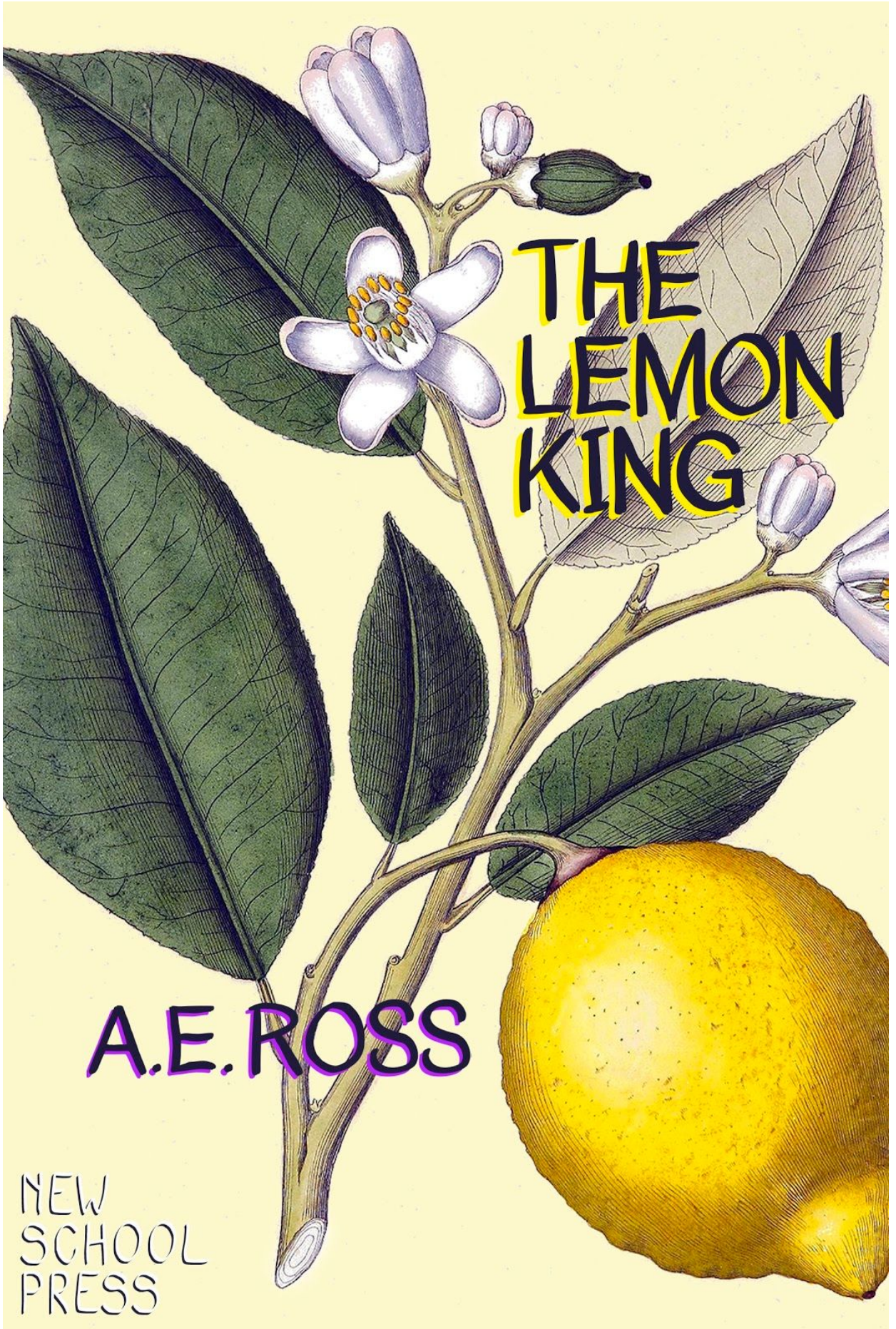


The Lemon King

By A.E. Ross



**THE
LEMON
KING**

A.E. ROSS

NEW
SCHOOL
PRESS

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I.

Today, for the very first time in my relatively short life, I woke up to hear something other than the whistle of the by-products plant that calls out over Corona like a capitalist's muezzin. All around the circle city you can hear it, waking up some people to pick and others to pack; all of them participating in the same bitter trade.

Americans love lemonade, but nobody loves lemons like the people of Corona. They love them pre-sugar, when the bitterness puckers your cheeks. They love them in the summer when the heat suffuses the city with the smell of rotting fruit. They even love the juice, the way it stings underneath your skin. Well, the orchard owners love that - the braceros out in the trees, not so much. Fresh squeezed from Jalisco, from Guanajuato, from Michoacan, they pick and pile and process, their brown limbs ripening under the California sun to provide citrus satisfaction to the rest of these great United States. Lemons for the twist of an Old Fashioned in Manhattan, lemons to squirt onto freshly shucked oysters in New Orleans, and lemons for enterprising children to juice and sweeten and sell at a premium on the tree-lined streets of Greensboro, Huntington and Topeka.

Jules hates lemons, and if I had any sense left in my goddamn head I wouldn't give two shits what Jules does and doesn't like. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem work that way. I keep going back over it: altar boy, honor roll, student council president. All these things are supposed to tell the world how good you are; how smart, how civic-minded, how responsible, how kind. It turns out they don't really mean all that

much in the end. The moment people realize there's something wrong with you, all of those merit badges get crushed like pulp under the feet of the angry mob, leaving you in my shoes, which are currently tucked under my bunk in a cell at the Fred C. Nelles "School For Boys." In truth, a juvenile correctional facility. Nelles once had the privilege of reforming wayward teens, but now it just keeps us separated from polite society until we reach the age of majority.

