

The Lollipop Paper

By Yuri Alkin

A note from the publisher:

The handwritten document that later became known as "The Lollipop Paper" was found in the archives of late Andy J. McGriffin, who served as Vice President in the administration of his brother Jack H. McGriffin. Initially, the language of the paper and its episodic structure made experts doubt the authorship of Mr. McGriffin, who besides his political career, was known as an accomplished and eloquent writer. However, after independent expertise confirmed the authenticity of Mr. McGriffin's handwriting, it was concluded that the document was a draft of an unfinished novel.

The paper was published with consent and by the will of Mr. McGriffin's widow Mrs. Rebecca McGriffin, who passed away seven months later when she was eighty-three years of age. After the publication, the short memoir was frequently referred to and quoted in the media. Some speculated that the date of the original publication was not coincidental with the approaching presidential elections. No sufficient evidence has ever been produced to either disprove or prove the accuracy of the events described in the document. To this day, the paper remains one of the greatest mysteries in American history.

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The phone rang in the middle of the night.

"The midnight awakening," Becky muffled as I was greeting my brother and relocating myself to the living room. She had a talent for slipping in quotes from my books even in the oddest of circumstances.

Jack sounded fresh and surprisingly excited for the mess he was in.

"Andy," he announced on the phone, "I need a favor." As always he made it sound like he wanted you to do something as easy as scratching your ear.

"Sure," I replied, struggling with yawning. "Want me to take a look at a couple of your speeches?"

"Forget speeches," I almost heard him grinning. "I need to you to be my second in command."

"You *what*?"

"You heard me."

"You want me to run as your *vice president*?"

"Bingo!"

I found myself scratching my left ear.

"Jackie, you need to get some rest. This election thing has been putting too much pressure on you."

He snorted.

"Tell me about it."

"I thought I just heard you say that you wanted me to be your running mate."

"That's what I said. That's why I'm calling."

"That's why you're calling."

"Yes."

"So it's not a joke? You're serious?"

"As serious as I can be. I want you to run with me."

I glanced at the watch. This nonsense was happening at two fifteen in the morning. Jack at his best.

"I thought you've learned something during these years."

"You bet I did. I've learned even more during the last few weeks."

"Then why don't you take all this wisdom and use it to realize that you've just proposed a brilliant political suicide? You can't be serious about bringing *me* into national politics. Even your delivery boy would think you've gone nuts."

"He's not an elector. Now let's get serious. I need you by my side."

"I am by your side, you know that."

"I need more. Without you I stand no chance."

"You mean without my brains."

"In a way, yes."

"I'm flattered. But my brains come with the package. You, of all people know that. Come on, this isn't funny anymore. You need my help? I'll keep helping you. I'll do even more than I've been doing. But to put me in the spotlight? Are you that crazy? We're not the same you know?"

I knew that I was frustrated a little more than I should've been. It wasn't about the midnight call anymore and not about his stupid joke. All the childhood memories suddenly began coming to life. Jack had done something I wouldn't expect him to do—he deliberately reminded me about that forty-one year old zero-to-two-hundred split. He was not supposed to do that.

"You still don't get it," he chuckled. "You just don't get it, do you?"

"What's there not to get? You said it yourself, you need my brains and my loyalty."

"Andy, I need *you*. My brother. My *twin* brother."

The word *twin* stood out like a single tree in a field.

"What exactly are you implying?" I asked slowly, wondering if he indeed thought up such a conspiracy.

"I knew you'd get it," he replied with satisfaction. "Now why don't we talk about specifics."

* * *

One day somebody will write that book. The book that would tell the true story of the McGriffin brothers. And if the author would be smart enough, he would trace the events that shaped our lives and personalities as far back as possible. To college, to school. To kindergarten. To those far, far off days when Jack and I liked to chase that girl—what was her name?—Kath. . . Beth?—anyway, when we liked to chase that running crying little doll only to take her lollipop away from her. She always had a lollipop and we always wanted it.

Why was it so important to deprive that specific girl of that specific piece of colored sugar? Well, when you're five many things are important. In fact, they matter just as much, if not more, than a paycheck ages and ages later. So we would chase her and confiscate what we—for some mysterious reason—thought was rightfully ours and eat it. Not both of us at the same time, of course. One day it was Jack, the next day it was me. You've had one of these, right? You lick, and lick, and lick, and then there's nothing left and you wonder where this thing had disappeared and why you wanted it so much in the first place. The older I get the more things in life start looking just like that candy.

Go figure. The most amazing part by the way was that she—Kath, Beth, or whatever her name was—kept bringing a new one in every day. Every single day. I have no idea what she had been thinking and what she had been telling her mom and dad, but she just kept bringing this bait in. And we kept chasing it over and over again. Looking back, I actually suspect that the lollipop was a sort of bait indeed. That she kept doing it intentionally. That she wanted us to chase her, to

single her out of all other girls, to make circles in that dusty playground until the desired prize moved from her tiny sweaty palm to one of ours. But it took me a while to get to that conclusion. By that time Kath-Beth must have had a few children of her own. At least I managed to get a couple of them myself.

But ask me when it occurred to Jack, and I'd have nothing to say. In fact, I wouldn't be able to say whether it occurred to him at all. "So what?" you'd wonder. Well, nothing really. Except he's my one and only twin brother and the closest friend I've ever had. But as I said, to understand our real story you'd have to go way back. . .

