

MY FATHER



Luise Barry Luke (1930-1999)

By Gregorio Luke

My father looked more like a homeless than a scientist. His nicotine-stained hands were those of a handyman not an intellectual, and his persistent stutter made it difficult for him to talk, he seemed remote, but never hostile. He was tall and bald. Had an unkept beard and always wore jeans.

Nevertheless Luise Luke was a scientist involved in the APOLLO and SKYLAB missions, winner of the Apollo Achievement Award. A vastly cultured man, equally capable with his intellect as with his hands.

He could master almost anything: carpentry, mechanics, navigation, race car driving.

His impressive presence and 6ft 4 in height, was in contrast to a shy, gentle nature, an almost painful inability to express anger, and a reluctance to speak about himself. Even at end of his life, he never complained and referred to his terminal cancer as if it were something completely unimportant.

When talking to him, you always had the feeling of being with a chess player several moves ahead of you. A good

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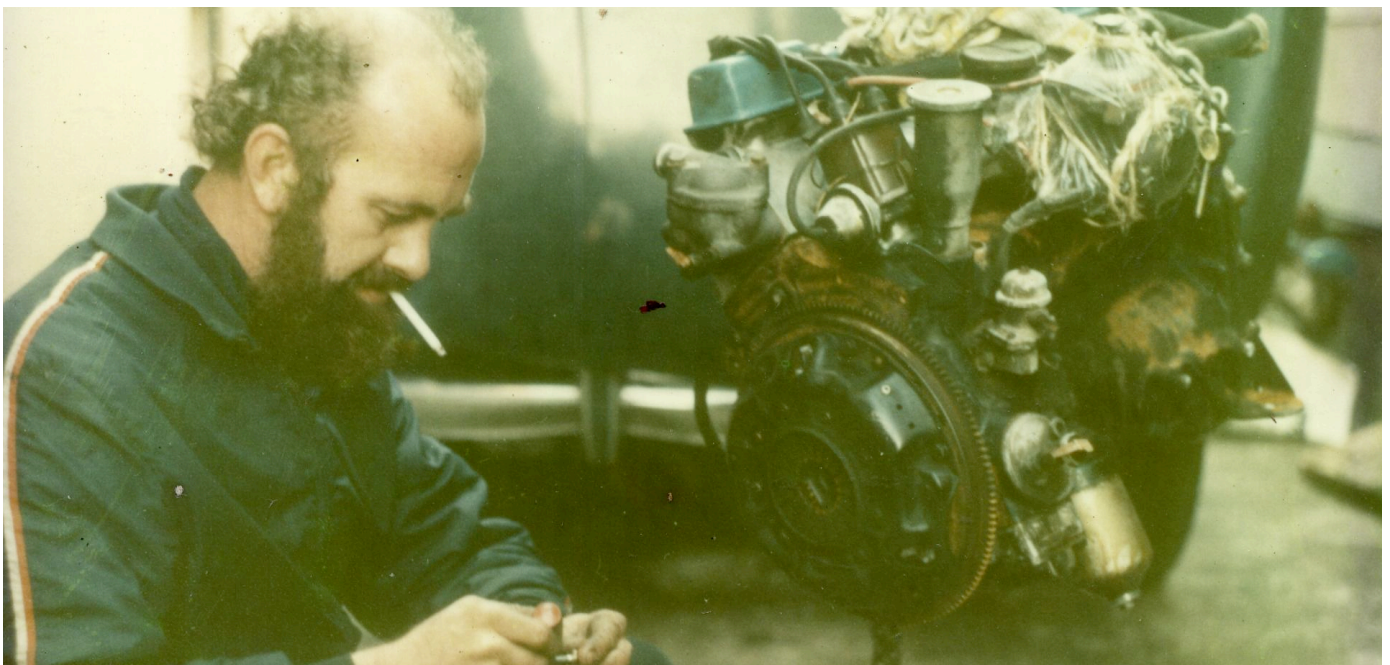
listener he calmly absorbed what you had to say. He would then prepare a meal for you or take you fishing. If he really wanted to impress you, he would put on his boots and bring you scallops or clams. He had the wisdom to understand that giving advice was useless because only you could arrive at your own solutions and that the most a friend could do is listen and help you discover your own truth.

My father was a quiet man that nevertheless strongly affirmed his independence and refused to conform to any social expectation. "I enjoy the small pleasures of life," he once said.

