

Lucky?

Frank Lauder



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L *UCKY*

by

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*Who is PT Jones?
And further- does it matter!
In 'Lucky' PT Jones finds
out both who he is and
whom he isn't. Oh, and
incidentally, on the way
finds his path both to risky
riches and dangerous love...*

This book is dedicated to the memory of
Heinrich Jakob

L U C K Y

*'Are you sure
That we are awake?
It seems to me
That yet we sleep, we dream.'*

Book 1

Ever Got Lucky?

Chapter **1**

Crazy Horses

The day dawned blue, with an icy edge to it which belied the warmth of the coming sun, edging the lower wisps with yellow

and orange as the backdrop of rich greens turned to the characteristic sandy khaki beige of savannah, the distance dropping away like a precious stone falling into lucid, crystalline water, limpid and as sensitive to the touch as silk and nearly as invisible, untouchable, unreachable.

And then he awoke.

"No, no, not like that!" It must have been an echo in his mind. PT Jones stumbled as he crossed the road in the biting wind. It seemed that every time he passed some shabby unpainted doorway, he would trip over a cursed detail- perhaps just the lintel - or else the odd stone, which somehow jutted at just the right height from the pavement to catch the sole of his shoe and tear it *right* off. What was that - the inertia, which prevented him from raising his feet just that little bit higher?

That at least was how it seemed to him. And today the wind was coming up cold as a refrigerator on a hot day and the bland sky, grey

as a piece of slate that felt warmer than it looked. And that was enough. More than enough actually, for Ptolemy Jones.

Ptolemy Jones, known to both his friends and enemies as PT Jones, was not only down on his luck, but at that precise moment down in the mouth *and* in the pocket. I shall not labour you with details, but were you at all involved, you might yourself say that in his case even his crumpled trousers had that indefinable and yet entirely expectable quality in the circumstances, of wanting eventually to lower themselves back from whence they had come.

The imagination ground to a halt at that point, for there was nowhere further to proceed. His imagination didn't think so, anyway.

Well, that was how it seemed to him. It was subjective, let's face it. The whole thing was subjective. PT Jones walked on for a moment, and then stopped. Could things get more negative? Or was he trapped in some academic, subjective impasse? Could pigs fly, just like he'd seen in that ad on the television?

Why yes, well of course they could!

And then - as if perfectly on schedule in a very down-market advertisement - the first drops of icy-cold, hard drizzle deposited themselves on his suffering head.

Let me let you in on this picture; PT is a battered forty something, an ex-journalist with a degree in 'Business', and a problem. Trouble. All the height of him reeks trouble.

And that is the trouble. The trouble, that is to say, down at t'mill, bar, house, parlour, sauna, massage shop, record plant, library, gas station and even airport.

Yes, Ptolemy (the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages had found his name by opening a book of archaeology at random and lighting on the first available name), as distinct from his illustrious, and some would say ill-chosen namesake, is at this moment in time neither successful nor illustrious, so far having his moments of glory only in avoiding all the pitfalls which would ensure him instant fame, much to the chagrin of his ex-wife and all several of his

ex-friends.

That way he got to be named twice. Once as the official, unlikely Ptolemy (to officials and detractors) and then as PT to all those people who at one time he'd thought to be his friends.

Well at least that's one thing.

And another thing. As PT

Jones stops for a moment, to consider his past and his looming future, maybe just to shelter from the downpour that he is convinced is just about to arrive. The expected happens.

Well, at least he's right about that, then!

Bang on schedule, a blindingly dense rainstorm splashes his feet until the leather of his shoes looks a grimy green-grey, and his clothes, soaked as they are, droop even more than they have done up to now, they're sodden.

PT Jones, as a matter of habit, and to seek some kind of warmth, thrusts his hands into the pockets of his cast-off jacket. Direct from the charity shop. Only two ninety nine...

(keep the change!)

Just a minute! There's something there, something hard and gritty and - something there - what is it? A metallic, sharp edge - a hard serration, a softer metal inlet against the harder ring outside.

PT can hardly believe his luck!

What is that? Oh, that rare thing, a Five Pound Piece, nestling, forgotten, in the lining. That leaves him three pounds up! Maths never has been his strongpoint.

For some unaccountable reason PT Jones suddenly feels a grain of hope stir in his mind.

The rain ceased as quickly as it had started, though the pavement and the road were still all-over slimy, icy water, but then suddenly, unexpectedly amidst the gloom in his thoughts, he saw the reflection of blue sky and bright sunlight in a huge puddle, as the clouds made a last-ditch effort to salvage some sunlight and telegraph it directly to him.

Fortune? Could be. You never know, do you - after all, *it could just be you!*

The sole of his shoe had scuffed badly against an intruding edge of pavement, and he looked for somewhere to stop and inspect the damage. Then a blast of moist warm air struck his back, as a body moved close to his, a face seemed to look at him closely, as if he were a specimen of something or other - and then was gone, in the grey fudge of the street. Instinctively he had half turned; now he found that he was at the gaily-attired door of a betting shop. And the air was warm.

What should he do with his newfound gains?

What would you do?

"Oy mate, come in and take a bet!" A female voice which he hardly heard, but it tipped the balance.

In a wild moment he turned on his heel and limped in, more to seek warmth and fix his shoe (he told himself, realising at the same moment that he made quite a polished liar) than anything else.

Now PT Jones sat to one side, warming

himself more with his imagination than in reality, watching as well the punters, discussing horses or whatever they did here or in *The Elbow Room* along the next street but one, where every day he passed and saw them busy doing absolutely nothing around the bar. Life is full of the unexpected, isn't it?

There was a voice at his elbow:

"Bet?" It had that edge of an accent, but he hadn't fastened on to where it was from. Anyway, he had been checking his shoe but had found nothing, privately. Thus, at the sound of the voice he almost jumped.

"Bet?" He'd only ever betted once before, and the horse he'd put his money on had fallen on its final unchallenged run-in to the winning post. It was a rainy afternoon, and the course had been a morass, the horses (and then the horse and its jockey) rapidly being covered with mud. Unless he'd been informed by someone who had been neutral, he'd have had real

trouble in identifying his horse at all. Not that that horse running up the course would have left anyone in doubt about its identity, as it was the sole survivor anyway - and when more especially it collapsed (probably from surprise) once it was within whistling distance of the finishing post.

Well, that was how he remembered it. This summed-up the present moment in all its faded indulgence, if that was the word... and which was also about the colour of his particular money at that moment, anyway...

"*Bet?*" That edge to the familiar voice. He remembered that it had belonged to that tightly curved, black-bound form, that... For a cold moment he felt both repelled and confused.

There was a crowd he noticed, a strangely tense, expectant crowd, behind the woman asking this particular question. Oddly, the crowd contained the face of a man he'd seen somewhere before - probably in the street. The crowd glanced at him, expecting something. It was his imagination of course. He must have fever or something; he knew that for certain, for

he was sweating. Malaria perhaps?

Something savage, anyway. Maybe they knew something about his condition that he didn't? Perhaps you had to bet to stay here... or...

"Well" She was wearing a short, tight, slightly textured shiny skirt, her pubis shapefully pushed out against the grain. Despite everything he found her, *well...*

"Yeah" He said, immediately wishing he'd not said that.

Several people outside his immediate focus seemed to be talking amongst themselves, but why, he knew not. There was a fragment of laughter then, blown like a tattered flag in the gusty grey smoked waft of air.

"Which one?"