It was stated once that a man's soul could be seen through his eyes. The saying continued through the ages without much of a change until quite recently one wise man thought of it from a different angle. It was not the soul, he speculated. All souls have their dark secrets and one's eyes can be as helpful to reveal them as one's buttocks. What can be observed through one's eyes though besides the color of retina pigmentation is something different, something that does not have a proper name in human language. It is what a common expression denotes as *the spark in the eyes*. We all realize that there's no real spark appearing in the couple of rather cold balls of flesh attached to the visual nerve, yet we know one when we see it. It is the unnamed, unidentified, impossible to grasp with words substance that tells you more than the person's looks, voice or suit. Clichés such as charisma and attractiveness don't cut it, since a person can be as attractive as a cow's smile, yet create waves of positive attitude in anybody after a five minute conversation. Charisma comes closer, but it's still not there, for it's way too often confused with a pretty face. The *spark* is definitely more than that.

It is the substance that sometimes makes an old man more appealing to right-out-of-college gals than their most cherubic classmates (I'm not talking about the substance that people store in their bank accounts). Whatever it is, it exists, and if you don't believe me just think of the most interesting person you ever met and then ask yourself whether it was the face, the vocal exercises, the dress or something else. Also for the purpose of this exercise please ignore those who were already interesting just because of their reputation. Think of the never-seen-this-guy-before type of encounters. See? Right. The substance. And that substance is not the soul—whatever the soul might be. Intriguing isn't it? The man who thought this up was—and still is—quite wise. Or, at least, quite knowledgeable about the subject. I know. Because I thought this up myself.

Jack and I were born with eighteen minutes difference—nothing unusual, as any experienced nurse would tell you. So you would expect that whoever was in charge of dealing *the substance* that day should have been quite accustomed to such an interval. He—or it—was indeed. For the amount was definitely meant for two. Nevertheless, something went terribly wrong. Perhaps, somebody called this distributing authority exactly at the most critical moment. Or he just remembered something important—like a need to allocate a few more units of the substance because of unexpected deliveries on the other side of the globe due to an earthquake. Or it was simply the superior being's idea of a joke. I'll never know why what had happened had happened. Not that it makes any difference. What matters is the result. The substance was not split half and half. It was not even split thirty to seventy. Not even ten to ninety. It simply wasn't split. Jack came out first and got all of it. I came out second and got none.

Growing up without having a tiny bit of *it* is tough. Trust me. Especially when your precise copy always lives next to you—as precise as an image in the mirror. With the single minor difference—everybody adores him and ignores you. As family legend goes, our father greeted Jack with the cheerful shout of "That's my son!" Twenty minutes later, he repeated exactly the same words to welcome me into this world, only this time the exclamation mark bent down and turned into its doubt-denoting cousin. Of course, nobody had ever told me that directly—our parents loved me too. But I overheard this innocent story way too many times to presume that they had no slightest intention of sending me the message.

Anyway, truth or not, but the transformation of the exclamation mark into the question mark had been following Jack and me all the way. He was greeted, I was frowned upon. He was welcomed, I was ignored. He was adored, I was tolerated. You get the drill. Yet we were authentic twins—as authentic as they ever come.

I don't remember much of early childhood and I'm thankful to my ignorant brain for that. There wouldn't be much to remember other than rather pitiful moments. In fact, my recollection of myself begins approximately with that lollipop chasing. The only memory of an earlier period is my aunt's face, gleaming with a wide smile, and her lips, pronouncing gleaming words, "Jack, darling, wouldn't you like an apple?" And her long fingers with manicured nails taking the warm red apple away from my weakly resisting hands. The memory doesn't tell me whether Jack accepted the apple or not, but knowing him I'm sure he didn't. Not because it was taken from

me—he never paid attention to such minor details—but because he didn't like fruits when he was a kid. He still doesn't.

I remember quite a lot of our teenage times though. Boy, was it tough. Jack got all the dates. Literally. All of them. At times it seemed that all the women in the school—teachers included—would kill to just go out with him once. And the boys wouldn't even think of getting at him for that, for they adored him at least as much as girls did. To say that everybody loved him would be a very pathetic attempt to describe that God-like status that he attained by doing nothing other than being himself. He wasn't the cutest, strongest, smartest or richest kid on the block. He was just the boy who got precisely twice as much *it* as any person had ever had. And that was enough.

The strangest part of that period was that while swimming every day in this sea of worship he managed to preserve his decency. To put it simply, he did not become an arrogant jerk, as one would expect from any normal person in such a situation. He behaved like a jerk on more than a few occasions, but this did not become a pattern in any way. In his heart he was still a nice guy. And that was the biggest mystery for me. For I was always nearby to observe and conclude.

Just as Jack wasn't the best in anything, I wasn't the worst. I wasn't ugly. Damn, I even looked exactly like the guy who made girls blush just by giving them one quick look. I wasn't nerdy, in fact my jokes were much funnier than Jack's attempts to be funny (until one day when he began using my jokes, but that's a different story). I wasn't weird, I wasn't pitiful, and I wasn't stupid. I just didn't have *it*. None of it. Not even a little, tiny, microscopic piece of it. And that was sufficient. They didn't like me. The word "they" here means everybody—the whole stinking world. I still don't know how I didn't go crazy back then. Retaining sanity while being disliked by even the ugliest girl around is not a task for a teenage boy.

One day though, the situation had suddenly changed. Nancy, one of the most popular girls in the school, approached me and looking everywhere but into my face asked if I'd like to go out sometime. Taking lack of direct eye contact for shyness and smiling as wide as I could I assured her that I'll be happy to accompany her. Soon. Perhaps even tomorrow. No rush, but tomorrow would be good. Or probably we can go out tonight. I need to check my schedule.

To say that I was happy and proud would be a serious understatement. I was as happy as a lifelong sinner who arrived to the gates of hell only to be informed that the abovementioned place had been filled and he had no choice, but to go to heaven. Nancy glanced briefly at me, bit

her lip and then in suddenly different voice said, "Never mind. Forget it." Then she left abruptly, taking along my happiness.

