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The Lemon Grove

Written by Helen Walsh

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The
**LEMON
GROVE**



**HELEN
WALSH**


TINDER
PRESS

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The sun drops low on the horizon and, with it, the distant hum of life starts up again. Families and couples weighed down with parasols and brightly patterned bags begin the trudge back up the hill road from the beach. A couple of mopeds weave in and out of the slow tide of bodies.

Jenn stays dead still as the weary beach dwellers pass close to the villa. They do not see her sitting on the low, stone balustrade of the terrace, hidden amongst the lengthening shadows of the lemon grove. Their faces are hard to make out but their beach bags and sarongs catch the falling light as they move slowly past the trees. Only one small boy spies her as he lags behind his parents, dragging his inflatable dinghy along the dusty road. Jenn throws him a little finger wave. The yellow dinghy scratches to a standstill and hangs there by its cord,

shifting slightly in the breeze. The child bares a small bar of teeth then, suddenly aware of the distance between himself and his parents, sprints off up the hill.

Jenn puts down her book, tilts her head backwards and closes her eyes. From the pine-clad cliffs above, she can hear hikers. They speak in German but from their anxious tone and pitch, she comprehends: hurry, they are telling one another, we need to get down before the light goes. She knows the cliff walk well – a good two hours from here to Sóller. Two hours of staggering vistas and sheer drops down to the rocky coves below.

More cars and mopeds pass by. The hikers come into view: a group of stout middle-aged women in robust walking attire. They take the smooth, stone steps down to the road, then stop to pass a water bottle around. They share a joke, but the relief in their voices is evident. Refreshed, and with a new resolve, they strike out for the village. None of them notices her: the woman in the white cotton dress. If they were to glance back they might see Jenn drawing her knees to her chest, locking them with her arms and tilting her head right back as she tries to find the last embers of the sun, to hang on to the moment. She likes the sense of being here, yet being invisible.

She opens her eyes. The first thing she sees is the stone balcony of their bedroom above: the slatted

wooden shutters, wide open, the light spilling out of their room emphasising the sudden shift to evening. The air is beginning to cool. The mosquitoes will be getting in, colonising the cold white walls; but she can't be bothered. She doesn't want to move. Up there, Greg will be sleeping – or reading, or showering. For now, Jenn is happy here, alone. One more chapter, then she'll go on up.

She picks up her book again, *Reprisal*, a Scandi Noir thriller. All her young workers at the care home have been raving about it but Greg is right: this particular author is no Pelecanos, and for this she's grateful. The last thing she wants on holiday is to be stretched or challenged. This one is all ravishing blondes in fear of a serial killer. She shuts the book – it is no longer possible to make out the print. She gets up and stretches. Most of the beach traffic has gone. Through the silence, she can hear the spit and snap of a bonfire. She pictures the hippy kids down on the beach, drying their clothes, cooking their supper. She watched them, early this morning, casting out their line from the rocks, time and again reeling in silver, wriggling fish. Boys with straggly beards and bodies scorched from a summer living off the land.

She'd jogged down to the cove at first light. A relic of the moon still hovered above the mountains. The crunch of her feet on the shingle brought two of the

beach kids out of their cave. They tried to ward her off with a look. And then another boy appeared, naked. He yawned and stretched, and lit a cigarette, turning to face her full on. His eyes sought hers, his dick hanging between his legs, mocking and superior, half erect like a threat. She felt a jolt of indignation. If it was solitude they coveted, why pick *this* beach? Resolutely, she peeled off her tee, wriggled out of her shorts and plunged into the sea. It was cold. A dirty grey mirror under the low morning light. For the first few strokes she could barely breathe. Then, striking out, she was overcome by a sense of liberation as she found her rhythm. She swam out, further and further, until the first fingers of sunlight hit her scalp.

Back on the terrace at Villa Ana, when the sun was high and the beach overcrowded, she saw them once again, making their exit from the cave-den. This time two girls were with them. From such a distance, they looked like they'd been sprayed gold. They threw off their sarongs and stretched out their lithe, naked bodies along the flat surface of a rocky overhang as little bashful as if they were in the privacy of their bedrooms. Jenn watched her husband cast a brief sidelong glance, so swift and seamless that, if you didn't know him, you'd think he hadn't noticed them at all. But Jenn did know him, and his 'micro-leching' still made her smile. She'd

raised an eyebrow – not to censure him but to empathise. The girls – slim, toned and young – were exquisite. He looked away, found out; embarrassed.



