

Chapter Two

The President of the United States of America

The President of the United States of America walked along his private path in the woods behind the White House gardens. He walked this path every morning and evening as part of his daily exercise. Several of the secret service walked parallel to the path through the dense underbrush. It was understood that The President of The United States of America did not like to see his secret service and so, even though it was difficult, they did their best to protect him while keeping out of sight.

The President could hear the snapping of twigs and clumsy movements of his retainers but he smiled and ignored them. It was important to appear aloof when you were a man of great worth and power. It could never be said that the President of The United States of America did not appear Presidential. He also knew it was very unlikely that anyone would make an attempt on his life; he was, after all, the most beloved President the United States of America had ever had.

President Roosevelt, who had preceded President John, had been a pretty good President but President John thought he had been too tremulous and that he didn't look very good in his wheelchair, though in truth, President John had never seen such, but only heard about it. President John was thin and dapper and didn't wear those silly glasses like Roosevelt had on occasion.

As he rounded the last major bend in the path he stopped to check his timepiece. It was well after nine in the morning by this clock but it was hard to keep his watch in good order because the hours of the day were different and so he had to roll it forward slightly six or seven times a day. By ten, he wanted to be back in the White House to check on the stills. President John could also feel a strange sense of an impending storm. There was something in the air and he wanted to get back.

Roosevelt had signed the ratification of the twenty-first amendment, which repealed the Volstead act. That was the one that had made President John's business illegal for so long and Roosevelt had fixed that for him. It would not have done for The President of The United States of America to be labeled a Moonshiner. The law had made no sense anyhow, the People liked booze and he liked the business of making it. He didn't think Prohibition made anyone safer or happier and he was glad when he didn't have to go to a speakeasy or work with uncivilized hoodlums anymore. Vito and Luccio had been hard boiled, thuggish and beastly. They made his business look bad,

they were ugly in the eyes of The American People, who were his customers, even if some of them liked Prohibition and didn't think booze was good. President John knew it was good because He knew that doctors prescribed it as medicine, He knew a lot of doctors who had acquired special permits from the Government to use booze for all kinds of ailments and maladies. President John, himself, had always used booze to cure hangover and Malaria.

That was something he did worry about here. There were all kinds of diseases that did all kinds of awful things. When he first came to this place, he had known a woman, who had been really very healthy, she had been his wife but then something awful had happened to her. She became very ill. He had not known what to do and was afraid to help her and so now she was gone. Later, he was afraid to touch any woman. He feared they were all diseased and he would catch their diseases and so he kept to himself. It was hard to be alone and be President but he had ways of dealing with being alone. He was at peace. This place had been good to him. He had his Whiskey and his stills and his pictures. He wrote at his desk, he came up with laws and he was very Presidential.

President John stopped along the path and stood under a tree that he didn't know the name of but liked the smell. It had funny leaves and low branches. He reached out and touched the leaves which were like fine fronds of a fern and they curled up at

his touch. "It's a shy tree," he said, "doesn't like company so early, maybe in the evening." He couldn't remember if he had touched the leaves of that tree before. He must have seen it many times during his walks but the thought he had mostly noticed it in the winter when it was bare and then it only had little brown knobs on it. He sniffed his fingertips. They were dusted with a fine powder and smelled like pencil shavings. He touched the tips of his fingers to his tongue and tasted. It was as tasteless as dirt but in a few seconds, the tip of his tongue began to buzz and he thought it might be poison so he spit several times into the bushes.

He considered calling one of his secret servicemen to come and tell him what the tree was. If it were not poison, it might be good wood to make casks from or to burn for filtering charcoal. He fingered the bone whistle in his suit pocket but decided against it. It was going to be a long summer and he thought he would walk by this tree many more times. Instead, he pried the stopper out of a water bladder he kept full of spring water and rinsed his mouth out. He spouted the water in a long thin stream, arching forward and then drank the rest of the small bladder.

He picked a set of leaves off of the tree and tucked them into his pocket before heading onto the return path. By the time the Old Glory came into view with it six rows of eight stars, flapped in the gathering wind, President John was becoming concerned by the weather. The flag was made by his Constituents by hand and had taken months

to collect the fabric and sew together. Quilting was not a tradition the people of this place had and so it had been difficult work. The colors were somewhat muted and the flag was beginning to tatter. There was no way to easily lower and raise the flag and so it stayed on it's pole, high atop the thatched roof through all seasons, night and day, and now had some fairly large holes developing between the stripes. Every day President John thought about having it taken down and refurbished and every day he forgot the moment he was inside.

