

Oranges

Robin Reif

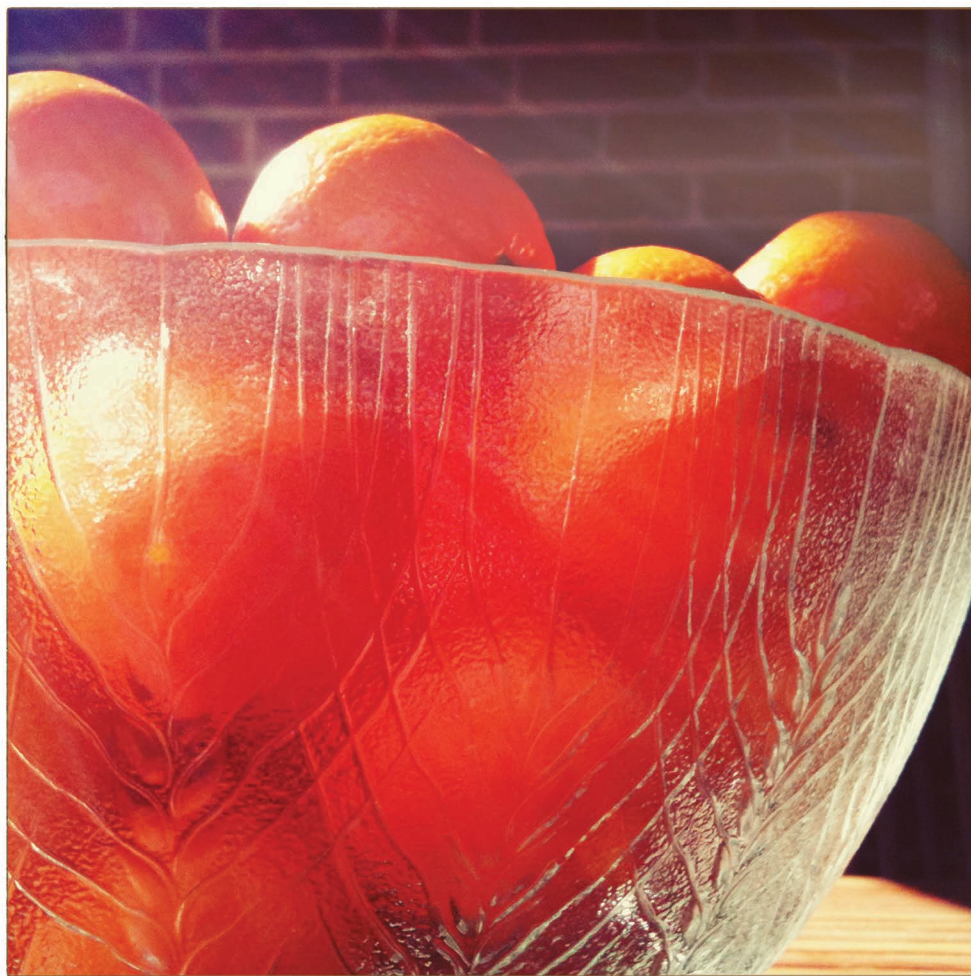


Photo by Wade Sisler

We called it the Buffet of Dead Food: flaccid bacon, eggs—hard-boiled and cold—and toast so tough it scratched the roofs of our mouths. Still, the meal had a touch of grace: a pyramid of oranges, pulsing and alive in their pedestal bowl. My roommate—I’ll call her Maggie—always took one and placed it on her nightstand to eat later.

When I first saw Maggie on arrival day for our year-abroad program, I would have cast her as Saint Joan. Willowy, with close-cropped hair, she projected stoic calm, though her eyes were so glassy that I often wondered whether she'd just been crying. It was not a love-seeking face, responsive and eager to please, like mine. Her face belonged only to her.

We were Americans—drama and English literature students—housed in a tiny London hotel, a shabby relic in what had become the decidedly swank district of South Kensington. Our walls were putty, the metal-frame beds and pockmarked desks likely bought at an auction of prison furniture. I'd unpacked by the time she showed up and, feeling in the know, introduced her to students and staff I'd already met as I helped lug her trunk up the four flights. That first night, we sat on either side of our double window's sill, giddy to be in London—in those years, the '70s, city of long-lashed models with enviably straight bangs, of Mick Jagger with his girl's lips and thrilling bulge, of mod boys slouching in doorways, their moody, androgynous allure delicious and disturbing. Glam rock was just breaking out with Elton John and David Bowie, the most beautiful boy we'd ever seen. Beyond this, London was filled with the *fabulous*: bold souls who showed up naked at museums or set their hair on fire, just because. The IRA bombings didn't gate-crash until months later, in March.

