

One

James Buchanan Slept Here



BUCKEYE WIGGLED THE WET SAND of the San Tontos beach between his toes, vaguely annoyed at the chill of the Pacific and more pettily annoyed with his own irritable mood. He rarely walked the shore as he did now. Ordinarily he would have run headlong into the surf to inhale the shock of it all at once, but not at this hour, not without the sun to reassure him through his shivering. Never mind swimming, he should have been sleeping, but that too was impossible, with Hazel in bed cracking a walnut shell every minute and he imagining the fragments everywhere on the sheets, itching even to the inaccessible acres of his back.

Walnuts. Surprise. Healthy stuff for a change. But damn her for ruffling my dreams. How can she sleep herself with all the gurgling of her stomach? Damn her to . . . to . . . freeze her forever in a sea of blue Jell-O, her favorite summer sweet.

An upturned mussel shell cracked beneath his soft raw heel, snapped like a walnut shell, as if his wife had found him on his private stroll. His foot bled a little, the mild sting washed away by the abrupt cold thrill of a wave rolling up his ankles. He damned her a third time to complete the ritual, and for keeping him awake when she knew he had a top-shelf morning meeting. If he was not crisp

and witty for the climate conference at 9:00 a.m. sharp, he might kill his chance for a choice box at the Bolshoi on his October trip to Moscow. *The Taming of the Shrew*—new, something finally new.

More than their inept economics, he detested the cheerful punctuality of the Russians—always so chipper from minute one at meetings. How could they act so disciplined yet be so poor? Probably all a bluff to erase the Russian reputation for centuries of inefficiency. But give them their due: a smile was just a smile to these “former Soviets,” as he still liked to think of them, which was better than he could say for the French who nuanced every little twitch of a lip or an eyelid into a meaning. The Russians at least took his smile for genuine, as if the sarcastic glitter of his teeth was not translatable.

But damn them all along with Hazel. They knew his weakness for the ballet, whatever else they did not understand, and if he was not the essence of entertainment tomorrow—no, today already—they might instead offer him—who knows—a tour of an experimental genome farm like what they had dished out to Senator Betsy Bakoff from Montana the last time he sent a congressional nuisance as a strategic snub. Or worse: seats for the opera. In October, it would be Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov*. “Boris Good Enough,” he muttered to himself, “getting sung to death by his own chorus.”

What really interested the Ruskies—all that interested those he cared to talk to—was science, the toy of people who couldn’t translate very well: rockets and satellites to monitor crops and trucks, newly discovered moons, dwarf stars, life on Mars in the prehistoric age (did Mars have a historic age to be “pre” to?). Harnessing nuclear waste, deconstructing fossilized sperm to reconstruct DNA to revive species that had flunked Life Skills, breeding earthworms to combat world hunger, refining horse manure to . . . what did they say it could be used for? What did it matter? Horseshit for horseshit’s sake. Where was the techie who could balance the surround sound, finesse the morph knobs on the audio system for Hazel, and keep her appetite out of bed?

And now this new overture for collaborative science, this oceanic experiment, when both sides had already proved that they couldn't stop pissing each other off in the sand-locked countries of Middle Earth—this “collaboration to finesse the global temperature.” What did that mean? Not much explanation, though the Moscow techies had apparently killed an hour referring to it at Tuesday's “briefing” in the Valley. Why cool the world when the Conservative News Watch says nobody's proven it's really warmer? Global warming. Would somebody bother to read a goddamned history book? he fumed. It's been warmer, it's been colder. An occasional superstorm is just that—occasional.

More hot air inside than out. Yes, for once let's not be the ever-amenable statesman at these meetings. For once . . .

He kicked a stone with his middle toes, thinking it to be a shell. . . . once and for all, I'll bring sandals to wear on this lumpy beach.

Now, he might just wheedle them into offering a box at the ballet—it had to be Tuesday because Wednesday would be Mussorgsky's chorus—before he raised whatever objections his temper could not suppress. This time—not like February's workshop on collaborative science in the Lime Office where the real work got done, not talked—this time, no greasy bacon and fried eggs for breakfast, no spoiling his best points with stifled belching and heartburn, with all the close-groomed engineers from Moscow looking on, probably charged with vodka, and of course no scent of it on their breath, while he struggled full-stomached against the grease of an American patriot's morning meal.

