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**Gravity**

by royaltyisshe64

**Summary**

After being caught in one another's orbit for nearly 25 years, will this be what finally pulls Bill and Hillary Clinton apart?

**Notes**

See the end of the work for notes.
August 15, 1998

He was procrastinating now – putting off the inevitable, hoping with the futility of a man already condemned that he could, with just a few more moments’ thought, concoct a scenario in which he didn’t have to gently shake his wife awake and administer what was likely to be the killing blow to their marriage. All night Bill had laid stock-still in bed, staring at the ceiling. Tormented by guilt and fear of what he knew would come when he did what he knew he had to. All night he had vainly sought a way out of his present predicament, but none was forthcoming. He was trapped. And, what was worse, he had no one but himself to blame. There could be no scapegoating, no excuses. Just his own stupidity and selfishness and cowardice and lust. Now, in a momentary respite to the relentless bedside pacing he had begun hours ago, he stood, staring down at Hillary and resisting the temptation to touch her, however slightly. If he caused her to stir inadvertently, even by moving a stray strand of hair, then it would all be over that much sooner.

She looked serene. Sprawling awkwardly (but clearly comfortably) on her side of the bed, her face was blissful and free of the makeup she had begrudgingly adopted as part of her daily routine. Still beautiful. Always, he thought, beautiful, even if Hillary herself never quite managed to see it – or believe it. Of course, he hadn’t exactly made it easy for her to accept those assurances coming from him. What might charitably be termed his ‘indiscretions’ had ensured that, more than the decades of relentless, vicious scrutiny from the media and political rivals. To the best of his knowledge, however, that insecurity didn’t prey too much on her mind. Not to nearly the extent that the perpetually hovering specter of his infidelities – past, present and future, real and imagined – did. And now he was about to reopen wounds that had barely healed in the first place.

Bill took a deep breath. Like the removal of a Band-Aid, he supposed it was best to get this over with. Rip off the deceit currently holding their marriage together and see what – if anything – was left standing. He had let this situation go for far too long as it was. This was his last chance to tell her the truth before the deposition. Given everything else he had robbed her of, he at least owed her the chance to process this information with some semblance of privacy before all hell broke loose publicly.

Hesitantly, he reached over and jostled her shoulder. “Hill?” he said quietly, half-hoping his hushed tones would somehow fail to wake her.

No such luck.

“Mmmm, already?” She glanced groggily at the alarm clock on her bedside table, giving a self-deprecating chuckle at the pointlessness of that exercise without her glasses. The moment she caught sight of the grave expression on her husband’s face, however, Hillary sat bolt upright and snapped into action as only she could. “What is it, honey? Are you going to the Situation Room? Is Chelsea all right? What’s going on?”

“It’s fine. Everything’s fine,” Bill lied – he hoped for the last time that morning.
Shallow, shuddering breaths.

Bill didn’t know exactly what kind of reaction he’d been expecting, but this wasn’t it.

Hillary couldn’t quite process what had just happened. Not that this kind of confession hadn’t been sprung on her before – quite the contrary, much to her chagrin. The stinging, suffocating pressure on her chest was an all-too-familiar sensation. That was a constant. Something about this time felt different, though. Like she still wasn’t awake. Any second now, she’d jolt into consciousness as one invariably does the split second before hitting the ground in those petrifying nightmares about plummeting from some indefinite point in the sky. That was what this felt like: unreal. Horrible and unreal.

Suddenly, his hands were on her – his elegant hands that she adored so, but which had betrayed her time and again with squeeze here and a pinch there. Before her rational mind could kick in, her own hands were flying, slapping him away from her. Where once she had derived comfort from his touch, now there was only a stinging reminder of what else those hands had done, how they had touched interns and secretaries and God knows who else. Hillary was not about to be placated by them. Not now.

She was screaming at a volume and a pitch well beyond her control. “How could you? How could you do this to me? Why did you lie to me?” Just those three questions. Over and over again. Devastated. Devastating. Unanswerable.

This was certainly a more conventional response, although Bill certainly didn’t feel relieved. For all his considerable charm, there was nothing in his arsenal that could soothe agony as deep as this; smaller bumps in the marital road could be paved over easily with facile words, a sheepish bite of his lower lip and a sidelong glance that he knew would drive his wild with desire, a reconciliatory roll in the hay. This was a pain for which he had no ready salve.

Tears were pricking at his own eyes, but he would not let them fall. He was wholly undeserving of such catharsis. Regardless of how broken he knew he was – how could a man who reduced such a brilliant, beautiful, loving woman to this condition more than once over the course of a relationship for no good reason be anything other than broken? – seeking her pity rather than earning her forgiveness accomplished nothing. Helped no one. It only replaced the Band-Aid.

“I’m sorry, baby. I’m so sorry,” he said quietly.

It was so small, so insignificant in the face of everything, but it was sincere. It was all he had. Bill knew it wasn’t nearly enough. Too little, too late. Better not to break her heart in the first place than to try to mend it after the fact. At a loss, he continued that penitent refrain, hoping that even a microscopic fraction of his remorse would be communicated by those simple words.

Hillary’s words dissolved into indecipherable, uncontrollable weeping, and she collapsed into her pillow, a small figure wracked with despair and profound disappointment. Some small part of her wanted her husband to enfold her in his strong arms and take the unbearable weight of her anguish on his shoulders. The irony that the one person on this earth who could buoy her through such rough seas was the very one who piloted her into them had never been lost on her. Bill engendered
in her a fragility, a weakness that she found unconscionable. Inexplicable. But now this – maybe this would prove to be the one unpardonable transgression. Who was she kidding? She was such an idiot, all heart and no head, when it came to this confounded man, though. Her tears were almost as much an act of self-laceration as they were an outpouring of misery.

‘Stupid. You’re so stupid. How could you have believed him again, after everything he’s already put you through? How could you ever delude yourself into thinking that you were enough for him? Stupid, stupid, stupid. Pull yourself together. Think. That’s the only thing you’re any good at, anyway. Think.’

Eyes red and swollen, she shakily lifted her head. She couldn’t look at Bill. Any sort of direct connection would send her reeling again.

Bill looked expectantly at his wife. Her breathing was still shaky and punctuated by vestigial sobs.

“How – how are you going to tell Chelsea?”

There was a noticeable crack in her voice when she said their daughter’s name, and Bill felt his heart give another sickening lurch. He’d been so keyed up about breaking the truth to Hillary that his parental duty had completely slipped his mind. Another damning indication of his insensitivity, he supposed.

“I don’t know. I guess I’ll just tell her the truth – as much of the truth as she needs to know. God, I’m so sorry. I –“

He felt himself start to slip into an old pattern of excuses and let his words peter out. Now was not the time.

Hillary abruptly rose from the bed, sweeping past him as she rubbed her eyes furiously, still keeping her visual focus anywhere but on her husband.

“I’ll come with you. Just give me a minute to make mys—“ Another tremulous inhale. “– make myself presentable. It’ll be better for her to have both of us there.”

The bathroom door clicked decisively shut behind her. No sooner had it done so then Bill heard renewed weeping from within.

He often had the feeling that he didn’t deserve her. That sense had never been stronger than it was now.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the kind feedback! This one's a bit longer - hope you all like it. Again, do let me know if anything rings false or if there's something I can do to improve.
“You’re not wearing your contacts.”

A feeble attempt to make conversation as they made their way to Chelsea’s bedroom. He almost had to jog to keep up with her purposeful strides, despite being several inches taller than she was. Hillary still hadn’t looked at him, a fact that produced mixed feelings. He didn’t like losing that connection, that integral contact with her, but, at the same time, he didn’t think he could bear seeing the profound hurt in her eyes. Especially not when he was still steeling himself to witness it in Chelsea’s.

“No point. I don’t have anything but meetings in the East Wing today, anyway.”

She hadn’t bothered putting on makeup, either. Left pointedly unsaid was that adopting either of those purely cosmetic measures would render unduly complicated any crying jags she felt compelled to embark on later.

‘This is ridiculous,’ Hillary thought. She was practically sprinting away from Bill and toward what was bound to be one of the most excruciating experiences of her life. And they were talking about her glasses.

Bill nearly crashed into her when she stopped abruptly. Automatically, without thinking, he placed his hands on her shoulders to cushion the impact. Just as fluidly, she extricated herself from his grasp, turning to face him for the first time. Still no eye contact.

“Bill, I –“

She swallowed. She could feel her husband’s eyes boring into her. He was scrabbling desperately for some kind of purchase, some part of her he could still hold on to. It was almost enough to weaken her resolve – almost enough for her to relent and just let him off the hook, just as she had done so many times before. But not quite. If he wanted to fix this, he was going to have to earn it, and she honestly wasn’t sure he ever could.

Clearing her throat, she continued, “I think I should go in first. Wake her up. She’ll panic if she sees both of us this early, looking so grim.”

As always when it came to their daughter, Hillary knew best.

“Of course,” he murmured.

God, that little, almost imperceptible tremor in his voice. Tugging powerfully at her heartstrings was paramount among Bill Clinton’s many talents, much to her chagrin.

‘Don’t weaken, Hillary. Don’t let him back in. Not this quickly.’

“She might think Stanford’s had second thoughts about admitting the offspring of two such incorrigible troublemakers.”

It slipped out before she could stop herself. Gallows humor. Anything to momentarily lighten this suffocating atmosphere, thick with mutual misery. Bill laughed, perhaps more due to the fleeting
break in the unbearable tension than anything else, and she felt her heart flutter. Just as swiftly as she’d stopped, she turned on her heel and continued walking, frightened of letting herself soften too much too soon. Bill had, after all, broken her heart and publicly humiliated her. But, sap that she was, Hillary loved him. Hurting him deliberately – or even mimicking her husband’s cavalier ways in a pyrrhic attempt to get her own back – the very notion was anathema to her. As much as the popular perception of her was that of a cold and calculating Lady Macbeth, she wasn’t about to let Bill suffer purely for the sake of her own emotional vindication. Not excessively, anyway.

Feeling the faintest glimmer of hope for the first time that morning at the unexpected resurfacing of his wife’s dry wit, Bill followed her, desperately trying to keep pace.

- 

His wife and daughter walked toward him, hand in hand, before positioning themselves next to him on the couch. Chelsea was like a buffer between them, although even she was preemptively positioning herself closer to Hillary, almost as if she knew without being told that her father had screwed up monumentally yet again. Hillary was still holding her hand tightly, keeping her gaze averted from Bill. He understood; the last thing Chelsea needed at this point was to see her mother go to pieces.

Time to rip off another Band-Aid.

‘Close your eyes. Deep breath. Make eye contact. Begin.’

“Chelsea, I lied to you when I said that I never had – a relationship with Monica Lewinsky. I lied to your mother.”

Hillary felt her daughter’s hand tense as she clasped it between her own. A little squeeze, a reminder that Chelsea had promised to let Dad say what he needed to say without interruption, to give him a fair hearing.

“There is – no excuse for anything I’ve done. There’s not even a particularly good reason. I’m sorry. I’m really and truly sorry. I love you so much, Chels.”

Silence.

“Dad, I – what were you thinking? How could you do that to Mom and then – and then make her stand by your side while you lied to – to all of us? She went on national TV and defended you and the whole time – “

“Sweetheart, he didn’t make me do anything.” Hillary struggled to keep her voice calm and even, despite the fact that she felt the same righteous indignation bubbling up inside of her. And she was immensely proud that her daughter’s immediate reaction to Bill’s confession was to express that ire. “I did those things because I – I – “

Her voice broke. Bill and Chelsea both knew intuitively that the reason was twofold. Not only was the pain of giving love as her rationale too raw, but there was the heartrending uncertainty of the verb’s tense: past or present.

Bill reached across Chelsea to her in an effort at consolation, but as he made contact with her knee, she sprang up as if touched with a white-hot poker.

“Hill, I – “

“I just realized – I don’t know where I left my dossier for the Save America’s Treasures meeting – “
I have to go find it—“The words came tumbling out as quickly as possible. She needed to go. She needed to get out of here before her strength completely dissipated. She was not going to break down in front of Chelsea. Pulling her daughter up into a tight hug, she managed to blurt a tremulous “I’ll be back in a few minutes, baby” before practically running from the room.

Bill and Chelsea heard one gut-wrenching sob before the door flew shut behind her.

After a withering glower from his daughter preceded her own hasty exit, Bill was left on the couch. Alone. Frankly, it was precisely what he deserved, and he knew it.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for all the positive feedback! This is getting trickier to write, so I apologize in advance for the longer gaps between installments.
August 16, 1998

_Crazy_

*I'm crazy for feelin' so lonely*

Patsy Cline’s forlorn contralto could be heard distinctly, even through the bedroom walls, for the umpteenth time in the past hour.

*I'm crazy*  
*Crazy for feelin’ so blue*

To Hillary’s credit, this was no attempt at psychological warfare – at least, not against her husband. As far as Bill was aware, she had no idea he had been sleeping out here on the couch as of last night, instead assuming that he was occupying one of the White House’s surfeit of spare bedrooms. He did nothing to dispel that illusion, decamping every morning before she emerged from the room they had once shared. It was sappy and absurd, but he wanted to be as near to her as possible. In terms of physical distance, anyway. She had barely spoken to him since yesterday, quiet monosyllables her only vocal output. Eye contact was apparently still out of the question, never mind anything more concrete and tactile. Not that he blamed her.

*I knew*  
*You’d love me as long as you wanted*  
*And then someday*  
*You’d leave me for somebody new*

And here she was, curled up in an overstuffed armchair, attempting to drown her sorrows with both a bottle of wine she pessimistically viewed as being half-empty and a sea of papers she was attempting to coalesce into a reworked foster care policy. All that effort at distraction was rendered moot, of course, by the endless, miserable loop of “Crazy” in which she had mired herself. The alcohol wasn’t helping, either, only providing a dull buzz. She hadn’t really thought that it would, but she was desperate. If she could switch off her heart – or maybe her brain – it might help. This might hurt marginally less.

If Hillary allowed her mind to wander for even a fraction of a second away from her work, she was caught in a vicious cycle of self-loathing and self-recriminating, an excruciating pursuit she engaged in even at the best of times. Normally, Bill was the one to pull her out of it, to feed her palliative praise. She was beautiful. She was kind. She was smart. She was a good wife. She was a good mother. Outwardly, she tried to brush it off with something she hoped resembled nonchalance and good humor. But inside, she clung to those words. Pathetically. She had catalogued every compliment, every iota of affection, with her usual thoroughness. Pathetically. And now she tortured herself by replaying them all with heavy overtones of her husband’s infidelity. Pathetically.

‘When he told me he thought I was sexy, was that a day when, the second I was out of sight, out of mind, The Intern’ – she no longer had a name, an individual identity; she was an amalgam of every Other Woman that had haunted her all these years – ‘got down on her knees for him? Did he tell Her that She was beautiful, too?’
And there were other thoughts that plagued her. Uglier questions.

‘He’s lied to me so many times. About so many things. Was it a lie when he said “I love you”?"

Hillary downed the rest of her glass in one swallow. It provided no numbness. It only served to banish the last tenuous thread of self-control she possessed. She knew she was crying too loudly to go unnoticed, even with the music still playing, but she didn’t care anymore. Maybe she would cry herself out and tomorrow wouldn’t hurt as much.

‘Bullshit.’

Tomorrow was the point of no return. All the dirty laundry would be aired and the public recriminations would begin. Her reputation as a frigid bitch too obsessed with her future political prospects to keep her husband satisfied would be reaffirmed in the eyes of the population at large. Hillary had never felt like the “nasty woman” outsiders had described in such gleefully cruel detail, but maybe they were right. At least in part. Maybe Bill would have been happier married to one of those docile beauty queens his mama had picked out for him.

Holding her breath in an effort to avoid spilling mid-sob, she filled her glass again.

Worry
Why do I let myself worry?
Wonderin’
What in the world did I do?

At times like these, Bill was all too aware of Hillary’s tendency to try to beat her heart into submission or to valiantly attempt to rationalize her pain out of existence. It was one of the most infuriating things about her. Where she – and so many others – saw her intellect as her chief asset, he knew otherwise. Yes, his wife’s mind was truly a wonder to behold: she could absorb, analyze and synthesize information with an agility and an acuity that he, for all his own intelligence, could barely fathom. But there was another attribute she possessed, albeit less consciously, that, in his view, put her mental adroitness to shame. Bill didn’t believe he had ever met a human being with a greater capacity for compassion and kindness. (Towards others, anyway. He had never known a harsher self-critic; he shuddered to think of the merciless internal monologue that was doubtless hammering away at Hillary now.) And confound her, she was actually ashamed of it, saw it as an Achilles’ heel over which an impenetrable armor needed to be erected.

Now he understood why. In a flash of clarity, he knew. It was to protect herself from people like him. People to whom she hesitantly exposed her vulnerable underbelly and who either failed to recognize her carefully camouflaged fragility or, worse still, ruthlessly took advantage of it. He realized with burning shame that he was in the latter category.

Sick. That’s what he was. Sick.

He could hear her crying now. Knew she was blaming herself, because she was constitutionally incapable of blaming anyone else. Knew she was meticulously dissecting her every perceived flaw, lamenting what she couldn’t or wouldn’t change, not even for him. And he knew she would do almost anything for him.

What did she get in return? He had broken her heart and now he was about to humiliate her in front of the entire nation.

Oh crazy
For thinkin’ that my love could hold you
I’m crazy for tryin’
And crazy for cryin’
And I’m crazy for lovin’ you

Those lyrics cut Hillary to the core every time. With such succinctness and such precision, they cast away all her futile pretensions and laid the reality of her situation bare.

She loved Bill. Regardless of how he felt about her – at this point, she was sure of neither the depth nor the sincerity of his emotions – she probably always would. There was no rhyme or reason to be found. Any sensible person in this kind of unbearable agony would cut off the pain at its source, but she, normally so levelheaded, had no capacity to walk away. Not now. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

Crazy
For thinkin’ that my love could hold you
I’m crazy for tryin’
And crazy for cryin’
And I’m crazy for lovin’ you

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much again for all the positive comments! Hope you "enjoy" the angst, as I really laid it on thick this time. Sometimes I just can't help myself.
August 18, 1998

“Right, how are we going to do this?”

“I’ll take Buddy,” Bill volunteered feebly. Hillary’s glower indicated quite clearly that her question had been directed more at Chelsea than at him.

Their daughter quickly jumped into the conversation, knowing full well that neither parent could look visibly upset when they finally ventured outside. The unforgiving glare of the media spotlight would highlight any cracks in the façade of a united, if strained, family front. “I’ll go in the middle.” Her customary position, now more than ever.

“Do you want to hold hands?”

Chelsea looked confused for a moment. “Of course, Mom, I –“

“It’d have to be with your father, too. It can’t seem like we’re ganging up on him.”

It would look good, but Hillary was not, under any circumstances, going to force Chelsea to do anything she didn’t feel completely comfortable with, regardless of the potential benefits. She was practically a grown woman now, but, even if she were still their little girl, reducing her to a pawn or a political prop would have been entirely out of the question.

Wrapping her daughter up tightly in her arms, Hillary murmured gently, “I’ll be fine either way, sweetheart. It’s your decision.”

Standing awkwardly to the side – the only thing to do when one was being discussed like an inanimate object, an irritation to be contended with, persona non grata – Bill fumbled with their dog’s leash, trying in vain to focus on anything else and making a concerted effort not to look too pitiable. He didn’t deserve sympathy from Chelsea and he didn’t want it unless she had a genuine, unsolicited desire to give it.

“Can I make my mind up when we’re out there?”

“Of course, baby.” One final squeeze, and Hillary released her. “Everybody ready?”

Chelsea nodded. The first lady slipped sunglasses over eyes still red and puffy from copious tears shed before giving her husband and daughter a quick once-over. After all, the last thing they needed in the immediate aftermath of last night’s disclosure was for Bill to walk out with his fly undone. Gallows humor again. She was momentarily tempted to share that particular thought with her husband, but stopped herself, unsure whether he would take it in the spirit in which it was intended. Come to think of it, she wasn’t really sure what that spirit was herself. Best to leave it unsaid. Reasonably satisfied, she signaled to the Secret Service agent at the door that they were as prepared as they were ever going to be.

As the Clintons strode onto the White House lawn, Bill couldn’t help glancing over at his wife. Head erect, hair immaculately coiffed and makeup applied (for the first time in days), back ramrod-straight, her shirt and earrings a burst of turquoise she had thrown on at the last minute after
realizing that her look would otherwise be described as funereal, she leaned over and whispered something to Chelsea that made them both smile. Not broadly, but at least they were smiling. Behind her dark lenses, he couldn’t discern whether she had even looked at him before returning his view to that of her exquisite profile.

A gentle tap at his empty left hand almost startled him. He looked down and, observing his daughter offering him her own right hand, felt an almost overwhelming rush of relief. His face broke into an uncontrollable grin. Of course, he hadn’t been forgiven and his myriad sins were not forgotten. That was far too much to ask. But he had received a momentary reprieve; for these few hundred yards, he was not a total exile from his own family.

Almost giddily, he looked over his shoulder to the assembled press, Chelsea laughing at his absurd ecstasy. Bill glanced back to Hillary and, although his smile remained, it was now a hollow rictus. The steel in her spine, the fixed stare straight ahead all indicated a cool detachment – the ice queen freezing out her philandering husband – if you didn’t know Hillary Diane Rodham. Really know her.

He alone saw the imperceptible tremor in her jaw that meant tears were being beaten back. He alone recognized that her head was held slightly too high, too defiantly, for her sangfroid to be real.

Still holding on to the lifeline that was Chelsea’s hand, their backs now toward the bank of eagerly snapping photographers, he looked down, as if he were checking that Buddy was behaving himself properly. In truth, he just needed a moment to exhale, to collect himself again and to quiet the agonizing, incessant question thundering around his brain.

‘How in the hell am I going to fix this?’

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this one's a bit short - I was struck with a sudden burst of inspiration thinking about those iconic photos of Bill, Hillary and Chelsea departing for Martha's Vineyard, and this is the result. Hopefully the next chapter will be longer; I've already started working on it a little.

Happy Christmas and Happy Hanukkah to those who celebrate, and thank you all so much for the overwhelmingly kind reception!
August 19, 1998

Bill had resigned himself to separate bedrooms here on Martha’s Vineyard. Unless he could concoct some way to sleep on the landing outside his wife’s bedroom unnoticed, there didn’t seem to be a viable alternative. There was still the nagging sensation that a comfortable mattress was more luxury than he deserved, that the fact that he could no longer hear her nighttime tears meant he was getting off far too easily.

Other than that, however, getting out of the White House had seemed to dissipate at least a tiny fraction of the stiflingly tense atmosphere that had been threatening to smother them all completely. Without nearly as many people milling around for whom the walls had to be maintained, Hillary had actually started to relax, if only slightly. As long as she was reading or otherwise engaged, she was, remarkably, willing to be in the same room as him; she was already smiling more; he had heard her laugh once or twice – not a full-bodied laugh, but a laugh nonetheless. Maybe he would even be able to talk to her – properly – soon.

‘If you ever figure out what to say.’

That remained the big question, overshadowing any and all progress made. The air had to be cleared, but how? He couldn’t conceive of a scenario that didn’t culminate in her either screaming at him or sobbing, neither of which would be even remotely productive. Well, there was one particular direction he yearned for things to head, but it was so far out of the realm of the possible that it wasn’t even worth taking into consideration. Given the undeniably sordid tenor of recent events, Bill was ashamed of himself for even fantasizing about making love to Hillary again. Not only did he not deserve it, but there was also the fact that those thoughts and their persistence seemed to be emblematic of everything inherently wrong with him. Why he had gotten them into this mess in the first place. All the reasons Hillary should just cut her losses and leave him. All the reasons Hillary should never have married him in the first place.

Rapping at the door jolted him out of his spiraling guilt. He knew it was her, recognized the efficiency of her knock, before her voice even called out to him.

“Come in.”

Glasses on, hair not quite long enough for a proper ponytail clipped back as best as she could manage, his wife peered around the jamb before opening the door wider and, somewhat hesitantly, stepping through. Even though she was sporting a baggy t-shirt and shorts, garments chosen with little care and absolutely no thought of his titillation, Bill drank in the sight of her. This was his girl – the one he’d fallen for years ago, whose appeal ran beyond mere conventional prettiness.

“Dinner,” she announced, seemingly a propos of nothing.

“Dinner,” he repeated, blankly.

“Your birthday.”

He’d forgotten completely.
“I’d made reservations,” she continued, “but – well, I thought it would be better if we stayed in. No press stakeouts. No staring. So I called the restaurant and they’ll send a waiter and the food over here.”

A moment’s pause, but, when she received no response, Hillary barreled on, trying to bring this interaction to a close as quickly as possible. “Everything will be ready at seven.” She tried to come up with something else to say – a conclusion of some kind – but she drew a blank. None of the banal pleasantries that would normally flow naturally could make it past the lump she found in her throat at seeing Bill reclining on his bed in a clinging t-shirt and boxers. Forcing her face into a rather strained smile that she desperately hoped conveyed appropriate indifference, she reversed out of Bill’s room without another word.

The door’s latch clicked gently. He finally exhaled. She cursed herself quietly, the shame of actually wanting him after all that he’d put her through almost unbearable.

- 

When she came down the stairs at seven o’clock, Bill felt as though the wind had been knocked out of him. Recovering his ability to speak after what felt like ages of slack-jawed gaping but, in reality, had been only a matter of seconds, he whispered hoarsely, “You’re gorgeous.”

He thought that was an objective enough assessment. Hillary was wearing a black cocktail dress that looked, to him, impossibly tight. His eyes traced every voluptuous inch as if seeing it for the first time, even though he knew her body like the back of his hand. There was a curious mixture of relief and disappointment that her neckline didn’t dip down far enough to expose any cleavage, but he found himself fixating on her creamy collarbone, staring unabashedly at the small diamond pendant that was its only decoration.

“This isn’t for you,” she hissed, the words coming out far more harshly than she had necessarily intended them to. An apology momentarily flitted across her mind before she decided that she didn’t owe him one. Any pain he might be experiencing was entirely his own doing.

Bill averted his gaze, unconsciously chewing on his lower lip. Of course she wasn’t dressing to impress him; he had already known that without being told explicitly. This was simply a matter of keeping up appearances. But, despite the decidedly inhospitable tone of her statement, he took some small comfort in it. At least she wasn’t dressing this way to torment him, to provide a stark reminder of what he was missing. He probably could have eliminated that possibility out of hand. Hillary rarely thought of herself in those terms, as the beguiling temptress he often saw her as, at the best of times, let alone now that yet another adversary, this time in the form of a curvaceous twenty-something intern, had been thrust in her face.

Truly, she hadn’t dressed to kill, only to preserve the illusion that pleasing her husband was anywhere near the forefront of her mind. That was her intention, anyway – now all that seemed to have gone right out the window. The butterflies in her stomach were a sure indication that his charm and damnable good looks still operated on their usual high plane. But when she’d seen the look on his face, the barely-contained lust, her heart leapt. Hillary hated herself for that unquenchable thirst for approval. His approval. It didn’t matter what he did, really – as long as some part of him still wanted her. And now she had to kill the contempt, suppress it, act like nothing was wrong. Not for him, of course. For her mercifully limited audience of Chelsea and the waiter.

Donning what she and Bill sardonically called her “pageant smile”, she drifted past him and into the dining room.
They were all uptight to begin with. Under the circumstances, that was practically unavoidable. Hillary didn’t think she could stand another second of poor Chelsea valiantly attempting to chatter blithely about her plans for her second year at Stanford. No one else would loosen up until she did. She could feel everyone watching her, as if expecting a sudden emotional eruption at any second, without even the slightest provocation.

Organic relaxation was out of the question, so she allowed the slightly terrified-looking young man who was serving them refill her wine glass far more frequently than she would ordinarily dare. It worked absolute wonders.

Soon, things were almost normal. By the time Bill’s birthday cake was served, the traditions observed – wishes made, candles extinguished, songs tunelessly warbled – the atmosphere was virtually indistinguishable from family meals in happier times.

Bill laughed as Hillary threw her head back and cackled – the genuine article, not the watered-down facsimile he’d seen so infrequently over the past couple of days – when Chelsea started recounting their ill-fated attempt at miniature golf from a few summers ago.

“And then Mom hit her ball so hard it bounced off the wall and came back –“

Hillary chimed in and they finished in unison, “Right past where it started!”

His girls disintegrated into gales of giggles; it felt like eternity since he’d seen them both happy.

“Chels,” he interjected, “go put a record on.”

They both stared at him like he was speaking Esperanto.

“What?”

“A record?” Hillary said, arching one eyebrow incredulously. “God, you are old!”

Chelsea doubled over with mirth again, but nonetheless struggled over to the CD player, shuffling through the stack of discs nearby. “What do you want, Dad?”

“Your choice, darlin’. I trust your taste implicitly.”

She held one case aloft, looking mischievous. “How about Rumours?”

His wife must have been significantly tipsier than he had thought, because her response was a loud guffaw and a giddy “Don’t you dare, Chelsea Victoria”.

Their daughter finally made her selection and pushed play, holding jazz hands aloft as a blast of brass heralded the opening track of The Genius of Ray Charles.

Both parents applauded her choice vigorously. Bill got up and, fueled by Hillary’s uproarious laughter, began to perform an enthusiastically improvised, terribly executed faux-Broadway dance routine with Chelsea. Eventually, Hillary was yanked from her seat to join in the wildly uncoordinated melee, each of them ecstatically yelling the lyrics to “Let the Good Times Roll” in a completely different key.

At the song’s close, Hillary let out a whoop. She hadn’t felt this good in a long time. As the CD moved to the next track, her eyes met Bill’s. Tentatively, he offered her his hand and, taking a deep
breath, never letting her eyes leave his, she accepted it. He pulled her in close; the rest of the world melted away.

It had to be you
It had to be you
I wandered around
And finally found
Somebody who
Could make me be true
Wo-wo-woah could make me be blue
And even be glad
Just to be sad
Thinkin’ of you

Seeing that her gambit had paid off, Chelsea surreptitiously withdrew. She probably could have driven an express train through the room and gone unnoticed.

Some others I’ve seen
Might never be mean
Might never be cross
Or try to be boss
But they wouldn’t do
For nobody else gave me a thrill
With all your faults, I love you still
It had to be you
Wonderful you
It had to be you

Still slightly uncertain, he leaned down – a hesitant peck to the lips didn’t seem like too much of a risk, all things considered.

Her arms snaked around his neck the second he drew away, bringing him back in for a real kiss, deep and unexpectedly passionate. As was so often the case, once they started, they couldn’t stop, barely even to come up for air. Their bodies were almost flush, still swaying gently.

‘Cause nobody else gave me a thrill
With all your faults, I love you still, now
And it had to be you
It just had to be you
It had to be you

The opening chords of “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” yanked Hillary back to reality and she practically leapt away from her husband, face reddening at the mortifying recognition of how quickly, how easily she’d allowed herself to be sucked back in. She would never ever learn. She could never, apparently, have her heart broken by this man enough. Even by her discredibly low standards, four days was a record. Tomorrow morning, she was not going to hate herself for waking up next to him as if nothing had ever happened, as if she hadn’t been betrayed. Not yet. Hillary Clinton owed Hillary Rodham that much.

Bill stared at her, dumbfounded, as she flew out of the room, the sound of her footsteps hurrying upstairs thundering in his head.

Deep breaths to put the steel back in her spine. A careful reallocation of her self-loathing. She knew he would follow her, and she had to be ready. Ready to fight him. She couldn’t afford to let him
win. If she did, he would never change. That fact had become increasingly apparent, even to someone as disgracefully blinkered by the unbearably heady mix of lust and love as she was.

By the time the door burst open behind her, Hillary was prepared. Hardened.

“Are you seriously expecting that – just because it’s your birthday?” The chill in her words was palpable, each one an icy shard cutting him to the quick. Blue eyes blazing, she spat out, “You really are unbelievable. I’m not one of your whores, Bill. Don’t you dare treat me like one.”

His own frustration was rapidly reaching boiling point. Was she jerking him around intentionally? He didn’t deserve better; he knew that. But she didn’t have to continually rub it in his face.

“Jesus, Hillary, I was hardly forcing you. Just because you can’t act human for more than ten minutes at a time –”

“‘Act human’? What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

Against his better judgment, Bill smirked. The Rubicon had been crossed.

“That would be my point.”

“And what, pray tell, do you want me to do? Get down on my knees, I expect.”

“You know, things normal wives do, like showing a little tenderness to their husbands on their goddamn birthday.”

“After the shit you’ve pulled? That’s not being a wife, that’s being a doormat. Why don’t you try acting like a decent husband for a change and see what kind of results you get?”

“I have tried!”

“When? Before, after or while you were keeping your dick wet in the intern’s fucking mouth?”

“Just because you don’t notice anything that’s not heading for the Ways and Means Committee doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist!”

“Oh here we go. Yes, I’m a frigid bitch and your sensitive soul needs to seek comfort elsewhere. Bullshit, Bill. We can’t all be screwing around – somebody has to actually do the work!”

Somehow, she managed to compose herself, a sight infinitely more terrifying to Bill than her fiery temper at its very worst. “Let me ask you something.” The words were carefully judged, expertly chosen. He could practically see the wheels and cogs turning in that magnificent brain of hers. “Do you ever think about other men I’ve been with? Past boyfriends?”

This was a trap. It had to be. But he couldn’t see it. She had always been a much better lawyer than he was. He hesitantly shook his head.

“Not even when we’re in bed?”

“… No…”

“Do you ever see me looking at other men – not lasciviously or anything, just looking – and wonder? If I’ve fucked them – if I’m going to? If I want to?”

That had honestly never occurred to him. He was infinitely more attuned to the male gaze that was turned on her than its inverse; smugly swooping in and reclaiming his wife from a congressman or
dignitary whose infatuated flirting she was completely oblivious to was one of his greatest pleasures. There had never been even the slightest hint of reciprocity in any of those encounters, of that he was absolutely certain.

“Of course not!” he said indignantly.

“Why not?”

Her tone was still impossibly level, sphinx-like in its obscurity.

“Because – because I know you – you’d never –“ Six different responses fought to get out of his mouth simultaneously, before he settled on one. “I know you, Hillary. I know you –“

“Won’t or can’t?”

“What?”

“Won’t or can’t?” she repeated, voice trembling slightly, eyes wet, but feeling the perverse satisfaction of yet another point proven. She knew it. Of course he didn’t think of her in those terms, didn’t think of her as capable of repaying his infidelities an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. That was probably the real reason he had married her and not some buxom blonde bimbo: she presented no viable threat of payback for his roving eye and wandering dick. He never had to worry; he never even had to think about it. He could rest easy, while she was consumed by insecurity and anxiety, by doubts and fears perpetually validated.

Blinking back tears furiously, she didn’t bother to wait for his response. Keeping her composure was a battle she was rapidly losing. “Well, you’re right. Either way, you’re right. I couldn’t do that to you – even if I wanted to, I couldn’t. I suppose – I suppose that’s why you need them. The other women. Of course. I’m not enough; I’ve never been enough; I could never be enough. Not for you.” Hillary wished she could shut up. Stop talking. Bill was staring at her, and she felt her voice getting higher and louder and more hysterical, her cheeks hot, tears flowing freely. She was being an idiot. A jealous, vain idiot. “I tried. Not hard enough, but I tried. What’s the point, anyway? There’s always going to be another one – another Monica, another Gennifer –“ She spat out the names she usually avoided like the plague, but even two was more than she could bear. A half-hearted attempt to channel her pain into renewed anger failed.

Bill’s reflexes didn’t fail him. He caught Hillary before her knees hit the floor. This time she didn’t pull away from him. Sobbing, she collapsed in his arms.

She couldn’t fight anymore. The fragile strength she thought she’d mustered ebbed rapidly away and all she wanted was to be held.

“Baby, look at me,” he murmured soothingly. He needed eye contact, needed her to see that he meant every single word he was about to say. She buried her face deeper in his chest, crying harder. “Please, Hill.”

Reaching down to lift her chin gently, their eyes finally met again.

“I love you.”

Hillary tried weakly to jerk her head away, but her reserves were far too sapped.

“I love you,” he repeated.

“I love you too,” she choked out, through thick tears.
That almost broke him, but he had to press on. This was too important.

“I want – I want to earn that love again. But I can’t do it if you don’t let me back in. I know I’ve hurt you. I know I don’t deserve another chance. I know you’re scared. But please – try? Let me try.”

Hillary nodded shakily.

“Okay?”

Grabbing a fistful of Kleenex from her nearby nightstand, she attempted a wobbly smile. “Okay.”

Not caring in the slightest how badly her nose was still running, Bill pulled her into a tight hug.

“Are you gonna be alright? For tonight, I mean?”

Still teary, she returned his warm squeeze.

“Yeah.”

She didn’t really want to let go, but knew she needed to. If she clutched too desperately, that would defeat the entire purpose, set what meager, tenuous progress they had just made back immeasurably.

“We’ll talk more tomorrow, babe.”

Another nod, this time stronger.

“I love you, Hillary.”

“I love you, Bill.”

He turned to go, was almost out the door, when the sound of his name brought him back, facing his wife once more.

“Happy birthday.”

The last thing he saw before the door gently clicked shut was the most authentically tender expression a man could hope for.

He had never been gladder that he’d managed to blow all his candles out in one go.

Chapter End Notes

Holy cats, this got out-of-control long (by my standards, anyway). Thank you all so much for the incredibly kind comments, and I hope you enjoy this installment!

Also, I have absolutely no idea where I’m going with this, because I am terrible at ending things. It could end up going all the way through the impeachment if I don’t come up with anything more suitable. Who knows? Certainly not me, hahahaha.
August 20, 1998

He felt himself beginning to panic. Hillary was gone. At least, he couldn’t find her, and his guilt-wracked brain created an equivalence – false, he hoped – between those two states almost instantaneously, like he was an infant whose mother had temporarily disappeared from view.

‘Object permanence.’ He’d heard that term from Hillary during, he presumed, one of her enthusiastic attempts to elucidate early childhood development to him, and it was her voice, ever an integral part of his mental processes, that supplied it now.

Bedroom. That chair in the den. The window seat. Porch. Hammock. Even, he thought wryly, the kitchen. Bill cycled through the list of possibilities for the umpteenth time. Had she gone for a walk? No, her agents were still here. He’d asked them.

It finally dawned on him, his sleep-deprived brain putting the pieces together in a sudden burst of coherence.

Her agents were still here. Hillary was still here.

Clearly, the hours spent mentally writing and rewriting what he would say to her this morning, how he could possibly begin to apologize, to make her understand that he loved her – always her, only her – had taken their toll. And he was still nowhere near being able to express all the things he felt so acutely and had almost from the beginning: the fear, the inadequacy, the remorse, the shame, the overwhelming love. All the credit he’d been given for eloquence, his ability to charm and to explain away any transgression, was rendered null and void. Maybe because he couldn’t bullshit her. Not this time, anyway.

Trying to focus on the task in hand, to block out the self-reproimations he had given her voice for even a moment, was proving difficult.

‘Where else would she go?’

Then it came to him.

-

Slowly, he eased open the door to Chelsea’s room.

There she was, hair disheveled, eyes red, makeup smudged, still wearing that black dress. Holding their daughter, stroking her unruly mass of auburn curls. He could tell Chelsea had been crying too, and yet another wave of self-reproach washed over him. Of all people, he should have known. Screaming parents had been a staple of his childhood, seared into his memory, coloring so many of his adult actions. But did he even think of his little girl once before he sequestered himself in his bedroom to eagerly plot his reconciliation with her mother (and, what was so much worse, to fantasize about the passionate sex that that glorious reunion would doubtless entail)? No. Not for a moment. Typically.

As he pushed the door further ajar, it squeaked.
“Shit,” he blurted.

Hillary started slightly before casting a critical look over at Bill, pressing a finger to her lips. Scolding him was practically a reflex action. She didn’t like it. She had never liked having to play the bad guy, the rigid hard-ass to his jovial good ol’ boy, but she had no choice. He gave her no choice.

Carefully, she disentangled herself from Chelsea, giving her a gentle kiss on the forehead before brushing past Bill and heading downstairs. She was already seated at the kitchen table, looking preternaturally composed, by the time he awkwardly occupied the chair across from her.

“You wanted to talk?” Hillary knew she had given far too much ground last night, however cathartic it had felt in the moment, and she wasn’t prepared to relinquish any more until her husband had clarified his position. His intentions. He thought he was home free. She could tell. And she could not allow that.

Bill tried to summon words. “Darlin’, I – I meant what I said last night. I love you, and I wanna fix this. I just… don’t know how.”

‘Too little, too late,’ she wanted to snap. ‘You should have thought of that after the first time – or the fifteenth – you fucked around.’

How sorry could he be when he was only sorry he got caught?

Again.

This was not constructive. She needed to be practical, to swallow it all, to shove the raw emotion away. Cram it into some tiny corner of her soul to be dealt with later. ‘Later my ass,’ she scoffed internally. ‘Never.’

Her face an impassive mask, save for the damnable tell-tale signs of tears past, she refused to let him off the hook, responding to his entreaty with a question of her own: “What do you want from me, Bill?”

Now he was starting to wobble, the lower lip quivering. Tears welling up. She had to hold fast. ‘Don’t soften.’

“I just want you back!”

‘Back like how it was in Arkansas? Back like how it was in 1992? “Never again, never again; I love you; I want you.” Bullshit. Bullshit. It was bullshit then and it’s bullshit now.’

