

Praise for
Assassination Vacation

“Part history lesson, part hilarious travelogue, the charmingly obsessed Vowell’s stories cheerfully highlight the oft-appalling ways in which popular culture has spun these politically based murders into tragitainment. . . . With Sarah Vowell at the wheel, *Assassination Vacation* is a far-out trip into America’s storied past. I call shotgun.”

—Elissa Schappell, *Vanity Fair*

“This is a book like no other, a serious and interesting romp through loopholes of time and American political violence. Vowell likes to explode myths and reveal hypocrisy wherever she finds it. . . . Vowell is an American original. . . . She is somehow simultaneously patriot and rebel, cynic and dreamer, and an aching secularist in search of a higher ground. Her book—part memoir, part meditation, and part road trip—will attract readers who are still unafraid of having many of their assumptions challenged.”

—Elaine Margolin, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

“Vowell takes as her province the innumerable eccentric ways that people manage to squeeze personal and civic meaning out of a world framed by pop culture. . . . Her wit makes these stories funny, of course, but so do her curiosity and ear for vernacular, which yield further revelation and insight.”

—*The Washington Post*

“A winking rumination on the murders of Abraham Lincoln, James Garfield, and William McKinley.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

“A funny-grim travelogue . . .”

—John Mark Eberhart, *The Kansas City Star*

“Darkly comic and fascinating miscellany about presidential assassinations.”

—Elizabeth Barr, *Buffalo News*

“*Assassination Vacation* is a beguiling mixture of memoir, history, and humor. . . . Despite the grimness of the topic, *Assassination Vacation* is a fresh, fun read from a talented writer.”

—John Keenan, *Omaha World-Herald*

“Adventure, intrigue, and laughs . . . [a] witty book. . . . Vowell takes readers to various historic locations and explains in her inimitable way why each is relevant to one of the assassinations.”

—Amy Carlson Gustafson, *Saint Paul Pioneer Press* (Minnesota)

“One of the things that makes *Assassination Vacation* so rewarding is that it’s a book in love with history.”

—*The Virginian-Pilot* (Norfolk, VA)

“It is her gift for details that gives life to historical figures and adds a new dimension to the textbook topic of presidential assassinations.”

—Siri Agrell, *National Post* (Toronto)

“Funny and perceptive. . . . The book is a hoot, entertaining, bemused, even educational. Vowell deeply loves American history, especially its strange byways and unexpected connections; but never once, while reading this, will it feel like you’ll be tested after class. Instead, more than likely, you will annoy your spouse by wanting to read the best parts out loud. The book’s a combo plate of quirky observation and droll insights, a dish Vowell consistently serves. . . . These commentaries are the thoughtful and thought-provoking musings of a genuine patriot—one who loves her country even if its politics disappoint her.”

—Adam Woog, *The Seattle Times*

“Buy it now. . . . Vowell’s writing combines historical fact, pop references, and her own wisecracking observations, a mix that can astound you and make you laugh out loud, and sometimes both at once.”

—Liz Braun, *Toronto Sun*

“Vowell reclaims her quirky ‘This American Life’ appeal with this funny, off-kilter book about presidential assassinations. You’ll never think about President James A. Garfield the same way again.”

—*Wisconsin State Journal* (Madison)

“*Assassination Vacation* . . . blends travelogue; weird-but-true history lessons; and [Vowell’s] own quirky, hilarious, and downright profound thoughts on the American character.”

—*Wisconsin State Journal* (Madison)

“In *Assassination Vacation*, Vowell offers a take on history that is less footnoted, less grainy-footage History Channel type stuff, more *Laugh-In* in Technicolor. . . . History as you’ve never listened to it.”

—*Newsday*

“Vowell could make a trip to the DMV interesting. Delighting in the ironies and oddities of America’s past, she succeeds by telling history through her own skewed filter. . . . Part travelogue, part history text, and part memoir, *Assassination Vacation* is more fun than it has any right to be—a bizarre road trip into some of the most searing moments of the nation’s past with one of our most amusing storytellers at the wheel.”

—*The Baltimore Sun*

“Illuminating, often insightful, and always interesting.”

