

MANIFEST DESTINY

DAVID J. SCHWARTZ

FORMER PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN tells me I'm not living up to my potential. He says I could be an asset to my community if I applied myself. He says I should quit my dead-end job and start sending out résumés. He says I should quit collecting orphaned keys and volunteer instead. He says I should quit drinking cheap beer all day, earn enough money to settle down with a nice girl and start drinking scotch, or at least better beer. He also says that I keep crushing on lesbians because I have intimacy issues.

I know what you're thinking—you're thinking that I named my dog Former President Ronald Reagan, or my parrot. Or maybe that's my private nickname for my dad. But you're wrong. My dog's name is Anderson, and he doesn't talk. I don't have a parrot. And my private nickname for my dad is the Irishman, even though he's from Korea. He doesn't talk either, at least not to me.

No, I really am being lectured to by Former President Ronald Reagan—or perhaps I should say, the Late President Ronald Reagan. He calls me on the phone whenever he's bored. All the dead presidents do: all the recent ones, anyway. Reagan calls the most, though, because he hasn't been dead that long, and dying cleared up his Alzheimer's. I guess he's looking for some stimulating conversation. Instead he's stuck with me, if what he told me yesterday is true.

"You could call someone else," I had suggested after I ran out of annoying customer stories. I work the night shift at a 24-hour Stop 'n Rob, and people act crazy on the night shift. I've been trying to figure out why. Just because it's dark outside doesn't mean that it's OK to walk into my store and wander the aisles with your hand down your pants, stopping

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occasionally to sniff your fingers. Or to argue about whether the evening paper is really today's paper, since it's after midnight and it's already tomorrow. Whatever: I know the stories are boring. That's why I told Reagan he should try calling someone else.

"There's no way to dial this phone," he said. "It's a direct line. We pick up the receiver and you answer."

"Wow," I said. "It's like I'm Brezhnev or something."

The rest of them—Nixon, LBJ, JFK and Ike—never mentioned that, even though I've been talking to them since I moved into this apartment in 1994. Now that I think about it, though, Ike mentioned that they used to talk to a Japanese girl in Sacramento back before Truman disappeared.

I asked JFK about her, but he said it didn't have anything to do with him. Which is odd, because usually all JFK is interested in is women; he and I used to talk about girls all the time, until he gave me some bad advice. I got so pissed about it that I would hang up on him if he called, and after a while he pretty much lost interest. I feel bad about it sometimes. We kind of bonded in the beginning, because my name is John Fitzgerald Kim. My parents were both immigrants—Mom is from Germany—and they were concerned that I wouldn't fit in. I can't say that the name helped much in that department.

The point is that JFK and I don't talk much anymore. Nixon doesn't call either, not since I cracked open a Milwaukee's Best while I was talking to him and he thought the line was tapped. I told him I would never do that. I was lying, though. I did try to tape one of the calls, but all I got was me talking to a whole lot of dead air. I didn't try it again, because I hated the way I sounded on the tape.

LBJ and I haven't talked much since we got into it about Vietnam a few months back. He told me I should go back to college, that he didn't want to discuss it with me until I knew what I was talking about. Maybe he hit a nerve. I called him a lot of things that I'm not sure he is. My roommate Lev is the history expert, not me.

The one I used to talk to the most was Ike, but we haven't spoken since Reagan showed up. I have to admit that kind of hurts my feelings. We used to shoot the shit for hours, and he hardly ever lectured me except for that last time, when I told him Reagan had died. All of a sudden he got serious. "You have to take control of your life, Jake, or events will just sweep you

along." I didn't know what the hell he was talking about, but the next time the phone rang it was Reagan, and that was the last I heard from Ike.

"What are you guys doing?" I ask Reagan, hoping to jump-start the conversation. It's my day off, and I'm flipping channels, drinking alone and playing with my keys, which drives Anderson crazy. He always thinks someone's at the door. He's not a very smart dog. "You playing poker again?"

"No. Dick won't play with Jack anymore. He says Jack cheats. Jack says he just knows how to call a bluff." Reagan laughs. I don't get it.

