

And I Will Bring You Oranges

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*(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)*
~e.e. cummings

Nothing had been the same since those perfectly quartered oranges with the peels still on had been spirited from the sparkling aluminum tray into the hands and mouths of those men. Everything had changed in that one, isolated moment; but Roxie didn't think she could explain it to anyone. She could barely explain it to herself. Instead, she carried it within her like a secret pregnancy of dubious paternity, wondering if anyone could tell.

Little did she know that her inability to express either the moment or its ensuing effects was not really her fault. Her ancestors, the ones whose names no one recalls, wouldn't have struggled to find the words; if anything, they'd have struggled to choose from the palettes at their command, hemming and hawing over the vast lexicon before them like so many scraps of fabric for a quilt. Even her grandmother, the talent dimmed, could have bumbled her way through to something coherent, though few in her audience would've known the response to her call. Her own mother would not have been able to narrate her inner stirrings any better than Roxie could; the ability had been filtered from their blood like so many pairs of green eyes, cleft chins and high metabolisms. Indeed, the very fact that Roxie had noticed the oranges at all, and that the image and what it held had lodged itself like a fishbone in her windpipe was, in many respects, a genetic anomaly...some wayward strand of DNA from long before her people had ever settled in Queens. So, Roxie thus afflicted, remained as flummoxed and silent as Lavinia without her tongue, unable to name the perpetrators of her transformation.

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She thought Julio looked ridiculous on his tiny bicycle with his pants sagging so far below his backside that she could see the entire race-car motif of his boxer shorts whose cars, she noted with boredom, were in a red-green-yellow-purple pattern, covering his sorry ass. The sagging pants coupled with the too-big fluorescent yellow hat that swallowed his cranium, the bill left straight as was the style, made him look clownish as he crouched atop the low-rider bicycle, his arms raised above him to clutch the impractically high handlebars. His pose was distinctly simian... *a monkey-clown*, Roxie thought, *a dumb-ass monkey clown*.

“Rox,” he called over his shoulder, “come on, yo!”

“Coming,” she yelled, and pedaled her own bicycle, a pastel blue beach cruiser covered with white Hawaiian flowers and the word *Aloha* across the seat. She caught up with him and side-by-side they meandered their way through the cast of characters that comprised Ditmars Avenue on a Sunday afternoon. There were the clusters of four that looked like pre-packaged stock families offered in every ethnicity, the kind you see in advertisements for cheap life insurance or friendly government announcements reminding you to immunize your children against the various scourges of New York City: the Muslim family, with the mother’s face hidden behind a veil, the Hispanic family in their Sunday best, the Caucasian family with ironic t-shirts like *Barack Your Body* and *Pug Life*. Every third person was an elderly Greek woman, facial hair sprouting from fertile pores like bouquets, shuffling in orthopedic shoes and wondering when the *hell* did all these new species invade her neighborhood.

They pedaled past the stores of the discount handbag, thrift and cheap furniture variety. Salons offered to paint your nails in shades of *I’m not really a waitress* and *Iris I*

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was thinner. They inhaled the alternating odors of stale beer and cigarettes that wafted out of the Irish pubs and the piquant lemon and garlic that beckoned from the Greek restaurants. Skinned carcasses hung like warnings in the windows of butcher shops: *Do Not Blithely Wander Through This Neighborhood If Thy Be A Sheep, Pig or Cow, Or This Shall Be Thy Fate!* A single Starbucks assured everyone that the modern world hadn't left them behind. *Who needs Manhattan? You can get your extra hot venti skim half-caff sugar-free cinnamon-dolce no-foam latte right here in Astoria! Hooray!* She saw their reflection in the windows they passed: two teenagers on bikes that looked like they'd just happened to merge onto the same route but were by no means together. Julio tried to look hard and intimidating on his child's bike, mad-dogging the homeless men fishing plastic bottles out of trash cans; Roxie, looking both disinterested and apologetic, a uniquely teenaged combination, avoided direct eye contact with passers-by.

