

## NOT DRINKING THE KOOL-AID

November 18, 1978

Jonestown

Over the P.A., the daily Jim Jones harangue does not wake Robert this morning but music instead – not the Jonestown Express but classical. From his other life, the pre-Peoples Temple life, he recognizes Vivaldi. But instead of Spring or Summer, which were played and overplayed endlessly in department stores and elevators, hoping their cheerfulness would prod consumers to buy, it is Winter. As a child, Robert had been a prodigy on the piano, but gave it up in adolescence when he saw how hopelessly unhip and unblack classical music was.

Looking around the dormitory, he sees the others still sleeping, men most of them black like Robert and the majority poor, from hard lives and torn families, nothing like his own cushy middle-class world of San Rafael, California, a life he'd fled gladly on meeting Jim Jones four years earlier. Elijah on the bunk beneath him started stealing at 10 but had been clean since his family joined the Temple. And Reg on the bed beside him had a rap sheet the Oakland cops liked to describe as “as long as their dicks to the hundredth power,” and he remained a difficult person, but in Jonestown had found prestige and power as a big wheel on the security team.

“What the fuck?” says Reg, on waking. “What is that shit on the P.A.?”

“Oh man, he’s trying to impress the congressman,” says Elijah.

Now Robert understands the Vivaldi: Congressman Ryan is still here. While Jones hadn't permitted any of the media to stay overnight, he'd relented when the Peoples

Temple lawyers insisted he let the congressman sleep in the guesthouse, a nicely appointed cabin he'd evacuated swiftly of his latest female conquest, a very young black girl, the first black female Robert remembered the leader, whom he'd taken to calling in his mind the Petty Tyrant, had ever been with. She is only 19 to Jones' 47, her black hair very real while his was from a bottle and looked it. Shanda is one of the recent arrivals Jones had commandeered by asking his faithful elderly followers to recruit young relatives to join them in the jungle in a show of make-believe to the folks back home that Jonestown is thriving rather than dying.

Robert looks at his watch: 7:30. Clearly, this is no ordinary day. Usually at 5:45 a.m. Jones himself or his recorded voice was waking them with comradely, inspirational words, plus the latest news from Tass, to start a day planting in the fields or clearing bush or whatever the day's grueling labor might be. In Guyana, it is imperative to begin work at dawn, because the heat makes life impossible after 11. Civilized people, which is to say, those native to the tropics, usually spent mid-day napping or resting in the shade, but the Petty Tyrant says building a new world takes everyone's energy all day long; he never rested, did he, he would ask rhetorically. Over and over, they were reminded to be like him.

The field workers are given half an hour for lunch, fifteen-minute breaks once every three hours, and expected to work till 5. Robert's had it. As has DeeDee, who, at 22, was five years younger than Robert but had been in the Temple longer – most of her life, in fact.

On their beds, the others are rubbing their eyes, dressing in shorts and tank tops, most of them tagged or initialed with various members' names who'd worn them

previously. Robert's wardrobe is no exception. In principle, he likes thrift; he agrees that constructing a society takes massive energy, and he has plenty. Back in San Francisco, Robert gave himself completely to Peoples Temple, when they were doing meaningful work in the Fillmore, helping the elderly and the street kids, getting medical care to those in need. But here, after only six months, he can't see the point to any of it. Unlike Robert, most had arrived in the huge exodus of June and July 1977, before the exposé in *New West* magazine came out. Somehow, Jones had gotten a copy before it hit the newsstands, and he'd concluded that the publication of that highly critical article, complete with "traitors'" damning and false testimony, marked the end of the Peoples Temple in the United States. It was time to leave the capitalist states of AmeriKKKa for good.

On his way to the pavilion for breakfast, Robert smells bacon; Jones is going whole hog to impress Ryan, Robert thinks, laughing at his wordplay. So far, everyone agrees the congressman's visit has gone extremely well. Far better than what the Petty Tyrant had prepared them for. But Robert saw from Jones' expression after the entertainment last night that the Petty Tyrant was still skeptical and unhappy. Perhaps he hates the press even more than the congressman, blaming them for the demise of his Bay Area fiefdom. Most likely, the reporters are saving their hardest questions for today, before they leave Jonestown for good. That's what Robert would do, what he had done working for the *Press-Democrat* back in Santa Rosa. While they were still in California, Jones had asked Robert to field the media attack after the *New West* exodus, which he had, faithfully and with heart. At that time, he'd believed, along with the others, that the press really was out to crucify Jones.