He asks me if I'm watching the Notre Dame game. I'm watching "NBA Inside Stuff" with Summer Sanders and Ahmad Rashad. I don't really like basketball, or football either, but Summer Sanders is hot.

"I don't think it's on," I say.

"The TV Guide says it's on," Reagan says.

"You get TV Guide but no TV? What kind of heaven is that?"

I think the question upset him, because he's gone quiet. I remember once I asked Ike what heaven felt like, and he said he wasn't sure that was where he was. He said they were in a little room with a couch, a card table, four folding chairs, a bottomless bowl of pretzels, a deck of cards, a cribbage board, a tray of poker chips, a red phone and a door that wouldn't open. I told him it sounded like the green room for a no-budget talk show. He said he wondered who the host was.

I turn to the Notre Dame game and do a little play-by-play to cheer Reagan up.

"Are you playing with your keys again?" he asks.

"Sorry." I stop flipping the keys. I have two key chains. One is for keys that I use: my apartment, the store, my bike lock. The other is for mystery keys, keys whose purpose I don't know. I find keys at the Laundromat, on the sidewalk, or while cleaning the store. Always single keys, all different sizes and sorts. They are for rooms in hotels that have since converted to keycards, padlocks that have long since been discarded, and doors that no longer exist. There are house keys and car keys and handcuff keys. There are more of these orphaned keys around than you might think. Last night I found one that looks like it opens one of those bus station lockers. It has the number 34 on its round orange cap.

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Sometimes, when I'm walking home drunk and alone, I try to open the doors I pass. I figure there has to be a finite number of combinations of notches and grooves—in a city the size of Chicago, there has to be a door that will open to one of my keys.

I'm describing a rushing play to Reagan, crediting the running back with a series of inhuman leaps and a vault that would make Bela Karolyi fall on his knees, when Lev comes home. I know he's there before he even opens the door, because Anderson starts growling. For some reason he doesn't like Lev.

I thought Russians were supposed to be real moody, but Lev is always smiling. He smiled when his mother called from St. Petersburg to tell him that his grandfather had died. He smiled when Russia lost to Belgium in the last World Cup. I'll bet he smiles in the shower. Sometimes his smile is a crazy-person smile, the kind of smile that lets you know you'd better give him his space; today, though, it seems fairly genuine.

"Who you talk to?" he asks. He's coming from one of his jobs, probably the pretzel cart, since it's Saturday. Lev has some kind of advanced degree in American History, but it's from a Russian school and he can't get hired here. He works four crap jobs and lives his life in three shifts: work, drink, and sleep, and he does double overtime on the first two. I've never known him to take a day off.

I tell him I'm talking to Ronald Reagan, and he nods with vigor. "Commandant Reagan!" he shouts. I'm not sure if Lev really believes that I talk to dead presidents. He might just think I'm crazy and that it's safer to humor me. He asked to talk to JFK once, to ask him about Cuba. He acted like they were having a conversation, but JFK said that Lev didn't seem to hear anything he said.

"Lev says hello," I tell Reagan.

"Thank you, Commandant Reagan!" Lev calls. "Thank you for freedom. Thank you for democracy. Thank you for capitalism."

"He says you're welcome," I tell him.

Lev says that he doesn't have time to talk, that he's just stopping to change his clothes and drain his gizzard.

"He means lizard," I tell Reagan. He tells me that he'd guessed as much, and asks me if I'm going out too.

"None of Lev's friends speak English," I say. "When I go out with them I feel like an idiot."

He tells me I should speak Korean to them. He says that would make for a truly cosmopolitan evening. I tell him for the fifth time that I don't really know Korean, just a few swear words that the Irishman taught me before he moved out of the house and into a bottle of Bushmill's. I wonder if maybe the Alzheimer's is still affecting our former president.

"You should get out more," Reagan says. "Make some new friends." Someone yells something in the background. "Jack wants to know if you've talked to Amanda lately."

