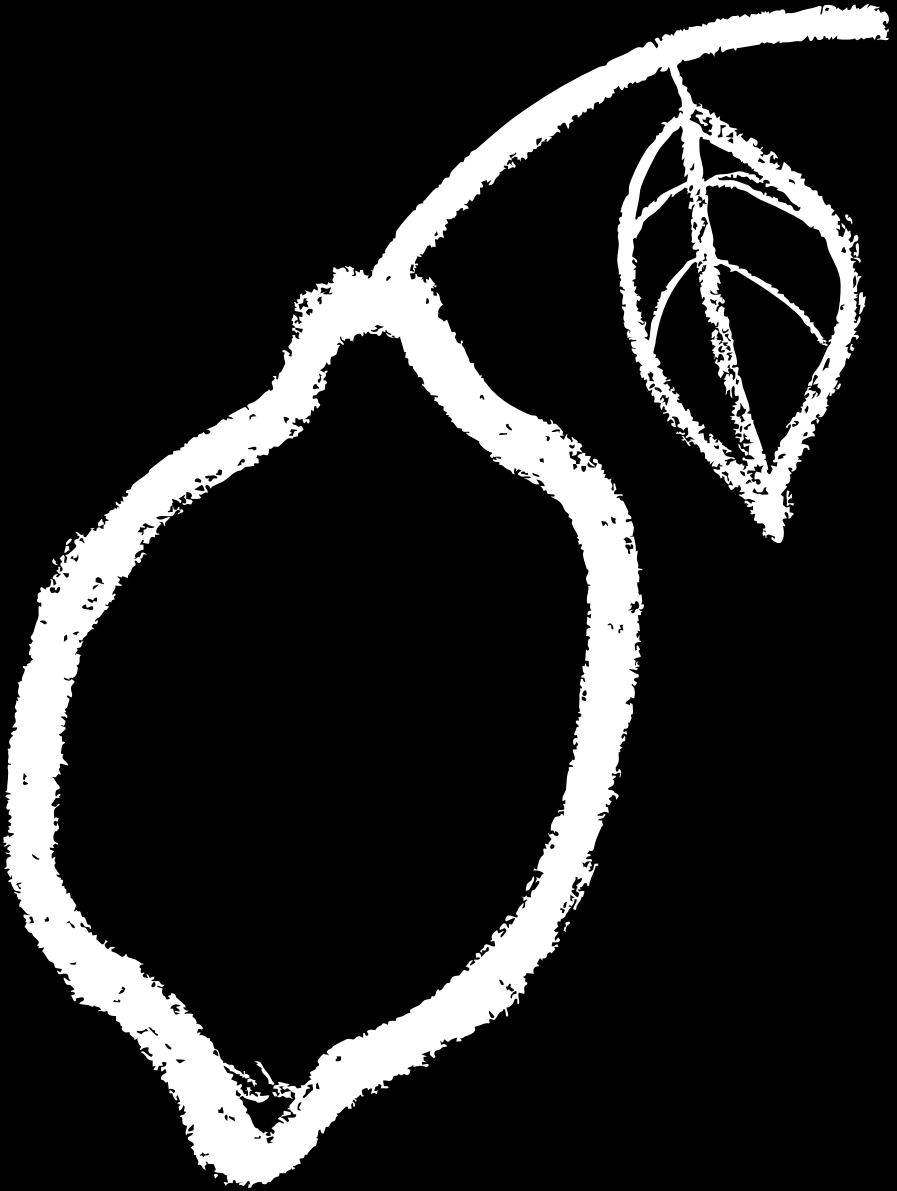


Lemons: In an Orchard

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I can't see my face. I'm sure I look rough. I feel around my cheeks, the back of my skull is sore.

