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ABIGAIL ALLEN

Love is Lemons

A lemon lozenge on my tongue, I lean into the back of the couch, melting into the pillows like the belly of a gooey egg on a scalding pan. I feel myself curl. I forget I'm in the room with Peter. His hair is being braided by Georgia and Amy, who are giggling like the typical college girls they are. His watery green eyes laugh as their fingers tug on his long locks. I watch Steve and Chris and Felicity play Monopoly on the grubby carpet. A comb and a pizza crust and a wad of flattened gum the size of a quarter are stuck to the fibers. Felicity looks over at me and smiles. My back sinks deeper into the cushions, my skin softening, scratching with the fibers, tingling as they sew into my flesh, needle bobbing under the layers of muscle and liquids. I unwrap another lemon lozenge and fold it under my tongue, close my eyes, and let myself turn into a seat for someone else.

“Oh, my God, look at the picture she just sent.”

I open my eyes, the couch fibers stretching white over my eyelids. Peter takes Amy's phone from her and laughs.

“Was that yesterday? How'd she know we were there?”

Amy combs her fingers through her blond streaks. I self-consciously touch the strands of my boyish hair tangled with couch lint.

“Maybe she followed us,” she says. “It's not hard spotting us in a crowd.”

“The Deadly Blond Duo,” Peter says.

“Power to the blondes.”

They bump fists together. I feel a patch of soft cushion squeeze between my ribs. The lemon lozenge swirls inside my mouth—sticky yellow syrup. I think about my existence as a chair and not about Peter.

Felicity shouts in excitement. Her properties are crowded with plastic buildings. Steve scoffs.

“It's because of that stupid chance card!”

“I’ll avenge you, Steve,” Chris says. “I’m not out of this yet.”

“Good luck,” Felicity says. “I’m about to make it rain.”

Steve raises one of his brows.

“Just remember, Felicity, we all pay the bank in the end.”

“Could you embroider that into a pillow for me?” she asks.

Chris laughs.

“Did you make that up or read it on a gum wrapper?” he says.

“Sometimes I’m deep, guys,” Steve says.

Felicity snorts.

“Yeah, deep in debt.”

I want to rip apart the cushions of the couch. Watching Peter watch Amy and ignoring it all, blurring their faces to fleshy smears, and shredding the couch fibers.

I peel away from the couch, wincing as the grid of fabric tears from my skin. Peter looks up at me, his freckled cheeks flaring red. I don’t know why. I hardly know him.

“I should get going,” I say.

They all stand up and walk me to the door, talking at once, blurs of white noise. The last time I will see them all, most likely. Peter hangs back and waits until the rest of them have hugged and cried with me, and then he steps forward.

“Drive safe, Star-catcher,” he says.

Peter squeezes my shoulder and turns away. I blink to keep myself steady, to remember that he means nothing to me. I open the door and slip outside.

It’s just like me to imagine life is a movie, to pretend Peter will come out after me and shout, “Hey!” and walk me to my car just a hundred feet away. His breath, sweet and tangy like the lemon lozenge under my tongue, filling up my lungs, and his dumb, frizzy blond braid catching the light from the moon. We’d stand there leaning against the car, talking about nothing, and then he would hug me, longer than proper, and then walk fast back inside, back to his yellow-haired goddess, away from the short-haired chick with her pink pick-up truck.

I linger by the driver’s door, watching the house. The sound of faint laughter mingles with a guitar and singing prickles my hair. I smile and blow that beautiful boy a kiss in the darkness where he cannot see who sent it. Crunching on the last small melt of lozenge, I open the door and slip inside the car.

My truck rolls away into the night, a slow pink beetle crawling over the dirt road. Somewhere inside the cabin, Peter feels a tiny prickle on his cheek, where my kiss has landed.

I wake up seven months later in the middle of the night, with the image of Peter burned into my brain. His arms coil around me, his throat smelling like apples and peaches and vinegar; he kisses me until everything's blurred. The world sparkles like sapphires as he leads me to a bed sewn of butterfly wings and drags my soul over his. I jolt awake before he has a chance to bring me closer.

"Oh no," I whisper.

The night is quiet and warm. I sit at the edge of my bed and peer out the window, willing his name to die in my memory. *Peter. Peter.* He's always there, lingering, a ghostly thing—white and smooth like the shell of a coffin. I put my lips to the cool glass and close my eyes. He takes shape under my mouth, and I sink into his cold chest, his bare heart. *Peter.*

"Don't haunt me," I say. "Don't be near in my mind and not in life."

