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AFTER THE USHER'S FALL

By Peter Maass September 10, 1996

A man in a dark suit enters an auditorium from a side door. He is in his late thirties, and his posture is perfect. Shoulders thrown back, chin up. His hair is parted neatly and has a slick look; his tie is in a perfect Windsor knot. He has an aloof bearing, like a character from an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel, perhaps a guest at a Gatsby party.

But here, he seems just a little out of place. A little too dignified. This is a legislative session of the Howard County Council. The man in the dark suit taps the microphones, to make sure they are turned on and working right for the council members who will soon arrive. He looks vaguely familiar, this man. He sits at a desk beneath the podium. He waits. He shuffles through some papers.

The council members enter, take their seats. The chairman calls the meeting to order. Aside from a few staffers and journalists, there is no one in the auditorium. It has several hundred seats and feels lonely, like a mausoleum. It is a few minutes after 5, and everyone wants to be finished as quickly as possible.

The man in the dark suit is the council's administrator. He is asked by the chairman to read off new legislation. It is a formality required by law. The man reads, fast. It is mostly minutiae. A resolution to appoint someone to the Cable Advisory Committee. A bill to change the salaries of a few fire department workers. He reads a description of bill 68-1996: "A bill approving and providing for a multi-year installment purchase agreement by Howard County, Maryland, to acquire development rights in approximately 140 acres of agricultural land located at 13240 Greenberry Lane in Clarksville, Maryland . . ."

The session is over in 20 minutes. The meeting is adjourned; everyone files out. The man in the dark suit gathers up his papers, switches off the microphones and leaves. But that feeling of familiarity lingers; it is because once, this man served presidents. Once, he was news.

Until he was fired in an eruption of publicity two years ago, Chris Emery was an usher in the White House, working directly for the Reagans, the Bushes, the Clintons. He has fallen. He has been felled. He is a scoundrel. A victim. Take your pick.

In Washington, there are the News Makers and the news makers. The News Makers are professionals at the job; they practically live in the spotlight and feel bereft outside of it -- Senator X and Representative Y and Talking Head Z. Then there are the news makers, small "n," people who are content doing whatever they do until they get sucker-punched. Something happens and they become the story of the day or week and their house is staked out by crews from Fox Television and "Hard Copy." Sometimes they become instant heroes, but more often the publicity is dubious: Dita Beard. Anthony Ulasewicz. Fawn Hall. Craig Livingstone. Soon, as time passes, the news makers are news makers no more, they begin reassembling their lives, or maybe they don't, but no matter their fate, their names become little more than answers to cocktail hour questions that begin with the phrase "Whatever happened to . . ."

While Washington may forget these people, however, they do not forget Washington. What it has done for them, what it has done to them.

"I'm embarrassed to say that I probably think about it every day," Emery says, his voice cracking just a bit, like a twig snapping.

A visit to his small office in Howard County is instructive. A photo on the wall shows Emery standing with Gerald Ford, Bill Clinton, Jimmy Carter and George Bush. Another features him with President and Barbara Bush, who scribbled personal notes under the picture. And there's an adorable snapshot of Emery's daughter on the White House lawn.

A visitor might also notice that Emery occasionally wears cuff links with the presidential seal; each of the presidents he worked for gave him a set. And at his home in Howard County, there are similar things -- a picture of the Bushes in the living room, framed White House Christmas cards on the walls. Chris Emery is proud of what he has done, where he has been, whom he has known.

The ushers -- there are four -- run the White House and oversee its domestic staff of 85 workers. They take care of the first family's needs, whatever they are. The ushers are traffic cops, too, making sure political and private visitors are steered to the right places in the White House. They make sure there are flowers on the tables, pens by the phones, microphones and lights and chairs in position for prime-time press conferences. Through it all, the ushers get close to the first family in a fly-on-the-wall way, and they witness history.

When President Reagan strode out onto the White House lawn for farewell remarks with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, Chris Emery was a half-step behind, holding an umbrella over their heads to ward off a light drizzle. For an usher, it was everyday stuff.

The pay is fine, \$59,000 a year. The perks are great; Emery has given personal White House tours to Barbra Streisand, Dana Carvey, Joe DiMaggio.

"There's no doubt in my mind that it was the greatest job in the world," Emery says.

Little wonder, then, that until Emery was fired, there were only two reasons ushers left the White House -- retirement or death. Since the days of Grover Cleveland, only 18 people had held the job.

So imagine that one day you are working in this fantasy job at the White House, and then, the next day, you are not working there, you are being called untrustworthy by the first lady's spokesman, and your life has been upended. And imagine that you know it is all wrong, that in fact you can be trusted, that you have done nothing improper and do not deserve to be treated like a rat and stalked by the media. But there you are, out of a job, and the National Enquirer is on the phone and wants to know if you have any dirt to dish. You learn something about life.

"The moral is: Never feel too comfortable in anything you're doing," Emery says. "The rug can be pulled out from underneath you at any moment. . . . Nothing is sacred."

Chris Emery, 39, is sitting on his living room couch, alongside his wife, Penny, and they are going over the nightmare, one more time. It came out of the blue. Chris was called into the

office of the chief usher and says he was told, without explanation, that he was being fired, effective immediately.

At first the White House explained the firing as a routine event, part of a "restructuring." But a spokesman for Hillary Clinton later told reporters that Emery had shown "an incredible lack of discretion" by returning several phone calls from Barbara Bush, who was seeking help with a computer Emery programmed for her while she lived at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. Was this a firing offense? Emery is quick to note that he was returning calls, not initiating them, and never talked about anything happening at the Clinton White House. No matter; when he left the White House, Chris Emery was damaged goods.

