

I.

Washington, D.C.

1.

THEY HAD TO TAKE an elevator not reserved for Senators, a slow upwards haul. Nat Handler told himself he wasn't nervous—he'd been meeting famous lawmakers all day—but found his hand checking the knot of his tie as the attendant cranked open the door.

Hardy Owens, grinning from embarrassment at having to show a cub around his hallowed Capitol, and at the shiny provincial innocence of this particular cub, led the way. As for Nat, he was reminded of first days at boarding school and college. The day's one gleam thus far was a flash of fellow feeling offered by the skinny junior Senator from Massachusetts, Jack Kennedy, who bounded up into the facing seat on the Capitol subway—back then a contraption resembling the open carriages of horse-and-buggy days—and, putting out his hand with a ready smile, introduced himself.

Nat was surprised at how gaudy the Capitol was, even these inner recesses; every inch faux-marbled or stenciled, covered with fresco or mosaic, lest—he supposed—King George should crawl back in through some patch of wall left bare. If the aim was

grandeur, to awe with the majesty inherent to the people of a Republic, the effect was just—gaudy. It owed something to Rome's baroque churches, perhaps also to its bordellos.

Owens, speaking into an office, held open one of its double doors.

"*Hell, yeah,*" came the drawl from within. "Bring him on in, want to meet *him.*"

Squeezing past Owens, Nat located the speaker behind an enormous desk, virtually an aircraft carrier of mahogany: Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson.

Standing up, Johnson came around and put out both hands. A shapely secretary sat beside the desk, her notebook resting on a borrowed patch of flight deck beside a stack of papers. She looked glad of the reprieve.

"H'wra *you?* Telling Hardy, glad to meet *you.* He taking care of *you?*"

The grip was bone-crushing, but Nat withstood it, and had to look up only an inch or two. "Glad to meet you, Senator."

"Well, that's fine. Sit down, gentlemen, get to know Randy's newest fair-haired boy."

Randy Orpen, founder and Editor-in-Chief of *Orbs* magazine, was Nat's boss, and Owens'.

"Don't want to take your time, Senator," said Owens, still hanging at the door.

"Sit yourselves on down, done here in a minute. Where were we, darlin'?" he asked, falling backwards into his giant leather chair.

Nat took one of the chairs indicated and so,

reluctantly, did Owens. Boxes cluttered the room; Johnson was in the process of moving his headquarters downstairs.

The young woman held up the top sheet of paper.

"This came from the Dallas Chamber." She handed it over and, without looking at it, Johnson sailed it into the air.

"No time for that shit," he barked. "Write 'em a letter."

The secretary scrambled to retrieve the sheet. She was young and blooming, and in stretching to the floor revealed the roundness of her bottom. Johnson smirked at Nat.

"Next?" he said.

"Mayor Planter of Blanco sent —"

Johnson grabbed the letter and tossed it.

"Remind Mayor *Patootie* I'm a busy man!" he thundered as she went to the floor to retrieve it. Nat half-thought that the Leader was appraising his response to his performance—not catching but following his eye. He also detected in Johnson's, watching the secretary's lithe, lunging form, a wet avidity. Her breasts knocked against each other as she came up from the floor. Owens glanced at his watch and, bored but resigned, planted his feet flat and rubbed his crew cut as he looked out the arched window behind the antic Texan, where lay the heart-stopping prospect of the National Mall, straight down to the austere fact of the Washington Monument, beige-brown in wan January sunlight.

"Midland's after you again about —"

"Let 'em know—but *nice*—that soon as the

'publicans give me a breather, I'll look into their little matter." Toss and scramble.

"The Wilbarger County Commissioners want—"

"You tell 'em—really *tell* 'em—that the way Wilbarger County voted last time, be a cold day in *hell* they see *me* again." Paper went flying and the red-faced secretary scrambled, haunches working. "Remind 'em even their fucking pipeline's puny next to what's on *my* plate."

