the second coming

by imgonebye

Summary

Susan is happy for Elaine. Feels kind of proud, even. She’s documented this meteoric rise from its start, watched Elaine blossom from a moderately well-liked First Lady obscured by her husband’s popularity to cucked and reviled Elaine Hammond, presidential hopeful who just won’t lose the bloated, cheating baggage; and here she finally is. Elaine Barrish again, resplendent in sequins, poised for either even greater heights or the most painful nosedive she’ll ever take.
Whatever happens, Susan will be there.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Part 1

Someone is writing a poem. Words are being set down in a force field. It’s as if the words themselves have magnetic charges; they veer together or in polarity, they swerve against each other. Part of the force field, the charge, is the working history of the words themselves, how someone has known them, used them, doubted and relied on them in a life. Part of the movement among the words belongs to sound—the guttural, the liquid, the choppy, the drawn-out, the breathy, the visceral, the downlight. — Adrienne Rich

Probably no one would dare tell Susan that she used to be better at this, but that’s fine. She knows already. She got too big too early; complacency set in, and now she’s writing snappy one-liners about the President’s fashion sense and how Elaine Barrish heralds the second coming, a vast image rises from Spiritus Mundi as the hellish fucking Barrish Beast sloucheth forth from the wastes to wreak havoc upon the landscape of modern feminism. Shit, that would probably be a better allusion than anything she’s done recently. The thought makes her sigh and rub the bridge of her nose.

The big problem is the industry, specifically that they are the last heralds left in an industry so far past its last hurrah that it may yet be resurrected before it fully crumples. What she writes has to be short, dynamic, simple, to-the-point, interesting, humorous, witty but not in a particularly demanding way, we’re talking pop-culture witty, engaging, hard-hitting but not too hard-hitting, as objective as possible while still carrying with it that bite of opinion that people read her column for—otherwise they’d be reading Georgia’s trite prose about red carpet outfits or whatever piss she’s covering now. Not that Georgia’s a bad journalist. Susan recognizes a bit of herself in the younger woman—the areas around the backbone, admittedly. Now if I’d let myself get trampled over that easily I wouldn’t even have a Pulitzer to remind me that I’d had better days. It’s not entirely Georgia’s fault. She also has a boss who’s realized that a journalist you’re screwing is easier to manage than one you aren’t. She’s also not nearly as good at this as Susan is, was, has been, will be, whatever.

Because Susan has contacts, tenacity, a reputation as a horrible icy bitch with no feelings whose only ethics are journalistic, and even then those are slightly questionable. Not questionable enough to get her in any trouble though. She’s not like……………. well. Georgia. She isn’t feeling particularly charitable, otherwise she’d give her some advice: Draw your line in the sand. Draw it thick and mark it well. Set up searchlights above it and back far, far away. You don’t go near it. The only way you go near it is if you have an In. Not a tip, a full-blown In. We are talking President’s Cabinet, the Big Three of the USFG, or international shitstorm type In. It’s like porn. You know it when you see it. If you have to ask, it’s not an In. And that line should include bad taste and voyeurism, particularly the SUICIDE ATTEMPT of the CHILD of an EX-PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, GEORGIA, AND THE CURRENT SECRETARY OF STATE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Don’t be fucking gauche, Georgia. It doesn’t look good to cry in your office when you’ve successfully out-Cold-Bitched me. Don’t screw someone for information—but if you do, don’t make a habit of it. And don’t look desperate (for information or some human fuckin’ contact) while doing it. Let’s hope we’ve all learned from this: Don’t screw your boss. Not even if you’re in capital-L Love or if he’s offered you a story. Not even if he’s really, really good in the sack (which we frankly both know he isn’t).

Susan’s line in the sand is only slightly scuffed, and most of these scuffs are in some way related to Elaine. She’s proud of that, actually. Cold Bitches don’t usually follow rules. She has her cake and eats it too. It’s just that sometimes the cake tastes like beer and regret, which is literally all she can
President Hammond is relaxed on the plane to Turkey, despite the last-minute change of plans.

What a riveting line, Susan. This right here is why they pay you the big bucks.

This is what writer’s block feels like. Does anyone even care about the story? It doesn’t count as an In when the events are this damn boring. I can see it now: EX-PRESIDENT HAMMOND DECEPTIVELY BORING, by Susan Berg. EX-PRESIDENT HAMMOND NEEDS HOBBY THAT MAKES FOR GOOD JOURNALISM, by Susan Berg. EX-PRESIDENT HAMMOND UNSURPRISINGLY CHARISMATIC, by Susan Berg. The only real news to come out of this whole experience is BERG OK WITH BARRISH, probably by Georgia Gibbons, honestly. Berg more than OK with Barrish, as it turns out. Berg regrets treatment of Barrish.

Her sister’s husband buys terrible beer—who the fuck drinks Coors Light? He’s ready for the potbelly and the mid-life crisis before his kids even have college accounts. She squints at the can—the use-by date passed nearly a year ago. That explains the bouquet of cardboard, rust, and human suffering that’s currently saturating her tongue and likely eroding her esophagus as well. She pitches the can into the trash before she thinks anything stupid—such as, Jesus, when was my use-by date?

OK. Let’s go. She cracks her neck, shudders, stretches. Stares at the laptop screen ’til she feels the blood droplets forming on her forehead and her eyes shrivel to little raisins that her sister Liz will put in her oatmeal tomorrow.

The problem is that these are Big Stories. Like, so big that when she thinks about them she can hear the capital letters clicking into place. The extra-millisecond pause where she hits the shift key with her left ring finger and the B with her thumb. She doesn’t feel ready. It’s easy to lambast the living shit out of the President. He dresses like a movie star (B-list, honestly) and his administration verges on incompetent (with one shining exception). Sometimes she feels like she’s being tube-fed gaffes. This week in D.C. Follies, Garcetti blows three THOUSAND taxpayer dollars on a bottle of Petrus for some ambassador’s dinner (Spender in Chief), Collier says gun laws should be tailored to the areas they apply to, cites Detroit, Compton as areas that need more enforcement, and then—cherry on top—absolutely eats shit when journalists remind him of the racial demographics of these areas.

Biiiiig fat gold star for Elaine Barrish, who is probably the most successful Secretary of State this nation has ever had, even if you don’t adjust for the absolute shitstorm that U.S. foreign affairs have become in the last decade. Susan is happy for her. Feels kind of proud, even. She’s documented this meteoric rise from its start, watched Elaine blossom from a moderately well-liked First Lady obscured by her husband’s popularity to cucked and reviled Elaine Hammond, presidential hopeful who just won’t lose the bloated, cheating baggage; and here she finally is. Elaine Barrish again, resplendent in sequins, poised for either even greater heights or the most painful nosedive she’ll ever take.

Whatever happens, Susan will be there.

NOVEMBER 7, 2012, 6:03 A.M.

“Well, Madam President, how does victory taste?”

“Like I just gargled a dollar in change,” Elaine groans blearily. “Someone get me a coffee before I …..” She rolls her eyes; words obviously fail her.
Susan is two full nights sleeps ahead of her and smugly chipper. “Trade the presidency for a good mattress and a bottle of melatonin?”

“Honestly, at this point I’d trade it for a sofa and noise canceling headphones. And it’s President Elect to you. Not gonna be Prez ’til January.”

“Let me have my fun,” Susan says, handing Elaine a cup of coffee. She picked it up earlier when she headed to the Starbucks next to their hotel to get her own cup, because the hotel they’re staying at has either been using the same grinds for the last decade or found a way to

“Oh you are a godsend. Douglas brought me a cup earlier, but it was from the breakfast buffet so—”

“Tree bark and body odor?” The pair of them have spent the last two days at the hotel swapping analogies for the coffee.

“Fermented cat shit.”

Susan stifles a snort. “Ass drippings.”

“Eugh. Stop. I don’t even want to drink this now.” Elaine’s phone buzzes but she doesn’t bother to check it. Douglas and Bud left just over an hour ago under penalty of bodily expulsion from the room, and Elaine got half a nap on the couch with a hotel pillow and a highly suspect hotel blanket.

“Really? It’s Premium French Roast…. ” Susan wags her own cup temptingly at Elaine.

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means some Canadian in the back jacked off into the beans before they ground ’em,” Bud says as he lurches blearily into the room. Elaine snorts and takes half a sip as Bud proffers his own thermos.

“Now, this that I’ve got here is some premium ground hotel piss, let me tell you that.”

“As much as I’m enjoying your commentary, what the hell are you doing here? I told you to let me sleep.”

“Well, you aren’t sleeping. Anyway, Collier’s outside, and he’s in a mood. Looks like a hamster just crawled up his asshole.”

“If we’re lucky, one did,” Susan says under her breath. Bud and Elaine both turn to smile at her, breathing out near-identical half-snorts. She ignores the weirdness for a second and basks in the glow. She’s got an article half-written about how the United States is starting to reek of oligarchy—Elaine’s opponent was Jeb Bush, for Christ’s sake—but that will wait. The last two days have been a whirlwind. Bush conceded just under five hours ago.