Her back was sweating Rorschach prints through her t-shirt and her red hair was curling into tendrils at the nape of her neck from the heavy backpack she shouldered; filled with the cans of beer and sandwiches she'd paid for with her babysitting money. Her cousin, John Jr., had kept the change and promised not to rat her out as long as she didn't get drunk and stupid. She'd agreed not to. She didn't even really like beer. It had been Julio's idea that they get beers and have a picnic at the park. She'd been intrigued by the notion of a picnic, he'd never proposed an activity so...romantic, so *boyfriendly-girlfriendly* before. Their alone time generally consisted of hanging out in one of their bedrooms; hers with the door always ajar, her mother making periodic visits; his closed shut, allowing them to do all her mother feared, and more, she thought, as she couldn't imagine her parents doing the things they did. Julio aspired to be as *gangsta* as he could

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in bed, calling her the names and doing the things that were being constantly fed to his carnivorous brain through the ear buds of his iPod. She was sure he told his crew intimate details about all their activities, describing her body to them in terms of neatly separated sections – her ass, her thighs, her breasts... like a butcher diagramming a cow; she could tell by the way they both stared at and dismissed her.

When they went to the movies, it was always with a mob of Julio's friends to go see some action movie she wasn't interested in at all; something with a lot of car chases and weapons and women who became progressively sexier as they got sweatier and more beaten-up, tied lustroously to a radiator in a warehouse, seductively gagged, all six-packs, bra-straps, glossed pouts and bruises like jewels. Julio, their ringleader, would make loud jokes the whole time and throw candy at the back of his friends' heads, always keeping his left hand firmly on her upper thigh like she was another of the unpredictable pit bulls he trained with his dad. People in the theater would invariably ask them to shut up, which Julio happily anticipated. He would respond theatrically that they could suck his dick or shut the fuck up before he beat their ass. Roxie would sink low into her seat and try not to be seen, staring at the screen as if it were the most interesting thing on earth, willing the manager to come and kick them out.

At school, of course, they'd been restricted to the kind of interactions boys and girls had been engaging in for eons; quick, furtive handfuls of each other's body, kisses at lockers between classes with wads of sugary gum in their mouths; performance of maturity through displays of ownership. She preferred their relationship at school, it somehow made more sense. At school, teachers would see them together and give her certain looks that said *why are you with that fool* or *you're just rebelling, you'll grow out*

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of this. She took comfort in seeing herself through their eyes, in believing what their glances transmitted. Julio had just sort of morphed into her boyfriend; there'd been no ceremony or declarations about it. No courtship or shy flirting; he'd just called her his girl in front of their friends and she hadn't objected. Now, though, they'd been graduated a week - she with honors and he just barely. It seemed she'd ferried Julio across the membrane that separated her childhood life from her new, adult one; the one where she would cut her hair short and professional and have her own apartment and decide where her furniture went and make plans with girlfriends during those hours of the week where she'd always been in school. How strange it would be to go to lunch on a Wednesday at one-fifteen, how very surreal. Bringing Julio into this new life felt more like a choice than circumstance and she was increasingly regretful.

They finally arrived to the park and walked their bikes towards a patch of shade under the foreboding arch of the Hell Gate Bridge. Their bikes flung in a pile of gears and rods like so many discarded leg braces and crutches. Roxie emptied the contents of her backpack while Julio lit a cigarette and turned his attention wholly to his phone as if he'd just discovered it. She spread the sheet she'd brought along, faded pink roses at the edges, and found handfuls of rocks and pebbles to put on the corners so it wouldn't blow away. She arranged the sandwiches and bags of chips in the middle of the sheet, and kept the beers slightly hidden in her backpack, just in case.

