

Big Secrets

by Benjamin Matvey

Toby was half way through the report before he realized it was not intended for him. The report kept recommending that the President (of the United States) do this or tell this dignitary that, and—most curiously—it repeated that the President “should check with THE EMPEROR OF SPACE before proceeding.” It finished with a request that the report be “explained to the President in a warm, soothing tone.”

Toby didn't understand the report. That is why he kept reading. He had long since gotten used to not quite understanding what he read, especially since he started his internship in Senator Douglas's office.

When he realized something was wrong, he scrolled up to the heading of the e-mail. It read:

TO: James Dwightman, Special Assistant to the President of the United States, Earth

FROM: Gerald Rumsbear, Secretary of State and *Special Designee of* THE EMPEROR OF SPACE

Toby was confused and also embarrassed that his mouse and keyboard were covered with powdered sugar from the morning's donuts. Suddenly there was a commotion beyond the particle board of his cubical. Toby peered over the cubical wall and found himself face to face with a frenzied Senator Douglas.

“Oh, hi, Uncle Harry...” Toby said, out of habit. But before he could correct himself, Uncle Senator Harry Douglas said: “Toby, you didn't open your e-mail just now, did you?” The wrinkles on Uncle Harry's face—which always reminded Toby of the hide of an elephant—were very red.

“Oh, sure—Yes, sir,” Toby said.

A stillness seemed to pour into the room. A strapping, baldheaded man in a gray three-piece appeared behind Senator Douglas.

“Senator,” he said, his eyes piercing through his silver spectacles.

Harry turned around. “Agent O'Malley,” he gasped.

“I'd like to have a word with your nephew.” Agent O'Malley looked over at Toby. The Agent was old, at least eighty, Toby guessed, and he had these huge bright blue eyes, like in Japanimation. “William T. Larusso?”

“Yes, sir. That's me, but people usually call me ‘Toby.’ Mr....?” Toby said.

“O'Malley. Michael O'Malley.” Toby was amused by this last name: wasn't that the hero from *The Aristocats*?

“Would you mind if I took you out for lunch, son?” O'Malley asked.

Toby looked over at Uncle Harry to see if it was okay. Harry didn't budge.

“It's on me,” Agent O'Malley said.

“Okay. I mean—great! I mean—thank you!” Toby said.

Agent O'Malley smiled kindly and turned to exit the office. Toby followed him, but looked back at the Senator as he shut the office's main door behind him. Uncle Harry hadn't moved and his face now looked as white as Toby's breakfast donuts. Toby briefly wondered if he was okay, but Uncle Harry was sort of a stressball.

They walked down the hall and got in the elevator and went up and up, much longer than Toby remembered it ever taking. When they reached their floor, the doors opened to reveal a palatial restaurant with white walls and curtains and white linen on all the tables. O'Malley marched in and a Maitre d' with a tiny moustache greeted them and led them to a table in the corner.

Toby didn't want the agent to know he had no idea there was a restaurant up here, but he couldn't help looking around to see if anyone famous was eating nearby. He was disappointed that, other than the numerous staff (three waiters, a bartender, several bus boys, and a chef manning a sizeable roast at a carving station), the restaurant was empty. Maybe it was too early for lunch.

“So...Toby, do you know why you are here?” Agent O'Malley asked as he unfolded the napkin to cover his lap.

“For lunch, sir?” Toby said. Agent O'Malley paused to figure out if this was a joke, but there was no glint underneath Toby's dark little eyes, no smile in his big round face. Toby was, after all, a child of great privilege, O'Malley reminded himself. People he hardly knew probably had taken him to lunch his whole life.

“But do you know what I want to talk to you about?” Agent O'Malley asked again. Toby responded with a TV interviewer's nod. O'Malley felt a twinge of worry. He wondered: would Toby's dimness make this easier or much, much harder?

“Son, did you read an e-mail today that was addressed to the special assistant of the President?”

“Oh...oh yes. Yes I did. Very, very sorry. I didn't mean to,” he said.

“You should not have read it,” O'Malley said.

“But why was it sent to me?” Toby asked. “If—if it's okay to ask.”

“Accidents do happen, sadly.” Agent O'Malley couldn't help but wince as these words came out of his mouth for what felt like the hundred thousandth time. “Do you remember what it said?”

“Something about the defense in-ish-a... and the tax reform plan... and the...” Toby paused, “Can I order the crab?”