Susan reported live from the Barrish headquarters in Chicago. She blogs now. She kind of hates it, but she’s getting more views than Georgia, so she deals with the annoyance. Besides, it’s her own show. Alex can suck a fat one. This is her show. Her ties to Elaine have cost her maybe a shred of credibility, but she’s got a permanent In. And a (HOLY SHIT!!!!!!!) Breaking News Reporting Pulitzer for her blog—and they’ve never given that to an individual before—

“For her comprehensive and in-depth coverage of Elaine Barrish’s announcement of her candidacy for President of the United States, and impressive follow-up reporting on the months of planning leading up to the announcement.”

Damn right. She broke the news, obviously. ELAINE BARRISH TO RUN FOR PRESIDENT. On her blog, mind you; she’d just left the Globe and christened her site with the journalism equivalent of
a bottle of champagne and a pint of virgin’s blood. She spent the next 48 hours giving background so thorough that even the Barrish-Hammond clan was impressed. Not Margaret, but Susan was pretty sure that she could save Elaine from assassination by catching a bullet between her teeth and Margaret still wouldn’t like her.

Elaine sprints off to the bathroom to wash her face—“take my face off then put a new one on,” she says when prompted—and Bud just raises his eyebrows at Susan.

“Bet you never thought this would happen,” he says. The campaign has taken a toll on him, despite—or perhaps, because of—his detachment from it. He’s taken to joking about how even his wrinkles have wrinkles; she can feel the relief pouring off him. It’s infectious.

“Not in a million years.”

“She’s going to offer you Press Secretary, you know.”

“What?”

“Oh come on, surely you felt that one coming. A two-time Pulitzer award winning journalist who’s somehow ingratiated herself with this family—and considering that first Pulitzer of yours, I’m still not sure how you did it—you’d have to be living under a damn rock to not have any idea.”

“Well, Jesus.” Oh, she’d thought about it. Then she’d thought, No. Elaine isn’t going to do that. That’s predictable, she has integrity—hell, I wouldn’t name me as Press Secretary. I run a blog for fuck’s sake.

When she tells Bud, he laughs. “And Tony Snow worked for Fox News. Your weblog’s got more credibility than that fracas.”

Susan’s first thought is Who in the Fuck says weblog? She laughs, Bud excuses himself, and she sits and waits for Elaine (who, as she has learned, gets ready remarkably swiftly). Perched against the dresser on her arms, looking for all the world like she isn’t screaming on the inside.

Bud is right; her blog certainly has gained incredible traction. It wasn’t just her connection to Elaine’s campaign, although that has certainly helped. She is, as it turns out, very good. Big News good. Russian Foreign Minister Viktor Porchov’s prostitution scandal? She broke that, and for what it’s worth followed it with a look at sex work in D.C. That was one hell of an article to research. The girls, unsurprisingly, didn’t like dishing about their most powerful and lucrative clients. Collier’s minority problem, after he lost the primary to Elaine by one hell of a margin for an incumbent (66% to 34% of the popular vote). He’s been uncomfortable to deal with after she wrote that he was “hemorrhaging minority votes with the blunt finesse of a seasoned Christian Conservative”.

Speak of the devil. Lame Duck POTUS Collier pokes his head into the room and grimaces when he sees her.

“Good morning President Collier.” Susan is nothing but smile. He nods uncomfortably and leans back out. Life is good.

NOVEMBER 22, 2012
The first person who called when Elaine announced yesterday morning was Georgia. Funny how things work out.

“I just wanted to say I’m so happy for you,” Georgia said. “Really I am.” She sounded like she was trying to convince herself as much as she was trying to convince Susan.

“Really? Because I’d be jealous. Furious, in fact. And after all you did to try to get on Elaine’s candidacy story as well.”

Georgia made a noise. It was like a grunt, or maybe a sigh. Something that she tried to strangle in her throat after it was nearly out. Susan almost felt bad for her. But this is big name, big game, Big News politics now. In a lot of ways, it’s easier being on the other side.

“Enjoy your Thanksgiving,” she said and hung up.

Susan enjoys hers, even though she is sitting next to Margaret Barrish at the Barrish/Hammond table. Anne Barrish is on her right, which has got Douglas all but losing his goddamn mind.

“Relax,” she tells him when they bump into each other in the kitchen—Susan is getting a drink, Douglas is being childish and paranoid. “I’m not here to ruin your marriage. How fast do you think I’d lose the Press Secretary position if I did?”

He stares at her, blinks, then nods. “Thank you. Um, what were you looking for?”

“A drink.”

He opens the fridge and offers her a beer—a Coors Light. One look at the dramatic slant of her eyebrows is enough of a response for him; he puts it away. She returns to their family table with a glass of water, and Anne greets her with a smile.

Susan thinks Douglas is a good man. Or at least good-ish, more specifically as good as a man can be growing up with a cheating father and a junkie brother. Not that TJ isn’t a good person. He’s just hard to deal with, and drug addictions don’t usually bring out the goodness in people, in Susan’s experience. She doesn’t think he’ll cheat on Anne again. But if he does, it’s going to be her job to spin it to the public.

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NOVEMBER 24, 2012

Susan doesn’t do TV interviews very often. She’s fine on TV, actually; she’s passably eloquent and relatively charming, she looks and sounds good, and she has the unflappable poise of the Venus de Milo, but she’s just never really liked them. Probably something to do with how unforgiving it is. You can edit the shit out of an article, completely rework a paragraph; if you’ve thought of a new point by the end you can put it anywhere you like. Writing lends itself much better to cohesiveness than interviews do. She’s going to put her foot in her mouth somewhere along the line, she can feel it.

But this one isn’t going too badly. She thinks it might have something to do with Elaine’s own charming spin on ‘break a leg’; a “don’t fuck this up, Susan,” whispered into her ear as she departed from Barrish HQ to the studio; they shared a grin. It never seemed like a smart idea to work with your friends before. But if Susan were Prez Elect, Elaine would be her first thought for Secretary of State. You just don’t turn down skill when it’s so readily available to you.
“And you’ve devoted quite a bit of attention on your blog to minority interests, is that correct?”

“I’d just call it proportional representation,” she says with a smile, and the anchor nods at her correction. “But yes. It seems to me that so much of our government focuses on majority groups—specifically white people, men, the wealthy, straight people, the list goes on and on. There’s no problem with paying attention to the issues of these groups, obviously, but I’ve always felt that in the interest of transparency and objectivity, there has to be a more level playing field. Of course, as a white woman, I think it’s far out of my scope to comment on racial issues, which is why my less objective writing, such as my book and column, has often focused on feminist issues.”

“And you’ve often written about gay issues as well.” Oh shit fuck shitting shitfuck. It’s not that her sexuality is a problem to her. It’s just that it’s a problem to approximately everyone else. And that does, in a way, make it a problem to her. But now is as good—and bad—a time as any. “Such as the issue of marriage equality. Do you feel that you have the appropriate scope on those issues?”

“I semi-frequently write about LGBTQ+ issues. In the case of marriage equality, it’s a human rights issue. There’s a clear denial of an entire group of people from an institution that they deserve. But,” heart hammering, “I feel that I do have the appropriate scope, as a bisexual woman.” Should have just said I have gay friends, honestly, they’d probably want to hear that more. They don’t like your advocacy when you’re part of the group you’re advocating for. They want you to be a fearless ally, a martyr for the cause, the Gay Mother Teresa. But living a lie gets tiresome. Publicly outing herself is an impulsive act she’ll never be able to take back. I’m gonna fucking regret this. But maybe I won’t.

She’s never even come out to Elaine. This isn’t live, at least. She can tell Elaine first. Just so Elaine isn’t surprised, of course. Not like David here.

David’s eyebrows shoot up considerably higher than Susan was expecting. Maybe his skin is just freakishly smooth for a middle-aged man, not botoxed to shit. She spends the next twenty-odd minutes explaining bisexuality to him, which is a fucking joke. Yes I’ve had relationships with women Yes I’ve had relationships with men NO not at the same time that’s something entirely different NO David I’m not attracted to everyone I meet Are you attracted to every woman you meet? Because if you are that seems a bit tiring Say David aren’t we supposed to be discussing my appointment as WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY and on and on until finally, it’s over.

She doesn’t speak to David as she leaves the studio, despite his obvious attempts to flag her down. Elaine’s driver picks her up; from the backseat of the Cadillac she calls Elaine.

And gets voicemail.

She tries a text. She’d rather not leave a voicemail; she doesn’t want to monologue to Elaine—or anyone—right now. The first time she came out to someone—her best friend in college—she nearly cried. Possibly because she was very drunk, but also because she was scared. That feeling hasn’t gone away. This shit doesn’t get any easier with time.

Susan Berg: Hey. I don’t know if this matters at all, it probably doesn’t, but I just wanted to warn you.
12:42 PM

Susan Berg: During the interview I was talking about my coverage of minority issues & he asked me about how I feel qualified to talk about LGBTQ+ issues if I won’t give much analysis on race issues as a white woman
12:43 PM

Susan Berg: So I told him I’m bisexual. Which I am, btw. I just didn’t tell any of you, so I didn’t
want you to be blindsided.

