

“President for a Day”

a short story

Herman Fister stood in a crowded hallway, one of many in a sea of people, all lined up to get into the government office. He could smell that someone had egg this morning, or possibly, was saving one for later. He had a gut and a sadly, resting-grouch-face which made him look older than his 65 years should. He was annoyed. They were backed up as far as the exit, packed so tight that from time to time one of his fellow sardines would poke him in the ribs.

“Akkkk-chhooo!” he sneezed, at full volume (and full spasm,) adding a cough for good measure. “What? It’s not contagious anymore,” he barked at those around him, and was granted a few inches of privacy, as they recoiled disgusted. He enjoyed the extra space for a moment, but as time wore on, and more people joined the crowd, the pokes and the smells returned.

Every trip to the government, no matter the reason, had been unpleasant. Dealing with his vehicle registration last year, nearly put him in the hospital. They had run out of chairs and his hip let him know about it for the next 3 weeks. “Bureaucracy in-action” he said under his breath, and spat, though few noticed; several others were cursing as well.

All this because of a letter he recieved months ago. He had nearly thrown it out on the day but thought better and opened it. Inside was an official looking paper, on official looking letterhead. It was from the desk of the White House, and read:

Dear Mr. Mrs. or X. Citizen,

Congratulations!

You have been selected to serve your country in the highest office: The President of the United States.

{**Herman Fister**}, you are hereby officially summoned to fill one full term (24 hrs) of President, for which you are to perform all duties associated with. This will complete your term limit, and exempt you from future Presidential drafts.

Notice of action to follow...

Also included was a photocopied leaflet entitled "How to be a President" --mostly flowery language about the importance and workings of government, though truthfully, Herman didn't care, and was still fuzzy on which branch was which. He was *fairly* certain there were three. But the position paid two weeks salary and meant that, on his fixed income, he could afford to treat himself to several meals out. His favorite being all-you-can-eat spaghetti at Pasta Factory. There would also be the noticeable spike in online "approves" on his social media when his video went live, and the satisfaction of knowing he had done his civic duty.

On this particular day, the government office would process between three and five other Day-Presidents, depending on how backed up the system was. Anyone could be president, just most couldn't be bothered to file the appropriate documents in time. Often people would fake a doctors notes or check "deceased," hoping to skip the whole thing.

The majority of people at the office weren't there for anything so fancy. Most were applying for certificates for a new citizens (thanks to procreating!) or registering their partner, whom they would register to procreate with, one day.

Ahead of Herman, people started to work their way through a security checkpoint. One by one, they took off their shoes and emptied their pockets of technology or gum (gum?) and placed them nervously onto a large, moving x-ray belt.

Then they stood at rigid attention, and prepared for their personal scan.

"BUZZ!" One of the detectors went off and let everyone know who had failed the test. The guard admonished the offender just for pleasure of it. "Remember when we said no metal? That means belt buckles too, princess. Let's go." The small man, whose nerves were now shot, turned pale and removed his belt. He held up his pants with one hand (though not enough for people to avoid an eyeful) and his stack of paperwork in the other, and proceeded through the scanner again, as instructed.

"BUZZ!"

Herman rummaged through his bag to look for his paperwork. "Don't tell me..." he panicked for a moment, thinking about having to come back and stand all over again,

before remembering having stashed them in the laptop section of his bag for safe keeping. He didn't own a laptop. He unzipped the compartment and took out the summons, along with all subsequent notifications, relieved.

He stepped up to the checkpoint, and handed over the stack of forms to the officer who was looking intently at his screen. Then Herman began to load his personal possessions onto the moving belt.

"I.D." the guard prompted, annoyed he had to say so.

Herman winced, and after some effort produced his driver's license as well. The guard scrutinized Herman's picture and looked back to Herman's face. Then back to the picture once more where his brow wrinkled in concentration.

"Welcome, Mr. President," he said, handing it back to him.

"Sure, whatever" Herman replied, and grumbled something unprintable as he stood to be scanned.

The officer on the other side was satisfied when Herman didn't buzz, and so collected his things quickly (yet still held up the line) and entered the next room.

There, he found himself surrounded by everyone who had been in line before him, plus dozens more who had already been waiting already. A ticket dispenser was stationed just to his left, and he tore off a ticket and looked for an empty seat. The ticket read "U-235-2," and referred to one of many screens hanging from the ceiling. Each contained giant lists of numbers, similar to the arrival gate of a busy airport terminal.

