



THE CONVERSATION – HOWARD ROBINSON

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The rising sun edged its way above the cast iron dome of the Capitol and, like a slow moving balloon, touched the tip of the Washington Monument. It cast a shadow west along the National Mall towards the Lincoln Memorial from which the 16th President of the United States kept an imperious watchful eye. Light danced across the rippling water of the Memorial's Reflecting Pool giving the sense of ten thousand tiny mirrors playing tricks with your eyes as the distant rumble of a helicopter overhead and the soft hum of early morning traffic signalled a city stretching itself back to life. Many may have found this taken-for-granted transition of one day into the next more reassuring than usual, given the tumultuous times in which they were living. If the nation was soon to be in the clutches of a storm, Washington was in line to become its eye.

Lincoln had witnessed much from his elevated, seated position. There had been Marian Anderson, the celebrated Negro contralto who had been refused permission by the Daughters of the American Revolution to perform before an integrated audience in Constitution Hall. She sang instead in front of 75,000

people at The Great Emancipator's feet on Easter Sunday 1939 with the support of Eleanor Roosevelt. He had witnessed Thirty-Seven arguing his case with Vietnam protestors in an impromptu middle of the night meeting. And then, of course, there had been that defining moment before the great old statesman, when Dr King had stood before a quarter of a million people and told them of his dream.

It was before five thirty and in the Oval Office, the President was alone. He had come to value these moments of calm, these opportunities to take stock, to remind himself of his own legitimacy before the cut and thrust of each new day. To convince himself he *was* making America great again. He felt emboldened by this sense of himself against the world, to be able to talk directly to the people from his smartphone, and he wasn't about to go against what came naturally to him because it didn't meet with the approval of those bleeding heart liberals in the media. He thought about how they had reported those comments to Gingrich about the job being bigger than he had thought; that just showed him that it wouldn't matter what he said or what he did, they would come after him anyway, faking the news, making it up as they went along. Perhaps the Oval was becoming less of an office and more of a bunker but, either way, he was the rightful occupant and they were not. So what if they called him unpresidential; what could they actually do about it? He stood by the east door and looked out at the tangerine sky high above the Rose Garden, it was an astonishing colour. As he did so, he rested his hand on the sculpted bronze bust of Winston Churchill as if trying to take on some of the old man's greatness.

"For a room that's usually constantly busy, a revolving door of this advisor or that, don't you think it can also feel like the loneliest place on the planet? Or maybe you've not been here long enough yet to have noticed."

Forty-five turned sharply, instinctively anticipating Secret Service agents breaking in from all directions and forcefully removing the intruder. He stared in disbelief at a man dressed sharply in a dark grey suit with a Prince of Wales check, a crisp white shirt and a navy blue and white striped tie. He was sitting

casually in one of the new, gold brocade chairs brought in after the Inauguration, his right leg over his left knee, highly polished black brogues to the fore, his hands interlocked, a gold watch resting on his suntanned wrist. Forty-five was struck dumb. This was not an everyday occurrence.

“Come on Mr President, it’s not like you not to be ready with a comeback, a soundbite or two, a piece of witty repartee. There aren’t many who know the burden that this room - that this office - can place around a man’s shoulders, but I do. Believe me, I understand what you’re going through.”

Forty-five walked towards the centre of the room. It was only a few paces, but it appeared laboured as his mind went into overdrive. He stood with his feet touching the edge of the circular rug, with its shades of gold and rust and beige, that he had had brought into the Oval to remove any evidence that Forty-four had ever been there at all. He rested his substantial frame on the front of the large, nineteenth-century oak desk built from the timbers of a British exploration ship, placed both hands out to either side and slightly behind himself, palms flat down on the wooden surface.

“You probably know that Rutherford B. Hayes was the first holder of this office to use that desk,” the visitor advised in that now iconic Boston accent. “What you may not know is that it was Jackie who suggested bringing it into the Oval for the first time.”

“Is that so?”

The visitor nodded, smiling benignly.

“It’s only been out of the White House once since. That was when Lyndon sent it on tour with a travelling exhibition about me after....well, you know after what. It was Carter, I think, who brought it back from the Smithsonian, though you may want to check that; some would say it was just about the smartest thing he did in the four years he was here.”

“Maybe the *only* smart thing he did while he was here.”

Forty-five permitted himself a smile. However history would judge him, he surely hoped it would be better than it judged Carter. He fixed his gaze on the visitor, and then looked around the room, shaking his head in suspicion and bewilderment as he did so.

