



Lemon

A NOVEL BY
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for Carson

‘If I hadn’t been reading about a Jewish girl in Nazi Germany, I might have let Zippy kill me.’ This gets Blecher scribbling in her notepad. I knew it would. She’s a psych-major-dropout-turned-guidance-counsellor, the only thing between me and another suspension.

‘She tried to kill you, really?’

I nod, sucking on my Tootsie Pop.

‘Let’s talk about all your mothers.’ Blecher always wants to ‘talk’; she learned that in Psych 101. I don’t want to talk, especially about my mothers. It’s not that I have anything against them. I don’t go around blaming them for my inability to attend classes regularly, or to find the meaning of life, but mental disturbances seem to be a recurring theme, if my current mother’s crack-up is any indication. ‘Why would a student want to stab *me*?’ she keeps asking. The fact that she was the school principal eludes her. Which is why another suspension must be avoided. Rattling around the house with Drew freaking over her stab wounds is no joyride.

I keep sucking, staring at the mottos taped to the wall behind Blecher’s desk. ‘HANG IN THERE!’ one of them says. ‘TOMORROW THIS WILL BE YESTERDAY!’ assures another. ‘TIME IS THE GREAT HEALER!’ Beside the slogans are smiley faces. I endure Blecher because our ‘sessions’ keep me out of the halls crowded with buttheads, but the woman is seriously damaged. She dyes her hair orange and fries it with a curling iron to make it puff off her head. She wears little pointy shoes and stashes food in Tupperware in her desk. You can be talking about something personal, like how you wish you could develop an eating disorder but you can’t stop eating, and she’ll reach into a drawer and

pull out a cracker and one of those cheese triangles wrapped in foil. You'll have to sit there watching her tear the foil off the cheese in little tiny strips. Soon the cubicle-sized office will stink of Blecher's digestion.

Pen ready, she looks probingly at me. 'Let's talk about how your first mother tried to kill you.'

'Pills. Plus a jump off the balcony, holding hands so we wouldn't be lonely.'

'How did you stop her?'

'I said I was reading.' After *Anne Frank*, I was hooked on persecuted-Jewish-girl stories. Compared to them, living with Zippy wasn't so bad. Or putrid Damian for that matter. Shared custody meant I was in constant motion. Like the Jews, I had no homeland.

Blecher pats her puffed hair. 'Why do you think Zippy wanted to commit suicide?'

'To teach Damian a lesson. He was always bumping uglies with other dames.'

The truth is I considered *pretending* to swallow the pills, faking the jump, then shaking myself free of her, watching her body flail through the air in her fluffy bathrobe. Then I twigged to the awful truth that I'd be left all alone like the Jewish girl. Her father had gone into hiding and her mother was constantly volunteering at the orphanage. Jews had been forbidden to attend German schools so the girl had to hide out in the apartment all day. 'I love you more than anybody, Mother,' I said, which wasn't saying much as I didn't love anybody – except my hamster, Alice, who'd died – but I understood that dramatics were required, that our death warrant was Zippy's cry for help. I dropped to my knees, grabbed her around the waist and wailed into her bathrobe. 'I don't want to die and I don't want *you* to die! Why do we have to *die!*?'

'Because nobody gives a fuck about us, honeybunch. Nobody gives a *fuck!*'

Blecher twirls one of her gold stud earrings, winding up her brain. I spare her the sordid details of Zippy's debacle because Blecher's one of those living-in-a-Disney-movie types who get

hysterical when you reveal life's atrocities. 'It must have been terrifying for you,' she says.

'I just wanted to finish my book.' The Jewish girl was walking alone in streets full of Nazis. She bought sausages from an 'Aryans Only' butcher. He even called her *liebling*. I was scared shitless he would discover her true identity and snatch her bratwurst.

'You've always found solace in reading, haven't you?' Blecher's powers of observation continue to amaze. I only have a book on me 24/7. 'I love to read,' she says, which is outrageous because the only thing she reads is *Archie* comics. She hides them in a *New Yorker* or something so you'll think she's intellectual.

