

The many plots against the President of the United States are so routine she's grown tired of hearing about them during her morning briefings. One possible conspiracy has you, her chief of staff, worried because it could involve people on her staff and you might be the only other person aware of it. Despite coincidental deaths of several close associates you're reluctant to share your suspicions for fear you are simply losing your mind.

## **Executive Pink**

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A photograph of the White House in Washington, D.C. The building is white with a prominent portico supported by tall columns. An American flag flies on a tall pole in front of the building. In the foreground, there is a large green lawn with a fountain spraying water on the right side. The sky is clear and blue.

Mathew Paust

Executive Pink

*a Novel*

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## Prologue

I suspected right away that I had stumbled upon an assassination plot.

Not sure I can explain how I came to suspect this. I don't think I'm psychic, unless you would count the occasional ability when I was younger to start humming a tune an instant before it was played unannounced on the radio. It could have been because the disc jockey had been playing the same sequence of songs so often that I unconsciously memorized the order. Then again...

I wonder now if a related phenomenon was at work to prime me for my immediate recognition that the strange message I'd stumbled onto while snooping through White House email might well be a communication between conspirators in a plot to assassinate my boss, the President.

The President being the President of course was hated by multitudes. In her case the haters constituted right-wingers - both greedy economic giants and bitter proletarian ignoramuses - along with assorted misogynists, misoneists and misologists of all races, ages, income levels, genders and sexual proclivities. Many of them who might otherwise have tolerated her or even offered her grudging respect, were utterly turned off by her refusal to confirm or deny that she occasionally enjoyed a pharmaceutical compound proven clinically to induce female orgasm, which is sold to billions of women worldwide under the trade name Primrose Lane.

Assassination plots ranked a close third behind fund-raising activities and poll results in the President's morning staff meetings. That is, until the President one morning waved an impatient hand at Warren Hendrian, her domestic affairs adviser, to halt his usual litany of plots against her life that were newly discovered, under investigation or recently thwarted by various law enforcement agencies, the primary

one being the United States Secret Service, to which, among his many duties, Hendrian served as the President's liaison.

"Warren, enough. Enough already," she said in a tone hovering dangerously close to scold. "If they're going to kill me, they're going to kill me. I dearly hope our guys are smart enough and good enough to keep that from happening. But if it happens, it happens and I'm sick of hearing about all the sick and evil people out there who want to do me in. So...", she smiled abruptly, showing a set of even teeth so white they looked like Jimmy Carter's caps, "enough with the lists of all the plots and counter-plots and so forth at these little morning get-togethers. OK, darling? We have more important things to talk about, I hope. Adele, what's happening in the jungle? Whose asses do I need to kiss today?"

This effectively ended the routine discussion of assassination plots in the morning meetings, although I as Chief of Staff had Hendrian deliver those reports to me so that if nothing else I could adjust the President's schedule to avoid situations that could prove opportune to any of the plotters who had been identified and, I hoped, really were under investigation.

I decided at first not to tell Hendrian what I had discovered. I had several reasons for keeping this card face down. Perhaps most important among them was that he was a pompous ass who would have loved nothing more than to push my face into a pile of my own feces were I dumb enough to show him the pile and then bend over it and wait for him to strike. Which is what I would have been doing had I told him that something I'd stumbled upon while snooping in the purgatory file of the White House email network might be a note from one would-be assassin to another.

My first inclination was to bring in Tonga Cooke, who was chief of the White House technical support team, and a friend. And or possibly Joan Stonebraker, agent-in-charge of the White House Secret Service detail.

For the time being, I worried solo. I did keep a journal during this time, though, partly because I felt frustrated and outraged - not to say terribly vulnerable - that there are still and may ever be serious doubts

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about the government's integrity in the JFK murder and its investigation. One journal kept by a player in that sad, sorry episode might have contained the key to obviate all of the myriad heavily and meticulously documented theories both proving and disproving the various intricate conspiracies credited for the crime that will haunt Americans for as long as there is an America.

