

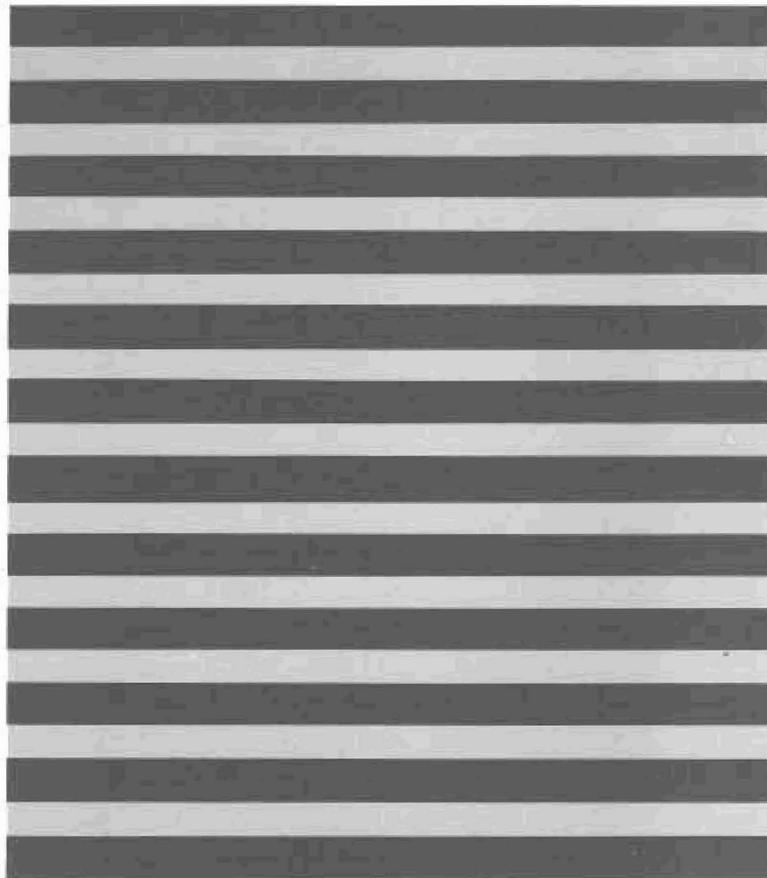
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## **Orestes in Southern California: a forensic case of matricide**

BY J. REID MELOY, PH.D.

SPECIAL REPRINT



## Orestes in Southern California: a forensic case of matricide

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*The author presents an unusual case study of matricide, one in which the perpetrator, a 33-year-old poet and actor, acted out the role of Orestes in real life. The biogenic basis of his mental illness, schizoaffective disorder, was exacerbated by a developmental trauma—the loss of his father to polio and of his mother to psychosis—as a toddler. The only psychotic avenue to his masculine identification and separation from his mother as an adult was murder.*

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In the early morning hours of May 7, 1969,<sup>1</sup> Luke awoke his mother by attempting to smother her with a pillow. Terrified by his behavior, she agreed nevertheless to go sit with him in their living room and drink a cup of coffee. Luke then asked his mother, "Will you drink from my penis?" She recoiled at the conscious thought of actual fellatio with her 33-year-old son but told him she would have to go into the kitchen first. From the kitchen she fled to her neighbors' home across the street.

The neighbors were awakened by their elderly friend—Luke's mother was 65—asking them for help and telling them that her son, who followed her, had tried to smother her while she slept. They gathered in the living room and tried to calm Luke down. Luke stayed for a few moments and then suddenly left. Mr. Smith, one of the neighbors, peered out his window and noticed that Luke was getting two objects out of the trunk of his car. As Luke again walked toward their home, Mr. Smith noticed that he was carrying a bat in one hand and a saber sword in the other.

When Luke entered the living room for the second time, he handed the bat to Mr. Smith and said, "Kill me." He drew the sword from its sheaf, approached his mother, placed his hand on the small of her back, and stabbed her in the abdomen. As Luke's mother fell backward and he repeatedly stabbed her, Mrs. Smith walked in from the kitchen, started screaming, and grabbed Luke around the waist, attempting to pull him from his mother. Mr. Smith grabbed his wife, and they fled from their home and called the police. Luke continued to plunge the sword into his mother's abdomen and chest, and then turned her over and thrust the sword into her back. He covered her with a rug and left the Smiths' house.

Officer Brown was the first to arrive at the scene of the crime. He later wrote: "I received a radio call at approximately 0650 to 1200 Corwin Street for a man stabbing his mother. As I exited the car, an unidentified citizen yelled at me, 'She's over there in that house,' pointing at 1201 Corwin Street. They also stated, 'He is at his house across the street,' pointing to 1200 Corwin Street. As I looked at this house, I observed a white male later identified as Luke at the front door. I sent Officer Marks to 1201 Corwin to check on the welfare of the victim. I went to the front door of 1200 Corwin. As I approached the front door, I asked Luke to come out and talk. He shut the door. I heard Officer Marks put out on the radio that the victim was dead. I advised radio that the subject was in 1200 Corwin Street. He had just shut the door

and I requested a unit at the rear. The front door opened again, and I observed Luke standing behind the screen door. I asked him if he would come outside so we could talk. He stated, 'Can you come inside.' I told him no, and again asked him to come outside. He approached me and I placed him in custody. I then put him in the back of my patrol car. Other officers arrived and interviewed witnesses at the scene. We arrived at Central at approximately 0740. I advised Luke of his rights<sup>2</sup> and he said he did not understand them."

