

Random Acts of Mayhem!

Odyssey through an urban landscape;
while on the road to redemption, a
once-privileged athlete encounters
bogeymen, bearded dragons, sages,
and other creatures representing life's
harsh and unforgiving realities.

Luther Lovelace Jr.

Random Acts of Mayhem!

*Odyssey through an urban landscape; while on the road
to redemption, a once-privileged athlete encounters
bogeymen, bearded dragons, sages, and other creatures
representing life's harsh and unforgiving realities*

Luther Lovelace Jr.



Strategic Book Group

Copyright © 2011

All rights reserved – Luther Lovelace Jr.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage retrieval system, without the permission, in writing, from the publisher.

Strategic Book Group
P.O. Box 333
Durham CT 06422
www.StrategicBookClub.com

ISBN: 978-1-62212-409-1

Book Design: Suzanne Kelly

I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees: all times I have enjoyed
Greatly, have suffered greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone; on shore, and when
Through scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
Vexed the dim sea: I am become a name;
For always roaming with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known; cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honoured of them all;
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.
I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
Glams that untravelled world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.

—Tennyson, “*Ulysses*”

*With love and adoration for Hope,
And for the four Js,
And for their mother,
And for their grandmother,
And for their wives and children.*

To Jo Jo for lending a critical eye to this project.

PART ONE

**FALLEN EAGLES, HAVING COME TO TERMS
WITH THE LAWS OF GRAVITY**

CHAPTER **One**

I couldn't remember the last time I'd spoken with someone about the symptoms of my condition and received the personal attention I deserved. In fact, the last time I checked, basketball megastars didn't wake at 4 a.m. and think, *Ah, here I am—a charter member of society's underclass, hooked on a run-down Third World public housing existence. What Third World things shall I do today?*

In retrospect, I never regarded myself as an authority on matters pertaining to the human condition. Nor had I any special affinity with people—other than my mother—who ate their lunches from brown bags. But the events of that horrific day at Willard helped initiate a fundamental shift in my thinking, steering me down a path that forced me to spend these last seventeen years of my life staring into my rearview mirror.

I'd awakened early that morning. Brushed my teeth. Combed my hair. Made it to work on time by steering clear of the 101. Managed to get halfway through the first day on my new job. In fact, my mission was to merely make it through the day without incident, and judging from past experience, that was all I could feasibly accomplish.

It was high noon. I'd just peeled the overripe centerpiece of my brown bag lunch when I heard a knock on my door. I bit into the banana sideways and made a face. Before I could get the taste out of my mouth, three middle-aged women materialized, each carting Tupperware widgets in an assortment of colors and configurations.

"We're the welcoming committee," they spoke, almost in unison.

The buns in their salt-and-pepper hair cast them as meddling caricatures from a daytime soap opera, leaving me to wonder if patience was still a marketable skill. Nevertheless, I greeted

this collection of geriatric busybodies with all the good cheer, enthusiasm, and hospitality a man in my situation could muster.

I guessed their average ages to be around fifty-five, but age didn't deter them from giggling like star-struck groupies, enamored with the new kid on the block. "You wish to join us for lunch, young man?" one of them asked.

I pushed aside my brown bag and watched with passing interest as a cluster of grapes rolled out onto my desk, stopping just short of the edge. "No, thanks. I brought a chili cheese sandwich and a bag of Doritos from home."

"Mercy! You can't be serious, young man," the chubby one said. She shifted her weight from one Armani loafer to the other, anchored her fingers around the tall one's arms, cocked her head into an oblique angle, and bore in on the contents of my bag. "If you value your health, young man, you might want to consider changing your eating habits. Add a little fiber to your diet. Cut back on high cholesterol junk foods."

I grinned. "I'll take that into consideration, Mrs.—" my voice trailed off.

"*Ms. Holiday*," she corrected. "I'm a widow going on four years now because that stubborn husband of mine—God rest his soul—refused to heed my advice and take better care of himself." She pointed to the tall one. "Pardon my manners. She's known around these parts as Mrs. Givens, but you can call her Leah."

I acknowledged all three with a curt nod. "I'll take that into consideration, Ms. Holiday."

I observed with no small degree of amusement as Ms. Holiday suddenly struck a petulant pose, in the fashion of an aging Cinderella waiting for an invitation to the ball. Leah nudged her. "I'd bet my last paycheck that your young bride doesn't subscribe to *Better Nutrition Magazine*," she declared to me.

"You'd most likely win that bet, Leah." I splayed my left hand across my chest. "See," I said, pointing with my right index. "I'm not married."

