

[south wind/BB]

People of the South Wind

By Bob Bahr

The city desk at my newspaper ran something on Lauren Jones's disappearance two weeks ago, but the story died there, perhaps along with Ms. Jones. The Lebanon Police had nothing to go on, and the public didn't seem to care that this 18 year old went poof. In TV newscasts, her mom seemed to alternate between hysterical grief and rage at what she suspected was an inconsiderate and delinquent daughter.

Jones's story wasn't really on my radar. I thought the News Section would handle it all, and that was OK by me. But when her boyfriend showed up at the newspaper's offices, he got a sympathetic ear in James, our man at the front desk. He promised to tell the editor all about his love and his grief. This he did, in the hallway, at the end of the day. And there I was the next morning, in Burke's office, finding out that the love story of Lauren Jones and Brian McShane was my newest assignment. The piece offered some interest for me; I was always troubled by the fact that honeymooning blondes in Barbados excite a manhunt, but the disappearance of someone like Lauren Jones merits a few inches in her local paper, and that's it. So it goes.

But the assignment meant talking to grieving relatives, one of my least favorite things to do. In this situation, at least I could offer the hope of more publicity for Jones's case. Maybe someone would come forward with information. I rubbed the piece of paper with McShane's name and number between my fingers, half listening to Burke's ideas of how the article should go. The piece would follow the course it needed to follow, I thought. The friends and relatives of Jones will say what they can, the pathos will be readily evident, and more than likely, the trail will be cold. Jones could have simply run away. She's 18. It's not a crime, not a police matter. Her mother and her boyfriend consider her a missing person, but the rest of the people in her life—according to the initial news item—seemed to think she just left Lebanon to get away from her life.

Burke was wrapping up his spiel—I could tell by the change in his posture. I tuned back in to hear him say "by Thursday." "OK, I'll give Mr. McShane a call," I answered.

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Brian McShane lived in an apartment complex with a tiki lounge theme called Pacific Ridge, even though the Pacific Ocean lies almost 3,000 miles to the west of it. Pacific Ridge consists of several squat buildings clad in faux weathered wood, the lampposts in the parking lots topped with grey palm fronds, or something approximating them. I walked up the outside staircase to the second floor of his

building and knocked on F34. McShane came to the door wearing a Louis Vitton baseball cap on backwards and crooked. He was wearing a Pittsburgh Penguins hockey jersey and he looked like hell. "Brian? I'm X with the Lebanon Tribune. Would you mind if I asked you a few questions? I'm working on an article about Lauren Jones."

McShane ushered me in; I walked past his grief and into the gloom of his apartment. The TV was on and Cheetos were open on the coffee table in front of the sofa. "Have a seat," he said. The apartment showed signs of a person keeping things relatively neat in difficult circumstances. My attention perked up. Here was someone trying. "Where did you meet Lauren?"

"She's friends with a guy I work with," McShane said. "Joe Ryan. I met her in the park after work one night. I thought she was hot and asked Joe about her, and she gave Joe her number to give to me. I asked her out and the rest is history," he said with a grin.

OK, he was in love. "How old are you, Brian?" "20," he said. "I turn 21 in December. Lauren is younger than me, but it didn't matter. She is real mature for her age."

"What do you think happened to her?"

"Man, I really don't know. It's weird. It's not like her to just disappear. I don't think she would just leave Lebanon without telling me," he said with a hint of doubt in his voice. His face was going blank and I knew I had to steer this quickly before sadness overtook him again.

"Where did you last see her?"

"She came over and we watched a movie...the next day, she didn't return my phone call. I thought she was just busy. I tried her again the next day, then the next day. By then I was really worried. I called her mom, but she was no help," McShane said with a touch of anger.

"Did she get along with her mother?"

McShane spat out a chuckle. "OK, I guess. Her mom was always really down on her. Lauren was OK, she wasn't into nothing bad. She just held it against her about something Lauren did. She should have just cut her some slack."

"Lauren got in some trouble?"

McShane looked at the blinds that blocked the sunshine from coming into his place. "Nothing big. She got caught with some meth. She didn't do it anymore. I guess she was into it pretty bad for a while, but Laur was...is... planning on starting her own business. She's super ambitious."

"What business was she going to start?"

"She had a lot of different ideas," McShane said. He grinned and rubbed his chin.

"Were you two getting along?"

"Yeah of course. I told you, she was just over before she disappeared, watching a movie."

"OK, OK," I soothed. "Do you think anybody from her past maybe held a grudge against her?" McShane was silent for a moment, then slowly said no. I watched him search his memory. "I think all that stuff was pretty behind her. Lauren doesn't make enemies. She could get pissed off, but she was loyal. Close friends. She complained about some people at work, but I don't think she got into it with them."

"Where did she work?"

"McDonald's. Speaking of, I gotta go to work. But I have lots more stuff to tell you. I'm off tomorrow. You wanna meet somewhere?"