President John walked through the back door of the White House. The packed dirt floor was cool under his bare feet and he enjoyed the sensation after the heat of the path outside. He paused in the doorway to squench his toes in the fine dust that collected near the door frame. In the center of the large main room was a handmade rug of soft grasses dyed the colors of the star spangled banner. Hanging on the log walls were his portraits and the cloak of the old Chieftain who had resided here before President John's first term. High slatted windows provided the only light and streamed down through the dust motes to land in rectangles on the far wall and spill down to the floor.

The peak of the roof was open to view and the thatch could be seen between the gaps in the skip-sheathing. There clustered a small family of birds among the cross braces and the rug below had been flecked with their droppings. One side of the room

had a loft space with a steep log ladder leading up and a rope handrail. His private quarters were surrounded by roll down screens hanging on the two sides of the loft not directly against a wall. The door frame was curtained with red fabric and the blessed yellow bunting that The American People thought of as protection for the President.

Below the loft was the open area He called the Oval Office, his writing desk festooned with handmade papers and pots of colored inks. The quill pens in these pots were from birds that John had not known in his former life as a Chicago Whiskeyman. The fluffy feather of one pen was dark with gold flecks, and caught in one of the sunbeams. It sparkled with tiny yellow bursts of fire, their reflected spots alighting on the nearby support beam and high-back of the desk. The chair at the desk was ornate with raised arms and a cushioned seat and headrest and yet it conveyed the simplicity of something whittled by an earnest but unskilled hand.

In the corner, under the steps leading to the loft was a second set of steps leading down into the dirt floor. A log hand rail made an L-shape and inferred the landing and then the turn that the stairs took as they descended into the basement.

It was there that President John was headed. The first set of steps was steep enough that he was forced to turn around and climb down facing the rungs and holding on with his hands. At the landing, he turned around and walked down the short flight of five stone steps before ducking under the low door header and into his workshop. The

floor here was far better tamped down than the room above. President John had carefully graded the dirt and soaked it with oil so that it was nearly like concrete and polished to a deep brown the color of walnut. There was another red, white and blue grass mat on the floor below the last step.

When The President of The United States of America set up a distillery in the basement of the White House, The American People hadn't seemed to know what to think. Then, he had handed out his booze to everyone who came to visit and word spread. That was why he was the most beloved President, The United States of America had ever had.

President John was fastidious here. He sat down on the lowest step and brushed his dusty feet off with a little whiskbroom he kept for that purpose. He cleaned the cuffs of his pants and spent a moment examining the hangnail that was developing on his right middle toe. With a quick gesture, he brought his foot up to his mouth and bit the offending nail off and spit the remnant back, up the stairs, over his shoulder. He scrutinized the result and was perturbed to see a small drop of blood well up in the cuticle where he had torn the skin. He lifted the corner of the mat and dabbed at it until the bleeding stopped and then proceeded into the room.

When President John grinned, he exposed a long rubbery dam of gum above his upper teeth and his lower teeth disappeared under his thin lower lip. It was as if his

mouth had been constructed too high or his jaw too low and it gave him the appearance of being all chin and gums. He grinned now looking at his long wooden table and his row of three, seven gallon pot stills. He breathed in the scent of fermentation and nutty wood barrels. The thin smell of alcohol infused air that always made him feel like he was at the top of a mountain and the oiled dirt that made him think of unleavened bread and rain.

In this place, he had taken all the things he had learned in the other and perfected them. Chicago had been very good to him but this place was much better. For so many years he had worked in dark, secret places in Chicago, never meeting anyone he had not known for years already. He had been treated like a scientist, a craftsman and with respect but also like game piece and a prisoner. He had wanted to be an egg. He was never allowed to go to the parties where the beautiful people were drinking his booze and the thin women would sing and take off their clothes, not until after he made the deal with Vito and Luccio.

