

Excerpt from *George Bush, Dark Prince of Love*

Prologue

Some women like muscle. Brute strength, or the illusion of it. Their idea of an attractive man is a craggy meatpacker with a squirrel brain, who likes to crush vermin with his bare fist. I call these women Reaganites.

Now, the Reagan-loving women are not weak. That's a popular misconception of what I like to call the Liberal Bourgeoisie. Oh, they may like cooking and value their Tupperware; they may often be Episcopalians; they may gather together in white A-frame houses to fashion Liberty quilts on the first Sunday of each month. But they're the ones working at little needlepoints of the flag while the local maniacs burn crosses on the neighbor's lawn, and smiling quietly. They tend to be long on purpose, but short on delicacy.

Personally, I've always preferred the underdog. I was the plain girl with buck teeth and pigeon toes in the corner of the schoolyard, offering her recess snacks to the skinny boy with glasses and a stutter. There was something about him--call it gentility or call it a pathetic quality--that caught me and held me.

And that's what sets me apart from all my Reagan-loving sisters. Sets me apart, and sets me free.

For the language of true love is not carnivorous. It's not florid. It is not words like "plunder," "pillage," "kill the Communists." It is a kinder, gentler language, of nostalgic longing; it speaks of a more subtle mastery. And yet it harkens back, at the same time, to our long history of savagery. Without which we'd be nothing but hippies. It is a language that tells us what to think, like lords with serfs in olden days, but asks for our indulgence too. It hints that we can visit savagery as if we were tourists.

It is a language, I contend, like "Read my lips."

I see that you doubt me.

1989

1. The Great Inauguration

"Our funds are low...we will make the hard choices, looking at what we have and perhaps allocating it differently."

--President George Bush, Inaugural Address

G.B.'s inauguration cost \$25 million, the most expensive one in U.S. history. But you have to celebrate democracy. Without rites and ceremonies we're nothing but a bunch of apes in fancy outfits.

I had followed the '88 election campaign closely from the very day I was let out of jail, where I'd been languishing for eight long years, wasting away among reprobates while the Flower of my Youth withered and died on the vine. And that was really a shame, about my Youth. Because up till then it had been one of my best Qualities. They don't include "pretty" or "nice." What can I say, you play the hand you're dealt.

Let me set your mind to rest: I was innocent of all charges. Now, I'm not saying I'm the Holy Virgin. In fact I wouldn't even make the grade as one of those fallen women that were frequently anointing Jesus's feet. The Bible's big on prostitutes who give pedicures, and those ancient scribes had a real way with words, which I fully appreciated during my brief tenure in Women's Max Sec since the New Testament was all we were allowed to read. Minus the Book of Revelation, which the warden claimed might incite us to violent acts. Apparently it had triggered a group-psychosis episode among some Seventh-Day Adventist inmates, who got fed up waiting for Armageddon while they were on laundry duty and tried to tumble-dry a small-bodied Muslim to death.

No: I have a mean streak, a devious personality, and when I'm in my cups I can enjoy a good fistfight if the cause seems just. I'll be the first to admit I have faults; they just don't include a tendency to commit criminally negligent homicide. Sure, convicts often protest their innocence while counting the months till their next shooting spree, but that's not me. If I was guilty, I'd say so. I'm going to tell the plain truth, because you deserve it. And I respect your moral sensibilities.

What happened was, I had a friend named Shelly. She was my best friend ever since Second Grade. That was when we learned there was safety in numbers; I blackmailed her stepdad and she bribed my mom, so they both left us alone. By the time we were eight we were running through the neighbors' sprinklers in identical bikinis. We didn't look the same: Shelly was scrawny but beautiful, even then, and I was already wearing Ladies' Plus Sizes. I tend toward obesity. When we hung out together we looked like a stick and a balloon. But Shelly never shunned me for that. She would beat on kids who called me Fatso and Lardcake.

Anyway, I was the bookworm and she was the slut. I cheated and stole and got us into state college, where, in our dorm room,

she made out with a guy named Bonanza on the third day of classes. By prearrangement I was hiding in the slatted closet to see what it was like. I'd never kissed a guy. But Bonanza had a pelt of fur on his back that would have made a mink jealous, and Shelly had drunk some Wild Irish Rose. So when she saw it she leaned over the side of the cot and threw up, if you'll pardon my French. Later we laughed in the shower room and did some crystal meth she'd bought from him. That was the kind of friends we were. Inseparable, pretty much.

When her second divorce came through we celebrated at Bowl-o-rama. We bowled gutterball after gutterball, because we were higher than kites. Afterward we decided to make a beer run, and I got in the driver's seat. Ran a red light at an intersection, and we were hit from the right.

The coroner's report showed Shelly was pregnant at the time. She hadn't known it. Her aunt Rachel, who had always hated my guts and once shaved Shelly's head to teach her chastity, testified that Shelly was a good Christian girl. Aunt Rachel was a pro-Life activist and liked to throw fetus dolls smeared with ketchup at teenage girls on their way into Planned Parenthood clinics. I still remember staring at her as she sat there ramrod-straight on the witness stand: she wore a ruffled floral print blouse, and had her hair sprayed into rigidity. It sat on her head like a boxy gray helmet. She said, "My niece had never taken illegal drugs before that night. She was coerced by peer pressure. Michelle was a very innocent and pure person and a faithful churchgoer. She was a bright, shimmering angel."

