

**1 Philadelphia, January 27, 2009: Otis Atop the Ben Franklin Bridge**

Contrary to what you might think, the pedestrian walkway of the Benjamin Franklin Bridge has never been a popular platform for suicide. Beautiful bridge, great view, but few suicides, perhaps because very few know of the walkway, and fewer still know its access points. Or perhaps it is more practically because that, from a suicide perspective, the distance from the walkway to the Delaware River (less than 42 meters) is not considered a fatal drop. Those seeking a fast and dramatic death fare better in San Francisco where the famous Golden Gate Bridge has played host to more than 1,200 suicides since its 1937 opening. But one of the first things people on the onion hunt learn is you work with what you've got, which is why Otis Oppenheimer found himself on the pedestrian walkway of the Benjamin Franklin Bridge in the early morning hours of January 27, 2009. It was a typical cold, damp Philly winter evening. Oppenheimer chain-smoked and rubbed his hands together for warmth as motorists and PATCO transit cars alike sped by, oblivious to his presence.

"Goddam east coast weather," he mumbled as he fumbled with the tiny recorder, which he wore like a necklace. "I'll have to assume this is working," he said pointedly toward the small microphone on the recorder's side, "though honestly I've never much trusted technology. Where was technology on Nine Eleven? On a fucking vacation is where."

Otis paused to light another Camel. His shadow stretched across the length of the walkway, lit by the overhead gantry lights. He counted the remaining cigarettes. Along with the unopened pack, they totaled thirty-three. It would be enough; it would have to be.

"The thing about it," he continued, "the thing is, you just never know. No, that's not it. You do know. You fucking know and you still carry on. Out of loyalty. Out of a naïve sense of honor. Out of belief. That's what pulled me in; I think it's what pulled all of us in. Belief."

## GLASS ONION

The cold wind whipped up and down the Delaware River. It stung his eyes and ear lobes. But it would be okay now. Oppenheimer sat down on the walkway and leaned his back against the concrete railing. He stared down at the river and watched as the Spirit of Philadelphia sailed lazily toward its berth at Penn's Landing.

“Maybe I can impart a bit of wisdom to you—three rules that I've learned. In my 45 years I've come to live by these rules. Always figured they'd serve as the foundation of a self-help book I planned to write in the retirement years, but let's be honest, there won't be any retirement years. Anyway, maybe they'll do you some good, help you to attain the good life—socks and sandals and a lawn chair by the barbecue.

“Okay, so, first rule: trust no one. A total shocker, I'm sure. But believe me, it's not as easy as it sounds. The truth is, we want to trust. We want to believe in our friends, our lovers, the government. Don't do it. Resist the urge, because you're going to get fucked regardless, so you might as well be fucked with your eyes open.

“Second rule: Build a solid social network. I admit that my career path hasn't enabled me to follow this one. It's been a problem. Nothing that a 10-year antidepressant prescription and a slight addiction to gin can't help overcome, but that, in its own way, is part of the problem. We should need people more than we do. Barbara Streisand was right, dammit. And I admit, I freely admit, that building a social network while trusting no one sounds like an oxymoron. But it's important, trust me.

“Final rule: If you're going to be working in the north east during winter, bring along a decent coat. The fucking east coast winters are brutal.”

Otis stared into the evening sky. It was dark, but the nearness of the Philadelphia skyline kept it from ever being too dark. A jet thundered overhead en route to Philly International.

## GLASS ONION

“Boeing 238-passenger jet model 747-200M; one of 43 currently in use by major carriers. Various accidents and incidents plague the 747 series, among the most notorious is Korean Air 007 which was shot down in by the Soviets in 1983 and—”

He paused.

“You see, this is what happens. It’s what happens when you choose a life like I’ve chosen. Too much down time and nothing to do with it but memorize stupid shit that at the end of the day doesn’t fucking matter. I probably know more about Boeing than most Boeing execs and engineers. Christ.

“What I’d really like, what I need, is a time machine. I need to go back to 1986 and do one of two things—stop me from signing on to this piece-of-shit Holy Grail assignment, or kill myself. Simple.”

### **2      April 5, 1986: Reagan’s Dream**

The lights in the West Wing of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW burned brightly at 3:00 a.m. President Reagan and First Lady Nancy were seated at a round oak table. Draped in a black, custom-made silk robe specially designed by Antonio Versachi, the leader of the free world resembled an aging cultist. Seated between the Reagans was Julia Copeland. Copeland was no stranger to the First Family, having been summoned to the White House on no fewer than 36 occasions since Ronald Reagan’s ascent to the US Presidency on January 20, 1981.

Under typical circumstances Copeland’s attire would have more closely resembled her profession; she was especially fond of wearing brightly colored silk paisley garments for meetings such as this. But the Secret Service arrived unannounced at her Bethesda home at 2:08 a.m. rousing Copeland from a deep sleep. The agents had insisted that she dress with haste and accompany them.

Seated between the Reagans, the 27-year-old Copeland (wearing faded jeans, Nike high tops, and a Foreigner t-shirt) looked less like an internationally renowned psychic and more like a vacationing waitress. She’d at least had the good sense to place a kerchief around her head to downplay the recently dyed hair.

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Nancy sat quietly and sipped tea from an ornamental cup of china so thin she could almost see her fingers through the design, while actor-turned-politician Ron sipped bourbon from a thin metal flask. The flask was made of platinum, a gift from Nancy that bore an inscribed testament to Ron's prowess in bed. It was a private token that only a very select few had ever seen. Copeland busied herself with a Tarot deck as she struggled to maintain a calm demeanor. The Reagan's were not known for this impromptu behavior; something was up.

"Do you remember what you told me in February 1981?" Reagan asked.

"Yes," Copeland answered. "I told you an attempt would be made on your life."

"That's right. You told me I'd be wounded but not fatally."

Nancy said nothing but refilled her teacup with Earl Gray poured from a teapot as gossamer as the cup.

"In 1983 you advised me on the Grenada situation. Do you remember what you said?"

"I said the Grenada invasion would succeed with limited loss of life. There were 19 American deaths, if I recall correctly."

"We prefer 'casualties' to 'deaths' dear," Nancy said softly.

"Well," Ronald Reagan said soberly, "those brave men and women made the ultimate sacrifice for liberty, answering freedom's call."

An awkward silence followed and Copeland found that her palms were sweaty.

"How may I help you this morning, Mr. President?" she asked.

Ronald Reagan didn't answer. He seemed troubled.

"Ron's been having the dream again," Nancy said.

"The glass onion dream?"

"Yes."

"I see. Tell me about your dream, sir."

"Well," Reagan said, "It's round. It's glass. It's a bit larger than palm-sized."

## GLASS ONION

“No. I’m sorry. I don’t mean the physical appearance of the onion. Describe what happened in the dream.”

“It’s the same dream as always. The glass onion is at my side. It...reveals information. I’m shown the future. I visit with Gorbachev again. We meet for a summit in Moscow. The Soviet Union collapses in 1989.”

“Since we last discussed this, I’ve been researching the object. This glass talisman you dream of exists, or at least is rumored to once have,” Copeland explained. “It is mentioned in several nineteenth century texts—hinted at, really. Philosopher Nils Boman wrote that the onion could not be kept by any mortal, and that it appears only when it wants to be found; it reveals itself selectively to certain individuals.”

“It wants me to find it?”

“I believe it does, though honestly, how such an undertaking could be achieved escapes me.”

“My dear,” Nancy said, “my husband is the President of the United States of America. He can pretty much make everything and anything happen.”

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