

Tallmadge

HEADLINE: Former-President Tallmadge Eludes Secret Service, Sneaks into Local Pool Hall Wearing Disguise

Tallmadge thought the moustache and sunglasses charade was hokey, but it enabled him to spend an evening in Lookout, New York's pool hall unrecognized, where he fleetingly felt normal.

The tabloids and talk-shows enjoyed lampooning the ex-President's antics.

HEADLINE: Ex-President Still Behind the Eight Ball

HEADLINE: Tallmadge: "I Couldn't Find My Nixon Mask"

HEADLINE: Tallmadge's Clown Nose Falls Off at 10-Year-Old's Birthday Party

It was open season on John Tallmadge, who had produced no shortage of compelling headlines during his single term as President of the United States.

"I just wanted to get out of the damn house," Tallmadge told a peeved Martin Kaepernick, the Secret Service Agent in charge of his security. Tallmadge was entitled to Secret Service protection for the remainder of his life. At his own insistence his security team consisted of only three agents, each of whom worked an eight-hour shift, covering the 24 hours of his day.

"We serve for your protection," Kaepernick reminded him. "It is our job, our duty, and our honor, to fulfil this obligation."

A higher-ranking S.S. Agent also informed Tallmadge, in a tone just respectful enough not to sound scolding, that it was inappropriate for the President to undertake any movement whatsoever without notifying his security team. The risk to his life was ongoing, regardless of his having left the White House.

Tallmadge did not fear an assassin's bullet. He was not the worst President in history. Now he was sixty-four, freshly and mournfully widowed, his children grown, and all he wanted was to re-enter life as a normal citizen, a right he believed he had earned after serving four years

as America's primary punching bag. He had been told when he took office that his private life was over, permanently, but Tallmadge, who had always approached public life with a sly grin, hoped that the people would forget him once he retired.

Clinton gave him advice on post-Presidential life: "Stay involved. The work is never finished. In the long-run they will forgive everything."

W. Bush was more succinct: "Serve your time. Then step out."

Obama clapped him on the back and said: "Now where were we?"

Tallmadge tended to think Bush had the best idea.

His public relations people encouraged him to stay public. Write a book or two. Do tours and talk-shows. Give a commencement speech. Show the people that the task of creating a good, just, American society was ongoing, and everybody's responsibility.

"I negotiated peace treaties, and health care reforms, and helped legalize pot, for God's sake," Tallmadge told Secret Service Agent Rudolph Gadwig, the nearing-retirement agent who slept in Tallmadge's large, empty house for the night shift. "Now I just want to have a beer and shoot some pool."

"I'm out in two years," Gadwig replied. "Then the first round's on me, sir."

Gadwig was the most companionable of Tallmadge's body guards. Often Tallmadge could not sleep at night, and he would rouse Gadwig from the guest room, informing him that there was an emergency summit of his most trusted advisors in the den: General Daniels, and Secretary Jameson. The two old hats would sit by the fireplace drinking high-balls, discussing whatever was on Tallmadge's mind, usually his late wife, or his administration. Gadwig was a good sport to indulge the fireside chats. Tallmadge assured him that if the S.A.C. ever sanctioned him for on-the-job drinking, a pardon would be arranged.

The other two Agents were less fun. Kaepernick, who took the morning watch, was 39, a family man, ex-military, never smiled, even opened car doors with life-and-death seriousness, and had his sights set on being an S.A.C. The third man, Danny Bueller, was straight out of the academy, and Tallmadge suspected the boy had made a mistake somewhere in his nascent career to draw his current assignment. The young man was earnest enough, but naïve, and hopelessly eager not to appear to be a doofus. Bueller was Tallmadge's de facto escort for evening activities, such as when the ex-Prez wanted to go to the movies.

“Bring your girlfriend along, Danny,” Tallmadge offered more than once. “We’ll have more fun.”

“I’ll have to clear it with Kaepernick, sir,” Bueller replied, both of them knowing how the security chief would respond.

