

# Amazing Things Are Happening Here

..... *Stories* .....

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Black  
Lawrence  
Press

To Rosalie

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# Canvassing

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I was once—briefly—a suspect in a murder investigation.

That was more than thirty years ago, during my senior year at Chalgrove Prep, and, quite frankly, it's hard to imagine the scruffy teenage romantic that I was from the vantage point of the respectable, pragmatic paterfamilias I've somehow become. When I was first appointed to the state bench, Vanessa Bonchelle's name did appear in the local papers, but only to note that I had married her younger sister. At the time of my elevation to the appellate court three years later, where I'm pleased to say I've carved out a niche for myself as an authority on criminal procedure, the media focused its attention almost exclusively on our newborn triplets, and upon Lauren's decision to have them delivered vaginally in Oslo, where her mother lives, rather than via c-section here in Rhode Island, so any mention of the Bonchelle family's tragedy was an afterthought. In fact, I might not have spoken of my teenage crush again, as Lauren and I had arrived at a tacit pact not to mention her sister, if I hadn't received an unexpected letter last month from the State Correctional Facility at Narragansett. The long, narrow envelope looked no different from the dozens of prison missives I receive at the courthouse each month—some hostile, others beseeching—yet mailed to my personal address in

Creve Coeur, to the home of my wife and daughters, it seemed an abuse. I was about to discard the envelope without opening it. Then I noticed the name printed on the back: Troy Sucram.

I stashed the letter in the pocket of my tennis shorts. My wife and I had a mixed doubles match scheduled for that Sunday morning—like I said, I’ve become respectable—and Lauren had dispatched me to pick up the sitter while she pumped breast milk for our baby. When I returned, my wife was still showering, so I retreated to my study and sliced open the unwelcome envelope. I feared my hands might tremble, but they remained steady. The missive itself proved concise and straightforward—written in block letters on pre-lined paper: Troy had served his full thirty years. He was set to be released at the end of the month. He intended to leave the state permanently, but wished to meet with me for a few moments before he did so.

I was still clutching the onion skin page when Lauren appeared in the doorframe, her auburn hair a luscious contrast to her pale skin and tennis whites. A lifetime of suffering had done little to dull her dazzling looks. At forty, she retained the willowy frame of a school girl—and for the first time in years, I was again struck by her similarity to the adolescent beauty I had idolized at seventeen.

“Bad news?” Lauren asked.

“Not for us,” I lied, sliding the letter into a drawer. I could as easily have slid it into the wastepaper basket, but I did not. “Just another felon pleading his case.”

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Chalgrove Prep had been an all-male institution for one hundred thirty-eight venerable years before Vanessa Bonchelle and twenty-six other young women entered the academy in the autumn of 1979. To my father, a third generation alumnus, this heralded the demise

of Western civilization—he referred to the girls collectively as “the camel’s noses”—but those of us still in the academic trenches took the development in stride, as we had the decision to admit “working class” scholarship kids like Troy Sucram to our class six years earlier. We quickly learned new gender-neutral lyrics to “Dear Old Chalgrove” and to use the bathrooms on alternate floors. Soon enough, several of the newcomers had attached themselves to varsity lettermen; on autumn afternoons, these amorous couples leaned back-to-back in the courtyard during free periods, pushing the limits on public displays of affection. I wasn’t among them. Vanessa sat directly in front of me in three of my courses—Bradford following Bonchelle alphabetically—and, during the first nine months of my junior year, we did not exchange one single word.

