

LEMON TREE

**LINDSAY
MERBAUM**

We laid Gramma to rest in the yard, beneath the lemon tree. The doghouse sat in its shade, though the dog had run away. Right then, the lemons began to swell from the blossoms. We didn't notice them. We stood there at the grave with our heads bowed, exhausted from grief, too stunned to cry. A lemon fell at our feet, making a crater in the moist earth.

Gramma always loved that tree, though she wouldn't eat the fruit. "Too sour," she said and puckered up. Gramma with white-silk hair in a braid, blue-tinged teeth and a wooden cane stolen from a witch with one leg, so she couldn't give chase. *But can't witches fly?* we asked. Gramma with teas that could cure sadness, with crumpled lists in her pocket, written in script we couldn't decipher. Gramma with her spicy stews, her dark puddings with the skin on top, her wooden salad bowl she said belonged to her mother's mother's mother that she rubbed down with cloves of garlic. Gramma with orchids perched atop the beams of our two-level round house. ("Dome sweet dome," Gramma liked to say). The orchids bloomed all year round, their leaves growing so big they covered the window.

The lemons grew overnight, fat and thick-peeled, big-nippled and stipple-skinned. We collected them in our aprons. Their sourness was sharp as a fine blade. We made lemon pies, lemon cream, lemon bars, lemon jam, lemon oil the way Gramma had taught us. They tasted divine, like the most exquisite sorrow. We garnished fish we caught in the stream. With the rest, we carved faces into the peel, made up the characters of good and evil and put them to work in plays.

But the lemons kept coming. Every morning there were more. They filled the yard, tumbled down in piles towards the house. The smell was intoxicating. The ones at the bottom rotted sweetly, adding a fermented scent to the fresh fruit, like a citrusy wine.

All day we hefted buckets of lemons, bailing out the yard. But each morning it was full again. We put on our old snow boots and began to stomp on them, reducing the top layer of fruit to pulp. The juice squirted us in the face and made our eyes red and swollen. "We killed them," we said.

The dog house got filled up, then buried. The tire swing disappeared. We could no longer open the back door. We watched from the only window in the house as the wooden fence began to buckle and bulge. Later the window cracked. Then it shattered in the night and the lemons filled the sink beneath it. They rolled across the floor, hit the wall, hid under Gramma's rocking chair. In the morning, we found them in the dog's bed, under the couch, and, inexplicably, in drawers and under cushions.

"Gramma, stop!" we cried. But she couldn't hear us. She was dead.

We scrambled up the crooked stairs to the second floor, sang loudly as we could to drown out the thumps and bumps as the lemons began to fill the downstairs. It was as if they could move of their own will, rolling this way and that. We crouched against the wall with our hands over our faces. If the house had had corners, that's where we would've gone. We were hungry yet nauseated from the scent: rot and sad-sweetness, earth and fruit pies, perfume. That's what they smelled like.

We were beginning to realize that we were homeless, that the dog was never coming back.

"It's too late to make any more pies, isn't it," we said, and as the stairs began to moan and creak, we both began to laugh until tears rolled down our faces, fat as lemon seeds.