We set up a meeting at a coffee shop on the main drag. He didn't shake my hand as I left. I flipped through my notes as I walked to my car, squinting at the blazingly sunlit pages. Nothing yet. Jones didn't seem like a likely candidate to just skip town, but my primary source was her boyfriend, and sometimes boyfriends don't know their girlfriends as well as they think they do. Jones may have kept a habit to herself. Hell, Jones might have had a whole second life beyond McShane's vision.

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McShane described a better than usual relationship while I sipped a latte and he drank a chai tea. He played with his disposable lighter on the table, turning it 180 degrees, over and over. He tapped it on the table, adjusted his ballcap, leaned forward when remembering fond memories. I was getting diddly squat, though. Just niceties. "She had a funny way with people," he told me. "Lauren was always ready to talk to anyone. I once walked up to her while she was talking with some people from a religious group. You'd have thought they were old friends of Lauren. But when they left, she said, 'Whoa, what a couple of wackos!' She had just met them." I nodded, then stopped. "When was this?" McShane looked alarmed. "About two weeks before she disappeared. You don't think some cult kidnapped her?"

"No, but it's worth noting," I replied. "Do you remember anything about them?"

"Just that they were into like self empowerment and shit and had some big thing about a second path of life, something hidden for centuries. Weird shit."

"Do you remember a name or anything?"

"I remember that they talked with weird words, like baby words, like 'nurty' or 'nurtoo' or something. And they talked about 'the holy harvest' and something about winds. Lauren got a kick out of it, but she said it spooked her."

"Why?"

"She said she just felt like they were not all there. Kinda wacko."

"Did she give them her number or anything?"

"No, she wouldn't do that. Laur is friendly, but she's not stupid, man. Do you think they kidnapped her or something?"

"No, I'm just asking. Do you know how I can get in touch with Lauren's mother?"

"I have her number in my phone, but don't tell her you got it from me. I don't need that stress."

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Yvonne Jones lived near the airport. Two planes screamed overhead in just the time I took to park and walk down the sidewalk to find 214 Jasmine Road. On the phone, she agreed to talk to me, but warned that she wouldn't be much help. I told her I'd be grateful for anything she could tell me. The door was open but the screen door was closed. I knocked on its frame and it rattled within the threshold. Yvonne came to the screen, her blonde hair pixelated and waving in a moiré pattern through the fine mesh. Gray-brown sickness emanated from her shape, materialized in a cloud as she coughed and said that I must be the reporter. She offered me some lemonade.

Yvonne had some complaints. Her AC wasn't working, and she was out of ice. She was resentful about apologizing for the room temperature lemonade. Slip-on Vans covered her feet, and her peach-colored river shirt was unbuttoned all the way down. She was pretty, and was probably much prettier 30 years ago. Her arms and legs crossed in protection across her body, her brown eyes stared like a cornered animal. Both of the emotions that came across in the news article were still there in her, but submerged under less turbulent waters now that a month had passed. Yvonne Jones could not tell whether her daughter skipped town or disappeared under nefarious circumstances, and she feigned indifference about it. But she was talking about Lauren animatedly, and calling her "my baby," and the mother in her had clearly not given up. I nudged Yvonne out of my mental column of suspects who may have snatched Lauren.

I brought up Lauren's involvement in methamphetamines. Yvonne flashed in anger—first toward her daughter for getting involved in "bad drugs," then at me for

saying something unflattering about her daughter. "She didn't listen to me. There was never any drugs in our house. Well, maybe a little weed sometimes, but not that she would know. Lauren did it, did that meth, just to spite me." Yvonne glared sideways at nothing.

"Do you think it's possible she could have gotten back involved with meth, or with her friends who use it?"

"Friends!?! Meh!" she harrumphed. I sat silent, hoping for more. I got nothing. Yvonne made a pointed comment about journalists, and I decided to dispense with niceties. "Could Lauren have gotten involved in a cult? Brian said that—"

"Brian? That piece of shit. Little white hood rat. He's in some cult? Figures. Maybe the police should know about this. What did he tell you?"

"No, he said he saw Lauren talking to two people in the park who were promoting some ideas he found strange. Was Lauren a seeker? Did she go to church?"

Yvonne laughed derisively. "No way. My little girl wouldn't let *anyone* indoctrinate her. She's too strong minded. Look, you want to hunt down a lead? Why don't you look into that Michael Pyle guy? He's a *real* piece of shit, and he used to live right over in Myerstown. They keep finding out about more girls he kidnapped. Some of them were black girls. He might have a thing for them. She might be chained in some basement somewhere. Lots of sick fucks in this world."

Pyle was in the national news still, seven months after his arrest. The former hobby store manager was linked to at least eight murders, and his M.O. was to abduct, keep captive, and kill on some arcane schedule the FBI has yet to decipher. It was a dark spectre that I really hoped not to introduce into my story. I'm a feature writer. This was supposed to be a heart-tugging piece, an illumination. But Yvonne was right. It could involve Pyle. Lauren Jones could simply be another name doomed to forever be associated with that dirtbag.

