

Believe in Me

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Jason Warburg

-- Excerpt #1 --

OPENER

On the west wall, opposite the circular bar that rises like an altar within the central well of the San Francisco Hard Rock Café, hangs a window into another universe.

The image captures a band onstage mid-song, in full flight, their energy as electric as the spotlights that have torn the night wide open to cast a brilliant glow all around them. The angle is low, as if taken from audience perspective at the very front lip of the stage, but off to one side, so that the entire group is seen in near-profile.

The singer, lithe and dark, bends backward with the note at center stage, mouth open to the microphone he holds in his right hand, eyes closed, face constricted in an intense ecstasy that might be mistaken for either spiritual or sexual if not for the worry lines, the deep trails mapping his forehead.

The other four players are spread out across the scene like a loose assemblage of disciples. The drummer rules the back, long sandy curls flailing along with his muscular arms. The bassist stands close by, small and enigmatic, nearly hidden even in plain sight. The keyboard player holds down the far outpost stage right, only his head visible over the bulk of a grand piano, a scattering of bright curls surrounding a serious face. The guitarist is closest to the camera, bent over his instrument with left foot thrust

forward like a runner in the blocks, mouth open in a lopsided grin as long strands of blond hair obscure his eyes.

The five each occupy their own world at this instant, yet their individual orbits are bound together by a fierce intensity, a shared purpose fueled by welling emotion. They've traveled far to reach this moment, and seem determined to live within it for as long as they possibly can. As common as this basic tableau might be in rock and roll photography, there is something distinctly uncommon about this particular image, some concentrated hyper-reality lurking beneath its surface that makes the shot itself not just captivating, but iconic.

This, it says, is IT. The top of the mountain. Stop and look around. You might never be here again.

In the farthest visible reaches of the photo, at the very edge of the wash of light that seems almost to radiate from the band itself, stand two small figures rendered faceless by the distance, a man and a woman, watching from the wings. The one on the right has dark, shiny hair and feminine curvature, and is looking up at the one on the left, who is taller and is looking down at her with a suggestion of longing, and perhaps anticipation as well.

The one on the left is me.

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1.

I've always been that guy at the side of the stage. I like it that way. Let someone else hog the mike and the relentless scrutiny that comes with it; I'll stay on safer ground. I'd still rather write these words than speak them, as you can plainly see.

One thing has changed, though. In the old days – which consisted of every day of my working life until six months ago – the figure at the mike would have been an attention addict of a different tribe. Genus *candidate politicalus* rather than genus *singer rockandrollicus*.

How I survived that unlikely leap into another universe is the tale I'm here to tell. And since he's so prone to interrupting anyway, it seems only fitting to give the first word to California Attorney General -- and Democratic nominee for the United States Senate -- Frank Cassini.

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"Green!"

"Yessir," I said, taking the soft leather briefcase Cassini had thrust at me as he vaulted, blinking, up and out of the back of his chauffeured Lincoln Town Car. It was July 5th,

four months and change before election day, and I was standing at the curb at Los Angeles International Airport with The Candidate himself. His jet-black loafers gleamed beneath a double-breasted light grey suit of Italian wool, which offered flattering cover for the middle-aged spread that was rapidly conquering his five-nine frame.

“Gimme your phone.” His round face was flushed, thick charcoal hair rising stiffly in the breeze, dark eyes darting left and right at the milling herds of common passengers surrounding us. “Mine’s outta juice,” he muttered as I reflexively obeyed, handing over the new iPhone I had just that week vanquished the campaign bureaucracy to procure.

“Go!” he barked at me, waving with his free hand for me to take the lead as our California Highway Patrol escort (today it was the intrepid Robert A. Falconer, a.k.a. Officer Bob) assumed his post at Cassini’s side. Weaving through the unheeding crowd inside the terminal, we cleared security without major incident courtesy of Officer Bob. As we power-walked the length of the terminal toward Gate 87, Cassini finished his call and began barking questions at me.

“What’s new on the Colfax fire?”

“Twenty-four thousand acres burned, thirty percent contained, every air tanker north of Bakersfield deployed. The national guard is enforcing mandatory evacuations east of Interstate 80 and they’ve set up shelters in Grass Valley and Meadow Vista.”

“Meadow Vista? Does that burg even have a traffic light?”

“Their high school gym holds 400 and a hundred volunteers have already showed up to help.”

“A hundred people with nothing better to do. Figures. They know how it started?”

“The working theory from Emergency Services is, lightning strikes from a thunderstorm.”

“In the middle of summer? In the goddamned Sierra foothills?”

“Climate change. More moisture in the air at weird times of year.”