"Yes, I *do* see!" she said, turning to the others, glowing with righteous vindication. "Didn't I tell you he looked more like a swinging bachelor? He has that—" She turned to look at me.

“You have that look about you—that swagger. Married men lose their swagger halfway through the third year of marriage, that is, unless they’re having affairs.”

I must have flinched at her candor because at this point, the attractive one weighed in to smooth things over. This was not unlike the give-and-take of interest group politics, and she sought to steer the conversation to the higher plane of social conduct, with motives of the purest intentions. “Bananas are rich in potassium,” she offered with a smile. “But judging by its looks, the one you’re holding in your hand has seen better days.”

I recognized a practiced political hand at work and, with a sigh, eyed my lunch with mock surprise. “Is this banana on trial?”

“Such a sense of humor,” she said, her eyes twinkling. “But never mind that. How’s your first day on the job going so far?”

“Not too shabby. Just a few glitches here and there, but nothing I can’t handle.”

Leah growled a laugh into the Tupperware bowl she was carrying, and then she turned her long chin a fraction of an inch toward me. “You never told us your name,” she spoke gently, barely moving her mouth.

“Isaac. Isaac Preston.”

“Isaac Preston,” she repeated. “Such a strong name.” She cocked her head and furrowed her brow. “Isaac Preston . . . Isaac Preston . . . Sounds familiar . . .” She looked directly into my eyes and smiled a knowing smile. “*Isaac Preston*. The basketball prodigy everyone was drooling over a few years back?”

“Astute observation, Sherlock,” Ms. Holiday said sarcastically. “I mean, he’s over six feet and he’s still slender. Of course he played basketball!” She looked at me. “Didn’t you play basketball, Isaac?”

I leaned back into the leather chair and bit into my sandwich. “That was a million years ago,” I replied.

“I’ve got it now!” Leah screamed, her eyes flashing with the excitement of having solved the riddle. “You’re that kid from Willard—that basketball player. I remember reading about you in the papers!”

Luther Lovelace Jr.

“I was somewhat of a celebrity back in those days,” I nodded. “You’re right.”

“Yes. I forget the details, but I distinctly remember my husband raving about you.”

“Your husband’s a basketball fan?”

“*Was,*” Leah answered. “Leonard passed away several years ago.”

“Both Leah and I are widows,” the chubby one volunteered.

Having been reluctantly pushed to society’s periphery by an unfortunate string of events more than seventeen years previously, my cold-natured response didn’t surprise me, but I was disturbed to find that I rather enjoyed the feeling. An icy thought slashed through my mind, and I was tempted to soothe the souls of the suffering with a schoolyard epithet, though I did not. Instead, I bowed my head and waited for one of my fellow time-travelers to jump-start the conversation.

This impromptu gathering of meddlers and health food junkies settled into an awkward silence for a moment. Then Leah spoke up. “You don’t look a day over eighteen.”

“I passed that milestone ages ago.”

“Every time I turned around back then, your picture was in the newspapers or you were being compared to that Michael what’s-his-name.”

“Jordan?”

“Yeah, Jordan.” Opening her eyes wider and fixing me with an intense stare, she said, “Pardon me for being so bold, but if you were that good, then why is it you’re not, traveling around the country with a professional basketball team?”

“That flight got cancelled,” I grinned.

“Too bad,” she lamented, “but do you keep in touch with any of your teammates from high school?”

“I’ve been out of circulation for a while. That’s to say, I haven’t spoken to them in years. I suspect they’re scattered about the country, playing pickup games in their spare time.”

“Do you still have nightmares about that day?” Leah asked, her voice dipping almost to a whisper.

“What day is that?” the chubby one asked, the excitement in her voice building. I could feel her eyes bearing down on me. She would have heard about Willard through the grapevine—not the full story. Parts, maybe. I wanted to change the topic, but all I could do was close my eyes, hold my breath and hope to die.

“Young man?”

My eyelids fluttered open. “Sorry. What is it you were asking?”

“Are we intruding into your space?” Leah asked. Clearly, she wasn’t going to drop it.

I scratched my head. “Well, my memory’s not quite what it used to be,” I lied.

“Forgetfulness goes hand-in-hand with the aging process,” the attractive one quipped. “Leah should be familiar with failing memory as well as anyone. Ask her when’s the last time she sprang for cappuccino at Starbucks. Bet she can’t remember.”

Leah waited a minute to confirm that she was hearing her friend correctly, and then she said, “Perhaps, now’s not a good time.”

“We’re all friends here in this room,” the chubby one insisted. “What’s spoken in this room stays in this room.” She looked around the room, searching for confirmation. “Can I get an ‘Amen’ to that?”

“Amen!” the choir beamed.

But Leah remained steadfast in her effort to get to the bottom of the matter.

