

Master of the Task Force

“Honey! I’m home!”

Seated on the couch in the large living room of their Georgetown, Washington, residence, the wife of the Vice President, an attractive woman in a wholesome American sort of way, looks up from the sampler she has been working on at the clock on the mantelpiece. 4:10! How can the days of these politicians be so short? Especially now in the time of Coronavirus.

Carefully, she snips the red silk thread with which she has just embroidered the large looping “T” of “The,” the large looping “R” of “Right,” and the large looping “L” of “Life” and listens as the Vice President places his briefcase on the hallstand, removes his coat, scarf, and overshoes – it has been bitterly cold, suggesting snow – and pulls on his slippers.

And there he is, standing in the doorway – she can never quite believe she is married to the Vice President! – in his dark blue suit, with the striped tie she gave him for Christmas, the hall light shining softly on that little cap of white hair. He seems almost to glow, standing there. Has he been given something to do??

“Honey,” he announces. “The President has appointed me head of ‘The White House Coronavirus Task Force.’”

Now why would the President do that? she wonders reflexively. Her husband is a useful man in many ways, and she is often proud of him, but his background is not scientific. Sometimes indeed it takes her a moment or two to remember exactly what he did before he went into Politics. It seems so long ago.

“Does that mean we’ll have to be tested?”

“It does.”

“But we’re Republicans!!”

“We are, Honey. But this isn’t about Politics. This is about Science.”

He sits down next to her on the couch, and the word hovers over them momentarily as they gaze at the fire. The wife of the Vice President does a fine job of building a fire.

“Everyone,” her husband continues, “everyone – will need to be tested. Immediately. Well, as soon as we get those testing kits from Taiwan.” He takes off his tie and loosens his collar. “And we, the Task Force, will be making a presentation to the American people every day.”

“Is that Danish doctor part of the Task Force? The tall one. The blonde.”

“You mean Dr. Berks. Yes, of course. She’s one of the leading experts in infectious diseases in the world. We’re lucky to have her.” Here he smiles more broadly perhaps than wisely. “She’s quite something, isn’t she? The President thinks so too. He gets a little jealous that she gets so much of the limelight these days.”

“Well, I hope there won’t be any shenanigans with this ‘Task Force.’ Late night dinners, drinks, hanging out in bars. We both know what can happen with these “task forces.” You spend all day cooped up in The White House worrying about whether the Chinese are behind it all, and how soon you can get the Stock Market back to where it was, and whether the President was right all along and the whole thing is a hoax. The next thing you know you’re in a bar somewhere. Without me!”

“Honey, you know I’d never do that.” He puts his arm around her, and there is a brief nuzzle. “And anyway, she’s not Danish. She’s Swedish.”

“Well, those countries are all the same. Socialism. Free love. Bicycles. Wasn’t that where Bernie Sanders had his Honeymoon? Sweden?”

“No, that was the Soviet Union.” He pauses. “And much as I hate to say anything in Bernie’s defense, it was a long time ago.”

“Well, I’m worried about this virus. And the Stock Market. It seems to be crashing. I looked at our portfolio today. If Steve hadn’t told you to sell those pharmaceutical stocks, we’d be in even worse shape than we are.”

“The fundamentals continue to be strong,” replied her husband firmly, sticking his chin out in that bullish way of his.

“What does that even mean? ‘The fundamentals continue to be strong.’” She turned to him sharply, her tone slightly mocking.

“Businesses are closing. People are dying, losing their homes, their jobs. They’re separated from those they love with no idea when they will see them again. No one is traveling. These are the fundamentals, surely. And they’re not strong. They’re collapsing.”

More than anything he wants to assure her that soon – two months? Three? Six? - everything will be “back to the way it was,” that the yearning deep in the country’s soul will be answered, that American know-how and resolve – virtue even – will do the job. But the words die in his throat.

His cell phone buzzes on the coffee table. A new text message.

“Just worked out great deal! Great deal for America! On respirators. Company in Newark. Dealt with them before. “Great people! Great people! The best!!

“Honey,” The Vice President of the United States puts his arm around his wife of many years and bows his head gently. “Let us pray.”

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