



Keith Hartman's Books and movies

Doing Time in LaLa Land

Part 1:

The Tale of Jesse Falcon

(a bizarre story of closeted gay lust, faked incest, and an artificial Australian)

Hey folks!

This is the first in a series of true-but-weird stories about my time making indie films in Hollywood. I hope that you enjoy them!

Note: I've changed the names in these stories to avoid embarrassing the people involved. Though frankly, a lot of them would deserve the humiliation.

In this case, the actor going by "Jesse Falcon" was using an equally goofy predatory animal name.

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I first met Jesse on a Saturday night a couple years after I moved to LA. I was grabbing dessert at Champagne Bakery in West Hollywood when a friend waved to me.

“Hey, Keith! Come over here. I want you to meet someone!”

My friend, a gay man in his fifties, was sitting at a table with a very cute blond guy in his mid-twenties.

“This is Jesse,” my friend explained. “He just moved here from Orlando to be an actor. Maybe you could help him out, since you’re a director and all?”

Now at this point in my career, I had only directed a couple of short films, and I was still trying to raise the financing for *You Should Meet My Son!* So there really wasn’t much that I could do for some fresh-off-the-bus actor. I think my friend was trying to impress Jesse by making it seem like he knew people in the industry.

“More of an *aspiring* director,” I said. “But I’ll help you out if I can. What do you want to know?”

So Jesse started peppering me with questions. As far as he was concerned, I had suddenly become the most interesting person in the room. Sure, I was a nobody in the industry, but at least I was *in the industry*.

Anyway, after a couple of minutes of chit-chat, I realized that my friend was glaring at me. I mean, it was kind of his fault. He’d told an aspiring actor that I was a director. What did he think was going to happen?

But I figured that I should try to turn the conversation back to something that my friend could participate in.

“So how do you two know each other?” I asked.

“Oh, we met online,” Jesse said.

Now, this was in the days before Facebook. And while Grindr hadn’t been invented yet, there was a gay dating site called Manhunt that everybody was using. So either there was some weird internet chat room for fifty-year-old gay guys to meet aspiring actors that they had nothing in common with or . . .

Or this was a date. And I was crashing it.

So I made an excuse and said good night.

A couple weeks later, I heard someone yelling my name as I walked down Santa Monica Boulevard. I turned around, and there was Jesse the cute blond actor

“Hey, Keith! Do you remember me? We met at Champagne Bakery.”

“Oh yeah! How did the rest of your date go?”

Jesse looked confused.

“What are you talking about?”

“Uh... when we met you were on a date with my friend,” I reminded him.

“Oh, dude! You misunderstood. I’m straight.”

“Really?”

Okay. Maybe I had misunderstood. But there was still that weird “We met online” thing. And my friend had sure acted like *he thought* that they were on a date.

Anyway, Jesse and I grabbed a coffee and we got to talking. He was a nice enough guy, and after that I’d see him around the neighborhood every week or so. Eventually, he did wind up auditioning for a project of mine, but he wasn’t quite right for it.

And then one night I was out at Mickey’s, a gay bar in my neighborhood that has go-go boys dancing around in their underwear up on boxes. And suddenly Jesse came running through the crowd and hugged me.

“Hey, Keith!”

“Hi, Jesse! Uh . . . what are you doing in a gay stripper bar?”

Without missing a beat, Jesse pointed to a guy across the bar.

“I’m tagging along with my gay brother. You want to meet him?”

“Uh . . . okay.”

Jesse introduced me to his brother, and we got to chatting. The three of us danced for a while. And then they invited me over for dinner at their apartment a few days later.

For the next few months, I kept running into the two of them around my neighborhood. And then one night at Mickey’s, Jesse came running over.

“Hey, Keith! Can you give me a ride home? My brother wants to leave with a guy that he met here.”

“Sure.”

Jesse and his brother lived about a mile away. So we grabbed my car, and I drove Jesse home. But on the way, the conversation took a turn for the weird.

“So... Keith?” Jesse asked. “I was just wondering... Have you ever thought about dating me?”

I was so surprised that I just blurted out the first thing that came into my head.

“No. Because you’re.... you know... straight. Right?”

“Right,” Jesse said. “Just checking.”

I dropped him off outside his apartment. On the drive back, I realized that Jesse had come as close to telling me that he was gay as he was ever going to. And if I had played my cards right, he probably would have invited me to come up for a drink. And Jesse was *very* cute.