“Yeah, right. More likely some jerkoff didn’t bother dousing his campfire. Alright, why’s Ostrowitz calling me every day?”

“He wants you to endorse the auto mileage standards initiative. They turned in the signatures two weeks ago. Should get the final word on qualifying for the November ballot any day.”

“Dammit, don’t any of these clowns understand you’ve gotta play the middle in the general? I can’t let Kendrick sit there calling me a nanny-state job-killer through the

whole fall campaign. They should've stuck that crap on the primary ballot where it belongs."

I nodded silently; to do otherwise bordered on recklessness.

"Alright. Middle East?"

"The talks are still going, but they're no closer on the holy places in Jerusalem. Both sides are threatening to pull out if there's more violence."

"Which just makes the crazies on both sides more likely to start blowing things up. I swear, the damn Jews and Arabs are still gonna to be fighting over those piles of rock when my grandchildren's grandchildren are dead and buried. They're nuts, every last one of 'em."

Maybe, I thought to myself. Or maybe you just hate them because they believe in something.

"What's the name of the school again?"

"Cesar Chavez Junior High."

"And we picked it to pimp charter schools because...?"

“Biggest year-to-year jump in their SAT-9 test scores in the history of the test. Verbal rose 39 percent and math 31 percent.”

“Christ. Anybody think to check if maybe they cheated?”

“Uh, no, sir. The school population is 54 percent Hispanic and 18 percent Asian American, mostly Hmong and Vietnamese. Last summer they instituted a mandatory six-week English immersion program for their ESL students.”

“Mandatory summer school. Heh. That’ll keep the little buggers off the streets.”

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My enlistment as deputy press secretary to Francis John “Frank” Cassini’s campaign for the U.S. Senate had come at the urging of Charlie Bond, a hungry-eyed fellow University of California, Davis alum who at the time was the Cassini campaign’s Central Valley field representative. “The guy’s a sure thing,” Charlie had told me in his perpetually urgent way, over watery drinks in a Sacramento bar overrun with navy blue blazers and pleated grey slacks. “U.S. Attorney, Congressman, Attorney General,” continued Charlie, ticking off Cassini’s resume bullets on his fingers. “Five years in the courtroom making his name as a tough-on-crime Democrat, then a run for Congress, eight years there getting cozy with the money guys he needs to run statewide, then six

years as state AG, building name i.d. and solidifying his base. Now he's like a thoroughbred at the gate, waiting for the bell to go off."

I had spent my first six years out of college in a series of low-level legislative staff positions around Sacramento, nothing involving an actual campaign, but enough experience around the fringes of them to recognize that Charlie's cocktail-napkin profile was not without merit. Cassini was a strong public speaker, a canny deal-maker, and a persistent advocate for bedrock middle-class Democratic issues in a state where the Republican Party had spent the last two decades nominating one far-right candidate after another for the Senate – the latest being fire-tongued State Controller Darcy Kendrick -- and losing. From a political perspective, Cassini was a consummate pro, one of those guys who seems like he knew exactly what he wanted to do with his life the first time he saw the president on television when he was seven years old.

But leadership – driving positive change, making hard decisions, little things like that -- wasn't it. What Frank Cassini wanted to do, I had concluded after more than a year of drafting meaningless pieces of news-release puffery in the man's press office, was to be surrounded at all times by people who needed something from him. Lobbyists, contributors, reporters, staff – it didn't really matter, as long as he was the center of the circle. Issues were necessary nuisances, to be managed dutifully in the manner of monthly invoices that needed to be paid on time. It was the free-floating cloud of need and deference that Cassini craved.

California Attorney General Francis Cassini was a thoroughbred, alright – a petty, overbearing, thoroughbred egomaniac whose fate my own nascent career in politics was now tethered to in a way that could make me giddy or queasy, depending on the day's polls and the candidate's mood. As for the wager-happy Mr. Bond, he had crapped out one chilly morning in Visalia, fired a week before Christmas after booking Cassini into a poorly-attended labor event where the local union president had exhibited an unfortunate fondness for "Godfather" jokes.

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I parried back as we approached the gate. "Do you have the cards?"

Cassini liked his speeches printed out on three-by-five index cards in sixteen-point type so he could slip the entire speech in his pocket and then, if necessary, refer to them without using his glasses. His memory for the essential points was sharp and he didn't refer to them much, but their presence was a security blanket that helped calm and focus him.

In response to my question, he began fishing through his inside coat pockets without catching anything. Turning with a frustrated glare, he found me waiting with my backup set of cards already out and in my hand. He accepted them with a quiet smirk, about as close as I'd ever come to receiving that rarest of endangered species, the Cassini compliment.

