

WHAT I SAW AT THE REVOLUTION

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New York:



A Political Life in the Reagan Era

Challenger

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he Irish have a certain affinity for death, an interest in talking about it and thinking about it. I mean of course the real Irish, not these big, beefy blonds of no known ethnic origin, but Irish-Americans who still bear the mark of their ancestral pains and habits. They used to say the Irish like wakes because they serve whisky, but I think they liked them because the blunt finality of death jolted them out of their normal everyday depression. Life is for some of them so serious that it cheers them up to remember it will end. Also, the Irish are often nervous about having the appropriate face for the occasion. They have to be happy at weddings, which is a strain, so they get depressed; they have to be sad at funerals, which is easy, so they get happy.

My generation has suffered a lot of abstract deaths, the deaths of leaders and singers and soldiers, but most of us still have our parents and brothers and sisters. In the most personal way death hasn't become real for us yet. When it does, in the nineties, it will affect our art and culture and the themes of our plays, and I suspect it will be another force that turns us toward religion, and belief. (No one has lived for and been immersed in the ephemera of the entertainment era like my

generation; when that energy is channeled into other, more interesting things, it may well be dazzling.)

I love eulogies. They are the most moving kind of speech because they attempt to pluck meaning from the fog, and on short order, when the emotions are still ragged and raw and susceptible to leaps. It is a challenge to look at a life and organize our thoughts about it and try to explain to ourselves what it meant, and the most moving part is the element of implicit celebration. Most people aren't appreciated enough, and the bravest things we do in our lives are usually known only to ourselves. No one throws ticker tape on the man who chose to be faithful to his wife, on the lawyer who didn't take the drug money, or the daughter who held her tongue again and again. All this anonymous heroism. A eulogy gives us a chance to celebrate it.

It was a pretty morning. It was relaxed. There was no big work pressing on me. The biggest recent personal drama for me was giving up smoking. I had for years been afraid that if I couldn't smoke I couldn't write, so intertwined were they. (I told a friend who is a writer, "But I need it at the typewriter." She said, "Maybe it's a good thing to need something while you write.") I'd stopped three months before, had written nothing worthwhile since, and hoped to snap out of it.

→ Ben had brought his daughter, Meredith, to work. She ran from office to office, tripping gaily as some children do. She was seven years old and happy and sensitive. She looked like girlhood pictures of Grace Kelly.

I was on the phone with a friend. The TV a few feet away was, as always, on, at the moment tuned to CNN, which was covering a space shot live. The shuttle was going up. I was laughing at something the person on the other end was saying when Nancy Roberts, Ben's assistant, came rushing in.

"Something happened to the shuttle. They think it blew up."

"What?"

The TV screen is blue with a trail of white smoke. Pieces of something are falling through the sky.

"What? What happened?"

"They think it blew up!"

Meredith walked in softly. "The teacher is on it," she said. "Is the teacher all right?"

The silence on TV is broken by a newscaster who knows as much as we do. You know it's bad when they don't know more. It's clear from the broken trail of smoke and the debris falling through the air that something terrible has happened. You know from the sound and look of things that everyone is gone.

