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# "The Oath of Office"

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# The Oath of Office

ADAM BRAVER

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**W**ITHIN 24 SECONDS.

Jack screamed out, and she fell forward, and it sounded like firecrackers, and Jackie's first thought had been why on earth would they be shooting off fireworks. That's a strange thing to be doing. It was hard to see what was what. Jackie only looked up once, but when she did, she found herself on the back of the limo, and she doesn't know what she was thinking, only that she might have believed herself dead also. That her soul was climbing out of her body.

Then she's huddled down in the backseat. Hunkering. Taking refuge. Clint Hill lying on top of them. Jack's foot sticking up out of the car. She's trying to tug it down. Hiding from where she thought the shots were coming from.

People can say what they want about her class and her debutante poise, but once those shots were flying, she was all over him, willing to take the bullets, and Jackie knows she would have if they hadn't found Jack first.

*Walking Spanish.*

It's not a long walk through the airplane, from the bedchamber to the Presidential Suite. But it's long enough. She keeps her hands to her sides. No one seems to notice her. Not Kenny or Larry or Pam or Mac or anybody else from Jack's staff. They must be in the compartment already, waiting for the administration of the oath. It's taking her forever to get the short distance, but she trusts she can. Her body is dulled, and her head just as dulled. But she can sense her mind working rapidly, processing and dismissing at equal rate. A paralyzing contradiction. Still, as she moves forward, closer and closer to the swearing-in, she is moving further away from what she knows. There's an expression that she remembers from a novel or a movie. *Walking Spanish*. When a sailor is being dragged through a ship before being forced to walk the plank. *Walking Spanish*.

*Within 28 Seconds.*

Lyndon's holding her hands. His are big like clown gloves, and they cover hers completely, the bones of his fingers like bars. She's looking down, but can feel his eyes, staring. And he calls her sweetheart, saying, "Sweetheart, I'm so sorry." It's all rocks and gravel in his voice. She tries to slip her hands free, but he keeps a firm grip on them. She can sense Lady Bird looking at her. At the mess she is. Already planning to pick out a nice change of clothes. Clean her up. Fix her hair. Maybe run a warm bath. But Lyndon will not let go of her hands. It's as though he wants her to cry before him. But she won't cry. Even if she could.

The compartment is hot and crowded, and it smells of sweat. And she just wishes this would get going. Lyndon finally lets go, and he reaches for a glass of water, swallowing it in one gulp, as though trying to drown himself. Everybody's shifting. Every movement magnified. The judge takes her place, with the bible in one hand, and the typed out oath in the other. The Dictet is turned on to preserve this moment. Prove that it was real, when nobody will be able to believe such a thing could happen.

Lyndon speaks his lines of the oath slowly; not as though deliberately savoring the moment, rather he's unable to get hold of the words. As though his voice and his brain belong to two different bodies. Judge Hughes seems to rush her part, trying to speed him up.

After Lyndon repeats, *so help me god*, there's a pause, a long pause, and it's so quiet in the room, almost without air. This should be the space they stay in forever, where everything just pauses. Lyndon leans down and kisses Lady Bird with his eyes open; and when he catches Jackie's glance, he pulls away from his wife a little ashamed, reaching out to Jackie, but she doesn't give her hands this time. He hugs her like he's hugging a man, and then takes a half step back, holds on to her elbows. She doesn't want him to say anything, and he seems to know it. He purses his lips, and then swallows. Looking at her. Part of her hopes he's sick inside. That his intestines can barely hold anything in. And it's not from anger toward him. Nor from spite. It's just seeing his men behind him shaking hands.

"Again," he says, "I am so sorry, Jackie."  
 "Thank you, Mr. President." As she steps to the side, his hands stay on her elbows, and she realizes that he is in his own pause. Once she feels his hands slip away, she knows everything is moving forward now. That there is no place for her, other than to tend to her husband.

*If.*

It's impossible not to think in terms of *if*. When she'd been walking through the cabin to the swearing-in, she'd considered over a dozen *ifs*. She thought of the weather. The bubbletop. The various pauses along the route, each time Jack commanded the car to slow down to say something to a spectator. Maybe when they motored around the corner into the downtown. If maybe she'd leaned in to say something, and, unable to hear, he'd leaned back, just as the bullets passed by. If maybe she'd sat that much closer to him. If maybe the wind had shifted, and the hanging banners had blown the other direction. Or maybe if she'd pushed the hair off her forehead. Or maybe if Patrick hadn't died.

*If* was a split-second that nearly any detail might have altered.