12:43 PM

Susan Berg: Anyway I tried to call you but it went straight to voicemail and I thought you said you were taking the afternoon off. Hope everything is OK.

12:44 PM

Elaine calls her ten minutes later. She’s breathing Mama Bear fury so hard that Susan can almost feel it in her ear. This isn’t what she was expecting.

“SUSAN. Are you all right?”

“What—yes. I’m fine. I think. I might not be after the interview airs, but we’ll just have to wait and see.”

“The Republicans are going to be on your ass the instant it does, maybe earlier if it leaks. Do you want to head back here for the night? I know it is godawfully unpleasant to be outed in such a public way. I’m here, we’re here, if you want support.”

“I, um.” This is a big one. Does she go home to her empty apartment, blissfully devoid of pitying looks and consolation, woefully devoid of company and comfort? “I think I’ll take you up on that. Plus,” she says lightly, “I have to return your car.”

“All right, we’ll see you there. Is there anyone you don’t want to be there? Do you want me to tell them?” Elaine sounds like she’s trying to keep a lid on that interrogative nervous tic of hers, which Susan appreciates.

“Tell them. Please. Thank you, Elaine.” She especially doesn’t want to see Douglas’s face when he learns.

It’s an hour-long drive back to Elaine’s house. She’s so wound up she thinks she’ll have to spend the rest of the ride doing breathing exercises to feel human. Inhale onetwothree exhale onetwothree inhale deep belly breaths, pretend you’re on a black sand beach in Maui and a shirtless, toned surfer with a dazzling white grin is offering you a Corona. Madame President holds out a piña colada. Exhale onetwothree inhale onetwothree. Some choices are easy. She doesn’t even notice herself falling asleep.

Impressions: a little girl with a mouthful of thorns crying because nothing she’ll ever do will be important enough for the grueling hunger in the depths of her belly. The thorns take root. A shark with rosebud teeth prowls the bloody waters. Fish quake in the nooks and quarries of the gore-washed lagoon. Elaine Barrish hands her a piña colada. The water is warm and the sun is bright. They hold hands under a cabana. A red-stained fin is silhouetted against the horizon. Her mouth is full of thorns, but this time she can spit them out and scream.

And she wakes up in Elaine’s arms, which is just one of those things. She’s slumped across the black leather seats and Elaine’s sitting on the very edge of them, holding her so she doesn’t totally fall.

“Are you all right? You sleeptalk, you know. You kept mumbling about a piña colada.”

“Oh that’s, uh, you know. Whatever.” Shaking the hair out of her eyes, she realizes what Elaine just told her. “Shit, have you been sitting here long?”

“Only a couple of minutes. I was about to ask one of the agents to help carry you in if you didn’t wake up. You’re okay?”
Susan sits up, allowing Elaine to hop out of the SUV and stand outside, waiting for her. “I think I’m as okay as I’ll ever be, considering.”

Elaine opens her mouth then shuts it, reaching out to steady Susan as she slouches her way out of the backseat, limbs sleep- addled and pendulous. “I’ll grill you later. I’ve told the family to leave you alone.”

She leans her head on Elaine’s shoulder. “God you’re tall.” Elaine laughs. She’s got to be six feet. I fucking love tall women. She stifles that comment.

“Do you want to go back to sleep?”

“Please.”

She’s standing fully by the time they’re inside. Ever the rebel, TJ winks at Susan as Elaine leads her to a guest bedroom.

DECEMBER 5, 2012 12:03 PM

This is the last time I’ll be writing on this blog, at least for the time being.

People keep telling me I’m moving on to bigger and better things, but I could never discount what I’ve done on this website (and what this website has done for me) in that way. I’ve had this website for less than a year, and it’s already been one of the most fulfilling career experiences of my life. My work on this blog has won me acclaim, awards, and likely the job I’m leaving it to take—White House Press Secretary.

These are procellous times. The crises in the Middle East remain critical; our economy’s slow trudge to recovery seems to be slowing by the day; our current President is blocked from action by a deadlocked Congress; North Korea and Iran pose vaguely viable and unquantifiable nuclear threats; the Supreme Court deliberates on Section 3 of the Defense of Marriage Act. These are just the big name issues; every day, new conflicts erupt, new issues emerge, new heroes are made. I became a journalist because I saw the field as the only way to foster a comprehensive understanding of the mutable and dynamic world we live in. I became a journalist because I wanted to be a part of the documentation of history.

There’s more to it, of course; I was an angry young journalist stuffed to the gills with opinions and judgment. Over the years I have been selfish and competitive, devoted beyond reason, biased beyond fairness. I’m not proud of every opinion I’ve had or every criticism I’ve made, but I’m proud of where my drive has taken me.

Every day, all around us, things happen. Billions upon billions of things. Some mean nothing, but others mean everything. I don’t mean to write in truisms, but I think that understanding that history is made every second all around us was the impetus for most, if not all of my career choices. It’s the reason I’ve got the reputation I have.

Contrary to speculation, I won’t be selling this website. From the start, this was something that was to be uniquely mine; no editor to censor me, no rival journalists to compete for stories with. I know I’m most recognized for my vitriolic editorials and for my criticism of the very family for which I now work. I’d always felt trapped by my own aforementioned reputation, not to mention by the constraints of a dying industry. This website has given me the freedom to grow in the directions I wanted and to branch out according to my whims and instincts. I’d rather leave it to the dust of ages.
than relinquish something so symbolic of everything I’ve worked for in life.

I’d like to thank all of you who have read this (and there are certainly a lot of you) for aiding in what has been an incredible, if relatively short journey. I can’t leave you with some great insight into the future of politics or media, primarily because I think the future holds surprises for even the most sapient of us. I’m sure I will be just as surprised as the rest of you by what the news brings to us over the next couple of months, years, decades. I hope that’s as exciting to you as it is to me.

Thank you for lending your ears and eyes.
Part 2

Chapter Summary

The best thing about their friendship is how very Teflon it is; they’ve been through some hard-hitting tough shit and it’s only driven them closer together. Being ex-enemies has fostered between them an openness for criticism that Susan has never felt; she’s been criticized, sure, but never in a way that is so absent of judgment and expectation. They shed their damage and exist together.

Chapter Notes

i don’t remember what happened to/with susan's mother so i just made some things up. mea culpa. these aren’t chapters inasmuch as they’re just parts of the story, because if i tried to do the whole thing in one go i’d never ever finish or post it. this part features minor character death and some moderately gross imagery.

“"The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.” – William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming”

DECEMBER 2, 2012

LEAVING A MEETING WITH PRESIDENT COLLIER, PRESIDENT-ELECT ELAINE BARRISH DEFENDS HER APPOINTMENT OF SUSAN BERG AS WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY

Perched on her new couch with a bag of pretzels and a mug of cocoa, Susan frowns at the TV. Onscreen, Elaine looks slightly annoyed at the edges of the welcoming smile she’s put on for the journalists.

“Oh, yes, people keep talking about her inexperience. I find that to be irrelevant. She has over fifteen years of experience under her belt and is an award-winning journalist whose work has been syndicated to the Associated Press, CNN, and hundreds of other respected and reputable news sources not only in the United States, but around the world. That being said: I’ve found that of all things, experience is not the greatest indicator of success. Anyone can gain experience; there are far more credentialed journalists than she that I passed up without a second thought. Ms. Berg’s ingenuity, tenacity, motivation, and finesse are what inspired me to give her the position.”

“But what about her past remarks on you and your family?”

“I’ll be honest with you,” Elaine says, looking directly into the camera. Susan smiles in spite of herself. Elaine has gotten good at interviews in a way that she never was before. Her statements carry with them a hint of meta-commentary, the suggestion that she’s got the Presidential Agenda to push
but here’s what she’s really saying, here’s what you’ve got to take from it. This is what it all means. “I know Ms. Berg has historically been more than harsh on me, and I know that we haven’t quite seen eye-to-eye over her career. I’m fine with that; if I tried to staff my administration with people who agree with me on every point, I wouldn’t have an administration. But beyond that, I’ve gotten to know Ms. Berg as she chronicled my campaign, to the point where I hired her. We’ve become close friends over the last few months, and I’ve come to see her not as some vitriolic detractor, but as someone who demands more from government. She doesn’t criticize just to criticize, but because she has a vision of a federal government that is led by people of strength and principle. I’ve come to realize that Susan Berg is a woman who demands what is due from the highest power in the land, and I wasn’t going to pass up the opportunity—and privilege—to have her on my team.”

She laughs shortly. “I know that doesn’t necessarily relate to her position, which is basically to make my administration look good—” Here a rumble of laughter from the journalists, Elaine’s wry smile, a warm flush spread across Susan’s cheeks at the praise, “—but frankly, strident voices like Susan’s belong in government. Demanding more from ourselves is what has made this country great.”