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Back at the Trib, I searched news stories to read up on Pyle. A definitive profile of his preferred victim hasn't materialized, according to the FBI. There was nothing about Lauren Jones that suggested or eliminated her as a possible victim of Pyle. I widened my search to include all missing persons. I narrowed it to women 18 and over. I narrowed it to meth users. I widened it to take in missing men. I searched by region. I searched by age. I searched for McDonald's workers. I grasped at straws, searching for missing persons whose names began with an L.

My coffee was cold. My Mountain Dew was warm. My stomach growled and ached. My head hummed like a fluorescent light. I was done for the night. Flipping closed my notebook, I caught a glimpse of a strange word—"nurty." I thumbed back

to that page and looked at the nonsense words "nurty" and "nurtoo." A cult? Back to Google. I wondered who Lauren talked to in the park that day, and why it stuck in Brian's mind, why it spooked Lauren--a woman who had undoubtedly seen scarier things if she had spent any amount of time among tweakers. Meth is a helluva drug.

The word "cult" gets thrown around rather carelessly, even among respectable dailies. This train of thought seemed destined to evaporate into thin air. All the stories I came across referenced old cults, like Manson or Jonestown, with a smattering of brave but fangless exposés of Scientology. The next day I would talk to Lauren's co-workers at McDonald's. Tomorrow night this story will be in the can, and I'll be on to something else, I thought.

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Lauren's fellow employees at the Union Turnpike McDonald's only confirmed what Brian and Lauren's mother said. There were no ice freaks among the workers as far as I could tell—or what they could tell—and only one person had a discouraging word to say about Lauren. "She was kinda stuck up," said a teenager with the tips of her black hair dyed purple. By noon I was sitting in the park where Lauren chatted with the supposed cult members, rolling two many-sided dice in my mind, hoping for a miraculous pair of 7s to show.

Up they came.

The woman was about 30 and had long wavy black hair, her face pinched and stern. The man's blond hair was spiked with a bit of product, and he wore a T-shirt with a tattoo design and some unimportant words printed on it. They had stopped to talk with a group of women who seemed to be eating takeout lunch from Styrofoam containers. The couple was solicitous. The diners were skeptical and dismissive, judging from their facial expressions. I fought back wild thoughts and concentrated on the two. Logic and experience said they were harmless prosyletizers, no worse than your garden-variety evangelicals or frumpy women handing out *The Watchtower* in farmers markets. The women were having none of their talk, and after a minute or so of cold shoulder, the couple moved away. There was only one other group in the park, closer to the parking lot, for the two to approach. I needed to intercept them. I slid off the bench and walked to the parking lot and paused, busying myself with my phone, facing them. Their stop at the last group of picnickers was even briefer than the first, and as expected, the couple began walking toward me.

"Excuse me, can you tell me where the Java House is?" I asked when they were closer. "I'm supposed to meet someone there, but I can't find it."

They came to me, happy to find someone interested in a conversation. "I think I might," said the man in a light gravelly voice. "Come on, I'll walk you there." They smoothly eased into talk about the weather, about how it was a gift, a true gift. I

wasn't terribly surprised when we got to the Java House and they asked to join me while I waited for my invented friend.

The conversation always arced back to the mystical, and I understood why Brian thought they were cultish. I also understood Lauren's apprehension. There was something animal-like about them, something predatory, smelling of both corn and crypt. There was a quickening of blood about them, and a certainty of death. They were hungry, yet patient. They were distracted by some big thought that they were not sharing. All of their sentences pointed to it, but as of yet, there was nothing where they pointed. Neither was speaking particularly cryptic. In fact, a liveliness and straightforwardness dominated their tone. But nothing wholesome could be found in anything they spoke.

I asked them if they belonged to some kind of group. They looked at each other and shared a public grin, small and quick. "What do you mean," said the man, who called himself Duane.

"Are you part of a church or something?"

"No," said the woman, Jackie. "But we do share the same beliefs."

"Like what?"

Duane cupped his hands around his cardboard coffee cup and leaned forward on the table. "We are People of the South Wind."

"What's that? A Native American tribe?"

"No," he said, leaning back, relaxing into this explanation. "It just means that we found a deeper, more ancient truth, and we try to live by it."

"Sounds interesting. Where can I read about it?"

"You can't," said Jackie. "Almost all of the texts from that time were destroyed."

"Then how do you know anything about it?"

"The wisdom wasn't lost. But not many want to know it," said Duane. I could feel Jackie's eyes on me.

"Can I find out more? I'm interested. Where do you all meet?"

Caution clouded both of them. "If you are serious, we can take you to Richard."

"Is that your leader? Your teacher?"

"You could say that, yes," said Jackie.

I insisted on driving. Jackie sat in the passenger seat, Duane in the back. They directed me out of town, out Route 5, toward Myerstown. My pulse quickened. Were they connected with Pyle? I calmed myself and went through my options. "This seatbelt is digging into my gut," I grunted, undoing the latch and letting the strap get sucked up like spaghetti into the side of the car. I glanced at my door. It was unlocked. I considered several scenarios.

