

# Oranges, Blueberries, Cucumber, and Mint

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THE CYST BEHIND ANDY'S LEFT KNEE IS SOFT AS AN OVERRIPE PEAR, the veins and arteries blue and purple. She believes that the left side of the body is the feminine, dependent, side. The knee represents how tired her feminine side is of keeping track of everything, all the worry she creates due to living alone—*anxiety, heavy as bone, the sturdiness required in having to do it all.* She worries about lightning strikes and leaks in the hot water tank. And the dog about to die.

And sometimes the cyst retreats—where does it go when it's gone?—and the knee behaves, and she takes to the hills with her walking stick.

Andy sits beside the phone at the window, the long one in the kitchen where she can look out at the rose bush, an English rose that's gone wild. Her hair has gone wild, too, white and unruly; she sees its frayed aura in the glass. The impish fifth dimension, a gap where anything can happen, saved the song sparrow that wintered in the rose bush. When the stray cat came, the song sparrow's life wasn't affected; the deluded cat didn't think of the lurker in the rose bush as anything but entertainment. In the spring the song sparrow left to make his family. Later, in the fall, he will return—his third year—and, if the cat hasn't moved on, Andy will work again in that probability space, the fifth dimension the universe keeps for itself, beyond the three obvious spatial ones and the one set aside for relativity. In the fifth, randomness is expected, anything is possible, and, out there, time is leaky.

Andy turns seventy in three days. She weighs too much, and she's tired of chastising herself about it. The roll of her belly competes with her breasts. Her skin looks pickled in places. A baby doesn't imagine growing old. Parents, unintentionally cruel, bring a child into the world to share their misery. She grew up, slipped slowly down, and now drops into decay. The cyst tightens the skin, straightens the leg; even her ankle is swollen. She eats fried hash browns with sour cream, the fat-rich food a sign of fretting. Danuta, a young neighbour, phoned earlier and said that

for Andy's seventieth birthday there should be a party. "My knee," Andy said, her mouth budding excuses. Danuta put the kibosh on excuses. She said, "We'll have Pimm's Cup. The mint is overflowing its border. We'll do the party there, on your porch. A small number, everyone will want to come, so we will have to be exclusive. People might bring presents."

Danuta must think that Andy still cares about gifts or presents, anything in a box. More recycling, more fake smiling. You must be kidding. Andy reminds herself to not speak this truth, no matter the temptation. Look at her blessings: because of the forecast of hard rain, she didn't hang out the laundry, and because the power might go out, she'd purchased more candles, and early in the day, her aged dog did his business and is inside, in a torpor, on his blanket.

The guests arrive, so glad to have been invited. The conversation is quiet, refined, yet there is a woman in the party who has never tasted gin—never tasted gin's piquant bite?—and the whispers go round from mouth to merry mouth, and then the company takes turns kissing the cheek of the new-to-gin woman, who blushes. Her name is Ferrie Fey. She came to the party with someone who left early.

Ferrie Fey brought a gift, a bucket with two holes in it, one hole for the miseries you know about and the other for the ones you don't. You hang your head over the bucket and let the miseries fall out of your eyes, your nose, your mouth, your ears if necessary; that's the idea of the gift, though no one understands. It looks like a utility bucket, real metal, hard to find these days.

"I'll try the misery bucket," says one, the most forthright in her views about the plight of the poor around the world. She's a small woman, wound tight. She wears silver bracelets. She stands over Ferrie Fey's bucket, the two nail holes in the bottom slightly different in size. Decisions need to be made: would miseries begin to pile up if someone mixed up the holes? "I can't do this trick," the forthright woman admits to the rest, sipping their Pimm's. "I might do it wrong."

The salty wind from the sea blows in. The oak leaves shiver, clacking in the trees at the tops of the hills, and in the valley the golden-haired grasses twinkle and quiver.

"Nice naked knee," Andy's ex-lover whispers, touching his prune lips, sun-dried and calloused, to Andy's delicately plump cheek. His sudden

coming on to her with these intimate words makes her shudder, and a few goosebumps shimmer down her legs past the knee, which does need caressing. But those days are in the past.

Someone asks, "Is your knee bothering you again?"

"God damn right," says Andy, to break the mood. She stands, brushes aside the old man. "Hand me that bucket."

If she doesn't try the bucket—well, she *is* going to try the bucket, so there's no sense in imagining otherwise. She could talk all night, analyze away whatever virtues she has amassed, take away her generosity, and replace it with greed. The four dangerous words—disturbance, heedlessness, helplessness, fear—have so much power. Yet at just this moment in the bright showy autumnness, all the earth is alive—the rasping, noisy scrub jays are back, the roses are concentrated into precise red hips.

A perfect moment, such as this, brings memories—a meadow of wild sweet peas, a forest of spicy cedar, a mathematician from Stanford, a hurricane in the Maldives, horses loved and ridden, nights in the desert. Then a dark memory: someone's blood pressure at 191, a number with death in the digits, adding up to 11, mystical for a reason Andy can't remember. The hubbub on the porch doesn't allay her anxiety.

She begins to talk. "All my miseries will sink to the bottom of the bucket and out both the holes until they are gone." She glances at her guests and plunges in. She laughs and the bucket echoes.

She remembers all the places and events, the outings and parties she wasn't invited to (and these are just the ones she knows about), due to her nature, her crankiness in general, her mental isolation. The tears come suddenly, like the sharp relief of cumulonimbus clouds that split open and lead to thunder, the echoes galloping up the hills beyond the porch, beyond the misery bucket, the bottles of Pimm's, just beyond where anyone has to make a story and ruin it.

She weeps into the bucket, then looks up and finds that they are gone, the friends who are friends with each other. Empty glasses line the railing—glasses fragrant with twists of orange, mashes of mint, frozen blueberries, bits of cucumber; raspberry leaves lie soaked and dark at the bottoms. A tornado of understanding rushes through her body. All her friends were here, despite her harum-scarum life that, though it had its intimate blessings, has left her fundamentally alone. They came. They wished

her well. The empty glasses are filled with abundance, with approval. She sits in her chair, loosens the belt of her skirt, lets her knees part. The wind rustles along the deck. The leaves appear to come skittering, press at her calves and knees with their crisp edges. No need to worry about them, to water or rake them. Her heels perch against the rungs of the chair, her toes ground to the deck. The energy of the leaves shifts, fills in the spaces, the inner softness of her vaginal hole, the cavity behind her tailbone, the small dent left by chicken pox—the shock of that pock remembered. Her knees vibrate as they bend. The over-ripe pear-soft cyst cowers and withdraws. The leaves are a gift of nature spinning into her inner nature, and then out her belly button along her thighs where the skin is rough from horses' flanks and the wearing of jeans. Gold is the colour of gratitude; the sweet creases of burnished leaves enter, like a vision, into the universe that is her mind.