Officer Marks had entered the neighbors' home and later wrote in his police report: "I found a woman lying face down on the floor in the doorway between the living room and the kitchen. The woman was covered with a rug. I pulled the rug back and checked her carotid pulse for about ten seconds. I looked at her pupils and felt her chest for any movement. There were no signs of life. I noticed a large amount of blood under her head and chest. I searched the house for other victims and it checked negative. I advised radio that the victim was dead and then I exited the house. The sword was lying on the kitchen floor at the head of the woman, and the sword case was lying on the living room floor."

While en route to the police station, Luke made the following unsolicited comments: "I never killed anyone before. My mom's worked hard all her life and all she wanted to do is see Bob. She lost him when she was young. I did it because I love her. If that is hard to believe, I will explain later."

Five minutes went by. "Did I do the right thing? My mother suffered enough."

Three minutes later: "Uh-oh, I'm in trouble now. A man's got to do what a man's got to do. The toys of your childhood, my mother was Satan, you know."

Four minutes later: "My mother was a ballerina, she was crazy as a bedbug, a gorilla, she was sweet and tender like every mother."

Three minutes later: "What I did was right, wasn't it? All I want is to leave the country. It was the hardest thing I ever had to do."

Eight minutes later: "She was the Fury. I had to kill the Fury to become a man."

Five minutes later: "Every women is my mother. No, that is not right. I killed her; every woman is my sister."

Twelve minutes later: "Mother killer, Fury."

Five minutes later: "I should be at peace with my mother. I know what my sentence should be."

Ten minutes later: "You guys just sit here like nothing happened. I just killed my mother. I don't understand you. This is for the Judas Priest and hell's bells, all the pain my mother suffered working at the store. She ran the business and they were stingy."

Twenty minutes later: "Are you going to shoot me for murder? She was tired and I'm glad I did it."

Just prior to the drive to the police station, Luke had begun to exhibit unusual behavior in the back of the vehicle. He sat cross-legged on the floor with his hands cuffed behind his back, and rhythmically rocked forward and backward. He hummed to himself and made a thumping noise as he rocked. He became restless and moved around the rear of the truck. He yelled, "Get me out of here before it happens! You've got to let me out of here so I can take my mother home. Is she OK?" He pressed his lips against the upright of the rear door window glass on the driver's side and said, "I'm eating

bugs.” He sat on the rear bench and pushed his legs against a metal brace. He said, “Officer, you’ve got to lock my legs up.” He then ran forward and began striking his forehead on the rear window glass. When the officers told him to calm down, he backed away from the glass, crouched down, and silently raged at them. He growled, gritted his teeth, contorted his face, and trembled.

Mr. and Mrs. Smith were subsequently interviewed by the police.<sup>3</sup> Mr. Smith reported, “I was sitting having coffee. I’m not sure if my wife was awake. Luke and his mother came over. She was crying and they both entered my house about the same time. Luke was saying something about being sorry. I told them to sit down, and gave them coffee. Luke began some general conversation with me about my garden. He wanted to see it. He then left the house and went across the street to his house. When he came back over, he was dressed in a pair of shorts. I saw him take some things out of his car. It was parked out front. He walked into the house. He came over, gave me the baseball bat, and said, ‘You can kill me.’ I was standing in the living room. His mother was walking out of the kitchen and into the dining room. She had been there talking with my wife. I saw him take the sword out of the scabbard that he was carrying. He put his hand behind his mother and stabbed her. He went all the way to the hilt. She fell. I ran out the front door and around to the rear of the house to get my wife. When I came through the kitchen, I pulled my wife away and I saw Luke jabbing his mother in the back. We ran out the kitchen door and went to the neighbors. Luke told his mother he was sorry before he stabbed her.”

Mrs. Smith recalled, “At about six thirty my husband woke me up and said that Luke’s mother was in our house and wanted to see me. She whispered to me, ‘Luke tried to suffocate me. He put a pillow over my head and tried to kill me. He almost got me.’ Luke went into the back yard with my husband. Luke’s mother said she was going to call an ambu-

lance. She did not want to call the police. She did not want to upset him. Luke and my husband came back into the house and got a cup of coffee. Luke went into his house, and in a few minutes came back with his own mug. He got more coffee and said to me, 'You know, Madeleine, I have been having all these terrible things go through my mind.' He then went back to his house. My husband was watching through the living room window. He hollered, 'He's coming now, and he's carrying something that he took out of the trunk of his car.' Luke's mother was talking to her sister on the telephone. She hung up the phone and started walking toward the dining room. I put the phone on the kitchen floor. I then went to the bedroom and came back immediately. As I was walking in the hallway, I saw him and heard him say, 'I'm sorry, mother, I'm sorry, I love you.' He hit her with the sword and knocked her down. I don't think it penetrated the first time, because he was on top of her just burying it in. I saw him do it about three times. I tried to grab him from the waist. He was bent over her. She was saying, 'Oh Luke, oh Luke, you're killing your mother.' My husband pulled me back, and I was walking back towards the door, still watching him just burying it in. We left the house and went running to our neighbors."

Luke's mother was taken to the county medical examiner's office. The autopsy report read, in part: "The body is that of an unembalmed, well developed, well nourished Caucasian female whose general physical condition is consistent with a chronological age of 65 years. . . . The chest shows multiple stab wounds, some of which are very small up to one eighth inch at maximum dimension. Chiefly in the upper portion of the left chest and over the left neck, several deep stab wounds are also present. . . . Over the upper lateral portion of the left breast is a disruption about three-quarter inch in dimension. On the upper right portion of the abdomen are a number of deep disruptions. . . . The back also shows a number of stab wounds. There are a total of twenty-two cuts and wounds to the body of the victim and two defensive cuts to the left arm of the victim."<sup>4</sup> The cause of Luke's mother's death was

massive hemorrhage due to laceration of the heart, lungs and liver.