As an afterthought, Roxie had brought along her latest obsession: a small paperback of poetry by E.E. Cummings. Mrs. Mallory, their literature teacher, had written at the bottom of one of Roxie's own poems: *very original style – you might enjoy e.e. cummings*. She'd been dazzled from the first poem she read. The way he broke words

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in half and put them back together sideways, the way he ignored grammar and punctuation and all the rules Roxie'd been recently quizzed on. The way his invented words seemed more suited to describe the world than any she'd ever known. And, of course, he wrote of sex and bodies in such a way that made her feel juvenile and inexperienced; she'd never felt anything so jubilant...so nearing ecstatic, as when she was read Cummings. In spite of all she'd done with Julio, she relished the feeling of emotional virginity; unexplored physical vistas of some other body, some alternate her. Can a poem – ink on paper – change a body? Could she read these pages and be new? She felt like she'd stumbled upon something illicit; the very fact that a *teacher* approved of his reckless style was like seeing behind the curtain to the hidden lives of the adults around her, and being invited to join them. If Mrs. Mallory read poems like *there is between my big legs a crisp city*...maybe she also cried, or had a boyfriend, or was a lesbian, ran marathons or had an eating disorder. That Roxie now read Cummings was a part of her new script, and she marveled at it. In any case, Roxie felt she might try to read Julio a poem or two. They were two graduated adults on a picnic, after all.

After she'd arranged everything and sat down in the middle of the sheet like some milkmaid in a nursery rhyme, Julio came and put his head on her lap; a post-pubescent tableau vivant.

“Hungry?” she asked.

“Nah, not yet.” They both glanced around the park, taking note of the people drifting past them: mothers with infants pressed to their chests, dogs on leashes with their chests puffed out, men with canes with their chests caved in. The slight breeze coming off the East River carried the smell of early summer sunlight and warmed soil,

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permeating the air around them like a tincture. So rare, this moment of comfortable silence between them, it was almost alarming. Maybe he was changing, too, she wondered. Perhaps Julio had felt the shift of graduation as she had - a persistent urge to expand.

“I’ve been reading this guy, this poet,” she began, “he’s totally different, you know, not boring or anything.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, it’s no big deal. Want me to read you one? If you’re bored.” Julio had closed his eyes and taken off his hat. She stroked his forehead, a new gesture; her new hands, his new brow.

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Ok. I think you’ll like this one,” she reached over for the book without upsetting his heavy head, opened the volume to the dog-eared page and began: *Anyone lived in a pretty how town; with up so floating many bells down...*”

“Yo! What up, son!” Roxie looked up to see three more clowns on bikes approaching: Julio’s friends, they had an air of indifference towards the crowds they ploughed through that bordered on menace. They rode their bikes right onto the sheet, leaving dirty wheel marks on the faded roses of her mother’s sheets. In one movement Julio was on his feet with his hat back on, “Yo playas!” They exchanged elaborate handshakes and nodded, serious and unsmiling. An onlooker would think they were unhappy to run into each other. They threw their bikes down and spread their bodies across the empty spaces, taking care not to touch one another. They didn’t acknowledge

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Roxie, who remained cross-legged with her book in her lap in the center of the four young men.

“Where the brew at?” one of the clowns jutted his chin towards Julio.

“Yo, Rox,” Julio said in turn, “bust out those beers.” Roxie reached over to the backpack and pulled out the six-pack of *Coors Light*, freeing each can from its plastic noose and passing one to each of them. They’d gone warm; it hadn’t occurred to her to keep them cold, but the monkeys slurped at them messily, wiping their chins and licking their lips. Her book had slipped off her lap. Monkey Number Three picked it up and studied the cover. “What’s this, yo?” He was turning the book over and thumbing the pages like a harp. Roxie wondered if he was asking what the object itself might be.

“Just some book. It’s Roxie’s,” Julio, bashful.