Frankness was all Hillary had to offer in response. It was either that or the ignominy of rushing over to mother him yet again. “I can’t trust you. If you want me to let you in again –“

‘This is why you don’t open up. They just hurt you. You can’t let them. Don’t let him.’

She wracked her brain for conditions, terms for whatever new bargain they were about to forge.

‘More vows for him to break.’

There was desperation in his eyes, in his tone. “Anything, baby. I’ll do it. I can’t live without you.”

‘He says that now – in a month, maybe two, you’ll go right back to being a bitch. He’ll need some sweet young thing’s lips, her pussy, to soothe his wounded ego. And you’ll be broken.’
Hillary closed her eyes.

‘Don’t you dare cry. Don’t you dare.’

Control. That was her mantra. Poise pulled back from the brink, she opened her eyes again. “I can’t do this again, Bill. I love you, but —” Control. “If you want me —”

“I do, I do,” he blubbered.

Control. “You have to earn it. Prove to me that I can trust you. That you love me. That I am never going to have to go through this again. I can’t do my part if I don’t know those things with absolute certainty.”

Breaths coming in unsteady heaves, Bill’s eyes met hers. He needed her to see that he meant this, that this was not just another manipulation. “I promise you, Hillary. I promise you. Whatever it takes.”

For her sanity’s sake, he had to be countered with ice. Control, so tenuous where he was concerned at the best of times, was threatening to slip completely again. Rising from her place, she leaned as close as she dared.

“Don’t make me regret this.”

And she was gone. To cry into her pillow, but he didn’t need to know that.

Chapter End Notes

Still trying to negotiate where I'm going with this, but I hope you enjoy this bit of fumbling around something vaguely resembling a plot. Thank you all again so much for your feedback!
Cold War

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

August 31, 1998

“Just the two of us,” he’d said, grinning that little-boy grin, normally so irresistible. It wilted quickly, crushed under the weight of her stare. It had never been just the two of them. Not really. Certainly not now.

Chelsea was on her way back to California and they were preparing to embark on a state visit to Russia. When asked to justify his decision not to postpone the trip, Bill had asserted that relations with the old Cold War foe remained crucial, more important by far than any partisan gamesmanship in Washington. Absolute nonsense. He felt the ground shaking beneath him as surely as she did. No, this was sleight-of-hand. A distraction. Not for the ever-dogged GOP – it would take a feat of diplomatic brilliance that was well beyond her husband’s capacity to pull off that particular miracle. Unilateral Russian disarmament and no less would get the House Republicans off the scent of vaguely impeachable scandal emanating from that damned blue dress.

For her. Get her out of the White House; be a good boy; be publicly attentive; give her things to do that weren’t the serious work that she knew he felt robbed him of her. Send her to post-Soviet sewing circles with Mrs. Yeltsin. Rely on Boris to provide copious ammunition for private giggle fests with all his (frequently inebriated) antics. Maybe he would grab her ass again. It would be nice not to be the long-suffering wife in that tired scenario for a change.

She knew the game. If this was his grand scheme to repair their relationship, it required some serious reevaluation.

They had made some strides over the past ten days, sequestered on Martha’s Vineyard, only prey for the paparazzi periodically. He was being solicitous and kind, attempting to intuit her needs and meet them as best he could. God love him, he was trying. The decades of searing betrayal could, with some effort, be blotted out for minutes at a time, rendering her temporarily capable of smiling, laughing. She had learned to let him touch her without flinching or yanking herself beyond arm’s length, to allow the tension to ease just enough so that it wouldn’t be unbearable for outsiders. Walter Cronkite could take them on boating excursions without worrying unduly about the First Lady going postal and bludgeoning the President with a life preserver. Although, God, she had wanted to when his eyes had raked across her, his arm wrapping around her waist in an intimate gesture he knew she couldn’t pull away from without obvious awkwardness. Let him have his little moments. Another lesson learned. Those crumbs were all he was getting, after all.

But now, an overseas trip. Like his arms drawing her to him on the yacht, there was no graceful escape. No way out. And he knew it.

Russia. Then Ireland, both Northern and the Republic of. Four solid days of the big show, of pageant smiles and dolling up and acting like absolutely nothing was wrong. Like all hell wasn’t breaking loose back home. Like they were fine. Like she was fine.

He knew damn well that no one gave a shit what he and Yeltsin discussed. Not a word of his address to the Dáil – the drafts of which she, typically, was going to look over because he’d asked so shyly, so sweetly, and she was just that kind of sucker – would be remembered. That was not the peace process the world wanted to focus on. No, it was all eyes on her, even beyond the normal,
idiotic preoccupation with her hair, her clothes, if she was pretty and soft and sweet enough (the answer was always resoundingly to the negative). Every single gesture, each syllable would be analyzed, crucial pieces to the baffling puzzle that was the all-important state of their union.

And, to add insult to injury, he’d had the unmitigated gall to pencil in time for some golf. Was she supposed to be so grateful that at least Naina Yeltsina and Cherie Blair were on the depressingly short list of women he wasn’t fucking that she’d let that go? Christ almighty.

-  

They hadn’t made this walk without Chelsea yet – without a buffer, an all-too-welcome diversion. They were alone under the microscope now.

‘It’s only the South Lawn. You’ve done this hundreds of times. Stop being stupid. Get to Marine One and you’re done.’

Her brain was swiftly realigning itself, thinking of minor alterations she could make to her remarks on the importance of education as a unifying force, briefings she could plow through on the long flight to Moscow. But her muscles were tensing uncontrollably, legs operating only haltingly. She was scared, and cowardice was the one unforgivable sin.

At least she’d decided to wear sunglasses again, which meant she only had to concentrate on maintaining forward momentum and keeping the lower half of her face either impassive or, ideally, some rough approximation of happy.

But some primal part of her mind was rebelling, replaying the late night jokes and unflattering caricatures, running through the litany of her faults and his transgressions yet again. She wanted to whirl on that heartless sea of flashing cameras and scream, “Yes, I’m in pain. Yes, I can feel. Yes, I can cry.”

‘But you can’t let them see that. Never let them see.’

Head up. Shoulders back. Keep walking.

A gentle hand on the small of her back.

Hillary looked at Bill.

He saw. He knew.

-  

September 1, 1998

A state visit wasn’t really a state visit until costumed children had sung and danced violently at you. In this particular instance, it was to the tune of an absurdly upbeat synthesizer rendition of “The Song of the Volga Boatmen”. Young boys in sailor suits crouched and kicked vigorously.

‘Smile and clap. Try not to look either amused or confused by anything that happens.’

It was easier for Hillary when there were children – little girls looking at her, awestruck. Inspired, she hoped. ‘It will be easier for you. It will be better for you. I will make it that way.’ Sometimes that ambition was all that kept her going, not, contrary to popular belief, Machiavellian lust for power.
The man at the podium gestured to her. Time to open up for the headliner.

This speech was nothing special, really – a horde of Russian elementary schoolers on their first day back from summer vacation was not the audience for anything groundbreaking. Just a reiteration of her belief in future generations, their capacity to change the world for the better, the key role that education played in that dream.

She stole a glance at her husband.

Bill, who had tenderly covered her with a blanket and brushed her hair ever-so-delicately out of her face when he thought she had finally fallen asleep on the interminable flight over. Bill, who, after a moment’s hesitation, she had let hold her hand as they made their way down the stairs onto the tarmac. Bill, who was now burying his face in those elegant hands, looking miserable and bored out of his skull.

‘Fuck. You.’

A scintillating public speaker she was not. She knew the “education is a boat; don’t be left behind on the shores of ignorance” metaphor was more than a little labored. But, when your marriage was hanging by a thread, when you’d sworn up and down to make it right, publicly conveying that your wife was precisely the shrill, all-business harpy that everyone had already decided she was took a whole lot of nerve.

She could practically hear the pundits now, snarling that, like the rest of the American public, the President just wished she would shut up. He couldn’t even stand to listen to her; no wonder he –

Hillary had to pull the brakes on that train of thought. ‘Not now. Later.’

Well. There was one way to push all talk of her husband’s perceived indifference right onto the back burner.

As her comments drew to a close, she elected to make an omission. One she knew with absolute certainty everyone would notice.

“And now, I’d like to introduce the President of the United States.”

Bill perked up at his cue, but then looked puzzled. Unsettled, as he realized what was different.

Not “my husband, the President”.

He reached for her shoulder as they passed each other on the dais. She allowed fleeting physical contact but brushed past without looking at him.

Her passive-aggression was beautifully engineered, she judged, with a disgraceful degree of smugness, as she adopted her ‘listening’ smile and tried to time her nods appropriately without really devoting any of her attention to what he was saying. Exquisite.

And now she knew exactly what the big story from the first day of their Russian foray would be.

- He knew he had screwed up royally at some point today, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on when. Or how. It didn’t really matter, he supposed. The salient point was that atmosphere between him and Hillary had reached arctic temperatures.
Standing farther away from him than was even remotely natural as they posed for the traditional pre-dinner photos with the Yeltsins, she was trying to make small talk about the renovations that had taken place since they were last in the Kremlin – a challenge when the translators had to keep out of shot. Would President Yeltsin mind showing her the library later? She was talking over him, past him, through him, even when he tried to interject that he had already seen the library and it was spectacular.

She was spectacular. Pearls and sequined accents elevated her dress-and-suit-jacket combination from drab to dazzling. He couldn’t help noticing, however, that barely an inch of skin was left uncovered. Her figure was decidedly not on display, but that did nothing to stop him from staring with what he hoped was a modicum of subtlety. From yearning.

The receiving line came streaming past. Pleasantries were exchanged. Handshakes. Attempts to communicate enormous pleasure at being in Russia again to bigwigs whose grasp of the English language was virtually nil. The usual, until the American contingent began to arrive.

Madeleine took his hand firmly, giving him a polite smile in exchange for his genuine enthusiasm for another Anglophone at last. When she moved on to the First Lady, who was already reaching out to accept the customary gesture of greeting, the Secretary of State bucked tradition. She grabbed Hillary, bringing her into a warm, tight hug, as though trying to transfer strength to her by means of body contact.

Hillary’s face remained inscrutable, but her body language signaled relief. Gratitude.

Bill had to look away before the two women broke their embrace. He couldn’t afford to have his face register the imponderable guilt he was experiencing.

God, he hoped the couch in their suite was comfortable.

Chapter End Notes

Inspired by watching the press pool coverage of this trip today. Hope you enjoy - and thank you for the kind comments!
September 3, 1998

“So. How are – things?” Bill appreciated the effort Tony was clearly making to maintain a neutral affect, but he knew that absolutely no one (except his idiot brother Roger, who had called offering felicitations after seeing what Monica looked like on the news) had even the slightest sympathy for him. Rightly so.

“But great.”

The prime minister hesitated, not wanting to salt fresh wounds but compulsively attempting to keep a conversation going as they waited for Hillary to be corralled by her aides, pulled away from the throng (who were clearly reluctant to let her go) so they could all move on to the next bullet point on their itinerary.

Step one: greet the people. Smile – just enough to lift spirits, not so much as to seem frivolous; shake as many hands as possible; compliment the courageous, shore up the openly grieving.


Step three: make speeches. Laud the peacemakers, condemn the terrorists. Provide reassurance and hope.

In locales as fraught with sudden, violent tragedy as Northern Ireland, it was, sadly, a case of lather, rinse, repeat – although Americans couldn’t be expected to understand this. The First Lady, displaying either unforeseen depths of empathy or a startling political acumen, was obviously unaccustomed to the morbid routine.

“She’s – she’s very good at this. Cherie hasn’t been able to stop talking about her speech last night. We’re all a bit in awe, to be honest.” Another pause, and he realized he’d lost his audience. Bill was now gazing further down the street towards his wife, eyes misting over. Tony, political animal that he was, couldn’t ascertain if this was gamesmanship, genuine sorrow at the tragic loss of life in Omagh or something altogether more personal.

Not that it really mattered. The media would put whatever spin on a teary president suited them best at that particular moment.

And that was precisely why Hillary had decided to wear sunglasses. Again.

They were threatening to become a permanent part of her wardrobe. At least until this god-awful mess blew over.

If it blew over, which she was beginning to doubt it would. Not without a great deal more pain and mess, anyway.

Any humanity she displayed today, she had realized with a faintly nauseating lurch earlier, would be yanked from its context, twisted and mangled beyond recognition. Anything to prop up the already decided-upon narrative. ‘Icy shrew momentarily melts in vain effort to curry public favor.”
Vindictive bitch throws understandably sexually frustrated husband under the bus by staging emotional breakdown at bomb site, exploiting the grief of hundreds with typical ruthlessness. Lady Macbeth tries to play Princess Diana.’

No, thank you.

The individuals she touched, she connected with. They knew she cared. She hoped they knew it was authentic. That was all that mattered.

That would have to be enough. She wasn’t going to put on a big show for the press, put her heart (yes, she had one) on her sleeve. In the open. Where it was exposed. Defenseless. Vulnerable.

Not today.

Not ever.

If you’d come to see Hillary Rodham Clinton break, you were going to leave disappointed.

Bill, on the other hand…

As she made her way back to the waiting group, the Blairs looking stoic and somber, her husband much less so, it was difficult to ignore the rapidly welling tears, the telltale chewing on his lower lip. To her immediate chagrin, her initial response was a hot flash of annoyance. An embittered snap. Searching his eyes, now boring despairingly into Hillary’s tinted lenses, she felt a stomach-churning uncertainty. Was this yet another manipulation? A desperate, public play for her sympathy?

‘Why do you keep doing this to me?’

Her hand on his arm – steady, gentle. It landed there compulsively, without her having made the conscious decision to place it there. To believe. The faintest squeeze of reassurance. He wiped his eyes, giving her a small smile that made her heart jump fractionally in spite of herself. Shutters snapped, and her hand flew away again, a gun-shy bird startled by the noise. The infernal, relentless doubts came flooding back. Once bitten, twice shy – and God knows how many times she’d been bitten.

‘Why do I keep letting you?’

September 5, 1998

She knew it. She’d been willing this to be real – willing him to mean it this time. In spite of the abundant empirical evidence stacked against that tenuous, child-like faith, there still burned the faint, flickering hope that she meant something. That they meant something.

‘Same players. Why shouldn’t it be the same old game?’

Bill was golfing. (The bastard.) Hillary was ostensibly relaxing, which everyone knew really meant that she was ingesting reams of documents, scribbling detailed marginalia wherever she could cram it and formulating cogent policy out of those scrawled screeds. Today, however, neither scenario was true.

Although she was shifting copious papers aimlessly on a desk, all she’d actually succeeded in doing was making a sizeable dent in the suite’s available stock of whisky.
First one glass, hoping for distraction, if not clarity. If she could derail that pernicious train of thought, maybe her mind would settle elsewhere. Something constructive. Work. Not even work lacked the sting of disappointment – of failure.

Then two glasses. Anything to blot out the pitying looks from the women in the crowd on Lower Market Street. She had heard the whispers about her so-called bravery, all the more mortifying coming from people who knew the real thing and who lived it day after day. “Chin up, darlin’.” Don’t let them get you,” an old lady, one who had likely seen the unrelenting heartbreak of the Troubles from the beginning, had said, achingly sincere, clasping her hand tightly, holding on as if she were Hillary's lifeline.

Three. She had to stop Bill’s half-assed excuse for a public apology rattling around in her brain. 

“And made a big mistake.”

‘No shit.’

“And is indefensible and I am sorry.”

‘Go on…’

“I can’t disagree with anyone who wants to be critical of what I have already acknowledged is indefensible. There’s nothing that he or anyone else could say in a personally critical way that I don’t imagine I would disagree with since I have already said it myself, to myself, and I’m very sorry about it, but there’s nothing else I can say.”

‘Oh, well. That fixes everything, doesn’t it? You’re very sorry about it – very fucking sorry – and you hate yourself. Never heard that one before.’

All that was missing were the apparently meaningless promises to change. He’d do better. This would never happen again. He loved her – always her, only her. His hands in the right places and a whisper of “Hilly baby” against her neck in between kisses to kill the last scrap of futile resistance.

And then a month later, two if she was lucky, that gnawing at the pit of her stomach would start again: ‘Who is it? How many are there? Is it just sex or is this It?” It. The one he’d leave her for. He’d come so close before. And once he was out of the White House – mission accomplished – scandal didn’t matter anymore. Then came doubt. What if, this time, it was all in her head? ‘Don’t push him away. Pull him closer. Make him love you. Make him remember.’

Four. This one went down in one stinging swallow.

After that, everything had begun to run together, shrouded in a maudlin miasma.

Bill eventually ambled in, covered in a light sheen of sweat. The diversion had relaxed him. Was he ready for the shitshow that was bound to erupt the second they were wheels down in Washington again? Probably not really, but it seemed highly unlikely that anyone could ever be truly prepared for that kind of onslaught.

Expecting to see his wife in her natural habitat – buried in enormous binders, memos flying – the small, vulnerable figure curled up in the chair, almost dwarfed by it, a glass in one hand and a depleted decanter in the other, didn’t register properly at first. He approached with caution. Hillary had four distinct reactions to alcohol: sweet, liberated silliness; gloriously insatiable libido; uncontrollable, gut-wrenching weeping; brutal, vicious cattiness. She could slide between any of
these states in a matter of seconds, which made getting a handle on her nigh on impossible.

“Hon’?”

It took her a second to focus on him. “The conquering hero returns!” She lifted her glass to him, voice dripping with sarcasm, words running together. “And I was gonna have your pipe and slippers ready. Or maybe you’d prefer a cigar.”

‘Fourth one.’ He winced.

She noticed.

“Oh, I’m sorry. That was indefensible. In-de-fensible. Well, there’s nothing you can say to me in a personally –“ she struggled momentarily over the syllables as she clumsily made her way toward him, her tongue thick in her mouth – “personally critical way that I don’t – that I would disagree with. Already said it myself, to myself. And I’m very sorry.”

When his own words were hurled back at him, he realized just how shabby, how inadequate, they sounded.

“Hillary, I meant what I said. I will make this up to you. You just – give me a chance. Give me time.”

“Time? To do what? To find some girl who won’t talk?”

“That’s not –“

“Not fair? How is that not a fair fucking assumption? Six weeks. I give it six weeks. Maybe longer if those bastards impeach you. Then we’ll be right back to ‘Honey, I’m so sorry, but –‘ I should be used to it by now. You could set your watch by it, like you’re on some kind of sick fucking schedule. ‘Oh, it’s Tuesday. Better find some new little piece of ass. Make sure everybody knows but stupid, stupid Hillary, who should know better but still buys into my bullshit.’ I don’t know why I still care. Why the fuck do I expect different results when it’s the same set-up every single time? Just one thing, Bill, if it’s not too much to ask. Next time, would you mind not making my humiliation into the goddamn Rainbow Tour? I’ve had enough people feeling sorry for me the past few days to last me the rest of my life. Which is a good thing, I guess, since we’re going back to the country where everyone fucking hates me.”

Finally, she came up for air, pausing momentarily before diving into another flood of invective.

“Slick Willie. Slick fucking Willie. They blame you now, but eventually it’ll come right back to me. It always does. His bitch wife. Not fucking likable. What do you want from me? What do they want from me? Why does it always, always have to be like this? Why do you always do this to me? What’s so fucking wrong with me?”

Were the tears coming? He reached out a hand. It was slapped away with a “Don’t you fucking touch me”. ‘Let her talk. You deserve this. You deserve worse.’

“And you’re sorry? Like hell you are. You’ll fucking say anything, won’t you? Say anything, promise everything, do nothing. And I never fucking learn.”

She stopped abruptly. Bill looked up, hoping to God this part of the ordeal was over, that the crying would start. He could deal with the crying. It gave him time to mull things over. Processing the guilt while drying her tears had become an integral part of this sickening merry-go-round.
Hillary had blanched, hand rushing to her mouth before she fled unsteadily to the bathroom. He followed silently, held her hair back as she choked out apologies in between retches. Wet a washcloth for her face while she shook, ashamed, on the tiles. Brought her glasses of water as she composed herself and prepared to take the final hurdle before they were home. Home, but not free.

- 

She was still pale. Her hand trembled in his. But she made small talk as they walked, airy discussion suitable for the prying eyes of any lip-readers in the press. Bill marveled at the way she could always manage to pull herself together, hastily glue the broken shards into something that so closely resembled a pristine, unfractured whole that it was impossible to discern from a distance.

They turned at the top of the stairs, performing the automatic routine. Smile. Wave. Then in. Out of sight.

He held her all the way home. Her sleep, when it came, was fitful.

This time, it would be different.

‘I promise.’

- 

Hillary felt miserable. Hopefully, she only looked jet-lagged, but, she thought grimly, she supposed she’d find out tomorrow morning when she mustered the courage to examine the newspaper coverage. As they made their way across the South Lawn, the door that would mercifully shut the rest of the world out didn’t seem to be getting any closer. Like she was on a treadmill.

The cameras were zooming in. She could practically feel them. Her hand in his. Us against the world. Back into the arena.

He needed her if he was to have any hope of salvaging his presidency. Just as she’d done so many times before, she needed to swallow her pride – what remained of it. Bill couldn’t make it without her.

Was she ready? Did he deserve it? Could she trust him?

Hillary didn’t know. The questions battered at her throbbing head with no answers forthcoming.

‘I love him. Let’s start from there.’

Buddy came careening out of the White House, bounding up to Bill with unbridled enthusiasm. He released her hand, idled a moment to play with the dog.

She kept walking. On her own – just to prove she could. Prove it to him, to the bank of photographers. To herself.

Chapter End Notes

Based on little more than Hillary’s wan appearance on their return. And an unquenchable yen for angst. Thanks so much for reading, and I hope you enjoy!
September 12, 1998

She stared hard at the sheaf of papers before her. Her aides had looked aghast when she’d said she wanted a copy. To read it for herself. Mortified, staring at the carpet, they had acquiesced, not wanting to exacerbate the already profoundly unhappy situation with argument.

They had read it. She knew they had – everyone had rushed home yesterday to pore over every salacious detail on their computer screens, those without benefit of internet access waiting to hear through the grapevine. It wasn’t entirely prurient fascination; no, she was sure that some of them were merely putting their ear to the ground, listening for the rumble of impeachment and hoping, as she was, that all their hard work wouldn’t be undone by a few ignominious instances of fellatio.

When the young woman who’d clearly drawn the short straw finally came in to her office, bearing the dreaded document, her dark eyes were anguished. “Mrs. Clinton – Hillary – don’t do this to yourself. Please.”

“Thank you, Huma.” Crisp finality. The die was cast and the aide retreated, tears in her eyes.

‘Switch off emotion. Read it as a lawyer. You want the facts. All the facts. No matter how much it hurts. You have to know. You can’t be the only person in the country who doesn’t know. What he said. What he did.’

He had told her most of it. Probably. The nitty-gritty. What he remembered of it, anyway.

‘He didn’t remember. See? It meant nothing. She meant nothing. He loves you. Not her.’

As she’d balled up tissues in her fists, knuckles white, he’d given her the sordid blow-by-blow – an all-too-appropriate term. Did it hurt? Of course. There were few agonies in her catalogue of experience that could even begin to compare. But it was nothing she hadn’t heard before. Admittedly, she’d hoped to God she’d never have to hear it again, but the novelty of betrayal had worn off long ago. He’d made her used to it.

Not quite used to it enough.

Beyond the personal level, Hillary needed to know how much public damage control would be required of her. How badly was this going to impact the upcoming midterm elections? What were the odds of an impeachment going forward? If yes, was the Senate likely to actually remove Bill from office?

She had to couch it in those terms in order to detach, to allow her brain to engage. To do what she needed to do.

‘No surprises. Please, no surprises.’

- 

Any other time, in any other circumstances, Hillary would have found hysterically funny the terrified faces of staffers as they practically dove out of her way as she barreled toward the Oval
Office. Hardened members of the secret service regarded the First Lady moving at speed, like they would a potential assassin rushing toward their charge with a bomb – only they made no defensive action whatsoever, instead clearing her path, opening doors, refusing point-blank to be the immovable object to counter her unstoppable force. Clearly, in this particular situation, the President would be getting what he deserved as far as they were concerned.

Bill looked petrified when she burst in, unannounced, but then seemed to brace for an onslaught of vitriol. It was not forthcoming.

She slammed the dossier on the Resolute desk, turned on her heel and stalked back out.

Once the shock of his wife’s abrupt appearance and equally sudden departure had somewhat subsided, he stared at the thick, bound volume she’d left in her wake. Surely she didn’t want him to read it. He knew its contents – the whole sleazy narrative and, more likely than not, the conclusions Mr. Starr had drawn about his fitness to continue holding office. Her face when she had stormed in, cheeks still tracked with tears, told him that she’d at least perused it.

A sigh, seeming to emanate from the depths of his soul (tainted wreck though it was), escaped him.

It was all going so… not well, really, but better. Baby steps. He wasn’t off the couch, but he certainly didn’t expect to be; their conversations only skimmed the surface, with the tacit acknowledgement that he was far from forgiven and his transgressions certainly not forgotten. She had given him an unexpectedly rousing introduction at the congregation of the Democratic Business Council, rallying the troops for what now looked like an excruciatingly ugly election – more a referendum on his personal peccadilloes than anything to do with policy. The kind of slog she loathed. Too many scars, most of them nowhere near healed.

Looking angelic in a powder blue suit, eliciting cheers and whistles from the unexpectedly rambunctious assembly, Hillary had launched into a robust defense of the progress they had made, generously crediting accomplishments that were largely hers to his leadership or some ambiguous, all-encompassing Democratic amalgam, allowing everyone but, typically, herself to relish sweet, smug satisfaction.

He saw her passion, the deep-seated convictions that were driving her, in her posture, but there had been an involuntary internal flinch somewhere deep in his guts when the scope of her remarks narrowed, extolling his personal virtues.

“None of what has been done in the last five and a half years to put our country on the right track, heading in the right direction for the future, could have been done without the leadership of one particular person.”

‘Hill, don’t…’

She was about to start elevating him to a status approaching sainthood whenever duty called on her to fire these opening salvos across the GOP prow. And he knew precisely why. If the Republicans were hell-bent on destroying him – on destroying them – he had to be set up as a martyr. A man destroyed not by weakness of the flesh but by the opposition’s determination to derail his progressive political agenda by whatever underhanded means necessary. Change the conversation from personality to policy. Pivot.

She had preached to the choir, lauding him to the mountaintops, and he felt the atmosphere in the room building.
“I know that all of you are proud of what has been achieved in this administration, and I’m very proud of the person I’m privileged to introduce. I’m proud of his leadership; I’m proud of his commitment; I’m proud of what he gives our country and all of us every day by his commitment. And I’m proud to introduce my husband and our president, Bill Clinton.”

There had been an almighty roar from what was supposedly a gathering of staid businesspeople. Indescribably grateful, he had pulled her to him as they crossed paths, kissing her temple. The embrace was allowed – just – but she had pointedly refused to relax into it. It had stung, but he understood, as he had willed her to understand when he had finally found his voice again.

“It’s rare for me to feel that I am at a loss for words.” Obliging laughter. A tense smile he could practically feel from behind him. “I can only hope you know what I’m feeling – for you… for my wife… and for my country. I think you do. And I thank you, more than you can possibly know.”

It wasn’t enough. He knew it – had known it then. Had known it when he’d offered still more public words she wouldn’t let him close enough to utter in private the next morning.

“I don’t think there is a fancy way to say that I have sinned. It is important to me that everybody who has been hurt know that the sorrow I feel is genuine.”

He had rattled off a list of names, identifiers – dared to utter the fateful words “Monica Lewinsky” again, even – but pulsing through it all was a plaintive ‘Hillary Hillary Hillary’. The only one who really mattered. Who had ever really mattered.

‘I love you. I’m sorry. I love you. I’m sorry.’ His constant mantra.

“I have asked all for their forgiveness. But I believe that to be forgiven more than sorrow is required. At least two more things. First, genuine repentance, a determination to change and to repair breaches of my own making. I have repented. Second, what my Bible calls a broken spirit. An understanding that I must have God’s help to be the person that I want to be. A willingness to give the very forgiveness I seek. A renunciation of the pride and the anger, which cloud judgment, lead people to excuse and compare and to blame and complain.”

Whatever the press said, the tears were real. The sentiment was true. He only hoped that she had heard him.

For the rest of that day, at least, it seemed she had. She was more than cordial, even veering into the territory of warmth. Then the deluge had come and she slipped away again, into the roiling torrent of pain and misery that threatened to consume her. And, he thought (with typical selfishness), to take her away from him.

Head in hand, he flipped the report open to an arbitrary page.

Where he had anticipated crisp, immaculate white sheets, lines of black type coldly delineating his shortcomings, he found passages highlighted. Underlined. Annotations scribbled in margins and on neatly attached Post-Its.

She had picked apart every one of Ken Starr’s grounds for impeachment, assessing the supporting evidence with what he had always bragged – never with better reason than now – was the finest mind he had ever seen. Some of her comments were not encouraging: too often, she had merely written “TROUBLE” next to a paragraph. Occasionally, however, she offered rebuttals and counterarguments. “WEAK CASE” jumped out at him, preceding many of the lengthier sections of marginalia.
Bill Clinton had never felt so profoundly loved in his life.

Carelessly letting the ponderous tome fall open to an earlier page, it registered that similar notes, albeit fewer and farther between, dotted Starr’s narrative. The litany of his infidelities.

He felt sick when he saw the tear-smudged ink, the shaky stroke of the pen beneath one passage.

“According to Ms. Lewinsky’s friend Neysa Erbland, President Clinton once confided in Ms. Lewinsky that he was uncertain whether he would remain married after he left the White House. He said in essence, ‘[W]ho knows what will happen four years from now when I am out of office?’”

One word, stark and piercing, marred the page, a plaintive cry that rang in his ears: “Why?”

The unwritten questions excoriated him.

Dates had been underscored without additional comment. He knew they were ones when she had been at home. Often mere rooms away. A flight of stairs distant at most. When he had duplicitously, without shame, gone from his mistress – either physically present or on the phone – to the marital bed. Sometimes Hillary had employed the pen so forcefully it tore the paper. Occasions when errant husband and unknowing wife had made love.

No mark but those of tears touched the catalogue of gifts he’d given Monica. An indignant “?!?!” next to the intern’s recollection that, after their second interlude, he’d joked that receiving oral sex was a rarity for him.

On and on he read, his wife’s painstaking notes more searing than anything she could have screamed at him in rage. If she had the strength to do this, then he owed it to her to take in every scrap of her handiwork.

The last page. A final message.

“I’m sure the House will vote to impeach. The question is whether the Senate will remove from office. We have to focus on shoring up public opinion and notching up success in midterms to make a decision against us untenable.”

Indecipherable words had been scribbled out here, but he was too focused on those plural pronouns to even try to make out the thoughts she had censored. Eyes now overflowing fell on the last lines.

“I will do whatever it takes. I love you. – H”

Sobs wracked his body. He had taken the best woman – the best person – he had ever known, had bent, twisted, and broken her beyond what anyone, let alone someone of her caliber, should tolerate – had killed some dreams, indeterminately deferred others – and this, so typically, was her response.

Love.

Recovering his composure sufficiently to make the journey upstairs, he observed a frightened and somewhat dumbfounded member of the kitchen staff walk into the bedroom with a tray of mocha cake and two bottles of wine and exit with handfuls of what appeared to be shredded neckties.

“Mrs. Clinton said these were for the incinerator?” the young man queried hesitantly.

The president nodded, watching him go before pulling a blanket and his pajamas from their hiding
place beneath a sofa cushion. Patsy Cline began to boom from the bedroom yet again. The new nightly routine.

Bill doubted that Hillary would ever be able to banish his gross unfaithfulness from her mind entirely. It would be skirting around the fringes for the rest of their lives, together or apart, nagging at her from within some kind of psychological Pandora’s box in good times and bad. If she was charitable enough to stay with him, he should finally learn to be grateful, not frustrated, by the emotional walls she put up, that her psyche was a maze she alone could navigate. That was, after all, how her love for him had apparently managed to survive, in spite of his best efforts to eradicate it.

*I’m crazy for tryin’
And I’m crazy for cryin’
And I’m crazy for lovin’ you*

Chapter End Notes

*Sorry for the longer delays between chapters - I'm still trying to figure out where this is going, because I'm a woefully disorganized writer who is terrible at plot. Thanks so much to everyone for reading and commenting!*
October 10, 1998

Hillary had never been more grateful for a solo overseas visit. Eastern Europe, not generally thought of as the most tempting destination even after the implosion of the Soviet empire, beckoned: an international women’s conference, a visit to a shelter for homeless children and the prospect of absinthe in Prague with Vaclav Havel (a notion she found either alarming or thrilling, depending on her mood). And no Bill. No discussion of him, even. Just her and her passions – and that absinthe. As promised, in the past month she had thrown herself wholeheartedly into campaigning, fundraising, visiting schools, coordinating policy initiatives on cancer. Bailing her lying, cheating son-of-a-bitch husband out of his latest mess, as was her wont. Essentially, she’d do anything she could set her mind to that would muffle even slightly the echo of “Who knows what will happen four years from now?”, still reverberating brutally around her brain. Every time she closed her eyes, she could picture him. Giving that girl his best come-hither smile, eyes sparkling devilishly, hands diving beneath too few layers of too-tight fabric for breasts pointedly bigger than hers. Casting furtive glances at the door he knew perfectly well she could walk through at any moment.

“Who’s watching Bill?”, the crueler signs had read as she’d trekked around the country, even before she’d known for sure about The Intern. When all she’d had were vague suspicions and childish doubts that failed to mesh with the adoring gazes, the lingering touches and the slow dances in the surf. But wasn’t that always the way? That question, given emphasis by the jibes of outsiders, continually pricked at the back of her consciousness, an itch she’d never be able to scratch to her satisfaction. At least now she knew it didn’t make a goddamn bit of difference whether she was home or not. Whether she was putting out or not. It didn’t matter what she did. Never enough. Never good enough.

On top of all this – she never made things easy for herself, did she? – there was guilt of her own to bear.

Before she’d slammed that fucking report on his desk, she’d scrabbled through her closet. Found it. The first edition of The Wind Among the Reeds she had trawled innumerable auction catalogues for before spending a truly obscene amount of money to secure – his anniversary present. When she looked at the cover, embossed with intricate designs in gold thread, all she could see was a cheap annotated copy of Leaves of Grass. And she’d trawled her brain. Which of her aides’ birthdays was nearest? Who could she find some vague pretext to shunt this book, once treasured, now
unbearably noxious, to?

Her internal Rolodex stopped on a name: Sean. September 22nd. Close enough. His family was Irish. If he didn’t like Yeats, he’d know someone who did. Judging by the way his jaw dropped when she thrust the venerable tome in his face, there was no further need for re-gifting.

Some slaps to the face were too much even for her to stand.

Almost from the beginning, Hillary had known that her claim to Bill’s body had virtually no hope of being an exclusive one. There were too many women prettier, more malleable, more agreeable. Easier on every conceivable level. It had taken her longer, but she’d even relinquished the fantasy of being sole proprietor of her husband’s heart. More painful, harder than the first blush of disillusion, but she’d lived. Now the notion that not even their intellectual connection was off-limits to interlopers, one that had never previously entered her foolish, arrogant conception of their marriage, reared its ugly head. Had he been cultivating that insidious Other Woman, molding her into a companion who was smart enough but not too smart?

“What knows what will happen four years from now?”

‘Fuck. Don’t cry now. You still have to keep it together through dinner.’

Her righteousness had lasted all of two hours before remorse – inexplicable given the circumstances – began to gnaw at her guts. Even after everything he’d done, she couldn’t turn up empty-handed on their anniversary. So her journey to the Little Rock school bearing Bill’s name had featured several last minute detours, accruing favorite foods from beloved establishments. Bringing her man ribs and steak by plane. ‘Happy now, Virginia? Is this the kind of wife you wanted for your precious boy?’ Hillary hated that bitterness, but it took far too much energy to fight it. Sometimes she just had to wallow.

She reclined in her seat, bracing herself for the arduous evening to come.

Twenty-three years.

“What knows what will happen four years from now?”

- 

Bill watched her absently shift a piece of lettuce around her plate. She hadn’t touched anything except the Chardonnay.

He’d gratefully wolfed down her gifts from the homeland, making gentle attempts at flirtation, paying sincere compliments and trying to telepathically communicate the unalterable truths she seemed to have forgotten. That he’d made her forget through maltreatment and neglect. The beautiful bird he’d caged and released only on a lead to serve his own selfish purposes.

“Darlin’, you’ve got to eat something. It’s a long trip tomorrow.”

‘Keep your tone light. Banish the worry from your voice. It won’t help if she thinks she’s at fault.’

Hillary’s eyes leapt up to his for the first time over the course of this interminable meal. Inscrutable, but she brought the speared leaf up to her lips, chewing with a vague aura of defiance before setting her fork down firmly and downing the rest of her latest glass of wine. That seemed to be the one inch she’d give tonight, but he’d take it.

“Well, you’ve given me your present – now it’s my turn,” he said, rising swiftly before she could
give voice to any objections. The jewelry case out of his pocket and open, he swept behind her. All she saw was a flash of silver as he clasped the article quickly around her neck.

Curious in spite of herself, she made for the nearest mirror to examine what she knew was a naked endeavor at bribery. She gasped. It was a damn good one. She could barely make out the necklace’s base metal under a glittering frost of diamonds.

“Jesus, Bill…”

“Twenty-three is silver-plate. I looked it up. But I didn’t think that was nearly good enough for you by itself.”

Still somewhat bedazzled by the scintillating new adornment for her turtlenecked collarbone and more than a little fuzzy from alcohol consumed, she turned back to her husband.

“I’m not gonna fuck you,” she blurted before her brain could catch up with her mouth.

Her face and attitude were so incongruously grave; Bill felt a laugh bubble up within him. It escaped in a riotous burst completely beyond his control, and it kept coming, doubling him over. In a matter of seconds, Hillary too had collapsed. She threw herself down on the sofa, head thrown back. He struggled over next to her, still howling. Both were incapacitated for minutes that felt like eons before, gasping for breath, sides aching, the hysteria subsided.

Then they stared. Faces closer than they’d been in weeks. Blue eyes on blue, trying to reforge that intrinsic connection. Hillary drew hesitantly closer before abruptly pulling back.

Her mind was awake again.

‘Too soon. You swore you wouldn’t let him do this.’

She cleared her throat, blinked furiously, felt the heat of a blush on her cheeks before she could even try to will it away. And he saw it all. Saw her weakness. Saw her lust. Saw that stupid, stubborn love rear its head again.

Now it was his turn to scramble for words to fill the silence and bridge the gap. He couldn’t let her withdraw again. If she retreated fully into herself, he wouldn’t have a chance to say what he’d intended to. His second gift. (He hoped.)

“Hillary –” he hesitated, but then the rest of the sentence came tumbling out in a jumbled mess. “I’ve been seeing someone.”

He heard the sharp intake of breath, saw the flinch like he’d just slapped her. Now, after seeing that reaction far too many times, he finally recognized it, placed it as something uncomfortably reminiscent of his mother’s reaction when he’d gingerly reached for her face with a swab soaked in iodine.

“Oh Christ, no, baby. That’s not what I meant. Oh shit. Shit, I’m sorry.”

Recovered quickly from her idiotic reflex, she shook her head gently. “I knew.” Besides, he’d never broken news of an affair to her like that before. Only after it was literally impossible to deny or deflect and never a moment earlier. “A… therapist?”

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“Yeah. I’ve been – going over a lot of things. Things I’ve only ever told you before. And I’ve been taking a real hard look at myself for the first time.” He bit his lip. “I don’t like what I see, Hill. Guess I never really have, but… I dunno, it’s like I’m really facing up to it for the first time.”
His eyes met hers again, found them focused. Listening. Tender.


Bill looked up and found his smile returned. “Go ahead.”

“He thinks – the – the doctor, that is – he thinks that it would be a good thing if you came along. Sometime. After you’re back from Europe. If you talked too. About how you really feel and what I can do for you. To help you.”

He could see she was thinking. He knew that the prospect of opening up to a complete stranger, allowing unbridled access to her vulnerable core was anathema to her. This was almost more to ask than her forgiveness. His hand sought hers and she held on tightly.

“Okay. I’ll try.” Her voice was small and quiet, but not, to his immense relief, choked with tears. Eye contact again. “I love you.”

“Oh God, I love you too. More than you’ll ever know. You’re my angel.”

In the blink of an eye, her lips were on his, her fingers running through his hair, pulling him deeper before releasing him just as swiftly. She looked more surprised than he did.

Hillary struggled with herself a moment before breathing a hasty “good night” and rushing to the door. She’d already agreed to therapy. Christ knows what she’d be saying yes to if she tarried another moment.

Chapter End Notes

Still stumbling around trying to find a plot. Thank you all for reading and commenting (and hopefully enjoying)!

And yes, Hillary did have absinthe with Vaclav Havel in Prague. This is the real life.
October 14, 1998

She was uncomfortable; he could tell. Her posture, like the last time they’d done a joint interview about his philandering, was rigid. Jaw clenched. Legs crossed. Arms folded in a preemptive defensiveness. Part of Bill had hoped this would be different – after all, their audience was not the American public or the predatory media, but just one man. A trained professional who was not baying for blood or vying to be the one who finally cracked through Hillary Clinton’s seemingly impenetrable façade and elicited tears. No one wanted to hurt her. No one was going to exploit whatever knowledge they gained over the course of these sessions – with foolhardy optimism his mind used the plural – for any purpose other than to help her heal. To learn to love her better. Of course, Hillary didn’t feel that way. She had walls and she had them for reasons. And, over the years, he’d begun to realize that there were far too many he neither knew nor understood. That had to change. He had to change it.

