





STATE OF THE UNION

**GODWIN POPE IS
VICE PRESIDENT.
HE HATES HIS JOB**

BY JAMIE MALANOWSKI

Parked high in the vice president's usual spot behind and above the podium, Godwin Pope surveyed the House of Representatives chamber in the Capitol building. The panorama wasn't his uniquely, of course; on Godwin's left, Herman Vanick, the fleshy, cunning former gym teacher who had elbowed his way into the speakership of the House four years ago, had nearly the same perspective from his seat, though Godwin doubted the ass-patting towel-snapper saw what he did. Vanick looked at the room and saw pretty much what the president saw—a dunghill populated by ants who loved, hated, feared or owed him but who were basically merchants, here to buy and sell favors, markers, pork. Godwin looked at the room and saw history—John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay and Sam Rayburn, a beardless Lincoln and a callow Kennedy, measuring themselves within the room's quiet magnificence. Well, yes, okay, those men, along with an army of ambitious sharpies who had managed to maneuver their hands in the people's business—and in their pockets.

But that's civilization, right? The strong and smart and clever have always tried to get something out of the credulous and besotted—and not only get something out of them but make them think giving it up was the right thing to do. The divine right of kings, Godwin snickered to himself. Now there was a sell job.

Meanwhile, Godwin noted, the customary members of the tribe had assembled.

On the right, the guardians, our military chiefs, the members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Not our most valiant warriors, mind you, but six professionally accomplished commanders who have learned through decades of bureaucratic maneuvers that the answer to every military question, whether it's about money, time, firepower or troops, is "We need more."

Next to them are our great justices, the members of the Supreme Court, resplendent in their robes. Nine judicial high priests with nary a shred of practical experience among them, who try like a fat woman with a pair of bicycle shorts to stretch an 18th century document around 21st century issues.

To their left sits the Cabinet—forgettable, interchangeable people

whose proudest accomplishment, now and always, will be to say, "I headed a government agency." Headed. Like Pelé.

And filling the room are the mighty solons of Congress, the 535 wise men and women of the Senate and House, the Jacks and Jills and Shaniquas and Billy Bobs, the ex-fraternity house presidents and prom committee chairgirls, the former school board members and state assemblymen who learned their trade debating liquor laws and zoning regulations and who now get to kick around questions of war and peace, poverty and abundance, enrichment and enslavement.

All waiting for...

The back doors of the Chamber opened, and a minuscule man called out to the throng. "Mister Speaker! Mister Speaker! The president of the United States!"

Look at him, thought Godwin. Good old Jack Mahone. Smilin' Jack. Happy Jack. Crafty Jack. President Jack. Big Jack Off. We rise and salute his arrival.

The president was a Louisiana man, Baton Rouge, 59 years old, ex-governor, ex-senator, passably handsome, garrulous, louche, a man who possessed a common touch, a man of the people. He won 36

GODWIN COULD SEE THE HEAVY-LIDDED BLONDE WHO WAS THE PRESIDENT'S OUT-OF-TOWN PAL.

states on Election Day, and 13 short, fast months later he's managed to plunge to the lowest favorability rating that any president ever had at the end of his freshman year.

Godwin kept applauding as he watched Jack run the gantlet of Cabinet cheerleaders, reach the dais, bound up the steps and grasp the speaker's outstretched arm. "Hey there, Herm. How they hangin'?" Jack fairly bellowed, loud enough that Godwin was afraid the whole room would hear. "Think you'll applaud anything I say tonight?"

"My guess is you'll say something I agree with, Mr. President," replied Herm, his professional bonhomie in perfect form.

"Hey, Godwin," Jack chimed, reaching for his vice president's hand.

"Good evening, Mr. President."

"Chet went over everything with you, right? When to applaud, when to lead a standing ovation—"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"And how to look. You have to look confident."

"I will."

"And proud."

"Yes, Chet and I went over this."

"And interested! For fuck's sake, look interested. No yawning in the background."

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Oh, and one more thing." Mahone motioned Godwin closer. On TV, commentators were remarking on this as a sign of the close collaboration the two men enjoyed. "Godwin," Jack was asking, "are you coming back to the residence after?"

"After the speech?" The question stunned Godwin. Mahone tended to reserve such invitations for his closest cronies, a small category of humanity to which Godwin neither belonged nor aspired. "I hadn't planned on it, sir. I don't think I was actually invited."