He looked at the chalkboard out of focus, for he was a bit myopic. Selected the horse, or whatever it was, at a hundred-or-something-to-one, with a wild lump in his stomach, and pointed at it.

"That one!" After a beat, unwelcome laughter unaccountably broke out and someone

clapped, out of time.

But this only served to further steel his foolhardiness. He'd show them! "Yes, that one!"

The girl looked at him:

"Sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure!"

She indicated, he took up the challenge - and in a moment of hormonal madness got up, made out a slip with 'Ancient Flame 3.30 KEMPTON-£5 WIN'. He'd seen this horse's name in one of those tabloid pages on the wall somewhere.

It might have been the fever, of course, but when he gave it to the Clerk behind the wire, the clerk gave him a blank look, perhaps of incomprehension, stamped the paper, then turned his back to do something more important.

PT made his way back to the feral warmth of his seat five heavy pounds poorer.

As he sat down dispiritedly, with an

unpleasant jolt, he realised that inexplicably the room was filled with a poisonous sea of laughter. It came at him, in bright fuggy neon mustard yellow. Poisonous. Fever kills, you know. Laughter? Well, maybe.

Not only that, but every other person in this multitude (or so it seemed to him, clicking into biblical mode - a panic reaction), was laughing for some unaccountable reason. And yet, not only that, but the girl who'd called him in had now disappeared to the far end of the room, out of his myopic grasp. He felt confused, powerless, lost, being a confuse-able sort of person. Oh, and a bit of a loner, to boot...

But time is dynamic. It was later. Unexpectedly the girl was approaching him, one hand extended. She pressed a beaker of warm tea into his hand.

"That's the most expensive tea you'll buy this week!" she said, almost brightly. She smiled at him. *She smiled - at him!*

Was that *irony*, and was *that* an accent...?

PT Jones sank to a chair with a clammy feeling in his guts and sadness in his heart.

He grabbed a tabloid and pored over it to divert himself for a long moment, embarrassed by his own hopelessness.

For the next half hour he blanked his memory and let his mind dwell on those things most concerning him. *Hunger, insecurity, where to stay tonight* - being among his immediate thoughts. The shadow overarching him, his cell of a room, was his main allergic driving force, his monster, now.

He resurfaced after an age, surrounded by the unhealthy scent of silence, here in the rare outer reaches of this unlikely retreat. He sank back into a sort of twenty-first century stereo misery.

Ah, but now there was a commentary on his right, a bright voice sent merely to torture

him in his own stereophonic hell, with an especially hollow reverb set to sharpen the pain:

"...Over the third fence Petal, followed by Daisy Dam then Running Time - and in fourth place Colombo Coy....." A break while another voice chipped in knowingly with expert advice about another matter. Then:

"...and at the fourth it's Petal who's fallen and now Running Time leads from Daisy Dam while Colombo Coy seems to have gone lame..."

He found that, perhaps in sympathy, three of his toes had gone completely numb, so, to prevent the onset of gangrene, he hobbled a few steps across the shop to rest against the wall, full of bile and regret. Dyspeptic too!

'I must have been crazy to imagine...'

The stereo effect of a tin can down a rusty wire, gripped him unpleasantly;

"... Now in the final furlong it's Daisy Dam on the inside whilst... wait a minute it's... well I'll be darnedAncient Flame.... who's unexpectedly red hot, and streaking along the outside rail taking the longest line and moving so rapidly that....."

A moment of total incomprehension, while the tin can twanged along the wire.

"Well I'll..."

The punters gathered in the area around PT seemed suddenly to go silent, as in deep hypnosis, or perhaps prayer.

(You have to remember that this was the big one, the required final orgasmic moment of ecstatic loss and success all rolled into one.)

Expectation, almost.

Now had come the time when at last they could commiserate, curse, and ritually trail across to the local pub or the *Elbow Room* for a final round of drinks with which to wind-up another lost day of their lives. Such opportunity!

But here? Sudden silence: nothing seeming to move - no sound until one of them dropped one of those little plastic ballpoint pens, which busily clattered away into the wooden surround of the room. A muttered curse.

"... A rank outsider at 125 to 1, Ancient Flame, the most unlikely horse in the race... has

won..!"

Stunned, total, silence. Another muttered curse, then more stunned silence. The sound only of jaws dropping.

PT had *won*.

PT Jones had *won*?

Something? Quite an amount? An amount which he had had neither the time the capacity nor the inclination to calculate.

And no one had said "*How?*" even once.

A record?

Now, that must be some sort
of record!

Chapter 2

The girl in the short, tight skirt

Unexpectedly, as in a dream,

PT Jones had become moneyed, well in his terms, anyway.

Presently, looking around him, he could see that the yellow wisps of nerve gas had begun to clear as the room began to empty.

There was a raucous voice from the back of the room, something he had heard before, a woman's voice perhaps: "*No, no, not like that, it was in the numbers!*" Then laughter. He heard it quite clearly, as he struggled to gather his ego from wherever it seemed to have shrunk to.

A voice at the back of this room was trying to work-out aloud how his bizarre bet had scored: a rank outsider backed by another rank outsider... Had they stopped to think about it, *rank* suited him only too well as a description? Or maybe...

The over-friendly girl in

the short tight skirt suddenly zoomed back into focus from out of no-where, looking ever so, well, *friendly*. It must be his fame. Well, perhaps.

*'If I had but life enough or time,
This coyness madam would be no crime...'*

Red lips. Pale eyes promising heaven and hell, all in one glance. She sat beside him neatly, flagrant, fragrant, and above all, vagrant.

None of those. No, none of those.

"How'd you do that?"

"Oh", he said meaning '...No idea', but then suddenly saying, "It was simple... I just..." (Remembering the voice from the back of the room...) "I... it was a numbers thing I do - I know these things." He was good at lying - in fact getting better all the time, and he carried it all through - which gave him a certain twisted confidence.

"You're good with... figures?"

He saw a sudden, mysterious flame invade her eyes as she narrowed them.

Aware -that it was *now* that his fifteen seconds of fame was fast fleeting, PT Jones hoisted himself up to leave while the going was good to middling, feeling six-hundred-and-something-pounds to the better. He hadn't had so much money in - well, ages. A stretch of time, as long as an endless rubber band.

The girl in the black dress smiled at him. *Smiled* - at him.

"Come back soon, Okay." Despite himself he nodded and smiled too, finding on the way out that in some unlikely way a *spring* had migrated into his step, and that in some sort of perfect harmony, the rain had stopped: maybe now ... well, just maybe, *it could be him*. Where'd he seen that one? *Madness!*

Bright, opalescent blue had invaded this grimy part of the Universe. It was an unlikely scenario. So unlikely that no-one else had so much as noticed. For most of them anyway, life was nothing but a grimy set of days which stretched forward to forever, as it had been for him before this new positive *thing* broke through, at this suspended moment. But, he was

converted, if only by his luck.

By now the sky was clear and the Sun almost warm, the streets swiftly drying with unexpectedly friendly, warm gusts of wind. It must be for him. Who else could it be for? He asked himself, it was after all his day, today.

He felt a grain of something stirring in his veins, the rocket-fuel of positive thinking, though he knew not why.

PT Jones was fuelled with this new positivism: all at once he thought: 'It's gonna be good, I know it in my bones! I'll buy myself some decent clothes... and blow the rest. From today I'm going to start to win!

Madness?

Ha, ha! Madness? Yes, of course!

Suddenly, he smiled to himself.

