A Bag of Oranges

There were exactly seven items on my grocery list. Milk, chocolate chips, butter, cream cheese, bread, toilet paper, and oranges. Whenever I went shopping–which was often these days; the boys were hitting their growth spurts–I worked from the back of the store to the front, where the registers were. I turned it into a sort of game, hugging the sides of the shelves with the cart to achieve the most efficient route.

I was almost finished with my list when I saw someone I hadn't seen in a long time. She was alone, and for a moment I felt pity. I waved at her and she waved back. It took her a second to register who I was.

"Jolie? Is that you?" she said, an agape smile blooming on her face.

I laughed and nodded. "It's good to see you. How's life?" I asked, tucking my mousy hair behind my ears.

She began to ramble excitedly, her voice jumping from topic to topic, talking about her job and her apartment in New York. She used to be my best friend in high school, and in those years, she often divulged to me her dreams of writing for the Wall Street Journal, so I felt a flare of pride to hear she was living in her dream city. But that pride mutated to jealousy when she mentioned her acting career.

She had never told me she wanted to be an actor. In high school–and now, really–that was the one thing I really enjoyed, the one thing I had to myself; everything else was hers.

"Listen, I've got to get going," I interrupted, giving a plastic chuckle.

I felt ashamed of the jealousy gnawing tunnels through my heart, but I couldn't help it. That was my dream. Mine. And here I was, shopping not for a movie premiere afterparty, but for

my small family.

Her face fell for a second and then she smiled. "Okay. Have a good day, Jolie!" The brightness of her voice pissed me off. What had happened to me?

I needed to check out now; it was nearly dinner, and I didn't want to be late again. When my cart squeaked to a stop in front of a cash register, the woman behind the counter stared at me, her eyes and uniform dull. Bile rose in my throat.

A nagging thought pierced my foggy head. I looked down at my items and realized I had forgotten something. Oranges. I groaned internally. I really wanted to go home now. But oranges were quite possibly the most important item on my list. Tomorrow was my husband's birthday, you see, and I just had to make him a cake. An orange cake, with little bits of peel scattered on top like landmines of flavor. So naturally, I turned the cart around and headed for the produce aisle, where I was distressed to see that the whole place had been rearranged. An odd feeling of disorientation overwhelmed me. How was I supposed to find my oranges like this? I searched everywhere for those damn oranges in a frenzy, angry that I had gotten lost in my own local grocery store. It wasn't until I reached the last wooden display that I saw the only remaining bag of oranges nestled in the very back of the shelf. I picked it up and slung it into my cart, hurrying to the checkout counter. I found it almost comical, the relief that flooded my body when I had secured the fruit. It was just a cake, after all. A small giggle escaped my lips at how ridiculous I was. If my mother were here, she would shake her head slowly and tell me that I should focus less on myself. The blue netted bag landed on the conveyor belt and traveled towards the expectant cashier.

I had worried about other things once, about auditions and resumes and agents and the makeup I wore. I was inches away from everything I had ever wanted, but as my acting coach

had said after one too many rejections, patting my back and thinking about her next meeting, *"It's not for everyone".* But why couldn't it be for *me*?

I would step off the big yellow bus after school–or in my later years of high school and college, pull into the gravel paved driveway in my rundown Nissan–and step into an empty house.

I nearly never had homework, and the soap operas on TV would pull me onto the couch and into the realm of cheating husbands and infomercials.

Maybe if I got bored, I would move right up next to the TV and turn the knobs until I stumbled across a behind the scenes special. I would mentally cut the actresses faces out, strutting around the complicated sets, and glue my own in. *I will be like them one day,* I would think. *Someone will watch me on TV someday, I'm sure of it.*

The bag of oranges had traveled down the belt now, almost to the black pit of the barcode scanner. An odd burst of panic inflated in my chest, knocking rampantly against my ribcage.

"Cash or credit," spoke the cashier's voice, more like a statement than a question.

"Uh- Credit." My eyes had drifted and locked on the tiles under my tennis shoes, so I unglued them, scanned my card and hurried from the store in a daze.

The car was unbearably stuffy, the AC filling it with cold relief. I laid my head back onto the gray seat and let my lungs depress. With my sigh, a tear escaped the corner of my eyes, which were once so bright with ambition, and traveled down my hot cheek. It felt like a sin to cry over what I did not have. Shouldn't I be happy, with a normal life like this, a perfectly fine husband like this, nice children like this?

The wheels must have spun themselves out of the parking lot and onto the road, because my hands did not drive the car. They were too occupied tap, tap, tapping away, pounding holes

into the steering wheel. For a moment as I drifted along a long stretch of highway, I let myself get lost in fantasy. Oh, I could almost touch it.

It was wrong, I knew it was, but I stopped the car, closed my eyes, and wished. I wanted red carpets and flashing lights and movie sets and the feeling of *performing*, of hearing the audience clap, the wonderful euphoria of a standing ovation. I wanted it so badly I could scream. And I did, right then in my car. It was a desperate, regretful scream. I hadn't screamed in a long time, and it was beautiful. I could feel it so crystal clear now, my heartbeat pounding in my ears and the smile creeping along my face.

I looked deranged to anyone who might have happened upon me on the side of the road, sitting in my car smiling like that.

But they didn't understand how I could feel it, the regretful passion. I felt it creeping up my neck, swallowing me whole. I ripped open the bag of oranges and peeled one, stuffing the sweet-smelling peels into an empty container in the console of my car. The tangy fruit filled my mouth and nose, creating a young, free feeling.

I wanted to get out of the car and run down the road, until I reached the stoic suburbs of Connecticut where I grew up. I could watch myself as I turned 19, as I met the man in the white button up at that stupid college party and gave up my dreams for him. I wanted to tell him he was boring. I knew he was boring when I met him, when I started dating him.

He was nothing like the people I had dated in high school, who were wild and fun and handsome, but he was *secure*. My father said he had a good handshake, and my mother shed a tear at our wedding. I thought that it was time to stop being silly and let go of my acting dreams, because they were never going to happen. Instead, I should find a good man, I told myself. I should settle down and buy a house in the suburbs with two big windows next to the red door,

and a big porch with a big fern in a little pot. And there I was. And I wished I wasn't.

So my tires dragged themselves home, and I left my heart in the pullout of that road. I could hear it still screaming as I drove off. It must have thought I might find it later and come back to it.

By the time I pulled into the smooth driveway of our two-story house, I was calm again. I had finished my "episode" and was ready to be the best wife I could. That was my dream now, I reminded myself, almost scoldingly. My car turned off and I stepped out into the smothering summer air.

As soon as I plucked the grocery bag out of the front seat, I heard a ripping sound. I looked down in horror as my paper bag tore and the open net of oranges spilled out onto the pavement, sending my precious fruit rolling away and out onto the street and into the garage. I began to pick them up, scrambling for the bright fruit, when I heard a terrible howl and turned around to see a speeding car ripping toward my oranges in the road. I watched wide-eyed as the fruit burst and the juice flew up into the air, landing in patterns on the pavement. I began to sob, collapsing onto my knees in the driveway. I heard the door of my house swing open and my husband ran out, his sneakers pounding.

"Jolie. What happened to you?"