That’s not to say that I didn’t think about her constantly. Although I can’t pinpoint precisely the origins of my interest in Vanessa—how her wild auburn mane and volatile idealism came to eclipse Danielle Pastarnack’s delicate innocence or Sally Sewell’s devil-may-care coquetry—my attraction quickly developed into a full-fledged infatuation. At that time, my experience with women was decidedly limited: I’d gone to a couple of Sadie Hawkins dances with the stepdaughter of my father’s urology partner, a sweet girl who suffered from total alopecia, and had kissed her once, on her doorstep, out of curiosity and pity. Yet nothing in the first sixteen years of my life had adequately prepared me for the political whirlwind and sensual dynamo that was Vanessa Bonchelle, or for her ongoing challenge to the authorities of Chalgrove—whether that meant circulating a letter demanding that “*In deo laetandum*” be removed from the school’s seal or pounding her fist on a desk while questioning Mr. Rothfeig’s interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine until her breath ran out. Every detail I learned of her life rendered her that much less approachable: her moth-

er's crown as Miss Norway and former career as the highest-paid fashion model in Europe, her father's self-made fortune in oilrig accessories and his close friendship with Prince Philip of England. Unfortunately, each day that I lacked the courage to speak to Vanessa only elevated the wall of ice between us. Once, in chemistry class, I reached forward on impulse and felt her glossy hair between my fingertips. I suspect Vanessa knew what I had done—her neck appeared to tense ever so slightly—but she didn't acknowledge my act, and I couldn't be certain. After that, even casual eye contact with Vanessa sent a shiver of mortification down my spine. I gave up hatching plots to befriend her, and instead fantasized about miracles, often farfetched or apocalyptic, that might bring us together.

Summer approached. If my miracle did not occur before the end of June, I lamented, I would have to wait until the following September for another chance at divine intervention. So I spent my weeknights studying for the SATs, and my weekend evenings shooting pool with Eddie Arcaya and Chase Flynn in Eddie's finished basement, stewing sullenly in my unspoken love. And then one muggy Saturday afternoon, our door chime rang. I expected the postman, so I answered the bell in a torn t-shirt and grass-stained sweatpants. To my amazement, Vanessa Bonchelle stood on the front porch. She sported tight acid-wash jeans and carried a clipboard. My crush appeared on the verge of speaking, but caught herself as she recognized me, and I realized that she was as shocked at the meeting as I was.

"Hey Josh," Vanessa said—as though we spoke every day. "I'm collecting signatures to place Congressman John Anderson in the Presidential ballot. Are there any registered voters at home today who would be willing to sign?"

Her lapel pin announced: MAKE THE ANDERSON DIFFERENCE! Humidity matted her bangs to her forehead. Before that

instant, I had never heard of Congressman John Anderson, but I suddenly became his most ardent supporter.

I searched my throat for words, but found none.

A moment later, my father emerged around the side of the house. He'd been tending his rosebushes and held a pruning shears in a gloved hand. He sized up Vanessa as though appraising a prostate gland and then turned his attention to me.

"Is this a friend of yours, Joshua?" he asked.

"I don't know," I stammered.

Vanessa stepped into the breach. "I'm collecting signatures to place Congressman Anderson on the November ballot," she informed my father. "Would you be willing to sign? Signing does not mean you're agreeing to support Congressman Anderson in any way. All you'd be doing is giving voters a choice."

"I suppose you're a supporter of Anderson?" my father asked her.

"Vanessa Bonchelle," said Vanessa. "I'm the Congressman's campaign manager here in Creve Coeur." When my father did not shake her outstretched hand, she launched into a campaign salvo: "Congressman Anderson is the only major candidate who supports extending the ratification period for the Equal Rights Amendment," she began. What followed were the candidate's positions on nuclear weapons, fair housing, Amtrak. As she spoke, Vanessa's white cheeks turned crimson. I could feel my father's arteries hardening vicariously.

"I see," said my father. "Now let me tell *you* a story, young lady. When I was a surgery intern, I once worked a forty-eight hour shift in the OR. I was so tired when I finished, I pulled my car up at the stop sign outside the hospital parking lot . . . and I sat there, *waiting for the stop sign to turn green*. That's how hard *I* worked to get where I am today . . . and that's why I'm voting for Reagan."

My father snipped the air with his shears. "You're welcome to offer your friend a snack, Joshua," he said. "Your mother left a

strudel on the sideboard.” And then he tossed his gloves into the stainless steel bin beside the door and vanished into the house.