But after the Petty Tyrant had fled, and his paranoid voice and notions were out of

Robert's daily earshot, and he'd had the chance to sleep on his cot in the pressroom at the Geary temple – really sleep, for the first time in years, early to bed and late to rise, he'd begun to doubt.

Arriving here, seeing DeeDee so unhappy – not about their brief romance and subsequent separation of over a year, but due to life at Jonestown – she a true believer and all – he'd decided to leave. Whatever it took, he would do it. Every day of his six months in the jungle he'd spent convincing DeeDee to go with him. At last, she'd agreed. Now, they're just waiting for the right moment to conduct their own exodus.

Everyone on the food line grins with joy at the bacon and eggs breakfast, perhaps the second such meal they've eaten here. Up front, Ryan is chatting amicably with Marceline; the Petty Tyrant has yet to make his appearance. Probably wasted from whatever he'd taken to get to sleep while the meds to wake him up are not yet functioning. A good-looking Irishman of middle age, Ryan observes the group contentedly, his relaxed smile seeming genuine, and Marceline is laughing, though Robert can never read her accurately. Is she full of shit, like so many of the women who fell under the guru's spell, apparently unable to sustain an original thought? Or is she a Pollyanna craving utopia, blinders shielding her from blight because that Eden which gleams ahead in the not-so-distant future, still outshines anything real? Not so very long ago, Robert himself shared the same impaired vision.

Among the hundreds of people eating at the long tables, he finds DeeDee, sitting with her family in their usual spot.

“C'mon over,” says her mother, Cora. “Robert, you get some of that bacon? We all very excited that the congressman visiting us this morning.”

“Yeah. Hope he stay for a week!” says Deondré, DeeDee’s youngest brother, who at 14 is always hungry. At every meal, DeeDee and her mother give him some of their food.

The boy gets up. “Sit here, Robert. I’m gonna see if they got seconds for us today.” He’s laughing with glee. “Bet they do.”

Robert sits beside DeeDee, who puts her hand on his knee beneath the table and squeezes. “Hey babe. How you doing this morning?”

Robert holds her hand and studies her. He nods, then whispers, “Today.”

DeeDee’s forehead creases with confusion. “Why?” she whispers back. “Things are going really well.”

“Exactly. Let’s go while the going’s good.” He notes Cora looking them over with curiosity.

“What you two whispering about like church mice down there?”

“Nothing Mama,” says DeeDee, slapping his thigh softly to indicate they should stop talking.

Robert likes Cora and wishes she could be persuaded to leave with them, but she’s one of the die-hards, so he hasn’t even tried. DeeDee agrees it’s useless and would only draw suspicion to them both. Deondré also loves Jonestown, where he feels free, has many friends, and is learning how to drive the tractor.

A month ago, one of Robert’s fellow jungle clearers who was also itching to leave, had been found at the northern border of the settlement, close to the Venezuelan border, stashing supplies for a future escape; now he’s a zombie in the ECU – short for Extra Care Unit. Robert and others who understand the real function of the place call it

the Electrical Cure for (E)Unuchs. There's no proof electroshock actually goes on there, though it's probably for lack of equipment, or insufficient juice in the power plant rather than want of will. Doc Schacht, whom he calls the Jewish Mengele, does whatever he wants in the ECU to those who, according to the Petty Tyrant and his informers, aren't going along with the program. It's rumored that Jones threatened Shanda with a stay in the ECU to prevent her from leaving him for a boy her age, a black boy. For Robert, landing in the ECU, doped to zombiedom on Thorazine, would be the worst fate of all. He's got to get out of Jonestown immediately.

Vivaldi continues to play in the background while everyone eats and talks leisurely, as if they did this every day. Robert and DeeDee drink tea and wait for their unit supervisors, whom Robert calls the overseers, to collect the crews for work. At a recent meeting, the Petty Tyrant had said that if every supervisor had a shotgun, they wouldn't have any problems at Jonestown. The group had cheered. With that applause, Robert knew he couldn't wait any longer to flee.