“Don’t get me wrong, however this is being done and whoever is doing it, it’s tremendous, clever.” He turned, looking up and around the cornice as if talking to somebody concealed within the fabric of the walls. “I don’t know if it’s some kind of virtual reality or if it’s being done with mirrors, but it probably breaks like a thousand security rules so let’s just turn it off now and get back to work.”

The visitor laughed. He could see the incumbent considering a move for the phone on his desk but who would he call and what would he say to them? *Come rescue me from the ghost of President Kennedy?* The visitor sniggered when he thought of the field day the media would have when that story inevitably leaked.

“You don’t really believe it’s me, do you, Mr President? Come, sit down. Let’s talk.”

“Yeah, sure, I believe it’s you. What do you take me for? I mean, given you’ve been dead over fifty years, why on Earth should I question that it’s you? This is probably some elaborate CNN scam to try and catch me out but I have the measure of them, mark my words. I don’t fall for fake news. I make the news, they fake the news.”

The visitor was enjoying his successor’s evident discomfort.

“And what kind of news is it that you are making? Alienating neighbours and allies, jeopardising the future of the planet, rolling back on health care, creating a society more divided than it has been for a generation, not to

mention leading us to the brink of a nuclear strike. Is that the kind of news you want to be making?”

“Well it’s about time somebody had the strength, the guts to deal with some of these issues, to take the tough decisions. The people are grateful I’m here. We’re doing big things.”

The incumbent looked at the visitor seeking approbation. He received none.

“You know, sometimes, the toughest decisions are the ones you choose not to take, the ones nobody ever gets to know you were even considering. It’s often about what you don’t do, what you don’t get the acclaim and the applause for, not the things you can put on parade and salute, that mark you out.”

Forty-five didn’t move a muscle. He stood rigid, continuing to look for hidden cameras. He couldn’t reconcile being in conversation with a man he knew was dead before his eighteen-year-old self had even graduated from the New York Military Academy, and yet not feel that he was losing his mind. Thirty-five sat casually, patiently but with his stare scrutinising the large-framed figure before him. The office itself was enough to overawe anyone but he could easily see how the incumbent’s physical stature could add to that sense of intimidation.

“What’s the problem, Mr President? Cat got your tongue?”

Forty-five shook his head. If he told anyone about this – *anyone* - there could be grounds to have him certified; maybe that was the plan by whoever had arranged this charade. And then, and he couldn’t believe he was thinking it, if he couldn’t tell anyone about it, maybe he should embrace the moment instead.

“Let’s talk North Korea. What’s your end game?”

“Well, for sure we have to do something about North Korea. I mean, you wouldn’t dispute that, would you? It’s a brutal, unpredictable regime. He has no regard for the safety and security of his people, for their neighbours and no respect for human life. It’s about time we had somebody in the White House prepared to stand up to him.”

“And you’re prepared to take us to the brink to do that?”

“What kind of question is that from the man who took us to the edge of nuclear war because of Soviet missiles in Cuba?”

“Those Soviet missiles were barely one hundred miles from American soil. North Korea is six and half thousand miles from American soil. I know the arguments about protecting our allies and I know the arguments that advances in technology today mean that distance is less important in the North Koreans’ ability to deliver a deadly strike against American assets, but to some it seems as if you’re picking a fight to boost your domestic profile rather than to protect our citizens. So, Mr President, I ask again, what is your end game? Just how far are you prepared to go?”

Forty-five moved to a seat facing the visitor, his legs slightly apart, leaning forward, his hands clasping his knees, his bright red tie hanging low between his legs.

“Jack....can I call you, Jack?”

“I’d rather you didn’t,” Kennedy smiled, his teeth so bright it was as if his mouth was backlit.

“We can’t go on any longer with a discredited policy of simply having patience with North Korea. It’s a failed, discredited policy. The people are losing patience. They want their President to take action and that means getting others in the region and elsewhere to implement sanctions to persuade North Korea to take a different path.”

“So that’s why you’re pushing for China to do something? Good luck with that.”

“China are going to have to step up and help us deal with North Korea or...”

“...or what, Mr President? When you were running for office, you accused China of taking American jobs and manipulating currency. You threatened a 45 per cent tariff on Chinese goods. You even said that China had created global warming just to thwart American manufacturing. That’s not the way to build an alliance. Are you surprised they’re not taking you seriously?”

“Kim is testing intercontinental ballistic missiles potentially capable of reaching American soil. Don’t you think I’d be failing in my job if I didn’t do something? What would you do, sit back and applaud his efforts?”

