

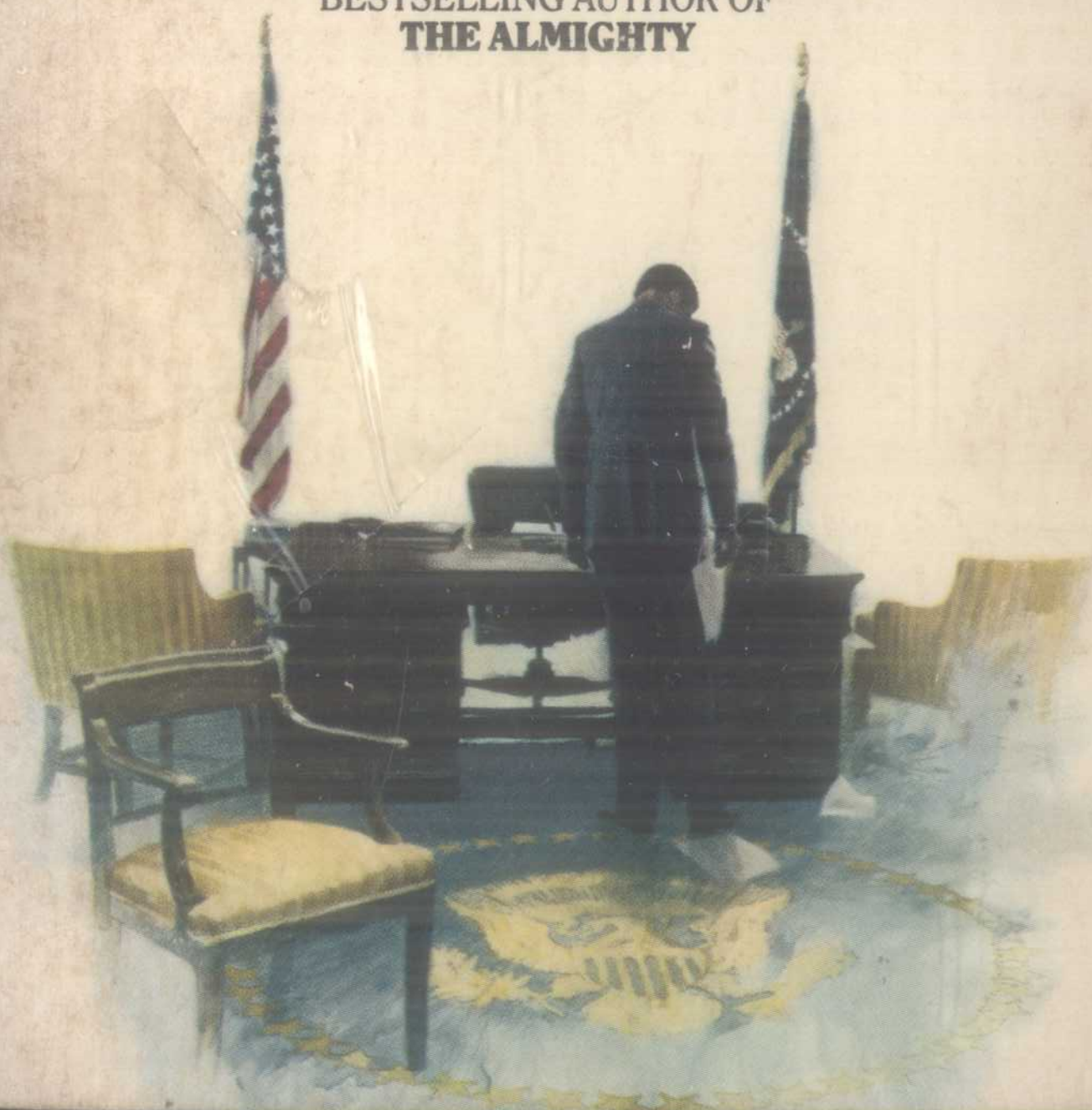
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One of the author's prized possessions is an original autographed manuscript, written firmly with pen on cheap ruled paper, signed by a former Negro slave who became a great reformer, lecturer, writer, adviser to President Abraham Lincoln, United States Minister to Haiti, and candidate for Vice-President of the United States on the Equal Rights Party ticket in 1872. The manuscript reads as follows:

