Gerstler’s Triumphant Return (1972)

Sitting among the malodorous teenagers—boys ripe with day-old sweat, girls thick on jasmine scents—Jeremiah Gerstler tried to check his mounting vexation. He never would have guessed these shaggy-haired kids were honors students. They wore fringed suede jackets, peasant blouses, and despite the season, short, short mini-skirts. Hannah seemed to be the only normal one in the group, dressed in Levis and the argyle sweater they’d given her for Chanukah. The bus hurtled toward its destination, and Jeremiah was stuck, no way out of his commitment to spend the next five days shepherding his daughter’s 10th grade class around DC.

He tugged at his hat, pulling it down over his ears to block out the noise. Towards the back of the bus the weird-looking boy wearing lipstick and eye makeup (he thinks he’s David Bowie, Hannah whispered), strummed on a guitar and took requests from classmates. Jeremiah didn’t usually feel old—underneath the tan corduroy fedora was a full head of wavy brown hair, more than he could say for a lot of men in their late 40s—but in this crowd he was as ancient as the Founding Fathers. His bowties were hopelessly out-of-date, according to his daughter, and for this trip he’d acceded to her request to leave them at home.

Mr. Bruno, the young history teacher sitting a row ahead, wore his long hair tied back. Standards for teachers in the liberal, artsy atmosphere of the Berkshires were a bit too relaxed for Jeremiah’s taste
and he found Bruno's ponytail off-putting. The man's flannel shirt gave off a whiff of something close to marijuana. Incense? Pipe tobacco?

How the hell had Jeremiah's wife coaxed him into chaperoning this thing? Who better than a political science professor and former NSC staffer to accompany the class, she'd said, knowing exactly how to play to his ego. It wasn't Molly's fault entirely. He could never resist a trip to Washington, a chance to catch up with his old buddies, a chance to breathe in the panoramic view from the top of the Washington Monument. And he figured he could use the trip to prepare for his all-important return to the Capital next month, when he was scheduled to testify before Congress.

"So, what are you going to say to our esteemed congressmen?"

Bruno turned to ask him as they crossed into Delaware. "Hannah told the class about your testimony."

Jeremiah glanced up in surprise; a warm glow spread over him. His daughter was proud of him! Though something in Bruno's tone—the way he said "esteemed"—made Jeremiah wary. "I'm going to be talking about the after-effects of going off the gold standard."

The teacher stared at him blankly. Jeremiah knew his topic wasn't a lightening-rod issue like Vietnam, but scholars and a few astute people on the Hill cared.

"You heard about that, last summer!" Ever since Nixon's big announcement a year and a half ago that he was taking the United States off the gold standard, Jeremiah's expertise was in demand: requests for book reviews and conference presentations, articles for the college's alumni magazine, interviews in the local Berkshires and Albany papers, and most excitingly the call from Raleigh Fox, his old
pal from the NSC, asking him to testify before a new joint House/Senate subcommittee.

“Sure,” Bruno said. “So did Tricky Dick do the right thing?”

Again, with the cynical tone. “Yes, definitely,” Jeremiah replied, trying to keep a sneer out of his voice. “We should have done it years ago. Nixon was smart to do it.” He could sense the young man tensing.

“I see.” The teacher's expression was skeptical. Clearly he knew nothing of the global monetary system.

“Anyway, forget it.” Probably best not to talk politics with Bruno, who, from the looks of him, had attended multiple war protests in college, or worse yet, was a draft dodger. Though by this point, who didn’t want an end to this war that had already claimed so many lives? Anthony Oliver, one of Jeremiah’s most promising students, had been ambushed in Quang Tri, nine short months after graduation. Jeremiah had represented the university at the funeral and the loss—the goddam waste of 58,000 young men—made him sick with grief.

He sighed and shifted in his seat, telling himself to stop fixating on something he couldn’t change. Molly’s voice rang in his head, enjoining him to relax. He’d try to appreciate seeing the DC sites through the eyes of a younger set, Hannah and her friends. He was under strict instructions from his daughter to cause no embarrassment. No doubt the scheduled briefings at their congressman’s office and at State would be given by junior officers since it was the week before Christmas. Here, Jeremiah assumed, he’d jump in, helping explain the finer points of diplomacy and international relations to the teenagers.

Maryland rolled by, past the thoroughbred racetrack he and Raleigh used to visit, the rusting railway bridges and the mill towers.
that dotted the path to Washington. And when they crossed route 495, he was light-headed, a bit nauseous and uneasy. But he also felt something of a rush, as if closing in on the Center of Power could restore his vigor, like a superhero refueled.

