

Lisa Goldstein: Fortune and Misfortune
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This is my story, but first I have to tell
you about Jessie.

Jessie and I met at an audition. My agent
had told me they were looking for someone
to play a contemporary high school kid so
I dressed the part—torn baggy jeans, white
T-shirt, red flannel shirt tied around my
waist.

I'd been waiting for about five minutes
when Jessie walked in and gave her name to
the receptionist. She wore one of those
dress-for-success costumes that make women
look like clowns—skirt and jacket of
bright primary colors (hers were red), big
buttons down the front, hugely padded
shoulders. She looked at me and then down
at herself and laughed and grimaced at the
same time. It was an oddly endearing
expression, the gesture of someone who
knows how to poke fun at herself.

"You're so clever," she said. She glanced
at her outfit again. "I've probably blown
it already."

She looked as if she wanted to talk
further, but just then the receptionist
called her name. I felt annoyed—I'd been
waiting longer than she had, though I knew
that that had nothing to do with
Hollywood's pecking order. She was

closeted with the casting people for about ten minutes. When she came out she looked at me, held her palms up and shrugged elaborately. Her gesture said, clearly as words, I have no idea whether I made it or not.

I didn't think about her until the next cattle call, when I saw her again. She was wearing the same clothes—I wondered if it was the only decent outfit she owned. I was reading a magazine, but she sat down next to me anyway.

"Did you get called back for that high school thing?" she asked.

"No," I said.

"Neither did I. I'm Jessie."

"I'm Pam."

The receptionist called my name then. I felt a rush of pleasure at being called first—this woman wasn't all that far above me after all. "Listen," she said as I stood up. "If I get called next, wait for me and we'll go to lunch. I don't know too many people in this town."

"Okay," I said.

She did get called next. I waited, and when she came out she offered to drive us to a coffee shop in Westwood.

I had already pegged her as someone very much like myself, just barely getting by on bit parts and commercials and waitressing jobs. So I was surprised to see her walk up to a white BMW and turn off the car alarm. She must have noticed

my expression, because she laughed. "Oh, it's not mine," she said. "I rent it for casting calls. You have to play the game, make them think you're worth it."

I'd heard this before, of course. In an image-conscious town like Hollywood every little bit helps. A fancy car isn't enough to land you a part, though, and I wondered if she had any acting ability to back it up.

I got in the car and she drove us to the restaurant. When we were seated she looked directly at me and said, "So. Where would I have seen you?"

I told her about my few commercials and the made-for-cable movie I'd done. "I was Iras in Antony and Cleopatra at the San Diego Shakespeare festival," I said. "I was also the understudy for Rosalind in As You Like It, but the damned woman refused to get sick."

She seemed a little puzzled at this. Wondering why I bothered with Shakespeare, maybe. "What about you?" I asked.

"I had a bit part on a soap," she said. "It was a great gig, until they killed my character off."

"I'm sorry," I said, and she laughed.

Los Angeles, they say, is where the best-looking boy and the prettiest girl from every high school in the country end up. You can't sneeze in this town without infecting a former high school beauty queen or football quarterback. Even so, I thought this woman astonishingly beautiful. She had deep sea-blue eyes,

dark lashes, and a mass of dark hair. More than that, though, she had some subtle arrangement of bone structure that compelled you to look at her. She might just make it, I thought, and felt the envy that had dogged me ever since I had come to town. Next to her all my faults stood out in sharp relief—I was too short, too plain, my mouth too thin. I hate myself when I feel this petty, I struggle against it, but I don't seem to be able to help it.

As penance I made an effort to like her. And really, it wasn't that difficult. She had probably been told that she was beautiful since before she could understand the words, but for some reason she didn't seem to believe it. She ridiculed herself, her ambitions, the idea that she could make it in Hollywood where so many others had failed.

"My parents are sure I'll come crawling home within the year," she said. "You wouldn't believe the arguments I had before I left. Well, it's the old story, isn't it—young girl from the country goes to Hollywood."

"Where are you from?"

"A farming town in Wisconsin. You've never heard of it. What about you?"

"Chicago."

"And how did your parents take it?"