"Tell Jack to go fuck himself." Amanda was the girl Jack had given me bad advice about. His advice was to tell her that I talked to dead presidents. He told me that would get me laid for sure. Instead Amanda stopped returning my calls. You'd think a guy who slept with Marilyn Monroe would have a clue about women, but I guess it was just power that got him into all those panties.

"I'm not going to repeat that," Reagan says, and hands the phone to JFK.

"How are you, Jake?"

"Go fuck yourself," I say, and flip my keys.

"What's that?"

"I asked Ron to tell you to go fuck yourself, but he wouldn't. So I'm telling you myself. Don't bring up Amanda."

"You'd be able to laugh about it if you dated more," he says. "You should go out with Lev. You might have something to talk about tomorrow."

I ignore that. "Were you really cheating at cards?"

"I don't need to cheat," he says. "Dick's got so many tells that I don't even need to look at my hand."

Nixon yells something I can't understand.

"Ping-pong isn't world diplomacy, Dick," says JFK.

Nixon yells something I don't really think I should repeat.

"I'll talk to you later," says JFK. "There's an ass here that needs kicking." He hangs up.

They do that periodically—more, since Reagan showed up. I don't know if it's him personally that they find aggravating or just the fact that it's

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five of them cooped up in a room together. I guess even former leaders of the free world need to blow off some steam.

Lev comes out of his room as I'm hanging up the phone, wearing white linen pants and a yellow shirt unbuttoned halfway to his navel. Lev has so much black hair on his chest that I'm periodically possessed with the urge to shear him like a sheep. But it works for him—some women have a thing for chest hair.

"My friend," he announces, "the Mafia are going to the clubs! Are you coming along?" He always asks me, and I always say no.

Anderson whines as if he knows what's coming.

"Sure," I say. "Let me change my shirt."

I've been out with Lev and his friends twice before: once to watch the World Cup, and once to Lev's cousin's wedding. Both of those times we were stuck in one place, and I didn't realize what an unnatural state that was for the Mafia until today.

That's what Lev and his friends call themselves: the Mafia. "We are Russian Mafia!" Lev says at the end of every phone call he makes to one of them, and today he has announced it in every sports bar, dance club and beer garden. Then he swatted me between the shoulder blades and told everyone who wasn't listening that I was "the Korean gangster," which I suppose is less of a mouthful than "the Korean-German gangster."

The Mafia has an uncanny ability to hail cabs, which is handy because in several places we didn't stay long enough to make a phone call. I usually drink beer, but tonight it's been vodka shots. I lost count a few hours ago, both of the shots and the number of times Lev has said, "We are out of this Deadsville!"

I don't know what time it is now, or even where we are. We've stumbled into a warehouse club with a weekly fetish night, and there's a lot of leather and metal traveling through the darkness between strobe flashes. On the dance floor people are moving as if the heavy bass is pressing down on their shoulders, weighing them down. Upstairs a silent crowd is drinking and observing a series of male volunteers being whipped by a bored dominatrix wannabe.

What's left of the Mafia has settled into a side room where the music isn't quite so oppressive. Lev must be tired, because we've been here long

enough for him to lock lips with a redhead in a latex bodysuit. His cousin Felix is passed out on a bench. Another cousin put his foot through a car window a few hours back, and two friends took him to the emergency room. And one cab never made it from the Gold Coast to Bucktown; Lev believes they have gone home to their wives, and has denounced them as disloyal and weak.

The casualties and deserters have been replaced with camp followers, and one of them, a heavy girl named Debbie, has apparently decided that I'm the least threatening of the group. She's wearing a leather skirt with handcuffs at her waist and a bustier that isn't working for her. We're on an old couch across from the bar, and she's sitting on her hands, leaning forward so that her brown hair hides her face. I am twirling my keys and thinking about trying one of them on Debbie's wardrobe.

"Are you going to throw up?" I ask her. My words seem to come from somewhere over my left shoulder, muddled beneath the echoes of synthesizer and bass.

"I'm not even drunk," she says. "I don't drink."