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Monday morning, the first full day of the trip, the group undressed their heavy New England outerwear and stepped inside the Washington Monument to begin the 868-stair climb. The students seemed to gallop up the steps like racehorses. DC was a town for young people with boundless energy. A gust of cold air welcomed Jeremiah when he emerged on the observation deck, a bit out-of-breath.

Taking in a lungful of air, he stepped to the edge. God, he loved the view here, though the branches of the cherry blossom trees were bare. In the distance, near the Lincoln Memorial, ice floated on the Reflecting Pool. The people on the ground looked tiny from this height. How excited he'd been in 1955 to arrive in DC with his new bride, thrilled to begin their adult life. He'd felt the capital's push and pull for 20 years, ever since his mentor at Columbia had encouraged him to put his academic training to practical use for the country. He sauntered the deck, taking in the vista from each direction. To the east stood the Capitol Building, majestic and gleaming. The hearing at which Jeremiah was testifying next month would be held in one of the smaller congressional buildings, but now, seeing that white dome, his chest swelled, inspired by the accomplishments of this great nation. His profound patriotism came from his immigrant parents, forever grateful to the United States, despite their sacrifices.

Instead of eating lunch with the group, Jeremiah slipped out to meet Raleigh at the Farragut Square Inn, a far cry from the 19th Street
Diner where they used to debate the issues over greasy grilled cheeses. The upscale restaurant made him slightly anxious, and Jeremiah wondered what his former colleague thought of his career switch, eight years prior, from government to academia. Teaching wasn’t quite as glamorous as working in the Administration.

"Fancy shmancy," Jeremiah said as Raleigh strode up and thumped him on the back. "Moving up in the world, I see." He hoped he didn’t sound envious; he felt genuinely pleased for his old buddy. Raleigh was now a hot shot, the number two guy in the newly created Joint Study Committee on Budget Control.

"You too, Professor. Congrats on getting tenure, by the way." Jeremiah smiled and nodded. He knew he could count on Raleigh to understand that academic work was meaningful.

Over orders of sirloin steak, Raleigh regaled him with Washington gossip. Jeremiah stirred with nostalgic regret. Though he’d never felt like a Washington insider during his nine-year sojourn in DC, he’d been privy to some basic goings-on. He missed that, off in his quiet college town in the Berkshires.

The biggest buzz right now, his friend relayed, was this business about the Watergate hotel; the episode "stunk to high heaven," with fingers pointing high up in the Administration. Jeremiah had seen the article in the Washington Post claiming Nixon aides were involved in sabotaging Democratic candidates, but it seemed so ludicrous he hadn’t believed it. "A collection of absurdities," a White House spokesman called the accusations. They shook their heads, marveling at the folly, and Jeremiah wondered silently if he should have stuck to his loyalties. He’d never before voted Republican, but Nixon’s bold monetary policy
combined with what seemed like significant progress on ending the war in Vietnam convinced him to back Nixon in last month’s election. He admitted his defection to no one, especially not his liberal wife or daughter.

“The war will be over soon one way or another,” Raleigh predicted when they switched topics to the breakdown of the peace talks. “Either the talks will resume or Congress will cut off funding in January.”

“Thank God.” Despite Kissinger’s “peace is at hand” statement just before the election, the Secretary was now saying the United States would not be stampeded into an agreement. The war was not yet over. More boys like his student Anthony would die. Every time Jeremiah thought about it, he became incensed.

“Well, that’s one of the things we’re hoping to do with this new committee,” Raleigh continued. “Curb the President’s ability to spend or cut at his discretion.”

Jeremiah asked about his upcoming testimony. What should he expect during the session, how long would he have to speak, how did each Senator and Representative on the committee lean politically? Raleigh briefed him on the protocols and assured him everything would go smoothly.

“Good, good. I wish I could invite Bob,” he said, of their old boss. “Show the guy I knew what the heck I was talking about. Should I put that in my testimony? My old boss didn’t want to hear a thing about it?”

“No!” Raleigh exclaimed, nearly choking on a piece of steak. “For god’s sake, no need to accuse anyone of incompetence.” He covered his mouth as he coughed, exposing a gold wristwatch with a black face and red numbers on display, the new kind Jeremiah had seen only in
commercials. “Focus on the research,” Raleigh continued. “Just sound sensible, bipartisan, not like some hothead who’s there for political purposes. That’s the most important thing.”

“Roger that.” He pointed to Raleigh’s wrist. “Nice watch. How much are they paying you?”

Raleigh’s genteel face turned pallid white, and then he recovered. “Jesus Gerstler, you’re direct!” He started to chuckle. “You haven’t changed a damn bit, have you?”