Who knew but that this was his new persona? The dawn of a new Jones. Someone quite unlike him, unrecognisable. He was about to become new, and *lucky*.

Five minutes elapsed and he rushed into a shop, with wild haste. Then, fifty minutes later

- out - clutching a bundle of bags. Half his cash lighter, and yet happy, happy, light, light, light. It was all slightly mad, really. A row of commas, mad. What a pleasure being choosy can be. He'd discovered a very new Mr. Jones. Someone quite unlike him, unrecognizably positive and determined. He threw the bag containing his old self into a skip, consigning it forever to the past. He was definitely **crazy** now.

And now? What now? *That girl*

at the betting-office? 'What a fool, there's one born every minute.' He made his way back down the road, like a cork being sucked into a whirlpool, back into the betting shop, for some reason fearing discovery but this time she wasn't there. He took a deep breath and looked around him.

Then, on an impulse as mad as sunlight, he put two hundred down to win on another outsider, carrying the resulting cash over to ride on a safer horse in the next race. Someone said it was a '*Double*'. He had no idea. Well, that it

was, then.

The assembled punters marvelled at this new found confidence and assurance, word having spread like a bush fire.

A few tattered minutes – absurdly – though only he seemed to know it – and, a miracle! *The first horse won.* Mr. Jones was suddenly soaked in the adulation of the instantly faithful, gathered there specially to listen to his every word. That rare animal – a winner!

But the paranoia is in the small print, and it wasn't until the middle of the next race that he realized that his next 'Sure Thing', his epoch cracking calculation, his 'Safe' horse (at a mere 12 to one), was bringing up the rear of a five horse race.

He hid his face for a moment.

'My God! It really will be Rags-to-Riches and back, in one day!' Horror.

How many smackers had he put on that nag?

Was he mad, even with his basic arithmetic... what had taken hold of him? Three Grand, riding on a 12 to 1? He must have taken

leave of his senses; *he must be completely mad, incurably mad.* His curious yet cloying supporters, so faithful up to now, began to fade away. He felt their eyes, all bloodshot.

It could be that bright flat blue sky. He had to have something to blame, for now all of a sudden he began to see colours in a strangely surreal way, very bright and light, very flat. He was obviously on the edge of collapse - sort of like a particularly virulent and nasty attack of Malaria. A shiver... Ague? Or it could be the promise of that tight skirt...? It could be him, it could be... *Bad* luck! Maybe he was bad luck incarnate!

No only his fan club but also most of the other casual onlookers had, once again that day, torn up their tickets and left for the nearest bar by now, but PT was still glued to the problem in progress by an unhealthy impulse, like... like *Malaria*.

And it was getting worse. He was shaking like the Last Leaf Of Autumn in a south-westerly

gale... Like the Last Leaf Of Autumn.

Then, first one horse fell, then another. The news was on the bush telegraph of course, a line apparently piped straight to this God-forsaken betting office specially, just for his cursed ears. Just for them, and with all the benefits of stereo. And that made it worse. It came from the left, it came from the right. It filtered around behind him. Four-phase perhaps? But, to no avail - all around him the news was... *bad!*

Now he was swiftly attacked by the Ague. He'd half expected as much. Uncontrollable shivering, sweat, cold sweat; pains in the stomach, the elbow, the... knee – everywhere, *that's the ague alright*. He wanted to leave, just as simple as that, but he was paralysed, unable to move, unwell. You could see that if you were there, it was plain as the nose on your face. He'd lost his mobility. With finality, pathetic, he raised a hand really slowly, but it was useless, his eyes failed to find meaningful focus. He was finished now, for ever. He flopped down, near to death.

By now quite a few thrill-filled minutes had passed and hysteria gripped the newly inflowing multitude of punters as yet another runner bit the mud. As in a dream - there was *his* horse, Crisis Call (my God how apt!), with a black pony called Bouncing Dolly bounding along on the horizon, at least three furlongs ahead. He could see it all - though he only heard it, with his eyes tight shut. Would he win? Would Crisis Call know there was a *crisis* in this remote spot?

Would he? *Would his pony? Like hell it would!*

Feeling the loss, the horror, but above all feeling violently sick, he lurched into the toilet in misery: and was about to tear up his ticket - when it was announced over the Tannoy that there would be a Steward's Enquiry.

Some weird, vague, technical infringement?
Huh! No! This could take forever.

Oh God! This was awful, awful. A fortune riding on a boozy steward's short sight! You

would expect it, though. Sod's law, and all that.

He staggered back out to collapse on a seat. And accordingly, an age went by. Another plastic cup of hot thin tea happened to him. And another.

He became aware of the Black Dress hovering near him once again - *expectant?* So near, and yet so tantalisingly far. He was dead. He'd fainted. By God! Was he mad – or Gay? He'd been moulded by misfortune, he was doomed.

A blank, lost time. It was *awful*.

Blur, then: the result of the inquiry... but yes! *Impossible!* - *He'd won!* It had won; actually, the nag had won. The assembled rabble turned to watch him whoop uncontrollably, despite himself. It was a result! It was.... And now? And now yesterday's outcast once again had a million friends, most of who were in this betting shop. My goodness, how – well - *Lucky*.

Unusually, sportingly, the manager of the shop gritted his teeth, emptied the safe of a bad week's takings, memorised everything about

him -even his shoes - and mentally banned him for life.

PT Jones reached the end of the block in a state of suspended hysteria, the money stuffed into his newly un-soiled jacket pockets, and floated across the road on a layer of warm air, a layer warmer than any he'd experienced for half a lifetime. This could not be true... He'd once-upon-a-time read a book called *The Process*, which had nothing to do with this... yet... something somewhere, a process, was happening to him, but he knew not how or for that matter why. But he knew that it could only be that special something, his luck.

He thought for a few moments. That was it! He knew what it was! He ground his teeth, *that's* what it was! Obviously- he'd gone insane and would at some crazy, unlucky, future moment come back down to earth with a crash...

Anyway nothing here could really be real – that was the only *real* mentionable in the same breath as his version of *real*. Tears came to his eyes... No, it couldn't be - it *was* all imagination

after all... This happened every day, people fell out of bed on waking, healthy and happy... and just died. *Every day!* Why not PT Jones then? This could not be anything remotely like real, why, it would all dissolve around him at any moment, tomorrow was just a theory, after all; he knew somehow in his heart of hearts that it would have to end someday, some nasty, cold vicious, vacuous day. Why not now?

'Dear God - why not here - why not me! Be merciful and make it quick! Of course *it could be me*, dead!'

That was it, that was it!

It was obvious... obvious... this was all a drug-induced dream. Maybe he was dead and... *Well?* Or... God! It must be the tea... illegal substances... what were they called – hallucinogens? The imagination reeled! One thing was for sure; it would soon be over – the hallucinations, the damn imaginary things... the whole fantasy.

But actually, nothing happened.

He resorted to the pub, where, as was his habit, he emptied out his pockets to find sufficient money in bits and pieces of change to comprise the price of a beer. He did it anyway, even though he was incurably rich suddenly and had all this crazy money stuffed in his pockets.

"Hullo Mr Greene", said the barman, Jim, mistaking him for another punter.

"Hullo, John", he replied replicating the mistake in the opposing direction. '*John has a happy sort of face for someone stuck in a ghetto like this one*', he thought, remembering that he had started a conversation here the day before, and never finished it, so he resolved so to do. As he remembered it, it had been the product of a typical pub conversation involving a joke. Except that the promised joke (that he hadn't delivered) had fragmented sufficiently in his mind, that he would have to make it up as he went along, you never knew, maybe the hallucinations might help.

