

An Airtight Box

By Kathy Flann

During intermission of the "Tosca" benefit performance, ex-President Clinton, without Hillary, stepped outside the door of his Kennedy Center box, wondering what it would be like if someone shot him, maybe in his good lung, or maybe, if the attacker had lousy aim, even in the penis. He waved and sidled over to the people that had gathered on the other side of the velvet rope; at his first step toward them, the people broke into applause. He shook hands and stood in one place for a good three minutes, something that always made the guys on his Secret Service detail twitchy. Surely a non-lethal gunshot wound – one intended to inflict pain instead of death, which a lot of shooters do, according to the guys – would distract him from the sick, heavy feeling in his chest, like his organs were being squeezed between two pieces of Amazonian timber.

This morning in New York, his doctor's cold stethoscope, pressed hard against the site of last week's surgery, had felt as weighty as a beam. "Well, I've taken a good long gander into the abyss this time, haven't I?" he'd said. He'd shifted on the exam table, the paper sheet crinkling beneath him. "The bypass wasn't enough? I had to drive by for another look? Well, that's me all over, Doc," he'd explained, laughing, which made his pectoral muscles ache as if he'd bench pressed too much.

"Please don't speak until I'm done with this, Mr. President," the doctor had said.

He nodded. "I always drive by for another look," he'd finished, more quietly. He'd wondered if the sound of his heart racing was as loud to the doctor as it was in his own ears. He winked at his assistant, who was sitting in a green vinyl chair in the corner, talking on her cell phone to her assistant, confirming the arrangements for the flight to Washington and for her pre-session briefing with key Democratic House members.

She didn't acknowledge the president's wink; she said he only winked when he was nervous. She had no patience with nervousness. She covered the mouth piece of the phone and sighed; the president braced himself.

But she only said, to the doctor, "Please feel free to tell him to stop being so ridiculous." The sunlight, a little weak and watery, shone on the left side of her face. Her eyes were so blue.

The doctor stood erect, looked at the president's assistant, who was talking on the phone again, and then he looked right at the president's face; the stethoscope still dangled from his neck. The doctor's dark hair was tousled and he was rugged and handsome except for his discoloured skin and teeth, which suggested a habit of cigarettes and whiskey, maybe bourbon, and there was something slightly unsettling, wolfish in his unremitting eye contact. The president found this look all too familiar.

"I keep telling you," the doctor said. "This fluid in your lungs, it's rare after the surgery." He spoke with a Carolina accent, but haltingly, like each word was a gumball he had to retrieve from the bottom of a narrow necked jar. "A nuisance, definitely. I'm sure it's had you wheezing like a bulldog. And when your lung collapsed, it must have scared the holy hell fire out of you. But it really is no big deal. Only a complication from the bypass. The decortication fixed it. No more fluid and no more scar tissue. You'll be a new man in no-time flat. Scout's honor," he said, fumbling to hold up some fingers in a scout-like manner; it was clear he had no idea which ones. Giving up on that particular gesture, he patted the president's shoulder. "You were just unlucky."

Unlucky. The word had stayed with him all day. It had never ever been applied to him before. Ever. Anytime in his life there'd been a whiff of bad luck in the air, he'd ducked it, dodged it, or hosed it down with something that smelled a whole lot sweeter. And as for his accomplishments, no one ever referred to those as luck. The concept of luck was impotent, like an old man. Except now he himself was an old man. Or, at least, nearly.

The Kennedy Center was a low-security crowd, all the DC professionals and key Democrats you could squeeze into one orchestra hall. It was a little boring, if the president was honest with himself. There was no work to do here. When he spotted the woman on the other side of the velvet rope – a statuesque girl, really, with long, dark hair, shiny as an oil slick – he drifted over as if he was heading that direction anyway, shaking hands, patting children's heads. He wasn't thinking of what was coming next. He was just looking, just having a look.

"How are you? How you folks doing?" he said. "Good to see you."

"Nothing's been the same since you left," complained a heavyset woman in thick glasses that made her eyes look like small brown fish.

"You're not kidding," he said. "I miss all that free stationery." He got a laugh from more than just the woman. "And no one plays music when I walk into a room anymore. It's so dang quiet. Even Sam ignores me." He looked over at the head honcho of his Secret Service detail, who was standing beside the entrance to the box in that military "at ease" position, not quite right with the crisp dark suit or the crow's feet around his eyes. He was more Dirty Harry than GI Joe.