Jeremiah gave a sheepish smile. “Is that a compliment?”

“Tact was never your strong suit. Good thing you switched to academia. You wouldn’t have made a good politician. Or diplomat.”

This was an uncomfortable truth, but painful to hear. The way to respond was to make light. “Yeah, Molly says I don’t have an internal filter. But now, thanks to you,” Jeremiah grinned, “I’ve been invited to testify before Congress. I wonder if the press will take an interest. I can see the headline in the Washington Post already: ‘Prof. Says He Tried to Warn Three Administrations on Faulty Policy.’”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. I’m sure the Post—hell, the New York Times—they’ll all cover your testimony. You’ll be on the cover of Time Magazine.” Raleigh raised his hands to frame an invisible headline. “Professor Gerstler’s triumphant return.”

He laughed heartily at Raleigh’s joke. Hurrying back to the hotel to meet the group, Jeremiah turned the words over in his head: Gerstler’s triumphant return. A long-awaited triumph for Gerstler. Pres asks Gerstler to head up special committee.

Enthralled in the fantasy, he was unprepared for the throng of students and other guests gathered around a television screen in the
hotel lobby. Angling to get better a view of the set, he found the history teacher, who shook his head sadly. "So much for peace," Bruno said. "We just started bombing the crapola out of Hanoi and Haiphong."

"What a dickhead," said a student, referring to Kissinger or Nixon or Laird, Jeremiah wasn't sure which. "Murderer!" said another, her tone angry. Though he, too, felt dismay at the news, Jeremiah was irked to hear the kids referring to the nation's highest officials in these terms. Such a difference between this generation and his. He frowned and was about to reprimand them when Hannah caught his eye with a pleading look asking him not to say anything. This was his life now: the predictable, mundane reactions of college and high school students. Meaningless in the face of history.

He sighed. Would things have been different if he'd stayed in Washington? His lunch with Raleigh offered a glimpse of discourse on a higher level, a gilded world of action and inside intelligence.

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In the next few days, Jeremiah squeezed in one more meeting with a former colleague, but most of the time he was marshaling kids on and off the bus. He tried not to hover near his daughter too often, though every once in a while she'd drift towards him for a chat. How I ever been here before? She was seven when they'd left DC and didn't remember much. They did head counts at every stop: Lincoln Memorial, the National Museum of American History, and Ford's Theater, where the class hoodlum (as Jeremiah had come to think of him) imitated John Wilkes Booth.

News of the bombing campaign in Vietnam—dubbed Operation Linebacker II by the Administration—was sporadic, but on Wednesday
they heard of the first American casualties, as well as reports of massive civilian casualties on the North Vietnamese side. Jeremiah's stomach clenched with each account; like the troubled reaction he'd had when the full story about My Lai came out. What had happened to the honorable US forces, men he'd been proud—30 years ago—to call his brothers-in-arms? With each report, he felt more duped, angry at the Administration and its manipulation. He'd wanted to believe Kissinger's promises of peace, but now he understood that he'd simply been a chump, fallible in his raw human need for hope.

Jeremiah and the history teacher took to discussing the news. He admired the way Bruno engaged the kids in debate; his long hair no longer seemed important. "Know any Yiddish?" Jeremiah asked him.

Bruno shrugged. "Maybe a few words here or there."

"Well, here's what I think: bombing for peace is like shuffling for virginity."

Bruno laughed. "Yeah, I've heard that one. But when I was at Michigan, our language wasn't so quaint."

He imagined Bruno in college, leading protests in his wiry glasses and goatee. Jeremiah couldn't recall doing anything radical in his whole life, unless you counted participating in a teach-in at the college. But even then he wasn't an outspoken participant, he'd just taught. He never wanted to do anything to jeopardize his candidacy for tenure. And some of the anti-war protests—the ones bent on villainizing the enlisted men—bothered the World War II veteran in him.

At the State Department, the tour guide waxed long on the building's architectural features and artwork, and Bruno had to prompt her twice before she explained the Department's basic functions. She
seemed to think the students were more interested in the ceremonious aspects of diplomacy rather than the meat of policy-making. Today was the final day of their trip, and Jeremiah hoped they’d be treated to a thought-provoking speaker. But as they walked along the corridors, the guide ignored the copies of treaties hanging in their heavy frames, instead pointing out portraits of former Secretaries and telling anecdotes about visits from various heads of state. Jeremiah and Bruno rolled their eyes.

