

Two Men, One House

**A Short Story by
Mike H. Mizrahi**

It was no use. Sleep was as slippery as the snowy path leading to his front door. The man lowered his feet to the dark green carpet and sat for several moments on the side of his bed. The pitiful sobbing that had contributed to his insomnia continued to echo faintly through the room, yet he was the only soul there.

Who was so forlorn, and why?

His feet and hands were cold. A tiny cloud gathered and dissolved with each breath he released. He prodded the floor until he felt his favorite 14-inch goat-hair house shoes, and then he carefully slipped them on. After he lit the table lamp by the fireplace, the gangly man gazed into the large mirror above the white marble mantel.

Bloodshot eyes stared back at him. Many had called them sad eyes. Not surprising: He and melancholia had been long acquainted. High cheekbones and a deeply lined face. Tousled hair. Large ears and nose. The image that followed him into each morning had been called odd-featured, wrinkled, inexpressive, and altogether uncomely.

The newspapers had been ruthless in their name-calling since he took residence here. No changing the countenance bestowed upon him by fate, or the Almighty, or whoever claimed his awkward six-foot four frame as their creative masterpiece. He'd come to accept the truth about his appearance long ago and was quite comfortable with it.

Out in the hallway, he stroked his beard and tiptoed toward the strange, dreamlike noises, hoping not to add to the disturbance and awaken his wife in the next room. As he walked, the

sounds of distress accompanied him through every empty room, a reverberation that refused to fade.

The man shivered as he wandered the hallways.

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A younger man who had traveled a great distance with no remembrance of the journey stood among the wailing people in the East Room. He knew the room, yet it appeared different. The wallpaper and furniture were new but the styles were dated, as though from a bygone era. Human shadows loitered on the walls, cast there by the few oil lamps illuminating the sad affair rather than the electric lights he was used to.

Military guards stood erect around the catafalque upon which an open casket rested. Some luminary lay in state, that much was clear. But who? The person's face had been covered.

The whole scene was eerily familiar.

Somehow, the visitor's own face went unrecognized. Every person across the globe who'd read a newspaper or watched television would normally clamor to be with him. Anonymity had been lost decades ago, but he did not miss it. The adoration fueled his exuberant spirit.

The traveler peered at the man to his right. The citizen's topcoat and stove pipe hat, with plaid and checked trousers, made him look like someone from another century. He sported a long mustache, curled at both ends, and held a stylish cane. The woman at his left wore a cage crinoline underskirt allowing her dress to extend around her body more fully. Her face was unpainted, but she'd adorned herself with a fashionable necklace and earrings and a bonnet and gloves.

As he gazed down at his suit, and lifted the bowler from his head, he considered the impossible. Had some mysterious force whisked him to the People's House in a different era? A time machine, a la Jules Verne? He'd just watched the movie with Caroline and had to convince

her that the Morlocks would not sneak into her room. There must be another explanation.

Maybe this was a dream. But the illusion seemed so real, the outlines so specific.

The anguished cries lingered, but he still did not understand why the people mourned so. Shifting to his right, he addressed the dapper man next to him. "Tell me, sir, who lies in this casket that the people here would be wailing?"

No response. Perhaps the pitiful laments drowned out his inquiries. He asked again.

"Can you tell me what has happened?"

Again, no reply.

Turning to the woman behind him, he posed the same question but she too ignored him. Their rudeness struck him as uncharacteristic of the usual visitors to this place. The deep lamentations and his inability to learn the cause for their sorrow left him dumbfounded.

He walked over to one of the military guards, assured this time he would not be disregarded. The soldier remained unresponsive, so he faced the other trooper but expected the same outcome.

"Can someone tell me what's going on here?"

A high-pitched voice came from behind. "Not sure. Got out of my bed to head down and find out."

Surprised, the visitor followed the comment and beheld the most distinguishable man in American history standing amidst the crowd. The presence of this icon in his nightclothes and slippers perplexed him further. A century of time separated them, yet there they stood in the same room together.

"Thank you for acknowledging my existence. For some reason I cannot fathom, the other people are treating me like I'm the invisible man."