“It’s not about doing something or doing nothing. It’s about what you do and how you do it. We only resolved the Cuban situation after long, tense, stressful negotiations with Khrushchev. Even down to the wire, we weren’t certain it was going to work but we kept dialogue open. We didn’t conduct our negotiations in the full glare of the media. We didn’t negotiate in soundbites. We did it through the back channels. I met Gromyko here, in the Oval. It’s difficult to build trust with people, especially the unpredictable ones, if all you’re doing is either slating them or threatening them in public.”

“And Gromyko lied to you. So let me read back to you what you said from this office. I was only reading this the other day. You said that *neither the United States nor the world community could tolerate deliberate deception and offensive threats on the part of any nation, large or small*. You said that *we no longer live in a world where only the actual firing of weapons represents a sufficient challenge to a nation's security to constitute maximum peril*. So, now I ask you again, what is so different between now and then?”

Kennedy held his palms up in submission. Forty-five felt emboldened and spent a moment considering how to formulate what he wanted to say next. It was important for it to be right.

“You know, I have no idea why the American people still idolise you. I think it’s because of what happened, the young, handsome idealist President, part of the beautiful couple, snatched away in the prime of his life. Nobody actually scrutinises your record. It’s like you’re untouchable.”

The visitor laughed.

“And does that bother you?”

“It bothers me that you’re not judged on what you did, you’re judged on the tragedy that overcame you. The whole *what might have been* scenario. Nobody’s allowed to criticise the great JFK even though when you look closely, there’s plenty there to take issue with.”

“I can’t believe it actually bothers you. Here I am, dead for 50 years, no kind of threat to you and it bothers you anyway. Believe me, there are enough people who see right through you for you to not bother about one who’s not even alive any more.”

Forty-five ran his right hand back through his fulsome sandy hair and shook his head. Kennedy rose from his seat, momentarily holding his side, evidence of the debilitating back pain that had remained a secret throughout his presidency.

“You see, that’s what I mean: the injections, the operations, the illnesses, even the back brace; you portrayed this image of being one thing – fit, healthy, dynamic - when you were in fact the opposite. You weren’t straight with the American people and yet you have the nerve to come here and lecture me.”

Kennedy moved towards the fireplace behind him, taking a pack of Monticello cigars from his inside jacket pocket. The waft of purple grey smoke emitted momentarily concealed his face and caused 45 to cough a little. Kennedy removed the cigar from his mouth and checked the tip to see if it was burning evenly. He half turned his body and looked up at the mantle-to-ceiling painting of Vigo the Carpathian that Forty-five had brought in to replace of the portrait of George Washington.

“Vigo the Carpathian,” smiled Kennedy, turning back into the room to face the incumbent. He seemed relaxed; enjoying the discourse. “It’s an interesting choice, a 16th Century tyrant, don’t you think? A despotic ruler. Is that what you aspire to be, Mr President?”

“Like you were such a paragon of virtue.”

“If you want to be seen as a great leader, Mr President, take a little free advice. You need to be more than just a slogan on a baseball cap. Stop trying to re-run the election. You won it, you’re the guy in office, start acting like it. Remember the sign Truman kept on his desk in this very room - the buck stops here. This isn’t a reality television programme, Mr President, this is people’s reality. It’s that serious. To be a great leader, you have to take the people with you. That means reaching out, building a consensus, and not saying awful things about Muslims, Mexicans, disabled people, transgender people or women. You want to be a two term President? Then you can’t say those things. You can’t call women fat, or pigs, or dogs, or slobs. Do you want me to go on? There are more women eligible to vote in this country than men. Not only is it morally wrong, it’s electoral suicide as well. I saw that clip from your trip to Israel. Hell, man, you couldn’t even get your own wife to hold your hand in public.”

Forty-five walked towards the fireplace, the slight twitch of his eye the only indication of stress and anger.

“Seriously? *You’re* going to lecture *me* about women? That’s hilarious; rich, even coming from you, the man who said if he didn’t have sex everyday, he got a headache. What about Monroe, and that German hooker you brought to pool parties here, let alone Mimi Alford. Heck, you were doing interns thirty years before Clinton.”

The visitor sighed.

“It doesn’t play well with the media and I’m telling you, despite what you think, you don’t want to wage war on the media. You need them more than you think. If all you’re going to do is stifle a free press and present your own propaganda as fact, that makes you no better than Kim.”

“The media, or at least big parts of it, lie. Big time. Fact.”