—*Rocky Mountain News*

“Equal parts textbook, guidebook, and memoir, *Assassination Vacation* takes readers on an informative and (where appropriate) hilarious tour of some of the darkest moments in our nation’s history.”

—*The Star-Ledger* (Newark, NJ)

“Sarah Vowell . . . guides us to places connected to politicians who met a bloody end. Sound gruesome? With Vowell, such a journey is hilarious, informative, and about as quirky as it gets.”

—Margo Hammond, *St. Petersburg Times*

“[Vowell’s] aim is to make us see the past in new ways. And she succeeds: In Vowell’s hands a presidential nonentity like Garfield . . . gains depth and dimension. . . . Any writer who can put James A. Garfield and Lou Reed in the same sentence leaves me in slack-jawed awe.”

—Charles Matthews, *San Jose Mercury News*

“Cutting through cant with a satirical scalpel, she is the history teacher we all wanted in school: whip-smart, hilariously self-deprecating, and gifted with the power to make the invisible appear vividly before our eyes.”

—*The Miami Herald*

“Vowell’s somewhat macabre enthusiasm for her subject matter bubbles over onto every page of [*Assassination Vacation*], as she unearths fascinating and eerie details about the assassinations and entertainingly recounts her trips to tourist spots like Lincoln’s tomb. Reading the book is like having lunch with a very smart, funny friend who wants to talk about a subject that you couldn’t care less about. And by the end of the lunch, you’re begging her for a suggested reading list.”

—*The Capital Times* (Madison, WI)

“*Assassination Vacation* . . . reads like Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, minus the drugs and run-on sentences. Peripatetic, distinctly American, and always enthusiastic, it recounts journeys Vowell made to satisfy her curiosities about the legacies of assassinated presidents. . . . Vowell is the perfect tour guide to our country’s bloody past. She approaches her subject with a raconteur’s wit and the unguarded passion of a fan.”

—*Time Out New York*

“Vowell . . . burrows into the past with an academic’s zeal, making seemingly absurd connections that have their own logic and witty truths. . . . She travels with a patriot’s devotion and an observer’s eye for the priceless.”

—*New York Daily News*

“Hilarious . . . [Vowell] is flat-out funny. . . . She is a master of the bon mot, and the associations she makes compel the reader to call up their literary friends and share the insights.”

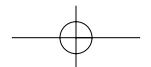
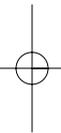
—*The News Tribune* (Tacoma, WA)

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ASSASSINATION VACATION

SARAH VOWELL

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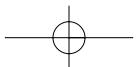
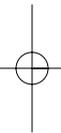
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In memory of Carlile Vowell (1904–1995)

Grandfather, principal, history teacher, Muskogee
County commissioner, wiseacre, and Democrat.
What I wouldn't give to hear him cuss that a book
about three Republicans has been dedicated in his
name.



In the Middle Ages, relics spawned a continentwide craze. Devotees packed their bags and streamed out of towns and villages, thronging the pilgrimage trails. For most, a journey to see the relic of St. Thomas or St. James offered the only valid excuse for leaving home.

ANNELI RUFUS *Magnificent Corpses*

“The real Lincoln exists in my mind,” Pris said.

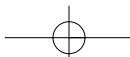
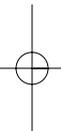
I was astonished. “You don’t believe that. What do you mean by saying that? You mean you have the *idea* in your mind.”

She cocked her head on one side and eyed me. “No, Louis. I really have Lincoln in my mind. And I’ve been working night after night to transfer him out of my mind, back into the outside world.”

PHILIP K. DICK *We Can Build You*

That’s what writing is. You’re keeping people alive in your head.

CARL REINER



P R E F A C E

One night last summer, all the killers in my head assembled on a stage in Massachusetts to sing show tunes. There they were—John Wilkes Booth, Charles Guiteau, Leon Czolgosz—in tune and in the flesh. The men who murdered Presidents Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley were elbow to elbow with Lee Harvey Oswald and the klutzy girls who botched their hits on klutzy Gerald Ford, harmonizing on a toe-tapper called “Everybody’s Got the Right to Be Happy,” a song I cheerfully hummed walking back to the bed-and-breakfast where I was staying.

