

Pure Luck

By

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"Small people are tragic," Rain said.

Jule didn't know if Rain included him in that lot or what. He didn't really care. He nodded, thinking, *Yes, Rain, whatever you say*, and wished she would cut the breeze and sell him what he'd come to buy.

She stood at the window, looking down thirty stories.

"There are five million of them down there," Rain continued. "They all have their own small tragedies looming over them like dying suns."

Dying suns? Whatever. As long as she got to the point soon. His last bit of Luck had started to give out. He felt exceedingly uncomfortable in Rain's apartment. It was too clean; there was no detectable odor that he could remember each time he visited, nothing that would make her place seem even a tad familiar. The interior always changed, too. New furniture, new lighting (painfully bright right now), different pictures on the wall. Jule never bothered to look at the pictures other than to register that they were there. He watched Rain.

Even now, as he wished she would just do the deal so he could get the hell out of there, he was thinking, *God, she's beautiful*. He knew that her body had been bought and paid for in part with his money, but it didn't matter. Still beautiful.

She was long and cool, like Venus sculpted from the finest black statuary marble. But she moved with a fluidity that suggested she may have been born of the rain she had chosen to name herself after.

"Look at them," she said, but Jule didn't bother to join her at the window. He was almost hypnotized by the outlines of the body beneath her red silk kimono. He only half heard her words. "Flogging themselves with guilt, taking blame for all the things they can't control. They walk back and forth down there, and they think that all they really need is a little Luck."

Suddenly she had his attention by the balls.

"Luck," he repeated, smiling. His hand in his pocket, fingering a magnetized

plastic chip of currency, ready to produce it in an instant.

"The price has risen, Jule," Rain told him, as she turned away from the window to look at him. Jule's heart sank. He didn't bother to ask how much the price had gone up because he'd brought exactly the amount it cost... *used to cost*. He tried to think of who else he could go to. There was Jaims Claybourne, but Jule still owed Jaims a lot of currency. Besides, Jaims cut his shit, and Jule was addicted to it pure.

Addicted. He didn't like to think of it that way. In the street they said an addict was lost at sea, drowned, and his body gone forever.

"For you, Jule, this one time, I'll sell it at the old price. This one time."

The chip was out so fast he almost dropped it. Even though Jule knew it was bad luck to flash currency before seeing the product, he couldn't help himself. He wanted to make the deal before she changed her mind.

Rain didn't even look at the chip, but she reached into her kimono pocket and produced a plastic baggie filled with little red capsules.

As was typical for Jule every time he saw a new supply for the first time, he thought it ironic that as a kid he'd regarded red as his unlucky color. Once, he refused to ride a bicycle his father had gotten him for his birthday because it had red stripes. His father wouldn't exchange the bike, and forced Jule to ride it. Jule immediately wrecked it, fractured his collarbone, and got into trouble because his father thought he'd wrecked it on purpose.

Now red was the color of the best Luck money could buy.

He exchanged the chip for the baggie, extracted one of the capsules. He immediately popped it into his mouth and swallowed it dry. (He had trouble swallowing pills as a kid, too. How things change.) Already he began to feel better, but he knew it was just his relief at having a new supply.

"Go, Jule," Rain said.

He felt his Luck kick in on the elevator going down. Suddenly it didn't matter that he didn't have any money left. Actually, it was a lucky thing he didn't, because if he did it would make him complacent, content with only a little, unwilling to lay it on the line for the jackpot. Now, though, he felt hungry for a challenge.

He knew that if he could make the right combination happen, connect the right dots, if he found a pattern somewhere, he'd be okay. That's all Luck was, and he didn't kid himself about it. It wasn't some supernatural force. It gave him the ability to lean into the wind at just the right angle and slip through without resistance.

Observe, analyze, act. No different than anything else, except sometimes it was just so subtle people didn't know what else to call it. Luck, Providence, Fate, Fortune. There were many forms, including a little red capsule you could swallow whenever you needed it.

He didn't have to go to Jaims. Now *that* was lucky. Jule was not on very good terms with Jaims. Besides the debt, their personalities clashed and they'd taken a disliking to each other from the beginning. Everybody knew.

Everybody knew that if you wanted the best Luck, you went to Rain. She was a goddess in the pantheon of users and dealers that populated Jule's life. If getting his fix

meant that Jule had to prostrate himself before Rain and chant, he'd spend most of the rest of his life on bended knees growing hoarse. As things stood, he needed to go out into the world to obtain that most holy sacrament to exchange for Luck: currency.

Jule took the bullet to Underground, a tourist trap that still managed to maintain a little local color in some of its out-of-the-way sections. These were the sections upstanding locals warned tourists to stay away from. It was there that Jule could use his Luck to its fullest potential.