It seems today is to be a day of rest, though in the past Saturdays were like every other workday, and Sundays had gone from full days off to afternoons only.

At last Jones appears, wearing a shiny red shirt and his habitual black shades, looking like hell, but no more than usual, only a little more out of it, if that's possible. Instead of Jones, Marceline reads announcements over the P.A.: the press will be arriving shortly from Port Kaituma. There will be more interviews and tours, and then, after lunch, "our guests" will be leaving Jonestown. "I want to say how wonderful it's been to have the congressman here," says Marceline, and everyone claps. Robert joins in, because not to would look suspicious; always someone is watching, taking mental notes

to pass to the Petty Tyrant later on. With a lift of her eyebrows and the slightest of nods, DeeDee seems to indicate she's ready.

Despite the plastered-on gracious smile, Marceline looks worried. Beside her at the front table sits the Petty Tyrant's entourage: Jocelyn, Maria, six-year-old Sean, the son he'd had with Hope, the woman they called the Grand Bitch Traitoress witch who'd defected long ago but left her kid with Peoples Temple; Maria cares for him as if she were his mother, though she's only 23 and so thin Robert doubts she can reproduce. Beside Sean is two-year-old Jamie, Jocelyn's son with Jones, though Jamie has the last name of some white flunky Jones had marry Jocelyn just for show. Shanda's nowhere in sight, and Robert wonders if Doc Schacht got her in the ECU after all, along with Chaikin, one of the Jewish attorneys who was usually Jones' legal enforcer, but with whom he'd had a serious falling out, according to Deondré, who overheard the argument and the subsequent hauling off of Chaikin to ECU after dark. Of Jones' other children, only Ken, the Korean adopted son, is there, along with his wife and baby. The other adult Jones sons are all in Georgetown, playing basketball against the Guyanese state team. He doesn't see Agnes, also adopted, who is shy and never sits up front.

Pulling the red flatbed full of reporters, the tractor arrives beside the pavilion, which Robert takes as his signal to leave. "I'm going to straighten up in the dorms," he tells DeeDee and her mother.

"Me too," says DeeDee, and immediately follows. They bring their dishes to the clean-up area and make their way toward the bathhouse at the center of camp, smiling at everyone they pass, greeting them with "brother" or "sister" while planning under their breaths to meet at Robert's stash, just outside the clearing, in one hour.

Sweeping the floor, Robert regards his sparse belongings, knowing he can't take anything bigger than would fit in his pockets if he is to avoid inviting suspicion. His most important possession is a photograph of his little sister, who died at 11 from heart disease. He slips it out of its frame when he thinks no one's looking and presses it carefully into his shorts. In the bottom of his one drawer, beneath the underwear, is a twenty dollar bill, which he nestles beside the photo. He thought he had more cash but doesn't worry about it. At the other end of the dorm, Watts, a lanky sweet-talking idler from Southern California, is chatting up some girl in the doorway.

For their trek they need water. With a good breakfast in their bellies, and the prospect of arriving at Matthews Ridge by nightfall, they can probably do without food, but it would be better to bring something they can munch on, as the humidity saps everyone's energy by noon.

The guards' guns are conspicuously absent. Robert nods at Reg as he passes on his regular patrol route, walking the camp's perimeters. At the old folks' dorm, Robert witnesses an argument at the door between two reporters and Mac, Jones' right-hand black man who just arrived from San Francisco a few days ago, who's telling them they can't go in, Marceline by his side agreeing.

"Some of these elderly are ill, some are on bedrest, and some of them, frankly, just don't like strangers. They don't want people they don't know invading their living space with cameras," she says as politely as she can.

Mac's more direct. "Look, you folks have been everywhere here in Jonestown. We've been more than polite to you, and there's nothing we're trying to hide, but c'mon, let's show these old folks some respect and not barge into their bedroom with



flashbulbs!”

The newsmen confer. “If you don’t have anything to hide, why won’t you let us in?” says the bigger one. “We’ve seen all the other buildings, you’re right, so the fact that you won’t let us in here makes it seem like there really must be something bad inside you don’t want exposed to the press.”