Tallmadge felt sorry for duping Danny Bueller the night he flew the coop. It was about eight o’clock and they were watching baseball, and Tallmadge told Bueller he didn’t feel well and was going to call it an early night. He snuck into his bedroom, locked the door, and used a thin strand of adhesive putty to apply the fake moustache he’d purchased from Amazon.com. Donning aviator sunglasses, a leather jacket, and a faded Syracuse University baseball cap, he climbed out his own bedroom window and hoofed it to the garage. He hastily started up his environmentally friendly and inconspicuous Honda Insight and cruised off to the pool hall.

He had not intended to stay out past the end of Bueller’s shift, but the thrill of competition seized him, and the Stella Artois on draught tasted mighty cold and good, and he was down six games to four in a heated eight-ball tournament with a local who had introduced himself only as Sparky. He felt normal for the first time in years.

When Gadwig arrived at the house he was informed by Bueller of the President’s ill health, and since Gadwig was only human, and it was imperative to his life and career that the President not expire on his watch, he knocked on Tallmadge’s bedroom door. When no response came from within, he and Bueller eventually broke the door down.

The red alert went out. A Secret Service special response team mobilized from New York City. The FBI initiated a similar directive. The chief of Lookout’s police department summoned all his officers out of bed to begin the search directly.

At around eleven-thirty Tallmadge checked his watch, cursed himself, paid Sparky the forty dollars they had riding on their tournament, and floored his Insight back to the house. He was pulled over by an alert Lookout police cruiser half a mile from his driveway.

A strict policy of lockdown was instated. Agent Bueller was formally reprimanded, and though Tallmadge repeatedly insisted the caper was entirely his own idea, and that Buller had been deceived, the S.S. still sent in a linebacker to replace the young man, whose background included the Navy Seals, and kick-boxing.

Bored, suffocated, missing his wife, Tallmadge began each day by refusing the latest batch of the endless stream of appearance requests his publicist sent him every morning. He

cooked himself a hearty breakfast of scrambled eggs, bacon, hash browns, and 7-grain toast, and refused to share any with Kaepernick. He spent much of his mornings blogging, anonymously criticizing the coaching decisions of various professional sports teams. His only social salvation was his daily visit from his brother-in-law, Tobias Perlmutter, who lived across town and showed up each day at three PM, whereupon he and the President would sit on the porch drinking beer and playing chess, while Tallmadge turned on ESPN on his living room television at extremely high volume so they could hear it from outside.

HEADLINE: Ex-President Becomes Front Porch Curmudgeon, Hollers at Local Kids to Stay Off Lawn

“I don’t know what to do with myself, Toby,” Tallmadge confessed to his brother-in-law. “Dee and I had planned our retirement together. We were going to spend it traveling, raising grandchildren, lending our support to charitable causes. Now she’s gone I have no sense of purpose. I just want to get the hell out of here.”

“We miss her too, John,” Tobias Perlmutter said. “Maybe what you need to do is get more involved in things. Find yourself a new cause.”

“I want to see the country again. Just not as the President.”

At the end of each afternoon Tobias Perlmutter went home to his wife, Lucia, Dee’s sister, and Tallmadge was left to contemplate another lonely evening in his big house.

HEADLINE: Former First Lady Altadeena Tallmadge Tragically Killed in Skydiving Accident

Skydiving was something Dee had always wanted to try. She was not a risk-taker by habit or inclination, but it was her sixtieth birthday and she wanted to do something she’d never done before. Tallmadge had jumped with her. He had landed safely, after watching in terror from slightly above as the parachute of Dee’s instructor malfunctioned. He had held his dying wife in his arms in the middle of a grass field near Lookout as emergency crews swarmed in.

There was a nationally-televised memorial service and benefit concert in Washington. Several of Dee’s favorite musicians performed. All the living former-Presidents attended. Obama recalled how he and Michelle had drawn inspiration from Altadeena’s quiet leadership. “She was

a person who led by example,” Obama said. “She needed neither encouragement nor recognition. She was the kind of American we all aspire to be.”