“Anyway, now I want to tell you that joke I was talking about yesterday evening John”. Said Mr. Greene

“Sure”, said the barman, blankly blinking, for he was not the same barman, either, (although he *was* Irish, though his name was Fritz, as a matter of fact):

“It goes like this –”

“Go on”

“Uhuh”

“And he was walking along a road...”

“Uhuh”

“Anyway, then it began to get dark... it was wet”

“Have a drink”

“Thanks!”

“Anyway”

“Go on”

“It was getting dark”

“Right”

“Too dark”

“Uhuh”

“Much too dark”

“Yuh - and wet”

"So then he trips over something in the dark"

"Well?"

"It's a shapeless... a bag, sort of thing - he looks inside it, and there's a little piece of paper with an address..."

"Uhuh"

"And it says... *'You just got lucky... come to this address for a big surprise.'*"

"A likely story" The Irish accent showed for a moment.

"Why not, John?"

"Well, okay, right." Fritz looked around the bar and licked his lips. Mr. Greene regained his attention: but only for a time:

"So, of course he goes... and when he arrives there's this beautiful woman in this amazing figure hugging dress whom he vaguely recognizes from a... betting shop... he used to hang out at."

"Uhuh"

"... Like, when he had cash" He was halfway between memory loss and recall, so he began to pedal wildly to make sufficient steam to aid his

recall:

"Okay"

"And she's smiling at him..."

"As you find"

"As you... anyway, then he's found himself in this really plush flat, with these really nice people..."

"Oh, ho!"

"*No, Uhuh.*"

"Wake me when you get to the punch line!"

"And in no time at all they're discussing politics and economics and he's..."

"What?"

"Doesn't matter"

"No, say"

"He's got a big thing for this woman"

"Okay, bigger than normal"

"No, you know what I mean"

"Sure"

"And she's like looking at him - so then they go out to this mega plush restaurant and everyone thinks he's great for some reason - never stop talking to him, wanting him to run their corporations, insisting on paying the bills,

which is just as well because he's broke - "

"Is this a joke?"

"It will be!"

"Nobody'd ever believe it!"

"Yeah"

"Then?"

"Wait... and then they go on to this casino and he takes a couple of small value chips, because that's all the cash he's got (though she thinks he's flush, get it?) - puts it on a single number, because he has no idea how the system works in a casino because he's never been in one... he *wins*... and then, it's ridiculous, the wheel never stops spinning his way - and suddenly he's made quite a few grand, like."

"He had a few before he got going, like".

"Drinks?"

"Maybe"

"Right"

"Another?"

"Yup"

Clink, clink, fizz, thud. Sound of money.

"Yup"

"Is that all you can say... Yup?"

"Yup"

"Shall I continue?"

"Uhuh" John, or Jim, or Fritz, served a shortsighted woman a double vodka, and then returned. Mr. Greene continued:

"Right, then suddenly this woman is all over him, and whispers in his ear..."

"What?"

"You know, like let's us get a room upstairs and *do it!*"

"Like they say!"

"Likewise"

"Then?"

"And then they make love all night... and it's amazing: she's so exhausted by all the pleasure that she's practically unconscious... sleeps like a cat, all curled up... warm, fragrant... you know..."

"Carry on."

"Anyway... then he sees that her little handbag is on the side table, and there's a long coloured string, sort of hanging out of it."

"Sacre Bleu!"

"Is that Irish?"

"Got it in France."

"So, curiosity finally overcomes his manners and he pulls the string... it reels out for a while... then a little flowery thing falls out of the bag: and by jingo, it has a picture attached to it..."

"A Picture?"

"A Picture... so he pulls the string closer to him, gently like... and before his eyes can focus on what it is, suddenly a bell tinkles, the door opens, dancing girls and a small orchestra enter, his sleeping mistress fragrantly awakes, all the lights go *UP* and a loud voice, piped into the room says..."

"Go on, go on!"

"Congratulations... You are lucky... You've won the automobile in the picture."

"Whereupon he wakes up?"

"No, no, I woke up, in a way... it's true... in a way the punter was me!" PT Jones felt suddenly serious, a confessional sort of thought

which the barman detected on his radar.

"What was your name?"

"You mean, what *is* my name?"

"Yeah"

"Ptolemy"

"Do what?"

"Ptolemy-with a 'P'!"

"My God!"

"It gets worse"

"No way!"

"So they say"

"Oh Yeah"

"I..." But before PT Jones could further embroider, the barman had left to serve another customer, convinced that he was mad, drunk, or worse. And anyway he wasn't in the mood for anyone's life story this evening.

Sadly, **PT Jones left the bar** a more sober man than he had entered it. Life had moved under him, the plates of his earth had shifted in his organic timescale, forever. There was resolve burgeoning behind all this. With what he felt to be this newfound wealth, he must do something. After a lifetime of

headbanging in his concrete cell on the fifteenth floor, he must take time to straighten himself out, widen his horizons and clear the air. This was an opportunity he might never have again. But how would he do that? Why, he would take a holiday - that was it - clear the cobwebs away, and then take stock.

So it was that PT Jones found himself, a day or two later, at the railway station on the platform, having just missed a train. Not out of character, then. Next to him sat a woman ensconced in her novel, one of those potboilers so beloved of the travelling classes. After a few minutes his constant shifting began to irritate her.

“Why are you moving around so much?”

“Eh, sorry”

A few more moments passed.

PT Jones was fidgeting, it was true.

The woman stole him a smile.

“Sorry, I’m a bit twitchy, I just missed the train and I’ve been here for more than an hour”

“Oh, so did I”

"Where are you bound?"

"Oh..." he looked up and the electronic ciphers on the platform twirled and clacked, and steadied - *Crouch End* "Oh, Crouch -" he gestured vaguely.

"Not a bad place... they have an Inn called the Crouch End Inn... actually..." she fumbled in her bag... "Here it is - I have their card!"

"How extraordinary - I mean, to have their card!"

"Oh, it's just a fluke!"

Was this his luck again, was he just *lucky* - or what?

"Oh yeah"

"It's getting trendy, you know"

"Really"

"Yes, Crouch End"

"Thanks."

At that moment, either very early, or perhaps so late that it was no longer expected, the train they were both not waiting for clacked into the station and they entered a carriage.

Almost four hours later,
and PT Jones was walking down Crouch End Hill,

having been given directions by his erstwhile traveling companion. *'Right at the bottom of the hill, left by the YMCA and the you'll find it, behind a short screen of cedar trees, set back in a pleasant grove'*

Five minutes later, to his surprise there it was, glistening in the clear, rather damp morning's air, steel and glass. The approach, down a shallow incline fringed by cedar trees. A little unworldly, yet select. And fairly busy, he would think. Who knew what would happen there? Ahah!

He pushed his way through the crowd of people who seemed to have gathered around the reception desk and who were it seemed, expectantly waiting for someone - a media 'Person': Sven or his latest pro-creation, perhaps?

As he neared the counter, the buzz seemed to steady. People shifted uneasily.

He raised a hand to press the bell – but he'd been pre-empted, there was already a clerk, the concierge, apparently smiling at him.

Orwellian? Kafkaesque? At first he was slightly put-off; was this the smile on the face of the tiger, perhaps? Or was it...

"May I help you, Sir?"

He nearly jumped, sideways. Fate?

"Yes..." the buzz behind him had reached an explosive, expectant point, like an audience on the television, pregnant with laughter, desperate and waiting for the off. What was this? Fate? His speech was suddenly full of question marks.

