

GAME OVER

A Love Story

“Philosophers have argued for centuries about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, but materialists have always known it depends on whether they are jitterbugging or dancing cheek to cheek.” —Tom Robbins

#

Since Clinton, every *liaison* was *dangereuse*, but President Henry Barrett was pristinely careful, especially in the Oval Office.

The coded knock came—a light tap, then four, and three: *I / l-o-v-e / y-o-u*. A tattoo perfected over his six-year presidency. The lady was punctual. He put away the NRA and ISIS files, switched off the concealed recording system and killed the phones.

“Come,” he said.

The door opened into the elliptical sanctum.

“Good afternoon, Mr. President.” Her smile always got him.

The room was a quiet place, his work refuge from the relentless, necessary commerce of everything beyond the door.

“Call me Henry, he said.” It was a whisper.

“Anything you say, *Mr. President*.” She winked, producing the wattage again, and turned the lock.

It was their game, this coyness that was no crime. She kept stats, her Excel spreadsheet tallying one-hundred-and-twenty ... sessions ... in the People’s House.

So far.

He didn’t understand why Clinton had dallied with an intern, when he, Henry, had wired this mature woman into his confidence, before the campaigns, before his marriage even. She was

incapable of blabbing and had no friends like that Linda Tripp gorgon, who sunk Monica and cost Hillary the 2016 election.

It did not hurt that Henry named the woman's brother White House chief of staff, a colluder-in-chief who understood the world's toughest job exacted stresses. The man appreciated his sis's needs, too, and manipulated staff schedules to favor the couple's condensed visits. He wanted interior secretary but the president had wanted him close.

Cradled at her side was the usual butter leather portfolio, a fine subterfuge that bespoke work being done in the Oval. Yet Henry still wondered what the staff knew. Even in the ultra-private Lincoln Bedroom he was fastidious, knowing their interludes typically consumed a half hour of heaven underwritten by citizens.

"Will this checker my career?" he said.

He'd made that insipid crack for years and still she thought it funny.

"No more than mine, big boy," she said.

Her every visit was a descent of impish angels. For all her lightness of being, however, he knew she worried. She'd think he was again channeling the doomed Richard Nixon and his wretched Checkers speech.

President Barrett's insistent burdens—terrorism, genocide, immigration, preyed-upon children, a stop-everything Congress, NRA juvenilia ("Don't worry, guns have nothing to do with gun deaths."), science-free politicians ("Fret not, climate has nothing to do with weather.")—dissipated temporarily during their privacies, a reliable joy of the relationship. She considered it her job to buoy him. Even with the titanic freight she bore with him, her nonjudgmental loving was, like deepest mercy, not strained.

She was his favorite Shakespeare couplet: "Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks / but bears it out even to the edge of doom."

#

The woman flipped her portfolio onto the presidential lap and, sly-eyed, plopped a kitchen timer beside it.

“You’re clocking the action?” This was new.

“Your moves are sometimes slow, honey,” she said, and told him to set the device at thirty minutes. “This ain’t chess, y’know.” Affecting a Texas baritone now: “*Ah-h* knew Bobby Fischer”—fingers plying a pretend cigar—“Bobby Fischer was a *frand* of mine. *Mistah* President, you’re no Bobby Fischer.”

She had on the plaid, red-and-black kilted thing, double buckles at the waist and an industrial clothespin that latched it mid-thigh, plus a blue leotard today, or hosiery or tights or whatever they were, which matched the hue of her linen blazer. The whole getup accentuated her contours below the knee —*Quelles jambes*. The lady was an olio of demureness and maturity, self-containment and girly whimsy, scamp and seraph.

“Seriously, Hank, you wilt. Pace yourself, love.”

He removed his suit coat, set it over his chair. “Where shall we...play?”

She spiraled a thumb onto the Kennedy desk as if nailing a presidential cockroach. “Right here, Rambo.” The immaculate aircraft carrier of a desk.

“Woo-woo,” he said.

Other times they used the White House mess (after hours), the presidential basketball court, the Truman balcony and, apogee of his derring-do, the press room, Henry’s *souçon* of condescension revealed. Maybe the limo next?

Better yet a quiet copse on the South Lawn. Harder to ditch the Secret Service though.

For now it was the commodious deck of the *USS Kennedy*. They’d once stowed playthings below, in its cubby, where John-John had long ago hid his.

