



Bitten

MY UNEXPECTED LOVE AFFAIR WITH FLORIDA

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Preface

THIS BOOK TELLS A STORY about place. The place I call home. Florida. “The state with the prettiest name,” as the poet Elizabeth Bishop wrote. More specifically, it’s a story about my ongoing love affair with Florida. I write this book to honor the state’s singular beauty, to express how crucially my contact with its land, and sea, and sky has informed and enriched the various dimensions of my still young(ish) life. I’ve lived here now for seventeen-plus years—longer than I’ve lived in any other place—yet I feel that I’m still in those early, passionate, and even sometimes silly throes of this love affair. As I’m not a Florida native, however, a certain defensiveness dogs me. Others, surely, hold a greater claim to speak for and about the various Florida phenomena that excite my imagination in the following pages. I beg these various others their indulgence as I forge ahead. Perhaps the meditations of this upstart Floridian might still be of use in their own way.

My wife and I relocated to Florida in the spring of 1996. I remember my astonishment at the ease and speed with which we traversed the states, from Pennsylvania on down, trying on various climates along the way as if they were clothes. Wendy and I have lived here ever since, and we have no intention of moving elsewhere, despite the lobbying efforts of some of our northeastern friends, who can’t quite fathom our stick-to-it-ness. They’ve never expressed such sentiments outright, but I’ve inferred from the tone of some of our conversations (have I been too defensive?) that they just can’t take Florida seriously. Our friends, I think—many of whom have relocated multiple times as adults—presume that inertia or sheer laziness must account for our long-

On Stealing Fruit

“MEXICANS STEALING YOUR LIMES.” So my Italian neighbor, Franco, tipped me off about the serial theft of my Persian limes by the Latino landscapers, who maintain a separate neighbor’s yard across the street.

Franco and I were out front, puttering about our respective gardens. I thanked him mildly for the information, wiping my filthy brow. I could tell by the frozen look on his face that my apparent lack of concern confused him. “I told them I call police,” he continued in his dialect, “if I catch them in my yard.”

I didn’t think much of his warning at the time, partly because I suspected that Franco might have been wrong, and partly because my family was struggling, anyway, to keep pace with our bountiful crop of limes that season. There were only so many mojitos and limeades we could drink, only so much yellowtail snapper ceviche we could eat.

And so I’m not sure what surprised me more a few days later when I spied from my master bedroom window the two Latino landscapers stripping the fruit from my Persian lime tree (*Citrus latifolia*)—that they were, in fact, stealing my limes or that it provoked such anger in me to catch them in the act. I rushed out the front door to confront them and caught them totally unawares, each of them clutching awkward handfuls of ripe green fruit.

“What do you think you’re doing!?” I accosted them. They gazed doe-eyed at me, frozen in their tracks. I wasn’t sure they understood my English words, but they must have gotten the gist of things.

“You have to *ask* me if you want my limes!” I continued.

Nothing.

“Necesitan preguntame si quieren mi fruta,” I took a lame stab at the Spanish.

“Here,” the shorter of the two finally extended his lime fistfuls toward me. “You want? Take.” His taller comrade, whose dark hair was long behind a dingy baseball cap advertising their (or, more likely, their employer’s) landscaping company, extended his limes toward me, too, but remained silent. I exhaled. It suddenly felt churlish to begrudge these hardworking laborers a few measly limes when I had it so easy, comparatively—my “work” consisting mostly of gazing at a blank computer screen from within the comfort of my air-conditioned home. And, again, we had more limes than we could handle, anyway.

“No, you might as well keep them now,” I uttered, my blood pressure abating. “Just, maybe, ask next time, okay?” They nodded their heads and walked back across the street with their modest harvest.

What I didn’t think about at the time, but might have, was that these two landscapers were performing the rites of a longstanding ritual in my densely populated patch of Florida: the sometimes surreptitious harvest of our manifold fruiting trees about town, citrus and otherwise. To sound just a sampling of our regular bounty is to invoke the fecundity that accompanies our year-round, Zone 10 growing season: orange, lemon, lime, litchi, loquat, grapefruit, guava, papaya, pineapple, mango, avocado, tangerine, carambola (aka star fruit), sugar apple, kiwi, kumquat, banana, and so on. Most of these fruiting trees boast multiple varieties too. If you wanted to buy a mango tree from my favorite local tropical nursery, for example, you would on any given day be faced with upward of thirty varieties from which to choose.