"A room?"

"A *suite*, Sir", said the voice, proffering the previously impossible... Had he thought about it? Oh, what the hell, he could afford it now!

"No? Eh, yes, a suite then?" PT Jones fingered his hidden stash to make sure it was still there, it really was - still *real*. Maybe he wasn't hallucinating any more.

There was a sudden burst of clapping, and PT Jones flinched and weaved, ducked and bounced like a heavyweight boxer

avoiding a parry. *This must be a novel, and he must be a character*, but of which extraction literary history had not yet decided.

Then he heard it, a disjointed voice, someone talking: a sort of commentary on the moment's events:

"... And now, welcoming the one millionth regstree to our celebrated Crouch End Inn, here in scenic North Essex, England - the lucky but unknowing, winner is..." the speaker craned his neck and read from a hastily hoisted 'idiot' board: "...a happy coincidence... Mr. PT Jones, a valid client of ours who, my computer screen informs me, often stays at Crouch Inns around the globe. Our two hundred and forty seven Inns, set as they are in scenic, yet busy, positions throughout the globe, are fortunate to serve many such people as PT Jones. Crouch Inns are of course ideal for the business traveller, who would yet wish to enjoy a little local colour. And now Mr. Jones..."

The man with the authoritative voice swivelled away from the camera and seemed to the excited viewers to confront him, first locating him securely, his eyes uncomfortably swiveling away and back to gauge the precise angle of the camera, lights and prompt card, whilst still apparently facing the hapless PT.

"... And now (squint) Mr. eh, Jones - on behalf of Crouch Inns, I would like to present you with our Golden Key, which entitles you to free, yes *free*, accommodation at any Crouch Inn for the next calendar year (starting right now.)"

Mr. Jones was quite simply flabbergasted. He grasped the glittering plastic key (with I-D attached) and, with quivering fingers accepted a glass of champagne. It was a dream, a page out of a novel by a romanticist, simply that, and when later that evening, having quaffed several bottles of champagne he awoke in the pleasant pastel environs of his rooftop suite, PT Jones just knew that he was on the edge of something really *big*, It could have been vertigo, or the alcohol, but in his bones he'd seen it...

Really, big.

But what? What was it?

Chapter 3

The Numbers

"No, no, not like that, it's the numbers!"

It was an echo, a feverish start in his mind.

In a moment he was awake. Sweating slightly; the heat of the internal engine taking over from the fever of a rogue generator gone

wild. He opened first one eye and then the other in a sort of experiment, the density of a blurred, heavy grey cloud sitting hard on his brow. At an angle, not uncomfortable, straight.

And likewise, his eyes seemed suddenly very short sighted, shorter sighted than ever, only capable of registering in the immediate area. Perhaps you had to pay for all that luck by developing an incurable condition of some sort. Perhaps? Maybe.

Now, experimentally, he touched the sheet near him with deepening suspicion, finding that apart from a slight indent near his hand which he took to be a consequence of the weight of his arm, the only thing he was able to be convinced of was that he was not in his old concrete box of a flat, and definitely not in that creaking truckle bed. This bed was flat, soft and yet firm – how unexpectedly comfortable!

Once he'd had a dream, where the girl in the tight, friendly skirt, came over to him and smiled at him, lifted her butt a tad, as if to say, *'Like a piece?'*

He was about to launch into some

academic explanation of all this (to himself, in his mind) when there was a soft, curious, impact close to him.

"What the...?"

"Unhh!"

That was definitely not a sound uttered by him. He'd just breathed in. He turned slightly: and there, to his amazement lay... the girl in the tight skirt? *Really* - could it be her? But there it was - the unmistakable ring of truth - for she was still wearing those triple golden studs in her ears that he remembered so well from... could it have been yesterday? And yet, there was something about this girl - was it her hair, perhaps? No, her hair was different; she couldn't be the same person. It was as if he had suddenly woken and rubbed his eyes, as if the sleep his eyes contained had blurred the focus. Perhaps this also was just a cruel part of his imagining, which would be whipped away from under his nose in the next few seconds; then the frame would click back, and he'd find himself a prisoner of reality.

He blinked several times to clear his fogged

vision: but when he re-focused, she was still there, breathing softly... quietly post-coital, salty, scented of bed and skin and hair and... *maybe, just Maybe!*-

Before he had time to think, things moved on.

"No."

He rocked the bed, made for the bathroom, and flicked on the light after allowing his imagination to run wild, then softly closed the door.

Relative to the muted daylight, the hidden lights glowed bright and sharp, intensifying his post-something shock, but also prompting a deep thump in his head. ***Picture this:*** he rummages in the empty cabinet, and finds some fizzy tablets lost in the corner, which he stirs into a glass of water. After a few more minutes of crazy, somehow horrified joy, he opens the door a crack just to check whether this mad dream is real. And to his eyes it really *is* –

Exhibit 1: The Slumbering Heap. Under the Duvet really is - well, real, *it has feet*, and at least

one *hand*. Breaking news - He makes as if to walk across the room, and the *clunk!* of his decomposing hangover rears-up and bites him hard, so that he staggers the last few steps to the bed, where he dives into the warmth and thermal fragrance of –

Exhibit 2: A Warm Body, scented ... well –

Exhibit 3: *Heaven*, after all that hell, not to put too fine a point on it. Then, beautiful, forgetful, stupid, blank, nothingness. Nirvana, *no*, soft somebody....

Thus, he sleeps for a time, until, intuitively feeling the bed stir under him once more; he rolls over, catching sight of this still strange stranger's naked rump disappearing into the bathroom.

Now he waits, eyes tight shut ears attentive, for her to regain his eye-line. She comes out of the bathroom, clutching a towel, towelling herself dry; which is to him a newly re-found, re-discovered, hidden,

secret pleasure, after a lifetime in the tundra of his wild mind.

"Hey," he says, softly. Her hips approach him from an angle, which allows him time to enjoy her breasts, her belly and her crotch, with his eyes.

"Oh" she says... *"I thought..."*

"No... Don't leave if you don't have to."

"Well, I guess I..."

She settles her butt close to him, naked, but oddly formal.

"Did we?"

"Maybe..." she says "...but I was pretty out of it too."

She's lying, she knows.

"I don't know anything about you."

"Perhaps you shouldn't," she says, with a secret tenderness, which clangs against the fact of the moment.

Should he make eye contact?

"Oh?" A moment passes, oddly, between them, their eyes meeting only for a second.

"Shall I order breakfast?"

"Would you like some?" Should he try?

"I always do," she says.

"Always?"

"Usually!"

"Oh really... well, do it, then." '*Always do?*'

"Yes, always, well, nearly always."

"I'm just trying to fasten on this one..." PT shifts his rear in the comfort of the sheets, "I was at the bar last night..."

"And you found yourself talking to this girl in a red..."

"Silk... "

"Silk"

"Dress."

"Oh, Yes!"

"Well", though slightly clipped, her accent is languid and hardly noticeable in the quiet of the morning.

"... Me!"

"This *woman*."

"No ... Well yes -"

"I remember the dress really well."

Apart from the unrealities of real life

and bad television, PT had discovered in himself a certain conjoined weakness for design and texture and fabric. Which could only be genetic, like wanting to be a ballet dancer when you were a shipbuilder. And which in his case was not that far from the truth. Except that he couldn't dance.

"Sometimes... "

"But tell me... Why were you there ... No... *How* were you there?" Suspicion throbbed in his temples.

