

Very early on a cold early-February morning when I was 6 or 7 years old, my Mom was fixing a warm breakfast for us. While she was stirring the oatmeal into the bowls and putting them on the table, she sent me out the back door to get the newspaper. As I walked down the driveway, I had to cross paths with our orange and grapefruit trees, which were planted on either side of the driveway. The sun was just then coming up over the Indian River (really the Atlantic Ocean), or I would not have been able to see an unusual site: here, in the middle of winter, a tiny orange blossom had come out of its bud and was searching for light and warmth to begin its life. I slowly walked over to it, for some reason not wanting to surprise it, for fear that it might run away or something. Silly me. As I stood next to it, I felt a soft morning wind at my back, and watched the breeze gently sway the little orange blossom -- which was, in fact, yellow. There was a little white trim around each of its petals. It sort of slumped its bitsy head down, trying to absorb the wind's energy. I guess it thought that doing so might give it a chance to flourish as the day progressed. I walked to the end of the driveway, picked up the paper, and walked back to again observe this rarity. I was captivated by the anomaly of nature's timing. The wind had picked up a bit. The little orange blossom had opened its bud to it, and was stretching (if flowers stretch) to catch the sun's rays, gaining yet more momentum for its life's beginning. But I looked at it knowing better: I guess my little friend couldn't see peripherally, but on either side of him were buds covered in ice, and had stems too brittle to circulate food from the trunk of the orange tree. None of the other parts of the tree would be able to help this little guy. He was on his own. And he was out of season -- maybe 6-7 weeks ahead of the other blossoms ... or many months behind the last year's crop. Maybe, I thought, if the day gets warm enough, branches would thaw just enough to give him a chance.

I said 'goodbye' and went on to school on the bus. When I came home that afternoon, I got off the school bus and came up the driveway to check on my friend. Lo and behold, he had blossomed! It was the combination of the sun warming the leaves and the wind blowing the ice chips away that had allowed the petals to fully open. Wow! This was going to work! He actually looked kind of healthy. So I went on to play some ball, did my homework, and had dinner. Before I went to take my bath, I walked back down the driveway to see how the little flower was doing. The temperature had dropped, and the sun had long since set. The wind was now whisking uncomfortably. Were it not for the streetlight in front of our house, I would not have been able to see that the little orange blossom was just hanging in there, scared, I presumed, and shivering. The ice that had begun to again form on its leaves still covered the other buds from earlier that morning. It was so sad. I leaned down to kiss it, thinking that maybe the warmth of my breath would be of some small usefulness to help it survive the night. After breathing deeply through my mouth on it a half-dozen times, I pulled back to see that, indeed, the pedals' shape had softened just a little, and I could almost sense a vague smile coming from this little creation. It was as though it was saying to me:

"Thank you. I don't know who you are, or why you have cared for me, but thank you. I know I don't belong here in this season; I didn't ask for this to happen now. But, I have a survival instinct, and I will do what I can to make it. Even though it is against all odds, I want to be useful and show my beauty in this short time that I have been given. Whoever you are, thank you for caring for me. If this is all I will ever be, I will have known your touch and have been blessed for it."

Now, I knew flowers can't talk, but I also know what I heard that night. I walked into house, went to bed, and said a prayer that my little friend would make it through the night.

I got up very early the next day, and didn't wait for Mom to ask me to get the paper. As I rushed to get it, I didn't stop on the way down the driveway, either, because I knew I'd be able to see better with the sun's light shining back on the tree. Returning, I approached the orange blossom tree. I looked where my little friend had been, but saw nothing. As I got closer, I realized I could not remember which branch it was on -- they all looked the same now. A few steps closer I realized the reason -- the blossom was no more. It didn't even die on the vine: the freeze that night was so harsh, that all the petals -- I guessed it must have been agonizingly slowly -- had every one fallen to the ground. There, the ants (who can protect themselves underground at night) had already found the fallen petals and were devouring them. Where the bud had been was just an ugly green stub -- not even remained the beauty of an unopened bud, but just a cavity on the branch. There was nothing left. I was crushed, absolutely crushed. I hadn't even gotten to say goodbye. There was not even a corpse for me to bury, as if a little boy were to want to bury a flower. It was just gone, and all that remained was my hurt, my anger at God, my anger at winter, and my longing for my tiny friend who had tried to live its life at the wrong time and in the wrong season.

Would it have helped if I had covered it with a cloth? Would it have helped if I had come out in the middle of night and blown my breath on it? What if I had sat there through the night with a cigarette lighter (grandpa's) held to its frail petals, just to keep it warm -- would that have made a difference? Could I have done anything to sustain its life just a little longer? Did my tiny friend deserve this? Many years later, I learned that the answer to every one of these questions was "no." But I also learned that, no matter what I thought I could have done, I was there at just the right time to make its life just a little brighter for the time it did have. I did what I could do, and my little friend thanked me for being with him in the worst of circumstances. Never a February passes that I am not reminded of the little orange blossom who, for whatever reason, wanted bloom on that winter day. I also came to learn that the magnitude of my hurt was exactly proportional to the difference between the realities of this world and my expectation that things could somehow be different for just this one little flower. Juxtaposed somewhere between hope and the laws of nature and rightness is the realization that some things come for just a moment, and then they pass right on by. And that is why growing up never ceases until we are grown fully to God's arms as we leave this place. And that is also why it will not

break our heart when we have to say goodbye. For the memories such as this one brought pain, and in pain was weakness, and in weakness we turn to the only One who can make in difference to us anyway.

And so it is in this life.

There have been other times, too, where I have observed this bittersweet experience. I don't know why this happens; I guess I never will. Maybe God someday will answer this for me. Sometimes, it seems to me, things just bloom out of season. And I have found that, in doing so, their short life produces a blossom of many tears.