Then she burst into tears and covered her face with her hands.

Well, at the time I was so depressed about Shelly that I could barely speak, but I had to laugh aloud at that one. Shelly would have.

It was no belly laugh--more of a pained choking sound. But the jury did not appreciate it.

And of course I had the priors for shoplifting paint thinner, possession with intent, and assaulting an officer. Two of which Shelly had shared with me. That telltale fact was not mentioned at the trial, since Aunt Rachel had sicked the victims' rights advocates on my wuss of a Public Defender. My own legal guardians were notably absent from the trial proceedings, but that didn't surprise me. They were doing the same thing they'd done all my life, which was watch TV.

I don't need to tell you prison didn't bring out the best in me. I failed repeatedly to have my sentence commuted for good behavior. The thing was, I knew Shelly's death was an accident and all, and that it would have been me in the passenger seat if her ex hadn't stolen her Hyundai the week before. And frankly, I wished it had been me. Shelly always had better prospects. So for the first two years I wallowed. I felt responsible, and I missed her.

Anyway, right after I got out in early fall it was election year, and I watched the Presidential campaigns and the televised returns avidly. I'd forgotten that I lived in a Country during my years inside; I had forgotten the colors and the ceremony. It was still a novelty to stroll in the fresh air, under the sun or moon, without Bessie G. putting me in a headlock for the sake of a broken Kool, or having to watch T-Bone practice her full-contact yoga on the new recruits. I was colonizing the Land of the Free, and I felt downright patriotic. Every night when I got home from the factory, I liked to nurse a gin and cranberry juice, put my feet up and watch the news. Then I'd take a walk through the mobile home community and look at the sky.

Of course, everyone knew the outcome before Election Day; Dukakis didn't look like a President. That's one thing about Presidents: they can be spotted from far away. If I had seen Dukakis in a teeming mass of people before he gained the Democratic nomination, I might have said "podiatrist, with orthopedic specialty." Depending on his garb, I might have said "professor of political science," or "poultry supplier to the greater Boston area." But of all the P-words, I would never have said "President." I suspected that two wiry tufts of hair had recently been pruned from the Dukakis ears in preparation for camera closeups. And I was not alone.

G.B. was a shoo-in.

For the Inauguration, I laid in my own supplies: some Fritos, marked down to 39 cents because they predated Stalin, and a bottle of Baby Duck. I decorated the trailer with some old Christmas tree icicles. My social calendar was not full. In fact, it looked exactly like a TV Guide.

I've always had mixed feelings about TV. It's kind of like when your parents are alcoholics, and their poison of choice is bourbon. Now, if you decide to follow in their footsteps as an Alcoholic, you don't go reaching for the bourbon. Not right off the bat anyway. You take your own path in life, maybe scotch or good vodka.

So because I grew up with parents who were fixtures in front of the pixels I used to avoid it like the plague, which is why I grew up reading books. But in jail I had a lot of printed materials and not enough TV, plus which the small screen was the only access road to the Great Beyond. I started getting into it finally. And when I got out, and had no one talk to, I was hooked.

At that early date, I was not yet a smitten woman when it came to G.B. Up until the Inaugural I'd pretty much thought of G.B. as the wimp with the Willie Horton ads. Sure, there was the appeal of "Read my lips," with its mild-mannered yet primitive simplicity. But basically, I hadn't thought twice about G.B. I saw him as a Reagan hangover, and unlike my fellow citizens I had never cared much for Ronnie. Maybe I was just in a bad mood from being in prison, or maybe, by dint of being inside, I was immune to the raging Gippermania that hit the country. You tell me.

Whatever the case may be, the Inaugural was a turning point. When G.B. exhorted us to "as a society...rise up united and express our intolerance," I was intrigued. It may have been the Baby Duck, but this struck a chord. I struggled to my feet, slopping a yellow lip out of my flimsy plastic cup, and toasted the sentiment. I saw myself in the vanguard of an intolerant army, cutting a wide swath across forested lands with our bulldozers as we headed for the Capitol to mass beneath the West Front terrace where he spoke. With the soapy taste of cheap champagne in my mouth, I wasn't a hundred percent sure what we were intolerant of, but this seemed less important than the call to arms.

The bottle emptied steadily, and I was finally forced to switch to gin. At that point I became an expressive participant in the dialogue. G.B. would ask, "Are we enthralled with material things, less appreciative of the nobility of work and sacrifice?" And I would say, "No sir."

Or he would say, "My friends, we are not the sum of our possessions." And I would say, "Hear hear. If we were, I'd be a 1973 Plymouth with busted suspension and a dirty beige Goodwill couch."

Or he would say, "There are young women to be helped who are about to become mothers of children they can't care for and might not love. They need our care, our guidance and our education, though we bless them for choosing life."