"Did you hear about that Pyle guy?" I asked. "He was out here near Myerstown holding people captive and killing them. Horrible stuff. Did you hear about that?" If shit was going to go down, I wanted to direct it.

"God, yeah, how terrible. I hear they caught him," Jackie said. "Turn up here," Duane said. We were driving toward Cotton Creek now. Did they change our route after my question, or was this the plan all along?

After a few miles and two more turns, we pulled up to a farmhouse without a farm. The front porch was long and shaded by big oaks. A collie mix barked and ran up to the car door. "Come here, Mitchum," Jackie said. "Leave him alone. Give me some kisses." Mitchum licked Jackie's face as she sat with the door open. Duane climbed out and invited me into the house.

At the kitchen table sat an angular man in jeans and a blue flannel shirt, named Richard. He didn't seem impressed to see me. "What do you want to know?" he asked, after Duane explained my presence.

"I'm just interested in hearing more about...the People of the South Wind."

Richard gave me a stare, then he curtly said that I wouldn't understand. Within minutes, I was driving back into Lebanon.

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People of the South Wind. Richard didn't seem like a teacher. He seemed like a gatekeeper. And I wasn't going to get past him. At the office, I wrote the piece on Lauren Jones and turned it in. It was a puff piece. She was a good kid, and she was missing. Her associates miss her. She dreamed of having her own purse store, one that prominently featured her own knitted creations. She liked horses.

But she wasn't white enough or cute enough to garner much more interest among our readers or with my editor. I was still thinking about her.

Did she join the People of the South Wind? Did she get swallowed back up in the meth world? Is she dead? Is she living in the streets in New York City, or

panhandling in New Orleans? Maybe she socked away enough money to buy a one-way ticket to Europe, or perhaps just a bus to Nogales.

I Googled "people of the south wind," and got a bunch of links to a song by the classic rock band Kansas. Digging further, I read that the Kaw Nation were also known as Kansa, and this was the origin of the state name Kansas. Were the mysterious cult couple merely followers of Native American beliefs? I kept digging. "South Wind" was also the name of a novel published in England in 1917 by Norman Douglas. I found mentions of "south wind" in some Warcraft chats. Gamers?

In Greek mythology, Notus was the god of the south wind, bringer of late summer storms, scourge of harvests. His counterpart in Roman mythology was Auster. In Aztec mythology, the south wind is Huitztlampaehecatl, notable for... not much. In Mesopotamia, the closest to a south wind deity is Pazuzu, a fearsome persona indeed. Part eagle, part lion, part dog, with a scorpion tail, Pazuzu is the god of famine and death in childbirth, and an evil spirit. He has been name-checked in works of fiction, including *The Exorcist*. Was "Lauren's" cult some Satanists?

I Googled "south wind," "nurty," and "nurtoo." Nothing. I went to sleep with the Ultravox song "Reap the Wild Wind" blowing around in my head, certain that I was on a flight of fancy.

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The next day I sent an email to my friend Terrence Loomis, an ancient religions professor at Northwestern who I knew. We were talking on the phone 10 minutes later.

After small talk and a bit of catching up, I asked him, "Hey, what do you know about Pazuzu?"

Loomis laughed. "Are you writing about an exorcism?" he asked, baitingly. I explained my path of inquiry and he paused.

"Could they have been saying "Ninurta?" Loomis asked.

"I don't know. Maybe. Who or what is that?"

"Ninurta was a Sumerian god, had the head of an eagle, sometimes he is depicted as a winged lion. He was both the god of farming and of healing, but also the destructive god of the south wind. His analogue in Roman mythology is Saturn; in Greek, Kronos."

"Have you ever heard of a cult today that worships him?" I asked.

"No. But check the internet. I'm sure someone, somewhere is doing it. Consider it a corollary of Rule 34."

I hung up, grabbed my laptop, and schlepped to a City Council meeting to report on anything hot that might happen there—or to grab some Z's. Probably some Z's. During the meeting, I daydreamed about Sumerian gods, recalling some of the ancient reliefs I had seen at some point in museums. It was more interesting than the liquor licenses the City Council was arguing over.

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The following day I worked on a good one, a profile of a local chef who received a James Beard award. I filed my piece, got cleared by the copy desk, and at 10 pm I was home online, looking at images of Ninurta. Weird stuff.

I Googled "ninurta" and "kidnap." Added "murder." Tried "disappearance." And found a piece from Columbus, Ohio that said "NIN.URTA" was scrawled in blood on the wall at a murder scene. A wife and husband were abducted; the woman had been murdered and the man remained missing. The husband was the prime suspect.

I continued digging. After an hour or so, I stopped to email a friend in the FBI to see if he had anything for me. A few more clicks revealed another instance when "ninurta" was written at a murder scene. Wichita Falls.

When my friend emailed me back the next morning, I was not surprised to hear that in addition to my two instances, he knew of two more. In Sea Gate, Florida, "ninurta" was written in ballpoint pen on the wooden floor where a struggle and abduction had taken place. And in Worcester, Massachusetts, a kidnapper was heard repeatedly yelling "ninurta" when he was gunned down by police.