“E.E. Cummings,” the Monkey read, “*Cummings?* What the fuck yo, *Cummings?* Is this some porn shit?” He laughed through his teeth. Julio leaned over and grabbed the book out of his hands and tossed it aside, “Yo, fuck off, man. It’s nothing. Dude, did you see Big P’s new ride? It’s sick, yo. Fucking rims and shit, chrome, some OG shit for real. Don’t know how that motherfucker’s broke ass paid for that shit.” The topic had been successfully changed. Roxie felt a stone of rage in her stomach, “I’m going to the bathroom,” she announced as she got up and retrieved her book. Nobody replied.

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She thought she might cry, or vomit. She marched away from the boys with her fists clenched and her teeth grinding. So blurry was her vision with the tears she wouldn’t let loose that she didn’t notice the ring until she’d almost breached it. She’d walked to the

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edge of a giant circle; marked by small, plastic yellow flags stuck in the earth like toothpicks. She looked around her, startled.

The circle was filled with exotic birds, plumage aflame. She rubbed her eyes and saw that they were not birds, but people, winged people. Brown men with sinewy calves and blue-black hair shimmering like motor oil were standing like guards around the circle; crowned with elaborate headdresses of feathers – improbably long, plucked from no bird Roxie could think of, quivering as if they would fly. Oxblood reds and dead-of-night blues...poisonous, extinct purples. Some had bells around their ankles and wrists, some carried objects like wands; all were shirtless under the blazing sun, wearing what looked to Roxie like leather mini-skirts. In the center of the circle, against the backdrop of the river, a cluster of drummers conversed with each other, passing instruments and implements between them, settling into a shape. They began abruptly like a clap of thunder and Roxie literally stumbled backwards.

Roxie, transfixed, watched the men dance as though they were plugged into the earth by invisible cables and cords, tethered and manipulated like so many marionettes. Their bare feet pounded and stomped. Sweat poured and coated their pulsing bodies. As they continued, a woman in a blue gown embroidered with symbols that looked to Roxie like mathematics, hair like wet paint down her back, entered the ring. She seemed to float, her small feet not bending a single blade of grass. She was absorbed like liquid, compelled to their center, until she was standing in front of the drummers.

A pause.

A sonic silence.

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And then she moved. Subtle at first, shoulders rising and falling, a slight bending of the knees, one foot lifted, hovering, then noiselessly replaced. The drummers began again, accompanying her, following her cues. The dancing men took up her choreography: her body called *bird* and they were birds...her body cried *snake* and they were snakes.

Another dancer entered the ring carrying a banner printed with images that reminded Roxie of the cave art they'd studied in school, hoisted on a tall wooden pole. Roxie thought she recognized his profile, but before she could make it out he began to bounce and jump and twirl, his flag twitching like a fish on a taut line. Outside of the circle, a different kind of dance was underway. Children were running around laughing and tagging each other. Old people sat in foldout lawn chairs in the shade, arthritic fingers tapping to the beat of the drums. There was a tent with a plastic table where women were setting out platters of food and opening bottles of soda. Roxie could smell citrus and chili and the almost female scent of fresh tortillas. Someone was emptying a bag of charcoal into the belly of a barbeque. There were other onlookers like Roxie, taking pictures on their phones, straddling bicycles or rocking strollers. There was a collective sorrow among the outsiders; a recognition of loss, of birth rights unfulfilled. Roxie felt utterly displaced. The drummers stopped and started, stopped and started; the woman in blue steady at their helm. Roxie couldn't guess as to the precise meaning of their movements or rhythms, but she felt they were working mightily towards something. Calling something into being, working up a froth.

There was a break in the dancing and a woman, dressed unceremoniously in too-tight denim cutoffs, her belly spilling out of her tank top, entered the circle carrying a

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large aluminum tray. The dancers were breathing heavy and shaking their manes like horses; bodies drenched in sweat; teeth dry from thirst. It seemed precipitous. The woman went from man to man, and gave them a slice of orange from her tray. *Thank you*, she seemed to be telling them as she presented them with fruit, *thank you for working so hard for us*. Roxie stared as the slices exchanged hands; precious and glowing, like the dying embers of the last fire. The man who gripped the banner had no free hands with which to receive his dripping portion so the woman put it right into his mouth and something inside of Roxie was tore to shreds.