"Isn't that right, Sam?"

Sam didn't respond, just kept scanning the middle distance as if the president hadn't spoken. After a beat, the agent looked at his watch with just a trace of boredom. The crowd erupted with laughter. Bill looked at them as if to say, Do you see what I have to put up with? He and Sam had been perfecting this gag for five years. This was version one. In version two, Sam said, "Yes, sir, ignoring you completely, sir," which the crowds always found equally funny. The gag worked, he thought, because no one expected the Secret Service guys to be up for a laugh. They saw the guys as inhuman, could almost sense the qualities different from themselves – the better-than 20/20

vision the guys were required to have or the fact that they were all world-class, precise-to-a-hair, bona fide marksmen. Luck, the president thought, I've got your luck.

The girl was tall, alabaster-skinned, maybe thirty-one or thirty-two, with a dazzling and mischievous smile. She hovered on the edge of the crowd, not quite one of them, not quite waiting to meet him. With a quick glance over the heads of the people to his left, the president noted her snug black turtleneck, the two less attractive, shorter friends pulling her forward toward the rope, the resigned, amused roll of her eyes.

He took his time, shook more hands, chatted with a lady from Hot Coffee, Mississippi and signed her program. But without looking, he kept tabs on the girl, took as long as he could to get to her; in his experience, the longer people waited for something, the more attachment they developed to that thing. Of course, in this case, it meant that he himself was waiting, as well. When he finally stood in front of her, she had murky green eyes and a firm dry handshake that sent tingles up his arm, not like the clammy limp numbers he got from most members of the public. Her friends squealed, but she didn't. Her eyes simply opened a little bit wider, and one corner of her mouth started to rise, in the beginning of what could be a smile. In that instant, he pictured his daughter's imploring face, much younger than it was now. "Promise me, Daddy. No more." It was a promise he hadn't been particularly apt at keeping. There had been a few slip-ups. But since Hillary had won office herself, he'd been the model of restraint. Hillary still yelled at him just as much. He still secretly liked it.

He knew he shouldn't do what he was about to do, he knew it was bad, but he caught Sam's eye nonetheless and gave him the nod, a nod he hadn't given since he didn't know when. This was exactly the sort of abuse of his security detail that he had always been accused of in Washington, but Sam understood. Sam was in his third marriage and also had a girlfriend who worked in a café on Capitol Hill. That girlfriend was a regulations and security breach all by herself, even if he never told her who he worked for; Sam would be fired in an instant if Bill mentioned it. "Hey, we are who we are," Sam was fond of saying with a shrug. "Guys who live big and fuck big."

After that, sitting in the box next to Hillary's empty seat, the president felt a little better, but he had trouble concentrating through the rest of the Puccini. The president counted the number of faces that turned to look at his reaction when Tosca's lover was being killed: 32. He scanned the crowd for the girl and her friends, but he couldn't make them out. Well, beauty didn't necessarily correlate with money. She might be in the balcony. As soon as the performance ended, he hurried down a back stairwell, skipping the Kennedy Center's Hall of Presidents, with its familiar red carpet, massive chandeliers, and one last crowd to greet. Outside, he leaned toward Sam, who whispered her name into his ear: "Sarah Heston." The president veritably leapt into his limousine, hardly noticing the nip of the November air.

And there she was; she was sipping champagne and flipping through the

president's copy of Rolling Stone. Good old Sam. The president's motorcade – less conspicuous than when he was in office, just two tan SUVs and his black stretch Lincoln – headed up the ramp out of the parking garage, toward the Watergate Hotel, just one block away.

"Your goon said my friends couldn't come," she said, blinking. "Why is that?"

"Sarah," the president said. "Is it okay if I call you Sarah?" He knew it was okay. This was simply a tactic he'd learned to allow himself a moment's thought and to make people feel especially respected, if the occasion warranted. The car smelled faintly of pineapple – he just knew it was her hair, her long dark hair, which spilled in a haphazard fashion over the fur-trimmed collar of her coat. "You intrigue me, Sarah."

"Well, if that will get me a ride home, fine. But I'm not going to sleep with you."

"You're direct," the president said. "That's an excellent quality."

"Thanks. Did you hear what I said? That I'm not going to sleep with you?"