And I would say, "Bless you, sluts." And I would say, "Ever hear of a condom?"

I was emboldened by drink. And alone. But the way he looked, it was as though he'd heard me.

There were blots on the landscape, admittedly. Such as VP Dan Quayle, G.B.'s retarded son. In political terms. G.B. himself regretted the choice just days after he made it, writing in his diary, re VP D.Q., "I blew it." But let's face it, bagging on D.Q. is like kicking a three-legged dog with chronic flatulence. I'm above it, frankly. Charity begins at home, and G.B. took that motto to heart. He believed in helping the disabled. As he said that very night, we have to hold out our hands to the less fortunate. "The offered hand," he said, "is a reluctant fist, but once made, strong, and can be used with great effect."

I went, "I'm there, G.B. I'm there."

And then I danced, lost my footing and fell against a lamp shaped like a cowboy hat, breaking the bulb.

I was in a delicious, blurry mood when I finally settled down to sleep on the lumpy futon I'd found in someone's garbage pile and deloused with a spray can. The lingering smell of fumigant reminded me of chlorine. I thought of the swimming pools of my childhood, with Shelly sitting on the edge and dipping a toe in, me eating a creamsicle beside her, and other kids' mothers in lawnchairs behind us shining with coconut oil. (In the summertime, Shelly used to choose her boyfriends based on which rich kids in our classes had pools. We would narrow it down to the best three or four pools by word of mouth, and then case the joints one by one before Shelly made her selection.) Suddenly the image came to me of G.B. presiding over a million acres of rolling green hills and white colonial homes, dotted with kidney shapes of cool blue. He stood on a pedestal not far away, arms crossed, nodding slightly, a rigid baron of decency. I was balanced on the end of a springboard, waiting to plunge into relief and luxury. I was bouncing in anticipation, on the balls of my feet.

I don't know exactly how it happened, but somehow in that picture the joke froze. I stopped laughing at G.B. It was like a door swinging on its hinges, but not quite closing. For the first time since T-Bone bent my left thumb backward and broke it, I slept dreamlessly.

And I was so hung over the next day I could barely make it to the assembly line. Working where I worked then, you came into contact with some unsavory types, though to be honest they compared quite favorably to both T-Bone and Bessie G. By sheer dint of the fact that they washed on a regular basis. Still, I was

unpleasantly surprised when, in the morning, several of my coworkers took it upon themselves to crassly impugn G.B.'s capacity for leadership. One of them went so far as to pin a typed quote to the Employee Information bulletin board beside the snack machine. I have my own opinions, it read. I just don't always agree with them. It was attributed to our new Commander in Chief. A misquotation, I was confident. Either that, or G.B. was engaging in a little good-humored self-mockery, too subtle to be understood by the plebs. For a President, he had a lively sense of humor. You can't take these things out of context.

G.B. and I had shared a silent communion after the Inaugural, and I was irritated. People these days don't give a President an even break. Everyone and his brother has to have an opinion on every damn thing. Everyone thinks they're the expert. They'll talk shit about a President behind his back, but you can bet that if he reached out to shake their hand at a shopping mall they'd be excited as a kid on Christmas Eve. They'd be relating the experience to friends and relatives until they were senile and nodding in their armchairs. "Did Grampa tell you about the time he met the President?" And once they'd shaken a Presidential hand, they'd hesitate before they talked the same old shit again.

It pissed me off. Of course, the guys I worked with were a far cry from the residents of Greenwich CT, G.B.'s home turf. They wouldn't know blue blood from guttertrash. G.B. was full-fledged American aristocracy, but all they wanted was a raise and a health plan. No vision. It would have broken G.B.'s heart if he'd seen it.

I decided to take a stand for unity.

At first my method was persuasion. For instance, there was a guy who worked up at the loading dock and liked to whine on and on about wanting a leg prosthesis for his crippled kid. Now, I respected his needs, but it was his only topic of conversation, besides sports scores and the supremacy of the white race. So one day I cut him off, took him aside and said, quoting G.B., "Tommy, good faith can be a spiral that endlessly moves on."

Tommy goes, "Huh?"

So I said, "Freedom is like a beautiful kite, that can go higher and higher with the breeze."

Because I'd committed several key passages from the Inaugural to memory. But forget it. The words were wasted on him. He spat on the ground and went back to his forklift.

When I saw that poetry wasn't working, I knew I might have to abandon persuasion and resort to force. That came to a head when

I punched another coworker in the stomach defending G.B. It was a bad move, and I regretted it almost right away. But I have a temper, as I may have mentioned previously, and she was making remarks about his private masculinity that I thought were disrespectful of the Leader of the Free World.

Luckily I coined another phrase from the Inaugural at the dispute arbitration, which convinced my supervisor I was a reasonable person. "Lee Ann," I said, "I'm really, really sorry. And on days like this we remember that we are all part of a continuum, inescapably connected by the ties that bind."

Lee Ann said, "Fuck ties, you crazy bitch," but my supervisor, who'd just taken sensitivity training, was moved and docked Lee Ann's pay instead of mine.

Thank you G.B.