Let us proceed to my journal.



## The Message

It was about eight o'clock this morning and I was experiencing my usual ambivalence during what some might consider a peculiar exercise, with one foot on the pinnacle of my power and the other in the nadir of depravity. I was alone in my office snooping through the White House email. It is something I do sporadically throughout each day and, I might add, is not historically unprecedented in this job. I had begun my idle browsing habit quite casually while looking to retrieve a memo I'd lost to a slip of a finger on the keyboard. Once inside "purgatory," which is what we call the directory that holds all email output for three days before dumping it presumably into oblivion, I succumbed to the temptation of a slugline that boldly asked, "nooner?" Calling up the file I learned a new word for vagina and the day's trysting place for Tonga Cooke and someone named Julayne in the data processing pool.

I didn't know who the sender and recipient were until I called the message up on my screen. All I could learn from the slugline was that the memo had originated in Tech Support. Once on my screen I had the complete message including both its addresses. Tonga, who heads the White House Technical Support Team, had assured me that besides himself only me, Adele Schwammel and the President could call up anything from purgatory. This is probably why Tonga had slugged his note to Julayne as he did, trusting that neither the President nor me, his friend, would have the time or inclination to do what I had just done. Schwammel, on the other hand, gave off that she was not computer friendly, and she never answered email sent to her. The President's political rabbi, Schwammel preferred to conduct her business in person or on the telephone.

Yet, it was stumbling upon a juicy note from Schwammel to an officer manager in Treasury shortly after experiencing the sophomoric



thrill of discovering Tonga's note to Julayne that addicted me to daily fishing in purgatory. That Schwammel's email-documented pursuit of the office manager constituted the most titillating intelligence I'd found in my two years in the White House did not dampen my enthusiasm for these secret little expeditions. For Schwammel, the President's closest political aide - by title, Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy - was clearly someone to keep an eye on.

What the fuck? I take an almost perverse pleasure in writing the exact words born in my fore brain when I stumbled upon the ambiguous message. I was alone in the office and not in any circumstance inclined to auto confabulation. I denied it voice. But the bafflement was real. It pushed and burgeoned, taunting me with squirming alternations of drollery and menace. I shoved back from the desk and stood up. I would pace if I had to, which is how I usually deal with cerebral stress when alone. But for now I didn't wish to break eye contact with the screen on my computer monitor where the smattering of words glowed with perplexing ambiguity. They were either innocent - foolish beyond belief yet quite innocent - or they carried unthinkable implications. At the moment, I was drawn to the latter interpretation and I felt a chill at the back of my neck. As I pondered, the chill extended down over my shoulders making me hunch them and hug myself.

THIS IS A TEST. You with us or what? Out.com's off unless you stay. THIS IS A TEST.

Test, my ass, was my first unspoken reaction. I'd almost passed it by because it was slugged test, but it was for that same reason I tapped it up. I had never seen such a slug in purgatory. It piqued my administrative curiosity that somebody was conducting a test without my knowledge. Whatever it was I hadn't been consulted, nor had it included my computer terminal among its recipients.

Out of the loop. Even on something so trivial as a software test, if that's what it was, it annoyed me to be excluded. But what I found on my screen when I tapped up the test, instead of the expected quick brown fox or all good men, started a whole new set of bells ringing.

Making it worse, this particular message didn't have any coding that said who sent it or who received it.

It was this absence of addresses that initially set the hook in my worry lobe. Something wasn't right. Technical glitch probably. But how could such a thing happen? This is the White House. If something like this could happen as a glitch then it could be done deliberately and in any event a communications system for the most powerful governmental staff in the world shouldn't have the kind of glitches that erase such important references. A flash of annoyance imprinted these thoughts as a priority to bring up with Tonga.