She removed her blazer and draped it over the ogle-eyed bust President Theodore Roosevelt, benighting him. “The voyeur’s spectacles are too much and he’s got feral teeth.”

“My dear woman,” he said, “Teddy’s beautiful head belongs on a mountain.”

In the shedding and placement of a garment even, her motions came without affectation, as intimacy understated. They had done this enough times to classify it as a rite. The president trembled to watch her.

He loosened his tie. She focused on his eyes: “You’re the best president I’ve ever ...”

... Ever *what?* As always, she’d stopped the oft-repeated sentence before its climax, as a Tantalus. He never asked her to complete it and now offered his oblique: “Who was runner up?”

No hesitation. “It’s between John Adams—don’t underestimate the little guy—and Coolidge,” she said. “Cool Cal. Man was a stallion. You jealous?”

Henry ignored the jibe and touched the pearls at her neck. Her blue-green irises ignited. They did not fail to bewitch. “Prepare to be jumped,” he said.

“Ha!” She puckered sweetness at him then cocked a finger and knuckle-chucked his foremost sub-chin. “Get ready to be cornered, *el Presidente.*”

He would not be diverted. “What about Kennedy?”

“Carnally overwrought,” she said, “and sexually overrated.”

“Jimmy Carter?”

“My heart lusted.”

“The Gipper?” he said.

“Just said no to Nancy’s cooties.”

“LBJ,” he said.

She made an icky-face. “A patriot does only so much for her country.” Pointing to her tummy: “You can look at my appendix scar, but I’ll hoist no beagle by the ears.”

“Heaven forefend,” Hank’s eyeballs scrolling up to the cave behind his brow. “What about the man who brought peace to Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel and Palestine and stopped Iran’s *nuclear* program?”

“Guy who sent ballistic missiles to Texas?” she said, “so the buckaroos could keep Mexicans away from the Alamo?”

“Corralled Putin, too.”

“My verdict on the Great Uniter: all cowboy hat, no cow.”

“Okay-y-y, Wild Willy Clinton, then,” he said.

“Honeybun, the man-child has a scrotum nose, for which the priapic prez met the prurient prosecutor.”

“*Prolix*, babe!” he said. “Thou art so alliterate. Who knew?”

“Maybe you also don’t know how Monica’s dress got stained?”

Uh-oh.

The lady leaned in, slim breasts sweet against his arm, and whispered:

“Monica ...didn’t ... *inhale*”—that last word enunciated via a hot breathy sex-pot exhalation that melted the wax in his ear canal.

The presidential head snapped. “Whoa! How’d you know that?” failing to suppress a cackle.

“My lips are sealed, sir.” She moved to kiss him in earnest. “Pity hers weren’t.”

Henry put his hands at her shoulders, straightening his arms to set a small distance between them and hold her there. Then, *sotto voce*: “Darling? ...”

“Yes, pookie face.” Unflummoxed by his reticence.

If she were an instrument she’d be a piccolo, imperially slim, easy in the upper register, agile above the main chorus of things, insouciant yet capable of symphonic blending when the

score called for it. Were she music itself—the food of love—let it be jazz, for the woman’s exquisite syncopations and aeronautic improvs against the limited tonality and staid tempo of Henry’s inalterably low key.

“This is difficult ...” His head down now. “... My wife, seventeen years ... our kids...I—”

“—Sh-h-h-h-h-h...,” putting her finger to his lips. “If you can’t take care of *that* woman—*Mizz* Barrett—I will.” The tone not portentous, only solicitous. “Besides, in a secret substratum of her brain, maybe she approves. Lady ain’t dumb, Hank, or hadn’t you noticed?”

In the slant afternoon light, dust motes drifted around the dignified chamber in indolent helices.

Back in the game now, Henry said: “You and she are equally brilliant. Take it as a compliment, okay?”

“Will do, honey, so long as you take you and me as a complement, okay?”

Their parrying recharged him. In all things she laughed with, not at. Ditto him with her.

The lovers put foreheads together and rocked in unison, giggling, first softly, then recklessly. Really, it mattered not who heard. (Still, he was glad he’d turned off the recording gadgets.)

“*J’adoube*,” the lady said, resting a hand on his shoulder, light as tracing paper.

“Don’t go Latin on me, okay?” he said.

