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Sam's Club

Cam Torrens

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Checking in at the lobby of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building is simple. They have my name pulled up on their computer and an escort ready to take me to the Office of Security Investigation.

“Grab a seat, Sir. The team will be right with you.” A petite, pleasant young woman in a pantsuit motions toward a long table picketed with a chair in the middle on the far side and two chairs on the other. All that’s missing is a one-way window and a dangling lightbulb to complete the interrogation room I’ve imagined—and dreaded—since learning I’m to interview for a job next door in the White House.

This is my second visit to this historic structure. Five years ago, it was called The Old Executive Office Building, and I faced another panel as a national finalist for a White House Fellowship. Although uncertain how today will go, I’m guessing my 1998 interviews with actress Mary Steenbergen and former National Security Advisor Robert “Bud” MacFarlane will seem like softballs in comparison.

I walk around the table, moving towards the lone chair, and wave to the departing woman. I settle into my seat and concentrate on my breathing. In through the nose, out through the mouth. This interview doesn’t have anything to do with the job I’ve been asked to apply for. It’s the hurdle required to enter the White House tomorrow and convince them I’m the right guy to carry a piece of luggage they call the “football.”

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We're at the end of deployment preparation back in the C-130 squadron I command at Little Rock Air Force Base in Arkansas. I'll fly commercial from this interview and catch up with my squadron in Qatar for three months of IRAQI FREEDOM support out of Al Udeid Air Base. My unit spared me no mercy as I departed to compete for this potential future job.

"Hey, boss. I heard you didn't make it past the first day when you tried to walk on the Academy football team. Now you're going to carry a football for the President?"

"Sir, I predict you'll spend ten percent of your time carrying that suitcase and ninety percent making coffee. Probably Foo Foo coffee too."

"Someone I knew did that job. You wear your service dress the whole time and stand around at cocktail parties. Good luck. I'd take the fucking desert over that."

I take their shit because that's how I roll—admitting they're right while looking for opportunities to hurl an insult back where I can. They know what's going on. I know what's going on.

It's not really a football. But it *is* a 45-pound suitcase holding the president's launch codes for the United States' nuclear arsenal. Military aides from all four services have been carrying the nuclear "football" since the end of the Eisenhower administration. How ironic that I won't carry it unless I pass my trials today in this building named after Old Ike.

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What kind of self-respecting warrior is interested in a nameless, faceless job following around the commander-in-chief with a satchel in hand? It's a pretty easy answer: an officer who has reached the pinnacle of his O-5 operational career as a commander and knows his or her only chance to remain in the cockpit is to command at the colonel, and maybe, the general officer level. For some reason, the only officers who don't find themselves on the promotion fast-track after carrying the football for the President are the ones who are asked to leave the job for some egregious error in judgment—usually influenced by thinking with alcohol addling their brain, or their dick in their hand, or both. Everyone else walks away from the tour for an operational command at the Colonel/Captain rank.

That's what I want. I'm already slated for a year of Air War College starting next summer, followed by two or three years behind a desk—probably at the Pentagon—before competing to fly planes again. If I can snag this gig, it'll be two years of hell—admittedly peppered with some interesting experiences—but also a chance to skip War College and the staff tour for an early shot at O-6 command.

I'm confident about tomorrow's White House interview. The panel consists of the sitting aides who carry the “football.” They're all a year or two older than I am. I'm guessing they're less interested in finding out how much I know than they are in determining whether I'm a team player. That's what I would look for. No one wants to work with an asshole. Rumor has it one—
an asshole—slipped through the selection process during the Clinton administration and ruined it for the rest of the aides. They spent most of their tour hiding from the First Lady, minimizing

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their time in uniform, and as far away from the First Family as procedures allowed.

But today's security interview? I'm not as confident. This job requires a squeaky-clean resume. While my Air Force performance rates are excellent in many areas, even outstanding in others—if you believe my inflated performance reports—I do have a skeleton or two in my closet. Not like I killed my drill sergeant in basic training and hid the body, but a couple of times out with the boys, where things took a surprising twist.

I've told these stories already to the Department of Defense teams that interview me for my security clearance every five years. No one messes with those screenings. If you don't tell them everything, they go digging. And if they find out you haven't been straight with them, you're pretty much done serving in the military. But those security guys are checking for just one thing—whether you've done something so bad—Farm animals? Stolen lunch money?—that a foreign government could blackmail you into divulging military secrets if they found out about it. That means if the security personnel pass you, they have no reason to run and tell the rest of the Air Force all the bad stuff you've admitted to. Separate stovepipes. I'm hoping the military security clearance stovepipe crosses miles away from the White House security screening stovepipe.

Two men enter the room, all smiles. Both wear sports coats and loafers, a look that tells me they probably don't spend much time next door with Bush 43.

The first to enter introduces the other. “Cam, this is Bob Stevens. I'm Mike. Mike Tracy.

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Thanks for dropping by. This is just a formality, but it's kind of a necessary one, you know?"