For some reason, I surveyed one corner of the room, half expecting to see swarms of little old ladies coming at me with pitch forks, barrels of whole grain cereal and green leafy vegetables. None swarmed over to me, of course. I was getting my waking nightmares confused.

Hell-bent on her mission to demystify this experience, Leah, her voice as tight with stress as a porcupine caught between two wolves, whispered hesitantly into my ear, forcing me to open my eyes wide and roll the leather chair back against the wall because something in the essence of her message made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

Noticing the expression on my face, the chubby one gasped. “What is it you just whispered to make our young ball player look like he just saw a ghost?” she asked.

“Later,” Leah snapped.

Ms. Holiday blinked, and her smile morphed into puzzlement. “I thought we agreed to—”

“Not now! Not now!”

Perhaps because she lacked the energy to pursue this line of questioning, or perhaps because in my furious silence she sensed a greater depth to the story, Ms. Holiday shifted her attention to the window and the haze shifting past its borders. “It’s gonna be a scorcher today,” she said solemnly.

“Ladies,” I said, gesturing at the clock on the wall. “Best I get to work before our boss comes to his senses and realizes he’s hired the wrong guy for the job.” I offered a smile whose reflection shone in a distant, dim mirror hanging crookedly under a poster of the periodic table.

“Well, if you need anything,” the chubby one said, pointing over her shoulder. “I’m right next door. Don’t be afraid to knock.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“And the both of us are upstairs on the second floor,” the most attractive of the three said. “I hope you don’t mind if we look in on you every now and then.”

“Not at all. I’ll need all the help I can get.”

“Is this assignment temporary or do you plan on staying with us until the end of the year?” she added.

“Not sure. It depends on how well I do these first two weeks.”

The chubby one clapped her hands together and then rubbed them off each other. “Well, we don’t wish to keep you from your chili cheese sandwich and chips. Lunchtime’s almost over and by the sounds coming from outside, I sense that your students are getting a little restless. It’s best we be getting back to our own little cubbyholes!”

“Time flies when you’re having fun,” I said.

My choice of words must have struck a nerve in their collective conscience, and I guessed that all three women could read

between the lines on my face and reach the same conclusion: I wasn't having fun.

When they opened the door into the outer hallway, I was treated to a symphony of discordant laughter, and to the dissonant arias of a hundred conversations. Tenors, altos, and sopranos merged into choruses. Choruses merged into a blur. As soon as the door closed behind them, a loud thud shook the ground beneath me—an inadvertent failure by one of my students to maintain a sense of decorum.

And at that very moment, I felt a constricting in my chest; the medication I was taking, perhaps. But then maybe the chubby one was on to something. Maybe my love affair with fast foods, booze, and fast women had begun to take their toll on my body. Nevertheless, I couldn't help but thank my lucky stars for having survived the journey, considering what I'd gone through to get here. That's to say my drinking was no longer a major concern. The twelve steps had been a test of my will to abandon my destructive lifestyle. I'd peed into the cup and the results had raised no red flags. *Hallelujah! Thank you, Jesus!* Landing this job had convinced me that I was finally on the road to recovery.

Despite my euphoria, I harbored no illusions regarding the power of the rumor mill; no doubt, it would begin churning at fever pace the moment my three new friends returned to their cubbyholes.

The tall one had already used that inquisitive brain of hers to sort out pieces of the puzzle. And I knew it wouldn't take long for her to connect the dots. Soon, her two companions would fill in the blanks. And then, having pieced together the full story, this entire village of meddlers and health food enthusiasts would rise to the task of running me out of town on a rail. They'd all bid me good riddance and send me packing without ever having asked the question "What exactly did happen that spring day at Willard?"

I poked a plastic fork into the Tupperware bowl and sampled the broiled salmon tossed with avocado, mushrooms, and tomatoes. I'd nearly forgotten what it was like to eat a good home-

cooked dish. It was fresh—far fresher than the thawed fries that had become my staple for the past several months. Still, throughout this short respite, I had trouble concentrating. Some of it was a result of prescription medicine. The panic attacks and night sweating. The dizziness and eye strain. But it wasn't the dizziness, ultimately, that had my head spinning. It was the feeling—all too familiar lately—that no matter how hard I tried, my past was beginning to catch up with me.

The memories began to reappear: the images, the spring of '95. My whole life stood before me, and the trial of the century had reached an impasse. That spring, Travis Tanner pulled me aside and offered advice on how best to avoid the calamities prophesied in the *Book of Revelation*.

The non-verbal cues make sense only in hindsight; Mr. Tanner was a stereotypical algebra teacher, an introvert whose mode of communication was structured around symbols and abstract rhetoric.

