

# Lemon Scent

## I. PAISLEYS IN THE SPACES BETWEEN

Her pale brown hands, skin fine and smooth like brushed silk, clutch an oval silver tray against her yellow sari in the area of her navel, indenting lightly. I look down at her offering – faintly wrinkled reddish black prunes. Careful not to linger to contemplate the shape of the hands, the impeccably manicured shiny-shell-pink fingernails, I concentrate, instead, on spaces between the score of healthy-looking prunes slit slightly and stuffed plump with peanut butter, the slits sealed over with firm pink icing. The spaces between the prunes reveal a white, linen-textured paper doily embossed with low relief paisleys.

The outer edge of her oval tray brushes against the area of my navel. Above the tray there is a heat growing, filling the space between her and me, and the smell of her cologne on fire thickens to fill up the space. I trace paisleys in the spaces between the prunes with my eyes.

I am careful not to imagine the warm smell of her skin, behind her ears, on the back of her neck. Grasping the tray tightly with her right hand, she obscures my paisleys with her left, fills my view with her hand. Between thumb and middle finger she picks up a prune. Her forefinger guides it from behind up toward my mouth.

I am careful not to look into her eyes.

A little shaft of light glimmers off the band of her gold wedding ring as it catches the light from another room. As her hand reaches my mouth I look over her shoulder to the other room. Her husband stands leaning against a wall sipping his drink, chatting with his friends. I barely open my mouth and her cologne rushes against the back of my throat. Her fingers touch my lips. My tongue flits against her forefinger. The heat and smell of her cologne, like a pounding surf, fill up my mind.

I am careful not to linger.

## 2. THE GESTURE OF DEEP CONCERN

He looks out the kitchen window with the phone pressed to his ear. Down the hill from that side of his house run miles and miles of undeveloped forested land – wild samaan, giant ferns, ginger lilies, bird-of-paradise bushes and palm trees, all meshed in suffocating philodendron vines – meeting the sea in the distance.

He doesn't really see what he is staring at. Level with his eyes is the horizon line where the faint sliver of white sea butts against the white sky.

His voice is distant, fading in and out of the bad telephone connection. His edges are softened with a gesture of deep concern.

"...has everything she could ever want but ... I don't understand ... is sulking, her depression again, you know ... I am going out for some drinks with the guys from work tonight, so please come over. Spend the evening with her ... I'll be back late, very late. Spend the night. Lately she only ever laughs when she is with you ... I can count on you, can't I...? I don't want her to

be unhappy...."

He pauses, breathing in faint traces of his wife's lemon-scented cologne that lingers around the mouthpiece of the phone. Reaching across meandering miles of rough country roads, the line's crackling ceases long enough for him to utter a scared, masked warning: "I must not lose her."

He hangs up the telephone, shoves his cold hands into the back pockets of his blue jeans, and absently looks out the window across the rolling green lawn, dotted here and there with lone hibiscus and croton that his wife conscientiously tends, to the wire and concrete fence that surrounds his property.

He stops at the door of their bedroom before entering and anxiously watches her, his prized exquisite accomplishment, envy of his men friends, huddled in a lifeless puddle on the bed. Standing in the doorway he is not fully at ease informing her that soon he will be leaving and that he has invited Anita over to keep her company for the evening.

An image of Anita and his wife talking intently and at length, almost shyly, at a party recently, comes to his mind. She seems to sizzle with life in Anita's presence. He hopes that his gesture will charm her to him. He sees her chest flutter. Her breathing quickens noticeably.

She uncurls herself and slowly emerges from the bed. He walks over to her and reaches hopefully for her waist, but she glides in and out of his fingers before he can pull her towards him. Knots of fear are beginning to cramp his stomach. Gradually his eyes harden, redden with anger.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, pulling on heavy grey-and-red sports socks, twisting and shoving his feet into greying leather running shoes, he glances up at her every few seconds.

At her dresser she stands leaning in toward the mirror, brush-

ing her long, wavy black hair until it fluffs out light and full around her face and down her back. He has the impression that she is brushing out her hair more thoroughly than usual. He watches her face in the mirror, hoping that she will look over at his pleading face. Without taking her eyes away from her face in the mirror, she offers him a cup of tea before he leaves, but he can feel that her intention to make it is weak and unwilling.