"Actually, they've been pretty supportive," I said. "Especially my father. He did amateur theatricals in college. He said, 'I think you're good

enough, but unfortunately what I think doesn't count for much. You have my blessing.' And then he laughed—he'd never said anything so old-fashioned in his life."

"That's great." She was silent for a while, no doubt thinking about the differences between us. "Listen, Pam," she said. "I'm going to an audition next week. It's another high school student. Ask your agent about it."

"Sure," I said, surprised. I would never tell a rival about an audition. Jessie was someone to keep, a caring, genuine person in a town full of hypocrites. "Thanks."

"See you there," she said.

We saw each other a lot after that. We went to plays and movies and critiqued the performances, took the white BMW to cattle calls, made cheap dinners for each other and shopped at outlet clothing stores. We took tap-dancing lessons together, from a woman who looked about as old as Hollywood itself. Jessie told me about auditions coming up and I began to tell her if I'd heard anything, though each time it was an effort for me.

She got called back to her soap—they wanted her to do a dream sequence with the man who'd played her lover. We rehearsed the scene together, with me taking the lover's part.

It was the first time I'd seen her act. She was good, there was no question of that, but there was something she lacked, that spark that true geniuses have. The envious part of me rejoiced—this woman, I

thought, would not be a threat. But there was another side of me that regretted she wasn't better. I liked Jessie, I wanted to see her succeed. I felt almost protective toward her, like a mother toward a child. She was so innocent—I didn't want her to get hurt.

I was offered several parts at the Berkeley Shakespeare Festival and began to make arrangements to go up north. Jessie was pleased for me, but by this time she knew me well enough to speak her mind. "There aren't going to be any casting directors up there, Pam," she said. "Those parts aren't going to lead to anything. It's an honor, I know that, but it might be better to stay in town, see what you can get here."

"I need to stretch myself, see what I can do," I said. And when she seemed unconvinced I added, "It'll look good on my résumé."

We rehearsed together again. I had gotten the part of Emilia, Iago's wife, in Othello, and I had her take the other roles. As we rehearsed I was amazed to realize that she didn't have any idea what the play was about, that she stumbled speaking the old Elizabethan cadences. I had thought, naïvely I guess, that anyone who wanted to act had had at least some grounding in the classics.

"So this Iago guy, he wants Othello to suspect his wife Desdemona," she said. "He's really evil, isn't he? Do that bit again, the one that starts 'Villainy, villainy, villainy . . .'"

I did. "Hey, you're good," she said. There

was nothing but pure pleasure in her voice. "You're really good. I bet you'll make it. Don't forget your old friends."

She had an audition the day I was to leave, so she rented the BMW and drove me to the airport in the morning. We hugged at the curb in front of the terminal, careful not to wish each other good luck, smiling a little at our superstitions.

I had fun in Berkeley. I liked some of the cast, disliked others, felt indifferent to the rest, the way it usually goes. We were busy first with rehearsals and then with the performances themselves, and I didn't have time to get lonely. Every week, though, I'd call Jessie or she'd call me and we'd exchange news.

Finally we settled into a routine and I had time to catch my breath. The man playing Iago told me about an audition in San Francisco, a company that was going to do Sophocles' Oedipus. "Almost no money, of course," he said. "But all the prestige you can eat. It'll look good on your résumé."

I called, got an appointment for an audition. Iago loaned me his Berkeley university library card, and I took the BART train over to campus to study up on my Sophocles.

All the way there I could hear Jessie, as clearly as if she were sitting next to me. "Why are you doing this? What possible good can it do you? This isn't going to lead to anything, you know that."

In my mind I told her, firmly, to shut up.

I was a bit overawed by the graduate library stacks at Berkeley: I'd never seen anything quite like them. There's no space between the bookshelves—they sit on tracks and have to be cranked apart by hand. It's the only way they can keep their huge amount of books in one space.

I found the Oedipus trilogy fairly easily. While I was in the Greek drama section I decided to look around, see if there were any books that might help with an interpretation of the play. I took down a few that looked interesting, then reached for the crank.

I stopped. There was a book on the shelf called Fortune and Misfortune, grimy with dust. I don't know why it caught my attention—it looked as if no one had opened it for years, maybe decades. I pulled it down and read at random.

"And he who reads the following words will be plagued by ill fortune for all his life," it said.