“Sorry,” I said.

“It’s okay. I’m used to it.”

An awkward silence enveloped us. The scent of crab apple blossoms wafted from the yard. Across the street, a team of laborers was repaving the Davenport’s handball court, the foreman bellowing orders in Portuguese. I considered inviting Vanessa inside for a slice of apple strudel—but, at that moment, I wanted to distance myself from my father’s ideas as much as possible.

“Do you need any more volunteers?” I finally asked. “I mean . . . I could help you get signatures, if you wanted me to . . .”

I felt the air freeze inside my lungs.

“Cool beans!” Vanessa exclaimed. “Would you like to be deputy campaign manager or press secretary?”

I had apparently doubled the size of the Anderson effort in Creve Coeur.

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My stint with the John B. Anderson presidential campaign started the following morning when Vanessa picked me up in her flamingo-pink Chrysler Cordoba. The vehicle boasted a vinyl roof and power windows. Its owner wore white tights under a denim skirt and had a daisy pinned above her ear. A pair of his-and-hers clipboards rested on the passenger seat. Vanessa’s intention was to train me in the art of collecting signatures, then to dispatch me to canvass on my own. My own goal was to glom onto her for as long as humanly possible, preferably until Anderson entered the Oval Office, in the hope that proximity would inspire romance.

“Good morning, deputy,” she said. “Ready to pound the pavement?”

“Sure thing,” I said.

We drove under the expressway and into the working-class Italian-and-Irish neighborhood opposite the dockyards. I had read up on Anderson the night before in back copies of *The Providence Journal* and the *Creve Coeur Clarion*—and what little I knew suggested that these ethnic Catholic tenements were unlikely to provide fertile ground to collect signatures for a liberal Republican. Nor, for that matter, were the upscale Victorians on Banker’s Hill where Vanessa and I lived. Canvassing down by the college, or even at the Hutchinson Mall, made far more sense to me, but I had no intention of questioning Vanessa’s tactics.

“How many signatures do we need?” I inquired.

“One thousand across the state.”

“How many do we have right now?”

“As of last weekend,” replied Vanessa, “we had twenty thousand four hundred.”

She looked at me and beamed. “Our goal isn’t really to collect signatures. That’s just our cover. Our goal is to get people thinking about Anderson. But it’s much easier to talk to people like your dad if you’re only looking for ballot access.”

“Is that official campaign strategy?” I asked.

“It is,” she replied, “if I say it is.”

Vanessa explained that she spoke once each week by telephone with the campaign’s New England nerve center in Boston. She had no budget, no office. She’d asked for the job when she’d contacted the Anderson campaign in Washington hoping to volunteer at their Creve Coeur headquarters—and had discovered that there wasn’t one. The only formal instruction she’d received was not to promise anyone an appointment in a future Anderson administration; otherwise, she was on her own. Of course, running a city-wide campaign with no budget wasn’t easy. It didn’t help that her father, although

worth in excess of fifty million dollars, refused to spend one dime on her efforts. Victor Bonchelle made my father look like a Maoist. Eleven years later, when the entrepreneur shot himself to death—in the wake of Vanessa’s murder and a series of financial setbacks—he telephoned the funeral parlor in advance to arrange the service, then laid out a dark suit on the bed for his own viewing. How a man of my late father-in-law’s ilk and temperament produced a pair of free-spirited daughters remains one of life’s great mysteries.

