

## The Big Picture

“What a bunch of geezers,” declared the young cadet as he and his classmates shuffled along from room to room taking in the sights.

“Yeah, and look at the size of that guy, Skinny,” exhorted one of his fellow cadets, pointing toward the large framed portrait of a corpulent William Howard Taft seated in an armchair looking uncomfortably flatulent. “He’s the biggest one of ’em all.”

“Guess you gotta be some kinda giant to be Prezdent,” concluded Skinny, looking overwhelmed by the sheer size of the framed pictures hanging throughout the large house. He noticed that all the men were dressed in black suits and wore black beards or big mustaches, and that some had long flowing white hair, as evidenced by the poker-faced Thomas Jefferson; only George Washington seemed to wear a uniform. Yet there was one common thing about all of these men that appeared all too obvious, and it seemed to confuse the young cadet: the cold unsmiling faces frozen in silence. Not a single president looked happy.

A light January snow fell outside the windows of the White House blanketing the grounds with peaceful flurries. Inside the tour guide, a bubbly young lady dressed in red flannel, was talking and pointing as she slowly moved the group along down the center hallway while others snapped photos, or just swiveled their heads back and forth like those gas station advertising signs with big green dinosaurs. They peeked into the Vermeil Room and glanced at a graceful looking Crace Goodhue Coolidge standing alongside her lanky looking Borzoi, a tall dumbfounded dog; inspected the dishware on display in the China Room, and walked in a semi circle through the Diplomatic Reception Room where “the President receives foreign dignitaries.” Skinny leaned into his friend and whispered a question.

“What’s a dig-ner-terry?”

“People who can’t stay for supper, I guess,” said another cadet in hushed reply.

Skinny bobbed his head in consent. After all, cooking for a house this big was completely unimaginable to him. It would be a lot easier to have Carpaccio’s deliver pizza, he reasoned, just like his mom did whenever the Johnson’s came over on Saturday nights with ice cold quarts of Schaefer beer. Like the jingle said, ‘Schaefer is the one beer

to have when you're having more than one.' It was then it suddenly struck him, and his eyes went wide with discovery.

"Hey, Elliot, there ain't no TV in the house!"

"You idiot, of course there is," he reassured. "Everybody watches Dinah Shore on Sunday nights. It's behind some picher. Besides, who watches TV during the day?"

"I guess you're right," agreed Skinny in an unconvincing tone of voice. But it just didn't make any sense to have a TV and not watch it during the day. Somebody's gotta be watch'n it, he thought.

The group slowly meandered from the oval reception room out into the hallway and next door to the Map Room, all the while taking note of wallpaper designs, drapery fabrics, and color coordinated furniture and fixtures. With 132 rooms, 35 bathrooms, 28 fireplaces, and more nooks and crannies than a roll-top desk, it was inconceivable that a television set wasn't hidden somewhere in the house; and what about the antenna with all its wires, not to mention tinfoil. Rabbit ears don't just hide in the open!

The young cadets were from the Wyler Military School in Evansville, Wisconsin, a semi-military prep school for boys that had once been a Methodist-Episcopal seminary for more than 50 years, and whose weathered Italianate buildings dated back before the American Civil War. It had a small enrollment of about 65 students, mainly from the Chicago area, yet it concentrated on teaching discipline, good manners, and the social graces that seemed to be rapidly deteriorating throughout modern America. It held that God and country were comparable to faith and reason, and that to be patriotic was an equivocation of the patristic values necessary for securing liberty as well as salvation. Allegiance required a singular duty absent of doubt, conscience without being conscientious, and remembering always that those who came before in service and sacrifice were now regarded as patrons of everlasting honor embodied in the nation's triadic colored flag. It was impressed further upon the young minds that – God loves a soldier.

The big house was a veritable gallery of artworks, from sculptures and paintings to early American furniture that clearly was labeled, "Do Not Sit." Along the corridors hung ornate framed landscapes, expressionist paintings of clouds, watercolors of flowers

and coastal images of windy seashores being attacked by malicious waves. Some of the cadets were curious about the portraits of faces they did not recognize.

