

EXCERPT 3

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN JFK STANDS UP TO HIS HARD-NOSED BROTHER AND FATHER AS THEY BEG HIM TO BE MORE “REALISTIC?”

“Dad, listen,” Jack said. “Do you have anything new to say about Cuber? Because I don’t. Respectfully, Dad, we’re not going to agree on it so I don’t see any point in either of us getting all worked up about it again, do you?”

“Well, you blinked, boy. You just blinked, and the whole world knows it, and now you’re ready to do the same goddamned thing in Vietnam.”

Jack picked up a silver lighter shaped like Aladdin’s lamp from the table, pushed a lever and rolled the end of a cigar in the flame that popped up. He brought it to his mouth and took a slow draw. He looked at his father through the first vapors of smoke. “We can’t win in Vietnam, Dad.” He rolled the cigar to inspect the evenness of the burn.

“We can’t win?” Joe grasped both arms of his wheelchair so hard his upper body swayed forward. “Is that what you just said to me? That the Armed Forces of the United States of America can’t beat this pitiful pack of monkeys in pajamas?” He turned towards Bobby, eyes wide, one hand churning the air. Jack wondered how much the two of them had planned out this conversation.

“You’ve never said that before, Jack,” said Bobby. “Not that I’ve heard. You’re saying we can’t get this done militarily, no matter what we throw in there? Do you really believe that?”

“What is it you want to get done, Bob?” Jack answered. “There’s all kinds of things we can do militarily. We can just about flatten the whole damn country. We can raze its cities, blow up its highways and bridges, we can shut down its railways and airfields, what’s left of them. We can burn its villages and crops and blow most of it up from the air until it’s more black and brown than green. We can kill probably four out of five Vietnamese, if we don’t care about how many of ours we lose in the bargain. There’s a long list of what we can do, if we want.” Jack rubbed his cigar on the edge of an ashtray to trim its end. “What we can’t do is win.”

“I’ve heard that before,” Joe said quietly. His head was down so that the others strained to hear him. “After Dunkirk, 1940, when Hitler was bombing London. Back in ‘17, too, everyone telling Wilson we couldn’t win no matter what.” He lifted his head and looked towards Sorenson. “Gloom-and-doomers. We’ve always had them. The ones who piss their pants the minute it gets rough. The ones so scared they try to scare the rest of us so they don’t have to feel alone.” He looked Jack in the eye. “The quitters.”

A long moment passed. The only movement was a pale blue ribbon rising from Jack’s cigar to the ceiling. Bobby rose and took a cigarette from the silver box next to Jack. He lit it with the big lighter and began pacing the narrow space between his father and brother, four steps up, four steps back. “Jack,” he said. “You can’t know that yet. We’re nowhere near full deployment. We could bring down a division from Korea and some from Japan. I think we could even

spare something from Europe, if we were quiet. You could mobilize the Guard. What if I called McNamara? Get him up here by tomorrow and—”

“Bob,” Jack said, “sit down.”

“Let’s get McNamara and Taylor and—”

“Bob.” Jack’s voice was hard. Bobby sat down. Jack trimmed the hot tip of his cigar on the edge of an ashtray. “When De Gaulle pulled out of Indochina ten years ago, do you think he was out of troops? Do you think he figured the Vietnamese army was stronger than his?”

“De Gaulle!” Joe made the name sound toxic. “Ridiculous! We’ve got fifty times the muscle France has. A hundred times!”

“Maybe,” Jack nodded. “But that’s irrelevant, Pop. Muscle settled the wars of your lifetime. Muscle built an empire for us and kept it rolling for a century.”

“‘Empire,’ Jack?” Joe said. “You’ve been listening to your bearded friend too much.”

“What’s a clearer word for it, Dad?”

“Empire is what England did, boy,” Joe said. “And Spain and Portugal and France.”

“Which brings us back to my point,” said Jack. “Let’s not fight over the right word. The real point is that they’re all done with it. France figured out ten years ago they couldn’t win, and here we still are scratching our nuts. But the French were right.”

“The French pulled out because of Dien Bien Phu,” said Bobby. “They were completely surrounded with no escape route.”