There must be a few bruises there. A little dried blood crumbles off my forehead into the palm of my right hand. A semi hard and wet spot at the back of my skull stamps a bloody print onto the probing fingers of my left hand. I pull down the waistband of the jogging pants and inspect an injection site. They really jammed it in there in a hurry. It was a muscular injection, but it did the trick all right. There is a bruise the size of a grapefruit where it went in. My jacket is gone entirely. From what I can see of myself, I look like I've been rolling around in the dirt.

There is a contusion on my left elbow and right knee. My back feels like I slept on a pile of rocks. This is likely a reality, since that's more or less where I woke up. A strange small circle of stones under a lemon tree. A makeshift witch's rite of protection, though in this case I'm pretty sure protection wasn't on the minds of my abductors. They didn't grab me up and throw me out here in a ring of rocks to protect me from some imminent threat to my well being. More the other way around. This is a message. Whether the message kills me or not is yet to be seen. It's not totally hopeless. I have no water, but I'm in good shape for my age. One of the

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benefits of success like mine is a more than rudimentary amount of free time to stay fit.

The first animals I notice are bees. There aren't many flowers left. There's only one type of plant out here, lemon tree, and they've all gone to fruit. So the bees are just kind of here. It's too early for them to hibernate. How far could they travel to keep busy before they might as well move? They are small. Honeybees with transparent wings and fuzzy abdomens. They cling to the fruits and scan their little bee horizons for infrared signals that I feel pretty certain aren't out there. At least they aren't hornets. One lands on my leg. I brush it off quickly, startled. I don't like bees. They say they're all dying, and whoa, what are we gonna do? I'm gonna sip a margarita in my backyard without looking in it first to see if there be any stranded drowning little idiots with tiny nuclear warheads on their asses.

Insects like this will also feed on corpses. They don't talk about it much, but these guys will eat pretty much anything. Maybe that's how hornets came into existence. A hive of honeybees got the taste for flesh from chewing on a decomposing rabbit and the next time something chewed it's way out of a hexagonal incubation chamber it was this bloodthirsty crazed war machine that ate up its whole family before running out of the hive and amok among the flowers in the field, which it could probably still see with honeybee clarity but now was only enraged by.

It's too late bees. Go home.

At least my legs aren't broken. I stumble a little, the first signs of exhaustion and dehydration appearing around mid afternoon. The gold Movado on my wrist tells me so, of course it could be lying. The fact that I still have a six hundred dollar watch on tells me something about the reason I'm out here. It has nothing to do with simple robbery. My feet are sore. My neck is pounding and red from where I haven't been able to keep the sun off it. The smoke in the skies blots out the yellow orb which I know to be tracking my every move. The shadow which forms weakly to the front right works its way to the rear, at which point my forehead will feel baked and blistered unless I find some way to make a hat out of lemon branches. Now there's an idea. I refuse to wear a stupid hat though, and my resolve to be rescued is strong enough where I'm willing to forego looking like a jungle refugee for the

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time being and accept a little sunburn from this hazed out sky. I won't be out here more than a day. Someone will be looking for me. Plus, there's got to be some kind of traffic out here. It appears to be an active farm, at least the trees are pruned and the fruit is ripe.

I look up, where there is no specific sun, just a deluge of solar radiation seemingly coming from every direction, even up from the ground. Ash falls from the sky like it's trying to snow. There is a hawk flying overhead. At least I hope it's a hawk and not a vulture. He's circling, but not necessarily over me. Maybe there is a rabbit down here or something. He flies off to the left while I watch him. He dives into the foliage and disappears.

It's funny being blinded by the repetition of forms and colors and little else. So many greens, more than in a box of crayons. I start naming them to keep my mind from gnawing on itself. I start with leaf green then realize how stupid that sounds because they are all leaf green. Some of them are darker, like jade or malachite. so I've got jade green. Then some are lighter like the exo-skeleton of a praying mantis or lacewing. So then I've got lacewing green. Pretty soon I'm running out of direct comparisons. I begin with more distant connections. Sour green comes to me when I think about eating a lemon, though that really should have been a yellow. It was a yellow-green, but I've already decided that colors named after other colors really won't cut it in my custom crayon box of greens, grays, browns, and one monolithic sun-bright yellow standing out among the rest, solitary of wavelength, bringing all the attention to itself even as it perches behind and under green awnings and facades of leaves. There is only one yellow.