Finally Johnson had dealt with his correspondence. After his secretary crawled, red-faced and panting, over the floor picking up every last scrap, he dismissed her with an appreciative look at her departing backside.

"Well now, sir: Welcome to Washington," he said to Nat, and Nat suddenly was aware of undergoing the most penetrating, all-embracing survey and investigation of his person he had experienced in the 21 years since his mother's death. "They tell me you're Texas?"

"My parents, sir. I'm from New Mexico and Arizona, but Dad was raised in Commerce and my mother in Vernon—Wilbarger County."

"Don't say?" said Johnson with a half smile.

"Yes, sir. Her brother was sheriff for years, his son still is."

"That right? Look, anything I can do for you, you tell me, all'ight?"

"Yes, sir."

"Wanted to see who Randy was sending us. Welcome to Washington."

A few minutes later the orange dome of the

Capitol was receding behind their cab. The cast iron, freshly daubed with Rust-Oleum, was exposed for the first time since being swung high into the heavens by steam engines during the Battle of Gettysburg.

Owens, student and worshiper of power, told Nat he'd been accorded a glimpse behind the curtain, and Nat almost said, yes, just like *The Wizard of Oz*. But he didn't; kept to himself his sense of the great man's insecurities. His colleague wouldn't understand, but only look at him with dismay. Owens did add that his western background might work out after all.

Nat could read his mind: He, Hardy Owens, was cut in the Ivy League pattern of *Orbsites*, whereas Nat was—what, exactly? University of *Colorado*? Master's work at the University of *Kansas*? *Really*? Well, maybe New York knew best. New York usually did. Or maybe Randy was slipping? That was another possibility.

On Connecticut Avenue near Dupont Circle Owens nodded Nat out the door at the Bender Building, the District's newest, most glamorous office building. Its ground floor was occupied by Paul Young's Restaurant, office adjunct and expense-account haven whose red-walled, red-carpeted décor would be characterized at an Inaugural party two years in the future by Joseph P. Kennedy, the new President's father, as looking "like a high-class whorehouse!" Upstairs, reached by elevators whose new-fangled buttons lighted at the warmth of a hovering fingertip, was the *Orbs* bureau.

Nat passed the pretty young receptionist and found his desk in the bullpen. He greeted some

colleagues, arranged a drawer, got in on a laugh about Senator Dirksen, used the men's room and descended again, to stroll to his stop and wait for a bus going out 16th Street to the District Line. Dreary green and yellow streetcars also passed, rooftop cables sparking and snapping.

A D.C. Transit bus eased to a stop. Nat boarded and found a seat. Unfolding his *Evening Star*, he read the front and editorial pages, then rested it in his lap and looked out the window. At one stop a bus headed the other way, filled with weary black women, paused across the street—maids and housecleaners going home. Nat looked around his bus: almost entirely white, almost entirely male, if also weary.

Finally it pulled up to the curb at the strip shopping center on the Maryland border. Getting out, Nat saw Viv at the wheel of their Plymouth station wagon, a 1956 model in beaten green. Jack, aged seven, slipped over the front seat to join Jimmy, five, in the backseat. Pausing at Viv's window to kiss her—*smack!*—he went around and got in. On the seat between them was a grocery sack of gin and bourbon, Tom Collins mix, tonic water and two cartons of Kent cigarettes. As they drove out, Jack was punching his brother's arm and Jimmy was howling.

Ignoring them, Nat asked, "Any luck?"

"Nothing I liked," said Viv. She was house-hunting every day, but between the postwar boxes off Viers Mill Road and too-palatial colonials, it looked like being a long search.

A few minutes later she turned off Georgia Avenue towards the Park Silver Motel, but drove past

its cantilevered entrance and parked around the corner.

“Come see,” she said. Nat looked at her with perplexity but, collecting the kids, she walked into a tiny park surrounding a gazebo roofed by a giant acorn.