Then I turned to the note's text. Implications bombarded me. Is it a joke or a game? Just nonsense? But why this particular nonsense? The harmonics are all wrong, like joking about a bomb at the airport. This is not likely something Tonga did, but then who else could it be? Unless it *is* a joke. Tonga pulling my leg? Maybe one of Tonga's people? Being devilish? Yeah, of course. That's the ticket.

Yet, even as I felt a slight release of tension at this idea I knew I couldn't leave it at that. It wasn't enough to be just pretty sure. If only because even a strained interpretation of the message leaving a sinister tickle demands my exploration of its inferences. My responsibility and loyalty to the President demand nothing less. The risk of making a fool of myself is in comparison insignificant.

Whatever else I did I knew I had to get the damned thing off my screen, copy it so some other file for safekeeping, then abort purgatory and get on with the day's affairs. I planned to come back to it in the afternoon and decide then what course to take.

I approached the keyboard with the caution of a sapper moving in on an undetonated bomb. It occurred to me that what I saw on the screen might be the product of some eccentricity of my particular machine. What if the message wouldn't copy or vanished somewhere in cyber limbo beyond retrieval by the cleverest technician? Should I leave it alone and call Tonga to come up and see it the way it is? I'd started to reach for the phone when a strip message flashed across the top of my screen: SAVE SAVE SAVE SAVE SYSTEM GOING DOWN IMMINENT SAVE SAVE SAVE SAVE. Well, that settled it.

A crash would lock whatever was on the screen, but if it wasn't saved it would vanish in the reboot after the system came back up. My fingers flew to the keyboard and tapped out a few deft strokes transferring the file to my personal directory. When it had copied I picked up the phone and called Tonga.

"Can't come now, Chief. Got a problem down here. Save whatever you're working on. We're going down any second now."

"Thanks for the heads up, buddy," I said, annoyed that he hadn't called me first.

"Sorry, Chief," he said in my office moments later. "I guess we were trying to call each other at the same time. I got a busy signal. Your phone must be more important than mine." I stared at him, but his grin never wavered. He then explained that the problem had to do with some upgrades he was applying to the network file server.

"Software's still getting acquainted."

"That might explain the weird thing I found in purgatory. What I was calling you about."

"Weird thing?"

"Very strange message, and no addresses."

"No addresses? That is weird. Either end?"

"Nada."

"When was this, Al?"

"Just before I called you. Just before the system crashed." As Tonga watched I logged back into the system and tapped up the purgatory directory. I scrolled down screen by screen, squinting for better focus on the glowing list of file slugs. It took a couple of minutes to scan to the end of the directory - 418 entries. *Test* wasn't among them. My metabolism quickened unpleasantly. I scrolled backward up to the beginning, still not spotting the phantom slug.

"Musta got lost when we crashed," I muttered, doubting if Tonga heard me.

But he said, "Shouldn't have. It wasn't that big a deal. Like turning off your machine with something on your screen without logging out. All you lose is what you haven't saved. You don't lose anything out of a directory."

“Tonga, it was in there and now it’s not.” I kept my voice even, but my irritation continued to build.

“Chief, you mind if I ask you what it was?”

“It just said *this is a test*. Then there was the usual nutty message that comes with a test, and then *this is a test*. That’s all.”

“Chief, I may be out of line to ask you this, but just what in hell is so important about a test?”

“It’s not that so much, Tonga. It’s just that if we’re losing anything from the files, even only a test, something’s wrong. And that kind of thing shouldn’t be happening here.”

“Tonga was sitting on the edge of a window well behind my desk, which put him, a shorter man than I, at a level that gave him a sight plane about a foot below mine. It also put him just out of easy reach so that he had to lean out into a crouch to touch me on the arm, which he did, and said, “Chief, it’s a purge directory with an automatic dump time. You don’t know how long that note was in there. Maybe its time came up just as the system went down.”