"The question stands." I am impressed with the formal tone of my address. Ma always said I should be a lawyer, although there's a good chance she was just wishing for someone to keep her out of lockup.

Debbie tosses her hair back, and I decide that I will have sex with her if she isn't a lesbian and displays the least interest, which she won't now that I'm thinking about it and am therefore completely unable to play it cool. In fact it's likely that once she realizes I am interested she will claim to be a lesbian whether she is or not.

"Are you Asian?" she asks me.

"I'm American." I raise my glass and shout at the Mafia, hoping they won't notice that I've gone off vodka. "American!" They cheer, and I spill a couple of ounces of water in my lap.

"If you tell me something about yourself, I can tell you how you'll be remembered," Debbie says. "It's a talent of mine."

"No one's going to remember me," I say. "It's not like I'm the president."

"Presidents are all criminals," she says. "Murderers. Even the ones everybody thinks were great, even they killed people. You can't have that much power and not be guilty."

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I tell her she sounds like that song by the Police where Sting sings about murder being the sport of the elected. I tell her I thought that song was pretty damn profound when I was seventeen. I don't tell her that it seems fatuous to me now.

Debbie tells me that the only moral political system is anarchy. I tell her I'd like to kiss her. She sits up and pulls her hair out of her face. I have time to think that she's actually sort of pretty before I go in for the kill. My tongue is dry, but hers is wet. Her hair is soft. For a drowsy moment I am convinced that we are in love, that we are going to live happily ever after. Then the smell of clove cigarettes reaches my alcohol-dulled senses. I try to pull away, but she's leaning on me, and my hand is caught in her tangled hair. I break the kiss like a diver reaching the surface, and push her away to run for the bathroom.

Mom used to cheat on the Irishman with a guy who smoked clove cigarettes. I'd come home from school and he'd be sitting in the kitchen by the window, blowing the smoke out the window. He was an artist or something from Yugoslavia, and he never said anything to me that I understood. One day I came home early from a field trip to the Shedd Aquarium and he had her bent over the sink, his pale flat butt jiggling all over the place. Ever since then the smell of clove cigarettes makes me ill. I don't much care for tropical fish, either.

I lock myself in a stall and heave a half-gallon of Russia's finest liquors, a dozen Buffalo wings and a bag of pretzels into the bowl. When it's done I'm sweaty and shivery, and my ears are ringing.

"Are you all right?" Debbie asks. I see her chunky platform boots under the bottom of the stall door. Either she's desperate or she's got a thing for guys who vomit after kissing her.

"What about the First Ladies?" I ask.

"What?"

"Are the First Ladies criminals?"

"Some of them." Debbie sounds unsure, as if she's never thought about this before. She shuffles away, and I hear water running.

"Which ones?" I open the stall door. Debbie is standing at the sink with her back to me, washing her hands. The handcuffs at the waist of her skirt flash at me, and I reach for my keys. Maybe this isn't the best test; maybe every handcuff key fits every set. All I know is that it feels right to do this

now, to start here.

When I step up behind her she tenses but she doesn't turn. She talks about Dolly Madison and Mary Todd and Lady Bird, but I'm not really listening, because the key fits. The leather skirt is warm and the metal cuffs are cool; I unlock them and dangle them next to Debbie's ear.

Debbie looks in the mirror and stops talking about Eleanor Roosevelt. "Not here," she says. She straightens her skirt and leaves me holding the handcuffs. My ears are still ringing, but I'm focused now. The key has opened my eyes.

There's a locked door next to the sink, and I know exactly which key to use; it's a Schlage with a rounded diamond head, a sturdy key the color of the nicotine stains on my mother's teeth. It turns smoothly in the lock, and the door swings open to reveal a janitor's closet.

A mop soaks in a bucket of dirty water, smelling of bleach and vomit. On the right are shelves stocked with cleaning supplies; on the left stands a block of lockers, five high, numbered 31 through 40. I flip through the keys until I find the round orange cap that says "34" on it.

Inside locker 34 is a steel strongbox. Something tells me this is not the time to open it, so I tuck it under my arm, lock the closet behind me, and leave the bathroom.