In a composite Nation like ours, made up of almost every variety of the human family, there should be, as before the Law, no rich, no poor, no high, no low, no black, no white, but one country, one citizenship, equal rights and a common destiny for all.

A Government that cannot or does not protect the humblest citizen in his right to life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness, should be reformed or overthrown, without delay.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Washington D.C. Oct. 20, 1883

I
STANDING THERE in the cold office, at this ungodly hour, no longer night, not yet day, she felt apprehensive and nervous. She wondered why, but instantly her memory had traced the source of worry, and she knew its answer was right.

From her earliest childhood on the modern farm outside Milwaukee, Edna Foster remembered, she had been raised—by erect parents of German origin—to believe in the virtues of constancy, steadiness, punctuality. Whenever she had given voice to a girlish dream of irregular adventure, her solemn and mustached father, an omnivorous reader of almanacs and books of useful quotations, would repeat verbatim the words of Someone (rarely named, Edna suspected, because her father hoped that the terse homily would seem his own). "*Gott im Himmel*," her father would say to the ceiling, addressing his approving Lutheran God, "adventures, romantic adventures she wants." Then, glowering down at Edna, he would recite the wisdom of Someone: "Adventures are an indication of inefficiency. Good explorers don't have them."

Her father, she guessed long after, had the approval of his God because he had so carefully anticipated and thwarted the temptations of the Lutheran devil. Her father's devil seduced the weak and erring not with the banal sins of immorality and unrighteousness, but with the Twentieth Century sins of irregularity and confusion. As a consequence of this paternal foresight, Edna Foster's formative years had been boundaried by tan-

gible disciplines: the clock at the bedside, the budget in the bureau drawer, the schedule on the kitchen wall.

These rigid lessons had stood Edna in good stead during her attendance at the business college in Chicago, during her first secretarial jobs in Detroit and New York City, and especially when she had come to work for T.C.—yes, he had been T.C., “The Chief,” even as a senator—in the Old Senate Office Building in Washington, D.C. In an uncharacteristically long and almost indecipherable letter, her father had hailed her prestigious government job as the inevitable triumph of her upbringing.

It was only after so much had happened to her employer, after T.C.’s nomination, and the exacting and exciting campaign, and the heady election night, it was after all that, when she followed T.C. into the White House with her shorthand pads and special Kleenex box, that Edna had come to realize that the parental standards she lived by were causing her difficulty. T.C. found her indispensable, she knew, because of her efficiency. What he did not know was that his secretary’s efficiency depended upon her opportunity to be methodical. Yet the new job, from the start, seemed to have been equipped by the old Lutheran devil. No inkpot could drive that devil off. The office of the President’s personal secretary was possessed of furnishings that mocked regularity: clocks had thirteen hours, calendars had thirty-two-day months, light switches had no “off” markings, or so it sometimes seemed to Edna.

As personal secretary to the President of the United States, Edna Foster possessed great pride in her position—she had recently learned to regard it as a position, not a job—and she had believed George Murdock, and giggled with delight, when he had told her over their second martinis in Duke Zeibert’s bar, “Edna, if the President’s wife is the nation’s First Lady, then you are the nation’s First Secretary.” It was one of the things that she liked about George Murdock, his way of putting ordinary things so cleverly, which of course came from his newspaper reporter training. But then the job—no, position, position, as George kept reminding her—had

its burdens, as she sometimes explained to George, and the worst burden of all, the most disconcerting for one of her background, she could never disclose to him, for then he might think her inflexible and dull, and therefore unattractive.