“So are we, Bob,” Jack said. “The French left Indochina because they understood how different the world is from the one Europe ran for four hundred years. The Vietnamese know something that colonized people haven’t known before. They know that there are millions, hundreds of millions just like them all around the world. They know there are more of them than there are of us, and I don’t mean just a few more. They know they have us surrounded.” Jack shifted in his seat to face his father directly. “Maybe we could wipe out this pitiful pack of monkeys, Pop, if we put everything we have into it. But there are dozens more armies like them all over the world. For every guerilla we kill three more will pop up.”

“Well, goddamnit, then you kill those three!”

Jack shook his head. “The math doesn’t work, Pop. By the 1980s or ‘90s we wouldn’t be much more than headquarters for a four-continent Foreign Legion, keeping the lid on ten countries at the same time, then twenty, then pretty much the whole world except Europe and Japan, until all our wealth is weapons and all our people are soldiers. And say we do that for longer, even into the 21st century. Where do you think we are then? Can you imagine an end to it? Can you imagine a day when the three-fifths of the world who sweat to keep the rest of us in luxury says, ‘Americans are too devoted to all their wealth to ever give up, so we’ll just have to learn to be happy with whatever crumbs they let fall from the table.’ Can you imagine that, Pop? Ever?”

His father’s eyes were closed now. Jack crossed over to sit next to him. He laid a hand on the sleeve of Joe’s cardigan. Joe opened his eyes. “Pop, do you understand what I’m trying to

say? They know now. We can't put the genie back in the bottle. They don't particularly care how much muscle we have. They're not like us. They look far out ahead and see something they know they can have. They think they're part of an inevitable historic tide, and because of how much they believe it, it's true."

Joe moved his chair out of Jack's reach. "That's beautiful, Jack. Truly moving. After you're out of office you can go teach seminars at Harvard with fantastic ideas about how the world should turn. I'll endow the Chair myself. In the meantime, the world you happen to live in needs a President with balls." Joe shook his head. "Christ, Jack. What if the Soviets had this room bugged? What if Khrushchev heard what you're saying?"

Jack crossed back to his chair. "He has, Dad." He picked up the lighter again and snapped it. "We've talked about all of this, more than once. We talked about it the day before yesterday."

"What?" Bobby was back on his feet. "Jack, you just talked to Khrushchev?"

"Unnh-huh." He was drawing hard on the cigar to get it going.

"To tell him how hopeless Vietnam is?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"What did he say?"

Jack let out a funnel of smoke before answering. "He agrees."

"Jack," said Bobby, "You're kidding about this, right? You're just poking us. You didn't have a conversation like that." He stopped pacing and leaned his back against the door. Joe was motionless in his chair, slightly hunched over with his eyes wide.

"Actually I didn't initiate it. Khrushchev called me to talk about two months ago," said Jack. "Then I called him back a little later, and then we decided to do it weekly. We talk on Tuesdays when I get up, six o'clock our time, two in the afternoon his."

"With nobody else? Just you and him?"

Jack smiled. "No, Bob. My Russian's not quite up to that. All seven words of it. Williamson comes over from State to translate and Khrushchev has someone on his end."

"And so you said we have to get out of Vietnam because they're part of this historic tide and we can't win? That's what you told Nikita Khrushchev?"

"I don't know that I've used quite those words. Usually I listen more than I talk." Jack drew on his cigar. "And the more I listen, it's — well, I know what he's thinking before his translator finishes saying it." He laid the cigar in the ashtray and looked intently at Bobby. "He's thinking what I'm thinking, Bob."

"You mean that we can't win in Vietnam?" Bobby paced four steps to the big desk in silence and then four back to the door. "Jack, have you considered the possibility that Chairman Khrushchev might have reasons other than comradely affection to tell you you're right that we can't win in Vietnam? Let's see, how can I put this complex concept into words? How about this: Khrushchev...is on...the other side. He is the other side in Vietnam. So when you say we

can't win there, perhaps he's not going to rush to argue the point with you."

Jack smiled. "Perhaps he's not, Bob. And yes, his guys are shooting at our guys, or at least they're using his guns. But that's just today. What he's realizing is that their friends in Vietnam and the rest of Southeast Asia, and in Cuba and southern Africa and South America, too, are only temporary. They're his friends as long as they need help getting us out of their lives. Over the long haul they can't win in a country like Vietnam any more than we can, because the Vietnamese won't let any outside power bleed them anymore, whether it's the French or us or the Soviets or the Chinese. We're all on the same side of history, the wrong side, from Ho's point of view or Castro's. That's what Khrushchev knows. And he's catching hell, too, by the way, from everyone who has his ear." Jack turned towards his father. "And you know what, Pop? They're telling him he can't blink, no matter what. They think he's lost his mind, too, that he's forgotten the number one cardinal rule, that if he shows us anything but fangs we'll eat them up like raw meat."

