

# Most Excellent and Lamentable

by Jason Erik Lundberg

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Sometimes I'll be driving the Z3 on the highway and imagine my brakes cut, unexpectedly, unexplainably. And the gas pedal will get stuck, maybe with superglue, like in that Blues Brothers movie, and the speed, the speedometer keeps rising, past ninety, one-hundred, one-hundred-and-seventy, and the cars I'm racing past are just blurs, streaks of color which barely register before they're *gone*, and the fluid for the steering wheel has evaporated and I'm careening now, careering across lanes, across the median, and I'm heading straight for an eighteen-wheeler, knowing that when I hit that there'll be nothing left of me to identify, no fingerprints, no teeth, just a liquefied mass that used to be a person, knowing all this but completely helpless, unable to do anything about—

But of course none of that happens. It's a fantasy. When you're immortal, all you can think about is death.

\*

To Julian, I'm Lucas. He sees me as a student of the world, a wandering poet. He thinks I'm misunderstood, unappreciated in my own time. He thinks this because I want him to think this.

I write haiku and pantoums that make absolutely no sense. I fill up trendy Moleskine notebooks with unintelligible, incomprehensible verse. He nods and makes interested noises while reading my "poetry," calls me brilliant.

When I use symbols like Ж and Ѹ, he looks at them thoughtfully, trying to divine importance, unaware I'm only using letters from the Cyrillic alphabet. He's been threatening to publish a book of my poetry for years, but he never has any money.

"Lukey-*duke!*" he shouts as I step into Java Jive. He's unshaven, hair all aimed to one side as if he'd been standing behind a jet engine. His clothes come from sometime in the mid-1980s, thrift store chic. Rimless eyeglasses.

I ease into the chair opposite his at the table. Julian smells vaguely of cloves.

I say, "You look happier than normal, Jules. Get laid last night?"

Julian just smiles, teeth broken and spaced too far apart.

"I see Queen Mab hath been with you," I say.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"No, no, it's not like that. I'm in love."

"Love?"

“The girl, the one I told you about, she came into the bookstore again today.”

“Which girl?”

“You know, *the* girl. Last week she bought a raggedy-ass copy of Sartre. Her.”

“Oh.”

“Today she bought Camus.”

“So?”

“Dude! She’s a deep thinker, man. She’s beautiful *and* she has a brain.”

“I’ve seen plenty of women like that.”

“Well, I haven’t. They’re pretty rare for me. Especially ones that dig *me*.”

“Hold that thought.”

I get up, walk to the counter, order a chai, pay, get the drink, and sit back down. I imagine it’s poisoned, and take a gulp.

“Okay, where were we?”

“Romy.”

“Romy?”

“That’s her name. The girl. Her name is Romy.”

“And you know this because.”

“Because I asked her out.”

“Isn’t that against the rules?”

“It’s a used books store, Lucas. No one cares if you date the customers.”

“Ah.”

“I’m taking her to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* tomorrow night. I still have my student ID, so we’ll get in cheap.”

“Beautiful?”

“Dude, she’s *gorgeous*.”

“Pippins and figs.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

\*

To Romy, I’m Marc. She sees me as a painter, a refugee from the Paris art scene. She thinks I’m unconventional, controversial, willing to tear down the boundaries of realism. She thinks this because I want her to think this.

My seduction starts after Julian’s date with her, me following behind in the shadows of lampposts. Watching as Julian drops her off in his Chevette, too nervous to lean in for a kiss, talking a bit too animatedly with his hands. She gets out of the car, thanks him for the date, and disappears into her apartment building. He sits there for a moment more, then rolls home.

I emerge from the sliver of shadow, ring the bell for her apartment. She says “what” through the intercom speaker, tired, wishing the date had gone better maybe.

“I’m an itinerant seller of pigeons,” I say, giving myself a French accent.

She laughs, a sound like rain, or a river.

“Who is this, really?”

“I want to paint your portrait,” I breathe, flooding the intercom with charm, drowning her in my charisma. You know that story about the man who sells ice to the Eskimos? It isn’t a story. I did that.

“Come on up,” she says.

The first thing I notice is her eyebrows, plucked and thinned, wisps, hints of eyebrows, memories of eyebrows. Romy is a redhead, but not a fiery red, or a deep red, more a pale red. Not strawberry blonde, not pink, but the lightest dusting of redness in her hair. Her eyebrows share this lightness, adding to the effect.

We move to the living room and stare at each other. I’m facing away from the windows. I feel the crosshairs of a sniper’s rifle on the back of my head. Those little nape hairs stand up and the base of my skull crawls, a caged animal scrabbling to get out. I can envision my brains becoming Romy’s makeup, adding color to her pale face, her eyebrows.

“It will be hard for me to trust you, Marc,” she says. “I’ve been hurt before.”