Luke was questioned by homicide investigators as to why he killed his mother. "It's complicated, it's a long story why I killed my mother. First of all, in order to understand I'm trying to join you. I never killed before. The only thing that I have ever killed are red ants and roaches. One time I killed a bird with a slingshot from a tree. The bird is the largest animal that I killed until I killed my mother. I did it for the sake of our earth. If you knew the whole story, you would understand. I feel like you, my mother, my sister, my brother, I am lost. I need some guidance, some help in terms of helping the shape, changing the environment on the earth. Subconsciously, the red ants and cockroaches that I was killing, I was killing Indians and Blacks, not that they were. My tender mother, she was a gorilla. She was a missing link to bridge the gulf between the past and the present, if you understand what I'm saying. All that has been lost. I dream of extinct animals and creatures brought back."<sup>5</sup>

Luke continued, "She wanted to be with Bob, her husband. Maybe I did wrong. I thought I was doing the right thing. I wanted to join you. You are humanity. I want to join you. My mother was a saint. I killed her to save the saints. I saw signs and symbols everywhere. I am no one. I am nobody. I care about everything and I care about nothing. I have not been asleep for five days. I have lost track of time. I killed my mother. She worked for eighteen years and broke her back. I sacrificed her because I thought it was the second coming of Christ. My mother was a sixty-five-year-old female version of Jesus Christ and she was crazy. I think I decoded her. I used a sword, a sword I found in India, in a palace hotel in an India closet. I used the sword in a play. It was heavy. I saw blood coming from her and spilling on the kitchen floor. I am sorry. I am not guilty. She screamed at me, 'You're killing me, Luke.' We worked in a code. The first time I tried to kill her was gently with a pillow, but that was

not right, she told me. I then got two weapons, a bat and a knife. I tossed one to the man of the house, gave him the baseball bat and asked him to kill me, but he didn't. I stabbed her heart. It was hard for her to fall. I saw Dr. Atherton after I freaked out from a play. It was a Greek trilogy. The name of the play was the *Oresteia*. The Fury drove me crazy . . . I am the Jew's Messiah and the Moslem's Mahda. I wouldn't have killed my mother if I had seen the geyser in Mexico."<sup>6</sup>

### **Prelude to the homicide**

Luke was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1939. His father, a captain in the Army, died of bulbar polio when Luke was 18 months old. His mother had an acute psychotic break, most likely a psychotic depression, following the loss of her 33-year-old husband when she was 30. She was hospitalized for a year, during which time Luke and his older brother lived with their aunt and uncle in Omaha, Nebraska. Luke never gave up hope, however, that his mother would recover, and she did join them in Nebraska until Luke was five. They moved to Southern California, where Luke lived until he was 21.

His mother was remarried briefly for two years, and this union produced a second brother. All three children were intellectually and athletically gifted. Luke's older brother eventually became a physician, and the younger one a professional athlete. Luke reports that his school years were relatively uneventful, and he received his bachelor's degree in English from a well-regarded private university. He had distinctive skills in both basketball and poetry, and he eventually received his master's degree in English from a major university. He also spent one semester in Europe studying German.

Luke characterized 1959 as the year his grand odyssey began. Others would consider this time as the beginning of his insidious decompensation into psychosis, which eventually

resulted in his matricide. He went to New York and from there to Europe, where he spent six months living in Sweden with a young woman. It didn't work out. He moved to Copenhagen, where he met a rather charismatic Indian intellectual who encouraged him to study in the Far East. He moved to Pakistan and remained there until 1961.

Luke returned to Europe to visit his Indian friend in Italy. They returned to India and Pakistan together, where they attended a private Islamic school. Luke converted to Islam, had his first psychotic break, and was arrested by the police. He spent ten days in observation, and the American vice consul sent the following letter to his psychiatrist in the United States:

Luke first came to our attention in late June, when three of his American classmates at his school devoted to the study of Islam told us that he had been acting strangely. They said he had become extremely aggressive and quarrelsome, and occasionally appeared to be suffering from hallucinations. On July 14, 1962 (age 23) he was reported to the police for his dangerous behavior, and arrested by local police the next day for violating the Lunacy Act. The Lunacy Act makes it illegal to be a lunatic in Pakistan. The normal procedure in Lunacy Act arrests is for the court to commit the accused to jail for ten days' observation by a prison doctor. Luke was visited in the prison hospital by our counselor officer, who found him subdued, polite, and confused. He expressed a desire to return to the United States. He said he bore no animosity toward anyone and realized that he was in jail for his own good since he needed the rest.

Local authorities agreed to release Luke from custody and then dropped the charges against him on July 28. He departed for the United States two days later.

Upon his return, Luke was diagnosed with chronic paranoid schizophrenia, a major mental disorder characterized by hallucinations (false sensations) and delusions (fixed false beliefs). During the next three years he was treated with large doses of antipsychotic medications and showed major improvement.

Luke re-entered the theater and appeared on several nationally recognized stages. He won an Atlas award for one performance.

Before the homicide, Luke was teaching as a graduate assistant and rehearsing the trilogy *Oresteia*. In the first play he was Agamemnon, the father of Orestes, who sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia in order to make the winds favorable for his voyage to Troy. In the third play, *Eumenides*, Luke played a Fury who demanded revenge against Orestes for the murder of his mother, Clytemnestra.

While rehearsing, Luke fell in love with an actress named Lorena Darwin, who played Cassandra. He was also involved in a lengthy asexual relationship with a woman named Gertrude Smith; they spent a great deal of time together, but she had a boyfriend in San Antonio.