I'm not a religious man. I don't believe in karma. Still, if I make it back from this, I know some people who are gonna be on my shit list. I think about revenge. What I'd do. I think that I probably wouldn't have enough patience to drop them in the middle of some expanse of ironically inedible fruit. Leave them for dead. I begin to think how I'd like to see them suffer, and then I wonder if there are cameras out here. Am I paranoid yet? I will be if I don't find my way out of here, I'll go mad.

I don't belong out here. I mean nobody does, it's not a livable place. Just miles of trees and the only fruit in sight, lemons. Yellow, like the sun would be if there weren't all this smoke drifting down from the fires up north. If I had had a choice in the matter I might

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have asked to be stuck up there. At least if I didn't choke to death on smoke, there would be a slight chance of rescue. There doesn't seem to be anyone around here at all. You'd think they'd be out here picking fruit. They look ripe to me, but so far I ain't seen a soul. Not that I really like other people that much, but they're kind of necessary unless you're a survivalist, and I don't know what's worse, dying of thirst or starvation in a lemon grove, or spending your entire life preparing to survive such a thing. I am well beyond the point of that being a choice, and if I survive, I intend this to be a one-off adventure.

This was just an accident. It's all a big mistake. It doesn't pay to try and do the right thing. These trees are my reminder of that. That, for all my brilliance, I couldn't see this coming. How I could be so far above everything, then get slammed right down into this god damned repeating maze. This must be what wage workers feel like.

First, I tried running. I thought, it can't be that far. So I just ran. These stupid sharp branches tore at me. I've just got a t-shirt on, and pants. I got out of breath pretty quick, and my throat super dry. A couple low slung fruits punched me in the face as I ducked under a branch. This knocked me right over. I sat there for a minute thinking again about my day so far. A rabbit bounded through my vision. It stopped and looked at me with that typical rabbit case of Parkinson's. His nose shivering in my general direction. I thought of ways to kill it. None of them soon enough, cause he ran away when I jerked my leg in frustration.

I am fucking thirsty. I haven't had a drop of water all day. The tranqs wore off around seven am, I started shivering a little bit. There was this feeling, kind of unbelievable, you know you get that feeling sometimes when you wake up after a bender, like this hollow sinking nakedness in your gut. It screams, you! have. fucked. up. the. last. time. Then if you're at home and you're anything like me, you'll find the quickest way to change that feeling possible. After a few minutes, it kinda wears thinner, and you remember how bad it was, but you start to feel like you were maybe over reacting. This time, there is nothing between me and this feeling. And it doesn't go anywhere. There is nothing to take it away. Just lemons.

I woke up with a dry mouth. Now it's some time after noon, I've recycled all my spit thinking about what it would be like to

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bite into one of these little yellow bastards. Every time I let my mind go and in my imagination my mouth tastes this, my salivary glands shoot off rounds like an underage boy in a brothel. That's fucking gross. Now I've got that thought about boy semen, but the simile places it in my mouth, which was unintentional and distasteful, more so than the original simile. And despite all this, my glands are now unable to produce any more spit, so they just convulse painfully instead.

So, I decide to eat a lemon. They are, after all, the only thing I could catch out here that is remotely edible. I'm thinking maybe I'll evolve on the spot, develop acid concentrating glands and leave here with full acid pouches, go and find those sons of bitches who fucked me and spit in their faces. Na, more likely I'll just puke, but I really gotta try. If I get out of here and I read about a guy who had the same experience as me, only he taught himself to eat lemons, got used to them, even craved them, and discovered that the lemon diet cures cancer and hemorrhoids and all sort of nasty shit, well, I'd feel like a sucker for sure for not trying.

I shouldn't have tried.