THAT WAS THE PRESIDENT-ELECT, SPEAKING—

Susan changes channels, flipping aimlessly; she sees a blown-up photograph of her own face smiling broadly at her from Fox News and stops there, half apprehensive. She hasn’t watched much news since the big Coming Out Incident (Bi Panic 2k12). She reads, obviously; the White House Press Secretary can’t cut herself off from the world just to avoid seeing her love life dissected on public television.

The Fox News diptych is her own photograph next to Charles Krauthammer; the tagline: BARRISH DEFENDS APPOINTEE BERG ON REPUTATION, SEXUALITY.

“—And what I don’t understand is—”

“Is that Krauthammer?” Elaine asks, wandering into Susan’s living room as she towel-dries her hair. “It’s like the Republicans don’t have a sense of irony at all, letting a man who looks like the white Grinch deliver their commentary. You shouldn’t watch that, by the way. It’s not going to be nice.”

“—the support for these alternative “lifestyles”—”

“You’re probably right,” Susan says with a sigh, hitting the power button. “I figured I shouldn’t ignore it entirely, though.”

“Honestly, here’s my advice.” Elaine is wearing her bathrobe, she notices with a touch of something that resembles either screaming glee or panic. It’s thick lavender terrycloth, nothing fancy or titillating, but it’s one of those things. Those moments that will be remembered forever: Elaine squeezing her hand so hard that her bones felt like chopsticks when Jeb Bush called her to concede the presidency, the hug and kiss (chaste, cheek) she gave her when Susan agreed to be her Press Sec. Holding her while she slept in the back of that Cadillac after she came out on TV. “We’ve become close friends.” My bathrobe, knee length on Veritable Amazon-Elect Elaine Barrish. She wishes there was more to this moment. In her kitchen, two Secret Service agents sit at the kitchen table; they’ve taken her last two bottles of water and put only the slightest damper on her mood. Because Elaine’s just here to finalize a few things and plan out their schedules.

“Spring it on me.”

“Read the nasty stuff later, when you’re farther removed. When it’s not a pressing issue, take the luxury of sparing your feelings. Watch this stuff next month on your own terms; tell yourself ‘that was last year’. It helps. That’s what I did with your columns, back in the day. If it’s not relevant, it
Oops. Elaine rarely mentions her early columns. They loom between them, a volcanic no-man’s-land strewn with accusations and insults. “I still owe you an apology for those.”

“You don’t really but I’d still love to hear it.”

Elaine drops herself unceremoniously onto the sofa next to her and props her legs up on the coffee table. Miles of legs. Flash of thigh where the bathrobe slides down. Susan tries not to stare. Or gawk.

She sighs and leans out to put her cocoa on the table. Parallel to the line of those legs. Shakes hair out of her eyes. Her mind is blank; she must have rehearsed this apology hundreds of times over the past year.

“I was young, angry, and in possession of a critical misunderstanding of feminism and patriarchy. You were my first big editorial, you know. I thought that men wouldn’t criticize you because they didn’t want to be labeled anti-feminist, then I thought men wouldn’t criticize you because your behavior was exactly what they wanted from women.”

She throws out the script.

“I still do believe in that one. The first family is an icon. I wanted you to be an emblem. If the First Lady can’t leave her husband, what hope does anyone else have?”

“The First Lady is married to the most powerful man in the country,” Elaine reminds her softly.

“But it’s a—a fair relationship, if not an equal one. And I thought—still do, sorry—that you had not only cause to leave him, but public support for and documentation of that cause. There are women around the country who are beaten, trapped, financially and emotionally tied to boyfriends and husbands, ignored by the police, written off by family and friends. I thought it must be so incredibly selfish and small of you to stay with Bud after everything, and that you had a duty to these women, as a woman of means and stability, to leave him. I stress that this is past tense, by the way.”

Elaine exhales heavily. The susurrations of chatter drift in from the kitchen, where the two agents murmur back and forth. “That’s a heavy one. It never occurred to you that they weren’t my responsibility?”

“Oh, eventually. It didn’t change my feelings, just my reasoning. I always wanted better from you. I’d always liked you, honestly. You seemed like a smart woman eclipsed by the sheer bulk of your husband’s charisma and libido. Staying with him made you look weak.” She can feel Elaine starting to simmer next to her. “I didn’t realize what it felt like to be in your situation.”

“I’ll say.”

Primarily, Susan feels like shit. But underneath the thick layer of remorse she still feels that speck of pride in just how unapologetic Elaine is. How she’s refusing to do anything other than acknowledge what Susan is saying.

“You said you always liked me?”

“That’s why I was so hard on you. There’s no such thing as a reliable editorial. We’re all hopelessly biased, making news out of nothing, lambasting things we ought to like for slight flaws. We’re hypercritical of the things dearest to our hearts.”

That... didn’t come out right. Elaine raises her eyebrows and smirks. “Flattered, I’m sure.”
Up until the cheating incidents, Susan had been nursing a massive and overgrown schoolgirl crush on the FLOTUS, who had literally just fully won her heart by openly disagreeing with the ratification of DoMA. (“We’re essentially creating second-class citizenships,” she’d said bluntly to reporters in 1996. “The government is systematically denying to the people of America the cornerstone of most committed relationships and families. That’s not defending marriage. That’s making marriage a privilege.” A month later, Bud Hammond was a cheater and Elaine Hammond was a pariah.) After that, she’d just been angry. How could a woman with so much backbone lose it so quickly?

“I won’t deny that you were right. I should have left him years before I did. I could have left him years before I did.”

“It’s really not my business anymore.”

“And it never was, but that never stopped you.”

“I am sorry. Truly, I am. I’m trying not to make excuses for myself.”

“And you haven’t, to your credit. I don’t know if an explanation was any better of a choice, though.”

“I didn’t think there was a possible third option.”

“No, probably not. I respect your honesty, even if it wasn’t the easiest thing to listen to. I count on your honesty, in fact. Thank you.”

“I owed it to you.” Susan shifts uncomfortably, then stands. “Do you want anything to drink?”

Elaine glances at the mug on the table with feigned innocence. “Is that cocoa you’re drinking?”

Two cups and a whole emotional spectrum later, Elaine excuses herself, apologizing profusely. The best thing about their friendship is how very Teflon it is; they’ve been through some hard-hitting tough shit and it’s only driven them closer together. Being ex-enemies has fostered between them an openness for criticism that Susan has never felt; she’s been criticized, sure, but never in a way that is so absent of judgment and expectation. They shed their damage and exist together.

DECEMBER 25, 2012, 10:38 p.m.

Susan spends Christmas alone, which is one of the less fun parts of being an icy bitch who hates her family. Actually, this is a relatively new experience for her. This time last year, she was at her sister’s house for brunch; the year before, she and Alex spent the morning in bed. He got her lingerie and a beautiful hardcover copy of *A Room of One’s Own*. Her sister got her a vase, which she purposely left when she moved out.

She could have been invited to the Barrish-Hammond Christmas morning if she pressed hard enough. (“God knows you’re almost family,” Bud says with a warm grin.) The B-H clan is welcoming beyond necessity or cause. Even Grandma Bear Barrish is beginning to grudgingly accept her. (“She really only hates you on principle,” TJ says as Margaret eyes Susan over the rim of her drink.) But as the Barrish-Hammonds have built a strange and powerful kinship over, around, and through their dysfunction, Susan has become more uncomfortable with their presence.

It mostly stems from the fact that she’s spent so long thriving in drama and chaos that she doesn’t know how to navigate calm waters like these.

Christmas ’11: Liz whisper-shouting at her, pretty face contorted. She’s basically mouthing insults;
you fucking bitch, her lips say. Don’t you dare talk about Mom like that, not to me. Not after all she’s done for us. Susan is starved for an example of this self-sacrificing matriarch that Liz has canonized. She imagines prayer candles with her mother’s face; Our Lady of Perpetual Malignancy, Our Lady of the Various Disappointments. Madonna of the Carcinoma, eyes rapt, single breast knotted with disease. A child suckling from the snarling scar across her exposed ribs. Liz kneels at her feet, bathing the phalanges with perfume to disguise the smell of rot; she speaks perfidy in present tense as the bloated corpse withers to nothing.

Even at the end of her life she was still a heinous bitch. Fine, Susan mouths back. She spends the night in a hotel.

Christmas ’09: Alex has finally accepted that the honeymoon period of their relationship is over.

“Who the fuck cares about a thirteen-month anniversary?” He’s pouting, she’s uninterested. What the hell does he think she wants from him? What kind of absolutely insipid sow does he take her for? Who screws their boss and expects commitment? He actually cries, which surprises her. And she fucking apologizes to him.

Christmas ’05: Her mother visits her apartment. She pretends she’s out. Liz probably gave her the address. No card or anything. Just a presence that lingers for weeks like a smudge of grease around her doorframe.

Christmas ’99: She dumps her boyfriend, he freaks out, she spends the evening at the police station. There goes her deposit and a year of her life. A butch policewoman gives her a candy cane and her number.

Christmas ’97: A good one, one of the best on memory. She has a wicked hangover from the Globe’s Christmas party and spends the morning in her girlfriend’s arms.

