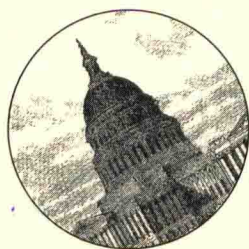


THE WOODY

A Novel



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A Novel





SIMON & SCHUSTER
Rockefeller Center
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

Although the author has taken pains to give this work an underpinning of verisimilitude, it remains a work of fiction, inspired though it may be by the flotsam and jetsam of media publicity and general gossip. Those public figures who do appear in the text by name do so entirely without their knowledge or cooperation, and any statements by them or actions taken by them or in their names derive solely from the author's imagination, and the other characters and events described are also wholly imaginary. Any resemblance to real people and events is coincidental.

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ALSO BY PETER LEFCOURT

Abbreviating Ernie
Di and I
The Dreyfus Affair: A Love Story
The Deal

PETER LEFCOURT

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*To former Senators
Gary Hart, Alan Cranston, and Bob Packwood,
whose dogs were not kidnapped.*



1.

PERU

"CALL ME, Ishmael."

He folded the cell phone and flipped it onto the bed, twenty feet away from the tepid Jacuzzi in which he lay after having had what could best be described as an inconclusive sexual encounter with a lobbyist for the condom industry.

The lobbyist, Evelyn Brandwynne, exited the bathroom naked, speaking on her cell phone in a businesslike and decidedly non-postcoital tone of voice to her Washington office.

"The funding is dead. It's terminal. There's a sheet over its head. . . ."

He watched her move slowly toward the bed with a glass of yellowing white wine and a Kleenex in her hand.

"No. I don't know. . . . What time . . . ? Shit."

She sat down on the bed and, the phone still at her ear, asked the man in the Jacuzzi, "When is the last shuttle out of Logan?"

"Nine."

She squinted at the Cartier watch on the night table and said into the phone, "I may just make it."

Evelyn Brandwynne used the Kleenex immodestly, then replied to her caller's question, "Working . . ."

There was a moment's hesitation before she delivered the punch line. "In Peru." And she folded her phone and began the search for the scattered articles of clothing removed maybe forty minutes ago, when she had begun to lobby the junior senator from Vermont.

"I don't mind traveling, Senator, but this is ridiculous. It takes days to get here."

She slipped into a pair of black lace panties and rummaged through the sheets looking for her bra.

"And it's not as if it's doing me any good, is it?" she remarked, now on all fours on the bed scrounging under the pillows.

The sight of a lobbyist from the National Association of Health Prophylaxis Industries facedown on his bed in nothing but a pair of black lace panties had a small but nonetheless stirring effect on Senator Woodrow Wilson White. But by then it was too little, too late. And, besides, he wasn't going to let her bill out of committee anyway, so why put both of them through this again?

She located her bra, slipped it on, and turned back to him with a look that was not without tenderness.

"I actually like you, Woody. I'd probably be doing this even if you weren't the ranking Democrat on that goddamn subcommittee . . ."

"Medicaid and Health Care."

"It's in the public interest. Smaller families, fewer tax deductions, a lot less AFDC."

"Medicaid isn't going to fund rubbers, Evelyn."

"Why not? You get it to the Floor, and the women love you."

"The women already love me. It's the dairy farmers and the loggers who don't love me, and they're not particularly interested in having the federal government subsidize the rubber industry."

"Health Prophylaxis."

"We're trying to balance the budget."

"Nobody ever got his face on Mount Rushmore by balancing the budget."

She zipped up her skirt, slipped her sweater and suit jacket on, and went over and sat down on the edge of the Jacuzzi. For a moment, she said nothing, just sat there with a finger absently stirring the water. Then, in a softer, more compassionate voice, she said, "Look, I think I'm supposed to say something now, like, you're working too hard or it happens to everyone . . ."

"Take Eleven east to Windham, One Twenty-one to Bellows Falls, then straight down Ninety-one to Springfield and across Ninety-five. You don't hit traffic, you'll make your plane."

For a moment she held his look, searching for something appropriate to say, and, finding nothing appropriate, she got up, blew him a kiss, and walked out.

