

The Continuity of the Work Day
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“Many of them, indeed, know better but, as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of identity. Try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shining and all of the stars aflame.”

James Baldwin, My Dungeon Shook – A Letter to My Nephew

In the office of the Congresswoman Carl was working for, whose building, “Rayburn,” lay in the shadow of the Capitol Building in which the Representatives fervently debate the issues of the day, Carl recounted his weekend to his colleagues—Legislative Aids, though he was just a Researcher—by the water cooler.

He was still trying to connect with them. Working here disappointed him. His father, who had also worked there in his 20s, had always said that working in Congress was a great way to serve the American people—partially by addressing local issues, since U.S. Congresspersons represent districts of about 760,000 people each, but partially by addressing national issues, since U.S. Congresspersons write federal, not local, laws. Carl was not naive and knew that often corruption governs politics; his father had taught him that from a young age, too—for example, the military industrial complex barely hides its shape below daily life in the suited delegations walking the halls and smiles over coffee in the cafeterias, just like a hand laying under soft sand. Here, at the water cooler and asking what freedom meant to them, other than Socratic sharpening of his own understanding, what he was really seeking was the extent to which this was just a game or career to them. Would they willfully ignore the effects of corruption, the experiences of their constituents, and kick the can down the road for the hard problems?

This was important to determine because, among other reasons, one of his responsibilities was to answer the office’s phone, through which some people called high on oxycodone, which had killed at least one of his friends and thousands and thousands of people since the Stackler family debuted it. If this is just a game, one ends up on the side of the Stackler family, or even a “grey area,” and not their victims’.

Through these brief conversations with his colleagues, it seemed to him that perhaps in their shadows or the anals of their minds the word justice could resonate—after all, they were here, being paid much less than they

would be doing something similar in the private sector—but Carl still had to feel them out lightly in order not to come off as a reverend for the mere mention of a word like justice or freedom instead of the technicalities and rationalisms that they brought up in order not to risk proposing something to, for example, house the houseless. It was cold out at this time of year in D.C., which entailed police helicopter searches that found missing persons frozen in the little forests folded into the suburbs. From here in the break room, as if past the legislative aids' cubicles in the room next to them and through the window, he could see the story of his weekend forming on the field of the National Mall.

Something very disconcerting had happened. He was walking on the National Mall to get a bit of sun during lunch hour, because it was about 2 in the afternoon, when he returned to Rayburn for a moment to look for a bathroom. In the office's anteroom, he hit his head on a brass wall-mounted lamp, the surprise and physiology of which caused him to faint. He had a lucid dream that he was back in George Washington's Crypt below the Capitol. But, instead of the buzz of groups of national and international tourists listening to guides through large, neon green, over-ear earbuds, the crypt was empty and dark. At first, the novelty of this emptiness fascinated him and he walked around the circular architecture through the concentric circles of neoclassical doric columns, looking around at the exhibits, like the golden Magna Carta gifted by England in 1776 to commemorate the symbolic end to the rivalry that had brought about the revolution two hundred years earlier; the first clock in the old Supreme Court (which had been down here rather than in a separate building); he ascended a floor upstairs to see the Rotunda's paintings, for example, the Baptism of Pocahontas, in which Sacagawea is being baptized while her indigenous friends and dignitaries watch aghast; the Apotheosis, a fresco at the center of the dome's ceiling, acting as the seed from which the rest of the building sprouts, which fresco is topped by George Washington, flanked by Lady Liberty and Lady Victory Fame. Figures representing war, science, marine, commerce, mechanics, and agriculture fly through the clouds and rotating around Washington like dancers around a bonfire. Notably missing is justice.

