

A FELLOW OF INFINITE JEST

A Luke Jones Novel

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For all those who risk mind, body and soul to keep us safe...

“Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy:
he hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred in my
imagination it is! my gorge rims at it.”

Hamlet, Act V, scene i

1

Spring 1979

LUKE JONES DIDN'T WANT TO DIE OUT HERE on the street and he certainly didn't want a bunch of innocents to get splattered by a shit storm of bullets because of what he was about to do. He set the radio transmitter into the dashboard slot and waited for dispatch to confirm what he already knew about the brown Cadillac idling at the corner of Fourth and "E" Streets in San Diego's Historic Gaslamp Quarter.

A female voice responded almost immediately. "Unit 2-John, 9-7-2-Nora-Ida-Tom comes back stolen, wanted for burglarizing a gun shop and for numerous liquor store robberies. The occupants killed several LA Sheriff's deputies and wounded two civilians in a failed hot stop along the 405 freeway in Long Beach last night."

A series of three shrill tones followed. Then a simulcast over all SDPD radio frequencies started cop cars screaming in Luke's direction from across the city.

Luke eyed the occupants of the car on the other side of the one way street. A corpulent man with a crew cut overflowed the front passenger side of the Deville. Luke could see a tuft of sandy hair that narrowed into a "V" where a tattooed swastika distorted itself inside the folds of fat above the collar of the man's T-shirt. Three spiky-haired women filled the back, and a linear lean-to of a man soon sidled out the front of a liquor store headed toward the driver's seat. Smacking a pack of

cigarettes against an open palm, he shifted a brown paper bag snugly into the crook of his arm, his demeanor too calm to have just committed another robbery.

Luke glanced at the ride-along next to him, a product of the Department's emphasis on community policing. A doe-eyed stunner wearing a tightly stretched T-shirt and Jordache jeans, she could have been a movie double for Jacqueline Bisset in "The Deep." But her nattering whining brought Jean Hagen's character from "Singing in the Rain" to mind instead which was enough to supersede her remarkable physical attributes.

He'd tried shutting out her grating questions and running commentary extoling him as, "... a hero for saving that other officer's life. I saw your name in the paper and got so excited when I found out you were the one I'd ride with. You do know I'm a paralegal for Gray, Cary, Ames and Frey, the largest law firm in the city? Were you on duty when the PSA plane crashed? That must have been horrible. We could see the smoke for forever that morning. We're on the nineteenth floor you know..."

The Caddy accelerated away fast, and Luke missed his chance to order her from the car. He scooted the cruiser from the curb, following at a discreet distance, waiting for the first units to arrive before initiating the stop.

Lifting his chin toward the Cadillac, he swallowed hard. "That car's full of cop killers who'll blow us away if they get the chance." Luke paused long enough to be sure she understood it was not a joke.

"Unlock your door now and open it as soon as we come to a stop."

The ride-along's breathing turned wheezy and the beginnings of an odd clicking sounded at the back of her throat. She tapped insistent fingernails against the plastic of her door. Her face turned an evanescent shade of pale as her eyes closed.

"I need you to stay calm," Luke said. "An officer will run up and use your door as cover. He'll have a shotgun and shoot anybody with a gun who comes out the passenger side of that Cadillac."

The ride-along sat still and silent except for the involuntary clicking noise.

“I’ll be the one issuing orders to the people in the car. Do you understand?”

She nodded.

What he chose not to tell her was they might not have the luxury of waiting for cover units. The Caddy could pull over any second and light up the street with random gunfire from the automatic weapons stolen in the gun shop burglary.

The Nazi wannabe made a movement as if reaching under his seat and the woman behind the driver turned to glance back at the cop car. Luke hoped the bad guys believed that his horrified companion was an armed police officer. The assumption could buy them enough time for help to arrive.

2

THE FREEWAY ENTRANCE LOOMED A FEW BLOCKS ahead when threatening clouds released a torrent of rain. The aging squad car quivered a warning of impending engine trouble as the Caddy picked up speed toward Interstate 5. Luke willed the motor to keep going and remembered the mostly bald tires. An uncontrolled skid on wet pavement could prove deadly. If he couldn't keep up, with Tijuana only fourteen miles to the south, the skinheads might disappear into the congested traffic headed toward the border.

The engine of the cop car, a Ford Torino with a single bubble light attached, started a slow hiss as the Caddy sideswiped an El Camino, sending it hydroplaning through a red traffic signal and into the intersection of 16th and "F" Streets where it T-boned a shiny new BMW. The Caddy accelerated as the Beemer's driver leaped into the street, motioning insistently for the approaching squad car to stop.