“The crab?” O'Malley responded.

“My parents never let me eat crab.”

“Uh...yes, son, order whatever you want.” O'Malley shook his head, took off his spectacles and quietly wiped them. O'Malley needed to remind himself of why he was doing this, why he was trying to save this dumb kid, so he asked Toby some questions about himself. Toby went to American University (O'Malley was taken aback that his family's money and power couldn't get him in somewhere better), he was in a fraternity, he didn't have a girlfriend but he knew who he was asking to the formal (her name was Jennifer), he didn't know what his major was yet even though he was a junior, he liked to watch the Cartoon Network which he defended with quiet dignity as not being just for kids.

O'Malley practically had to beg the Directorate to let him try this mission—any mission—“his way,” but the small talk wasn't really

helping him remember why he was willing to use the 60 years of credibility he had saved up on William 'Toby' Larusso, the nephew of a Senator he thought was a boob. In his mind he repeated something his mother used to say: "Every life has its own special value."

When O'Malley was a kid, he looked up to the "G-Men." He cheered when they gunned down John Dillinger in Chicago for trying to see a movie with his girlfriend. The rest of his family was not happy with him for this; they looked up to Dillinger and the other outlaws of the day for "beating the system." They especially liked George "Machine Gun" Kelly. He sounded like a nice Irish boy.

But Michael O'Malley would not be deterred by his destitute parents' disapproval. Michael O'Malley wanted in, he wanted in the whole big system and he was willing to do whatever he needed to do to get in. He wanted to work for J. Edgar, himself.

And he had no idea what he was in for. A transvestite FBI Director was small potatoes compared to the things he learned. There were so many Big Secrets and every year they seemed to get bigger and bigger and stranger and stranger.

The first time they sent him on a mission, Mike was ready—downright itching, in fact—to do his duty. It didn't matter that his target was just a teenage amateur stargazer, who worked at a Ho Jo's. It was about *national security*; it was an *emergency* and "the good of the many," after all. But after many years, he learned they were *always* emergencies: this pilot must not report that "object," this celebrity must not be allowed to talk to the tabloids, that autopsy must be destroyed, that circus clown knows too much. And the solutions were always so swift, final and deathly uncreative.

And how things got muddled sometimes! He could not forget the scout troop that a fellow agent put down because they had reported that an actual UFO they had seen was a weather balloon (in later years O'Malley wondered if this somehow related to dyslexia, a condition his son struggled with) or that waitress who bought the farm because she aided and abetted "aliens" in Roswell (it turned out they were actually just Mexican. After that the FBI made its

language a bit more specific). It never ceased to amaze him that this weird assortment of dopes, twerps, and knuckleheads had succeeded in keeping *any* of the Big Secrets.

O'Malley shifted in his chair and the newfangled little pistol in his shoulder holster felt uncomfortable against his chest. Maybe his body missed his old gun, or maybe he just didn't like carrying the damn thing at all anymore. O'Malley pressed hard on his spectacles when he thought of his grandkids trying to hug him when he had it on. He hated that. He hated those dirty weapons being so close to them.

The food had arrived, waking O'Malley from his thoughts. Toby had been sitting there quietly fiddling with a packet of *Sweet and Low*. Toby was stunned by the big red alien creature they delivered on the plate before him. Not wanting to look the fool, and knowing there was meat in there, he grabbed at one of the claws and tried to crack it open with his hands. The dull little spikes of the exoskeleton stabbed his stumpy fingers and he recoiled, surprised by the pain, and totally perplexed by these inconveniently placed points.

And then something happened that surprised O'Malley: he laughed. He laughed from somewhere deep inside his belly, a laugh that broke over his shoulders like both a cold sweat and a cool breeze. This young man had no idea that crabs had not evolved to be eaten; he had no idea that this creature wanted to live, wanted to hold on to life, and that our species did not give a damn about what the animal wanted. O'Malley imagined the blissful, narcotic innocence of Toby's world where soft-shell crabs crawled into people's mouths and hummed a happy tune as they were chewed and swallowed. It made O'Malley think of lying on the fire escape and counting clouds on summer days when he was nine-years-old.

Now Toby was laughing, too, and this made O'Malley laugh all the more because he knew Toby had no idea why either of them was laughing. O'Malley finally caught his breath, and had to wipe a tear away from the corner of his eye. He put his spectacles back on and took a good look at Toby. An instinct was now at work within

O'Malley. It was the same instinct that made him cover his children's eyes at the movies when any character was about to be killed. It was the same instinct that still compelled him to place books with swear words in them on the highest shelf in his den so they would be beyond the grasp of his grandchildren.

