

# 1

**G**ODWIN POPE CHECKED his watch. Seven minutes left. He won't be late for this, Godwin thought. There's a legion of handlers and the mighty magnet of free air time on five broadcast channels and five cable networks to keep him on time for his first State of the Union address. His first real one, anyway. Jack Mahone had delivered one a year ago, but at that point, he'd been in office less than three weeks and was still keen on making a good impression. Since then, Mahone had on various occasions proved capable of keeping his wife, his children, his staff, the joint congressional leadership, the other seven of the G8 leaders, the Dalai Lama, eighteen gold medal-winning Special Olympians, and the Chicago Bears waiting while he flossed, did a crossword puzzle, played with his dog, finished his calisthenics, and talked to George Clooney about nuclear proliferation, but it seemed much too much to believe that he would dare shamble in late on a vast national audience equipped with remote-control channel changers and a hundred choices.

Or maybe he would.

Parked high in the vice president's usual spot behind and above the podium, Godwin surveyed the House of Representatives Chamber in the Capitol Building. The panorama wasn't his uniquely, of course; on Godwin's left, Herman Vanick, the fleshy, cunning former gym teacher who had elbowed his way into the Speakership of the House four years ago, had nearly the same perspective from his seat, though Godwin doubted the ass-patting towel-snapper saw what he did. Vanick looked

at the room and saw pretty much what Jack Mahone saw – a dung hill populated by ants who loved, hated, feared, or owed him, but who were basically merchants, here to buy and sell favors, markers, pork. Godwin looked at the room and saw history – John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay and Sam Rayburn, a beardless Lincoln and a callow Kennedy, measuring themselves within the room’s quiet magnificence. Well yes, okay, those men, along with an army of ambitious sharpies who had managed to maneuver their hands in the people’s business – and their pockets.

But hey, Godwin thought, there’s no point being glum about it. That’s civilization, right? The strong and smart and clever have always tried to get something out of the credulous and besotted – and not only get something out of them but make them think giving it up is the right thing to do. The divine right of kings, Godwin snickered to himself. Now there was a sell job.

Of course, a big part of anybody being able to pull off a theory like that – that any single ordinary-looking goofball, whether you call him president, king, kaiser, sultan, or whatever, should control the fate of thousands or millions or hundreds of millions – was being able to perform well in meetings like this. Because ever since *Homo sapiens* slouched out of the caves, people have had meetings like this. Not always in a great high-ceilinged hall scrutinized by fourteen television cameras and the eyeballs of a global audience.

Sometimes it has been by the big rock or the big sequoia or the carcass of the mastodon. But always we’ve gathered, ready to listen to the Top Man try to map out the road ahead. And as always, Godwin noted, the customary members of the tribe attend:

On the right, the guardians, our military chiefs, the members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Not our most valiant warriors, mind you, or our bravest, or our most bloody-minded, or our most efficiently lethal, but six professionally accomplished,

ribbon-bedecked commanders who have learned, through decades of bureaucratic maneuvers, that the answer to every military question, whether it's about money, time, firepower, or troops, is "We need more."

Next to them are our great justices, the members of the Supreme Court, resplendent in their robes. Nine judicial pashas, with nary a shred of practical experience among them, mystical high priests trying like a fat woman with a pair of bicycle shorts to stretch an eighteenth-century document around twenty-first-century issues, while at the same time wriggling to cloak partisan positions under the guise of nonpartisan precedent. Godwin remembered the pretty young attorney who had been parked across from him at a dinner party – at Freston's house, that's right, Freston of Frest-Tel Construction. Yes, in fact it was Freston's stepdaughter by his third marriage, Rochelle, the Frest-Tel heiress. She'd just finished a stint clerking for the elderly, musty Associate Justice Pinturabo – look at him down there, his fat belly bulging even under his robe! She had disclosed the most amazing fact: seven of the nine ultimate arbiters of the laws of the world's richest, most innovative nation had never Googled a thing – not even themselves.

To their left sit the cabinet, a group of men and women of medium accomplishment and a superabundance of caution. The president's friends. His fund-raisers. His donors. His bootlicks. Forgettable, interchangeable people whose proudest accomplishment, now and for all their lives, will be to say "I headed a government agency." *Headed*. Like Pelé.