He felt a compulsion to reach across the disconcerting distance between them and rub that spot near the small of her back that made her limbs go to jelly. It didn’t switch off her constantly whirring brain, but it usually came close. After some internal debate, he resisted the impulse. That would likely be crossing a boundary, making assumptions he was no longer entitled to make. Instead he stared, attempting to communicate telepathically with his wife: ‘Relax, Hill. Relax.’

Counting her blinks, noting their preternaturally regular pace, he saw all too clearly the fear she was trying so valiantly to control. For him. Hillary was doing this, as she did so many other painful things, for him. Another piece of guilt to weigh on his heart.

This wasn’t going to be easy, but then he didn’t deserve easy.

Dr. Franklin strode in, abandoning his jacket as he came. An avuncular figure, older than either of them, he beamed and thrust his hand toward Hillary. “Ah, Mrs. Clinton! I’m so glad you decided to join us today. It means so much to Bill.”

A smile came in response, albeit a tight and precarious-looking one. “Hillary, please, Dr. Franklin.”

“Good. And you can call me Tobias. Shall we get started?”

Two nods.

“Now Hillary, this is just a conversation. I’m only here to facilitate. Draw things out. But what really needs to happen here is for the two of you to communicate. Be open with each other. Whatever you’re feeling is okay. This is a safe place.”

Bill glanced over to the figure two cushions distant from him. She was still smiling, acknowledging the words of reassurance, but her guard had not lowered a fraction.

“Bill – how have you been doing since we last spoke?”

Reaching up to massage his temples, he sighed involuntarily. “Been better, been worse – but not much. Work has been… even more contentious than usual. I haven’t had the time to focus on
“Haven’t had the time or haven’t wanted to make the time?”

“A little of both,” Bill admitted sheepishly. “Well… mostly the latter, I guess.”

“Avoiding the difficult issues doesn’t make them go away.”

“I know… It’s just – when I try to understand why I’ve done what I’ve done, by definition I have to think about what I’ve done. Either that, or dredge up memories that I don’t particularly want to remember. Hating myself isn’t going to help, but – how can I not?” He felt Hillary’s eyes on him and was keenly aware that his every word and intonation was being carefully logged and analyzed. For one so eminently sensible, the logical contortions she performed to shoulder the blame for shortcomings that were his and his alone were often astonishing. Heat of shame rising in his cheeks, he gesticulated helplessly at his clearly startled wife. “I mean, Jesus, look at her!”

She recovered herself sufficiently to scoff, shifting her weight to one hip so that she leaned still further away from him.

“Did you want to say something, Hillary?” Tobias prodded gently. An emphatic shake of her head.

Bill emitted another sigh, now exasperated. He should have known Hillary would clam up, be rendered mute by the presence of an outsider. She was a listener, not a talker. He would inadvertently fuel insecurities, reopen old wounds and create new ones, and she’d quietly absorb it all until he finally pushed the wrong button. They could do that without the help of a therapist. They had done that.

“You see?” He couldn’t keep the note of irritation from his voice and rapidly ceased trying. “This is what I get – constantly. If she doesn’t like where things are going, she just shuts down. Shuts me out. Because God forbid anyone see a single fucking chink in the armor! I go upstairs, I’ve had a rough day, and there’s always something more to do. Maybe I don’t want to redraft a speech or hear about adoptions or how some damn initiative needs more funding. Maybe I just want –”

“A blowjob and someone to listen to you whine? Isn’t that what you have interns for?” Hillary snapped. At least she was talking.

“Oh, here we go again. How many more times can I tell you that I’m sorry? You never believe it anyway.”

“Maybe because I’ve heard it so fucking many times!”

Tobias interjected, attempting to defuse the rapidly rising tension. “She has a point, Bill. Apologies without the altered behavior to go with them hurt more than they help. But, Hillary, it sounds like Bill wants to know more about what you’re feeling. Can you talk to him about that?”

She closed her eyes, willing herself calm. Losing her temper was a mistake. Not advantageous to anyone. ‘Don’t let them get to you. Either of them. Put your game face back on.’

But she was on a knife’s edge, and she knew it. One word from him, one gesture, one touch, and she’d be reeling out of control again. No one else could do this to her. No one.

Deep breath, and she rifled through her brain, selecting a rehearsed, diplomatic, but fundamentally truthful response from an overfull catalogue.

“Hurt. I feel hurt, obviously. But I love him and I respect him and I respect what we’ve been
“Oh, for God’s sake, Hillary. This isn’t 60 Minutes. Talk to me. Really talk to me. I want to know.”

She sucked in her cheeks and Bill could see a muscle on her jaw ticking, the frequency of her blinks accelerating rapidly and nails clutching at her sweater. This was unanticipated. More fiery resistance, yes, but not a struggle against tears – not this early.

“I am hurt. I’m hurt and I’m scared and I’m – look, what does it matter how I feel? We’ve done this song and dance before.” The heavy implication that they were likely to do it again was lost on no one. “In the short term, you’ll feel bad. In the long term, it doesn’t mean anything because sooner or later…” Hillary stopped herself, squeezing her eyes shut again. The words were pulsating, resounding through her brain again. ‘Who knows what will happen in four years?’ The fight to maintain some modicum of dignity was one she was rapidly losing. Why did she agree to this? It was torture, pure and simple. She didn’t want to be probed and evaluated, her psyche whittled down to some manageable cliché so that Bill would feel – vindicated, perhaps – that his foibles were not alone at the root of his misbehavior. But she was already acutely aware of her manifold faults; some interloper pointing them out was superfluous. Cruel and unnecessary.

Bill’s voice, uncharacteristically meek, slipped through her defenses. “Then why do you stay?”

Tears even her best efforts could no longer dam streamed silently down her face. “You know why.” Shakily, she turned to face him, struggling to meet his gaze. “Why do you?”

Her husband was clearly lost for words.

“You’re the one who threatens to leave, not me. You’re the one who wanted a divorce. Who said it. Not just this time, but… before. And you said it to her. You said after we – after you –“

“Baby, I didn’t –“

“Then why the fuck did you say it?” Her voice was taking on a shrill note that she loathed, but it was a choice between regulating her pitch and desperately blotting at her cheeks with the tissue helpfully proffered by Tobias.

“I don’t know!”

“Bill,” Tobias mercifully interceded, “why don’t you tell her what you told me in our last session? I think Hillary needs to hear it.”

Stomach churning in anticipation of some typically pat excuse – it was stress relief; she pushed him too hard; she was difficult; she was getting old; some demoralizing combination of the above – she stared fixedly at an irritatingly asymmetric shelf-top arrangement of antique china.

Another heavy sigh bought him time to collect his thoughts and formulate them into speech he hoped she would understand.

“Hillary… I guess I’ve always felt like – you’re gonna jump in and say this is bullshit, but I swear to you, it’s not – like you’re too good for me. And there’s some part of you that knows it; that’s why you’re always trying to improve me. Make me work harder. I want to be who you think I’m capable of, most of the time, anyway. But sometimes – that’s a lot of pressure, and instead of telling you the truth, like a grown-up, I just… hope that if I disappoint you badly enough, you’ll realize that you can do better. Like, if I hurt you, you’ll go find someone who won’t.”

He swallowed, chewed his lip. That was the comparatively easy part to confess; it made his
infidelity seem like some perverse altruism.

“Or – and this is what I really hoped for – you’d lower your expectations to the point where I could meet them without trying terribly hard. If the only way I could keep you was to break you, then I was willing to do that.”

Deadly silence ensued. Bill longed for her to scream, cry, run out of the room – do something. Anything. Slap him. He more than deserved it. Instead, there was an oppressive, choking haze of stillness as his wife considered his words with her usual due diligence.

“I know it’s stupid and pathetic and I’m sure there’s more to it than that. But I want to find out and stop this. I’m sick of hurting you – not as sick as you are of being hurt, I’m sure. God, you should’ve dropped me the second I started fooling around. Then the right one of us would be winning elections, instead of me constantly dragging you down.”

Still nothing. Agonizing minutes of nothing. Finally, Hillary spoke, addressing herself to Tobias rather than her husband. “Is it – would it be okay if I just… listened this time? This is a lot for me to take in – not just this – what Bill said – specifically, but the whole, um, experience. And then I can pull my weight better next session.”

(Of course,) the doctor murmured, flashing her a reassuring smile. “It’s only natural to be overwhelmed. You’re in the thick of an overwhelming situation. Even if it’s just hearing what Bill has to say, your being here is so valuable.” Shifting his focus back to the other end of the sofa, he asked gently, “Do you want to pick up where we left off?”

Bill nodded. As he launched once more into painful childhood memories – the drinking, the shouting, the crying, the hitting, still as vivid and raw as they’d been forty-odd years ago, all rushing back to the forefront of his mind in a torrent of ugliness – he felt a curious sense of relief. Next time. She had heard him; even if she hadn’t comprehended his twisted rationale, she had heard and was trying to understand. Unfathomably, she was willing to do this again, perhaps even to allow him the privilege of exploring hitherto uncharted regions of her psyche. To truly understand her - and to love her the way she deserved to be loved.

Suddenly her small hand was resting on top of his, the connection an umbilical cord to channel boundless strength and love. He clung to the small part of her he was privileged to touch, the act all the more significant because she had initiated it. Yearning for more, to hold her tightly and never let go, Bill contented himself with lacing his long fingers through hers, feeling her grip constrict slightly with each recollected trauma. Silent declarations of her devotion.

They weren’t all right yet – nowhere near it – but for the first time in months he felt genuine confidence, not merely wishful delusion, that they would be. Not now, maybe not even particularly soon, but someday.

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully this isn't a total disaster. I've been fiddling with it for what feels like ages, but... I'm never satisfied with anything, hahaha. Anyway, thank you all so much for reading and commenting!
October 26, 1998

Frozen in the doorway, Bill stared at his wife. She hadn’t heard the door open, hadn’t noticed him come in. More likely than not, it hadn’t even registered that he’d be back from San Francisco by this time. She was lost in a sea of papers, scribbling alterations to what he presumed was her stump speech for Chuck Schumer, to be delivered to a roomful of senior citizens tomorrow. He’d lay money there was a self-deprecating crack about her age in there somewhere.

Fifty-one.

Hard to believe. Sitting cross-legged on the bed in leggings, thick white socks and a baggy Stanford sweatshirt, glasses periodically sliding down the bridge of that straight little nose he loved so much, she looked for all the world like she had on her twenty-fourth birthday. The first he’d shared with her. Her hair was shorter, blonder now; the papers were no longer notes from class or endless drafts of essays (one rough draft had never been enough for Hillary Rodham). So much had changed, but here she was: still chewing absently on the tip of her pen, trying to find the perfect words.

Without fully intending to, he cleared his throat, as he’d done so many times before to extricate her from whatever herculean labors she’d set herself. Draw her attention back to him, where he always longed for it to be.

Hillary nearly jumped a mile at the unexpected interruption.

“Christ almighty! How long have you been standing there?”

His silence and the bashful aversion of his gaze told her it had been quite some time. She couldn’t imagine what he’d been so enthralled with that he couldn’t speak up. It was just his old lady – a joshing appellation that was getting more uncomfortably apt by the year.

“How’d the fundraiser go?”

A noncommittal, almost invisible movement of the shoulders. “Alright, I guess.”

Stillness again. Not the easy, peaceful kind that had become a well-established part of their marital routine, but an awkwardness that stretched, taut almost to breaking, over the gaps in a stilted conversation in which both parties tried to bookmark anything particularly meaningful to be brought up during their next session of counseling.

The seconds dragged. Hillary scanned her brain for something to say that wasn’t either a subtle guilt-trip or a not-so-subtle plea for affection. She jolted again when Bill appeared to suddenly remember why he’d crossed the unspoken no man’s land and entered their bedroom and darted back out, returning with a tray.

“Cake,” he said, smiling shyly.

They both hesitated before she began shifting binders and notepads, clearing a space large enough to accommodate Bill while keeping her face carefully neutral, her pace deliberate, in an arduous
effort to avoid giving the wrong impression. She’d be welcoming enough to avoid hurting him, but, as much as she wanted everything to revert instantaneously to how it was before, her wounds had only just begun to heal. Sex still bore the taint of betrayal, and she couldn’t forget it. Not yet.

Depositing the large serving of mocha cake on the newly open stretch of comforter, Bill left the room again, Hillary looking after him, confused.

Peering around the doorframe, as if reading her conflicted thoughts, he grinned. So damn irresistible. She felt herself starting to smile before she even knew what the joke was. “And, to prove my intentions are honorable…” He reentered, two glasses of milk proffered to her.

Bill watched her head fly back, heard the glorious peals of her raucous laughter and basked once again in her light. After setting the innocuous beverages on the bedside table, he situated himself on the mattress, keeping one foot firmly on the floor like they were a couple in a 1950s sitcom and the discerning eyes of the censor were peeled for the slightest hint of impropriety.

One eyebrow quirked quizzically, a smile still playing on her lips, she inquired, “Forks? Plates? Napkins? Anything?”

He shrugged, grabbing a hunk of cake unceremoniously and thrusting it toward her with a “Happy birthday, babe.” Giggling, she accepted and took a large, gleefully unladylike bite. All pretense of adulthood dropped, husband and wife greedily devoured the chocolaty dessert.

“Shit, Bill,” she interjected, her words muffled by a full mouth. “I was trying to be good until after the state dinner Wednesday.”

“So?”

“Have you seen the First Lady of Colombia?”

“Oh come on, Hill. Live a little. You’ll look fantastic; you always do.” The eye-roll he received in response didn’t quite manage to mask her pleasure at that remark.

They munched in contented quiet for a few more minutes, relishing the respite from the tension that so often threatened to overwhelm them both completely. This was, more or less, what “normal” felt like. Admittedly, their customary handsiness hadn’t yet returned, Bill, more often than not the instigator of such physical displays of affection, attempting to atone for a multitude of sins by allowing Hillary space. Not wanting to remind her, to cause any more pain than he had already. But he wanted to touch. He longed to reach up under that sweatshirt, its looseness at once irritating and inviting, and feel the figure it was hiding. That impossibly waspish waist that his hands could nearly span in its entirety, moving up her rib cage to still-pert breasts whose size and appeal she chronically underestimated. His eyes clung to the curve he could see, tracing up and down the shapely line of hips and thighs clearly visible thanks to those deliciously close-fitting leggings. What he wouldn’t give to make contact with that supple flesh again. To feel that warmth, those legs her ever critical eye perpetually, infuriatingly, found fault with wrapped tightly around his torso. For his own pleasure, yes, but, more importantly at this stage, because that seemed to be the only context in which she’d take his protestations of her beauty even remotely seriously.

“Bill?”

Now it was his turn to start, momentarily panicking that his thoughts had translated into visible arousal.

“Can I ask you something?”
‘Oh thank God.’

“Of course.”

“Even if it’s… well, it’s a little dumb.”

“Hillary.”

“What you said – to Tobias. About not being good enough for me?”

He nodded.

“It’s not a class thing, is it?”

“… What?”

“I mean, it’s not like I’m some drapery heiress and you married into the Rodhams of Park Ridge. Going to Arkansas and seeing where you grew up, where you came from, was a major culture shock, but not for that reason. And if I acted like it was or like I looked down on you – or your family – because of that, I’m so, so sorry.”

Her eyes were achingly sincere, brow furrowed in genuine concern. Had she seriously been agonizing over this for the past fortnight?

For such an inarguably bright woman, Hillary could be willfully obtuse to an extent that boggled the mind.

“That’s – not what I meant. I’m not good enough for you. Whether or not I had indoor plumbing as a kid doesn’t even come into the equation.”

“Oh.”

He could tell she didn’t understand, however rapidly the cogs in her brain were whirring in an effort to compute what he’d just said. But how could he make her see? Bill had tried many times and in many ways to hammer home her virtues only to have his overtures dismissed as idle flattery. A means to an end. A tried and true method of wheedling his way between her legs. (Why, he couldn’t help wondering, would he even want that if she weren’t precisely as desirable as he claimed?) That those sentiments could be heartfelt, even coming from such an inveterate ladies’ man, seemed to be beyond her capacity to comprehend. Admittedly, he had not helped his case by gravitating toward stereotypes – undemanding good-time girls with little appeal beyond his immediate sexual gratification – in his extramarital indulgences, but she should know better.

Of all people, Hillary Rodham should know precisely what she was worth.

“I was just worried that you thought I was a snob, some uppity Yankee bitch looking down her nose at all the Clintons and their friends and their neighbors. I know your mother did. Pretty much everyone back in Little Rock. But – Bill, I really couldn’t bear it if you felt that way.”

“Darlin’, that never even crossed my mind. Honestly.”

“I’m glad.” She was all too aware that that purported emotion hadn’t reached her eyes and quickly amended her statement in the interest of frankness. “Relieved.”

He was looking at her so intently, seeming to absorb every aspect of her appearance, from the lines on her forehead to her too thick ankles. Looking deeper, maybe, into her very soul, that fractured,
messy thing she was still trying to sort back into its neat compartments. Despite the fact that she had barely any skin exposed, there was heat on her cheeks, pinpricks tickling every inch of her body, heart and stomach flipping; she found herself completely incapable of raising her eyes to meet his.

Bill moved forward abruptly, applying a gentle kiss to the tip of her nose. “Frosting,” he offered by way of explanation as he drew back, but the huskiness of his tone belied such a pedestrian, innocent rationale.

It took every ounce of self-control her considerable reserves contained not to shove the tray to the floor, eradicate that metallic, unbridgeable moat between them, and revert to their time-honored dance. There was absolutely nothing she wanted more and nothing, she knew, that would help less.

He shifted uneasily before standing, grabbing the crumb-covered plate and drained glasses and situating the tray unnaturally low on his abdomen, praying on the one hand that she wouldn’t notice and hoping on the other that she would – that well-deserved smugness would replace the stark, unmerited self-doubt that broke his heart.

“I, um –“ It was a struggle to get his voice to work properly; it cracked and croaked and it had to be perfectly obvious why. “I did get you something else, but it’s, uh, not quite ready yet.”

‘It looks ready to me.’ A snappy comeback emerged from the filthiest recesses of her mind, pushing through the haze of desire but not quite making it to her mouth. Instead, she merely nodded. “Thanks,” she murmured, a hint of a catch in her throat, unconsciously biting her lip and worsening her husband’s dilemma.

Bill made for the door as quickly as his burdens would allow, mustering what little willpower was left to him to turn around and not rush back to that all-too-tempting bed. “I love you,” he intoned, with the choked solemnity of a prayer. A prayer to a goddess he was singularly unworthy to serve. A vow that this time would not be broken. An oath of fealty. To his queen.

The door closed behind him and she exhaled like she’d just remembered how to breathe, collapsing backwards into pillows and dissatisfied dreams.

Chapter End Notes

This may be as close to fluff or smut as I am constitutionally capable of coming - we shall see, hahahaha. Hope you enjoy - and thank you all again so much for reading and leaving your far too kind comments!
November 5, 1998

The midterms were over. Mercifully, they would be no worse off when the new Congress was sworn in in January than they were right now. The composition of both the Senate and the House still favored the Republicans, but the election, which had been as much a referendum on the President’s personal conduct and whether it outweighed his execution of the office entrusted to him as anything else, had been nowhere near the rout the GOP leadership had been banking on. Gingrich’s days were numbered; it remained to be seen whether Bill’s were, too.

The lull in the Clintons’ itineraries made another visit from Tobias impossible to avoid any longer.

“I guess I’m just… not sure what else I can say that I haven’t said already.”

Hillary was trying. Really, she was. But therapy, simply put, didn’t seem to be her milieu. Opening up wasn’t her strong suit under ideal circumstances (her and Bill, alone and reasonably happy, very probably more than a little tight), but this still felt like an interview. One in which the probing inquisitor was far more personable and sensitive and notably less judgmental than any journalist she’d had thrust upon her to date, but an interview nonetheless.

Tobias smiled gently. “You don’t have to talk about what’s going on now specifically. Talking, period, is the important part.” After another minute of awkward silence, he prompted, “Bill talked about his childhood last time. What’s your earliest memory?”

Thank God. This was easy. This was an answer she knew, one she’d had at the ready ever since the media blitz promoting *It Takes a Village*.

“We moved to Park Ridge when I was four. Like any kid, my first course of action was to head out and explore the neighborhood. Just as naturally, I suppose, the local gang of children, who were already extremely well established, wasn’t particularly thrilled about an interloper from out of nowhere trying to horn in. Especially some dopey little girl. So I got teased.”

A masterpiece of understatement, just like every other time she trotted this chestnut out. Her pigtails had been yanked; her homemade dresses mocked; projectiles hurled at her from the branches of trees she was too small to climb; Indian burns administered without mercy. Weeks of torment that felt like an eternity, but every single day her mother shooed her back out into the war zone, seemingly oblivious to the full extent of her daughter’s misery. Maybe she had been: Hillary had never tattled, knowing she didn’t stand a chance in hell of being accepted if that ignominy became part of her reputation. So, when the humiliation became too much, she fled, taunts dogging her all the way, and sobbed in the sanctity of her room. No complaining, no attempts to enlist help. Just her, alone with her pain.

Some things never changed.

Over the years, yes, she had developed that thick skin that Eleanor Roosevelt advocated, but the effect was more a dilution of the vitriol she was continually subjected to than an impregnable shield. Individual bits of invective hurt less, but the cumulative impact remained unaltered.

“One day” – shit, there was a frog in her throat; why was she letting herself get so emotional? – “I
ran back home crying. And my mother said, ‘There’s no place for cowards in this house, Hillary Diane Rodham. You go right back out there and handle your problems.’”

Words engraved indelibly on her soul, that rang in her ears at every moment of crisis. Now, of course, Hillary was fully, painfully, aware that Dorothy was endeavoring to instill in her daughter the courage and resilience that a childhood characterized solely by neglect, abuse and betrayal had given her – the one blessing out of unspeakable misery. Now she understood, but then it had been a terrifying ultimatum, however gently it had been delivered.

“So… I dried my eyes, brushed the dirt off my dress and returned to the arena. They tried to push me around some more, but I refused to let them scare me off again. And once they figured out that I wasn’t going to be a pushover anymore, they left me alone. Eventually.”

Bill had heard this story before, of course, but always spun as the first test of Hillary Rodham’s considerable mettle, the revelatory instant she recognized her own strength and her remarkable capacity to strike terror into the heart of any bully, adult or child, male or female. Most of that was due to the light-hearted tone she generally adopted – the middle-class 1950s rose tint that colored most of her childhood remembrances. An uncomfortable thought struck him and made him shift on his cushion. He saw only her strength because he needed her strength so badly. Her fears, her insecurities, were useless to him except as targets for manipulation. Weaknesses that allowed him to sink from the doghouse back into her heart. He saw what he wanted to see: what she could give him, what he could exploit.

‘I am an absolute bastard.’

“I didn’t know Mom had been watching me from the window until a couple years ago. Seriously.” She laughed mirthlessly, trying vainly to regain control of her narrative. Make it sound like every other time she’d recounted it, a clear, concise, convenient origin for her indomitable nature. But they were staring, two pairs of eyes boring into her. Despite the internal alarms sounding, practically pleading her to lock down and retreat back into herself, for some unfathomable, unforgivable reason she kept talking. “For that huge chunk of my life, I was absolutely convinced that I’d been pushed out of the nest – at four years old – to see whether or not I could fend for myself. If I could, fine; if not, too bad. Survival of the fittest. And the idea that I couldn’t show my face if I failed… Intellectually, I knew that she didn’t mean that I’d be drummed out of the family if I didn’t stand up to those little assholes. Obviously. That would have been insane.” Her furious blinking, the arms wrapped tightly around herself, belied her professed certainty. “But I still remember that – I don’t even know how to describe it – that hole in the pit of my stomach. I still get it. Like… every time I fall even a little bit short, every time I even consider giving up, taking it easy – I’m teetering on the edge of that fucking abyss and it’s just waiting to swallow me up.”

“God, Hillary. You’ve never told me – any of this. Not how you really felt.”

Studiously avoiding his eyes, she struggled to keep some semblance of composure. “Well. I mean, it’s not a big deal. It wasn’t a big deal. I mean, Jesus, compared to what you and Mom went through? Please. This is just –”

Just what? Hillary had no idea. Some inherent psychological frailty blowing perfectly normal occurrences out of all proportion, most likely. She exhaled slowly, the breath coming out in a long shudder that gradually steadied.

“Anyway. It’s not like I was some maltreated little waif consumed by her own angst. My parents loved me; I knew they loved me. I had plenty of friends. Everyone experiences pressure to do well. It’s just part of growing up,” she said, more to herself than for the reassurance of anyone else present.
An oft-told Rodham family yarn, one whose chronological setting was so unmoored that he’d long suspected it had transpired more than once, floated to the forefront of Bill’s mind. Hillary brought home her report card, eagerly submitting it for parental approval. Absences negligible, academic performance exemplary in each and every class, any additional notes from her teachers laudatory. What else, Bill always thought, would anyone expect from a girl doubly blessed with a powerful intellect and a relentless work ethic? After scanning the transcript, her father looked up impassively and remarked, “They must be making the classes too easy at that school.” Hugh had always recounted the tale with booming peals of laughter, but Bill invariably noticed – an observation only heightened in retrospect – Hillary’s smile tense almost imperceptibly, a muscle in her jaw tic. And he had wondered, but he’d never asked.

Now he did.

“What about Hughie and Tony? Was there the same pressure on them?” As the words left his lips, they felt redundant. He already knew the answer.

“Are you kidding?” There was an edge, a bitterness to her voice that she was powerless to temper. “All they had to do was play football, keep their grades high enough not to get cut from the team and get into Penn State – and Tony couldn’t even manage that.”

He instantly recognized that he had touched a profoundly sore spot. Hillary’s hands were trembling even as they twisted in her lap and it was impossible to distinguish what proportion of the look in her eyes was blazing fury and how much was her proximity to tears.

“But at least those expectations were clearly understood. Explicit. You either ticked the box or you didn’t. They knew exactly what Mom and Dad wanted, but it didn’t bother anyone one fucking bit when they screwed up. I mean, there might be a sigh and some grumbling and head-shaking, but that’s it. And meanwhile, I’m working my ass off with school and Scouts and church and work and sports and extracurricular activities like you wouldn’t even believe and it’s just taken for granted.”

She found self-pity inherently loathsome and self-aggrandizement nearly as bad, but she was utterly powerless to stop the words and, even more so, the emotions she had bottled up for so long as they tumbled out.

“The straight As weren’t enough. The merit badges weren’t enough. The youth groups and the debate clubs and the tutoring – none of it came close, not even when you pile it all up. Nothing I have ever done has been enough.” Her voice, unsteady for the past several minutes, finally gave out; body wracked with sobs that seemed to have been building up for years, she folded in on herself, initially jerking away from Bill’s embrace before collapsing into it.

This wasn’t about pleasing her parents. Not really. At least, not entirely. He knew it, and so did she. Both of Hillary’s parents – certainly Dorothy and even Hugh, who had never gotten particularly good at showing it – were immeasurably proud of their girl and all that she had achieved. Always had been. They may have started the trend of harsh, unrelenting self-criticism that so dominated the internal life of Hillary Rodham Clinton; it may have been exacerbated over the years by rigorous, often contradictory, standards set by virtually everyone else she’d come into contact with, including, he acknowledged with a pang of shame, him. But, in the final analysis, the only person – the only one whose opinion mattered, at any rate – who didn’t think she was good enough was Hillary herself. It was so staggeringly obvious to him and so infuriatingly incomprehensible to her.

“I’m so tired, Bill,” a tiny voice, raw from weeping and muffled by his chest, managed to choke out before becoming overwhelmed by emotion once more.

“I know, baby. I know.” His fingers gently threaded through her hair before intuitively tracing a
path down her neck to where knots of tension invariably manifested. There were tears streaming freely down his own cheeks, but he kept his voice steady, hoping that his words as well as his soothing tone would make an impression. “You are so much more than just ‘good enough’. I knew it the moment I first laid eyes on you and I’ve only grown more certain every single moment since.” He felt his wife shaking her head and reached to tilt her face up, raising her eyes to meet his. “You are.” There was still resistance in her eyes, struggling to break contact and create plausible deniability. “You have the best mind, the sharpest wit I have ever encountered. You are so goddamn beautiful. You are brave beyond belief. You are kind and compassionate and caring. If Chelsea were here right now, she’d tell you that you are the best mother ever to walk this earth and I agree with her. You are a much better wife than I will ever deserve.”

He could have gone on. How he loved her – why he loved her. Enumerating the ways. He wanted to go on, and he fully intended to, but before he could begin his next sentence she closed the gap between their lips.

She kissed him properly – without a drop of alcohol in her system – for the first time in months. Deeply, but not desperately, the salt of their tears comingling.

It was agony to pull away, but she had to. What Bill had said was too valuable to drown out in a torrent of physical passion; she could not treat it like a debt to be repaid in sexual favors. That had too often been her approach and it would no longer suffice. She believed him, in spite of his past lies and transgressions, even if she couldn’t quite bring herself to find his description of her virtues accurate. But that was her task: to learn to see herself the way he did. The way Chelsea did. To find the truth in their words.

With a jolt, Hillary remembered that they were not alone, ripping her focus from her husband to look for Tobias. He had gone, apparently seeing that his work for the day was done and that the Clintons were best left to their own devices. As the rational part of her brain gradually ground back into action, she realized that the schedule of President and First Lady was about to encroach on them once again, taking precedence, as always, over the human beings inhabiting those roles.

“We have to go. Arts and Humanities dinner. I have to get ready. We have to get ready.”

Gregory Peck, bless him, had already been so obviously concerned, so sweetly solicitous of her well-being under the circumstances at the medal presentation earlier that afternoon. Never mind the assembled media, if she didn’t eradicate all visible indications of distress, there was a genuine concern that the veteran actor would give her husband a stern, Atticus Finch-style talking to.

They tenderly wiped each other’s tear-tracked faces with tissue, coming nowhere near undoing all the damage done, but enough that they were presentable for the short walk up to the Residence. Rising, she took his hand – a gesture that made his heart sing.

“I love you so much, baby.”

“I know.” Hillary did know. She was absolutely certain now. Whatever she might say, there had been moments of devastating, discomfiting doubt, but they were no firmly – she hoped permanently – in the past. Bill loved her. “I love you, too.”

She squeezed his hand tightly and opened the door.
Oh my god, this was a beast to write. I'm still not sure I'm 100% happy with it, but then again, I'm never 100% happy with anything, so... might as well go for it. Thank you all so much for reading and for your incredibly kind comments!
November 6, 1998

This confounded nervousness was ridiculous. Defied logic.

They had been married for twenty-three years, had known each other and been a couple in every sense of the word for over a quarter of a century – monumental lengths of time when placed in those terms. Over half her life had been dominated by Bill and the unholy mess he’d made of her heart, the heady mixture of love and pain to which she’d rapidly become hopelessly addicted.

He’d been President for nearly six of those years, more than long enough to establish an invitation to join him at Camp David as jargon for a dirty weekend, made palatable to the ever-present ears of the countless aides, Secret Service agents and Cabinet members that perpetually hovered nearby. Just such an offer had been made last night after the Arts and Humanities dinner and, momentarily enraptured, she had said yes. Breathed it, more like, and the look in his eyes, how transparently he wanted her, had only served to reaffirm her decision.

Still giddy this morning, like the horny teenager she’d never really been until she met him anticipating prom night, she had doubtless horrified Huma by sending her on a lingerie run. Not the first of her tenure (and most likely not the last), but it still had to be somewhat awkward, especially given the current tenuous state of the Clintons’ marital relations. The First Lady was hardly in a position to traipse off, unnoticed, to Victoria’s Secret herself, however: it was impossible under the best of circumstances, and had been made all the more so given the sordid tenor of the present news cycle.

Now, modeling the haul for her keenly critical eyes only, that rush was ebbing away, replaced with the tingle of a less pleasant variety of apprehension.

It wasn’t that she found what she saw in the mirror wholly repellant; Hillary liked to think of herself as a realist, recognizing her virtues alongside her flaws. Much as the harsh caricatures of political cartoons and the vicious nitpicking she was routinely subjected to stung, she knew which criticisms were grounded in reality and which were the purely spiteful denigrations of those who despised her unequivocally from head to toe. Her profile was a notable good point; her skin, aside from the expected wrinkles, was excellent; her eyes were a brilliant, sparkling blue. Sometimes her hair, in its many permutations, looked all right, too.

And that, more or less, was as far as it went.

It had been juvenile, she knew, and more than a little petty to want to remind Bill – just a bit – of The Intern. To highlight the error of his ways, yes, but more to invite the kind of compliments that could continue the arduous process of reassuring her and begin erasing the lingering specters of the veritable legions of Monica Lewinskys, past, present and future, from her mind. Now she was utterly convinced her scheme would backfire radically.

“Shit,” she muttered, looking over her shoulder to examine her reflection.

It was the worst kind of cliché, but her ill-advised request for a thong really did make her ass look big. Not in an appealing, voluptuous way, either. Just… big, leading down to thighs like fucking
tree trunks, calves and ankles not much better. It would be one thing, she supposed, if her upper body was constructed with curves to match, if there was some sense of balance and proportionality, but she was instead painfully bottom-heavy.

She hated that she cared, that she let it bother her. Her physical appearance was irrelevant – should be irrelevant. But she knew that it did matter, and not just to the shallow, chattering throng on the outside, but to her. To Bill.

‘Bill likes it. Bill thinks you’re beautiful,’ her inner voice offered, helpfully for a change.

That grain of comfort fell on willfully deaf ears; it wasn’t anywhere near enough to still the stirrings of uneasiness, the nagging insecurities now beginning to eat away at her anew.

‘I’m not ready.’

The realization was infuriating. It had absolutely nothing to do with a lack of sexual desire. On the contrary, she had found herself hovering on the verge of throwing herself at him shamelessly more often than she’d care to admit. Her conscious mind invariably stymied her, providing some stark, ill-timed reminder of the wreck he’d made of their lives that effectively killed, if not the mood, then at least her desire to share it with him. She was aware that he was experiencing similar frustrations, often catching him staring at her, chewing on that lower lip so irresistibly, his face clearly indicating precisely the kind of licentiousness he was envisaging. And good luck trying to find a Kleenex in any area of the Residence or the West Wing predominantly occupied by him.

Whatever satisfaction she garnered from these tokens of his lust was marred by the persistent notion that the only reason he hadn’t fallen into bed with some other bimbo was because he could no longer afford to run the risk of getting caught. Not for the sake of their marriage, as it was presumably abundantly clear by this point that she would never leave, no matter how egregiously her love and trust were abused. He’d be finished politically, the ignominy of being the only president in American history to be removed from office – and all because he couldn’t keep it in his pants – a disgrace too irredeemable for even the Comeback Kid. And her dreams would die, too. Just like that.

‘He loves you.’

‘I know.’

‘You love him.’

‘I know.’

None of that altered the fact that this was a terrible idea one iota, but she wanted him so badly – and wanted him to want her so badly – that she managed to convince herself to go through with it regardless.

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November 7, 1998

Twenty-four hours later, it remained a terrible idea.

But, goddamnit, she would make it work.

Not wanting to embark on the slippery slope that any consumption of alcohol portended, Hillary politely demurred all offers of a drink, showering her husband with coy smiles instead, allowing his
hand to rest on her thigh as they rode on Marine One.

As soon as they were alone, flames crackling away cheerfully, atmospherically in the fireplace, his lips crashed into hers, her coat and his jacket swiftly abandoned on the floor. God, this felt good, felt right. A delicious, delirious clash of teeth and tongues, tangling with each other, her arms snaking around his shoulder blades, pulling herself up to him, as close as she could conceivably get, and his hands remapping every inch of her. Grabbing at her buttocks—so often his first port of call—and kneading them with an ardor she found enormously gratifying, she could tell that his discerning fingers noted the unusual absence of friction between the contrasting fabrics of her trousers and her panties.

“Ohhhhh baby,” he moaned into her mouth, his rapidly growing arousal’s physical manifestation pressing against her.

“On occasion, he called her ‘Sweetie’, ‘Baby’, or sometimes ‘Dear’.”

‘Shut up,’ she thought desperately.

Freeing herself just enough for the task in hand, continuing her barrage of kisses as best as she was able, she began feverishly unbuttoning her blazer, revealing the royal blue concoction of satin and lace covering her breasts, pushing them up, amplifying her cleavage as much as possible. She grinned at him as his appreciative gaze traveled downward, the mystery of her panties momentarily forgotten.

“Aw Hilly, I can’t even begin to tell you how much I’ve missed these girls.” His tone was almost reverent, and she couldn’t help giggling.

“We were kissing and he unbuttoned my dress and fondled my breasts with my bra on…”

“Don’t you wanna see the rest of the ensemble?” she purred. Hillary was all fluttering eyelashes and coy smiles as she loosened his tie, pulling him to her for another kiss, this one long and languid.

“There’s nothin’, and I mean nothin’, I want more.”

The other half of her pantsuit hit the floor, rapidly followed by Bill’s jaw.

“Is all that for me, baby?”

“Mmmhmm.” She was going to elaborate, perhaps even make a smart remark, but he was on her again, hands and lips, drawn together overwhelmingly like opposite magnetic poles.

Bill removed her blazer and, after reaching around to paw greedily, approvingly at the newly exposed flesh, his hands journeyed upward once more, fumbling slightly with the clasps of the unfamiliar bra.

“So fucking beautiful,” he murmured over and over again, voice increasingly muffled by his ardent attentions to her bosom.

“And he unbuttoned my dress and he unhooked my bra, and sort of took the dress off my shoulders and… moved the bra… He was looking at me and touching me and telling me how beautiful I was.”

‘Shut up, shut up, shut up.’
She closed her eyes, trying to focus on how his touch made her feel and hoping that each grope, each kiss, each nip, each suck, would be the one that finally amplified her raging libido sufficiently to drown out what her relentless mind would not allow her to forget.

It wasn’t working. Shit.

Hillary practically yanked Bill up from her breasts, catching a fleeting glimpse of his pout before her mouth collided with his once more, kissing him harder, sloppier, urgently seeking distraction.

‘There’s one way you could exorcise her once and for all.’

Releasing him, she sank slowly, deliberately to her knees, fixing her eyes on his face, that gorgeous fucking man who had loved her and lied to her and made her laugh and made her cry and made her cum, who had fathered her child and broken her heart and mended it again, watching as his head lolled back in preemptive ecstasy, groaning as she palmed his cock through the strained fabric of pants and briefs.

“Baby, why are you so good to me?”

‘Because I love you so fucking much.’

Hillary knew she couldn’t say it without tears, so she refrained, looking instead at his fly.

“I think he unzipped his pants… because it was sort of this running joke that I could never unbutton his pants, that I just had trouble with it.”

She froze.

“Who knows what will happen four years from now when I am out of office?”

‘Fuck.’

Seconds dragged interminably.

“Hill?”

Her head lifted and blue met blue.

“Honey, are you alright?”

Trying first for a nod, the genuine concern in his eyes convinced her that he wanted honesty more than a blowjob and she quickly changed course to a shake. He helped her gently to her feet.

“What’s wrong?” She hesitated. “Tell me, Hillary.”

“It’s ridiculous –“

“Hillary.”

There was clear frustration in his voice, but his expression remained tender.

“I couldn’t stop thinking about her. About the two of you.”

The shame etched so starkly on his face was heart-rending.

“Bill, I want this. I want you.”
“But we have more work to do,” he said quietly, completing her thought. “I’m sorry, darlin’.”

“Me too.”

“Don’t be sorry.” His tone was firm. “You have nothing to be sorry about – nothing, you hear me?”

Another nod.

“Now, let’s get you to bed.” The suddenness of his gesture making her squeal, Bill swept her up into his arms and carried her into the lodge’s master bedroom, softly laying her down and tucking her in, just as soothingly as he’d done with Chelsea after many a nightmare. Then he turned back to the door.

“Billy?”

Eyes locked again.

“Stay with me?” she asked, extricating an arm from beneath the blankets and reaching for him.

He smiled and she could see the tears glistening in his eyes as he took her hand in his. “There’s nothing I’d love more.” They stayed that way for a few moments, relishing that simple loving contact. Bill cleared his throat, giving her a sheepish grin. “You’re gonna have to give me a few minutes first, though.” Her gaze traveled in the direction a jerk of his head indicated, down to his still-present erection.

Hillary cackled as Bill hastily headed for the bathroom to take care of unfinished business. “Don’t be long!”

His head peered back around the doorframe. “Thinkin’ about you in that thong, I won’t be.”

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The next morning, they woke up, wrapped in each others arms, greeting the new day with a kiss.

Chapter End Notes

Something vaguely resembling smut! Derailed with angst, naturally, but I hope you enjoy!
November 8, 1998

Temporarily relocating to Camp David had another advantage: sessions with Tobias wouldn’t create as easily detectable a pattern of visits if the Residence wasn’t their sole venue. If Bill had his druthers, though, rather different circumstances would have preceded this encounter. The two of them would still be shrouded in a halcyon post-coital haze, minimizing their marital troubles to the verge of non-existence. Sex didn’t cure all ills – it was wholly unnecessary to remind him of that fact, certainly not in the present circumstances – but it would have restored some sense of normalcy.