When the bullet stopped at the platform, the doors slid open and Jule stepped out. He noticed a penny - an actual copper penny - that he almost stepped on. He picked it up instead, and remembered a saying he'd heard as a kid.

Find a penny, pick it up, and all day long you'll have good luck.

Jule laughed. He didn't need a penny; he had the real thing. He let it drop back to the faux marble platform floor. Wasn't even good as currency anymore.

Jule noticed, as he walked by, women tucked their purses up under their arms, men felt back to pat their wallets. Jule didn't steal that way. He waited for opportunities, like the time he went to the bathroom, and walked out with a brand new pair of Spacewalkers, the latest fad in basketball sneakers. A careless shopper had set them too close to the edge of the stall, and got caught with his pants down, so to speak.

Had he not dropped out of Makata's Japanese Executive Discipline Camp, those Spacewalkers would've cost half a week's salary. A fine pair of kicks indeed, and they fit. Jule had actually considered not selling them, but before he could even make a decision, one of Jaims' boys, Cleaver, got to him.

It turned out okay. Luck came into play. The shoes just covered his debt to Jaims that time.

As he walked, Jule heard a familiar sound. *KUCHUNK*. He smiled. That had to be Sandy, stapling a flyer up over a movie poster. *KUCHUNK*. He rounded a corner and sure enough, all he could see of the movie poster was half the face of some beautiful actress. *KUCHUNK*.

The flyers, which were all the same, announced, "If the Lord asks you to resign, he means resign *all the way*." Jule had no idea what it meant. *KUCHUNK*.

"Hey, Sandy," he said, walking up behind her.

She whirled, gun ready to staple his eyes out if need be. Blonde hair tied back with a blue bandanna, tight blue jeans, white t-shirt knotted at the waist. It revealed her slightly round stomach (where Rain's was flat) and extra-wide hips that gave Sandy the appearance of a fertility goddess. When she saw it was him, she narrowed her green eyes but visibly relaxed. "Oh, it's you." She turned back to her work.

KUCHUNK.

"Got some more Faith," he observed. There was a stack of what had to be at least two reams of flyers on the floor against the wall.

KUCHUNK.

She turned back around. "What makes you say that?"

Jule shrugged.

KUCHUNK.

"As a matter of fact," she said, "I *did* get some Faith. But that's not why I'm doing... *this*..."

KUCHUNK.

When the movie poster was completely covered by flyers, Sandy hooked the staple gun onto her belt. Jule helped her scoop up the stack of flyers, and followed her. She seemed to be heading in his direction. It occurred to him that he shouldn't mind walking along with her no matter where she went. Sandy was his wife, after all.

"So how was your day?" he asked, trying to think of something domestic to say. *Day?* He hadn't seen her in at least a week.

"My day was just fine, thank you," she replied formally. She always acted that way when they hadn't seen each other for awhile.

It was his fault she was hooked on Faith. Jule accepted that. They'd been together early on, when he still had a future as a contestant in the rat race. Even then she used to say she had faith in him, when he'd come home weekends, worn out and broken from the intense Japanese-style training sessions. He'd cry, whine like a child that he couldn't take it anymore, that nothing was worth what they were putting him through, and she'd hold him close to her bosom and shush him gently and say she had faith in him, everything would work out.

That was why, when he did eventually drop out, she stayed with him. And when he fell in with the "wrong crowd" she stayed with him still, because she had faith.

It got to a point, though, where just having faith wasn't enough. She turned to the clergy, who gave her a first dose of Faith in capsule form, and that was that. Their Faith supposedly ensured a loyal flock for the Church, but Faith itself was nondenominational. By then Jule had already gotten hooked on Luck, so they decided that if they just had enough Faith and Luck, they'd be okay.

"Jaims came by the flat," Sandy said, as they walked. "Looking for you."

Even though Jule was riding high on Luck, a cold feeling entered his gut. "He didn't do anything to you, did he?"

Sandy was silent for a moment, then she sighed and said, "I had Faith. It doesn't matter what they did to me, because I had Faith."

So it had been pretty bad.

Jule discovered at that moment that it was possible to have Luck and still feel the burning of helplessness in the pit of his stomach, after-the-fact rage. He wanted to drop the flyers he carried, throw his arms around Sandy and protect her from what had already happened. At the same time, because of Luck, he knew that somehow... *somehow* this would work to their benefit in the end.

It had to. To look at it any other way would be too much, and would also mean that his Luck was bad. But if his Luck were bad, then he wouldn't feel so damn *lucky*.

"Anything I can do?" he asked, knowing there wasn't. On Faith, Sandy didn't need him, not in a physical way. "I love you, you know." He did, too; he just didn't know anymore what that meant. They stayed apart so much, yet they always had that bond of being married. That other part of himself always existed out there, somewhere... even without Luck he always felt truly lucky to have her.