Unfolding himself with a groan, Nat stood by the car gathering his trench coat. Realizing he wasn’t with them, Viv turned, and Nat walked over. He was looking more at the neighborhood than at the park — downtown Silver Spring’s blocky big-city outline of the Woodward & Lothrop and Hecht Co. department stores, a White Castle guarded by sparkly cement bears, the inviting neon sign of the Anchor Inn. Dinner there sounded good.

“This is *the* silver spring,” Viv told him. “What they named the town named for? Look: It says Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln used to come out in their carriage for picnics. Isn’t it sweet?”

“Huh,” said Nat, utterly uninterested.

2.

THAT SATURDAY, HARDY OWENS gave a party. He told Nat everybody was looking forward to meeting Viv.

Nat put on his best blue suit, Viv a new dress more formal than her others. Its linen set off her

Indian jewelry—weighty Navajo squash-blossom necklace, bracelets, rings and earrings inlaid with turquoise, coral and shellac broken off a phonograph record. In addition, she wore the latest model contact lenses, tiny curvatures of glass that nonetheless hurt her eyes—*scalded* them—causing perpetual tearfulness.

As Nat tied a tie skinnier than any he'd worn before and Viv sprayed Chanel No. 5, they nervously took stock of themselves in the motel room mirror. They saw that though both were yet young, and Viv retained youth's freshness, Nat was imposing on face and body rigid male assertion and control; practicing expressionlessness, too, the art of giving nothing away. In his job, it was best so, and it accorded with his idea of manhood.

"Where did you say his wife's from?" Viv asked.

"Don't know that I did."

"Hawaii, did you say?"

"Did I?"

Viv was unnerved by Nat's protestations that he didn't remember, how his eyes and mouth and the set of his head were abandoning her; how he was capable of scrutinizing her as though he'd never laid eyes on her before. Sometimes he put a thumb to his teeth and *studied* her. Stepping up to a higher-powered plane of his career, Nat had room in his mind, it seemed, only for the essentials; not for her. So she armored her warmth and shyness in similar expressionlessness. And yet for a moment they found each other's eyes in the silvered glass, surprising each other like swimmers underwater.

Enjoining Tommy not to let the three younger boys stay up late, they went downstairs from the two connecting rooms and drove out.

They found the address in Georgetown easily enough, on a street of doll houses. Viv gasped at their cuteness, but cars longer than the houses were wide were prowling for parking spaces, so they ended up leaving the Plymouth two blocks away. She was not happy about walking so far in heels, but declined Nat's suggestion that he drop her off; if she had to meet his colleagues and their spouses, she wanted him at her side.

They rang at a red door flanked by brass carriage lamps and attended by black iron jockeys in red iron silks. A moment later their host filled the doorway, and they ducked inside.

The absurdly tiny scale of the house disarmed them—miniscule spaces stacked on top of one another, a patch of garden off the dining room. Getting drinks, they revolved through the rooms. It was charming—another aspect of frontier, Viv realized, but an unexpected urban one. Surely it had been part of a mews, some servant establishment long ago, or not so long ago, before being so expensively redone? Twelve feet wide; even given the three stories, miniature, unreal, toy-like.

And crowded with bodies, young, attractive bodies with a rapacious edge of desserts and desires that confused her. Finding he'd misjudged the evening's formality, Nat took off his tie and undid his top button; Viv felt overdressed.

She liked Hardy's wife, Leilani, the Hawaiian

beauty queen—the beauty taken on faith, her appearance was so exotic. Listening to husbands exchange war stories, Viv sampled canapés—cheeses doused in pepper sauces on imported crackers, toast rounds garnished with cream cheese and capers—and ate shish-kebabs. A sprinkling too young for the War had served in Korea instead, which was of no interest to anybody, but most were Europe or the Pacific, and they joshed one another; the really harrowing stuff, the stories that glazed eyes open to bottomless wells of grief, tonight (as most nights) went untold. Owens loudly lamented the poker-playing prosperity he'd enjoyed in the South Pacific, and otherwise the most serious conversation concerned likely candidates for President the following year.