It's dark now, but still she stays. She can hear the distant bleat of goats drifting down the ravine. Here and there, villas with huge glass façades light up the brow of the hillside. All over the valley, the windows of small stone *fincas* flicker to life. Hidden amid the olive groves by day, they show themselves now as their eyes light up, ready to start the night watch over the Tramuntana.

Nothing moves. The darkness deepens. Jenn shivers, intoxicated by the magic of the hour. The road is no longer visible. The first stars stud the sky. A wind rises, and, borne on it, familiar sounds of industry from the restaurants in the village above, the clang of cutlery being laid out, ready for another busy evening. She rubs her belly where it is starting to gnaw. It's a good kind of hunger, she thinks, the kind she seldom experiences back home; a keen hunger that comes from swimming in the sea and walking under the sun. They've done plenty of that this past week, and they've drunk plenty, too: wine, beer, brandies, liqueurs – they've felt as though they've earned it, Jenn and Greg. And yesterday, after Greg turned

himself in for the night, she sat by the pool and sparked up one of the Camel Lights she found in the kitchen drawer. The kick of it, dirty and bitter, fired her up, made her light-headed.

The temperature drops. The dark hangs damp in her lungs. Sea dampness: salty and lucid and nicked with the scent of pines. Grudgingly, Jenn accepts that time is up. She goes inside to find an inhaler and chivvy Greg along. He's out on the balcony, fielding a call on his mobile, a glass of brandy hanging loosely from one hand. He's showered, dressed, scented; his dark, grizzled beard is trimmed. He's wearing his cream linen suit – he brings it out with him every year. It's the only time he ever wears it, his gentleman-abroad look. The suit is a little tight around the shoulders these days, but he looks the part – august, though somewhat too formal for arty Deià, she thinks. She hangs by the sliding doors. He's talking to Emma. She feels a tightening in her throat as she listens to him trying to cajole her stepdaughter. She moves out to the balcony and indicates with a two-fingered tap to the wrist that they'll need to leave soon. She reaches over, takes the brandy from his hand and drains the glass in one clean hit. He gives her an admiring glance; smiles.

'Can you ask Emma to pick up some dental floss?' she says. 'The silk one. Can't get it over here.'

Greg holds up a finger and shakes his head, not so

much a rebuttal of her request but a plea for quiet. Emma is taking him to task over something or other and he is doing his usual thing of tiptoeing around her, taking the path of least resistance. Jenn puts down the empty glass, holds her palms to the sky and rolls her eyes. She steps inside to locate her inhaler. She came away with three – now there are none. She's certain she left one on the floor by her side of the bed. She turns out the solid wood drawers, gets down on her knees to search beneath the bed where, in the absence of rugs, the cool hardness of the ceramic tiled floor bites through to her bones. She gets to her feet, tips out her make-up bag, noisy in her frustration.

Greg hisses through to her, 'Under your pillow!'

Not one, but all three of them placed neatly in a row.

'Oh for fuck's sake,' she says. She blasts once, twice; better.

He holds up a hand to silence her while increasing the pitch of his voice. 'Now, Em, worst-case scenario, Jenn and I are out . . .'

It hurts like mad that. All these years on and, when it suits him, whenever he senses a scene, he drops the 'Mum'.

' . . . take a taxi to the village and try Bar Luna. Benni's bound to be there. He has a key.'