As it turned out an hour later, by asking me out she was trying to get closer to Jack who hadn't been paying much attention to her lately. A date with me seemed a justified—though very heavy—price to get closer to the God of All Girls. Despite the advice of her girlfriends, she was ready to pay that price, but in the end she couldn't do it. My idiotic smile was the last straw. I overheard all of that in girl's chat and the word "idiotic" became the last straw for me.

I remember rushing home after this devastating experience, staring into a mirror and shouting like crazy, "What the hell is going on?!" The next thing I remember is my red face in the mirror and Jack's picture in my hand (in our house we had more than enough of these hanging on the walls). I madly, and at the same time carefully explored my nose, my eyes, my cheeks, my lips, my hair—only to find them once again identical with those of my lovely brother. Everything looked exactly the same as Jack's. All until the pieces came together. I think it was that moment when I ultimately realized the depth of the trap I got into at my birth. And it was then that I decided that I was not going to surrender in any shape or form. I decided that I would prove to all these people that *it* was not the only thing one needed in life. I decided never to complain and never to show that I care about the opinions of cruel humanity.

It took me three whole days to forget about my vow and tell my dad that my life sucked. He listened to me and sent me back to do my homework. I was also reminded to look at my brother once in a while and behave more like him—like a man, with no whining and complaints. Apparently, my father took my words rather personally, due to the tough budget situation our family was experiencing at the time. I had no option but to follow his other advice, namely, to suck it up and to get on with it.

When we were thirteen or so another difference surfaced our lives—the one that played as important role in shaping them as the original injustice. That difference was good old brainpower. Not that Jack wasn't smart—he was a very clever boy. Our thinking abilities were about the same—I believed in this back then and I believe in this now even after everything that happened later. But you wouldn't walk twenty miles to the next town if you can get there by car—even if your legs are in perfect condition. Likewise, if you don't have a car, but must get to that town you will drag your feet over there, right? That was what happened to us. Jack could get anything he wanted using his absolute charismatic power and he relied more and more on it for

everything. As for me, smiling at people to get what I want would only get me into a lot of trouble, so I had to make some use of that gray matter of mine. The complete inability to achieve anything using Jack's ways only helped in that.

Few facts about our bodies are known as well as this one: the more you exercise some a muscle the stronger it becomes. Not exercising it on the other hand leads to atrophy. Which is exactly what happened to our brains. Mine became quite sharp—way sharper than it was supposed to be (unless this was what the substance dealer had been planning for all along). Jack's became not so sharp, if you know what I mean. Yes, I have every right to say so and I earned it the hard way. Slowly, but steadily I was becoming the smartest kid in the school. Smartest, but still despised by everybody. Jack was walking the same path, only in the opposite direction. At times it seemed that the less he thought the more they liked him. I was growing up cynical, pragmatic and ready to do whatever it takes to achieve the goals I set for myself. And Jack was growing up. . . well, Jack. Oh and by the way, we still looked the same.

This second difference reached its peak when the sociology teacher, Mr. Grahams was distributing our papers. He came in at the middle of the school year to replace Mrs. Astons, who followed her fiancée, who in turn moved to Kansas to become a higher paid human being. Girls said that she was following her heart, while boys, yours truly included, speculated that she followed the money and one more thing that should not be mentioned in the reading materials that could reach children's hands. Mrs. Astons was an ever smiling little brunette on the last brink of youth. She was kind with the students and not too tough on her judgments and grades. And she worshiped Jack of course.

Mr. Grahams was nothing like her and the difference went way beyond gender and age. The tall gray-eyed cold-blooded man in his late fifties didn't appear to be very sympathetic to our cause and eventually proved to be every piece of a tough guy we thought he'd be. Surprisingly enough, for me he became the father figure I've never really had. But that happened later. On that day he was just passing out our papers, accompanying them with sarcastic comments. Nevertheless, when handing me my paper he said, "Not bad, young man. Not bad at all." Only later did I learn that this was the highest possible praise that could come out of him. Then Mr. Grahams turned to Jack. "Son," he said looking paternally at him and handing him the paper, "you need to go into a field where people would care only about your appearance and wouldn't give a shit about what you think or even do." And so years later Jack went into politics.

I on the other hand took the completely opposite path—to the place where I could succeed or at least make a decent living without anybody seeing or hearing me. Not that I didn't want to rise and shine, but realism had become my second name by then. Funny enough our parents had a similar idea about my professional future. They also pictured me spending my days in some dark corner, doing something well paid and at the same time useful for society. The only problem was that we had a slight difference of opinions on what this “something” was supposed to be to be. My idea was freelance writing. Theirs was accounting. You can sense that we were not exactly in sync.

I had nothing against accounting as an occupation—as long as I was not the one punching the numbers my whole life. True, I wasn't good with people (or rather they were not good with me), but I was definitely better with words than with figures. We fought for a while and with every day of arguments one simple idea was becoming clearer and clearer for me: if I wanted my dad to pay for my college degree, that degree had to be about numbers. Faced with the dark prospects of doing things I didn't like for years to come, I began changing my attitude toward accounting. In other words, my attitude toward this innocent and honorable occupation went from neutral ignorance to animal hate.

One day I even threatened our dad that I would become an accountant only to go work for the IRS and to ruin his finances by scrutinizing his tax payment practices. Although this was nothing but a joke, the single mention of IRS audit unexpectedly changed the color of dad's face from normal to bright darkish red. “You should be ashamed of yourself!” he screamed. “You are a disgrace to this family and if you ever want to become an educated man this education will be in the field of my choice! Do you comprehend this?!” When angry, dad for some reason was overly literate in his remarks. Perhaps that was the gene, which was pushing me so hard toward the writing field. Years later, I ran into a few more people who had such a tendency, only they all were soap opera characters.

