

Meet the President! by Zadie Smith

“What you got there, then?”

The boy didn't hear the question. He stood at the end of a ruined pier, believing himself quite alone. But now he registered the presence at his back, and turned.

“What you got there?”

A very old person, a woman, stood before him, gripping the narrow shoulder of a girl child. Both of them local, typically stunted, dim: they stared up at him stupidly. The boy turned again to the sea. All week long he had been hoping for a clear day to try out the new technology—not new to the world, but new to the boy—and now at last here was a break in the rain. Gray sky met gray sea. Not ideal, but sufficient. Ideally he would be standing on a cairn in Scotland or some other tropical spot, experiencing backlit clarity. Ideally he would be—

“Is it one of them what you see through?”

A hand, lousy with blue veins, reached out for the light encircling the boy's head, as if it were a substantial thing, to be grasped like the handle of a mug.

“Ooh, look at the green, Aggie. That shows you it's on.”

The boy was ready to play. He touched the node on his finger to the node at his temple, raising the volume.

“Course, he'd have to be somebody, Aggs, cos they don't give 'em to nobody”—the boy felt the shocking touch of a hand on his own flesh. “Are you somebody, then?”

She had shuffled around until she stood square in front of him, unavoidable. Hair as white as paper. A long, shapeless black dress, made of some kind of cloth, and what appeared to be a pair of actual glasses. Forty-nine years old, type O, a likelihood of ovarian cancer, some ancient debt infraction—nothing more. A blank, more or less. Same went for the girl: never left the country, eighty-five-per-cent chance of macular degeneration, an uncle on the database, long ago located, eliminated. She would be nine in two days. Melinda Durham and Agatha Hanwell. They shared no more DNA than strangers.

“Can you see us?” The old woman let go of her charge and waved her hands wildly. The tips of her fingers barely reached the top of the boy's head. “Are we in it? What are we?”

The boy, unused to proximity, took a single step forward. Farther he could not go. Beyond was the ocean; above, a mess of weather, clouds closing in on blue wherever blue tried to assert itself. A dozen or so craft darted up and down, diving low like seabirds after a fish, and no bigger than seabirds, skimming the dirty foam, then returning to the heavens, directed by unseen hands. On his first day here the boy had trailed his father on an inspection tour to meet those hands: intent young men at their monitors, over whose shoulders the boy's father leaned, as he sometimes leaned over the boy to insure he ate breakfast.

“What d'you call one of them there?”

The boy tucked his shirt in all round: “AG 12.”

The old woman snorted as a mark of satisfaction, but did not leave.

He tried looking the females directly in their dull brown eyes. It was what his mother would have done, a kindly woman with a great mass of waist-length flame-colored hair, famed for her patience with locals. But his mother was long dead, he had never known her, he was losing what little light the day afforded. He blinked twice, said, “Hand to hand.” Then, having a change of heart: “Weaponry.” He looked down at his torso, to which he now attached a quantity of guns. “You carry on, lad,” the old woman said. “We won't get in your way. He can see it all, duck,” she told the girl, who paid her no mind. “Got something in his hands—or thinks he does.”

She took a packet of tobacco from a deep pocket in the front of her garment and began to roll a cigarette, using the girl as a shield from the wind.

“Them clouds, dark as bulls. Racing, racing. They always win.” To illustrate, she tried turning Aggie’s eyes to the sky, lifting the child’s chin with a finger, but the girl would only gawk stubbornly at the woman’s elbow. “They’ll dump on us before we even get there. If you didn’t have to, I wouldn’t go, Aggie, no chance, not in this. It’s for you I do it. I’ve been wet and wet and wet. All my life. And I bet he’s looking at blazing suns and people in their what-have-yous and all-togethers! Int yer? Course you are! And who’d blame you?” She laughed so loud the boy heard her. And then the child—who did not laugh, whose pale face, with its triangle chin and enormous, fair-lashed eyes, seemed capable only of astonishment—pulled at his actual leg, forcing him to mute for a moment and listen to her question.

“Well, I’m Bill Peek,” he replied, and felt very silly, like somebody in an old movie.

“Bill Peek!” the old woman cried. “Oh, but we’ve had Peeks in Anglia a long time. You’ll find a Peek or two or three down in Sutton Hoo. Bill Peek! You from round here, Bill Peek?”

His grandparents? Very possibly. Local and English—or his great-grandparents. His hair and eyes and skin and name suggested it. But it was not a topic likely to engage his father, and the boy himself had never felt any need or desire to pursue it. He was simply global, accompanying his father on his inspections, though usually to livelier spots than this. What a sodden dump it was! Just as everyone had warned him it would be. The only people left in England were the ones who couldn’t leave.