Luke had no time to attend to traffic accidents. He veered around the gesticulating man as he told dispatch to notify Border Patrol at the international crossing in San Ysidro and to have Highway Patrol post units along the southbound freeway. If his car crapped out, some other officer would have to find the Caddy and face down the cop killers.

The woman with a hooked nose and a Woody Woodpecker hair-do who sat behind the driver turned in her seat. She had the look of a Valkyrie, especially when she folded her hand into the shape of a gun,

pointed it, looked straight at Luke, pulled the trigger, and blew on her thumb.

Knowing that the murderous skinheads no longer doubted his intentions, Luke reached across the expanse between the two front seats and squeezed his passenger's cold hand in reassurance in spite of the fact he could see no light bars in his rear-view mirror and couldn't hear any blaring sirens in the distance.

The chatter of the radio soon died away, leaving him free to constantly update his location and wonder what was taking his cover unit so long to arrive. With his window open, he finally heard the low keening of sirens in the distance above the din caused by the rush hour traffic. When the first cover unit appeared in his rearview, it led a sea of cop cars undulating down the four lanes of freeway as far Luke could see.

He flipped on his overheads and announced he'd make the stop at I-5 Southbound at Crosby Street and the Deville yielded along the berm of the freeway as sedately as a family sedan pulling into a rest area for a picnic. Luke bounded from his seat as his unit came to a stop a few feet behind the suspects' car.

He sighted down the barrel of his Smith & Wesson .38 as he leaned into the space between his open door and the cab of the car. The Ford's engine shuddered into silence and steam hissed and rose through the cracks of the engine compartment as he tossed the worthless microphone onto the floor and barked out another order. "Driver, show me your hands."

Instead, the driver's door of the Caddy opened and a Doc Martens boot stepped onto the pavement as the nose of a MAC-10 automatic machine gun pushed its way into the rain. Luke knew that the bunch in the car had murdered his fellow law enforcement officers in Los Angeles just a few hours before and the terror of the moment flashed his thoughts back for an instant to his recent mandated meeting with the police psychiatrist.

3

LUKE ROTATED HIS WATCH. HIS BUTT HADN'T MOVED in more than an hour. He wondered if the wait constituted part of the shrink's strategy.

Less than a week before, he'd killed a suicidal gambler named Charles Henreid to save the life of his partner J.R. Shimmer. He'd had no choice even though Henreid was worth more than ten Shimmers. Shimmer was a pusillanimous little oaf who'd helped their lying and conniving sergeant shit-can Luke's best friend Denny from the police department.

Shimmer still breathed the rarified air of "America's Finest City" while Henreid cooled in a refrigerator at the morgue and Denny arrested shoplifters at the local Target discount department store. Sergeant Constantin Biletnikoff kept constant watch on the pending promotion to lieutenant he'd secured through his successful efforts to rid the Department of Denny Durango. And Luke Jones twisted in a chair as a department psychiatrist opened massive mahogany doors to extend a manicured hand.

Dr. Michele Pantages' contract with the SDPD included individual and couples counseling, psychological testing for job applicants and the mandated evaluations of officers who'd killed before they could go back to full duty. She also taught academy and in-service training classes. The contractual arrangement added up to an enormous revenue stream, but

potentially compromised her doctor-patient relationships since it put her in contact with so many of her clients outside of the clinical setting.

She offered her hand and squeezed hard when he reciprocated. She'd once told him about her days as a power forward on high school and college basketball teams, a history confirmed by her athletic and graceful movements. Her short dark hair accented an elegant neck, and the abbreviated skirt she wore displayed muscular legs.

Oak paneling covered the walls of her office, the thick, rich kind that would have greeted Mycroft Holmes or Phileas Fogg in their Victorian men's clubs. Bookshelves lined two walls, and a coffeemaker sat next to a stainless steel sink. A maroon, leather loveseat faced the desk, resting next to an easy chair of the same color. Dr. Pantages clearly intended the loveseat for couples, the easy chair for individuals, and her masculine office to project gravitas to a largely male law enforcement clientele.

She'd have done her prep work on Luke during the interminable minutes since he'd handed his patient's history form to the waiting room receptionist. That information, combined with their discussions during academy class breaks, were all she'd know about him and he intended to keep it that way.

Two questions on the mostly standard questionnaire surprised him though. "Did you work the PSA 182 plane crash? If so, what was your assignment?" He knew the drill otherwise. First, she'd ask about his pre-morbid lifestyle functioning to get a baseline on his life's routines and interests before he killed Charles Henreid. Then she'd move on to the serious stuff.