I rocked back in my swivel chair and swung around toward Tonga so I could study his face. Thin and nose-prominent with droopy-lidded eyes set a little too close together and lips shaped with a hint of upturn at each end, Tonga’s face in repose conveyed an impish irreverence. That he was really quite serious at heart could be seen by anyone who spent more than five minutes in his presence. Yet, even I could be unsettled by this curious mask of features when it seemed to become a litmus for self appraisal at a time of uncertainty for its beholder. Right now I didn’t know what to think. As my friend’s visage mildly mocked, I agonized an instant and decided to take a terrible leap of faith.

“I made a copy,” I said. I tapped the strange message onto my screen. Tonga stood and squinted at it. I kept my eyes on his face. It betrayed nothing.

“Weird,” he said.

“What do you think?”

“I’m not sure, Al. The addresses should have copied along with the message, but you say there weren’t any addresses in the purgatory version?”

“It was exactly like this,” I said, nodding at my screen. “And the slugline was blank except for the word *test*. Damn, Tonga, I was hoping you’d be laughing by now, telling me this is a joke or something.”

Tonga shrugged and lowered himself back to his perch on the window well edge. When he spoke his voice was thoughtful. “Believe me, I wish that were true,” he said. “But this upgrade has nothing to do with the email system. I couldn’t do what’s on that screen if I wanted to.”

“Some kind of electronic glitch?”

“I suppose anything’s possible.”

“Any way of finding out who sent the message?”

He took a little time before answering. “If that’s all we have, probably not. But if somebody’s fooling around they’ll eventually leave a track. I’m gonna run a special virus screen soon as I get back in case there’s something lurking on somebody’s hard drive.”

“Lemme know what you find,” I said, speaking in a descending scale to signal conclusion. Then to avoid sounding like a prick I changed the subject. “So, Tonga, what’s this I hear about you getting married?”

Tonga knew this was just exit small talk but he played along, rolling his eyes as he stood and saying with exaggeration. “Who told you that?”

I smiled. “Well, is it true?”

Already halfway across the room Tonga waved me off but turned back grinning when he reached the door. “You better check your sources, Al. Somebody’s been feeding you some kind of bull.” Then he stepped into the hall and closed the door behind him.

I slumped in my chair. In five minutes I would be in the Oval Office going over the day’s agenda. It promised to be a light day, with the only potential for serious irritation being the persistence of Sen. Bartholomew Gladstone, R-Maryland, to gain an audience with the President. The President detests the Senate Finance Committee chairman. She once called him, to his face, “Bart Bullshit.” I’ll admit to taking a secret delight in foiling the senator’s designs on White House

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access at every possible turn. “Not today, Bart, the President’s in too good a mood,” I said into the phone this morning.

“You know, Al, what you need is to get laid. Loosen up that tight ass of yours. Hell, I can find you a willing pageboy or two if you like. Just ask Uncle Bart,” Gladstone said, his voice resonant with baritone conceit.

“That’s all right, Senator, you keep them. You’re loose enough for the both of us.”

“Mee-yoww. Boy, I like you. You ought to drop by the office some time. I’m not such a bad fellow, you know.”

“You’re as bad as they come, Bart. Thank God I’m a Democrat.”

“God didn’t have a damned thing to do with that, boy,” Gladstone shot back. “Now come on, just between us girlies. When am I gonna get five minutes with her highness? Just five, that’s all I need.”

“We’re having a fundraiser next week. Ten thousand a plate.”

“Oh, you’re cruel, Al. And you force me to question your patriotism. Whatever happened to the concept of good relations with Congress?”

I’d had enough of the bloviating buffoon. “The President supports your opponent, Senator. When she gets elected, then we’ll have good relations. Good day.” I hung up on the fatuous asshole before he could start singing his favorite song whenever he’s around me: Primrose Lane, of course.