“Blessed.” He said to the empty room. The strange construction of his face also seemed to have placed his voice box high in his sinus cavity and made him sound stuffed up but at the same time snobbish. “I’m so glad.” He said walking quickly over to the small fire burning under the latest batch. He had finished his walk with plenty of time to toss around the tinder with a pair of metal tongs. He adjusted down the small flapper

to the clay vent pipe that brought fresh air down to the fires and the he opened the larger flapper on the chimney above it. There were six of these clay tubes, in sets of two behind each pot still and disappearing into the rammed earth wall that made the foundation of the White House.

Now, of course, he was happy he had made that deal. He was the President now and he had secret service to protect him and he made the best Whiskey in The United States of America right here in the basement of the White House. Back then, the deal had not seemed so good for him. He had been angry because he knew he was so much smarter than Vito and Luccio and he hated that they had been able to trick him like that. But, they knew the world they were working in and he didn't. He knew basements and stills and farms and the feeling of tiny ovals of cellulose, starch and germ sliding by the millions between his fingers. They were familiar with the smells of paper bills with pictures of Franklin, McKinley, Cleveland and, Occasionally, Salmon B. Chase. He was familiar with the scents of fermentation, oak barrels and musty dankness.

After making the deal, he was allowed out as long as he was escorted by Vito or Luccio. At the speakeasies he met knockout gals with lovely stems and easy personalities. He played cards with jocular men full of tall tales and razor-burned faces. People treated him as a patron of their fun and gave him respect. Some people wanted to get in on the supply and tried to get him drunk. He was mostly immune to it. He told

people that getting drunk made it so you couldn't taste the drink. Tasting the drink was terribly important to a craftsman. He was invited into the beds of several women but he'd always rather look at them and that offended some of them. They didn't like standing around posing all night.

He turned to the wall of barrels that were stacked three high and four across on a rack under the steep ladder leading to the main floor. Each barrel of the bottom row had been tapped and was now nearly empty. Later this evening, he planned to tap the first barrel of the middle row and share it around to his Cabinet and Secret Service agents. If the keg was good, he might throw a larger festival sometime in the next few days so the larger community could enjoy it. If it turned out like his first keg though, he would recycle it as cooking fuel instead. His work was just starting to get back the point it had been when he got out of prison.

It was Luccio who had answered his telegraph and picked him up at the exit gate. As it turned out, the business of legal liquor was not that much different from that of illegal Liquor. The only change was in the scale. Sudden breweries sprang out of the woodwork all over Chicago. The legal limit of seven and a half percent by weight did not stop there from being a boom in alcohol. John found himself in charge of a line of fifty pot stills and thirty-five dumbbells almost immediately after leaving Joliet. Within a couple months he was back into his old routine, working on better blends and finer

filtrations. He was especially fond of a mixture of Maple and sage charcoals and began acquiring various other spicy woods and contacting barrel makers to experiment with aging whiskeys and bourbons in madrone, Cherry and rosewood drums.

Each keg on the rack under the White House floor was an experiment that represented the blending of everything he had learned from all the batches before. He had each keg crafted from a different local wood and he had used the most flavorful of those woods and charcoal to filter his whiskeys. He would one day come upon the precise procedure for fermenting the perfect blend of grains filtered with the absolute best tasting wood and aged in the barrel that most complimented that flavor.

It would be another three years before the results of his three current batches could be tasted. The Barrel he would open tonight was one that he was fairly sure would be wonderful. He kept a journal of each process carefully noted in every percentage and measure, sitting atop each barrel and weighted with a small round stone. The barrel and the papers were covered in more than three years of dust despite his fanatical cleanliness about the floor and work surfaces. He scrunched his eyebrows together, as if noticing this for the first time and gingerly lifted the rock off the pages. He placed the rock in his sport coat pocket and rolled his fingers and thumb around in the manner a cricket uses to clean its legs. His attention was focused squarely on the dust covered pile of leaves and he held it in both hands before him and walked it up the short flight of

stairs, carefully up the ladder and out the front door of the White house where he dumped the pile of dust on the White House lawn and shook the papers as though they were a rug. Then he plopped down, cross-legged in the grass and began to read. He looked up once at the darkening sky but then was drawn back into the world of his notes. The pedestrians walking along past sixteen-hundred Pennsylvania Avenue were not confused by his ramblings. It was not common to see their President sitting cross-legged on the lawn but it fit into a larger pattern of eccentricities that they had come to accept and they neither commented in his presence nor did they pause long to wonder at his mutterings. If he was learning to make the water of the hearth and would keep stayed his Godhandle, then his strangelier ways did not cause overmuch worry and his Constituents went about their days.