Sandy stopped walking and looked at him, smiling. "I know you love me, Jule. I guess you're fortunate that I have Faith in *you*. I love you, too."

Jule felt uncomfortable again. This was one of those moments that felt too real, too honest. Jaims was real. What he had done to Sandy was real, and that it was Jule's fault was honest.

Jaims. It had never occurred to Jule until now that maybe he should clear himself with Jaims once and for all. Settle up accounts, pay off the debt. But the debt was so much. More than Jule had, even counting his Luck. Unless he could *use* the Luck to get what Jaims needed, to get him to leave Jule and Sandy alone.

"I'm gonna get us out this mess," Jule said, with as much conviction in his voice as had ever been there.

"I know you will, honey," Sandy said. "I know." She stopped at another board to staple flyers over the poster claiming, "*Hope-Cola, just one sip will give you a new outlook.*" Weak stuff, diluted from a Luck/Faith mixture. Jule had tried it once for a quick-fix but had been utterly disappointed.

KUCHUNK.

"I'm going down to the dog pits," Jule told her as they moved on to the next battery of advertisements. "I'll find you when I get back, okay?"

Sandy didn't look at him, but merely nodded in reply.

"Okay, then," Jule said, backing away awkwardly. "See you."

"Bye, Jule," Sandy said. She held another flyer in her hand, ready to staple, but she didn't. Her head was lowered, and Jule could tell that her eyes were closed, she was reaching inward for her Faith, for strength, even as he knew he would be relying on Luck to get him through the immediate future. He turned away from her and continued on his way.

A little while later, a woman he knew only as Martyr waved him over. Had he seen her first, he would have pretended not to and picked up his pace. She leaned against the wall of the corridor that led to the pits, dressed in a grey cloak and leather sandals, smoking a cigarette. As Jule approached she gestured down towards the pits.

"Don't go down there, Jule," she said. "Jaims and his goons are down there, and word is they lookin' for you. He gonna kill me for tellin' you... but I have to, even though you didn't come for the abortion ceremony or anything. You missed a party."

"You were pregnant?" Jule stared at her for a moment. "But you said you'd been *fixed.*"

I know."

Their liaison had been embarrassingly brief. Jule had felt lucky just to be getting some at the time, though. He'd been warned about her by a number of people. He should have realized there was a reason they called her Martyr. And she didn't have an excuse, no one made a drug for that... yet.

The thought of Martyr going through the abortion ceremony made him grin. Martyr being asked three times if she wanted the abortion, answering yes each time with the utmost gravity. Jule could see how Martyr might enjoy being subjected to that, with her disposition.

"Thanks for the information about Jaims," he said, "but I'm looking for him now."

He left her there, and walked to where he knew his Luck would be tested. En route he retrieved another hit from the baggie, and popped it. He considered taking a third, but after so many hits the effect couldn't be augmented anymore, and it became just a waste of Luck. Two would do.

Smoke, loud, thumping music, and the nightmare-inducing sounds of dogs killing each other polluted the pits. Not the kind of people Jule could imagine enlisting in a Japanese Executive Training Camp, but here he was one of them. He exchanged nods with several regulars, waved back at a few people who waved at him. He made his way toward the center of what had once been a gigantic nightclub. The floor he stood on was a terrace overlooking the pits, once a dance floor, where the dogs – genetically engineered monstrosities with alloy claws and fangs and shot up on pain-killing narcotics - tore each other apart for sport and profit.

The amount of currency from the pits lining the pockets of government officials ensured that they would remain untouched by the Law. The crowd surged as he got closer to the center, and through the music and the roar of the spectators, Jule heard the snarling, barking, and growling of a dogfight.

The bodies around him generated so much heat he started to sweat, but it felt good. Back in the game, in the action, a player again. He scouted for opportunity. If he could find someone to pawn off a little Luck to...

Ah, Lockjaw, who could never quite close his mouth after a run-in with Jaims' goons a while back. He always looked like he was about to say something, but he never did. Jule elbowed his way over to him and waved as he approached.

"Got somethin' for you," Jule said, raising his voice to be heard over the din of music, growling, yelping and cheering. He fished out a Luck capsule, holding it between his forefinger and thumb before Lockjaw's eyes. They widened.

"You got currency?" Jule asked.

Lockjaw nodded, produced a chip. Jule quickly calculated how much there was, figured what would be a fair profit, then fished out three more capsules and gave them to him, taking the chip.

Now he had something to bet with.

Things were going smoothly, better than he'd hoped so far. If his Luck held out, this could be his best night yet.

