

Apollo and the Blossom Boy

There's a town called Sparta, a small, slow summer town, where people stop to look through windows on the street, where rose-fingered Dawn takes her sweet time to spread her honeyed fingertips across the main avenue. It's the kind of town where wealthy people live for its quaintness in charming little homes, where tourists go to escape business calls, where average folks own a car but never need to use it. Most people who wander through snap a photo of downtown on their phones, and send it out saying "This is what life should be!" There's no falseness about Sparta, about the half-smile on everyone's faces, about the pastel green buildings downtown with French windows. The mayor's son graduated from high school with all the other kids, the prince of his class, the kind athlete, a name soft as the town itself, Hyacinth.

When summer comes round, sticky with a saffron sky, the vacationers pour in, and Hyacinth, the boy with the blossom pastel purple lips, watches them from his seat at the café on the avenue. He sips his lemonade, a bit too tart, and sees that out there steps a golden boy from the driver's seat of a VW convertible yellow as the sun at noontime. Hyacinth finishes his lemonade, a bit of remaining sugar clinging to the melting ice. The golden boy takes off his sunglasses, shakes out his sunlit hair. His name is Apollo; he's a budding musician and poet from a big, white city where skyscrapers look like fortress walls. He carries a guitar on his back. He won't be using it, not on this trip. Hyacinth has seen him before, on the Internet somewhere, on a video with more than a million views. His lips are sour with lemonade; they shape his name, *Apollo*. He licks them slowly. Maybe later, they'll talk.

Apollo has things to do, producers to call, social media to check. He left his work phone at home because he's on vacation, in Sparta, and has spotted a beautiful blossom of a boy. His guitar is airy on his back; his hands are damp from the steering wheel of his chariot. The hood of

the car is hot as a fiery horse's mane; the rims of the wheels are sun shaped, and shine accordingly. He shuts the door and the horn honks when he locks it. The sound disrupts the quiet town, and all lift their light heads to look at him, the god of the urban streets who has arrived in Sparta. One of his admirers includes the beautiful boy, who jingles ice around in a cloudy glass, his pastel purple lips bursting against the green of the building like a small bud in an empty field of swaying grass. Apollo takes a step forward on the rugged asphalt, which hasn't been repaved in years, rough as mountains at the seaside. He forgets that all his things are still in his toasting car; he forgets that his guitar strings need to be played some time this summer or else they'll spring and pop in discontent. Hyacinth, the spring boy, the flower of Sparta, is right before him, and Apollo can think of nothing else.

Hyacinth is a runner, with light, quick feet. He's won medals at school, had laurels nestled in his feathery hair, gotten a full ride to his top choice college in a faraway place. Everyone thinks he has wings attached to his shoes, a gift in the mail from a clever legend, but he denies it guilelessly; it's only a myth. He runs every morning, while the night is just retracting her dark wings, while Sparta snoozes in dreams as faded as its buildings. Light touches him at the end, when he reaches the café whose doors have just creaked open. Sitting on the wooden stairs is Apollo, with a sunny smile, nimble fingers dancing across an imaginary guitar. Hyacinth greets him politely, as his powerful father has raised him, his breath a tad unsteady. He wipes the sweat from his brow; his muscles gleam in the hazy morning light like an oiled Greek athlete at the games. Apollo waves kindly, captivated by the lilt in the boy's speech, the way the vowels sound like siren songs and the consonants like the foam of the sea. Hyacinth leans against the wooden fence around the outside tables, yellow paint chipping off and clinging to his rich skin, and asks Apollo where he's from. Apollo gives him a half-lidded, sleepy smile, induced by the

charm of the blossom boy. *O-lym-pus*. He says it slowly, hangs onto the “s” at the end, packing each syllable with images of buzzing streets, of the gods of society wearing pressed suits and stepping out of fine cars into swivel chair thrones. The mayor’s son only opens his petal lips into a fragrant smile and welcomes him. Already, Apollo’s fingers have quieted and forgotten their craft.

Days pass, and at the end of every run, lemonades are drunk and coquettish smiles are exchanged. Hyacinth bends down to tie his shoes; Apollo watches his deft fingers tug and pull at the laces. Hyacinth then asks him if he can run, if Olympus boys do those kinds of things. His question is rounded at the edges, softened by his delicate accent. Apollo’s grin is crisp and clear, sharper than the blossom boy’s careful speech. The next day, his feet blaze with spotless yellow Discus brand running shoes that draw the eyes of locals who are not accustomed to seeing such saturated things. A couple more coquettish smiles are exchanged, as well as a coy challenge: a race down the cracked asphalt. Hyacinth’s hair touches the edge of his lavender lip; a drop of light catches in Apollo’s golden eyelashes. Hyacinth is eager to see what an Olympus boy can do, how quickly a city god’s feet can dance.

Apollo’s laughter carries across the whole town. It rattles windows, wakes up napping children, pierces through the daze of the grocer who mindlessly sets his produce on display. He’s going to beat Hyacinth in this race, he’s sure of it. The two pound down the asphalt, whizzing past leisurely tourists and daydreaming locals. The end of the race is through the doors of Ovid’s, the used book store where Hyacinth bought his first book and where aspiring intellectuals sip coffee and read the classics. Apollo bursts through the doorframe, his shoes kicking up a grey cloud of dust off the faded carpet. Hyacinth is soon after, panting as he plows into the golden boy. He says that he didn’t know city boys could run that way, to which Apollo answers that *O-*

lym-pus boys can do all sorts of things. Apollo is still laughing, the sound as clean and pure as the cloudless sky. Later that evening, he finds out that the mayor's son's lips are sweet and sticky with melting sugar.