Senator Woodrow Wilson White waited for the sound of the rental car

on the gravel driveway before rising from his cold Jacuzzi and slipping into a fluffy terry-cloth robe.

He padded barefoot downstairs through the drafty A-frame into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, and found the recorked bottle of rapidly turning white wine. He would have to lay in some wine with the firewood. Charge it to the entertainment-and-travel allowance, though you had to be careful ever since they tightened up the rules in '91 with the congressional-allowance bill that he, like everyone else in the Congress, had had to vote for.

The A-frame was located in the village of Peru, pronounced Pee-ru, seven miles from Manchester, twenty miles from Bellows Falls. It was the only thing his first wife had left him in their divorce eleven years ago, and the one place the senator could go and be assured of privacy.

Wife number one, Sharon Rosinski, a former Miss Toledo, had been captain of the UVM women's ski team. They had bought the A-frame early in their marriage, when they were still living in Ohio, for Vermont ski vacations. Wife number two, Daphne Melancamp White, hated skiing, snow, and, for that matter, the entire state of Vermont. She had been to Peru only once, during a six-day blizzard, and vowed she'd never return. And never did.

The A-frame had helped to establish the senator's Vermont residency when he first ran for the Senate in 1986, and it was slowly falling apart. The foundation sloped four degrees toward the hillside—a problem, a structural engineer had explained, that could not be corrected without taking the house down. The window joints were warped, letting drafts of cold air in. The plumbing was rusting from long periods of disuse.

It was the bane of Woody White's Washington staff's existence because there was no easy way to get there and because the senator often didn't answer the phone when he was at the house. His Vermont staff wasn't happy about the A-frame in Peru either. It was at least a two-hour drive from Montpelier, longer from Burlington.

And there was absolutely no security at the A-frame, both staffs pointed out to him. The fact that nobody knew where it was, the senator responded, was the best security of all. Not only was Peru barely on the map, but once you got there you had to take a series of unmarked dirt roads from the center of town in order to reach the house.

It wasn't easy for a United States senator to get lost. The people of Peru, all 336 of them, by and large respected his privacy, plowed his road when it snowed, and kept the house on the fire plan for the village's volunteer Fire Department.

He thought of calling home to see if Daphne was there, but he knew she

wasn't. And besides, the cell phone was upstairs, and he didn't feel like moving. He was exhausted and depressed. Maybe it happened to all men, now and then, but it hadn't happened to Woody White in a very long time.

He was counting on the lobbyist from the National Association of Health Prophylaxis Industries to be discreet. After all, if she talked, she would have to reveal the source of her information, which would be difficult without compromising her own ethics, not to mention the future prospects of the bill that was languishing in the senator's subcommittee.

As the late-winter sun began to slide behind the hill, Senator Woodrow Wilson White sat at his sloping kitchen table drinking wine that was only several days away from vinegar, thinking about having flatlined with the lobbyist and about his prospects for reelection in November and about his current wife, who might or might not be having an affair with a Finnish ice-skater, and about his first wife, who was suing him for more money, and about his daughter, who was married to an Amish blacksmith and had no telephone, and about his son, who was in the marijuana business in Miami and had serious IRS problems, and about the fact that he had to be in Rutland tomorrow for a campaign appearance at a hockey-stick factory.

He was so immersed in this dreary collection of thoughts that he didn't hear his cell phone—upstairs on the bed, half buried beneath a pillow. Even had he heard the ring, he would have been reluctant to answer it, because he knew that it would be Ishmael and that Ishmael would have a long list of things the senator needed to attend to, things that, for one reason or another, he was not attending to.

So even though he had called Ishmael and asked him to call him back, the senator probably wouldn't have answered the phone even if he'd heard it, which he hadn't.

Ishmael Leibowitz, Senator White's chief of staff, sat in his office in the suite of offices in the Dirksen Senate Office Building on Constitution Avenue and let the phone ring twenty times before putting the receiver down.

"Isn't there another number there?" Debbie Sue Allenby, the senator's chief legislative assistant, asked.

"Yes. But he doesn't give it out."

"Not even to you?"

"Not even to me."

"Does Montpelier know it?"

"Nobody knows it. His wife doesn't even know it."