"How about I give you a personal tour of my suite at the Watergate?"

"No thanks."

He looked at her earnestly, and tried his fail-safe line, the one that always, always worked: "I've made a lot of mistakes, Sarah. I won't say I haven't."

"Have you read this article about The Hooks? I think they're a British band. Do you know them?"

"All right," he sighed. "Where do you live?"

It had to be Smoky Ordinary, didn't it? Some tiny place beyond the farthest away Virginia suburb the president could even name. He gave his driver her address and got comfortable in the seat. He hated riding backwards. Perhaps she hadn't realized that she was sitting on his side of the car. He should have sat next to her. What was he thinking? He was rusty, that was all. He had at least an hour to rescue the situation. He had seduced a nation once upon a time. Bill, get yourself together. Get your head back in the game.

He looked out the window at the Potomac, at the way the lights and fine rain made the surface sparkle. "I miss DC," he said. "The North doesn't suit me." Then he looked at Sarah again, her face intermittently lit up by the city outside. She wore hardly any makeup and her creamy skin was unlined; yet she didn't have a baby face. Up close, it was hard to guess within ten years how old she was. "What do you do for a living?" he asked. He laughed, remembering something he was once told. "That's the big question DC people ask each other when they first meet, right? What do you do?"

"I'm a photographer," she said. "This isn't bad, by the way," she said, pouring him a glass of champagne. "And I'm not 'DC people.' I'm from Virginia."

What was with this girl? No one from Northern Virginia ever owned up to living there, unless pressed. He took the glass from her. He wasn't supposed to drink. But what the hell. It was going to be a long night. "Thank you, my dear. Cheers." He drained it in a single long swallow, and passed it to her to refill.

"Cheers," she said.

They were quiet for a while after that. Sarah wasn't speechless in a doe-eyed way. She didn't look at him adoringly, or fearfully, with her mouth open a little as if willing words to come out. Instead, she flipped through the magazine as if she were at the hairdresser, her long legs crossed at the knee in a relaxed fashion and the top one bouncing a little, her sparkly high-heeled shoe peeking out from under the hem of her slacks.

"What?" she finally said, smacking her palms onto the pages on her lap.

"I'm sorry?"

"Why do you keep staring at me?"

The president leaned against the window and sighed. He wondered if Hillary was still in that emergency session of Congress. If the country was going to go to war, he would get a call soon. He could picture the fullness of Hillary's mouth when she was thinking, the intensity of her blue, blue eyes. Was she speaking right now, that room full of suits under the spell of her no-nonsense voice? He could imagine her saying the words they had penned together earlier, in a conference call: "Democracy does not end with a constitution and the right to vote. It is a never-ending struggle that we must grapple with everyday." He let the words roll around in his head. Yes, a struggle, a carefully orchestrated effort. Not something that could exist by accident. God, it was exciting when the two of them worked together. His wife had the sexiest, sharpest mind he'd ever encountered. Screw the press and all their insinuations about divorce – their love, unorthodox as it was, had done things for the country that historians would still be discovering decades from now.

The lamp above Sarah's head cast a gauzy glow around her. It flickered for a moment, and she set the magazine aside. He blinked, and the limousine's whole cabin seemed to grow dimmer. He felt incredibly tired. He was pretty sure the drugs he was on were incompatible with liquor. He shut his eyes – just a quick snooze, he thought.

When he managed to open his eyes and look out the window again, the limo was cruising down a two-lane highway through some woods. He wasn't sure where he was at first. His arms and legs tingled with sleep. He could see nothing, just blackness, and it was as if he was riding through the hills of Arkansas, his mother's bright red lips twisted into a grimace as she steered the Ford Impala through the darkness. He could almost believe she was at the wheel of the car; he could see the way she would gesture to this girl with the nod of her head. "There's no such thing as a stranger, Billy," she would say. "They're just friends you haven't met yet." She would get out her compact, pat her nose, one wrist steadying the car. "Your problem is, you've been spending too much time with rich people, city people, and Northerners. Sweetie, you talk all the time but you've forgotten how to say anything."

He was aware now that he was rubbing the velour beside him, directly behind the driver's seat, as if checking if his mother was there. The girl was staring out the window. He looked at her, tried to focus. Her dark hair was so beautiful; he desperately wanted to touch it. "So which photographers do you like, Sarah?" he said.