I match their smiles and nod, but there's no way in hell the relaxed demeanor is putting me at ease.

They start in on the questions and I begin to wonder if I've been too optimistic. I've heard these questions before.

Bob starts, pausing between each question for my answer.

"Have you ever plotted to overthrow the US government?"

"Have you ever been a member of the communist party?"

"Have you ever had any financial difficulties or declared bankruptcy?"

The questions sound so serious but I've heard them all. And I'm guilty of none of them. When they reach the question "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" I confidently answer "No," even though we're treading close to the issue making me nervous today.

Bob finishes the questions on his list and nods at Mike. "That's all I got." I want to sigh in relief, but that's a tell, so I just exhale slowly as my muscles relax. "Mike?"

Bob says.

I suck a breath back in.

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“Yeah, Cam. Good interview. I think we both know what’s left though, right?” Mike waits for me to answer.

“Uh, what?” I say, on the minute chance this is some line he uses to get guys talking.

“Why don’t you talk to us about the elephant in the room?”

This time I audibly exhale, then suck in a breath and spill my guts.

“I’ve filled this out on my security form with the Air Force multiple times. It was a misdemeanor, not a felony. Purdue vs. Wisconsin. We were downtown for Breakfast Club before the game. Couple Bloody Marys and then this young security guard starts hassling me about coming in the wrong end of the stadium as I was looking for our seats. He tore up my tickets, I grabbed them, and—”

Mike cuts me off. “Cam, stop right there.”

I stop.

“We got that. You spent twelve hours in the pokey for public intoxication. We already know about that from the stuff DoD sent over. Can’t say it was your smartest move, but you know...things happen.” He nods at his partner. “Right, Bob?”

“Shut up, Mike.”

“Then, what—”

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“It was the question about financials.”

“What?” I’m baffled. I’m married to an Air Force officer who outranks me. We make good money. We don’t even have a car payment. “We’ve got some houses,” I say. “But the mortgages are good. Nothing’s overdue.”

Mike nods. “What do you know about Sam’s Club?”

“Nothing. We don’t shop there. They screwed us over on a membership thing a couple of years back and my wife is boycotting them. They tried to say we owed them \$20, and she’s been disputing it ever since. She’s big on principle.”

“It’s \$40,” Bob says.

“What?”

“Not \$20. You’ve owed \$40 to Sam’s Club for over three years.”

“Like I said—”

Mike must be the interrupter of the team because he shuts me down again. “Cam. We don’t actually care. I mean, sure, we care about principle and all that. Good on your wife. But if you want to interview tomorrow, you’re going to have to clear that debt today. Principle or not. Do you understand?”

“I can call my wife and she can work it out with them.”

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“Do you have a credit card?” Mike says.

I nod.

Mike turns to Bob. “You still got that number?”

Bob shoves his folder toward Mike and taps on a yellow sticky with his pen. Mike nods toward a phone at the end of the table.

“If it were me? White House job? I wouldn’t go calling my principled wife.” He pulls the sticky off and hands it to me. “Here’s the number. We’re going to wait outside. Just pay it, Cam.”

So I do.

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Six of us interview in the West Wing the next day. One of them is a classmate from the Air Force Academy and we do dinner together that night. We all stay at the same hotel. When we return to the rooms, the front desk gives a message to my classmate and then to me. We’ve been asked to return for another round of interviews the next morning.

A limo picks us both up the next morning and drops us off on the asphalt loop to the West Wing. Classmate Johnny “Q” Quintas interviews first and high-fives me on the way out. My

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interview flows as I expected. I'm not an expert at reading faces, but the three other officers—they leave the incumbent Air Force officer out so as not to bias their selection—all seem responsive to my answers.

Q and I both have Blackberry work phones and the selection team tells us they will call when they have results. We decide to hang out together.

I get the first call.

“Fantastic interview, Cam. So tough to choose between you two. We ended up deciding to go with Q.”

I tilt the Blackberry down and mouth to Q, “You got it.”

To his credit, he tries to make a face that looks like he's sorry for me, but it's all mixed up with his excitement at getting the job. In the end, he goes with a wide grin. I might have done the same.

I'm disappointed. I wish I could say it's because I want to serve our country and our highest elected official by protecting the codes to our most lethal instrument of power. That's not it, though. Six officers competed for the job. One got it. It wasn't me. That's what stings. And I can't blame it on Sam's Club.

That night I fly to Bahrain with a four-hour layover in Paris. By the time I board my connection, my pity party is over. I've got a squadron of 33 aircraft and 275 personnel to

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command in a war that started 9 months ago. I've got a follow-on assignment to War College where I'll be able to reconnect with my family after all these deployments. Life is good.

I picture Bob and Mike laughing at the Air Force officer spilling his guts about his night in jail. Then I imagine myself telling the same story at the recreation tent at Al Udeid where I'm limited to three weak-ass beers and there's no danger of intoxication. My boys are going to be roaring.

Fucking Sam's Club.