Luke had two props in the *Oresteia*, a baseball bat and a ceremonial sword. He found the saber in a closet at a single-room-occupancy hotel in the city where he lived. He believed the saber had been left for him by some unknown person. Imprinted on it was "Made in India," and, of course, Luke had undergone his spiritual transformation there several years earlier when he had converted from Catholicism to Islam. During rehearsal, Luke felt influenced by external forces and began hearing and seeing things as if he were touched by the gods. He began to believe that his actions were not his own, as if he were simply a medium for God's will.<sup>7</sup> One evening he attempted to sexually seduce Lorena. She rebuffed him and distanced herself. The next day, Luke noticed a large map in one of the classrooms at school. He believed this map, if he gave it as a gift to Lorena, would reconcile them, since she was organizing a trip to South America. He was also hallucinating more often.

Several days later a professor was lecturing on Shakespeare's *A Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night*. He began a sentence

with the words “The problem is . . . ,” and Luke knew the problem was world hunger. He interrupted the professor with a question but instead confused him. Luke threw an orange from his lunch bag at the map and stormed out of the classroom. The professor followed him to the lunchroom and tried to talk with him, but Luke grabbed an apple that the professor was eating, began eating it himself, and threw down the core. He angrily left campus, went to his car, and leaned on his automobile horn to “punctuate” his anger. He drove to Mexico without telling his mother, with whom he continued to live.<sup>8</sup>

Luke stopped at a statue of Lazarus in Tijuana. He left his car and saluted the statue as if someone who was dead had risen again. He later reported that he felt superhuman at the time. Luke was compelled to drop out of school, leave the play and his job, and make his way out of the country. He felt threatened by others and feared for his safety, as he perceived the world collapsing about him.

There was a red warning label on a toilet in a bathroom. Luke believed this was a sign that he should flee from those he knew and live in Mexico with those he did not know but who nevertheless were real.<sup>9</sup> The next day he returned to Southern California, however, and began to wander the grounds of a local psychiatric hospital. His car battery died, so he borrowed a friend’s car, returned to school, and announced to his students and department chair that he was resigning.

Luke said, in retrospect, “I felt guided, not by specific voices, but as if I was in the hollow of an immensely powerful hand and doing its wishes.” He felt controlled if he left his mother’s home but somehow, paradoxically, under his own control when in her home.

His behavior became increasingly peculiar. He took two of his dead father’s ceremonial swords and two books of plays: *To Kill a Mockingbird* and four screenplays by Ingmar

Bergman. Late one night he went to a women's clothing store, left one sword and a large stone, and broke some bottles in front of the store as "an offering." He hitchhiked several blocks to a pornographic theater, where he handed the other sword, the other book of plays, and a stone to the owner. He later told an examiner that he was trying to convince the theater owner that pornographic movies were inappropriate. The book of plays was a reference to classical art, and the stone and the sword were a threat and a bribe. When he found out that the theater did indeed stop showing pornographic films, he was elated.

He began to rearrange his room in his mother's home. His father, of whom he had no conscious memory, became a central figure in his mind, especially since he had relinquished his father's swords. Luke felt alone and miserable. He began playing with his childhood toys in his room. His psychotic regression carried him into an isolative state, alone with his mother. He ruminated about his mother's love for only one man, his father; she would often say that she pined for him, and wished that she could die and join him. She told Luke she would soon be granted her wish, given her age.<sup>10</sup>

Early one morning, several weeks before the killing, Luke took the flag that had covered his father's coffin, and his father's picture, and climbed up onto the roof of his house. He wouldn't listen to his mother begging him to come down. He spread the flag upside down on the roof and placed his father's picture facing east. He tied the canvas bag that had held the flag around the chimney like a diaper. Luke began tom-tomming on the top of the chimney to greet the dawn "as a wild Indian."

He remembered hearing the sound echoing blocks away, and the voices of small children yelling, "Take me first, take me first," as if they were asking for a spaceship to take them away. Luke climbed down, ran into his garage, and grabbed his father's relic Japanese rifle and a toy rifle. As he rounded

the corner of his house, two policemen accosted him and spread-eagled him on the ground. He was handcuffed and searched. He remembered seeing oil stains on his pants leg and realized that oil was the major crisis on earth.

Luke spent a week in a psychiatric hospital. As a patient, he arranged a field trip to the local university to see the *Oresteia* with a member of the staff and other patients. He was excited to see the play, and at one point he stood up and joined the Fury in saying, "Or who will live with justice?" The doctor told him to sit down.

Following his discharge, Luke went to Santa Barbara. He convinced some friends to return with him to the *Oresteia*, the same production for which he had auditioned, but he was rejected because of his deteriorating psychotic condition. It was ten days before he would murder his mother.

The next day he made love to his girlfriend, Gertrude, and believed it was a magical experience. He was easily sexually aroused, and he noted that there was a huge oil strike in Mexico, linking these two events in his mind. Luke urged Gertrude to buy a house with him so they could live together.

Gertrude recalled these days for the police investigators: "On Friday, two days before Luke killed his mother, he called me around 11:30 p.m. He was crying and told me he was coming over. He paced the floor and was taking walks out of the apartment. He was saying he hates machinery. He disconnected all the clocks and the refrigerator; he was acting like a little boy."

"Luke talked to himself, read out loud, went outside and banged his head on his car. He had this great need to protect me, and said how much he loved his mother. He didn't sleep that night and left the next morning."

“He called me at work at 9 a.m. He had driven through our town at 90 miles per hour to see what it was like to be in *Star Wars*. Luke said it was like driving through the valley of the shadow of death. He called again around 1:30. He was crying and wanted to see me. Luke said he was homicidal and couldn’t live without me. He was also worried that someone was going to hurt me.”

“I went over to their house after work. Luke’s mother thought he was doing better, and she was cooking dinner. He was telling her how great she was, the greatest mother in the world. After dinner, she told him she couldn’t take it any more, and that he had to take his medicine. She told him to move out, and that she was tired, old, and not feeling well.”

“She also told Luke that if anything happened to her, her oldest son had her will and that her estate would be split into three parts for her sons. Luke openly resented that he didn’t have possession of the will.”