For maybe the first time in his life, Lev is not smiling. I can't decide whether to tell him I'm leaving or to ask permission.

He nods when he sees the strongbox. He asks if I have my keys. I tell him yes. He tells me to be careful. I think his accent is missing. He turns back to the redhead, and I realize I am dismissed.

All the presidents think it's a shame that I never served in the military. They think I would have benefited from the discipline and the socialization. Ike in particular has told me that I should enlist now, while I'm still relatively young. I always told him I'd think about it, but I never did. I saw what military service did for the Irishman.

I am thinking about this as I cross the dance floor. I forget to weave through the crowd, but somehow even when I'm about to collide with someone who is clearly oblivious to my presence, they move. I feel like a ghost in a carefully choreographed play, where the other actors have to

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work around me while pretending not to notice me.

When I get outside I don't see Debbie. Normally I would be angry and self-pitying about this; I would blame the shirt I'm wearing or the vomiting or decide Debbie was a friend of Amanda's sent to make a fool out of me. I'm not doing any of that now. I'm pulling out my keys and looking up and down the street. When Debbie steps out of a convenience store with a pack of cigarettes—Camels, not clove—I'm not surprised or relieved. I walk towards a black sedan with tinted windows, trusting that she will follow if she likes.

"You have a car?" Debbie asks.

"No." I unlock the sedan on the first try, and tell Debbie to get in.

I haven't driven in years. My getting behind the wheel sober would be a violation of the laws of common sense; drunk as I am, I ought to have my humanity revoked. But I believe that the only way I will have an accident tonight is if it is part of the plan. I am seeing patterns where there were no patterns before, reasons for unreasonable things. It makes sense to me now that my parents hated each other. I see the providence of my dull and pointless job. I perceive the justice of my prolonged celibacy. Why rage against it all? There's a comfort in letting go of choices, in letting the current take hold.

The sedan's engine starts easily and runs as quietly as a dishwasher. I pull into traffic, barely hearing the horns.

"Where are we going?" Debbie asks.

"Look in the glove compartment," I tell her.

She does. "There's nothing in here but some moist towelettes and a stationery pad from a hotel on Michigan Avenue."

"That's where we're going," I say. "What's the address again?"

She tells me. I drive around aimlessly until I find Lakeshore Drive, then I head south. Debbie tries to make conversation. She tells me she used to sell handcrafted sex toys at a store called Morning Wood. She has a lot of funny stories to tell, but I'm too busy concentrating on not killing us to laugh.

I park on Michigan and tell Debbie to wait in the car.

"Are we going in?" she asks. "This is a nice hotel."

"I'm just making a stop, and I don't want to get towed. I'll be back in a few minutes."

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I run inside. The hotel key on my ring reads “1301,” but when I get on the elevator there’s no 13th Floor, so I look for a service elevator. There’s a door near the public restrooms that probably says Employees Only or No Entry or something like that, but to me it reads This Way.

Behind it is a table and a chair and a black-and-white TV tuned to an episode of “M*A*S*H,” the one where they’re all having the nightmares. My father hated “M*A*S*H,” so we never missed an episode. He would sit and swear in Korean and English and call Alan Alda a faggott. He used to do that for the reruns, too.

The service elevator is in the hall beyond; I activate it with one of my keys. There’s no button for 13 here either, but there’s a keyhole next to 12. I use another key. I feel good. I’m on a mission.

The halls of the Thirteenth Floor are wallpapered with Eagles and Minutemen and the Liberty Bell on a field of red, white, and blue. There are no windows. 1301 is the Presidential Suite—complete with the Seal on the oak double doors—but when I open the door I find not an elegantly situated entry with dark wood and silk upholstered furniture, but a utility closet with a sink and a chair. The 34th President of the United States, Dwight David Eisenhower, stands at the sink in a rumpled suit, washing his hands.

“Is that you, Jake?” He dries his hands on a towel and tries to straighten his suit. He’s shorter than I realized. “The door was open.” He looks behind him, but there’s no door there. He shrugs.