And filling the room, stretching from side to side, are the mighty solons of Congress, the 535 wise men and women of the Senate and House, the Jacks and Jills and Shaniquas and Billy Bobs, the ex-fraternity house presidents and prom committee chairgirls, the former school board members and state assemblymen who learned their trade debating liquor laws and zoning regulations, 535 egotists superglued to corporate

interests, who now get to kick around the great questions of war and peace, poverty and abundance, enrichment and enslavement. Living dinosaurs, Godwin thought, creatures whose tiny minds stand in inverse proportion to their wide, spreading butts.

All waiting for . . .

The back doors of the chamber opened, and the sergeant at arms of the House, Woody Lynn Grant, a thin, tiny, pinched-faced man wearing huge aviator glasses and a glen plaid suit with ginormous lapels, called out to the assembled throng.

“Mr. Speaker! Mr. Speaker! The President of the United States!”

Will wonders never cease? Godwin thought. On time!

His annual speaking part in the great national dramedy come and gone, Grant, who had been making that announcement for twenty-eight years, and who three years ago was rumored to have thrown a letter opener at an underling who had, without a sufficient tone of mournfulness in his voice, noted that Woody was now four years past retirement age, stepped aside. Into the vacuum strode John Bartholomew Mahone, wearing a navy Hart Schaffner & Marx suit and a professionally triumphant grin. He moved down the aisle, slowly and yet somehow at the same time vigorously, pumping the outstretched hands of those members of his party who had managed to finagle aisle seats in an effort to get a split second of face time on national TV while backslapping the passing prez.

Look at him, thought Godwin. Good old Jack Mahone. Smilin’ Jack. Happy Jack. Crafty Jack. President Jack. Big Jack Off. We rise and salute his entrance, his presence, his very perambulation. It’s an act a great many one-year-olds have mastered, Godwin thought, but let’s applaud him nonetheless.

Herman Vanick leaned close to Godwin. “How long do you think this windbag is going to gas on tonight?”

“I understand they did run-throughs at the residence yesterday and the fastest time was seventy-two minutes.”

“Ke-rist on a crutch!” moaned Vanick. “I was hopin’ to get home in time for the second half of the USC game.”

“If he left out all the pork barrel programs they put in just to get in on your good side, Herm, he could cut it by a quarter.”

“Yeah, right. Say, is your buddy Ralston going to sign any free agents? Everybody knows the Redskins need a fullback. People in fucking Mongolia know the Redskins need a fullback.”

“Don’t spread it around, but I hear they’re going to go after Marco McChesney.”

“Ah, shit, McChesney’ll be as big a bust as this asshole Mahone.”

Godwin had no opinion on the relative merits of Marco McChesney, but he wasn’t going to exhaust himself defending this asshole Mahone. The president was a Louisiana man, Baton Rouge, fifty-nine years old, ex-governor, ex-senator, passably handsome, garrulous, louche, a man who possessed a common touch, a man of the people. He came out of the convention nine points back and won thirty-six states on Election Day, almost a landslide, mostly by correctly and successfully painting his opponent as dismally out of touch. Thirteen short, fast months later, he’s managed to plunge to the lowest favorability rating that any president ever had at the end of his freshman year.

The poor stupid bastard never had a honeymoon, Godwin thought. He let his good old buddy loyalists from Baton Rouge manage the transition, and they rewarded him with a slow, slovenly, amateurish, leak-filled process that left most of the key cabinet appointments in limbo until they had to get bum-rushed through the vetting process as Inauguration Day loomed. Corners were cut, disastrously, as it turned out. Mahone’s first attorney general nominee, a pompous federal

judge from Minnesota, was revealed to have been employing a teenage Guatemalan houseboy for six years. The jurist was thrilled to be able to plead guilty to various tax violations and ship young Esteban back to Quetzaltenango before the hard-ass lifers in the Justice Department got the chance to ask too many questions. The furor over that blunder hadn't quite died down before Mahone's replacement nominee, an esteemed law professor and mother of four from Baltimore, famous for her many television appearances, was paraded before the media. The president's friends in the press gushed at this model of modern womanhood and wondered how she managed to do it all; virtually at the same time, his enemies wondered why she possessed seventy-two separate Prozac prescriptions from physicians in Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, Washington, D.C., Ontario, and Grenada. She very quickly decided she needed to spend more time with her family, and Mahone elevated a bland deputy from the previous administration, just to stop the hemorrhaging.