Vanessa parked at the head of a cul-de-sac and we started ringing doorbells. Some residents listened civilly and signed—although often adding, “I’m voting for Carter,” even as they returned her ballpoint pen. Others offered polite excuses: they were late for church, they weren’t American citizens, they did not sign petitions on principle. One elderly woman shouted at us in what sounded like Greek, shaking her raised fist. Another man barked, “I’m not voting for no colored guy,” and slammed the door. I shouted back, “But Anderson’s white,” then realized how awful that sounded. Mostly, I let Vanessa conduct the electioneering, satisfying myself with the pleasure of hearing her impassioned voice and watching the delicate flare of his nostrils as she grew excited. My companion clung to her fierce optimism in spite of Anderson’s abysmal polling numbers, constantly reminding voters that “the future is inherently unpredictable” and “anything can happen” on Election Day. *That’s what makes democracy great*, she’d conclude. *That’s what separates us from Moscow and Peking and Tehran*. Every so often, as we left an entryway, she’d offer me a tidbit of insight: *Don’t talk about the other candidates*, she’d say. *We’re canvassing, not debating*. Or: *Always fake a few signatures at the top of each page, so the voter doesn’t feel that she’s the first one to sign*. *People don’t like going out on a limb*.

Around one o’clock, we bought sandwiches at a café on Drowne Boulevard and ate them on the benches in the adjacent pavilion.

Canvassing, even as a spectator, proved exhausting, and I was famished. Yet if I hoped our lunch break might provide an opportunity for more personal conversation—or even flirtation—I was to be disappointed: Vanessa spent the entire forty-five minutes comparing Anderson’s national campaign with other recent political insurgents. Never have the names Morris Udall or George McGovern sounded so romantic.

We continued up Front Street that afternoon, then explored the narrow, crowded blocks between the waterfront and the train station. “It’s just like when I take my baby sister trick-or-treating,” said Vanessa. “You want to find the right balance between homes that are close together and people who will actually answer their bells.” So while working class apartment buildings held promise, public housing projects generally proved a wasted effort, as many residents refused to risk opening their doors for strangers. Much of our time was spent responding to questions about Anderson’s stances on issues. Here, Vanessa appeared to have an extraordinary amount of information tucked in reserve.

One cocoa-skinned man, who identified himself as “Brother André,” demanded to know Anderson’s position on the recent military coup in Suriname. “Is your Mr. Anderson *for* Chairman Bouterse or is he *against* Chairman Bouterse?”

“I take it you are *for* Chairman Bouterse?” said Vanessa.

Brother André scowled. “How can *any* man be *for* Chairman Bouterse? I am for freedom. Bouterse is the opposite of freedom.”

“That is why Congressman Anderson was the first legislator to propose economic sanctions against the illegitimate Surinamese junta,” replied Vanessa, her face suddenly aglow. And she explained, in painstaking detail, Anderson’s ambitious schemes to cripple Chairman Bouterse’s regime in a dozen different ways. By the end of their conversation, not only had Brother André pledged to vote

for our candidate, he'd even summoned several friends from a neighboring apartment to sign Vanessa's petition. Meanwhile, I tried to recollect whether Suriname was in Africa or South America.

As we rode the elevator to the next floor, I remember thinking that a girl as beautiful and intelligent as Vanessa would *never* fall for me.

"How on earth did you know all that?" I asked her.

"All what?"

"About Chairman what's-his-name, and Congressman Anderson's attitude toward the conflict in Suriname, and all of that? Honestly, it's hard to imagine that Anderson even has an opinion on the coup in Suriname."

"He doesn't," replied Vanessa. "Not as far as I know."

"But—"

"I think fast on my feet," said Vanessa. "It doesn't matter what position the Congressman holds on any particular issue, especially an obscure one. What matters is that he'll bring good judgment and a sense of fair play to government, that he'll stand up for the underdog. I want to live in a world where people aren't judged by how much money they have, or what body they were born into, but by what they're capable of doing. If I have to bend the truth slightly to make that happen, so be it."

In hindsight, Vanessa's flexibility with the truth bordered on the sociopathic. At the time, my companion's "functional honesty"—as she termed her duplicity—rendered her all the more alluring. Yet she must have sensed my misgivings, because without warning, she paid me a compliment. "I can't tell you how happy I am that you've joined the campaign," said Vanessa. "We've only been working together for what—nine hours? And already it's hard to imagine doing this alone."

I fed off of those words for another six months.