“From round here, are you? Or maybe a Norfolk one? He looks like a Norfolk one, Aggs, wouldn’t you say?”

Bill Peek raised his eyes to the encampment on the hill, pretending to follow with great interest those dozen circling, diving craft, as if he, uniquely, as the child of personnel, had nothing to fear from them. But the woman was occupied with her fag and the girl only sang “Bill Peek, Bill Peek, Bill Peek” to herself, and smiled sadly at her own turned-in feet. They were too local even to understand the implied threat. He jumped off the pier onto the deserted beach. It was low tide—it seemed you could walk to Holland. He focussed upon the thousands of tiny spirals on the sand, like miniature turds stretching out to the horizon.

Felixstowe, England. A Norman village; later, briefly, a resort, made popular by the German royal family; much fishing, once upon a time. A hundred years earlier, almost to the very month, a quaint flood had killed only forty-eight people. Over the years, the place had been serially flooded, mostly abandoned. Now the sad little town had retreated three miles inland and up a hill. Pop.: 850. The boy blinked twice more; he did not care much for history. He narrowed his attention to a single turd. *Arenicola marina*. Sandworms. Lugworms. These were its coiled castings. Castings? But here he found his interest fading once again. He touched his temple and said, “Blood Head 4.” Then: “Washington.” It was his first time at this level. Another world began to construct itself around Bill Peek, a shining city on a hill.

“Poor little thing,” Melinda Durham said. She sat on the pier, legs dangling, and pulled the girl into her lap. “Demented with grief she is. We’re going to a laying out. Aggie’s sister is laid out today. Her last and only relation. Course, the cold truth is, Aggie’s sister weren’t much better than trash, and a laying out’s a sight too good for her—she’d be better off laid out on this beach here and left for the gulls. But I ain’t going for her. I do it for Aggie. Aggie knows why. Aggie’s been a great help to me what with one thing and another.”

While he waited, as incidental music played, the boy idly checked a message from his father: at what time could he be expected back at the encampment? At what time could he be expected. This was a pleasing development, being an inquiry rather than an order. He would be fifteen in May, almost a man! A man who could let another man know when he could be expected, and let him know in his own sweet time, when he had the inclination. He performed some rudimentary stretches and bounced up and down on the balls of his feet.

“He was doing well at first, but then he started drifting in and out of health coverage.”

“Maud, that was her name. And she was born under the same steeple she’ll be buried under. Twelve years old. But so whorish—” Melinda covered Aggie’s ears, and the girl leaned into the gesture, having mistaken it for affection. “So whorish she looked like a crone. If you lived round here, Bill Peek, you’d’ve known Maud, if you understand me correctly. You would’ve known Maud right up to the Biblical and beyond. Terrible. But Aggie’s cut from quite different sod, thank goodness!” Aggie was released and patted on the head. “And she’s no one left, so here I am, muggins here, taking her to a laying out when I’ve a million other stones to be lifted off the pile.” The boy placed a number of grenades about his person. In each chapter of the Pathways Global Institute (in Paris, New York, Shanghai, Nairobi, Jerusalem, Tokyo), the boy had enjoyed debating with friends the question of whether it was better to augment around the “facts on the ground,” incorporating whatever was at hand (“flagging,” it was called, the pleasure being the unpredictability), or to choose spots where there were barely any facts to work around. The boy was of the latter sensibility. He wanted to augment in clean, blank places, where he was free to fully extend, unhindered. He looked down the beach as the oil streaks in the sand were overlaid now with a gleaming pavement, lined on either side by the National Guard, saluting him. It was three miles to the White House. He picked out a large pair of breasts to wear, for reasons of his own, and a long, scaled tail, for purposes of strangulation.

“Oh, fuck a duck—you wouldn’t do me an awful favor and keep an eye on Aggie just a minute, would you?—I’ve left my rosary! I can’t go to no laying out without it. It’s more than my soul’s worth. Oh, Aggie, how did you ever let me leave without it? She’s a good girl, but she’s thoughtless sometimes—her sister were thoughtless, too. Bill Peek, you will keep an eye on her, won’t you? I won’t be a moment. We’re shackled up just on that hill by the old Martello tower. Eight minutes I’ll be. No more. Would you do that for me, Bill Peek?”

Bill Peek nodded his head, once rightward, twice leftward. Knives shot out of his wrists and splayed beautifully like the fronds of a fern.