Outside the apartment a man is smoking. It's 2:00 a.m., and he's taking a long, sweeping drag on his cigarette. The smoke curls into whispers of words, formless brown letters. I squeeze my hands around my waist. How can a man, upon a chance meeting in summer, enter my mind after leaving my life?

I watch the sun come up. It's bright pink like the soft wet petals of a rose unfurled. It scatters stripes of orange into the trees and sends golden beams snaking up along my window, crawling into my room, spiraling around my legs.

Peter's face appears in the clouds, and I bite my lip so hard I'll go to the hospital for stitches in fifteen minutes.

"Well, I'm just glad they haven't gotten married yet," Felicity says. She crunches on the ice cubes rolling around in her glass. "How long have they dated? Since the end of summer? That's like eight or nine months."

I smile and look out at the river below the balcony, at the sailboats with their bright crayon-colored sails and striped bellies.

"That's a modest time to date someone," I say. "Anything less is a concern."

Peter.

I feel the thick scar left on my lip from months before. Felicity studies my face and I avoid the confrontation by taking up an origami project with the edges of my napkin. The bartender is humming and washing the empty counter space. The restaurant is nearly empty apart from Felicity and me and a lone college student at the bar. I pick up the dessert menu and browse the selections.

"You're hiding something from me," Felicity says.

"I'm not hiding anything from you," I say. The waiter walks by and places the bill on the end of the table. I grab it from Felicity's outstretched hands.

“Except for this bill.” I stuff my credit card in the black-lipped folder and wave the waiter over again.

“You lie,” Felicity says. “I know because you have a scar on your lip you haven’t mentioned yet. And I know that has something to do with it.”

“Why don’t you want Georgia and Steve to get married?”

Felicity cocks her head and crosses her arms. “Did you know Amy and Peter are dating?” she asks.

My heart crumples in my chest. Felicity sees it in my face instantly. She grabs my hand.

“Star, are you okay? What’s wrong?”

I look across the water and see the sun bathe the water in blood as it sets. The clouds bruise and somewhere a gull shrieks. Without sound, I murmur, “I didn’t know.”

My fingers shake as I slip my hand into my pocket and grab a lemon lozenge. I don’t have any left. My tongue feels sour.

When I get home, I deactivate all my social media. If they die, I will never know. Perhaps they already have.

“Your article is incredible,” Ryan says. “A fascinating read. It reminds me of Arnold or Vico.” He grins. “But with the smugness and sarcasm of Nietzsche.”

I smile and wrap my hands around my mug. My lemony perfume clashes with the gritty coffee stench of the café we sit in. Ryan is drinking black coffee from a paper cup. I watch his lips as he lifts the cup to his mouth. There’s something uninviting about his lips, how *unlovely* they are. They don’t scream or beg to be kissed.

Ryan notices me staring.

“What?” he asks.

I shake my head. Outside, fall is dying away; a couple on the street crunch over the brittle skeletons of leaves. They swing their entwined hands back and forth, giggling, shivering, and huddling together in the cold, in the summer, in the seasons of their love. Ryan watches me still; I try to ignore him but at this point, doing anything around him is dangerous.

“You’re a brilliant writer, Star,” Ryan says. There is something serious in his voice that makes me look at him. His eyes are soft and fierce; my stomach feels sick. “You’ve got a way about words. The way you thread them together—it’s poetry.”

Ryan’s face blurs. My body sags against the seat. Isn’t this what I want? Someone who loves poetry and stars?

Ryan reaches for my hand across the table.

“We’ve been friends for a while now,” he says, “and it seems I get a little closer to you every time—”

I’ve never told him about my dreams.

“—never met anyone I’ve liked so much, that I—I’ve, cared about—”

I have never told him about Peter and the summer he carved my heart out and kept it for himself.

“—I think about you all the time. That short hair and those, those eyes—”

Ryan hates lozenges. I’ve never told him about the nickname.

“—I want to date you, Star. Because, because I love you.”

It’s cruel to have let him go on so long. Not his speech, but his friendship. I knew from the beginning he would fall in love with me. We’re a perfect match. I don’t have any reasons to refuse him, yet I do every time.