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I interned that summer at a neurosurgeon's office. I already knew that I had zero interest in following my Bradford forebears into medicine, but my father remained convinced that increased exposure would persuade me otherwise, so three days each week, I shadowed Dr. Moncrief, a college roommate of my great-uncle's who chain-smoked cigarettes in his examination room. What I remember most vividly of the work was that Moncrief shared a vestibule with a craniofacial surgeon named Mooney who specialized in treating severely deformed children. Thirty years later, I can still picture some of those kids—toddlers lacking ears, teenagers with deep dents in their foreheads. Eventually, I learned to enter and leave the building with my eyes closed.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, Dr. Moncrief operated in Providence, freeing me to continue my work with the Anderson campaign. The campaign's canvassing efforts had already been scaled down to three days each week, because Vanessa's family required her presence at their Martha's Vineyard beach house over four-day weekends through the summer. My crush often complained of the flight to the island on Vincent Bonchelle's 16-seat Learjet, which terrified her, but rarely shared any details of her time away. We spoke mostly of politics—or rather, Vanessa spoke and I listened—so that, after four months of canvassing, I knew more of the private lives of Governor John Connally and Senator Howard Baker than about her own. Outside of canvassing, our social worlds existed in isolation. Vanessa didn't introduce me to her friends, mostly ex-pat girls she knew from before her arrival at Chalgrove, and I never once considered inviting her to Eddie Arcaya's basement for pool or to play ping-pong on Chase Flynn's patio.

The closest we ever came to a truly intimate conversation occurred in late June, the day Gallup released a poll that showed

Anderson surging to 26 percent nationwide. We'd stopped for ice cream at the drive-thru Friendly's. I'd just taken the SATs that Saturday, and my father had "rewarded" me with five hundred dollars in cash, so I still recall paying for a trio of fifty-cent milkshakes with a \$100 bill. The third milkshake was for Vanessa to bring home to her younger sister—whom I still hadn't met.

I held Vanessa's milkshake while she drove, and periodically, my companion leaned over the gear shift for a slurp. She'd unbuttoned the top three buttons of her blouse, on account of the heat, and I had to avert my gaze to avoid her cleavage.

"What do you want to be doing in twenty years?" asked Vanessa.

Her question caught me off guard. A suave young man might have been able to say, "Spending time with you," and have pulled it off—but suave, I was not.

"I honestly don't know," I spluttered. "I haven't thought that far ahead."

Vanessa frowned—she appeared genuinely dismayed. "I'd like to be Secretary of State," she said, matter-of-fact, as though the post was hers for the asking. She adjusted the rearview mirror. "I'd also like to have six kids—three boys and three girls—and to take them traveling with me around the globe."

"Six kids is an awful lot," I replied—calibrating my own life course accordingly.

Vanessa laughed. "Sometimes I think I should have fifteen or twenty. That's the best way to leave a stamp on the electorate. They could become their own voting block."

We paused at a traffic light. Vanessa took her milkshake from my hand, her wrist brushing against my fingers.

"Do you think we'll still be friends in twenty years?" she asked.

Her choice of the word "friends" shattered my mood.

"A lot can happen in twenty years," I said.

“Not *that* much,” she answered. “If two people are truly determined to stay friends, nothing should be able to stop them.”

When I replied to Troy Sucram’s letter, several weeks ago, I was hit with the unsettling realization that the distant future Vanessa Bonchelle looked forward to, on that sweltering summer afternoon, has already receded ten years into the past.

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In hindsight, it’s tempting to think that my time with Vanessa might have continued as it was indefinitely, if not for our encounter with Troy Sucram, but the reality was that Election Day approached rapidly. After the autumn, I’d no longer have had an excuse to explore the backstreets of Creve Coeur in Vanessa’s company, and as October drifted toward November, without any romantic overtures on her part, I struggled for an opening to reframe our relationship. I considered writing Vanessa a letter to confess my feelings, or even showing up to canvass one morning armed with a dozen roses. She hadn’t rejected me, after all, I assured myself; she merely hadn’t yet considered me. However, I also sensed Vanessa might not be ready to consider me—and that more time together could only increase my prospects—while the artificial constraints of an election campaign threatened to force my hand. Needless to say, on the crisp, late October evening when we visited Troy, these concerns already weighed heavily upon me.