She makes a big thing of closing the shutters, putting

on her jacket. She observes herself in the wardrobe mirror, puts a hand to her mouth and snorts. Yesterday morning, she bought this white cotton dress in the village store. It was a pure impulse buy, something she wouldn't dream of wearing at home. Yet it's the kind of floaty, classic, broderie anglaise frock she'd always imagined herself pottering around Deià in if they moved out here for good. Eyeing herself in the shop's mirror, she liked what she saw. She was elegant yet enigmatic and, yes, sexy; a perception no doubt helped along by the interior candles that shaded her skin a copper brown, the musky incense, the piped flamenco music and the cute gay assistant who stood behind her, lifted her hair from her shoulders, and whispered, '*Qué bonita . . .* your eyes are like amber stones,' on her neck. Now she feels duped. She drags the dress back up over her head, and her loosely tied-up hair falls to her shoulders. She is gratified to spy the label still intact. She hangs it up in the wardrobe and straightens out the creases. She looks at herself again, her deep cleavage accentuated by her tan and the Spiced Auburn shade of her hair, coloured only this morning, and she decides that, fuck it, she's going trashy for one night. Gregory may well tut and bite his lip, but she's on holiday and she's showing off what she's damn well got in tight black jeans and a low-cut silver tee.

As she dresses, she sees that Greg has twisted his upper

body round the chair-frame to observe her. He makes gestures with his hand that indicate a preference for the dress, and her hair worn up. With her jeans pulled halfway up her thighs, she shuffles closer to the wardrobe, takes the dress out for one last appraisal. Even at half-price, seventy-five euros was no bargain; and even with the label intact, she anticipates a struggle getting her money back from the camp assistant. She could easily envisage that charm turning to bitchy contempt. She holds it against herself in the mirror. Elegant. Safe. Middle-aged. She'll never wear it again, once they're home; she should wear it now, just for him.

He is still watching her. She can hear Emma losing patience with him.

'Oh, Poppet, it's fine,' he cajoles and turns his gaze away from his wife. 'I'm sure Jenn can live without floss for a week or two.'

She places the dress decisively back in the wardrobe and returns to wriggling into the jeans. Was she like that as a teenager? Probably, given half the chance – but she was blighted with acne at Emma's age, she was nowhere near pretty enough to get away with it. She shuts the wardrobe door a bit too loudly and leaves him to it. She clumps downstairs. They'll be late now, whatever.

She takes the last cigarette from the drawer in the kitchen, unhooks the cooker lighter from the whitewashed

wall and moves out into the lemon grove. The stark white petals on the overhanging vines glow fluorescent in the dark. Her night-vision plays tricks on her: she picks out goats grazing in the grove that, on closer inspection, are no more than tree stumps or bushes. Last night, tipsy from the shots of *liquera manzana* that accompanied their bill, Jenn coaxed Greg into walking back down along the river path. But even beneath the brilliance of the moon, they were forced back onto the road, the rough path made all the more hazardous by loose stones and jutting roots. Tonight, they'll be taking it easy. No matter how fulsome the welcome or how insistent the offer of nightcaps on the house, tomorrow they must wake with clear heads. Tomorrow, a different kind of holiday starts.

She squats down on the rough, dry grass. Lights up. Sucks the smoke down deep in her lungs and holds some back on the exhale, popping out a sequence of smoke rings. How will it be, she wonders – playing gooseberry to a couple of teenagers? And what of this boy Nathan? Nate. The way Emma says his name irks her – curt, territorial and loaded with significance, as though *Nate* were a novel species of itself, one which she herself had discovered.

Jenn has met him, once, a few weeks back, if that awkward exchange could be classed as meeting him. Up until then, Emma had been referencing Nathan with

increasing regularity, but thwarting her parents' invitations to tea, dinner, lunch, whatever. It came as some surprise, when she got home from a late shift, to find Gregory reversing down the drive with a youth she took to be Nate hunched up in the back. He was wearing a beanie hat, tugged down over his eyebrows, his jacket zipped up to his chin. It was dark and he kept his eyes glued to the back of the passenger seat, so she barely got a look at his face. She tapped on the window and made a bumbling gesture with her hand to indicate that he should come over again – soon. Even from there, she felt Emma's annoyance at her clumsy intervention. The boy flashed a meek smile but Emma stared straight ahead into the darkness, poking at her father to drive on. Later that night, when they got back, she said nothing to her – she sat between her dad's legs, the two of them spooning ice cream from a tub, thick as thieves. Jenn had taken herself off to bed, needled at how easily Greg let Emma exclude her these days. Yet it was she whom Emma turned to when she needed an ally over this – the holiday: 'You *have* to talk to Dad. He said no, he won't hear of it . . . Nate *has* to come to Deià. All my friends' parents let them take their boyfriends on holiday. Dad's living in the dark ages. You saw him, Mum! Boys like him don't hang around waiting for you. He's *bound* to meet someone while I'm away.' Jenn couldn't help but