The worst burden, she could tell herself alone, was *emergency*.

It had been so on the farm in Wisconsin. The tread of the Western Union boy's footsteps as he came up the walk, the tinny faraway voice of the long-distance operator, had always meant emergency, and emergency was the enemy of order, peace, security. This enemy, and only this one, had always broken her father's composure, reduced his authority, and its threat had frightened her then and it frightened her still. And now, of all people on earth, it was Edna who had the one job—position—where emergency was an expected weekly visitor, although for her always an unexpected visitor, leaving her as damp and upset as she might be left by a skipped heartbeat.

Last night late, after midnight, there had come the telephone call from Governor Wayne Talley, the President's closest aide, and the word he had used was *emergency*.

"Hello, Edna, did I wake you up?"

"No—no, I was just reading." Then she had realized the hour. "Is there anything wrong?"

"Nothing special. The usual. Look, Edna, are you well enough to come in tomorrow? How's your cold?"

Automatically, she had coughed. "I suppose I'll live. Yes, of course I'll be in."

"I'd like you to make it early, real early. T.C.'s orders."

"You name it," she had said.

"Around six A.M. I know that's rough, but it's rough all over. The Russians are giving us a bad time. T.C. will be at the table early with Kasatkin. When they break, it should be about noon or so in Frankfurt, and that'll make it seven in the morning here, daylight time. It's going to be an open conference call from Germany. We're piping it into the Cabinet Room, so you get set up

for seven or eight people. And you'd better hang around in case he has something personal to dictate. Okay?"

"I'll be there, Governor Talley."

"Sorry to do this to you, Edna, but it's an emergency."

There it was. Emergency. And here was she. Disconcerted.

The chauffeured limousine had been waiting before her Victorian-style apartment on Southeast E Street, just off New Jersey Avenue, when she had emerged at five forty-five. By ten minutes after six, she had crossed the empty Reading Room in the press quarters of the West Wing of the White House, and quickly gone to her cubicle between the Cabinet Room and the President's Oval Office.

After snapping on the overhead lights, and hanging her coat beside the bookcase, she had telephoned downstairs to ask someone in the Navy Mess to bring up some hot, hot coffee and a slice of toast. Now, shivering as she waited, resenting the early hour and the loss of two much-needed hours of sleep, resenting even more the nameless emergency that shattered her pattern of work and peace of mind, she began to sneeze. Hastily she sought the package of Kleenex in her leather purse, yanked one free in time to cough into it, and then wadded it to pat her painfully reddened nose.

Trying to ignore the ache between her protruding shoulder blades, determined to bring herself up to the day's beginning, she moved woodenly toward the small wall mirror next to the beige file cabinet, with its ugly security bar still locked in place down the center. With antagonism she stared into the mirror, blinking miserably at her bird's nest of brown hair, all stringy, at the faint crease in her forehead, at her swollen watery brown eyes and the slight bulges below (bags filled by overtime hours), at the shiny long straight nose, and then at the quivering dry lips.

She went back to her desk for her comb and compact. Seated before the gray electric typewriter, holding the compact's mirror above her, she toiled to achieve a semblance of efficient neatness. She had a plain face, she knew, but at its best, all well and rested, it was at least

passable. George Murdock said that it was more, and she wanted to believe him, but when so many people had told you that your face had character, you knew for certain you did not have good looks. Certainly it was a face that could not afford tension or sleeplessness or the common cold.

She wondered whom or what to blame for this morning's wreckage. She could not blame George. Dutifully, it having been a week night and with her constant sniffing, he had brought her home early from their dinner. She could not blame herself for staying up until Talley's call after midnight, trying to read but really thinking of the miracle of her eight months with George and speculating about the months to come. After all, that was important, this thinking and daydreaming about George. It was the first time in her entire thirty years that she had had the chance to indulge herself so, that is, indulge herself seriously, that is, in secret hopes for the future.