“How come President Tyler looks so excited,” asked one of the boys. Then another noticed that President Woodrow Wilson appeared sickly and tired. The young tour lady in red flannel was prepared with short and concise answers as she continued to move the group along with trained eyes and smiling gestures. An older married couple was among the cadets, shepherding the boys with apparent authority and ensuring the absence of any hi-jinx. One of the older boys had stopped to admire a portrait of a young lady with delicate features, read the inscribed nameplate, then raised his hand toward the lady in red flannel to be recognized.

“Please Miss, who was Fanny Kemble?” The tour guide smiled at the question.

“She was a famous British actress and writer who was born in London and educated in France before coming to the United States in the 1830’s to act in the Boston Theater. Eventually she married Pierce Butler, the grandson of one of our Founding Fathers, also named Pierce Butler, who represented the state of South Carolina in the Continental Congress, then the Constitutional Convention of 1787, and finally the U.S. Senate. She became an early abolitionist against slavery and was widely published in her life as a playwright, poet, and political activist. She died in her native England in 1893.”

Everyone was now concentrating his or her looks at the portrait, scrutinizing the delicate features and considering how destiny afforded a place on a wall in the most famous house in the world.

“Shall we move along then,” suggested the guide, as heads nodded agreement while making their way east toward the offices of the First Lady and her staff.

Unbeknownst to everyone else however, Skinny had wandered off during the history lesson of Fanny Kemble and into the quaint little Library across from the China Room. He was enthralled by the many colorfully bound books that reminded him of his grandfather’s den where exciting stories of Robin Hood and the Count of Monte Christo had been read to him before bedtime. He stretched on tiptoe in an attempt to see if he could recognize any titles, but the books were too high, and he wasn’t going to disobey his mother’s rule about climbing on other people’s furniture. The only thing grownups seem to do is yell at you for no reason, he mused to himself, and he sure didn’t want to

get into any trouble in somebody else's house. Gee-Whiz, it's tough enough being a kid without strangers screaming at you to do this or not do that. It's as if grownups can't make up their minds, so they simply yell at you for no good reason. Maybe they just forgot what it was like to be a kid, he finally concluded to himself.

He moved to the other side of the fireplace, opposite the doorway to the Library, and looked up at a painting that momentarily caught his attention. The nameplate was inscribed 'Boy Fishing – 1929.' A small light protruded over the top of the frame giving it a surreal glow, as though the image beckoned toward something hidden below the bridge from where the boy stood looking down for some unseen sign. It was a tranquil setting of trees embracing a calm stream over which an old wooden bridge provided the boy a place to fish from, but who could guess the nature of luck in a still image.

"What are you doing in here," barked a voice of authority from the doorway. It made Skinny drop his peaked cap from one hand and grab at his crotch with the other in complete surprise. He winced as he turned toward the doorway, certain he had found himself once more in trouble.

The man in the doorway wore a light gray three-piece suit, polished brown shoes, and almost no hair atop his shining pate, yet his penetrating eyes were soft and set around weathered wrinkles. He stood soldierly and erect as he ordered, "Come over here."

The young cadet, dressed in a heavy woolen blouse with navy blue shirt and clip-on tie, picked up his cap and walked toward the man still clutching at his crotch.

"What seems to be the matter with your pants, young man?"

"You scared my tinkle, sir," replied the cadet in a small tinny voice.

"What's your name?"

"Skinny, sir."

"I mean your real name," said the man with an edge of impatience.

"Willie, but they call me Skinny."

"Why aren't you called Willie if that's your name?"

"Cuz I'm skinny. What do they call you?"

"You'd be surprised," replied the man in a slow vowel sounding cadence. "How old are you?"

"Six and a half, sir," said the boy, looking upward with a proud grin.

The man looked down at the cadet with a stern demeanor and pursed lips, then unexpectedly bent down and gazed into the boy's fresh face as if searching for something familiar, or perhaps remembered. But all he could see were two bright blue eyes looking back with an unknown fear of the moment. He noticed a small wet stain in the boy's trousers, and then, looking up at the painting the boy was admiring asked gently, "Do you like to fish?"

"Never done it before, but it sure looks sad."

"Hasn't your father ever taken you fishing?"

"Ain't got no father," replied the boy in matter of fact terms. "He didn't like me and mom so he left when I was little. Guess he had stuff to do," he whispered conspiratorially.

"Yes, I can imagine. Well then, let's see if we can't find you a bathroom," said the man, straightening his posture and leading the way toward the stairwell outside the Library where a sign indicated, 'Men's Room,' on the door. "Go in there, son, and don't forget to flush after you've completed your business," and pushed open the door for the youngster to enter. After it closed he stood there, as if on guard duty, lost in thought.