Next, I had to listen to the sequence of angry vows and Shakespearian style comments about an ungrateful son and unwise choices of mindless youth. The career in creative writing faded away and disappeared in the gray slopes and fields of accounting. The hope for a change followed it shortly. And then suddenly everything changed. Jack, who had never before participated in discussions about my future, entered the room and said, “Cut it, Pa. Andy wants to be a journalist, what's wrong with that?” The fountain of dad's eloquence dried out

immediately. The next morning I got the blessing to become whoever I wanted to be—even a writer. And that was the day when I fully realized the ultimate power of a double-portion of *it*.

College years went by quickly. I was good at writing, bad at relationships and the attitude of people around me was still far from what I wanted it to be. The modern adult world, despite all its cruelty, in some ways is less cruel than the world of children. After being taught for years to hide their real thoughts, adults who call themselves "civilized people" become excellent sugar-coating professionals. The fact that they despise somebody doesn't stop them from being nice with that horrible person. Unlike kids, they avoid using direct phrases such as "You suck! We don't want to play with you!" They smile and tell you how glad they are to see you, how great you look today and how much they missed your company. While doing that, they obviously can think to themselves "You suck!", but would never allow these words to slip from their tongues. Ah, the civilized society . . . Nevertheless, you can always sense that somebody doesn't exactly adore you. I sensed that all the time and this feeling only strengthened my cynicism, a necessary ingredient of success in my field.

These days Jack was not far—in fact, right there. Only his major, unlike mine, was in political science. Fulfilling the prophecy of Mr. Grahams, he was preparing himself for a career in politics. Whenever somebody would ask him, "So Jack, who are you going to be after college?" he would always reply with one word, "A politician." Not many asked though—it was written all over him that he would play big politics one day. Meanwhile he played pool, guitar and football. He was not the best at any of these hobbies as well as in studies, but that meant nothing to anybody. The atmosphere of love that formed around him in the school had followed him to college only to become thicker. The minute girls met him, they were ready to fall in love with him. Two minutes after guys met him, they were ready to admit he was the coolest fellow they ever knew. Three minutes after our dean met him, he was ready to pronounce that never before had this college seen a brighter young man. I know he was ready to do so, since this was exactly what he had done. The college was not one of the top ten, but I could bet all my future paychecks that these walls saw brighter men than my brother. Only none of these men had more than the maximum of *it* a human can have. Jack had twice as much.

While my brother was enjoying the benefits of his gift, I was exploiting the benefits of living in the adult world. With time I learned how to camouflage the complete lack of *it* with artificial wit and sarcasm. The type of girls who chose to make their careers in journalism could

appreciate this. Nothing could replace the real *it* of course, but at least I had better success with the opposite sex than in school. In fact, the word "opposite" is not really necessary in the previous sentence. I went on occasional dates and even managed to get into two relationships. One lasted a month, another ended after three days. The problem was always the same. Despite my whole-hearted attempts to compensate for what I didn't have, it was still too hard for girls to sustain the terrifying emptiness of this black hole. "Gosh, I don't know what's wrong with you," said my three-day passion breaking up with me. "You're fun, you're smart, you're good at these things, but you know what . . . you . . . you're different. You scare the shit out of me." Then she left, taking her clothes.

As you can see there was some progress compared to the school days. Back then, girls took my happiness and hope away, as they left. Now this was beyond their power. For I didn't have any hope left. What that girl said was the ultimate truth. Having zero of *it*, I had zero chances to succeed in anything that required prolonged human interaction (sex doesn't require it, so at least there I was ok). I knew that for the rest of my life I would be going from one brief occasional relationship to another. No woman in her right mind would choose to become closer with me after knowing me for a while. Well, some women with self-esteem lower than the Alaska winter temperature would, but I didn't want to be with those kind of women. You see, I had my own pride. Moreover, I was very proud in my heart for the stand that I took in life, but I kept these thoughts to myself. Like the majority of my other thoughts though.

Then the college years ended and the rest of life began. I went to work for some not so well known, but decent magazine. They were not the first ones to interview me, but the first ones to extend an offer. The secret was that unlike other interviews to which I rushed immediately upon invitation, I staged this one deliberately.

First, I spent some time freelancing for them and making sure that none of the staff members even spoke to me on the phone. They were after my writing skills, so in the age of phones, letters were our only means of communication. They fell so much in love with my articles, that they had no choice, but to bear with me when I appeared at their doorstep in person. A usual story of falling in love via letters. At least I didn't turn out to be a serial killer like it happened to that girl who was exchanging "I love you!" letters with the guy who, she thought, was imprisoned for shoplifting.

Anyway, after becoming a staff member I made sure to be as uninvolved in verbal communications as possible and to do my best on each and every piece of writing I submitted. The result was as noteworthy as it was expected. Fellow colleagues didn't like me to say the least, while the editor-in-chief came to the realization that with me his magazine was worth twice as much. That arrangement worked for me.

As for Jack, he went exactly where he wanted to go—into the wild jungle of politics. I'll spare you the details. If you know something about politics, you know all about his rise. If you don't know much about it yet, you probably won't appreciate this information. It would be sufficient to say that Jack's career was unheard of. It's a modern classic story now, and any schoolboy aspiring to be a politician knows how this came-from-nowhere-nobody young man climbed through the ranks of the powerful party faster than a hard-core Yankees fan rushes to the closest TV for the season's final game. Jack was destined to become a politician, or to be precise, an *elected* public official. A servant of public interests, as they say. Like the people who constitute the public ever shared the same interests . . .