"Oh, just waiting for... you."

"You're much too delicate for this."

They look at one another for a moment.

"Gentle, perhaps."

"Okay."

"I know." She has that twang in her voice - perhaps Manchester, he isn't too good on accents. She is talking about something else.

"So - explain something"

"I was there, with... a friend at the bar ... You know, I'd just happened along... And then this good looking guy was making conversation... we were talking and drinking... for ages actually

- then he asked me whether I'd like to have a midnight swim... I said yes... "

"Midnight?"

"Later."

"Then?"

"He had this idea in his head..."

"We came up here..."

"After a while..."

He looks at her and she feels more naked than she is.

"Who am I?"

"Something to do with marketing management... wasn't it?"

"And you just fucked me – I'm a stranger... I could be someone who three days ago got lucky in a betting shop and then..."

"Oh, don't be crazy! There's something about you that makes that impossible... perhaps your air of... confidence, maybe?"

"You felt confident with – me?" PT Jones found this dialogue absurd. Mind you, only *he* knew what he knew.

"You know we fucked... but it felt special... really."

Was he convinced? Do you customarily give your one-nighter the third-degree? Does she know that he is a penniless, hopeless... punter? God!

A silence whilst they find new positions.

"Fucked your brain or fucked my body?"

"Look..."

"You know - I don't know how I got here".

The fact is that he means it, but she doesn't know where he's coming from and doesn't pick up his loneliness. Which is the swizz, isn't it?

"What do you think?"

"No, *we* fucked... No, oh shit, I thought for a moment that *we'd made love*". (How old-fashioned).

She seems a little confused, bemused perhaps.

"D'you want me to leave?"

"Is that our deal?"

Is that how she closes a deal?

He feels the coldness of all the outsides he's been to against the warm sadness of such a

temporary arrangement, here, inside. He gauges it, hefts it, decides.

Her eyes seem glassy and bright, yet determined. PT Jones secretly feels as if he wants to throw up.

“I’ve never done this before.”

Now he’s beginning to get to the point. It’s a form of cowardice *and* a form of using, too. Sometimes you use others without even knowing that the deal is that they use you. And when it’s over, the failed bankers of this world lose their lovers to other bankers who’ve assumed their importance and now wield the big stick which they’ve lost. And thus the users get used by their users. The trick being that we’re all on a tightrope called life, and that tightrope has a finite end to it, we all lose this and that, our money, our looks, our performance, our finish, our sparkle, in the end. But this wasn’t the end any more for it was his new start, his moment, his time, his beginning. And the underlying question? - Ah, but for how long?

Nobody was going to be able to take away

this brave new day from him: *Over my dead body – why, it's the first new day in my life for... for ever!*

Alcohol, dreams, green eyes, cut-away brassieres. There was a trace against her skin where she had sweated that morning, and he could see it, the minutest lace flower of stress upon her body, which had been for a few moments his, as she'd seethed under him like the wild, suckling ocean breaking against the granite of clear dawn.

"You don't have to say that!"

"But you are, aren't you!"

"No I'm..."

This was turning into a storm.

"You know what I'm saying!"

"Not now... Not last night."

"How much was it... How much do you want?"

"I wouldn't want to..."

"But you do."

"Sometimes... well, yes I do, dear."

"Oh!" Ptolemy Jones is deflated. It was that single word that made the whole thing into a

transaction.

"Oh! -*Shit!* I've never fucked a Tom before."

"I'm sorry".

No sound of sorrow, though, only a bizarre surprise, embarrassment, confusion of a sort.

"I hate to get into this sort of thing..."

"You seemed so into what..."

"You seemed to get into it so easily."

"No, it was you; I was watching you, attracted to you..."

"That was the drink I guess."

"I am sorry."

"So'm I"

"Look, let's just eat breakfast and..."

But this wasn't a movie. And he'd take a while to adjust to such variation in his life: a detour in an otherwise undirected and chaotic existence - where it would lead, he cared nothing of. Or, could it be a sea-change?

From that day on, prompted by his memories, any meal as simple as this first

breakfast became one of his great pleasures, for it was vigorously signalling an important turning point. Which point it would remain, forever. Symbolic, wasn't it? And that encounter, with a woman at least as lost in the jungle of her life as he was in the desert of his, had changed him, changed his attitudes in a way he could never have foreseen. Maybe forever.

This weird new life of his had begun to realign itself with fateful direction and at unaccustomed speed that normally he would have thought impossible. Why, up to now his life had been little more than a long trudge. And this was weird, a wonderfully particular moment, a special day coming at him in an unexpected way at a strange moment in that lost, scratchy video called: *His Very Own Prodigal Life*.

Where *would* he go from here?

Having arrived here, wherever that was, fate had set him to take off, just as a bird might arrive on an outcrop merely as a part of the process of departing: it was part of a new journey - his life

was no longer a life in suspension: he felt the restless beginnings of movement, of energy and motion... fancied himself to be... an Albatross: forever cruising the thermals over a troubled sea. This was the start to an unending voyage. No, but there *must be* a sign in there somewhere, in all the doom of his life: some happy accident that was hardly accidental. This was a dynamic universe, a complex but not accidental physical construct, a complex group of related coincidences all set to propel him to a new horizon, though which one he knew not, though one day he would find it. The word chance doesn't exist. Or luck. Really. No, the way things had happened meant that he was meant to be here... fated to be here - and so was she... Whoever *she* was: how crazy, the two of them trapped in this crazy criss-cross of fate, victims of their own apartness.

Segments of his wasted life leapt at him like crumpled pages - out of the darkness of the past: a crazy remembrance of things so inconsequential and forgotten that he resolved to leave them forever on a shelf in his mind. He

could philosophise forever... or else make a move, stir the inertia and create... something.

The air felt warm, which was good. Anyway, the way things were was positive - though that left him feeling empty. And at the same moment he knew that today was not a sad day: today was a new way of venturing out, discovering perhaps discovery itself. Today was pregnant with more promise than he'd known for an age. Today, he was sure inside himself that in some as yet unknown way, this today was a great launching, a great new exploration.

Oh, and that the way the world had turned today for him meant that he was fated to be, well, *Lucky*. And nobody can take that away from you – they can repossess your car, throw you out of your home, but they can't take your luck away from you. Can they?

Can they?

Chapter 4

Money, Money, Money

Rich! Was this real? PT

Jones didn't care any more; after years of imprisonment in his concrete dungeon

he'd lost most of his capacity to care. It was a kind of negative learning curve, a passage traversed only in one direction. A shiver ran through him. He shivered for luck.

He lolled in an easy chair and considered the facts of all this. An Inspector Morse segment waiting to take shape in a random universe – written by... well, monkeys, then. And what had started this whole thing off - kicked him out of gravity and into an unseeing cosmos? It could have been the promise of that tight skirt... it could have been, well... *bad* luck!

But his luck was *good*: wasn't it! It was luck madness, solid as rock, dense as steel, as strong as an Ox... why, with luck like this, a cosmic chequebook, he could endlessly write his luck out... after all he would live forever, wouldn't he?

And this life, this chequebook, Ha! Ha! - Always had another wodge of pages, so that it could never be exhausted. Simple, that was it...!

PT was glued to the problem in progress by an unhealthy impulse.

"I want to live life to the full!"

"How many other people are going to find out?"

"I don't think that's possible."

"I gather that that's not feasible."