"Well, it would mean a lot to me if you came."

"Really?"

"Yes, really." A wide, warm smile lit Jack's face. "Isn't this the Mahone-Pope administration?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, let's act like it."

"Yes, sir. And thank you, sir. I'll be there."

"All righty. Now, could you do me a favor?"

"Certainly, sir."

"A friend of mine came in from out of town unexpectedly—you see her? Up in the gallery? About four or five rows behind the first lady? And over—to the right?"

The two men looked into the gallery. The plump, extravagantly coiffed first lady smiled sweetly and waved, and the men waved back. Over and to the right, Godwin could see a heavy-lidded blonde whom he took to be the president's out-of-town pal. She had two large Tupperware bowl-shaped mounds of flesh prominently emerging from her low-for-the-occasion neckline, and she was using the long red fingernail on her left pinkie to daub at her mascara.

"The elegant blonde, Mr. President?"

"That's her. You didn't bring a date, did you?"

"To the State of the Union address? No, sir."

"So there'd be no problem if we said she was your date when we went back to the residence, would there?"

"None."

"And that's all you have to do. Bring her by, and then you can bug out if you want. Or stay. Whatever."

And with a wave of his hand Jack turned and faced the business at hand, namely, attempting to right his already perilously off-course administration, leaving Godwin to settle into his seat and, behind a good soldierly facade, slip into a sulk worthy of Achilles.

No one would ever have predicted that Godwin Pope would someday become vice president. His earliest progenitors on these shores were flinty, suspicious Yankees who possessed a certain ingenuity and clever heads for business. At one point the family controlled 87 percent of the pin-and-needle market in North America, and still great-great-grandfather Obediah undercut incipient competitors as ruthlessly as a Rockefeller. Over the years, the family fortune rose and fell, depending on whether it was one of the periods when the heirs boldly and successfully led National Metal Fasteners Inc. into paper clips or staples, or whether it was one of the periods when the heirs—different heirs, of course, wastrel heirs—threw chunks of the family fortune at a promoter of commercial seaweed farming or a maharishi from Philadelphia who preached the Tao of Free Love or one of about a hundred dealers of fine cocaine.

By the time Godwin enrolled in Princeton, National Metal Fasteners Inc. was owned by a midlevel Japanese copier company, and the family's riches had dwindled to the point at which Godwin still had enough money in the bank to be able to choose between one family tradition and the other. He had begun sizing up the cocaine dealers when fate interceded and assigned him Tom Ralston as his freshman-year roommate. Ralston was a precocious 14 years old, didn't much like to wash, paused in the middle of conversations to pick his nose and thought everyone else was stupider than he was. Which was largely true, and in the case of mathematics, incontestably correct. Tom Ralston could solve foot-long algorithms in his head in seconds.

With breathtaking ease Tom graduated two semesters early and joined IBM in Palo Alto, where Godwin visited him over spring break. They were both complaining. Godwin had been accepted to half a dozen law schools, none of which he had any interest in attending. And Tom found IBM distressingly boring. "They're so fucking slow!" Tom screamed. "You (continued on page 138)

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can't get approval for anything without 14 people signing off!"

"Approval for what?" Godwin asked.

"Like, to write programs."

"Television programs?"

"No, software. This personal-computer thing is going to take off. Any moron can see that. People are going to buy these fucking things."

"What the fuck for?"

"To do stuff—their taxes, to play games, to run small businesses. But to do any of that, they need programs."

"What makes you think you can write programs?" Godwin asked.

"They're just algorithms," Tom said, and showed him: There were algorithms for an address book and algorithms for an appointments calendar. There were dozens, dozens of algorithms that caused the computer to do things.

At that point Godwin made up his mind to leave Princeton and invest what was left of his share of the Pope fortune in Tom Ralston's ability to solve equations. He and Tom formed Zephyr Inc., which turned out to be a brilliant partnership. Tom, with his technical virtuosity and head for product, designed the programs; Godwin, with his taste for competition, ran the business. Seventeen years later, after Zephyr was swallowed whole by the Microsoft Corporation, Godwin and Tom each were worth \$1.63 billion dollars. Tom bought the Washington Redskins, and under his whiny, demanding, infantile, free-spending ownership, the team won two Super Bowls. Godwin wasn't so easily entertained. For years he had been the public face of the company, and he had come to enjoy being quoted and cited and pictured and courted in all the power centers of the globe. Suddenly he discovered he had nothing to do.