“So deal with it. Work around it. Be careful the fights you choose to pick and who you choose to pick them with. I didn’t make an enemy of the media. I always said that it was invaluable, even if it they did cause me grief from time to time. Nobody wants to read things that are not agreeable, I get that, but an independent media is an important check on what is going on in the administration. It’s a way of building trust. So, I agree, *I* wasn’t subject to twenty-four hour rolling news or constant social media scrutiny but embrace it rather than make an enemy of it and if you can’t embrace it, just deal with it.”

Forty-five pursed his lips and sucked air in through his front teeth.

“Can I ask you something?”

Kennedy nodded.

“Did you enjoy being President? Do you miss it?”

The visitor considered the question as if he had never had to confront it before. He drew again on the cigar resting between his fingers.

“I certainly miss the New England Fish Chowder the chef used to prepare and having ice cream with hot fudge or a Bloody Mary in the Residence, but enjoy? I’m not sure enjoy is the right way to describe it. I had a sense of purpose, a sense of mission. Eisenhower once told me that you only get to enjoy it once it’s over and you can look back on what you’ve achieved. I never got that opportunity.”

“And if you could go back, given what happened, would you do it again?”

“I had a calling to do this job, a sense of destiny. I don’t know if you have that. I know about all that has been written about me running so my father could live out his ambitions through Bobby and me. There may have been some truth in that at first but not once we made it here. From day one we knew we had work to do, problems to solve, a country to bring together. You’ve got similar challenges.”

“Tremendous challenges and, despite what you and others say, we’re rising to them every day of the week.”

“If you don’t mind me saying so, that sounds as if you’re trying to convince yourself rather than me.”

“You can believe what you want to. We’re already making lives better for ordinary Americans.”

“Really? Tell me what you have actually achieved; name me one constructive, legislative achievement in your first six months. Something positive. Everything you’ve done so far has been to deconstruct rather than build: healthcare, the travel ban, climate change.”

“Those things were so bad that most Americans would agree that to deconstruct them, as you put it, is actually constructive.”

The visitor flicked the top layer of ash from the tip of his cigar into a white porcelain ashtray that sat on a small wooden side table.

“When I came here this morning you were over there looking out into the Rose Garden. Beautiful isn’t it?”

Forty-five nodded.

“Probably my favourite place, if I’m honest; the scene of so many historic moments down the years: Rabin and Arafat shaking hands, Begin and Sadat before them – things people thought impossible made possible here. I walked in that garden with Dr King and we talked about how best to address civil rights together. And what do you do, in your first big opportunity, you use it to pull us out of the climate change agreement and set us at odds with almost every ally we have in the developed world.”

“It was a bad agreement, very bad for American jobs.”

“So bad that you’re now saying you may reconsider?”

“Makes a change to have a pragmatist rather than an ideologue in the White House, don’t you think?”

Outside the Oval staff were beginning to arrive at the start of the new day. The President’s briefing meetings would soon begin. The visitor knew that time was short.

“Have you ever seen *Bad Day at Black Rock*?”

Forty-five’s expression was non-committal.

“You really should. It’s one of my favourite movies. Ask them, they’ll order it in for you. I think you’d like it. Spencer Tracy, Lee Marvin, and Ernest Borgnine. Anyhow, there’s one line that Spencer Tracy’s character, Maccreedy, says: *You’re not only wrong. You’re wrong at the top of your voice.* Maybe less

should always be more; maybe you could preserve the dignity of the office and get more done by being a little less, how shall I put it, at the top of your voice.”

“That’s cute but time’s moved on since you were here. The American people don’t buy into fairy tales like Camelot any more. I’m not sure they ever did. They have more pressing and important things to worry about.”

Kennedy walked sideways past Forty-Five, slowing down until their faces were close enough for him to detect heady mix of anger and aftershave. He smiled in a way that made the incumbent uncomfortable before moving towards the door into the Rose Garden.

“This isn’t about me. It never was. I’m not the one people are looking to, pinning their hopes on, some might say having nightmares about. Some of us still think America is great but to use your words, everybody wants to see America great again. They just want it to be done the right way and more people than you can imagine are unsure that you’re the man to do it. Your biggest challenge Mr President is to prove them wrong and show them you’re up to the job. Only you know if you can do it.”

“I’m already doing it,” he replied, “big time.”

“Maybe you are, Mr President, maybe you are. One final piece of friendly advice: listen to what Lincoln said: *‘if you want to test a man’s character, give him power’*. Well, you’ve got the power, now show us your character.”

Kennedy tightened the knot on his tie, pulled each of his cuffs in turn, lifted his right hand in a casual farewell gesture, and called over his shoulder as he disappeared into the Rose Garden.

“The world 's watching, Mr President. Don't let it down.”

Ends.

I