(Earlier that day Luke had gone to the church where he had received his religious training, and visited the Stations of the Cross. He remembered feeling “totally in love with my mother, the best woman I have ever known.” He would weep profusely when he recalled this in subsequent interviews. Luke also became convinced that both his city and another major metropolitan area were going to be bombed in retribution for Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He delusionally believed that they had been chosen as sacrificial cities to ensure world peace, and that he could stop this devastation only if he had sex with his mother or killed her. This delusion quickly coalesced as the central, conscious motivation for the matricide.)

Gertrude continued, “Luke’s mother talked about her husband. She said that when he died, she couldn’t make it and had to go to the hospital. She also told Luke that she loved him but sometimes didn’t like him. Luke promised that he would go to the doctor. He paced the floor and cried. We

went outside, and he asked if I thought she was being too harsh with him. I said, 'Yes, a bit.' We went for a walk, and he kept telling me what horrible shape the world was in. Then he'd talk about machinery and airplanes, and leaving the country. I went home at 9 p.m."

"He telephoned me at 10 to see if I was O.K. He called back at 11:30 and was crying. He said he was coming over to protect my house, because he was afraid something was going to happen to me.<sup>11</sup> I heard him yelling at his mother, 'Get out of my room, I don't want you here.' He told me he'd kill himself if anything happened to me. I asked him to not come over, but he showed up at my house at 1:15 in the morning. He said he had a dream that something was going to happen to me. He talked about going to the moon, and that we were going to get married in Mexico tonight. He was restless and continually pacing my apartment. When I told him no, he said he was going to kill his mother and that he hated her. I said, 'You don't hate her, you love her.'<sup>12</sup> He then said, 'Will, will, will, will, oh, I get it—maybe I should kill her in her sleep and everybody *will* think that she died in her sleep.'<sup>13</sup> He talked a lot about killing her. I didn't ask him anything. I didn't want to know. He was with me about an hour. When he left at 2:30, he didn't say he was going to do it. He went to get some things from his car, and took a pillow from my couch. He got his wallet and some money out of a pair of pants."

Luke couldn't sleep, and went in to tell his mother. She invited him into bed with her, but this didn't help. In fact, he became increasingly agitated.<sup>14</sup> When they went into the living room together, he watched her smoke and realized how immensely powerful she was. He delusionally believed that her smoking was fueling the brush and forest fires that were occurring in their city on this extremely hot weekend. He remembered hearing her refer to herself as "the dragon lady." He believed that whatever she did affected the entire earth. Luke thought that he couldn't have sexual intercourse with

her, since her vagina was sacred and belonged to his dead father. Anal intercourse was also out of the question. His only recourse was fellatio, which prompted his question "Will you drink from my penis?"<sup>15</sup> He remembered then placing a pillow over her face for about five or ten seconds as she sat in the chair.<sup>16</sup> When asked by investigators if this was the way he gave his mother a choice between dying and having sex with him, he yelled, "Exactly, exactly!"<sup>17</sup>

### **Aftermath of the homicide**

Luke was found guilty of voluntary manslaughter<sup>18</sup> and not guilty by reason of insanity. The psychiatrists and psychologists who examined him following the crime agreed that he met the legal criteria for insanity: as a result of a mental disorder, he lacked substantial capacity either to appreciate the criminality of his conduct or to conform his conduct to the requirements of the law.<sup>19</sup>

Luke had initially been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia following his first psychotic break in Pakistan. After the homicide, the clinical consensus was that Luke suffered from an affective or mood disorder of psychotic proportions, technically called schizoaffective disorder. The natural course and symptoms of this mental illness include an onset in early adulthood and the variable and extreme disorganization of thinking, feeling, and perception. Thoughts are pervaded with grandiose delusions; feelings fluctuate between accelerated states of mania and deep waves of depression; and perceptions include false sensations such as auditory or visual hallucinations. In Luke's case all these symptoms were present, except for the depression. Like the schizophrenias and other major mood disorders, schizoaffective disorder appears to have an inherited biological basis. In the murder of Luke's mother, this mental disorder provided the delusional thinking that consciously rationalized his act. He wrote this letter ten years after the matricide:

In all my early life, I felt locked in a struggle. The struggle of the individual to maintain his integrity and identity alone in a world where most others have succumbed to the beauty of brute force, natural energy, and mindlessness. Ten years ago, I, too, in a terrible moment of madness succumbed to the worst of the world in myself. In my vision of intense horror, by the deranged act I committed, I intended to shock the world into the kind of awareness that would forever banish the forces of ignorance, fear, hatred and prejudice from within ourselves and from our world. My intention was honorable, my means insane. My mother was to be the sacrifice on the world's altar. Hers was to be the final murder on earth. My own death, which I expected to soon follow, will be the final execution on earth. I imagined that I would be crucified on satellite television around the world and my death would be witnessed by virtually every person on the face of the planet. What I perceived humanity to be perpetrating against Mother Earth, I did to my own beloved mother as a sign and a warning that humanity was destroying our planet and itself. And in my own mind it was to be the last murder. My mother's death at my hand would stop the madness and the killing for once and for all. In my mind, I was sacrificing my world, my mother, so that our larger world, Mother Earth, could be saved and made to work as well as we all wish it would work, peace and plenty like paradise come to earth.

Luke was committed to a regional forensic hospital, where he remained in treatment for seven years. He was conditionally released to an involuntary outpatient program in his community, from which he absconded two years later. He was identified in a distant city after being on the lam for nine months, and was extradited back to the state from which he had fled. Luke was restored to sanity<sup>20</sup> eleven years after his matricide; he now lives his life unfettered by the legal constraints of the criminal justice system.