bridle at 'all my friends' parents'; these were families who only technically holidayed together. They took their relatives, friends, colleagues, neighbours and respective au pairs away with them, Jenn reckoned, because, deep down, they couldn't stand one another. But she didn't venture this to Emma. Instead, she focused on Nathan. The gauche bushbaby she'd glimpsed in the back of the car. He didn't look like the type of boy who'd start putting it about, the moment his girlfriend's back was turned. 'Em, come on. *You're* the one who's going on holiday. It's going to be twice as tough for him. And in spite of what your friends' parents say, I still think it's a little soon for him to be coming away with us. You've only been dating a few months.'

Emma was inconsolable. There had been other boys before, but they were nothing compared to this. This was different. This was Big – the one against which all future relationships would be measured. Jenn could empathise; she'd been there herself at a similar age. Looking back, she realised that hers had been a manipulative little shit: the lead singer of some dismal shoe-gazing band, and the sex, like the music, was blurred and badly improvised. Yet she remembers each and every beat of it. She would have walked through fire for Dan Matthews.

'Please? Can't you make Dad change his mind?'

'Oh I don't know, Emma . . . we'll need to meet with Nathan's parents first.'

'I'll get his mum to ring you right now!'

'I haven't said yes yet.'

'Oh, Mum! You're the best. D'you know that?'

She only ever called her that these days when she wanted something. Somehow that hurt more than the slow, inevitable retraction of the word itself.

She regrets it now, crumbling so easily; regrets grinding Greg into submission. The pair of them worked so hard to be able to afford this holiday, in spite of Benni, the villa's owner, ramping up the price year on year. He knew what he had, Benni. He knew that they needed it. And with the new Dean coming in September, there was uncertainty over Greg's ongoing role at the university too. Was he still Head of English? The former community college had only stepped up to full university status five years previously, but already there was a new board with new, business-driven ideas. There was a pressure on Greg that hadn't been there before; there was more teaching, more admin, PhD students to supervise, and he was now expected to adopt a more hands-on role in upping the annual student intake. So yes, they *needed* their annual fix in Deià, at their beloved Villa Ana. Jenn was determined it was going to be special this year; she imagined they might drive the entire spine of the Tramuntana,

from Deià right through to Pollença. Emma was old enough now to enjoy the hippy markets of Estellencs and Fornalutx, maybe the Picasso museum in Sóller, too. They could lunch under the grand old orange trees in the square, then she and Emma could browse the boutique shops in the old town. She was going to buy her something symbolic – a pendant, perhaps, or a bracelet. She wanted something that acknowledged their journey together, their unusual and very special bond. Yet she wanted something peculiar to Mallorca, too – a gift that spoke of the times they'd spent and memories made on the island.

So it was settled. She and Greg would fly out a week ahead and Emma would move in with Greg's mum. They could have their boring adult time discovering hidden coves and falling fast asleep after long, lazy lunches – then Emma would come out and they'd spoil her to bits. But it was no longer just Emma flying out. Now, tomorrow, they would be opening their door, and their holiday, to a stranger – and no matter how much she tries to tell herself she's done a good thing, Jenn simply cannot shake off her misgivings. She should have stood her ground with Emma. She should have said no.

It is cold now. Up above her, more stars spike the sky. A bat flits past – there, right in front of her, then gone. Observing the house from outside, lit up, its solid blue

shutters absorbing some of the light from the moon, she's stricken with nostalgia for these last few days. Already, there's a sense of loss. This week – their week – has shot by. It's as good as over, now.



They park on the lip of Deià, by the Robert Graves School, then walk the gentle incline up to the village. The main drag is buzzing already, people strolling from café to café, perusing the menus or lingering at estate agents' windows to ogle mind-blowing villas with infinity pools; villas they can never own. Candles are being lit on the terraces of tapas bars, and all along the curving road, stout wooden doors in stone walls open up to reveal bijou restaurants with giddy panoramas. From their patio table at Jaume tonight they'll be able to see right down the gorge, past Villa Ana, and out to sea.