## Job Titles

Yesterday's morning staff meeting with the President quickly reeled out of control. Warren Hendrian was at fault, whining nasally that he didn't like his title - Domestic Affairs Adviser

"Hers sounds more important," he said after the President asked him what the hell he was talking about. He'd just blurted out that he wanted a different title. He had interrupted Adele Schwammel, who loathed Hendrian and was showing it by glancing successively at everyone in the room while she spoke - except at Hendrian.

Schwammel had been delivering a stentorian account of the President's need to kiss the asses of a group called Eccentric Billionaires Willing to Spend Cold Untraceable Cash For Political Favors, known more popularly by its acronym EBWSPCUCFPF. The President had said she would not grant the group's latest request, which was to promise to pardon one of its members were he to be indicted and convicted of bugging his nine-year-old adopted son in the breakfast nook at his Beverly Hills castle. His now estranged wife had videotaped the entire episode.

"God dammit, Ruth," Schwammel barked, "These people paid for the Boomer ad. Forty-seven percent of the voters, including myself, think the Boomer ad is what put you over the top in Florida. Without the Boomer ad you wouldn't be president. These loonies paid for it. You can't just thumb your nose..."

"I want another job title," Hendrian suddenly whined. The President, who had begun inspecting her fingernails, stared uncomprehendingly at Hendrian. Her jaw hung slack.

Schwammel finished her sentence and started another before she caught on, then stopped in mid-word and joined the President and others in the Oval Office staring at Hendrian. No one in the room liked

Hendrian, but neither had any of us seen him in such a state of apparent discombobulation.

“Huh?” was all the President could manage. Hendrian, probably by now deeply regretting his outburst and trying, his brain squirming frantically, to find a way to salvage some dignity, stared back at the President. Hendrian’s jaw hung slack, too, but he, driven by the moment’s panic, was able to bring it back up to form a neutral face before his boss could do the same with hers. It was a start, but he knew he couldn’t stop now.

“She sounds more important than me,” he said. This time the words came out in a croak.

“Warren, have you lost your mind? This is hardly the time to be bringing up such a chickenshit thing,” the President said. “I almost said *problem*, but that would be overstating whatever it is you are trying to tell us.”

Adele Schwammel raised one side of her upper lip in an exaggerated sneer, then heaved her chest in a silent laugh. “I *am* more important than you, you twit,” she said.

Hendrian’s piggy face reddened but he refused to look at Schwammel. He kept his eyes on the President. When he next spoke, his voice had recovered most of its normalcy - which at its best is an irritating, adenoidal sing-song. “I’m in charge of security in this administration but my title sounds like I counsel servants who are committing adultery,” he said. After a pause, he allowed a weak smile.

The President stared at Hendrian as if he were a real pig who had somehow gotten past the guards.

Schwammel jumped in and broke the tension. “Sounds like fun to me. Why are you complaining?”

Hendrian ignored the joke. He turned and glared at Schwammel. “Oh, shut up,” he said. Then, back to the President, “Her title has all the buzzwords that sound important. She’s an assistant to the president. Her job involves policy. I’m just an adviser. You might as well just call me an aide.”

“The jackals already do,” said Schwammel, using her favorite slur for news media people.



Hendrian leaped at the opening. “See what I mean? Aides can be anybody. They’re a dime a dozen. I’m goddamned more than an aide and I want a title that reflects that!”

When nobody responded, he added, directing a pained squint at the President, “And even worse than all of that, we both have the word *domestic* in our titles. It sounds like from day to day, depending on who’s being quoted, that the job - whatever it is - is being rotated back and forth between us. This is just plain nuts, Madam President, if you’ll pardon my bluntness.

“I had hoped to avoid touching on that aspect of the problem. And - once again, I mean no disrespect, ma’am - but it damned well is a problem!”

The color in Hendrian’s face had deepened to nearly that of a cheap Chianti. When he finished speaking, he exhaled a gargantuan blast of air that escaped with the pressurized hiss of a tire being vandalized. It was clear to everyone in the Oval Office that Hendrian had taken what he considered a heart-stopping risk, that it mattered enormously to him and that he might even have wet his pants a little during the height of the tension.