After that, there were a few times when I thought about calling up Jesse and asking him out. But honestly, I just didn’t feel like playing the whole closet game.

Anyway, I kept seeing Jesse and his brother around the neighborhood. And then one day, I was having dinner at Champagne Bakery with my friend Martin, who also used to live in Orlando. And who should we run into but Jesse?

“Hey, Jesse!” I said, making introductions. “This is my friend Martin.”

Jesse stuck out his hand to shake, but Martin just stared at him.

“Wait . . .” Martin said. “I know you. We worked at Universal together. You were part of the Ghostbusters show, right?”

“Uh . . . yeah,” Jesse said. “I remember you now.”

“What did you say your name was?”

“Jesse. Jesse Hawk.”

Martin burst out laughing.

“No, it’s not. What’s your real name?”

“It’s Jesse Hawk, *now*.”

But Martin was not willing to let the issue drop. For the next ten minutes, he gave Jesse the third degree, trying to find out his real name. And Jesse just would not give it up. Eventually, Jesse left.

“Damn,” Martin said. “I know his name’s not Jesse. I just can’t remember what it is. And who the hell picks ‘Jesse Hawk’ as a stage name?”

Eventually, Martin changed the subject, and I figured that would be the end of it. The secret of Jesse Hawk’s real name would remain a mystery for the ages. But then a few days later Martin called me up, excited.

“Man, have I got some juicy dirt on your friend Jesse.”

You see, Martin is the kind of guy who just cannot let these things go. So he’d called up a friend of his back in Orlando. This friend had also worked at Universal and knew the mysterious ‘Jesse Hawk’ back in those days.

“So it turns out that Jesse’s real name is Greg Smith,” Martin explained.

“Thanks. Because you know that I’ve been lying awake at night wondering about that.”

“But here’s the best part,” Martin went on. “I told my friend that Greg was living out here with his brother. And my friend said ‘Wait a minute! Greg doesn’t have a brother.’”

“What? Is your friend sure?”

“Yeah. He’s known Greg for years. And Greg is an only child.”

“Okay. So then who is this guy that he’s introducing as his brother?” I asked.

“That’s what I wanted to know. So I described the fake brother to my friend. And he said. ‘Oh my God! That’s Greg’s *boyfriend*. They’ve been together for years.’”

“Wow.”

In a twisted way, it made sense. Jesse wanted to stay in the closet because he figured that casting directors wouldn’t see him as a romantic lead if they knew that he was gay. And if people heard that he had a gay roommate, then they might start to wonder if he was sleeping with the guy. But telling everyone that he lived with his openly gay “brother”? That just made him seem hip and tolerant.

Of course, on a deeper level it was completely bonkers. If Jesse ever did land a big romantic lead, then some entertainment reporter was bound to do some digging and discover that he was an only child. And then the whole “I’m dating my fake gay brother” story would have blown up into a weird pseudo-incest scandal.

At any rate, I didn’t see any point in confronting Jesse about it. I kept seeing him and his “brother” around the neighborhood, but I never let on that I knew.

But with Jesse, there was more crazy yet to come.

Jesse got a job as a waiter at the French Market, a popular restaurant in West Hollywood. He worked there for several years, and we’d always chat about his acting career whenever I came in.

But one night, Jesse was suddenly different.

“Hey, Jesse!” I called out. “How are you doing?”

“Do you know what you want, Keith?” he asked in a low voice.

It was kind of abrupt. But I gave him my order, wondering if I’d offended him or if he was just in a bad mood.

And then a few minutes later, I heard Jesse chatting loudly with some folks a few tables over from mine. Only now he had a thick Australian accent.

“Oh, yah,” he told the customers. “I just got off the plane last month. Reckoned I’d give acting in LA a try. I was working all the time back in Sydney.”

At first, I thought it was a joke. But as the conversation went on, I realized that the folks at the other table were some kind of entertainment execs. And Jesse was totally trying to convince them that he was a fresh-off-the-boat actor from Australia. I guess he figured it was better than being an American actor who’d been kicking around town for five years without breaking in.

When Jesse came back with my food, he spoke in a low voice so that the other table wouldn’t hear his American accent. But by the time he was bringing me the bill, he was addressing me in an Australian accent as well.

“Thar ya go, mate!” he said.

“Uh... thanks, Jesse.”

I left, wondering what Jesse’s coworkers thought about his new background. I mean, he’d been working at that restaurant for a couple of years. How was he explaining the sudden change in his accent?