The unshaven gentleman gave a slight bow and welcomed the stranger to the White House.

“Slumber eluded me again, chased away by these sounds and my constant anxieties,” he said. “The weeping lifted all the way up to my bedchamber. Most nights I can only catch an hour or two of rest anyway.”

The traveler stared at the well-known face. “This must be a mirage of some sort, a trick of the mind. Correct? Because neither you nor I should be here together, talking to each other.”

“Let me find out what’s happening.” The tall man walked over to the sentry. “Why are these people so forlorn?”

The sentinel saluted. “The president's been assassinated, and his body lies in state.”

Unfazed, the homely man sauntered toward the casket, where the face of the corpse lay shielded. Unidentifiable. The visitor also approached, and he too could not discern the face.

“This scene is familiar,” the visitor said, “but my common sense screams out. None of this is real, at least not where I'm concerned. So the fantasy must belong to me. This is my dream, and you are the visitor.”

The bewhiskered man turned to face him.

“Well, I beg to differ. The vision belongs to me since I am the president, and I am still alive. When I wake up, this distressful scene will evaporate into the morning air, leaving only my grogginess. And you, sir, my dream companion, will be gone and not remembered. With a cup of coffee and an apple, all will be well.”

“But wait, for I too am the president, and also very much alive,” the visitor said. “For you, all will not end well.”

The outsider tried to warn the chief executive. Fate would land him right where this dead body rested in state, in the same long box, and on this solemn occasion. In real life, not in a dream. And very soon.

Again, the iconic country lawyer-turned politician tried to assure him that he had things

backwards. “It’s impossible for you to be the head of state while—”

“Sir, please hear me! You must still take heed of the premonition, for you will be shot dead in several days. The nation will mourn, as these citizens do at this moment before your embalmed body. A processional train will carry your remains home for burial in Illinois. Do not doubt me, sir.”

The bearded president finally acknowledged the possibility.

“You spin a convincing yarn, much like me. You know, this reminds me of the story ‘bout...” He gazed downward for a few moments and smiled. “Tell you what...I’ll share your concerns with Mary and a few others and see what they think. Maybe it is my weather-worn face beneath the covering cloth.”

“Thank you, Mr. President.”

“At the same time, I want you to consider that it’s also possible that you, Mr. President, are the one in permanent repose this night. Ask yourself this: Do you inhabit my imagination? Or are you sleeping, and I am the infiltrator of your dreams?”

As the time traveler mulled these questions, the older president exited, presumably to return from whence he came.

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The youthful president awoke. His wife, dressed in his favorite pink suit, transferred items from her travel bag to a clutch. She looked exceptional.

“How did you sleep, Jack?” she asked.

“Not well, but what else is new. My daytime worries continue to take residence in my nighttime restlessness. And I dreamed the strangest things.” Sitting up, he winced at the sharp pain in his back.

The darling of America, his First Lady, put on her makeup. “Take your shower, and on our

way to the breakfast gathering, you can share what you remember. The hour is growing late.”

As hot water beat against his sore back, he reviewed the schedule. As hoped, the trip had already paid huge political dividends in anticipation of his re-election campaign. After politicking, a weekend of relaxation with Jackie and others at Lyndon's ranch awaited him.

Record crowds were expected to line the Dallas motorcade route to welcome their president. To the consternation of the Secret Service, he refused to travel in a closed vehicle. How could he connect with the crowds while hidden behind bulletproof glass?

As he massaged the pleasant-smelling shampoo into his scalp, the most powerful man on earth smiled at his imaginary conversation with his celebrated predecessor.

The dream that Lincoln shared about his own assassination just days before he and Mrs. Lincoln attended Ford's Theatre was the stuff of historical fascination. How strange that he should find himself in a dream within a dream. If only he could go back in real life to warn President Lincoln about his fate that day in April.

The campaign season loomed ahead, and his agenda for a second term energized him. New frontiers waited to be explored. He'd put the power of his office behind achieving his national goal of putting a man on the moon. And achieving social justice.

There was much to do.

The End