Going back to Jack's rise—you could argue that two hundred percent of *it* could've as well made him a star actor or a star singer or a star dancer or any other type of performing star. True. But the keyword here is *performing*. All these people must perform, at least to some degree. And Jack wasn't good at it. You should've heard him playing that guitar. Truth be told, he wasn't really good at anything other than being himself. And that served him well. In fact so well, that until he went after his ultimate prize he made no enemies. No real enemies I mean. There were more than a few people of course who envied him, and I'm pretty sure that some of them even hated him for his shining charm and success, but that was different. He managed not to make any sworn enemies, ones that would do anything to take you down. And that is extremely rare in high profile politics.

We kept in touch although we lived totally different lives in different places. What could become a life long powerless hate on my part somehow died out as I was growing older. It was not Jack's fault that he got what should have been mine, and knowing him, I was sure that if it were up to him, he would have shared. Probably not the entire half of *it*, but at least a large chunk—larger than many others would agree to give up in such a weird hypothetical situation. But it was not up to him, not up to me and not up to any human on the face of the earth.

So I learned to live with it. He was a good brother and a decent person. Jack had similar views on me. I was, perhaps, the only person he knew who didn't fall under his spell. The power of such independence combined with my overall benevolent attitude was tough to underestimate. Jack appreciated it and at times sought my sarcastic opinions when he needed a grain of salt. Every now and then, I would receive his call to talk about his next step or his next important meeting. He had a lot of people who were happy to advise him, but he wanted somebody who, to reverse Mr. Grahams' words "wouldn't care about his appearance". He was definitely dialing the right number for that.

Then there was the book. I had been thinking about writing it for a while, following the tracks of legions of journalists before me. Only unlike people who always planned to start writing "tomorrow", "next year" or "right after I get that raise", I was conscious about the difference between dreaming about things and making them happen. So one day I sat down and typed the phrase, which without false modesty I can call famous: "The morning started at eleven PM."

Next, I spent six months dragging myself to the chair every evening and every weekend and cursing the moment when I made the moronic decision to write anything, but articles and checks. Then six months ended and I faced the need to publish the result of this half-year long torture. I was not destined to become one of these famous authors who have to offer their first novel to seventy eight publishers before the seventy ninth one takes a risk to publish two thousand copies only to find out next morning that he had discovered a gold mine. I knew that I wrote a good novel, I worked in the writing industry, I knew (through letters, only letters!) a few good editors and a few dozens of good agents. So the first publisher who got the manuscript published it. And then he found out that he had discovered a gold mine.

The only problem that came up during the publishing process was the cover. The editor insisted on publishing the author's photo. He was as stubborn about this as a die-hard atheist about origins of human species. This was the way he liked publishing his books, period. His stubbornness even made me walk into his office personally, have a ten-minute conversation about the weather and the market fluctuations and then ask him politely, "By the way, do you still want that picture of me?" I saw clearly that he wanted to back off, but his professional pride prevailed. "Yes, please," he muttered.

And so we ended up publishing the book with Jack's face on it. He was my twin brother after all. Nobody knew, of course. The stubborn editor's boss who never met me in person even called

me to say something like, "So what was all this fuss about? I wish my pictures looked like this one."

I don't even know what made the novel such a hit—the cover or the content. Perhaps, it was the combination of the two. One way or another, but it was surely a success. It made it to the bestseller lists and even stayed there long enough to make critics talk about a new star on the horizon. I was busy writing articles for my boss, freelancing for a few other magazines, browsing through the offers and even reading some fan mail. Most of the mail though came from women who, as one of these correspondents put it, “just had to buy the book to always have these magnetic eyes nearby on my bookshelf”. Talk about horror movies. I just kept forwarding all this nonsense to Jack for his amusement.

One day I was on a plane flying to Boston for a family gathering. I hated flying, but my father was celebrating his sixtieth birthday, so I didn't have much of a chance to avoid this trip. He hadn't been the best father, at least not to me, but I was a good son. I said "Hi" to my neighbor, who turned out to be an attractive young woman, as they say in our business, lowered myself into the chair and asked for the paper. Then I watched the airport buildings run away as the plane was taking off and was just preparing to take down some notes for the article I was working on, when a somewhat curious “Excuse me” came from the right. I turned to the young woman only to find her again a real pleasure for the eyes. She was not a prom queen type, but that just made her more attractive.

“I apologize for this awkward question,” she continued, “but do I know you from somewhere? Your face is so familiar, but I'm sure we haven't met before.” At this moment, I wished my name was Jack. I had completely stopped wishing for things like this when I was sixteen or so, but she was so real. *Real* is not the best word, but there's no right word in the entire Oxford Unabridged dictionary to describe the thing that made her different.

“No,” I replied, having no doubt about the outcome of this conversation. “I don't think we've met. Sorry.”

Surprisingly, she didn't rush to finish the chat.

“Are you some kind of celebrity?”

“Hardly.”

“How about being on TV?”

“No. Never.”

"Strange," she smiled. "I can swear I saw you someplace. Well, the flight is long, I may figure it out."

"I see you don't give up easily."

"No. As one writer said, I do what I can and while I can."

"Are you quoting *The Midnight Awakening*?"

She looked pleasantly surprised.

"Yes. So you've read it too?"

"Not really."

"Then . . . how did you know?"

"I wrote it."

"Oh!" she had the look on her face that an eighteen-year-old girl would have after receiving an autograph from the King himself.

"I love this book! So this is how I knew your face! So—" Then she suddenly lost her enthusiasm.