Below the Rotunda, through a hallway that leaves the crypt and into the old Supreme Court, while Carl marvelled at the newer court clock that had supposedly been fixed to run five minutes fast so that the judges were always on time, the lights turned off and he noticed how quiet the building had been without the usual passersby. He started walking back to the crypt. He could still see through the remaining bits of sunset that came in through distant windows, danced between hallways and columns and reflected off the polished grey sandstone. When he arrived in the crypt, radiating out of the center,

which was exactly one floor below the Apotheosis and two below the statue of Lady Liberty atop the cupola directly above it, a beam of light began to blink and make the surfaces centellate though shading some corners. There he was where he never wanted to be, George Washington, dressed in a bluff collar and wrists, an off-yellow woolen vest, pants of the same, a blue woolen overcoat, and a yellow lapel adorned with buttons of what was probably a fake gold. He grabbed Carl by the shoulders, looked straight into his eyes, a serious face—his jaw firm and his mouth forcing itself straight. “Run and don’t look back.”

When Carlos awoke, he was still in the office, the lights had been turned off, his colleagues were gone, and a light hum resounded throughout the space, like distant murmurs. Still (or newly) disoriented, he slowly examined the office and started recognizing himself. He could hear, as he was focusing on a landscape painting in the waiting room, that the humming grew slowly louder. He remembered being a kid in the forest and hearing a bees’ nest behind the leaves on the branches. Now more anxious and seeking the source of the sound than wondering how he got there, he recognized more and more of the office despite a crescendo in the noise. The landline telephone on one of his colleagues’ desks rang and, reflexively, as he was trained, he ran and lunged to pick it up but nobody answered and he saw in the old digital caller ID that there was no number. Normal, really. Perhaps it had been a Russian—they harassed whenever the congresswoman called out their human rights abuses against the Ukrainians. So, it’s not like they never harassed the office—and in fact it often happened—which hints at a problem with the guarantee of universal and inalienable human rights. Did Carl have to point out that, once there is a violation, the rights are obviously not inalienable nor universal?

Somebody had to be in the Legislative Director’s office—if he dared interrupt her work. She thought that she was the first to come up with the idea that being an asshole should help her lead or get ahead, and thought that no one else knew that that was what she was thinking. (For an aside, she had named her child Paolo and Carl had only ever seen it written. When she first brought the baby to the office, Carl asked how *Pah-oh-loh* was doing and she didn’t understand what he had said. He immediately realized that perhaps her partner had not been latino as he had assumed and he quickly corrected, “uh, how is Pow-Low.” And the conversation proceeded normally from there, as normally as it ever was between the two clashing personality types.) He entered her office and the automatic lights flashed on, which burned the image of the room into his retinas but, calibrating himself and the behind-the-eyelids images fading, he saw that no one was there. The distant hums still buzzed.

He resolved to leave. No ecos sounded against the marble floors in the hallways, not from the fancy shoes of interstate visitors nor staff running to procure signatures for bills or submit documents. No conversations between representatives, staff, lobbyists. No protest ambushing an office. Thankfully, there also wasn't anyone recommending a restaurant as if it were their personal creation or property (oh, the lengths one will go in D.C. to feel like the owner of something or better than somebody! Self-consciousness destined to seek recognition infinitely...) The security booths were empty—anyone could have entered with a bomb. He exited to the grand grey marble staircase below the eagle on the timpany above the doors and neogreco-roman columns raising almost 20 feet.

Along Independence Avenue, above which the sun was at perhaps 42 degrees altitude and about to slip behind the capitol dome, thousands of people waited in a line directed at the western facade of the capitol (the facade on the other side from the National Mall), thus the line wrapped around the building from the avenue. The weather was overcast, a grey typical of winter in D.C., especially downtown where the buildings tend to be made of a bland official concrete and the contrasting colors of tourists are less prevalent compared to summer. The line, then, should be composed of mostly locals if a few tourists. They exchanged excited though reserved comments. Folks were dressed in black, grey, and brown coats and scarfs—particular to people who want to lay low or simply lack imagination or bravery. Some carried signs and banners painted with red triangles or blue circles; others simply pickets with anything from Proud Boys, Let's Go Brandon to Black Lives Matter or No Planet B. The Mall's trees were leafless. A few wore North Face jackets and it was still in style to sport a patch on the upper arm, most knock offs of Canada Goose, though some of the insignias Carl could make out were Exxon, Lockheed Martin, Domino Foods—Cargill, surprisingly—McDonald's, and Chic Fil-A. The line effortlessly wound around a man seated in a lawn chair and wearing blankets on his lap under a makeshift cloth semi-tent who was playing a documentary on a portable tv and boombox-like speakers about how Reagan caused the Gulf War, 9/11, and the civil unrest in Sri Lanka. Another 50 yards or so before a sweet smelling billow of smoke blew through Carl's face from someone's vape and oh my did it smell good—perhaps lavender and lemon.