But on this night, trying to coax our hearts to settle enough to sleep, we looked out over the surrounding rooftops. "I am so lucky to have a roommate like you," Maggie said, "so confident, so outgoing." Ambushed by the compliment, I did something I still cannot entirely explain. I began to sing. Not with her, *to* her. Worse, they were songs of lost boys, from *Peter Pan*: "Never, Never Land" and "You Can Fly." Perhaps I wished to show her my other talents. More likely, her expression of admiration for traits I knew I lacked ignited anxiety, and a random shard of my fragmented self just exploded into this odd performance.

I think of her in that moment—an introvert, far from home, having latched on to someone she thought was safe but perhaps was not. Still, we became friends, heading down each morning to the Buffet of Dead Food and each night trading class gossip and news of movies or plays we'd seen. On weekends, we'd haul our dirty clothes to the local laundromat and sit on low benches poring over medieval mystery plays and modern English poetic drama—*Here is no continuing city, here is no abiding stay*—as we waited for our stuff to dry. Despite her distracting looks and the sculptural beauty of her head, Maggie was not interested

in being seen. She aspired to be a film editor, “locked in a dark room, punished for the rest of my life,” she’d joke. I envied that she could feel the reality of her existence even with no one watching. I wanted to be an actress and needed the gaze of others to reassure me that I was real. Her creative impulse was to shape and structure; mine was to enact.

That fall, I did, along with most of my classmates. As young Americans with a little money, we ricocheted among parties, openings, and hot new clubs where we found ourselves rubbing shoulders and other body parts with rock stars, celebrities, and those we mistook for rock stars and celebrities. Some of our tutors—poets and actors of modest fame—pressed their advantage with students who, by June, would be a continent away. We dyed our hair, wore outlandish clothes, changed our names. In and out of each other’s rooms throughout the long London nights, there were so many bodies, so much desire—ambient and contagious—continually pinballing in new directions. Having long labored under the yoke of stiff competition and required achievement, we were dizzy with joy at freedoms we couldn’t resist.

But Maggie did. She looked on, bemused, never losing her grip on intensely regular habits—bed at 11:00, up at 7:30, homework in the afternoons. When I danced myself into a blur at gay clubs where I was a plus-one to my classmate, who called himself “Jackie St. James,” or crashed West End dressing rooms, begging to borrow unpublished scripts from actors who took me for a groupie who wanted something else, I’d return home to our call-and-response: “Hi, Robs!” “Hi, Mags!” then rehash my misadventures. Her witnessing amplified my experience.

Then one night we went to see *Cries and Whispers*, a tale of sisters whose suppressed longings Bergman excavates through layers of wealth, beauty, and late-nineteenth-century clothes. Maria, a cruel flirt, and Karin, a forbidding introvert, circle one another, both craving intimacy but terrified at needing it. When they finally stumble into an ecstasy of touching, talking, and embracing, they just skirt the bounds of incest. Afterward, Maria withdraws. Karin is distraught and pleads with her, saying, “You touched me. Remember?”

Emerging from this portrayal of feelings we feared, Maggie and I shuffled out of the theater and started walking the several miles back to our hotel. The streets were wet and dark, not too cold. Occasional headlights startled. At some point, I realized that we were holding hands.

Still, close as we’d become, as we moved into winter, we were like a single figure inching away from herself in a mirror. And with each step,

the distance doubled. The more indulgent I became—dropping daily ballet classes, gorging on greasy pub fare and rich Indian food—the more disciplined Maggie was. Her great cheekbones became sharper; hip bones jutted from her jeans. At cafés, I'd order pastry; she'd order plain tea. I didn't ask what was wrong. Superseding my concern was envy that she could imprint her will upon her body. This self-denial seemed a pursuit of purity like that of Saint Joan, willing to forfeit her flesh for a greater glory. I yearned for some version of this perceived strength but lacked whatever Maggie had to make it real.

She began to disappear at night, moviegoing with Barbara, a square-framed girl with a shaved head who'd already published rock reviews in London's hip *Time Out*; it was only fear of further humiliation that kept me from voicing Karin's plea: "You touched me, remember?"

I can't recall when I noticed the oranges uneaten on Maggie's nightstand. There'd be one or two, and then the pile would grow. One day, I took one, telling myself what stealers of fruit have told themselves since the dawn of time: *It won't be missed*. The orange was perfect: every vesicle lush and acidic, a tiny explosion. I didn't take it out of anger or to cause her pain. I took it because I wanted something, but I couldn't have said what. My heart was in play but as impenetrable to me as the sludge beneath the Thames.

A few days later, I took another from her nightstand and noticed a small pad hidden underneath them: columns with sums, each adding to a bit more or less than 500. I made sure to dispose of the orange peel downstairs in the common kitchen.

Maggie grew more remote, and I began to believe she suspected me. Still, she wasn't eating her oranges and continued to hoard them. As she said nothing, whenever the room happened to be empty and I happened to want one of her oranges, I took it. Oranges were free on the daily Dead Buffet, cost five pence at any fruit stand in London, but I wanted Maggie's.

