

EXCERPTS — The Talk Show
by Joe Wenke

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THE CALL FROM ABRAHAM LINCOLN JONES came just after 2:00 a.m. On one side of the flat screen TV, Chris Matthews was interviewing Bill Maher. On the other side, one of the contestants on *Worst Cooks in America* was barbecuing hot dogs and hamburgers. Winthrop hit mute and answered the phone in one ring.

“Yeah.”

“Fuckin’ A!”

“Yeah?”

“Fuckin’ A!”

“Fuckin’ A?”

“Yeah. F-U-C-K-K-K . . . N . . . A! Goddamn it!”

Silence.

“Hey, don’t get cute with me, Winthrop. You know who the fuck this is.”

Winthrop waited one more beat. Then he said, “Fuckin’ A . . . LJ?”

Jones exploded. The Big Bang laugh. Just like on the show. “BING-O!” he screamed, “BING-O! THAT’S MY NAME-O . . . MOTHERFUCK-O!”

The two men had never previously spoken, but Jones was right. Winthrop had known. Instantly. Yes, it was ALJ, the one and only. The man who had dominated talk TV for the last two decades. The

anti-Oprah. Raw. Rough. Never predictable, he was the ultimate survivor—hated by some but always loved—crazily, unaccountably, loved nonetheless by millions of people who, if they thought about it for a single second, would realize to their utter confusion that they agreed with Abraham Lincoln Jones on practically nothing.

“What are you drinking, Mr. Abraham Lincoln?”

“The usual. Blue on the rocks. You?”

“Patron. A few Dos Equis.”

“Maybe then it’s time for some real conversation. Some crazy E! Hollywood true revelations.”

“Celebrity upskirt?”

“You got it, Jack. You ready?”

Winthrop was feeling weird. The call had come as a total surprise, but right away it had begun to feel as if it were somehow inevitable or, more precisely, something that he had already experienced, maybe in dream. “I’m always ready, Abe, ready for anything,” he replied. “I guess it’s the gift of paranoia.”

“I know you’re ready, Jack. That’s why I called. I know you. I know your ass inside out. I bet you know my fuckin’ ass too.”

“How’s that, Abe?”

“I know you—the best way to know a complicated white guy like you—through your work.”

“What work?”

“What work?” Jones laughed. “What work? Don’t be coy, Jack. Why, all your fuckin’ work. Not just the fancy Pulitzer shit—the homeless pieces and the power and race book—but all your goddamn work. All the *New York Times* Gray Lady columns you write in twenty minutes and the *New York* magazine articles, too.”

Winthrop fell momentarily silent. The bit about the work was flattery, but then again not. There was too much urgency in Jones’s voice.

“You still there, Jack?” Jones asked, sounding for the first time just a touch subdued.

“Totally, Abe. Totally.”

“Then let me get right to the fuckin’ point. Winthrop—I am the Man. I been the fuckin’ man forever. I know it, and you know it, too. But I must admit. Ever since I started, I’ve had not one, not two, but three motherfuckin’ problems. That’s three—as in one, two, three strikes you’re out.”

“Number one?”

“Number one, Jack? Number one, when all is said and motherfuckin’ done, I’m just a goddamn good for nothing motherfuckin’ TV slug.”

“Abe, you’re a huge star. Come on. Aren’t you being just a little bit hard on yourself?”

“You watch much TV, Winthrop?”

Winthrop glanced at the muted screen. Chris Matthews had moved on to his Sideshow. Rush Limbaugh was referring to a transgender woman as an “Add-a-dick-to-me babe.” Meanwhile, the *Worst Cooks* contestant had somehow set himself on fire.

“What’s problem number two?”

“Problem number two? Problem number two?” Jones paused, out of breath. Winthrop could hear him gasping into the phone like an emphysema patient. Finally he spoke. “Maybe you haven’t noticed, Winthrop, but I got a serious dermatological condition.”

“You mean you’re black.”

“BING-O! And you know what that means, Jack, my man, right up to this motherfuckin’ day when Barack Hussein Obama—black man, white man, Christian man with an infamous Muslim name is the one and only President of these United States of America.”

“But that is truly remarkable, Abe. I mean undeniably, despite the birthers and all of the tea party madness.”

“Yes, remarkable,” replied Abraham Lincoln Jones, his voice dropping to a whisper.