Not that I came all the way from New York City just to enjoy a chorus line of presidential assassins. Mostly, I came to the Berkshires because of the man who brought one of those presidents back to life. I was there to visit Chesterwood, the house and studio once belonging to Daniel Chester French, the artist responsible for the Abraham Lincoln sculpture in the Lincoln Memorial. A nauseating four-hour bus ride from the Port Authority terminal just to see the room where some patriotic chiseler came up with a marble statue? For some reason, none of my friends wanted to come with.

Because I had to stay overnight and this being New England, the only place to stay was a bed-and-breakfast. It was

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a lovely old country mansion operated by amiable people. That said, I am not a bed-and-breakfast person.

I understand why other people would want to stay in B&Bs. They're pretty. They're personal. They're "quaint," a polite way of saying "no TV." They are "romantic," i.e., every object large enough for a flower to be printed on it is going to have a flower printed on it. They're "cozy," meaning that a guest has to keep her belongings on the floor because every conceivable flat surface is covered in knickknacks, except for the one knickknack she longs for, a remote control.

The real reason bed-and-breakfasts make me nervous is breakfast. As if it's not queasy enough to stay in a stranger's home and sleep in a bed bedecked with nineteen pillows. In the morning, the usually cornflake-consuming, wheat-intolerant guest is served floury baked goods on plates so fancy any normal person would keep them locked in the china cabinet even if Queen Victoria herself rose from the dead and showed up for tea. The guest, normally a silent morning reader of newspapers, is expected to chat with the other strangers staying in the strangers' home.

At my Berkshires bed-and-breakfast, I am seated at a table with one middle-aged Englishman and an elderly couple from Greenwich, Connecticut. The three of them make small talk about golf, the weather, and the room's chandeliers, one of which, apparently, is Venetian. I cannot think of a thing to say to these people. Seated at the head of the table, I am the black hole of breakfast, a silent void of gloom sucking the sunshine out of their neighborly New England day. But that is not the kind of girl my mother raised me to be. I consider asking the Connecticut couple if they had ever run into Jack Paar, who I heard had retired near where they

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live, but I look like I was born after Paar quit hosting *The Tonight Show* (because I was) and so I'd have to explain how much I like watching tapes of old programs at the Museum of Television and Radio and I don't want to get too personal.

It seems that all three of them attended a Boston Pops concert at Tanglewood the previous evening, and they chat about the conductor. This, I think, is my in. I, too, enjoy being entertained.

Relieved to have something, anything, to say, I pipe up, "I went to the Berkshire Theatre Festival last night."

"Oh, did you see *Peter Pan*?" the woman asks.

"No," I say. "Assassins!"

"What's that?" wonders the Englishman.

To make up for the fact that I've been clammed up and moping I speak too fast, merrily chirping, "It's the Stephen Sondheim musical in which a bunch of presidential assassins and would-be assassins sing songs about how much better their lives would be if they could gun down a president."

"Oh," remarks Mr. Connecticut. "How was it?"

"Oh my god," I gush. "Even though the actors were mostly college kids, I thought it was great! The orange-haired guy who played the man who wanted to fly a plane into Nixon was hilarious. And I found myself strangely smitten with John Wilkes Booth; every time he looked in my direction I could feel myself blush." Apparently, talking about going to the Museum of Television and Radio is "too personal," but I seem to have no problem revealing my crush on the man who murdered Lincoln.

Now, a person with sharper social skills than I might have noticed that as these folks ate their freshly baked blueberry muffins and admired the bed-and-breakfast's teapot collec-

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tion, they probably didn't want to think about presidential gunshot wounds. But when I'm around strangers, I turn into a conversational Mount St. Helens. I'm dormant, dormant, quiet, quiet, old-guy loners build log cabins on the slopes of my silence and then, boom, it's 1980. Once I erupt, they'll be wiping my verbal ashes off their windshields as far away as North Dakota.

I continue. "But the main thing that surprised me was how romantic *Assassins* was."

"Romantic?" sneers a skeptic.