Or, to be more precise, to stop the hemorrhaging from that particular wound. Jack bled elsewhere. There was the gay ambassador being married in Barbados confirmation thing, and the First Lady's clumsily phrased expression of sympathy around the crippled kids thing, and the ex-daughter-in-law's nude website thing, and the eighteen marine peacekeepers being killed in Malaysia while Jack was skiing in Sun Valley thing, and the Hurricane Fatima recovery debacle thing, and the NASDAQ collapse and the economy teetering on the verge of recession thing – zing, zing, zing, all in a row. The president of Fox News busted his overtime budget for the year in just over six months because he had to put on so many extra people in order to maintain the network's flow of fair and balanced outrage. But it wasn't just Fox that didn't think Jack was up to the job, and it wasn't just Godwin. The tone of the editorials in the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe* and even the home state *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, which

had begun at apologetic, had evolved into dismayed, and had lately turned south into exasperated. There were thumb-sucker pieces in the opinion mags about the decline of executive power and features in the conservative mags about Herman Vanick and the rise of congressional authority, and there were murmurs among Washington's permanent plutocracy that Jack was simply unlucky. The unspoken question behind such comments, of course, was how long could an unlucky man be left in charge before his unluckiness sickened them all.

Godwin kept applauding as he watched Jack effervescently run the gauntlet of cabinet cheerleaders, reach the podium, and bound up the steps. Godwin extended his hand, but Jack reached past his vice president and grabbed the Speaker's outstretched arm. Vanick's name recognition was lower than Mahone's, of course, but his favorability ratings were higher, and Jack wanted the cameras to have a good long look at the president having a warm, smiling, bipartisan clutch with the Speaker, the better to make it look like Herm's fault when the president's legislative program hit the shit can on Capitol Hill.

"Hey there, Herm, how they hangin'?" Jack fairly bel-lowed, loud enough that Godwin was afraid the whole room would hear. "Think you'll stand up and applaud for anything I say tonight?"

"My guess is you'll say something I agree with, Mr. President," replied Herm, his professional bonhomie in perfect form.

"One thing I'll bet you'll agree with is that I probably shouldn't have had those chiles rellenos before a big event like this. Man, I got gas something awful!" At that, Jack snapped off a fart. "You fellows will have to forgive me if I have to let a few go up here. Better out than in."

"No problem, Mr. President, I've been there myself," Vanick replied, but Jack was already reaching for Godwin's hand.

“Hey there, Godwin.”

“Good evening, Mr. President.” Godwin loathed the man, but he knew the rules: polite at all times, deferential in public.

“Chet went over everything with you, right? When to applaud, when to lead a standing ovation —”

“Yes, Mr. President.”

“And how to look. You have to look confident.”

“I will.”

“And proud.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Very proud and very confident.”

“Yes, Chet and I went over this.”

“And interested! For fuck’s sake, look interested. No yawning in the background.”

“Yes, Mr. President.”

“Oh, and one more thing —” Mahone motioned Godwin closer, and Godwin leaned way over so that their heads nearly touched.

On TV, commentators were remarking on this as a sign of the close collaboration that the two men enjoyed. “Godwin,” Jack was asking, “are you coming back to the residence after?”

“After the speech?” The question stunned Godwin. Mahone tended to reserve such invitations for his closest cronies, a small category of humanity to which Godwin neither belonged nor aspired.

“Well, I hadn’t planned on it, sir. I don’t think I was actually invited.”

“I guess I’m going to have to make a point of speaking to somebody about that. In fact, I’ll kick Chet’s ass. Because it would mean a lot to me if you came.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.” A wide, warm smile lit Jack’s face. “Isn’t this the Mahone-Pope administration?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, let’s act like it.”

“Yes, sir. And thank you, sir. I’ll be there.” How weird, Godwin thought.

“All righty. Now, could you do me a favor?”

“Certainly, sir.”

“A friend of mine came in from out of town unexpectedly – you see her? Up in the gallery? About four or five rows behind the First Lady? And over – to the right?”

The two men looked into the gallery. The plump, extravagantly coiffed First Lady smiled sweetly and waved, and the men waved back. And indeed, over and to the right, Godwin could see a heavy-lidded blonde whom he took to be the president’s out-of-town pal. She had two large Tupperware bowl-shaped mounds of flesh prominently emerging from the surprisingly low-for-the-occasion neckline of what seemed to be a rather clingy dress, and she was using the long red fingernail on her left pinkie to daub at her mascara.