The words brought Tallmadge to tears. It was magnanimous, he thought, to see the nation recognize Dee. Dee, who had grown up in upstate New York, graduated from the New England Conservatory of Music, and worked for twenty-five years as a high school music teacher before becoming First Lady. She was a modest woman of no pretention. One Washington media reporter had called her the most relatable of any First Lady. Standing endlessly next to or slightly behind her husband in public, Altadeena’s facial expressions often betrayed her mood: bored, frustrated, lost in thought, giddy. “She had a terrible First Lady poker face,” the reporter wrote. “Which is why everyone loved her.”

Altadeena was offered a burial plot in Arlington National Cemetery, but Tallmadge politely refused. He had his wife cremated, and kept the urn in his home office, where he could be near her.

HEADLINE: Tallmadge Carries on in Wake of Tragedy

He remembered the sleepless night at the end of the primaries when he had finally edged out Foreman. The campaign office looked like Bourbon Street. He had sat outside in the back alley trying to suppress chest pains. Altadeena gently talked him through the breathing motions his therapist had taught him.

“Dee, we might actually win this thing,” Tallmadge said. “We might be going to the White House. Do you think we can handle that?”

“No,” she replied, and Tallmadge minutely relaxed.

“It will change everything,” he said, stating the obvious.

“You could quit and go back to Lookout. Maybe get a job at the high school. They need a new gym teacher.”

Tallmadge took a deep breath. “Just don’t leave me in there,” he said. “Whatever happens, don’t leave me.”

Altadeena drove him home that night and told him to lie on the floor while she played the piano. After half an hour Tallmadge’s heart rate returned to normal, and shortly thereafter they received the phone call confirming that he had the party’s nomination. He would be the first

Independent to ever stand a serious chance of winning the Presidency, the first Green candidate of the newly-instated three-party system.

HEADLINE: Chief Executive Smokes Grass on White House Lawn

For a while it seemed like America might be headed toward an era of progress. John Tallmadge was known variously as “the people’s President,” “the New America’s President,” even “the cool President.” He led the initiative to federally legalize marijuana, stating that the elimination of black markets would save billions of dollars and drastically reduce drug-related crime and violence. He was right on both counts. In the second year of his term he fully nationalized health care, and cut military spending in half. He federally legalized gay marriage, saying: “The Oval Office will stay out of your bedroom.” He believed people had the right to own guns, and know what was in their food, and his policy on immigration was that the influx of population should be controlled to preserve the integrity of resources and infrastructure. He and Altadeena supported the broadest possible freedom for American citizens, and their success threatened to crumble both the Democratic and Republican parties.

Terrified that Tallmadge would run for re-election and win, the Red Team and Blue Team united in their efforts to filibuster every item that came from the executive office. They created a relentless smear campaign in the media, calling him a pothead who was weak on terrorism and a danger to national security. Then the precipitating incident that Red and Blue had been hoping for/dreaming of occurred: Iran mysteriously acquired nuclear capabilities. Congress urged the President to war, strike first before they destroy us all! Tallmadge refused. The United States was no longer the world’s police force, he argued. Actually instead of “police force” he used the term “bully,” and Red/Blue did not like this at all.

His final hundred days in office were marred by treachery and deceit. The parties refused to work with him. Tallmadge relieved his mounting stress by lying on the floor of the Oval Office while Altadeena played the piano. He had the old Presidential Grand from the Lincoln room wheeled in for that purpose. Red/Blue was shocked/relieved when Tallmadge declined to run for re-election. Most media outlets concluded that the third party experiment had failed.

Tallmadge had a one-word summary for each of the administrations that preceded his. Clinton: “sham.” Bush: “disgrace.” He allowed two words for Obama: “He tried.” For himself he might have said: “Nice try.”

Red/Blue regained power and quickly attempted to dismantle Tallmadge’s institutions.

Tallmadge retreated to his stately home in Lookout, New York. He had his wife, his children, and a library full of books he planned to read. He never felt more freedom in his life than when he left the Oval Office.

Then Dee’s parachute chord failed to properly execute its function.