"Totally," I rebut. "There's a very tender love scene between Emma Goldman and Leon Czolgosz."

Blank stares.

"You know. He was the anarchist who killed McKinley. Buffalo? 1901? Anyway, the authorities initially suspected Goldman had helped him, but all it was was that he had heard her speak a couple of times about sticking it to The Man. He'd met her, but she wasn't his co-conspirator. Anyway, the play dramatizes the moment they meet. He stops her on the street to tell her that he loves her. The guy who played Czolgosz was wonderful. He had this smoldering Eastern European accent. Actually, he sounded a lot like Dracula—but in a good way, if you know what I mean." (They don't.)

"He told her, 'Miss Goldman, I am in love with you.' She answered that she didn't have time to be in love with him. Which was cute. But, this was my one misgiving about the performance, I thought that the woman playing Goldman was too ladylike, too much of a wallflower. Wasn't Emma Goldman loud and brash and all gung ho? Here was a woman whose words inspired a guy to kill a president. And come to think of it, one of her old boyfriends shot the industrialist

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Henry Frick. Maybe I'm too swayed by the way Maureen Stapleton played Goldman in the film *Reds*. She was so bossy! And remember Stapleton in that Woody Allen movie, *Interiors*? Geraldine Page is all beige this and bland that so her husband divorces her and hooks up with noisy, klutzy Maureen Stapleton, who laughs too loud and smashes pottery and wears a blood-red dress to symbolize that she is Alive, capital A. Wait. I lost my train of thought. Where was I?"

Englishman: "I believe Dracula was in love with Maureen Stapleton."

"Oh, right. I haven't even mentioned the most touching part. Squeaky Fromme and John Hinckley sing this duet, a love song to Charles Manson and Jodie Foster. Hinckley and Squeaky sang that they would do anything for Charlie Manson and Jodie Foster. And I really believed them! Squeaky's like, 'I would crawl belly-deep through hell,' and Hinckley's all, 'Baby, I'd die for you.' It was adorable."

Mr. Connecticut looks at his watch and I simultaneously realize that I've said way too much and that saying way too much means I might miss my bus back home. And I really want to go home. I yell, "Nice meeting you!" and nearly knock down the teapot collection in my rush to get away from them. Though before I can leave, I have to settle up my bill with the friendly B&B owner. His first name? Hinckley.

On the bus home, I flip through my *Assassins* program from the night before and read the director's note. Of course talking about the murders of previous presidents is going to open the door to discussing the current president. That's what I like to call him, "the current president." I find it difficult to say or type his name, George W. Bush. I like to call him "the current president" because it's a hopeful phrase,

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implying that his administration is only temporary. Timothy Douglas, the *Assassins* director, doesn't say the president's name either, but he doesn't have to. Clearly, Douglas is horrified and exasperated by the Iraqi war. He writes,

Proportionate to my own mounting frustrations at feeling increasingly excluded from the best interests of the current administration's control in these extraordinary times helps me toward a visceral understanding of the motivation of one who would perpetrate a violent act upon the leader of the free world. My capacity for this depth of empathy also gives me pause, for I have no idea how far away I am from the "invisible line" that separates me from a similar or identical purpose. . . . Please allow me to state for the record that I am completely against violence of any kind as a way of resolving conflicts.

That crafty explanation slaps me in the forehead with all the force of "duh." Until that moment, I hadn't realized that I embarked on the project of touring historic sites and monuments having to do with the assassinations of Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley right around the time my country iffily went to war, which is to say right around the time my resentment of the current president cranked up into contempt. Not that I want the current president killed. Like that director, I will, for the record (and for the FBI agent assigned to read this and make sure I mean no harm—hello there), clearly state that while I am obsessed with death, I am against it.

Like director Tim Douglas, my simmering rage against

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the current president scares me. I am a more or less peaceful happy person whose lone act of violence as an adult was shoving a guy who spilled beer on me at a Sleater-Kinney concert. So if I can summon this much bitterness toward a presidential human being, I can sort of, kind of see how this amount of bile or more, teaming up with disappointment, unemployment, delusions of grandeur and mental illness, could prompt a crazier narcissistic creep to buy one of this country's widely available handguns. Not that I, I repeat, condone that. Like Lincoln, I would like to believe the ballot is stronger than the bullet. Then again, he said that before he got shot.