The queue didn't pay Carl any mind except the occasional side eye as he walked alongside it. A few bones lay about a few of the steps on the stairs leading up to the facade. Probably chicken bones but they looked a little big. There were some dark brown stains under them but that might as well have been coincidental—the sidewalk stains of a big city, caused by any variety of acids or chewing gum ground by soles a thousand times over. He

still hadn't asked anyone why they were waiting in line; he had learned not to ask at these events—if you pretend to know what's going on, sometimes you get in and get away with quite a lot; alternatively, if you ask, you risk being reported.

Once he entered the Rotunda, Carl recognized the event as a Lying in State, which Congress only orders for those special bodies that had hosted persons highly significant to the State. In the center of the circular room, a casket was raised atop the Lincoln Catafalque, draped in black cloth semi-circles and black rope tassels on the corners, used for each Lying in State for all 41 people since its creation in 1865 for the funeral of the eponymous president. Below the rays falling from the Apotheosis's wheel of ceiling lights, the black cloth's folds looked like they shaded shadows. Five soldiers—each one of four looking at a corner of the casket, perhaps at the tassels, and one looked at the head—carried rifles in their right arms with the rifle butts facing the ground, barrels pointed towards the heavens. The classical oil paintings floated in the dim lighting of the surroundings. The viewers proceeded along the line in a spiral towards the center. Whispers resounded against the concrete, marble, and sandstone. Carl was now arriving to the center of the spiral, where anyone could walk up to the casket. Seeing them from behind, it looked like people were leaning over the casket just a bit, as if to bless or whisper prayers, wishes, loving coos.

Just a few people until Carl would arrive, he saw that there were in fact two lines. One was much shorter and hard to see behind the long line. The shorter line was for paying members so that they could skip the line. It was usually unoccupied. When somebody who had paid arrived—better dressed, a little less stressed and cleaner—a soldier stopped the long line so that the short line's members could pass directly to the casket. Carl wondered how much it would cost to block the members' line but also then how much it would cost to block his block.

Looking beyond the two bodies between him and his destination, nobody prayed; rather, inside the casket, wrapped in a brilliant white, they picked at an unrecognizable body, already carved out to the point of not having a face nor stomach. They pulled off cartilage and tissue. The woman next in line was dressed in black and a veil and dried a tear with a white handkerchief. She paused to look along the length of the body, starting at the head, down to the torso, legs, and feet, stopping for a second where the face had been. She leaned over and bit into the chest. She had to dig her face into the tissue, shake back and forth, and tear by inclining her head back and upwards. She wiped the blood off her face with the kerchief.

Having taken their turn, she and her spouse left returning more or less beside the line.

It was Carl's turn and he felt eyes on him. He sunk his fingers into the torso and felt tepid slippery wetness. His fingers rubbed up against a bone and he took it. He stuck it in his mouth like a lollipop so that no one would question him.

He left the line, returning the way he had entered, walking along the spiral. He saw that some friends waited in line but he didn't wave, to avoid attracting attention; perhaps in his winter hat they would not recognize him.

Now back on Independence Avenue, he returned to the body of congressional buildings, this time entering Longwood. He remembered that the Capitol Police had advised them to hide in the stairs during an emergency because, carved of marble, they are very durable. He descended a few floors and hunched over, laying his back against the wall. He buried his face in his hands. He felt the bone's ridges against his tongue and the end's marrow melting, the compact tissue around it withering. He spit it out. It clacked against the marble.