The one thing I do hear on this fine morning, besides the buzzing of the speaker system and the shouting and the hollow sound of metal on metal, is the grasshopper. He's tucked himself inside my cell somewhere, keeping me company. You'd think I'd be able to find the sucker since there's nowhere to hide but instead I spent last night lying awake as he furiously rubbed his legs together, cricking up a symphony. From the cell next door came a bassline voice: "Shut that motherfucker up!"

I didn't respond. I let my little friend do all the talking. He doesn't really bother me, anyways. Not now that the sun is out. I crack the spine on my geography textbook, my notes lying beside me on the bed, and start tracing the rocky mountains north towards Canada, dissecting their geophysical strata. The one thing about being in here, it's a hell of a lot easier to get my homework done. Graduation is coming up in a couple months and I need to make sure I can pass my exams and get my diploma.

There's a decent chance that I won't get to walk across the stage in a cap and gown but I don't have much else to do in here; I might as well graduate on time. At least I know I'll do better on my English final than I did on the psych exam they gave me when I stepped through the doors of this place. It's hard to do well when you're handcuffed to a chair in front of a guy that seems to think you're a menace to

society. Boy, if he could only see my grades. I mean, I was told that those would count for something.

Getting frustrated with myself, I change positions, propping my back up against the white brick wall, holding the textbook out and above my head to try to force myself to focus before my arms tire out. That's when the door bangs open. It's bright yellow, the only bit of color that breaks up the cell. Another inmate is escorted in by a guard, who removes his handcuffs before turning and clanging the door shut without a word. I'm looking up at him, assessing the threat. He's doing the same to me.

Must be nearly six feet tall, this guy. Dark eyes, golden skin, holding a stack of linens and the other few amenities that Fred C. Nelles so graciously provides.

"You okay with the top?" I ask. He just stares at me. "It's just that I've already settled into the bottom." I say, patting the sheets.

"Fine by me." He says. I stay where I am as he tosses his shit up onto the top bunk and climbs himself up there. Silence rings aloud.

"What's your name?" I ask. It's kind of a flaw of mine. Never could stand the silence if there's someone else to talk to.

"Jeffrey." He says, deep and curt.

"Nice to meet you, Jeffrey, I'm Clark."

"I know."

I frown. Put my book aside, and sit up, crossing my legs in front of me on the plain white blanket.

"All those fellas in the office were laughing about putting me in here with you. Really yukking it up. Said I should be afraid." He says, and I hear him stretch out above me. I can see his white state-issued shoes dangling off the end of the bunk.

Too tall. There's still two hours till lunch, and nowhere for either of us to go but here, the high security wing.

"Can I ask?" I say, not wanting to overstep my bounds. It would be a shame to piss someone off so bad that I die before I even get to my adjudicative hearing. When he responds I pretend it's my conscience whispering down from on high.

"Reckon you already know. S'why you're in here, ain't it." It's not a question, and he's not wrong. I nod to myself, picking at a loose thread in the wool blanket.

"And you?" I ask. He's silent for a tight five before he responds.

"Bagged an old lady, downtown Whittier. Heat caught me with her purse." The metal of the bed creaks as he turns over, his body pressing the mattress down above my head. His feet disappear back up onto the bunk. I nod solemnly.

"They don't put people in here just for stealing purses, do they Jeffrey?" I ask, my geography homework forgotten by my knee, my back to the window. All I can see is that door, lemon yellow. Jules hates lemons.

"No, they don't."

II.

It's September 9th, the first Friday of senior year. I'm in the passenger seat as Clark drives us down the freeway away from Corona, towards Los Angeles. As soon as that last bell rang, I stashed my books in my locker and headed out to the parking lot where he met me. He was sitting on the hood of his Father's cherry red Impala. A pair of ray-bans covered his eyes, but his mouth was smiling. I smiled too, as I hopped in.

I was surprised when he had invited me to go with him. Clark's father's client had given him two tickets to the speech, given that he and his wife wouldn't be able to attend. They were instead spending their evening in a delivery room, welcoming their third child into the world. Really, what surprised me was that Clark had asked me, of all people, to come with him, but what he said did make sense. He's the incumbent student body president and I'm captain of the debate club, so of course we would be the two most invested in attending the rally. I am interested, that's true. Not just about the event, but the promise of escaping the confines of Corona for even one evening was a gift. Sometimes you start to feel a little trapped inside the circle city.

Clark's got one hand on the steering wheel, the other on his knee, as we cruise between the hills along US 91. The end of summer is still holding the sun captive in the sky, not letting it sink into the ocean quite yet. The sky is casting a rosy glow on Clark's freckled forearms. I look down at my own arms, wrists, hands, unconsciously balling my long brown fingers into fists, my knuckles cracked and sun-worn. I don't like thinking about what life would be like as someone else, but sometimes it's all there is.

We've been driving in silence since we pulled out of the school lot. It's surprising, usually you can't shut Clark up. Or at least, that's what I remember from junior year. I didn't see him at all over the summer. I spent nearly every day in the JustRite orchard, helping out my father's picking crew. I don't know what Clark was doing. Swimming, I guess?

"Hey Clark?" I ask, breaking up the quiet just to get out of my own head.

"Yeah Julio?" He asks, looking over at me from behind his shades as we cruise along the straight stretch.