As I mentioned earlier, Troy Sucram was one of the fifteen working-class students who Chalgrove had admitted on scholarship in 1974 in order to improve the school’s local image, and to stave off efforts by the municipal council to incorporate private schools into its tax base. Some of these boys—Eddie Arcaya was one of them—navigated the transition smoothly. Yet from the outset, Troy carried an enormous chip on his shoulder. He boasted—against the weight

of chronological evidence—that his grandfather had been among the stonemasons who constructed Chalgrove Hall. In the library, he circled all of the vulgar words in the unabridged dictionaries. When, as part of a lesson on mass hysteria and the Salem Witch trials, our seventh grade teacher, Mr. Drapkin, reported that a dying squirrel had crawled into one of the classroom’s ventilation shafts—a patent falsehood that prompted several students to complain of the dead rodent’s odor—Troy actually claimed to have witnessed the creature himself. He *continued* to insist that he’d seen it, even after Mr. Drapkin revealed that the squirrel’s existence had been an utter fabrication. In spite of all that, Troy had his fans, especially among the female newcomers: He was tall, and broad-shouldered, with an easy smile and a permanent five o’clock shadow that might pass for rugged.

At the end of the summer, Vanessa and I had returned to our school-year campaign schedule, canvassing evenings and weekends. Anderson had already secured a place on the November ballot, so we no longer gathered signatures. Instead, we pitched the candidate’s merits directly. Vanessa now recognized that he couldn’t win the general election, but she still maintained he had a shot at Rhode Island’s three electoral votes. At a minimum, she wanted to win Creve Coeur. That would only be possible, she believed, if we visited every local household at least once, which is what led us to the dimly lit stretch of asphalt behind the county bus garage, where Troy Sucram’s family lived in a dilapidated Cape Codder. Juniper hedges and pachysandra had entirely overrun the front walk, but at the side of the dwelling, a gate stood open in the stockade fence. The word “ENTER” had been spray-painted on the adjoining wood. A cold rain was starting to fall, slicking the path and plastering dead leaves to the slate.

Vanessa rang the bell. We heard arguing inside. Then Troy appeared in the doorframe, the portrait of nonchalance, his Boston Braves cap awry, his shirt unbuttoned and untucked.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Troy greeted us. “Vanessa Bonchelle in the flesh.”

I stood behind Vanessa, holding open the screen door. Troy flicked me a nod of acknowledgement.

“We’re campaigning for Congressman John Anderson,” explained Vanessa. “He’s running for President,” she added. “Are your parents home?”

“Nope. But you can ask *me* for my vote.”

“Are you eighteen?”

“Eighteen and four months. Getting left behind in first grade is starting to pay off,” Troy said. “And I’m even registered. Surprised, aren’t you?” He grinned in self-satisfaction. “Why don’t you come inside and we can talk?”

I expected Vanessa to decline his invitation—she had a rule against entering homes, because it squandered too much time—but to my surprise, she let Troy Sucram lead her into his kitchen. I followed. Troy ordered his two younger brothers to “skedaddle” and cleared stacks of magazines off a pair of folding chairs for us. For himself, he transformed three milk crates into a makeshift stool. “Now why should I vote for Governor Anderson?” he asked. I sensed an energy welling in the air—emanating from both Troy and Vanessa—on a frequency entirely different from my own.

“*Congressman* Anderson,” replied Vanessa. “You knew that.”

“Maybe I did and maybe I didn’t. . . . Anyway, what’s so great about the guy?”

What ensued was the worst half hour of my life. I had heard Vanessa discuss Anderson’s platform thousands of times before, but now I sensed that with each bullet point, her love was seeping through my fingers. She spoke quickly, forcefully, but she sounded uncharacteristically nervous. Troy never took his eyes off her. Meanwhile, my attention drifted from the utensils on the drain-