All that changed the night he allowed

Ralston to drag him along to a dinner party thrown by Shohreh Pashvalavoo, the voluptuous, raven-haired political pundit. A glamorous Iranian emigrant who had parlayed her beauty into three strategically placed marriages and three highly remunerative divorces, Shohreh took a particular interest in Godwin and, to the neglect of her other guests, spent the evening hanging on his every word. Later that night, straddling him in her bed, she asked if he would mind answering a question.

"No, of course not."

"Why are you wasting your life?"

Needless to say, he was caught off guard. "That's hardly the sort of question guaranteed to bring this evening to a happy climax," Godwin replied.

"Whatever reasons you come up with, they're all bullshit. You are rich, healthy, tremendously intelligent, enormously sophisticated, in the prime of your life and beholden to no one. You should run for public office. Every day the world is at a crossroads. I can think of no one I trust more to determine in which direction we should go."

Whether it was what she said or where she then put her mouth, either way he felt a dam burst of motivation. Hell yes, he thought, I could make a difference.

Eight brisk, busy, free-spending months later, Godwin got himself elected to the Senate. Four years after that, long after Shohreh left Washington to take up with her lesbian lover in Northampton, Massachusetts, Godwin glumly concluded she was wrong. He was making no difference whatsoever. That's when he decided to run for president.

At first he thought it was the most brilliant decision he had ever made, and he floated on an ebullience the likes of which he had never experienced. He found he liked campaigning, liked getting up in front of crowds and spouting off. What surprised him was that they listened. He refused to talk about flag burning or homosexual marriages, issues he disdainfully described as 20th century concerns. Let's move on, he said. Can't we establish a health insurance program that makes us more competitive? Can't we figure out a better way to pay for education? Promises, promises, his opponents chided and asked about the costs. "Tomorrow is right around the corner," Godwin replied. "Are you ready?"

Godwin's challenge caught something in the zeitgeist. His campaign almost overnight became a vehicle for a whole range of dissatisfactions with the incumbent administration. All of a sudden he became something larger than life, a champion, a man on horseback, the great hope. Donors gave him money, volunteers clogged his storefronts, surfers jammed his sites, the news networks assigned correspondents. Once he took the lead in the pre-primary polls in New Hampshire, the nabobs of the media came to him, tugging their forelocks, chuckling at his quips, solemnly digesting his views. They loved that he was different, that he had been

a successful businessman, that he was a bachelor known to have dated some of the world's most desirable women and that he had new ideas. In his Silicon Valley days, he had had the experience, more than a few times, of appearing on the cover of a magazine, but now there were weeks when he was on the cover of six, eight, 10 of them at once, and newspaper front pages, too, and it was intoxicating.

Buoyed by this attention, Godwin won the Granite State primary, the Sunshine State primary and the Show Me State primary. Sadly, he didn't quite realize that he was in the Build 'Em Up phase of the American media's interest in a subject. The next phase, the Tear 'Em Down phase, would follow.

It began in an auditorium of Towson University, at the end of a routine debate a week before the Maryland primary. It was Godwin and Jack Mahone and a couple of insubstantial small-state pretenders on the stage. None had made any news in the discussion, which certainly worked to Godwin's advantage. No news, no switches in momentum, no more time on the clock for Mahone, no way to stop Godwin's nomination, no way for him to prevent Godwin from winning Maryland and rendering the rest of the primaries moot. Asked for closing remarks, Godwin, with professional polish, pushed through his final words to his usual vigorous finish.

"And that's how I plan to conduct my presidency," he said, "with an open heart, a determined will and one eye firmly planted on the horizon." The applause was on cue and just as fervent as expected.

Had the pattern of the previous four debates been followed, Jack Mahone would then have begun detailing the lessons of hard work and honesty he had learned working on the deck of his daddy's sun-baked shrimp boat on Lake Pontchartrain. Instead, new words spilled out of Jack's mouth, surprising the audience, surprising the media and surprising Godwin so much that seconds passed before Godwin realized Jack was actually speaking to him.