O'Malley decided Toby must be spared.

"So, Toby, what else did the report say?" O'Malley asked.

Toby froze with a tiny string of crabmeat in his mouth. He hesitated, but then finally let the words bound from his mouth:

"It talked a lot about the 'Emperor of Space.'"

"THE EMPEROR OF SPACE?" Agent O'Malley asked, thinking over his options of dealing with this. He had many different elaborate plans to convince him it was a North Korean or the Green Party plot to discredit the President, but maybe such a sophisticated argument would be lost on this fellow.

"Oh, what wacky idea will Rumsbear think of next? The man can be so funny, but other times his sense of humor is just plain queer. You know what a kidder he is, of course, you've seen him on TV," O'Malley said.

O'Malley nodded, pleased with the simplicity of this excuse, and Toby's eyes widened and his mouth slowly gathered into the shape of an "O."

"So there is no EMPEROR OF SPACE that the President has to answer to?" Toby asked.

"Of course not! Can't you hear how silly that sounds!?" O'Malley said, hoping that Toby wouldn't ask too many more questions.

"Oh yeah!! Of course not. That's really funny!" As Toby said this, he was trying to coax himself into a laugh. "Rumsbear is so funny! I had no idea they were all such, you know, regular guys. Funny! Teasing each other and stuff. This will totally show Mom that Republicans are just regular people too...."

"Toby!" O'Malley said. "You can't tell *anyone* about this, okay? We can't let the world in on the joke. It's none of anyone's business except the President, his assistant and Mr. Rumsbear.

Understood?" O'Malley sank a bit. Maybe the he should have gone with the "North Korean Plot" story instead?

Toby looked disappointed.

"And it wasn't your e-mail so you can get in big trouble if you tell anyone," O'Malley added. He took a sip of his water and then stuffed a roll in his mouth as he pondered this.

O'Malley eased in his chair. "You promise, that you won't *ever* tell anyone?"

"Yaw," Toby said with the roll half chewed, and then forced a painful swallow. "I mean, yes. I'll keep it secret. It wasn't my e-mail."

"Good. Could I get you to sign...?" O'Malley tried to complete the sentence as he took out the contract of confidentiality from his jacket pocket.

"But I can tell my fraternity brothers, right?" Toby asked.

As soon as Toby said this O'Malley saw the Maitre 'd who had been standing a few feet behind Toby jerk his hand down to the pistol concealed in his apron. O'Malley glared at the agent, and he moved his hands back to his sides. O'Malley looked to his left, however, and three more "waiters" stood there, hands clutching various deadly things buried in their aprons.

O'Malley realized that maybe this wasn't the place to take a non-traditional approach to such a traditional problem.

"*Garcon!* Check please," O'Malley cried and Agent Bradford brought him the check. While he smiled up at Bradford, he wrote a little note on the "check." *If any of you snot-nosed agents ever second guess my ability to handle a fat little college boy again...* and such and so on. Toby was confused why Agent O'Malley took such a long time signing the check, but decided not to ask.

Toby was not done with his food, but he didn't question it when they got up, and hurried back into the elevator. As they entered, it struck Toby how weird it was the restaurant didn't have a single window.

In the elevator Toby tried to explain how telling his fraternity brothers wasn't really like telling anyone, since they were also

sworn to secrecy on so many things Toby would happily tell Agent O'Malley about. Toby also said that he couldn't actually lie to his brothers. What if one of them asked him if anything funny happened to him today? O'Malley said nothing, thinking of how to convince this pitiable little rich boy to keep his mouth shut.

When they got down to the lobby, O'Malley told him they were going for a walk. Toby squeaked some concerns about his lunch hour and Senator Douglas.

"Believe me, the good Senator is not expecting you back today," O'Malley explained.

O'Malley led Toby out of the congressional offices into the crisp air of the late fall afternoon. He led Toby down the streets and up and around the perimeter of the Capitol building where the statue of James Garfield is hidden. He led him down the Capitol steps and into the great green expanse of the National Mall. As Toby looked at the Air and Space Museum and Smithsonian, Toby felt a happy sugary fizzle in his stomach. The Mall never failed to remind Toby of the specialness of this city where all his relatives seemed to work—he remembered the terrible crush he had on Washington, D.C.