My teeth are a gentle massage. My eyes are a nice Ceylon tea. My hands are a beloved blanket, a stuffed animal plumped with security.

“If love be rough with you,” I say, “be rough with love.”

The sex is raw and uninhibited, articulated with animal primacy. I scream. She screams. We all scream. The mattress screams.

Julian's right. She is gorgeous.

\*

The next morning, leaving Romy's place, I slide into my Z3 and turn the key in the ignition. The car explodes. Someone has planted C4 under my transmission. Glass, metal, plastic, and bits of me spray in all directions, an eruption of technology and humanity. We turn the street, the buildings black and red. Charred and sticky. We set off a dozen car alarms. We make the earth tremble—

I open my eyes, but I am intact. The Z3 is intact, always was intact. The street is quiet except for the birds in the trees. A bunny rabbit hops along the sidewalk.

A sigh, and I put the car in gear.

\*

Julian is manning the counter as I step into Bibliophiles. Dust and old paper and, faintly, cat. I sneeze.

"Hey Lucas," he says, less emphatic than usual.

"Jules. Something wrong?"

"She won't return my calls," he says. "It's been three days since we went out. I think she's blowing me off."

"Who?" I pretend I don't know.

"The girl. Romy. It sucks. I bet she's seeing someone else."

"It's possible. Like you said: beautiful *and* a brain."

Another employee, laden with trade paperbacks, shuffles behind the counter, commences the avalanche of books, an imploded building of books. He's Mediterranean maybe, prone to tan easily.

Dark hair, cut close to the scalp. Earrings up one side and down the other. He wears a green shirt with BUCK FUSH in white block letters. His glasses have rims, thick and black.

“Hey,” I say.

He nods.

“Lucas, this is Ty,” Julian says. “He just started a few days ago. Ty, Lucas: a local poet.”

We shake hands, testing grips, measuring each other’s masculinity. I imagine his strong Mediterranean hand on my throat, squeezing, tears in his eyes, revenge for an injustice, some unintended offense, cutting off my air, crushing my voicebox, snapping my cervical vertebrae, black spots coalescing in front of my eyes, his teeth gritted so hard they crack, I’m almost gone now, a beautiful asphyxiation—

A quick pump, up-down, and we let go. He turns and heads toward the back of the shop. I hate him, abruptly, suddenly, on a cellular level.

“Maybe he’s the one,” I say to Julian.

“The one what?”

“The one who stole your girl.”

“Ty?”

“Why not? He’s a good-looking guy.”

“I don’t know, Lucas.”

“Didn’t you say he only started working here a few days ago?”

“Yeah . . .”

“And wasn’t that when you went out with Romy?”

“Yeah.”

“And isn’t it possible she saw him while she was in here, and they hooked up later?”

Julian punches the counter and the books resting there slide to the floor.

“Son of a bitch! Why would he do that to me?”

“O, he’s the courageous captain of compliments. A Prince of Cats.”

“What?”

“A knave; a rascal; an eater of broken meats; a base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy, worsted-stocking knave; a whoreson, glass-glazing, superserviceable, finical rogue; one-trunk-inheriting slave; one that wouldst be a bawd in way of good service, and art nothing but the composition of a knave, beggar, coward, pandar, and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

I take a breath. “Poetry,” I say.

“Oh. Okay. Man, you’ve *got* to write that shit down.”

“It’s already been done.”

“Wow, you had that memorized?”

“So now we know he stole your woman,” I say. “Let’s talk about how to get even.”

\*

An exhibit in a warehouse gallery, which I take credit for. When Romy looks at the names of the artists below each painting, she sees only my name.

“These are incredible,” she says. “They’re so *textured* and *real*. I love how you used mixed media in these. Is that from a Chinese newspaper?”

We stroll down the wall, pausing at respectable intervals, examining each piece, the deep colors, use of black, and foil, found objects like trowel blades, rusted forks, barbed wire, dental appliances, radio-controlled car motors, scissors, butcher knives, machetes.

Stopping in front of a Cornell box, filled with a clipping from the *New York Times* (September 12, 2001), a pigeon skull resting on a pile of grey feathers, a phial containing grey ash, and a die-cast toy jumbo jet suspended from the top by fishing line.

Romy gets quiet, staring into the box, peering, poring over the contents, as if the harder she looks, the more meaning she’ll glean.

“And what were you hoping to accomplish with this piece?” she asks.

The answer is one I’ve been saving for years, just waiting for the right circumstances, the right question to justify its brilliance. Romy’s eyes are the hue of a scorched sky.

“I wanted to show that after a disaster, even a cataclysmic, life-changing tragedy, art and beauty can still be made.”