This was very interesting, thought Winthrop. No one had more presence, more energy, more panache, more sheer, outrageouschutzpah than Abraham Lincoln Jones. And yet here he was with

a phone call out of nowhere, revealing vulnerabilities one would never have guessed at. Once again, Winthrop could hear Jones breathing heavily into the phone.

“So here’s my point, Jack.”

“Your point . . .”

“My point, man, the goddamn reason I called you in the middle of the fuckin’ night . . . my point . . . is change.”

“Change you can believe in?”

“No joke, Jack. Change you can believe in. Ain’t nothing harder, nothing more motherfuckin’ rare than change, cos, you and I both know almost nobody ever fuckin’ changes, not one little bit. Not even if it’s easy, which it never is. Not even if we’re talking about having a goddamn Henny Youngman Corn Beef on Rye once in a blue fuckin’ moon at the old Stage Deli instead of your usual Jerry Lewis Muscular Dystrophy Telethon That Ain’t Never Found And Ain’t Never Gonna Find No Cure Turkey Club—go crispy with the bacon and fries!”

Winthrop just laughed. Couldn’t help it. Jones laughed, too. He was on a roll.

“Take it easy on Jerry, Abe. He got canned after all those years. The Stage is gone too—but you were saying—”

“Right, Jack. I was saying. It’s all about change. But let’s put the issue another way. In fact, let’s put it your way, Jack. If you’re a fuckin’ nobody, you don’t fuckin’ change.”

“Did I say that?”

“Fuck you, Jack, you know you remember every goddamn precious word you ever wrote. So you tell me. What’s the sure as shit sign of a motherfuckin’ nobody? Come on, now, Jack. I’m practically quoting you.”

“He thinks he’s somebody.”

“Exactly. A fuckin’ nobody thinks he’s fuckin’ somebody. But in reality he’s no fuckin’ body. And as a fuckin’ nobody, he’s got nothing to change from or to.”

“But you’re about to tell me we’re different, right?”

“Ain’t you the cynical motherfucker? But give me a goddamn chance here, Jack. Let me talk. I’m fuckin’ serious. We are different because as you yourself have written, we know we’re nobody.”

“And that what sets us free—lets us throw the switch, change, jump the tracks and go off the cliff like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid—God rest Paul Newman’s blessed soul.”

“You got it, Jack. And I’m calling you well past the goddamn motherfuckin’ witching hour to tell you your fuckin’ switch man is here.”

Winthrop paused for a second. “OK, Abe,” he said, after taking a deep breath. “What’s the proposition?”

“It’s this: We all know TV is a swamp.”

“Well, you did say you’re a slug.”

“Fuck you, Winthrop. My mama always said, no lie, you are judged by the company you keep. So who exactly is the motherfuckin’ company I keep on TV? Let’s go up the list, starting at the bottom, with that fuckin’ witch, Nancy Grace, scoring ratings points off of dead babies and missing girls, suckin’ the lifeblood out of every tragedy that has legs. Then, even though he’s gone, I still got to call out that fuckin’ nut job, buzz-headed bigot, Glenn Beck—”

“He’s gone, sort of. You can still watch him on the Web.”

“That man actually made a big show out of baiting the one and only Muslim Congressman, ever, Keith Ellison from Minnesota, challenging him to prove he’s not working with the enemies of the United States.”

“He also said that Barack Obama hates white people. Actually that he has ‘a deep-seated hatred for white people.’”

“And for a while he was everywhere—*CNN Headline News*, *Larry King Live*, *Good Morning America*, *Fox News*.”

“Maybe he and guys like him are the new Establishment.”

“You mean the swamp establishment—and it’s not just the right wing nuts on *Fox News* like Bill O’Reilly and Shawn Hannity minus

Alan Albatross Colmes and all their Great American guests like Ann Coulter and Laura Ingraham.”

“And the architect, Karl Rove . . .”

“Right. And that motherfuckin’, toe-sucking, Clinton-bashing bastard, Dick Morris. Even Fox fired his ass. But it’s not really an ideological thing with me. It’s fuckin’ personal. Personal to me, that is. This was my motherfuckin’ medium. This was my way to communicate.”

“I understand, Abe.”

