

EXCERPT 1

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN JFK SURVIVES THE DALLAS SHOOTING?

...I'm supposed to have had this near-death experience, the tunnel of light and the divine embrace and so on and so forth, and woken up some kind of holy man. It's a lovely story but it's not what happened. I didn't visit the sweet by-and-by. I never lost consciousness except when they put the mask over me in surgery. Not that getting shot doesn't have a way of focusing your attention on what matters. It has a way of lifting your head up out of whichever ridiculous thing you happen to be obsessing over at the moment.

But I never heard the angels sing. What changed me was what happened afterwards. From the moment those shots were fired everything went absolutely my way. I've told you that old definition of statesman as 'a dead politician,' right? It turns out to work for a wounded politician, too. Even the press that had no use for me whatever on November 21st thought I was Moses revisited on November 23rd. In those first few weeks whenever Pierre gave them any comment from me they'd play it as if it were the bravest and most clever thing anyone had ever heard. Everything we put in front of Congress was passing by 80% margins or more, including bills we'd introduced just to browbeat or reward someone that we never imagined would get anywhere. We weren't even pushing them, they just sailed through because almost everyone was dying to let the world know they were our friends. Then came the business with Hoover, which made us look even better. Whatever I wanted was completely mine without even trying.

Whatever you wanted? Caroline asked. That would apply to whoever, too, wouldn't it? Her father paused before answering. Yes, he said. The women I wanted came to me, too, and then left when I wanted, one after the next. Is this something you want to know much more about? Caroline shook her head. No.

I had everything, Jack went on. If you stretch your imagination to include every prize a twentieth century man could possibly win, I had won it. Okay, not everything—here he'd smiled—I never did get to play centerfield next to Ted Williams, but everything else was mine. For the first time in my life there was nothing left to win. There was nothing left to win. When I met with aides in the White House they'd usually begin by congratulating me and I wouldn't know what to say. For a while I drifted along, numb, usually tired. And then one evening, after a report on the newest batch of these utterly ridiculous public approval numbers, I went outside by myself a little after dark. I say by myself—there were two agents who followed me outside, but they let me wander a whole thirty or forty feet off onto the lawn by myself. I remember this like it happened last week. The night was clear with a big moon, humid and warm. Except for the crickets and a slight hum of traffic there was no sound at all. I took my shoes and socks off to let the wet grass cool my feet, and I watched the car lights drifting down Pennsylvania Avenue.

After a little while I turned around to go back in. I looked up and saw the immensity of that magnificent building, its windows glowing warm and golden, as if I had never seen it before. I

stood there staring at it until one of the agents called out to ask if I was okay. I nodded. I don't think I could speak. All that came to me, clear and plain as if you were saying the words to me right now, was: Is this all there is? Is this it?

Those words began to come to me every day, not as an active thought but always lying underneath all the chatter. So that whenever we were strategizing on something or another, your uncle and Ted Sorenson and me, whenever they brought up some nasty thing we had to do or some good thing we couldn't let ourselves do, I had to know why. The answer was always the same. It was always about keeping the upper hand. It was about holding onto this power and position we had, maybe getting more, not for our own greater glory, of course not that, but for all the causes we wanted to move forward. But here I was with all the power and position a mortal human being can possibly have, and there was nothing magic about it, no arrival point where you could look around and say 'this is what we've worked so hard for.' Once I saw that, when I saw beyond any doubt that what we were fighting so hard to hold onto would never be enough—and I was the only one in the room who could possibly know that—then the compromises we were constantly making had no point to them. They were silly.

So as they fired ideas back and forth about this plan or that I would be thinking about all the plans that had been hatched in that same room since John Adams moved in, all those thousands of calibrated compromises made by people like us who convinced themselves they were just preserving their power to do whatever noble things they thought they were doing. And I'd wonder where it had all brought us. No, I didn't wonder. Anyone with eyes and the nub of a brain knew it had brought us to the brink of incinerating ourselves. And all we were doing here, if we were successful, was securing my hold on the tiller for a few miles on the cruise to oblivion. So the two of them would be analyzing and calculating and debating right in front of me, pulling these problems apart and putting them back together again, both of them worked-up and brilliant, and then when they turned to me I would see the beginnings of panic on their faces, because they knew by looking at me that I'm thinking is this all there is?

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