He knew those engineers had been knocking back vodkas just as surely as he knew that they could not translate his grin. Glowing like peasants, mustaches stiff with pastry glazes, still they went on sketching rough drafts of space labs on his desk blotter, given to him by the attorney general's daughter for Christmas, and breaking his mechanical pencil leads under the pressure of their stubby chafed fingers. But dammit, for all their clumsiness, they were precise when

they ran out of blotter and stretched their sketches across his parchment calendar, which his favorite lady had sent him for no special reason. That had irked him: they had projected their decompression chambers right across Easter Week, and he couldn't see his spring minivacation anymore. How would he ever explain to Snookey what had disfigured the calendar, especially the part about "humanly modified atmospheric cycles," which made no sense at all? Well, what was the chance she'd ever see it again anyhow, or him, he winced, for another two years at least, maybe six?

Yes, yes, he reminded himself grudgingly, it was his own idea to call that February meeting a "workshop" against Metz's warning not to. Workshops were too unstructured, Metz had said. Well, he got that right. But designating last week's meeting in the Valley as preliminary was a miscue, too, in the opposite direction: nothing got done or said once you said "preliminary," at least not in the hour he felt obliged to stay. It was supposed to be a meet-them-and-greet-them affair to usher off Babushchev's engineers and techies to chat science fiction with the boys and girls in the Valley Labs, and maybe that happened after he left. But all he heard was a tally of old achievements between the Russians and Americans (well, that part was short enough, thank God!) and a long, aimless overture toward "fresh promise for Russian-American diplomacy shaping technological alliances and advances to recharge the global economies."

Isn't there just one global economy? he puzzled. For that matter, and for all we talk about it, is there really any such thing as an economy anyhow? Wind, just wind. Real diplomacy is a successful effort to smile at the person wasting my time.

No, for once, he would insist, graciously if possible, that they sit on the sofas and chairs; he would have the side tables furnished with ink pens which he knew the Ruskies hated using even for signing treaties. He would litter his desk, hopelessly, with documents, files, a newly printed photo of the first lady perhaps, for they had taken notes on the back of the last one he had left lying about upside

down without a frame. Hard to believe he hadn't noticed that till they had left. Not that it mattered now, since he had later sheared off a strip of the bottom, her pearl necklace and the most modest hint of cleavage, as a bookmark for the Vatican mole who had the insolence to request a souvenir. But at least he was the only president in recent history whose desks actually looked like work got done on them.

His foot still bled from the mussel shell. To give the wound a minute's chance to seal, he sat down on the hard, smooth, water-packed sand, his back one with the flat-faced rock behind him. He pushed the heels of his hands into the beach, forming the first prints of a new day just above the dilated brim of the receding tide. With the moon out, he thought, he might shore up a sandcastle like Snookey did on their last morning together in New Hampshire, but he had never had much of a talent for that sort of thing, no very delicate hand nor any feel for design or shapes waiting to be molded. His daydream would always picture the castle already built . . .

And then wrecked by the likes of the men landing that oversized dinghy only a hundred feet to his left.

So why beach a dinghy here? Their ship distressed? No, they wouldn't have cargo.

It looked, through the moon-grey darkness, like oil drums.

"Let's rest," one of them panted. "Next time I'm wearing gloves. And you're buying them. All the major money in this junket and the oars are splintered. No gloves, no life jackets. Shit, next time hire yourself some galley slaves . . ." The rest was lost to the splashy rumble of a breaking wave.

Matches flared and, downwind, a perfect statue to grace the portal of anyone's sandcastle, Buckeye spied them askance as he imagined any mythical sculpture might do. He might not have recalled the odor had he not found Snookey stoned in the hunting lodge three years ago. His sworn duty staring him in the face, and not a Secret Service agent handy at the moment of need. Always there otherwise, orchestrating superfluous security.