The moustache disguise at the pool hall had been a stupid idea, but it had worked. Nobody had recognized him, even though everyone in Lookout knew who he was, obviously, and where he lived. Tallmadge studied his face in the mirror. It was a plain face, blandly handsome, turning sad as the various lines and creases of his life bore into his skin. For four years he had been the most photographed and recognizable man in the world. Now he had every man’s face. Like many presidents, he had greyed in office. Bush had gone in brown, Clinton a feisty auburn-silver. Both had come out cloudy old men. Obama was the smart one, keeping his hair short so the public couldn’t really see the effects of stress.

Tallmadge thought he could disguise himself if he grew a beard. James Garfield had been the last of the small cohort of bearded Presidents. The public would not expect a modern President to sport 19th century facial cover.

For three months he rarely left the house, except to visit his brother- and sister-in-law for their weekly dinners. He gave no interviews, made no public appearances. He did not go for the long walks around town that he enjoyed (trailed at a distance of fifteen feet by Secret Service).

“You’re looking robust, sir,” Gadwig told him as they sipped whiskey in the den. “Can’t wait till I retire, so I can grow one.”

Tallmadge snuck out of his house before dawn on an October morning. In a duffle bag he packed a change of clothes, his toilet kit, and the urn containing Altadeena’s ashes. He slung the bag over his shoulder and again climbed out his own bedroom window. He felt bad that it was Gadwig on duty this time, his aging pal passed out and snoring in bed from the whiskey Tallmadge had pumped into him the night before.

The car, he worried, would make too much noise. The S.S. had installed a guard at the gate house at the end of Tallmadge's driveway. This man was a light sleeper, which Tallmadge learned one night when he slunk through the shadows like a prowler and threw acorns at the gate house window. The Agent, whom Tallmadge had spied napping, burst from the gate house with his Glock drawn, his eyes wide as an owl's. Tallmadge crouched behind an oak tree for fifteen minutes before sneaking back into the house.

Tallmadge took his bicycle from the garage and pedaled it silently down the driveway. He saluted the sleeping guard on his way past the gate house.

Out on the road he tasted the cool autumn air in his lungs. His heart pounded from the exhilaration of freedom. Bearded and dressed plainly in jeans, an old New York Mets jacket, and a checkered lumberjack hat, he pedaled three miles across town. Not a single car passed him on the road.

When he reached the Perlmutter's house he quietly leaned his bicycle against their garage. Peering through the window of their station wagon, he saw that Tobias had left the keys in the ignition, as was his habit. Auto theft did not run rampant in Lookout.

He left a note in their mailbox:

"Dear L and T,

I am borrowing your car, and will return it in a day or two. Do not be concerned for my whereabouts. When the S.S. comes knocking, and they will, tell them you have no idea where I went, and that I took the car without your knowledge, both facts true. If you come to any trouble, I will get you out of it.

Thinking a lot about Dee these days. Love and miss her.

His Excellency"

Tallmadge placed his duffle bag in the back seat of the station wagon, started the engine, and coolly pulled out of the driveway.

HEADLINE: Nationwide Search Begins for AWOL President

Kaepernick and several likewise stone-faced, conspicuously-armed Secret Service Agents crowded the Perlmutter's kitchen at 10 o'clock in the morning.

"We are authorized to detain you if necessary," Kaepernick said.

"You've got his note right there, boss," said Tobias, frowning in his bathrobe. "We don't know where he is."

"If you had to make an educated guess," Kaepernick said through clenched teeth.

Tobias tilted his head back in thought. "My guess... is that John does not want to be found."

"That's irrelevant."

"He might have gone to Cape Cod," said Lucia, offering coffee to the agents, who refused. "That's where he and Dee used to vacation when they were young. Truro. The beach. They loved it there, especially my sister."

Kaepernick pulled out his radio and issued an all-points bulletin to the Secret Service, FBI, U.S. Marshall's office, and the New York and Massachusetts State Police Departments. Within minutes every law enforcement officer in the Northeast was looking for a silver Ford station wagon with New York plates.