It was perhaps twenty minutes later, as he approached the pile of rubble—pounded by enemy craft—that had once been the Monument, that young Bill Peek felt again a presence at his back and turned and found Aggie Hanwell with her fist in her mouth, tears streaming, jaw working up and down in an agonized fashion. He couldn’t hear her over the explosions. Reluctantly, he paused.

“She ain’t come back.”

“Excuse me?”

“She went but she ain’t come back!”

“Who?” he asked, but then scrolled back until he found it. “M. Durham?”

The girl gave him that same astonished look.

“My Melly,” she said. “She promised to take me but she went and she ain’t come back!”

The boy swiftly located M. Durham—as much an expedience as an act of charity—and experienced the novelty of sharing the information with the girl, in the only way she appeared able to receive it. “She’s two miles away,” he said, with his own mouth. “Heading north.”

Aggie Hanwell sat down on her bum in the wet sand. She rolled something in her hand. The boy looked at it and learned that it was a periwinkle—a snail of the sea! He recoiled, disliking those things which crawled and slithered upon the earth. But this one proved broken, with only a pearlescent nothing inside it.

“So it was all a lie,” Aggie said, throwing her head back dramatically to consider the sky. “Plus one of them’s got my number. I’ve done nothing wrong but still Melly’s gone and left me and one of them thing’s been following me, since the pier—even before that.”

“If you’ve done nothing wrong,” Bill Peek said, solemnly parroting his father, “you’ve nothing to worry about. It’s a precise business.” He had been raised to despair of the type of people who

spread misinformation about the Program. Yet along with his new maturity had come fresh insight into the complexities of his father's world. For didn't those with bad intent on occasion happen to stand beside the good, the innocent, or the underaged? And in those circumstances could precision be entirely guaranteed? "Anyway, they don't track children. Don't you understand anything?"

Hearing this, the girl laughed—a bitter and cynical cackle, at odds with her pale little face—and Bill Peek made the mistake of being, for a moment, rather impressed. But she was only imitating her elders, as he was imitating his.

"Go home," he said.

Instead she set about burrowing her feet into the wet sand.

"Everyone's got a good angel and a bad angel," she explained. "And if it's a bad angel that picks you out"—she pointed to a craft swooping low—"there's no escaping it. You're done for."

He listened in wonderment. Of course he'd always known there were people who thought in this way—there was a module you did on them in sixth grade—but he had never met anyone who really harbored what his anthro-soc teacher, Mr. Lin, called "animist beliefs."

The girl sighed, scooped up more handfuls of sand, and added them to the two mounds she had made on top of her feet, patting them down, encasing herself up to the ankles. Meanwhile all around her Bill Peek's scene of fabulous chaos was frozen—a Minotaur sat in the lap of stony Abe Lincoln and a dozen carefully planted I.E.D.s awaited detonation. He was impatient to return.

"Must advance," he said, pointing down the long stretch of beach, but she held up her hands, she wanted pulling up. He pulled. Standing, she clung to him, hugging his knees. He felt her face damp against his leg.

"Oh, it's awful bad luck to miss a laying out! Melly's the one knew where to go. She's got the whole town up here," she said, tapping her temple, making the boy smile. "Memoried. No one knows town like Melly. She'll say, 'This used to be here, but they knocked it down,' or, 'There was a pub here with a mark on the wall where the water rose.' She's memoried every corner. She's my friend."

"Some friend!" the boy remarked. He succeeded in unpeeling the girl from his body, and strode on down the beach, firefighting a gang of Russian commandoes as they parachuted into view. Alongside him a scurrying shape ran; sometimes a dog, sometimes a droid, sometimes a huddle of rats. Her voice rose out of it.

"Can I see?"

Bill Peek disembowelled a fawn to his left. "Do you have an Augmentor?"

"No."

"Do you have a complementary system?"

"No."

He knew he was being cruel—but she was ruining his concentration. He stopped running and split the visuals, the better to stare her down.

"Any system?"

"No."

"Therefore no. No, you can't."

Her nose was pink, a drop of moisture hung from it. She had an innocence that practically begged to be corrupted. Bill Peek could think of more than a few Pathways boys of his acquaintance who wouldn't hesitate to take her under the next boardwalk and put a finger inside her. And the rest. As the son of personnel, however, Bill Peek was held to a different standard.

"Jimmy Kane had one—he was a fella of Maud's, her main fella. He flew in and then he flew out—you never knew when he'd be flying in again. He was a captain in the Army. He had an old

one of them . . . but said it still worked. He said it made her nicer to look at when they were doing it. He was from nowhere, too.”