Apollo doesn't know how many times he has woken up and fallen asleep in this town, how many times he has started his car down the main avenue to sightsee, how many times he has written about the blossom boy while drinking tart lemonade and listening to him talk about his running and college in his gentle accent. His phone is thrown under a pile of clothes in the hotel, with countless messages from Oracle, the record company dying to hear him sing sweet romance into the microphone. Apollo only cares for the hazy golden air of Sparta, for the pounding of feet down the sidewalk and loose hair flying wildly, for the smooth lavender lips of Hyacinth which inspire passion to bloom with every touch. His poems ache with love thick as the forgetful waters of Lethe, with the carelessness of Dionysus' wine. In the heavens of the pages he places the titles, *Hyacinth*, every single one of them. Every stroke of the pen, every race down into Ovid's, every fragrant smile, every sweet sour kiss, Apollo falls deeper and deeper into golden summer, into the endless lazy Spartan days.

Fate would have it that record temperatures are reached in mid-July. The tourists flock to the local pool, where they tan with sunglasses on, then stare at the pool water like Narcissus, wondering if the chlorine will smell too strongly or ruin their hair. Hyacinth is lazy that day, and untangles himself from his sheets just before noon. The day is lax, and the hours stretch like yawns. No one moves very quickly. Apollo is waiting with a lemonade on the café stairs, humming some ancient hymn, one that all the Olympus boys learn in school. Hyacinth approaches, drenched in sweat from the glaring sun. He nabs the lemonade and drinks it desperately, some of the golden liquid leaking from the cup like glistening olive oil and dribbling

down his lips, anointing him in cool sugar. It's really too hot to run down to Ovid's, but Hyacinth doesn't say so. He wants to show Apollo what Spartan boys can do. Sunlight tangles itself in the locks of Apollo's hair. The golden boy opens his mouth, asks Hyacinth to see if he can fetch his running shoes from the hotel room. He forgot them today, he says mischievously. Apollo pulls out a stopwatch, to time him. Hyacinth's lips bloom into a smile. He's up for the challenge. The asphalt is hot enough for a record time, the streets are cleared for the prince. He tosses his hair, takes his stance. Apollo says this time will immortalize him, that after this, he can carry him to Olympus, where Hyacinth, too, can be an Olympus boy. Hyacinth laughs, the scent of lemonade wafting from his breath. When Apollo calls go, Hyacinth takes off running, across the street, feet soaring down the burning pavement. He is fast, fast as Hermes with his winged shoes. The clock is ticking slowly, keeping pace with the relaxed rhythm of the town. Hyacinth will carve this into legend with that time. He bursts into the messy hotel room and collects the Discus brand shoes by their laces, sprinting back out, holding victory in his hands. In Sparta, hardly anyone drives, and if they do, they drive more slowly than a lumbering Cyclops. Why should the flower of Sparta ever have to look both ways? He bounds into the street, laughing. He can see Apollo waving quickly, urging him to go faster. A tourist isn't used to the pace here; he's eager to escape the heat and go back home. His belongings are piled onto his luggage rack; his eyes can barely see through the glare of the Spartan sun; he drives a little too quickly. Hyacinth keeps his eyes on Apollo, eager to return his shoes so that they can race to Ovid's and read in the air-conditioned corner. Tires screech on the old avenue, the Discus shoes fly from Hyacinth's delicate hand, his head slams against the concrete like the fall of a withered petal. Apollo is pale as powder; Hyacinth's lips lose their pastel purple color. The once quiet town has become loud with Apollo's guilty wails, his grieving cries. He scratches his knees on the asphalt, he screams

for alcohol, for bandages, for something. Locals peer through doors with drowsy eyes; the pharmacist hurriedly brings out some supplies. The town doctor is away for a conference and won't be back for a while. Apollo moans; his tears carve rivers down his face. A hideous red coats his hands and stains the faded asphalt, a color too passionate for the Spartan streets. Nothing can stop the withering of a flower. Fate has chosen too hot a day for such a challenge.

Apollo packs. He salvages his phone from the pile of clothes, shoves his journal into the bottom of his bag. He is too afraid to open it right now, to see the pages and pages of summer scrawled in black pen. He loads it all into his yellow VW, set for Olympus. He does not stop at the café for lemonade. Instead, he goes to the florist, a weary-eyed and heavy set woman who waits at the counter vainly every day for someone to stop by and purchase some lifeless flowers for their sweetheart. Apollo asks for the purple bouquet, the one in the front of the shop. When the woman asks who for, he only says it's for someone worth remembering. She thinks this is fair enough, and hands him the bouquet for a cheap price. He bids her a good day and walks down the cracked avenue. The streets are empty as they normally are, quieter than the echo who lost her voice. His guitar is heavy on his back today, perhaps because he hasn't touched it since seeing the beautiful blossom of a boy set down an empty cup of lemonade. In front of the hotel, there is still a little bit of a nasty stain. Apollo sets down the flowers, ponders them in the dusty yellow sunlight. His tears stain the petals deeply, the salt eating at their gentle skin. Slowly, he tunes his guitar, turning the pins note by painful note. His fingers are stiff from lack of practice. He sings with that honeyed voice that people worship, the voice that draws people to bow at his feet. He sings about Ovid's and how nice it is to be kept there, with lovers and friends alike, catching breaths and stretching. He sings about the lemonade that is always a bit too tart, about the way its sugar sticks to lips. After that, he stops singing. He packs his guitar away, slams the

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case shut. He leaves the flowers where they are, gets up, and gets into his car. He puts it into drive, gently presses the accelerator, and drives off, leaving Sparta, with its faded colors and drowsy aura, behind him. His endless Spartan summer will be remembered in verse only. Maybe one day, he'll publish it and sell it at Ovid's, for some silly boys to pick up while they're trying to catch their breath.