I pick a fresh one. It is flawless, heavy, like a sun-drop jewel. I toss it casually in the air and catch it, like one does in a park with a ball. I am warming up. I stop and hold it to my nose and sniff. It has all the qualities of concentrated sweet and sour, with a little bit of floral edge that usually turns to a detergent note by the time it gets to the shelf at the grocery store. I sink my fingernails in the rind just a little, hear a little pop, see a spray of atomized oils whiff out into the air. I lick it and feel my tongue go numb. That might be my first clue as to how this is going to go. But I open wide anyway, ready to discover for myself. I bite it like an apple, if an apple were an electrified bucket of horse piss. It always tastes so good when it's used to cut the fishiness of a fried platter, when it is cut itself by a cup of sugar in a glass of lemonade, or even pickled in brine and juice, the rind becomes an edible candy treat, great on salads.

God, after the first bite I really want to stop chewing, but I think, of course this is hard. Of course it hurts. But maybe on the other side of the pain, sustenance. So I chew and the acid quickly finds every crack in my enamel, every nick on the inside of my mouth, my lips are numb and burning at the same time and the

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nerve response is like chewing on tacks without slowing down. My face curls up, my neck throws my skull into convulsions as the intensity grows with every bite. I am crying but I don't feel it.

The seeds and the skin taste the best. I wonder what this experience has done to the balance of moisture in my system as I greedily swallow back all the saliva it brings out. When I am done, I feel the charge moving down into my empty stomach. At that point I put two and two together and realize my stomach is about to dump more acid onto this acid bomb. Oops. I guess I should have known, but I was desperate. I double over. I heave. I heave as though dragging something out of my toenails through my spine and out my tongue. Yellow yellow bile and fruit remains spill out onto the brown dirt.

A drone flies overhead. It is carrying a lemon, likely for inspection. Running a program. A robot farm. But surely the drones don't do all the picking. I wave, trying to get its attention. When it seems to be unresponsive, I pick up a lemon and give it my best college baseball strike pitch. I nail the fucking thing and the effect is that it stops, turns and looks at me, as if to say, don't do that again. Then it turns back around and flies away. I toss another lemon after it, but I've wasted my arm on the first throw. My shoulder hurts. I heard something pop.

It's impossible to stay here. My mind takes me back over the memories of the years. Makes all the sweet spots painful, and the painful spots are points I fill with rage at the way I've been treated by the universe. I used to be quite successful. It was all a cruel joke though. What was my crime? Wanting more, perhaps. They all want more though, more of me than there is to go around. I have to satisfy so many hungry and vacant hands. They consumed me. And when I couldn't, didn't have any more to give, they stuck me out here, as if knowing their secrets were the worst crime I could have committed. Knowing how hollow and hungry they are.

I'm pretty tough, I might make it out of here. I've got to find some water though. In what I take to be the early afternoon as made evident by my watch, I look under a tree. The space beneath looks rather well groomed and shaded. It's time for a rest, so in I crawl. Brown and yellow dirt filling the fabric of my knees with humus, sand, and clay. The palms of my hands pricked by an errant patch of burweed makes me shout, fuck! My bare arms

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are already laced up and down with red stripes from some of the tight squeezes between the lower branches.

The underside of the foliage is lighter colors, the solar rays more diffuse. The ground is hard with root structure, but I am thoroughly too exhausted to give a fuck. I lay on my back like a broken action figure, my arms popped off laying next to me, my elastic spine is exposed, the paint on my nose is chipped and reveals an injection molded white plastic filler. God, I wish I was dead. No, no fuck I wish I wasn't here. Could anywhere be worse? The knowledge that I don't know what my wife and kids are going through adds to the torment of my situation. Would they have fucked with my family? I can't believe I hadn't thought of it before now. The images of murdered tortured bodies bring me to such a climax of pain, I lose consciousness briefly.