“I could go on all night, Winthrop, but I won’t. It’s a goddamn pandemic of pathology masquerading as news and entertainment. From that fat fuck, Lou Dobbs, demagoguing the illegal immigrants to those ex-wife-scary bitches on *The View*, with their cat fights every fuckin’ morning. No way around it. TV is a polluted, reptile-infested swamp. And the other media—they’re toxic too or they’re dying. Like that dinosaur you work for, the great Gray Lady! And the magazines nobody reads—*The Nation*, *The Atlantic*, *Harpers*, *The New Yorker*. Then we have Talk Radio—a fuckin’ cesspool filled with megalomaniacs and clowns—Rush Limbaugh, Mark Levin, Savage Nation. And the Internet, the goddamn Internet, totally full of shit with the YouTube racists and the Twitter haters and the hard core bloggers spreading horseshit that wouldn’t pass a fuckin’ smell test at the *National Enquirer*. Nobody gives a fuck. It’s all just one big mind scam after another. It’s all the same old shit.”

“So what are you proposing, Abe?”

“What I’m proposing is something new, Winthrop. Something real. What I’m talking about is communicating with America—straight to the heart, straight to the soul, true and direct—that’s the thing.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“We’re going to do that, Jack—through the grand and glorious vehicle of the Abraham Lincoln Jones Eeeh-mancipation Tour!”

Yes, thought Winthrop, the ALJ energy was definitely back. “OK, Abe,” he said, “You say you’re going to communicate with America,

whatever that means. You do that and you're not a TV slug anymore. What about the other problem you mentioned? What about race? What about the serious dermatological condition? And, oh yeah, in case you've forgotten, what about strike three?"

There was silence again. Jones had gotten so excited, he had actually almost forgotten for a moment about number 3—the real serial killer of political careers—maybe even more deadly than dermatology. The silence continued. Finally, Winthrop broke in.

"Abe, you're gay."

"Right, Jack. I'm gay. Strike three. But here's the thing. That's what's changed. That's the new fuckin' news. Strike three might just be my motherfuckin' ace in the hole."

"Ace in the butthole."

Jones exploded again. This time it was scary—a combination of nuclear fusion and some weird strain of super mutated pertussis nasties. Winthrop found himself staring at his watch. After about a minute, he broke in.

"Abe. Hey, Abe. What up, man! Don't go all esophageal on me! We need you, man."

After a further pause, Jones finally spoke—stage whisper style and raspy—"No, Winthrop, No tobacco, man. Combination of Johnnie Walker and weed. And you set me off."

"Well, I think I know what you're going to say, Abe, and I agree—to a point."

"Tell me, Jack."

"Nothing's changing faster than attitudes toward gay people and marriage equality. It's amazing. Unprecedented."

"It is."

"My own position's a little different. You see, I'm pro gay and anti-marriage, so I've come out in favor of same-sex divorce."

Jones exploded again. "Hey, ain't you the fuckin' comedian, Winthrop! But that's why I like you, man. You don't give a fuck about anything. You just tell the fuckin' truth."

“That’s it, Abe. Tell the truth no matter what. And the truth is, yes, attitudes are changing, but look out for the backlash.”

“I feel you.”

“It’s coming. Like the birthers came after Obama, and it will be ugly. That’s why people like Peggy Noonan say, ‘Go slow.’ They want to put a speed limit on change. They’re afraid that freedom and equality might just be too upsetting to all of the Red State bigots.”

“Which brings us back, Winthrop, to why the fuck I called you.”

“The Emancipation Tour.”

Several beats of silence went by. “Exactly, Winthrop, exactly. My Emancipation Tour.” ALJ was quiet again. Practically whispering. “What I’m imagining, Winthrop, what I wanna do—it’s beyond fuckin’ talk shows, beyond all the politics, beyond all the motherfuckin’ bullshit and lies. What I’m gonna do, I’m just gonna go out there, tell the fuckin’ truth and see what happens.”

Winthrop was impressed—and not a little bit scared. He knew where the truth led. For a few precious moments, he just stopped and listened to ALJ breathe into the phone.

“You there, Winthrop?”

“I’m here, Abe. I’m with you, and I get the picture. Except for one minor point—why are you coming to me?”

“Jack, that’s simple. I need your help.”

The unabashed honesty of the statement amazed Winthrop. “So you’re not looking for a handler,” he said.

