

JENNIFER F

Oranges

Rick bought the oranges for one dollar a pound. He bought fifty pounds.

“That’s too many,” Pam said. “Two people can’t eat all those oranges.”

“It’s a good deal,” Rick said.

Pam ate them, alone, when the house was dark. For a week, she ate oranges every night until her stomach was taut with pith and seed. Their scent hung in the house like a miasma.

The following week she brought an orange to her neighbor Bill. To bring two would be too obviously profligate. “Thank you for the orange,” Bill said, and invited her in for a drink. After gin rickeys he peeled the orange in one long, curling strip, then stacked the peel on the coffee table so it took the shape of an orange again. To Pam it seemed to snap into place, perfect and whole.

Pam began bringing oranges to her meetings with Bill. Sometimes he would put small trinkets inside the empty peel, a chocolate truffle or a note that said “Hello,” before handing it back to her. Sometimes she would rub the peel, zest side up, on his body before they began lovemaking in earnest. This was easily construed as sensual but was intended to cover up his musty smell.

“Where do these oranges come from?” Bill asked at last.

“I have a tree,” she answered, too quickly to stop herself. There was no real reason to hide who bought the oranges — Bill knew about Rick, and vice versa. Whenever she was in bed with someone, however, she had the notion that it was a matter of etiquette to adopt the pretense that they were the only living beings in the world.

So she told Bill she had a tree that grew outside her window, close enough that she could pick oranges in bed. She described honey-scented flowers that bloomed even when the tree was in fruit. The next time Pam came over Bill asked her to tell him about the tree again, timidly, like someone admitting a harmless but mildly unsavory fetish.

She embellished the image, adding thick leaves that cast shadows like old lace, an aroma like the hair of a nubile girl, a community of songbirds whose music resembled Brahms if you listened in the right state of mind. With every visit he asked for more. Soon she was shouting details about the tree’s beauty and fecundity in the midst of their lovemaking, while he thrashed beneath her.

She relished in it more than she expected to.

It became harder to walk across the street to her own house, with its air full of oranges. It nauseated Pam, and Rick’s touch made it worse. He did his best to help: he bought various aids online and presented them like men present jewels in old films. They each tried on masks: big-eyed girls from erotic cartoons, latex presidents, grinning animals. The oranges penetrated all of them.

It was after Millard Fillmore and Buchanan that Rick became especially frustrated. He tossed his mask into the corner, where it collided with an orange. “Fucking Whigs,” he said.

“It’s alright,” Pam said, patting him.

Rick leaned into her, then lifted his head. He had an idea: a threesome. Did she know anyone who would be interested?

“I might,” Pam said. “He lives nearby.”

Bill agreed, and Pam and Rick set about gathering what they needed: dinner (roast chicken and seasonal vegetables), wine, some mild hallucinogens. They cleaned the house thoroughly, though they gave up on getting rid of the orange smell.

Pam visited Bill the night before to make sure he had no aversion to the menu. He was jittery with excitement. “Are you looking forward to seeing Rick?” Pam teased.

“No, the orange tree,” Bill said. He ran through Pam’s inventions: the songbirds, the nubile scent, the heavy fruits. She did not remember telling him these details. Her palms sweat so much she left before touching him.

It was dark by the time Pam got back to the house. In the yard she scratched out a hollow and poured in the remaining oranges. One day was not much to grow a tree, but the more seeds she planted the more likely one would sprout. All she wanted was a shoot she could show her neighbor — an exaggeration was better than a lie.

The dinner was a success, though the chicken was slightly pink. After dessert they steeped the tea in a stoneware pot Bill had brought. It was a pleasant blend; along with the psilocybes were dried ginger and rooibos. The wine had an immediate effect, however. Soon they were fumbling into bed.

“Would you like to try on a mask?” Rick asked Bill, holding out a Coolidge.

“No, thank you,” said Bill. There was no need.

“I think the tea isn’t as mild as the guy told me,” said Rick.

“Oh man,” said Bill, from the back of his throat. “Look at that.”

Pam saw an orange tree, enormous enough to demand the full range of perception, its branches bent almost to breaking with flowers and fruit. Relief cascaded through her body, more powerful than any orgasm: the seeds had sprouted.

“That’s something,” said Rick.

For the moment, they were satisfied.