Christmas ’12 could be one of those good ones if she tried hard enough, the kind of year that sparkles in your memory the way a shiny new quarter did when you were eight years old and coins had value. Christmas with the Oligarchs, she thinks wryly.

But it feels awkward; in the Barrish-Hammond detritus, there was a role for her; pariah, instigator, the kinds of labels she’s grown into over the years. Hello, my name is STONE COLD BITCH. Ask me anything! Her presence was unwelcome, which was fine because she had a purpose. She’s always been very good at existing spitefully in someone else’s space. Being a giant cankerous rafflesia bloom in the Barrish living room is her job, a mainstay of her existence since that first column in ’97.

She feels invasive when they’re happy. She truly has no right to be there, not after years upon years of negativity and bad press.

Not that she’s ashamed of what she’s done. That’s the problem with the whole situation: the cognitive dissonance behind being proud of her body of work and simultaneously intimately connected with someone that her work so acutely targeted for harm.

What would she say? Hey, it’s me, the heinous capital-b Bitch who’s made about half your family secrets front page news, but it’s fine because that was my job and I have no regrets and besides, I’m crushing on your mother. God rest ye merry, gentlemen.

The only ethical code she’s ever committed herself fully to is that of journalism, with journalist ethics being a big, nebulous grey area whose gradation is entirely subjective based on who you are, where you stand, and who’s looking weak right now. And who’s paying, in some cases. That’s why she
can stand beside Anne without the slightest break in expression, even as Douglas pales noticeably, why she can watch Bud and Elaine shake hands or clasp each other on the shoulder, strained by conflicting intimacy and decorum, without batting an eyelid.

It’s like how Elaine isn’t responsible for every woman in the country who doesn’t have the strength or means to leave a shit relationship. The only people responsible for the Barrish-Hammonds are the Barrish-Hammonds.

DECEMBER 26, 2012, 7:13 a.m.

BREAKING: PRESIDENT BUD HAMMOND RUSHED TO THE WALTER REED MEDICAL CENTER EARLY THIS MORNING—

A nurse notices the three of them huddled in the hallway and all but sprints to turn off the TV.

“Coronary artery spasm,” Elaine says dully. “Gave him a heart attack. They’re operating now.”

Douglas comes sprinting down the hall; TJ embraces him without looking up or speaking.

“I’m so sorry I couldn’t—”

“It’s fine. They’re operating.”

It was Elaine who found him by sheer luck; she was dropping by his house in the wee hours of the morning to pick up some documents and found him collapsed on his bed, sweating like he’d just run a marathon through a sauna. Susan doesn’t know the exact details. She just knows that at 6 a.m. Elaine called her sounding very small and very tired, and told her to find TJ and bring him to Walter Reed, right now please and thank you, I’m so sorry to wake you, he won’t answer his phone.

Susan feels very adrift, standing uncomfortably outside the family huddle. Margaret sits next to her, face grave. They don’t speak.

She has seen two presidents rendered hopelessly small today. Her exhaustion is killed; in its place is a numb haze that defies emotion or explanation.

The family huddle breaks; Elaine takes her hand and squeezes it like she is a buoy and the tide is ravenous.

“Thank you.”

She thinks, It’s not a problem. “You’re welcome,” she says instead.

DECEMBER 26, 2012, 5:33 p.m.

YOU. HAVE. TWO. NEW. MESSAGES.

FIRST. MESSAGE. SATURDAY. DECEMBER. TWENTY. SIXTH. TWO. FOURTEEN. A. M.

Hiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii Susan it’s Elaine, obviously, and I’m just calling to wish you a—MERRY CHRISTMAS (shouted in many garbled voices)—from the whole family, especially me. Hope you’re having a great night—damn, morning, and I’ll see you tomorrow for the transition team meeting. Love you! Oops. Haha. I’ve had a bit too much to drink. Talk tomorrow.
Susan. It’s Elaine. Bud is fine—as fine as anyone can be, considering—and he’s recovering in the hospital. I’m sorry I didn’t call you sooner. I fell asleep in the hallway and SOMEONE (the glare is audible) didn’t wake me up. I’m sure it’ll be all over the news soon. I think you’re going to have to draft a statement for us. Sorry you had to leave. National security my ass. I’ll see you soon. Call me back.

Susan almost laughs; the thin, papery body she’d seen in the ICU hadn’t felt like her mother at all. She’d stared at the papery death mask, chemo ravaged and bald, that dignity she’d clung to in life relinquished to the revolt her body staged against her. Stared at it and willed some kind of emotion
out of her soul; all she’d gotten was disappointment. She’d said goodbye to her mother long before
the cancer took her, even before she’d discovered that knot in her breast. But the next day she’d
cried, first a flood of tears then wracking, tearless, wordless sobs that shook her body and nauseated
her.

It wasn’t over her mother’s death. Her life is what had so acutely hurt Susan, the wasted potential of
their relationship, the years of silence then explosions. The inevitability of death claimed its due
proportion of sorrow as well.

“I don’t think my relationship with my mother is in any way comparable to your relationship with
Bud,” Susan says.

Liz got there after her and burst into tears in the doorway. Saw Susan wasn’t crying and absolutely
fucking lost it. She slapped her across the face, hard. Her husband grabbed her by the arm and held
her; two little faces in the hallway peeped through the window, confused and fascinated in that
sadistic way that only children can be. Why is mommy crying? She ignored them as she left, cheek
throbbing with the force of Liz’s zealous fury. Why are you so UNGRATEFUL ringing through her
ears.

There’s this myth of deathbed wisdom; at the end of your life, you’ll have this newfound moral high
ground beyond judgment and grudges; beatifically, you forgive your children and they forgive you.
Too weak to hold them, you’ll squeeze their fingers with your trembling hands, hands you’re too
weak to lift. You’ll say something like: I’m so sorry I never told you how much I loved you. I’m so
proud of you. Don’t cry for me. I’m great. It’s going to be just like falling asleep. I love you. That at
the death of your loved ones, all grudges will be washed away. You look at the past with unclouded
eyes and realize that it wasn’t all that bad, really. You’ve got perspective now.

She only did those things because she loved you. The ones who love us will always hurt us, but
that’s okay. They mean well.

Susan felt none of those things. She’d grown from an angry child to an adult with an attitude that
locked in all that rage. Her mother’s corpse blew the lid clear off. She sat in the car for about an hour
before she was calm enough to drive.

“I always thought I’d be prepared for something like this after everything we went through with TJ.”

“I don’t think it’s actually possible to be totally prepared for anything.”

Elaine exhales a laugh in response. “That’s true.” Then, more quietly: “It was so weird. I’d come to
terms with it, you know.” She does not say death. It lingers between them, childishly: don’t jinx it.
“Then they told me that he’d survived the operation. And after that; whew.”

She looks at Susan and recognizes something in her eyes. “I’m sorry for bringing up your mother,”
she says. “I didn’t realize.”

Liz constructs Mom with the same sempiternal benevolence and devotion the Catholics ascribe to the
Virgin Mary. She was the better daughter; older, friendlier, better in the way that is valuable in polite
society. She was Mommy’s little angel, blonde and wide-eyed; dark-haired Susan, with her
chippable shoulders and quick, biting wit, was never quite able to live up to that standard. She
learned to bloom in the shadow and avoid her family. It wasn’t that her situation was abnormally
bad, but that her situation was just innately wrong for her. Susan Berg picked up the Cold Bitch from
her mother, who had the kind of glare that could pin you to the wall. She learned how to deal with
being reviled—her birth, after all, was the one that reallyucked Mom up, gave her twenty pounds of
excess weight that took years to shred and angry red stretchmarks like the flames that await false
counselors in Malebolge. Absolutely busted her pelvic floor and gave her gray hairs from head to pubic.

Not that Mom didn’t try, but Susan just happened to be one of those precocious kids who did things like ask her about those fading stretch marks (now a tannish lilac, their former bloody glory gone) and try to stay up all night and get in trouble for weird shit like catching a mouse and bringing it to class in her bag. When you don’t like your kid, that kid becomes a burden. An annoyance.

In the years after Susan moved out, her mother would occasionally try to reach out to her in fits of motherly guilt; these meetings were short, uncomfortable, and soon became formulaic. They realized their error the moment they made eye contact; Susan would mention her work, Mom would shake her head in disapproval; Liz would come up, with her boyfriend, then fiancée, then husband, then family; Susan maybe had a boyfriend, or maybe she didn’t (she never mentioned the girlfriends); Susan was doing well but her mother’s eyebrows quirked up in refutation. They got into a fight at the end of every one of these without fail. Sometimes they were silent; Susan would throw a few bills on the table and storm off. Sometimes they shouted.

“It’s fine,” she says. Elaine reaches out and squeezes her knee.

“No it’s not. I shouldn’t have asked.”

They sit in silence until Elaine breaks it with a sigh and a rustle of fabric.

“Thank you, by the way. For everything. Your unwavering support and your honesty.”