Meredith walks over and puts her hands on my armrest. She watches, fascinated. Her face says; This isn't bad, is it? I am breathing as I did when the pope was shot, and Reagan. It is like the sixties, and This is a Special Report. I do what CBS trained me to do: handle the horror by writing the show.

~~~~~> "Tell your father I'm writing the president's remarks."

I press a plastic button on the IBM word processor; the screen lights up, the buzz begins.

Things to cover: update on the situation—are they dead, search continues? I need a cigarette.

✓ — Dick Darman's on the line from Treasury.

Dick.

Is he going to speak? Are you writing it?

Don't know but assume so, and yes.

Good. Every grade-school child in America was watching, and older students too, did you know that?

No, but Ben's daughter was here upset.

Well, my sons were watching. The president has to speak to the children and reassure them that the world isn't ending and that there is both inherent purpose and danger in scientific exploration.

I know.

It's very important.

I got it, Dick, thanks.)

Karna Small, Bud McFarlane's assistant from the NSC, calls.

I was with the president at the meeting with network anchors for the State of the Union, she says, and I took notes on what he said.

Oh God, thanks. Send 'em over.

"What can you say," her notes quote him, "it's a horrible thing. I can't rid myself of the thought of the sacrifice of the families of the people on board. I'm sure all of America is more than saddened. . . ."

Q: Do you think it was right to have a citizen on board?

"They're all citizens—all volunteers. That is the last frontier, the most important, the space program has been most successful. We've become so confident that this comes as such a shock. . . ."

Q: Who brought the news to you?

"We were all sitting there [Oval] preparing for your questions when the Vice President and Admiral Poindexter came in and said they had received a flash that the space shuttle had exploded—we then went to see the TV [to the study] saw the replay—it was just a very traumatic experience.

Q: Do you take comfort in the fact that we have not lost as many as the Soviets?

"We all have pride in that, but it doesn't lessen our grief."

Q: What can you say to the children to help them understand?

"Pioneers have always given their lives on the frontier. The problem is that it's more of a shock to all as we see it happening, not just hear about something miles away—but we must make it clear [to the children] that life goes on.

Q: But how do you feel about the teacher?

"I can't put out of my mind—her husband and children—the others [other astronauts] knew they were in a hazardous occupation . . . but here, your heart goes out to them."

(A call from the West Wing—the president can't go on until the search is suspended, but we need the remarks as soon as possible, keep it short, five minutes. . . .)

(I'm done. Type it up. Three copies, quick. And tell Buchanan we're coming.)

A meeting with Buchanan and the mice. Pat reads quickly, nods. "Terrific, let's go." Dennis shakes his head. (Pat said later, "Did you see how he held it? Like a dog had relieved himself on it!") I need a cigarette.

Into a larger meeting in Mr. Regan's office, all of us plus the chief plus Larry Speakes. Speakes reads and looks at me; his face is sensuous and dumb.

"Ah don't know if you get across that the space program continues."

Mmmmm, I say, nodding. "Uh, well, actually we do have here 'We'll continue our quest in space. There will be more shuttle flights and more shuttle crews . . . Nothing ends here—our hopes and our journeys continue.'"

"Well ah read it and ahm not sure you made it clear to me."

Well I didn't have crayons. "Maybe we can ask the president to punch up that graph."

"Ah guess."

No one is pleased, but there is no time to rewrite. I am depressed. I failed when the whole country needed something and we actually could have helped. Buchanan kept saying, "This is really good," but he was always odd man out.

( They got the speech to the Oval Office. The president came on the air looking . . . unsure.)

"Ladies and gentlemen, I had planned to speak to you tonight to report on the State of the Union, but the events of earlier today have led me to change those plans. Today is a day for mourning and remembering.

"Nancy and I are pained to the core by the tragedy of the shuttle *Challenger*. We know we share this pain with all of the people of our country. This is truly a national loss.

"Nineteen years ago almost to the day, we lost three astronauts in a terrible accident on the ground. But we have never lost an astronaut in flight. We have never had a tragedy like this. And perhaps we have forgotten the courage it took for the crew of the shuttle. But they, the *Challenger* Seven, were aware of the dangers—and overcame them, and did their jobs brilliantly.

"We mourn seven heroes—Michael Smith, Dick Scobee, Judith Resnik, Ronald McNair, Ellison Onizuka, Gregory Jarvis, and Christa McAuliffe. We mourn their loss as a nation, together.

"To the families of the Seven: We cannot bear, as you do, the full impact of this tragedy—but we feel the loss, and we are thinking about you so very much. Your loved ones were daring and brave and they had that special grace, that special spirit that says Give me a challenge and I'll meet it with joy. They had a hunger to explore the universe and discover its truths. They wished to serve and they did—they served us all.

"And I want to say something to the schoolchildren of America who were watching the live coverage of the shuttle's takeoff. I know it's hard to understand, but sometimes painful things like this happen—it's all part of the process of exploration and discovery—it's all part of taking a chance and expanding man's horizons. The future doesn't belong to

