



My first time

(for Leonhard K.)

I keep it in the fridge. Perhaps I shouldn't, but I do. I like the idea of its golden purity enclosed in perfect darkness, the flow of time suspended by the artificial cold that slows down life itself.

It's in a jar with a tight-fitting lid. A clear juice-like substance fills the gaps between strips of flesh and skin, a little less of it every day. I dread the moment when the jar is empty, when all of the liquid has gone, the last tiny fragment of soft yet solid flesh has vanished. The unscrewed lid releases nothing. The cold of the fridge not only slows down bacteria, it also makes air sluggish. So there is virtually no smell when I open the gleaming, golden lid. The two golds are completely different. One is fake, metallic, shiny, reflecting the light. The other is real, organic, translucent, light incarnate, almost white.

But when I dip a spoon into the liquid, scoop up a few drops, place them on my tongue – when the heat of my tongue hits those molecules, there is an explosion inside me of fragrances and flavours. There is tanginess, a sugary tartness, a hint of bitter, hidden fruit coming to the fore, a freshness like the first drops of rain after a long, hot, sultry spell. My palate and the back of my mouth fill with fragrances, sunlight, with memories of hours spent sitting in the sun, watching the sea washing over weed-covered concrete, lapping at the slipway, sucking at a lone crab sitting in a hole that once held a wooden post and now offers a jagged yet perfect shelter, the splinters of wood snags for creatures too small for me to see.

The liquid goes well with a lot of foods. I have married it with goat cheese, fresh and creamy and bland; with Manchego, earthy and crumbly; with black linseed bread; lukewarm boiled potatoes; avocado, banana slices, a pear and apple bits. It's delicious on its own. So intense!

A friend gave me this fruit, a huge thing, almost the size of a newborn baby's head. It grew in a lab at an altitude of 1,500 metres – 4,500 feet – in an Alpine resort in the heart of Switzerland. An unlikely place for this kind of tree to thrive. But thrive it does, in a huge earthenware pot, producing lots of fruits. The day mine was picked, we counted some sixteen of them, some of them almost ripe, others tiny still and green, and a few blossoms, too. I accepted the gift reverently. A perfect fruit, with a skin smooth, fresh and unblemished, it reminded my fingers of silk. But its delicate fragrance was distinct, unique. I wrapped it, carried it home and placed it in my fruit bowl. There it sat and shone in mid-winter – for days, for weeks. I meant to use it for a cake, but didn't; there was never time.

One day, I cut it. Its skin had grown just slightly puckered – time to use it. I sliced it thinly into a small saucepan. Added sugar, honey, a little water. Heated the pan. Stirred, tasted, added more sugar, and more honey, more sugar, more water. Simmered and reduced and stirred – until it seemed to have the right consistency. I poured it into a clean glass jar with a golden lid that I screwed tight to produce a perfect seal.

From the one fruit, there was a little more than half a jar. Now the jar is almost empty – but my mind is suffused with the memory of the flavours, aroma and colour of my very first home-made lemon marmalade.