"Francois-Marie Banier?"

She made surprised eye contact and then wrinkled her brow. "He photographs celebrities," she said, with a tone that might be reserved for words like landfill or maggots. "He's talented, of course. But can you think of any subject more boring?" She let out a little snorting laugh, surprising herself, and then covering her mouth and laughing for real. Her hand was broad with short natural fingernails and no jewelry; this was a hand that actually did work, he thought. He could imagine Sarah in her darkroom, the wonder in her eyes as images appeared on the paper in her fingertips.

"Bertien Van Manen?" the president tried.

Sarah stopped laughing, her face slack as if he'd slapped her. "You know who she is?"

"Of course. I went to 'Give Me Your Image' in Madrid last summer. It was amazing."

"She's my favourite photographer," Sarah said in a tiny, almost inaudible voice. Finé.

The girl's eyes stared out the window at the darkness. The president let the quiet remain for a few minutes then, just the sound of the wheels hitting potholes.

"You're a tough nut to crack, Sarah Heston," he said, smiling. He already had her, he knew.

She looked at him thoughtfully. "Well, you see, here's the thing. I was married for three years. His name was Bill, too," she said. "I used to work for a cookbook publisher." She stopped and looked at her fingernails. "I was just there while I got my photography off the ground. And then we met." She bit the nail on her index finger and kept talking. "Only, I didn't know he was married to someone else. Actually, which one of us he married first, I have no idea." She studied the president's face. "I've always wondered: If you marry two people, is that still adultery? Legally, I mean. He's going to hell either way."

He smiled at her and studied her face in return. You never knew with some of the girls he met; they could have stunning figures, dress with impeccable style, and the instant they spoke, they'd become utterly undesirable. Not so with this girl. Her unselfconscious frankness made him want to share in return. Did she know that his own father, William Jefferson Blythe, who died before Bill was born, was rumoured to have been a bigamist? Did she know that most people studiously avoided the word adultery in his presence? He wondered for the first time if she was a reporter.

He knew his ice blue eyes would twinkle under the streetlights. He also knew, from years of practice, never to answer the questions he was asked, but the question he wished he had been asked. "I would love to see your photographs, Sarah Heston," he told her. There was no question now. She was ready to melt: finé.

He never went to girls' houses. It was too personal, and much, much too risky. But now he had to find out who the hell she was. Make the whole thing look like a misunderstanding if need be. He'd been reckless, there was no doubt about it. He had

no idea who her friends were or how soon they might talk. His heart felt like there was a rope tied around the middle of it. That little pink mouth, the way her nose wrinkled when she was thinking, still looking out the window instead of at him. He knew she would make him laugh or shout—she was that kind of intense. She was either incredibly calculating or one of the most genuine, un-Washington people he'd met in years.

The three-vehicle motorcade drove down the main street of the town, and he could see the reflection of the speeding, shiny cars reflected in the shop windows. There was a hardware store and an old mom-and-pop grocery with a bright pink front. In the town square, there was a statue of a man on a horse—Stonewall Jackson, the president assumed—still facing north, never to retreat. A shaggy, three-legged dog hurried down the sidewalk at a surprising pace, as if he was late for an appointment. The limo turned and entered a residential area, small white houses with porches and the occasional brick rambler. It reminded him of Hope, his hometown. He halfway expected to see Miss Marie Purkins' School for Little Folks, the squat cinderblock building where his ability to read at the age of four had famously dazzled the staff. It had been his first intoxicating taste of success.

"This is it," Sarah said, pointing. "Stop here."

The driver had already pulled to the curb. He walked around the car and let Sarah out. "You really want to see my photos?" she said, her forehead wrinkled with doubt.

"I do," he said. He smiled. "My guys have to give me the okay, though." His driver shut the door again. Sam had the president well-trained to wait in the car. He watched two of the agents follow Sam and Sarah into the house, and a few minutes later, Sam appeared. He nodded at the guy positioned next to the president's car door; the agent opened it and waited for the president to get out.

He wasn't sure. Was this a good idea? If she was a reporter he was done for already; he should cut his losses and get out of here. If she'd been wearing a wire, he hadn't said anything overly untoward yet, had he? He replayed the last hour in his mind, imagined Hillary's reaction, her flared nostrils, the flash of her eyes. This image, though, only excited him, a fiery ball in his stomach.

