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**Lemon**

Novel

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It was a cool, green part of the world. It always smelt of rain, though it seldom fell. When spring arrived in the valleys, the withered, lean world of winter became big and inhabitable again, but anyone who looked up at the mountain peaks could still freeze, even in summer. The cats prowled the meadows, sat in the growing grass and waited for the mice, like a beautiful death in the sunshine. The village was so small that if you looked around, you were never sure whether everyone knew everyone or no one knew no one, not even under your own roof. The older people told the children to greet all the men on the street, saying you could never be sure who your father was. There were stories everywhere, behind which doors were swiftly shut. Behind one, a family had been waiting years for a girl that had disappeared, and jumped every time an unfamiliar child in a blue dress walked along the road. Behind another, a man had been living in the tool cellar since his wife had moved her lover into the house. There were houses where the windows remained closed, only opening when somebody died, to allow the soul to escape. The village's inhabitants just needed to glance down the street to know when death was arriving in or departing these rooms. A

window flung wide-open was its final sign, prompting the women to reach for their salt and sugar and to begin to bake, soon putting a warm cake on the doorstep as a testament to their sympathy.

The Drachs lived at the edge of the village, sufficiently isolated to not see anyone, but, if they went around the right corner, to have one foot in a neighbour's front room. The house Lilly Drach had inherited after her parents' early death was beautiful in an unconventional way, but unfinished and dirty. There were no means for repairs or improvements; money was so scarce they didn't speak of it, but instead immediately began to shout once discussing it became unavoidable. When you looked closely, the house was aslant, twisted by the wind as though it had bowed a few centimetres in a storm, tree-like, and never found its way back to its upright state. It looked like a doll's house with its wooden veranda and filigree staircase, the shapes too delicate for the roughness of the region and village. A large parasol next to the front door bloomed in summer and slept in winter, wrapped flimsily around itself, a watchman on the steps.

As soon as you stepped through the door, you were hit by the smell of old fabric, perfume and dust. The floor, made of ship planks, creaked only beneath some footsteps, and it was like racing across a mysterious piano, the boards like wooden keys that sometimes chimed and sometimes stayed silent when August ran barefoot through the rooms, so wildly that he occasionally got splinters in the soles of his feet, which his mother then removed with a sewing needle, glasses perched on her nose. The house was a cheap cabinet of curiosities, filled with junk but no treasure, and August's father did his best to trade in it. On weekends he drove to flea markets, loaded the van full and returned with almost the same quantity of items; sometimes more, if he'd discovered something he thought he could sell more expensively elsewhere.

The house was so full to bursting there was barely space for its inhabitants, every nook and cranny filled with flea market wares, found curiosities and heirlooms that they hadn't managed to escape. Some pieces of furniture were like ghosts revealing the past: the plump upholstered chair whose threadbare arms called to mind the heavy forearms of its previous owner, the flowery plastic tablecloth on the kitchen table with the burn hole you could tuck your little finger into and believe you still felt the heat of the cigarette. Around the long table stood seven mismatched chairs, as though each person needed their own place that fit them alone, and record covers in neon colours hung from thin nails on the walls. Canaries as colourful as bonbons sat in a cage by the window, studying themselves in their small, dangling mirrors with their heads tilted, and even August's mother checked her lipstick in the tiny reflection when she was feeding them. The heavy mullioned windows behind reminded August of the priest's sweeping gestures at Sunday service, the sign of the cross in the name of the Father, from top to bottom and from left to right, an eternal blessing of the landscape. They divided the view, the sky, and the apple orchard into rectangles, inside and outside overlapping, and anyone looking out saw the meadow through the fingerprints on the windowpanes.

[...]

It was a childhood that taught him to lie. Was that you, his father would ask, and August nodded or shook his head and soon understood that no answer was ever the right one. If he said no, it meant: Are you calling your father a liar; if he said yes, the response was: I knew it. Guilt wasn't a personal performance in this world, but something assigned by others, a little package you couldn't refuse, a stone that was placed secretly each night deep in your trouser pocket, making you slump beneath its weight during the day. Everyone lied to one

another in this house, and not least to themselves, and every additional lie made them greedy to believe the next one too. Everything will be fine, August heard his parents say. It was a belief against all probability; a hope against all experience. It required a forgetfulness, a gap in memory where a nice moment swallowed the bad one preceding it. His mother wouldn't say a single ill word about his father, and never stood up to him in his rages, gazing lethargically into herself instead, but as soon as they were over, she would hurry to August, red-cheeked, to shower him with tenderness. She seemed almost happy to have finally found occasion for her comfort, as though she had been saving up unflinching hand movements through her great inertia for precisely those moments when she daubed a bruise with rubbing alcohol, or popped a sweet butterscotch into the crying child's mouth. She ran her fingers through her hair, used words she otherwise avoided, spoke assertively as though she were someone else, and surrendered to her own metamorphosis with the contented look of those who have finally destroyed the prison bars of their own existence and are free. August fell into his father's hands, and into his mother's outstretched arms. His parents were a lenticular image of protection and threat, a Janus-faced being with one cold and one sympathetic face. It was a ritual of violence and tenderness, a fateful entanglement of emotion, and August believed in his mother's love, believed her lies with the desperation of the un-rescued, the un-rescuable. And when she gripped him by his shoulders, looked at him and asked whether it was all better now, he couldn't help but stare back earnestly and tell the next untruth.