“The lovely blonde, Mr. President?”

“That’s her. You didn’t bring a date to this thing, did you?”

“To the State of the Union address?”

“Why the hell not? I know you like women. And it’s cheaper than the movies.”

“Well, be that as it may, I brought no date.”

“So there wouldn’t be any problem if we kind of said she was your date when we went back to the residence, would there?”

“None.”

“And that’s all you have to do. Bring her by, and then you can bug out if you want. Or stay if you want. Whatever.”

And with a wave of his hand, Jack turned and at last faced the microphones and TelePrompTers and the business at hand – namely, attempting to right his already perilously off-course administration, leaving Godwin to settle into his seat and, behind a good soldierly facade, slip into a sulk worthy of

Achilles. Christ, he thought, after all I've done, after all I've accomplished, it's been bad enough being stuck in an invisible, empty job like vice president.

Now on top of that, I'm the president's beard to boot. I'm an idiot for being here, an idiot, an idiot, an idiot. And I have no one to blame for me being here but myself.

NO ONE WOULD ever have predicted that Godwin Pope would someday become vice president. His earliest progenitors on these shores had been flinty, suspicious Yankees who possessed a certain ingenuity and clever heads for business. As their contemporaries vied fang and claw to build and operate the best wool and cotton mills in New England by conniving to run one another out of business, the Popes were happy to sit back and supply them all with pins and needles. At one point, the family controlled 87 percent of the pin and needle market in North America, and still Great-Great-Grandfather Obediah undercut incipient competitors as ruthlessly as a Rockefeller. Over the years, the family fortune rose and fell, depending on whether it was one of the periods when the heirs boldly and successfully led National Metal Fasteners, Inc. into paper clips or staples, or whether it was one of the periods when the heirs – different heirs, of course, wastrel heirs – threw chunks of the family fortune at a promoter of commercial seaweed farming, or a maharishi from Philadelphia who preached the Tao of free love, or one of about a hundred dealers of fine cocaine.

By the time Godwin enrolled in Princeton, National Metal Fasteners, Inc. was owned by a mid-level Japanese copier company, and the family's riches had dwindled to the minimal point where Godwin still had enough money in the bank to be able to choose between one family tradition or the other. Godwin had begun sizing up the cocaine dealers when fate interceded and assigned him Tom Ralston as his freshman-year roommate. Ralston was a precocious fourteen years old, didn't much like to wash, paused in the middle of conversations

to pick his nose, and thought everyone else was stupider than he was. Which was largely true, and in the case of mathematics, incontestably correct. Tom Ralston could solve foot-long algorithms in his head in seconds. And Godwin, who even at that early age had an alpha cool, who in his first week at school walked onto the varsity tennis team and talked three freshman girls into bed, for some reason between pity and affection, adopted the smelly, brilliant runt. He bought Tom clothes. He took him to parties. He got Tom laid. It may well have been considered the first purely altruistic act of Godwin's life, if only Godwin himself hadn't been so terribly, desperately alone. His mother, tragically claimed by cancer, died before he was old enough to form an independent memory of her face. He and his father, the difficult, severe, mocking Chesbro Pope, were never close, and all possibility of a gradual rapprochement evaporated on New Year's Eve in Godwin's senior year in prep school, when Chesbro perished in a private plane crash in the Pyrenees, taking with him the bitterness with which his many setbacks had soured his life. Also lost was his much younger second wife, Minerva, the chic, vivacious, probably alcoholic art dealer, whose attraction to his father Godwin could never fathom, and on whom Godwin carried a total crush.

Halfway through Godwin's last year at Princeton, the relationship with Ralston paid off with more than an emotional reward. With breathtaking ease, Tom had graduated two semesters early and gone to work for IBM in Palo Alto, where Godwin visited him over spring break. They were both complaining. Godwin had been accepted to half a dozen law schools, none of which he had any interest in attending. And Tom found IBM distressingly boring. "They're so fucking slow!" Tom screamed. "You can't get approval for anything without fourteen people signing off!"

"Approval for what?" Godwin asked.

"To do stuff," Tom told him.

“Like?”

“Like, to write programs.”

“Television programs?”

