

THE NOVELIST'S EVENT

by James Reston, Jr.

For nearly ten days, I spend most of my time in the great, open-air atrium of the Park Hotel in Georgetown, Guyana, listening to the sensitive interviewing of perplexed newsmen. The survivors of the madman are a bedraggled lot: some resisters, others there only by the accident of life. They had business in Georgetown that day, when, a week earlier, the devil had made his prodigious, diabolical proposal in Jonestown. The luck of a properly timed dentist appointment. Some, I would later hear, considered it misfortune rather than luck. Their stories of barbarism in the jungle, the return to bestiality akin to Conrad's Kurtz, are what have drawn me here, leaping first at this authentic horror from literary impulse. It is a fascinating saga, perhaps the most fascinating of our time. Yet it is so loathsome. One hundred and fifty miles away, the American Army proceeds with its janitorial mission. Never before have I worked for so long on the edge of nausea.

Late this afternoon, I stand on the fringe of a cluster surrounding one Michael Prokes. He has the clean, weak face of everyman California, his voice the flat, common tone of the Fresno Valley. Former television newsman, Jones's press spokesman for several years, courier at the end for the wades of the Temple's millions, stuffed into ammunition pouches and dime-store suitcases....along with the letters of transfer to the Soviet Embassy. He talks matter-of-factly to his bewildered audience. It might be the uneventful noon day briefing. Where? The Federal Trade Commission or the like. No hot wind of holocaust here. I view him as the Goebbels of the piece.

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At length, Prokes discourses on the caring of Jim Jones, the blissful sharing of the loving community, grand experiment that it had been. I can take it no longer.

But what was Jones like that Saturday morning? Hadn't he changed? What had so upset him? I ask.

Jones was no different, came the answer.

"Hadn't he exploded over the crisis of Ryan's visit?"

"Oh no, Jim was always at his best in crisis."

"Look, Mr. Prokes, 900 people are dead out there, and you're saying there was no crisis that morning." My tone is sharp, the desperate frustration rising to the surface. "That makes no sense whatever."

He stares at me for a long moment, stunned. He is accustomed now to his listeners nodding dumbfoundedly at his vacancy. I have gone too far. I know it instantly. I am the author. I will be two more years on this story before I am finished. Why am I contributing to this madness, instead of simply absorbing it? What point is there in grilling the witness now? My own sanity simply.

"I don't have to take that," he snaps, rising to the further shock and disappointment of the sensitive newsmen, still full of a thousand questions. "I've tried to be cooperative. I've been answering questions now for six straight days. Look, I've got a son dead out there. I don't have to stand for your browbeating." A son? He is a faggot, I learn later, the son another of Jones's offspring, for whom Prokes becomes the eunuch-custodian. He stomps off. Newsmen turn angered stares on me. Four months later, Prokes will call a news conference in Modesto, California, read a five page statement, putting out the same old stuff: Jim Jones was Goodness incarnate, a great government conspiracy was poised to destroy his Utopia. He is