Ryan’s smile wavers, nervous, clicking as time pours on. I feel heat from tears prickle my eyes. My stomach is seasick. Peter is dating Amy still, for all I know. It’s evil to keep the dream living in my mind, and it’s dangerous. But his memory has become wedged into my brain; there’s no carving him out without destroying me.

“I can’t, Ryan,” I say, pulling my hand away, stuffing it into a pocket and drawing out a lemon lozenge. My voice cracks. “You know why I can’t.”

“No, I don’t. I don’t know why because you never say,” Ryan snaps. He frowns. “You kissed me. Why did you kiss me?”

I had. I had kissed him. Under the fireworks at the summer festival. I remember thinking I was kissing him, I was kissing Ryan, but after I had pulled away and opened my eyes and looked up to Ryan’s face, I was disappointed. That night I had gone home and tried to stay awake, to keep me from dreaming. But then Peter asked me to dance in the rain and I began to snore.

I squeeze my eyes shut, silencing my tears.

“Ryan, you deserve—”

“Yes, I *deserve* better,” Ryan says, his voice sharp. “I deserve someone who returns my affection. Well, then, why do I fall for women who never do?”

He slides out of the booth. I cover my mouth with my hands, staring out the window. At first, I think it’s raining but realize it’s my tears on the glass. Ryan lingers by the table, watching me and shaking his head.

“What is it, Star?” he asks. “What are you holding onto?”

I remember my last dream, where Peter pulls me next to a roaring fire and reads me fairy tales. His hair is soft at my neck; I am a puddle in his lap.

“I’m a fool, Ryan,” I say. “My heart was gone a long time ago.”

Ryan abandons me in my booth, tears running down the windowpane, silent sobs in my lemon tea. I unwrap lozenge after lozenge and stuff them into my mouth, hoping to choke. My wish comes true and a woman from around the counter drags me out of the booth and does the Heimlich until

the lozenges land on the floor, rolling around like wet yellow marbles. I sob and am not blamed—everyone thinks my tears are from shock.

My body feels cool, coated in the emerald dress that trembles along my thighs and the dripping pearls rumbling along my exposed collarbone. I resemble a sea creature, some wet green thing that crawled up from exotic shores with blood-red lips and blue flesh. My short brown hair curls around my ears. I grin and turn my chin, pretending I am confident when I'm not. *Be unforgiveable.*

It's been a little over a year since I've seen them all, besides Felicity, who visits and calls often. The time and distance don't stop the dreams from coming—Peter, hiding in birch trees until their flesh turns bright blue and their branches are heavy with peaches. Peter, dancing in fountains at night with me, the bottoms coated in layers of glimmering coins. Peter, kissing me up and down, whispering poetry into my throat, reading me scripture and running his hands through my short hair. I've dreamt us on wires, pulled tight from the tip of the Eiffel Tower to the top of the Empire State Building. I've dreamt of his hair—golden and long, curly tassels rustling over his shoulders. I've dreamt of us meeting again—somewhere random, like Target or Walgreens—me picking up a stash of lemon lozenges and him looking for a new fridge magnet to put in his apartment. We would bump into each other in the makeup aisle—I'd be looking for lipstick and he liked to buy lemon-flavored lip balm.

"Why, if it isn't Star-catcher," Peter would say, stepping toward me and standing too close in real life but far away in a dream. His hands would smooth over my short hair. "I still dream of you." He'd kiss me lightly on the forehead.

I remember waking up from that dream and thinking that I'd never been kissed on the forehead by a man before.

My truck crunches over familiar dirt on familiar roads that lead toward the cabin, toward the lake. The stars are glorious, charged with electricity and light, green and violet like a Mardi Gras parade in the sky. I smile and tighten my hands on the wheel, bracing myself. *Peter.*

I don't understand it. I hardly talked to him when he was still in my life. He's a stranger. And yet...and yet...

I punch the radio on. The song is something stupid, something romantic and tragic, buttered and greased with the language of love. My hand hovers over the dial. I don't end up changing it until an Adele song comes on.

The cabin rolls into view. I park the car and turn off the ignition. Popping in a lemon lozenge, I sit in the cooling car, staring at the light pooling from

the windows. After a moment of silence for the dead memories I'd buried there, I step out of the car and head up toward the cabin.

The door swings open and bodies rush at me with shouts and squeals of excitement. Felicity pulls me into a hug, Steve and Georgia drape their arms across my shoulders, Chris pinches my cheek, Amy squeezes my hand and, and—

“Star.”