The president got out of the car, walked up the rickety front steps. The rain had stopped, and the air smelled like wet grass and the magnolia tree next to the porch. The tree frogs were chirping. Not a single light was on down the whole block. It was like going back in time to 1949, when he still lived with his grandparents at 117 South Hervey, and his mother had not yet returned from New Orleans with exactly one nursing degree and one abusive husband named Roger. Nowadays, he inked Roger out of most of his memories. He liked to imagine his mother was always the sassy, confident woman she became after his death. He pictured her now coming to the door to greet him, a Tom Collins in her hand and Duke Ellington on the radio.

He hesitated at the door, studying Sam's face for some positive or negative reaction. Sam, however, gave nothing away, and the president stepped over the

threshold and into the house. Sam pulled the door shut, and the president heard him descend the steps. He would be stationed outside in the darkness, invisible until he chose to reveal himself.

"What can I get you?" Sarah said from the kitchen. "I have a little bit of Scotch, some Budweiser—" He could hear bottles clinking. "Oh, and one bottle of cab, but it's not very good. Maybe we can give that to your friend." One of the guys, he knew, would be in there with her, standing unobtrusively in a corner. Right about now, he would shake his head, smiling politely.

"A glass of water would be fine," the president replied. She had hung up her coat on a wall rack made from deer antlers and hooves. He touched one of the antlers – smooth, cool bone – and took off his suit jacket. She stuck her head around the kitchen doorway, looking a little embarrassed. "This was my grandfather's house. He was a taxidermist."

"It's great," Bill said. "Completely authentic," he added, looking around. His head was still fuzzy. He blinked and wandered the periphery of the strange room, an amalgam of two very different generations. There were contemporary cream-colored sofas and chairs, but there was a familiar musty smell that would never be in a new home. He spied cardinals and blue jays in life-like poses on the windowsill. Antique jigsaws hung on the wall, as well as a mirror that said Irwin's Feed and Seed. He remembered the Coca Cola mirror in the house on East 13th Street, where they had moved with Roger; it had an image of a little girl and a white cat. He could picture his mother primping in front of it before Roger came home from work, her hands fluttery with anticipation about which Roger was actually going to show up – the one who grunted and ate supper in silence or the one who came home affectionate, unpredictable, and reeking of whiskey, the one who had aimed a gun at them both when Bill was five.

"Lock up your troubles in an airtight box," his mother had liked to say. She had stood in the doorway of his room on that night with the gun, and said it to him where he lay in bed, his eyes wide open and the covers drawn up to his neck. She came over and sat down next to him and stroked his hair and then she said it again and again. He loved it when she said those words. He loved to imagine his troubles inside the box, futilely scratching and howling like feral cats. He loved the satisfying click of the lock. Sometimes he imagined dropping the box into the ocean.

"Here you go," Sarah said, handing him a glass of ice water. She held a glass of the supposedly dreadful wine. She shrugged. "Somebody's got to drink it," she said.

"Thanks." He took a sip. He hadn't realized until that moment how dry his mouth was, how hot. He could feel the trail of the cold water in his throat.

"The photos are in here," Sarah turned on the light in the dining room. "The group that's ready to leave the darkroom, at least. They're a series."

He squinted, adjusting to the bright light. He felt a little dizzy and blinked to get his bearings. He walked up to the wall and began to study the dozens of framed black

and white photos there, floor to ceiling, some poster-sized, and some tiny as matchbooks. At first, he saw only soft curvy patterns, like the hem of a skirt, or the edge of the sea. But then his eyes snapped into focus. What he was seeing was dozens of flared wings, a set within nearly every photo. He looked closely at what was in front of him. This one was a sparrow on the windshield of a car, its wings spread slightly and its beak open, some of its blood just visible on the glass. The next one was a duck in a tall patch of weeds, its body stiff and straight and long. Then he saw a mourning dove on the asphalt, its neck at strange angle and its eyes closed so peacefully, little half circles that children drew to indicate sleep.

He moved along the wall, taking in what the display offered. There were seagulls, chickadees, robins, grackles, and even a chicken. All of them dead. Many on the hoods or grills of cars. Others, the small ones, in someone's cupped hands. It was the quantity in such a small space that overwhelmed him. He felt hot, a little nauseous. He pulled out one of the dining room chairs and sat down. "Boy, you're full of surprises," he said. He tried to train his eyes on Sarah's face, the motion behind those big dark eyes. No, this was no reporter. "How did you find them all?"

