The Taste of Lemons

By Allison Call

I enter the courtroom earnestly with a strange, acidic taste in my mouth that I don't like but that reminds me of something important. People turn and stare. They know who I am. What I'm about to do.

My mother is sitting on the left side in the front row. Pro-defendant. The defendant is my father. She's staring at me too, gives me this delicate, paper grin as I pass her. She's childlike. Whenever I see my mother, I picture her drying her veiny hands on a dishtowel and saying things like, "Eat something, Jennifer."

I see him at the defense table reclined a little in his chair. Mr. Reinhart, his lawyer, is leaned over toward him saying something. My father nods several times. They're talking about me probably. Our deal.

I go up to the witness stand, sit down. The wooden chair creaks in the dim quiet. The jury analyzes me, skimming for the slightest gesture or look that will give me away. I'm a circus attraction, a bearded lady or horned man. They're waiting to hear what I have to say. They need to hear it. It will make or break things for him.

I look over at my father again. He's looking at me directly.

I haven't seen him since Christmas in Baltimore. The last time was at a Christmas party at my Aunt Naomi's house in Lochearn. He had just come back from the grocery store, been gone two long hours. Log truck overturned on 95, he said. Held everyone up. I remember he took off his jacket and Oriole's cap, hung them on the coat rack by the front door, then looked me straightly in the eye as he passed as if to say, "You're old news, honey."

He looks older since I saw him last. His tanned skin is leathery. A used saddle. He's wearing a blue suit and his blond hair is slicked back greaser-like, smooth-talking-car-salesman-like. He always hated the idea of aging. Bought a BMW convertible for his 40th birthday just to prove he was still young. Then, he got older.

He palms a little wave at me. "Hi, Jenny Wenny," I can hear him say in his voice. His specific voice. I give him a little nod back. The jury notices.

He swallows and I watch him swallow. His tie bobs under his Adam's apple when he does it. I am uncomfortable. My throat tightens. I swallow too, trying to get rid of that awful taste in my mouth.

Then, I see her. She's straight across from me, hands buried in her lap. Her black hair is curled into tight, little ringlets and her white blouse looks freshly ironed. White. Prosecutor's choice, probably. Accents her innocence. The well of the court is a dense chasm between us. A valley of the shadow neither of us can cross. She not looking at me, and I'm glad.

She must be afraid. I would be too. The last time I saw her, it didn't go well.

Mr. Reinhart stands. His loafers clunk on the hardwood as he moves toward me. Clip. Clop. Clip. Clip. Like a horse. I think of horses. Hands in his pockets, chin cocked upwards smugly. Like he's waiting for an uppercut. Or a bridle.

He thanks me for taking time out of my day to be there.

"No problem," I say.

Mr. Reinhart is blocking part of my view so I can only see half of her now. Half an eye gaping. Half an arched brow. Half a wilted mouth. Half a white blouse.

He asks me about my father, Ezra Lennon. Asks about his character. What kind of father he was. Is. I say he was a good one. *Is* a good one. A good father. I say he worked a lot as an

investment banker but still made time for me and my mother. I say he had a boat we used to go fishing on in the summertime at Fell's Point. He named it *The Anne* after my mother. Anne Penzik Lennon. I say he's Catholic and my mother is Jewish, but my mother let him raise us Catholic. I say he loves The Beatles and used to joke with people about his last name. Lennon. "I'm related to John, actually," he'd say. "He's my second cousin."

Mr. Reinhart is trying to paint Ezra Lennon as a family man. I'm helping him do it. I have to. They kept their end of the deal so now I have to keep mine.

It's what a good daughter does, after all.

That horrible taste in my mouth resurfaces. The taste is of lemons, I realize. I hate lemons. I hate the taste, the smell. I ordered hot tea at a café downtown last Friday and the waitress mistakenly brought it to me with a slice of lemon in it. I snapped at her, sent it back. I felt bad afterwards, but not that bad. Poor Sabrina.

I hate lemons.

When Mr. Reinhart is done, the prosecutor cross-examines me.

"Ms. Penzik," she starts, "do you have a good relationship with your father?"

"Yes."

"When's the last time you saw him?"