"Well, all I can say is, that sure sounds pretty. But gosh, almost everything Godwin Pope says sounds pretty. Let's move on, he says. Okay, sure, we all want to move on. But first I have one question: How come there ain't any almonds in my chocolate bar?"

The audience roared with laughter. Even Godwin's supporters roared with laughter. Even Godwin's highly paid handlers roared with laughter.

"Can you tell me that?" Jack insisted, extending his open palms toward Godwin in an invitation to respond. "How come there's no almonds in my chocolate bar?"

Godwin had spent hours preparing for every gambit he could imagine Jack trying to pull, but he had no idea what Jack was talking about, and his ignorance terrified him. A vague, pregnant *uum* escaped his lips.

"How come?" Jack sarcastically demanded. He sensed Godwin's confusion

and realized there was a chance that panic was merely a prod away. “How come, Senator? How come there ain’t no almonds in that chocolate bar you’re trying to hand these good people. Yeah, I know why.” Jack later said it was like when he played quarterback in high school in the big Thanksgiving Day game against the Renegades of Our Lady of Perpetual Peace and the coach called for a sneak; he hit the line hoping to get a yard and a safe landing, but following a bing and a bang and a bump he was still on his feet, and the next thing he knew he was facing 85 yards of green grass and a wide-open path to the end zone.

Minutes later the debate would end, and mere seconds after that Godwin would learn why the audience was laughing. Jack had been talking about a Hershey’s commercial, a fucking candy-bar ad, in which the cutest four-year-old girl in America peers above a candy counter and asks a vinegary-looking proprietor, “How come there’s no almonds in my chocolate bar?” In the days that followed, Godwin would see the ad maybe 500 times, would see the girl’s picture, would see her in his dreams. But at the moment, Godwin had never seen the commercial, and the secret of her identity, let alone of her existence, might as well have been buried in a milk can under a rock in Tierra del Fuego.

“What are you saying, sir?” Godwin had finally sputtered. “I want to talk about the issues. Why do you want to talk about nuts?”

And the audience roared anew.

The Chocolate Bar Debate, as it was swiftly dubbed, was the turning point in

the campaign. Just like Ed Muskie after he cried or Howard Dean after he screamed, Godwin had become a zombie candidate, bravely campaigning on despite having been instantly and irrevocably killed. “Didja see the debate last night?” Jay Leno asked. “Jack Mahone asked Godwin Pope how come his candy bar didn’t have any almonds. Pope said it was because he was planning to ask Mr. Peanut to be his running mate.” Mahone’s supporters showed up at every rally; Godwin couldn’t get two words out before they began chanting “Where are the almonds? Where are the almonds?” Godwin tried to punch back. “I think my teacher-training program is a pretty big almond,” he said on *Meet the Press*. “My investment tax credit for small businesses? You don’t think that’s an almond?” There was a lot voters liked about Godwin—no one doubted that he was smart—but deep down they had always feared that anyone who had been born rich and made himself richer just might not really know them. Now Jack had shown the voters that their fears were well-founded, that not only wasn’t Godwin Pope a guy who ever had to worry about how many almonds were in his chocolate bar, but when he wasn’t going to the opera and attending conferences about third-world development in Davos, Godwin Pope wasn’t even a guy who ever watched television.

Godwin worked hard to regain his momentum, but to no avail. The energy faded, the crowds thinned, and his aides moped, wept, bickered and quit. Finally, after it became inevitable that Mahone would amass enough delegates to win,

Godwin withdrew. The big parade, the presidential campaign parade of which he was once the grand marshal, now moved on, pausing infrequently to see how the ex-candidate was doing.

God, how that annoyed Godwin. The ex-candidate, the ex-Silicon Valley tyro, the ex-important person. Always a man quick to scorn the moaners and whiners who forever lined the drainage ditches along the highways of his life, Godwin was now horrified to find himself dumped in their midst and often speaking their excuse-studded lingo. The realization disgusted him, and he began to think of doing something to break the mood. The thought of spending the summer looking at the leggy blondes of Iceland was beginning to appeal to him until he got a call from Tavis Whouley, the chipmunk-faced chairman of his party.

“Y’all will be coming to Miami, right?”

“For the coronation of Jack Mahone? He’ll manage fine without me.”