Elaine’s hand is still on her knee. Flustered, Susan smiles bright as mercury. “It’s honestly the least I could do.”

“For some, it’s more than they could manage.” Elaine releases her knee and leans back, but the sensation remains. Susan does not budge. “I admire you, honestly. In my experience, it takes a good deal of strength to be completely candid with a president.”

“Then it’s lucky for me you’re only the president-elect,” Susan jokes.

“Ha-ha,” Elaine says drily.

Sighing, Susan uncrosses her legs and leans forward. “I don’t think I’d deserve to be a part of your team, especially considering my past, if I wasn’t willing to be totally honest.”

“No, you wouldn’t. But then again, you wouldn’t be you if you weren’t so unabashedly upfront with your opinions.”

Susan cracks a smile. A real one this time, not the flashy nervous grin she’s so prone to around Elaine. “I can’t tell if that’s a compliment or an insult.”

“Call it a little bit of both,” Elaine says. She stands and pads across the room, barefoot in her silk blouse and slacks. Stops and looks back over her shoulder. It would be the perfect snapshot if Susan had a camera: Elaine caught in the warm colors of the sunset, the most powerful woman in the world relaxed and at ease; caught mid-action, you can see the way she moves from the tautness of her limbs. Loping like a cheetah. “You want a drink?”

“Sure. What are you having?”

“Red or white? I’m having white.”
“Red,” Susan says.

Elaine walks back into the room with a bottle in each hand. “You really do enjoy making my life harder, don’t you,” she teases as she walks back to the kitchen to get glasses.

“I live for it.”
Chapter Summary

Here's the thing: Susan doesn't believe in love at first sight or those instant sparks of connection you supposedly feel when the red string of fate's slipknot around your aorta loosens because you're close enough for it to go slack. The universe is not in the habit of clicking audibly into place at formative moments. It is only through retrospection that Susan can see that some internal compass of hers set Elaine as North.

Chapter Notes

1. This story has been amended so that it's now going to be 4 parts instead of 3.
2. Some negativity toward Douglas, pretty much resolved.
3. Mild (like less than pg-13 mild) sexual content.
4. OKAY I have been having huge problems with formatting i.e. whenever I post a chapter it ends up with a LOT of randomly placed spaces. I've got no idea how they ended up there or what the cause of the problem is but I've gone through and edited most of them out.

I said 'you smell like the ocean' and lay down my tongue beside the dark tooth edge of sleeping
'swim' she told me and I did, I did

—Judy Grahn

DECEMBER 31, 2012, 11:2 3 p.m.

The sparkle of champagne down her throat, something French and expensive. Elaine grabs her by the arm. Half-shouts in her ear over the deafening thrum of conversation. This is cyclical; they drink, meet some foreign dignitary or government official (Elaine spends most of the evening speaking French, Chinese, Spanish), and Elaine leans down, towering as she is in heels, to tell her about the time that she and so-and-so were drunk in Athens, or lost in Paris, and they dodge Collier and have their glasses refilled. In the two hours and change since they arrived, Elaine has shed her blazer; she looks slightly out of place in her navy slacks and button-down white blouse when compared to her vamped up colleagues. It is, however, impossible to say whether they make her look overdressed or vice-versa; there is a certain office-given gravitas about the President-Elect that suggests that when it comes to appearances, she is always in the right. Susan feels this ineffable contrast as Elaine leans lightly on her arm; she has opted for the tried-and-true little black dress, which feels like both a
dreadful mistake and a wonderful idea.

It's not *that* little. It's a knee-length, cap sleeved affair with a decidedly modest wide neckline that *barely* shows her collarbones. *I like the dress,* Elaine said earlier. Susan dresses for success.

Here's one of the perks of being in the President's—well, President-Elect's—very small inner circle: this is an event she is personally invited to. This time last year if she'd wanted to go she'd have had to plus-one her way in with some connection of hers. Now she is that connection, not that she'd be willing to let another journalist schmooze on into the White House on her coattails. Not anymore. And especially not *now,* as Elaine leans against her and says something else.

"I'm getting the hell out of here before the ball drops and the President reaches the aggressive stage of drunkenness. Come with me?"

"God, yes," Susan murmurs.

"What?"

"YES," Susan half-yells, nodding emphatically. "I'd love to."

Elaine says her goodbyes with the speed and prowess that befits a seasoned politician, a flurry of motion and excuses culminating with a hand on the President's shoulder ("—I'm so sorry to duck out like this, but Bud's convalescent and I don't want to leave him alone, especially with his condition so delicate—") and a sympathetic—dare she say relieved?—nod from the man affirms her flight. The excuses Elaine offers differ from person to person, although most relate to Bud's delicate state (and the fact that he's being babysat by her two sons who [Elaine ever so unsubtly implies] definitely would rather be doing practically anything else on New Year's Eve); Susan can't help but wonder which of them, if any, are getting the truth. In her opinion, Elaine is restless. There's that gleam in her eyes, sparkling restlessness. Something deeper? Something said in the dilation of her pupils that would be circled and highlighted were it to be put to text.

Elaine winks at her from across the room and tilts her head, indicating an exit with her chin. Unlike Elaine, Susan says no goodbyes (this is not a friendly room for her), just brushes on out.

In the back of the Cadillac, Elaine drapes herself across the leather seats with a sigh. "It's so goddamn claustrophobic in there," she says, gesturing vaguely back toward the White House. "Where do you want to go?"

Laughter bubbles out of Susan's lips, bright little bursts as scintillating as the champagne. "You mean you didn't have a plan?"

"I'd have gone back home to sleep if you'd wanted to stay." The muted light accentuates the bags under Elaine's eyes; Susan is acutely aware of how tired she must be, how much pressure is yoked on her shoulders. She considers leaving Elaine to rest. Remembers Elaine's piss-poor sleep habits. Remembers how very lonely her life is becoming, how unsympathetic. "Any ideas?"

New Year's Eve in D.C. is a spectacular experience for civilians. It swarms with revelry, pulsing with an infectious hope that threatens to compel even the most jaded to merriment. But this isn't an option for the President-Elect. Susan glances out the window at the ensemble of vehicles that await her decision.

Elaine shifts and paper crumples; she pulls a package out from behind her with a roll of her eyes. At Susan's raised eyebrows, she grins wryly. "The Italian foreign minister brought me a bottle of
"Madeira," she says.

"Why don't we go to your house and drink that, then? Relieve Douglas and TJ?"

"You wouldn't mind?"

"God no. It's better than any plans I'd had for the night."

Elaine leans up to talk to the driver, murmuring directions into his ear. This is the kind of thing that makes Susan's inner journalist prick up her ears and boot up her laptop.

Three hundred words on President-Elect Elaine Barrish's transition to the presidency click out from those figurative, red-taloned little fingers: Despite the clear gravity of her position, despite the long hours she has spent exchanging false smiles with politicians whose resentment of her is so palpable that you could bottle and sell it to masochists, despite the media scrutiny into her personal life that would make even the most megalomaniacal narcissist beg for a reprieve, and despite the clearly heavy and immensely stressful burden of caring for her recovering (and lately recalcitrant) ex-husband, she still treats those around her with the care and intimacy she is so known for. As a veteran of numerous presidential campaigns, she is no stranger to the often paralytic compound of over-worked and under-rested that runs pandemic in the transition period. Despite her insistence that members of her transition team rest and recuperate during these few, relatively calm months, Elaine is racking up a deficit to rival the federal government's, a burgeoning sleep debt that arguably does not bode well for both the President-Elect and her administration. Her devotion to her job is certainly admirable, clearly the reason for her high approval ratings and current position, but one has to wonder (indeed, as I do now) whether this devotion does not ring slightly self-destructive.

We often decry the surgeon's sixty to eighty-hour work week as dangerous and unhealthy, and rightly so. How can one be at their best with such delicate, demanding work when nearly half of their time is spent doing high-stakes, high-stress work, the results of which often serve as a nihilistic testament to the futility of human life? At least surgeons have shifts. The Presidency-Elect comes with a variable hundred-hour workweek that promises only to be augmented by inauguration. These moments feel like the calm before the storm, the moment in "Peace, Little Girl" before the countdown begins.

The sirens screech to life as their motorcade takes shape. The Cadillac is relatively soundproofed so the sudden, muted buzzing of Elaine's phone is audible over the klaxon war-whooping of the sirens.

Elaine fishes it out of her purse to answer it and Susan can see a picture of TJ on the incoming call display.

"Is everything alright? . . . Good, that's a relief. You gave him his medication?"

"Bud's sleeping," she mouths to Susan.

"And I'm sure you have plans . . . Yes, of course . . . Oh, he did? Shame on him . . . No, I'm on the way home right now, actually . . . Why would I ever want to do that? So I could kiss Collier at midnight and we could sing "Auld Lang Syne" together? . . . Yes, and I'm sure his wife would love that too . . . We'll be home in less than ten minutes. Is anyone else home? . . . That's fine then. You should try to leave in five minutes, actually, because the motorcade will make it really hard for you to get out of there . . . Great! Love you. Happy New Year."
JANUARY 1, 2013, 12:00 a.m.