Just then one of the most expensive Peoples Temple lawyers shows up; he flew in solely for the congressman’s visit and is trying very hard to finesse the details. Robert can’t stand him. He’s one of those white liberal shylocks who puts lots of energy into helping the have-nots while leading a very bountiful life in the heart of Pacific Heights, where he lives with his family in a four-storey Victorian, and whose friends are all white, Robert is sure.

The lawyer huddles with Marceline and Mac; everyone’s gesturing toward the long low building whose few windows are curtained. Even to Robert, who knows it’s only a dorm, the place does look suspicious.

“All right, then,” Mac says, “you can go in, but you be very respectful of those old people, because they deserve it. If you aren’t, I’ll take you out.”

Though the newsmen are nodding, they clearly don’t like this black man with his authoritative tone telling them how to behave.

Marceline knocks, then talks through the door for a long time with someone; finally, it opens. The cameramen push in behind her, and Robert can hear their cries of astonishment even from his distance on the main boardwalk, trying not to look conspicuous as he fiddles with the lace on his sneaker.

“Jesus!” one of them shouts.

“Why’s it so dark in here?” says another.

“It’s like a cave or something,” calls the first.

“No, it’s like a ship it’s so tightly packed in here.”

“Like sardines.”

“Like slaves,” booms the big voice of the big reporter.

“All right, that’s enough!” Mac says, hustling them out of the building. Mac looks like he wants to punch the big guy, and perhaps if Marceline weren’t there he would, but the newsmen, having gotten their dirt, seem content to move on.

Robert makes his way past the Cuffy Memorial Baby Nursery, where the littlest kids are normally cared for, even on Saturdays, but today it’s empty and rather forlorn without the laughter and chatter of children. He notes some of the Concerned Relatives talking to their family members at the edges of larger groups and wonders if they’ll convince anyone to return to the States with them; he doubts it. Only four of the Concerned Relatives made it to Jonestown; the rest are still in Georgetown, Robert had been told, disappointed not to find room on the congressman’s plane to the jungle after all their trouble and expense of flying to Guyana. Today, Robert bets the Petty Tyrant would have preferred a plane full of relatives to the gaggle of journalists he’s ended up having to face instead.

A strangeness hangs in the air, the idleness of the morning welcome by many but its purpose unclear to all. Behind the pavilion, Robert sees a young Italian-looking man who must be Maria’s brother, trying to talk to her, but she keeps walking away. He follows, begs her to listen, which she does for a minute, then stalks off again. Robert sees him remove something from his neck, a cross or some sort of pendant on a chain, and

hand it to her. She looks at it, shakes her head angrily, and tries to give it back, but the brother refuses. Their voices rise.

“Dad wanted...” starts the man.

“Take it.”

“But why won’t you...”

After throwing the object in her brother’s face, Maria’s gone, striding back to the Pavilion, where now the reporters are clustered around the Petty Tyrant on his throne, a white chair with cushions conforming to Jones’ bottom.

From one of the girls’ dorm, DeeDee makes her way along the boardwalk toward Robert. Carrying nothing, she speaks to those she passes with a smile and a nod, playing the part of happy camper so well, Robert feels fear prickling in his belly.

“Hey!” She kisses him on the cheek.

“Hi.”

“I have a great idea,” she says loudly. “Let’s have a picnic! I already asked Virginia if she could make us some sandwiches, and she said sure.”

Hugging her, Robert wants to say, “You are brilliant, woman,” but he merely smiles.

He wishes he could watch the interview, which is being filmed by the big guy’s cameraman. The reporter asking the questions looks mean, and the Petty Tyrant acts defeated, though the interview has just begun. More and more people come to the Pavilion to watch. It’s the perfect time to leave.

He nods at DeeDee, who about-faces, making her way toward the kitchen. Of course, they can’t say goodbye to anyone. Who knows when they’ll see her family again?

Like everyone who leaves, they'll be called traitors and worse, and the family, even Cora, will denounce them, even if inside they aren't angry. He knows it's hard for DeeDee to leave Jonestown. Most of her life is here, with this community, and almost all her blood kin. Back in California, she has a father she barely knows and some aunts in Los Angeles, serious Baptists, who excommunicated Cora from the extended family when she joined Peoples Temple.

Unlike DeeDee, Robert has a home to return to, though he hasn't spoken with his parents in over a year. They won't like DeeDee, he's sure; she's too country for their taste. But they'll probably let them stay there until they figure out what to do next.