Put a Band-Aid over everything. Let him believe that all had been forgiven and forgotten, that he hadn’t really broken her heart after all, that she had sufficient strength to mend their marriage all by herself as she’d done so many times before.

Of course, it hadn’t gone that way. Instead, he had received a stark reminder of exactly how much pain she was in – pain he had caused. And still she loved him enough to kiss him, to allow him the privilege of holding her and of sharing her bed. To sit on this couch, however uncomfortably, to let his arm drape over her shoulders, his other hand holding hers, and to expend the herculean effort required to pull them back from the brink.

No wonder she couldn’t believe how much he loved her; he could scarcely believe it himself.

“So, how have you two been doing? I know it hasn’t been long since our last meeting, but Bill wanted to take advantage of this weekend out of the White House.” Tobias looked at the pair facing him uneasily with the patience that was so sorely necessary and waited for a response, suspecting that the answer would be complicated. It invariably was with these two.

They stared, alternately at each other, the floor, their hands – anywhere but at Tobias – before Bill finally blurted, “We almost made love last night.”

“Bill!”

“No, it’s all right,” Tobias said, trying to keep his face from betraying even a hint of amusement. “What happened?”

Hillary sighed, shifting in her seat. “I couldn’t get my brain to switch off. That’s all.”

“It was my fault,” Bill interjected. “She was trying to make me happy, and I shouldn’t have made her feel like that was what she needed to do.”

Her knee-jerk reaction was to object, pointing out that she wanted him just as badly, but there was an unpleasant dash of veracity to his statement, sufficient to make her interrogate her true motivations. Had she tried to be strong and failed, or was last night emblematic of her fundamental weakness? Just one more in a litany of examples illustrating vividly the shameful lengths she would go to for him… her capacity to subjugate and sabotage herself in yet another wretched attempt to finally, once and for all, secure his love, ensure it would no longer be shared, however superficially, with the seemingly unending parade of adulterous distractions who were prettier, younger, more fun. More buxom. Less demanding.
‘He loves you, you idiot. He told you. Don’t be so pathetic.’

“I wanted last night too. I just – I shouldn’t have read that fucking report. I thought it would be worse not to know, to let my imagination run riot like –“

Like it usually does.

No one present needed her to finish that sentence, least of all her husband.

Swallowing, trying furiously to shore up the dam that held back – only just – the deluge of lurid visions – Bill and all those women – the merciless tormentors she had conjured from a nauseating mixture of justified paranoia and the harsh reality of his chronic infidelity, she steadied her voice enough to continue.

“All. It was a mistake. And I’m sorry I made it into some kind of ordeal, but Bill was very sweet about the whole thing.”

“Why do you feel it’s so important to start having sex again, Hillary?” A fortuitous mental reminder steered Tobias clear of the phrase “sexual relations”.

She didn’t want to say it, to release that insidious thought from the confines of her mind and infect Bill with it. It would hurt him and however much he deserved it, she was loath to add so much as an iota of pain to a life that had already accumulated a surplus.

“Normalcy, I guess. Wanting to move on. Forward.”

There was something else; she was holding back, and Bill was keenly aware of the fact. “Hill?” he prodded gently.

She shook her head, avoiding his inquiring eyes.

“I can’t do anything about it if you don’t tell me, babe. Come on. Please.”

Gaze still fixed on her hands, fingers digging into her palms, she relented, hesitantly acquiescing. “It buys time. The sooner we…” A breath. She needed it. “The longer it’ll be before the next one.”

He could not allow himself to cry, however natural a response that would be to a punch in the gut. Then she would feel compelled to apologize, to comfort and soothe; there was nothing he deserved less and nothing more illustrative of the status quo in their relationship. And what could he say? What could he offer that wasn’t a pale palliative, transparent bullshit? Every time he had promised there would be no more, there invariably had been a moment of inexplicable, inexcusable weakness. There were endless justifications for the fears and insecurities Hillary was plagued with and had been from childhood; he had provided many of them. He had nurtured them, encouraging her demons to eat away at her in order to avoid battling his own.

“Hillary –“

“I know – it’s stupid. But I don’t know what else I can do, what else you want from me. I can’t give up my work, Bill. I can’t be easy and uncritical. I can’t be someone I’m not. Not even for you.”

“I don’t want anyone else.’ The words didn’t feel empty, but he knew how they would sound. The questions they would fail utterly to answer. ‘It’s not you; it’s me.’ Bandied about as a hollow platitude too often, but the simple truth. His sins existed on a separate, parallel plane from his all-consuming love for her, the two contradictory but absolutely, equally fundamental elements of his
life. He was, therefore he loved Hillary Rodham; he was, therefore he fucked it up.

“I love you. There’s nothing you need to change,” he managed, keenly aware that those trite, feeble phrases, however emphatically stated, could not even begin to express what he intended – what he needed so desperately – to tell her.

She exhaled sharply, unable to keep the mounting frustration from her voice. “That’s what you keep saying.”

There had to be some way to communicate the raw, overwhelming emotion he still felt pulsating through every inch of his body with undiluted intensity, immortal kindred of the exhilarating sensation that had banished his own name from his mind when she’d strode across the law library toward him all those years ago. Words rarely failed him, but he found it unlikely that words sufficient to describe what he felt existed. Even by the great poets of the world, they had not yet been coined. And if they couldn’t manage it, what possible hope did he have?

But he had to try.

“This morning, when I woke up next to you – and I could just... look at you and hold you – that is everything to me. That is my world – you are my world. You are the reason for everything good in my life: you’re the reason I have Chelsea, the reason we’re in the White House. I’m not a great man, but whatever worthiness there is in me is because of you. You’re the reason I know what love is. You taught me that.”

“Don’t, Bill,” she whispered. Much as, at her core, she craved that kind of adoration and yearned for praise that came without qualifications, this wasn’t right. She was not – could not be – reduced to a paragon. Her home was not on a pedestal. “I could say exactly the same about you.”

“This is something to work on,” Tobias suggested. “You are each individuals with tremendous abilities – virtues and vices. The strength of one does not correspond directly to the weakness of the other. You can be different and flawed and valuable and deserving of love and have none of those things be mutually exclusive. Recognize that. Embrace it. I know, it’s easier said than done, but the more clearly you see one another – and yourselves – the sounder your relationship will be.”

He smiled at them. “I can tell you right now that lack of love is not the problem here.”

However staggering the task now set to them seemed, there was considerable comfort in the notion that an expert in the field did not consider the Clintons broken beyond repair. For every outsider who failed to recognize what Bill saw in her, for every interloper who deemed Hillary an ambitious Lady Macbeth incapable of loving anyone, here answering their chides was an authority who saw them for what they truly were: two imperfect people deeply, hopelessly in love.

Chapter End Notes

I'm still not sure I'm altogether happy with this one, but I'm taking the plunge regardless, hahaha. Thank you all so much for your incredibly kind comments, and I hope you enjoy!
November 8, 1998

Hillary flopped down on the sofa, simultaneously releasing a torrent of breath that expressed forcefully the mixture of frustration and fatigue induced by the past few hours, unable and singularly unwilling to conceal her exhaustion. She was, after all, off duty for a change – the luxury of allowing her true emotions free rein should be taken advantage of whenever the opportunity presented itself. Bill clearly felt the same, although, true to form, he had been far more transparent, easier to read during the session itself, graceful fingers massaging tiny circles on his temples with sufficient frequency that she’d taken to keeping an informal tally as a sorely needed means of diversion. After all, she couldn’t keep derailing their efforts at counseling with tears. True, they were cathartic, from a genuine wellspring of suffering. Not a conscious attempt at manipulation – if she had any real self-control, she’d choose something she loathed significantly less than the weak indignity of crying as a means of self-expression. They also provided two further, vital advantages, that of bringing an abrupt, merciful end to the current round of questioning (no, she did not particularly want to talk about her relationship with her father, however grudgingly she saw the practical utility of such a discussion) and that of eliciting the response she shamelessly craved from her husband. Arms wrapped securely, lovingly around her, words of reassuring adoration whispered in a relentless, soothing stream into her ear, tender kisses pressed into her hair, her cheeks, her forehead. To the best of her knowledge, no one had ever actually been sorry for hurting her – had actually acknowledged that she’d been hurt – until him. There was something rather wonderful about it, albeit in a spectacularly perverse way.

“You want somethin’ to drink, baby?” Bill offered.

“Thanks,” she sighed, “but I’d better not.” The pit of her stomach lurched slightly. It was moments like this that reminded her most starkly of the folly inherent to one already prone to harsh self-criticism delving any deeper into her own psyche than was strictly necessary. Perilous rabbit holes, dark and unpleasant, with no bottom in sight, were generally the result when she was encouraged to dwell too much on the past or on the convoluted machinations of her brain. And she was heading down one now. “Bill?”

On hearing his name and the ill-concealed worry in her tone, he paused in the act of pouring himself a scotch on the rocks and turned, growing more perturbed by the fretfulness clouding her eyes and moving swiftly to her side. “What’s wrong?”

She hesitated again, feeling acutely both the idiocy of her anxiety and the added concern that, if she initiated this discussion, Bill would be forced yet again to revisit painful territory. His expression, however, clearly indicated that she’d roused his concern. He would not be placated by whatever slipshod front she could manage to erect. “Do you think I drink too much? I mean, does it remind you –” She found the sentence impossible to complete. He was staring at her, setting his glass down on the coffee table – not, she noted, her brain desperately scrabbling for something – anything – else to latch onto, on a coaster. Despite her best efforts, her thoughts stubbornly traveled back to Ireland, to unsteady knees on a tiled floor, heaving her whisky-soaked guts into a hotel toilet while her husband, with the tenderness and patience accumulated over decades, kept her hair from her face and dabbed her gently with a cool washcloth.

‘Just like his fucking mother.’ The thought hung heavy between the two of them.
“No.” His reply was definite, forceful. Conclusive. But still she fretted, guilt furrowing her brow deeply. He elaborated, “You’re nothing like that. It’s completely normal every now and then, especially when everything’s going to shit.” Hillary clearly remained unconvinced. “It was completely different with Mama and Daddy. You are nothing like that.” The words were difficult but apparently necessary, and his voice wavered slightly.

“You sure?” She felt a pang, but she couldn’t help pressing the issue. Hurting him like Virginia had – never mind Roger – or being even vaguely reminiscent of that appalling excuse for a childhood brimming with alcohol-fueled abuse and neglect were nauseating prospects. And what, she thought with a horrifying jolt, about Chelsea?

Bill could see her spiraling rapidly, see the recriminations whirring through her mind at high volume and speed. He reached out, grounding her with his touch. There were few things he hated more than that mushrooming self-induced anguish – the needless torment she forced herself to endure over the minutest of flaws and imagined sins. Hillary thrived on self-control, but that relentless, vicious fault finding, he had quickly come to learn, was a core element of her internal processes, well beyond even her capacity to keep in check. Automatic. A vice whose casualties were almost exclusively Hillary herself – sure, the nitpicking would extend to Bill, the high expectations to her staff or, in the past, her students, but there was never anything like the brutality applied to her own shortcomings.

Her humor had always been self-deprecating, her appreciation of her own virtues, to him embarrassingly abundant, modest. But he remembered vividly the first glimpses he’d caught of the darkness threatening to drown out her light: the vague dissatisfaction whenever she looked in a mirror; the way every inch of her sometimes trembled with barely suppressed frustration; how she would walk back into his arms after yet another mostly one-sided phone call with her father or an evening spent in the company of his family and finally allow herself to give way to wracking sobs for which she offered no explanation, just an uncalled for apology after the fact. Touched as he was that Hillary made him (and him alone) privy to her vulnerabilities, he hated to see her in such pain, particularly when it was so utterly needless.

Bill begrudged her nothing that would, however fleetingly, override the constant censure of her own mind and enable her to relax, to be gentler with herself. If she needed sex, if she needed his unqualified love and support, if she needed to get more than a little tipsy, if she needed the sweet comfort of cake and ice cream, that was her prerogative. She more than deserved it. He owed her that much after everything he so selfishly put her through. If only it didn’t make her feel so weak and ashamed afterward.

“Look at me, Hill.” With uncharacteristic timidity, she hesitantly allowed eye contact to be reestablished. He repeated once more, each word carefully and emphatically enunciated in the hope that this time they would hit their mark and, at least temporarily, offer comfort: “You are nothing like that.”

She nodded shakily. “Thank you.”

“Here,” he said, offering her his abandoned beverage, by now substantially diluted from melted ice, and giving her a squeeze before rising to fix himself a fresh one. If that didn’t express his absolute confidence in her, in his assertion, he didn’t know what would.

Easing back onto the couch and pulling her back into the security of his embrace, running his fingers through her hair, Bill struggled to conceal the nagging sensation now afflicting his own brain. As he reflected on what he knew of her childhood (disconcertingly little, now that he thought about it) and the kinship he’d always felt with Hughie and Tony, long-smothered suspicions –
stifled by both an inability and an aversion to dealing with their inherent consequences – began at last to coalesce. Dredging these matters up could no longer be avoided, he realized, his mind fixed raptly on that damned toothpaste cap she had mentioned so seldom, so fleetingly, with such forced offhandedness. He hadn’t dug deeper because she didn’t seem to want him to; nor, especially, did he want to. (‘Selfish,’ he once again rebuked himself.)

He’d ask Tobias, he resolved, kissing her forehead, feeling her head resting against his chest.

Chapter End Notes

Alternate title for this chapter: "I Continue to Put Off Dealing with Hugh for as Long as Humanly Possible". Thank you all so much for your continuing kindness, and I hope you enjoy this meandering piece of angst!
November 10, 1998

There was no easy way to start this conversation. Hillary would never allow him a convenient inroad, a means of casually inquiring about her father and then continuing to gently probe until the whole truth, whatever it was, was revealed. It had to be, as with so many moments in their relationship, like ripping off a Band-Aid.

Watching her face in the moments after the question was uttered, he realized with a mounting sense of unease that this particular Band-Aid had not been – should never have been – his to remove. Her mouth had initially dropped open in a brief concession to shock. That had been anticipated, unavoidable in the circumstances. But the momentary flash of absolute panic in her eyes… Bill wasn’t altogether certain whether that was another manifestation of how utterly taken aback she’d been or whether it was a reflexive reaction to the memories his unanticipated interrogation had allowed to breach their normally secure, hermetically sealed corner of her mind. Given the monumental struggle so visibly required for Hillary to regain some semblance of her customary control – eyes avoiding him assiduously with each and every blink carefully timed (her strategy, as he knew all too well, to avoid the onset of tears); back rigid, limbs adopting a firm policy of self-containment that ensured he knew better than to try to touch her; nails making her palms white where they dug into flesh; and the furious working of that muscle in her jaw, more agitated than he’d ever seen it – he was inclined to think the latter.

With disconcerting vividness, he could suddenly envision that chubby-cheeked little girl, whose honey-blonde hair he perceived quite clearly despite having only encountered her in black-and-white photographs – that strong, beautiful, brilliant little girl who was now his strong, beautiful, brilliant wife – reacting in precisely the same way.

‘Reacting to what? Oh Christ, how bad was it? Why didn’t you see this? You, of all people, should have known, should have seen…’

“What the fuck, Bill?” she at last choked out. “You don’t just – ask someone that. What am I supposed to say?”

“Just tell me the truth, baby.”

Hillary flew to her feet, her fidgeting unable to be quarantined to mere twisting hands any longer.

“The truth? The truth is no one in my house was fucking brandishing firearms at each other. My parents never got liquored up and attempted to reenact the gunfight at the O.K. Corral. Dad would – the neighbors never had to call the police, okay?”

His stomach kept sinking, even when he thought it could drop no lower. ‘How bad was it?’ Images raced through his brain, mostly – he hoped – pure invention. The supposition of a boy whose own
childhood had been marred by physical violence and screamed invective. But now the flurry of hypothetical incidents was growing heavier, harder to block out or ignore. He had to know the reality, or the imaginary would never stop haunting him.

“For God’s sake, stop looking at me like that!” The pity in his eyes was unbearable. Intolerable. ‘This is why you keep it locked up. This is why you don’t let them see – not even him. Especially not him.’

“Tell me, Hilly. Please.” Bill’s voice was gentle, pleading. She could hear the tear in it, that little throb that rendered her powerless to deny him.

With a sigh that seemed to emanate from her very core, she sank into the chair opposite him, staring fixedly at her hands. Physical distance of some kind had to be maintained or she’d never have the strength to bridge the emotional gap.

There was so much that she knew she’d never be able to adequately express. The cruel diatribes – interminable, merciless volleys of words, whether shouted or uttered with deadly calm – were what stuck with her. What, she thought with burning shame, had done the most damage. It wasn’t so much what he said, or even how he said it, but that she knew, deep down, that every single cutting remark was chosen with pinpoint accuracy to highlight the weaknesses and flaws she knew full well were there, drawing them out into the open and confronting her with them head-on. The ones she hated most. Sometimes she wondered which had come first: her own loathing or her father’s. Did it matter? The result was invariably the same. His denunciations, the line-by-line criticism of her every defect, ground her inexorably into pathetic nothingness, a broken mess of a girl, but she could not show it – the trick she and her mother learned so quickly, but her brothers never mastered. Head up, shoulders back, eyes front, and take it. Take it all, carve it on your heart and never forget a word. Say it to yourself, parrot it back without an ounce of compassion, punish yourself, so he won’t have to. Work harder. Be better. Better, but never enough.

Did he hit her? She knew that was what Bill was really asking, what he really wanted to know. Yes. Was it excessive, more than whatever “normal” was or, at any rate, was considered to be in the 1950s? Probably. Had her last year at Yale brought about the sickening realization that it would now widely be considered abuse? Absolutely. But that was nothing. She could handle the fleeting physical pain and the momentary humiliation that accompanied it. There was no comparison between that element of her experience and the gauntlets run by Bill and Dorothy. None. Despite the tangibility of a slap or a spanking, it was so much less real. Less permanent. It never wormed its way inside her head and ate at her like the words did.

“What do you want to know?” she asked, barely above a whisper.

He cast his mind back to the first time she’d ever visited his apartment in New Haven. How, after she’d left, he’d gone into the bathroom, burying his head in his hands at the realization that he hadn’t made even the slightest effort to clean it up before letting his girl – and how he had hoped she was his girl – use it. How he’d observed that the one thing in all that overwhelming mess Hillary had taken it upon herself to fix was the toothpaste. The cap had been carefully recovered from whatever mysterious niche it had hitherto occupied and screwed tightly back atop the tube. Everything else remained a complete shambles. At the time, he’d thought it impossibly cute, another delightful quirk in the personality he was still discovering. Now, of course, he had heard the story – a version of it, at least – but, as with the bullies who had made her early days in Park Ridge a living hell, he now wanted the reality, however stark.

“Tell me about the toothpaste.”

Taking a slow, trembling breath, closing her eyes tightly, Hillary proceeded to give him the facts.
Just the facts, unvarnished, untainted by florid description or excessive emotion. It was the winter after she’d turned five. Biting cold, a few inches of snow blanketing the ground. She’d brushed her teeth, washed her face, had knelt down by her bedside to say her prayers when her father stormed in. Yanking her arm, he’d dragged her into the bathroom, pointing furiously at the uncapped tube of toothpaste and bellowing about the indefensible waste of money – his money, the money he worked so hard to give them. She was stupid and ungrateful. Those words came up again and again. There had been a slap. Then, with a slam, the narrow window had opened, her round eyes watching the cap arc out of it. “You go get it,” he hissed. Her mother’s objections, met with a “Godammit, shut up, Dorothy”, only succeeded in allowing Hillary a coat to wear over her pajamas and dressing gown. Dad stood on the porch, smoking, watching impassively with arms crossed as she scrabbled through the snow and the darkness, gloveless hands quickly losing all feeling, making her task all the more difficult, and the bare shrubs along the side of the house pricking at her. She didn’t know how long it took her to find the cap, but, eventually, she did. Back inside, her tingling numbness gradually gave way to brief jolts of sharp pain as she was spanked. So she wouldn’t forget again. Then, under her father’s stern gaze, she’d carefully united cap with tube, fixing them together as securely as her tiny hands could manage.

“And that’s all.”

Hillary looked up, opening her eyes just as her husband’s arms enveloped her, pulling her gently from her seat to be held. She could feel his warm tears falling into her hair, the shudder of his back as he wept. For her. He was crying for her. She tried to tell him not to bother, that she was all right, but her throat was too tight. All she could manage was a sob of her own before her knees buckled.

But she was safe. Bill scooped her up, sitting back on the sofa with her trembling form curled in his lap. His hand made soothing circles on her back. Voice raw with emotion, he said, “I love you” again and again, a seemingly endless reiteration. Reassurance. A promise to put her back together again.

Chapter End Notes

And here we go... There will probably end up being multiple chapters dealing with Hugh and Virginia, respectively, because there’s so much to untangle with each of them.

The toothpaste incident really did happen. I’ve added some fictional details and expanded on it in a way that I think is reasonably grounded in reality. Hopefully it didn’t go overboard; this is just my analysis and extrapolation based on what I do know.

Thank you all so much again for your incredibly kind comments and for reading!
November 11, 1998

Bill stared at the impassive white marble before him. His face, he knew with absolute certainty, conveyed the mix of sadness and resolve appropriate to the commander-in-chief on Veterans’ Day. It did make him feel slightly uneasy – exploitative, almost – that his thoughts couldn’t have been further from the masses of men and women in uniform, living and dead, he was there to commemorate, whose service and sacrifice he’d pay tribute to in speech and action. Rather, the workings of his brain were fixed exclusively on one particular veteran and had been so since last night.

The ceaseless repetition of Hillary’s memory – that heartbreaking image of that little girl, the sad and frightened child he could see occasionally catch peeking out from within the woman she’d become, on hands and knees in the snow, being forced to make a desperate search for something as stupid, as inconsequential, as the cap to a toothpaste tube – haunted his mind’s eye and had made sleep a practical impossibility. He had heard with painful clarity the hurt that still throbbed in every syllable, every inflection, as his wife recounted the episode; he had seen every crack, even the most minute, in her carefully cultivated façade of impassivity, the almost imperceptible frissons of anguish – unnoticeable to anyone, everyone, but him – that fleetingly crossed her face. There was a certain, sickly gratitude that she’d kept her eyes clamped shut for the duration. Seeing those pools of blue he so loved made turbulent by unshed tears and decades of unexpressed inner strife would, unquestionably, have been more than he could bear. (That the limits of his tolerance for her suffering had even crossed his mind made him more than a little nauseous, in all frankness. Hillary was so strong and he was such an unforgivably selfish bastard. To begrudge her such a richly deserved cry, to know and be relieved that the reason she battled so hard to deny that emotional impulse, was egocentrism beyond any conceivable justification.)

He still felt the hollow ache of sadness keenly, still yearned to spend the rest of their lives – eternity, if he was allowed – canceling out her suffering, perpetually cosseting her in a cocoon woven from threads of the nurturing and indulgence she’d been denied for so long. Rapidly, however, as he’d held his wife and felt her body convulse with sobs, another emotion began to dominate.

He was angry – so fucking angry – with Hugh Rodham.

Bill was angry with himself, too: looking back, with all the frustrating lucidity afforded only by retrospect, there had been opportunities, scores of them, to rise to the defense of not only Hillary but Dorothy and the boys, too. He had let them all slip past. Most shamefully of all, his motive for doing so had not been mere oversight, irritating but ultimately excusable. No, despite the fact that smaller, subtler instances of Hugh’s bullying had occurred right under his nose, despite the fact that he had seen them and had detected (albeit without fully understanding) the strains and tensions rife within the Rodham family dynamic, he had chosen inaction. Allowed himself to believe the dysfunction that had characterized his own upbringing afforded him no right to pass judgment over the nuclear, middle-class exemplar he stood so absolutely outside of. Not wanting to rock the boat or make more of a scene than his obvious status as an interloper, a rogue Southern playboy with undeniably white trash roots emerging from nowhere to abscend with the lone daughter, already had. Cowardice, in short. Regardless of what veneer his excuses sought to apply after the fact, the
fact remained that his own fear had rendered him incapable of protecting the woman he loved from the person – setting himself momentarily out of the running – who had hurt her most.

He set his jaw, moving forward locked in synchronization with the soldier who carried the wreath, green boughs sprinkled liberally with bursts of red, white and blue flowers. Bowing his head in prayer once the designated position was reached, the president’s thoughts wandered again.

It occurred to him suddenly that, abhorrent though the notion of meting out such brutal punishment (emotional and physical) was to him – and incomprehensible as he tried to imagine treating Hillary and Chelsea the way Hugh did his own wife and children – he might be able to muster up some kind of sympathy if the roots of that behavior lay in the post-traumatic stress suffered by too many in that generation whose lives were interrupted, if not ended, by the Second World War. Among the many questions he’d left unasked for far too long were those pertaining to Hugh’s service. That the man had been thoroughly indoctrinated into the ways of the military was immediately apparent in every aspect of his being: the gruff bark that was his habitual tone of communication, the rigid bearing that Hillary had learned to mirror as one of the few means of self-defense available to her and the completely inflexible dogma that governed absolutely both his own life and that of his family. Now that his curiosity was piqued and the avenue of discussion had already, agonizingly, been opened, a torrent of queries was unleashed.

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“Hon’?”

“Mmm?”

In an effort to cultivate Tobias’s recommendation that they spend as much of their time together as practically possible devoid of work-related discussion, the Clintons were ensconced in a living room, cuddling on the couch and watching the one news-free channel they could both agree on. Admittedly, Veterans’ Day meant that the programming on Turner Classic Movies wasn’t particularly to Hillary’s liking, but she’d take Gary Cooper in Sergeant York over a taped football game any day. Nestled in her husband’s arms, nursing a glass of wine while Bill, predictably, ate all the popcorn, everything felt natural – right – again.

“Your dad was in the Navy, wasn’t he?”

She tensed slightly. Obviously, Bill wasn’t going to drop the topic of her father – not now, especially not after last night – and she was never going to be comfortable reliving it all for his elucidation. Catharsis of that kind was deeply unnerving to her and not, as far as she could tell, particularly helpful. This seemed a harmless enough inquiry, though.

“Yeah.” A substantial sip of the tannic red liquid.

“Mediterranean or Pacific theater?”

“Neither. Dad barely even left Chicago.” Smirking a little at the confused expression she knew intuitively had flickered across his absurdly adorable face, she extricated herself from his arms and turned to him. “Naval Station Great Lakes. Training. Great job for a guy who got his B.S. in P.E.” That turn of phrase elicited a giggle she couldn’t quite stifle. Not without the threat of a glower or an imminent smack from her father, anyway.

“A drill sergeant, huh? Well, that sure as hell explains a lot.”

Her giggling rapidly degenerated into a full-blown cackle. Bill joined her in laughter, but clearly
remained somewhat baffled as to what, precisely, was at the root of such unbridled hilarity.

Gasping for breath, she choked out an explanation: “They don’t have sergeants in the Navy, babe. Some commander-in-chief you are.” Barely managing to set her wineglass securely on a coaster, she collapsed into hysterics again.

Bill knew he was staring at her, no longer out of perplexity but stemming from an overwhelming feeling of adoration. This was the girl he loved, in all her splendor.

Onscreen, the music swelled as a stammering Joan Leslie adopted a comparable expression, attempting to convey her love to Gary Cooper, who was overalled and hitched to a plow. He stopped her fumbling by drawing her smoothly into a kiss, and Bill decided to do likewise.

Hillary, after a moment’s surprise, responded enthusiastically, opening her mouth as soon as her husband’s tongue sought entrance and drawing him ever closer with fingers tangling in graying hair.

“Smartass,” he whispered as they drew apart, indescribable tenderness in his eyes. Giving her rear a squeeze, he pulled her back to him. His heart swelled at the shy smile, the reflected love, the dulcet tone of her sigh as she settled back into his chest.

There was so much more he wanted to know, but, he thought blissfully, it could wait.

Chapter End Notes

Vaguely fluffy happenings at the end! It just sort of happened, and I couldn't bring myself to derail it back into angst. Also, I have no idea what the TCM schedule on November 11, 1998 was, but, on any given Veterans' Day, it is a safe bet that Sergeant York will be on, and I remember that movie and its romantic subplot more distinctly than I do most war movies.

Thank you all so much again for reading and commenting! I really do appreciate it enormously. Hope you enjoy!
November 13, 1998

“It’s over,” Bill announced as he entered the living room, unable to keep the relief from his voice – relief that had been almost tangible as it swept over him at the end of yet another telephone conference with his beleaguered attorneys. There was a picture in his mind’s eye of Hillary’s face relaxing into a genuine smile at those words, beautiful blue eyes sparkling at him, of snuggling on the sofa, whispers of “Billy” purred into his chest, of at least one kiss and maybe more. He had barely been able to refrain from giving a little skip as he’d bounded upstairs, a slight twinge in his knee providing a timely reminder of the ill-conceived nature of such an outburst.

Her face was a punch in the gut. A swift knock back to reality. This changed nothing. This fixed nothing. He saw it now with absolute, excruciating clarity, in the set of her jaw and her pointed refusal to look at him, denying him the oxygen he needed so desperately.

“It’s too late,” she stated bluntly, with an audible chill that made his heart stop. “Assuming anyone managed to forget –“ he hated how she invariably had to pause to collect herself before she said any of the names, the names that he could see eating away at her – “Gennifer Flowers, they’re sure as hell going to remember Paula Jones and Monica Lewinsky. Especially when you’ve paid one of them nearly a million bucks to shut up. Especially when you’re on the verge of impeachment because you lied about the other one. No one will remember that the judge dismissed the suit. The salient point – all that will ever matter – is that you screwed around and then you lied. It’s not over. It’s not going away.”

Cardiac rhythm resumed something approaching normalcy as he realized she wasn’t talking about them – her thoughts were turned towards the bigger picture. It was, as ever, a convenient distraction from feelings she didn’t want to explore, much less try to untangle.

“I don’t care about that.” Swiftly eradicating the space between them, he knelt at her feet, this time ignoring his troublesome joint’s complaint. “I care about you. What’s outside is outside; it doesn’t matter. You are my everything.”

Hillary looked down at him, the impact of her gaze seismic. There were several abortive attempts to coalesce her feverishly churning emotions into coherent words. What she didn’t – couldn’t – verbalize was, nevertheless, made abundantly clear in the blazing of her eyes, the flash of anger and hurt that she didn’t bother trying to conceal: ‘You should have fucking thought of that before –’ Even in a rebuke that was merely implied, that sentence remained unfinished, not the petering out of a vague reproach but a condemnation abruptly strangled by pain.

“I know, baby. You’re right. And I’m so sorry.” Her small hand was clasped in his, not so tightly that she couldn’t extricate herself if she wanted to, and didn’t jerk away, not even when he brought it to his lips for a soft kiss. For all the fuss she made over his hands, attributing indescribable grace to his long, slender digits and fixating on them, even publicly, with ill-disguised eroticism, he considered hers to be equally worthy objects of affection. Tiny and perfect. Like her.

He cleared his throat, pulling himself gingerly up and onto the cushion next to her, still clinging to her hand. The silence – her silence – was disconcerting, but something about it didn’t feel nearly as oppressive, as ominous, as it had in past months. She was thinking, gathering her thoughts and
sorting through them carefully, assigning them with her customary diligence to the appropriate mental compartments.

“I’ve pushed back my departure for Japan till Wednesday morning. Since – since we have all weekend, I thought maybe we could do another session with Tobias? At least, I could. If you don’t want to –“

“No, that would be good. Tomorrow?” Her tone was difficult to read, but, if he wasn’t deluding himself, he thought he detected a bit of a thaw.

“Sure. I’ll call him.” Bill got to his feet.

“Billy?” That sweet voice, with all its shyness and vulnerability, sent tingles straight down his spine. Bill wasn’t altogether sure it hadn’t been some deliciously cruel auditory hallucination, taunting him with precisely what he so longed to here. When their eyes met, his hopes were affirmed. “You don’t have to – right now, do you?”

Resuming his seat, he shook his head vigorously, keeping his gaze locked with hers until, overwhelmed, she broke contact. Deep blue irises fled from view, hidden behind dual layers of lids and lenses.

Hillary wanted to be able to draw a line under the issue of her husband’s infidelities, to forgive him and move on. Forward. There were few things she desired more ardently. However, the number of occasions she’d experienced that desire gave her more than a little pause. “Never again” had, hitherto, never actually meant “never again”; several months’ respite, yes, and being spoiled rotten, wooed anew by an endearingly, irresistibly penitent Bill, but that bliss was woefully impermanent. Fleeting, invariably falling apart when the next passing pair of tits caught his wandering eye, when she pushed him away in a futile effort to minimize the hurt of the inevitable. Letting him in was a risk, one that harsh experience had taught her was not particularly wise.

Regardless of what he said, some of this – their relentless, toxic, intoxicating cycle – was undeniably her fault. There was no way that she was in actuality the paragon he so zealously proclaimed her to be; that kind of perfection was a distant, unattainable goal she’d spent her entire life chasing. In spite of his peccadilloes’ status as the most widely visible, impossible to ignore manifestation of the fault lines running through their marriage, she did more than her share to exacerbate tensions. Hillary was not unaware that it upset him that she didn’t worship him the way he did her, that she found fault with even his best efforts when she knew he was capable of so much more. She supposed that was a compulsion not unlike his to seek out the nearest pliant bimbo. Just as he tried to curb his destructive urges, so did she. Neither of them hard enough, apparently. Sometimes, when she looked in the mirror, she saw hints of the woman her detractors said she was. Hints, too, of her father. And she hated it – hated herself – with a terrifying fervor.

“I’m sorry, too, Bill – and don’t say I have nothing to be sorry for.” His mouth snapped shut, silencing those very words before they were uttered. “Sometimes it scares me how much I love you. How much I need you. And… it’s like I want to protect myself from that by keeping a little distance, even though I know how much that hurts you. It’s stupid and selfish, but it’s going to take time for me to unlearn that.”

Not for the first time in the past several days, he felt the tears come, unwanted and unbidden. “As long as you need, darlin’,” he managed.

Her soft lips parted against his, giving him the love he craved, the love that sustained him. This was the girl no one but he saw and whom he loved more than life itself. Perfect.
Chapter End Notes

After an infinitesimally tiny bit of fluff, we're back to our regularly scheduled uneventful angsty meanderings, hahahaha.

Thank you all so much for reading and commenting - hope you enjoy!
November 14, 1998

Bill was waxing rhapsodic about his mother. Again. Oblivious, as he invariably was under these incredibly specific circumstances, to the mounting tension locking his wife’s posture into rigidity, the willpower being exerted to restrain an almighty roll of the eyes. The gesture would have been insensitive, of course, but Hillary sorely needed some means of releasing with comparative safety the anger that rapidly built up within her during one of Bill’s interminable rants about the venerated Virginia – goddess among women, mother of all mothers, worshipped Madonna, hallowed be her name.

What made this one in particular rankle more than the others was the incorporation of her own childhood, the use of it as context for an especially nauseating manipulation she hoped like hell was unconscious – if only Mama had known about Hugh’s harshness, about the punishment and the criticism and the slaps, she would have clasped Hillary to her bosom, overflowing, as ever, with love, and never let go.

‘Until she smothered me and could finally get her precious boy a real wife,’ she thought furiously. Bitterly. Resentment she’d hoped had gone to the grave with Virginia still roiled, hot and caustic as ever, somewhere in her core. The volcanic rush, the barely controllable surge of blazing fury, towards the surface was unmistakable; it was now only a question of how long she could stave off the eruption.

“I mean, no matter what was going on between her and Daddy, Mama always loved us, made sure we knew it. She’d’ve done anything for us. And I know it would’ve broken her heart to know that Hill” – a little squeeze that sent her ire rocketing even more rapidly to heights that made an explosion imminent – “had that kind of insecurity – uncertainty – when it came to –”

“Yes, it is! And I’ve told you – hell, she told you – but you never, ever listen because it’s not what you want to hear! I don’t know why I bothered with this; it’s just going to be like every other time we’ve tried: we talk a little, we cry a little, you feel bad, you say it’ll never happen again, that this time – this time – you’ve come to terms with your demons. Bullshit! You haven’t come to terms with anything that casts even a hint of a shadow on the – the grand illusion of your mother’s martyrdom, when really she didn’t sacrifice a goddamned thing for you. You had to give up your childhood so she could carry on having a good time. Virginia was selfish, Virginia was self-absorbed, and sooner or later you’re going to have to fucking wake up and deal with it!”

Bill’s slackened jaw snapped shut, his own temper boiling over. “Jesus, Hillary, you just can’t let anyone have a little fun, can you?”
Too late. He only realized what he’d said after the words were already sitting heavy in the air, saw the hurt all too clearly pooling in Hillary’s eyes.

She took a deep breath, tamping down the impulse for tears. Later. “Fun like dragging your child to nightclubs? Fun like routinely getting so tight that he has to deal with at least one parent’s hangover almost every morning? Fun like bringing your son as a fucking prop to confront your husband and his mistress? You’re right, Bill. I’m no fucking fun. Because I don’t think a mother should have fun at the expense of her child’s well being. I think that’s self-centered and inexcusable. And your mother knew it the second she clapped eyes on the homely little Yankee you brought to her doorstep. She knew I was going to work too hard – work you too hard. You weren’t going to be all hers anymore. And she hated me. Maybe some part of you hates me, too, and that’s why you –” That was it. More than she could stand, a flood of emotion even her capacity for detachment was powerless to hold back. In one last, desperate attempt to maintain some shred of dignity, she stood, blinking furiously, jerking away from his feeble attempts at conciliatory contact.

Bill was speechless. He didn’t know what to say, and, if something had occurred to him, he doubted he’d be capable, physically or intellectually, of articulating it. Hillary was so wrong – so utterly, devastatingly wrong – in her ultimate conclusion. She had to know that; she couldn’t possibly have meant that. But everything else bore the discomfiting mark of truth, the pinpoint accuracy that so often characterized her analysis.

“Why don’t we sit back down?” Tobias’s tone was gentle, guiding Hillary back to the sofa with an almost imperceptible touch. She sat as far away from her husband as the piece of furniture would allow, hands clutching at the armrest and gaze fixed unyieldingly on the slight dishevelment her fevered steps had produced in the room’s rug. After giving Bill a moment to collect himself, Tobias asked a one-word question, without a hint of accusation, “Bill, what are your thoughts on what Hillary had to say?”

His vocal cords creaked and cracked, still not entirely ready for use. “You’re wrong, baby.” He saw her grip tighten and knew it was taking every ounce of self-control she possessed not to lash out again, to listen. “Not about Mama. That’s – that’s hard for me to say, much less get my head around, but you’re right about her. I just – I love her so much, and I know how bad she was hurting, so I guess… I don’t know, she needed me to love her so much that it felt wrong of me to do anything else.”

“You took such good care of her. Protected her. Like you do Chelsea.” Even with her voice hushed, she couldn’t quite verbalize the crucial addendum, the one she, in moments of pure egocentrism, relished the most: ‘Like you do me.’

He responded to the unuttered phrase intuitively. “But I don’t! Not nearly enough. Not nearly what you deserve. For one thing, I didn’t stand up for you with Mama like I should have.” The recollections of his mother’s thinly veiled insults, the snide remarks, her shaking head, her loud sighs, filled him with stinging pangs of regret. Hillary’s hurt eyes, the sobs he soothed, giving her placebos while refusing to get at the root of her pain. Not that he didn’t argue his wife’s case at all, but his rebuttals consisted solely of ‘Mama, I love her.’ Far from the ringing endorsement, the point-by-point refutation, he could have – should have – provided. “And then, on top of everything else, I –“ Now it was his turn to break. It sickened him to think of how he’d betrayed her, how he’d hurt her.

An image came to him, unbidden and unwanted, from those horrible days when he’d stupidly, inexplicably, gotten it in his head to leave her for one of them. How, when he’d told his mother, she’d hugged him and gave him precisely the kind of validation he sought. She’d stroked his hair,
told him to do whatever would make him happy. When his guilt got the better of him, he’d added, almost as an afterthought, that a divorce would crush Hillary. It would break her heart. And Mama had smirked.

His stomach turned.

Mama knew. Mama knew exactly how she was hurting Hillary, how she was encouraging Bill to hurt her – not that he needed much help on that front – and she didn’t care. She wanted to hurt her. It didn’t make any sense to him, but that didn’t make the realization any less devastating.

The pain in his voice was too much for Hillary; she had to look. And when she looked and saw the anguish she’d heard etched starkly across his face, evident in his posture, she had to touch. To hold. To console. His head on her heart, calming fingers stroking his hair, a peppering of tender kisses accompanying their movements.

Not for the first time, he wished he’d had a mother like her.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies to any Virginia fans out there, but I kind of went to town on her.

As always, thank you so much for reading, commenting - and hopefully enjoying!
November 15, 1998

Applying the finishing touches to the endless cavalcade of remarks she was expected to give over the next several days, perfecting basic templates offering encouragement and solace to communities impacted by Hurricane Mitch with just enough opportunities to add off-the-cuff, personalized touches and incorporate her own firsthand observations, was a perfectly reasonable excuse for absenting herself from Bill’s continued exploration of Virginia’s tangled maternal web. On top of that, she had an early start tomorrow to a workday lasting over twelve hours, her only meals hastily consumed during purely theoretical “down-time” during flights from air base to airport, airport to air base – and this was only the prelude to a whirlwind (‘Jesus, remember not to say “whirlwind” while you’re down there’) expedition, cataloging both strides towards democracy and damage incurred by the recent natural disaster and longer-term strife. Hillary was keenly aware of these simple facts. She was aware, too, that no one was blaming her or accusing her of a concerted, conscious attempt to avoid further engagement with the issue of her mother-in-law. No one, that is, apart from she herself.