THREE . . . . TWO . . . . ONE!

On the big screen, the ball drops in Times Square. Elaine kisses her square on the lips.

There's that bodice ripper/teen romance trope about fireworks and choirs of angels. How your eyelids bat closed and you melt into your true love's arms. Nice try, Meg Cabot. A heady jolt resounds through Susan's body, amplified by time and wine (we are talking a half bottle of Madeira). She is deafened by her heartbeat, the soft sound of exhalation through Elaine's lips—breath so close she can feel it on her cheek. A brief homage to the cliché: only the shock prevents her from melting. Susan can only imagine that the impulses shooting through her brain are the electrical equivalent of the Kill Bill sirens.

Their lips part and she can't breathe.

"I . . . . . . . shouldn't have done that," Elaine says, clearly mistaking Susan's stiff silence for offense. "I'm sorry."

She's leaning back, face closed, embarrassment evident. Something behind her eyes curls up like a hedgehog. Ready to unfold and leave.

Her jaw muscles finally stop rebelling. "Don't be," Susan says. Her face is so warm, like face-of-the-sun warm, like seventh-circle-of-hell warm, like Elaine-Barrish-just-kissed-me warm.

The uncoiling in Elaine's warm eyes, the fracture points of doubt. The sheer vulnerability, humanizing power—this is something that would stand like an obelisk in the landscape of time if Susan were given to visual metaphors. The most powerful woman in the world looks at her with vulnerable eyes, that stony façade paper-thin like the veins in a leaf. Holy shit! Absolutely transcendental.

If Susan were given to visual metaphors, she'd describe what happens now as the stars aligning in a gleaming, shimmering path like champagne bubbles, like the way she feels when she laughs with Elaine. That scene in The Little Mermaid where a chorus of crustaceans urges the prince to go on and kiss the girl. She leans back in, smiling so hard her face hurts. Presses her lips against Elaine's and drowns.

JANUARY 2-20, 2013, SOME UNKNOWABLE HOUR a.m. AND/OR p.m.

Susan is being honest when she says she doesn't sleep much.

Her new apartment seems to breathe around her, slightly out of tune with her own rhythm. It's late, or perhaps early, the kind of hour that feels silent despite the sounds that float in through her window. These night-sounds are quieter than the ones at her old apartment. Muffled by height and the affluence of the neighborhood.

Silences are breathless.

She feels stifled lying on her side so she rolls onto her back, feels her dark hair splayed around her head like an inverted halo.

It's beginning to smell like her now, but also not. Not like her-her. She's changed her detergent, shampoo, even her toothpaste. The smell of cleanliness is a different hemisphere of floral. The neutral smell of her skin is a new sensation, a new understanding of what it means to be alive.
These are the tenets of becoming.

Is this Susan In Love?

This is Susan Who Has to Pee, most nights. She pads to the bathroom in the dark then flinches when she flips the switch and the bright LED light bulbs burst alight and her eyeballs feel like they're distending, photosynthesizing, ready to explode or claw their way out of her skull like the eponymous creature in Alien. If it was her bladder keeping her awake before, it's now the lightning burst of light and the cold tile under her bare feet. She makes herself a cup of tea (mint or chamomile) and nurses it, stares out the window, browses LexisNexis for some kind of epiphany in the periodicals.

Sometimes she just stares at herself in the mirror (which really should not be located opposite the toilet) and realizes she hasn't taken out her contacts, which explains why her eyes feel so goddamn dry. When this happens, she stares at herself for a second or two, notices the faint deepening lines around her eyes and nose. Notices the dark smudges under her eyes, the ones from mascara she didn't bother to properly remove and the ones from sleepless nights like these.

Is it guilt that keeps me awake?, she asks herself. Is it the unaddressed cognitive dissonance? Is it stress, or love, or something deeper and baser? Here I am and here are my cards all laid out, and they are The Lovers and The Empress and The World but The World is reversed and that means I'm fucked or something. Roll with me, subconscious. They're two queens (hearts, diamonds) and a two, and she just overshot blackjack. That's the problem with me. She washes her hands and takes out her lenses. I'm always expecting shit to go South. Everything's a Hindenburg in the making.

Sometimes Elaine texts her, little inconspicuous things like does 9 AM work for tomorrow instead of 10 or forget about education reform for the press gaggle tomorrow, we're not pushing that until we know we have the votes in the house. She texts back go to sleep, Elaine every time, and gets an I should tell you the same thing in reply.

And shit, she should sleep. For all her agonizing over how tired Elaine sometimes looks when the light hits her at just the right angle, she's racking up sleep debt like she stole Donald Trump's credit card, running up a massive overdraft on her circadian rhythm.

She nurses two fingers of whiskey and listens to Tom Waits vibrate his way through "Alice" 'til her eyelids give up on her and fall shut OR She drinks half a cup of tea then wakes up four hours later face down on her kitchen table with a mug half empty of cold tea and a righteous crick in her neck OR She texts Elaine that sleep emoji and tucks herself in, tosses for half an hour or so, and wakes up with the sun OR She sits up with her head in her hands for hours and wonders just who the fuck am I to be here and be so blessed and yet so incapable of dealing with my blessings, so human but yet by the powers vested in me by the President-Elect of the United States of America, so goddamn powerful.

Here's another thing: times like these, she half-forgets about things like kissing Elaine and waking up in her bed with the dust-specked sunlight streaming over the sheets like liquid gold and loving Elaine and the familiar comfort of their more-than-friendship which they have tacitly agreed to neither label nor discuss and the way Elaine relaxes and laughs—giggles, really—and glows like her bones are electric and the little things which are true to cliché and matter more than anything else, like the way Elaine is comfortable brushing against her and offering no apology for the closeness, or the way she stands behind Susan when she is drafting some press release and finger-combs her hair, or the way that Elaine leans so that their shoulders are level and Susan can half-shoulder her burdens and be consumed by the immeasurable terror of nuclear war and world hunger and the fucking tax code and the pettiness of world leaders and reporters who insist on calling her Presidentess, then add insult to
injury by correcting themselves—I mean Presidentess- Elect. The overwhelming weight of 314.1 million and counting Americans whose conflicting dreams and ideals weave a massive ugly tapestry of myriad political praxes.

But the way she tries and fails to stifle a smile when Susan calls her "Madame President"! The way her hair is loose and tousled when she wakes up slowly, reluctantly, sun rising over the horizon, then paints the sky with red and pink as she smiles at Susan, remembering where and who she is and who she is with. The way she makes Susan laugh and feel welcome in spite of and because of and with regard to and with no regard for all the baggage she brings, the legacy of bitchiness and cutthroat vitriol, the mommy issues and denial of vulnerability and bitterness over nothing and everything. The way she is so beautiful when she smiles, and beautiful when she doesn't, and the way her voice resonates when she talks about anything, the way Susan could listen to her forever.

And some nights, Susan takes Elaine's advice and sleeps, and she dreams of the little girl with a mouthful of thorns and that little girl spits out the thorns and from them grow soldiers, legions of them, all armed with pens, and she dreams of the shark with rosebud teeth whose teeth bloom and bloom and from that cavernous maw comes a rose garden lush as Eden and she pricks her finger on a thorn picking Elaine a bouquet, but the pain is fine because she has learned to live with the thorns, that the thorns are her friends, and Elaine licks the drop of blood from the tip of her finger and the world makes sense, somehow, even as the tides of entropy drag the shark out to sea and pit the little girl's army against all matter of foes. She wakes from these dreams feeling strangely at peace.

JANUARY 7, 2013, 8:25 p.m.

First:

"I told you they pushed the inauguration back to the twenty-first, right?"

"Of course."

"Of course. Why wouldn't I?"

"It's two weeks away. Don't stress yourself out so early."

"Do you have the notes on, um . . ."

"The fiscal cliff?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Have you read any of it?"

"I've skimmed it and I was briefed on it. I haven't performed a close reading on it, if that's what you're asking."

"Nope, just asking. Can I get the notes when you're done with them?"

"Absolutely. By the way, did I tell you about the message TJ left me?"

"Not yet."

"He called me last night—well, this morning, two a.m.—heinously drunk, just to ask if anyone had told me about Area 51 yet."

"Ha! That's TJ for you. More importantly, has anyone?"
"No, Susan, I have not been inducted into the vast and formidable conspiracy to deny the American people knowledge of extraterrestrial life and contact. I imagine that happens after the inauguration."

Then:

"What's Collier saying about Syria?"

"That it's an absolute fuckstorm and he's thrilled that in two weeks Bashar al-Assad and the, say, sixty thousand innocent dead Syrians will be my problem."

"You know they'll want to hear about it at the press gaggle. It's got to at least be a blip on the horizon."

"Those sixty thousand dead Syrians are definitely going to be a blip on the horizon. It's just not an immediately unfuckable situation, and as you can imagine, the Collier administration is doing even less than the absolute bare minimum to give us intel or resources."

"What are you thinking then? Absolute moral prerogative, sending supplies to the refugees in Turkey? UN intervention?"