The President, her face composed but with a genuine sorrow softening her brown eyes, gave him absolution then by murmuring, “I see, Warren. Very well. I’ll ask NSC to come up with a different title for you.”

During the discussion, not wanting the President to catch my eye, I played eyesies with the other two people in the room. Neither of them wanted to get involved in the dust-up either. The one I most enjoyed looking at was the President’s pollster, Myrtle Basing. Young - mid-twenties - dirty blonde, Shirley Temple curls and shining blue eyes. Smart, too. Great sense of humor, and her legs, which she shows off with mid-thigh skirts, are terrific. For the record, I’m single. Divorced, two kids. Only about ten years older than Myrtle. Former governor of Iowa. Have most of my hair. Not bad pickins. Myrtle’s living with a former Green Bay Packers linebacker. But I don’t think it’s serious. I can bide time.

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I also exchanged glances with David Zuidmulder. Married, three kids. Stuffy. No competition. Assistant to the President for Foreign Policy. Not much on his plate yesterday. Nor today, for that matter.

I couldn't help but wonder, as I looked at everybody in the room except the President, whether I was in the presence of a conspirator to assassinate her. It could be any of them. It certainly has to be someone with access to the White House computer network.

I almost burst out laughing at one point, when the thought struck me that maybe the plotters mean to rub out Warren Hendrian.

*I might just join that plot.*

## What in Hell to Do?

What an awful week this has been. I still haven't told anyone about the assassination plot. I'm not even sure I believe it anymore. Five or six times a day I do and five or six times a day I don't. Either way, I know I have to worry about it. Every now and then I figure to hell with it, but the relief from this lasts only long enough to keep me from screaming or sobbing uncontrollably.

I'd love to bounce this off somebody. It would be so great to share the burden. I think Tonga Cooke suspects what I suspect, or suspects that I suspect it. I trust Tonga. But this is too delicate a situation to trust with even somebody I trust. If it turns out to be a joke Tonga played on me and I fell for it, I'd have to fire him. I've been hoping he would clear up the mystery with some techno-explanation that would put to rest all of my suspicions. Hasn't happened. Finally, yesterday, as casually as I could muster, I asked him if he'd learned anything about the strange message. He wagged his head and gave me such a look of major frustration that for an instant it masked his perpetual smirk.

"Haven't found squat," he said.

It was when the smirk returned that I understood I had to include Tonga on my list of suspects. At the same time I knew that technically everybody on the White House staff or with access to the White House email network had to be regarded a potential conspirator. I suddenly felt more alone than I remember ever feeling in my life.

This was one of the moments when I believed in the plot. During those moments when I don't I have to fight a powerful impulse to send out a general email memo quoting the mysterious text verbatim and clucking that such frivolity has no place at the seat of government, etc. What keeps me from acting on the impulse is a certainty that whether or not there are conspirators I surely soon would be either dead, committed or hooted into political oblivion. So whence the impulse,

especially its strength? I think it derives from the same place as the impulse to shout “boo” at the monster in a nightmare. A need to exhibit some bravura, take some action no matter the consequences. When I shout “boo” in a nightmare it’s a way of informing the bogies as well as reassuring myself that I’m hip to the venue. It always works in dreams. My demons vanish, or melt into something benign.

The best prospects for all concerned in this scenario are that I’m the butt of an ingeniously devious practical joke, or that I’m paranoid.

My ex-wife would say it’s the latter. With good reason. Paranoia was the excuse I used when she caught me doing the horizontal rumba with Margie Apsit in the third year of my gubernatorial term. Of course it was more than an excuse, as I truly believed my wife was fooling around with one of my aides. I never could prove it, but I’m still pretty sure she was. Since I was the one who got caught and had more to lose from scandal we agreed she would stay on board for the term’s duration in return for my ceding custody of our two children once I was out of office and she sued for divorce. I am reminded lately every time I arrive home to my empty Watergate apartment that this had been a deal with Satan.