They kept walking in silence, both of them gazing admiringly at the buildings filled with history and at the white marble monuments. But when they veered north at the Washington Monument, O'Malley spoke:

"Look at this place, son! Doesn't it just fill you with a sense of awe at the genius of the people who founded our country? Doesn't it inspire you with what a handful of visionaries can do to change the world, to change history?"

Toby nodded his news anchor nod, but O'Malley could tell his words were starting to penetrate. "Think of everything this country has accomplished in its short existence. This little city they built in a swamp is now the capital of the world. Think of how dark the world was before America, son: religious wars and superstitions and despots, but this untamed country on the fringe of the world offered a whole new way!"

Toby could feel his chest rise as Agent O'Malley reminded him of the great men who had lived in this city: Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Abraham Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, Dwight D. Eisenhower....

"A belief in all this majesty, all this pride and perfection is something that all Americans should have as his absolute right, don't you think? They should have the right to be secure in the knowledge that they are part of something great, don't you agree?"

Toby nodded through misty eyes at O'Malley's words as he spoke in grand landscapes and vivid vistas of the obstacles America had to overcome just to survive: revolution, civil war, depression, global conflict. But O'Malley reminded Toby that through all of these perils the simple and beautiful truths of the founders pulled America through.

Then Toby realized they had walked a long way; he was now looking through the thick iron gate at the back yard of the White House. The impossibly lush yard was dotted with uniformed Secret Service agents who stoically stared back at Toby. The White House looked more beautiful than Toby ever remembered.

"And Toby, the secret you learned today may seem funny to you, but if it were to get out that funny little joke that Rumsbear played on the President could truly discredit this administration. And what's worse? It would dilute the very idea of America, the very dignity of this office that every man woman and child in America deserves to be able to hold on to, without doubt or fear."

"And I know what you are thinking: 'isn't it like lying to pretend I never got that e-mail,' and I say 'not at all.' The great truth, perhaps the greatest of all truths, is that America is a beacon of hope, dignity, fairness and magnificence to the world. Anything that makes people doubt this truth is therefore essentially a lie, even if it contains some minor 'truth.' Do you understand?"

Toby was tearing now, stuffed with the majesty of the country of which he was lucky to be a small part. He felt horrible that he ever failed to understand the importance of keeping this secret, but he felt an ennobling sensation bubbling up from the pit of his belly. This

secret would die with him. He would tell no one, not Uncle Harry, not his fraternity brothers, not even Jennifer if she begged him with tears in her big round eyes.

“So don't you think you should forget you ever read that e-mail today and never mention it again?” O'Malley asked.

“Yes, sir! You are right! Every American deserves the right not to... the...he deserves...it would be lying not to...it's such a big lie to tell them....” Toby was having a hard time expressing it, but O'Malley knew what he meant and he placed his hand on the boy's shoulder.

O'Malley had done it. A Big Secret that was exposed through stupidity had been suppressed and it only cost the government one half-eaten crab. Maybe this would be a new day for how the Directorate deals with threats to national security, or international security or pan-galactic security. After all, there were so many Big Secrets and so many people knew them, too, if O'Malley stopped a moment to count. Why did blood need to be spilled if one more person knew just one of them?

But just as he was thinking this, O'Malley saw a skinny, pallid shape sprinting out of the back door of the White House. His form was very familiar to the agent. He was running as fast as he could; his only piece of clothes: tight, white BVD's. He was waving a golf club over his head and wearing what looked like a Napoleon hat. It was the President of the United States and he was yelling at the top of his lungs, “On to Byzantium! Forward! Tell the people to bring their glaives and mutton spoons!”

The Secret Service agents who were behind him were finally able to tackle him on the green and pulled him back towards the White House as he protested, “the empire! The empire! The delicious Byzantines....”

Toby hadn't moved an inch; he was still squinting and furrowing his brow as hard as his furrower would go. O'Malley knew that any minute Toby would turn back to him and ask him to explain what Toby had just seen, asking him questions that he couldn't even imagine how to explain away. Two of the biggest secrets in one

day—O'Malley cursed the luck silently to himself. He sighed bitterly, made sure no one but Secret Service were watching, pulled out his pistol and shot Toby in the back of the head.

As he walked away from Toby's body, swearing under his breath and leaving the unlucky kid for the others to clean up, he decided it was time to retire.

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