OK, so Ninurta is a thing. There was still no link between Lauren Jones and the South Wind people, or the South Wind people and Ninurta. I drove back out to Cotton Creek.

The farmhouse was empty—no people, no dog. I peered in the windows. I walked to the side of the house and looked into the trash can. There was a white trash bag in there. Time to suck it up and rummage through it. Breathing through my mouth, trying not to smell the pungent mix of cantaloupe rinds and other table scraps, I looked for pieces of paper with some kind of clue on them. The only thing that struck me was a list of names. About a dozen people. It could mean anything, but it felt weird. I set it on the ground, wiped my hands on the grass, pulled a handful of oak leaves off a branch and crumpled them up, trying to get the germs and smell off my hands.

Back home, I Googled the 14 names on the paper. I quickly discerned the common denominator. They all lived around Atlanta.

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I had another deadline on Thursday, but then I was off until Tuesday morning. Not technically off, but my presence wouldn't be missed until the staff meeting on Tuesday. I booked a flight to Atlanta.

In the airport, waiting for my flight, I tried to find a geographic pattern among the 14 names. While two shared a neighborhood and three lived on Peachtree Street, I could see nothing certain.

I rented a car and checked into the Westin on Peachtree. What the hell was I doing? I called three of the 14 and made up some bullshit story about doing an article on what native Atlantans recommend to tourists. Only one, a nice older lady named Mary, seemed to buy my story. Got bupkis. I ate a burger and drank a Manhattan at the hotel bar, and went to bed, cursing my folly. Saturday night in Hotlanta. Boy, I sure know how to party.

That night I had a fevered dream. Inevitable, I suppose. A 12-foot man with the head of an eagle screeched into an ancient village square, furious and vengeful. It held a mace of gold, and swept it in wide circles, killing all who were in range. It stomped after a young woman with kinky hair pulled back in a pink scrunchie. Lauren Jones. The creature—Nintura—pinned her with a taloned foot and tore out her neck with its sharp beak, spraying blood everywhere. On me. I sat up with an unintelligible moan.

In the morning, I clicked on the TV to hear about a missing person. Tyler Franklin. Number six on my list. My heart pounded and I Googled his name while the newscast continued, anxious to see what was being reported online. Several news outlets had the story, but most of the facts were the same across the board. On the alternative weekly's website, I read an account that had a juicy tidbit. (Somebody at that weekly had an in with the Atlanta Police Department, evidently.) Franklin's cell phone dialed after he was reported missing, and the GPS on his phone placed Franklin in Marietta. I called the reporter.

At first, the journalist was extremely disinterested in sharing information. When I told him a little about my investigation, he warmed up. "What's this Ninurta?" he asked. My explanation only whetted his appetite for more details about the ancient Sumerian god. I asked him to meet me for coffee. He suggested beers. Less than 45 minutes later we were sweating on the patio deck of a Mexican joint on Peachtree a few blocks from my hotel, swigging cold ones.

"The police pinpointed his location when he dialed," said Robin Blount. Blount was young, pot-bellied, quick-witted. He had already dribbled a bit of IPA twice on his striped rugby shirt. His curiosity seemed to suck in colors and details from around the room and beyond, out the windows. He was hyper aware. "They think he butt-

dialed. He was on Macland Road, heading west. It disengaged. They think the people who abducted him heard the phone and killed it."

"What's out that way?" I asked.

"Subdivisions," he shrugged. "Malls." With a hard stare, he studied a man who entered the restaurant.

"Anything weird?"

"Are mega-churches weird?" Blount asked with a grin. He peeled part of the label off of his beer bottle and tilted the bottle to examine the disfigured glass.

"They are if they worship Ninurta," I said.

"Nothing like that. Fundamentalism. Spiritual entertainment. Gospel of prosperity. Baskin Robbins. Office parks."

Back at the Westin, I studied maps of Marietta and Macland Road. Blount didn't seem to be leading me astray. My flight was the next day at 5:30 p.m. I planned on driving out Macland Road first thing in the morning. Just to look around.

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The morning sun turned my back windshield into a blazing plane of light, its beams catching every mote of dust that had accumulated there. Looking in the rear view mirror, I saw my face illuminated with a yellow eye mask of light across my face. I squinted and swore, and took a sip of coffee from the Styrofoam cup. A few strip centers passed on my right, some subdivision entrances on my left. What did I expect to find here? Windy Hill Road became Macland Road, but the views didn't change much. I looked for mega-churches, with Blount's words still in my head, but all I saw were average congregations, and none that advertised a god with an eagle head and the claws of a lion. Not outwardly, at least. I sighed, thinking about the money I had thrown at this venture. What was it about Lauren Jones that pulled me into this?

Ahead of me, I saw an office park. I scanned the buildings, looking for something—anything. Glass boxes, poured concrete structures...and a strange one-storey building with Art Deco lines. It looked like a cross between a Deco sculpture pedestal and an adobe church. Squat and squarish. It was painted an innocuous shade of tan. Along the right top corner, I saw "Legash Industries" in outline type. Legash...why did that ring a bell?