By the time we'd cleared the boarding pass scanner at the gate and started down the ramp to the plane, he had my iPhone out again; by the time we boarded, he was chattering away once more, telling a contributor his previous commitment wasn't going to cut it any more, not in this race. Officer Bob made sure we found our seats, the first two in first class, and sketched a sardonic goodbye wave as he disappeared back up the gangway. *He's all yours now.* One of Bob's colleagues would meet us at the door in San Francisco.

Cassini had barely sat down, though, when he was halfway out of his seat again, leaning toward the door, nearly shouting into the phone. "Greg? Greg?!" He turned to me accusingly. "What the hell's wrong with this thing? The minute we stepped on board I got a ton of static."

"I don't know, sir, sometimes I have trouble with it on planes –"

"I have to finish that call." He stood and had taken a step toward the door when our stewardess, a fortyish redhead with long, slender ballerina fingers, intercepted him, touching his arm.

"Sir." Her expression was measured but severe, her intonation that of a patient schoolteacher calming an unruly student. "You can't leave the plane."

He turned and laughed in her face. “Excuse me?”

“Sir, please.” Red’s guarded expression hadn’t changed, but I was amused to note her stance, clenched and ready to pounce. This was clearly not her first time dealing with The Important Passenger Who Declines To Cooperate. She also had terrific legs.

“You’re on board. We’re preparing for departure. You can’t leave the plane.”

“The door’s still open.”

“Yes, it is. There are two more passengers just coming through the gate right now.”

Cassini’s tangled expression spoke of his shock and disgust at such treatment. “This flight was supposed to leave five minutes ago!”

Red stared at him and began to speak slowly, carefully. “Yes, but we held it. A hundred and eighty-seven people on board on time for departure, and we held it.” She paused almost a full second before finishing, pointing her line like a stage actress. “For you.”

“Well, I’m on now, aren’t I?”

“Yes,” she said. “And that’s where you need to stay.”

“Is that right?” sneered the Attorney General of California, and began punching numbers into my phone emphatically, as if daring her to grab it out of his hand. Without taking his eyes off her, he then took three long, exaggerated strides backward, through the doorway, across the threshold and back onto the jetway, where he turned and made a display of hitting the “Call” button.

Jabbing his finger at me for emphasis, he growled a directive: “This door does NOT close until I’m back inside.”

Just then two new figures came barreling around the corner and down the last few feet of the jetway behind Frank in a rush of pounding footsteps and out-of-breath gratitude. As Cassini moved back against the wall, they lunged past him and onto the plane like a pair of overgrown teenagers on a joyride. The leader was late thirties, around six-one and instantly magnetic, pale, chiseled cheekbones and laughing blue eyes in a brown leather bomber jacket, well-worn 501s and a navy Seattle Mariners baseball cap. His companion was almost as tall, but broader, thicker, bearded and dark-skinned enough to suggest African royalty. Both wore sunglasses, though Leather Jacket’s were perched casually on the bill of his cap.

“Hey!” said Leather Jacket to Red, making it both a greeting and a punchline. *I know him*, I thought, trying to puzzle out his familiarity. *How do I know him?*

“Welcome on board,” she replied, all business again.

“Thanks!” he said with practiced ease, clapping large, supple hands together and flashing her another smile as they ambled past and fell into the empty pair of seats across the way from me in the first row. “Thought we’d missed it. Awesome.”

“No problem,” she said, “You just made it.” With this, she turned and, at last, smiled. At me. A feline smile that broadcast her intent as clearly as if she’d used the airplane’s public address system.

Oh, shit.

I knew what was expected of me now. I was expected to get up and get in Red’s face, explain that she didn’t know who she was dealing with and that if she closed that door she might find herself stewing the Seattle-Anchorage run for the next six months. I had my hands on the armrests, ready to push myself up and into battle, when something shifted inside me, like a heavy piece of luggage coming loose in the back as a car goes around a sharp turn.

Certainly, it had something to do my own increasing inability to reconcile Cassini’s public face of pragmatic, can-do Democrat with the private man I had come to view with a mixture of awe and revulsion. Most likely, it had something to do as well with the contrast of Leather Jacket’s entrance, the jovial grace with which he had handled his own situation. But I honestly believe what finally reached me was something

determined and honorable in the face of our anonymous stewardess, who wanted only one thing: to do her job, and maybe hang onto a little dignity in the process.

She paused a moment at the door, glancing down at me again. *She's still expecting me to get up and yell at her*, I realized. *Because I work for him, she expects me to be like him. Jesus.* And that was that. I looked up at Red, raised my eyebrows, pursed my lips and sighed. She flashed me the briefest of grins before pulling the handle on the automatic door.

Politics, I thought as the door began its irrefutable hydraulic swing downward, *may not suit me.*

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