"I appreciate you inviting me." I lift a hand to my brow to keep the sun out of my eyes so I can see his face.

"It's nothing." he says, as if it's true. He gestures towards the glove box with his free hand. "Open that." I reach forward and open the small compartment. Inside there's a state map, a pack of Pall Malls and a spare pair of sunglasses. "You can wear those aviators, if you want. They're my dad's. Huge MacArthur fan." He smirks.

"Thanks." I reach forward for the sunglasses and put them on. The tinted lenses are a great relief. I look over at him to see he's grinning. I smile back.

"They suit you." he says. I laugh.

"I'm no MacArthur."

The sun is halfway to the ocean by the time we find parking near The Shrine and head into the auditorium. I fold up the sunglasses and put them in my breast pocket as we join the crowd. The first thing I notice is that while there are a lot of different people in attendance, very few of them look like me. The second thing is that we are

grievously underdressed. I look over at Clark nervously but it doesn't seem like it's occurred to him.

"Should we have worn ties or something?" I ask nervously. He looks over at me and raises an eyebrow.

"Hey, maybe they'll just be so happy that we're two civically engaged teenagers that they won't mind what we're wearing." He says with a wink. He's quickly proven incorrect. A older couple passes us, giving the slacks and button-ups of our school uniforms a scan followed by a sneer. An older man in a three-piece suit looks particularly scandalized as we brush through the crowd to find our seats. The feeling in the air is electric as we grab a pair on the edge of the centre section. The red seats and the bright lights overhead fill the whole space with an anxious golden glow. All around us, people of stature and substance are filing in, milling around, claiming seats. Clark and I wait another hour, talking about teachers, classmates, and homework while the anxiety builds. I keep looking around, trying to keep my voice low so no one registers my accent.

The lights dim.

The theatre erupts into thunderous applause as Senator Kennedy takes the stage. Acknowledging the state representatives, he begins:

"Governor Brown, Attorney General Mosk, Senator Jackson, Mrs. Engle, first, I would like to have you meet - well, my wife is home having a baby." The crowd around us dissolves into laughter as he continues with his speech, playing to his audience with a mix of humor and honest determination. As he talks I look out at the crowd. They seem to be hanging on his words, applauding at every chance. I know

political rallies are meant to be filled with supporters but I guess I just didn't realize what a hold he had on people, but I even find myself getting sucked in as he speaks.

I sneak a look over at Clark to see if he's getting pulled under as well. His jaw is set, his eyes serious as he takes in Kennedy's words. He turns his head toward me slightly, his blue eyes shifting off the Senator to meet mine. The corner of his mouth lifts up, just barely a smile, as he adjusts his posture in the red velvet upholstery, pushing his back up against the seat, his long legs widening their stance. As he moves, his knee falls against mine and suddenly a spark bursts to life inside of my chest, spiraling upwards. My head snaps back towards the stage, but he doesn't move away. Breathing slow, I flick my eyes back towards him to see that he's turned back to watching Kennedy speak with rapt attention. My knuckles grip the hand rests tight as I press my knee back into his with intention, and side-long I see the smile spread across his lips.

On stage, Kennedy makes his closing remarks.

"In 1886, Abraham Lincoln wrote to a friend, "I know there is a God and He hates injustice." He said, "I see the storm coming. If He has a place and a part for me, I am ready." Now, in 1960, we know there is a God, and we know He hates injustice, and we see the storm coming. We say, "If He has a place and part for us, we are ready." Thank you."

Even though it was a brilliant speech, I resent the standing ovation as Clark rises with the rest of the crowd, the warmth of his knee leaving mine. I rise too. My hands clap instinctively even though all I can focus on is the spark of anxiety settling in my chest, extinguishing as the adrenaline dissipates.

The audience begin to disperse and as we make our way through the throng, I feel a hand on my back, just between my shoulderblades, fingers nearly brushing my neck. It lingers there until we reach the lobby where the crowd is more sparse. A blush spreads across my cheeks, leaving them hot even as we step into the night air and make our way to the impala.

The ride home is quiet except for Brenda Lee on the radio. She sings that she's sorry, so sorry, but her apology get swallowed up by the night sky.

III.

They walked me back to my cell, released me from the cuffs, and slammed the yellow door behind me without a word. Even though it's been at least an hour it feels like the ring of metal on cement is still echoing through the room. I can't seem to shake that noise out of my head. My textbooks are piled neatly on the bed, waiting for me. I'd pick one up just for something to look at but I'm not sure my hands will stop shaking long enough. Besides, I've got four years. That's plenty of time. Why rush it?

Jeffrey's not here, I don't know where he is. I'm glad to be alone.

Geography doesn't seem very important right now. Nor does arithmetic, or history, or chemistry. My fingers skitter across the surface of the textbook on the top of the pile, pulling it into my lap. Economics. I open it up to a page of complicated word problems.

"If Clark's father runs a successful lemon products plant, how much of his money can he bear to part with to help his incarcerated son, whom he can no longer look in the eye."

Gosh, if I could solve that one, I might bother to take my exams and graduate. I run my hand across the top of the page, tracing the chapter heading before grabbing hold of the paper and tearing it from the binding, letting it go to float down and land on the cement. And then I rip the next one, and the next one, and the next one, until there are several chapters worth of fiscal policy and equilibrium littering the floor. My hands are still shaking. My feet feel numb. But more than anything, my chest is hollow. I feel like I should be crying. Screaming. Banging on the doors that this isn't

fair, this isn't right, this isn't what happens to nice boys like me. But then, nice boys are kind of the problem, aren't they?