I suddenly slapped my blinker on and turned right into a parking lot. Stopping the car, I searched my brain. Legash was linked to Ninurta somehow. Somewhere, I had read that word in connection with the Sumerian god of the south wind. I pulled out

my phone and searched for it. Yes—the center of the Ninurta cult in Sumeria around 2,000 BC was a place called Legash. Heart pounding, I turned the car around and turned on my left blinker, hunching over the steering wheel as I waited for a break in the traffic.

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It's probably just the founder's name, I thought as I pulled open the glass door and heard the whomp of air leaving the vestibule. Cool air and that new carpet smell smacked me, and I shivered. Not from cold, but from fear. I was scared. Come on, I thought. You've interviewed gangbangers and reported from parts of Pakistan that are run by feudal warlords. But this place had a sick smell. It felt heavy, with a dull brown atmosphere pushing down on it.

"Hello, what can I do for you?" a chocolate woman in impeccable business attire asked me. She was seated behind a plain desk of blond wood veneer with rounded sides. "Uuhhh, I was told to come her to find out more about Ninurta," I said, throwing myself headfirst into this. "Ninurta," she repeated. "Yes," I said. "Richard sent me."

"Richard?"

"Yyyes." This wasn't going to work.

"Please wait," she said, and left behind a door of frosted glass. Maybe I asked the right thing?

"I am Blair Legash, president of Legash Industries," said a man with a full head of white hair and well-tanned everything else. "What can I do for you?"

Now I truly felt a fool. Legash Industries was indeed named after its founder, not some old Sumerian city. And yet, Legash emanated something odd. It was like a putrid light, or the sweet smell of decay. He seemed of buckwheat and musty earth and cloying pollen. I continued with my gambit. "I came here to learn more about Ninurta," I said with as much innocent conviction as I could summon. Legash glanced down at my shirt, contemplative. "What," he said carefully, "is Ninurta?"

I swallowed and said, "He belongs to the People of the South Wind, or they belong to him." I pictured a policeman pushing my head down so I wouldn't hit it as I lumbered, handcuffed, into a patrol car.

"Come with me," he replied evenly.

The man who called himself Legash led me to a room without windows. There was a round wooden table with four Lucite chairs, and two overstuffed chairs at angles

facing a glass coffee table. We sat down in the wide chairs and he immediately began. "What would you like to know?" His friendly, quizzical tone rang false.

"I...don't know. Jackie and Duane said they have found a new way to be, a new way to be in harmony with the universe." I was blowing smoke, but maybe Legash would go for it.

"Ninurta," he said in measured tones, "is not a way to be. He is god."

"Will you teach me about him?"

"It takes years to understand Ninurta," he replied.

"Where does he live? What does he require of humans? Is he human?"

A change came over Legash, like a storm cloud obscuring the sun. Maybe I showed too much of my hand. What would a true prospect for their religion ask? Legash paused, then said he would find me materials to read. He left and I sat in the white room, listening to the quiet. I could not hear any voices or footsteps. Even the lights were not humming, and the only ventilation seemed to come from vents in the floor. After a few minutes, I became restless. After a few more, I got scared. I walked over to the door and listened. Nothing. Opening the door, I saw a man turn around to face me; he had been stationed outside. Was I captive? "Hi," I said. "Where are the restrooms?"

The man didn't answer. He turned back around. Was I captive? I started down the hall. "Excuse me!" the man said sternly. "I need you to stay here until Mr. Legash returns."

"I need to use the restroom," I said still walking. Two more men turned the corner ahead of me, blocking my way. "I want to leave. Now."

"You can go. But not now. Not this way. Our security doesn't allow people to wander freely through the building. Confidentiality, industrial espionage. We can't afford to have people seeing what they shouldn't see. You can go as soon as Mr. Legash returns."

I reluctantly returned to the room and sat down on the edge of one of the Lucite chairs. My pulse pounded in my ears. A moment later, Legash came in carrying two old books. He handled them easily, and I realized as I watched him walk across the room that although his face looked like that of a 70-year-old, he moved like a man 30 years younger. He handed me the books and I was surprised by their weight. "I think you will find some of your answers in these," he said.

"Thank you. Mr. Legash, am I being held here? Your men said I was not allowed to walk around, or even use the bathroom. Am I being detained?"

"Of course not, my apologies. Some of my employees are a little weak in their people skills. Please, let me personally show you to the restrooms." Legash opened the door and gave a pointed look at the man outside, who didn't bat an eye. I followed Legash down a quiet hallway, past unmarked doors. We turned the corner and walked past an elevator, and he opened a metal door that led into a bathroom. "Here you are, Mr.?"

"X. Thank you. I'll just be a minute."