He threw caution aside,

as he always did. After all, what was something promised, it gave you hope at least - against absolutely nothing? Sometimes life has hidden values, as, when stubbing your foot against an outcrop in a desert you find that you've tripped on a reef of gold.

Of course - a reef of fortune, a showcase of beauty and forgotten luxuries: and, as customary with such things the sickly sweet and strangely *erotic* promise of disaster, as well.

That was the package.

He knew it, now.

Book **2**

e-Something

Chapter 5

Lucky, Lucky, Lucky

It was

morning. Amidst his contented slumber he felt the bed heave gently under a surrendered weight. Who he was with, and their immediate agenda, was of no interest to him in this weightless, suspended state, on the edge of dreaming; like a space-man on the edge of a moment of force all that really occupied him at that moment was this newness of a bright new day. He imagined to himself half aloud in this reverie that it was time to start his new life on a note of endless optimism, to go forward boldly, whatever happened; he would create his success.

At that moment, Mr. Jones had had enough of being purposeless. With a jolt he realized that the old person that he knew so well, PT Jones, had lost the thread of reality sufficiently that he had almost forgotten how to play at life as most people play without even realizing it. Mr. Jones had become almost *grey*.

For one thing, the name, or the

person, PT Jones had failed to make an impact of any sort in the world so far – little did he know it – but that would be to his great good fortune. Life can be like that. And anyway that would all come later, it was fated.

As far as he was aware, all that was needed now was a little more of his special brand of luck, that bizarre animal, just a smidgeon – he'd seen this new animal called success, begun to smell it, got it firmly seated in his mind. So now he just had to make sure that he maintained that state, to put it another way stayed *lucky*, for the way things were meant that that way, he would succeed beyond his wildest dreams.

Thus later that evening, riding on a hope – the same naïve, despairing, frisson of excitement - he walked into the Crouch End Inn's small casino and - *surprise!* His first, second and

third punts on the Roulette wheel all came in. Could you imagine that? Multiplied-up, each time! PT Jones couldn't, and was almost as surprised as the croupier was dismayed. You know, what he'd thought about but never let secure itself in his mind was becoming more concrete every moment. What had blown into his mind on a whirlwind of rain and broken sunshine and clouds one day seemed to be happening to him; this was crazy – what a thought, after all this pointless time – because perhaps he really was *lucky*, whatever that meant. The Jones - that beat the bank at Monte Carlo?

Or was it something indefinable about him? Perhaps can be a big word.

Something was still missing, some small ziggurat, not '*Mis en place*' yet, in his plan;

'Consider...' he thought... 'It's after all, the luxury of the well heeled not only to disregard the thought of mere financial

failure in a small way at the casino, but also to have someone beautiful with them who dotes on them, someone who will help them win, or lose come to that.' That something, something he'd failed to do until that moments thought had visited him.

'After all', he continued to himself, 'losing a fortune, at the casino is only a small part of the game in question - the real game being that one of winning and losing a whole stack of different things, among them the priceless bauble who would drink-in every word as if it were some sort of magical potion, and then give him all she'd got and who knew, maybe more.

James Bond? PT Jones? Winning and losing?'

So what was missing?

Which, in a roundabout way, is just where he'd come in; because, in his deepest mind he was still keenly

affected by his past failure, convinced that this was the way things could never to be for him; he was convinced now that he'd never be capable, ever. of feeling the kiss of true luxury – it was written in the stars, you know, like fate.

Thus, like the proverbial beast, it would take a trick of fate to make Mr. Jones change his spots...

A fact: contrived to be a viable deconstruction of this very truth, time limited as was all such philosophical cant, would only last until the two of them returned to his penthouse. Mr. Jones, lost amidst his philosophical musings, merely waited until the lift door closed in the still of the night before he allowed himself to enjoy the sight of the form of his companion; and thus returned rapidly to his feet of clay.

The lift doors opened and closed, he opened the door of the penthouse with a

flourish and found the drinks cabinet which, obeying old habit he made a beeline for - whereupon this new paid bauble of his (aren't they all paid, one way or the other?) quietly but expectantly stripped naked, as if to demonstrate some point that maybe he was not entirely au-fait with - and then asked him for, well, *money*, before progressing any further.

He gave in against his instinct and laid the cash down. After all he was flush now, wasn't he? And it was late. He'd rather sleep, but he was weak, merely male flesh. She was flesh too, though stronger....

"Okay!" she said, brightly, as soon as the money was counted. Then: "Like me with just my high heels?"

She didn't know, and it didn't concern her that Mr. Jones didn't hear her. Why? Because previously he'd been devoid of income: incapable of making the sort of

rationalization that entails pitching money and plenty against pleasure, however sad that pleasure was - and additionally that now at this fast moving moment he was rich, just rich. Simply, he would say to himself if he thought of it, rich.

Even if the whole shebang ended tomorrow, today was happy and he had been, was, *lucky*. At that moment, for the first time in many months (or was it years, or perhaps even aeons) he'd realized that money had suddenly lost its importance. At the same time of course, he was acutely aware that he'd have to survive through the dangerous anaesthetic of this surprise – partly due to the fact that what she was asking for seemed an absurdly small amount of money in the scope of his bundle of fifties.

You see, who cared? Not he! No question that when you're rich, everything away from your focus seems an excuse for something you haven't seen, something

frivolous or entirely off-the-point, alternative, some evasion. He hadn't discovered that yet, though he would, soon. Just as cynicism becomes part of the disease of riches.

And not only that. Right now he was beginning to discover the deep luxurious touch of a special silken sensitivity however profane, something that this unlikely unnamed whore possessed; some sort of riches amidst poverty. Up to now he'd never had the clarity of mind, the pleasure of time that was truly his own, enough to see this simple fact. And now he had that bought moment, so expensive and so insubstantial like the hidden splendours of Tutankhamen's tomb, buried for a thousand generations and now discovered - acutely aware of something the chaos of his life had denied him – something that he could begin to take control of and finally to enjoy.

What a fortunate, what a

lucky thing - how rich was he beginning to be, amidst the poverty of his past!

The following day

Mr. Jones returned to the Hotel and spent the entire, wasted afternoon swimming in the Spa. Relaxation had never been like that before. Why, for the first moment in many years he could afford to forget, to totally relax and let his mind unwind, to develop the ability to lose his memory in the most elegant of ways.

What a luxury!

Now, when he looked in the mirror, rather than seeing the old slightly bloated damaged, *himself*, he saw a later, updated, better version; strengthened, youthful, strong; an opaque, real, new PT Jones was taking sculptural form in front of his eyes. But - the clincher? The clincher was still almost. The clincher was always *almost*.

Soon, he was sure; he would hardly recognize the old vessel that had once-upon-a-time contained the obsolete, outworn model once known as Ptolemy Thomas Jones. It is so easy to lose that which you always thought was yours, however reprobate that is, even the old you. It can be painful too.

But, he explained to himself, it would after all be more a case of the devil you knew, as against the devils you felt were chasing you down. In such a mood of contemplation he later settled down in a lounge by the pool and listened to the water lapping his life away, this time with pleasure.

Why? Because suddenly, happily, PT Jones had been able unexpectedly to put aside the stress, the imposed meaning of all the money he'd been tortured by in his life - even if it would be so for only this brief period. For the first time for a long time: (it was *that*

sort of money to someone used to living on the edge of nowhere - just more jumbled numbers) he'd paid the cheque into his bank and allowed himself the luxury of forgetting how much he'd won – and how dicey it had been to get thus far in so short a time. Added to which was the fact that he had imagined the surprise of whoever it was sorted his account, which gave him an unexpectedly warm glow. The dizzying rollercoaster climb from almost-always-in-the-red to definitely-deep-in-the-black had been one that was fast enough to catch him in the throat. He smiled.