But the question remains, why did Luke kill his mother? What were the motivations and developmental pathways that inexorably led Luke to this matricide when he was 33 years old? Why would Luke kill his mother when thousands of other individuals who suffer from major psychotic disorders are never violent?<sup>21</sup> Such an act is complex and multi-determined, and not all the contributing factors can ever be

known. But certain variables do seem necessary, although not sufficient, for the commission of this matricide.

Most obvious to understanding Luke's act was his genetic vulnerability to psychosis. Research in psychiatry and psychology has demonstrated that most major psychoses, when not drug induced, have a largely inherited component. They are transmitted from one generation to the next, although they may remain dormant in certain generations, and they are more likely to occur among first-degree blood relatives of those with the illness.

Luke's genetic vulnerability to a major mood disorder, diagnostically labeled schizoaffective disorder, was foreshadowed in the psychotic episode of his mother following the death of his father. She was 30 years old at the time. So Luke, according to the patrilineal or matrilineal transmission of the disorder, was biologically predisposed to the development of a major psychosis in early adulthood, depending on the extremity of environmental stressors. In his case, the stressors were most likely the acculturative shock of his journey to the Far East and his separation from his mother, a symbiotic dependency without which he could not maintain a grasp on reality.

The singular developmental factor that predisposed Luke to matricide was the trauma of losing both his mother and his father when he was 18 months old. This is an important and complex period in a child's life, and a time when attachment disruptions and losses can deeply wound and scar a nascent psychology. Margaret Mahler, a distinguished psychoanalyst and researcher, called this period "separation-individuation,"<sup>22</sup> and described the subphases of differentiation, practicing, rapprochement crisis and object constancy. The entire period chronologically encompasses the infant's life from six months through three to four years.

What was most salient to Luke's psychology was the sudden loss of his mother as a constant object when his narcissistic

sense of autonomy and omnipotence had flowered and he was feeling his own separateness and vulnerability. This is the end of the subphase of “practicing” and the beginning of the “rapprochement crisis,” when the toddler is moving away from and returning to his mother, resisting his dependency and her constraints, and excitedly although ambivalently exploring the world. In fantasy the child is annihilating the mother when he has temper tantrums and is sensing himself as omnipotent, the center of the universe. At the same time, the mother is containing the child when he is angry, and also mirroring the child’s grandiosity in a nourishing and full manner when elation is felt by both. As the rapprochement subphase continues, the child experiences feelings of remorse on the heels of his wishes to destroy, to be rid of his mother; at other times he feels heightened anxiety in her absence. He realizes that his wishes and his mother’s are not always consonant. Goal-directed anger is more apparent, and hyperactivity and restlessness emerge as a defense against his awareness of sadness. His mother is now perceived as separate, but is alternatively conceived as being “all good” or “all bad,” a defense that is referred to as *splitting*.<sup>23</sup> He also encounters doses of reality that are inhibiting or downright painful, reminding him that his grandiosity has limits and that his mother is wanted but is not always satisfying. During the consolidation of rapprochement, and in satisfactory and nontraumatic mother–child dyads, the mother remains to accept with gratitude her child’s remorse and sadness, and attempts to soothe the painful exigencies of his reality. The child returns to his mother, his narcissism tempered, his destructive fantasies quieted, and his capacity for the empathic sense of others born. He has “gradually and painfully given up the delusion of his own grandeur.”<sup>24</sup>

In Luke’s case, his mother is suddenly gone, and in his mind he has destroyed her. His annihilatory fantasies, a product of his normal intermittent rage toward his mother, have caused her to disappear, and his omnipotence is verified in reality. Luke’s narcissism has become to him a source of danger, and

the wellspring of further abandonment rage at her loss and fear of his own destructive power. His sense of specialness and entitlement is no longer an avenue of experimentation ("practicing") and pleasure, but a diabolical aspect of his personality that has the potential for real destructiveness and omnipotent control of others.

Luke cannot finish the developmental subphase of rapprochement because he has no opportunity for reparation. There is no longer a maternal object to receive his gratitude and contain his disquieting affects. Her loss and subsequent return have dynamically set the stage upon which his delusions of persecution and rescue (of both his mother and Mother Earth) can consciously fuel the matricide many years later.

His dependency needs were also magnified in the absence of his mother. Paradoxically, narcissism demands dependency. It is a pseudo-autonomy that requires the admiration of others. The toddler whose narcissism is flowering is lost without the parent as audience, just as the narcissistic personality-disordered adult demands attention and yet devalues it. Luke's early memories were imbued with a sense of great destiny and he met the criteria for narcissistic personality disorder in the years following the matricide.<sup>25</sup> His intense dependence and ambivalence concerning his mother were captured in several responses from a sentence-completion test that he did after the homicide. To the phrase "As a child my greatest fear was" Luke wrote "that my mother would go away like my father did." He responded to the phrase "He felt his lack of success was due to" by writing "a protracted psychological dependency on others, especially my mother." And then he completed "Love is" with "seeing your mother in a lost picture on a milk carton."

The loss of his father also mattered immensely to Luke, but in a more disguised form. James Grotstein,<sup>26</sup> a distinguished contemporary psychoanalyst, has used the term "background object of primary identification" to describe the way in which

certain parental objects provide the template for the concept of self. Although Luke never consciously knew his father, this background figure was an unconscious identification suffused with the hope and expectation of an eventual masculine identity. The death of his father meant a search for an alternative paternal identification figure, which was never to be fully realized. Luke found it for a period of time with his uncle, and it was probably rekindled with his mother's second marriage, when Luke was four years old. But in all these cases the "father" leaves or is lost, and unconsciously Luke has achieved the taboo wish of Oedipus: to kill the father and mate with the mother. This oedipal fantasy becomes more salient as he reflects from the age of five, when his mother's second husband leaves, back to the dawn of his consciousness when his father disappeared. Omnipotence, again, stimulates the belief that he caused his father's death.