“Nowhere?”

“Like you.”

Not for the first time the boy was struck by the great human mysteries of this world. He was almost fifteen, almost a man, and the great human mysteries of this world were striking him with satisfying regularity, as was correct for his stage of development. (From the Pathways Global Institute prospectus: “As our students reach tenth grade they begin to gain insight into the great human mysteries of this world, and a special sympathy for locals, the poor, ideologues, and all those who have chosen to limit their own human capital in ways that it can be difficult at times for us to comprehend.”) From the age of six months, when he was first enrolled in the school, he had hit every mark that Pathways expected of its pupils—walking, talking, divesting, monetizing, programming, augmenting—and so it was all the more shocking to find himself face-to-face with an almost nine-year-old so absolutely blind, so lost, so developmentally debased.

“It is not done well, but one is surprised to find it done at all.”

“This”—he indicated Felixstowe, from the beach with its turd castings and broken piers, to the empty-shell buildings and useless flood walls, up to the hill where his father hoped to expect him —“is nowhere. If you can’t move, you’re no one from nowhere. ‘Capital must flow.’” (This last was the motto of his school, though she needn’t know that.) “Now, if you’re asking me where I was born, the event of my birth occurred in Bangkok, but wherever I was born I would remain a member of the Incipio Security Group, which employs my father—and within which I have the highest clearance.” He was surprised by the extent of the pleasure this final, outright lie gave him. It was like telling a story, but in a completely new way—a story that could not be verified or checked, and which only total innocence would accept. Only someone with no access of any kind. Never before had he met someone like this, who could move only in tiny local spirals, a turd on a beach.

Moved, the boy bent down suddenly and touched the girl gently on her face. As he did so he had a hunch that he probably looked like the first prophet of some monotheistic religion, bestowing his blessing on a recent convert, and, upon re-watching the moment and finding this was so, he sent it out, both to Mr. Lin and to his fellow Pathways boys, for peer review. It would surely count toward completion of Module 19, which emphasized empathy for the dispossessed. “Where is it you want to go, my child?”

She lit up with gratitude, her little hand gripped his, the last of her tears rolling into her mouth and down her neck. “St. Jude’s!” she cried. She kept talking as he replayed the moment to himself and added a small note of explanatory context for Mr. Lin, before he refocused on her stream of prattle: “And I’ll say goodbye to her. And I’ll kiss her on her face and nose. Whatever they said about her she was my own sister and I loved her and she’s going to a better place—I don’t care if she’s stone cold in that church, I’ll hold her!”

“Not a church,” the boy corrected. “14 Ware Street, built 1950, originally domestic property, situated on a floodplain, condemned for safety. Site of ‘St. Jude’s’—local, outlier congregation. Has no official status.”

“St. Jude’s is where she’ll be laid out,” she said and squeezed his hand. “And I’ll kiss her no matter how cold she is.”

The boy shook his head and sighed.

“We’re going in the same direction. Just follow me. No speaking.” He put his finger to his lips, and she tucked her chin into her neck meekly, seeming to understand. Re-starting, he flagged her effectively, transforming little Aggie Hanwell into his sidekick, his familiar, a sleek reddish fox. He was impressed by the perfect visual reconstruction of the original animal, apparently

once common in this part of the world. Renamed Mystus, she provided cover for his left flank and mutely admired Bill Peek as he took the traitor Vice-President hostage and dragged him down the Mall with a knife to his neck.

After a spell they came to the end of the beach. Here the sand shaded into pebbles and then a rocky cove, and barnacles held on furiously where so much else had been washed away. Above their heads, the craft were finishing their sallies and had clustered like bees, moving as one back to the landing bay at the encampment. Bill Peek and his familiar were also nearing the end of their journey, moments away from kicking in the door to the Oval Office, where—if all went well—they would meet the President and be thanked for their efforts. But at the threshold, unaccountably, Bill Peek's mind began to wander. Despite the many friends around the world watching (there was a certain amount of kudos granted to any boy who successfully met the President in good, if not record, time, on his first run-through), he found himself pausing to stroke Mystus and worry about whether his father would revoke his AG after this trip. It had been a bribe and a sop in the first place—it was unregistered. Bill had wanted to stay on at the Tokyo campus for the whole summer, and then move to Norway, before tsunami season, for a pleasant fall. His father had wanted him by his side, here, in the damp, unlit graylands. An AG 12 was the compromise. But these later models were security risks, easily hacked, and the children of personnel were not meant to carry hackable devices. That's how much my father loves me, Bill Peek thought hopefully, that's how much he wants me around.