All flights were delayed.

* * *

Four hours later, Herman was starting to nod off. He fought to stay focused on one screen where his number should appear. By his guess he should be called up in the next 30 minutes or so, but had fallen for that a few times already.

Many small windows surrounded the room and each was filled with a bureaucrat. Sitting across from them on the other side of the glass were citizens, young and old. They both spoke to each other through small circles cut into glass, and handed paperwork back and forth through the slots below. The bureaucrat would check they had filed their forms correctly, before sending them on and signalling for the next.

At last, one of the screens flashed “U-235-2 : Window Y38” in bright green, and Herman scrambled to write it down. In a moment it would zip away, and he knew if he missed the proper location in time, he would miss his chance to be processed today. He moved as fast as he could (given his bum hip) and headed toward a hallway where he saw the numbers going up to Y28 before cutting off behind a blind corner.

Perhaps he was guided by the ghosts of past Presidents, for the numbers did continue, and around one more blind corner was window Y38. In it was an angry old fart named Robert Thelmar, who was about to press the button which would signal a “no show,” when he spotted Herman approaching and eyed him suspiciously.

“I’m here. I’m Herman Fister.”

“And what can we do for you today?”

"I'm here to be President. Here are my forms."

Robert reached out for Herman's paperwork. "We'll see about that."

Robert Thelmar had no real power to stop Herman from being President, if his forms were in order, but this was part of the game. Robert, the bureaucrat, was not one of the great men who wrote the Constitution and said that the office of President was open to every American of legal age, regardless of gender, race, religion, or politics. He was merely a cog in the political machine and, as a bureaucrat, had to put on a gruff exterior for the screening process --to scare off weaker would-be Presidents.

"Do you understand your responsibility --what the job means for the country?"

"I do." he assured him, and was glad when there wasn't a direct follow up question.

"And do you love your country?"

"As much as any. I'm very *patriotic*."

Herman knew an interviewer was never allowed to ask for proof, legally speaking, of an applicant's patriotism, so he felt free to let loose for a bit, embellishing his love for America and lying, just a hair, about what he would do for this country, should it be required of him. (It had been, and he hadn't.)

Robert had nothing else and was past his processing time, and said "Well then, Mr. President, it's my honor to inaugurate you. Proceed to door AF1. NEXT!"

Herman walked to the end of the hall where the sound of an electronic lock disengaged moments before he tried the handle. He walked through the door with the Presidential Seal, and stepped into the small room.

The room was barren and disinfectant caused his eyes to water. He hadn't seen a webcam that bulky (or at all) in years. He tried not to think about what had been done to that podium over the years by Presidents gone by but some candidates sure made the most of the occasion. He made an effort not to touch anything he didn't have to.

A voice came to life over the intercom and he was jolted with instruction.

click "Mr. Fister. Proceed to the podium and record your address when the light turns green. You will have 5 minutes and must sign off before the clock runs out, or you will not be fit to serve. Do you understand?" *click*

"I do"

click "Good, then whenever you are ready." *click*

Herman didn't have the luxury of a speech writer like some of the fancier Presidents, and frankly, he felt like that was cheating. He was, however, allowed to put anything in his speech short of vulgarity or overt racism --all protected under the banner of "free speech." It would be posted weeks later on whitehouse.gov on the official day, and re-posted on their sister YouTube channel, covered in ads.

He centered himself behind the podium, looked straight at the webcam and saw the timer start to count down as he began.

“Hello, my fellow Americans, this is your president speaking. My name is Herman Fister...”

He went on about how he felt most Hollywood movies were often a let down, and overpriced, and somehow managed to tie this into his dislike of baby carrots. “They have no personality!” he declared, and before long found himself talking about his current shoes, specifically why they were the most comfortable pair he had ever owned (superior inner lining). He spoke of old age, and the aches and hassles that accompanied it, and was optimistic for a moment as he spoke about his one true love: a ‘78 6 ton, which never gave him any issues, back when he used to drive.

Herman noticed time was almost up, and mustered his best news anchor voice before signing off, at last, with the standard closing remark, like every President before.

“So in conclusion, my fellow Americans...

Everything is great,

and I promise,

everything will be better tomorrow.”