I am only slightly less astonished by the egotism of the assassins, the inflated self-esteem it requires to kill a president, than I am astonished by the men who run for president. These are people who have the gall to believe they can fix us—us and our deficit, our fossil fuels, our racism, poverty, our potholes and public schools. The egomania required to be president or a presidential assassin makes the two types brothers of sorts. Presidents and presidential assassins are like Las Vegas and Salt Lake City that way. Even though one city is all about sin and the other is all about salvation, they are identical, one-dimensional company towns built up out of the desert by the sheer will of true believers. The assassins and the presidents invite the same basic question: Just who do you think you are?

One of the books I read for McKinley research was Barbara Tuchman's great history of European and American events leading up to World War I, *The Proud Tower*. Her anarchism chapter enumerates the six heads of state who were

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assassinated in the two decades before Archduke Ferdinand was murdered in 1914: McKinley, the president of France, the empress of Austria, the king of Italy, a couple of Spanish premiers. Her point being, it was an age of assassination. Well, I can come up with at least that many assassinations off the top of my head from the last two years alone as if playing some particularly geopolitical game of Clue: Serbian prime minister (sniper in front of government building in Belgrade), Swedish foreign minister (stabbed while shopping in Stockholm), the Taiwanese president and vice president (wounded when shots were fired at their motorcade the day before an election), two Hamas leaders (Israeli missile strikes), president of the Iraqi Governing Council (suicide bomber). And, in May 2004, an audio recording surfaced from Osama bin Laden promising to pay ten thousand grams of gold (roughly \$125K) to assassins of officials in Iraq representing the United States or the United Nations.

“I’m worried about the president’s safety,” I said at a Fourth of July party in 2004 when this guy Sam and I were talking about the upcoming Republican National Convention here in New York. “I think you’ve seen *The Manchurian Candidate* too many times,” said Sam. Guilty. Still, I dread bodily harm coming to the current president because of my aforementioned aversion to murder, but also because I don’t think I can stomach watching that man get turned into a martyr if he were killed. That’s what happens. It’s one of the few perks of assassination. In death, you get upgraded into a saint no matter how much people hated you in life. As the rueful Henry Adams, a civil service reform advocate who marveled at his fellow reformers’ immediate deification of President Garfield after that assassination, wrote, “The cyn-

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ical impudence with which the reformers have tried to manufacture an ideal statesman out of the late shady politician beats anything in novel-writing.”

*

Somewhere on the road between museum displays of Lincoln’s skull fragments and the ceramic tiles on which Garfield was gunned down and McKinley’s bloodstained pj’s it occurred to me that there is a name for travel embarked upon with the agenda of venerating relics: pilgrimage. The medieval pilgrimage routes, in which Christians walked from church to church to commune with the innards of saints, are the beginnings of the modern tourism industry. Which is to say that you can draw a more or less straight line from a Dark Ages peasant blistering his feet trudging to a church displaying the Virgin Mary’s dried-up breast milk to me vomiting into a barf bag on a sightseeing boat headed toward the prison-island hell where some Lincoln assassination conspirators were locked up in 1865.

I remembered that my friend Jack Hitt had written a book called *Off the Road* in which he retraced the old pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. So I floated my pilgrimage theory to him in an e-mail and he wrote back that at one point on his Spanish trip, he saw “the flayed ‘skin’ of Jesus—the entire thing, you know, with like eyeholes and stuff, mounted on a wooden frame.” Cool. His e-mail went on to say that in the Middle Ages,

Relics were treasured as something close to the divine. Often when a great monk died and there was a sense that he might be canonized, the corpse was carefully guarded

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in a tomb—often twenty-four hours a day. Visitors could come to the tomb. Most of the funeral vaults of potential saints had a small door, like you might have in your suburban house for cats. Visitors could poke their heads in the little door and breathe in the holy dust. Most people thought that such dust had curative powers since it was associated with a near-saint whose corporeal matter had been directly blessed by God. So, getting near a relic, touching it, being near it was considered extremely beneficial and treasured.