The door slams open, refreshing the echo in my eardrums as I look up, expecting Jeffrey to walk back through the door. It's not him, but the same guards who left me here not long ago. I cock my head to the side as one nods at me.

"Visitor." he says, looking directly past me, ignoring the piles of loose-leaf I've created. My breath catches in my chest at the possibility that my Father has come around, although it seems pretty fucking unlikely from how we left things.

I wait in the chapel as the summer light floods in. In front of me, past the pulpit, the stained glass reflects fragments of color onto the wooden floorboards. It almost reminds me of Sundays at home, long hours spent at St. Paulinus waiting for mass to end. It's strange to think of home as some distant place when it's less than an hour's drive from here, but it really does seem impossibly far. With the new freeway opening, I may not even recognize Corona by the time I return.

My hands are cuff free, but the worn circular ruts around my wrists are there to make sure I don't forget. The younger of the two guards wondered if they should leave me cuffed for the visitation but the other just wiped his nose on the back of his hand and commented that my visitor likely has nothing to fear.

I smell her before I see her. Rosie always smells like clematis and coppertone. I listen to the click of her heels on the chapel floor, knowing that the guard's eyes are probably following her hungrily as she slides into the pew to join me.

"Hello Clark." Rosie says, warmly. I look over to see her wavy brown hair is cascading down over the front of the cardigan they made her wear to cover up her

shoulder-baring sundress. The reigning Miss Corona causes a stir wherever she goes, but a boys' reform school is a dangerous place for any woman.

"Hi Rosie." I say, relieved to see a friendly face.

She passes a newspaper into my lap and I'm surprised to see a copy of the Los Angeles Herald bearing the byline "*Sodom in Corona?*"

"I'm guessing my Father isn't happy about that." I say, flinching as I force myself to raise my chin and look her in the eye. She looks drawn. We're both silent for a moment, shoulder to shoulder.

"He got the same, Clark." She says, answering the question I was very much afraid to pose.

"He's in Chino?" I ask. She nods. My hollow chest is being filled with a new sensation. It feels a little as if I've popped a couple of fizzies into my lemonade and drained the glass. I guess I was just holding out hope that things are going better for Jules than they are for me. From the look on his sister's face, I can tell that's not the case.

I don't think I'll ever forget the hours I spent in the Judge's chambers. Small and stuffy, the oak-panelled walls seemed to press in on all sides. His greying mustache hung over his mouth like an unlevel painting on stained drywall. Watery blue eyes looked out at me from behind a pair of browline glasses that perched atop a pudgy, swollen nose. It must have been dusty in that office because he sneezed upwards of thirteen times during our hearing. I lost count mid-way through, around the time he asked me if I'm a homosexual.

He was trying to put on a fatherly air, but when I didn't immediately answer that question in the negative, he licked the foam from the corner of his mouth and told me that things were going to be okay. That I could move past my illegal, indecent, immoral and disgusting acts, and become a member of society once more at the age of twenty-one.

No trial, no lawyer, just one opinionated old man that someone decided was capable of judgement. I can't recall if there was a gavel involved although that seems like something that I'd like to have known.

Four years seems a long time to reflect on whether I'm a homosexual.

Especially when I'm fairly certain the answer I gave him is correct.

I don't know what to say to Rosie so instead I reach out and take her hand in mine. The warmth of the back of her hand against my palm makes a shiver dance all the way along my spine from top to bottom. She looks over at me through her long dark lashes and my breath catches, seeing someone else in her eyes.

"You know," she begins, tentatively, "You could appeal."

"I--" I begin to interject, but she's not finished.

"If your sentence were to get overturned, they'd have to throw his out as well." I shake my head, having already been down this avenue to little result.

"I discussed it with my Father but he said--" I pause, trying to calm the anger that's still working its way through me since I saw the man. "-that he would only do it if my college fund paid for the lawyer."

"So what's your plan, you wait four years, save your money and just take off for college when you get out of here?" I nod, digging my front teeth into my bottom lip,

for lack of any proper way to defend my current plan of action. Rosie frowns, painted brows dropping down dangerously as she pulls her hand from mine. “Yeah, that’s a real nice plan, Clark. I wish Julio had that option.”

“What do you mean, can’t your family appeal?” I ask, instantly regretting my words when Rosie follows them up with a sharp, dark laugh.

“Come on, Clark. It’s only by the grace of God and Robinson Orchards that my parents are even citizens here, and just barely at that. Do you think JustRite is going to sponsor my brother’s appeal like they did my parent’s papers? I’m pretty sure Robinson has already told my Dad to forget he even has a son if he wants to keep his position as foreman.” She sucks in a sharp breath and I can see the tears collecting along her lower lashes. “And he needs that job. We all do.” I reach out and take her hand back, clutching it in mine. I need her to understand.

“Even if I appeal, Rosie, that doesn’t mean anything will come of it. They could take all that time and money just to decide that yes, the judge was right, we deserve this. And then what? Jules and I are both out a future.” I say, struggling to hold eye contact as the tears start to roll down her cheeks. A tense lump begins building in the back of my throat.

“Clark,” she says, pulling her hand away for the second time as she pushes up off the pew, “You don’t get it. Julio doesn’t get a future, not the same way you do. You can do your four years, say you’re reformed and they’ll probably still accept you into Ivy and give you a white-collar job. Julio would have been lucky for that to happen to a chicano like him before he was charged as a sex offender.” Rosie stares down at me, eye make-up beginning to crawl down her cheeks like ink from a busted pen. I

look away towards the stained glass, breath a little hard to come by all of the sudden.

