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Invitations

My father once pissed off Richard Nixon enough to earn himself marching orders to 'Nam. It wasn't personal. He just wanted to play golf. He's an elder statesman now—my father, not the ex-President. Nixon's been dead for three decades. In my family, he's just a footnote.

My father is eighty. He's worn the same style of frameless octagonal spectacles ever since I can remember. Watches his Pittsburgh sports teams while riding an exercise bike. Still practices medicine full time. And sometimes he talks about the olden days.

There's the time he got caught in a deadly desert flash-flood, only to be saved because his Volkswagen and its sealed undercarriage floated him to higher ground. There's the phone call in which he charmed his future wife of fifty years into a second date by saying, about the first one, "Was that as bad for you as it was for me?" Or, to return to the matter at hand, the time he unintentionally wronged the wrong president.

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A little bit more biographical info on my father. He is the son of an immigrant butcher. He and his two brothers were raised in a modest home in Squirrel Hill. During my father's childhood, pollution from the booming steel industry made it almost impossible to see across any of Pittsburgh's rivers and almost impossible for him to breathe. His experiences with severe asthma and frequent hospital stays led him to become a doctor.

A little bit of biographical info on the thirty-seventh President. He was a petty asshole.

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Americans called it the Vietnam War. The Vietnamese called it the Resistance War against America. My father was just another twenty-seven-year-old serviceman at Luke Air Force Base outside of Phoenix. As a doctor-in-training, he was allowed to defer service until he completed his residency by enlisting under the Berry Plan. He was an "obligated volunteer." My father was an oxymoron.

In 1970, Halloween was on a Saturday. High of 85°F. Mom and my infant oldest sister—also on the base—stayed cool by dipping in a wading pool. Halloween also happened to be my father's only day off that month. He was heading to Sun City to play eighteen holes with another medical doctor and a psychiatrist, two men from the base whom he'd recently met.

By chance, Richard Nixon was visiting Phoenix.

My father was handed an invitation to be the President's doctor-on-call for the day. The "invitation" was technically not an oxymoron. It was a synonym for "obligated volunteer." My father did not know that. He said, "No thank you," citing prior arrangements (i.e., golf). He wouldn't learn the Armed Forces' definition of "invitation" until the following week, when arrangements were made on his behalf to forward his mail to Southeast Asia.

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An additional biographical note about my father. His great-great-grandfather's brother was the great-great Yiddish storyteller Sholem Aleichem. By contrast, my father's stories are succinct. This story I am in the midst of telling is one he conveys in a paragraph. Extracting details from him is possible only with persistence. I once asked, "Didn't you consider it an honor to be the President's doctor?" to which he replied, "What did I care? I didn't vote for the guy." However flippant he was in retrospect, his refusal came at a cost.

An additional biographical note about the guy my father didn't vote for. On October 31, 1970, Nixon told the public that he believed in something called "the strong application of fair American justice." Normally power operates far above us. But on that very same day, my father was being exposed to a strong application of Nixonian justice.

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News traveled fast on the base. Everyone heard that my father was being sent to a M.A.S.H. Unit in Nakhon Phanom, Thailand. "He'll get combat pay," other wives excitedly told my mother as she wiped away her tears. She didn't want to be separated from him for twenty months or perhaps forever. One neighbor came to my mother's front steps to say, "You're so lucky that your husband is going to the warzone to do his duty and fight for America. I wish it were my husband."

As my mother closed the door on the woman, she replied, "I wish it were your husband, too."

My father also preferred to be Stateside but was resigned to his fate. He even asked if they could try for another baby before he left, in case he didn't survive. My mother agreed and became pregnant soon after. I didn't know about that part of the story until I was in high school.

"Why'd you agree to that, Mom?" I asked at the time, pointing at my siblings. "So you could raise two brats on your own instead of one?"

"We originally planned on having four children." She didn't break eye contact. "We stopped after our third."

I did some arithmetic. *I* was their third and final child. There were countless anecdotes mined from the first five years of my life. The time I broke down my parents' locked bathroom door, the two times I cracked open my head against the crib, the time I dumped one of my sisters headfirst into a garbage can.

"Ha, ha," said the garbage-can sister. The one who owes her existence to Nixon. "You were birth control."

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What was Nixon doing in Phoenix in 1970 anyhow? I looked it up. It turned out he was delivering a sprawling, un-presidential speech on sports and law-and-order, sprinkled with dubious claims about pulling troops out of Vietnam and complaints about protestors throwing rocks at his motorcade.

The President always travels with his personal physician. But it is protocol to have an additional military doctor available in case of a heart attack, an errant rock, or other medical emergencies. Regardless of politics, nobody at Luke considered it an honor to be on call for the President. My father was slated to be that guy because he was the doctor on the base with the least seniority.

