

POMEGRANATES AND GRENADES:

A Powerpoint Poem

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Pomegranate soda tastes pretty good.

That's what I thought on a visit to Canada in 2005.

Why not take a couple of 12-packs back home in our car?

Nothing to declare when we passed through the border,

only to discover to our horror that during the War on Terror

we had smuggled in two crates of grenades.

You see, in Bilingual Canada, all products have

to be labeled in both English and in French, so

it's "Pomegranate" on one side, and "Grenades" on the other.

After perplexing why someone would name a fruit after a weapon,

I did a little Wikipedizing and found out--it was the other way around.

French soldiers in the 16th century named their cool new exploding ball after the French word for pomegranate. The grenadiers thought their invention resembled the size and shape of the fruit, whose blood-red juicy seeds resembled the soon-to-be-bloodied shrapnel.

In many other languages, the pomegranate and grenade came to share similar or identical terms: Granada in Spanish (hence the city in Spain), Granata in Italian, Polish and Russian, and even Rimmon in Hebrew.

The pomegranate giveth life, and the grenade taketh it away, by cutting through the skin, and puncturing internal organs.

Each pomegranate has about 600 seeds, encased by arils, or tiny sacks of juice. The proper way to extract the arils is to First, carefully cut off the calyx, or crown.

Second, lightly score the leathery rind into quarters.

Third, gently pull apart the fruit to expose the arils, and

Fourth, peacefully pluck them out from the white membrane.

Preparing a pomegranate is like disarming a grenade.

If you push in the calyx, you have armed the striker lever.

If you violently tear apart the fruit, or cut too deeply into it,

the arils will be punctured. They will bleed red stains.

They will scream and cry. They will die.

The original homeland of the pomegranate stretches from

Iran to India, through Afghanistan and Pakistan.

It spread across the Red and Mediterranean Seas in ancient times,

and was worshipped by all peoples who ate its succulent fruit.

To the Romans, it was the Pomum Granatus, or Seeded Apple,

whose tree could live up to 200 years.

To the Egyptians, it symbolized everlasting life, and was buried with King Tut.

Like the Phoenicians, they grew pomegranates for religious purposes.

To the Greeks, it symbolized love and fertility, and the blood of death.

Juno and Aphrodite offered the sensuous fruit in marriage,

and Greek brides wore its twigs in their hair, but

Hades also tricked Persephone into eating four pomegranate seeds,

thus creating the four barren months of winter.

To the Jews, the pomegranate was a blessed fruit,

its calyx the source of the design for King David's crown,

its seeds symbolizing the 613 mitzvot, or commandments of the Torah.

To the Christians, the Seeded Apple may have been

the fruit that tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden.

It stood for suffering, resurrection, and the blood of martyrs.

To the Muslims, the fruit is associated with the Garden of Paradise, and was a favorite of the Prophet Muhammad. It is still used in red pepper spread in Syria, tabouli in Turkey, and chicken stew in Iran.

To the Americans, the pomegranate is a life-saving food and an elixir of health, an instrument of war and a tool of occupation.

When their towers were toppled by a flying army,

The Americans invaded the homeland of the pomegranate, bringing the fruit's namesake as part of their vast arsenal.

The Grenade Machine Gun had its first use in Afghanistan, where it became a "very popular weapon" against the Taliban.

Pomegranates themselves still grew along the Arghandab River in Kandahar province-- the Pashtun heartland of the Taliban.

The strategists of U.S. counterinsurgency looked to them as a lucrative cash crop that could lure Afghan farmers away from growing opium poppies.

The way to curb addiction to narcotics would be addiction to export-oriented capitalism.

Instead of grenadiers harvesting blood, harvest pomegranate juice for grenadine cocktails.

It was only a matter of months before the aggressive worldwide campaign began:

The War for POM in the War on Terror, by the Antioxidant Superpower.

As the Army fought insurgents in the pomegranate groves,

the engorging growing industry fought for customers in the globalized market.

Within three years, by the time I bought my soda,

nearly 200 pomegranate products had hit the shelves:

wine and vodka, beer and salsa, soap and pills, dressing and shampoo.

The fruit's miracle properties could cure high blood pressure, cancer and heart disease among citizens of the heart of the empire.

They do little to heal wounds caused by Hellfire missiles,

cluster bombs, or shrapnel from shiny new Grenade Machine Guns.

In the Arghandab Valley, the 5th Stryker Brigade from Fort Lewis, Washington, set up a base in Pomegranate Country, in the middle of Taliban Country.

One platoon "cut down some of the pomegranate trees to dry up the courtyard to ease the mosquito problem."

Other Stryker platoons "got marooned in an orchard for several days.

Supplies ran so low that they turned to juice-filled pomegranates to maintain their strength."

Like the Greeks and Persians, the British and the Russians before them,

the American soldiers had to sip the blood of life from the ancient pomegranate to give them the energy to hurl the tools of death.

Because of the battles and the booby traps in the Arghandab Valley,

no one can pick the fruit, which now lies in rotting piles

Preparing a pomegranate is like disarming a grenade,

Carefully cut off the crown.

Lightly score the rind.

Gently pull apart the fruit.

Peacefully pluck out the seeds.

Handle it with care

so it doesn't explode in your face.