For six years T.C. and the job for him had been enough to fill her mind. Now there was not only the President, but another, two in her life of equal importance—how it would please George to know his august standing!—and this was a pleasure worthy of her budgeted thinking time. Nor could she blame her ravaged morning face on T.C. for bringing her in here at six o'clock instead of eight. Banish that thought, she thought; veto it, it's unconstitutional. No, not T.C., he was guiltless, a dedicated, wonderful, great man, so far away, arguing and fighting with those Communist leaders about Berlin and about Africa and about the planets.

Then she realized where to put the blame, and since it was on one still so fresh in his grave, she was sorry and ashamed. She could date her teary, tired, streaky face back to the Vice-President's funeral ten days ago. It had rained, and they had stood there, the high and the mighty and herself, too, soaked to the bones, staring at Richard Porter's wet oak casket, listening to the minister's high-pitched supplication, *Unto Almighty God we commend the soul of our brother departed, and we commit his body to the earth; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.* Yet, she had felt certain. all the mourners had

not been listening attentively, for most seemed turned inward with self-concern induced by the shock of the suddenness of the Vice-President's massive coronary, his first, his last, and the mourners seemed to be mentally determining to drink less, smoke less, eat less, work less, and have those medical checkups more often. Even the President, the President himself, young, middle-aged and strong as he was, a dray horse for work, a tireless robot on the golf fairways, had gone to Walter Reed Hospital two days after the funeral, the day before leaving for Frankfurt am Main, for a thorough physical examination.

The unreality of the Episcopalian funeral lingered in Edna's mind. She had felt apart from the ceremony at the time, as she was this moment. The Vice-President's death had not upset her deeply, nor, as far as she had observed, had it emotionally moved any of the official family either, except by its suddenness and its threat to all mortality. The reason for this, she decided, was Porter's relative unimportance. His passing left no gap, rendered the nation no weaker. He had been a good bluff man, in an affable salesman sort of way, full of clichés and politics and gallons of bourbon and Throttlebottom stances the cartoonists so enjoyed. He had been a professional politician and natural Vice-Presidential candidate brought into the campaign in order to lure the uncertain Far West with him. He had served his purpose, and in death T.C. was his legacy. Because of Porter, T.C. was Chief Executive by an overwhelming mandate from the people instead of by a close plurality. Poor Richard Porter had played his role, served the Party and the electorate, and without him life would go on unaltered. It was the seventeenth time in history the government would be without a Vice-President, and no longer unusual. It was T.C. who mattered, to Edna and to the country.

Closing her compact, Edna fully absolved the late Vice-President of responsibility for her head cold and wretched face, and now, her face repaired, her mind clearer, she smelled the steaming coffee on the desk behind her. Somebody from the Navy Mess had noiselessly

come and gone, and because of her self-absorption, she did not know who it had been and whom to thank. She sipped the coffee, recoiled, blew on it to cool it, and finally, breaking the slice of toast, munching it, she was able to drink down the contents of the cup.

At last, feeling better, forgiving the day for its earliness, forgiving everyone for everything, she came to her feet. Her platinum wristwatch, a generous gift from the First Lady, showed the time to be twenty-six minutes after six o'clock. Right now, Edna guessed, T.C. and his staff were leaving the Kaisersaal, the splendid dining room of emperors of the Holy Roman Empire located in the Roemer, Frankfurt's five-gabled city hall. The European press, and recently the American papers, had gleefully taken to calling the meeting between the President of the United States and the Premier of Soviet Russia the Roemer Conference, reminding readers that Frankfurt's city hall had been the site, during the Middle Ages, where international merchants gathered to trade.