"A Christmas party at my aunt's house in Baltimore last year. I work a lot so I only come home around the holidays."

To the jury: "Let the record show the witness is referring to the night of December 24th, the date Lindsey Ramos says she was sexually assaulted by the defendant."

I look at Lindsey again. I can see her fully now. She's finally looking at me. I don't like that she's looking at me.

To Jenny: “How often do you see your father?”

“Just once or twice a year around the holidays.”

The prosecutor comes closer, folds her hands. “What do you remember about that night?”

“I remember that it was cold, snowing,” I say, adjusting myself in the chair. “My Aunt Naomi made latkes and beef brisket like usual. I remember that.”

“Do you remember seeing Ms. Ramos there?” the prosecutor asks.

“Yes.”

“How do you know Ms. Ramos?”

“She’s a family friend. She’s dating my cousin Andrew.”

“Now, you met Ms. Ramos before the night of December 24th, correct?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“When?”

“I think the first time was at Andrew’s piano recital at their school.”

“You talked to her?”

“Yes.”

“You liked talking with her?”

“She’s a lot younger than me so—”

“She’s 13.”

She’s 13.

“Yes,” I say.

“But you like talking to her, despite the age gap?”

“Yes.”

“Do you like her?”

"What?"

"Do you like Ms. Ramos?" she repeats.

I look at Lindsey. "She's nice. Funny."

Lindsey's eyes burn into me. Two dark little coals, hot to the touch.

"Funny? How's that?" the prosecutor asks.

"She just told this joke when we were opening presents. It was funny."

"What was the joke?"

Mr. Reinhart objects to the question.

"It speaks to Ms. Ramos' character, Your Honor," the prosecutor argues.

The judge allows the question.

"What was the joke?" the prosecutor repeats.

"We were all talking about why we have a Christmas tree if we're Jewish and Lindsey said, what do you call a Christmas tree that knows karate?"

When I don't say anything else, the prosecutor says, "I don't know, what?"

"Spruce Lee."

Quiet laughter slowly erupts throughout the room. Even among the jury. Even the prosecutor smiles at the punch line. It settles before the judge gets involved.

"That's a good one," the prosecutor says.

I say nothing.

"Did you talk to your father that night?" she asks.

"Not really."

"You see your own father once a year and you didn't talk to him?"

"We said *hello* and *goodbye*. That's usual for us."

The prosecutor goes to the plaintiff's table and picks up a stack of papers. She scans the top page.

"According to your cousin Andrew Warner's testimony, you and the defendant were arguing in the backyard at around ten p.m. Does *that* sound accurate?"

I swallow. There's the taste again. "We were just talking," I say.

Yes, we were arguing.

"About what?"

"I don't remember."

I do remember.

"You remembered Ms. Ramos' joke word-for-word, but you can't remember a conversation with your own father—who you only see once or twice a year?" she says. She sounds sardonic now.

I say nothing.

"Several members of your family testified that you stormed out of the house in anger. Do you remember *that*?"

"I left, but I wasn't angry."

"What did your father do that made you so angry that night?"

"Nothing."

"He must have done something."

"I don't remember."

"Well, what do you remember, Ms. Penzik? Because we'd all like to know."

I remember only one thing: lemons. The memory spills through easily, unwantedly. I hate lemons. I hate the smell, the taste, the color, the texture. I hate them because my father loved

them. He loved them in iced tea. He's southern. From Charleston, originally. Everybody drinks iced tea down there, he used to say. My mother had to learn how to make it right for him. Sugar goes in before the ice otherwise it doesn't mix well.

It goes in this order: tea, sugar, ice, then lemon. No deviation.

End of every meal, after he finished his tea, he'd take one last, big swallow then let out a boisterous, contented sigh. An I'm-full sigh. A clear-my-plate-Mary sigh. Then he'd shove his thick fingers to the bottom of the tall glass and retrieve the two or three soaked lemons. One at a time, he'd suck on them until he drained the meat of the leftover lemon juice and tea that the slice had sponged up while it was in the glass. He'd toss the dried remains on his plate, and when he was finished, he'd often suggest taking me for a drive in his BMW with the top down, which I loved because it meant getting my own kind of freedom.