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How to describe an orange? An orange just is. It is both itself and its description. It is not something so very amazing, she told herself. She alone had consumed countless oranges, although she preferred apples, and did not feel at all changed for it. She vaguely remembered learning that oranges prevent scurvy – the sickness of sailors and pirates, of nauseous pilgrims making their salty way to new lands - so, there's that. After the oranges, she'd returned to Julio and the clowns to retrieve her bike. She'd hopped onto it like a trusty horse and rode as fast as she could away from them, her little paperback tucked into the back pocket of her jeans.

Her phone had started ringing as soon as she'd sped away, but it was in her backpack on the rose-edged sheet upon which the clowns slouched. All for the better, as it was Julio calling to ask her *what the fuck yo*, and she could no longer answer that vital question. Later that evening, she heard her mother talking to Julio at their front door,

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thanking him for the backpack, explaining that Roxie wasn't feeling well and was asleep. Roxie had told her mom that she didn't want to see Julio, and that she didn't want to talk about it. *Did he hurt you?* Her mom had asked. *No, mom*, Roxie had answered, annoyed, but it felt like a lie.

The next morning was Sunday, and it was tradition that Roxie and her parents would meet up with her older brother and his wife for syrupy breakfast at the Starlight Diner. She was still upset when her mom knocked on her door, but her hunger was stronger. Her stomach growled at the thought of her usual: a cheddar cheese omelet smothered with salsa and sour cream. She got dressed and climbed into the backseat of the car with her parents. Years later, she would remember with longing how safe, how impenetrable it felt to watch the back of her parents' heads from the backseat, to be checked on, even at eighteen, in the rearview mirror. They passed by Julio's house on the way to the diner, but nobody mentioned him. She felt Julio pass out of her life in that moment so easily as to make her feel slightly guilty. He'd never really had a place with her; his role in her world evaporating with as little ceremony as it had begun.

Roxie tried to cheer up as she took her place in the booth by the window. Her brother's usual goofiness made it impossible for her not to smile, calling her by the nickname "box of rox", that always made her laugh. The table filled with paper napkins and spotty utensils, ceramic mugs filled with weak, steaming coffee. After they placed their orders, her dad and brother and her mom and sister-in-law paired off and began their usual tete-a-tetes. Roxie didn't mind, and took the opportunity to stare out the window with her coffee, listening in on the conversations of people at other tables: there were

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grandchildren's birthday presents to buy, rents to be paid, teams that lost, teams that won, politicians that lied and hangovers to nurse.

At the sharp ring of a bell, her eye was drawn towards the window that opened onto the busy kitchen, where the waitresses huddled to retrieve dishes full of food, balancing them on their arms like circus performers. As she looked beyond the waitresses' big hair, over the plates piled with pancakes and pillars of toast, she saw him. The profile. It was the man who'd carried his people's banner in the ring yesterday. The man who'd danced under the sun, because that's what was needed of him; who'd been fed a slice of orange because he had made of himself their flag and standard. He turned and placed a series of platters on the ledge of the window, and she saw that her omelet was among them. Now this man had prepared *her* meal; she thought she might cry - the grace of the moment was suffocating. She didn't feel she deserved it, to eat of his labor. She felt so unworthy of an ounce of his effort. At that moment, he looked out at the dining room and their eyes locked, she was sure of it, and that torn part of her began to repair, ripped fibers fusing anew. She would replay the moment countless times in her mind as she arranged her own furniture, cut her hair short and met her friends for afternoon lunches. She would replay it when she checked on her sons in the backseat through the rearview mirror. She would replay it in the final minutes of her life - the room filling with citrus and chili and the rising dough of life.

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