"Yo! Jule, my man!" a voice called. Deep, booming.

He recognized the voice and turned toward where it had come from. Muscled negro beneath a meter of dreadlocks. Flanked on either side by two more, bigger still.

"Hey, Jaims," Jule said. Without bothering to look around he knew there was nowhere to run. Too many people, no room to maneuver. Sardines jammed around the pits to catch a glimpse of the bloody canine spectacle.

Jaims and his goons waited for Jule to come to them, which he did because it was the only thing he could do. Besides, he wasn't really afraid that anything bad would happen. Jaims had already made his point with Sandy. Jule figured Jaims didn't like to re-state the obvious.

"Ah, Jule brother," Jaims said. Jule had heard that the island accent was faked, but if Jaims wanted to pretend he was a Rasta, let him. "I hear you've just come from Sister Rain."

"Good news travels fast," Jule commented.

"And you have good Luck, then?" Jaims asked rhetorically. "Perhaps if you handed it over, we could call it a goodwill down payment on your debt."

Jule's heart jumped. If Jaims was willing to take Luck and leave him alone, for now, then he would have to make the Luck he'd already taken work *now*, tonight, before it ran out. He rode the crest of two hits now, and guessed he had a good six hours left. Enough time? Of course! He stood now in his element; this was *his* life. Sandy had Faith in him, and that was more than enough.

He extracted the baggie of red capsules and handed it over to Jaims.

"I feel good about tonight, man," he said.

Jaims pocketed the baggie on the inside of his leather sport coat, and smiled.

A high-pitched yelp pierced the air, and the crowd cheered in a crescendo of blood lust.

"You say you feel good about tonight, eh, Jule?" Jaims asked, then laughed. "Aw, man, don't you know that's only the Luck talkin'. You don't *really* feel good, brother, not at all."

"What are you saying, Jaims?" Jule asked. He *did* feel good, he felt *GREAT* because he knew tonight was going to happen for him; it was *his* night and *he knew it*. He told Jaims as much.

"Yeah," Jaims said, after taking it all in silently. He scratched his chin with yellowed nails. "Now let me tell *you* something, Mistah Jule. There ain't no such thing as luck. I'm sick of hearin' about it, I'm sick of dealin' with you people who fool yourself and think you foolin' us, too. Time to teach you a lesson, time you see the way it really is! "

Then after a quick, barely noticeable nod from Jaims, his two goons grabbed Jule by the arms and dragged him backwards. Suddenly the sardine-packed people didn't present a problem to mobility, and Jule felt himself pressed up against the metal barrier that surrounded the pit. They lifted him up by his legs and held him over the railing.

The pit. Snarling ferocity of the mutant dogs. He looked back over his shoulder. The dogs – Rottweiler-sized pit bull terriers with hulking shoulders and massive wedge-shaped heads – had stopped fighting and looked up at him, expectant. Their short, coarse fur was splotched with bloody wounds, and thick gobs of saliva dripped from their mouths. Before Jule could say another word, Jaims' goons let him go.

He surprised himself by not screaming when he fell, and when he landed, hitting the blood-slicked floor with bone-crunching force on his shoulder, he managed to sit up. The crowd noise hushed. Jule was face to face with two dogs who had forgotten their personal differences and were now focused on him. Rancid blood and saliva mixed with the earthen smell of the dogs, hitting Jule's senses full blast, almost knocking him back. The dogs growled and snarled in a low, menacing tone, baring those alloy fangs that gleamed like stainless steel, the saliva splattering onto the floor, their eyes black

and devoid of intelligence. They cautiously, but steadily, approached him. Jule reached into his pocket, hoping against hope he had something in it he could use as a weapon. And there was something: a small capsule.

He pulled it out. Luck. He popped it instinctively as the dogs closed in. The first dog grabbed his right forearm in its powerful jaws, easily snapping the bone. Jule yelled in pain. Fear consumed him. The monster dog shook its head fiercely, dislocating his elbow and shoulder. Pain shot like a hot spike into his shoulder.

The other dog lunged at his throat. Jule turned his head, recoiling at the putrid, rotting meat smell of the dog's hot breath, and felt the jaws clamp down on the back of his neck. He cried out. When was the Luck going to kick in? He didn't want to die. He wanted to live, to see Sandy again and tell her he loved her, to see the sky again, to laugh like he had, once before, so long ago.

Lucky for him, Jule knew he would be dead before his fear could completely consume him. Lucky. His consciousness shrank down to the final pinprick of thought, and he knew, finally, the pain would disappear, the anguish, the sorrow, the struggle of life.

As the dogs ripped the flesh from his crushed bones, Jule's felt nothing. He was gone, save for the rapidly diminishing realization of how lucky he felt to be...gone.