“Down there,” the guide pointed to a room at the end of a hall, “is where Dr. Kissinger gives press conferences or Q&A sessions, like the one he gave last week on Vietnam. Of course, we have a press briefing daily, during which reporters ask our spokesman anything they’d like relating to affairs of State.”

“What time is the daily briefing?” Jeremiah called out.

Her face brightened, happy to have a question. “At 11 o’clock, every morning. That way the reporters can go back to their offices and file their stories.”

Jeremiah checked his watch: 10:40 am. He sidled over to her.

“Would it be too much trouble to see if we can stay for the briefing? The kids would love it.” He motioned to his daughter and a few other students. “We’ve got a bunch of student journalists in this group.”

A few of them, as if on cue, produced reporters’ notepads. The tour guide looked uncertainly at them, and back at Jeremiah. She deliberated for a few moments, glanced at her watch, back at the kids, and then down the empty hallway. “Usually school groups need to get permission ahead of time, but it’s almost Christmas, so I guess it’ll be alright. You can stand in the back, and please don’t interrupt during
the briefing. Once the press is finished, I'll see if a public relations officer can answer your questions."

The students buzzed with excitement and Jeremiah gave her a genuine smile in thanks. As they filed into the press room, lining the yellow walls, Bruno held back a smaller group of students before directing them to different locations around the room. Jeremiah stood along a side wall, scrutinizing the reporters. The press was not sympathetic to this latest bombing campaign; he wondered how tough their questions would be.

After the spokesman's brief statement, the reporters fired question after question, like a tennis ball launcher. Thomp, thomp, thomp. Jeremiah marveled at their ability to grab onto the slightest of hints in the spokesman's body language or the particular way he phrased a point. "Has the Administration considered that the bombings will only harden Hanoi's stance?" Thomp. "Sources say the President ordered the B-52 attacks on civilians as a mauling operation, to show Hanoi his determination. Comment?" Thomp.

"That's a ridiculous, libelous statement. We don't target civilian targets. Next."

"So, you may strike civilians, even though you don't target them. Is that correct?"

"No comment."

"Is it your position that you don't discuss civilian casualties?"

Thomp.

Patiently, the spokesman lobbed the answers back at the journalists, reiterating earlier statements. The man could not be rattled, even as the questions grew more urgent. Jeremiah was both
impressed with the spokesman’s demeanor and frustrated by it. He would have liked the man to show some sensitivity, a little regret for civilian casualties and the massive destruction the US was causing in Hanoi. Sorrow for the 35 Air Force men downed since the operation began. At that moment, Bruno raised his right hand to his forehead and lifted one, two, three fingers.

The sound started as a buzz, almost imperceptible, but soon the entire room could hear the undeniable chorus of “Give Peace a Chance.” The hum grew louder, into a mantra, a few students singing the words under their breaths as reporters turned in their seats, mirthful grins on their faces. Jeremiah himself could not suppress a chortle. Terrific!

The spokesman scowled at the tour guide, now cowering against a back wall, hands at her cheeks. Jeremiah felt a little guilty: the woman would probably lose her job. The spokesman waited for the students to finish their song so he could resume his answers, but one song flowed into the next, from “Fortunate Son” to “Blowing in the Wind” to “Bring them Home.” Jeremiah sang along as best he could; he didn’t know all the words.

After initial attempts to restore the quiet—“thank you for that musical interlude”—the spokesman, with an expression of mild resignation, shrugged his shoulders and shouted to the reporters, “I guess that’s it for now, folks. Merry Christmas!”

Just then, the class hoodlum and three other students raced to block the spokesman’s exit. The reporters sprang into action, snapping pictures, asking for details—names, school, ages—and the students’ opinions of the bombing.
Jeremiah felt his chest expanding with delight over his daughter and her classmates: he loved these kids. He'd be crushed if any of them were sent over there, yet in a panic he realized they were two short years away from compulsory service. Given recent events he no longer trusted Nixon would keep his word and end the draft. Images of bodies flooded his memory: scattered corpses on frozen ground in France and Belgium almost 30 years before, the snow bloodied and crimson. A picture of his brother's inert body, a figment carried in his imagination since Lenny had fallen in the Battle of the Bulge, now mixed with visions of his student, Anthony, and the snapshots coming out of Hanoi. US servicemen and Vietnamese soldiers and civilians alike, all lifeless. Tens of thousands of families broken by a son's death in battle, just as his own had been. Each life an entire universe.

Rationally he knew the two conflicts were vastly different, and he brooked no regret over US involvement in World War II, or any war that was just. But this felt different.