Last night I rediscovered an old trick I learned in law school when the radio broke in the old Chevy I drove and I couldn’t afford to get it fixed. I’d hum tunes to myself. If the music won’t come to Mohammed, Mohammed will make his own, dammit. The trick presented itself with no prompting one day when I was feeling down or blah and didn’t have enough energy to hum any tune. I was driving along slack-jawed, hypnotized by an inane melody that was repeating itself endlessly inside my skull. A fragment of either *Battle Hymn of the Republic* or, if you can believe it, *I’ve Been Workin’ on the Railroad*.

Suddenly I heard it. Actually heard the melody that had been looping in my head. I could hear it plain as day, a rush of sound as if sung in unison by the occupants of a distant football stadium. It occurred to me that madness at last had arrived, or else someone had dropped a rogue sugar cube into my last cup of coffee. The distraction of this notion complicated my musing by banishing the tune that had triggered it. Was it a fluke of the moment? Any other signs of dementia

or reaction to a hallucinogen? Reassured by a quick inventory of my faculties I allowed the monotonous tune to preside again in my consciousness. I kept an ear cocked in case the stadium chorus were again to join in. I was not disappointed. Back came the sluggish, pulsing tones, lagging at first almost a beat behind those in my mind until the glory of actual sound supplanted the thought that had primed it. From its timbre and intimacy this ghostly music might have been whispers in my throat. It wasn't, as I soon discovered. It was the ambient noise around me.

Dominant in this din was the brisk grind of tires along the asphalt in a mix with muffled engine and deflected air breaching the imperfect fit of my door and of my side window. From my high school cornet lessons I knew this combination of sounds, although heard indifferently as a kind of droning cacophony, contained a harmonic spectrum. Apparently I was singling out the individual overtones that corresponded with the notes in my head. Like breaking a light spectrum into individual colors I was breaking the noise into music. It was an exercise in concentration. My imagination guided my ear to hear only certain narrow bands in the dense cluster of pitches. Although every band was sounding at once only those my ear selected emerged from the din and prevailed during their moments of attention over all the others.

I tried it with another tune - either *I've Been Workin' On the Railroad* or *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, whichever was not the one that had started my inquiry. It worked. I tried it on something else, something of equal simplicity, the kind of minimal, plodding elemental progression that was all one could expect a stadium full of drunks to follow. No grace notes or arpeggios. *Yankee Doodle* comes to mind. *The Yellow Rose of Texas*. I could go on and on, but I am a merciful journalist.

So last night, years after I'd discovered, abandoned and forgotten the trick - it takes a lot of concentration, impossible with anyone else in the car - I thought of it while cruising Rock Creek Parkway, a favorite of mine for unwinding after work. Often, if the weather's nice, I park and walk on the wooded footpath. It's a jogging trail by day, but by the

time I usually get there the joggers have finished their gourmet dinners and are enjoying aperitifs, cigars and, of course, the gossip *du jour*. But it was drizzly and windy out last night, and as I didn't have a hat or raincoat I forewent any walking, just idled along Parkway proper. After punching through radio stations I'd programmed on the selector buttons and finding nothing amusing, I turned the radio off and soon found my brain humming. Almost immediately I remembered how to find music in the noise. It took a little while to get the hang of it again, but when I did it became my perfect escape from the day's misgivings.

Most prominent among them, after the assassination plot, was Warren Hendrian's job title. The National Security Council, as I knew they would, suggested he be called National Security Adviser. The President waved this down, as I knew she would. She'd made it clear to me during the campaign that there would be no National Security Adviser in her administration.

"Too many assholes have had that title," she'd said. "Besides, it's time for a softer, gentler look."

"But isn't that a little Orwellian? I mean, whatever you call him, or her, he or she will be running the National Security Council. You going to change the name of that, too?" We were alone in a motel suite in Dayton, Ohio.