This is my story, as I said, but now I'm going to talk about you. Are you comfortable? Probably you are, sitting and reading in your living room, leaning back in your recliner, a pleasant record in the CD player, iced tea or coffee or beer or wine beside you. Or maybe you're sitting in your family van, waiting to pick up your child from school or ballet practice or the orthodontist. The sun is shining, birds are singing.

One of the books I picked up in the library was Aristotle's Poetics. Aristotle says that when we watch a tragedy we feel pity and terror as the protagonist falls,

and that when the play is over we feel cleansed, pure, a catharsis.

But what about the guy on stage? What about Oedipus, standing there with the gore running down his cheeks after he's plunged Jocasta's brooches into his eyes? Aristotle goes home, whistling, feeling better, feeling glad the tragedy happened to some other poor schmuck, but how does Oedipus feel?

What if the shepherd bringing the final message hadn't said, Oedipus, the reason all the crops are failing and everything is going to shit is because you killed your father and married your mother, you poor fool? What if instead he had looked out into the audience, pointed to, say, Aristotle, and said, "You—you're the reason we're in such a mess. You don't know it, but you've killed your father and married your mother, and now we're all doomed." Would Aristotle have gone home whistling then?

I don't think so. We feel better when we watch someone else suffer. But Oedipus, if there really was an Oedipus, and I think there must have been, he doesn't feel better at all.

The first thing that happened was that I didn't get the part of the Messenger in Oedipus. Well, I thought, I don't get most of the roles I audition for—you could hardly call this ill fortune.

The second thing was far worse. My mother called the hotel I was staying at and told me that my father had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. He'd had stomach aches and nausea for months, but by the time

he'd finally gone to the doctor it was too late. They gave him a day or two at the most. I took the next flight out.

He died before I could reach him—I never even got the chance to say goodbye. My father, my funny, caring, supportive father, the man who gave me his blessing when I said I wanted to be an actress. I called the company in Berkeley, told them I was staying for the funeral.

My mother wanted a closed casket. Because of this, and because I'd never seen him ill, I couldn't really bring myself to believe he was dead. I had dreams where I'd talk to him, laugh at one of his silly jokes, and then suddenly realize that he wasn't supposed to be there. "But you're dead," I'd say, horrified. Sometimes he'd disappear at that moment, sometimes he'd put his finger to his lips, as if to tell me that these were things that shouldn't be spoken of. Once he told me that he wasn't really dead, he'd just been away on a secret mission somewhere. And every time when I'd wake up my cheeks would be wet with tears. I hadn't known you could cry in your sleep.

The third thing that happened—well, it wasn't as bad, I guess. Certainly no one died, I didn't lose anyone I loved. I got back to Los Angeles to find out that Jessie had auditioned for a part in a major motion picture, and that the director wanted to see her again.

We rehearsed together. I took the part of the boyfriend, which Jessie told me would be played by Harrison Ford. I barely remember what the movie was about, to tell you the truth. I was numb with grief,

still coming to terms with all the holes in my life left by my father's death. And I was depressed over my career, the way it seemed that everyone was getting ahead but me.

Jessie tried to be supportive, but she was too excited about the direction her own career had taken. I couldn't blame her, really. The morning of her audition she rented the white BMW and left for the studio. I didn't hear from her until she called at five o'clock that evening.

"I got the part!" she said, a little breathless. "They all loved me, said I was perfect. I did those scenes we practiced with Harrison—what a sweetie he is!"

"That's nice," I said. "Listen, I've got to go—I've got some reading to do."

"Sure," she said. She sounded a little puzzled. Did she really not understand my jealousy? Was she really that naïve?

So I got to watch as Jessie became the next hot actress—this year's blonde, she joked, brushing back her masses of dark hair. Her conversation became thick with the names of famous actors, directors, producers. She rented a condo in Malibu. I thought for sure she would buy that damned BMW she was so proud of but she went one better and showed up at my apartment complex in a silver Jaguar.

"I couldn't resist," she said. "Do you like it? You know how the British pronounce Jaguar? They say Jay-gu-ar," and she told me which famous British actor had taught her that.

"It is not enough to succeed," someone in Hollywood had once said, I think Gore Vidal. "Others must fail." I tried to feel happy over Jessie's success, I really did, but I was sunk so deep in misery I couldn't do it.