But already she can't recall details. Only flashbulbs. Snapshots that barely linger. This morning in Fort Worth already is another lifetime. Sitting in the Hotel Texas, getting dressed. Wishing he wouldn't laugh about the risks. Thinking she should say so because she was that certain something wasn't right. But deciding not to. And when that first shot rang out, and she didn't know what it was, a noise, a firecracker, and Jack's clutching at his throat, and she leaned in toward him. Knew something was wrong. It's barely a second. A breath. But when she leaned over, and grabbed at him (asking? yelling? shrieking?), that thought about deciding not to say something went through her head, as though it were loading the bullet and cocking the rifle. She tried to scream it from her mind, just as the next shot came. Then she was climbing out of the car.

But it was the proper thing at the time, right?

As she'd entered the suite for the swearing-in, she was replaying that second, trying to remember if that's how it had really happened. Not quite certain anymore. Maybe her mind was already recalibrating the details. Turning it into her own private experience, with an ordering of details that at least gave the murder a logic.

Once over the threshold in the room, she looked up to see all those familiar faces, staring back at her, and then looking away just as quickly. She tried to lift her head up, and walk into the room with pride. But nothing was working right. She tripped on a tuft of carpet, losing her balance. Every hand reached out to brace her. If only she'd paid attention.

*Within 28 seconds. Part II.*

Lyndon has walked over to talk to his people. Strangely he already

looks presidential. Jack had worked hard to make Lyndon feel valued in his vice-presidential role. Inviting him and Lady Bird to State Dinners. Making sure each guest was welcomed by both the President and Vice-President. Jack sent Lyndon abroad, using him as the ambassador that Nixon never was. He'd bungled some early on, especially in Berlin. But Jack had bailed him out. Lyndon just didn't have a diplomat's personality. It's about social ways. But there he is, standing across the room. Already as though he was born into the job.

Lady Bird puts a hand to Jackie's wrist. Her touch is opposite Lyndon's; fragile, like kindling. And Lady Bird's face is sympathetic, maternal, so different from everybody else, who seems frightened of her. "Let's get you away from here," Lady Bird says. "Let me help you."

Words are hard to find. But Jackie tells her thank you.

The two of them stand in the center of the room. Hushed voices surrounding them. Not quite sure where to go.

"We need to get you out of those clothes, dear," Lady Bird says, almost in a whisper. She looks Jackie over. "Get you changed into something more comfortable. Out of these."

Jackie looks down. Her dress is covered in blood. Her right leg caked in it. She reaches up to scratch her cheek, and sees her glove almost fully stained brown. She draws in a deep breath, taking in enough air to keep her standing.

"Please, Jackie. Let me help you get changed."

Jackie's not ready to move. Not sure where to go. What to do. And she can sense Lady Bird getting antsy. Trying to find the right things to say. Being helpful. Keep any conversation going because Lady Bird must be sure that quiet is the worse thing right now. Where the horrors get played and played over and over. But Jackie does want the quiet. Needs it. And she wants it to be with Jack. Sit with him as though these past two hours have never existed.

"Shall we go now, Jackie?" Lady Bird's voice starts to tremble.

Together, they walk out of the room, and into the hallway, to the bedchamber. Jackie wants to keep moving to the back of the plane. To Jack. But she lets herself be guided. Her thoughts only seem like wishes. She's unable to go anywhere where she's not directed.

The bedroom is much cooler than the rest of the plane. A streak of blood stains the comforter. There is one dimpled spot on the bed, where Jackie had been sitting before she left for the oath. She sits down there again. The mattress barely gives.

Lady Bird again offers to help find a change of clothes. She busily opens the closet door, intruding in a way that she would never do

otherwise. "Let's see," she says. The wire hangers tingle against each other. Lady Bird doesn't know that she's First Lady yet. It hasn't overtaken her the way that the presidency has with her husband. She stands with her back to Jackie. Shoulders twitching, breathing rapidly. She too must be suffering, but trying not to show it, believing she has no right to.

"We always enjoyed the two of you," Jackie says. "Always enjoyed your company."

Lady Bird is breathing harder. Her wool coat rises and falls. "Now maybe this one," she says, still looking in the closet. "I'd think this one would be most comfortable." She turns around halfway. Jackie only sees her in profile. And although Lady Bird is talking, it's strange that Jackie doesn't see her mouth moving. Lady Bird is saying that she'll wait right here, if Jackie wants to step into the washroom to get cleaned up. She starts to pull a dress off the rack. A simple dark one Jackie had planned to wear to Governor Connally's evening reception. "Then I'll help you get into this," Lady Bird says. "You'll be much more comfortable, dear. Much more."