"It's nice to see you again, Luke. Have a seat." Motioning toward the leather chair, she pulled her chair from behind the desk and moved it to face him.

He sat on the loveseat.

"OK, let's get to it," she said as she scratched a note on a pad. Do you have any brothers or sisters?" She tapped the clipboard holding the patient questionnaire against her thighs.

Everything Luke intended to share with her already rested in the good doctor's lap. He wasn't about to give too much away because he'd heard about the scandal created when the previous chief had pilfered psychological records during a personnel investigation. That little nugget had first cost the chief the diminishing trust of a paranoid work force then got him fired.

Bob Coleman, the current chief, had terminated the previous shrink and promised leaks wouldn't happen again. Luke trusted Coleman, but couldn't trust Dr. Pantages to protect his privacy if some future chief demanded access to his records.

Pantages tried again. "Can you tell me about your family?"

"Two older brothers and a sister. She's the oldest."

"What do they do for a living?"

Luke focused on a spot over the doctor's head, protecting himself from eye contact that might only deepen his inappropriate attraction. "My oldest brother's a preacher like my Dad. The other one's an accountant. My sister's a housewife."

"Tell me about your parents."

"Like I said, Dad's a minister. Mom died of cancer when I was nineteen, but the doctors told her she had two years to live before I was three. Pretty much all I remember about her is the process of her dying."

Pantages lifted the clipboard and scratched a quick note, probably a reminder to re-visit that loaded topic.

"Who's your favorite musician?"

Luke answered without hesitation. "Michael Franks."

"Didn't he do 'Popsicle Toes'?"

"That's him."

"Why do you like him so much?"

"He's erudite as hell and writes quirky and ironic songs with allusions to great works of art. It's fun knowing a lot of his other listeners are missing the references."

Dr. Pantages scratched another note. "Can you give me an example?"

“In ‘Eggplant’ he says a woman has ‘a Giaconda kinda dirty look’ which is a lot more clever than saying she has a wry smile, don’t you think?”

Dr. Pantages scribbled another note, probably a reminder to look up Giaconda.

“Your favorite books?”

“You already know that.”

“So what makes you think Shakespeare is so great?”

“Are you saying you disagree?”

“No.” Dr. Pantages said it with a slight laugh. “Who’s your hero?”

“Jack London.”

“Why is that?”

“He declared that he wanted to live his life like a “superb meteor” and he did it while composing a library of insistent writing that described and challenged his world.”

Pantages put a period to the topic before Luke could respond. “I know there are some questions about whether he drank himself to death, but we can come back to that later. What’s the most fun you’ve ever had?”

Luke hated knowing that his answer pegged him as a guy who’d spent more time imagining a life than actually living one. “Going to plays.”

He considered whether he should go ahead and state the obvious. “Watching Shakespeare, because he explores the most important aspects of being human in ways that prove those aspects are no different now than they were a long time ago. And, he doesn’t just depict the good guys versus the bad guys on stage. He explores the dangerous conflicts taking place on the inside of characters like Hamlet, Lear, Leontes, Lady Macbeth and Othello, and manages to make them both more important and the same as the rest of us as he does it.”

Dr. Pantages leaned forward, hurriedly scratching more notes as she spoke. “We’re running out of time. But there’s a lot more I’d like to talk about in the future.”

His instantaneous thought—no way—must have registered on his

face. An awkward moment passed before she decided to take the time for more questioning.

“What have you been doing since the shooting?”

Luke shrugged.

“Exercising?”

“No.”

“Going to plays?”

“No.”

“Reading?”

Luke shrugged again.

“Had a decent night’s sleep?”

Silence.

Dr. Pantages pressed the issue. “Exactly what have you been doing?”

Before the shooting he’d run, worked out, read, attended plays and watched classic movies. For the past few days, he’d guzzled bourbon and beer, smoked cigars, slept almost not at all, sat on the toilet with chronic diarrhea and perched in front of the television. He’d be damned if he’d tell her that though.

He loathed this current version of himself; hated even more the notion of sharing it with a beautiful woman, and despised enduring this mandatory and intrusive process. It only increased his rage over having to kill Henreid, Denny getting screwed out of his job by a ruthlessly ambitious Sgt. Biletnikoff and his irritation with these tiresome questions. He’d be better off trying to get some sleep.

“Nothing.” As Luke said it, he could almost smell the doctor’s frustration mixing with the wisp of Shalimar perfume she wore. The scent reminded him of his mother.

“You were raised in a religious family. Do you ever pray for help or guidance?” Pantages asked.

“God’s no help.”

“Do you mean He can’t help?”

“To put it in clearer language, I mean if He exists, He’s toying with us.”