Her arms wide in supplication, palms up, eyes and words aimed at the ceiling: “Just let the friggin’ games begin, okay?”

Henry liked how her hands worked, flying in sweet arcs like tiny passerines, alighting here and there as she touched things properly, responding to his—he knew it—leaden moves.

Clacking sounds accented the couple's ardent serve-and-volley satisfactions, preventing their registering the ticking timer, long since swatted to the floor, until it buzzed—*Bzzzzt!* Then her colossal smack-down, setting the *USS Kennedy* aquiver. She was playing the French Open? Serena Williams vs. POTUS in a Grand Slam? *Nolo contendere!*

True to her boast, the woman had boxed him into a deadly dihedral, no escape left, right or over the top. He'd responded at each move but, as usual, did not meet her gamesmanship. Then the ingénue's consummate stiletto, her unassailable math: "Session No. 130 goes to ... *me!*" A freshet of snickers.

"Doomed," he said, bedazzled. (Those high-beam eyes.)

"Only Henry-poo Barrett could corner himself in an *egg-shaped* room," she said. (The Chiclet white teeth.)

He liked that she was better at this than he, no matter the turf they met on. (The succulent, non-collagenous lips.)

And, lo, she was patient with his tactical fumbings.

Muffled noises from Pennsylvania Avenue seeped through the Oval's bullet-proof windows. From T.R.'s tented dome, Henry lifted the blazer and helped her with it. He flashed again on how their seclusions might appear.

"You think they think we...?" he said.

"Ya think?" head canted three-quarter profile, eyebrows thrust. Spicules of perspiration glistened on the faint down of her lip, as on a sparkling sundew, a carnivorous plant that traps and slowly digests unwary insects.

“I think,” he said.

“Good thinking, guy,” she said. “Mensa needs you.” The A++-rated political sophisticate, master builder of international treaties, executor of complex budget alliances, 800s on his SATs, was a Swiss cheese of tabloidal naiveté.

They checked each other for remnant dishevelments, a nimble smoothing-out like that of chimps preening. A witness would conclude definite male-female attraction. It was. But their priming was so tidy that no one could assert by a preponderance of evidence an erotic sub-text underlying it. Nothing feinted toward high crime or misdemeanor. They resembled long-marrieds adoring one another still.

Henry could not relinquish his subject. “The jackass caucus in the House of Representatives would never believe us.”

She neatened his tie as he tried to even the ends. “Speaking of donkeys,” she said, “the Great White Slab in Florida...”

“...Lush Rumboat”—the president braying for effect—“bloviator *cum laude*. Retired the jersey.”

“Grand kleagle of ethics-free journalism,” she said, air-quoting ‘journalism.’ “What the Rumboid wouldn’t do with our spreadsheet.”

Our spreadsheet. The plural possessive by which she off-loaded onto him many a dubious package.

Henry: “When Lush shuffles the coil, they’ll bronze him for the Factless Broadcasting Hall of Fame.”

She amped it: “Formaldehyde the corpse, waxify his cutie dimples, add lipstick, *un peu du rouge ...*”

Henry: “... schlep him onto an open catafalque, like Lenin, a new roadside attraction for

Palm Beach ...”

She: “... then Hal the Computer dispatches the payload to the asteroid Flatulence to put him among political equals.”

At the mention of Hal, the president hummed some *Blue Danube* and waltzed her a few steps. “Thus spake Zarathustra,” he said.

“Please call me Phoebe, my Nobelist.” The woman was happiest whenever in motion.

“Whatever you say, Zara.”

“And fuck all his pals, too, Hank!” she said. “But leave six Tea Partiers for pall bearers, okay?”

“To haul away the Lush,” he said, “would require a John Deere, dear, better yet a D-9 Cat and a sky crane, else our longshoremen will strike.”

“And to think the Council on Foreign Relations named thee the century’s ‘Global Diplomat.’”

She worked a decorous patting of his errant lapel, collected the twenty-four red and black plastic disks from the Kennedy desk, and dumped them clacking and chattering into the Seagram’s velour pouch he held open. Then she folded the checker board and returned everything to her portfolio.

On the stars-and-stripes carpet, below the eagle’s outstretched talons and above “In God We Trust,” lay the timer. Phoebe retrieved the device, thrusting it overhead like a trophy. He hoped she wouldn’t kiss it.

Eyes a gleam, the woman lased a Serena grin at him. “Six-love, six-love, six LOVE!”