To be fair, I'm billing this as a standoff between the most powerful man in the world and a very sarcastic doctor in Maricopa County, but it's possible Nixon wasn't aware of my father. However, I have this sense that back then, Nakhon Phanom was riddled with the President's exiles. I can almost hear one of Nixon's crooked advisors whispering in his ear about some Jew doctor teeing up on the back nine instead of being a patriot. Nixon had a long track record of anti-Semitic remarks. His infamous "Enemies List" was disproportionally populated with Jews. The following year he even secretly demoted multiple government employees deemed to be Jewish. His process was quite lazy—he didn't even do the research to see if they were actually Jewish. They only needed to have Jewish-*sounding* surnames. There's an entire memo about it. It's called the "Jew-counting" memo. So it didn't help that my father's last name was Rabinowitz.

Another sticking point between Nixon and my father: they didn't share the same sense of humor. For example, my father wears a shirt that says *National Sarcasm Society* and when people say, "I like your shirt," he says, "Like I care." I once witnessed him recycle this joke thrice in one day.

By contrast, there's that phone call that Nixon had in

October of 1971 with then-Governor of California, Ronald Reagan, a man who would later descend to higher office himself. The two groused about UN delegates from Africa. Reagan said, "To see those, those monkeys from those African countries—damn them, they're still uncomfortable wearing shoes!" Nixon let out a hearty laugh.

I listened to this recently-published exchange. To Reagan's abject racism and Nixon's explosive burst of laughter. I did some more math. Those two men made consequential decisions for the United States—and also the world—for thirteen years.

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I'm jumping ahead here—we'll deal with the fallout from my father's Halloween snafu in a bit—but if Nixon ever followed up on Ronald Rabinowitz's military career, he might've been disappointed to discover that it culminated many years later in an honorable discharge. Though my father's time on the base ended in 1972, he was required to be in the reserves for seven more years before he could request a discharge.

In those post-active service years, my father earned a double-fellowship at Sick Kids Hospital in Toronto. Then he landed in Rochester, New York as a pediatric urologist. By August 1979, when his seven years were up, he and my mother had accumulated three children under the age of ten. He was busy. It makes sense that it completely slipped his mind to resign his commission.

While my father was an unwitting member of the Air Force's inactive reserves, the US military had a twelve-year drought. Cold wars, not hot ones. Nothing doing until August 1991. The start of the Gulf War. That's when the Air Force mailed my father a letter. It was an invitation.

He was invited to have his duffel bag packed on 48 hours' notice in the event that his services were needed.

Fortunately, the Air Force recognized he was middle-aged and in pediatrics. He hadn't seen an adult patient in fifteen years. And there was another reason he was not tapped for a

stint: the Gulf War was not fought during the Nixon Administration.

That campaign in Iraq did not last long. And by the end of the calendar year, the Air Force had enough of my father and sent another envelope. Inside was his honorable discharge.

My father never quit the military. The military quit him.

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While my father was framing his discharge, Nixon was in New Jersey. If he had further insight about Blacks or Jews, we don't know. The secret White House audio recording system he'd commissioned had been disconnected in the summer of 1973, as information revealed during the Watergate hearings was poised to bring accountability to a different set of his indiscretions.

Had he followed my father's civilian career, he would learn that Dr. Rabinowitz had already become a well-respected doctor. That in those days, he worked 80 hours a week, logged over 400 major cases a year, and never turned away a patient who could not pay. He's always had a calm bedside manner and aptitude for expressing complex medical procedures in simple terms. If Nixon had been able to separate a human being from their religion, race, gender, country of origin, or political affiliation, he might have found some respect for my father's skill and integrity.

So, how did my old man pull a fast one on the Commander-in-Chief? How did he sidestep the combat zone in November of 1970? For the second time in a week, he rebuffed an invitation.

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In fact, the day Nixon came to town, nobody on base cared. Everyone was talking about what transpired at my father's golf outing in Sun City, during those "prior arrangements."

He had brought a motley assortment of clubs: a wooden driver, a 2 iron, a 5 iron, an 8 iron, and a putter. "Arnold Palmer cheapies," my father said. Then, because he has encyclopedic

knowledge of all Pittsburghers, he noted that Arnold Palmer was from Latrobe, Pennsylvania. My father considers himself part of the Diaspora, not because he doesn't live in Israel, but because he no longer lives in Pittsburgh.

His recent acquaintance, Dr. Jones, was on the verge of shooting under one hundred on the course, a personal best. He was using his father's clubs: a Persimmon Woods driver, MacGregor Tourney irons, and a Ping Anser putter. The antithesis of Arnold Palmer cheapies. On par with clubs the real Arnold Palmer used.