Litchi fruit, to my mind, is the most delectable and undervalued of our local fruits. The litchi-tree (*Litchi chinensis*) variety in south Florida, the Sweet Cliff, is fairly small and nondescript for most of the year, its long leathery leaves in droopy clusters, its warty green pods camouflaged within the foliage. Given the year-round greenery and ostentatious blooms all about in Florida, I can’t say I much notice these trees for most of the year, not even their modest yellowish-white flowers in the spring. But by May or June each year, the warty pods, not quite the size of ping-pong balls and somewhat oblong, announce their ripeness by turning raspberry pink. Now *this* I notice! Tiny barbs on each of their scales render the pods rough to the touch. Yet not so rough that you can’t peel the skin to reveal the moist, translucent fruit inside. To plop the

whole fruit into your mouth is to savor the succulent sweetness that the Chinese have appreciated for over two thousand years. Just make sure to spit out the smooth brown seed. If you've only eaten canned litchi "nuts" at Chinese restaurants, bathed in artificial syrup, you don't know what you're missing.

Many of our fruiting trees stand in private backyards, tended and harvested by homeowners, who often distribute their surplus to coworkers and friends. Luckily for my litchi-fruit cravings, I happen to know someone who knows someone who cultivates several litchi trees—an elderly female immigrant from Calcutta, who gives them away. Other homeowners are more enterprising. To take advantage of her robust mango crop this year, a friend of ours tried her hand at preparing, bottling, and selling mango salsa. Some residents erect fruit pyramids on card tables in their front yard, collection coffee cans advertising their price. Fifty cents each seems to be the going rate in my neighborhood for mango. My ten-year-old son, for his part, delivers some of our limes to one of his school friends, who operates a lemon and (now) limeade stand. They worked out some sort of percentage deal, the precise terms of which Henry hasn't disclosed.

Only an outright thief would tromp behind a fence into someone's backyard to steal fruit. But plenty of the fruiting trees in my city stand more ambiguously on the swales between sidewalk and street, land technically owned by the city, or they stand on city property, itself, around the library and city hall, or on abandoned lots, or on commercial property, where ripe fruit often languishes, unattended. There's a lot of residential transience in my area; often, homeowners who plant a certain fruiting tree for future harvest abandon their crop to new owners, who may not like oranges or lemons or avocados. Property owners often neglect their fruiting trees in plain view in their front and side yards, allowing, say, their drooping oranges to grow past ripe, some of them bursting on the sidewalk, promptly growing rancid and attracting a countless variety of vermin, including Florida rats, which like to hide by day in the dense canopy of sabal palms and do their foraging by night. In this case, you're practically doing the homeowners a favor by taking a few ripe specimens off their hands! All of which is to say that a certain gray area exists when it comes to the morality of harvesting our local fruit.

If the matter of fruit-harvesting ethics seems rather random or trivial in the grand scheme of things, I'd only point out that establishing ethical codes for this precise activity has long preoccupied humankind. In my own religious tradition, students typically begin their study of the Talmud with the second

chapter of the tractate Bava Metzia, during which the rabbis over hundreds of years debated and parsed the laws pertaining to lost objects. The rabbis' arguments and counter-arguments vis-à-vis "found fruit" take up a good bit of the densely packed page space. While I won't attempt to gloss the entire chapter, the rabbis take pains to distinguish between found objects that must be announced, so that the owner can reclaim possession, and found objects that belong to the finder. Fruit in a vessel or piles of fruit, for example, must be announced. But "scattered" fruit—or scattered coins, or strings of fishes, or bundles of flax, for that matter—belong to the finder. That students traditionally begin their Talmud study with this chapter suggests, in part, that the rules governing our disposition toward lost objects, including fruit, form the moral bedrock on which most other laws stand. When present-day landscapers, neighbors, and I collect fruit about town, we participate, however implicitly, in this age-old dialogue governing the ethics of fruit collection.

To return to the decidedly unscattered fruit on my own property, the landscapers from across the street really should have known better than to harvest my Persian limes without first knocking on my door to ask for my permission. True, the tree stands in my side yard, in plain view from the street, but it's not on the swale and it's clearly a well-tended tree. To my mind, they breached our local—if somewhat vague—etiquette when it comes to harvesting neighborhood fruit.

If the landscapers had been brazen enough to walk around to the back of my property, they would have noticed three additional specimens: a Meyer's lemon, a key lime, and a hamlin orange. My wife and I have taken to cultivating various citrus trees, with varying degrees of success given the malevolent host of ever-evolving bugs and blights (e.g., canker, scale, mealybugs, mites, nematodes, fungi) that keep the USDA scientists plenty busy in their laboratories and give commercial growers insomnia.

Cultivating citrus trees, on the face of it, runs counter to the native-plant notions that have mostly governed our landscaping choices. Indeed, it surprises, and disappoints, many people to learn that *none* of the prized fruiting trees in Florida are native to the state. Most citrus, for example (and even the banana and mango), hails from Asia. Yet some flora, in my view, enmesh themselves so thoroughly into the very fabric of a place that to parse their native or imported origins to establish their bona fides is to descend into absurdities. I wouldn't deny Italians their beloved tomatoes, even though the