"It's not as hard as you would think. You just have to look out for them." She turned and pointed to a photo of a robin on its back in a wheelbarrow full of mulch.

Its feet looked so delicate, like twigs. "This one, for example," she said. "Big Fred, the foreman at the lumberyard, called me up and said, 'Get over here. We got something for you.' Everyone in town knows what I'm up to. I get a call at least once a week."

"I had no idea birds had it so tough," he said, laughing.

"Yeah, well, I don't think it's just birds," she said, looking right at his eyes, but only for a second.

"You got me there," he said. They were both quiet for a moment.

She turned back to the robin. "This one. I think it flew into the side of the building during a storm. I don't know if you can see the little dent in its forehead. Right there. See?"

He stood up and looked closely. Sure enough, the bird was perfectly intact except for the side of its head, which was just slightly caved in. "Oh yeah," he said. "I see it."

"Normally, they huddle together in the trees during bad weather. Where could he have been going?" Her nose wrinkled and her eyes probed the president's face, as if he might actually be able to answer this question.

"They're very good. Compositionally and thematically. You've shown them?"

Sarah nodded. "Just at some community art shows and stuff. I almost got them into a big show at a gallery in Baltimore last month. It'll happen eventually. For now, I'm paying the rent with weddings."

"It's how you're keeping your dreams alive. Nothing wrong with that," he said, his tongue thick in his mouth. Was it possible that she'd spiked his champagne with something? No, Sam would've found anything before he put her in the limousine. It

was just his meds. "If you want to do something, Sarah," he continued, "you just have to go for it. That's right. You're a lot like someone else I know," he said. But then he wasn't sure. He had lost his wife long ago, well before he'd lost his mother. Had the other women come first or had he lost her first? Not a day went by that he didn't miss Hillary, the way she was long before they took the national stage, the dead-on impressions she used to do of their professors at Yale Law School, the way she would recite her latest haiku when they were in the bath together, the electric intelligence of her eyes and the way it warmed him inside, right through his gut. Now he mainly saw it when she was mad, when she was yelling at him. That moment earlier in the day, collaborating on the speech – that was the exception that proved the rule. And none of the women he'd been with had even begun to fill that void. If he ever stopped wanting Hillary, the one thing in the world he couldn't have, would he stop wanting all of them?

He reached out for Sarah's hand, the hand that had gotten him here in the first place. It was so smooth and young. He kissed her palm, still dry, then her wrist. He pulled her toward him. Sarah hesitated, but then she smiled a little sadly. She touched his shoulder, and then she bent down and hugged him tightly, her hand on the back of his neck.

"I feel like I know you, Mr. President" she said.

All of the girls said this to him, but normally it happened afterward, when they were lying next to him naked and breathless. When they said that, it was as if they pressed a button that caused the joy of the whole encounter to fly away from him. Me? he would wonder. Overweight, puffy-eyed me? But it wasn't like that with Sarah now. Why was that? Did he maybe feel the same about her—like she was familiar? Or more simply, that this place where she'd brought him felt like the home of his youth that no one really knew, the place no videographer or reporter had been able to get right?

That she was, in fact, a stranger, someone he'd met by chance and had, truth be told, just wanted to be with for the night, made him want to cry. A gulping sob lurked in his throat. He breathed deeply, smelling Sarah's hair, like pineapple. He laughed a little.

"I wish I knew you, really knew you," he said, not just to Sarah but to all of them, to his wife and his mother. Maybe it was luck – something impossible to box up, store, manipulate – that had brought them into his life at all. The thought that this might be true made him feel sick all over again. "You seem like such a very good woman, Sarah Heston."

He fumbled with his pager, signalling to Sam he was ready to go. Out on the street, as the president was about to get in the car, Sam put a hand on his shoulder. He leaned close and whispered in the president's ear. "Cold fish. Better luck next time," he said.

Sam's comment amused the president. "Thanks, Sam," he said, and then he went

into a parody of his own 1992 campaign speech, complete with hand gesture. "I still believe in a place called Hope," he drawled. And with these words, the strange sensation he felt, which he could only just identify as doubt, the president's heart fluttered in the grill of his chest like it was made of birds' wings.