Well, Edna thought, T.C. has done his trading for the morning. Now, driving the several blocks to the Alte Mainzer Palace, his headquarters in Frankfurt, he is probably considering what problems of the trading he must discuss this afternoon (over there) or morning (over here) with select Cabinet members and Congressional leaders. Edna had seen photographs of the President's ornate Gothic ground-floor bedroom in the ancient Palace—the Bonn government had suggested the President use the ancient Palace for his living quarters instead of the United States Consulate across the Main River, because it was roomier, more picturesque, and nearer the Roemer—and not seeing this fourteenth-century Palace was what Edna regretted most about missing the trip.

Ordinarily, Edna traveled with the President. She had made four trips with him abroad—a wonderland for a farm girl from Wisconsin—but this was one of the two trips that she had missed, because of the darn head cold. Frankfurt was a city she had never seen, and even though Tim Flannery, the President's press secretary, assured her that she had missed nothing, that postwar Frankfurt

was a dull, Swiss-type industrial metropolis featuring nothing more exciting than the I. G. Farben Building and the Hesse State Radio Building, both modern monstrosities, Edna knew differently. She knew that the Allied bombers that had leveled Frankfurt's medieval Old City in 1944 had, by some miracle, left almost intact the two dusty near-crumbling architectural wonders of the fourteenth century, the Frankfurt cathedral and the three-story Alte Mainzer Palace that housed the Presidential party. Edna knew that she traveled the way she tried to work, with efficiency, and she was not ashamed that she collected palaces, castles, and museums, with which to educate her children someday. The possibility of children, for one not even married and nearing spinsterhood, brought Edna back to reality, and once more brought her mind to George Murdock. She was sorry to lose the Alte Mainzer Palace for her collection, but there was compensation in not having to be apart from George the entire week.

She realized with a start that she had been standing at the desk, daydreaming away five more precious minutes, and 3,000 miles away in Frankfurt the President was nearing his telephone in the ancient Palace, and she had not yet made the few preparations necessary for his call to the Cabinet Room. Hastily she searched her desktop for the list of those who would be present for the conference call, found no such list, and then guessed that Wayne Talley would, from long habit, have left it on the President's own desk.

Hurrying now, Edna opened the nearest door on her left, and crossed the rug to the sturdy brown Buchanan desk at the far end of the President's corner office. The green blotter held nothing, and neither did the empty card stand, so much like a menu holder, into which T.C.'s daily engagement schedule was slipped. Concerned, she looked about, and then she saw it, the single sheet of paper that Talley had left for her, a corner of it pinned under the weight of the black telephone, the deceptively ordinary telephone that was the much-publicized hot line.

Taking the sheet, she scanned the list typed upon it:

Talley himself, of course; Secretary of State Arthur Eaton, of course; Senator Selander, Majority Leader in the Senate; Representative Wickland, Majority Leader in the House; Senator Dilman, President pro tempore of the Senate; General Fortney, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Mr. Stover, Assistant Secretary for African Affairs in the State Department; Mr. Leach, the stenotypist. Eight in all. That was it for this morning.

Studying the personnel on the list as she slowly left the President's desk, Edna played her deduction game. One did not have to be Scott of the CIA or Lombardi of the FBI to make an accurate prediction, once one was given a set of clues. Edna made her prediction to herself, enjoying the sport almost as much as she enjoyed the diversion of the crossword puzzles and Double-Crostic games that she hoarded for weekends. The emergency conference call from the President, she told herself, would be devoted almost entirely to Africa and the trouble over the new Republic of Baraza. The presence of the Assistant Secretary for African Affairs indicated this. Then there would be talk about pushing something through a balky Congress, probably the unpopular ratification of the renewal of the United States' membership in the African Unity Pact, as well as further economic aid to newly independent African nations. The presence of two senators and one representative and one general indicated this. The attendance of Talley and Secretary of State Eaton furnished no added clues. They were always present when T.C. spoke, always there, his confidants and alter egos.