It all started with that damn book, I thought. It's all because I took that book down and opened it. "And he who reads the following words will be plagued by ill fortune for all his life," it had said. "Trogro. Trogrogrether. Ord, mord, drord. Coho, trogrogrether."

You look up a moment. The birds have stopped singing, a cloud has moved in front of the sun. You thought you were reading a story about someone struggling with death, with bad luck, with her own inner demons—Hamlet's outrageous fortune. You certainly had no idea you would become involved this way. It's too late, though—you've read the words, just as I have.

No, you think. She's imagined the whole thing. Sure, a lot of bad things have happened to her, but it's probably all just coincidence. A bunch of words in an old book—how could that possibly affect me?

It can, though, take my word for it. It happened to me. I know my life went downhill just as soon as I read those words.

You thought you were reading about someone going through a hard time. One of two things would happen—either things would get better for her, or they wouldn't. You were prepared to follow the story from the

beginning through the middle to the end, and then you were going to put it down and get on with your life. You were prepared to feel better after it was all over—if it ended happily you'd feel good, of course, but if it didn't you'd still experience the catharsis Aristotle talked about. You were going to feel good watching me suffer.

And now you're the one who's going to suffer. What do you think of that?

I stopped going out. I skipped auditions. I sat on my floor and stared at my carpet, which was a truly hideous shade of brown. I spent a lot of time wondering why anyone would make a carpet that color. And when I wasn't worrying about my carpet I thought about Jessie.

I couldn't turn on the television without seeing her. There were ads for her movie, there was Jessie herself being featured on some entertainment show or talking to Jay Leno about what a sweetie Harrison was. And when her movie came out it got worse. I didn't go see it, of course—there was my carpet to think of—but just about all the critics liked it. The skinny guy on that Sunday evening movie review program practically fell in love with her, though the fat guy didn't go that far. No one noticed that she wasn't a very good actress, that she was missing something. I wondered if, in addition to all my other problems, I was going crazy.

Whenever I went to the supermarket, there was her picture waiting for me, on the cover of People or some tabloid. One month she was even featured in a house and garden magazine, with pictures of the

interior of her Malibu condo. I couldn't help myself—I paged through the article while standing in the check-out line. She'd told the reporter that she wanted to create a space filled with light. I doubted it—she had terrible taste, could barely even dress herself. Probably that was something her interior decorator had said.

I'd been invited to that condo, not once but dozens of times. She urged me to come along with her to parties, told me about the directors and producers who would be there. She offered to take me to dinner. I made excuses, stopped returning her calls. All I needed, I thought, was to owe Jessie my career. No, I'll be honest here—I just didn't want to see her.

I thought a lot about envy. In college I had been in a production of Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, in the scene with the seven deadly sins. I'd played Envy: "I am Envy, begotten of a chimney-sweeper and an oyster-wife . . . I am lean with seeing others eat. Oh, that there would come a famine over all the world, that all might die, and I live alone, then thou should'st see how fat I'd be!"

If I tried I could remember the six other sins—pride, anger, gluttony, sloth, lechery, and greed. Envy was definitely my sin, though. I thought I would have taken almost any of the others: pride, lechery, even gluttony. Sloth would be good. Here I was, I thought bitterly, envying other people their sins.

The phone rang. I worried that it was Jessie, full of more cheerful good news, but for some reason I answered it. It

turned out to be Ellen, a friend of mine from college, and I relaxed.

"Hey, isn't that woman in the movie Jessie What's-her-name?" Ellen asked after we'd caught up on news. "I met her once at your house, didn't I?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Well, give her my congratulations. It must be exciting for her."

"Yeah," I said again. There was silence—a puzzled silence, I thought—at the other end of the line. "I guess this proves beyond a doubt that Hollywood values looks over talent," I said finally.

Ellen laughed. "I thought she was a friend of yours," she said. "I guess not."

"I guess not," I said.

I felt briefly better, and then a whole lot worse. What was I saying? Jessie was a friend, wasn't she? Didn't she deserve better from me? What was wrong with me?

Envy. Envy was wrong with me. I realized when I hung up that I couldn't get rid of it, that it was part of me, the way the other sins were part of other people. That's why people in the Middle Ages had named them, why the terms had stayed around for so long. No one was perfect. I would have to come to terms with my sin, domesticate it. I would have to make it mine.