And as we would drive down 95 with the top down and "Here Comes the Sun" by The Beatles blaring on the radio and the warm, Atlantic wind whipping through my tangled, twelve-year-old hair, I would become free. So very free. As free as any child could be.

But then the freedom left because Dad took an exit off the highway and drove us to Garden Hill Park and parked the car by a grove of trees and turned the radio down low and he took off both our seatbelts and made me kiss him on the cheek, and the next thing I knew I had no freedom because he took it from me in a way no child's freedom should ever be taken. And as he took my freedom, I could smell the leftover lemon on his breath. Over and over, I smelled the lemons and I hated them after that. I hated them even more the next time it happened, and the next, and the next, and the next. Most times, I stared at the Orioles cap on his dashboard wondering if I'd ever get to see them play, or get to do anything again, without thinking about my father and lemons and how much I hated them.

Both.

I never told my mother about the lemons. She never asked. Assumed the best, just like she was assuming now. Dad told me I couldn't her or anyone. Ever.

It's not what a good daughter does, he said.

The prosecutor looks at me, says, "Mr. Warner stated that during the argument with the defendant, he overheard you say," looks at the page, "he stated that you said, '*I saw you, Dad. I saw you.'* Did you say those words to the defendant that night?"

"I don't know. I don't remember."

I do remember.

"Ms. Penzik, you said saw something. What did you see?"

I didn't see anything. Nothing at all. All I saw was my father, the good father that he was—is—realize that we were running low on sodas and offer to go to the grocery store. All I saw was my father convince Lindsey's parents to let Lindsey come and bundle up so they could drive there with the top down in his old BMW listening to Beatles songs that he never got tired of and promise that Lindsey would be perfectly safe and back within twenty minutes. All I saw was my father come back with Lindsey two hours later and explain it was because a log truck had overturned on the highway and they couldn't get past it. All I saw was Lindsey wearing the same face I wore when I discovered my revulsion for lemons.

She at 13 and I at 12.

I agreed to lie for my father if my father did something for me. He had to sit in front of me in Mr. Reinhart's office while Mr. Reinhart went out for a long smoke break. He had to look me in the eye without hubris or pride or even the smallest hint of indifference. He had to have remorse in his eyes, his voice, his hands—his whole body had to be sorry. He had to say it to me.

He had to say that at the end of every meal, he'd shove his thick, contemptable fingers to the bottom of his tea glass and thieve two, maybe three, ruined lemons, and that, one by one, he'd suck them dry vampire-like until the meat was only filmy slivers that he would discard on his plate. He had to say that after dinner he would convince me go for a drive with the promise of rock n' roll and maybe some mint chocolate chip ice cream on the way home. And then after luring me to the soundtrack of "Hey Jude" and convertibles and freedom, he would take an exit off the highway and drive me to Garden Hill Park and park the car by a grove of trees and turn the radio down low and take off both our seatbelts and force me to kiss him on the cheek, and then he would steal my freedom with the smell of lemons on his breath.

Over and over and over and over and over and over.

And he did say it to me right there in Mr. Reinhart's office. He told me what he had done to me. And I knew he wasn't sorry. I knew he had taken Lindsey Ramos' freedom too. I knew it that night when he passed me like I was old news and went into the kitchen with the new packs of soda and was greeted by my mother and Aunt Naomi and Lindsey's parents and everyone else like he hadn't just done what he'd did. I knew it when he left Lindsey standing by the stairs in her ice pink puffer jacket and duck boots and she looked at me like I had something she wanted but that she knew I could never give. I knew because her eyes were my eyes. They were the same. We were the same. Mutuals.

He tried to make us less but indirectly made us equal.

"Ms. Penzik," the prosecutor says when I don't answer.

"Sorry," I say.

She watches me for a moment, then says, "Do you think your father raped Lindsey Ramos?"

I think about the lemons. They weigh heavy on my mind. I should tell someone about them someday. Now would be a good time.

I look at my knuckles and not at anyone in particular. “I can’t say whether he did, or he didn’t. I haven’t seen him since Christmas in Baltimore.”