“Jack, you know nobody can handle me. This is on a much higher level. I’m offering you a fuckin’ partnership, man. A partnership in a unique enterprise.”

“But where’s this going to lead, Abe?”

“Who knows, Jack? This is about fuckin’ change. Getting out of the motherfuckin’ box for real. Breaking away. Changing the system. I’m talking about some serious motherfuckin’ shit.”

“Sounds like town halls, Abe. Been there. Done that.”

“Fuck you, Winthrop, don’t try to categorize or minimize me. I

say, bull fuckin' shit. I say my Emancipation Tour is a motherfuckin' heavy metal, foot to the pedal, totally digitized, mesmerizing, interactive referendum on freedom and equality in America. No speed limit but the speed of light."

"OK, Abe. OK. I said I was with you, but let me just ask you one more question. I hate to sound crassly commercial, but what's the money?"

"Double what the *Times* gives you for your phony-ass columns. And you can keep on mailing in those little gems three times a week. I don't fuckin' care."

"Double's a million."

"You got it."

"When do I start?"

"You already did, Jack. I got our illustrious senator, Jason Bradley, coming on the show this Friday along with his wife, Sheena."

"The super model—or whatever."

"Yeah, whatever. Do us a favor and stage a little show biz finale. Then get on over to the Grand Army Plaza off Central Park."

"That's right. You're the Grand Marshal of the African-American Day Parade."

"Just be there at the plaza on Friday. We'll be talking."

"Sounds good, Abe."

"So we got a fuckin' deal, partner?"

"Yes, Abe, you got a deal."

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AFTER POKING AROUND A BIT, Winthrop found it—shoved between *Shemale Fuck Hotel* and a rare DVD of Bishop Fulton J. Sheen's *Life Is Worth Living*. *ALJ: Interviewing the Interviewers*. The shows were from maybe ten years ago. David Frost, Dick Cavett, Geraldo, Oprah, Barbara Walters.

Winthrop switched his system from V1 to DVD. Chris Matthews

and *Worst Chefs* disappeared and up came ALJ. The studio band cranked out “Soul Man,” the ALJ Show theme, as Jones’s announcer, Barry Bream, intoned the intro. “Hello, America,” he announced, “from our home at beautiful Radio City, the Showplace of the Nation, it’s *The ALJ Show* starring Abraham Lincoln Jones. Today, it’s another special “Interviewing the Interviewers” show with ALJ’s very special guest, David Frost. And now here’s the Emancipated Mouth, the Black Hole that swallowed America, the Master Blaster of Talk Show Disaster—Abraham Lincoln Jones!”

As always, the curtains opened to reveal a huge elliptical plexiglass desk. It stood on a slowly turning platform that was rotating the seated Abraham Lincoln Jones into full frontal view at center stage. Ceremoniously, Jones rose and bowed to crescendos of applause. Dressed entirely in white, he was wearing a tux with outrageous tails like the Beatles in *Magical Mystery Tour*.

Fast forward. David Frost was still talking about his Nixon interview. Winthrop was reminded of a recent survey of high school students. Fifty percent had never heard of Richard Nixon. Twenty percent didn’t know what came first, Vietnam or the Civil War. Ten percent couldn’t find the United States on a map of the world.

FF again. Jones discussing some truly ancient history—*That Was the Week That Was*. A minor television moment: Frost transfigured from talk show has-been to neglected social satirist, a British Mort Sahl (also neglected), clutching his clipboard à la William Buckley.

Again, fast forward.

Abraham Lincoln Jones coasting along the gossip route. A segment on the once celebrated romance with Diahann Carroll (who again?) sparks an ALJ segue into interracial sex in America. Spotlight now on Jones. It’s the sixties, and he’s a teenage prodigy and interracial trail-blazer, spinning STAX and Motown, running around town with hot blonde hippies in micro minis and pretty boys in bell-bottom jeans.

Then the slashed tires. A rock through his bedroom window. The bomb scare at the station. A melodramatic cross burning on his

front lawn. The famous attack in the WSOL parking lot. A concussion, broken nose and three cracked ribs.

The outcome: national coverage and his legendary meeting with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. just a few months before he was assassinated.