School was the only place August didn't need to make anything up, because instead of asking about his injuries when they became visible beneath a slipped sleeve, the teachers supplied their own answers, looked at him and merely said: Did you fall down the stairs again, did the dog get you again, weren't you brave, August. It didn't occur to him to expect anything else from them, and his grades were good enough that they didn't hassle him like they did other unfortunates. He often thought of the classmate who couldn't see well, how

one day the teacher had torn the glasses off another boy and put them over the poorly-sighted child's own glasses, and how this boy had sat there with two pairs of glasses, tears running out beneath them, and the teacher had yelled in front of the board: Can you still not see it? The teachers usually left August in peace; his intellect and correct answers protected him. He sat quietly in his seat and studied his surroundings out of the corner of his eye, without stirring, and only moved once he felt sufficiently unseen. No one noticed him. Singing was the only thing he steadfastly refused to do; despite all threats and reprimands, not a sound was ever heard from him in music class.

At home, his mother also set traps for him, giving him two pullovers for Christmas and then, on each day he wore one of them, acting hurt that he wasn't wearing the other. In the evenings, when she sat on his bed after reading him bedtime stories, she sometimes asked who he preferred, wanting to know: If the house were on fire, who would you save if you could only save one person, your father or me, but August was already smart enough to sense an ambush lurking in the greater love, and so he always said: the dog. They were lessons learnt a million times over. Then Lilly Drach would pull a face, rub her finger joints, wish him goodnight in a shrill voice and leave the room, only to ask the same question again a few days later.

When she made up bedtime stories for August in the evenings or read to him from books of fairytales, life flowed into her, she who during the day sat quietly with her meagre life and devout fear at the window or in front of the television. She threw herself into the world of myths and legends with the same fervour she attended her son's injuries, as though they were just comfort in another form. When the heroes conquered the mission that stood between them and life-long happiness, she beamed as though it weren't just the character's accomplishment, but hers too, as though she had slain the monster, rescued damsels, towns, entire kingdoms, as though her destiny had also been fulfilled, once and for all, in the

narrative. The books she had hoarded like treasure beneath her bed in her own childhood were mottled and well-thumbed, rubbed thin where she had excitedly turned the pages to see, for the hundredth time, what would happen on the next page. You can never assume a happy ending, she whispered to August, who sometimes impatiently wanted to skip to the end.

His favourites were the fairytales in which human beings were transformed into animals. From these he drew his own conclusions, they changed his child's eye view of the creatures in the village. From then on, he presumed a mysterious fate in every one, half in earnest, half in jest, searching to see whether the raven didn't perhaps laugh like the missing girl, or the horse cast the shadow of a woman, and whenever he saw the doctor's dachshund on the street, he looked at it inquisitively and pondered who could be hiding in its little body and how they might be revealed. And was the deer in the twilight not in fact Little Brother from the Grimms' folktale, gazing around alertly before it leapt away into the indistinct darkness; that of the forest and of the world. August knew that every transformation was an act of violence. At the moments in the fairytales when the bewitched returned to their original bodies, experiencing the transformation to themselves, when the princess threw the frog against the wall or the hero struck off the white cat's head, he always asked himself whether the metamorphosis wasn't also possible in reverse, whether one day, after his father had left his room, he wouldn't perhaps reawaken as a dog.

Because the dogs had it good. They received all the stray, unwanted love in that house on the edge of the village, becoming substitute recipients for all the unclaimed conciliatory gestures. Everyone let out their loneliness to them. The humans comforted themselves with their warmth, bent down to them under the table, sat with them on the floor, stroked their backs again and again, and it was the comfort of those who, the needier they themselves were, loved another all the more devotedly. The lean, smooth beasts with their greying snouts patiently let it flow over them; only when the love became too much did they turn their heads

and very slowly pad away. Often Lilly Drach gave them bites or an entire plate from supper, which she didn't eat either out of sorrow or principle, and wrapped her arms around them, and August took them to bed with him, where they slept by his feet and sometimes barked in their dreams, which they – too old now – no longer did during the day. It was his father, though, who had the strangest relationship with them. If he felt misunderstood by his wife and son, he gave the dogs lectures about the world, which increased in length and volume if he'd been drinking, because then he became maudlin and hoarse and pitied himself in a way that no one else would have been capable of. He drank to himself and the dead, his ghosts, to whom he showed never-ending respect, and toasted the dogs with his raised glass. Like many people, he gave the animals a hang-dog look more often than the other way around. Then he would preach from the kitchen table to the hounds at his feet with the earnestness of those who see themselves as well-informed, enlightened, as ventriloquists of the unrecognised; he constructed complex theories about money and politics; revealed to them his secrets, took them hesitantly into his confidence, bound them to strict silence and, in closing, poured his heart out about his botched life. They were the best audience, enthralled and underwhelmed in equal measure. Their silent attentiveness felt to him like the kind of great approval the world had denied him. Listen, he reasoned, I'm a good person, but the world is bad. You can't be someone here, he would add, raising his finger in the air and eventually yelling at the beasts, his voice cracking in agitation: Where I live, you're nobody.

