Everything, Perfectly, Forever

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Mr. T is the reason I started sending Christmas cards. Well, Mr. T with the help of Nancy Reagan. And, true, it wasn't Mr. T the man himself so much as his appearance with the first lady in one particular photograph, but the point is: that was enough. The point is: I saw something in an archive and it changed me.

Everyone walking the archives, those white-washed basement levels of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, is either an employee or a guest escorted by an employee. It is the kind of vast and silent place where you could go half an hour without bumping into anyone at all. The archives themselves are a series of cloisters: papers slipped in mylar sleeves, sleeves packed in boxes, boxes stacked on shelves. Only a tattoo of neatly written alpha-numeric code on the boxes and shelves interrupts the uniform anonymity. Even I needed a barcode before I could enter, a paper sticker I pressed high on my shirt like a nametag. My brother wore his similarly and we both, once the elevator doors opened, stayed close on the heels of one Jack Morris, a tall man in his late-30s man who wore his barcode on the back of a Staff ID.

I'd met Jack Morris shortly after I was hired to manage a museum collection of 8,000 photographs in Chicago. Jack was an audio-visual archivist from Simi Valley more concerned with film and negatives, but our respective employers both thought we'd benefit from a week at the Eastman House in Rochester, New York, so there we were at the Image Permanence Institute taking notes about silvering and foxing and what little could be done to reverse either one. Jack Morris had perhaps been kidding when he suggested from the remote distance of professional courtesy and three thousand miles from home that I should, at some unspecified date, if I was ever in California, come by the archives. Still, he was in every way cordial when I called six months later to announce my visit.

"Great," Jack said. "So what do you want to see?"

I had only one request.

"I want to see the picture you can't talk about."

Archives are different from museum collections. Collections anticipate exhibition. Archives prioritize preservation. Collections expect to make some few select things accessible to a wide audience, while archives are essentially the reverse: a mass of information catalogued and cared for so that an individual researcher might someday wade about, unfettered and unaided by curating, and uncover something of special interest. True, an individual can visit the parts of the collection not on display by appointment, and parts of archives sometimes get put on exhibition. Obviously both bodies exist for study and enlightenment, but they operate on different theories of how to get there.

Archivists, the joke goes, want to preserve everything, perfectly, forever—even if maintaining that level of preservation means none of it will ever be seen again. Nothing threatens an archive like an actual visitor, after all. To handle an object increases the risk *something* might happen. A crimp, a smudge, a fading in the light; who knows, really? Just to take its box off the shelf risks the box being lost. So if you want a perfect record, if you want to keep everything it its prime so it will be its most useful to the most researchers, you can't actually let anyone near it. It's not like the archive will get bedsores if it doesn't move. Its relevance will suffer if nothing circulates, but otherwise the archive will seem to lie there like an enchanted princess, asleep forever because there is only one right prince.

When I first met Jack Morris, he was talking to a grey-haired conservator about the gems in their respective collections. I remember they were laughing. I don't know what Jack told her about the photograph he will never discuss, but I will tell you what Jack then told me, when I asked: the picture is of the president. Also: it was taken at the White House. Beyond that, Jack mostly told me what the picture isn't. The picture is not one of the 8x10 reproduction glossies on file by year or subject in the library archives. Beyond that, it's mostly a thing that isn't. It was never published. It does not circulate. It has never been requested. And Jack, who had no particular loyalties to the ex-president before he started working at the archive, intends to keep it that way.

When I landed at LAX, my brother was waiting. Gavin was born two months before Carter won the 1976 election, some three and a half years before the 1980 spring Reagan swept the primaries and I was born. It's because of Gavin I grew up watching *He-Man* and *The A-Team* and listening to Weird Al Yankovic and reading *Mad Magazine*. It is surely, somehow, because of those credentials that I invited him to go see a picture that could not be discussed. I tossed my suitcase and my winter coat in the back seat of his car. I stood for a moment in the L.A. air, decided to pull off a sweater, and climbed in the front seat.

"Jelly bean?" my brother offered, extending a tiny silver tin.

"Why thank you, Gavin," I said, pinching out an orange bean. "How very appropriate."

He smiled, taking a green one for himself. He checked the mirrors and pulled away from the curb.

"You know," he said as I slipped on my sunglasses, the little white car now pointing us into the hills. "I don't really remember much about the Reagan administration."

"Me neither," I said.

"And, frankly, I don't really like libraries."

"That's okay," I nodded. "This," I said, "well, I think this might be different."

The entrance of the Ronald Reagan Library offers two paths. The left doorway enters a sunny gift shop with presidential magnets and presidential coloring books and presidential china and presidential everything in tiers and racks and gleaming rows. The right doorway is darkened, shadowy, goes into the museum. Between the two entries, completely hidden, is the elevator that goes down to the archives.