They pass the grocery store where they buy their bread each morning. The store is closing down for the evening and dark-skinned men are ferrying in crates of furry, fat peaches from the roadside. Jenn lingers on the pavement, turning out her old leather handbag, filled with junk – brushes, lipsticks with their tops left off, unopened mail – as she tries to find space to

squeeze in a couple of peaches for tomorrow's breakfast. Greg hooks his arm around her back and strokes her ribcage with his thumb, ushering her away from the grocer's.

'Quick,' he says.

'What?'

Too late. The slovenly, florid-faced man standing in the doorway of Bar Luna has spotted them. He hails them and hastens down the steps, pipe in mouth. Greg strides on but Jenn is trapped.

'Benni. Hi.'

His thin, fussy mouth clamps down on his pipe and he nods slowly, his eyes raking over her as though he's caught her and Greg in some terrible lie. He looks as though he's been drinking since lunch. A breeze sends a strand of grey, oiled hair flickering across his face.

'Again! You eat out *again*?'

He chuckles to let her know he's teasing, but there is a curve of disapproval on his mouth as he puffs his pipe and rocks back and forth on the balls of his feet.

Jenn forces a smile.

'Our last night of freedom, Benni. Emma arrives tomorrow.'

Greg is forced to a standstill further down the road. He tilts his head to the sky, unable or unwilling to disguise his impatience as he waits for her to end the

charade. Benni comes closer, his yellow teeth bared like a donkey's.

'So soon? The party come to an end?' The sour push of his breath blows the strands of hair back from his face. It forces her to take a step back. He wags a finger. 'No more misbehave now, eh? Eh!'

He unleashes the full yellow smile and, as he tries to focus on Jenn, reels backwards into the road. She seizes her chance and steps past him. Benni shouts after her, down the street.

'But why you eat out when you could be eating al fresco on your terrace?'

She catches up with her husband – who is livid.

'I don't know why you indulge him, Jenn.'

Benni stops following now, and stands in the middle of the road with his hands held out.

'I tell you! Maria come cook for you. Half the price. Under your own stars.' They reach the restaurant. 'And you don't have to dress like the Fitzgerald novel.' He cackles loudly then coughs.

This last bit is clearly aimed at Greg, and Jenn feels him stiffen. She stifles a smirk and hurries him inside Jaume.

'Fucking clown,' Greg mutters, and the family waiting to be seated turn their heads as one. Greg's fury has shot two puffs of scarlet into his cheeks. Jenn

puts a hand to her mouth and lowers her chin. A peal of laughter escapes through her fingers. She cranes herself up to kiss him.

‘Shall we eat?’



The restaurant is split into two parts: an airy interior with huge plants and large terracotta tiles, and a small outdoor terrace, overhanging the ravine. Miki, the Basque *maitre d'*, strides over, arms outstretched. He kisses Jenn on each cheek, standing back to appraise his loyal customers.

‘My friends, my friends!’ He lowers the flat of his hand towards the floor and pulls a half-sad, half-puzzled face. ‘But what is this? No little girl?’

Gregory chortles.

‘Emma? Little? Wait till you see her! Arrive tomorrow – not so little.’

They all laugh as Miki shows them through to the terrace, the incident with Benni forgotten now – but Jenn feels little gaiety. Once again, the notion brews that, in a few hours, this part of the holiday – the Them part – is done.

‘You tell her, Mikel sends his best.’

‘Maybe arrive Emma in this restaurant.’ Greg smiles. ‘Arrive in Deià with boyfriend.’

‘The boyfriend? Little Emma? No! *No!*’

Greg is all smiles.

‘Yes, Miki. Now the Emma is big girl.’

‘So sad. But good time arrive, yes? Next few days the weather is very hot.’

Miki gestures out towards the sea as he flaps out Jenn’s napkin.

‘Last year is crazy.’ Greg grins. ‘Many storm. This? Much better.’