My father grew during the depression. The family moved constantly during his childhood: Southampton, New York City, Bradenton, Greenport, attending ten schools in twelve years. In spite of the constant changes, he managed to graduate at the top of his class, win the Bausch and Lomb Medal of Science and received a full scholarship for MIT.

His parents and teachers encouraged him to pursue opportunities in engineering, but my father didn't want to leave Southampton. He enjoyed the ocean and was in love with the girl next door. Finally he reluctantly enrolled in MIT, but as soon as he arrived to Massachusetts, he lost all interest in studying and joined the rowing team. "Only in the water do I feel free" he told his mother. He dropped out after two unhappy years, but to his chagrin, he discovered that you can never come back home. When he returned to Southampton he learned that the girl he loved had married, and his dream of a simple life by the sea was shattered. He was now an urban creature.

Luke was speech impaired, he stuttered and was extremely shy. Perhaps because of his verbal limitations, he sought other ways to communicate, like cooking, fishing, sharing music, which he knew a great deal of- from the classics to Cat Stevens. He was also an authority on



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the subject of art films.

Another passion would be cars. He raced them, collected them, fixed them, but never in his life would buy a new one. He preferred to find them in the dump and rebuild them, joining a motor of one with the body of another. He ended up driving what appeared to be a brand new Jaguar or Range Rover for which he had paid a couple of dollars.

He eventually graduated as an engineer and was recruited by Bendix Aviation and then Gulf Aerospace and Allied Signal and was involved in many important projects such as the APOLLO project to put a man on the Moon. He would win the Apollo Achievement Award . Luke specialty was reliability predicting the performance of rockets in outer space.

In 1957 he married a Mexican choreographer Gloria Contreras, with which he had two children: Gregorio and Lorena. Soon he found himself at the center of the art scene of New York in the sixties. He became promoter of dance and a close friend of artists such as Tom Kendall and Kenneth Dewey among others.

He and Gloria divorced in the sixties and Luke moved to Denver, where he participated in another great space initiative- the SKYLAB. After several years of grueling work, Luke decided to travel the world. He married Marcela Cruz Rincón, a beautiful Mexican ballet dancer, 20 years younger than him, with whom he had a son Christopher and settled in Manhattan.

In New York he found a huge storage space a few blocks from 5th. Avenue. For months he worked on it,

renovating everything himself- electricity, carpentry, plumbing. He decorated it with exotic Indian materials, Indonesian furniture, and installed theatrical lighting. When he was done, the inhospitable storage space had been transformed into a luxurious eight-bedroom apartment in the heart of Manhattan for which he paid less than a studio apartment.

As he aged, the call of the sea summoned him, and Luke decided to return to Southampton and retire. Still young and energetic, he could have easily started another career. Some of his friends encouraged him to become a technological consultant or even open a European cars shop. But this time, Luke did not bow to conventional expectations as he had 30 years ago. This time he did what he cared about more: to live his life by the ocean, alone with his thoughts and loved ones. He grew a beard, took care of my brother Chris and spent many hours looking at the sea.

His comprehensive knowledge and understanding of life was such, that he could live life on his own terms. In a society that encourages consumption instead of creating, Luke discovered that you can only recover your freedom by inventing and creation with your hands. He decided to prove that even in a highly specialized technological society such as ours, nothing is impossible to master. He built his own ships, assembled and fixes his own cars, created toys for my brother, and even fabricated a leather miniskirt for his sister Beverly, much better than those created by professional designers.

Luke was a modern renaissance man who integrated the humanistic with

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the scientific. He believed that creativity was the product of the interaction of different types of knowledge and that there should be no separation between intellect and the hand, "a thinker should also be a doer".

Every week Luke made a pilgrimage to the dump where he would spend several hours. "If you want a gift- he would say- go to the dump". The gifts he was talking about were not only the objects you found, but the joy of discovering them, of finding treasures where others only saw trash. Every week he would return from the dump with something beautiful: a Chinese table, a Zuñiga painting, a guitar for a friend.

These weekly visits to the dump were a silent commentary on the materialistic society we live in. By finding treasures in the dump my father quietly affirmed that all value is subjective and that everything can be reinvented if you have the culture to

discover, the ability to create, and the courage to invent .

Louis Luke proved that creativity makes everything possible, you can dine like a king even if you have no money; make sports cars out of wrecks, luxury apartments out of storage spaces and treasures out of trash.