At that moment, were you cynical and living outside his life, you might say that PT Jones was in danger of losing the plot.

Later, he was savouring a new sort of cocktail at the bar (inwardly working on his future - which seemed only too likely to occur now, where all past theories

had cancelled it) - when unwittingly he made eye contact with a lightly suntanned man: who immediately burst into unexpected conversation – this happens!

"Jim, I'm in International FMCG and automobiles - I made over Nine Hundred big ones last year!"

"Oh, Hullo"

"Have a JD and Canadian... it's my favourite... hey, barman-"

"Well, Okay, then."

"It's a good day today."

"Yup, it is a good day isn't it!"

They both had different agendas and meant different things, but what the hell.

"Nice town, Crouch"

"Yup"

Silence. Then;

"Don't I recognize you from somewhere?"

"Well..." a myriad of possibilities flashed through his mind.

"What's yaw name?"

"PT." The name he'd used on the register: it gave him a little gravity, made him somehow feel... *someone*.

"Oh, PT ..." The face opposite him in the mirror seemed to slow down; the effect was almost imperceptible..."PT?"

"Jones." He was going to say '*P for On a Permanent Holiday for, well, years...*' But decided - as he wasn't standing at a bar and regaling the local alcoholics in order to get a cheap laugh - instead to be diplomatic, just to say something, avoiding the point that he was after all, well, just a nobody called PT Jo-
"*I'm taking a break.*"

"PT Jones." The face next to his had by now almost come to a complete standstill, as if finding something unlikely and profound buried full fathom five in its JD. For a moment his glass and its contents filled the view.

"Umm?"

"That's really nice," said PT Jones discovering the brownness of the JD and

Canadian, "...really very nice..."

"I'm sure you enjoy your bourbon"

"It's kind of a new taste"

"Just taking a break, huh?" said his new found friend.

"Well, maybe a little longer than that" replied Mr. Jones, dreading any return he might eventually have to make, back down the line to only he knew where.

Jim's face laughed a hollow, unbelieving sort of laugh.

"Well, we all try hard... some of us harder than others, PT," said Jim suddenly, looking hard and at the same time somehow *meaningfully* at him.

Someone dropped a tray full of glasses which tinkled and clattered all over the tiled floor somewhere over to their left. This was followed by the usual admonitions, and then the sound of sweeping and clattering. Jim had halted and seemed to be recharging his batteries for some covert reason, creating thus a mysterious break in continuity - with that

absent gravity of the true performer.

Then he started-in again somewhat cautiously—

"I think I seen you somewhere -- in *Forbes'* maybe, PT!" He phrased his words carefully.

"Could be," said PT Jones, playing for time "...Could be!" (*'Forbes...what?'*) he thought, scanning his memory for some kind of reference... he must know somewhere, a shop, a café? There was a shadow there... *Forbes'... Forbes?'*)

"Or Fortune", there was a short silence, almost metric. "Well, this is a real coincidence!" said Jim, suddenly taking his hand in an over-firm handshake, making his eyes water with the sudden familiarity - becoming really *friendly* for reasons which PT Jones could only dimly imagine. (*Fortune? Fortune?*)

"Yes, it is, isn't it?"

"I figured that that *was* a kind of fake British accent... but I can hear the stateside underneath, PT ... Dry... kinda. Yer

just can't hide. But you *can* run! Ha, Ha!"

"Well, Newcastle"

"Yeah... good one, Newcastle, know what I mean?" said Jim, "*Newcassel! Maine,*" and laughed in a wide-world sort of way.

"Umm," said PT, savouring the remainder of his drink, thinking about another. As he was about to raise his hand to catch the eye of the barman, his newfound friend, Jim, broke in:

"Leave the bottle here, George"

"Oh, that's good of you," said PT, visualizing that somehow he would carry this delectable liquid up to his room, the better to engender forgetfulness. But, sadly, for this moment it was not to be.

"Now I remember you... with your lady wife last night, celebratin' in the bar," said Jim.

"Yes I was... Yes." Before he could navigate further in this Sea of Doubt, he saw in the distorted face of the mirror through the glass partition of the bar that

behind him, that same woman he had spent such a lost night and, let's face it, *charming* morning with, was crossing the foyer with the obvious intention of leaving the hotel. Whatever her name was. A moment of alarm.

He excused himself and slipped out of the bar, quasi-casually, walking diagonally across the foyer towards where he had calculated that Jim would not see him, losing his cool and sprinting the few yards remaining between him and her. Jim was invisible in the bar, lost in his cogitations, and didn't see a thing.

He'd nearly lost her, nearly lost whatever he'd thought not to lose for this time, one more once forgotten time in an endless stream of forever.

She was already out of the lobby and beginning to turn into the street from the crescent of the driveway when he caught her elbow, hastily:

"Look, I'm sorry...but what's your

name"

"You don't need to know... Why?" It seemed curiously direct that way.

"Look, could you be my wife this evening... I mean pretend..."

"Well, I hardly have the time, I..."

"Look - how much?"

"Oh..." She named a price... and then said crisply but with a broken rhythm "Oh, and this time the sex is in-cluded," (as if somehow it had been ex-cluded that last night) then smiled, looking at least half real. Half real, just this time.

He clicked back in his mind to his marketing major at university: it struck him that perhaps this was what 'They' meant by price competition. *Peripherals...* you know? The sex last night had been better, and far more, well how would he put it, intimate, than he would have ever thought possible between a Tart and a John. He winced. He, a John? *God!*

"How many other people are going to find out?"

"I don't think that's possible."

He gave her his key:

"Be in the bar in five minutes and don't look... you know..."

"Like a working girl?"

"Um, yes."

"Sure?"

Was he supposed to say yes, or should he say *no*?

He was back with Jim

in a moment.

"Well, as I was sayin'," Said Jim, "When I saw your pitcher in Forbes', I reckoned... PT could be my man!"

Ptolemy Jones warmed to his new story, the *new* PT Jones, whoever that was, well, he was known at last, even if he wasn't he at all, well that at least would give him a chance to become...

"Ah, hah!" He faked.

"But of course you'd disappeared."

"I sure had." Disappeared? *What is this sort of fakery called?*

There followed a silence. PT Jones chewed over the data as he sipped the alcohol. Jim looked at him quizzically:

"And then suddenly in Crouch End... or somewhere..."

"Some End."

"Where else, where the famous go to hide-away – I should 'a thought!"

"In my neck of the woods they called that '*Hiding in plain sight*'" Something for the notebook, perhaps.

"Oh Yeah?"

"Logical, ain't it... the end thing!"

"Yeah," said PT warming further to his new, mad, story and blushing hot nervous red, even though he could not blush... "I figured I'd shaken them... but suddenly... Well *Forbes* is just about anywhere where there's real cash, right?" He had to stop, this was just too absurd, and he was beginning to feel all over prickly sweat. Besides, he distantly recalled that he'd heard of 'Forbes' but he had definitely never actually seen it. And who

the fuck was Jim?

This seemed to be time for a natural pause. Jim wanted to say something: for a fleeting moment he looked as if he were about to give birth, throw-up - and then it was gone. Time for a new approach. Jim approached his quarry stealthily.

"Cash is a good name for this kinda thing PT - *our* thing," said Jim, looking across at him meaningfully, slowly and cautiously,

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