From his stillness in the room, she knows that he is watching her as she readies herself for Anita's visit. Nervously she rambles, saying that if it rains the eaves on the roof will overflow because they need to be cleared of the leaves shedding from the poui tree in the back yard. He does not answer.

He watches her shake the bottle of lemon cologne into her hand. She rubs both hands together lightly, quickly dabs behind her ears and pats her neck, running her hands down onto her chest, the palms of her hands brushing her breasts. She pours more cologne into her hand and rubs it on the small mound of her stomach, massaging it. When she turns to walk over to her closet he gets up and crosses over to the dresser to brush his hair. Looking straight into the mirror at his own reflection, he says more loudly than is necessary, "I'm really glad that you have such a good friend in Anita."

She pulls a dress so forcefully off its hanger that the hanger springs away, snapping off the metal rod and clanging to the wooden floor. He continues, "I wonder why she isn't yet married. She is a bit of a tomboy ... not exactly appealing to a man. Do you think she is attractive?"

With her face still facing the open closet, she manages to pull up the zipper on the back of her dress by herself. He walks over to her and puts his hands on her waist. He turns her around and cups her face with his hand. With half a grin, as if cautioning

her, he adds, "You know, she might be one of those types who likes only women."

He drops one hand to his side and with the other he grabs her face along her thin sharp jaw line and pulls her face up to his. Uncured sharp lemon scent settles bitterly on the back of his tongue. With his lips almost against hers he whispers, "If I ever find out that you two have slept together I will kill you both."

He presses his opened mouth onto hers, pulling her lower lip into his mouth briefly. He smooths back the hair from her face, turns and leaves.

### 3. UNDER THE SAMAAAN TREE

The dry clay earth is creamy brown, like their bodies. Underneath them a thick wool blanket, lime green, like the long thin leaves of the bird-of-paradise surrounding them, softens the ground. Their clothing is concealed in a straw bag a shade lighter than the earth. Like a fan, the edges of the densely broad-brimmed samaan dip and sway overhead, evaporating the fine beads of sweat off their bodies as fast as they form.

Kamini props herself up on her stomach and reaches a hand out to part a couple of branches of the bird-of-paradise, so that she can glimpse the house a little way off in the distance. She can see the back of the house, the top of the back stairs outside the kitchen, where she often stands looking over in this direction. (One can only find this spot if one knows where to look – behind the fence, down the steep hill with tall razor grass, a little beyond the edge of the forest to the vined, spreading samaan. From the house one can see only the top of the tree, nesting ground of hundreds of noisy parakeets.) Just behind that is where they lie.

After making love, she always parts the branches and pensively looks over to the house.

She feels Anita's palm touching her, feeling her damp skin, the shape of her arched back, fingertips skirting her bony shoulder blades. Looking at the fenced-off house in the distance, she is unable to respond like she had minutes ago to the slightest coming together of their skins. Anita sits up slightly, beginning a firmer rubbing, a more intent massaging. Kamini knows that Anita has sensed her worry.

Even though there is no one in the forest to hear them, Anita whispers, "What's happening?"

Kamini lets go of the branches, which spring back up, blocking out the house and the hill. Looking into the wall of bush she remains silent. The fermenting smell of rotting wild fruit floats over them in a wave of a cooling breeze, sharp and sweet. Anita turns to lie on her stomach and puts her arm around Kamini's back.

"What's wrong, what's going on?"

Kamini looks down at the dusty clay earth just beyond the blanket. Reddish brown leafcutter ants with young, bright green leaves in their mouths, hovering over their heads like umbrellas, march in single file back and forth over the cool ground. Black ants scurry erratically, frantically. She looks at them but does not really see them.

"He says that he'll kill us both if he ever finds out about us."

"What! Both? What do you mean? What made him suspect?"

"I don't know."

"What did you say to him?"

"Nothing."

"Do you know what made him say that? Do you think he means it?"

"I don't know. I don't know why he suspects. He just does."

Anita turns over and flops her back down; her head hits the blanket with an exaggerated thud. She clasps her hands on top of her stomach and forcefully expels a combined breath and the word "fuck!"

Kamini looks down at Anita's face, which is oddly bright, a smile taking shape on it. "What are you smiling about?"

Anita unclasps her hands and reaches up to touch Kamini's cheek.