"When you are finished, they will show you back to the room where you can examine the books as long as you like," said Legash. I nodded and closed the door. Immediately I scanned the bathroom, searching for a plan. There were no windows. There were two stalls, a sink, and a mirror. I contemplated breaking the mirror and using a shard as a weapon. Not a great option. Who knows if they are armed, and the noise of breaking glass would alert them. I looked into one of the stalls for options, and scanned the floor and ceiling. There was a ventilation duct, but it didn't look like I could get up there to the ceiling, and the opening did not seem large enough for me to crawl through. In one corner was a door with a louvred opening along the bottom. I walked over and tried the doorknob—locked. I took my Visa card out of my wallet and tried to jimmy it. This always worked on TV, right? The card was able to scoot the bolt a little. I concentrated on moving the bolt a bit, then repositioning the card to scoot it a bit more. After two slips and failures, I managed to pull the bolt out of the door jam and the closet door opened. Inside were buckets, a dust mop and a wet mop, and cleaning supplies. I crouched under the bottom shelf and pulled the door shut.

Ten minutes passed. I heard a discussion outside the door. My legs were cramping. I had to readjust my body, but if I did it as they were coming in, I was toast. I planned my readjustment, then executed it as quickly as I could. Seconds later, the bathroom door flew open and the three men walked quickly through, the first one barking orders. The two stall doors were slammed open. "Check the vent." "Did you let him get past you?" "Heads will roll." "Did anyone hear him?" "We need to catch him before Malcolm finds out." The men seemed positively terrified. They left in a bunch, and I stayed quiet for a minute longer, then burst out of the closet and stood to the side of the exit door, listening. When I was sure no sound was in the hall, I stepped out and quietly closed the door behind me. My eyes fell on the elevator door. Where could that possibly go? This was a one-storey building. I ran over and pressed the button, not daring to look in either direction. The elevator door opened with a muted ding and I jumped in and pressed the only option on the control panel. The elevator moved down.

* * *

In the homes of certain very rich collectors, a room is given to one piece of artwork. Almost always, the room is dark, with very special and considered lighting

illuminating the precious piece for maximum impact. These rooms are controlled for temperature and humidity, and the lights only come on when someone is in the room, to further protect the artwork. When the elevator door opened, I stepped into such a room.

Along the right and left walls were sandstone reliefs of mythical beasts. The walls continued down halls on either side of a central partition, at the center of which sat an old man who looked up at me expectantly. He had a large volume open in front of him. "Welcome," he said in a warm baritone. I sensed nothing inside him. "Please allow me to show you around. Congratulations on your ascendance to the Order of Sharur."

"Thank you," I bluffed. He crookedly stood up and ambled around the desk and motioned me to follow him down the right passageway. I stole a look at the reliefs affixed to the walls. Nanurta. The reliefs were expertly done, but they were repeated several times, like wallpaper. This was just the entryway. I would soon find what's beyond.

"I am instructed to let new members of the Order find their way through the museum on their own, but I am permitted to answer questions," said the old man with a crazed smile. "I will be there, should you ask anything." He hung back, into the shadows. I started down the hallway.

At the beginning, an audio loop played the sound of howling wind, and a 40-foot wide, 20-foot high box showed sand swirling in a scouring purge of life in the desert, a pungent yellow-tan message of power and desolation. Dioramas of life in the Fertile Crescent were sparingly lit, with plaques explaining each scene. The text explained the central role in human life that Ninurta, God of the South Wind, played since the earliest days in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley. Mummies of humans laying on their stomach, chest and chin up, elbows bent under their shoulders Sphinx-like, lined the walls, some of them little more than bones held in bags of their leathered skins.

The displays were fascinating, and chilling, but the further down the passageway I walked, the more unnerved I felt. The displays were arranged chronologically, I could tell from the wall text, and around 200 BC, maces with a hatchet-like head began to figure prominently, along with tubes split lengthwise, their purpose unexplained. In the 1400s, lists of names began to appear, inscribed in tablets. The tubes became more uniform and elaborate. They appeared to be sluices of some kind, but not larger than six inches wide. Mummies continued to appear regularly, all in the stomach down, prone position, the upper bodies propped up, Sphinx-like. Ninurta was explained as being the god of war, of chaos, of silence. The most powerful of the gods, the evil force that quietly guided the leader of the gods, Elil.

I knew what it all meant, but I refused to acknowledge it. The tomb-like atmosphere of the museum sickened me. I felt Ninurta all around me. I felt evil all around me.

By the 1800s, each of the tablets listed more than 100 names. By 1910, maps with strings pinned to locations linked to each name. The mummies remained naked, but their bodies began to be more professionally preserved. By 1950 the mummies were embalmed bodies showing people one could imagine once knowing. At 1980, the room widened and I was walking through a diorama that showed the abomination that I knew sat at the core of it all.