Rationally, she knew it was better this way. Better for Bill to painfully, painstakingly, work through his own narrative and his own emotions before starting in on hers. Even taking into consideration what he’d already told her – more, she understood, by far than he’d divulged to anyone else previously – there were still depths yet to be plumbed. Nooks and crannies into which he’d tucked traumas, hoping to mislay them and never stumble across them again. After all, wasn’t that what she did? A place for everything and everything in its place, and some places you do not, under any circumstances, go. Compartments you don’t open. Hurt you keep hidden.

What she knew and how she felt were different beasts entirely, though.

The word “coward” rattled, as it so often did, around her brain. Bill needed her, and she wasn’t there. She was afraid of what she’d hear. Afraid of the rush of emotion that would undoubtedly accompany such revelations, rapidly eroding her capacity to be strong for him. Strong like he needed her to be. When he told her afterwards – when he was ready – she could be ready, too. It would be less raw for him and, therefore, far easier for her to keep the starch in her spine and maintain the precarious but necessary balance between softness and fortitude. He could find refuge in her arms without the obligation – the distraction – of wiping away her tears. It would be about him and not about her, as it should be.

Her work continued, tirelessly and (almost) ceaselessly, interrupted only fleetingly when she allowed her attention to be diverted by sympathetic pangs, those excruciating moments when the pain she imagined he was enduring became so acute that she was convinced she could feel it herself. Finally, mercifully, footsteps came. His. Her heart fluttered.

He looked exhausted. Broken.

He was.

But she was prepared and, she hoped, invulnerable. At least sufficiently so to give him everything he needed.
Her arms enveloped him, her right hand making gentle circles on the back of his neck and easing his head down to her shoulder, soft sweater ready to catch his tears. They came readily, not in sobs or shudders but quietly. Naturally, like rainfall. On tiptoe, she maneuvered him back to the sofa and broke contact, only for a moment, so she could try to make him comfortable. Bill was having none of it. Comfortable – comforted – meant her, and he pulled her back down to him, clinging desperately to the diminutive figure that housed all his courage and resilience.

Shrouded in her warmth, he listened to the steady, soothing thud of her heartbeat. With every pulse came a surge, a tangible manifestation, of her love, almost overwhelming him. It doubtless would if he gave it too much thought, so he instead allowed the sensation of security to wash over him, gradually drying his eyes and regulating his breathing.

Hillary remained quiet, continuing her tender ministrations and waiting until he was ready either to speak or to release her. After several minutes, he did both.

“Thank you,” he murmured, lacing his fingers smoothly through hers.

“Of course, baby.”

His gaze fell on the packed itinerary still lying on the coffee table. “I wish you didn’t have to go.”

She nodded. It couldn’t be helped, of course, but that knowledge didn’t make the separation, particularly at this most delicate of times, any easier. Any less miserable.

Picking up the sheet of paper with his free hand, he marveled at her relentless schedule, deciding to forgo any further discussion of his mother. Reopening those floodgates right now would only serve to mar Hillary’s last opportunity for true relaxation until God knows when. “I don’t know how you do it.”

“The usual little tricks of a lifelong overachiever,” she said casually, lightly, attempting to lift his spirits and her own.

Bill looked at her inquisitively.

“Oh come on, hon’. I know for a fact you’ve pulled more than one all-nighter. You know what I’m talking about.”

“Hill, I just consume a dangerous amount of caffeine and then crash as soon as possible. There’s no ‘trick’ there – at least, not a very good one.” He was chuckling. A welcome sound, especially when thrown into such stark relief by his earlier abject desolation.

Back of her hand pressed to her forehead in a dramatic gesture of faux despair, Hillary sighed. “Have I taught you nothing in lo, these many years?”

“Well, let’s face it, I am pretty dense.”

She pretended to consider his statement carefully for a moment before indicating her assent, her vigorous nods dissolving into giggles as her husband pretended to pout.

“Okay then, show me, since you’re so smart.” His feeble attempt to maintain an injured tone failed miserably, losing all its edge when he began to beam uncontrollably at her. Hillary was so smart. It was a simple statement of fact, impossible for him to give any derogatory spin to, even in jest.

Clearing her throat and pushing her glasses down the bridge of her nose, she adopted a stern, professorial tone. “This particular method may not prove useful to you, the layman, as it requires a
somewhat more advanced technique. And slightly longer nails.” Her hand out, palm up, she curled her fingers inward with considerable force, leaving tiny indentations clearly visible in the flesh when she loosened her grip. “Invisible to the untrained eye!” she announced proudly.

He recognized the gesture now that she’d drawn it to his attention; it was not only used to fend off sleep but also unwelcome tears or other displays of emotion. Pain to chase away pain, to banish frailty.

“More commonly, or in times of true desperation, the pinch may also be used. Considerable dexterity is essential to conceal this tactic from observers. Watch closely.” She rose to her feet and adopted a series of deliberately casual poses, ones he’d seen frequently in classrooms, courtrooms and meetings, not to mention at innumerable public events. “Did you see me do anything unusual?” Bill shook his head. “Ah, but look!” Hillary rolled up her sleeves and then, in turn, hitched up her sweater and skirt ever so slightly, revealing angry red marks on her arms, abdomen and thighs, left by unseen, but clearly forceful, pinches.

Flopping down next to him, she sighed. “And that, my dear, is how it’s done.”

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her to his chest. His wife snuggled in happily, clearly requiring little encouragement to take full advantage of the opportunity presented to her. Bill, on the other hand, found himself disquieted, presented with yet more pieces to a puzzle he wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to put together.

Running his fingers through silky golden strands, he planted a kiss on Hillary’s forehead. It could wait.

Chapter End Notes

Shout out to vodkastinger’s wonderful story "Soothe", which I feel very guilty about kinda sorta ripping off. But with way less wonderful, sweet fluff.

Thank you all (as always) for reading and commenting, and I hope that you enjoy! x
November 23, 1998

It had started so promisingly. The first night Hillary’d been gone, she had called him from the hotel, practically purring down the line to him and making the kind of adorable, exhausted noises that caused his skin to tingle. Surely she was cognizant of how badly he wanted her, how hard he was getting at the very thought of her. But maybe she wasn’t – not entirely, anyway. It was difficult to tell with her sometimes.

The next night: nothing. Pointed, excruciating nothing. As much as his wife avoided the news, or at least tried to, especially these days, those tapes were inescapable.

His original stupidity (screwing around with an intern; screwing around at all; picking, inasmuch as he’d actually consciously selected her, inasmuch as he’d actually given it any thought, someone so young and emotionally all over the place, more desperate by far than he was for love because she wasn’t lucky enough to have someone like Hillary; somehow leading her to believe that he was equally enamored with her) had been compounded exponentially by Monica’s own damnable naivety. Spilling her guts to some mercenary cow wearing a wire had added yet another circle of hell to the inferno. More fuel for the pyre gleefully being erected by the House GOP, kerosene happily supplied by one Linda Tripp. Something else to break his wife’s heart, just when it was beginning, slowly, warily, to mend.

Having only a vague conception of time as he trudged upstairs to the Residence, a side effect of all the hours in the air and the multitude of time zones he’d trekked through, Bill allowed himself some elusive, improbable hope that Hillary had been miraculously rendered impervious to the prurient gossip and relentless scrutiny at some point over the past week. That hope seemed momentarily justified by the sight of her surrounded by dossiers, reassuring in its utterly routine nature, only to be dashed nanoseconds later when he observed with a pang how red and puffy her eyes were, the tears still visibly tracking her cheeks.

She had tried her best to maintain her front of implacability for the duration of her trip and had, by and large, succeeded. Except for that one awful moment when she’d walked in on her staff gathered round a television, turned to the lone English-language channel, on which a panel of pundits and supposed experts was callously dissecting her marriage under the pretext of analyzing what potential impact Linda Tripp’s taped discussions with Monica Lewinsky, freshly released to the general public, would have on her husband’s increasingly embattled administration. Then, she could tell from their horrified, pitying faces, she’d been taken sufficiently off-guard that the punch in the gut she’d just received had visibly registered. Stifle it quickly, keep going – business as usual. There were hospitals to visit, women and children and dignitaries and Peace Corps volunteers to greet. Work to do. Her one night of total relaxation was spent imbibing rather too many cocktails with Oscar de la Renta, whose method of comforting her (aside from repeated signals to the waiter for yet another round) was to describe to her in vivid detail a series of spectacularly sexy ensembles he had conceived of for her, ones he knew would send Bill careening over the edge, his wife enthusiastically affirming how stunning she’d look. Just because it was a transparent attempt to soothe her oft-wounded ego and flagrant bullshit didn’t mean she appreciated the kind gesture any less.

What bothered Hillary the most about this particular development was the wholly unwelcome
surge of compassion she felt for The Intern. Exploited by so-called “friends” to achieve diabolical political aims and left totally devastated in the wake of a foolhardy, all-consuming attachment to Bill Clinton? She’d written the fucking book on it. Had done, she realized with a faint wave of nausea, before that idiotic girl was even in grade school. But she had to ball that sympathy up, make it imperceptibly tiny, compartmentalize it, lock it securely, permanently away, or she’d never be able to live with herself. Live with him. And she couldn’t, that dull ache in her chest reminded her, live without him. The Intern – all those Other Women, her husband’s legion of Mistakes – had to remain the faceless, soulless enemy for her sanity’s sake. It was the only way she could forgive him and begin the laborious process of rebuilding herself.

Fleetingly, she had contemplated dolling herself up for Bill’s return, to invite the naked lust she knew it would elicit and thereby provide herself with an absurd, obscene thrill. The knot in her stomach quickly dissuaded her, the little pit of residual anger and hurt, as did the reminder her brain concocted that she should probably reedit (for the umpteenth time) her remarks for the following day. So she had fixed herself a steady stream of gin and tonics – heavy, each time, on the tonic in a half-assed attempt at moderation – and waited.

Bill approached tentatively. “Hey baby girl.” He wanted to hurl himself at her, smother her in kisses and cuddles, apologize in every way he could think of, but such an onslaught could, if not carefully done, hurt more than it helped. As if the universe had interpreted his worst-case scenario as a request, Hillary almost instantaneously collapsed into gut-wrenching sobs. As he pulled her close, stroking her hair, one word leapt out from the papers surrounding her: Adoption.

Shit. That was tomorrow afternoon, wasn’t it? After a week like this, reopening that particular wound seemed especially barbaric.

“It’s not too late,” he whispered. “When we get out of here” – maybe sooner rather than later, it occurred to him with a little inward grimace – “we’ll do it. It’s not –”

Hillary pulled away abruptly. “It is,” she choked out. There was such unimaginable agony in those two syllables. The words came slowly, in painful, shuddering bursts. “I could never – everyone would think it was a prop – a sham – and I – and I couldn’t – couldn’t bear it. I couldn’t do that to – to our –“ Renewed tears rendered any further statements regarding their hypothetical future child – the child never to be – totally incoherent.

Every time Bill thought it was impossible for him to hate himself more, some new anguish, some new way in which he’d unthinkingly tortured this woman, beautiful beyond comprehension, beyond anything he deserved, revealed itself.

Before he could say anything, she started rubbing her eyes, trying desperately to pull herself together, little bursts of uncontrolled emotion punctuating her refrain of “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

“Don’t be.” In spite of this entreaty, Hillary continued her needless penitence unabated. Bill gently took her chin, forcing eye contact. “You have helped thousands and thousands of children and you will help thousands and thousands more. You have failed no one. Don’t be sorry.” Part of him wanted to go on, to make abundantly clear where the blame truly lay, but that wouldn’t help her. Not really. However sincere his sentiments, it only served to assuage his own guilt, a liberating, self-indulgent purge that she’d be honor-bound to refute and that he not so secretly wanted her to. But once you painstakingly worked your way under the façade – assuming you bothered to try – and really saw Hillary, it felt like the worst kind of sin to exacerbate, or even to ignore, all that softness. All that pain.

He opened his mouth to make his own apology, succinct and far more warranted than hers, but she
stopped him with a kiss. No effort was made by either party to deepen it, but he nonetheless found
himself overwhelmed. It communicated so clearly her love, faintly tinged with a desperate need,
and her suffering: two conflicting, coexisting forces, both equally profound and powerful. After
some moments, Hillary withdrew, looking almost embarrassed. Fragile. Shy. “Hold me?” she
asked, voice still trembling, tears still perilously close.

“Always.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be Chelsea and Thanksgiving - I just saw an opportunity for
additional angst too good to pass up. Thank you all so much for reading and
commenting - hope you enjoy!
November 25, 1998

“I’ve read it, Dad.”

Chelsea’s tone was even, one of studied nonchalance. If you didn’t know her – didn’t know her mother – it would be all too easy to assume she was referring to some tome assigned as part of her coursework. A novel he’d recommended. Bill knew better, could hear the distress dammed back by her casual words. The fact, too, that she’d waited so carefully for Hillary to leave the two of them alone and his wife’s wholly unconvincing pretext for departure (she had never before felt compelled to do a cutlery inventory the night before Thanksgiving dinner, particularly not when there were only three attendees) was more than sufficient evidence of a general conspiracy. His daughter needed to tell him, in no uncertain terms, how she felt about what he’d done and, characteristically, had not wanted to hurt her mother still more by doing so, each knowing how those four simple words would have devastated her. Chelsea knew what he’d done. What he was. His shame was complete.

Bill forced himself to look at her, into those eyes that perfectly blended his and hers. He waited.

There was a moment’s pause as Chelsea untangled her thoughts, selecting which wounded thread of so many, too many, to pursue first.

“How could you do that to Mom? I mean, Jesus, Dad, when you – when this started – that intern was what? Three, four years older than I am now?”

Shit. He felt sick. Ashamed and sick. Sick and ashamed. More so than usual. It had never occurred to him – no, he corrected himself, he had willfully banished any hint of that stomach-turning notion from his brain, too willingly allowed it to be subsumed totally by intoxicating lust. Absolved himself with the arrogant belief that Monica had started it with that delicious flash of her thong; that she wanted him at least as much as, if not more than, he wanted her; that age and the completely off-kilter power dynamic were rendered irrelevant by her repeated, enthusiastic consent.

“It would be one thing if it was just once, just some stupid mistake, but this is over and over and over again – for years – and there are dozens – what did the girl say you told her? ‘Hundreds’? – more out there just like her! I can’t – what about Mom? You love her, I know you do. It breaks her heart. You break her heart. I remember –“ Her voice hitched. Tears started to spill, despite her best efforts to combat them. “I remember hearing her. Crying. I wanted to go in and see what was wrong, but I knew – how mad she’d be at herself if I did. Sometimes I knew it was about – a baby – or some awful lies they were telling – but most of the time – it was you, Dad. Most of the time, it was you. I wasn’t sure exactly – I’ve never known exactly, until now – but it was you. And then she’d come out later and help me with my homework and read to me or we’d watch a movie like nothing had happened. Like it was nothing, like nothing was wrong. I let myself believe it, too, because I didn’t know what else to do.”

On the occasions, much fewer and farther between than they should have been, when Bill had allowed his mind to stray perilously close to acknowledging the pain his infidelities caused, he had never conceived of this. Hillary cried. He made her cry. He was acutely, painfully aware of those
facts, however much he tried to drown them out. But hearing his little girl – their little girl – recount that anguish, comimgled with her own, was beyond anything he’d contemplated, even in his most toxic, vicious bouts of self-recrimination.

“That you could do this to her – when you know her. She’s so kind and sensitive, not like what they say; I mean, she tears up at The Wizard of Oz like clockwork. She gives the best hugs. When you hurt, she hurts. She’s done everything for you, for me – for all of us. The others – they have no idea. But you know. And you did it anyway. That’s the part – I just can’t understand.”

“I can’t understand it either, sweetie,” he choked out, trying to retain some modicum of composure so that she wouldn’t feel guilty. So that she would keep talking. It was good for her – good for him to hear it, regardless of how upsetting it was. Because every word was true, an accurate indictment of his reprehensible thoughtlessness and ego and the appallingly callous acts those dual forces led him to. “But I want to change – I’m trying – I’m working hard at it. And I hope that, someday, you’ll be able to forgive me. That I’ll deserve it.”

Bill wasn’t altogether sure how or when she’d made her way across the den to him and was barely aware of it until he felt his child’s tears on his shoulder, her arms squeezing him so tightly that it was almost difficult to draw breath. “I love you, Daddy,” she whispered, voice muffled slightly by his sweater.

Despite the tightness of her embrace still constricting his chest, it felt as though a tremendous weight had been lifted. “Thank you,” he sighed. “I love you too.”

Minutes passed, the tension between father and daughter eased, although the hurt at its root had not yet been eradicated. Chelsea lifted her head abruptly. “Dad?”

“Mmmhmm?”

“Don’t tell Mom.”

He knew precisely what she meant without any need for elaboration. Hillary would never forgive herself for the years of what he could already hear her calling “carelessness”, the unconscionable slips of control that had allowed Chelsea even fleeting glimpses of her anguish, made worse still by the fact that Chelsea had actually worried about her. She beat herself up badly enough as it was without the added ammunition that that particular revelation would provide.

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By the time Hillary returned, glass of Riesling in hand, the pair were talking relatively normally again, discussing her plans for the next semester at Stanford – albeit with tearstains still visible on their cheeks. Chelsea stifled her yawns with increasing difficulty until she finally relented, acquiescing to her need for sleep. Both parents received emphatic hugs and drowsily muttered assurances of love as she departed, leaving them alone, seated immediately next to one another on the sofa in a silence rendered slightly awkward by her fresh absence.

“Did you two have a good talk?” Hillary asked, taking another sip of wine.

“Yeah.”

She glanced at him over the rim of her glass, clearly requiring a more detailed response.

“We agreed on quite a few things.”

“Oh?”
“First off, that I’m a selfish idiot.”

“Bill –“

“That I’ve nearly ruined everything we have by being such a selfish idiot.”

“Bill –“

“And, most importantly, that I’m – that we’re – completely crazy about you.”

Hillary stared down into the pale liquid before downing the last swallow, setting the drained wineglass firmly on the coffee table. “Me too.”

“And I’m so grateful for that, I can’t even begin to tell you. I love you s –“

Before he could finish his sentence, before her own brain had fully registered her decision, she was kissing him. The suddenness of this development did not translate into feverish passion; rather, each movement evinced a languorous tenderness that merely continued their conversation in more eloquent, explicit terms. Gradually her hands moved beneath his sweater, untucking the t-shirt they found there. His expansive chest, the soft flesh… she wanted more. She needed more. Shifting herself to straddle his lap, Hillary came up for air only long enough to pull off both layers of impeding clothing, quickly discarded over her shoulder.

Bill wasn’t responding. Or, rather, he was responding – she could feel his growing response quite distinctly from her new position – but he had not yet begun to escalate their contact as he was wont to do. She paused her ministrations, allowing them both to catch their breath.

“Is this what you want?” he panted.

She nodded vigorously, not entirely trusting herself to speak.

Their lips crashed together again, this time hungrier, harder, faster, her own sweater quickly joining the other garments on the floor in the few fleeting seconds of separation their greedy mouths would allow. As her hips started, independent of any conscious or rational thought, to move, to grind against him, he moaned into her neck, nipping and sucking his way down towards her breasts.

In between the animal, inarticulate noises she found herself reduced to, Hillary managed to produce two distinct words with interstitial groans when, his face buried in her cleavage, Bill’s hands started fiddling with the clasp of her bra: “Bed. Now.”

He agreed fervently.

Eventually, they made it to the bedroom. There were a few detours along the way, where one or the other of them would be shoved against the wall, pinned down with kisses, caresses and gropes, her leg wrapping around him as a vivid reminder of where they were meant to be going and what exactly she wanted to do when they got there. At some point, her bra disappeared, as did her trousers; if Hillary had been capable of coherent thought, that Chelsea might be the one to stumble across them would have concerned her, but that point had long since come and gone. He backed her onto the mattress, hands and mouth seemingly everywhere at once, before breaking away to look at her.

She was fucking breathtaking. Skin flushed, hair disheveled, the heaving of her chest only accentuating that divine ratio between bosom, waist and hips, her impossibly blue eyes locked onto his own, begging him for more. ‘How could something so perfect be mine?’ The love he felt, the
thankfulness, brought tears to his eyes, but, not wanting it to overwhelm him, to spoil this for her, he quickly returned to the task in hand, kissing her ravenously. He began taking full advantage of those long, graceful digits she obsessed over, drawing attentive circles and strokes over her clitoris with a thumb as his fingers found their way inside her, relishing the tight, wet heat as she arched and bucked into him, muscles contracting and relaxing with increasing intensity. Whenever he could bear to pull his lips away from her for longer than it took to murmur “Love you” or “So fuckin’ hot – so fuckin’ pretty”, he marveled at those sublime curves – her cheek, her neck, her breast, her stomach, her ass, her thigh – and how they blended with equally exquisite straight lines – she thrashed her head, giving him a perfect view of her profile. Like a doll. A beautiful porcelain doll made flesh and blood, given a heart and mind similarly unflawed.

Her delicate hands clutching at the sheets, clutching at him, fumbling frenziedly with his fly, shoving his pants to the floor, where they were quickly abandoned, releasing his cock, working up and down the shaft, slickening it with precum in a rhythm that matched his own – oh God, he wasn’t going to be able to hold out much longer and, from all the evidence he was presented with, neither was she.

“Billy – please,” she gasped, followed by a loud, euphoric shriek of “Bill!” as he finally slid into her.

A few thrusts, synchronous squeezes, the slightest touch brought them both to climax, sobs wracking their bodies as their mouths met again. His tongue entered her mouth in an attempt (clearly appreciated) to compensate for withdrawal elsewhere.

“I love you, Billy,” Hillary breathed. “I love you so much.”

He couldn’t form words, the capacity drained from him with his tears. There were no words to say that could possibly express even a fraction of what he felt. Reaching for the nightstand, he grabbed a tissue, tenderly wiping at her thighs.

As he played with her hair and watched her slip into sleep, Bill whispered, “Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

Smut has happened! I just hope it’s not completely godawful, and lives (at least somewhat) up to expectation. Also, this is technically Thanksgiving Eve, but... a lot of thanks get given, so I’m running with it.

Thank you all again for your infinitely kind comments!
November 26, 1998

It almost felt wrong – obscene – how happy he was. How smug, as he woke up with his wife’s body, soft, warm and sensuous, wrapped around him and saw her smile, almost a little shyly, before they kissed, hands wandering, caressing. That self-satisfaction reached almost intolerable levels after they finally managed to put the brakes on their newly revived routine of light morning Hanky-Panky and he headed out for a round of golf, when one of his agents pulled him aside, carefully out of Chelsea’s view, and presented him with the clothing he and Hillary had jettisoned the night before. The collection, he noted with considerable amusement, included her panties, which he could not for the life of him remember removing. Judging by the state they were in, he had clearly done so with considerable vigor. Fortunately, however, due to the uncalculated nature of their tryst, they were not a constituent part of any lingerie that drove him especially wild. Not that he’d mind her getting more. Hillary blushed furiously when he popped back into the bedroom, laughing as he inventoried the recovered items, but her fussing and fretting were easily stifled by another interlude against the closed door, far too brief for his liking, one in which he forgot himself (maybe ever-so-slightly intentionally) and marked her neck sufficiently that she’d be relegated to turtlenecks – wonderfully figure-hugging turtlenecks that provided a constant, teasing reminder of what splendor lay beneath the comparatively thin layer of fabric – for the remainder of the weekend.

Well, except for those indescribably joyous occasions that he was already giddily anticipating, when her sweater – and everything else – would come off and he could indulge once more in his favorite obsession. It didn’t matter one damn what the Republicans threw at him now; he had his girl back. He had both his girls back. There was still so much work to be done, so many reparations to be made, but his post-coital elation made it all seem beautifully, magically possible.

He, Bill was keenly aware, did not deserve an iota of this. Did not deserve her – not by a long shot. He never had and, despite his best efforts (which he vowed henceforth to give), very likely never would. But God, how he’d try. His life’s work would be her happiness – what it should have been all along. If she’d let him. If, he thought with a sudden, tremendous ache, he could make her see that she deserved it.

That afternoon, he came in well under par.

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Once the Clintons were assembled around the dinner table, plates piled high with Thanksgiving bounty, it was time for the traditional toast. Bill, in a rare adoption of the role of Southern patriarch, would loquaciously eulogize the past year, enumerating in intentionally rambling fashion the family’s myriad blessings until the heckling from Hillary and Chelsea became too much and he was forced to stand down. This year was no different.

“– and I think we can all agree that it’s a good thing the Secret Service deems it too high-risk for any of us to get Socks out of the White House Christmas tree ourselves. Now, Buddy’s year has been no less eventful, no less full of the many little pieces of good fortune that constitute our lives –“
A roll whistled past his head; its direction made it more likely to emanate from Chelsea, but Hillary did pitch a mean curve.

“– be we man or beast. This past January, for instance –“

He heard the groans of exaggerated exasperation in stereo, saw the grimaces and rolling eyes that typically greeted his remarks and, most of all, his relentlessly cornball jokes, and felt the beginnings of a sizeable lump in his throat. They had both let him back in, allowed him, for reasons he could never fully comprehend, the inordinate privilege of normalcy. Of being Chelsea’s father. Of being Hillary’s husband.

“Look, I know I’ve already gone on for way too long –“

“Hear, hear!” Chelsea interjected, much to her mother’s vocal amusement.

“But I really want to thank you. Both of you. There’s no one all this mess has been harder on, and neither of you should ever have had to go through it in the first place. And that’s my fault. It’s all my fault, my responsibility, but you two have borne the consequences of my stupidity and my selfishness with – with such grace and dignity, and on top of that, you’ve been far kinder to me than I deserve. Chelsea, you have grown into a truly extraordinary young woman and I am beyond proud, beyond blessed, to call you my daughter. And Hillary – baby, I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again until you’re sick to death of hearing it, you are so good. In every conceivable sense of that word. I love you more than I can express – and you know I’ve been trying for going on twenty-eight years and you know I’ll keep right on trying.”

He raised his beer to each of them and they returned the gesture with their wineglasses, Chelsea’s containing the microscopic sliver of red Hillary allowed only on special occasions.

Independently, reflexively, both women reached for Bill’s hands, gently squeezing a message of support and reassurance. There was silence and the air was thick, not with tension, but with love.

“Now come on,” Hillary cleared her throat. “Before all this gets cold.”

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Another tradition: sated with food and their beverage of choice, they huddled together on the couch, Chelsea in the middle, the bleak sepia tones of M-G-M’s conception of the Kansas prairie filling the television screen as a thin, slowly swelling flutter of strings made itself known on the soundtrack, hinting at the song to come. Aunt Em snapped at Dorothy, and Bill felt a nudge to his side and looked to where the jerk of his daughter’s head directed him.

Hillary’s eyes shone, light from the TV reflected by welling tears. Her lips subtly, almost imperceptibly, moved in synchronization with Judy Garland’s voice, the words ingrained in her heart, her memory, like a catechism. Like a prayer.

“Someplace where there isn’t any trouble… D’you s’pose there is such a place, Toto? There must be.”

Chelsea wrapped her arm tightly around her mother. Bill reached across and took his wife’s hand securely in his. She swallowed and blinked, allowing a few tears to roll down her cheeks in spite of herself before she glanced over to her family. Her eyes were still unmistakably wet, but her smile was all the more radiant for it, her happiness all the sweeter.

“It’s not a place you can get to by a boat or a train; it’s far, far away – behind the moon, beyond the rain –“
I think this is actually mostly fluffy? Maybe? I'm sure we'll be back to our regularly scheduled angst soon enough, hahaha.

Thank you all so much for reading and commenting! Hope you enjoy. <3
The crisp fall air was invigorating, liberating, as mother and daughter took a mid-morning (a late mid-morning) constitutional through the grounds of Camp David. They had discussed doing so the night before, and Hillary had protested as much when her husband insisted repeatedly on detaining her in bed for “just a little longer”. At least, she had tried valiantly to do so between the giggles, squeals and moans that he infuriatingly kept eliciting. Bill could play her like a fiddle. He’d always had that uncanny ability, a knack that no one else had quite mastered; if he could still make her this giddy after all the shit he’d done, the broad spectrum of torments he’d subjected her to, then there was no hope for her. She was happily ensnared. Excruciatingly, gloriously, permanently his girl. When she finally managed to make her way to the living room, desperately tugging her turtleneck up to cover as much as possible, Chelsea greeted her with a pointed glance at her watch and an affectionate roll of the eyes. She could only respond with a sheepish shrug and an utterly transparent fallacy about having slept in longer than anticipated.

They kept a brisk pace as they walked the now familiar circuit around the grounds of the presidential retreat, Secret Service monitoring them discreetly. Conversation centered predominantly around school, her friends, with boys occasionally creeping in. Chelsea, she could tell, felt slightly ill at ease bringing the topic up, testing the waters, asking her advice about it for the first time in months, almost as if she thought it might completely derail what had thus far been a remarkably pleasant holiday weekend. Hillary made it her mission to chase away that anxiety with relentless good cheer and a barrage of anecdotes from Wellesley, about the comparatively uncomplicated so-called romances she’d flirted with before the real thing had hit her like a ton of bricks. Shattered her. Put her back together again, made her feel, fleetingly, just a fraction as strong and beautiful as he thought she was, lulling her back into security before crushing her anew. The agony and the ecstasy. That was off limits still, certainly with her daughter, but vague stories about Jeff and David were permissible.

There was something a little disheartening about Chelsea’s unfeigned (if slightly exaggerated) shock at the very existence of boyfriends Before Bill, but that was rapidly undone by how obviously impressed she was by this freshly uncovered, relatable facet of her mother. How she relaxed and opened up more, reached her hand out to take Hillary’s. How they both threw their heads back and laughed as they exchanged confidences.

As soon as he was told that Mrs. Rodham was on the line, Bill tossed his book aside and snatched up the receiver. Not many men would be so eager to speak to their mothers-in-law, but then not many had been blessed with Dorothy Rodham, who, he was absolutely convinced, was an actual angel. Like her daughter, he noted with a contented sigh, thoughts wandering blissfully back to Hillary for a moment before his attention returned to the phone.

“Dorothy!” he beamed, unable to keep the excitement from his voice. It had been so long since they’d spoken.

The silence and the audible tension when she said his name in response reminded him why. She was deeply, profoundly disappointed in him; it was almost palpable. Not angry, not really, although
he deserved all the fury she could muster for breaking her daughter’s heart yet again. There was, however, nothing but a quietly devastating sense of disillusionment, and that hurt at least as much as any outburst of rage could. Bill had forgotten this, the other force that impelled Hillary towards unattainable perfection with a strength equal to that of the back of Hugh’s hand.

“H – how are you and the boys doing? Have a happy Thanksgiving?” he asked, words getting caught in his throat.

“Oh, the usual. You know. More football than I can take! How’s my Hillary? Is she feeling better?”

A slightly odd question, but he attributed that to Midwestern diplomacy, seeking a more polite way of asking whether or not he’d done any additional damage to Hillary’s emotional well-being recently. Whether or not their marriage was stabilizing. Whether he’d treat her as she deserved to be treated in future. “Yeah. I’m sure she told you that we’ve been seeing somebody, and that’s really helped us – well, it’s certainly helped me get some perspective. Really realize what I’ve been doing and start to understand a little bit of the why. And I hope it’s been good for her, too. I think it has.”

“Oh. Good.” Another awkward pause. “So the blood clot has cleared up?”

**Blood clot?**

He tried not to sound overtly flabbergasted. “It has. It absolutely has. You almost wouldn’t know she’d had one.”

“Well, I tried to tell her – I’m sure you did, too – to go easy on all that traveling. ‘Just rest,’ I said. But you know how she is. If there’s work to do, she’ll go out there and do it, no matter how sick she is or how tired she must be. She’s always been that way; she’d have to be half-dead before she’d let me make her stay home from school.”

Bill’s brain was whirring frenetically: ‘Blood clot? What fucking blood clot?’ Regardless, he forced out a chuckle. “She is pretty stubborn.”

“And strong. So strong.” He heard his own admiration – that love and respect, the hint of awe that made it border on worship – reflected in Dorothy’s voice.

“Your mother called.” His tone was flat, but the irritation he was attempting to mask was easily discernible, especially for one who knew him as well as Hillary did. Those long fingers were flipping aimlessly through a book that he had previously been hard-pressed to put down; he must have gone back and forth between the same two pages at least a dozen times since she’d entered the room. It’d all come tumbling out, whatever it was, soon enough, without any prodding on her part. Best to keep things on an even keel as long as possible, she thought.

“And how is Clan Rodham? God, I hope Tony didn’t set the turkey on fire again.”

Bill stared at her, trying to decide if he was angry. He couldn’t quite make himself feel anything other than hurt and an overriding worry. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked quietly.

Hillary looked at him quizzically, plopping down next to him on the sofa before averting her gaze, focusing intently on fluffing the surrounding pillows.

“About the blood clot,” he added, a little more forcefully. She froze.
“Honestly, honey, it wasn’t a big deal. It was in my leg; it hurt a bit; the doctor gave me blood thinners; it went away. That’s it. There was no reason to worry you. You have enough on your plate as it is, and you would have made a huge fuss for nothing. And I had to go out and campaign for the midterms, anyway.”

All of that was technically true, but she still felt compelled to avoid eye contact.

“You didn’t have to.” Her husband’s voice was thick with tears, trembling in the way that always pricked at the back of her own eyes.

“I did.”

That was the truest of all. There was no alternative but to fight, for his sake and for her own. Her dubious self-respect demanded the clawing back of her reputation, the reconciliation of indomitable feminist and political powerhouse with wronged wife still unaccountably head-over-heels smitten; her overpowering love for him dictated that she do whatever she could to save him, both from the external forces aligned against him and from himself. Physical pain, exhaustion (emotional and otherwise) didn’t matter one iota. It never had and it never would, not when she had work to do.

Forcing the words out through the growing lump in her throat, she added, “You don’t walk away if you love someone. You help them.”

Bill grabbed her, bundling her up tightly in his arms, sobbing into her shoulder. She managed to hold herself together, hand making gentle circles on his heaving back, until he choked out, “I could have lost you.” And she knew he wasn’t just talking about the blood clot.

Chapter End Notes

At least this is on the fluffier end of the angst spectrum? We're going to get back to delving into their many issues in earnest soon, so there will be angstier angst ahead, hahaha.

I know I'm a bit of a broken record, but I just have to keep reiterating how much it means to me that people actually read this and enjoy it, much less leave such kind comments. So thank you all so much!!
“Baby?” Bill’s voice, raspier than usual and slightly muffled by the thick wool of her sweater, made her open her eyes, still her fingers as they worked his scalp gently, threading through soft silver hair. By the sound of it, the tears had, for the most part, ceased; her ministrations had achieved their dual aim of soothing him and easing herself back from an emotional precipice. He lifted his head, clearly reluctant, from where he’d buried it in her bosom, eyes and hand simultaneously, instinctively seeking hers.

“Mmmm?” She cursed the catch in her voice, audible even in that simple, non-verbal utterance, and used her free hand to wipe roughly at her eyes. ‘He needs strength right now. Give him strength, not this maudlin, self-indulgent crap.’

“Hill, I –” Almost as soon as he began, he stopped, furrowing his brow, drawing his lower lip into his teeth. This was not, Hillary knew, for lack of words but for a surfeit of them, an attempt to give himself time to sort through them all and select the right ones. A vague sense of foreboding churned in the pit of her stomach. The reason behind his contemplation was often a need to seek the best means of telling her something she didn’t particularly want to hear or of asking a question she had no desire to answer. Or, on far too many occasions for her liking, both. She waited, and he finally settled on a phrasing at once ambiguous and blindingly clear: “I worry about you.”

“I told you, I’m fine. Really. There’s nothing to worry about,” she blurted out, unable to successfully mask the defensiveness in her tone.

“Not about the blood clot – not just about that, anyway. Sometimes –“ (‘too much of the time’) “ – you don’t take care of yourself. You push yourself too hard, so much harder than you need to. You can be sick; you can be tired. It’s allowed. It’s okay. You can take a break and let me do some of that heavy lifting. I want to.”

“That’s awfully sweet of you, but I’m –“ It was her turn to end abruptly, too suddenly to be classified as ‘ trailing off’. There were so many occasions when Hillary felt herself collapsing onto him, into him, that his continued perception of her as anything like the unassailable fortress of resilience and courage she so longed to be sent a warm, sickly smugness coursing through her. A sense of genuine accomplishment that even he, more privy than anyone had ever been or ever would be to all the cracks and jagged edges that marred her façade, still saw her predominantly through the carefully crafted, diligently maintained pretense of invulnerability. As she gazed into his eyes, pleading, irises almost more grey than blue, she saw how badly he wanted to be privy to every piece of her, remembered the acuteness of his frustration whenever he encountered yet another barred door, thoughts and feelings she hated and feared and wanted to keep absolutely off limits, even to him. Perhaps, especially to him.

His thumb lightly traced the delicate bones of her wrist, caressing the pale skin pulled taut over them. Hillary racked her brain, searching for some way to make him understand the difficulty – the impossibility, maybe – of what he was asking.

“I do have to work that hard, baby. I do, otherwise I’d never be what – what people expect me to be. What people want me to be, what you and Chelsea need me to be. You would all be
disappointed; I would be disappointed.”

“Hillary –“

“I couldn’t live like that. Even now, when I do just – give it everything I have, and it’s still not enough, still not good enough – that’s hard, but without all that effort, I wouldn’t come anywhere close, and that thought is – it’s terrifying.” She was sure she looked pathetic, wide-eyed and desperate, babbling about such unbelievably petty problems to a little boy who’d been beaten, relied upon from an early age to carry the weight of overwhelming, grown-up problems. He had so much pain of his own. The last thing he needed was another millstone around his neck, an emotional liability to fret over and expend the effort he should, by all rights, have devoted to his own healing on the idiotic neuroses of a wife consumed by an intense, petrifying fear of failure.

Her mind lit on the perfect illustration, the means, perhaps, of replacing his befuddlement with comprehension. “When I was, I don’t know, probably seven or eight, we started doing multiplication in school. You know how lousy I am at math.” Bill looked momentarily as though he was about to interject; she could see the argument to the contrary bubbling up, but he bit his tongue and let her continue uninterrupted. “And I just could not wrap my brain around it. It threw me completely for a loop. Like, what was wrong with me? Why was I so stupid? Other kids struggled, but they were used to it. They either figured it out or didn’t care, and I couldn’t do either. Then we had a quiz. I still remember that feeling, like my heart was suddenly just – out of my chest – when the teacher passed the papers back. And the look on my father’s face when I brought it home with all those awful red marks.” Hillary’s hands were shaking – Jesus, this was ridiculous. Heat and color were rising in her cheeks; it was impossible to discern whether she was more ashamed at the memory, so uncannily vivid, or at how viscerally it still affected her.

“So the next morning he came and woke me up. I have no idea what time it was, just that the sky was still pitch black. We drilled the multiplication tables for hours, until it was time to go to school. Weekends, too. There was barely any time for breakfast, just endlessly reciting. Every time I made a mistake or yawned or started to drift off, he’d give me a whack on the knuckles and I’d have to start over. By the time we had another quiz, the right answers came to me automatically. I barely had to think about them anymore. And I got every single question right that time. I knew that I never wanted to go through that again. If I could help it, I never wanted to see that look again, either.” There was a brief, painful pause, in which there could be no doubt at all that she had not been as successful in that particular endeavor as she had hoped. “But at least I knew how to – deal with it, I guess. How to do everything in my power, by myself, to be the best I could possibly be. And even though that still wasn’t enough, it was better to know that I didn’t have to just accept it. I could at least try.”

She exhaled, long and slow, in the moment of respite afforded by the end of her volley of recollections. “So that’s what I do,” she concluded, an afterthought to fill the silence. Her smile wobbled precariously, but she willed it back into place, feeling a slight exhilaration at yet another triumph over her own damnable fragility. “It works perfectly well for me. And I’m fine. You don’t need to worry.”

Bill sat silently next to her on the couch, still holding her hand and absorbing all she had said. Despite the tangible reassurance of their physical connection, the delay in his reaction unnerved her considerably. Her brain ground back into action: there were reasons she tried to avoid giving voice to her absurd insecurities and this was paramount among them. “I’m sorry, Billy. I shouldn’t have –“

“Thank you. For telling me. For trusting me. But you don’t have to do that with me – for me. Let me take care of you. I love you. Just you. That’s more than ‘good enough’ for me.”
His words startled her, as much for their content as for their suddenness. Hillary nodded, not quite able to speak, and Bill squeezed her hand tightly, pressing a kiss to her temple.

They remained that way for several minutes. She relished his quiet, protective love, the complete acceptance she could scarcely believe wouldn’t dissipate when confronted with her innumerable flaws. Yet here he was, holding her.

This was what so few people seemed willing or able to understand; this was why she always let him back in.