Curative powers? I wondered how taking the train to Philadelphia to look at a sliver of the Garfield assassin's brain floating in a jar is supposed to fix me. "There was a late Renaissance king of Spain whom I loved," Jack went on.

He was so inbred and crazy, incapable of eating food or reproducing that he was called *El Hechizado*—the bewitched. He was probably retarded. After destroying the world's largest empire (ever, in all history) and bankrupting a nation drowning in New World gold, he came to die. Half the College of Cardinals arrived to recite prayers over his feeble frail body. They split a live dove over his head every morning. And they had brought with them the most powerful curative tool then known to man, the putrefying, stinking rotting corpse of Saint Francis of Assisi, then (and maybe now) the greatest saint ever. It was laid in the bed next to *El Hechizado* and for the rest of his days, the King of Spain shared his bed with the greatest relic ever in the hopes that it would restore his health and grant him the potency to generate an heir. Neither hap-

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pened and the empire eventually dissolved into warfare with England around 1588 and became a backwater.

I can relate. (Not to being retarded, though it has been my experience that if you go on your historical pilgrimage while wearing your *Jackass: The Movie* ball cap some people look at you like you are.) I crave my relics for the same reason Señor Bewitched bunked with the late saint. We're religious. I used to share the king's faith. And while I gave up God a long time ago, I never shook the habit of wanting to believe in something bigger and better than myself. So I replaced my creed of everlasting life with life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. "I believe in America," chants the first verse of one of my sacred texts, *The Godfather*. Not that I'm blind to the Psych 101 implications of trading in the martyred Jesus Christ (crucified on Good Friday) for the martyred Abraham Lincoln (shot on Good Friday).

One thing the Spanish king's Catholicism and my rickety patriotism have in common, besides the high body count, is that both faiths can get a little ethereal and abstract. Jesus and Lincoln, Moses and Jefferson can seem so long gone, so unbelievable, so dead. It's reassuring to be able to go look at something real, something you can put your hands on (though you might want to wash them afterward). "What's that smell?" wondered the bewitched king. Actual Saint Francis, staining the sheets. Did a fellow as shrewd and sad and poetic and miraculously the right man for the right job at the exact right moment as Abraham Lincoln truly walk the earth until gunned down? Well, come along on one of these We Cannot Escape History weekend escape packages and we'll genuflect before the bone from inside his head

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and the hats he wore on top of his head. The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Civil War—when I really think about them they all seem about as likely as the parting of the Red Sea. But somehow, jumping up a foot to stare at my own face framed in Lincoln’s Springfield shaving mirror makes the whole far-fetched, grisly, inspiring story of the country seem more shocking and more true. Especially since when I jumped up to the mirror, I set off a super-loud alarm.

Jack’s e-mail about the relics ended with an aside about how he had just been shopping on eBay and stumbled onto “a guy selling tiny specks of ‘George Washington’s hair.’ Literally, these clippings were nothing more than single strands of hair less than a quarter of an inch long. They came in little ampoules and with documentation.”

I looked away from my computer and over at a frame on my wall and wrote Jack back that my twin sister Amy had given me a teensy eyelash-size hair of John Brown as a Christmas present. She settled on the more affordable tresses of the abolitionist guerrilla warrior Brown because Lincoln’s hair was out of her price range. That is the kind of person I have become, the kind of person who rips open a package in snowman wrapping paper to discover that her only sibling has bought her an executed slavery hater’s hair. (I got her a DVD player.)

As I learned that morning at the bed-and-breakfast while I was going on and on about the singing Squeaky Fromme, most people don’t like to talk about violent historical death over muffins. I would come to find out that’s also true about lunch and dinner too. When my friend Bennett and I were

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trying to decide where to have brunch he suggested a dim sum place in Chinatown. He asked me if I had ever tried bubble tea. I said yes, that I think a better name for the tea afloat with tapioca globules is tea 'n' dumplings and that I had it at the Chinese restaurant in D.C. that used to be the boardinghouse where Booth and his co-conspirators met to plan the Lincoln assassination.