I was reluctant to dwell on the images that had haunted my sleep—the uncontrollable sense of guilt—but even less did I want to stroll down memory lane with three middle-aged women bent on changing my eating habits. The Geneva Rules for prisoner interrogation notwithstanding, they were privy only to my name, rank, and serial number.

I am Isaac (Ike) Preston, thirty-five years old, no rocket scientist, and I cannot begin to answer the questions strangers keep asking. I am also a statistic—an affirmative action poster child, so to speak. But by this I do not mean that I'm a charity case, only that I currently live the life of a former high school megastar gone bust.

This coming to grips with my current condition is not offered in a spirit of contrition or self-pity. Believe it or not, my fleeting encounters with happiness help keep me afloat as I work to put my life back together. In any case, such encounters are therapeutic. They put me in touch with my most balanced self, breathing life into faded images of those who lost their lives during the spring of '95. I can't help but wonder if the dead were the lucky ones, after all. Their pain had been sud-

den, terminal, blunt force trauma, not transmuted into a cycle of recursive dreams.

While waiting for the bell to ring signaling the end of lunch, I was caught off guard by the sudden intrusion of one of the three members of the welcoming committee; she must've been standing in the doorway for God knows how long. "Sorry to interrupt . . ." Her voice sounded almost frail in her effort to bolster it.

"No problem."

Leaning toward me, eager to explain why she'd returned, the most attractive of the three ladies smiled. "Sorry I didn't get to introduce myself earlier. Sometimes my two friends get so carried away, it's hard to get a word in edgewise." Her grin widened. "My name is Karen. Karen Younger"

"Nice to meet you . . . again, Karen Younger."

She held a platter of fruit in her hands and stepped forward to place it on my desk. "I wanted to let you in on a little secret, young man," she said quietly.

"Why do you keep referring to me as 'young man'?" I asked, confused. "I mean, I'm not in high school anymore. In fact, I'm even old enough to hold a driver's license in this state."

Karen chuckled. "Please accept my apologies, young—" She caught herself. "In the crowds I hang out with these days, anyone south of fifty is considered young."

We both laughed at that.

"I hope you don't take this the wrong way," I began as a grin spread across my face. "But if I were ten years older—"

"Flattering your boss in this early stage of your career will get you nowhere, young man."

"Boss?" I asked. My heart skipped a beat.

She smiled. "Just joking. Flattery will get you anything you want."

"*Boss?*" I repeated, my mouth going suddenly dry.

Karen settled all the way into a chair across from me and crossed her legs in a seductive motion. "But that's not why I'm here," she said, her voice turning serious. "I wanted to speak with you alone."

I looked at the clock. “You’re the boss?”

She seemed not to hear me; she seemed so determined to get this burning issue off her chest. “I’ll bet you’re wondering why I’ve taken this sudden interest in you.”

I’d grown accustomed to anesthetizing myself from feeling real emotions, from experiencing painful situations, and from developing any solid relationships. Diminished interpersonal skills had already frayed my life to within a breath of its breaking point, but now I realized that my aloofness could trigger a setback on the road to salvation. Wisely, giving recognition to my survivor instinct, I maintained a cool silence.

“A penny for your thoughts.”

“Why *have* you taken this sudden interest in me?”

“How’d you like the salad?”

“Sure beats the hell out of cheese dogs and Doritos. Thanks.”

She nodded and inched closer to my desk. “I didn’t want to say anything while my two friends were here with me but—”

I waited.

She continued. “I just wanted to say that I’m familiar with the events that took place at Willard.”

I put aside the brown bag, which still contained about a dozen grapes, and I levered myself up from the desk. “How is it you know so much about Willard?”

“My brother taught there for twenty-two years. You might remember him. Travis Tanner?”

Suddenly, I was tempted to fold my bag, stuff it into my pocket, and walk out the door, chalking this one up to experience. Instead, I took a deep breath. “Yeah, I remember him,” I said, exhaling slowly. “Mr. Tanner was your brother?”

“My oldest brother. I come from a family of seven siblings.”

“Ah, yes,” I said, looking into her green eyes, feeling the guilt on my shoulders for not being more hospitable. “How’s the rest of your family getting along?”

“Our father passed away six years ago. The doctors said it was a heart attack. I think he died from a broken heart.”

“Sorry for your loss. And your other siblings?”

Buy the B&N epub version at:-

<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/random-acts-of-mayhem-luther-lovelace-jr/1111664183?ean=2940014696999>

Buy the Kindle version at:-

<http://www.amazon.com/Random-Acts-of-Mayhem-ebook/dp/B008D2ZFT8/ref>