Chapter End Notes

Not particularly happy with this one, but continuing to hem and haw over it doesn't seem to be making me any more or less satisfied - so here it is! Hope you enjoy, and thank you all so much again for your incredibly kind comments and encouragement.
November 30, 1998

“Why is there always something where I have to try and look pretty right after the holidays? It’s not fair. All you have to do is put on a suit and bam – you’re presidential. Doesn’t matter how much mashed potatoes you had or how many scoops of ice cream you put on your pie…”

Bill leaned against the frame of the bedroom door, admiring his wife as she fussed at her reflection and grumbled incessantly about what she saw. Based on her comments, she was apparently alternately holding her stomach in and relaxing, although he didn’t see one iota of difference between the two states. Her simple black dress nipped in at the waist, flared out over her hips and clung to her breasts, exactly as it had done whenever she wore it prior to the Thanksgiving glut, neither perceptibly tighter nor looser. Finally resigning herself to – well, he wasn’t entirely sure to what; to the impossibility of making significant alterations to her body in the forty-five minutes remaining before their briefing, perhaps – Hillary moved to the vanity, applying foundation in an attempt to conceal the fading marks he’d left on her neck. Tonight’s taping meant that her makeup needed to look good both in the room and on camera. Up close as well as from a distance. Not, as she was now muttering, “like Norma fucking Desmond.”

He was about to say that he’d be her William Holden anytime. Then he remembered that Holden’s character – what the hell was his name? Joe? – wound up shot dead, floating face down in the swimming pool after attempting to leave Norma for a younger woman. The time would come when Hillary would be able to laugh at such an allusion, but he was fairly certain that it had not yet arrived.

“Shit. Bill, would you grab a necklace? Something tight. I’m positive they’re still gonna be able to see these.”

Grabbing a choker-like confection of web-like gold and pearls from her jewelry box, he obliged, seizing the opportunity to plant a few gentle kisses to her neck as he fiddled with the clasps. “You look so good, babe. No one’ll be able to keep their eyes on the show. Patti LuPone will be furious.”

A short, sharp laugh emanated from Hillary in spite of herself. When he looked up, however, the big blue eyes he saw gazing at the mirror were unmistakably sad. It broke his heart. “Tell me,” he whispered.

She shook her head. “It’s –“ Hillary had to stop herself, close her eyes, take a deep, steadying breath. Dammit, if she cried now, she’d have to completely redo her makeup. And there wasn’t time.

“It’s not ‘nothing’ and it’s not ‘stupid’. Tell me.”

Exhale. Let it out. “I hate doing this. I’ve always hated it. Having to go on parade. Hearing people whisper when I know exactly what they’re whispering about. I can get through it when I’m angry with you because – somehow it doesn’t hurt as much. But now…” Breathe. Don’t cry. Do not cry. “And they’ll be staring. Pulling me apart, wondering – to themselves, out loud, both – why you stay.”
That was a punch in the gut. His hands clenched on her shoulders before he could muster the wherewithal to temper his reaction.

Hillary needed to focus. It didn’t particularly matter on what. Her hands shook slightly as she unscrewed the mascara wand from its attached tube of black gunk; she tried to will them steady as she raised it to one eye. Longer, more luscious lashes wouldn’t solve the problem, but they certainly couldn’t hurt.

Her husband took gently by the wrist, kneeling down next to her.

“Honey, your knee…” she said quietly. The feeblest possible protest. Her attempts to avert her gaze were futile, and soon they were completely locked in on one another, in their own little world.

“You are beautiful, Hillary. That is not up for debate. That is a fact. And I’ll tell you something else I know for a fact. I know that plenty of people stare because they want you. They want what, for some totally inexplicable reason, you have decided to give to me, and that makes me so proud. So grateful.”

God, he could see the tears coming and he knew how annoyed she’d be if they started to fall. Lift the mood; make her laugh; do something.

“Now, I’d be delighted to tell you all about how beautiful you are, in minute detail, but that’ll take a whole lot more time than we’ve got right now. Unless you’re otherwise engaged later…?” There was a smile, slightly shy, like a ray of sunshine peeking out from behind the clouds.

“I’m all yours, Mr. President.”

His face spread into a grin so wide that it had only been in place for a few seconds when his facial muscles started to ache. “But I would like to take a moment to enumerate some of your many admirers. Just for the record.”

A cock of the head, a quirk of the eyebrow, and she scooted over to make room for him on the stool, correctly intuiting that he couldn’t comfortably maintain his current position for too much longer. Instead of allowing them to sit precariously, hips smashed together, side by side, Bill swiftly pulled her onto his lap, eliciting a squeal and a cascade of giggles that were music to his ears.

“Go on,” she managed to say, struggling to make her expression neutral.

“Boris Yeltsin.” Bill’s tone and face were as serious as possible, but that façade was incredibly difficult to maintain, particularly once Hillary erupted in laughter, throwing her head back to his shoulder. “It’s true. He can’t keep his hands to himself when you’re around. If it were a decade ago, I’d be worried about you defecting. A woman can only resist that notorious Russian charm for so long…”

Once her breathing resumed some semblance of normalcy, she batted the ball right back to his side of the court. “I swear to God, I had that bruise on my ass for weeks – but there is not enough vodka in the world for Boris dahhhhhl link to get lucky, believe me.”

He adopted a skeptical look that earned him a light swat. “Strom Thurmond,” he said gravely.

Hillary gasped, the very picture of wide-eyed innocence. “Not the last surviving veteran of the War of Northern Aggression? That clean-living family man, as pure white as the driven snow?”

“The same.” The effort required to keep a straight face was practically herculean.
In her best aping of a Southern belle, she fluttered her lashes and drawled, “Ah suppose ah could just lie back and think of Tara…” And with that, his resolve was utterly shattered, leaving him wracked with silent laughter.

“K-Kennedy,” he choked out.

“Now that’s flattering,” Hillary cackled. “A real affirmation. Such a relief to know that I meet the exacting criteria of tits, a pussy, and a pulse.”

They were nearly hysterical, rocking back on their tiny seat with such vigor that they nearly ended up in a heap on the floor. A knock at the door made her jump up, still trying desperately to catch her breath while searching for her clip-on earrings, hoping that they at least sort of matched the necklace Bill had selected. “Coming!” she called.

Capricia’s voice, unable to mask the slight note of suspicion it contained, came from the other side, slightly muffled by the wood. “You’ve got five minutes.”

Hillary looked up and saw the glint in her husband’s eyes, a split second before she felt his hands on her ass.

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Five minutes later, she was still slammed up against that door while some hapless aide tried repeatedly to open it, rapping their poor knuckles raw in vain. Eventually, they gave up, but the commotion outside and its increasingly desperate tenor brought Hillary reluctantly to her senses.

“We – need to go,” she panted, mouth barely parted from Bill’s. “You – need to calm down, and I – mmmmm, I’ve gotta do my lipstick again.”

He sighed, fully aware that she was right but wishing that, for a change, she wasn’t.

“But I’ll be holding you to your promise, William Jefferson Clinton.” Each name was punctuated by an all too brief kiss, a gesture that made the moment she slid out of his grasp even more excruciating.

Wondering for what must have been the millionth time what he could possibly have done to deserve her, Bill shot her a devilish grin as he made his way to the bathroom. “It’ll be my pleasure, Ms. Rodham.”

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Even after the lights dimmed, Hillary could feel scores of eyes boring into her. But she could also feel Bill’s hand clutching hers, resting, fingers interlaced, on her thigh. She smiled.

Chapter End Notes

In a shocking development, I'm actually kind of pleased with how this one turned out. Which probably, perversely, means that it's awful, hahaha.

As always, thanks so much for reading and for leaving such kind comments - they mean the absolute world, honestly!
December 1, 1998

“I don’t want you to go to New York,” Bill announced, wrapping his arms tightly around his wife’s waist and pulling her back down onto the mattress before she could even stick an arm through her bathrobe sleeve.

It was abundantly clear what he did want from the sloppy kisses peppering her neck and jaw-line and the hardness pressed against the small of her back. He had been insatiable last night – not that she minded, especially when his physical attentions were accompanied by words, whispered, breathed, moaned, that applied sorely needed balm to her oft-wounded ego – and looked set to pick up precisely where he’d left off before they’d both reluctantly succumbed to the purely biological need for a few hours’ sleep.

“Does that mean that you –“ her breath hitched as his left hand wandered between her thighs – “are personally going to call and cancel all my engagements?”

“Yes. By executive order.”

“And what are you planning to tell them?”

“That the First Lady –“ he smiled against her shoulder as a delighted groan interrupted him, a response to his fingers gently circling her clit that she couldn’t even come close to suppressing – “is extremely sexy, even more so than usual, and, consequently, the President does not think it advisable for her to leave the Residence today.”

Hillary made an attempt at intelligible speech, but that power was lost to her. A growl escaped the back of her throat as his digits left her, travelling back up to join his other hand in its ministrations to her breasts.

“In fact, the First Lady should not even leave the marital bed.”

“That so?” she panted, turning over to face him. Those goddamned gorgeous hands, those hands that drove her crazy, shifted their attention seamlessly to her buttocks, drawing her perilously close to him. Grey-blue eyes, their own beautiful hue only accentuated by the fading color of his hair, scanned her face. Lust, primal and unmistakable, mingled with a boyish awe. No matter how many times he explained it to her, whatever it was he saw remained incomprehensible. Flattering, to be sure, but somewhat baffling all the same. On good days, she got a giddy, momentary flash of it, but those were few and far between; the rest of the time, she did her best to banish such pettiness from her mind, trying to silence the cruel, nagging voices as much as possible but generally only managing to muffle them temporarily. Whenever he gave her that look, though, they were struck dumb.

He nodded. There was more praise he wanted to heap on her. Hillary needed to know, to understand, how perfect every inch of her was. That, he thought as her lips collided with his, would be his new mission. Should have been all along. Their tongues tangled and she pushed him to his back, shifting herself accordingly to sit astride him. Bill whined slightly when she withdrew, breaking their kiss, but the opportunity to look at her and drink her in more than compensated for
the loss. Her delicate hand wrapped around his erection, bringing it first to full arousal and then guiding it to her entrance.

A blissful haze enveloped them both. Slow and sensuous movements gradually gave way to carnality as desire got the better of them, quickening their pace until they attained the shattering, glorious climax they sought.

Bill drifted back into consciousness when he felt a kiss pressed to his forehead.

“Where you goin’?” he mumbled.

“Shower. And then you need to get ready for your first round of meetings. It’s the President of Mozambique this morning, then World AIDS Day. DNC tonight.”

Busy, busy. Not busy enough, he fretted, remembering queasily the concurrent hearings over at the Capitol that would dominate every single news outlet, regardless of what good he did (or tried to do) today. He could hear them baying for his blood and felt the fear he’d thus far kept at arm’s length catch up with him. Why did Hillary have to leave? Even a couple of days was too much for him. He was weak, damnable weak, and she was so strong and he needed her. Her love was his lifeline, keeping him afloat, anchored, in the midst of turbulence that threatened to overwhelm him.

She knew. She always did.

The fuzzy cloth of her bathrobe draped across his bare chest, her soothing arms his security blanket.

“You’re a good man, Bill. You’re a good president. Nothing they say can change that. This is an idiotic, politically motivated witch-hunt, and everyone knows it, whether or not they’re willing to admit it. Keep doing your job. Show them what you’re made of. I believe in you.”

He let out a sob, an act that seemed all the more shameful, an act of unpardonable self-pity, in the face of her indomitable courage. Yet another stinging betrayal of her miraculous, unshakable belief.

Hillary’s response, almost automatic, was to hold on tighter. “I love you, baby. I love you, I love you, I love you.” As she repeated the phrase, she felt his breathing steady, shallow gasps replaced by even inhaling and exhaling. It was a tonic, the only thing she possessed to ameliorate the pain she wished so ardently she could banish forever. ‘Maybe you don’t love him enough,’ her insidious self-doubt piped up, unbidden, unwanted, only to be quickly (if temporarily) stifled.

Now as much to quash her own fears as his, she popped back up, using her momentum to drag him from his pillow. “Change of plan. You get the bathroom first. I know Sam wants to talk to you the minute you get to the Oval about Prime Minister Sharif’s visit tomorrow, and he’ll kill me if I make you late.”

“We can’t have that,” Bill said, feeling his face relax into a smile. This was his girl. His wonderful, beautiful girl.

“And I have to prepare myself for the First Lady’s most vital job, one crucial to the survival of the Republic.”

“Which would be?”

“Welcoming the White House Christmas tree, of course.”
Her deadpan delivery caused him to collapse back onto the bed, laughing and dragging her down with him.

The corners of her mouth twitched. “Honestly, I can’t keep the Chapman family waiting. They’ve come all the way from their tree farm in Endeavor, Wisconsin –“

Bill let out a howl.

“– with their five children –“

Another one, as fresh tears joined those that had rolled down his cheeks moments ago for a very different reason.

“– and an eighteen-and-a-half foot balsam fir.”

He kissed her. The impulse was irresistible.

“I don’t want you to go.” The words spilled out before he could stop himself.

Hillary sighed, a deep, full-body exhalation that allowed Bill to feel what she was thinking. She didn’t want to, either, not really, but it couldn’t be helped. Commitments had been made and there was work to do. Not all of it arduous: her itinerary included a stop at Bellevue’s pediatric AIDS unit to read to the children there. The trip was characterized by an almost relentless focus on the advocacy for women and children she adored and as little as possible of the petty politics she loathed, now more than ever. She wanted Bill, but she didn’t want Washington. This was a chance for escape, and a sorely needed one at that.

“I’ll come see you. Before I go.” He could hear the effort it took to keep her tone casual. “And I’ll call you. I think I have some down-time while you’re in the Office.” Mentally running through their respective schedules, she realized, heart sinking, that they both had potentially late-running dinners to attend, vastly reducing the odds of being able to coordinate a goodnight call. Hillary had to buoy herself, buoy him. Make this work. Make them work. “Anyway, you’re just mad I get to see *Shakespeare in Love* before you do.”

Bill knew what she was trying to do, what she had to do. He played along. “Yeah, right. But the minute you get back, I’m going over every single one of the premiere photos with you. I bet at least 75% of them feature Ben Affleck and/or Joseph Fiennes making eyes at you.” She raised an eyebrow and helped him up again. “I’m dead serious.”

“Whatever, honey.”

They held hands until their divergent paths – his to the bathroom, hers to the closet to select appropriate tree-greeting garb – forced them to let go, fingertips straining in the air to maintain contact for as long as possible.

Chapter End Notes

A little bit of everything in this chapter - not by art, more just because, as previously mentioned, I have absolutely no idea what I'm doing, hahahaha.

As always, thank you so much for reading, commenting, and, hopefully, enjoying. Your kind words honestly mean the world! (Also wtf is this over 11,000
hits?? That is insane. Greatly appreciated, but insane nonetheless.)
December 6, 1998

Looking at the couple seated across from him, Tobias found Bill’s announcement that he’d reclaimed his place in the marital bed – delivered earlier in the week via a telephone conversation, a cockerel’s crow extremely thinly disguised as a status update – almost entirely superfluous. When Hillary had walked into the room a few hours after the session had started, dressed in what she had somewhat sheepishly described as “holiday casual” (“I’ve been a First Lady for over sixteen years, and I still don’t really know what the hell that’s supposed to mean”), her husband had stared hungrily at her hideous sweater as if it were a gossamer negligee. His hands were everywhere. The simple act of touching her seemed instantaneously to soothe a man who, moments before, had been agitated, barely able to remain seated. Guilt-ridden, as he described, disgust clearly audible in his tone, his repeated infidelity to his paragon. To the one woman. This was a phenomenon he still struggled to explain.

He loved her. He loved her absolutely, unequivocally.

But he betrayed her. Time and again, he betrayed her, and there seemed to be no reason. Certainly not one sufficient to excuse the heartbreak she’d endured on his account.

Bill, Tobias knew, needed to talk more. As he grew more comfortable and began to venture into territory he’d much rather avoid, the answers (or hints to them, at least) would gradually dawn on him. A matter of easing into it. True, he might not like what he learned, but his desire for that knowledge would ultimately outweigh the sweet temptations of denial, such was his desire – his need, approaching desperation – to fix this. His wife was a trickier nut to crack, as it were. No less loving, no less eager to bring their struggles to a happy resolution, but simply more contained. More controlled. A listener rather than a talker, with defenses that would only prove more difficult to breach now that her emotions were less raw and easier to keep in check. She, too, had a great deal of inner turmoil that had to find an outlet, much that needed to be said; it was a matter of convincing her that it wasn’t indicative of some catastrophic character flaw to say it.

Hillary relaxed into Bill’s arms, allowing the curve of her hips to find its natural fit against his thigh. An awful, delicious smugness washed over her as he went on, at great length and in the most effusive terms, about what agony their extended separations over the past few days had been. How he’d longed for her.

She remembered keenly how he’d been waiting for her last night and Thursday night in the Residence, practically launching himself at her the moment she came through the door. In between kisses and caresses, he had listened raptly, hanging on her every word as she described in copious detail her experiences. Typically, there had been something of an interrogation regarding the homes of Louis Armstrong and Longfellow, interspersed with complaints about being stuck in the White House or traipsing around Rhode Island while she had all the fun. Gentle teasing about whether or not Ted Kennedy made any passes (he had). And then, inevitably, the lovemaking, in turns torrid and tender.

A return to normalcy, in other words. Or what she wished was normalcy, would be normalcy.

Tobias’s eyes were on her. Not harsh, not judging, but at the same time discomfiting. The cogs of
her brain started once more to grind, gradually replacing her self-satisfaction with acute guilt.

She hadn’t called home. Well, she had, but – there was a ‘but’. When she did speak to him, excuses were concocted for terminating the contact early, not quite giving him what he wanted. Purring down the line to him, then inventing an interruption that clearly left her husband wanting more. There were additional opportunities judiciously, purposely left untaken. An effort to maintain a certain amount of distance, keeping him, in fits and starts, from fully resuming his accustomed intimacy.

Why?

To protect herself, she thought. She wanted to think. And it was true – partly, anyway – but she knew that wasn’t the whole rationale. Hearing the sincere joy pervading Bill’s voice, his words, made heat rise in her cheeks. Her eyes dropped to fidgeting hands.

“I’m sorry, baby.”

The small voice that interrupted Bill in full flow surprised even Hillary herself; she was sure she had only thought it, but now there it was, sitting awkwardly in the middle of a freshly formed silence.

“What are you talking about, Hill?” His tone held a bemused chuckle that belied the concern she could feel coloring his gaze, even without meeting it.

“When I was gone. I – I was pushing you away again. On purpose.”

There was a pause. In his head, in that beautiful brain, she knew that pieces were now falling into place. Things he had elected to write off as mere insecurity or paranoia were being reevaluated, set into a new, adjusted narrative.

“Okay.”

“Bill, it’s not –“

“No, that makes sense. I get it. You still need time. God, after everything I’ve done to you – it’s too much to expect that overnight, just like that –“

“Why don’t you let Hillary finish?” Tobias interjected gently. She wasn’t sure whether or not to be grateful when Bill fell silent, expectation heavy in the air.

“You’re right,” she started. “But that’s not – it’s not all about that.” Was there any way to explain herself, her behavior, without coming across exactly as scheming and manipulative as the outside world perceived her to be? That didn’t matter. Honesty was the aim here. Forthrightness. This wasn’t a public relations exercise; this was her husband. “Sometimes… I keep you at arm’s length because I know how crazy it makes you. I know you don’t like it. And it’s the only way I have to make you feel desperate like I do. To punish you, I guess. To make you really, truly sorry, and then have you make it up to me so wonderfully. Christ, how nuts am I?”

Before Bill could respond, she barreled on, not particularly wanting to hear an answer to that question. “And it’s so stupid, because that’s why you –“ she couldn’t quite make herself finish that thought, but she had to forge ahead - "then I’ve given you a perfectly good reason to go screw around. Why wouldn’t you, when I’m being cold and distant and such a – such an awful bitch? But I just keep doing it and then let you feel like it’s all your fault when I know perfectly well it’s mine.”
Finally running out of steam, she stopped somewhat abruptly, waiting for a rebuke. A burst of temper, entirely understandable under the circumstances. But there was nothing. Bill simply sat quietly, his arm still wrapped tightly, reassuringly, around her.

It still made sense to him. As a means of reprimand, it was undeniably effective. Nothing in this world could make him feel worse than the withdrawal of her affections. It frequently felt like precisely what he deserved. He knew for a fact that, a great deal of the time, he didn’t merit the love she gave so generously. It dawned on him, too, with aching clarity how often that must have been the sentence she had agonized under. The frosty distance, the crushing disappointment so evident in his brief conversation with Dorothy – the smoldering, silent rage that served to punctuate and give added emphasis to Hugh’s more overt acts of physical and verbal punishment. The emotional warfare of the Rodham household could be less overt than what he had grown accustomed to in his own youth, but it was no less toxic. No less damaging.

There was a part of him that felt like he should be, at minimum, annoyed. Maybe he would be, later. Maybe the next time she threw up her walls, reflexively, out of pain and fear – but probably not. The revelation stirred more sorrow in him than anger. Because, however infuriating the behavior was, he understood it.

He understood and loved those broken pieces that, in their byzantine complexity, came together to constitute the woman he loved. The girl he loved.


Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the longer-than-usual wait! My power conked out for ten hours last Sunday and threw my whole weekend schedule off.

Hope you enjoy - and thank you so much for the continually lovely comments. They really do mean the absolute world. <3
December 6, 1998

After an evening spent with thousands of eyes – millions, if one took into account the future television audience – furtively glancing up into the Presidential Box, some with the aid of opera glasses and zoom lenses, they were finally alone. Invisible, except to one another. Their facial expressions, body language, gazes, whispers, could no longer be carefully monitored, minutely analyzed in a relentless effort to parse what was really going on beneath the surface. To the outside world, that surface appeared to be a carefully constructed piece of artifice. It had to be.

_**How could she love him? Look at her. Look what he’d done.**_

_**How could he love her? Look at her. Look what he’d done.**_

She was too shrewd; he was too easily led astray. He was too soft; she was too hard. Some kind of Faustian pact was clearly at the heart of the matter. Not love. It couldn’t be love.

Hillary sank into the leather seat of the limousine, exhaling loudly and allowing her facial muscles to fully relax for the first time in four-odd hours. Bill took advantage of the opportunity to admire, without external scrutiny, his wife’s figure, encased in burgundy velvet snug as a second skin. A perfect hourglass. He imagined grains of sand slipping from one end to the other: infinite, infinitesimal particles, each representing a microscopic detail about her, ignored by virtually everyone else, that he adored. The way her small hand had, seemingly instantaneously, joined with his when the lyrics of “Always on My Mind” boomed through the auditorium during the tribute to Willie Nelson. She didn’t even need to look at him. He had barely realized his eyes were misting over, only just felt the first twinge of remorse in his chest, and there she was. Giving him precisely what he needed, as ever.

“You were wonderful tonight.” ‘You are wonderful.’

“Billy honey, if I’d had to spend five more seconds listening to Bill Cosby – I beg your pardon, Doctor Bill Cosby – talk about himself, ‘wonderful’ would not be the word to describe me,” she said drily. Hillary’s fingers rubbed gentle circles on her temples, only ceasing in their ministrations when her Bill started to chuckle. The chuckle built into a roar as she continued, blue eyes sparkling.

“Go on and laugh, but we only narrowly avoided tomorrow’s headline being ‘Kennedy Center carnage: First Lady finally snaps, slays beloved comedian, America’s Dad, in violent display’.”

“He was that – that bad?” He was gasping for air, struggling to regulate his breathing and stop the laughter that threatened to overwhelm him completely.

“Mmmmm. The ego on that man… It’s truly something to behold. Why I couldn’t wind up next to Willie or Shirley Temple – anybody else – is beyond me. He just monopolizes. I have my own ideas about education, thank you very much, but would he like to hear them? Of course not.” Her effortless, unconscious transition from joke to rant only tickled him more, making him careless. Making him, for just a moment too long, forget.

“Well, you can’t blame him for cornering the most beautiful girl in the room and trying to impress
her. That’s just what we do.”

As soon as he said it, he knew it was a mistake.

She froze, the implicit compliment going unnoticed, drowned out by the statement’s more overt connotations. The memories it evoked. The legions of other, more beautiful girls in other rooms it resurrected in her mind’s eye: blondes, brunettes and redheads, all united by tits and teeth and standing too close, by syrupy coos and batted lashes and touches that lingered too long. How he reveled in it. Encouraged it. And always, always took it too far.

“Well, I didn’t –“

“I know.” ‘Talk to him; don’t shut down,’ she thought forcefully, willing her walls to demolition, brick by brick. “I know. You didn’t mean it – like that. There are just – there’ve been a lot of times when I was on the outside of that situation looking in, and it’s hard not to go back there, especially when it’s what everybody’s talking about. What everyone’s thinking when they look at us.”

“They’re thinking that I’m an idiot, and they’re absolutely goddamn right.”

Hillary paused for a moment, making a show of considering his assessment carefully before nodding vigorously. A smile that couldn’t help being a little rueful crossed her lips. “But you’re the most brilliant idiot I know. And you’re my idiot.”

They sat in silence as the lighted façade of the White House came into view. Ordinarily famed for his loquaciousness, able to break ice and eradicate tension with a single skillfully deployed volley of charm, Bill was rendered mute. He bit his lip and felt her hand take his again. A gentle squeeze. His heart sang.

“You know what the theme for our Christmas decorations this year is?” she asked airily, keeping her fingers tightly locked with his. Bill shook his head. “‘Winter Wonderland’. Just so you aren’t totally up a creek without a paddle when you drop by ‘Christmas at the White House’ tomorrow.”

He emitted a groan before he could stop himself. The cavalcade of holiday tapings that would dominate their Monday – his, too, but especially hers – had slipped his mind. She laughed, still a little hesitantly, but a laugh nonetheless. “I’ll let you in on another piece of inside scoop. One of our big ornaments depicts Socks and Buddy dancing together under the tree.”

The look on his face was one of slack-jawed bafflement. “Okay, baby, that’s a little –“

“The goal,” she interrupted, “is to create enough concern that I’m losing it that the GOP will feel it has no safe alternative but to back off. The last thing they’ll want to do is risk pushing me too far with an impeachment.” Hillary kept her gaze steady, struggling to remain deadpan as the corners of her mouth twitched.

Her reward came quickly: a mighty guffaw from her husband. The temporary banishment of that terrible cloud that too often threatened to consume them. Burying themselves in recriminations, wallowing in their respective pain and guilt, had never proven helpful. There was a time for confession and introspection, for unpacking their copious emotional and psychological baggage. This was not it. As proceedings in the House of Representatives ground slowly toward what now felt like their inevitable conclusion, the last thing they needed was additional internal strife. Talking about it could be productive, but not now. Not like this.

Leaning over and up, she applied a feather-light kiss to his lips. “I love it when you laugh,” Hillary said softly. She remembered vividly the first time she’d heard that sound, walking past an auburn-haired Viking in a crowded common room. He wanted to kiss her again, more deeply; she knew it,
but she could feel his hesitation, the pervasive worry that, perhaps, lust was once again overriding love. ‘One way to take care of that’ was her last lucid thought between the collision of their mouths and a sharp rapping on the car’s tinted window.

They parted, reluctant and breathless.

“You really are wonderful, you know that?” The emotion in his voice was palpable.

“If you think I’m wonderful now,” she whispered, “just wait till you see what I’ve got on under this dress.”

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for this installment being kind of all over the place, but my mind has been kind of all over the place this week, hahaha!

As always, thank you so much for your incredibly kind comments and I really hope you enjoy this meandering within a meandering. <3
December 8, 1998

“Ugh,” Hillary announced as they crossed the threshold between public and private life. She adopted a stagger of exaggerated exhaustion that elicited a chuckle from her husband before collapsing onto the nearest available sofa, her heels abandoned at arbitrary points between the door and her resting place.

“Drink?” Bill had similarly seized the earliest possible opportunity to untie and unbutton the black-tie uniform the evening’s events had demanded, and now he made his way to the telephone without even waiting for a response. Days like these – nights like this – a glass or two of wine was almost a necessity. An aid for the seemingly impossible task of unwinding and releasing the accrued tensions.

“Please.” She knew that the internal line was already being dialed. Hell, the bottle was probably already on the way up. Thank God. “I think a funeral and two dinners where I don’t actually get to eat anything is just about my maximum for the day.” And the hearings. The fucking hearings.

Don’t think about that. Don’t remember how you looked at Al this morning, in the midst of his grief, and wondered whether, deep down, he was hoping this would go badly for Bill. How you stared at the casket and thought what a shame it was that Al, Sr. never got to see his son become President. Ignore the rush of impending doom.

“You want something to eat, too, babe?” There was perceptible concern in his voice and it made her feel even sicker. She shook her head emphatically.

Two glasses downed, reaching to pour a third, her outlook had adopted a more comfortable sanguinity. Sitting with her legs across Bill’s lap helped considerably, the contact serving to ground her sufficiently so the encroaching haze remained pleasant and avoided becoming maudlin or tinged with justifiable despair. Her calves, resting on his thighs, still detected tension there. The crunch of his potato chips sounded, unaccountably, sad.

She adjusted her position accordingly, freed her hands and pressed her body closer to his. When their eyes met, the question was silently asked and answered.

Fathers.

Of course.

Bill continued quietly, as if they’d been speaking aloud the entire time but only now actually bringing their conversation into the realm of the audible. “I guess it just occurred to me today that – how things were – wouldn’t really have been all that different if my father had lived and Mama hadn’t been with Daddy. I mean, the same sort of things would have been going on. And maybe my father would’ve just left and I never would’ve seen him anyway and Daddy would be in the picture just the same. I had this whole alternative thought out, whenever I was unhappy, but when you look at the characters involved – realistically, not through some little boy’s fantasy – it’s ridiculous. I just – I dunno, I was thinking about it. When Al was talking about his –“ He rubbed at
his eyes. “Lord, it’s a good thing I didn’t have to give a eulogy today.”

Hillary sat in silence for a few moments, one hand rubbing his back and the other mirroring it with circles on his chest.

“They loved you. Your mama, your daddy – and I’m sure your father would have, too. Nobody’s childhood is perfect, but that’s an awfully good place to start.” She had plenty of spleen to vent about Virginia and Roger. If she had more than sketchy biographical details to work with, it was almost a certainty that William Jefferson Blythe, Sr. would generate similar animus. This, however, was not the right moment for anything other than gentle, soothing reassurance.

What he had meant to say, Bill was almost positive, was a few hushed words of thanks. What came out, unbidden and unwanted, was: “He hit me.”

It took a couple of seconds, significantly longer than her sober mind would have required, to parse those three words. The revelation was, sadly, not a particularly shocking one. Frankly, it beggared belief that the elder Clinton would target his wife and biological child for abuse and leave his stepson unscathed, but Bill had invariably relayed only those instances when his own involvement was limited to protecting the “bona fide” victims. Understandable. Those memories were hard enough to relive and recount, painful enough to hear. Her common sense told her there was more to it, as did her knowledge (academic, first- and second-hand) of child abuse, but prying helped no one. When he wanted to tell her, he would. That moment was now.

Keeping him securely locked in her embrace, she waited.

“Mama, too.”

Hillary’s ministrations came to a screeching halt. There was nothing but a blinding flash of red, a hot, seething hatred rising in her cheeks that desperately needed to be suppressed. Lips pressing into a straight line, jaw clenching, she willed the tears in her eyes to stay right where they were. Her grip on him tightened, anchoring them both. She felt him shaking in her arms and began to count the broad strokes of her hand against the fabric of his shirt, calming herself by calming him.

“She – she broke my arm, Hilly.”

Her eyes squeezed shut as he began to sob, cries wracking his entire body, burying himself in her bosom. It was a mistake. Images flickered through her mind’s eye at lightning speed. Photographs she’d seen, documenting childhood injuries: how many of them were from legitimate accidents and how many were artifacts of parental rage? Was Bill the real object of their anger or was he merely a convenient foil? Those pictures animated into imagined altercations. She could hear the screams and shouts, impotently witness the beatings, the switches and belts, the open palms and fists. What she wouldn’t give to take all that away, to eradicate it in one fell swoop. Make her broken little boy whole.

The cloudburst gradually passed over them. Bill’s breathing, still shuddery and shallow and thick with mucus, began to slow to a regular pace. Details could wait. Terrifying though the initial plunge had been, it was over now. Yet another Band-Aid removed in a swift, sharp shock, clearing the path for something as yet undefined. Catharsis. Healing, hopefully.

A question moved rapidly from the back of Bill’s brain, where it had resided, unasked, for months, to his mouth. It seemed, for reasons murky even to him, to be the right time to ask it. “When did he – when did your father – when did he stop?”

Hillary knew he was talking solely about the slaps and the spankings, not the tirades and the very
different scars they left. That psychological struggle was ongoing, probably permanent. She wanted to – not to lie, but to swiftly skate past the truth. The whole ugly, awful truth and all the pain that came with it. His honesty deserved recompense, though. A deep breath, and then the words came out, haltingly and in a small voice.

“After I brought you home for the first time.”

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the delay! Thank you all so much again, not only for your invariably kind comments here but also for the lovely reception to "Slings and Arrows". It makes me incredibly happy and grateful. You’re the best, each and every one of you. For serious.
December 8, 1998

There was a fluttering in Bill’s chest that could only be described as pride. For one who, at such an early age, had been cast – cast himself, perhaps – in the role of protector, the notion that he had played a part in rescuing his princess from one of her many dragons had considerable appeal. She was more than capable of defending herself, naturally; the vulnerability he (and, it often felt, he alone) was privileged to see only served to intensify his admiration for her indefatigability and strength. When he could bolster her, shield her, defend her, it was a point of pride. Something to be treasured. Too often he fed the demons, aided and abetted them in their destructive work.

It would be different now. It had to be.

He could feel her hand trembling as it continued in its consoling circuits, so small against the broadness of his back. Guilt began to pool in his stomach, even more nauseating when mixed with the grease of too many potato chips. As he shifted next to her, trying in vain to ease the discomfort that unsettled body and soul, Hillary intuitively shifted her ministrations to his belly. That made it worse. Somehow, in spite of what she had told him just moments ago – in spite of everything she had been through and was continuing to go through on his account – the focus remained on his pain.

"Baby --" As suddenly as he started to speak, he lost all grasp of what he was going to say. Bill wasn’t even sure what he wanted to say. There was too much ground to cover: too many questions, too many apologies, too many facets of love to cohere into speech, even for a man who routinely held forth on complex matters of policy without so much as a bullet-pointed sheet to guide his remarks.

"You want an antacid, sweetheart?" Hillary kept her eyes averted towards the coffee table, picking up her wineglass and taking a substantial sip while she rose from her position on the couch. Bolstered slightly by the slightly amplified buzz, she affected a tone she hoped was matter-of-fact without veering into the loathed territory of scolding. “Bill, you shouldn’t eat that much crap so late. No wonder you feel lousy.” Her voice creaked, not in a way that anyone who knew her as well as he did would confuse with tipsiness or irritation. Damn. The rest of her wine went down in one gulp. Time to get out of here, buy a few moments to collect herself, to gather her emotions and repackage them neatly, while ostensibly rummaging in a bathroom cabinet, before she started crying. She would not – could not – allow herself to derail the discussion with tears, either for his pain or, more despicably, for her own.

Traveling down this road was, she feared, a matter of inevitability, but the impulse to drag her feet remained irresistible. A substantial, undeniably selfish part of her yearned to keep the burden of revelation squarely on his shoulders, to avoid delving too deeply into her own psyche and unearthing things that seemed perfectly alright left buried. What problems she had she had proved herself, over five decades, perfectly capable of handling on her own. His trauma had led them here, not hers. (That was a lie and she knew it, but no one, to the best of her knowledge, had deemed peddling falsehoods to oneself a sin. Certainly not an unpardonable one, anyway.)

“No,” Bill blurted out. “Thanks, but – don’t.” He felt stupid and clumsy and abrupt – all the things he normally wasn’t. Long fingers and large palm swallowed up his wife’s thin wrist, enveloping it
Hillary didn’t want to talk about her father anymore. That was abundantly clear. Not right now, at least, although gentle prodding, carefully paced, could probably produce further results on some later date. He reached for the bottle of wine, wincing slightly, both at the churning in his gut and the slight twinge in his back. “If I get to overindulge, it’s only fair that you do, too.”

Giving her arm a light tug, he bobbed his head around, trying to achieve the twin objectives of reestablishing eye contact and eliciting one of those shy smiles he so adored. “Okay, baby girl? Okay, Hee-ah-ree?”

Although the smile was not only shy but wobbly and the blue irises that fleetingly met his were still swimming in unshed tears, he felt his goal had been met. “Okay, Billy,” she whispered, returning to a seated position so close to his thighs that she was nearly on his lap. They kissed, and the salt that lingered around his mouth mingled with the fruity tang of her chardonnay.

He poured more wine for her when they parted, the quantity of pale liquid giving her further, implicit permission to let go, tangling his free hand in her hair and delicately toying with the golden strands. His eyes drank her in as her lips found the glass’s rim.

“I don’t understand it.”

Bill spoke without really intending to, earning a quietly quizzical glance from Hillary, who swallowed her drink and proceeded to look at him expectantly, swirling the remnants of her libation in the translucent bowl. She wouldn’t like the rest of his statement, but neither could she be fobbed off with a half-hearted half-truth.

“I don’t understand how he could hurt you. Why. My parents – most of the time it had nothing to do with anything anyone had done. They were just drunk and angry and I wound up in the middle of it. By choice, mostly. I just – I guess I figured that if somebody was gonna get hurt, it might as well be me. That was better than Mama or Roger – Daddy could fend for himself, of course. If they could take it out on me, that stopped it from escalating. But you –”

She was staring at the contents of her glass, avoiding his eyes again. Her words, when they came were carefully chosen, crisply defined, demonstrating the control she maintained in spite of the alcohol consumed. “It wasn’t arbitrary, Bill.” Another swig. “I did something wrong – or not good enough – and I was punished. And I learned. Didn’t always think it was fair, but all kids feel like that. I was never hurt the way you got –” he could hear her voice teeter momentarily at breaking point – “the way you got hurt. The way Mom got hurt.”

That was what she said. What he heard – what tore him apart – was ‘I deserved it.’ That it was all right because, somehow, she had merited such treatment.

In the darkest moments of his childhood, he had found himself wishing that he deserved it. If his behavior, his words, his attitude could incite such violent outbursts, then he had some coveted agency. Changes he made would have impact. That was, he supposed, partially what drew him to church and school, what delineated them as places of refuge. There, his actions had consequences. They were the difference between heaven and hell, between passing and failing marks. Hillary had no escape. No way out of the pressure cooker.

No way but him.

He pulled her tightly to his side. “It’s not a competition, babe. I was hurt and so were you.”
A shuddery breath emanated from her; he felt the too familiar quake of a barely suppressed sob.

“Now,” he said, with all the authority he could muster, “you go get into something more comfy and I’m gonna go get you some ice cream.”

Hillary glanced up, looking directly at him and allowing him to really see her for the first time since their conversation had started. Her love washed over him, an awesome wave of sweetness. And he finally felt like he was beginning to earn it.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry this has been lying fallow for nearly a month! A sorely-needed vacation was taken - hopefully this hasn't resulted in a total loss of momentum, hahaha. As ever, I'm infinitely grateful to you all for reading my ramblings and giving such wonderful encouragement.
December 9, 1998

“Ms. Rodham, do you mind me asking you a question?”

“Shoot, Mr. President,” she replied, swallowing the mouthful of salad she’d been chewing absently. It seemed like the most prudent meal selection ahead of yet another holiday reception at which, she had no doubt, she would find herself both unable and unwilling to resist the proffered wine and cocktails and calorie-laden desserts. Thank God it was for the Secret Service – a group of highly trained professionals who really should be accustomed by now to encountering a First Lady who was more than a little tipsy and consuming more chocolate than her diet technically allowed. “But if it’s about the cats from Cats singing ‘Sleigh Ride’ earlier, I don’t have any answers for you.”

Bill nearly choked on his water. “It wasn’t that,” he sputtered. “But now that you mention it…”

“Or the guy in the bear suit. I don’t know what that was about either.”

“He’s from a kids’ TV show.”

“Ah. Well, since you have all the answers, you wouldn’t happen to know why there was a giant eagle dressed as George Washington, would you?”

“… You got me there, darlin’.”

There was a smile playing on her lips, a little quirk to the dash of scarlet that he had found his eyes drawn to all evening. But it wasn’t mischief, not really. She looked tired. Slightly sad. Her heart hadn’t been in the tree lighting, he’d noticed. Of course, that kind of ceremonial fluff never elicited the maximum enthusiasm from her; it was just that she normally managed to put on a better show. Tonight, while he had merrily sung along to every syllable of the program, from “Feliz Navidad” to “White Christmas”, practically bouncing in his chair, she had remained pretty and pleasant and frozen. Biding time until she could at last retreat from the public gaze, even if it was only fifteen minutes before she’d be shunted into her next receiving line, put through her paces again like a prospective Miss America caught in an unrelenting Möbius strip of pageants.

“Are you okay?” Half a dozen possibilities, all glib and flirtatious, had flickered across Bill’s mind before he decided to forge ahead and ask what he actually wanted to know.

A heavy sigh. Careful, languorous blinks. That was a ‘no’ if ever he saw one.

“What is it, baby?” Swiftly, he drew his chair around the table to her side, feeling the customary compulsion to be close to her. Any distance at all was apparently too much for her right now, as his wife was in his lap like a flash, her head nestled securely against his chest.