Viv met *Orbs* staffers, plus some from sister publications housed in the same bureau. There were even a few non-*Orbs*ites, *Washington Post*, *Evening Star* and *Newsweek* men. Gradually she relaxed. For some ten years she'd attended parties as wife of the boss or coming man; after being editor of the paper in Grand Junction, Nat was the Chicago *Orbs* bureau's hotshot. If Washington in a way felt like starting over, so be it.

The wives—homemakers and housewives, though most were better educated than their husbands—while they chatted up Viv were trying to make up their minds about Nat. Charming and attractive, they agreed, but also with something elusive and not so easily categorized about him. A tall, good-looking man, a little awkward, intelligence beamed behind his glasses as he deployed the gregariousness of the shy

person able to shove shyness aside for a given span. His Indian-chief profile made them nervous, but of course he was sanctified by New York. They had to be nice to him, and his wife, too.

Dancing to a hi-fi's rock-and-roll started in the biggest cleared space of the house—not the living room, furnished with slender Hepplewhite pieces and china figurines, but the top-floor bedroom. The dancers improvised handholding lines and figures, where bumping into each other was part of the fun. Soon those catching their breath on the staircase made it impassable.

Nat didn't dance—preferring to talk politics downstairs—but Viv accepted her host's invitation. Grinning, unseen by anyone, Owens touched her intimately, and she immediately backed off, but said nothing. Liquor blurred the proceedings, broke down barriers, made everyone silly. Viv found herself laughing with other wives in her highest register.

Later they were seated in the garden—ten feet square, with a space heater and hanging colored lights—where, one hand claiming Viv's shoulder, Nat told his set-piece about shipping out to war from Providence, Rhode Island.

“Viv found a factory job—”

“—tying lures to fishing lines,” she volunteered.

“Pregnant with our first, not showing yet, and I had to find her a place to live, safe, comfortable and affordable, and— Well, it was wartime, wasn't easy. But we finally did it, honey, didn't we?”

Viv's wan smile was no match for Nat's bursting grin.

“Spare bedroom in a house belonging to the most *motherly* old gal you ever met. Oh, the sweet old thing took one look at Viv and adopted her right off! Felt so good, darling, knowing that Mrs. Coffman would be looking after you.”

“Did it work out?” Leilani asked Viv.

Patting Viv’s shoulder, Nat stepped on his own punch line. “Let’s just say — You know, Rhode Island has some funny laws about brothels? Turns out, it was that kind of house!”

Cries of hilarity greeted this.

Indoors, women and men merged, went out of focus, until one of the younger men—no one knew whether accidentally or not—managed to pull a strap or undo a snap that left a woman standing in her bra, arms crossed, dress puddled at her feet. More cries of hilarity, and then, if lingeringly, it was over, and Nat was getting the car, at the door rescuing Viv from Owens’ embrace and driving her home.

“Went well, I thought,” he said.

“It was fun,” she answered.

He was thinking of that girl standing there in not even a slip, and of some of the other women, too. Oh, the young women of Washington! Viv’s fall of golden hair had long since darkened and been cut. They’d been married, what, almost 16 years? Four kids ago? And she was still the only woman he’d ever been with, War and all?

He drove them to the Park Silver sure and straight, one eye squinched shut. Walking upstairs, Viv remembered their occupancy of so many apartments, so many houses, always impermanent.

— A FAMILY ROMANCE —

Steven Key Meyers

Now a motel.

Bone tired as she was, in bed Nat reached over, opened her supine and at first reluctant body and went to work; went to work with a roughness new since their arrival in Washington.

Finished, he rolled off, placed a beanbag-bottomed ashtray on his chest and lit a cigarette.

A Family Romance

Copyright © 2020 Steven Key Meyers

All Rights Reserved

ISBN 978-1-7330465-1-0

Published by Steven Key Meyers/The Smash-and-Grab Press

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Except for historical characters treated in fictional terms, all characters appearing in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

2020

First Edition