A 10-foot statue of Ninurta sat at the back left, his hatchet-mace raised. Under his left foot squirmed three figures, their cheeks puffed and their eyes bulged. In front of him a man with the skin of a lion draped over his back, head hidden in the lion's skull, kneeled at a prostrate figure of a woman, her elbows bound underneath her and a wooden crutch holding her chin up. She seemed to be screaming, and blood flowed from her sliced neck, into an ornamental sluice and down to a round depression at Ninurta's right foot. His talons seemed to be drinking up the blood, like a tree sucking the groundwater into its trunk. The terror in the face of the mummified victim was surpassed by the ferocity and ugliness in Ninurta's beaked visage, his eyes blood red and his feathers seemingly wet from gorge. I nearly pissed my pants, and walked quickly into the next room, which seemed to be the last. Mummies lay stacked on clear slabs along the walls. A giant sluice hung on the right wall with dozens of names inscribed in it. I looked for Lauren Jones, and found her name, confirming the suspicion I barely wished to hold.

"He's in there. I'm sorry—I didn't know." The old man was pleading for his life, but I saw him go down from the punch of one of Legash's men—one of Malcolm's men. They laid eyes on me and rushed forward. I ran to the back wall, where I saw a seam and pushed open a door in the display. I was in a dimly lit loading dock, the bay of which opened into an endless tunnel. I looked around and found a wooden crate, and picked up one of the pried pieces from its top.

I'm not a fighter, but I knew this was it. The other men may not have been fighting for their lives, although Malcolm didn't seem like the forgiving sort, should they fail to subdue me. But I certainly knew I was fighting for my own life. One man went down readily with a strong blow I delivered to his temple. The man in charge came at me with a self-confidence I found unnerving. He blocked my swing and hit me in the gut. Bent over, he found my nose with his knee, then he punched down, hitting a glancing blow on my left jaw. I fell backward, dazed, but the third man was pelting me with his foot, and so I reached around and caught one of his kicks and pushed him on his butt, then jammed the crate board into his crotch. He stayed down and I gave him an uppercut with the board, underneath his jaw. It did better than fell him. It killed him, collapsing his trachea and leaving him gasping on the floor. I looked around for their boss but didn't see him. A crushing pain in my back told me where he was. I turned to receive a punch that closed my right eye and nearly made me vomit in pain.

I knew I was in for it. This one knew how to fight, and I was at half strength or less, with one good eye and a back that didn't want to straighten. But when his next punch was a body blow, I easily trapped his arm, and using my weight, I drove him backwards until we hit the wall. His head popped against the wall, and the man fell unconscious.

Escape. That was next. And that needed to be now.

On my right a heavy steel door was bolted shut. I tried it; it wouldn't budge. Halfway across the room, a metal strongbox was suspended about five feet from the floor by two steel cables. There was my answer. The cables disappeared into the darkness above me, attached to who knows what. I went to the other side of the strongbox and pushed it toward the door. It hit the door with a useless tap, but then gravity and the weight of the box seemed to pull me back away from the door. Confused, I tried to stop it, then realized how this pendulum could be used. I went with its motion, pushing it away from the door with all my strength and weight. The counterswing would give the door a mighty pop, and I just might be freed.

The strongbox was picking up speed, but the exertion was not increasing. Confused, I pushed it further. The strongbox got away from me, and swung away into the darkness of the tunnel with the barest creak of the cable. What on earth? Now I was good and truly screwed.

I stared into the darkness, baffled and defeated, but before I could formulate a Plan B, my world froze. My body felt disconnected from me. I heard a laugh from behind me, and a searing pain in the back of my head. With difficulty, I lifted one of my hands to the back of my neck and felt the gooey warm flow of my blood, and following it up, felt a thick, footlong foundry hook embedded in my skull. I began to lose motor control, and found myself hanging by the chained hook. I tried to speak but couldn't. I lost control of my eye movements. Staring straight ahead, I saw Malcolm came around in front of me and smile a wicked grin.

"So this is where it ends for you," he said in an oily voice. "What a waste. Your rashness has denied Ninurta what is rightfully his. Look at your life, running toward that drain. And for what?"

Malcolm walked a few feet away and spun around. "Shall we preserve your body, use it as a precautionary tale for others who try to attack us? Say the word—here are the two vats that do the job quite admirably," he said, prying off the plastic covers on two coffin-like troughs. "This one is good old formaldehyde, and that one is methanol. It won't hurt a bit...although I suppose you aren't feeling anything now anyway, are you?" he asked, gleefully. "Sir? Sir!?!?! Oh, please don't tell me you've gone already. I wanted to tell you everything you came here to find out. I was so looking forward to accommo—"

Out of the darkness, the strongbox came hurtling back. Almost soundlessly, it clipped Malcolm from the shoulder up and picked him up off his feet, tossing him. Into the bin of formaldehyde he went. He evidently had lost consciousness from the knock, but lungs full of formaldehyde brought him to. His face popped out of the liquid and he gasped and spat, eyes wide. One hand slapped out of the embalming fluid and grabbed the edge of the vat, but it was apparent Malcolm was not going to pull himself out. His eyes locked with mine, and from somewhere, before he went back down, I pulled out a last burst of energy and a measure of control, and in my dying seconds, I gurgled hoarse laughter as loud as I could as Malcolm slid back down into the formaldehyde.

- the end -