“I don’t know,” Hillary murmured. She genuinely didn’t. Sometimes feigned ignorance was an efficient means of avoiding a conversation she’d no desire to have, but, on this occasion, she was genuinely stuck. An ache, a muted throb, echoed around her chest. Her skull. The possibility that this was the last vestige of a hangover, shortly to be chased away by the hair of the dog that had bitten her, was top of her list of possible explanations. That wasn’t quite it, though. Not quite all.
His mind hit on the answer – an answer, at least; a small piece of the whole – before hers did. He remembered that little girl at the ceremony. Jessica, the Brownie tasked with escorting Santa and delivering a message, haltingly, stumbling over the words as she read them, expressing the sentiments of America’s children for the holiday season. He remembered how Hillary had instinctively reached to turn the child’s collar up against the cold. The pang he had felt then, that had momentarily cut through him before he rallied to make the rounds among the performers but had barely registered, returned, doubled in severity. He had left her there. Alone. Standing awkwardly, passionlessly mouthing the words to Christmas carols as she, the picture of discomfort, waited patiently for him to provide her with a way out.

He didn’t even reach for her hand.

Her recollection had clearly taken a similar route. “I still want another one,” Hillary whispered. The wound was not healed. The tear in her voice was testament enough to that.

“I know.”

“Do you?”

“I want –“ Bill’s gaze drifted down to her. To the beautiful face, still fully made-up, that wore its grief for only him to see. “I want you to be happy.”

His elegant fingers gently tilted her chin up, thumb stroking a rouged cheek when the desired angle was attained. “What would make you happy?”

Hillary’s silent answer came by way of a kiss, more tenderness than heat but not any less intense for it.

‘You.’

- 

“Ms. Rodham –“ Bill breathed into her ear.

“That’s – a little formal, isn’t it? Under the circumstances?”

They hadn’t even managed to close the door yet, the wood of the frame resting uncomfortably against her back, too narrow to provide the support requisite for the activity in which she really wanted to engage. It didn’t matter. This was merely the prelude.

“Hilly baby,” he purred, cranking up his drawl as far as it would go. She shuddered gratifyingly against him. “Better?”

Booze and sugar and chocolate hit his mouth in an exhilarating rush of lips and tongue. That settled it. The door had to be shut, to provide him with leverage, if nothing else. Privacy was something of an afterthought.

Hillary had still been slightly forlorn when they’d returned to the Map Room, a condition he quickly set about ameliorating. When the duties of hosting drew them apart, he made eyes at her from across the room. In close proximity, he flirted as outrageously as he could manage without venturing into crudity, keeping his hands on her always and making her cheeks flush, eyes sparkle. Visible lust, palpable sexual tension. Bill didn’t care who noticed it and, much to his surprise, neither did she.

He’d be lying if he didn’t acknowledge that he wanted the agents and their wives to see, to bear
witness to what a good husband he was capable of being – they, who were intimately acquainted enough with the couple to be fully aware of what an absolute shit he could be.

He was solicitous and attentive, bringing her drinks (and ensuring that they had the little extra kick she needed to survive events like this). When she looked longingly at a passing tray of tiny cakes or pastries, he retrieved one for her, quietly jollying her out of any lingering concerns about the imagined havoc such indulgence would wreak on her figure. Preposterous. The notion became even more so as he gripped those curves now, kneading a handful of ass through her slacks.

This felt obscenely good. Hands meandering underneath her sweater, trying to guess which lingerie she had on based solely on what he could feel of her bra and visualizing the various delectable possibilities until desire literally brought him to his knees.

Hillary moaned and squirmed against the door as he unbuttoned her trousers and slid them down her legs, licking his lips and peppering her inner thighs with kisses.

Above all, of course, all this really was for her. The impetus was greater than it had ever been. He would make her happy. He had to.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for the warm welcome back! As always, your feedback means the world and I hope you enjoy this chapter. Especially because I genuinely had no idea wtf I was going for basically the entire time I was writing it, hahahaha.
All the Good

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

December 10, 1998

Bill lollygagged his way across the parking lot to the Old Executive Office Building, his normally long strides impaired by his last minute shuffling of the papers he carried. Atypically, Hillary’s short legs had carried her several paces ahead of him. Ordinarily he would admire the view this afforded him, but a nagging concern that he may have mislaid a page in his rush out of the Oval Office despite the best efforts of his aides. It wouldn’t be the first time and, although his capacity for improvisation was undeniable, he didn’t particularly want to fly by the seat of his pants at such a significant, profoundly meaningful event.

Not one that meant so much to him. Not one that meant so much to his girl.

She stood at the foot of the concrete steps, waiting, a barely perceptible smile gracing her lips, making his heart do a small flip. The black fabric of her pantsuit set off porcelain skin and the gold and diamonds he had purchased for her birthday sparkled at her neck and earlobes. Brilliant, in every sense of the word.

Feeling the unmistakable, familiar sensation of lenses fixed on them, even from afar, Bill managed to resist temptation. Not ordinarily a strong suit, he thought wryly. There was very little he wanted to do more ardently than to sweep up in his arms the little piece of heaven he’d been given, that he’d taken criminally for granted on far too many occasions. To kiss her hard and long and passionately with no regard for how many eyes were watching, to tell her she was beautiful in a shout, not a whisper. But he knew what agony that would be for her, after the initial, girlish thrill had subsided. Another influx of vitriol, another excruciating wave of insecurity and self-doubt that only he would be privy to. A piercing stab to his heart – her pain, even imagined, giving him a brief jolt of his own.

Sitting behind her as she perched on her customary stepping stool behind the presidential lectern, Bill could hear the goofy, schoolgirl grin in his wife’s voice every single time she uttered the name “Eleanor Roosevelt”. It was impossibly sweet. The depths of her veneration were always adorably apparent, giddiness invariably amplified somewhat by the presence of actual real-life Roosevelt descendants in the room.

After dispensing with the requisite remarks of welcome and of exposition – which he realized he would later echo a little too closely, provoking a rapid-fire series of scrawled alterations to the sheaf on his lap – Hillary arrived at the meat of her remarks. Eyes once again locked on to her, he tried to keep his expression appropriately serious. Now was not the time for gooey admiration or sticky-sweet worship, difficult though it was to fend those powerful feelings off when every word out of her mouth, every facet of her being, filled him with a surge of immense pride, tempered always by the awe-inspiring fact that, despite having very good reason not to, she loved him, too.

“Everyone here today, however, knows how far we still have to go to ensure that the circle of human dignity embraces all citizens.” Typical Hill. No one here would be allowed to rest comfortably, complacently on their laurels. Not when there remained so much work still to be done. By others, yes. By him. But especially, he knew, this statement was a spur in her own side.
“Whether it’s young girls being sold into prostitution in Thailand, women who are victims of violence in their own homes here in this country or elsewhere, boys being used as human shields in Uganda, those recovering from the ravages of the Yugoslav conflict, those arrested in China for political activity, we have to recognize the depth of injustice and human suffering that still exists around us.”

A slight pause. He saw her spine stiffen, the military rigidity that foretold a plunge into battle.

“Perhaps the most egregious and systematic trampling of fundamental human rights of any person is taking place in Afghanistan today against women, under the iron rule of the Taliban. “ The rage – the outrage – in her voice was incapable of being disguised. Tears sprang, unbidden, to his eyes, and it took every ounce of control he possessed to keep them suspended there.

Hillary proceeded to enumerate a litany of abuses, describing the horrors inflicted by a theocracy run riot, raw fury enunciated in every carefully spoken syllable. Too many could not see past the intellect, the reserve and introversion to that wonderfully passionate core, the anger and anguish, in equal measure, that she felt so keenly at injustice and inequality and bullying and abuse. How could they – that ambiguous but all-powerful ‘they’ – get her so wrong? He watched as her hands gripped the podium’s edge tightly, almost white-knuckled in an effort to keep her tone even. The ferocity remained, undiminished, manifesting in an increase in volume, a slight tremble.

“The Taliban has imposed a draconian catch-22 on women,” she continued. Bill found himself having to look away, shifting his focus to his own speech. It was an absolute necessity in order to maintain composure. To prevent himself from enveloping her in a dangerously tight embrace from which he’d be hard-pressed to release her, from beaming and shouting out to those assembled, ‘This is the woman I love.’

“Health care for women has all but vanished. Women can no longer be treated by male doctors, yet women physicians are prohibited from working.”

A chill ran down his spine.

“The Taliban has not only closed schools for girls. It has even forbidden landmine awareness instruction for women and older girls, leading to increased injuries from landmine explosions among the female population. All of this suffering left one Afghan woman to lament, ‘A rocket or a bomb may kill all members of a family at once, but this is a slow death, which is more painful.’”

More chills, electric and exhilarating, followed in quick succession, and he welcomed the brief respite provided by Hillary’s introduction of two female activists from Afghanistan and the extended applause that followed.

“We cannot allow these terrible crimes against women and girls – and, truly, against all of humanity – to continue with impunity. We must all make it unmistakably clear this terrible suffering inflicted on the women and girls of Afghanistan is not cultural, it is criminal. And we must do everything we can in our power to stop it.”

Goddamn, she was good. She was so good.

“When we celebrate today the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we do have much to be thankful for, and many of us are living in societies and democracies that have gone such a far distance in the last fifty years to honor and protect human rights.”

His girl was rounding third and heading for home. He could feel it. She would end, not on a smug, self-satisfied high – the “holier-than-thou”, “Saint Hillary” attitude that so many who didn’t
understand and didn’t want to falsely ascribed to her – but with a stark reminder of the many miles yet to travel.

“But let us not forget the hundreds of millions of people who are still at risk. The 100 million children who live on the streets. The 160 million children who are not even in primary school. Those who are denied freedom of religion, freedom of thought, freedom to express an opinion, who have no choice that they can make to determine the course of their own lives. This is not a marginal issue. Human rights goes to the very center of what we in the United States believe politics and democracy should be about. And so today we celebrate the progress, but we also challenge ourselves to continue to seek out opportunities wherever possible to do all that we can to eliminate the continuing scourge of human rights abuses, wherever they may be found.”

‘Do all the good you can, for all the people you can, in all the ways you can, for as long as ever you can.’

Her creed. The relentless, driving force that impelled her to batter stubbornly against many a seemingly immovable object.

As she turned toward him, clearly having delivered an introduction he’d failed to hear over his own thundering heartbeat, Bill grinned. Propriety might dictate that he couldn’t whisk her from the room and make passionate love to her in the nearest relatively secluded place, but he was not rendered entirely impotent. This course of action, he knew only too well, was not even the next best thing. It would have, however, to do.

Greetings and thanks out of the way, checked carefully, surreptitiously against the opening paragraph of the first paper he had laid atop Hillary’s omnipresent leather binder, he made his move. “I would like to say also, before getting into my prepared remarks, that… someday when I write the memoirs of these last several years, one of the proudest moments of our administration for me will be the work the First Lady has done to advance the cause of human rights.”

Those assembled before him clapped loudly and with sincere enthusiasm. Even without turning to look, Hillary’s embarrassment was palpable to him. She didn’t think she deserved this, but she did. She deserved more. And he would give it to her. Privately. He wasn’t quite through, however.

“I remember the speech she gave in Beijing on a rainy day when people were struggling in the mud to get into that remote facility – the talk she gave just a few days ago at Gaston Hall at Georgetown University about Eleanor Roosevelt, I think one of the finest speeches she ever gave – but more important, the concrete work, the Vital Voices work in Northern Ireland and Latin America, and all the little villages she visited in Latin America, in Africa, in Asia, on the Indian subcontinent, to try to advance the condition of women and children, especially young girls.”

Now a pivot was necessary. A swift segue into the drafted and redrafted statement – so freshly retyped after one final set of suggestions from Hillary – or else that same strong, bright woman would probably kill him on the spot.

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In the anteroom, after the presentation of awards was over, she sidled up next to him.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Hillary whispered, emotion slipping through the cracks just enough for him to hear but not for anyone else to see.

“I did.”
Bill grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze.

Chapter End Notes

Well, this ended up being way longer than I intended, haha. I was tempted to include the rest of Bill's remarks, too, because they were SO GOOD - but I realized that that way lay madness. As ever, thank you all for your kind comments and for continuing to read these ramblings. It really does mean so much.
December 11, 1998

“He home again, home again,” Hillary announced in a singsong sigh. She and Chelsea made their way into the White House, looking very much like they had spent the past five hours on an airplane – a spacious and luxurious airplane, but an airplane notwithstanding. Ordinarily, her daughter’s return would mark decisively the commencement of the holiday relaxation period, the cessation of most official duties but the more inane and cocktail-filled. As she looked around for a clock, however, the specter of another interminable flight hovered. “For six and a half hours, anyway.”

Chelsea groaned.

“Hey, missy, you’re not the one who has to play meet-and-greet when we get there.”

“True. But I have to wait around for you guys to finish.”

“But I actually have to look both enthusiastic and presentable while Dad mills around with Weizman and Netanyahu and whatever poor soldiers they can round up at 1 am.”

“Mom, I don’t think looking pretty is as much of a challenge for you as you think it is.”

“Flatterer. Now, you get upstairs and tell Dad hi and then straight to bed.”

“You do realize I’m nearly nineteen years old, right?”

“Fine. Take your time. Pull an all-nighter. But I want you packed and ready and not a word of complaint at five-thirty.”

“Kidding, Mom, kidding!”

“I’m not.” She could only maintain that stern facial expression for a few seconds before she felt a grin begin to flicker into being, starting at the corners of her mouth and with a twinkle in her eyes until it was impossible to bluff any longer. “Mostly. Definitely not about you needing to be packed.”

Chelsea laughed. “Ten-four. Love you.” She leaned in and received her goodnight kiss before scurrying up out of sight to the second floor.

A quick detour to her office in order to ensure that she had assembled all the necessary briefing books and drafted statements into neat-ish piles, easily gathered by aides in the early morning chaos that, no matter how well she thought they’d prepared, was inevitable – and then, she hoped, her reserves of inner strength would be sufficient to bolster Bill.

Although she hadn’t watched his remarks from the Rose Garden earlier this afternoon (the requisite technological rigamarole wasn’t, in her estimation, worth it, and she didn’t really want to subject their daughter to that particular spectacle anyway), Hillary had gotten the gist. Things looked bleak, to the point where yet another mea culpa fraught with emotion was called for. As had been the case yesterday, when he’d embarked on that wholly unnecessary but utterly thrilling public paeon to her virtues, she didn’t have to look at his face to see his jaw clench and feel that familiar
flutter in her chest, the pride reflected right back as soon as he began his own remarks. Love and a ferociously maternal desire to protect combined, each spurring the other to greater heights. He was frightened and angry and frustrated, both with the machinations of the GOP and with himself. She’d be lying if she said she didn’t feel the same.

“Betrayed” was still the mot juste where she was concerned. ‘How could he do this to me?’ rattled through her brain like a runaway train and it took almost everything she had to keep it under some semblance of control, to keep her hand steady on the brake and try to ease those dangerous, destructive thoughts to a halt. The mantra of ‘He loves you’, however confident she was in its veracity at her core, sometimes wobbled and skidded into perilous insecurity. She was enough – he said so, and she believed him because heaven knows how he acted like it was one of the great universal truths – but sometimes the pervasive, insidious sensation that had haunted her for as long as she could remember, that she wasn’t – never was, never would be, not just for him, but for anyone – threatened to overwhelm her. And it was terrifying. Infuriating. Hillary knew, intellectually, that she should talk to him about it, that he would want her to. It seemed such a waste of their mutual emotional resources, though; their combined fortitude would be far more usefully applied to their daughter and to him. She could wait.

On entering the living room, she was pleased – relieved, a little – to see that Chelsea had heeded her instructions. Bill was alone on the sofa. He looked shattered, pale except for the florid patches of red on his nose and cheeks.

‘Be what he needs. Try.’

“Hi babe.” Her words, calm and quiet, snapped him out of his reverie. Clearly, he had been raking himself over the coals. The way he looked at her, like a drowning man catching sight of a lifeboat, left no room for doubt on that score.

“Hill –“

Her lips caught that strangled sentence before it began, silencing it with a tender kiss. Trickier by far would be to extricate herself from that embrace, to prevent him – them, really – from wholly ignoring the actual problems at hand in favor of the tried and tested placebo of sex. Corralling her thoughts, she pulled away.

“Gimme a couple of minutes. Be right back.”

Their eyes locked.

‘Promise?’

‘Promise.’

When Hillary returned, she carried the tube of antibiotic cream her husband’s complexion told her in no uncertain terms he’d been neglecting. After some consideration, she’d elected to sport a mid-length nightgown, a midnight blue one that revealed enough for Bill to enjoy without presenting an undue temptation. (She did, after all, want to get some sleep, even if they did end up fooling around a bit.) Walking back in front of him, she quickly planted herself on his lap, carefully unscrewed the medication’s cap and began ministering to Bill’s rosacea.

Fingers smaller and less elegant than his carefully blended the white cream into his skin, making tiny circles that doubled as a gentle facial massage.
“I am so proud of you,” she murmured, gazing into gray-blue eyes more full of tears with every word. “I’m so proud of everything you’ve accomplished – everything you’re going to accomplish. You are a good man. Yes, you’ve made mistakes. I’m not going to lie to you and say you haven’t hurt me; you deserve better than that. But none of those things make you a bad person. The bad people are the ones who are trying to destroy you for a human mistake, who are using it as a tool to serve their own agendas. That’s the truth, and you need to remember it. Hang on to it.”

Last speck of white absorbed into his cheek, she leaned in closer, pressing her forehead to his.

“I love you.”

As she said the words, she thought them, too – over and over, with such vehemence that he had to feel it as she did, pulsating through the depths of her being. Every ounce of her, every cell, every twisted strand of DNA, cried love. And, like an echo, it came back to her, reflected and somehow amplified.

They remained, frozen, in that position, in perfect synchronicity, for what she knew was only moments but felt eternal. Eventually, inevitably, his hungry mouth found hers. Just as his hands were starting to wander, she stopped him – half-heartedly, as the pout she received in response sent crackling, electric lust flashing through her brain.

“We need to go to bed,” she breathed.

He nodded vigorously, sending her into cascades of giggles.

“To sleep,” she clarified.

“I know,” he said, boyishly crestfallen.

She paused. “Eventually.”

Peals of the President’s laughter, a sound heard seldom in recent days, rang out through the Residence – and it felt like a home again.

Chapter End Notes

The special guest appearance of Bill’s rosacea goes out to vodkastinger, who, as I recall, wanted me to include it. I’m sure it will be back with a vengeance at some point. Also, profound apologies for, yet again, chickening out of doing an actual smut chapter. It will happen. Eventually. Later. As always, thank you so much for reading and I really hope you enjoy!
December 13, 1998

“Mr. President, what is your reaction to the decision of the House Judiciary Committee yesterday? Do you intend to resign as did President Nixon?”

And then, coolly, casually, as though he hadn’t just dropped a bomb in the middle of what had hitherto been a cordial (if slightly testy) press conference with the American president and the Israeli prime minister, the journalist moved on to a question in Hebrew for Netanyahu. The only bright side to this, at least as far as Bill could discern, was that it provided a moment’s respite. An opportunity for his mental faculties to scramble like Air Force jets, moving rapidly towards the target of a calm, unfrazzled response, was sorely needed. He could afford no external manifestations of the very real fear and anger he so keenly felt; outbursts of temper or Nixonian sweat – goddamn, how had it come to this, a point where he found himself far too frequently in the same sentence, the next link in a chain of thought with that unequivocal crook? – would only exacerbate a situation that was already barely tenable.

There was brief but pregnant pause. The translator had finished his work, providing an English-language approximation of the second question that almost no one had actually bothered to listen to, such was the anticipation for the embattled president’s reaction to such a blunt hurling down of the gauntlet.

“My reaction –“ Bill cursed himself inwardly as his voice caught somewhere in the back of his throat, giving away much more than he’d intended of his true feelings – “to the committee vote is that I wasn’t surprised. I think it’s been obvious to anyone who’s been following it for weeks that that vote was foreordained, and now it is up to the members of the House of Representatives to vote their conscience on the Constitution and the law, which I believe are clear. And I have no intention of resigning. It’s never crossed my mind.”

Done. Finished. Subject closed.

It seemed patently obvious to him, but, apparently, not so much to the assembled media. The dog pile continued, unabated.

“Mr. President, how confident are you that you can avoid impeachment in the full House next week, and are you planning any kind of additional outreach to lawmakers or the public?”

Fuck.

Fuck fuck fuck.

Was this how it was going to be from now on? His accomplishments – meaningless. Anything further he tried to achieve – meaningless. No one was interested. No one wanted to hear about peace in the Middle East. A hope for de-escalation in the perpetual tensions between Israel and Palestine could only be an anticlimax when what everyone really wanted to know revolved around a legalistic definition of “sexual relations” and whether or not he’d technically lied under oath when he said he did not have them with “that woman”. His proclivities and how he should be punished for them were the real story – the only story – now.
This was not the first time this realization had dawned on him, but it was the one that cut the most deeply. And he’d be damned if he gave the world the satisfaction of seeing that fact.

“Well, I – I think it’s up to – it’s a question of whether each member will simply vote to his or her conscience based on the Constitution and the law and, uh, I don’t know what’s going to happen. That’s up to them. It’s out of my hands. If any member wishes to talk to, uh, me or someone on my staff, we would make ourselves available to them, but otherwise I think it’s important that, uh – that they be free to make this decision without any undue pressure from any quarter.”

He hemmed and hawed and treaded water, keeping his face impassive, his voice even, his head just above the waves. He said the word “inappropriate”, and a snide little voice somewhere in the back of his mind, making his task still more difficult, wondered when “inappropriate” had suddenly begun to matter to him. Not when his hands were between warm and willing thighs, not when they groped breasts and asses and tangled in hair – none of which belonged to his wife. Not when the lips of interns, government employees, campaign workers, secretaries, strangers closed around his cock. Not when his mouth met theirs. Not when he broke Hillary’s heart and betrayed her over and over again.

*When he got caught.*

“Mr. President, you said that now it’s up to the members of the House to decide –“

Just as he was bracing himself, coming to terms as best he could for this miserable new normal, Netanyahu piped up from the podium to his left. “May I ask a favor – ask a question? You’re free to ask any one of your questions. I think the President has come here on a very clear message – on a very clear voyage of peace – and I believe that it would and, uh, I believe it would be appropriate to ask one or two questions on the peace process. I would like to know the answers, too.”

Bill was absolutely certain that no one had ever loved Bibi Netanyahu more than he did in that moment: not his mother, not his wife, not his children, not anyone in Israel, living or dead.

It didn’t stop the inquisition, of course, but, by God, he would take whatever moral support he could get. And an interstitial question about actual policy, about the Wye Accords, certainly provided him with a sorely needed moment to breathe and to regain his equilibrium. As he knew it would be, it was, however, *only* a moment.

“Mr. President, some Republicans want you to go further than a statement of contrition. They say that they want an admission of perjury. Are you willing to do that, and what do you think about Chairman Hyde and the Republican leadership opposing a vote in the House – in the full House – on censure?”

Bait. Obvious bait. One single, minute verbal slip and this reporter would have the scoop of the decade.

“Well, uh, on the second question, I think you oughta ask them whether they’re opposed to it because they think that it might pass, since apparently around three-quarters of the American people think that’s the right thing to do. Um, on the first question, the answer is no, I can’t do that, because I did not commit perjury. We had – if you go back to the hearing, we had four prosecutors – two Republicans, two Democrats, one the head of President Reagan’s criminal justice division – who went through the law in great detail and explained that. That it was – this was not a perjury case. And there was no credible argument on the other side. So I have no intention of doing that. Now, was the testimony in the deposition difficult and ambiguous and unhelpful? Yes, it was. That’s exactly what I said in the grand jury testimony myself.”
The trap had been successfully avoided; the fatal word “lie” had gone unemployed. But he knew – and it still ate away at him, gnawed and twisted somewhere deep in his guts – that he had lied. Maybe not, in the most pedantic sense, to the grand jury.

He had lied to Hillary. He had lied to her relentlessly for nearly twenty-five years. He had become terrifyingly good at it. Sometimes she believed him; sometimes she knew. Sometimes she pretended; sometimes she didn’t; sometimes she didn’t have to.

And then he lied to himself. It couldn’t possibly hurt Hillary that much. She was so strong. Invulnerable. If there was pain, it would only serve to bring her down to his own level – or make her realize her mistake and leave him to have the life he imagined she deserved, that she was capable of having. He was entitled to an outlet. She was so hard on him. She was being distant. He couldn’t resist and, besides, it didn’t really matter. What harm could it possibly do?

_Bullshit._ All of it was bullshit.

Bill knew that now. But what good was a lesson learned too late?

- 

The rest of the day was a marked improvement, even if his schedule intersected with Hillary’s far less than he would have liked. He knew she was happy with her day’s activities, moving from kindergartens to hospitals to primary schools to parent-child programs. Much as he longed for her to be at his side – or a pace or two behind – constantly, it was better for her this way, with her passions catered, too. And he was already anticipating tonight, when she’d be bubbling with ideas, hands gesturing vigorously as she described her observations in minute detail, scribbling memos to the Department of Education on every available scrap of paper. Glowing in the way that always gave him a little pang as she talked about the children, what they’d said, what they’d done, how tightly they’d hugged her.

Still, there was her stable, warm, reassuring presence when they visited Yitzhak Rabin’s grave, always within arm’s reach when he needed to ground himself with a touch. She knelt with him, carefully placing herself in his eye-line and partially blocking the assembled photographers. Right where he needed her. Always. It got easier from there. By the time she was sitting directly ahead of him in the audience as he addressed the people of Israel, a few seats down the table when he gave his toast at dinner, his earlier agony had started to ebb away.

Until, that is, she gave him one of those impossibly sweet grins and asked how his day had gone. Like her words had rendered his emotional dam structurally unsound, out it all spilled, laced with the toxic self-pity he knew she loathed. Yet there she sat, perched on the edge of their plush bed, staring intently at him and listening, her only sound an occasional, dangerously noncommittal hum.

When he had finally worn himself out with ranting and tears and pacing, Bill waited. He wasn’t sure what he wanted from her: punishment or coddling.

“Well. At least you don’t believe your own bullshit anymore. That’s an improvement.”

Without another word, she hopped down from the mattress. Before she headed to the en suite, one earring in the palm of her hand while unclipping the other, Hillary made a point of turning down both sides of the bed and leaving the bathroom door ajar.

Rifling through the bureau drawers where hotel staff had stowed their belongings, he found the garment he sought by feel alone, keeping his gaze fixed on his wife, her reflection, as she wiped
her makeup away – a task she never felt she could do soon enough for her liking.

When she emerged to choose her nightwear, Bill tossed her his Yale sweatshirt. She caught it. They smiled.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you waiting for a smut chapter... sorry, this still isn't it, hahaha. But soon. I promise. For real. In the meantime, I hope you enjoy - and, as ever, thank you all so much for reading and for leaving such ridiculously lovely comments. I find it hard to believe that this warrants such kind praise, but I am enormously grateful for it.
December 14, 1998

“Oh my god – this is just – this is completely absurd. How am I supposed to make anything with these tiles?”

“Don’t blame your tools, Mom. Sign of a poor Scrabble player.”

“I’m convinced you’re hoarding U’s over there. That is the only possible explanation for this – abomination of a hand.”

“You talk a good game. Now let’s see you put some of those fancy words on the board.”

The grin on Bill’s face broadened almost to the point of painfulness, where the joy he felt on hearing his wife and daughter light-heartedly squabbling over a board game could barely be contained by his physiognomy. It was certainly a marked improvement over what he’d spent the past two hours caught in the middle of; serving as a buffer between Arafat and Netanyahu, neither of whom could quite accept the objective reality that both parties had, in various ways, fallen somewhat short of the letter and the spirit of the Wye River Accords, was far from his favorite way of spending an evening. When his temper and his nerves were already so frayed by a faint, constant thudding that was either his heart or the construction of a gallows back in Washington, when he was trying to decide what on earth to do about Saddam Hussein, when his ongoing conversations with Tobias continually brought to the fore dangerous surges of pain that threatened to consume him – it was too much sometimes. Almost. But then there were his girls.

“Ooooh, has the champ finally decided what bit of lexicographical magic she’s going to grace us with?”

He heard Hillary sigh as she placed one tile on the board, saw the despairing heave of her shoulders and Chelsea’s cheeky grin as he leaned against the doorway, trying his very hardest not to laugh.

“What’s that, Mom? Out loud? For the benefit of the President of the United States, who has just entered the room.”

“I – I added an S to my earlier ‘cat,’” she mumbled, turning to face Bill, her expression an adorable facsimile of contrition.

“Which makes…?” their daughter prompted, unable to stifle her giggles.

“C-A-T-S. Six points.” There was a smile fighting through her pout as she sauntered towards him, ready to be enveloped by his embrace.

“Poor baby,” Bill cooed, fingers winding through strands of his wife’s hair, relishing the sensation of her warm little body pressed against him, and shooting a wink at their progeny.

“There was no other choice. When you’ve got a Q and a Z, an S and a smattering of A’s and your opponent refuses point-blank, despite your best attempts at shameless bribery, to leave you an open U, what can you do?”
“Oh now, Chels – that’s just cruel.”

“That’s how you play the game, Dad. Scrabble is vicious. Unforgiving. No place for the faint of heart. No quarter given. Besides, Mom absolutely annihilated me in the last game.” Bill let out a long whistle. The piece of scrap paper she showed him told a brutal tale. This was their third hard-fought battle of the night and the first in which Chelsea had come anywhere near victory.

“Well, that’s a whole different story,” he said, gaze drifting down to his wife. “You bad girl. Playin’ on my heartstrings like that.” She was vibrating with laughter, muffled against his jacket. Taking one hand, he gently guided her chin up, seeing the herculean effort of composing her face once more into a mask of innocence, big blue eyes wide and blinking angelically at him. Once. Twice. The third time, he could no longer resist the pull.

Their lips met in what he fully intended to be only a soft peck. But she felt so goddamn good, so rejuvenating after a seemingly interminable session of playing impartial nursemaid to two feuding leaders, that he rapidly found himself unable, unwilling to let go, deepening the kiss as far as she’d allow – not as far as he would have liked – before she broke away, attempting to regain some modicum of composure and noticing Chelsea’s tear-stained smile.

“Sweetheart, what is it?” Hillary was at their daughter’s side in a flash, Bill mere inches behind her. Chelsea started crying in earnest the moment her parents jointly wrapped her up and guided her to the suite’s sofa, both their protective parental instincts flying rapidly into overdrive. Circles were rubbed on the young woman’s back, auburn curls stroked, comforting words murmured until at last, after what seemed like ages of agony, she lifted her head from where it had rested on her mother’s chest. When speech became practicable, it was still interspersed with wracking sobs.

“I’m so – so, so glad you’re not – not getting a –“ she took a moment, collecting herself, as though the very word was painful to utter – “a divorce.”

It felt like Hillary’s heart had been ripped out. She squeezed Chelsea tightly, drawing her even closer. Immediately, the recriminations started flying internally. Why hadn’t she thought, after those first awful months, the months where she really had considered leaving and had tried the notion on again and again in her mind, as though it were a garment that almost fit but not quite, of making a definitive announcement, one way or the other? That there had been feelings, uncertainties, fears, about everything that was going on in their marriage that Chelsea hadn’t expressed out of concern for her mother’s pain felt like a particularly damning indictment.

Pre-empting an apology, Chelsea continued. “Not for me. I mean, I would be upset. Of course I would be upset, but it’d be okay. Weird, but – okay, I guess. After a while. I just – I don’t know what you would – what you would do without each other.”

“I don’t know either.” Bill’s voice came in a hoarse whisper, raw and vulnerable. Two more forceful, wrenching tugs in her chest that left her breathless, unable to speak and unsure of what she would say if she could.

As she searched her brain, trying to find some simple sentence that could, in one stroke, express the inexpressible, serve as an apology, an explanation, a testament to just how deeply, overwhelmingly she felt love. How she had since that spring day in 1971, since that chilly, dark February nearly nineteen years ago, and how terrifying and beautiful it was.

Twin pairs of pale blue eyes found her. They saw her – really saw her – as no others did.

“Me too, Mom. I love you, too.”
The Clintons sat, a tangled, teary, curiously comfortable arrangement on the couch.

Bill cleared his throat, reluctant to bring this interlude to a close but aware that a rap at the door would do so sooner or later if he didn’t. “So… does this mean y’all are gonna let me win at Scrabble on the plane?”

“Dad!”

“Not on your life.”

Almost on cue, the knock came, followed by Sam’s voice. “Mr. President? Mrs. Clinton? The dessert reception?”

Heavy sighs, gentle hugs, murmured “I love you”s as they separated. “Yeah, we’re coming,” Bill called back.

“You want us to bring you back something, honey?”

“I’m good, thanks.”

“Sure?” Hillary felt the compulsion to fuss, to linger.

“Sure.” Seeing her mother’s hesitation, Chelsea grabbed her hand. “Honestly, I’m fine. That felt – really good. In an intense, weird kinda way. But I’m exhausted.” Still holding on, she led the way, inching the family closer to the barrier between them and the outside world. “I’ll be in my room when you get back, so don’t worry about making noise.”

“Chelsea – “

“Doors. I meant opening and closing doors. What did you think I was talking about?”

Bill coughed. “Duly noted.”

One last group embrace, a final check in the room’s mirror that the President and First Lady looked presentable, and they crossed the threshold.

Chapter End Notes

I am very seriously considering having the next chapter contain smut. This is not a promise, but you have been advised, hahaha. As ever, thank you all so much for reading and leaving such unbelievably kind comments.

(P.S. I am meeting Hillary in, like, two months and I cannot even function. So I apologize if this is complete and utter nonsense because my brain has been broken since Wednesday because of this fact.)
December 14, 1998


Bill couldn’t help looking slightly crestfallen, surveying the glass of red wine and the assortment of miniature pastries and bonbons he’d smuggled out of the reception wrapped in a napkin and laid out for his wife while she was ensconced in the bathroom. In all fairness, he probably should have recognized that potential pitfall in his scheme to surprise her with sweet treats. It wasn’t practical, but he had thought it rather romantic: another opportunity to spoil his girl of the kind he’d sworn to seize.

This could still be salvaged, he realized, catching her eyes fixed raptly on his long, elegant fingers as they fidgeted and twisted the crumb-laden piece of cloth. They occasionally flicked over to one of the chocolate-filled tartlets. A telltale lick of her lips gave the game away completely. It still wasn’t clear, though, which sight elicited the hungrier look.

“Should’ve thought of that. I’m sorry, I just – you didn’t eat anything when we were downstairs.”

He spoke softly, accentuating his drawl ever so slightly, more than enough to begin to chip away at her resolve.

A giggle, unexpected to him, cut through the dreamy haze he had seen her begin to slip into.

“Jesus, Bill, you sound just like my mother. Just because I didn’t clear out the buffet table single-handed doesn’t mean I’m going to starve.”

He smiled, remembering how Dorothy constantly thrust heaping platefuls of food at her husband, her three children, and, once he had been subsumed into the Rodham fold, him – once cutting her daughter a slice that practically constituted the entire pie, burying it in whipped cream and fretting loudly all the while that Hillary was getting far too thin. This over-solicitude generally resulted in protests and eye rolls from Hillary; the men were generally too busy inhaling whatever had been set before them to offer comment of any kind.

“I was trying to exercise a little self-control. You know, so I can eat something besides salad in January.”

Making a show of raking his eyes over her (setting aside for the moment the inconvenient fact that her figure was largely concealed from view by a perplexingly loose-fitting nightgown), Bill purred, “I don’t think you have anything to worry about there, babe.” She shivered visibly and he got a thrill, seeing the thrill his words had given her. “Come on. You know you want to.”

For a few moments, Hillary managed to maintain the pretense of begrudging acquiescence, trudging over to where he sat on the bed and accepting the proffered wineglass and frosted brownie before adopting a position next to him, tantalizingly close. Her reluctant charade went out the window after the first bite. “This is gonna make a mess,” she fleetingly rationalized.

“I’m the President of the United States,” he countered, grinning.

“You have a point there.”
Before he could see her smirk, he felt it, curving against his mouth as it broadened. Bill barely had to brush his tongue against her lips to make them open, allowing him free entry and enthusiastically returning the gesture. Luckily, she’d had the foresight to set her drink safely on the nightstand. Otherwise, an ill-timed burgundy stain on the pristine white comforter provided by the Jerusalem Hilton would have proved a most unwelcome distraction. He pulled her closer. Somehow it still didn’t seem close enough; it never did. Even when she moved to straddle his lap, their languorous kisses only broken out of a damnable need for oxygen, the desire for more was seemingly unquenchable. His hands shifted intuitively, almost compulsively, to her ass, grabbing greedily at the flesh they found there just as her smaller fingers reached around and up to grip his shoulders. The desserts were completely forgotten in favor of something far more delectable.

“You know this is the only way I like chocolate?” he said, panting, seizing the opportunity the moment’s respite provided to slide wandering hands under the soft fabric.

“Mmmmm?” After he gave her buttocks one final squeeze and smoothly began working his way up her torso to her bosom, Hillary had already drifted beyond the point of forming coherent words, the question coming out as an intoxicating cross between a hum and a moan.

“Yeah.” Using his thumbs to swirl swiftly around her nipples, Bill pushed her breasts up, relishing the way they rested in his palms – and the delicious noises this particular maneuver never failed to draw from somewhere in the back of his wife’s throat. “Vicariously.”

As he knew she would, she tossed her head back, letting loose one of those gloriously liberated laughs that emanated straight from her gut. It became a breathless squeal, loud enough to make him glad that Chelsea had both given tacit permission and was likely – hopefully – sound asleep in the connected suite, when he recommenced his ministrations with fresh vigor, kissing at her exposed neck. She was growing steadily wetter; he could feel it just as markedly as he could his own hardening arousal pressing tantalizingly against her.

“Careful,” Hillary gasped. Objectively, he knew he had to oblige her. At best, it would be unseemly for the First Lady to conclude an official visit to Israel with visible hickeys; at worst, such a physical manifestation of a passionate relationship could be misconstrued as an especially tawdry attempt to change the narrative about their marriage at a politically pivotal moment. But how he wanted them to see, to know. His girl was beautiful and sexy and warm and loving and loved. Yes, she was brilliant. Yes, she was strong. Yes, she could be stubborn and withdrawn and critical and so, so hard on herself. Hard on him, sometimes. She was much messier than she let on, more complicated. That was who he wished those on the outside looking in could see. He was aware of the idealistic, quixotic nature of that quest, keenly, unhappily conscious of the fact that Hillary Rodham Clinton would always be in the eye of the beholder – who they wanted her to be, decided she was. It didn’t mean he hated it any less.

Seeing her husband become lost in thought, his eyes misting over, Hillary decided to be proactive. She pulled his t-shirt off over his head. Her nightgown rapidly followed suit, and she gently pushed him down onto the mattress, trailing kisses up his chest until her lips met his again.

“I love you,” he breathed, voice thick with emotion.

“I know.”

Reluctantly, she managed to separate herself from him just long enough to pull down and discard pajama pants (his) and underwear (his and hers) and resituate herself at the head of the bed, wordlessly reaching her arms out to Bill until he crawled up to fill them. They began again an achingly slow, tender mix of languid osculation and equally dreamy groping, hands lovingly caressing mutual erogenous zones, reveling in the supple flesh to be found there.
When those slender digits whose touch she craved so much found their way between her thighs, it felt like her heart stopped for a moment and then thundered back to life as he began lazily circling her clitoris, occasionally applying a bit of heavenly pressure that made her cry out for more. Snaking her arm around his, Hillary used the fluid already seeping from his cock’s head to lubricate the rest of the shaft. She wanted this to last forever, but she also wanted him inside her as soon as humanly possible.

Hillary scissored her legs through her husband’s, taking the initiative once again and drawing him into her deeply. His groan and hers, equally wanton, grew muffled as tongues tangled once again, mirroring their limbs. The position required a measured pace, more circular grinding than the hard and fast thrusting that their ardor generally provoked. It felt divine: her breasts pressed against his chest, pillowy softness against softness. Muscular planes, she occasionally thought, might be nice. She could certainly see the aesthetic appeal, to a certain extent, anyway, but she preferred Bill’s body. Both comfortable and comforting. A warm, living, breathing security blanket.

He moved his hips to counter hers, hands practically spanning her waist in full and adjusting his angle of ingress so that he managed to hit – well, everything, it felt like. “Shit, I’m so deep – and you’re so – fucking – tight, baby.” His breath was hot in her ear, voice rough and ragged. That alone sent the first faint flutterings of orgasm through her, causing her to clench a little around his member.

“Billy – slower – pl – please –”

“It’s okay, darlin’ – let it go.”

Her thighs tightened around his; their joined bodies, by now coated in a slick sheen of sweat and reciprocal arousal, continued making indulgent circles against one another. They didn’t opt to go this route very often, in an effort to preserve the erotic thrill it provided. In the throes, Hillary really questioned the merits of that decision.

Bill was much more of a talker than she was in bed, and she adored it. Her wildly overstimulated brain could only take in a tiny fraction of what he was saying; the words “perfect”, a thousand synonyms for “beautiful”, “love”, pet names, expletives, endless variations of “Hillary”, and sounds far less articulate but equally exciting sent her careening ever closer to the edge.

Her nails raked his back, far harder than she intended. That would leave a mark for only the two of them to see. Thin red lines that said, unequivocally, “mine”.

*Mine.*

The thought pulsated, throbbed in a rhythm synchronous with their movements: one clear word in a mess of firing synapses.