"Wait," she said, looking at me thoughtfully. "You're not the man on the picture." I was about to open my mouth and claim that sometimes I do get lucky in front of the camera, when she hit me with the next phrase, "Do you have a brother?"

I couldn't help but smile. This was the question that Jack always got. Women resorted to this inquiry when the circumstances of Jack's appearance signaled that he may not be available for a romantic venture on that particular evening. Being a good brother and friend, he always pointed these curious women to me, but the results of these redirections were always the same. Women don't like a man without *it*, sensing its absence better than animals sense fear.

Now for the first time somebody asked me this innocent question. And for some strange reason I threw away my original intention to lie.

"Yes," I replied. "I have a brother. A twin brother."

For a few seconds this strange woman studied me with her large brown eyes. Then she suddenly grabbed my hand. "Poor boy," she said. "Poor boy, it must've been so hard for you."

We got married four months later. Naturally, Jack was my best man (and three years later, I returned the favor). The wedding was one of a kind, because everybody stared at the best man at the expense of the groom, who, on top of that, happened to be the best man's twin brother. Jack danced with the maid of honor, holding her like it was their wedding and demonstrating moves

he had picked up in a few dance classes. He could just as easily have stood there like a statue and still achieve the same dramatic result. The girl's heart was broken and she cried over him for at least two months. It would be fair to assume that she was not the only one. Her boyfriend was furious and even paid Jack a visit with an obvious intent to make him pay for his indecent behavior and its unpleasant consequences. An hour later he left smiling like a rose and having asked Jack to join them for the next game.

The only person who looked at me, and only at me, during the wedding was my lovely bride. "I do," she said loudly and I knew she meant it. So did I. Standing there and looking at her I thought to myself that a man without *it* can still achieve some noteworthy heights—if not in public life then at least in his private one. If I only knew what was going to happen years later.

Our first acquaintance remained a mystery for me. I still don't know how, in a second or two, Becky could understand everything that was going on in my life and my heart. When I asked her about this on our honeymoon, she said, "You looked so much like a person who could write that book. But the picture didn't." Hardly a helpful answer.

In a way, Becky herself remains a mystery to me even today after all these years of good marriage. I don't say "happy" because to me "happy marriage" is an oxymoron. There're such things as "happy ending" and "happy hour", but for a marriage to be happy one of the partners has to be a delusional idiot. You can't be happy every moment year after year while living and night with somebody else—even if this person is an angel (an angel, by the way, would drive you crazy even quicker than somebody more earthly). The happiness miraculously goes away the first time you fight. And don't tell me that there are couples who don't fight. They belong to only two places: fairy tales and graveyards. There's a such thing as a good marriage though and this is exactly what Becky and I have had. And trust me, an authentic good marriage is a rare thing.

Becoming a married man helped me immensely in getting rid of the last few reservations I had about myself. No longer did I care about *it* and its absence in my eyes, head, stomach or any other place where this mysterious substance hides in the human body. I had all I needed to live a normal life and I surely went into every direction I wanted to explore. A well known fiction author, an occasional but, as they say, influential freelance writer, a sought-after sociology expert and a father of two children were some of these directions.

Jack meanwhile was doing well. Really well. Soon after going into politics he discovered that his major strength was exactly in what you'd expect it to be—winning elections. Being in the

office was a different matter and he didn't really prosper in any of the positions he held, but that didn't stop him from being elected into every single office in which he wanted to be. Mr. Grahams' prediction worked. When it came to charming the crowd and winning any kind of popularity vote Jack had no equals.

Appearance in person obviously worked the best, but TV results were exceptional too. He was just impossible to beat. No matter how hard the opponents tried to pour mud on him, a five-minute speech on his part made all these efforts void. The electorate loved him and wanted to see him in the chair—a higher one each time. Besides, he was not guilty of any serious wrongdoing. It is also worth mentioning that as soon as he got married, the only aspect of his lifestyle that could potentially damage his image became irrelevant.

Thus, it was not a surprise that he started thinking about running for the country's highest office at the age when a majority of presidents-to-be battle for the likes of assistant DA position. The ultimate ability to attract people of all ages, colors, sexes and whatever else makes one person different from another called for an ultimate challenge. Jack went for it with no hesitation and, some time after announcing his candidacy, was labeled “The Next Hope” by press. Then he left for the campaign trail.

As Jack was sweeping through the states like a tornado collecting more votes than all other candidates combined, it seemed that his victory was inevitable. Never had a presidential race seen a challenger who possessed the most desired quality of any election candidate in such great amounts. Others were older, more experienced, more powerful, with more money, with more connections, with more backing, with excellent records of running a state, commanding the troops, and fixing financial crises. Some of them were respected, some were loved, and some were feared. But none of them could do what Jack was doing day after day—appear before a gathering of voters and turn his critics into supporters. And only I knew the secret. Well, Becky did too. I told her all about *it* on the second date only to find out that she had guessed pretty much all of this already.

Jack won his party's nomination and was doing so well in polls that it seemed nothing could stop him from being inaugurated next January. And then the "Bridesmaid Scandal" hit the newsstands.

The specifics of the catastrophe were as rare as the entire race. Accepting significant state campaign contributions from people with a less than a clean record can be a lucrative business.

However, when the fact of such donations becomes public knowledge in the middle of a presidential campaign, it can severely damage your chances to win. In fact, it can bring them close to zero. Never mind that it's not you who is guilty. Never mind that it happened ten years ago. Never mind that you're very sorry. If a person who you chose to be your vice presidential candidate did this for his own campaign when he ran for the state senator you shouldn't have picked him. Who cares that you didn't know. You should've checked. This guy could become our country's next president, you know?