In my dreams I am hunted. That's nothing new. Maybe on some deep psychic level a part of me always knew this is how it would end. I'm in a sinister house. There are secret stairways and vast impossible rooms, tunneling basement churches where the lights go out just as I'm set upon by zombies. Sand covered floors with ceilings sloping down into dark corners where I feel drawn to put my hands. Locked rooms lit from within, others populated by coffins and characters who talk about me like I'm not there. The attics where vistas of public library bathrooms sprawl below in another kind of endless grid of stress holding.

In this one I'm walking along a trail on the side of a mountain. The path goes fairly parallel with the elevation even as it winds its way around boulders and under outcroppings. The sky is iron. The grass is plastic. The air is chilled and blasting my cheeks raw. I look at my fingers, gone already, evaporated in some caustic pool. There is something following me. Something is very close and getting closer. It howls. They howl. A pack of gray wolves with my hands for front feet. They've got voices which grab hold of my core like teeth sunk into my belt. The harder I run the closer they get, inevitably they will catch up. But they catch us all eventually don't they? None can escape forever. And how could anyone honestly say they were ready to give it up, unless they were one of those poor bastards pummeled already by life, dead kids and wife, cancer, framed for murder and molestation, infamous as a piece of shit that no one feels sorry for. The object

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of affinity for haters everywhere, including god. Maybe that guy will be me if I hang on long enough.

My eyes are open. I'm staring up through this beautiful green foliage. There are concentrated sun-drops hanging among the branches. They turn to condemned men all pointing their dead fingers at me. Fuck. I wake up with a start as one of the wolves grabs my calf between his powerful jaws and rips me out of my hiding place inside a very shallow cave. His growl echoes in the flat air the way no other sound does in this grove and I hear it inside my skull as that sickening stomach feeling of dread and regret consumes my attention once the dream passes. Then I hear a sound like someone taking a piss.

Next to my hand, still got all the fingers I checked, there is a stream of water poking out of the surface of the root grabbed ground. I stick my lips to the dirt and suck what must be a snapped irrigation hose. The water tastes like PVC and onions, but I don't care. It's not strychnine. At this point, I don't think a skull and crossbones label would stop me from tasting anything clear and liquid.

I suck the hose until I puke. That's unfortunate, and the water stops right after. Was my body able to retain any of that hydration or did I just lose more than I gained? I'm not an athlete, a doctor, or even a yoga instructor. I have no idea if I am closer to death or salvation at this point. I just know that my mouth tastes like the inside of a week old pizza box and my vision is fuzzy. I can see well enough to scribble down these notes.

I can see well enough in my mind's eye the things that brought me here and the people I've left behind. Anything between arms reach and the sky is just a frustrating maze of repetitious branches and leaves, and lemons, and they are occasionally blurring together like some impressionist landscape. Even without direct sunlight the shimmering shiny leaves are mesmerizing.

I've been sitting in a pile of vomit, considering eating the wet dirt to suck the moisture back from the earth. The thought leads me to believe that would make me puke again, and probably harder, and lose even more fluid. I'll just have to be more conservative next time. The thought of me being more conservative wracks my body with a spasm something like a wounded giggle. Oh, if they could hear me.

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Back home, if I were there, I'd be sitting down for an afternoon scotch before closing out my business for the day. I'd take another glance at the market. Send out another email telling so and so what to do when to whom. My work isn't very exciting. I work with a group. Angel investors, kinda. We take over struggling businesses showing otherwise potential for profit, and we make money. I don't indulge much. So, I'd finish my scotch and lock my study. After that I'd go for a run. The streets around my home are patrolled twenty four hours a day by a private security outfit, which is why it's so hard to believe I was kidnapped from my own neighborhood. Me, an adult male in the prime of my life, in fighting shape no less. It all happened so fast. That first hit to the head blinded me with pain and a bright flash. After that, I struggled. I think I felt a nose crush under my fist, heard a distant grunt as one of my knees came into contact with something big and soft. But it was too late, They got a rag over my mouth which muffled my shouting and tasted sweet and pungent. Then a stabbing pain in my leg and I'm out. Shit. I really didn't need to relive that right now. I was just trying to have a scotch and take a jog away from this madness, this isolation and fear.