“Y’all do need to come to Miami, Godwin. All the losing candidates are, and y’all are gonna get seven to 10 minutes of prime time to talk about anything you want in regards to how bad those Republican bastards are and why we need to elect Jack Mahone.”

“No doubt you think that’s an unrejectable offer, Tavis, and I thank you. But nobody’s going to watch a tableau of also-rans.”

“Now, Godwin, that’s precisely the kind of attitude we’re trying to avoid. Now let me tell ya—y’all have been a pretty good sport up to this point about your recent disappointments, and surely that’s no easy thing. But y’all are gonna have to do this one last duty because the money-grubbing networks have given me a shitty four hours over three nights to produce our party’s big infomercial, and I’ll be goddamned if I’m going to let y’all do anything that’s going to let them hair-sprayed pretty-boy anchors spend even a minute of that time wondering why y’all are off somewhere moping. Look, Godwin, y’all are young. Couple years, you might think it’s better to have friends helping everybody forget that unfortunate candy-bar incident than to have enemies who keep bringing it up, bringing it up, bringing it up every minute of the day. Do y’all get my drift?”

●

So Godwin came to Miami and was soon surprised to find he was enjoying himself. The delegates were friendly and the conch was good, and Godwin spent much of his first night there salsa dancing with an attractive state senator from Delray Beach named Joan or Joanne—Juanita!—a lovely woman, although he was a bit disappointed when he discovered that her breasts, which cantilevered so captivantly above her belly in her silver cocktail dress, flapped like beagle ears as she flip-flopped around his bed. Still, it

was as fine an evening as he could have expected, and he was just about to turn out the lights when he got a phone call from Chet Wetzels, the manager of the Mahone campaign.

“Senator, please forgive my nosiness, but are you alone?”

“Yes.”

“Governor Mahone is wondering if you could see him.”

“I have nothing planned tomorrow.”

“The governor was hoping you could see him now.”

It was after 12, and Godwin was about to gripe about the hour when it dawned on him that there was something in the urgent understatement of Chet’s voice that betrayed the very, very heartfelt hope that Godwin would agree. “I’ll get dressed,” he said.

“There’s a Lincoln Navigator on the third level of the garage under your hotel. The driver will blink his lights twice when he sees you. We’d be grateful if you made sure nobody followed you out.”

Godwin’s driver drove in silence for 10 minutes, jumping on and off the freeway, crosshatching the nearly deserted downtown streets, all to thwart pursuers who gave no indication of existing. The car eventually came to rest on the top floor of the parking garage, next to another Navigator parked under a big neon T.G.I. Friday’s sign. The driver jerked his head toward the other vehicle and Godwin left.

“Hello, Godwin. Nice of you to come. How are you enjoying the convention?”

“Pleasant. Tending toward boring.”

“Yeah?” Jack said in a tone of genuine concern. “Have you been over to South Beach? Those thongs, man. I tell ya, it’s like wall-to-wall ass. I’d give this up in a minute to be a cabana boy over there.”

“Really? I don’t think it’s too late.”

Jack’s lip curled momentarily, and then he laughed. “Ha! Good one. You’re a funny guy, Godwin. You should let that funny side out more.”

Godwin didn’t know if that constituted a compliment, but it was lame if it was and condescending if it wasn’t, and he felt himself growing stony the way he always did in Jack’s presence. A small silence blossomed and began to grow uncomfortable until Jack plunged in.

“Do you know why you’re here?”

“No.”

Godwin could see Jack pondering the likelihood of that being true. “Whatever,” he said with a shrug. “You’ve seen the polls, haven’t you?”

“Yes,” Godwin said. “You’re behind.”

“Yeah, I’m behind. None of the metrics are working for me. Right track, wrong track, registration trends, what the public sees as my relative strengths and weaknesses. The money’s getting iffy.”

“Well, I hate to be the one to break it to you, Jack, but I never thought you could win this election.”

“See, but I can. I can. I need to give the voters a new reason to look at me. If they could see me fresh for a minute,

then I'd have a chance. And there's just one way I can do that—by picking a good running mate. And in all our surveys, there's only one name that unites the party, that surprises people, that gives me some momentum."

Godwin was thunderstruck. "You cannot be serious. Do you remember the primaries? I do. I remember them as a time I was humiliated by a man I don't like very much."

"You don't like me?" Jack's face clouded over. "I like you."