There was quiet. Jack smoked. Sorenson wrote continuously in his notebook. Joe swayed back and forth in his chair. Bobby leaned against the door, staring down at the Persian carpet. The antique clock ticked away a minute. "Why didn't you tell me about any of this?" Bobby said.

"Why?" Jack laughed quietly. "Look at you, Bob. You're stupefied. Look at you, Pop. In the first place, neither one of you can hear this. Khrushchev says he can't tell anyone either." He trimmed the cigar on the edge of the ashtray. "This isn't something you can understand, Bob. Not really. It might be there are only two people on the planet who do."

"Well, you might have a better idea of how much I understand if you included me in the conversation," said Bobby. "How about trying it on me one more time: what is it you think I don't understand?"

Jack stubbed the cigar out and rose to walk to his desk. He sat down to face his brother across the length of the room. "We're terrified of losing our power to the Soviets. But we already have, Bob. They're driving most of what we do. We react to whatever they're doing in the world out of reflex instead of rational thought. If they want to bury us in an endless mess in Asia all they have to do is send in a few thousand guns and some artillery. And we provoke them into costly messes just the same way. Just listen to what they're saying, Bob. It sounds like us, word for word. They're afraid we'll gobble up the world exactly like we're afraid they will." Jack leaned forward and shifted his attention to Joe. "We're chained to Khrushchev, Dad. We're shackled to each other, stumbling down a road that will bleed us both dry, and chances are vaporize the planet. We're trapped because we're so rock-solid sure that the other's out to murder us."

Joe and Jack looked at each other. It seemed to Jack that his father had been listening to him with unusual care. Joe's voice was calm when he finally spoke. "So," he said, "After 500 years of western civilization running the way it does, you're going to change it."

"Well, you can take the blame for that," Jack said, smiling. "You're the one who taught us to shoot high." His voice softened. "What's the alternative, Pop?"

“The alternative is to come off your snowy mountain to deal down here with the rest of us, boy. The alternative is to do what it takes to keep this thing going as long as we can and not tie our knickers in a knot because the world’s not perfect.” Joe’s eyes glistened fiercely. “You’re not God, Jack, whatever I did to make you think you are. You’re just the President for right now. You think you can do all this and live forever as the Great One, the one who turned the giant tide, the one who changed everything that nobody before you could. They’ll find a mountainside to carve your head on, like Rushmore except you’re the only one they’ll put up there. Is that it, boy?”

Jack felt the old yearning to please him begin to flicker. One. Two. Three. “I don’t know, Dad. I can’t say what will happen.” He spread his arms to include Bobby across the room. “Listen, in case I sound like I think any of this will be easy, it won’t be. There’s a simple black-and-white story we’ve been telling ourselves about who the Soviets are and there’s no easy way to change it. It won’t be easy to change a foreign policy that’s given us so much wealth that most of us live like kings live in other countries. We haven’t even started talking about how that’s going to play in Peoria. None of it’s going to be easy. If there’s any easier option for getting us off the hopeless path we’re on, show it to me. Please. Because I’ll take it.”

Jack sat back and drew slowly on the cigar. He issued an almost perfect smoke ring that dissolved slowly as he looked at his father. “Just me on Mt. Rushmore? Alone? All by myself? Okay, all right, I can see that.”

Joe turned his head away. Jack walked over and kneeled on the floor in front of him. “I don’t know how all this will play out, Pop. But I’ll tell you something I do know. I know how they’ll remember us if we don’t change course. I know what they’ll say if we keep sending our boys to kill and die with no thought to the mass of enemies we’re making around the world. They won’t be carving monuments to me, that I can guarantee. They’ll say ‘He was too smart not to know what he was doing. The people around him were smart and experienced and they all knew better. But it didn’t matter. He didn’t have the heart or the balls to do anything about it, either.’ And they’d be right, Pop.” The intensity in Jack’s voice made Joe lift his head to meet his son’s eyes. “Is that how you want them to remember us? Screw Rushmore, Pop. I’ll be happy if some of them think we did the best that we could do.”

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