Yes, Edna decided unhappily, Africa would be the subject, and that promised a dull and wearisome morning. African talk meant almost nothing to her. What was it, really? A black jumble of crazy names like Basutoland, Nyasaland, Malagasy, Gambia, Dahomey, Chad, Rwanda, and lately, Baraza. Even if you were intelligent, you could not tell one country from another, or one primitive face from another (despite those wild robes they wore, despite those odd Oxford or Harvard accents they assumed when they called upon the President). It was all impossible and, for Edna, Africa remained the

Dark Continent, affecting her day-to-day existence in no way whatsoever. And—repressed heresy—she suspected that those comic-opera countries meant little more to T.C. or Talley or Eaton, either. Soviet Russia, now, that was another matter. Russia could blow us up, and ruin everything, everyone, before some of us had a chance to get married and live and have children.

She had paused before the French doors leading out to the cement walk with its overhang and colonnades. Outside—T.C. called it his “backyard”—the darkness had gone, and the gray dawn was brightening. Even in late August, the Rose Garden was still in full bloom, the roses and Shasta daisies and geraniums dominated by early chrysanthemums. At the far end of the garden Andrew Jackson’s hoary magnolia tree, partially obscuring the White House rotunda and Truman’s Balcony, was thick with green foliage. For a moment Edna was tempted to step outside, join the White House policeman who had appeared on the walk, deeply inhale the cool fresh air, and fully revive herself for the Frankfurt call. But the platinum watch on her left wrist bound her to duty. Swiftly she left the President’s office and returned to her own desk.

Yanking open drawers, digging supplies out of them, she was at last occupied with routine and too busy for daydreaming. In a few minutes, her thin arms heavily weighted under a pyramid of memorandum pads, boxes of pencils, shorthand notebook, and spare ash-trays, she went carefully to the door of the Cabinet Room. Balancing her load against the frame of the door, she grasped the knob, turned it, and pushed the door open with her knee.

She had somehow expected to find Arthur Eaton inside. He was usually first, seated and hunched over the long eight-sided, coffinlike mahogany table, his chalky, finely chiseled, aristocratic profile bent over sheaves of briefing notes. But he was not there. Instead, across the Cabinet Room, two khaki-clad enlisted men, plainly Signal Corps, were finishing the wiring of two gray metal boxes that rested on the dark table. Edna recognized the larger box, with its perforated side, as the receiver that

would unscramble and the loudspeaker that would amplify the President's confidential conversation from Frankfurt, while the sensitive smaller audio box was the microphone which would pick up any voice in the room, scramble it in a special transmitter, and send it off to the Gothic study in the Alte Mainzer Palace, where it would be unscrambled and made comprehensible through a similar portable system set up for the listening President.

Apparently the two Signal Corps men were too occupied to be aware of Edna's arrival. She coughed, and called out, "Good morning, gentlemen."

The younger, a technician third class, glanced over his shoulder. "Oh, good morning, ma'm. We'll be outa here in a jiffy."

"Go right ahead. We still have fifteen minutes."

Edna lowered her precarious load to the table, then went to the three pairs of green drapes concealing the French doors and opened them, so that once more Jackson's magnolia tree was in her view and the room behind her filled with the filtered early morning light. After shaking loose the Presidential flag, which now hung well, and taking note of the American flag, which was fine, Edna resumed her familiar routine. She distributed memorandum pads, pencils, ashtrays. She filled the water carafes. She was hardly aware that the Signal Corps men were making tests, and then saying good-bye.

She was not yet through when the corridor door opened. Startled, Edna wheeled, expecting Eaton, but instead saw two of the Secret Service agents of the White House Detail, one the red-faced, beefy Beggs, the other the wiry, blond Sperry.

"Got you busy early this morning, hey?" Beggs called out.

"They sure have," said Edna.

"Just want to thank you for Ogden and Otis, Miss Foster," said Beggs. She knew that her face must have reflected blankness, for he quickly added, "They're my boys." Then he said, "First ones in their school with the new Baraza stamps. We're all grateful."

"I haven't had any more from Africa this week," said