Luke's failure to resolve the oedipal crisis (through renunciation of the wish to mate with the mother and identification with the father) is pursued in his theatrical roles as an adult, and most dramatically in the moments before the homicide, when he hands the bat to Mr. Smith, "the man of the house," and orders Mr. Smith to kill him—a desperate attempt to triangulate his relationship to his mother by compelling a father figure to stop him from literally sexually assaulting or killing his mother.

When Mr. Smith does not do this, Luke thrusts the penis-sword into the abdomen of his mother. The act of matricide becomes a condensation of sexuality and violence, the wish/fear of both Oedipus and Orestes,<sup>27</sup> an act that could be committed only in a psychotic state and was the repetition of maternal annihilation, born in his omnipotence fantasy and borne out in actuality when Luke was 18 months old.

During the post-homicide years, Luke's violence risk toward others did not focus upon a repetition of the matricide with another older female, but upon his incessant need to verbally

taunt younger males. Invariably he would be physically assaulted and injured. The psychodynamics for this behavior appeared to involve a competitiveness with other males, usually oedipally rooted, and a masochistic desire to be punished for his act of matricide.<sup>28</sup>

Luke's genetic vulnerability to psychosis and the traumatic loss of his mother and father during his period of separation-individuation irrevocably shaped his personality. His childhood narcissism, manifested in feelings of omnipotence and entitlement, was never modulated enough by a constant and mostly nurturant maternal object. His dependency needs, heightened by the loss of his mother and her subsequent return one year later, were exacerbated by the onset of his psychosis, his return to her symbiotic orbit as a man, and his unconscious desire to somehow capture as an adult what he had lost as a child.

Luke's search for a masculine identification became the capstone of his psychopathology and the matricide: by killing his mother he could renounce his wish to mate with her, fulfill her wish to be reunited with her husband, and perform an omnipotent act that would rescue Mother Earth. In Luke's psychotic state of mind, the only avenue to his masculine identification and separation from his mother as an erotic object was matricide.<sup>29</sup>

## Notes

1. All identifying information in this actual forensic case has been altered to adequately disguise the identity of the patient. When an individual pleads insanity, as Luke did, he waives all rights to privilege concerning evidence pertaining to his mental state. The data contained in this essay were introduced as evidence in Luke's case and are a matter of court record.
2. *Miranda v. Arizona* (384 U.S. 436) 1966. For an excellent historical, legal and political analysis of the case, see Baker, L. (1983). *Miranda: Crime, Law, and Politics*. New York: Atheneum.
3. Scientific research during the past 15 years has demonstrated that eyewitness testimony is substantially influenced by the passage of

time, post-event suggestion, and witness motivation, among other things. See Loftus, E. (1991). *Witness for the Defense*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

4. Stabbing wounds are distinguished from cutting wounds by being deeper than wide, possibly damaging vital organs beneath skin and bone, and showing a predominance of internal bleeding. The wound itself is usually smaller than the blade that caused it because of the elasticity of the skin. Defensive wounds, usually to the hands and forearms, indicate that the victim attempted to resist or stop the attack by grabbing or blocking the weapon. See Geberth, V.J. (1990). *Practical Homicide Investigation: Tactics, Procedures, and Forensic Techniques (2nd Ed.)*. New York: Elsevier.
5. Luke's formal thought disorder, evident in this monologue, is a symptom of his psychosis, his loss of contact with consensual reality. Formal thought disorder refers to a disturbance in the form of thought rather than in the content. This portion of Luke's monologue is most indicative of derailment, a term used to describe speech "in which a person's ideas slip off one track onto another that is completely unrelated or only obliquely related." See *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (1994)*, p. 766. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.
6. This passage again illustrates Luke's derailment. Although his thinking does appear quite loose to an examiner, in his mind the thoughts are linked by delusions: fixed false beliefs that he has no personal boundaries and that certain religious events and figures are inextricably bound to his murderous purpose. The theological transcendence of the personal criminal act is common in the teleological, or purposive, reasoning of the psychotic individual who commits homicide.
7. Visual hallucinations alone are unusual in psychotic disorders unless the pathogenesis is an organic factor, such as the ingestion of a controlled substance like methamphetamine or phencyclidine (PCP).
8. Although the research concerning actual cases of matricide is small, most appear to be committed by schizophrenic males who are living alone with their mother at the time of the killing. See Campion, J., Cravens, J., Rotholc, A., Weinstein, H., Covan, F., and Alpert, M. (1985). A study of 15 matricidal men. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 142, pp. 312-317. Luke fits this modal profile.
9. This is a symptom called an idea of reference. It is a "feeling that casual incidents and external events have a particular and unusual meaning that is specific to the person" (DSM-IV, p. 768). It often is a marker for developing persecutory or paranoid beliefs.
10. Is there complicity between mother and son that results in matricide? In Luke's case, his mother's behavior, if retrospectively accurate,

may have contributed to his matricidal impulses, since he could consciously rationalize his act as a fulfillment of his mother's desires. There is also the hint of oedipal jealousy in these behaviors, as Luke, the son, gives away the father's swords (penis), yet still finds that his mother's sole love is her dead husband, and Luke cannot mate with her. In other cases I have found that mothers often harbor the unconscious belief that if they sacrifice their life, their mentally ill adult son will somehow be cured or healed. I call this a "resurrection delusion."