Bennett asked, "You know that Kevin Bacon game?"

"The one where he can be connected to every other movie star?"

"Yeah, that's the one. Assassinations are your Kevin Bacon. No matter what we're talking about, you will always bring the conversation back to a president getting shot."

He was right. An artist pal, marveling at the youth of a painter in the Whitney Biennial was subjected to the trivia, "Well, John Wilkes Booth was only twenty-six when he killed Lincoln." A gardener friend, bragging about his lilacs, was forced to endure a recitation of Walt Whitman's Lincoln death poem "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd."

As Johnny Cash put it about how his Garfield assassination ballad went over at Carnegie Hall in 1962, "I did 'Mr. Garfield,' which isn't very funny if you're not on the right wavelength, and nobody was." Once I knew my dead presidents and I had become insufferable, I started to censor myself. There were a lot of get-togethers with friends where I didn't hear half of what was being said because I was sitting there, silently chiding myself, Don't bring up McKinley. Don't bring up McKinley.

The bright side to researching the first three presidential assassinations is that my interest is optional, a choice. One

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man who makes cameo appearances in all three stories was not so lucky. Abraham Lincoln's oldest son, Robert Todd Lincoln, was in close proximity to all three murders like some kind of jinxed Zelig of doom. The young man who wept at his father's deathbed in 1865 was only a few feet away when James A. Garfield was shot in a train station in 1881. In 1901, Robert arrived in Buffalo mere moments after William McKinley fell. Robert Todd Lincoln's status as a presidential death magnet weighed on him. Late in life, when he was asked to attend some White House function, he grumbled, "If only they knew, they wouldn't want me there."

On July 2, 2003, the 122nd anniversary of the Garfield assassination, my friend Nicole and I rented a car and drove up to Vermont to visit Hildene, Robert Todd Lincoln's estate in Manchester. His mansion is a museum with landscaped grounds where, in the winter, there is cross-country skiing. I find it hard to stop myself from being unfair to Robert. Shown around the house, climbing the graceful staircase a guide proudly points out Robert himself designed, it's impossible not to compare him with his father: Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves, Robert Lincoln bought a nice ski lodge.

The person I'm really treating unfairly is Nicole, for talking her into the eight-hour round-trip drive to Hildene. I guess learning trivia about when the colossal William Howard Taft came to visit he slept on the floor because he was afraid of breaking the bed in Robert Lincoln's guest room isn't enough for Nicole, because at the end of the day, she pronounces the trip "kind of a bust." Ever polite, she hastens to add, "You brought really good snacks, though."

When we return the rental car on Thirty-fourth Street,

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the block is crawling with people filing into a concert at the Hammerstein Ballroom. The Foo Fighters are on the marquee. I walk Nicole to the subway, hoping she doesn't notice who's playing, because then she might remember tagging along as my plus-one to a Foo Fighters show seven years earlier, when I was still making a living as a rock critic, which I fear might remind her what I was like before I went off the historical tourism deep end, when tagging along with me to work used to be fun.

President Warren G. Harding, beware: the elderly Robert Lincoln was the guest of honor at the dedication ceremony at the Lincoln Memorial in 1922. (Harding, also in attendance, returned to the White House unscathed.) Robert died in 1926, but for the rest of his life, he made it a point to visit the memorial often, gazing into his father's marble eyes, saying, "Isn't it beautiful?"

A pilgrimage needs a destination. For medieval Christians, that was usually the cathedral of Saint James in northern Spain. This tour of the assassinations of Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley ends up at the Lincoln Memorial because that's where I'm always ending up. It is the closest thing I have to a church.

On the National Mall in Washington, next to the Reflecting Pool, that shallow, rectangular pond in front of the Lincoln Memorial, the National Park Service has posted a sign. It features a picture of the protesters in the March on Washington listening to Martin Luther King Jr. deliver his "I have a dream" speech from the memorial's steps. The sign says, "The Pool reflects more than the sky and landscape. It mirrors the moods of America, from national celebrations to dramatic demonstrations." This reminds me of a photograph