

When the buck stops (3-Minute Fiction entry)

by Mathew Paust

I saw surprise distort Albert's face when he appeared in the doorway separating his office from what he called "the big office." He was holding the morning mail pouch, which he ordinarily carries to my working office across the oval room where I sit now.

"Good morning Albert," I said. My voice came out unusually light, almost cheerful. I found myself giving him the smile I usually save for the public.

"Good morning, ma'am," he said, after quickly composing himself. He added, "You're here early."

I held the smile and nodded. "I am. This is an important day and I just felt like getting a head start."

"Yes, ma'am, I left a note on your...other desk that the ambassador has taken ill and won't be in this morning as scheduled."

"Oh? Well, that's just as well. Gives me more time to prepare." He set the mail pouch on the corner of the Truman Desk, bowed slightly and hesitated. I knew he was concerned about my haggard appearance, but I had no desire to tell him what was wrong and he knew better than to ask. "Thanks, Albert," I said, and he bowed again and returned to his office.

The stress I've been feeling the previous couple of weeks has been unprecedented, ever since the second call came in. This call had no video, but I dreaded it as I had dreaded nothing else. The call came after breakfast as I walked from our living quarters down to the West Wing. I recognized the unique ring tone that had heralded the first call, the trumpet flourishes that introduce "Hail to the Chief." The first call had come on Inauguration Day as my husband and I were getting ready for bed. There was a short video and the text message: "Congratulations! We'll be in touch."

Bill was in the bathroom. The video ended before he came out. I didn't tell him, partly because I didn't wish to spoil the moment and also because I was unable to save the images. There was no evidence of what I had just seen.

The video was old. Its colors were faded and marked by scratches and other signs of deterioration incurred by film over time. What the video depicted was a familiar scene, one I had seen many times over the years, filmed by a man named Abraham Zapruder. The only difference was this film had been shot from a higher elevation and at a considerable distance from where Zapruder was standing. This was looking down from what we know as The Grassy Knoll.

I decided not to tell anyone about the call, sensing intuitively it was not a prank, that the video was real and represented a conspiracy so enduring and complex I knew I couldn't trust anybody with what I'd seen. I served the next two years with a darkness on my heart. I avoided the Oval Office except when absolutely necessary, feeling its mockery of the neutered office it represented. Finally two years later came the moment of truth.

In an Oval Office ceremony later today I am to sign the most controversial piece of legislation of my presidency thus far. It's the health care reform bill we should have gotten in 2010. It passed Congress by the slimmest of margins. It could not withstand a veto. The second phone call informed me a veto was expected. My constituents will disown me if I do so. I would sooner die.