As Dr. Jones was close to sealing his victory, the third golfer, the psychiatrist, decided to have some fun by getting under his skin with comments like, "You'll never get below a hundred with Daddy's clubs." Jones began to falter—most probably because, my father later learned, Jones was under that psychiatrist's care—but the following remark, delivered on the fairway of hole eighteen, put him over the edge: "Breaking a hundred using your father's clubs is like having sex using your father's penis."

Jones quadruple-bogeyed. Beyond bogeyed, actually. I can't find the appropriate golfing term for becoming so enraged you go AWOL on the hole and chuck your bag of clubs into the adjacent lake. And your shoes. And yourself.

This story was a Very Big Deal. A quick-thinking lieutenant signed out the Air Force's frogman gear and recovered the clubs—not the shoes—and had a great amateur career with Dr. Jones' father's top-of-the-line clubs. Meanwhile, Nixon hopped back on Air Force One to D.C., where he added one name to his list of enemies and checked it twice.

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My father started asking around. The base he was being sent to bordered Laos. It received up to thirty inches of rain a month. It was also home to the "two step," a krait snake so venomous that one might only take two steps after being bitten.

Things were getting real. My father took his own steps to

avoid the "two step." He told his commanding officers that he simply couldn't go abroad. He told them about his asthma. He wouldn't last a week in that climate. It was convenient, for sure—he didn't want to leave his wife and baby—but it was true. They only needed to look in his chart. He was saying, "No thank you" again.

They were unconvinced by some Allegheny allergist's opinion on his lungs. They demanded independent verification. He would need to undergo thorough testing. His superiors assumed my father knew the internist at Luke, so they sent him to a doctor at March Air Force Base in southern California, close to Nixon's hometown of Yorba Linda.

They could've flown him out. They weren't lacking in planes. But he was ordered to drive the six hours through the desert in that same Volkswagen that would later save his life in a flashflood. On his way there, he ran out of gas.

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The way my father tells it, he wasn't paying attention to the dangerously low fuel gauge. He claims he wasn't nervous. He was focused on the game. A radio broadcast of the Pittsburgh Pirates against the Los Angeles Dodgers. When I pointed out that his journey would've taken place in mid-November, the offseason, it became a hockey game. The Pittsburgh Penguins versus the Los Angeles Kings. Either way, the afternoon temperature was creeping into the mid-nineties when the engine sputtered.

He was on a downhill stretch of desert and put the car in neutral. Then, like a mirage, a gas station shimmered at the bottom of the hill. When his car limped to the pump, he put in only a dollar's worth of gas. Enough to get him further down the road, where he filled up. He had been embarrassed at the first station. He didn't want the attendant to know he'd driven in on fumes.

The second miracle of that trip occurred upon arrival at March Air Force Base. One Nixon and the military brass had

not anticipated. It came in the form of the immunologist, Dr. Martin Lizerbram.

"Marty from Pittsburgh?" said my father in disbelief. When my father had his rotation at Pitt Medical School, Marty was the chief resident. A stellar guy. They had dinner, kibbitzed about that great Pirates game—I mean, terrible Penguins game (they lost 5-1)—and the next day, Marty put my father through a battery of tests, which he happily flunked. Marty recommended his restriction to base. Pittsburgh's Jewish Diaspora had saved the day. And for the first time in medical history, asthma had prolonged someone's life.

Fortunately, he would never receive combat pay. During his remaining twenty months on base, he said yes to subsequent invitations from his commanders. He was starting to learn the lingo.

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Richard Milhous Nixon died of a stroke in April 1994. He left behind a world that was still cleaning up his mess. By his own admission, he had let the country down. America agreed: he was a disgrace and a failure. In the two decades that followed his resignation, Congress passed dozens of laws to deter future Tricky Dicks. Each new secret recording that has entered the public domain over the years has further undermined any argument produced by the President's apologists, reducing Nixon to a man whose ambitions were proportional to his pettiness.

The night Nixon passed away, my father was not playing golf. It was the start of the weekend and as usual he was ready. He was on call.

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Lately I've been thinking about that return trip through the desert in 1970. About my father as he put Nixon's home turf in the rearview mirror, his arm still aching from Marty's morning allergy tests. My father did not yet know the arc of his life. He didn't know who would become his lifelong friends, and who would become footnotes. Which choices would become

permanent, and which were detours. He had six hours to kill before he rejoined a wide-open future that had been spared of Nixon's whims.

I wonder where my father's mind wandered now that the balance of his life was restored to him. I'd like to think that he used some of the long ride to reflect on what got him to that point, who had made him what he was, and how he might feel about his accomplishments when he was, say, eighty years old. That his resolve to push back and do the fair, but difficult thing was strengthened because of this experience. I'd like to believe that he had his thoughts to himself, that he didn't listen to any games as he passed through Palm Springs and Joshua Tree and the rest of the unforgiving desert, that he kept his eye on the gas gauge. He had to make it home.