

Oranges and Lemons

by Emily Morganti, '00

My mother went to Barnard on a full scholarship. She commuted from home, two hours a day on the subway. One night after a Columbia party, she was up a ladder taking down crepe paper when an orange hit her on the back of the head. It thumped to the ground and rolled under a stool, where my father knelt to retrieve it. He tossed the orange across the room to a friend — his intended target — and offered my mother his hand.

In my version, she shakes off his attempts to help her down from the ladder. Does not speak to him for months because she's so offended at being hit on the back of the head with the orange. Looks the other way when he passes on the street. Starts dating his roommate. In my version, the roommate can't be there for a date they're supposed to have. He has an emergency to deal with — a death in the family, a last-minute pinball competition at the pizza place, what have you. My father answers her knock with as much grace and charm as he can muster. "Hello," he says. "Are you here to see Bob?"

"Yes," she says, stepping cautiously over the threshold.

"He isn't here," my father says. "He had to go to a funeral/pinball semi-final/what-have-you."

My mother: "Oh." Of course, she could just step back across the threshold and find another way to spend her evening. But in my version she does not. She sits on the couch, tugging her mini skirt to cover more of her nicely shaped legs. My father brings out a basket of butter crackers and wedges of cheese. They talk about politics, literature. Something. What would my parents discuss during their first conversation? Now, after thirty years of marriage, their communication isn't even verbal; each speaks through the other's eyes. But how did they communicate then, when they were still new?

Of course, this night kicked off the ravenous affair that would become my parents' marriage. In my version, they could not keep their eyes (or their hands) off each other. They went everywhere in each others' company: the dining hall, where my mother sneaked my father in on her meal ticket; the library, where he tossed spitballs into her hair; the movies, where they nuzzled at the back of the room, my father attempting a hand on her thigh, my mother staring straight ahead, her arms and legs rigid. Perhaps she gently moved his hand from her leg, or told him to behave himself until they got home.

My father went home to Cambridge for the summer, but returned to New York several times to visit my mother. He stayed with a friend in Queens and took long subway rides just so they could spend an evening together. His first meeting with her father went badly. My father laughed a little too often, and gave my mother one too many sideways glances. They took rambling midnight walks, hand in hand under the smog, staying close to her apartment because it was not a good neighborhood. Alone in her bedroom, they watched Neil Armstrong walk the moon. Not too long after, they became engaged. My father said, "How about giving marriage a try," and my mother cried. Their wedding was inexpensive, their guests rowdy, and their honeymoon short. Finally.

In fact, I know nothing past my mother getting hit in the head with the orange. I may have even made up the part about the crepe paper.

I did not tell my mother when I lost my virginity, so she believed she was doing her duty when she pulled me aside the day after Christmas. My father was about to drive me to the airport so I could spend three weeks in San Francisco with my current lover.

My mother put her book down on the couch. She asked, "Can I assume you and Jon are having sex?"

I said, "That would be a safe assumption."

In a confidential voice: "Can I also assume that you're using something?"

"Another safe assumption," I said.

My mother patted my hand. "I'm not saying this to embarrass you," she said.

I said, "I'm not embarrassed."

"I'm embarrassed!" called my father, hovering near the front door with his car keys in hand.

It is summer. My parents and I are having dinner in a restaurant near the house where I grew up. We're sitting in a booth, my father and I side by side, watching my mother dip her bread in olive oil. She's telling me a story.

"I got together with Martha and Joan," she says. These are two of her friends from work. "We were sitting around drinking sangria. And we got to talking about our pasts." She clears her throat. "Our sexual histories."

I start to wonder if I want to hear this story. My father slices a piece of chicken.

"So first Martha tells us how many men she was with before she got married. She says six."

"Six isn't that many men," I interrupt.

"Then Joan goes," says my mother. "And she's been with about *twenty* men. And some women."

I sip my chardonnay. Beside me, my father is chewing.

"Then they get to me," my mother says. "I'm the oldest. I'm supposed to be the most experienced. I was a teenager in the sixties. And I tell them, I've only been with one man. And not until we got married. It was so embarrassing."

My father puts down his fork.

"I don't mean I wish it never happened," she says. "I'm glad I married your father. But sometimes I wish I'd waited... I don't know, six years or so. Just to see what was out there. To have a chance to experiment."

I want to tell my mother that experimentation isn't worth it. That my lover is pressuring me into an open relationship because he can't stand to stay celibate while I finish college. That I lost my virginity to a married man who called his wife's name when we were in bed. That I was offered twenty-five dollars for sex once, and I was so drunk I almost took it.

But her eyes are wide and honest across the table, so I don't. Twilight is descending when we stand to leave. My father pays the check. He drapes my mother's sweater over her shoulders, and holds her hand on the short walk home.