“No, software. This personal computer thing is going to take off. Any moron can see that. People are going to buy these fucking things. Ordinary people. My mother’s going to have a box in her living room that’ll have more computing power than was on board Apollo Eleven! People are going to want to use them.”

“What the fuck for?”

“To do stuff – their taxes, to play games, to run small businesses, I don’t know. People will think of things. But to do any of that, they need programs.”

“What makes you think you can write programs?” Godwin asked.

“They’re just algorithms,” Tom said, and showed him: there were algorithms for an address book, and algorithms for an appointments calendar. There were dozens, dozens of algorithms that yielded pages of code that caused the computer to do things.

“What do you want to do with these?” Godwin asked.

“Sell ’em. Look, it’s like fucking stereos. Most guys out here want to build stereos. Better woofers. Better tweeters. Bigger speakers. But people don’t buy stereos to own stereos. They buy stereos to hear music. Well, that’s where I come in. I want to be the Mick Jagger of the computer industry.”

At that point, Godwin made up his mind to invest what was left of his share of the Pope family fortune in Tom Ralston’s ability to solve equations, and his desire to do so like a Rolling Stone. He never returned to Princeton. He and Tom formed Zephyr, Inc., and even after the school awarded him an honorary doctorate in 1996 for endowing a computer sciences research center, which he did in Tom’s name, Godwin’s college transcript continued to show an incomplete for his senior year.

They set up shop in a strip mall in Mountain View. It was

a brilliant partnership. Tom, with his technical virtuosity and head for product, designed the programs; Godwin, with his taste for competition, ran the business. He proved surprisingly adept at charming partners, at paying suppliers a few pennies less per unit and wheedling buyers into paying a few pennies more, and at working small concessions into deals that later paid off lavishly when new products or new markets were developed. Moreover, he showed real aptitude playing the cutthroat: lopping off the deadwood, terminating the threatening, abandoning at the last minute beloved suitors for arms that held more profits.

Seventeen years after that spring break conversation, Zephyr was swallowed whole by the Microsoft Corporation, leaving Godwin and Tom each worth \$1.63 billion. Tom bought the Washington Redskins, and under his whiny, demanding, infantile, free-spending ownership, the team won two Super Bowls. Godwin wasn't so easily entertained. For decades he had been the public face of the company, and he had come to enjoy being quoted and cited and pictured and courted in all of the power centers of the globe. Suddenly, he discovered that he had nothing to do. Chesbro Pope, who surely would have been forced to hold his tongue during the years of his son's stratospheric success, certainly would have found a way to fling a zinger or two. "Nothing to do today, big shot? Maybe you should mow the lawn."

Tom suggested he start a venture-capital firm, where he could use what he had learned in the Valley to get in on the ground floor of the next big things. Nah. Where was the pleasure of getting in on the ground floor of the handheld computer market when you'd been in on the ground floor of the whole goddamn digital age? The thought of working bored him. Of course, so did leisure. He did some adventure traveling, scaling the sacred summits of Bhutan and hiking the Galápagos and riding horseback in Patagonia. It was all right. He also took flying lessons, which he liked – loved really, but

it's not like one can build a life on flying around in an airplane until you reach a living postcard. It's true that he remained interested in women, or at least in having sex with them, but the fact that when in their company he seemed distant and mildly cranky until it was time to hump prompted the most desirable women to pursue other, more attentive high-tech millionaires. This irritated aimlessness lasted until the night he allowed Ralston to drag him along to a dinner party thrown by Shohreh Pashvalavoo, the voluptuous raven-haired political pundit. A glamorous Iranian emigrant who had parlayed her beauty into three strategically well-placed marriages and three highly remunerative divorces, Shohreh took a particular interest in Godwin, and to the neglect of her other guests, she spent the evening hanging on his every word. Later that night, straddling him in her bed, dangling her perfumed breasts in his face, she asked if he would mind answering a question. He expected she had something freaky in mind.

"No, of course not."

"Why are you wasting your life?"

Needless to say, he was caught off guard. "That's hardly the sort of question guaranteed to bring this evening to a happy climax," Godwin replied. He tried to keep his exasperation to himself, but wasn't entirely successful.

"Ah, you do mind. Well don't worry, darling, I promise you that you'll be quite tumescent again when we need you to be. But please, answer the question."