“I don’t know what you want me to do, Rosie.” I say, my voice strained and sour.

“I just want you to think about him, Clark. If it’s not too much trouble.” she says, and walks away to tell the guards she’s ready to leave.

When they return me to my cell, Jeffrey’s on the top bunk, the deconstruction of my economics textbook is on the bottom bunk, and I feel like crawling under the bed.

Is it too much trouble to think about Jules?

It’s certainly seemed that way so far.

IV.

“So our man won, huh?” Clark says, leaning against the stucco walls of St. Paulinus’ School. His hands are shoved into the pockets of his navy slacks, part of our student uniform. Across the schoolyard, the church is in session, and we oughta be as well, but for some reason we’re out loitering in the November calm. Sixty-eight degrees and sunny, like the sky itself is congratulating our new president, and though I’m not entirely certain he’s “our man,” I nod.

“We should probably get going.” I say, jerking my head towards the church. Father Matthews is likely about to start mass, and I’m sure my parents will be sitting in their usual spot beside Mr. Robinson and his wife. In fact, Rosie is probably wondering where I am right now.

“Yeah.” Clark says, not moving. His back is up against the building, one leg bent with his sole against the bricks that line the lower half the wall. I’m standing awkwardly in front of him, not sure what it is that he wants from me, or vice versa. My shoulders are sore from helping out at the orchard yesterday, even though I should have been practicing for this week’s debate. Jason Russo is angling to take my spot as club captain, and I’ve worked too hard to let him, but saying no to my Father is... not an option.

“Whatcha thinking about? Clark asks. “You’re frowning.” As he catches my eye, something in my chest breaks anchor, bobbing up violently into my throat.

“Jason Russo,” I say. Clark raises an eyebrow.

“Oh yeah? What about him?”

“Just thinks he’s better than me.” I say, a blush rising to my cheeks as I realize I’ve exposed myself. The key to getting through school has been to pretend like nothing can get to me, not girls, not bullies, not the teachers who think I won’t understand the material the same way kids like Clark and Jason will. I’ve let myself slip, but Clark just nods, swallowing as he pulls his hands from his pockets and pushes off the wall.

He steps in closer.

“He isn’t.” Clark says, the toes of his shoes just inches from mine on the sidewalk. He lifts my chin up with his fingertips so I stop looking at the ground, and as our eyes meet, he says “Jules.”

With that, he un-makes me.

He’s taken my name, tasted it, and found it wanting.

Anglicized me.

He leans in and brushes his lips against mine, his fingers now pressed against my jaw line, steadying me. His other hand finds my waist, slipping beneath my uniform jacket to rest against my dress shirt. That thin layer of white cotton is the only thing separating him from the skin of my hip.

Without thinking, I lean into him, clumsily returning the favour. What feels like a minor heart attack is beginning in my chest, shockwaves radiating out in slow-motion. Clark’s fingers leave my face and find my other hip as his hands grip me, spinning me until my back is resting against the wall. He presses up against me before he pulls back and looks down.

“I hope that’s for me, and not for Jason Russo” he says, the corner of his mouth pulling up in a lazy smile. I realize he’s talking about my erection. Before I can reply I feel him move his hands from my hips to my belt buckle, and begin to undo it.

“What are you doing?” I say, breathless. I don’t want to stop but everyone we know is in a church one hundred feet away for Sunday mass, and this is definitely a sin.

How can this be a sin?

“It’s fine, I used to be an altar boy, remember? No one’s leaving that building for the next forty minutes. They’re all too afraid to piss off Father Matthews.” I exhale shakily as he unzips my fly.

“We’re supposed to be in there too.” I whisper, my voice coming out panicked. He looks up at me, sliding one hand inside my briefs. The feeling of his fingers around me makes me feel like I’m about to pass out, partially because it’s the first time, and also from sheer terror.

“So say a hymn or something, God’ll still hear it from here.” He grins. I bite my lip. He looks concerned and withdraws his hands from my pants.

“Julio. Do you want me to?” he asks, completely serious. I exhale deeply, and try to be reasonable. I can’t. I nod. He kneels.

*“I, through all chances that are given to mortals
And through all fates that be,
So long as this close prison shall contain me,
Yea, through a world shall sunder me and thee,”*

Clark's mouth is hot, his lips are tight and smooth. My hands scrabble at the brickwork on either side of me as I try to remember St. Paulinus' poem.

*"Thee shall I hold, in every fibre woven,
Not with dumb lips nor with averted face
Shall I behold thee, in my mind embrace thee,
Instant and present, thou, in every place."*

I only get in two stanzas before it's over. Clark looks up at me with a blunted smile as I let out a heavenly shudder, before tucking myself away and zipping up. He rises before me and places his hands on the wall on either side of my head, leaning in so that his lips brush against my ear.

"To Ausonius" he says; the poem's title. Not shocking that he would recognize it as we've both had to study the writings of our school's namesake in class. As the tension drains from my body, I close my eyes and slump against the wall. I catch the smell of me on his breath as he moves away and I snake my arm out, gripping the lapel of his navy blue blazer in my fist.

"Julio, what the fuck is going on here?" My eyes snap open to see my younger sister Rosie standing on the sidewalk in front of us, dressed in her Sunday best, eyes wide.

My heart, a second ago light as air, sinks deep into my gut.

V.