O cruelest word.

Henry had weathered thirty humbling minutes of double and triple jumps (“King me, dammit!”), two crushing quads (“Lay on, MacPrez, and damned be him who first cries

‘Hold!’”) and, *la pièce de résistance*, a spectacular quint. She’d whopper-jawed the leader of the free world three-games-to-zip.

Now she was sandpapering his scabs.

Too funny.

Henry Woodward Barrett had won the senate, two presidencies, a Nobel, a MacArthur and a grim war, but couldn’t beat his Wellesley-Yale-Berkeley sylph at checkers. God, he loved it all. He was George C. Scott outwitting Rommel, Robert Duvall inhaling a morning’s fragrance of napalm.

What marriage could top this?

As the lady fixed to leave, Henry affected basset hound eyes and faked a dejected loser posture.

“Don’t worry, Hanky Panky,” she said in coochie coo, touching his cheek. “You’re déclassé at board games—”

He nodded.

“—but manifestly a great president—”

He nodded.

“—and a damn sexy hubby—”

He nodded hard.

“—and, my love of loves, a world-class daddy to our surpassingly smart children.”

Silence.

“Therefore,” he said, “I help with the kids’ homework tonight, right? Phoebe nodded.

“You sandbag real good, weasel woman!” he said.

Cupping his face now, “Oh, Henry, you have it so right—as usual. Po-o-o-r Henry.” She

smooched a plucky little buss that squeaked. “*J’adoube, mon cher*. Alter not a thing.”

He watched his wife cross the room—calf tone like blue jazz—and open the door.

“Ms. Barrett?” he said.

She looked back into the Oval.

“Wait up for me?” he said.

She held up the portfolio and shook it so the checkers clacked and rattled.

“Your move, tiger.”

#

The president retook the *Kennedy* helm refreshed. He pulled the intelligence briefs, tossing the NRA tripe into the presidential wastebasket (onto which the chief-of-staff had helpfully stenciled “WHERE THE SUN DON’T SHINE”) and opened his ISIS file.

Seconds later, The Knock, woodpecker-rapid this time, an undifferentiated: *tuh-tuh-tuh-tuh-tuh-tuh-I/love/you*.

Henry rose. “Forget something, Pheeb?”

Her brights were flashing. “I’ve been thinking ...”

“Uh-oh. Court thou danger for thee and for me?”

“*Moi?*” Her fire-lit eyes wobbled his plain browns.

“What’s up?”

“A different game next time, Hank, that’s what.” She hurled extravagant winks at him, each punctuated with a head bob. “Your decision, please?” A command imitating a question.

Henry assessed the ramifications: “What about your pal Lush Rumboat?”

“As my indefatigable lover George Burns told me only yesterday, ‘Acting is all about honesty. If you can fake that you’ve got it made.’” She went on. “We give Rumdum an exclusive,

see... Leak him our spreadsheet, see... Let the heavyweight lightweight rant on checkers! ...

See?"

Our proud plan.

"Give Lush a break, catnip, the guy's head is a medicine ball," he said.

"Silly me, I thought it was a goiter."

"No wonder the man misogynizes. The Rumbelly is a Great American, darling, admit it."

"So's O.J." She cocked an arm to pledge-of-allegiance position, palm fibrillating against her beautiful chest. "Be still my beating heart."

"Okay, hottie," he said, "the president's decision is decided. Six words, ever concise: *Your commander-in-chief needs you.*" He grinned smugly. "Capiche?"

"Hmm-m-m ..." The cunning head tilt. "Okay, big shot, four words from your first, last, always, only First Lady: *In God we tryst,*" Particle-accelerator smile. "Wanna call the NSA to decipher the code?"

Striding to the door, she looked back and flung him a capacious over-the-shoulder *mwah!*-kiss. Then—grace-note quick—her arcing arm descended, deft as a nuthatch, to the gleaming brass knob, where her hand alit soft as a fallen leaf.

The president steadied his besotted eyeballs. "Your beauty 'doth renew faster than swift love decays."

"*Au revoir*, sweet prince," she said and, pinching a knob of red-and-black kilt, curtsied to the splendor of his allusion. "May flights of angels consort with thee and comfort thy worldly errands."

Henry, to the closing door: "*Je t'aime*, Pheeb, my bounty of seraphim..."

—END—