*Mine.*

And just like that, one more slide against her, into her – the bottom fell out. The world flashed white and no sensation but that of unbridled ecstasy existed, was even conceivable.

She came with a sob so loud that, had she been in possession of her faculties, the absolute certainty of being overhead would have mortified her. As her inner walls spasmed around him, Bill, too, climaxed, her body receiving his seed in spurts.

“Christ almighty,” he exhaled, rolling away from her. Always needing to maintain some form of physical contact, his fingers traced down his wife’s arm until they interlaced with hers.
“Yeah.”

“You’re just – “ Looking over at Hillary, meeting her sapphire eyes when he felt so raw, still a little unworthy of what he’d been given (and what he’d so often taken for granted), was an overwhelming experience. His voice cracked.

“So are you,” she smiled, pulling his hand to her lips and kissing it softly.

They lay like that for several minutes, pulse and breathing gradually returning to normal but thoughts still drifting in an amorous, sleepy haze.

“Baby?”

“Mmm?” Bill managed to pull himself back from the brink of slumber.

“I’m hungry.” A laugh started to build somewhere deep in his belly. “And we need to change this comforter.”

He reached down to feel the wet spot. “Goddamn,” he chuckled. “We did make a mess.”

Hillary’s eyes sparkled. “Well, you are the President of the United States.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, folks - here it is. Hopefully it lives somewhat up to expectation and you all enjoy. Extra-special thanks to @janeway578 for being a life-saving and ridiculously encouraging beta, because I have no idea what on earth I'm doing. She says it's okay, so I'm gonna run with it.
Cocoa

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
combination she knew it was unlikely he’d be able to resist for long. To circumvent any further
distraction from her mission, Hillary swiftly extricated herself. “Light on the chocolate, heavy on
the marshmallows?” she asked Bill. He nodded, pouting slightly and unable or unwilling to bother
camouflaging it. Shifting her focus to Chelsea, she inquired, “Heavy on the chocolate, heavy on the
marshmallows?”

“You’re the best, Mom.”

The words gave her a little flutter, an added spring to her step. No matter how many times she
heard it – and she had been blessed to hear it quite a few times – the thrill remained the same.

- 

Father and daughter had sat quietly, each absorbed in their own task: he laboring over The New
York Times’s most recent (diabolical) Sunday crossword and trying very hard not to think too much
about Saddam Hussein or impeachment, she ploughing through Sense and Sensibility for the
umpteenth time in an effort to decompress from a semester of less comforting reading.

“Dad?” Chelsea broke the silence somewhat tentatively.

“Mmmmm?” Knowing how over-solicitude made teenagers clam up, even his own darling girl, he
tried to keep his tone casual.

“You’re still – I mean – you and Mom – you find her – attractive. Right?”

“Of course!” It came out louder than he’d intended and almost before Chelsea had finished
stammering out her question.

“Like… sexually?” Her cheeks flushed red; he could feel his own doing the same.

“Of – of course,” he repeated, trying to temper his zeal.

“Even when you were – you know –“ She exhaled heavily, not particularly wanting to verbalize it
but unable to avoid doing so. “Screwing around?”

“Yes.”

“So – why? If that’s not an issue, then – it just doesn’t make any sense.”

“I know.”

“And it makes people think the most awful things about her. Both of you, but at least some of what
they’re saying about you is true. Kind of, anyway. True enough.”

“Have they been giving you a hard time at school?”

“No! Not for the most part. There’s the occasional jerk, but it’s only because that’s, like, the
world’s easiest target right now. Actually, they’ve been trying so hard not to mention it and…
unnaturally shielding me from it, I guess, that it almost makes the whole thing worse. But even my
friends – the ones who don’t really know you guys, not yet – think… either Mom must be a total
Type A bitch who drives you to it, or that there’s some Machiavellian crap going on where you get
to have your way with all the interns and she stands by you to preserve your ‘family values’ image.
And I know that’s not true – I mean, I’m pretty sure I do – but how do you prove a negative
without sounding defensive? Too defensive.”
Everything had rushed out in an uncontrollable torrent. Seeing her father chew on his lower lip, the
tell-tale clench of his jaw, made her scoot closer to him on the sofa, reaching to take his hand in
hers. “I’m sorry, Dad. You’ve got enough – more than enough – to worry about –“

“No. No, thank you, Chelsea. Thank you for telling me. It’s a real honor you still want to talk to
me at all, frankly.” Despite the thickness resting uncomfortably in both their throats, they managed
a laugh. Bill wrapped an arm around his daughter and allowed her to rest against his chest, a spot
she’d occupied in times of trouble for almost nineteen years. “I want you to ask me questions and
tell me how you feel. You know the same goes for your mother. I’m – what I’m most sorry for in
this whole mess is what I’ve put you and Hillary through. I mean that. And whatever I have to do
to fix it or make up for it, I’ll do it.” Planting a kiss among her curls, he quickly added, “Not a car.”

“Oh come on, Dad!”

“Those are the Secret Service’s rules, not mine.”

“Whatever.”

He gave her another quick squeeze. “So, you promise you’ll talk to us? Even if you don’t think
we’ll like what we hear?”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Chelsea burrowed deeper.

The clatter of mugs interrupted them as Hillary made her return, juggling her own newspaper and
tray heavily laden with cocoa and marshmallows.

“Finally!” Chelsea exclaimed in faux exasperation.

“How many times did you let the milk boil over?” Bill asked, unable to keep the syrupy affection
from either his voice or his gaze, watching her set the family’s goodies down on the coffee table.

“Only twice,” she said. Sitting so close she might as well have been on his lap, her husband’s arm
received a friendly swat. “But I was busy!” Hillary held her newspaper aloft with an air that could
only be described as triumphant.

“Oh?”

“Finished. In pen.” Laying her own perfect handiwork over his abortive attempt before popping a
stray marshmallow into her mouth, she looked smug and adorable in equal measure. Just the way
he liked her.

Chapter End Notes

And we're back! Not entirely happy with this chapter - but when am I ever? I do hope
you enjoy. Thank you all so much for reading and for all your support. It means a
tremendous amount to me, even if I don't always fully understand it, haha.
Caught

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

December 16, 1998

“Yeah?” It wasn’t the friendliest-sounding response to what had been a rather polite tap on the door, but he didn’t feel particularly friendly. He felt exhausted and irritated and, frankly, near the end of his rope.

Hillary swept in to the Oval Office before he could finish even that querulous monosyllable. “Tea,” she announced, her tone gentle but matter-of-fact. “Herbal. I don’t think you need more caffeine right now.” After a moment’s rummaging to find a comparatively unimportant document on which to set the steaming mug – the Resolute desk was not going to incur even the most minor damage on her watch – she stood by as her husband closed his eyes and let out a long, unsteady breath. He couldn’t possibly be nervous at the prospect of a televised address; that sort of thing came easily to him. Talking down a lens sapped her spontaneity, replacing the warmth she hoped she possessed in person with a cautiously constructed, noticeably affected façade of calm. Bill was effortlessly telegenic, regardless of how stressful the circumstances might be. And stressful they undeniably were.

As Bill took a long, grateful sip of tea, her gaze shifted compulsively, uneasily, to the door that led to the adjoining private study. There was a reason she had studiously avoided this room for months and it was encapsulated in the faint nausea she felt, the high-pitched giggles and coos – worse still, the moans – and the godawful images that, unbidden and most definitely unwanted, began to inveigle their way into her consciousness. She tried to banish them with several short, sharp digs of nails to palm. Not now.

“Better?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Want to talk about it?”

He sighed again, deeply, and began to make circles on his temples with long, graceful fingers.

“Well, the budget meeting this morning went about as well as you’d expect when half the people there want you hung, drawn and quartered. I mean, they haven’t kicked my ass out of office yet. I still have to do the damn job. And then this –“ Ruffling through the papers that constituted his remarks, clearly straining to resist the temptation to throw or tear them in some futile gesture of insolence, Bill looked up at her with desperate eyes. “I’m trying to deal with all this shit and I cannot do anything right. If you’d asked them this time last year about Iraq, every single one of ‘em would’ve been saying I was too weak on Saddam, letting him walk all over me, blah blah blah – I mean, anything less than me personally going to Baghdad and socking him in the jaw wouldn’t be tough enough. So you’d think missile strikes – with international cooperation – on military targets – would split the difference and manage to piss the bare minimum of people off, but no. Now it’s a political maneuver to get out of my personal mess when they might not even have managed to get their shit together and vote before they went into recess for Christmas anyway.”

The rant, pent up for frustrating hours, flooded from him in an indignant torrent. He hated this, every aspect of it. From the initial fault that lay, most gallingly, with him to the way in which it had been ruthlessly exploited by everyone from the intern herself to her friends (so-called) to the
media to his own political nemeses, it all seemed minutely engineered with startling precision to exploit what was worst in him and then to amplify it on a truly appalling scale. Bill searched for purchase in those deep pools of blue where his only safe harbor was often to be found. For a moment, he saw pain there. Not his, reflected – something all her own. It nagged at him, but he wanted comfort too badly and she was just magnanimous enough to supply it.

“You can’t let them get to you.” Bill gave her a pained, skeptical look. “You can’t let them see they’re getting to you,” she corrected.

“Does that make it hurt any less?”

Hillary paused. “No. No, it doesn’t.” That horrible, wounded look was back. Or maybe he was projecting, imagining it, so quickly did it vanish, replaced almost instantaneously by a gloriously defiant sparkle. “But it really pisses them off.”

His face relaxed into a smile in spite of himself and he swiveled his chair slightly away from the desk, an implicit invitation to sit on his lap that there was no need to verbalize. Her weight, the warmth of her body against him was an immediate salve.

“There’s something else.” She stiffened. The habitual, involuntary brace for impact made his stomach twist again. “Not bad,” Bill added hastily. “Chelsea was talking to me last night. She wants there to be a reason – something clear-cut and comprehensible for why I –” He stopped and followed her stare to the study door. Saying the words was redundant. Hillary’s mind was two steps ahead of him. “She asked if I was still attracted to you. Baby, you know I am. You know that, don’t you?”

“I know,” she said, barely above a whisper. A slight hitch and her unnaturally regular, increasingly rapid blinks betrayed her.

“You’re too good for me. You always have been. Honest to god, I have no idea why you stay – why you put up with all the shit I’ve put you through – but I –”

The light pressure of a finger stopped his lips in mid-sentence. “Billy, I feel just the same way about you.” He made an attempt to protest, but his vocal cords couldn’t quite function. “You’re so charismatic. And you’re brilliant. And you’re handsome. And you’re kind. You’re strong and you’re vulnerable.” Hillary cleared her throat, resolutely avoiding eye contact; he could feel her trembling. “And you picked me. Even though I’m stubborn and combative and I know – I know I’m not easy. Deep down, I’m a mess. I just do a better job of hiding it most of the time. You could have somebody less difficult – easier to love. And it’s so simple for you to find another – another woman who loves you. But I don’t think I c –”

“Stop it, Hillary. Don’t talk like that.” It was more than his heart could take. Bill knew, but allowed himself too often to forget, that Hillary was plagued by the same demons of self-doubt that dogged him. While he indulged them, wallowed in the inadequacy they engendered, she fought. If those insidious, vicious voices could not be ignored or drowned out by relentless activity, the damage they wrought at least had to be contained, locked away in some dark corner of her mind where she was the only one they would be able to inflict harm upon. She gave him access to that corner, sometimes. He knew what her demon sounded like; he had heard her father’s voice.

“I love you,” he said forcefully.

“Your tea’s getting cold,” she croaked, trying to get up, wiping at her face, trying to hide.

“Look at me, Hillary.” Bill tightened his arms around her, feeling one sob break loose, then
another. “Please, baby. Look at me.” At last, she gave in. “I love you. I want you. One of those is more important than the other, but they’re both true. They always have been, and they always will be.”

His lips touched hers gently, a gesture of tender affirmation. When he attempted to withdraw, thumb still stroking her soft cheek, she pulled him back in, deepening the kiss.

Their mouths worked against each other, tongues tangling. His broad hand spanned the small of her back, traveling up and down delicately, asking for nothing more than he was being given. This contact, sweetness itself, sufficed. Iraq seemed the hundreds of thousands of miles away that it was; the GOP were reduced to a gaggle of petulant, irrelevant children.

Hillary stood up and, just as swiftly as she had risen, returned to his lap, this time straddling him. Fingers began pulling at his tie, fiddling with the buttons on his shirt. Bill accepted the implied invitation with gusto, reaching under her bulky sweater before tiring of the obstacle and, during a pause in her own ministrations, lifting it over his wife’s head, tossing it – somewhere. He vaguely hoped he hadn’t knocked over the mug and spilled its contents on anything vital, but the concern, such as it was, was fleeting.

“Curtains’re open –“ Hillary murmured indistinctly into his mouth as he began feverishly working the catch at the back of her bra.

A slamming door knocked them violently out of their lustful haze, followed by a belated, sheepish volley of raps against the wood. Hillary practically sprang off of him, cheeks flushing automatically as she scrambled around the desk to search for her sweater.

“Shit, shit, shit!”

“Just a minute,” Bill managed to call out. He could barely contain his laughter as he straightened his tie and watched Hillary sprint across the room half-clothed to where he had apparently thrown her garment with some vigor. “We’re coming!” At that double entendre, he promptly doubled over laughing.

“Shut up, Bill – it’s not funny!” she hissed unconvincingly, giggles bubbling to the surface.

Redressed (but composure not fully regained), Hillary opened the door, hair tousled. “Hi, John.”

It was a struggle for the Chief of Staff to keep a straight face. “Sorry to interrupt, Mrs. Clinton. But we need to get the cameras in for the President’s address in about five minutes.”

“Oh, no bother. I was – I was just going.” She turned back to her husband, his boyish grin beckoning her back to finish what they’d started. “Good luck, honey. We’ll be watching upstairs.”

After the First Lady swiftly made her exit, John exchanged a long look with his boss. “You might wanna take care of that lipstick before the press gets in here, sir. Just a suggestion.”

Chapter End Notes

I am so sorry that this is not, as previously advertised, the preamble to the Special Olympics event. Tragically, I apparently cannot read dates properly. The next chapter (or possibly two) will be dealing with that glorious occasion. Hopefully, this is enough
to make up for that disappointment! Thank you all again so much for reading and commenting. It truly boggles my mind that people actually read this and enjoy it, and I'm enormously grateful.
December 17, 1998

After an exasperating minute spent fiddling with his bowtie – the dexterity of his fingers and years of experience seemed to count for precious little when it came to this particular task – Bill barged through the discreet wall panel that led to his wife’s dressing room. It had not been the most agreeable day and his circumstances showed no sign of improving anytime soon. Tonight would be something of a respite. Devoid of politics, but not, more’s the pity, of politicians.

“Hill, could you give me a hand with this fuckin’ –“

The sight that greeted him stopped him dead in his tracks, strangled his complaint. His wife stood at her vanity, clipping on a pair of especially dazzling earrings. That sparkle, impressive though it was, did not faze him. His gaze tracked inexorably downwards, first drinking in alabaster shoulders left unadorned by the customary strips of lacy fabric. She had opted for strapless tonight, a decision that filled him with optimism for her gown’s décolletage. Tracing her spinal column with his eyes, relishing the curves that flanked it, loving and loathing the sheer black material that tantalizingly covered – but just barely – the parts of her body he craved the most, he could practically hear his blood rushing downward.

Hillary could, too.

The smirk caught in the mirror’s reflection, the way she arched her back to lean forward to grab her necklace from the dressing table and the little moan that accompanied the maneuver gave her game away.

“Oh,” she breathed, allowing the string of gems to fall to the carpet.

Part of his brain – the part that was cognizant of the very large, very public event they were due to attend in approximately half an hour, keenly aware that her freshly sprayed hair could not be mussed and, most crucially, that he did not have nearly enough time to do even a fraction of the things he wanted to do to her – willed her not to bend over to retrieve them.

She did. Languorously.

He followed the jewels’ path, up her stockinged thigh, lingering for a horribly tantalizing moment at the gusset of her panties before continuing to her navel.

“Was there something you wanted, baby?” Hillary purred. The pretense that she had only just noticed his presence was laughably thin, absurdity maximized by the way she licked her lips to punctuate the question. And the way she was drawing the necklace up through her cleavage, before finally, mercifully, winding it around her swan’s neck and efficiently working the clasp.

A groaned “fuck” was all he could manage.

“What was that?”

“Please –“
Flush rising in her cheeks – she was just as wet as he was hard; he knew it – she turned to face him, trying with visible effort to keep her face arranged in a pout. “And I wanted this to be a surprise for you.” He watched as she fondled herself, breath catching as her breasts came enticingly close to spilling out of their confines. “Do you like it?” Bill nodded vigorously. “Good.” Hips swayed hypnotically, deliberately towards him.

The second she was within reach, his hands were all over her, closely followed by his lips. Gratifyingly, he elicited the same frenzied, inarticulate response he had earlier been reduced to. Bill tore himself away, just long enough to let out a “Fuck, Hilly.” His vocabulary still seemed to consist of only three words.

Hillary pushed him down onto the nearest of the room’s low chairs, divesting herself of the nearly see-through scrap of material that was quickly becoming an inconvenience and yanking his trousers and briefs to the floor. She clambered onto his lap, knees resting on either side of his thighs. “If we have a snack now,” she panted, “will you still be hungry for dessert later?”

Unable to formulate a verbal response (and forgetting completely about the matter of her hairdo), Bill growled, pulling her to him and kissing her hard. This would not even begin to whet his appetite. She was as acutely aware of that fact as he.

No further cue was necessary. Hillary leaned forward, almost tipping the chair over before she eased down onto him, mutual moans lost in a convoluted intertwining of tongues. That relative quiet did not last for long, however. As her hips began to move against his, pace escalating in short order from a walk to a frenetic gallop, her vocalizations grew louder and more urgent. This angle served to hit every single one of her sweet spots with each thrust – and seeing her like this did exactly the same for him. All vestiges of her customary restraint, the careful weighing of word, deed and appearance brought on by decades of internal and external criticism, vanished. Hillary Rodham was crying out with pleasure, not caring who heard, unconcerned that virtually all her lipstick was now smeared across her husband’s mouth and that her carefully arranged coiffure was now sticking out at curious angles.

*His girl. She was his girl. Even though he was so goddamned stupid.*

Bill closed his eyes, trying desperately to wait for her to finish. Each time she slammed against him, he jolted closer to the edge. And he wanted to take her with him. He wanted that more than anything. Collecting himself as much as he could, he made to reach between her legs, to hasten her journey to climax. As his scattered mind still struggled to gather the wherewithal to instruct the muscles in his arm to act – he exhaled an unconscious “I love you” into her ear.

That was all it took.

She came with a cry, the pulsations of her inner walls ensuring he was not far behind.

Pulling her tightly to him, not wanting to relinquish their connection just yet, he kept repeating the words. Her breathing began to steady. Abruptly – far more quickly than was usual for such interludes – her common sense snapped back on.

“Fifteen minutes!”

“Aw, shit.”

- 

By the time they made their way downstairs, the Clintons – he in a fresh shirt, she finally sporting
her black dress that clung snugly, he couldn’t help but note, to every single curvaceous inch – were
doused in so much cologne and perfume that Bill could feel his asthma beginning to flare up. In
what would be their last moments of privacy for the next few hours, Hillary turned to adjust his tie
yet again and quadruple-check that his outward appearance gave no hint of their tryst. Despite
several frenetic efforts, there were still a few sections of her own hair that she couldn’t quite
manage to re-tame; the aim became to create an illusion of artful tousling, or at least to make the
truth of the matter less abundantly apparent.

“Hello, Eunice. Sargent. Welcome back to the White House,” she beamed, striding into the
reception room with her hand still clutching her husband’s. The couples exchanged handshakes,
kisses on cheeks. “It’s going to be a lovely evening – celebrating your phenomenal work.”

“Thank you for having us, Mrs. Clinton.” Eunice glanced between Bill and Hillary, one of those
characteristic Kennedy grins beginning to manifest. “I love your hair.”

Chapter End Notes

It's Special Olympics time! For real! This will be a smutty two-parter. Hopefully. And
then we'll return to our regularly scheduled angst and probing of childhoods and weird
Rodham family dynamics - with occasional adult interludes.

For purplelacemoon, this event's #1 fan, and the invaluable, patient Janeway578.
December 17, 1998

“Woo! That was fun!” Hillary exclaimed, between stanzas of her hummed (but still somehow, miraculously, off-key) rendition of “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town”. She then transitioned giddily to an even more haphazard warble, veering to a high note several semitones distant from her target. “He knows if you’ve been bad or good, so be good – for – good – ness’ – sake!” Her hips scooted backward into her husband’s with a little bump to accent each syllable, ever so slightly missing the beat. Giggles filled the hallway of the Residence, interrupted by a delighted little shriek when Bill reached around her waist and pulled their bodies almost flush.

Breath hot against the shell of her ear, voice rough – a symptom of the want she could already feel pressed into her back – he whispered, “But you haven’t been a good girl, Hillary Diane. You’ve been making me crazy all night.” An electric tingle shot down her spine, finding a home between her thighs. “Knowin’ just what’s under that dress…” Large hands cupped her breasts, kneading them gently, palming their weight, eliciting yet another thrill before they traced down the sides of her abdomen. His target ground into him again, out of impulse more than the conscious efforts at flirtation that had predominated the evening. “And wantin’ it so bad… You know how hard it is to keep my hands off you with all those people watchin’ – when you look so goddamn good. I just wanna – eat you up.”

After a tortuously brief moment rubbing her through layers of fabric, Bill spun her around, not relinquishing an iota of their bodies’ closeness. “I wanna fuck you,” he concluded. Her lust-hazed eyes held nothing but hungry concurrence in the flash before their lips met hungrily. Knowing somewhere in the more logical reaches of her mind that they needed to get to the bedroom, ideally as quickly as possible, that this was no place for an assignation, certainly not when Chelsea had friends over, Hillary allowed herself to be backed into the wall, let (inasmuch as she could “let” a reflex take its natural course) her leg hook over his.

When he started hitching her skirt up, pawing at her drenched panties, however, Hillary had to draw the line. “No, baby,” she managed, taking a second to relish his pout before mercifully amending her statement. “Not here. Not yet.”

Hurriedly she moved down the hall, giving a quick rap at the door muffling girls’ laughter. Bill was right behind her. He pulled her into another ravenous kiss, from which she had only just managed to extricate herself, still breathless, lips swollen, cheeks flushed, when their daughter opened her door.

“We just wanted to say – goodnight, girls.” Her tone was nowhere near as even as she would have liked, and she was embarrassingly aware of the extent to which her appearance probably made known the extent of their fooling around.

A tittering chorus echoed her sentiments back to her, breaking into full-on hysteria as the door eased closed.

Before she could say a word, she was pressed against it. This time, she managed to free herself and grab his hand, dragging him urgently toward their room – “dragging” only because even his much longer limbs could barely keep pace with her.
The second their own door was securely closed, they were right back where they’d left off. She was drawn to him, an unruly mess of iron filings drawn inexorably into his powerful field, only then managing to coalesce, but not into anything more coherent. He jerked at her gown’s zipper, frustrated by the atypical clumsiness his desire induced. “Off,” he growled, a thrilling tone that made Hillary uncertain that she was any more up to the task than he was. Tearing frenetically at his own tuxedo, his clothing was somehow on the floor before hers. Another of the small miracles lust wrought.

Just like that, his whirl of activity came to an abrupt halt. His gaze raked over every inch of her body, member rigid, weeping slightly, in clear appreciation. Hillary, still clad in strategically placed black lace, felt so beautiful, so deeply, ardently desired, she could have cried.

Attuned to her moods as ever, Bill enveloped her, hands swiftly seeking his favorite places, mouth finding hers. “Your body – is incredible. I love it. I love you. I love –” He interrupted himself with a moan. Whether it was caused by his fingers kneading her buttocks or her hand wrapping around his cock was deliciously unclear. “Your ass,” he finally managed to conclude, his ministrations and his drawl joining forces, each amplifying the other’s seductive effect.

Their dual efforts – twenty feverishly fumbling digits – tore her drenched panties off. If Hillary had wanted to (or had the capacity to) spare a moment’s thought, she still would have been unconcerned by the spoiled lingerie; she knew with absolute, unerring certainty that a minimum of two or three new ensembles would be awaiting her Christmas Eve, if not necessarily under the family tree.

“Ready for dessert now?” she panted, her lips barely separated from his.

Bill turned her around gently, still caressing her, flitting between her breasts and periodically toying with her labia, swirling a finger all too briefly around her clit. “Baby, I’ve been ready all night. Every single time I looked at you in that tight fuckin’ dress, I wanted to rip it right off you and take you right there on the table. Let every single person there know what a goddess you are – my goddess.” What he wanted as he slowly walked her to the edge of their bed was abundantly clear and she was happy to oblige – especially if he kept talking like that, touching her like that.

Despite his earlier assertions of her naughtiness, she was, at her core, a good, compliant girl, kneeling at the mattress’s edge, spreading her knees and giving her back a little arch that, in turn, induced a moan as the object of his fixation jutted closer to him, a perfect, rounded heart-shape in the air. It received a squeeze and a light smack – little gestures that nearly finished her off then and there.

‘Our daughter and three of her dearest friends are right down the hall,’ she reminded herself in a desperate, mostly futile attempt to stifle what threatened to be a high-volume cry of pleasure as Bill slid into her from behind, keeping one hand firmly anchored to her hip while the other reached around, both to offer her additional support and to ensure that she was enjoying this just as much as he was. And from the very first languorous thrust, it was abundantly clear that Bill was enjoying it plenty.

His assertion that he’d been waiting altogether too long for this release was proving true, his pace escalating rapidly, pubic bone slapping and sliding against her ass. Hillary bit her lip. Hard. If she made any noise at all beyond her feverish breathing, she was keenly aware that it would be a scream. An ecstatic scream, but one that might nonetheless cause the Secret Service concern. Not to mention, of course, Chelsea. But then Bill tapped at that sensitive bundle of nerves, following it with one of those circular flicks that obliterated any semblance of control she had left.

“Oh fuck, Billy!” Was that too loud? She wasn’t sure her ears were working properly anymore.
“Talk to me, baby – please – oh fuck – harder –“ The words were almost arbitrary; she could have been speaking Esperanto or gibberish or fluent Mandarin for all she knew.

“You’re a good girl, Hill. Such a good girl – you’re the best girl. So fuckin’ sexy. The most beautiful girl in the whole goddamn world.” Coherence had long since passed Bill by, too, but he spoke with absolute, shattering conviction. She pushed back, leaning into the praise like a kitten being stroked. Nobody else loved her like he did; nobody else ever would. She knew it: it intoxicated her, overwhelmed her, and she craved it. It was her drug of choice. And she wasn’t just good enough. She was the best – or he thought she was, which was largely sufficient to satisfy her purposes.

He was nearing his climax, his gasps and affirmations growing increasingly ragged, but his long, slender fingers kept working. “Come on, babe. Come on. Let go. I want you to cum for me, darlin’,” One more swirl, another hard push home, in conjunction with his husky request, and she was reduced to sheer, blissful nothingness, cast adrift on a sea of pleasure. She was, after all, a good girl.

There was a cry – hers – a tangled mess of syllables, something about Bill and love that couldn’t be parsed if it was diagrammed for months. The throbbing she felt at her core, a series of fluttering pulsations, drew the seed out of him in turn. He was kissing her shoulder, telling her again and again what she craved most. Cosseting her in a warm, soft cocoon of adulation.

The second he finished and drew himself out of her, Hillary flipped over, gazing at him with almost palpable warmth, sappiness she saw reflected back to her in his little boy grin before he flopped down beside her. She nuzzled into his chest, comforting in its familiar softness, his fingers playing with the sections of her hair not made rigid with spray. Part of her – the part that wasn’t completely spent – wanted more, another round. To feel that incomparable high over and over again so she could never forget that she was lovely. Loveable. Loved.

Bill was talking to her. His voice made soothing vibrations that she could feel, pressed against him. *Angel,* he said. *Perfect.* He was beginning to drift.

She rose, grabbing some tissue and tenderly cleaning him off, guided him to a more comfortable position and carefully rearranged pillows and blankets for maximum restfulness. Her husband pulled her down for one more sleepy kiss.

A quick shower, face washed, contacts out, glasses on, and she too was ready. Bill wrapped himself around her automatically the moment she was situated in their bed.

Hillary closed her eyes, feeling his warmth, breathing him in. Humming with tuneless joy.

Chapter End Notes

Another big thanks to Janeway578 for putting up with me and offering her invaluable guidance. I do not smut easily, especially not for 1700 words. As always, you guys are the best, and your comments really do mean the world. Prepare yourself for impeachment angst and Rodham family drama!
December 18, 1998

How was he holding up? A pertinent question, if more than a little absurd. Redundant. About as well as could be expected, really, given the increasingly cataclysmic circumstances. The votes necessary to escape impeachment had long ago started to slip terrifyingly out of his grasp, and his capacity to exercise any control whatsoever over this debacle had been practically non-existent for most of the past year.

Bill tried to formulate an honest response, seeking words that weren’t over-steeped in the self-pity he too frequently, too easily found himself slipping into. It was comfortable, but unhelpful. Even Tobias’s patient gaze, devoid of judgment as ever, unnerved him a little, invited him to fall into that old trap. A small, warm hand slipped into his. Steady and reassuring as ever. He cleared his throat.

“Frankly, I’m terrified. This is staring right into the abyss – and every day I think maybe I’m amplifying it, maybe it’s not really as black as it seems. Then I see the look on everybody else’s faces and I realize it’s worse. It’s not getting better. I really am completely screwed. And yeah, I’m aware that this is a witch-hunt, that if there hadn’t been a ‘there’ there, they would’ve made something up, but I made it so easy. No one gives a shit about the hypocrisy. Gingrich has been messing around with a staffer for five years and he’s on his second marriage. For fuck’s sake, he left his first wife because she wasn’t young enough or pretty enough to be a First Lady – and she had cancer! She was in the goddamn hospital. If you don’t think he would have obfuscated or downright lied under oath about every single bit of that, then you’re crazy. What I did – what I’ve done – is wrong. There’s no point in denying that, because it’s the truth. Irrefutable. But this – this is fucking ridiculous. They just wanna hogtie me for as long as possible, damage me personally and politically as much as possible, so there’ll be less for their man to fix when they get him in come 2001. The illusion of their caring even remotely about what did or did not happen between me and Paula Jones or me and Monica Lewinsky doesn’t hold up under even an ounce of scrutiny. It’s just –“

He realized, not for the first time, that, in direct contrast to his concerns about being unable to express himself properly, he had been expounding at considerable length. The words, once he turned the tap, flowed easily, uncontrollably, moving swiftly around, over and through any obstacles like the periodic flurries of tension emanating from Hillary, the ticking veins he could feel in his wife’s hand, the stiffness of her posture, the shifting of her weight on the cushion next to him. But now it all sat heavy on his chest. The names and phrases that had elicited the strongest, most visceral reactions stuck out in neon flashes. God, how he hurt her. How he hated it. How he wished he could make it all stop.

“What about you, Hillary?” Tobias asked gingerly, knowing by now, after countless hours of discussion in person and over the phone, when Bill had run dry.

“What about me?” She bristled. Visibly. Audibly. Her tone’s careful, clipped neutrality was more giveaway than mask.

“How are you feeling?”
“I don’t see how that’s pertinent.”

“Honey—”

“You’re the one who did this. You’re the one being impeached. This is happening to you. I’m here for support; that’s it. Getting into all that doesn’t help you.”

That first remark, however much it cut, had to be allowed to pass unremarked upon. It was true, anyway. “All what? Hill, baby, you have been supportive. You have been so good to me these past few weeks. More than I deserve—”

“Because I love you. And I’m your wife. We’ve been over this.”

Tobias carefully, quickly made his interpolation. “I think it’s important to Bill – and to the healing process – that he knows what’s going on with you. Your feelings are always valuable and relevant.”

Hillary scoffed.

“To me, they are,” Bill said softly. “You know that.”

A sigh. A deep breath. “I know.”

“So?” He wrapped his arm around her, feeling a fraction of his concern dissipate when she snuggled in closer rather than pulling away.

“I’m tired. I’m just – so tired. People either treat me like I’m made of glass, with all their pity that’s just an inch away from contempt – because how could I be so naïve, so stupid, not to know; have so little pride to let it keep happening over and over again – or they act like I can’t feel anything at all, like the idea that I could be hurt is inherently ridiculous. Of course it’s all a calculation. Of course I’m just playing the game. And I don’t know which is worse. I’m a moron or I’m Machiavelli.” She smiled weakly at him. “Not a particularly appealing set of options.”

“Neither,” he whispered, giving her shoulder a light squeeze. Singing her praises, rattling off a litany of her virtues, was extremely tempting, but he had no intention of interrupting.

“There are worse things in a marriage than – than infidelity. My mother always told me that, and I know it’s true. But I still feel it… I don’t know. There’ll be a knot in my stomach, this awful, sick feeling. Or it just – I just start thinking about her. Them. You. And wondering why, what I did wrong, what I didn’t do. What’s wrong with me; what’s wrong with you. I certainly don’t want to. It’s not a train of thought I particularly enjoy, believe me. Sometimes it’s random. Like I’ve let my mind go quiet for a little too long, run out of other things to focus on. Or I see it in people’s eyes and it – infiltrates, I guess. But you’re hurting more than I am. You hate what you did more than I ever could and it makes you hate yourself and I have to fight that. I have to help you fight that. And it’s exhausting.” Hillary looked up at him, blue eyes brimming with adoration. “You always remind me why it’s worth it, though. Why I love you so much. Why I stay. That doesn’t make it easier, but – better. Even a little bit is enough.”

She removed a barely perceptible (possibly fictitious) speck of lint from his sweatshirt. Her resolve not to cry was abundantly clear, admirably firm.

“So,” Hillary stated conclusively, if a little shakily. “That is how I feel. I’m worn-out, and I’m scared, and I love my husband. Can we please move on?”

“Of course. Thank you,” Tobias said, knowing better than to push any further. “Bill?” he asked,
passing the man an eagerly accepted tissue.

Wiping his still-streaming eyes and blowing his nose bought him some time to collect his thoughts, which felt, somehow, even more jumbled than they did in the throes of passion. “You know, I think the smartest thing I have ever done in my life was to keep bugging you to marry me.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” she murmured, eyes cast down shyly and cheeks tinged pink. “Oslo was pretty good, too.”

Chapter End Notes

I had a really hard time with this one, for some reason, and I'm not particularly happy with it - but I'm not sure what else to do, either. Argh. As always, thank you all so much for reading and commenting. It really does mean so much, and I hope you guys enjoy. Impeachment Day is next...
December 18, 1998

Despite his best efforts to keep the remainder of the session on an even keel, Bill could barely breathe by the time it – finally, thank God – ended. The gradual souring of his wife’s mood rested, suffocatingly heavy, on his chest, filling his lungs with every inhalation, air thick and icy sharp. Unhappy. Nervous. A simmering anger. Curiously, he felt it wasn’t directed at him, but he couldn’t quite place it or sense its target as he usually did. He tried in vain to skirt around subjects he knew unsettled her. Unfortunately, those were the most substantive (the women, his mother, more women, the impeachment, how each agonizingly slow tick of the clock brought him ever closer to the moment of execution) and Tobias, in all his professional diligence, could not let them slide. Bill was still holding back; all three of them knew it. Even Hillary, staring stonily with furrowed brow at her cuticles.

And then, at last, freedom. Bill didn’t quite know what do with it. Half a bag of Cheetos later, it was still bothering him. ‘Worse things than infidelity.’ He’d never, in twenty-seven years, heard Dorothy utter that particular chestnut. She wouldn’t say it to him, he supposed, but it still struck him as odd. “What did she mean?” he asked, offering a dusty orange snack to Hillary, immersed in a book and her second glass of wine. Predictably, she demurred. “Who? What did they mean by what?” She was more relaxed – marginally – than when they’d initially retreated to the living room, but the words still came with a slight snap.

“Your mother. About cheating. Was she – talking about me?” Bill’s stomach plummeted down to that horribly familiar bottomless pit where it so often seemed to reside these days. Christmas with the Rodhams became a still-more dreadful proposal.

“No.” One word, crisply delivered with eyes still locked onto the same page she’d been reading for upwards of ten minutes. Nothing further appeared to be forthcoming. Then – “Not at first, anyway.”

Hillary’s distaste for unnecessary lies outweighed even her desire to abandon this topic and never return. He saw the opening and seized it, the cogs of his brain finally catching up to the obvious. Obvious, that is, save for the feet of clay it gave Hugh Rodham, stalwart bastion of conservative. Judge, jury, and executioner when it came to deviations, however minor, from his rigid expectations.

“Your father?”

The bafflement was plain to hear. Given the views on sexual activity he had heard espoused (pontificated on, really) over the decades of their fraught acquaintance – it was solely for procreation and should not be entered into outside the bonds of matrimony; any man who engaged in such frivolities was guilty of an intolerable lack of self-control; any woman so afflicted with moral turpitude was little better than a harlot – the prospect that that persona was a hypocritical front was nothing short of mind-boggling.

“No!” Her response came so quickly that it was clearly reflex more than anything else. “I mean – I don’t know.” Bill waited. “Mom never said… that, exactly. I’ve wondered. Sometimes. When he
was gone on business trips or was out late. Didn’t get back before bedtime. But – I don’t know.”

“When did you start wondering?”

“Twelve or thirteen. It happened before that, too. Him not being there. Honestly, a lot of the time it was kind of a relief.” She pressed her lips together tightly, abruptly: the look she always adopted when she’d said more than she intended.

“It’s okay,” he murmured, gingerly inching closer. Hillary allowed his arm to slip around her shoulders. “I’ve been there, too. You know that.”

She whipped around to face him, eyes brimming. A picture of rapidly crumbling defiance. “That’s not – they’re not even comparable experiences.”

“He hurt you,” he repeated for what must have been the thousandth time, but no less gently for it. Getting her to accept that simple fact, much less believe it, was still a long way off. “It’s not a competition. He hurt you, and that’s what counts.”

As usual, she barely acknowledged the assertion. “What I mean is…” Hillary trailed off. She meant that it was a temporary reprieve from homework inspections. The scathing critiques of every aspect of her being that made her feel what it must be like to be eviscerated, flayed alive. The belt, the palm or the back of his hand. That tight grip sometimes leaving marks on her wrists or upper arms. And the shouting. Worst of all, the shouting – the endless, thundering litany of her faults, the diatribes both political and devastatingly personal. Directed at her, the boys, her mother, or no one in particular. The world at large. It allowed her one night, at least, when she could go to bed with a quiet mind, questions of whether she was or ever would be good enough muffled for the time being. And it all still paled next to what Bill and her own mother had endured. She had never been beaten. Not really. She had never been neglected, gone unfed, uncared for. It was no worse than the upbringings of many, and far, far better than those of so many whose lives had touched her own. Why couldn’t she reach that blessed state of being, at long last, “over it” – assuming that there was even something for her to get over? Her father had been dead for five years; anything approximating abuse had been over long before that. Yet here she was. Still fixated. Still broken.

“Anyway.” Hillary obstinately refused to give in to the tears that had been brewing for much of the evening, blinking them back even as they started rolling down her cheeks. Not yet. “I don’t think that was what Mom was talking about.” Bill rubbed her back through red wool, pacifying her until she was ready to proceed. “It’s – not being – loved – in the first place is worse than being cheated on. She knew what that felt like. Better than anyone.” He nodded. “And when you’re loved, you shouldn’t throw it all away over something so stupid.”

“Over me being so stupid.”

“She knows you’re better than that just as well as I do. But you don’t. That’s the problem.” She corrected herself swiftly. That was letting herself off the hook far too easily. “One of the problems. I’m not much help, either. And don’t you dare say I’m perfect.”

“I think you are.” Hillary rolled her eyes, letting loose a small sob in the process. “Mostly.”

She laughed, and the torrent was unleashed.

Bill was thankful, in a way. Much as it tore at his heart to see her in such pain, ate at him to feel the warm, spreading tearstains soaking into his chest, taking care of her was infinitely preferable to thinking about tomorrow. What lay ahead. Here, it was just the two of them. He could soothe and protect her, however fleetingly, and she could be that willful little girl who refused, even through
her weeping, to tell him where it hurt.

‘Why don’t you tell me? Why won’t you tell me?’

The frustrating refrain pulsed through his skull, pounding maddeningly, relentlessly. His ever-active imagination concocted episodes from Hillary’s childhood, clutching at inferences and implications. Hoping he was going overboard, exaggerating, feeling almost positive that he was — transposing Hillary into his own memories, most likely — but feeling that debilitating uncertainty. Bill couldn’t know unless she told him.

And maybe she wouldn’t tell him unless he asked.

Chapter End Notes

And I’m back! With angst galore, per @vodkastinger’s request. As ever with chapters dealing with Hugh, I hope I’m not going overboard or being unrealistic, but there’s a comparative void of information. Not entirely sure this qualifies as being back in the swing of things (as ever, the author is less than pleased, hahaha). Hopefully, you enjoy and it’s not a cataclysmic drop in quality! Thank you all again so much for reading.

STILL!

End Notes

Hi all! I'm new to the world of Billary fanfic (and I don't write too much fic in the first place). Honest opinions and constructive criticism are more than welcome. I like to be as historically accurate as possible, too, so feel free to let me know if I've gotten something dead wrong. Thanks for reading!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!