The stack of letters beside my bed has been growing by the day. They started flooding in a week or so after I had my Father file the appeal. Among them was my high school diploma showing I matriculated with full honors. I'm not going to need it in the next four years, but there's not much to do in here and Jeffrey's not exactly a fan of mine. Better I keep to myself. Besides the diploma there's also been countless death threats and condemnations as well as a handful of anonymous letters of support. My Father hasn't spoken to me, but my Mother sends collections of passive-aggressive newspaper clippings every week. Headlines like "*Son of local businessman appeals sodomy conviction*" and "*Corona youth seeks release*" coming from as near as Los Angeles and as far as New York.

I don't know why this is garnering so much attention but when Father Matthews came to visit me, he said it seemed like people had a lot of concerns about our juvenile justice system these days.

"And maybe," he continued, "seeing a bright young kid like you put away for four years on something where the shadow of a doubt exists might have started an important conversation." So why aren't there any articles about Jules, then?

I like Father Matthews a lot, I always have. I think it's because he doesn't talk to me like I'm a kid. At first I thought he came here wanting me to confess and repent, but really he just asked me a lot of questions about my session with the judge, and what we had talked about. I told him everything I could remember, and he nodded along, not saying anything about my response to the Judge's most damning question. As he was about to leave he asked if there was any message I wanted him

to pass on to my parents. I thought for a second, and then nodded. He handed me a piece of notepaper and a pen and I scrawled out the words I'd been wanting to say to my Father, ever since he told me that if I won my appeal, I could do whatever I wanted, but I sure as hell wasn't coming home.

*No man is entitled to the blessings of freedom
unless he be vigilant in its preservation.*

I passed the note back to Father Matthews and he gave it a quick scan before wagging his tangled eyebrows at me.

"Kennedy?" he asked.

"MacArthur."

There was one letter I didn't keep in the stack. Stamped on the back with the words "California Youth Authority," the envelope was yellowed and slightly torn from repeated handling. It arrived a couple of weeks after the appeal was filed. The front had my address here at Nells, and the return merely read "From Ausonius."

I found it upon flipping through a stack of missives full of festering hate. A grin spread across my face as I opened the envelope with a fingernail and pulled out the letter inside. It was brief, but I understood. That's just the way Jules is. He knows the point and he gets to it. Doesn't waste a bunch of words like me, trying to say something that involved parties already know. The sum of his thoughts was that he was doing okay, or at least as well as could be hoped. He had managed to get his diploma as well, although since the recently opened California State Youth Training

Center in Chino was mostly focused on vocational programs, his words subtly implied he had taken a not insignificant amount of shit from guards and inmates alike.

“Best of luck until I see you.” He writes.

I slipped it under my mattress and proceeded to spend too many nights thinking over his congenial sign-off, trying to parse it for deeper meaning.

Reading that letter again now, for the forty-fifth time, a familiar feeling swells in my chest. I feel proud. I know that I can't give him my opportunities, or even myself, but I'm not sure he would want either of those things if offered. What I can do is make sure that he gets out of Chino with a full pardon.

I know exactly what I'm going to do, though I have so far neglected to share my plan with my father, my lawyer, or my priest. Why bother? I already know what they'll say.

As I fold up that letter for the forty-fifth time, I realize that there's something jammed down into the bottom of the envelope. Shaking it out onto my bed, I find another sheet of paper, tightly folded. I puzzle it open to see twelve lines scrawled in Jules' hand, with only the precursor “I still owe you three stanzas:”

*Yea, when the prison of this flesh is broken,
And from the earth I shall have gone my way,
Wheresoe'er in the wide universe I stay me,
There shall I bear thee, as I do to-day.*

*Think not the end, that from my body frees me,
Breaks and unshackles from my love to thee;
Triumphs the soul above its house in ruin,
Deathless, begot of immortality.*

*Still must she keep her senses and affections,
Hold them as dear as life itself to be.
Could she choose death, then might she choose forgetting:
Living, remembering, to eternity*

My heart closes like a fist as I read Paulinus' words. Jules' words.

Thinking of him in a place like this, four cement walls and a sliver of sunlight, has been difficult to bear. I'd been avoiding it entirely, but the barrier I've erected is cracked, crumbling, and now it's all flooding in. The judge is going to ask me what happened that night, and I'm going to tell him.

Who needs to go to college anyways?

I rip up the letter; evidence of a reality that will cease to exist the moment the appeal ends, when Julio walks out of the courthouse and into his future, whatever that may be.

VI.

My back sticks to the leather.

It's thirty-five degrees outside the car, and if it gets much lower they'll have to go out and light the smudge pots. It'll be kids our age, getting up in the dead of night to keep the groves warm. I hope it doesn't get cold enough. I don't want this year to start in an oily haze.

I exhale, my stomach pressing into Clark's, both of us sticky with sweat. His arms encircle me as we doze in the backseat, the clock ticking us onwards. It's just past midnight on New Year's Day. We're locked together, losing time, while Ray Charles keeps Georgia on our minds from the radio. I've never felt this comfortable south of Sixth Street, but there's something about Clark's lazy breath on my neck, the pulse of his wrist against my collarbone, that feels like home in a way Corona never has.

There's something restless about a place like this, a town on the verge of explosion. I don't know how things will change once the new freeway is finished, but it feels like we're all holding our breath. I think we'll become a drive-through town, a place where people never really stop. Every day I'll see people zipping through on their way to Anaheim or San Bernardino while I'm stuck here, just another lemon man.