"Jack said to give you these," the receptionist said when we announced ourselves. We looked down at a pair of museum tickets, looked back up confused and heads cocked. "Have a look around the museum," she instructed us, "and when you're done, I'll call him up from the archives." At the time I assumed it was a professional courtesy, an act of good hosting, a you've-come-all-this-way bonus. Now I wonder if it was a hedge. Maybe Jack didn't think there was enough in the archives to sustain our interest. Maybe he thought some background would do us good. Probably Jack was merely busy with other things just then, but it felt like he was stalling, making us work, trying to bury the remarkable under what any tourist could see. The tickets only got us access to the surface levels, but we took them. We did as we were told.

We could have been more reverent. "That chair!" I would exclaim, pulling Gavin's arm, "He sat in *that* chair!" Then, around the next turn, "That pen!" I would squeal, "He signed something with that *pen*!" If it had been the president's favorite chair or a pen that signed something important, the label text wasn't letting on. As far as we could tell, it was just case after case of suits and desks and a few random gifts from other heads of state, all now on black velvet because a certain man had touched them. They might have been more interesting had we yet realized, in this place where Ronald Reagan's official biography failed to mention his first marriage, how telling a silence can be.

The signature exhibit at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum is Air Force One. It is what most visitors go to see. In fact, it gets its own line on the green-and-white freeway signs announcing the exit for the museum. In the museum, it gets its own giant room, the nose of the aircraft pointed to a four-story wall of windows, poised as if it might yet break the glass and soar out over the canyon. Video screens lining the queue to enter Air Force One recount its history, show people breaking into tears, a pilot reading a poem he wrote.

Just before you enter the plane, you are asked to turn your back to it, stand there framed by the oval entry, and smile for the camera. It's optional, but if you say no, you'll be asked again. When you decline a second time, the photographer will remind you that there's no obligation to buy, no risk at all—you're just having your picture taken. He will give you a reassuring smile that this is routine, part of the experience, integral to it. And when you say once more, returning his genuine smile, that you simply don't need a picture, he will all but shake his head.

By the time Gavin and I had convinced the photographer we were actually going to pass on the picture, that it simply wasn't an image we needed to see much less keep, the visitors in front of us were about ready to exit the plane. As we stepped in, a grandfather and his grandson stopped the line behind us. The white-haired man leaned down, his arm around the boy, and the photographer raised his lens.

At the front of the plane Gavin and I saw The Football—the black briefcase with its red button which accompanied the president every day for eight years, omnipresent, lest he need to authorize a nuclear attack while away from his desk. It is known also as the Nuclear Football, the Atomic Football, the President's Emergency Satchel, The Button, The Red Button, The Black Box. During the whole administration it was never out of the control of a military aide. Now it is secured from the general public by an eighth of an inch of Plexiglas. Gavin and I bowed our heads to see it better, leaned into the curve of the cabin. Of course this device was lifeless now, inert, but it was still something overwhelming: the power to devastate life as we know it—weighing in at just 45 pounds, and sized to fit in a carry-on.

"Hurry up!" the docent called to us from the back of the plane.

"That's right," she said when we looked up. We turned to look behind us and saw no one. She waved us down as if we'd created a bottleneck behind which hordes of anxious tourists were clamoring to get by. "Come on, now."

We scurried past the leather-upholstered lounge of the president and his aides, we skimmed past the block of press corps seats tucked closer together, and at the back of the plane we saw—a kitchenette. "This is the Air Force One galley," the docent said through a smile. "The president always made sure to find out if anyone flying Air Force One was celebrating a birthday that day. And if someone was, there was a chocolate cake!" It was only the three of us in the entire length of the plane. "Do you have any questions?"

"So, *everyone* who had a birthday got chocolate cake?" I asked.

"Everyone," she beamed. The woman was old enough to have voted for Reagan, and something about the crispness of her shirt and gold of her necklace made me suspect she had. She seemed particularly pleased to share the cake story, giddy almost, as if it were a secret, as if everything we needed to know about President Reagan had just been revealed.

"What if the birthday person was allergic to chocolate?" Gavin asked.

"Oh, I am sure the president would check beforehand and get a different kind."

I tried to imagine the leader of the free world attending not only to the date of birth but also the potential cake-related allergies of every passenger who might occupy the same plane he was on. The docent assured me it was true.

"He was very thoughtful," she stressed. "The president was *very* thoughtful."

Jack Morris was also very thoughtful. Once we had seen Air Force One and Christmas Trees of the World and everything else the museum had to offer, Jack met us in the lobby as promised, asked if we wanted a drink of water or a bite to eat, and escorted us to the staff elevator. We tried to be thoughtful, too, as he showed us through the archives' stacks and shelves, even if it mostly looked like a lot of white boxes.