As I was reading these headlines, I had to agree with them despite my pity for Jack. He indeed demonstrated lack of reasonable judgment in choosing his running mate. And now he had to pay for it. He was in the race that was impossible to win at the time when it was too late to back off.

* * *

And then the phone rang.

Twenty minutes after the call had ended, I was still sitting in a chair and thinking over the most daring political trick our country ever saw. Then soft steps interrupted my thinking process.

"What is it?" Becky was standing at the door. "Is he giving a speech tomorrow?"

"It's not about a speech." I looked at her. "It's about running with him."

"Your brother is crazy," she replied, as always grasping the essence of the message in a split second. "Now tell me why you think it's going to work."

What do you do when despite your ultimate ability to win over people's hearts your chances of winning their votes are less than slim because nobody trusts the person you picked as your running mate? Right! You pick your twin brother and whenever a vice-president candidate is scheduled for appearance, you go there instead of him. Campaign schedule becomes a nightmare, so does the need to watch what you wear and what you say, you have to deceive even your closest aides, not to mention the entire nation, you can kiss your career good-bye if this scam ever gets discovered, and whatever is left of your personal life goes down the drain completely. But what you get in return is the ability to apply your entire arsenal of heavy weapons twice—first as a presidential candidate, then as a man who will be his right hand.

Unethical, you say? Then think what is more ethical: to elect a crooked politician whose dirty past is unknown just because it has been perfectly concealed, or to elect a smart man who despite all his cynicism wishes the best for his country, knows more about economics than your average

senator and unlike most politicians has never been power hungry? If you prefer the second option, you could as well vote for me in that situation. Yes, I know I'm not a modest man. I'm a realistic one, that's all.

The unexpected announcement, followed by the world-wide "What?" led to an even less expected turnaround in the election polls. The most unorthodox interpretation of American election system worked. When the Election Day came, we won.

And so it happened that at the age of forty, my brother Jack became the country's (and arguably the world's) most powerful man. He achieved this ultimate post at such a young age not because he was the smartest, brightest or richest candidate. The force that placed him in the Oval office originated in his natural ability to attract people. All he had to do was to apply this enormous gift in the right way and in return obtain his ticket to a spot in history.

But there, at the top of the country's power, in the closest circle of the world's most influential people he faced a mind boggling truth. The people who shared this circle with him, his counterparts from all around the world didn't care about *it*. They had as little respect for it as a car dealer has for the real condition of the cars he sells. For them *it* was merely a tool for obtaining and securing the position, but they wouldn't even blink because somebody's *it* made them do so. They were as immune to it as a recently healed chickenpox patient to this one-time disease. They simply didn't give a shit.

When I looked at the documents that Jack brought back from his first world tour, I couldn't believe my eyes. In all the countries he visited everything went fine—he brought back the usual congratulations, the mutual vows to promote peace between the two states, the trade agreements, and all the other things you'd expect the President to bring from his "Hi-I'm-The-New-Guy" tour. From all, but China. That one was different. Way too different.

"Do you realize what you have done?" I asked, trying to grasp the entire far-reaching stupidity of the agreement in my hands.

"I had no clue he'd talk about this. It's the best I could get out of him," he snarled. I obviously wasn't the first one to hint about the corner in which he'd just put our military capabilities in this region. Only I could afford to be more direct than his staff.

"Then perhaps you shouldn't have talked to him at all. You should've sent somebody instead."

“That was supposed to be a one-on-one, you know that. He is the head of the state and he wouldn’t talk to anybody, but me!”

“Then you’re not the right person for this job!” I shouted.

And suddenly he sighed.

“You might be right. I thought about this all the way back.”

I didn't even expect him to agree, yet alone so fast. During the short conversation that followed this acknowledgement, I gained more respect for my brother than I ever had during my entire life. He was very upset about the situation. But this wasn't about his ego. What really concerned him was his time in the office and the disasters in international politics that his term may bring to the country. Everywhere else he could depend on his advisors. Everywhere, but in the lonely office where he had to face his counterpart from another country. There he was destined to fail. No matter how well he was prepared, the person next to him could always make an unexpected move and talk him into something that was not in the best interests of America, to put it politely. And there was nobody who could replace him there. This was the President's job.

Or a job for somebody genuinely indistinguishable from the President...

Come to think of it, our plan (proposed by Jack, by the way) was not any more unethical than our election practices. Only this time, it was done purely for the country's sake.

It wasn't expected that I would achieve much, but at least we were in agreement that I wouldn't get us into as much trouble as Jack just did. Yet, as I was flying to Europe for my first round of high-level talks, I was somewhat uneasy. After all, I was the most unlikely person for the task of convincing somebody to do anything.

The talks proved me wrong. As it turned out, people on the very top not only didn't care about *it*. They spoke my language. They were men of reason, men of argument, men of coldly calculated moves. They were as pragmatic and cynical about everything as I was. I could always find a common ground with them. They were my kind of people. A year later, the Japanese premier coined the phrase, "Your press talks only about your easily noticeable qualifications, while totally ignoring the far more important ones." He was a smart man.

Later we discovered a few other areas where I could help out more than the vice-president's job description suggested. Gradually I was becoming the man behind every important decision. Jack wasn't happy about it, but every time he faced a serious problem he dragged me in more and more. Believe it or not, he wanted the best for the country. And perhaps, for the first time in his

life, he was realistic about his abilities. At some point, he even told me, "Andy, I'm not cut out for this job. I don't know anymore why I wanted it so much. But you were made for it." I didn't tell him that it took many years of public love and disguise to make us into the people we were. Had *it* been split equally at our birth, we would never have been in this situation and in this office. By adoring Jack so much they made him less smart than he originally was. By despising me, they made me way sharper than I was born. The ultimate unfairness had led to the ultimate results.