In the kitchen, Virginia, a heavy woman with a beautiful toothy smile, hands them a bag. "You got four sandwiches, two cassavas, and some eddo muffins my sister baked last night. We figuring out how to make sweet potato pie out of them eddoes."

They thank her. DeeDee hugs her tightly, causing Virginia to put the younger woman at arm's length. "What you going on about girl?" She studies her face. "You don't need to cry 'cause I give you some extra sweets. You just like Cora."

DeeDee wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. "Thanks Virginia, thanks a lot."

Robert pulls her out the door.

"Sorry," she whispers. "I couldn't help it."

"I think it's okay," he reassures her, wondering if Virginia might report them. She's one of the oldest followers, from the segregated days in the fifties back in Indianapolis, when Jones and Peoples Temple accomplished amazing things, the first church to integrate in a city where the KKK had many more sympathizers than the civil rights movement.

They'll just have to hope Virginia's too busy making a fancy lunch to impress the media and congressman.

The plan is to head in the opposite direction from Port Kaituma. Matthews Ridge is much farther away, but they won't risk running into anyone from Jonestown on their route. All they need to do is get through a mile of bush to the railroad tracks, which still carry bauxite once a day on an antiquated freight train. The tracks will take them into Matthews Ridge, a dilapidated mining town larger than Port Kaituma; from there they'll figure out some way to get to Georgetown. In the capital, they'll ask the American embassy for emergency passports, telling them, if necessary, that theirs were held by Jones "for their safekeeping," and they had been unable to retrieve them before leaving the settlement.

For all his criticisms, though, Robert doesn't want to rat out Peoples Temple; he has no desire to bring on the CIA and the FBI and the IRS. All he wants is to leave. But he imagines it won't be so simple when they get to the Embassy. Just after Robert arrived last spring, Jonestown was rocked by the defection of Susan Stein, one of the highest higher ups, who had in her memory the bank account numbers of Peoples Temple funds all over the globe. The Petty Tyrant had gone apeshit and apparently has yet to recover. Then, last month, another white woman up there in the heavenly spheres defected, and Robert is pretty sure the Temple will dissolve naturally before too long; he just doesn't want to hang around and watch. Unfortunately, Jones has made the atmosphere such that one can't simply leave; one can only defect. One can only be a traitor, not a well-wisher who simply prefers a different life than what Jonestown offers.

Unfortunately, the Stein woman had spilled every bean at the Embassy when she

asked for her emergency passport, including the suicide drills, which have been going on since the supposed siege of October 1977. Ever since, Peoples Temple has been on “high alert,” the let’s-pretend-we’re-committing-mass-suicide dramas, which Jones calls White Nights so as not to label them Black Nights, which would be racist, more and more frequent. Jones adores crisis; urgency energizes him. Robert thinks the White Nights are just melodrama, part and parcel of Peoples Temple’s love of theater.

When they get to the stash, Robert crawls inside a cluster of lianas draping three greenheart saplings. “Shit!” he yells, too loudly. He tenses, fearing a guard will rush out and find them, but nothing happens.

“What’s the matter honey?”

“The water’s gone!” He’s ready to cry. “I put five canteens in here, and there isn’t even one left. Someone took them!”

“Don’t worry.” A quiet female voice calls from behind another cluster of liana-crowned bushes. “It’s just Carol and Arlene.”

Two young mothers and five children of varying ages, including one infant, appear. “We heard your voices so we hid,” Carol whispers. “We’re leaving too.”

“Look like de black folk leaving de ship,” says Robert in a faux-Southern accent. “We’s gett’n out while de gett’ns good.”

“You got that right,” says Arlene, shifting the baby. The kids, two of them Arlene’s, two Carol’s, and the infant belonging to Arlene’s sister, are all quiet, waiting for the adventure to begin, the older ones carrying canteens.

“So, you know about this path?” DeeDee asks.

“I found it on clearing crew about a month ago,” says Carol. “We’re not the only

ones wanting to get out of here. Let's go already!"

"Want me to carry the baby?" Robert asks.

"When he gets heavy, we can take turns," says Arlene.

"Let's go!" says one of the boys.

"We're gone," says Robert.