Not every president gets a library, so far just the 13 from Herbert Hoover on. It's as if to get a library you need a critical mass of papers, and just to be sure, each administration produces, and proceeds to preserve, more than the last. For its part, the Reagan library holds 50 million pages of presidential documents, half a

million feet of motion picture film, and tens of thousands of audio and video tapes. Among its holdings of 1.6 million photographs, are two tan, four-drawer filing cabinets. They house the celebrity and VIP pictures in manila file folders. Jack paused our tour there.

"Who do you want to see?" he asked after explaining the content of the cabinets.

Gavin and I tried to think of famous people from the '80s, but all we could come up with was Mikhail Gorbachev and Pee Wee Herman.

"Okay," Jack said. "I'll flip through the files, and you tell me when you want to see something." We figured we could do that. "1981 Miss Universe Shawn Weatherly?" Jack asked. "Muhammad Ali? Lucille Ball? William F. Buckley?" He read through Kirk Cameron, Walter Cronkite, Phyllis Diller, Joe DiMaggio, but we weren't ready to commit. The questions faded into statements. "Cary Grant. Billy Graham. Wayne Gretzky." Gavin and I weren't especially particular, but we were hoping for something unexpected, something good. We passed on Bob Hope, Luciano Pavarotti, Mary Lou Retton, and I was starting to wonder if we should pick something, anything, just to be polite. "Schwarzenegger, Arnold. Selleck, Tom," Jack was saying. "Frank Sinatra?" he asked with a wink. The wink meant nothing to me or to Gavin, and after a pause Jack went on. "Jimmy Stewart. Mr. T…"

It seemed impossible that Jack had just said *Mr. T*—said it as if there was nothing more natural to come across in the Reagan archives, as if Mr. T had been the Vice President or the Chief of Staff. Jack was calling out Mother Teresa and Margaret Thatcher and Cheryl Tiegs by time we collected ourselves enough to say, more forcefully than was necessary, "Stop!"

"John Travolta?" Jack asked, his finger on the folder tab.

"No," we said in unison. "Mr. T!"

There was only one picture in the folder: a glossy 8x10 with a white border. Mr. T was wearing a Santa suit with the arms ripped off. Nancy Reagan sat on his knee, her pointy-toed flats dangling above his duct-taped combat boots. There was a Christmas tree behind them, the old-fashioned kind with hundreds of thin white candles at the tips of its boughs, and Nancy Reagan rather absently held at her side what I can only assume she had been hoping Santa T would deliver to a good girl like herself: a two-foot tall Mr. T doll, grimacing from behind the cellophane cut-out of a cardboard box emblazoned with the A-Team logo and images of its soldier of fortune characters firing automatic weapons. The first lady and Mr. T both seemed distracted, unprepared for the camera, yet there were Nancy Reagan's lips frozen against Mr. T's forehead in a permanent, passionless peck.

It was stunning. It had overtones of tradition and rebellion and violence and tenderness and abstinence and indulgence and entertainment and grace. It was the lion lying down with a lamb. It was *I pity the fool* and *Just Say No*. It was two members of the Screen Actors' Guild who might have more in common than I'd thought. I turned to my brother, both of us wide-eyed, open mouths starting to pull into grins. He hugged me and I hugged back. The picture wasn't just funny and odd and surprising—it was sublime in a way that spoke, if not directly to the season, then at least to everyone in my address book. It was perfect. It was nothing I could have asked for. It was not, it's worth noting, the picture I had come to see.

The peril of preservation is that one does not browse. Everything's there, for the asking, but how to ask for something you don't yet know exists? How to tell your appointed chaperone you'll know it when you see it? Why have faith there are hidden wonders to begin with, and what to say in this silence that drowns everything out? The picture I'd come for was in fact rooms and hallways and more rooms away from Mr. T, unannounced, like a crate in the infinite warehouse at the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The picture I went there for, the picture Jack Morris will never discuss, is in fact three pictures, proofs on a contact sheet taken in quick succession. Jack showed them to us on the condition that we not reveal their specifics. After we saw them, Gavin and I were escorted out.

I should say there is nothing scandalous about these pictures. They are, in fact, endearing. That there even *is* a code of silence—or that *these* should be the pictures to trigger it—is far more interesting than what little the hush conceals. It troubles me to keep their silence, but what I can say, what I think it is okay to tell, is this: Jack imagines that before the pictures were taken, the President of the United States said to his staff photographer, "Be prepared when I come in that door. I am only going to do this once." I imagine Jack is right. I imagine it happened exactly like that. And I try to imagine how many things we lose to their own protection. I try to imagine just how many things are seen only once.

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