Once he had calmed down, overcome the pain and become cocky in the drunken stupor of a long night, he began to perform magic tricks for the dogs. Hiding behind the door, August saw his father juggling apples, in his country fête mood, watched him make the red and yellow fruits fly through the air between two gulps of schnapps, reach into the drawer and pull out tennis balls and treats, only to make them vanish again before the animals' eyes. If he were in high spirits, he had them watch a slice of sausage in thimblery and revelled in

their distress when they expectantly nudged the wrong coffee cup with their snouts and found nothing beneath but yawning emptiness. Later, after his father was gone, August often thought about the nocturnal hocus-pocus, the apple juggling in the light of the kitchen lamp, the art of disappearance; and about how the blank space he had left behind hurt less than his presence.

[...]

A new city only becomes a home at that moment when you love another person in it. To think of someone longingly is to suddenly belong somewhere. Your feet root down into the ground so the next gust of wind doesn't blow you away, so the scam of some great idea doesn't bowl you over, so centrifugal force doesn't fling you out into the world. Strangers that were unreadable a moment ago, unwelcoming walls, faces, the heavens and houses burst open, and the paths now lead somewhere. Where previously you stood at a vague distance, all of a sudden everything belongs to you, as though a benevolent God had personally devoted them to you. Every detail on the street is directed at you – a window that opens, an ugly corner that becomes bearable, the sudden tenderness of a child running after someone's dog with its umbrella in the midst of a storm, so the animal doesn't get wet.

This is how it was for August Drach when he first met Ava. It was so late at night that the morning already glowed on the peoples' faces as they came through the door. She stumbled over a coat that had fallen to the floor from the rack, staggered, was suddenly caught and saw the embarrassed joy of a person who had accomplished something surprising, and to whom the world was, for once, graciously giving the opportunity to do something completely and utterly right. August was so taken with the stumbling woman that he didn't want to let her go; she lay there so pleasantly in his arms, momentarily dazed to have been



saved from falling. Strange pride at the successful moment coursed through August, making him stand bolt upright, and his face glowed so in the darkness of the dining area that it almost looked as though somebody had lit one end of the thin man like the tip of a cigarette. And when she not only smiled before sitting down with her companions at one of the corner tables, but also came back alone a few days later, he could barely believe his luck.

There's the kind of emotion that arises when somebody who always wanted to win, wins, and the kind that comes when somebody who always wanted to win, loses. August was moved by himself, by the triumph of having won the affections of the woman from the bar, a woman who was some years older than him. Thinking of how she looked at him from the side when she sat waiting at the counter with a bottle of beer, he was almost moved to tears. He felt that, all at once, he was somebody. She seemed like the great victory the years had made him need so much. For this reason, he soon went to the garage chapel every afternoon, joining those who were praying among the black tyres, or dropped to his knees, a cigarette nervously in his hand, to mumble his plea that the woman would come back again and again, never go away and belong to him completely. He knew nothing about God, but thought you could never know what good it might do to ask this favour, to demand it, because he wanted to use every means available to strengthen the fate. He remembered how his own mother and the mother of the missing child had turned in great despair to higher powers; he remembered the clamoured prayers of the two figures beneath the apple tree, their offers of trade with the universe. They had been willing to give everything. Their pleas for the girl's return had burst out of them, panicked, loud and confused. *Take what you want*, they had cried to the heavens and the apples. But they had negotiated poorly, it seemed to him; their need had been greater than the power they were appealing to. August wanted to learn from their simple-mindedness, do better and show greater negotiation skills with the gods between the car tyres. Because he was sceptical of everything that was vocalised, he fine-tuned the prayers and pleas as though

they were a state treaty, wrestled with the correct wording of his request so it didn't contain anything careless that could become his undoing, or a formulation with which he might unwittingly be undersigning consequential misfortune. Intimacy came at a price; this knowing hovered above his upturned face as an experience without name, a vague memory. With trickery and great care, he invoked the Unknown, the Almighty, suspecting there was no failure more terrible than an incorrectly fulfilled longing. He was determined not to make a mistake; he feared his request being ineffective if it were too imprecise, or, in the worst case, the Lord God leading him to hell in the most beautiful way, or lifting him up only so he would later fall from a greater height. It felt odd when he heard himself, next to the cross with the hung-up children's coats in the garage, praying so vehemently for a person he barely knew, but he didn't know who else to turn to. He didn't want to take a single risk. He wanted Ava.