I don't hate lemons. I just don't want to spend the rest of my life growing them. No matter how Corona changes, whether it grows or grinds to a halt, this is where I'll be. This is where I'll grow old, following in the footsteps of my father and his father, while Clark, who's snoring gently into my hair, will drive off for the east coast. He'll probably only think of me here, in the backseat of his Father's car. When he asked

me last week at lunch what I'm going to do after school, I just shrugged. What can I say that will compare? When he's studying Ivy League law, I'll be here, lighting the smudge pots, while a grey filter falls over the city.

Turning my head ninety degrees to face him instead of the upholstered ceiling, I place a hand on the side of his face, using my thumb to track the freckles on his cheek. His eyes open wide as I kiss him then soften as he wakes up to match the rhythm of my lips.

"You fell asleep." I say, pulling away and shifting myself so that he's beneath me, skinny thighs tucked between my knees. My head is ducked so that it doesn't hit the roof. Clark grins up at me.

"I was too comfortable." He says, his eyebrows raised as I run my hands down his pale chest. I spread my hands out across his ribs, admiring the contrast, when he reaches out and grabs my wrists. "Make me uncomfortable." he says, eyes flashing in the low light from the street lamp that stands a few feet from where we're parked. I feel him harden against me.

"Okay." I say, suddenly breathless.

A fist knocks on the fogged-up glass. We both go rigid.

I hold my breath, looking back down at Clark, my hands on his chest, his hands gripping my wrists. He looks me in the eye and glances over to the floor where our shirts and jeans are lying tangled in a pile. I'm still sweating in the humidity inside the Impala but my blood has run cold.

We dress quickly, and he pops the door open to see a member of Corona's finest, standing just outside.

“Okay lovebirds, time to--” he starts, his words cut off as he sees the two of us unfold ourselves from the backseat. “What the fuck?”

There are lights on in the house across the street. My house. I see shadows at the window, but I can’t tell who they belong to.

Rosie will know. She’ll be furious.

As my face hits the freezing metal of the trunk, my hands wrenched behind my back, all I can do is wonder what to tell my parents. The cuffs go on, pinching my skin as another officer ducks Clark into the cop car. My parents don’t come outside. I don’t even get a chance to talk to them before the officers march me over to the car and shove me in, slurs rolling off their tongues.

If I had known that the ride in the backseat of that cruiser would be the last time I’d see Clark for four years, I would have said something other than “I’m sorry.”

VII.

I'm ready to say it, until I see him.

This feels like a real courtroom, not like the Judge's chambers where my adjudication hearing took place. There are lawyers, one of them mine. There are real wooden stands. Two appellate judges look down at us from the bench.

There's an audience that includes Rosie, but not my parents. She looks like fresh air smells. I got a few gulps in while they transferred me to and from the van, but seeing Rosie reminds me of what it really feels like to breath free. I want to look at her the entire time, I want to look at everything but him, but I force myself to focus on Julio as they sit me down at the witness stand.

As he meets my eyes I'm struck by lightning. I know that sounds dramatic but it's how I feel, as if an arc of electricity is reaching out from Jules to me, and in that moment, I'm not sure I can do it, that I can say what I came here to say. I know it's the right thing to do, but for a split second all I can think about is how he'll see me. How mad he'll be at me for falling on the sword, regardless of the outcome. Stupidly heroic, Jules would say. Even across the courtroom I can see the crinkles around the edges of his eyes as he smiles, softly and sadly. I try to take in every inch of him, every subtle movement. Risking the chance that anyone is watching, my lips form the words "I'm sorry."

He raises his eyebrows, confused, shaking his head a little. Just behind him, Rosie's eyebrows carve livid lines across her perfect forehead, her eyes boring into me angrily. Her last letter was brief and to the point. Don't screw this up.

Just to the right of her is Father Matthews, speaking quietly with my lawyer, Sullivan. He's a weird looking guy. His suit is oddly cut. His eyes are red and watery with hay fever. This was the best my college fund could afford? I try to swallow the hesitation back down my throat as he approaches the bench and makes an opening statement. I can barely pay attention to his words. My gut clenches, the hair on my arms is standing on end. My body is producing an infinite supply of anxiety but I'm trying to fight it back down. As Sullivan turns to face me, my eyes flicker between him and Julio, anticipating.

He asks me what happened on January 1st. I open my mouth to lie, to say everything I've been planning to say.

That Jules didn't want to.

That I forced him.

That it wasn't sodomy, it was assault.

"Well, here's what happened that night, Mr. Sullivan." I say, the class president in me taking over as my brain fumbles over my intention. He cuts me off sharply, in his red eyes is a warning that I can't decipher.

"That's not what I asked you, Clark." he says, pausing just long enough so that I can parse him. "My question was, what did Judge Franklin ask you about the morning of January 1st." I look at him, trying to understand what he wants from me. Closing my eyes, I think back to Judge Franklin's chambers. I hear the phlegmy backwash in his throat as he sneezes for the thirteenth time just before he asks.

"Uh, Mister Sullivan, he asked me if on the morning of January 1st... if I had been a homosexual." Back in the audience seating, Father Matthews nods solemnly. Sullivan glances at the judges briefly before continuing.

“And that was all he asked you about that night?” he said, raising his eyebrows in what was probably supposed to be an encouraging expression, but it really just highlighted the glassiness of his eyes.

“Yes, sir.” I respond, panicking, not sure how to get from here to what I need to say in order to set Jules free. Sullivan follows up quickly.