But Jackie shakes her head. She draws a tight smile, enough to ward off tears. Her chin trembles. And she feels a tingle at the base of her neck. Looking up at Lady Bird, Jackie's head continues to shake. She's pushing away at the dress. "No," she says, and Lady Bird says, "What?" and Jackie says, "I want the world to see what they've done to Jack." And though she'd intended to say it in a way that was appreciative and explanatory, when she hears her own words, floating through the bedroom as though they are somebody else's, she realizes the bitterness and ferocity behind them.

#### *Near Death.*

Maybe that's when she thought she was dying.

On the back trunk of the limousine. Accelerating out of parade speed. Screaming. Calling out for Clint Hill. He was screaming back. Climbing on the bumper. Reaching for her hands. Her cries were real. A throaty primal version of her voice. But the cries were coming from some place else. A broken version of herself, smashed wires and splintered parts.

Maybe that's when she thought her soul was ascending.

On top of the car. Without heartbeats and pulses. For a moment she seemed so light. All vapor. Where a bullet could pass freely. There were no people. No crowds. No city streets or battlegrounds. Everything seemed oddly perfect.

Maybe she had died, for just a moment.

When she and Clint took cover in the car, it was as though she'd fallen back into her body. A strange crash, in which nothing seems to fit right. Shrunken and stretched. And the blood is soaking her, and Jack's pushed down into the seat, his face smashed against the interior, and it stinks and it's raw, and she can hear Clint's heart pounding against her back, and Connally moaning, and she just can't fit back into her body nor does she want to, because although she keeps talking to Jack, whispering to him that he'll be okay, she knows Jack is dead, and she doesn't want to be in this world anymore. She can't even scream. Her body is refusing her mind. It's all contortions. Closing her eyes, she believes she's crawling out of her body again into a strange world; but when the limousine finally pulls up to the ambulance bay and Clint jumps out, she finds her arms wrapped around Jack, and she knows they're her arms, and she knows just where she is, and what the inside of a human body smells like.

#### *Shock.*

At the hospital, the doctor told her it was shock. He was pushing up her sleeve, while he topped off the needle, saying shock can do things to the body that you wouldn't think were possible. The body works on its own in traumatic situations, he said, finding its own way to cope with the stress. She hadn't said anything about the experience. She hadn't said anything at all. But he kept talking about shock as though he knew. As nervous around her as all the rest. Trying to provide comfort through logic. The solace of science. He tapped the syringe, and rubbed alcohol on her arm. It would take effect in a matter of minutes. Temper the shock. Maybe seconds, even.

All she really wanted was a cigarette. Where she could rise up and drift away with the smoke.

#### *Walking Spanish. Part II.*

Lady Bird looks back one time as she leaves the bedroom. Jackie nods, as if to tell her it's fine. She takes in a deep breath. Looks around the room. Rubbing her hand along the comforter, on Jack's side.

Everything's over in less than a minute. Less than 24 seconds to fire the bullets. 28 seconds to take the oath. Now she's left sitting here while Jack lies at the other end of the airplane.

She rises. Goes to the door, pushing it open, peeking out to both sides of the main cabin. Without opening it the whole way, she slips through the doorway, almost ghostly. She just wants to be with Jack

now. In private. She's done her duty, tried to stand proud for her children and the memory of their father. Now she wants to sit with her husband.

She moves through the cabin, holding the seatbacks for balance. Startles when she sees O'Donnell standing in front of her. He glances over her shoulder. She hears people.

"Jackie," he whispers, as though it's the third or fourth time he's said it. "Is everything...?"

"I'm just..."

"Let me help you."

"I just want to be with Jack."

"The plane's about to... Captain Swindall's just announced. Let me help you. Please."

"No. Alone."

"Please let me."

"I just want to be with Jack."

O'Donnell pauses. Looks over his shoulder. "A chair, maybe?"

"A chair would be nice."

"I'll get you a chair. From the living room."

"That would be nice. A chair would be nice."

He walks in front of her, in a nervous rush. Behind her, people are watching. She feels it. An unnatural quiet. A fixed silence. And behind them, the new president will already be on the phone, making plans and arrangements, assuming his position. As soon as she's safely out of sight, the people behind her will join the president. Huddling over him. Making sure his wife is content. But for now they're waiting anxiously. Watching. Their impatient stares pushing her along toward Jack. Through the cabin hallway of Air Force One. Being pushed away. One hand on one seatback at a time. Walking Spanish.