Her directness and her curiosity disarmed him. After some thought, he told her that he didn't know why he was so aimless. Had he been worn out by running the business? Did he feel unmanned when they cashed out? Lying on her satin sheets, he questioned himself for a while, and might have gone on for hours, exploring his innermost feeling with this dark-eyed beauty, had she not surprised him again.

"Cut the bullshit," Shohreh abruptly said. "Whatever reasons you come up with, they're all bullshit. You are rich, healthy,

tremendously intelligent, enormously sophisticated, at the peak of your powers in the prime of your life, and beholden to no one. You should share your gifts. You should run for public office. Every day the world is at a crossroads. I can think of no one I trust more to determine in which direction we should go.”

Whether it was what she said or where she had then put her mouth, either way he felt a dam burst of motivation. Hell yes, he thought, she’s right. I could make a difference.

Eight brisk, busy, free-spending months later, Godwin got himself elected to the Senate. Four years after that, long after Shohreh left Washington and hied off with her lesbian lover to operate a sandal and candle shop in Northhampton, Massachusetts, Godwin glumly concluded that she was wrong. He was making no difference whatsoever.

That’s when he decided to run for president.

At first he thought it was the most brilliant decision he had ever made, and he floated on an ebullience the likes of which he had never experienced. Sex, skiing, attaining business success beyond his father’s wildest dreams, issuing an IPO that left him richer than all his Pope forebears put together – none of that quite matched the feeling of having the whole country focused on him. He found that he liked campaigning, liked getting up in front of crowds and spouting off. What surprised him was that they listened. He refused to talk about flag burning or creationism or homosexual marriages, issues he disdainfully described as twentieth-century concerns. “Why are we fighting over the scraps of these old issues?” he’d say in his stump speech. “Who cares? We are literally mere years away from a pill that will double your memory, from micro-robots that will be fit into your arteries and clean up your bloodstream and lengthen your life span, from getting an implant behind your ear that will enable you to get emails in your head. We are in the midst of unbelievable developments in genetic engineering, robotics, nanotechnology, which will

change our lives as thoroughly as the invention of the car and the lightbulb and the airplane did. Let's stop tearing ourselves apart over the leftover questions of a bygone age. Let's move on."

Let's move on, he said, and establish a health-insure program that holds down the cost of insurance and relieves business of the cost of providing it, which would instantly make American products more competitive. Wait a minute, his rivals balked, what about the costs? Let's move on, Godwin said. Can't we figure out a way to pay for education so that a young person doesn't graduate from college with a \$100,000 debt? Can't we help families by increasing the tax credit for children? Promises, promises, his opponents chided. Tomorrow is right around the corner, Godwin replied. Ask yourself if you'll be ready. Or will you be unpleasantly surprised?

Godwin's challenge caught something in the zeitgeist. Almost overnight, his campaign became a vehicle for a whole range of dissatisfactions with the incumbent administration. All of a sudden, he became something larger than life, a champion, a man on horseback, the great hope, an independent insurgent who could reject the party, redeem it, ride at its head to victory in November. He took on the look of something new and interesting, and people responded. Donors gave him money, volunteers clogged his storefronts, bloggers drooled, surfers jammed his sites, and the news networks and the newspapers assigned correspondents. Once he took the lead in the preprimary polls in New Hampshire, the nabobs of the media came to him, tugging their forelocks, chuckling at his quips, solemnly digesting his views on the great issues of the day. They loved that he was different, that he had been a successful businessman, that he was a bachelor known to have dated some of the world's most desirable women, and that he had new ideas. In short order, basking in his celebrity and buoyed by a lavish media buy, Godwin won the Granite State primary, the Sunshine State primary, the Show Me State

primary. Commentators began to proclaim his nomination inevitable, and it was barely Washington's Birthday! In his Silicon Valley period, he had had the experience, more than a few times, of appearing on the cover of a magazine, but now there were weeks when he was on the cover of six, eight, ten of them at once, and newspaper front pages, too, and it was intoxicating. He found himself having to divert his gaze to keep from staring at newsstands in airports, where images of his face stretched wall to wall, limited only by displays of Grisham novels on one end and the start of the Sun Chips rack on the other.

Poor Godwin. He didn't quite realize it, but he was in the Build 'Em Up phase of the American media's interest in a subject. The next phase, the Tear 'Em Down phase, would follow, as inevitably as night after day.