After a time, President John stood up, folded his arms behind his back and produced a series of pops. He rolled his neck and another series of pops crackled before disappearing back into the shadows of the open White House front door. Just inside and to the right was a large stuffed chair and small table which sat in the square of floor next to the Oval Office and not overhung by his loft. There was a reliable pool of sunlight that came through the larger window over the doorway and generally stayed through much of the day in the summer by which he could read.

Next to the chair was a painting of Mialahonnae, a gorgeous black haired creature who had been his wife when he first arrived in this place. She had come to him or been sent by her mother after his altercation with the Chieftain and his subsequent inauguration as President of the United States of America. He had not been able to communicate with her. He had not known how to speak to any of his constituents. It was she who taught him. She had seemed a lot like the Doll at the speakeasy in some ways. The girl who had taken him to her room the night he was arrested and sent to Joliet. She had been blonde and thin with a devilish grin and an impish laugh. When the police had arrived, he had panicked, running from wardrobe to water closet while the girl stood there laughing at him. When they burst into the room, he had been holding the skinny girl before him like a shield and ducking his head between her shoulder blades while she rolled her eyes and pointed with her thumb over her shoulder.

Mialahonnae had had the same devilish grin and impish laugh but she had been also kind and patient, a good teacher. She would playfully kick his rump from behind as they walked side by side through the White House gardens and sometimes lick his ear or his eyebrow. She would sometimes clamber up onto his back or try and tickle him until he fell into an undignified heap then she would sit astride his chest and curl over to gently bump her forehead against his. Sometimes then, she would cry while smiling and

her tears would fall into his eyes. He would look up at her at these times, baffled and sheepish, blinking away her tears and gripping the soil of the path with his long fingers.

Mialahonnae was gone now and the painting of her did not have much of her spirit. It was folky and cartoonish. She could have been any girl of the village with the yellow fabric tied in her hair and the red streaks painted from her lower eyelids to her chin. The painting was more a pictograph of traditional dress than a representation of the fiery beanpole who had been his wife.

“Pree-so-due!” President John looked up suddenly to see his head of the Secret Service poking his head into the doorway. “Uva Sign-a mad-Bakka Stoom, yeah?” The man was nervous. A summer storm often was a sign of impending war for the people of this place. That concerned President John. There had been no conflicts of any significance during his presidency and he did not want his peace destroyed.

“Ah whaat! You going a-terra-fix Watera Uva zat Hearth?” By this he was asking how President John was doing and how his latest batch was going. President John knew that Kimmsaen, this rangy and well muscled guard, had little actual interest in the process of making whiskey but he asked every day or two because he knew little more to talk about with his President.

Geahk Burchill - RisingStone Chapter Two - third draft

“Good, Brilliant!” President John answered. “I will tap the next keg tonight. Yeah.”

“Ah hah-ha! Bahr-weel-sant! Good! Ahat! Good, good! Ohyay shaahrf?” By which, John knew, he was asking if it would be shared around.

“Course, Always.” President John spoke English with Kimmsaen because Kimmsaen had been trying to learn the language for the past few months and pretended to be cross with his President when John fell back into Duhngheece, the language of the local people. John appreciated this because he found himself often forgetting words in English and needed to be reminded. He found it easy to speak English now because he had been reading his notes of three and half years ago when he was still much more practiced and wrote entirely in the language of Chicago. “After my evening walk, then we tap it - then we drink! I can’t wait to try it, you know, it’s been aged in that barrel we made from the Copesee, Copesa, whatever wood, from just over by the river, were you there for that? Goopa, giyappa puearda-hah-Ya?”

“No-hah, Surl-yay, Pree-so-due, no-yay Bauk-zen.”

President John showed his gum wall and tombstones. “That-tatta, Right! Your older brother, then. Maatsa-Guellsler!”

President John had risen from the chair. He smiled and nodded at Kimmsaen and strode over to put his notes on his desk. He was being Presidential again. He couldn’t let his security detail be too informal with him. It wouldn’t be seemly. So

Geahk Burchill - RisingStone Chapter Two - third draft

President John cocked his head sharply and walked out through the back door.

Kimmsaen poked his head out the front door, used the same gesture to call his partners and they scurried to catch up with the President.