An orange is that much more brilliant and beautiful in a dark time, and London was becoming very dark. December brought bone-chilling mists so gray I could swear ash was falling from the sky, turning the city's Gothic buildings into haunted silhouettes. As the agitated Thames rolled out to the North Sea, even the stone gargoyles jutting from its bridges were not so much frightening as frozen in their own fear.

After the diversions of autumn, by December, the senior-year acting students began buckling down, prepping for graduate drama school au-

ditions. I believed my only path forward was through one of the highly competitive programs in the States.

Unlike classmates who seemed more confident or casual and rehearsed mainly in class, I'd hole up for entire weekends in nearby Brighton, once a royal playground, now a seedy spot that Noël Coward had branded a place of "piers, queers and racketeers." There, I'd rehearse my two-minute audition monologues thirty, forty, fifty times a day. At sorry old hotels, I'd feed the electric heater five pence every half hour and eat cheap Scotch eggs at local pubs filled with desperate smokers and, afterward, one of Maggie's purloined oranges.

As auditions drew closer, I grew more nervous and hired a private acting coach, a shaggy-haired sometime TV actor who lived in the tiniest row house in North London. I'd schedule two or three sessions a week. Once he was fifteen minutes late. I worked myself into a rage and roared when he showed up. He looked terrified but seconds later found his voice.

"Stop acting *nyur-aw-tic*," he said.

What buoyed me a bit was that in rehearsal, a mysterious force would sometimes grab hold and summon me to solidarity with my character. I'd inhabit her, *act* her with surprising spontaneity and ride that wave to shore. But it was hit or miss. I lacked reliable access to the inspired flow.

Something else worked against me: any great performance—on the page, stage, or screen—is rooted in the artist's willingness to be present and exposed. For me, that was an excruciating proposition. One classmate had called me "that smiley girl," by which I knew he meant false and appeasing. I couldn't admit feeling as fragmented and helpless as I did and worked overtime to hide it.

That February I flew home for auditions. My first two did not go well. Yale Drama was my last chance. In a New Haven motel, I rehearsed two monologues, one classical and one contemporary, through the night. Exhausted, strung out, and hungry, having eaten only one of Maggie's oranges that I'd managed to lift before I left, I ascended the lighted circular stage in a small campus theater and began my contemporary speech, a scene in which Velma, a troubled twenty-something, confesses the murder of her mother to a stranger who just wants to get laid.

I pulled out my imaginary knife, desperately striving to project myself into Velma's complex terror and justification for her vengeance. A few lines into it, I knew I'd missed the moment when, in rehearsal, I would sometimes slip into that enchanted flow and bring it home. My

throat constricted, flattening my voice. My heart was a trapped bird. My dress was drenched beneath the arms. The desperation that could be read from the theater's back row was not Velma's but mine, the actress's whose character and future had just fled. It was a misery to finish.

I returned in defeat to England. Graduate school had been my only plan. While I was seeing my future evaporate, Maggie, who was willing to start at the bottom, had landed a secretarial job at CBS during the time I'd been gone.

As I continued taking her oranges, I figured out that the columns on her pad were an account of daily calories, about a third of what she should have been eating.

One afternoon in March, a week after the IRA's Old Bailey bombing, when we were all still rattled, I found Maggie sitting on her bed: spine curved, head down, legs crossed. She looked up. Her face was empty, as though she didn't recognize me. "Do you know what happened to my oranges?" she said.

"They're there on your nightstand," I offered.

She was not deterred. "Someone's been taking my oranges."

I thought of the black-haired women with tragic Iberian faces who cleaned our rooms, but despite all the unswept places within me, I would not falsely accuse.

"I don't know," I said.

There was silence. Then Maggie asked, "Have you been taking my oranges?"

I sat on my bed along the adjacent wall. We locked eyes across the wide diagonal. Mine began to sting. Finally, I said, "Yes."

I wanted to tell her that I took the oranges because they were there. Or that I took them because they were alive and were hers; because, despite evidence of her emptiness, I believed she had something I needed. I took them because I knew she was hungry but wasn't eating them. I took them because I, too, was hungry. I wanted her to know that her starvation awakened something deep within me. I wanted to tell her: I see you. You're starving. See me. I'm starving, too.



Robin Reif

Robin Reif's writing has appeared in the *New York Times's* Modern Love column, *McSweeney's*, *Off-Assignment's* Letter to a Stranger column, and *Yes!* magazine, among others. In addition to writing, she's a live storyteller who has appeared at the Moth and the Magnet Theater in New York. After holding leadership positions at global brand engagement agencies for over two decades, she is currently pursuing an MFA at Bennington Writing Seminars. To learn more about her writing, please visit www.robinreif.com.