I was about to find out.

A week later, I was out with my friend Martin at Champagne Bakery. —It really was the social hub of West Hollywood in those days. — And we ran into Jesse again.

“Hey, Jesse!” I said.

“Heya mates!” Jesse called back.

Martin just stared at him.

“What the hell happened to your voice?” he asked.

“What da ya mean?”

“I mean, when the hell did you start talking like Crocodile Dundee?” Martin asked.

“Oh, I’ve always been ‘stralian,” Jesse said. “Guess ya nevah noticed.”

Martin and I both laughed.

“Trust me,” Martin said. “We would have noticed *that* accent.”

“Nah Mate, Ya musta missed it.”

“Uh, *Greg?*” Martin said. “We worked together back in Orlando, remember? And back then, you said you were from Florida.

“Ah mate, ya misunderstood me. I was a real hellraisah back in ‘straylia, so me da sent me ta live in Florida with me mum when I was fifteen.”

“Interesting,” Martin said. “And how come your ‘brother’ doesn’t have an Australian accent?”

“Oh, well he’s actually me half-brother,” Jesse said. “Me mum married a yank after she split with me dah.”

Jesse and Martin argued for a few more minutes. But Jesse refused to change his story that he had always been Australian, and that somehow Martin and I had never noticed this before.

But things were about to get even crazier. A couple months later, I ran into a friend of mine who works in video games.

“Hey, Keith! Do you know a guy named Jesse Falcon?”

“Yeah. How do you know Jesse?” I asked.

“He auditioned for a voiceover role in one of our games. He mentioned that he’d worked for you.”

“What? He auditioned for me *once*. And I didn’t even cast him. Why the hell would he use me as a reference?”

“I think he checked my Facebook profile and saw that we’re friends,” Don said. “I guess he figured that your name would carry some weight with me.”

“Well, I could tell you some stories about Jesse. Just out of curiosity— is he still pretending to be Australian?”

“What? He’s not really Australian?”

“No. He used to be American. He only picked up the accent and started claiming to be Australian last summer.”

“Oh my God!” Don said. “I totally bought the act!”

And then he laughed.

“You know what’s really funny?” he said. “One of the reasons that I didn’t cast him was because his American accent sounded kind of phony.”

That was the last I ever heard of Jesse. He never did make it big in Hollywood, and a few years later he and his “brother” moved back to Florida.

So is there anything to learn from this story?

At first, I thought that the lesson might be something as simple as “Don’t go around telling crazy lies.”

But that can’t be right. Because Hollywood is built on lies. And sometimes crazy *works*.

Take the story of Riley Wilson, an eighteen-year-old screenwriter who landed a job on the show *Felicity*, and promptly wowed them with her inside knowledge of youth culture. The Disney corporation was so impressed that they put her on a \$300K contract to develop teen shows for them.

But when *Entertainment Tonight* ran a story on the “teen” phenomenon, some folks in LA recognized her as 32-year-old actress Kimberlee Kramer, who’d had several bit parts in Hollywood productions over the previous decade.

Disney and the WB were furious about the deception. Executives talked about how used and hurt they felt. How they’d bought her act, and even thrown her a big nineteenth birthday party on the set of *Felicity*.

But one has to ask: If Riley was such a genius when those execs thought that she was eighteen, why was she suddenly an unemployable outcast as soon as they knew that she was really thirty-two?

Riley's story after that is kind of mixed. She was never considered A-list talent again. But she went on to write five Lifetime Channel movies over the next twenty years, so she does seem to be working in the industry and making a living, despite the scandal.

So maybe the lesson for Hollywood phonies is this:

Sooner or later, you're going to get caught. So go big or go home.

People are going to feel hurt when they find out that you lied to them. But they'll feel even worse if you don't put some effort into it.

At least Riley had the decency to go all-out on her deception. She changed her name, got a new agent, and even had her mom come to her fake "nineteenth" birthday party on the *Felicity* set to help sell her cover. She tricked a lot of people. But she respected them enough to give them her A-game.

Jesse, on other hand, tried to convince all his friends that we'd somehow never noticed his thick Australian accent. So he clearly thought that we were *idiots*. And we reacted accordingly.

Anyway, that's the story of Jesse Falcon. If you think there's another lesson in all this, I'd love to hear it.

Keith

P.S. If you haven't signed up for my newsletter yet, you can do it at www.Keith-Hartman.com