

**Limoncello**

— *Charis Shin*

I lay down, feeling dried grass pricking the back of my neck. When I turn my head, I can barely see the porch light from my spot pressed close to the earth, and I know that I must be practically invisible, like the chameleons Abel found in his biology textbook and showed me that one time. I blend in like those creatures— the only thing that draws attention to me is my red hand-me-down hoodie with its fading, overwashed fabric. There's a hole in the kangaroo pocket from where Abel used to snuff out matches after he let them burn down to a nub. Basil turns a few times and curls up into a comfortable ball next to me, head resting on his front paws. When I turn my head to look at him, I feel like I can hear a faint humming under the sandy soil. Maybe it's the sound of roots, longing for a drink. It's been weeks since it rained, since I've felt that summer stickiness that makes Mama tell me to take in my toys so they don't get waterlogged.

The sky is darkening, cloudless and clear, making way for one bright pinpoint far away— a star, or maybe an airplane, who knows? Abel would, probably, he's weirdly into these kinds of things. I don't think he tells the girls that hang around him about how he loves tracing the constellations, except for I guess maybe Amelie. But right now he's locked himself in his room, blasting music through those big headphones to drown out Mama's nagging 'cause of the whole drugstore issue from this morning.

It's not like it was a big deal or anything. It all started when I found a piece of paper slipped under the souvenir magnet on the refrigerator. I like to look at that magnet sometimes, whenever I go make myself mac and cheese for dinner. If I squint, I can see our tiny faces framed by clay palm trees and shadowed by the tacky "Welcome to Miami" lettering along the frame. It's me, Abel, and Mama. I look little, and even though this was a whole two years ago,

Abel would say I'm still little. In the picture, I'm swamped in cargo shorts three sizes too big and I'm not smiling. It's probably 'cause Mama made me leave Basil with the neighbors, and sure, Valentina thought she was all that being a year older than me, but she's never known anything about taking care of dogs. She's practically scared to death of them, even the tiny brown ones like Basil. But anyway, there was a list under the magnet written in Mama's shaky cursive addressed to Abel, but I knew he wouldn't come home from Amelie's until the last minute before dinner— that's where he's been spending almost every day now. So I took that list, hopped on my bike, and found myself at Keller's Drugstore with Basil in tow. Mr. Keller had looked surprised when I stood on my toes at the counter and slid the piece of paper over to him, but he had nodded and went back to the storeroom and then he had waited while I counted out my change just like Mama had taught me.

The sound of the rusty screen door opening breaks me out of my thoughts, the netting shaking within its frame. When I look over through the darkness, I can see Mama through the back window, sitting in front of the TV that's flashing evening news pictures. "Hey, Lemon! You there?" Abel sticks his head out through the doorway. His voice sounds a little bit gravelly, maybe from yelling at people in different time zones who didn't play well enough to cover him in that shooting game he's always playing. I hold my breath almost without thinking about it, trying to make myself as flat as possible again, angling my body behind our unravelling, splintery lawn chairs. Basil, he's always been good at this too, hunkers down next to me. His nose, a little wet, touches my ear. I try not to laugh and it comes out as a small snort.

Abel's always had good hearing, and his shadowy figure turns in my direction. "I *know* you're out there," he yells, and even though I can't see his face, I know he's probably rolling his

eyes at me. I stay silent for another second, but Basil barks and blows it for the both of us. Next thing I know, Abel's bounding down the porch steps and coming closer to my spot at the edge of the backyard, nearly tripping over my overturned bicycle. I can hear him curse under his breath. Then I know the game is up for real, now, and I'm not sure why, but I feel a little twinge of something.

I start to sit up. "You can run," Abel says, sitting down next to me and grabbing my ear, "but you can't hide." He twists, hard, and I flail my arms at him, landing what I'm sure is at least half of a punch but next thing I know he has me in a headlock. My vision spins, just a little bit, I lose sight of the overgrown grass around us, and then the pressure releases. Abel is laughing and ruffling my hair and I find myself laughing too, until my stomach hurts.

"You're always out here. I know you always are, you come out here whenever Mama yells at you," he says once we catch our breath. He falls back onto the ground, putting his arms behind his head. His eyes look kind of heavy and I don't think he's shaved for while now. "You come out here at night when you're upset, Lem," he says. I remember then, the exact moment when he started calling me that, when I found heavy glass bottles of some ambery liquid under his bed in kindergarten and took a drink and just about passed out. I might've died, I think, except Abel came in on time and gave me sips of water. "It's lemonade, alright? Lemonade—you'll be okay, it's just sour, I'm saving this for a friend, it's no big deal," he had told me. I didn't know any better at the time and believed him. And even though I still feel bad now, a bit, about his making fun, it was probably a good thing because I turned right around that evening and told Mama that Abel had let me try some lemonade and she didn't bat an eye. So now Abel's friends know of me as the kid who didn't snitch on Abel's under-the-bed operation and they all

call me Lemon. Most of them do, at least. Amelie calls me Limoncello in a fake-Italian accent whenever she comes over and she always ruffles my hair like Abel does until he pulls her away into his room and locks the door.