11. This behavior infers the presence of the defense of projective identification. Luke is attributing to forces outside himself his own hatred and malevolence, yet he must somehow control these forces. In this case, projective identification is being used as a psychotic defense against further disorganization. Luke cannot just project his rage and be done. He must protect those who he at times believes are in mortal danger—in this case his mother and his girlfriend, alternative erotic objects within his tumultuous intrapsychic world. See Grotstein, J. (1981). *Splitting and Projective Identification*. New York: Aronson. Dr. Grotstein offers a Kleinian perspective, enhanced by the work of Wilfred Bion.
12. In actuality, Luke hated *and* loved his mother, experiencing these feelings at an extreme level in rapid oscillation, a marker for the defense of splitting and the manic psychosis in which he was caught. This comment, a futile attempt to be helpful, probably further confused and agitated Luke.
13. This is a further example of formal thought disorder, wherein certain divergent meanings of one word are condensed: in this example, the "will" of his mother, upon her death, is condensed with "will" as an auxiliary verb that directs futurity or a course of action. Condensation is a genotypic mechanism for many different types of formal thought disorder. See Meloy, J.R. (1986) on the relationship between primary process and thought disorder. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis*, 14, 47-56.
14. Her behavior, if it actually occurred, would signify to Luke, in his psychotic state, her acquiescence to his sexual desires, motivated by his delusion that he would save two cities from a nuclear holocaust. His mother's offer to gratify his oedipal wish, no longer unconscious as it is in most adults, would reasonably trigger intense emotional turmoil. Her behavior raises further questions about her unconscious complicity with Luke in his regressive sexual fantasies, as well as his matricidal fantasies, as noted earlier.
15. His question is also a condensation of an incorporative fantasy (drinking, eating) and a sexual fantasy. Such condensations are common in crude colloquial expressions for various sexual activities—e.g., "eating" or "eat me" for fellatio and cunnilingus. In

fact, two libidinal areas are involved, the oral and the genital, which metaphorically links two different stages of psychosexual development during such sexual activity.

16. Notice that this contradicts the reports of Mr. and Mrs. Smith concerning the timing and location of the attempted smothering. Discrepancies such as these are not uncommon in homicide investigations when several witnesses must remember the reported *memory* of another. Most evidence codes recognize the gross distortions inherent in such recall by excluding most forms of *hearsay* during testimony. Generally testimony is direct personal observation. One of the exceptions is the use of hearsay by expert witnesses.
17. Psychotic regression, in its extreme forms, is often manifest in conflicts between *eros* and *thanatos*. In matricide it is given an oedipal twist.
18. California law requires a finding of criminal guilt before sanity is determined. Voluntary manslaughter is a degree of homicide that requires intent, but it does not require premeditation, deliberation, or malice aforethought, elements of a killing that are legally necessary for various degrees of murder.
19. These are the American Law Institute (ALI) criteria, in effect in California at the time of Luke's homicide. Individuals are acquitted by reason of insanity in about one-quarter of one percent of felony cases, and there is invariably agreement by both prosecution and defense that the individual was insane at the time of the crime, obviating the need for a trial.
20. The legal basis for restoration of sanity, at least in California, rests on the determination that the individual would not constitute a danger to self or others. It is a curious anomaly, since the original criteria used to *determine* insanity are irrelevant. It is thus logically possible that an individual could continue to meet the criteria for insanity at the time of the crime and also meet the criterion for restoration of sanity. Statutory law, however, precludes such a possibility.
21. Although research concerning the relationship between violence and mental illness is not conclusive, the consensus among experts is that mental illness is not a major factor in violence risk unless a symptom of the mental illness, such as a delusion, specifically motivates the violent act itself. This is a critical aspect of Luke's matricide, since he delusionally believed he must kill his mother to save two cities from nuclear holocaust. See Monahan, J. (1981). *The Clinical Prediction of Violent Behavior*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications. Monahan, J. and Steadman, H. (eds.) (1994). *Violence and Mental Disorder: Developments in Risk Assessment*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

22. See Mahler, M., Pine, F. & Bergman, A. (1975). *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant*. New York: Basic Books. Meloy, J.R. (1992). *Violent Attachments*. Northvale, NJ: Aronson.
23. This pre-oedipal defense, which divides the psychological world into alternating all-good and all-bad representations, gives way to repression in later childhood. When self and others are conceived as whole, integrated objects in the mind of the child, usually during latency (ages 6–10), splitting is no longer operative as a psychological defense. See Kernberg, O. (1975). *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism*. New York: Jason Aronson. Meloy, J.R. (1988). *The Psychopathic Mind*. Northvale, NJ: Aronson.
24. Mahler et al., *supra* note 22, at 79.
25. The DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) lists nine criteria for the diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder, five of which must be present: is interpersonally exploitative; is grandiosely self-important; believes that his or her problems are unique; is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty or ideal love; has a sense of entitlement; requires excessive admiration; lacks empathy; is preoccupied with feelings of envy; and shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes.
26. See Grotstein, J. (1980). A proposed revision of the psychoanalytic concept of primitive mental states: I. An introduction to a newer psychoanalytic metapsychology. *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 16, 479-546.
27. The act of mating with or killing the mother, as alternative fears and wishes that oscillate in consciousness, also implicate the negative oedipus complex: the wish to kill the mother and mate with the father.
28. Luke's violence risk could be described as bimodal: first, the risk that he would become psychotic again and develop a delusional transference toward an older woman, believing that she was his mother; and second, that he would engage in assaultiveness toward younger males. The psychosis could be kept in remission with medications, thus eliminating the first violence mode; the second violence mode was treatable only with intensive psychotherapy, which Luke strongly resisted. For a comprehensive discussion of masochism, see Glick, R. and Meyers, D. (1988). *Masochism: Current Psychoanalytic Perspectives*. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press. Novick, J. and Novick, K. (1996). *Fearful Symmetry*. Northvale, NJ: Aronson.
29. See Stoller, R. (1974). Symbiosis anxiety and the development of masculinity. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 30, 164-72.