Tallmadge drove with the windows down, cruising along Route 5 through Cape Cod. He had made a pit stop just after dawn at a highway McDonalds, ordered coffee and an egg McMuffin. No one had recognized him. In Hyannis he stopped at a farm stand and bought a half-gallon of apple cider, some maple syrup, and smoked venison jerky.

He reached Truro in early afternoon. He had passed a seemingly inordinate number of police cars along Route 5. They were onto him, he realized. His sister-in-law had probably hypothesized his destination. But Truro was remote and devoid of cops or noise. Tallmadge drove down a winding dirt road to the secluded beach he and Dee had visited countless times in the footloose adolescence of their marriage. He parked in a sandy turn-around.

Stepping out of the car, Tallmadge stretched and inhaled the salty scent of the ocean. The low Cape shrubbery swayed in the breeze. The leaves on the trees were fiery yellow, orange, and red, calendar New England. Tallmadge took off his shoes and put them in the car. His cell phone

had been ringing and beeping nonstop for hours. He turned it off and stashed it in the glove compartment. Then he retrieved Altadeena's urn from his duffle bag.

In bare feet he walked the thin path to the beach. Cool sand massaged his toes. Tall grass caressed his pant legs. Tallmadge had forgotten what his country really looked and smelled like. Forgotten strands of seaweed in the sand. Forgotten the wind rustling in the trees, the gentle lap of waves along the shore of the bay. He walked the beach and saw a few slumbering cottages tucked in the foliage. Truro was just as untarnished and secreted as when he and Dee had snuck over to the beach to go skinny dipping when they were twenty-one.

Altadeena had never specified where she wanted her ashes scattered. They had not gotten that far. Death had been a distant, non-threatening thing, like thunder heard rumbling away. But Tallmadge wanted to cast her spirit into a gentle, natural place that she had loved, where he could visit her, where no one would find them.

He walked to the edge of the water and carefully stepped out along a rocky outcrop. The sky was autumn grey and thick with clouds, the bay water a blustery blue/black.

"Should've come in summer," Tallmadge mumbled. "But here we are."

He unlocked the urn and shook Altadeena's ashes into the air. They swirled like a ballerina's pirouette and vanished in the breeze. Tallmadge brushed tears from his eyes, rubbed his cold, pale feet against the slippery rocks, lost his balance, and fell into the ocean.

HEADLINE: It Could Happen to Anyone: Former-President Takes Accidental Plunge in Atlantic, Then Discovers Keys Locked in Car

Banging his head against the driver's side window, Tallmadge grumbled: "Goddammit." His clothes hung in sappy ribbons from his shivering body, sandy and clammy cold. He looked around for a rock to break the window, then decided against that plan, wondering if stealing his brother-in-law's car, then damaging it, constituted some type of crime.

He headed back to the beach and walked to the wooded cottages in search of help. The first two were dark, closed up for the winter. He calculated his chances of finding anyone home as grim, but when he knocked on the porch door of the third house, a woman about his own age came to the door.

“Hello,” she said, opening the door for him as if she was expecting a bearded, water-logged sea lion to show up at about this time.

“Good afternoon,” Tallmadge said with a campaign smile. “I’ve had a bit of trouble. Parked my car over at the beach and locked my keys inside.”

“Then decided to take a dip?”

“That’ll teach me to walk along the rocks.”

“One must be mindful.”

Tallmadge had no idea what to ask for in way of assistance. If he called anyone, such as AAA, or the Secret Service, or Tobias, his caper would come to a swift end. Soaking and cold as he was, he felt free, and did not want to return in chains to Lookout.

“Don’t suppose you know how to jimmy a car window,” he said.

“Don’t be silly. Come on in. Herb!”

She introduced herself as Gwyneth, and led him into the living room, where a man in a plaid shirt was firmly situated in an arm chair watching TV. The man turned and blinked at Tallmadge from behind thick glasses.

“Forgot your bathing suit?” Herb asked.

“Forgot my common sense,” Tallmadge replied.

“This man locked his keys in his car,” Gwyneth said. “I’ll call Jerry.” She touched Tallmadge’s arm. “Our son’s a mechanic. He can help you. How about some dry clothes?”