“I’m sorry about earlier.” Abel’s talking again, looking up at the stars and absent-mindedly scratching Basil behind the ears. I can barely see him in the dark. I can barely hear him either, over the crickets. “I should’ve gone, I know I should’ve.” He blinks, hard, his jaw tightening, and I think I see his eyebrows furrow. They’re thick and dark, like mine, which is funny ‘cause Mama’s hair is golden and she looks a little less angry than we do all the time. But I guess that angry-looking is a good thing, ‘cause whenever we see the aunts and uncles once or twice a year, they grab Abel by the shoulders and give his biceps a squeeze and tell him he looks just like Papa did when he was his age. Then they pat my head and tell me I’m a spitting image of Papa too.

“I know Mama’s been asking for that medicine since Thursday, I know, I’ve seen that list of stuff, who could miss it, it’s under that God awful magnet– it’s just that things came up and I just forgot.” Abel sighs and rolls over onto his side to face me. “Mama’s not mad at you, or anything, even though she yelled, alright? She’s more mad at me, you know, we were just scared when we came home and couldn’t find you– so don’t do that alright? Don’t go running off alone like that,” he cuts me off before I can start to argue, “and Basil’s great and all, but he doesn’t count as the *adult supervisor* you should be with. Sorry, Basil,” He half smiles, flashing white teeth at me that glow blue-ish in the dark and I smile back, even though I still feel a tad upset, ‘cause I know that he understands that things wouldn’t possibly go wrong as long as I was with

Basil. But this was just another one of those things that we would have to do to “Keep Mama Happy.”

We fall silent. There’s that faint buzz of nighttime, of cicadas hidden in the trees and grass is poking me behind the neck but I feel comfortable enough looking up at the stars that I don’t move. Abel’s quiet too. Out of the corner of my eye I can see him breathing, up and down, at the same time as I am, but that rhythm breaks and I feel his shoulders start to shake. I’m not quite sure what’s funny until I realize that Basil is climbing over his chest, and I know how much his paws tickle so I start to laugh too. Then Abel turns his head a bit and his eyes are glassy.

“Abel?”

He takes a deep, shaky breath.

“Are you okay?”

Then he’s talking, almost too fast and too low for me to hear, in this whole rush that almost hurts to hear but I don’t know why. It’s about Amelie, how it’s been a couple months, and how there’s something about her eyes, the way they’re framed by long eyelashes, but that’s hardly the point ‘cause some things led to another. And she had called him over earlier this morning and they sat and talked, and there’s something about a test, and it’s the kind of positive that’s not a good thing. But then Mama had called him and she had been pissed, just absolutely livid, and so he left Amelie’s house in a hurry in the beat-up car that Papa had driven Mama to the hospital in back when I was born. And all the while he had been thinking of the look on Amelie’s face, how her hands had been shaking. But he couldn’t even think about that for too long, ‘cause when he rolled up to the driveway and ran inside, Mama had practically been pacing holes into the linoleum in the kitchen. And then things catch up to speed, now it’s stuff that I

remember, 'cause I had walked through the front door with a white paper bag filled with orange prescription bottles, and Mama and Abel's heads had both whipped towards me and it had felt just like when the air in a balloon escapes all at once.

“—and I don't know what to do, Lemon, it's just about killing me, and I feel like,” he stops and squeezes his eyes shut, “I feel like there's not a person in this world that I can talk to about this.” It's strange, it's the second time this day that I've felt that feeling, with the balloon, except things still feel kind of tight and heavy now and Abel's face is wet. I don't know what to say so I open my mouth to try and think of something. But before I can, he turns to me with this weird look and holds out his arms.

I lean in to hug my brother.

As I put my arms around him— he smells like fabric softener— I remember something that Amelie would say to me while she used to wait for Abel to get back from track practice. She'd always come over a bit early, and she'd shoo Mama away from whatever she was doing and have her take a seat in her usual spot by the living room window. After Amelie got finished washing the dishes or folding the laundry or helping out with dinner, she would grab my hand and pull me into the hallway. “When life gives you lemons, you make limoncello,” she'd say, and spin me around and around. Mama, from her flowery armchair, would laugh and always look like she wanted to join in, so we'd dance and dance in circles around her until one of us tripped over the other's legs and we'd always end up in a heap by the front door. Abel, somehow, would always come in then, right on cue, shaking his head at us while he slipped off his sneakers, and he'd stoop to give Mama a kiss on the forehead before lifting me up onto his shoulders. I'd have to duck to keep from knocking into the ceiling, but from up there, I remember that I could see

practically everything— Amelie splayed out on the floor, a beam of sunlight across her face, and the way a smile would reach the corners of Mama's eyes.

And I was never quite sure exactly what limoncello was or what it tasted like. But I knew, somehow, that it must be sweet.