The sound of high-heels clomping down the stairs nearby could be heard when, rounding the landing, a woman stopped and caught sight of the man standing there alone with his arms folded across his chest and his head bowed as if lost in prayer. The sight seemed to startle her momentarily, but then she scurried down the stairs wearing a worried look on her face until she asked, "Is there something wrong, sir?"

Turning toward the door once more the man barked, "And wash those hands!"

A look of incredulity immediately flashed across the woman's face as her eyes grew wide, her mouth popped open, and her neck and head snapped back at the sound of such a supreme command.

"Have you captured a Democrat, Mr. President?"

"Probably the next Army Chief of Staff," he replied, almost smiling to himself.

Just then the bathroom door eased open as the young cadet, squeezing through the doorway, found himself behind a pair of light gray trousers attempting to see who was talking. The woman glimpsed the boy peering from around the President's legs and gave an immediate smile of welcome as she bent down to say, "Well, hello there."

“Hello.”

The President looked down at the boy and asked, “What about those hands?”

They were offered up for inspection with the reply, “All clean, sir.”

“Good, man,” replied the President, confirming his acceptance with a brief smile.

“Excuse me, sir,” said the woman politely, “but Senator Dirksen telephoned and would like to speak with you on an urgent matter.”

“Everything is urgent with the ‘Wizard of Ooze,’ Miss Whitman.” The President looked down and placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder and asked, “Do you want to grow up to be a soldier, young man?”

“I dunno, sir. Do they have to get up early and go to school?”

“I’m afraid so,” he said, almost chuckling to himself, “but that’s what makes a good soldier.” He bent down and gazed into the boy’s blue eyes. “Remember the boy fishing? Well, if you want to catch a big fish you have to get up early in the morning, before it wakes up, and be ready; then you have to be smarter than the fish by learning to wait for it to strike at your line. It’s not as easy as it looks, but it’s a skill worth learning, like being a soldier. Think about it.”

“Okay,” he replied, squinting in total consternation. Everybody gives you stuff to think about, he thought, and it’s always more homework.

“Miss Whitman, would you escort the boy back to where he belongs,” requested the President, “I’m sure he’s probably missed by now.”

“Yes, sir, I’d be delighted,” she said, smiling affectionately.

“Good-bye, Skinny. Be a good soldier and study your lessons, we’re all depending on you, my boy,” the President said, as he turned away and walked toward the stairway.

“Good-bye, sir,” Skinny said, and watched the President climb up the staircase until he was out of sight. Not a bad old guy, he decided, for a geezer.

He followed Miss Whitman down the hallway and around corners left and right until the lady in red flannel, who was explaining something to the group about President Theodore Roosevelt’s assorted animals that used to roam the White House grounds, suddenly stopped talking when she noticed President Eisenhower’s personal secretary. Everyone in the group immediately became aware that something was afoot until they

recognized the small form in cadet uniform being escorted back to the fold. It made silent bystanders out of all, including staff members who paused for a moment to watch the reunion.

“Hello, Jeanette,” greeted Miss Whitman, and then turned toward the group of cadets who were all looking askance. “At the request of the President of the United States, I am returning Skinny to his classmates.” She bent down toward the young boy and, with a warm smile said, “The President and I enjoyed very much meeting you, Skinny, and the next time you’re in Washington, please come by again to visit us, Okay?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” replied the boy, grinning up at the woman.

Miss Whitman fondly placed her hand atop the young cadet’s head, then turned and walked quietly away. It took a few seconds before Skinny realized that everyone was staring at him, wide-eyed and silent. Then Elliot came over and asked in disbelief, “You really meet the Prezident?”

“Yep.”

“Whadhesay?”

“He told me ‘bout fishing,” Skinny began to explain, as everyone listened intently, including the lady dressed in red flannel.

“Fishing?”

“Yeah, he said you gotta get up early in the morning and the fish learns you how to be a good soldier.” Several of the older cadets began to laugh aloud.

“You didn’t see the Prezident,” exclaimed a doubtful Elliot.

“Did so,” fired back an insistent Skinny.

“Did not.”

“Did so.”

“How’d you know he was the Prezident?”

“Cuz, he knows where the bathroom is, stupid!”