“I’d be grateful.”

“Herb, find a clean shirt and pants.”

Herb ignored her, staring at the television.

“Herb.”

“What.”

“You heard me.”

Herb placed his hands on the arms of his chair, like he might get up, then gestured at the television. “President’s missing,” he said.

“President Robinson?” Gwyneth asked.

“Tallmadge. One ‘keeps running off.’”

Tallmadge turned to the TV and watched with a feeling of impending doom as his own face appeared on the screen. The screen split to include a digital image of Tallmadge with a

beard. “The President may be wearing a beard,” the newscaster announced. “And sources believe he may be traveling alone in Cape Cod, Massachusetts.”

Gwyneth and Herb both turned to Tallmadge. Herb’s mouth hung open for a moment. “What’d you say your name was?”

“This isn’t like aiding and abetting, is it?” Herb asked as they all sat around the living room watching TV.

“It’s not a crime for me to visit Cape Cod,” Tallmadge said. “Nor socialize with American citizens.”

“But you did steal your brother-in-law’s car.”

They were sipping coffee. Tallmadge felt relaxed in a change of clothes and dry shoes.

“I borrowed the car,” he said.

“*There’s* a Clintonian distinction,” said Herb.

“I don’t want to go back yet,” Tallmadge said. “I came here to spread my wife’s ashes.”

Gwyneth touched his arm again. “Your poor wife,” she said. “We were all so upset.”

In the near-distance they heard a helicopter. Outside the afternoon was slipping into the cool blue of evening.

“How come you didn’t run for re-election?” Herb wanted to know. “We’d have voted for you. Probably.”

“Altadeena and I felt that elected office was a service, not a career,” Tallmadge said. “Democracy thrives on new ideas. I know many politicians don’t agree.”

“Well, we appreciate what you did with health care,” said Gwyneth. “My daughter didn’t have any before you came along.”

A car pulled into the driveway outside. Tallmadge looked up nervously.

“That’s Jerry,” said Gwyneth.

“Might be men with guns,” said Herb.

The thrum of the helicopter did not go away.

“I think they found my car,” Tallmadge said.

“The hounds are closing in,” said Herb.

“It’s good training. Keeps them sharp.”

“Waste of our tax dollars mobilizing the whole nation, if you ask me.”

“I agree with you.”

A young man walked into the living room, nodded at Herb and Gwyneth, glanced at the television, adjusted his baseball cap.

“Jerry, this is President John Tallmadge,” said Gwyneth.

Jerry stared at all of them like he didn’t hear her right. Tallmadge stood up and shook hands.

“There’s cops everywhere,” Jerry said. “I went through two road blocks just getting here from Provincetown.” He squinted at Tallmadge. “You’re really the President?”

“Formerly.”

“Just ran off, huh?”

Now they heard sirens approaching in the distance. Tallmadge sat back down in his chair. Gwyneth went into the kitchen. Jerry took off his hat and scratched his head. “That’s your car, sir?” he asked, pointing to the television, where news crews were filming the abandoned station wagon.

“That’s it. We might as well call in.”

Kaepernick would not be happy. They would probably take him back to Lookout and tie him to his bedpost like an old, stubborn goat.

HEADLINE: Tallmadge Says Ankle Bracelet Fits Like a Glove!

Gwyneth returned from the kitchen with a fresh pot of coffee. “Sit down, Jerry,” she said. “Let’s everybody just relax until the police barge in. Mr. Tallmadge, would you like another cup of coffee?”

The calm in her voice reminded him of Altadeena. He realized he was still holding the empty urn. He had accomplished his mission. He sat in the recliner which smelled of a hundred summers in another family’s home, dressed in the jeans and plaid shirt and socks and shoes of another man. He felt like another person, not a former-President who had dined with kings and endured the fiery scorn of the American media, but just a man visiting old friends, with nowhere to be tomorrow and nowhere in the vast, sprawling country he could not go.

“Thank you, Gwyneth,” Tallmadge said as the sirens closed in. “I will take a refill.”