"He's always so arrogantly flattered that those men he works with and parties with would like to have you, and so cocksure of himself that they never could. And now he's worried about me!" She grins shyly, which makes her look much younger than she is, and stares up into Kamini's face. "I just sort of like the idea that he's jealous of me, squirming about whether he has you or I do. He's probably right this minute anxiously wondering if we're somewhere making love."

"It's not something to joke about, Nita. I don't think he is joking. He would kill us if he found us together, you know! I'm really frightened that he might come looking for us."

"Does he suspect about this place?"

"I don't think so."

Anita extends her arm on the blanket, an invitation Kamini accepts, resting her forehead down on Anita's shoulder. They lie still for several seconds, then Anita pulls Kamini to rest on top of her. Their chests, stomachs and thighs are still damp. Their bodies become slippery with sweat, but gentle breezes cool them in the shade of the big tree. The branches of the samaan shift and part to reveal a thin, pale blue sky. Anita looks up distractedly, trying to catch the blue. She turns her head and whispers into Kamini's ear, "Kam, I have to ask you something. Did you sleep

with him last night?"

Kamini is still.

"Tell me Kam, did you? When was the last time you slept with him?"

Kamini lifts her head and, without looking at Anita, turns to face the bird-of-paradise bush. Anita is spurred on by Kamini's silence.

"Kami, you slept with him last night, didn't you?"

"No."

"Well, when was the last time...? You did, I can tell that you did. God! I can't stand the thought of him touching you, kissing you, going and coming inside of you. How could you!"

Kamini pulls away, off onto the blanket, stiffening her body.

"What's wrong with you?" Her voice drops, sounds defeated. "I am his wife, you know! What am I supposed to do? Say no all the time? I am married to him. I can't always say no every time he wants to make love...."

Anita, hearing her sadness, tugs at her to pull her closer. Her eyes are full of tears, and Anita sits up and says coyly, "You and I make love. He and you have sex, and even once a year is too often for my liking."

"Cut it out. You make me feel as if I'm sleeping around. If I keep saying no, no, no to him, he will suspect even more strongly. You don't know him! I wouldn't put it past him to..."

Anita reaches out and touches Kamini's lips with hers, taking in the smell of skin, lips, mouth. She slides her lips around to Kamini's cheek and leaves them lightly resting there, her tongue anxious but holding back. The earthy smell of the forest, alive with decaying fruit, subsides for a moment as Anita feels herself suddenly awakening again to the familiar warm lemon scent, blunted by the evening heat, sharpened by the closeness of

Anita's breath, hovering between their faces. Kamini feels Anita responding to her smell. She lies back onto the blanket as her lover's mouth follows hers. Her fingers take time curling over Anita's shoulders, drawing her closer down as she curves her pelvis up towards Anita's. She lets Anita nestle her body between her thighs.

Kamini glances up momentarily to the top branches of the darkening samaan, bristling with lime green parakeets beginning to land for the evening, ruffling themselves, hopping around, shifting their positions. Responding to Anita, she bends her knees and gradually slides her feet up on either side of Anita's body.

The blue of the sky has turned warm yellowish white.

## Wake Up

"Angenie. Angenie. Wake up."

My mother softly, urgently, calls. Her hand barely touches my shoulder before she pulls it back to herself. She doesn't have to try to wake me. I skip through the night alighting on sleep the way a butterfly barely samples petals of flowers along its path. Even though I am now fourteen I share a room with my two younger sisters, and I'm aware of every change in their breathing patterns as they sleep in their bed. Before my mother walked in I heard her coming, and in a flash I was coherent and in control.

A streetlight has lit a path through the window, across the floor and up one wall. She partially stands in its way, her face alone illuminated. It shows skin swollen with worry and loneliness, her emotions too emaciated to feel anger.

I know this pattern well, having been awakened more times than there are stars in the sky at this blackest hour of the night. Always for comfort and companionship. It would be easier if she asked for money. I could just turn my fat pink plastic pig upside down, rip off its stopper, and willingly shake it empty into her hands. But every time she comes for comforting I feel poor, and desperate to know how best to give her what she steals into my belly for. Instead I stiffen myself into emotionless calm, and take charge, duty of the night nurse.

"Where is your father, Angenie?"

She whispers, cigarette breath suspended over my face. She