It began on the stage of an auditorium of Towson State College, at the end of a perfectly routine debate a week before the Maryland primary. On the stage were Godwin, Jack Mahone, and a couple of insubstantial small state pretenders. None of them had made any news in the discussion, which certainly worked to Godwin's advantage. No news, no switches in momentum, no more time on the clock for Mahone, no way to stop Godwin's nomination, no way for Mahone to keep raising money, no way for him to prevent Godwin from winning Maryland and rendering the rest of the primaries moot. Asked for closing remarks, Godwin, with professional polish, pushed through his final remarks to his usual vigorous finish.

"And that's how I plan to conduct my presidency," he said stoutheartedly, "with an open heart, a determined will, and one eye firmly planted on the horizon." The applause was on cue, and just as hearty as expected.

Had the pattern of the previous four debates been followed, Jack Mahone would have then begun detailing the lessons of hard work and honesty and community he had learned during the summers he spent working on the deck of his

daddy's sunbaked shrimp boat on Lake Pontchartrain. Instead, new words spilled out of Jack's mouth, surprising the audience, surprising the media, surprising Godwin so much that seconds passed before he realized that Jack was actually speaking to him.

"Well, all I can say is, that sure sounds pretty. But gosh, almost everything Godwin Pope says sounds pretty. 'Let's move on,' he says. Okay, sure, we all want to move on. But first I have one question: How come there ain't any almonds in my chocolate bar?"

The audience roared with laughter. Even Godwin's supporters roared with laughter. Even Godwin's highly paid handlers roared with laughter.

"Can you tell me that?" Jack insisted, extending his open palms toward Godwin in an invitation to respond. "How come there's no almonds in my chocolate bar?"

Godwin had spent hours preparing for every gambit he could imagine Jack trying to pull, but he had no idea what Jack was talking about, and his ignorance terrified him. A vague, pregnant "Uuum" escaped his lips.

"How come?" Jack sarcastically demanded. He sensed Godwin's confusion, and realized that there was a chance panic was merely a prod away. "How come, Senator? How come there ain't no almonds in that chocolate bar you're trying to hand these good people? Yeah, I know why." Jack later said it was like when he played quarterback in high school in the big Thanksgiving Day game against the Renegades of Our Lady of Perpetual Peace, and the coach called for a sneak; he hit the line hoping to get a yard and a safe landing, but following a bang and a bang and a bump he was still on his feet, and the next thing he knew, he was facing eighty-five yards of green grass and a wide-open path to the end zone.

Minutes later the debate would end, and mere seconds after that Godwin would learn what Jack was talking about, why the audience was laughing, why Jack lingered through one

postdebate interview after another wearing a shit-eating, victorious grin. He was talking about a Hershey's commercial, a fucking candy bar ad in which the cutest four-year-old girl in North America stands on tiptoe and peers above a candy counter and asks a vinegary-looking proprietor, "How come there's no almonds in my chocolate bar?" In the days that followed, Godwin would see the ad maybe five hundred times, would see the girl's picture, would see her in his dreams. But at the moment, Godwin had never seen the commercial, and the secret of her identity, let alone of her existence, might as well have been buried in a milk can under a rock in Tierra del Fuego.

"What are you saying, sir?" Godwin had finally sputtered. "I want to talk about the issues. Why do you want to talk about nuts?"

And the audience roared anew.

"The Chocolate Bar Debate," as it was swiftly dubbed in political lore, returned easily to his mind; indeed, others insisted on bringing it up long after Godwin had hoped to lay it to rest. But just like Ed Muskie after he cried or Howard Dean after he screamed, Godwin was a zombie candidate, bravely campaigning on despite having been instantly and irrevocably killed. "Didja see the debate last night?" Jay Leno asked. "Jack Mahone asked Godwin Pope how come his candy bar didn't have any almonds. Pope said it was because he was planning to ask Mr. Peanut to be his running mate." Mahone's supporters showed up at every rally; Godwin couldn't get two words out before they began chanting "Where are the almonds? Where are the almonds?" Godwin tried to punch back. "I think my teacher-training program is a pretty big almond," he said on Meet the Press. "My investment tax credit for small businesses? You don't think that's an almond?" There was a lot voters liked about Godwin – no one doubted that he was smart – but deep in their heart of hearts they had always feared that anyone who had been born rich and who made himself richer just