It felt like hard-won wisdom. I would call Jessie, I thought, meet her somewhere for lunch. I'd even congratulate

her—congratulations were long overdue. I reached toward the phone I had just hung up.

I stopped. This wasn't taming my envy. This was covering it up, sweeping it under the rug, pretending it didn't exist. I knew what I had to do. I opened my phone book and looked up Jessie's new number.

I got her secretary. I should have expected that. The secretary had me wait while she looked through a list of approved callers. I was on the list, she told me, in a voice that suggested I'd just won a car. I felt absurdly grateful.

She put me on hold and then Jessie came on. "Hi, how are you doing?" she said. "It's been far too long." She sounded cheerful, happy to hear from me.

"Not too good," I said. I told her the whole story, the book in the library, the calamities that had happened soon after, the terrible envy I had felt over her success. I very nearly recited the words from the book to her, but something stopped me. That wouldn't be coming to terms with envy—that would be giving it free rein.

"You ninny," she said when I finished.

My heart sank. She hadn't understood. She had never been bothered by envy—she couldn't know how devastating it could be. Any minute now she would say, "Why on earth should you envy me?" or something equally inane.

Instead she said, "What about the book?"

"What?" I said stupidly. I couldn't imagine what she might be talking about.

"The book in the library. You said it was called Fortune and Misfortune. If it has a phrase that brings bad luck, it probably has one for good luck as well."

I stood still for long seconds, dumbfounded. "Oh my God," I said finally. "Listen, I've got to go."

"Tell me what happens," she said. "And good luck!"

I called a cab to take me to the Los Angeles airport. I got a stand-by flight to Oakland, and took BART from Oakland to the Berkeley campus. I didn't have time to call Iago, the guy with the library card, so I bought my own.

I cranked apart the shelves in the Greek drama section. The book wasn't there. It had probably been misfiled, I thought. It certainly wasn't about Greek drama. I ran out of the stacks and waited to use a computer terminal.

Nothing with that title was listed in either GLADIS or MELVYL, the two university catalogues. I went back to the stacks, looked on the shelf above and the one below. Nothing.

I'm going to stay here until I find it, I thought. I turned the crank to get to the next shelf, then the one after that. Fortune and Misfortune, I thought. A black book, covered with dust.

I looked at books until my eyes blurred, turned the crank until my muscles ached. I

waited impatiently while someone perused a shelf I had already looked at, eager and anxious to turn the crank and move on. I was still carrying my overnight bag, hastily packed with a change of clothes, and I set it down to concentrate on my task. A black book, covered with dust.

After a few hours the lights, already dim, darkened further like the signal to return to a play after intermission. The library was closing. I left the stacks, asked one of the librarians if he could recommend a cheap place to stay.

I returned the next day, without the overnight bag. And the day after that, and the one after that. I had packed only one change of clothes, and I needed a laundromat very badly. But I couldn't take the time.

Finally, on the fifth day, I found it. I couldn't believe it at first—I had to read the title at least three or four times to make sure. But this was definitely the book. The dust was spotted with fingerprints, my own and those of whoever had misshelved it.

My hands were trembling. I opened the book and read the headings at the top of the pages. Phrases for health, love, money, beauty, knowledge. All these things would have interested me once but I rifled past them, looking for the section I wanted, hoping it would be there.

It was. "And the following words will bring good fortune forever, and are proof against all words of ill fortune," I read. "Tay, tay, tray. Tiralanta, tiralall. All, call, lall. Tiralanta, tiralall."

So. Those are the words—the bad luck you had begun to fear will not strike, and maybe even something truly wonderful is about to happen to you. Maybe the phone is ringing right now, maybe it's good news. I won't tell you what happened to me after I read these words—it's outside the scope of this story, and anyway I think I've already done enough for you. I will say that I was sick and bitter for a long time but that now I'm better, though I'll never be entirely free of these awful feelings. And that the change in my fortune did not start when I read the book the second time, but when Jessie reached out her hand to me and started to pull me toward health. It's because of her friendship, and my father's love, that I can pass along these words to you. It's still difficult for me, but I give you—I give you all—my blessing.