“And how did you respond to that question?” he asks. I open my mouth, my tongue feels thick and numb, like it doesn’t belong. I lean in close to the microphone.

“In the affirmative.” I say. The audience erupts into mutters, but Father Matthews is just barely smiling. Directly across from me, Julio looks conflicted. His brow is furrowed in concern but his cheeks are growing pink, the corner of his mouth struggling not to tug upwards. This is the first time either of us have put a name to it, in front of each other at least.

The appeal only lasts twenty-six minutes more. Long enough for Sullivan to explain that my admission of homosexuality on the night of arrest didn’t give a precedence for juvenile detention.

The way Julio and I felt, apparently that was not a crime. Acting on it certainly was, but no one had bothered to try and prove that had even happened, so damning was my admission of being a homosexual on one single morning when the year turned over.

The appellate judges conferred for exactly ninety-six minutes during which time I sat, staring at my hands, tracing the path of each line, so that I would not look up at Jules. When the old men returned, they presented a statement affirming the appeal and overturning both convictions.

And so, the hot summer breeze ruffles through my hair as we descend the courthouse steps, wrists free and feet lighter. Father Matthews puts an arm around my shoulders, congratulating me, but I can't shake the feeling that I did nothing and he did everything. A few feet away, Rosie holds Julio's arm in hers and I can barely look in their direction. Thinking about what I was willing to do for him, what I almost did... I'm not quite sure how to cope with the fact that this particular reality is, right now, unfolding before me.

As we reach the bottom of the steps, cameras are snapping left and right, the flashes catching my eyes from all directions. A young reporter calls Julio over to pose with us and he and I stand there side-by-side, unsmiling. I am so careful not to touch him, for fear that the second my skin brushes his they will pull us right back up those steps again. Sullivan comes from behind and puts a hand on our shoulders as the Newsweek reporter snaps his photograph. Father Matthews stands beside me. I have about a hundred questions to ask him, but everything has happened so fast that I can barely breathe.

I look over at Julio, and he looks at me. I don't have any questions for Jules, but I sure as shit wish I had answers as Rosie steers him down the steps and away, leaving me captive with Sullivan's self-congratulatory speeches on the future of the California juvenile justice system.

The air is warm and still, suffused with the scent of Corona citrus.

I have never wanted to disappear until now.

VIII.

The warm autumn wind is whipping up the sandy patches past the concrete pad of the gas station. Not quite a Santa Ana, but ferocious enough to remind us all that Summer's come to an end.

I pull the nozzle out of the tank, returning it to the pump as the smell of gasoline permeates the air around me like a force field. The car isn't a pretty one, and I'm not certain how far it will get me, but as long as I make it over the city line, it'll be worth the savings I spent on it. I can hear footsteps pounding the pavement behind me, and I turn to see Clark sprinting full speed down the street towards the station. It takes me a second to realize he's running towards me. He stops just shy of the pumps, as if he doesn't want to come too close.

"Rosie said you're leaving." he gasps, hand hovering over a stitch in his side. I nod.

"I don't want to stay here." I say, looking over at the car, a few days worth of clothes piled up in the backseat along with some snacks for the road. He takes a step closer. Instinctively, I take a step back.

"Where are you going?" Clark asks, running a hand across the back of his neck as the sun beats us over the head. I shrug, shoulders lifting the fabric of my loose white t-shirt, the breeze hitting the thin ribbon of brown skin above my worn-out jeans.

"Literally anywhere." I say, pulling out my wallet for gas money.

I thought I was going to waste my life in this town. I've already wasted enough. Clark's just staring at me, chest still heaving a little from exertion. I haven't spoken to him since the appeal, just seen him in passing, or a few pews away in church. I think

neither of us really know what to say, and maybe that's alright. I don't mind this new humble Clark. I'm used to the version that won't stop talking, has some grand treatise about everything. I've listened to that kid wax poetic about lemons for longer than I've even thought about them, even with the juice still stinging my cuticles.

"Got room?" he asks, a slight smile lifting his lips to show his teeth as he sticks out his thumb to gesture towards the back-road leading out of town, just past the edge of the concrete. I raise my eyebrows. I don't know if I'm more surprised that he's asking, or by how badly I want to say yes.

"You've got twenty minutes." I say. Even that feels like too long to be trapped in one place. It's something that bothered me about this town before, but since Chino the feeling has become nearly unbearable. I don't know what's going to become of me, I just know I've got to be on my way. Clark looks down at his wrist, at his old leather watch, then back up at me.

"I'll see you in ten." he says, before turning and sprinting headlong back up the street towards his house. I head into the gas station to pay for the fuel and grab a drink.

Anything but lemonade.

Note about People v. Giani

<https://caselaw.findlaw.com/ca-court-of-appeal/1805618.html>

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Murray, Courtney and Mugs, who read and gave feedback.
And to that one band in Central Park who played the right song at the right time.

About A.E. Ross

A.E. Ross lives in Vancouver, B.C. with one very grumpy raincloud of a cat. When not writing fiction, they can be found writing and story-editing children's cartoons, as well as producing & hosting podcasts like The XX Files Podcast. Their other works have appeared on Cartoon Network, Disney Channel and Netflix but the projects they are most passionate about feature LGBTQIA+ characters across a variety of genres.

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Other Works by A.E. Ross

Run In The Blood

[NineStar Press, 2017](#)

Green Things Grow From Cinders

[Once Upon A Rainbow Volume Three - NineStar Press, 2018](#)

Light As A Feather

[Issue Two - Vulture Bones, 2018](#)