Previously the boy had believed that the greatest testament to love was the guarantee—which he had had all his life—of total personal security. He could count on one hand the amount of times he'd met a local; radicals were entirely unknown to him; he had never travelled by any mode of transport that held more than four people. But now, almost adult, he had a new thought, saw the matter from a fresh perspective, which he hoped would impress Mr. Lin with its age-appropriate intersectionality. He rested against the Oval Office door and sent his thought to the whole Pathways family: "Daring to risk personal security can be a sign of love, too." Feeling inspired, he split the visual in order to pause and once more appreciate the human mysteries of this world slash how far he'd come.

He found that he was resting on a slimy rock, his fingers tangled in the unclean hair follicles of Agatha Hanwell. She saw him looking at her. She said, "Are we there yet?" The full weight of her innocence emboldened him. They were five minutes from Ware Street. Wasn't that all the time he needed? No matter what lay beyond that door, it would be dispatched by Bill Peek, brutally, beautifully; he would step forward, into his destiny. He would meet the President! He would shake the President's hand.

"Follow me."

She was quick on the rocks, perhaps even a little quicker than he, moving on all fours like an animal. They took a right, a left, and Bill Peek slit many throats. The blood ran down the walls of the Oval Office and stained the Presidential seal and at the open windows a crowd of cheering, anonymous well-wishers pressed in. At which point Mystus strayed from him and rubbed herself along their bodies, and was stroked and petted in turn.

"So many people come to see your Maud. Does the soul good."

"How are you, Aggie, love? Bearing up?"

"They took her from the sky. Boom! 'Public depravity.' I mean, I ask you!"

"Come here, Aggs, give us a hug."

"Who's that with her?"

"Look, that's the little sis. Saw it all. Poor little thing."

"She's in the back room, child. You go straight through. You've more right than anybody."

All Bill Peek knew is that many bodies were lying on the ground and a space was being made for him to approach. He stepped forward like a king. The President saluted him. The two men

shook hands. But the light was failing, and then failed again; the celebrations were lost in infuriating darkness. . . . The boy touched his temple, hot with rage: a low-ceilinged parlor came into view, with its filthy window, further shaded by a ragged net curtain, the whole musty hovel lit by candles. He couldn't even extend an arm—there were people everywhere, local, offensive to the nose, to all other senses. He tried to locate Agatha Hanwell, but her precise coordinates were of no use here; she was packed deep into this crowd—he could no more get to her than to the moon. A fat man put a hand on his shoulder and asked, “You in the right place, boy?” A distressing female with few teeth said, “Leave him be.” Bill Peek felt himself being pushed forward, deeper into the darkness. A song was being sung, by human voices, and though each individual sang softly, when placed side by side like this, like rows of wheat in the wind, they formed a weird unity, heavy and light at the same time. “Because I do not hope to turn again . . . Because I do not hope . . .” In one voice, like a great beast moaning. A single craft carrying the right hardware could take out the lot of them, but they seemed to have no fear of that. Swaying, singing.

Bill Peek touched his sweaty temple and tried to focus on a long message from his father—something about a successful inspection and Mexico in the morning—but he was being pushed by many hands, ever forward, until he reached the back wall where a long box, made of the kind of wood you saw washed up on the beach, sat on a simple table, with candles all around it. The singing grew ever louder. Still, as he passed through their number, it seemed that no man or woman among them sang above a whisper. Then, cutting across it all like a stick through the sand, a child's voice wailed, an acute, high-pitched sound, such as a small animal makes when, out of sheer boredom, you break its leg. Onward they pushed him; he saw it all perfectly clearly in the candlelight—the people in black, weeping, and Aggie on her knees by the table, and inside the driftwood box the lifeless body of a real girl, the first object of its kind that young Bill Peek had ever seen. Her hair was red and set in large, infantile curls, her skin very white, and her eyes wide open and green. A slight smile revealed the gaps in her teeth, and suggested secret knowledge, the kind of smile he had seen before on the successful sons of powerful men with full clearance—the boys who never lose. Yet none of it struck him quite as much as the sensation that there was someone or something else in that grim room, both unseen and present, and coming for him as much as for anybody. ♦

Zadie Smith has contributed numerous short stories, nonfiction pieces, and a personal history —“Dead Man Laughing,” about her father's love of comedy—since first appearing in *The New Yorker* in 1999.