His voice in my dreams is thick, muddled, coarse, sexy. Peter grins beyond the unfolding crowd, his hands stuffed in his suit, curls brushing his shoulders. He says my name again and it's better than the nightmares—velvet, deep and rich and liquefied like scalding tequila. He steps toward me and wraps his arms around me and—

And I swear it's like he kissed me.

Something burning soft, infinite. His curls breathing into my neck. His hands pressing my back. His cheek rubbing into mine—fire versus flames. I gasp for air, my body buzzing, tingling, rippling, shivers inside my throat. My lozenge turns to yellow ooze on my tongue.

Peter pulls away, his grin just as big, no, bigger—faint, trembling, jittery. He steps back.

“How are you, Star-catcher?” he asks. His mouth twitches. “Do you get called that anymore?”

“No,” I say. Our eyes lock. “Not anymore.”

The night is filled with wine and hot food and laughter. I sit on the couch, in the same fold of cushion in which I'd been wilting a year ago, where I watched the similar timeline of events unfurl: Steve and Chris and Felicity setting up a game of Monopoly, Georgia and Amy begging Peter for his hair.

I watch Amy. Her face has thickened, her hair's lobbed shorter, and there's a dark smudge of a scar near her neck. I lick my lip where my scar is. Boys give girls scars, I decide, and God heals them. She's in a yellow dress, almost the color of the lozenges in my pockets but less sweet, and the back zipper is slightly undone, the fabric folding like origami along her spine. Peter is laughing with Georgia, his eyes on her until Amy turns, and he notices the zipper. I ignore the reckless tingling that pricks my skin. But how curious I am.

“Oh, Amy, your zipper came undone, let me get it,” Georgia says. She reaches over and pulls it up again. A boyfriend would've done it without question.

Peter has turned away, watching the game of Monopoly.

“I'm going to step outside for minute,” he says.

Amy ignores Peter and giggles with Georgia. I swallow my smile and watch Peter start toward the door. He glances at me; the glimmer in his eyes and rustle of his curls is unmistakable. He nods once and slips outside.

I know things will change if I go to him or don't. Two turns that spin and spiral and never collide again. He's giving me the option.

But I remember that stupid night when the movie reeled in my brain, and he never chased after me. Over and over again, he didn't walk, run, sprint down the steps and hug, press, hold me against the car door and murmur, "May I see you, may I kiss you, may I adore you?" Over and over the sleeping woods had answered: *No, no, never*. The loveliest constellations had burned into the sky with the warmest, sweetest summer air, and he had decided not to come. So will I go? Will it be begging if I do?

Peter stands on the porch, leaning against the railing, fingers knotting a loose string on his sleeve. The air breathes through his hair; his curls float like golden feathers, cool and soft in the gray moonlight. Beautiful stranger, why do you want me to come?

"May I have a lozenge?" Peter asks. He stares straight ahead. The lake is a silver puddle shivering under the moon's beams. The warbled sound of a bird echoes from a tree. I lean on the railing beside him.

"How did you know I had any?" I ask.

Peter smiles.

"What is Star without her lemons?"

I cough to hide my smile. *Be unforgivable tonight.*

"Amy," I say.

Peter looks over at me. His gaze forces me to look at him, so I do, stoically, tightly. He steps toward me, and I swallow my thundering heartbeat.

"I hardly know you," he says.

"I know."

"And you barely know me."

"Yes."

We stare at each other. I hate the silence—I want small talk. Stupid talking, dumb words, unforgiving. Peter's eyes begin to melt, moonbeams softening the edges. I don't know what to say. I turn toward the lake and rehearse my lines over and over and over in my head: *be unforgiving tonight, unforgiving.*

"Can I see you again, Star?"

The words lash surprise against my body. I look at him in alarm. Is there no Amy? Did he only want to catch a star?

"What do you mean?" I ask.

Peter shakes his head. He looks like an angel, that halo of gold.

"I never talked to you when we had a whole summer together and I've regretted it ever since. I was a stupid guy who passed up the chance to talk to a Star who loves lemons."

I forget my lines.

"Yes," I say. "I'd like to see you too."

It doesn't happen the way I have always pictured it.

He doesn't talk about my writing or call me a poet or ask to kiss me, and the world doesn't uninvent itself, and I don't make his mouth taste like lemons, but he does reach for my hand, and I do give him a lozenge, and we suck on our candy as Peter tells a story about visiting his sister in Ohio at Christmas.