"I haven't decided," she said. "I'm not sure I can do that. It's become an institution. But I can call my aides anything I want."

"The press can pick up on something like that," I said, trying another jab. She ducked, slipped inside and nailed me with a quick, nasty hook.

"Fuck the press. Nobody gives a shit about actual titles, but the cumulative effect of softer sounding words can be soothing. The word *security* used to do that. Now it sounds too martial."

Thus she dubbed her future national security aide Domestic Affairs Adviser, which meant she had to come up with a different name for the aide who traditionally held that title, who was in charge of watching political enemies and the economy and those who tinkered with it. I had an impulse to try to lift an eyebrow when she suggested Assistant to the

President for Domestic Policy, but I've never been able to lift just one eyebrow.

I've been a state governor, I'm Chief of Staff to the President of the United States, yet, no matter how politely outraged or superior I might feel, I cannot lift only one eyebrow at a time. Lordy, how I have tried. I can lift both eyebrows at the same time or furrow them menacingly, at the same time. I can wiggle my ears, cross my eyes, roll my tongue and suck in my cheeks so my lips are vertical. I can ripple my belly like the big sailor did during the "There Ain't Nothin' Like a Dame" number in *South Pacific*. But I can't lift a damned eyebrow. It's not that I'm not egalitarian that I feel a little frustrated by this. I certainly would never lift an eyebrow at someone who chose the wrong verb ending or fork at dinner. It's just that, probably, because the gesture is so commonly associated with elitism, I worry that I should be able to do it if only not to be ceding any skill no matter how trivial to the world's snottier sons of bitches.

Be that as it may, with the Candidate in the Dayton motel suite I instead furrowed my brow ever so slightly when she suggested that her top political aide be officially titled Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy.

"Why are you wrinkling your forehead?" she'd said.

"I'd preferred to lift an eyebrow, but I've never been able to do that." I was impressed with her confrontational aplomb, her attempt to sidetrack me and her ability to perceive what I had considered the very gentlest tensing of muscles above the bridge of my nose in my otherwise fairly extensive repertory of subtle facial signals. It had felt almost as if I did it merely for myself.

"I can't do it either," she said, and I knew right then I would follow this woman into the abyss. It was more than love. It was a sort of narcissistic projection. She was a me that I couldn't be nor would ever want to be, but there we were, linked by political umbilical to a destiny that would either fill several pages of history or end in footnotes.

I steered us back to the subject at hand. "I think using the word domestic for two unrelated offices of parity rank would be too confusing, press or no press."

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She reached out and squeezed my cheeks between a thumb and the first three fingers until it hurt. “Oh, just indulge me, dear Governor, please,” she said. “I intend to put someone in the, as you would like to call it, *security* position, who is so insignificant it won’t matter what we call him. I just want a good tattletale over there.”

“Do you have someone in mind?”

“Of course. I think it would be the perfect job for Warren Hendrian, don’t you?”

“Warr...? Mmmmwoo? Mwoo. Mwoo. Hoohoo. HOOHOOHOOHOOHAHAHAHAHEHEHEHEHE...” She smiled at first at my admittedly sophomoric reaction, then waited patiently, her forehead now creased in concern until I wore down, wiping tears from my eyes and face with a sleeve. I had needed the release and I knew she knew I did - we all did from time to time in the sustained, desperate struggle against the insanity of a campaign - but there was something in her expression that gave me a chill. For the first time it occurred to me that I was still under scrutiny, that becoming Chief of Staff, although she’d promised it to me and constantly referred to me as such, was not yet altogether in the bag.



The many plots against the President of the United States are so routine she's grown tired of hearing about them during her morning briefings. One possible conspiracy has you, her chief of staff, worried because it could involve people on her staff and you might be the only other person aware of it. Despite coincidental deaths of several close associates you're reluctant to share your suspicions for fear you are simply losing your mind.

## **Executive Pink**

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