We go back to Romy’s apartment after that, her running five red lights, narrowly avoiding a stray dog and three parking meters, and

she's laughing and I'm laughing, and we run upstairs and rend our garments, her wanting to be on top, and she's squeezing her pelvic muscles right, right *there*, and when I come it's a universe-creating explosion, it's a mortiferous heart-attack, turning the little death into a big one, it's looking into the face of Death and laughing, and yes laughing yes, and tears are trailing down my face from this unexpected apoplexy, and I never want it to stop, never, never, never, never, never!

\*

To Ben, I'm Wile. He sees me as a filmmaker, a connoisseur of pretentious independent short films. He thinks I'm a renegade, an auteur whose works will be microscopically studied centuries from now. He thinks this because I want him to think this.

We sit in a dark booth at the back of the Hibernian Pub, and I'm showing him my latest creation on a portable DVD player: a compilation of commercials about children's charities, spliced, edited, all hosted by that same bearded actor, sincere, imploring, wanting my money, for ten cents a day you can feed a family of four, the shots, the endless shots of impoverished kids with bloated bellies, the wide eyes, pleading for a break, for fairness in the world, knowing that ten cents a day won't actually do shit for improving their lives, knowing that they need more, much more, and knowing that they won't get it.

"Very powerful," Ben says. "The guy uses almost the exact same spiel every time."

“There are actually only a handful of separate commercials, from the poorest countries, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Somalia, Cambodia, but they’re aired so often that you think there must be dozens, hundreds of different ones.”

“You talked to Julian lately?”

“Yeah. You?”

“Nope.”

Ben and Julian are first cousins, close since they were kids, but incommunicado after Julian said Ben’s wife was a cruel bitch. Turns out Julian was right, but even after the nasty divorce, they haven’t spoken a word to each other. I’ve never met Ben’s ex-wife, but the stories about her are many.

“So who are we meeting here? Some new hotties for the ravishing?”

“No. This guy Ty. We’re going to ruin him.”

“Sounds fun.”

The film is still playing on infinite loop in my hand, the endless procession of gaunt faces, faces of those who have given up, faces waiting for release, and all at once I’m exhausted, just fed up with it all, my stupid pranks, the manipulations, the whole world. In that moment, I envy those starving children, wish for the loving embrace of deprivation, madness, the slowing of the blood. I sink back into the booth, hoping, praying that I’ll continue to sink, the cushion enveloping, smothering me, pushing itself into my mouth, my nose, my eyes, cutting off the world, delivering me from life.

“You okay?”

“I’m so tired,” I say.

“You look like you ate some bad oysters.”

“What’s the point? I mean, what’s the fucking point of it all?”

I turn off the DVD player. “We all turn to dust and bones eventually. President or poet, it doesn’t matter. At some point even I’ll be gone. Whether it’s the Big Crunch or the heat death of the universe, we all go back to atoms, to nothingness.”

“Death comes for us all someday,” Ben says.

“Life’s a tale told by an idiot,” I say, “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

“Bullshit,” Ben says, smacking the table with an open palm. “I don’t buy that at all. This existence *does* matter, however short it might be. We all have a role to play, and it’s how we play that role that gives our lives meaning.”

“And what’s my role?” I ask.

Romy, from nowhere, maybe hiding in the shadows all along, sits down beside Ben.

“You are the Trickster,” she says. “You make sure we don’t take ourselves too seriously. You bring laughter, and mystery.”

“And what are you?” I say.

“The Beauty. That who is sought after, pursued, the object of lust.”

Julian sits beside me, and Ty stands at the edge of the table.

“The Fool,” Julian says, hand on heart, “destined to be deluded over and over again. And the Doppelgänger,” he motions to Ty, silent, pale, face smudged with clown makeup, “your opposite and equal, who always gets blamed for your actions.”

“And you?” I look to Ben.

“The Fraud. Scaramouche to your Harlequin. Your lesser version.”

This is all very familiar now, the umpteenth iteration in an endless repetition. I’ve been here before, too many times, a purgatory of repeated experience.

Romy, Julian and Ben produce painstakingly-crafted handmade half-masques from thin air, an archetypal conjuring. They tie the masques to their faces with black cloth, their mouths still visible, but something unmistakably changed in their aspects, a *more-ness*. Ty stands mute, his face pancaked white, a checkered dunce cap on his head.

“The dance must continue,” Julian says, another masque in his hands, *my* masque, my true essence in bright primary colors. I know that I can decline, deny my nature and flee the bar, live a normal life and die in my bed sixty years from now. I could give it all up, refuse to play the cosmic game any longer, hang up my spurs.

I could, but I won’t. I just wouldn’t be myself.

I pluck the masque from Julian’s hands and tie it onto my face with a flourish. Through the eye-holes, the world looks more alive, brighter, energetic, full of sound and fury and slings and arrows, but

beautiful all the same. I smile and wait for the music to start, for the  
amnesia to settle in, for the dance to begin once more.

—*fin*—