I think the point is, I'm a conservative and a neo-liberal. Your kids call me a fascist, and I'm fine with that. I have more than enough resources to be content and comfortable upon my mountain of personal accomplishments. My net worth is upwards of eighty million dollars. Which is one of the frustrating things about my present situation. If those retards knew who they were kidnapping, if I had a chance to tell them. I could have bought my way out of this.

If they haven't been otherwise affected by this, my family must have reported me missing by now. I know we don't spend a lot of quality time together, but surely my absolute absence has been noticed. I'm under no illusion that I understand them. I don't know how to be loving. And I don't see a problem with that. I take care of them. That's how I show my feelings. I honestly don't think I have emotions the way other, lesser people do. Stoicism has always come naturally to me. There is nothing to be gained from sentimental wallowing. Maybe this discipline will account for my salvation out here in this maze that's all turns and no dead

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ends. I'm sure if I just keep walking in one direction that I'll find my way out of here.

You know something else that perplexes me? They took my jacket and my phone. They left my expensive dumb watch. And they stuck this empty journal in my pocket with two pens! In case I lost one or ran out I guess. They must have known I'd have a lot of thoughts come to me out here and in some last moment of compassion thought it would be helpful for me to be able to take notes. And my shoes, they left me my shoes. My runners are looking pretty ragged, this will probably be their last mission. The jogging pants I was wearing when I was abducted were appropriate for a jog around the block. They are sorely unequipped to deal with the qualities of this trail. Tears up and down the outside of the legs, my balls are soaking wet inside what amounts to a plastic bag. I'm both too hot and shivering cold at the same time. What I wouldn't give for some cotton trousers right now.



West, I'm going West. That's what the shadows tell me. I should be near the I-five, maybe, or the other one, shit. I can't remember. It doesn't matter. What I do remember is that one trip with Darby and the kids when they were little. I think Chet was about eight. That was the year we got divorced. That trip was hell. I still don't know what that woman wanted from me. I don't even know if she got what she wanted from me. We drove most of that trip trying to fight in secret in front of the kids. It never works, kids are like dogs, they pick up on everything. Not that we were good at subtle by that point.

I remember we were driving up the five, going to Malibu from San Diego. We took the kids to the zoo and Malibu was supposed to be a little something special for us adults. Not that

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the kids wouldn't enjoy it, but you know, we had a sitter planned through a friend and we were supposed to try and salvage what remained of our marriage, you know, for the kids sake.

Right in the front seat of the car she gave me this look. It was a look I'll never forget. Almost like we were friends again, and she was about to pull a real mean prank on me or something. But we weren't friends. All she said was, Daddy's gonna take you to the movies tonight. Soon as our bags were checked she disappeared. She came back the next day and took the kids with her. Got on an airplane and just went home. I drove back alone. I mean, I wasn't in a hurry. This was the family trip and if the family wasn't going to participate, I'd just go home. I tried to stop at some of the roadside attractions that we had planned on seeing, but it just didn't feel right. There was no reason for me to be there.

By the time I got home, she'd tried to pull some bullshit with that fucking Lyons. He's a snake, that's for sure. But, I have my own pet snake. And mine is a mammoth. Looks like a shrew, but he's a mammoth. Don't fuck with those little guys. That was the end of that. Not really, I mean it took about a year. The kids went through hell, but honestly I was relieved.

I got lucky after that. I found Lisa. She gets me. Which means she handles her own shit and lets me handle mine. There isn't any problem I have that I can't make worse by spreading it all around and stinking up everyone else's atmosphere. Fuck, Lisa. I hope you're okay. I hope nothing happened to you and the girls.

The sun is gone. I can't really see the paper anymore.

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(Novel)

A man thrashes repeatedly against his own self-awareness until he breaks through into an en-stranged world where his usual handles fail him...

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