Ishmael got up and started to pace around the small office, which abutted the senator's large office.

"What's he doing there?"

Ishmael gave her a look that implied that anyone who had worked for the senator for more than a few weeks should know not to ask that question.

Debbie Sue consulted her yellow legal pad.

"He's got a subcommittee meeting at four on Thursday. Plus there may be a Floor vote on the fisheries bill that morning."

"We can pair him on the fisheries vote."

"Which way?"

"It doesn't matter."

"It'll be in the *Record*."

"Debbie, Vermont is a landlocked state. They care about cows in Vermont, not about salmon quotas."

The phone rang. Ishmael grabbed it.

"Ishmael Leibowitz . . ."

There was a moment of silence, then Ishmael said, "Debbie Sue, may I have a moment, please?"

Debbie Sue nodded, making sure he knew that she knew that this was a personal call, and left the office.

Ishmael went over and closed the door, which Debbie Sue had left open on purpose. He returned to the phone and said, "Listen, I don't know about tonight. I've lost the senator."

He twisted the phone cord around his finger.

"When I find him, I'll call you. . . . Barry, it's my job, all right?"

And he hung up, irritated. Barry, who never lost *his* senator, a fifth-term nonentity from Idaho, had a hard time understanding the roller-coaster ride it was being Senator Woody White's chief of staff.

Barry called him five times a day and prattled over the phone. If he wasn't such a good source of Grade-A gossip and classified information from the Armed Services Committee, on which Senator Nonentity sat, Ishmael would have blown him off a long time ago.

But if he blew Barry off, not only would his intelligence pipeline be compromised but his status in the unofficial caucus of gay Senate aides would be in jeopardy. What if they discovered his secret and he was outed by the group, if not publicly, at least privately? He would be left to wander around making contacts with the straight Senate aides, who, by and large, didn't know what the hell was going on.

So Ishmael Leibowitz continued his subterfuge, living a lie, while trying to keep track of Senator Woodrow White. Besides being overworked and underpaid, Vermont's staff allowance being the second smallest in the Senate, Ishmael Leibowitz was, in all probability, the only closet heterosexual in Washington.

. . .

It was already dark by the time Woody found his phone. He never used the house phone because it was not a secure line, and though it was no longer a party line, as it had been when he and Sharon first bought the house, he was never entirely convinced that people weren't listening in.

Outside of the secure line in the office, the cell phone was as secure as it got without getting the FBI involved. And you never knew about them. They had guys over there in the Hoover Building selling secrets to the tabloids. If not directly to the Ethics Committee.

These were perilous times. You didn't watch your back, you'd find yourself in that windowless room on the second floor of the Hart Senate Office Building answering questions.

Woody had already had a brush with the vice squad. In 1995 a former staffer had accused him of sexual harassment. The charge was more or less groundless—a couple of ambiguous moments in the back of a campaign bus, instigated by the woman herself.

The Ethics Committee cleared him after a first-stage investigation, preferring to concentrate on Packwood, whom they were crucifying at the time. Thank God for Packwood. He had taken the pipe for the entire Senate.

Being cleared by Ethics didn't stop his alleged harasser, however. When she was finished with Sally Jessy and Geraldo, she wrote a book called *A Fox in the Henhouse—Woody White in Washington*, which spent a week on the *Washington Post* bestseller list before sinking precipitously onto the remainder shelves.

These were among the perils of being a United States senator these days. All for \$137,500, with no honoraria and a shrinking travel allowance. You couldn't even frank Christmas cards anymore.

Woody opened the flip phone and dialed his home number in Virginia. After ten rings, a melodious male voice answered, "*Pronto.*"

"Hello . . ."

"*Chi parla?*"

"Dario, it's me."

"*Chi?*"

"Me. Senator White."

"*Ah, buona sera, senatore. Come sta?*"

Dario Farniente was an illegal immigrant from Trieste, whom he and Daphne had hired to take care of their large neo-Colonial in McLean. To compensate for his limited, if not nonexistent, English, he was a superb cook, a meticulous gardener, and extremely discreet.

He was also a neo-Fascist. In his closet were a number of black shirts and armbands that were reminiscent of the heyday of Mussolini.