And so it worked. Never before had the principle "United we stand" been implemented so literally and so successfully in the highest echelon of American politics. Jack talked to the public. I talked to the external world. Jack shined. I thought. Jack was the President's face. I was the President's brain.

Among the staff the President became known for frequent tête-à-têtes with his brother. It was also noted that during international trips he was highly unapproachable and preferred to concentrate on his thoughts alone. Coincidentally, during the president's absence the vice-president also preferred in a way to lock himself in, although, whenever involved in a conversation, he seemed to be somewhat more charming than usual. But the White House rumor mill never stops.

Then the next election dawned. If there was anybody in our party who questioned the need for Jack's second term it was Mr. President himself. But then he said, "Let's bring you into the office once again" and the ball started rolling. We were confident, but had to face a serious challenge. This time our opponents learned the lesson. The candidate who emerged from their primaries was not the usual state governor or retired general type. He was The Prince Charming himself. I don't know how they found this guy, but he was the most charismatic candidate this party had ever produced. Instead of the battle of views and qualifications, the election was clearly heading toward the battle of charismas. If it hadn't been for the nearly perfect record of Jack's administration, my brains and Jack's *it* we wouldn't have stood a chance. Actually, without the last ingredient, the first two wouldn't have mattered much.

But with all three components present we were in good shape. As Election Day neared, polls indicated a higher and higher probability of another term in the office. By the time blackout period had started, we knew that we wouldn't need to look for a career change in the near future.

We just had to wait through that period when no mass-mailing to the electorate is allowed, count the votes, and go for the second inauguration.

Two weeks before "the first Tuesday after the first Monday", the infamous Nine Day Crisis struck like lightning. I believe some of the specifics are still classified. The details that were revealed twenty-three years later, were still not specific enough to describe the depth of the danger the world was in during those days. Never since Soviet missiles entered Caribbean waters, had the chances of the planet going nuke been any higher. Only this time, we had to deal with a mix of rogue nations and international terrorism.

I was on the phone day and night, going from meeting to meeting, hardly recalling the meaning of the word "sleep" and hoping that my country would see another day. Oh, and I also had to address the nation. Why me? Because the crisis outbreak happened while I was having talks with my British peer. The next day I flew back, but instead of going to the White House, I was re-routed to what official press releases call "an undisclosed location". The country was in such danger that an extremely rarely used security procedure kicked in. It was the procedure that in the interests of national security prohibits the President and the first person in his line of succession to share the same geographical location. In other words, it meant that until this thing was over, Jack and I had no chances to meet. And to everybody I was the President. Frankly, at that moment I couldn't have cared less about this minor detail. I was too busy.

I addressed the nation once, speaking from my heart, calling for patience and reassuring everybody that we will handle the situation (it hadn't been labeled a *crisis* yet). Then, two days later, because of another unexpected development that now belongs in history books I had to address the nation again. Later, there was a press conference. Overall, I spoke to the entire population of the United States four times during that period, not counting endless re-runs. Then the crisis was over and although it could have taken millions of lives, it took none. I was the happiest and proudest man on Earth. Jack and I finally met and after a hug, I became the Vice President again. The Prince Charming also appeared in the media praising my (or rather, Jack's) actions, calling for nation's unity, and hinting that the crisis could have been prevented had the government used intelligence information more wisely.

The staff members drew their own conclusions. Once, I overheard a conversation that went like this: "The President is surely a different man at times of crisis. He was the most unlikable person, ever. But man, how he handled it! It was the stuff of legend!" I didn't interrupt. In a way,

this was an accurate description of what happened. Now we had to get some sleep and go through the formality called "the Election Day". . .

One of the memories of my childhood is Uncle Mike. Uncle Mike was a nice man who always had a good joke for kids and a warm greeting for adults. Everybody in the family liked him most of the time. The only exceptions were times when he sang. For he was absolutely tone-deaf and had the most unpleasant singing voice imaginable. Somehow, he believed that he was a decent amateur singer and he kept demonstrating his inadequacy quite often. He practiced at home (which was probably why his wife left him after fifteen years of marriage) and sang at family gatherings. Despite all his attempts, he had never hit a single note right and no one ever honestly liked a single second of his singing. The poor man had zero potential to be a singer, and all the efforts in the world couldn't have made him more qualified for this role. And when he sang people who usually liked him almost hated him. I know I did.

You know already how this sidetracking is related to my story. The crisis was over. And so was the presidency. Two weeks later Jack lost the election with the closest narrow margin in history, with the exception of the famous Millennium election. The voters could forgive their presidents many sins. They couldn't tolerate a president who had zero ability to charm them.

Even a hundred years later Jack will be remembered as a truly great president who enjoyed unprecedented people support, architected extremely important international treaties, handled the Nine Day Crisis just a moment before the Election Day and then all of a sudden, mysteriously lost his wit and appeal to the electorate. He will also be remembered by historians as the only president who chose to have his brother—his twin brother—as vice president. Nobody will remember his brother, of course, for he shined only during elections, but I can live with that. I know too well that true greatness does not always reach the public eye. I am also fine with the fact that all my achievements will be attributed to Jack.

But there is something that does bother me. It is the reason behind Jack's defeat in the second election. I always remember about it, no matter how hard I try to pretend that I don't care. For it was not him. It was not me. It was us. Me and my brother Jack were one of the greatest presidents in the history of the United States. All American people loved this president for his exterior. The most powerful people around the world truly respected him for his interior. And

God bless the country that blew the chances of having this president for the second term over such a thing as *it*.