"Please."

"Okay, you don't like me. You don't like some of the things I do, or some of the things I stand for, or some of the people who back me. You think we're all afraid of change, that instead of preparing for the future, we're afraid of it and are trying to resist it. And you think that's shortsighted and wrong."

"And dangerous."

"And dangerous. We sure don't want to forget dangerous. Well, let me tell you something I've never been able to tell you before. You're right, Godwin. Your ideas are right. Your vision of the future is right. And the things you want us to do are the right damn things to do. But not everybody gets that yet, see? Your Silicon Valley pals, your Ivy League pals, they get it. They understand why outsourcing the job of a tech-support worker in Wichita to some guy in a turban in Bangalore, India is a smart, competitive move, not just for the guy in India but for the guy in Wichita, because with a little training he can get into a new field that has a bigger upside. I see that. But the guy in Wichita don't see it, and his wife don't see it. They look at the mortgage bill and they look at the retraining program, and they wonder if she's gonna have to get a job to make ends meet until he's finished, and they wonder who's going to hire him and if they're going to have to move and who's going to watch the baby if he's in a program and she's at work, and who's going to take care of his mother when they relocate a thousand miles away. And when you, with all your wealth, stand

there and try to convince them that it's for the best, they don't like you for saying it. And you find that hurtful, don't you? Because here you are, with a real idea for how we should prepare for tomorrow, a real vision that's only going to give them more freedom and more choices and more money in their pockets, and they won't listen. Why? Because all their lives, smooth-talking men in fine suits have been telling them what's best for them, and whenever that happens they feel like they end up holding the shitty end of the stick. And you're being blamed for those lies. And that hurts you, doesn't it?"

In his whole life, no one had ever spoken to Godwin this way. He felt unsettled. This man whom he had never considered as anything but a rank buffoon was talking as if he really knew what Godwin thought and felt.

"They're like children, aren't they, Godwin? They don't know what's best for them or who's best for them. They can't recognize how a person's going to help them, because all they pay attention to is how he talks, his Armani suits, how low cut the ball gowns are on the movie stars he dated. They've decided very unfairly that there was something about you they just didn't like. That's why the almond trick worked. They already had it in their heads that for all your obvious abilities, there was just something about you they didn't like. All they needed me to do was give it a name."

"Right."

"Because they like me. That's the thing. They don't think I'm so brilliant, but they like me. They may not always know it when they meet me, but sooner or later they will like me."

Jack sat back and exhaled. There suddenly seemed to be a certain authenticity about Mahone. For months on the campaign trail, Godwin had seen nothing but a carnival huckster who was always selling. But now, here, on the roof of this garage, in this car, the real man was suddenly present.

"Sooner or later everybody likes me. Can't really say the same about you,

Godwin. Jesus knows, we admire you, we respect you, we're awestruck by your damn brilliance. But you're out of reach, babe. We can no more like you than we can like, I dunno, a Greek god!"

"Oh come on, I'm no god!"

"Me, on the other hand—I'm as human as can be. People think they could have a beer with me at a barbecue and talk about their dog or the new point guard at LSU. But soon they'd be talking about their kids and their schools and what they're hoping for and everything they're afraid of. And because they feel that connection, I can take them wherever they need to go—and that can be to where you know they need to go. But I can't do that without you, Godwin. I need you to show me that path."

His meaty paw grabbed Godwin's hand. "Will you do it, Godwin? Will you help me build a better world?"

The passage of 18 months had done nothing to dull Godwin's embarrassment. Mahone played me like a child, Godwin thought. The romance lasted through the election, which Jack—having correctly gauged the small but significant change in the election's momentum that Godwin's selection would cause—went on to win by a handsome margin. But after the inauguration Godwin was all but forgotten. Soon he realized he had become an unwanted man in an unnecessary job.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen," Godwin heard someone saying. "God bless you, and God bless America!"

That's the finish, thought Godwin, and he leapt to his feet, applauding heartily. Below him he could see all the Shaniquas and Billy Bobs applauding too, and Jack, smiling warmly, raising his hand in a final presidential benediction before the cameras cut away. Keep applauding, Godwin thought, keep applauding. Suddenly Jack turned around and shouted above the applause, "Don't forget the blonde!"

God, he thought as his stomach clenched, this so sucks.