'How're you taking Archie tying the knot with Veronica?' I ask, suspecting she's pro-Betty and pretty broken up about the wedding.

'We're here to talk about you, Limone. What did Zippy do when you refused to co-operate?'

'I distracted her by begging for another hamster.' The Jewish girl begged her mother to promise she wouldn't send her away with the orphans to England. 'Promise me, Mutti,' she'd pleaded. But Mutti pushed her away and told her to finish her latkes. Zippy didn't push me away but the fluff on her bathrobe was tickling my nostrils. *Thump thump thump* banged through the wall as the neighbours cranked their stereo for another Friday-night beer swill. If we made it through the night, Damian would be there in the morning, stinking in his Buick. We'd go to the Golden Griddle and I'd stuff my face while he'd sweat over the sports section.

I never told Damian about the botched double suicide. He'd already left Zippy anyway to shack up with Drew who's ashamed of being a neat freak and tries to mess things up once in a while, do something really radical like leave her coat lying around. I'm a chronic slob so there have been tensions between us. At first Damian tried to get me to call Drew 'Mother.' Drew didn't care what I called her. We got along alright, passing the Shredded Wheat and all that. Damian was busy bossing around illegal immigrants on construction sites, so Drew and I spent a lot of

time alone, in separate rooms. Mostly I read, got into the dead Russians, especially Dostoyevsky because everybody in his books is so totally damaged. *He* must have been totally damaged what with that secret society business, being sentenced to death and all that, then being carted off to Siberia.

Blecher digs around in a box of Ritz Bits. 'Did Zippy get you another hamster?'

'Negative.'

'How did that make you feel?' She's wearing her concerned-counsellor expression, lips pursed, eyebrows merged. Best to defuse things before she contacts Children's Aid.

'I watched Bob and Bing movies.'

'Who?'

'Hope and Crosby.'

Blecher masticates Ritz Bits, clearly ignorant of the twentieth century's primo comic duo. I've got all the road movies. Bob lived to be a hundred. I think about that when I watch him being blown out of a cannon or something. I like movies made before 1950, when women had soft bodies and something to do in flicks besides strip and fake orgasms. Dorothy Lamour never flashed her headlights. Rossi and Tora, my non-compos associates, can't stand anything that doesn't have sex or special effects. 'How can you watch black and white?' they kvetch. When I tried to get them to sit through *Harvey* Rossi said, 'Is this supposed to be funny? Like, anybody can see there's no rabbit.'

'Maybe the rabbit shows up later,' Tora suggested.

James Stewart's alright, but Cary Grant's my man. I almost read his biography once but decided I didn't want to know what a fuck-up he was, twenty-five wives and all that. I know he was born Archibald Leach then remade himself as Cary Grant. I wouldn't mind doing something like that.

'You have your whole life ahead of you, Limone,' Blecher says, shaking the empty Ritz box. 'You should be full of hope and enthusiasm.'

'It's hard to get enthusiastic when adults keep telling us everything sucks.'

‘When have you heard me speak negatively about anything?’

‘Not you, the usual noddies who yak about the good old days before kiddie porn and pollution. When people left their doors unlocked and kids walked home alone. When employers paid benefits and didn’t downsize every three seconds.’

This stumps her. She scribbles on her pad.

‘These days,’ I continue, slowly so she can get it all down, ‘unless you’re a super-brain or gorgeous, you’re going to end up in some bottom-feeder job at some corporation that’s going to restructure every time you take a crap. If you make it through the first cuts, you might as well chain yourself to your cubicle because they’re going to want your soul.’

That’s why boys get into guns. It’s easy and you can scare people who wouldn’t give you a job interview if you offered to blow them. Well, maybe if you offered to blow them.

‘There’s no room out there,’ I say. ‘It’s way too crowded. We need more war and pestilence.’

‘You cannot,’ Blecher says, ‘you simply cannot expect to function with such a bleak outlook.’

‘I don’t expect to function.’

‘You’ll break your mother’s heart.’

‘Which one?’