“What happened to Kissinger's 'peace is at hand' statement?” Jeremiah yelled, directing his anger over the bombing campaign at the spokesman. “'Peace, peace,' he promised. But there's no peace!” He'd nearly choked up a moment ago thinking of Lenny, but now, looking at these kids, so young, he fumed. The thought of sending them to the jungles of Vietnam sickened him. His brother and Anthony were worth 10 of this guy.

He was through being quaint and rational. He didn't care for discourse now. “One, two, three, four, we don't want your fucking war!” Jeremiah chanted, fist in the air. Within seconds, the entire 10th grade class was stomping their feet and bellowing with him. They kept it
going for almost a quarter of an hour, until security pried the students loose and snapped handcuffs on Jeremiah and Bruno, leaving only the other parent chaperone with the kids.

He heard the snap, snap of the photographers’ cameras and students calling out bits of information to the reporters. Cold metal cuffs cut into Jeremiah’s flesh, but his hands seemed detached from his body. His whole being coursed with energy, a sense of vigor and righteousness he hadn’t felt in years, if ever.

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After several hours in police detention, Jeremiah and Bruno were released with stern warnings to take their hippie views back to Massachusetts. The fact that he supported the President’s monetary policies and wore bowties made no difference to them; throwing his lot in with the nation’s youth made him a hippie. Jeremiah felt a little wild.

Hannah threw her arms around her father, and he squeezed her tight, relieved she wasn’t furious with him over escalating the protest. “Well, we had a bit of fun, didn’t we, Hannah Banana?”

She nodded, and held him out at arms’ length, still stupefied over what he’d done. Then she laughed. “I can’t believe they took you away in handcuffs. Those pigs!” She wanted to sit with him on the bus to hear all about the lockup. She examined the red marks on his wrists and kept exclaiming, “Oh my god! You’re such a rebel!”

He beamed at her praise, though he had a niggling sense of something out of balance. He’d telephoned Molly from the police station. She’d always identified with the anti-war protesters, and over the phone she sounded proud of him. He solicited reactions from the other students, wanting the feeling of vitality to linger for as long as possible.
They boarded the bus for the long trip home, a few hours behind schedule. Jeremiah kept up his verve while Hannah sat with him but by Baltimore she'd moved to sit with friends.

They traveled farther and farther away from DC, and he was not sorry to be saying goodbye. All week, the question of whether he belonged in this city had dogged him, and he was fairly sure he had his answer now. The reality of his situation unraveled; his mind was like a jammed cassette tape, spiraling out of control.

He was finished here. There would be no return trip—triumphant or otherwise—no feted coverage of his academic contributions. In the morning, there'd be a small article in the Post about the protest. Perhaps all the way back on page 5. Then a phone call. Raleigh, having a fit, would un-invite him from testifying. Bastards. His chest constricted, like something was squeezing his ribcage. He couldn't take a deep breath; the more he tried, the more he panicked. His hands and arms were sweaty, despite the chill coming through the bus window.

Was this a heart attack? He struggled to remember the symptoms. After a few minutes the sensation passed and his breathing returned to normal, but a dark hole of regret had settled in his stomach. Why, why, why had he done it?

As the bus wound its way up the east coast, the students' wisecracks and squawking gave way to isolated whispers. A collective drowsiness descended, but Jeremiah was too wound up to sleep. He'd gotten worked up, was that such a big deal? It wasn't the first time he'd acted on impulse, for God's sake. He reached back, trying to analyze the moment he began chanting. He couldn't identify the rationale, only the emotion. He didn't ascribe to the political theory that nation-
states always act in a rational manner, so why should individuals? What he knew was that the protest felt pretty wonderful and gratifying, perhaps even cathartic.

Arriving back at the high school parking lot in the middle of the night, the kids said their goodbyes. Several students hovered near Hannah and Jeremiah. A few polite ones thanked him for chaperoning. In their sleepy eyes he could see their newfound admiration, and this gave him a lift.

At home he found a neat stack of the week's newspapers on his desk, and despite the hour, he ruffled through them, reading reports of other impromptu demonstrations around the country. One editorial after another criticized the bombings, further validation that what he'd done was moral and right.

Climbing into bed at last, he inhaled the familiar, welcome scent of his sleeping wife. He restrained himself from waking her, though his mind was still leaky with thoughts of the protest. In the morning he'd tell her how it felt to be standing among the teenagers, their hope and optimism contagious. What was the inflection point in politics and economics, when a million micro-lives could cause a change in the macro, like pointillism in art? Maybe he'd ask Bruno how to get involved in the movement. He pictured the reporters, silently cheering from the sidelines, offering him encouraging winks and smiles. ☐