“Take off your jacket and don’t talk.” I cuff his hands in the front and drape his jacket over them. He walks with me to the service elevator without a word. I can smell his aftershave.

We leave through the employee entrance and walk around the block to where Debbie sits waiting. I put Ike in the back seat and get in.

I take Lake Street west, and Ike starts talking.

“Before you we used to talk to this Japanese girl in Sacramento.” He’s told me this before, but I guess he doesn’t remember. “Kumiko. She was a sweet kid. Worked in a cannery. She and Kennedy . . .” I see him in the rearview, shaking his head. It’s hard to think of him as a murderer.

“She lived with her parents, but they didn’t get along. They didn’t speak any English, didn’t understand the culture—that’s what she told us, anyway. Harry was more of a parent to her than they were. As I’ve tried to

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be to you.”

The larger pattern is becoming clear, and it’s not as cozy as I first thought. It wasn’t created for me; I was created for it. I’m sweating.

“Nobody remembers me now,” Ike says. “Time to put it on the books once and for all, I guess.”

We’re in an industrial district--two- and three-story warehouses and factories. The neighborhood is all but deserted at this time on a Sunday morning.

“What happened to Kumiko?” I ask. “What about the one before her?” Ike doesn’t answer. Debbie puts her hand on my forearm, but I shake her off.

I turn north on Ashland and drive a couple of blocks, then take a left into an overgrown alley next to the Metra tracks. I’ve never been here before, but it’s the next stop.

I turn off the ignition and unlock the strongbox. Inside is a shiny blue handgun. I should be surprised, maybe, but I’m not. This is an American story, after all.

“I think you’ll find it’s already loaded,” Debbie says.

She has such clear, perfect skin. Her bustier is studded with rows of small steel stars. Patterns. I didn’t see it before, in the club, but I see everything now, even in the dark. The kohl around her eyes is dried blood. Where I’m headed, she’s already been.

I open the door for Ike, and he steps out smoothly even with his hands cuffed together. I take him by the arm and lead him down the alley through the weeds. Debbie walks next to me, but not close.

It takes three keys to open the door I need: one for the padlock on the outside gate, one for the deadbolt, and one for the door itself. I lock them all behind us.

There’s nothing in the room beyond the second door: not a chair, not a table, nothing but another door on the opposite wall marked “AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.” I have one key left.

Ike says he’s sorry it had to be me. He says we’re all just pawns of destiny. He says he killed a lot of Germans, but it was never anything personal. He says he got us out of Korea as quickly as he could. He says that was a war we couldn’t win.

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I shoot him in the heart. I don't do it for my parents and I don't do it for me and I don't do it for him. I do it because that's what happens next. He falls, but he doesn't bleed. He's been dead a long time, and one more time isn't going to hurt.

I tuck the gun into my waistband and unlock the last door; behind it is a curtain, and the sound of an audience applauding. I help Ike up and ask him if he's ready to talk to God.

"This isn't about God, Jake. It's about history." He walks through the door.

I start to follow, but Debbie stops me. She takes my hand and guides it to my crotch. The gun is still warm; the fit of my finger on the trigger is snug and satisfying. I allow her to raise my hand to my mouth.

I taste smoke. The back of my head opens up, and a delirium of sense and order knocks me off of my feet.

Debbie combs my hair over the hole in the back of my head while I watch the monologue on the monitor. The jokes might have been funny back in the sixties. A shot of the audience shows them taking notes.

"The president goes on first," Debbie tells me. "You've got about half an hour to wait."

I don't say anything. I already know I'm going to get bumped.

"Tell me," I say, "how I'm going to be remembered."

"As someone who lived up to his potential," she says, and the odor of clove cigarettes fills the air.



DAVID J. SCHWARTZ's fiction has appeared recently in *Strange Horizons*, *Rabid Transit*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet* and the anthology *Twenty Epics*. He used to be able to recite all the U.S. presidents in order, but after fifth grade it seemed less important. He lives in Chicago, and has stopped collecting keys since the incident.