The waitress at the next table shoots Greg a baffled look. Jenn laughs. She loves the pan-European pidgin Greg adopts when they’re abroad – she loves him all the more because he has no idea that he does it. They’ve been placed side by side so they can drink in the view together, but there’s not much left to swoon over now, save for the hulking black silhouettes of the Tramuntana, crouching squat and immense over the village. It seems to fence them off from the rest of the island.



Miki sets down two *kir royales* and a little plate of hors d’oeuvres: a slice of carpaccio speckled with foie gras shavings, and a miniature spinach and anchovy tart. The pastry is very thin and deep brown, hot to the touch. He gives a loving commentary on each dish as he places

it down, and all tension slides from Jenn's shoulders.

'And *this?*' Ceremonially, he places two vials of lurid green broth in front of them. 'Beautiful little taste of the garden. Is, how we say . . . *aspárragos?*'

'Asparagus!' booms Gregory.

'Ah yes. Asparagus. Little soup. Very beautiful . . .'

He kisses the tips of his fingers and Jenn wants to reach out and squeeze his hand. She's overwhelmed by the sense that this is rare; it's special; it's what holidays are *for*. She feels like hugging Miki, and he seems to comprehend. His eyes are wide and sincere as he draws a deep breath and reels off tonight's specials. Jenn is salivating over a braised asparagus served with pear, or a simple, grilled *gambas al ajillo* starter when Miki crouches down and whispers in her ear.

'Now, Jennifer. Please. The rabbit leavers. I must recommend to you this fantastic taste to start with. I know you will love.'

He jumps back to his feet, this time hovering over Greg.

'And for both of you magnificent persons, for the main course, I have to persuade you of the fantastic mountain kid. Fresh, like this, slowly roasted with the fragrant rosemary . . .'

Miki pronounces the vowels hard – *fragg-rant*. 'And served with a little taste of the sea, our special salty, green sea vegetables.' He takes one pace back and

bows slightly as though introducing a chamber orchestra. 'Perfect.'

She feels like applauding his performance. Both of them had planned on eating fish tonight – Week Two was going to be the healthy week – but this is a restaurant that understands the imperative of fat; fat is where all the flavour is. Greg lets his menu drop to the table. He holds his hands out wide.

'Sold, señor. Rabbit livers and mountain kid it is.' And before Jenn can give it one last run-through in her mind, he's added: 'Times two.'

Greg twinkles at her. She registers the flicker of hesitation on Miki's face, so she winks at him to let him know. It's fine. Just for tonight, it's okay.



They let Miki choose a local Rioja and, true to his word, it's rich and spicy and, with the first sip, Jenn is able to kick back in her seat and banish all niggles and woes, and all thoughts of tomorrow. The night and the billions of stars that now spatter the sky still belong to the two of them. To her. To hell with taking it easy, she thinks, as she takes a gutsy slug. Tomorrow's tomorrow.



It's almost two by the time they get back to the villa. Neither of them is ready for bed. Greg brings blankets and candles out to the pool, and two cold bottles of San Miguel. Jenn sits by the edge, rippling the moon with her big toe. Greg sits behind her, his big knees pulled up at her ribs, his arms draped loosely around her waist. They hear laughter from down on the beach and Jenn remembers the naked hippy girls, slim and flawless and fully aware of all eyes upon them. She half turns and snuggles her cheek into Greg's chest and reminds him.

'Which one did you fancy?'

'Both.'

She slaps his wrist.

'Who was it who said, youth is wasted on the young?'

'George Bernard Shaw.'

'No – it was definitely Robbie Williams.'

Greg laughs and kisses her neck. His hand slides under her top. The suggestion of sex hangs there for a moment – but she is heavy from food and drink and she delicately removes his hand. He seems content enough; he strokes her neck, scratches her scalp. They sip at their beers and look at the stars and she kisses him firmly on the mouth; a kiss that says 'time for bed'.



She is asleep. An insect is buzzing at the periphery of her consciousness. Does Greg get up? Was that a book that just slapped the wall? The gnat is no longer buzzing. The next thought she has is that, somehow, it's morning. Greg's side of the bed is empty. A strong sunlight is shafting through the shutters.

They are on their way.