

The Uncommon Common Man



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IT COULD happen to anybody. At 5:45 a.m., a common man wakes up, unable to sleep.

He goes to the bathroom, brushes his teeth, shaves and, still wearing his bathrobe, (as the press later reports), opens the front door and picks up the newspaper from the stoop.

He cooks breakfast for himself and glances at the front page. It says that at 12 o'clock noon, he will be sworn in as the President of The United States of America. He stares at it blankly.

His wife enters the kitchen in her pink dressing gown. "Good morning, Mr. President," she says cheerily, half-facetiously. But there is a trill in her voice, like that of a child anticipating a birthday party.

She had made him promise to retire. At 61, after an honorable, if undistinguished career, he had agreed it was time. But now, due to an accident of history, this common man . . .

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HE GOES upstairs, selects his best blue suit from the closet and pulls the trousers on, one leg at a time. The limousine purrs him across town to the White House. It glistens in the morning sun like a wedding cake.

The crowd at the gate cheers warmly. He is heartened by their warmth. He had always been well-liked, if neither feared nor idolized, by his colleagues and neighbors. But now, due to an accident of history . . .

He had watched the news on television the night before. He rarely did before. Like most common men, he preferred to leave his cares at the office. The commentators had agreed that a common man was what the country needed now — not an ambitious, driving, adventurous President, but a decent, honest, reassuring common man. And, thanks to an accident of history . . .

The Marine guard snaps to attention. Inside, the old President is departing in tears, incoherence and disgrace. As his

helicopter ascends into the sky, he leaves behind a gift for the common man — a black box.

The black box contains the codes that trigger a thermonuclear war. The common man glances at it. He glances away.

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IT IS TIME now for him to be sworn in. He holds up his hand before the Chief Justice tells him to. He makes a speech. He says, "Honesty is always the best policy." It is a nice speech, reassuring, the kind a common man would make.

He tours the White House, stopping to chat with the press. He can tell they like him. They have always liked him. But now there is a new respect in their eyes.

He invites some of his old colleagues over. They drop everything and come running. They don't call him by his first name any more. There is a new attentiveness as they listen.

Later, he sits behind the desk in the Oval Office, a battery of phones at his fingertips. This is the seat of power. And due to an accident of history, this common man . . .

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FOR THE next two years, this will be his desk. For the next two years, people will snap to attention, no one but his family will call him by his first name, the press will scrutinize his every expression, observe his every gesture, record his every word.

There will be political decisions that will, perforce, make enemies, issues that will, perforce, divide the nation and the world.

For the next two years, he will be Commander-in-Chief, one of the most powerful men on the planet. For the next two years, that black box, every second of every day, will be no more than a hundred feet away.

Maybe the people desperately wanted a common man in the White House. For a few brief hours, at least, they had one.

It could happen to anybody.