He called Penny from his car phone. Honey, I've been fired. Penny remembers the call. She was at home with their daughter, Katie. They cried over the news as they waited for Chris to arrive home. They gazed out the living room window. They waited. When Chris finally pulled into the driveway, they went outside and hugged him, told him everything would be all right, they would come out of it just fine.

"Everything happens for a reason," Penny now says. "If you're patient and if you help things along, you can bring something good out of it and come out of it a better person."

But it didn't seem like that at the time. Chris was unemployed for nearly a year. There were job interviews, but most interviewers just wanted to hear inside stories from the White House. He talked to a publisher about writing a book, but the publisher lost interest when Chris said he didn't want to write anything that would embarrass any of the first families he served. The Emerys lived off Penny's income as a legislative assistant to Maryland Del. John Morgan (R) and a few thousand dollars that Chris earned as a computer consultant. Finally, in 1995, he got his administrator's job in Howard County. His salary is \$59,000 -- exactly what he earned as usher.

So what was it like, dropping like a rock in a dry well, hitting ground among the forgotten and discarded and, for a while, the unemployed? The Emerys say it strengthened them, brought them closer than they had been, helped them set their priorities straight. Once Chris got his new job, they began building a beach house on a vacant patch of Delaware land that

they had bought years ago. If Chris were still at the White House, they would have never gotten around to that; life was moving too fast, they couldn't focus on such things. It is different now.

"That was a chapter of our life, and it's over," Penny says.

But it isn't. Washington beckons. Washington haunts. And Penny knows it. "I'd like to close the book, and I thought we did that, but it keeps opening again," she admits.

Chris's 15 minutes of fame, or notoriety, are on the verge of being extended for another minute or two. The Senate Judiciary Committee's investigation of the "Filegate" affair has veered in his direction.

The two men at the center of the affair -- Livingstone, the former head of the White House personnel security office, and Anthony Marceca, an Army civilian employee who worked for Livingstone -- were involved in a request for an unscheduled background check on Emery that came just two months before Emery was fired. Emery suspects the background check was aimed at finding an excuse for firing him because he was -- and remains -- a member of the Republican Party. He has a "Dole for President" bumper sticker on his car.

Committee investigators have questioned Emery -- as have investigators for independent prosecutor Kenneth Starr -- and notified him that he may be called to testify before the full committee this month.

Emery has stayed quiet about his years at the White House, though he says President Clinton was very warm while Hillary Rodham Clinton was very aloof. These are not earth-shattering revelations, of course. Emery uses his inside knowledge only to deny the juiciest rumors about the goings-on at the White House.

Did Hillary throw a lamp at Bill? No, Emery says. If it had happened he would have known, because any damaged furniture would have been spotted by the domestic staff and reported to him. Did Bill slip out of the White House for midnight affairs at the Marriott Hotel? No, Emery says, that could not have happened without insiders knowing about it, including

himself. The White House is a fishbowl, and the president and his family are the fish. The ushers and the staff are the fish-minders.

In the end, Emery's refusal to go public with any White House dirt may be the best evidence that the Clintons need not have doubted his discretion, need not have fired him.

White House access can mean money, lots of it. A book purporting to be the inside story about the White House, written by Gary Aldrich, an FBI agent who wasn't even based in the White House and met the president only once, is on the bestseller lists. Dick Morris, of toe-sucking fame, is getting millions of dollars for an insider's look at the Clinton campaign -- and he wasn't based in the White House, either. So what's with Chris Emery? Doesn't he get it?

"Maybe I should write that book," he muses. "But why? I don't think it's worth it. It's bad for the White House; it's bad for the presidency. I have no vendetta. Yes, I'm not a fan of Hillary Clinton's, but I'm not going to go out of my way to embarrass anyone. . . . Maybe my priorities are in the wrong place, but that's the way it goes."

Still, he is a long way from achieving Zen tranquility. It is more than two years after his firing, two years since his scandal du jour was forgotten by Washington because another scandal du jour popped onto the town's radar screen. Penny talks about their search for "closure," but what, in such a case, would closure be? The Emerys compare the trauma of the firing to a death in the family. You cannot bring the dead back. At the end of a long conversation in their comfortable house, a clue emerges. The Democratic National Convention has been on the tube, and Chris has been watching it. He watched Hillary Clinton's speech. Penny was next to him, but she couldn't watch. She says she turned away. She can't watch the Clintons. It's not because she's a Republican. Sen. Ted Kennedy doesn't make her stomach turn. But the Clintons -- they evoke the nightmare, they caused it. So she is blunt about this: She can't stand seeing the Clintons in the public realm, smiling and telling the country what wonderful, wholesome, caring people they are. Yes, Penny admits, it would be good if President Clinton loses the election. She explains why: "Because he won't be out there. . . . He won't be in our faces."

For the Emerys, that may not be closure. But it will do. CAPTION: Fired White House usher Chris Emery with his wife, Penny, and daughter Katie, above. At left, Emery is flanked by Bush, Carter, Clinton and Ford. "There's no doubt in my mind that it was the greatest job in the world," Emery says. He says he's "not a fan of Hillary Clinton" but refuses to tell insider tales. CAPTION: Chris Emery with his wife, Penny: "I have no vendetta. . . . I'm not going to go out of my way to embarrass anyone."