the fainthearted, it belongs to the brave. The *Challenger* crew was pulling us into the future—and we'll continue to follow them.

"I've always had great faith in and respect for our space program—and what happened today does nothing to diminish it. We don't hide our space program, we don't keep secrets and cover things up, we do it all up front and in public. That's the way freedom is, and we wouldn't change it for a minute.

"We'll continue our quest in space. There will be more shuttle flights and more shuttle crews and, yes, more volunteers, more civilians, more teachers in space. Nothing ends here—our hopes and our journeys continue.

"I want to add that I wish I could talk to every man and woman who works for NASA or who worked on this mission and tell them: Your dedication and professionalism have moved and impressed us for decades, and we know of your anguish. We share it.

"There's a coincidence today. On this day 390 years ago the great explorer Sir Francis Drake died aboard ship off the coast of Panama. In his lifetime the great frontiers were the oceans. And a historian later said, "He lived by the sea, died on it, and was buried in it." Today we can say of the *Challenger* Crew: Their dedication was, like Drake's, complete.

"The crew of the space shuttle *Challenger* honored us by the manner in which they lived their lives. We will never forget them, nor the last time we saw them—this morning, as they prepared for their journey, and waved good-bye, and "slipped the surly bonds of earth" to "touch the face of God."

It went almost as written. The staffing process had no time to make it bad. The worst edit, which Ben fought off—in fact it was the worst edit I received in all my time in the White House—was from a pudgy young NSC mover who told me to change the quote at the end from "touch the face of God" to "reach out and touch someone—touch the face of God." He felt this was eloquent. He'd heard it in a commercial. (I took it to Ben and said, I'll kill, I'll kill, I'll kill him if this gets through. Ben, alarmed, assured me he would explain if pressed that you don't really change a quotation from a poem in this manner.)

(When the president finished, he looked lost. I knew: He didn't like what he was given.

Darman called. "Perfect.")

The next morning there was a deluge. Secretary Shultz called me, Admiral Poindexter, Senator Chafee. Ann Higgins sent up telegrams. A man sent words for a song, "They left us looking heavenward." Charles Jones, the manager of the White House mail section, wrote, "I have worked in the mail section for 31 years. This is the first time that I have written to a staff member. Please excuse the intrusion, but I want to congratulate you on a great speech."

"Operator One, is this Miss Noonan? Please hold for the president." They always sound so happy, as if they're giving you a gift.  
 ~ ( "Peggy? Well, I just wanted to say thank you for your wonderful remarks yesterday."

"Oh, Mr. President, thank you."

"Well, they were just wonderful." )

"Well, it was from you. They sent me notes from what you said."

"You know, the funniest thing. I did the remarks, I read them and then at the end I just had this feeling that I'd failed. I thought that I'd done badly and I hadn't done justice. And of course I was so sad about what had happened. And I got off the air and I thought, Well, not so good. But then I got these calls and telegrams. . . ."

"I heard."

"An avalanche. And I guess, you know, it did work, and I didn't know it."

"I did something that may have put you off your stride. I forgot to write God bless you, as you always say at the end. And you were on the air and maybe sensed something was missing and couldn't think exactly what."

"That little poem, that Magee. I hadn't heard that in years, but of course I knew it from years back, the war. And I think it was written on a sort of tablet or plaque outside Patti's school that I took her to when she was a young girl."

( My secret: I *knew* he knew that poem ) It was precisely the kind of poem he would have known, from the days when everyone knew poems and poets were famous, everyone knew Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg. It had been popular during the war. Flyers could recite it.

"Could you send me a copy? And maybe I could read the whole poem at the prayer breakfast next week."

"Good, I'm doing those remarks. Thanks for calling, and don't worry

about your delivery yesterday. If you felt sad maybe that was the right way to look. It was a sad day. And you comforted everybody.”

I wanted to say: You know, I didn't have a cigarette.

That afternoon I got a call from a Hollywood press agent who said, “It's funny the president used that poem in the speech, because it was read the other night from beginning to end by Claire Trevor, you remember her, at a little party for Tyrone Power, Jr. ‘High Flight’ was one of his father's favorite poems—in fact, the day Ty Senior came home from the war, that night Gary and Rocky Cooper had a little party for him and they invited Ronnie, the president, and Jane, who was his wife, of course. And Ty Senior recited from memory ‘High Flight.’ He carried it with him all through the war—he was an air-force flyer you know—and he could recite it by heart. When he died Laurence Olivier recited it over his grave. Anyway, the president reading it brought back so many memories of the old days. Would you say hi to him and remind him of Ty reading it?”

Sure, I said, and wrote a memo.

A few hours later I got a call from a gossip columnist for the *New York Post*. He'd just had a call from an agent and wanted to know if it was true the president quoted “High Flight” because Ty Power read it to him years ago and he never forgot it? And then Claire Trevor read it at a party the other night and the president heard about it?

Not really, I said, not really.