"We could fund camps for the refugees, but that could draw Turkey into the conflict and they've already mentioned that Gül wants to close the borders before the trickle turns into a flood. I've got to arrange a meeting for state matters before we barge in with policies, but if anyone asks, we're supporting the Turkish civilians."

"I'm going to draft some notes on this so I've got something to go off tomorrow. How about, um, the Barrish administration has . . . um, unwavering support for the Turkish people—"

"Civilians. Got to say civilians or everyone thinks we're supporting the rebels."

"The Turkish civilians, then . . . who have been drawn into a, um, violent conflict that . . ."

"Has killed tens of thousands of their countrymen and . . . poses a direct threat to their lives and well-being?"

"That'll do. They'll want some kind of action plan, though."

"Christ, I'm not even President yet."

"I'll tell them that, um, it's an incredibly complex situation that's gone to shit in so many directions so rapidly and continues to evolve at such a pace that it would be shortsighted to have a concrete long-term strategy."

"I'm thinking that we should be preparing multiple different strategies for dealing with the situation and having them all ready to mobilize, but again, I can't flesh that out until I've had words with the state department."

Finally:

"I can't believe you."

"You're very distracting."
"It's the Oval Office!"

"And it's a bit too late to be having second thoughts."

"I guess so. Still . . . wow! That's one item crossed off my bucket list."

"You do not have a bucket list."

"Sure do. Sex with the President, check. Thailand, check. Climb Mount Everest, crossed off, but that's because that's not something I'd ever actually want to do . . ."

"What's left?"

"Figuring out the meaning of life, visit that massive mall in Dubai, go to space, fly on Air Force One . . ."

"Well, I can help you on that last one."

"Would a joke about joining the mile high club be totally inappropriate?"

"Technically yes, but considering your state of undress, I guess I could let it slide."

"Shit, do they like . . . tape this room? The Secret Service?"

"They can, but Collier won't let them as long as he's President."

"How, um . . ."

"Convenient, but also slightly supervillain-ish."

"There we go. Slightly megalomaniacal."

"That's him."

"But you're sure we aren't being taped."

"I'm positive. Besides, the taping process is manual."

"Shit! Do you hear someone outside?"

"Fuck!"

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JANUARY 9, 2013, 4:06 p.m.

"You. Are sleeping. With my mother," Douglas hisses through clenched teeth. "Please! Enlighten me. Spin this to me, Susan. How are you not fucking your way through this family?"

"Are you fucking serious?"

"What?" A short, angry little laugh, almost a disbelieving cough. "Give me—give me one reason I shouldn't tell her!"

"Tell her what? That we slept together? That you cheated on Anne? No, that'd ask too much of your integrity—that I fucked you? That you just couldn’t resist my evil manipulative grasp? Here’s a reason for you, Douglas: you’d ruin all of our lives! Do you think it’s worth it to destroy your marriage, my career, and your mother’s trust just to get over your own pathetic little insecurities?" She’s pissed
now. Count to ten, Susan. Breathe. Don't get him so angry that he actually makes good on his threats.

By three-Mississippi, Douglas is sitting in the chair in front of her desk. He's got his face in his hands. Breath whistles through his nose.

"Be honest with me, Susan. Do you care about her? Really? She's not just some story you're trying to break or some desperate bid for job security?"

"Yes." Breathlessly. "I care about her."

"You—Don't fuck this up. Please. For her sake. And for your own, because if you hurt her—"

"You'll ruin my life. I don't doubt it. Believe me when I tell you that I have no interest in ruining this."

Douglas shows no sign of movement, dashing her hopes that he'll leave her alone.

"Why her?"

It's July 1992 again. She's volunteering at a Hammond campaign rally in NYC. It's hot as balls and for once, the campaign is overstaffed. An aide tells her to just hang around; she can help clean up after Mr. Hammond speaks. She shivers; the air is electric.

Bud Hammond walks onto the stage hand-in-hand with a woman she's only ever glimpsed before. In 1992, Elaine wears her long, wavy hair in a loose updo and carries herself with an easy, unburdened grace. She's nearly as tall as her husband, thin and long-limbed; she should be gawky, but there's a tight finesse to the way she moves. Susan finds her eyes drifting as the afternoon progresses: Elaine Hammond is strikingly beautiful. She introduces her husband and her voice is deliciously low and resonant. Sweat has plastered the hairs to the back of Susan's neck by the time the speeches are over and the audience has cleared out. Elaine helps campaign staff hand out cold bottles of water.

Here's the thing: Susan doesn't believe in love at first sight or those instant sparks of connection you supposedly feel when the red string of fate's slipknot around your aorta loosens because you're close enough for it to go slack. The universe is not in the habit of clicking audibly into place at formative moments. It is only through retrospection that Susan can see that some internal compass of hers set Elaine as North.

Snap back to the present. "I don't know," she says coldly. "Why does anyone do anything?"

"That's not an answer."

"No, you're right. It's not." She feels cagey and electric. The energy between them wavers. "I don't have one."

How do you explain magnetism? Human attraction?

"Do you love her?"

She laughs, but it isn't a laugh. It's one of those noises that, caught between every expression of hysteria, manifests itself as a laugh because it would be indecorous to scream. A furious cough-huff-exclamation.

They argue in whisper-shouting that gyres between silently mouthing the delicate statements and audibly swearing, all punctuated by nostril flares and sharp, geometric gestures that have no
inherent meaning beyond the violence of their motion.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, Douglas?"

"I don't know, Susan, maybe it's the fact that you've taken advantage of my family every chance you get! I know empathy is a bit of a stretch for you, but surely you can understand that it's hard to trust someone whose entire fucking relevance to you comes from absolutely fucking your family over! What is she to you, the next big piece for your blog?"

"You fucking know she isn't."

"How? How do I know? Am I supposed to feel your sincerity in the air?"

"I'm not a fucking career politician, Douglas. This isn't some fucking game to me."

"Politics is a game to everyone," he snaps. "Some people just don't know how to play."

She stares at him with pointed, spiteful blankness until he drops the tangent.

"Do you, though?"

"Love her, you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

It's too damn early in the game for this sort of thing. She and Elaine don't even have an articulated relationship to be in the honeymoon stage of. And sure, she feels that warmth in her heart every time she sees Elaine now, because she knows that there is something profound and unspeakable between their hearts, and sure, she feels a way about Elaine that she has rarely felt in a relationship, and certainly not recently. This could even be the capital-R Real capital-T Thing, the kind of magnetic, fateful thing that Nicholas Sparks makes a killing off peddling to dissatisfied housewives and idealistic teenagers. But who the fuck is Douglas to lay claim to this thing, this . . . glowing energy in her heart that whispers to her things that she cannot admit to or even process? Who is he to demand from her truths that she has rarely articulated even to those they concern? What the fuck, she thinks at him, is your damage? What the fuck is the root of your entitlement?

She wants to snatch that silver spoon out of his mouth and slap him across the face with it, but that would send him crying to Elaine, whose mama bear tendencies truly are a thing to be reckoned with. So she drops into her chair and stares at him, trying to say with her eyes what she cannot with her mouth, that Yes I love your mother, and furthermore I may even be in love with her, which is a totally different animal, a highly evolved beast that is an efficient and deadly predator. Yes I care for her, Yes I want what's best for her, Yes I dream of some haleyon future wherein she and I can be free and comfortable without politics and nuclear war and all this abject secrecy, and especially sans you, Douglas, breathing down our necks because there is no more potent and terrifying combination than an entitled control freak mama's boy.

And just when she thinks he won't get it and that this is all going to go to shit in a big, explosive way, that she's gone bust by a massive fucking margin (two queens and a jack), he gets it.

He looks a little bit like he might cry.

"She likes you, you know. A lot. Probably loves you."

Susan manages to swallow, her unnaturally dry throat convulsing painfully.
"She's been through a lot of shit, you know. Of course you know. You wrote about it. You know, I've been involved in politics one way or another since I was a kid, and I've never met anyone like my mom. She's as much of a political animal as the rest of them, don't get me wrong, but she's also kind and idealistic and devoted—she cares so goddamn much. She's such a good person, Susan. And she's gotten so much shit from so many directions. I—you wouldn't believe how many people have tried to take advantage of that kindness and openness in some way or the other."

He stands, watching her closely. His expression is guarded; Susan stares back at him with the most neutral expression she can muster.

"It's not my business," he says after several long moments. "Just don't fuck this up. Please don't fuck this up. None of us would ever forgive you."

He leaves quickly, before Susan can tell him that if she fucks this up, she won't ever forgive herself either.

She sits in silence for some time after he leaves, only prompted to movement when her phone buzzes with a text from Elaine.

End Notes

i've fudged a few timelines and possibly events; i assumed susan's sister was named liz because that's a name her mother uses in that flashback and there are a whole host of issues with susan getting the breaking news reporting pulitzer, from the timeline to the fact that it's never been awarded to an individual before ever. Anyway, it's fictional, but I just wanted to add that disclaimer.

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