Pantages nodded and raised an eyebrow. "How do you mean?"

Luke considered his answer carefully. "I was taking a leak the other day and smashed a crawling ant against the wall because it irritated me."

"So God's the guy at the urinal and you're the ant. Is that it?"

Luke shrugged again, knowing that his stoicism had to be driving the doctor nuts.

"Tell me about your experiences at the PSA crash."

"I'm here to talk about the shooting," Luke insisted.

"That's not all there is to talk about."

"It's why the Department made me come here."

Capitulation registered on the doctor's face as she pressed on. "So, I'm in the presence of a nihilist?" She leaned back, breathed deep and constructed a steeple with her index fingers to press against tightening pink lips.

Luke mirrored her posture, flicked a piece of lint from his pants and lowered his gaze.

Pantages dropped her fingers, straightened her skirt, nodded tentatively and leaned forward. Did she think she'd created a window of opportunity? "Tell me how you feel about killing someone."

"I don't feel anything."

"Most of my patients say they didn't have a choice in the matter. Do you feel you had any other options?"

This was suddenly getting tedious again. "I can handle it."

"I'm sensing this is hard for you, Luke. If God can't help you cope with this thing, maybe I can," Pantages said.

As she said it, Luke exploded with almost violent laughter, expelling a fragment of the rage and frustration dammed up inside him.

Dr. Pantages let loose with a cascading laughter of her own. "What I meant--what I meant was---" She hesitated thoughtfully. "Maybe you could come in for a few sessions so we can talk things through."

Pantages was stunning and formidable and Luke would have liked

to see her again, but he'd be wasting time. He didn't need her help and they could never be friends now that he'd been forced to become a patient. "I don't think that's necessary." He settled back dismissively into the loveseat.

The doctor shifted tactics. "Maybe it's time to bring the Bard into the equation." She nodded toward a plaque on a bookshelf. "Do you recognize that?"

Luke had recognized the quotation the second he'd walked into her office. It was perfect for a shrink as long as the reader didn't know the full context.

*Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas'd;
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow;
Raze out the written troubles of the brain;
And with some sweet oblivious antidote;
Cleanse the fraught bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?*

"That's Macbeth asking a doctor to help his wife cope with guilt over King Duncan's murder," Pantages said. "Lady Macbeth's one of the most heartless characters in literature and even she needed psychological help."

Luke surveyed the office exaggeratedly before he spoke. "I see you don't have the doctor's response around here anywhere."

Pantages folded her arms and shifted in her seat. "What was that?"
"Therein the patient must minister to himself."

Dr. Pantages sighed and her body transmogrified into a question mark as her head dipped slightly and her shoulders hunched forward.

Luke thought he'd made a pretty good case for his self-reliance, but something visibly troubled the doctor. Did she think he was weak? That he couldn't handle his job? The knot at the base of his head tightened and his temples started to pound. It was a good thing she didn't know about the Professor's death or Luke's guilt over his part in getting Denny shit-canned.

Surely Pantages knew that killing somebody devastated cops more than they could possibly articulate. Luke tapped the sole of his shoe, admiring the doctor's militant tenacity in her efforts to help him. But they'd reached an impasse. "Isn't our time up?"

"It's time to book another appointment."

Luke knew the mandate—only one shrink's visit. She couldn't force him back for another appointment without documenting pathological distress. She'd have the whole police force stacked up in her waiting room if denial and unexpressed feelings constituted sufficient grounds for forced visits to the psychologist.

"OK, let's go ahead and set another appointment," he agreed, knowing he'd wait a few days then cancel it.

There were some things he wanted to say but he'd cancel the appointment anyway. He wanted to tell her he'd get stronger, not weaker, that any other outcome would be tantamount to quitting and he'd never quit anything in his life. Confronting every opponent and wrestling them into submission, that's what Luke Jones did.

"If you decide to follow through with an appointment, that would be terrific," Pantages said. "But it's imperative that you connect to your feelings. I know this all sounds like a shrink's gobbledygook to you, but it'll help—even if you like to think you don't need any help."

Luke waited silently. No way would he respond to this.

The doctor moved directly in front of him and leaned against her desk.

"Since I suspect that you're done talking to me and won't be talking to anybody else, I'm reduced to insisting that you write about your feelings. It doesn't have to be anything fancy, just an informal journal you can put into a drawer."

Luke found the familiar spot on the wall above the doctor's head as she moved toward him and offered her hand as a signal to stand. Their proximity as she clasped his hand allowed her eyes to communicate more than her mouth had had the time to say during their fifty minutes together.

Luke Jones was in trouble.