With unfortunate timing, Frost tries to put in his recollective two cents about Dr. King. The ALJ train rolls on as Jones proclaims King the greatest human being in American history. Loud, insistent applause, swelling to a standing O. King, greater than Thomas Jefferson, who owned slaves. Greater than honest Abe Lincoln, the PR man who supposedly freed them so he could ship them to Liberia. Greater, too, than FDR, who put Japanese-Americans in relocation camps.

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AS HE WATCHED THE DAVID FROST PIECE, Winthrop had little difficulty imagining how *The ALJ Show* with New York Democratic Senator Jason Bradley would go. It was really very simple. It would be vintage Jones. Vintage Bradley. The show would cook up a tasty stew of social and political issues: abortion, race, gay rights, Tea Party craziness, terrorism, and more—a surprise appearance by Sheena Bradley, wearing, no doubt, a stunning Gisele Boulud design.

Having had enough of Frost, Winthrop popped in the Oprah tape. Fat, skinny or in between, Winthrop wondered. Well, it was the fat Oprah this time, and Jones was asking her about her listing in *Forbes* as the top-grossing entertainer in America, earning more than two hundred million dollars. Two hundred million! That put her ahead of Steven Spielberg. Ahead of Bill Cosby. Ahead of everybody. Jones himself was number eight on the list, sandwiched between Madonna and Spunk Gism, a heavy metal band.

On his MacBook Pro, Winthrop was cueing Sheena's surprise

appearance: Bradley plugs Sheena's Sotheby's auction of art and designer fashions to benefit the Bradleys' anti-bullying foundation. Then enter Sheena, stage right. Everyone nonplussed, including ALJ. Everyone marveling at the synchronicity of the superstar. Life at the top—more magical than childhood, more dramatic than fiction. Camera pans from Sheena to Jason. Then close-up. Let TV tell the story. America's new king and queen enjoy a warm royal embrace. And Camelot is born again.

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THAT WAS HOW WINTHROP IMAGINED IT ALL, wrote it all. Now it was actually about to happen. On stage at Radio City, the show was winding to a close. Bradley was riding hard a favorite hobby-horse—one that had won him some important points with conservative voters, namely, U.S. vulnerability to terrorism. “You know, Abe,” Bradley said. “I want to say something now about America that might sound controversial, and I don't want to be misunderstood.”

“Jay,” Jones said, “We have the most intelligent, informed, politically aware audience in television. Not like the cockfightin' WWE crowds on Jerry Springer. My people are different. They know. They're real. They're hip. They're into the future. In fact, they are the future. Ain't that right? (Applause.) Ain't that right? (More applause.) Yeah, that's right. So say what you want, Jay. My audience knows.”

“Well, Abe, I'm about to be critical,” Bradley said, “So allow me to preface my criticism by saying that I love this country dearly. I am serving as the senior Democratic senator from the State of New York for one reason only—my deep love for this nation and its people. With all our problems, we are still blessed. We are still without a doubt the greatest country in the world . . . the greatest country in the history of the world.”

The audience applauded, stood. Some people shouted. Some whistled. Some stamped their feet. Winthrop had surveyed the crowd hours earlier as it was filing into Radio City. Notwithstanding Jones's characterization of their transcendent hipness, the audience in fact included a healthy percentage of vacationing hicks, ALJ lovers from the heartland of America. During Bream's warm-up, Winthrop had heard such names as Biloxi, Boise, Tuscaloosa, Fort Wayne, Enid, Sioux City and Waco. From across America they had come to New York City for Broadway, Bloomingdale's, the Empire State Building, Trump Tower, the Statue of Liberty—and *The ALJ Show*.

The reason was simple. They loved America. They loved television. They loved Abraham Lincoln Jones. And, at this moment, they also loved Jason Bradley. He was young, attractive, charismatic. And he enjoyed a powerful X-factor. He was married to Sheena Bradley, the world's reigning supermodel.

Yes, over the years there had been any number of Hollywood power couples, from the ancient wars of Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton right up to the magical coupling of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie. There had also been a number of interesting mixed couplings, that is, the mixing of supermodels with Hollywood or rock royalty—Christie Brinkley and Billy Joel, Iman and David Bowie, Cindy Crawford and Richard Gere. But Jason and Sheena had something extra. Combine rock and roll or Hollywood with high fashion and you got what? Glamour and sex, with a capital S-E-X, which was fine. But blend political ambition and charisma with the world's all-time perfect ten, the ultimate naughty and nice nymphet, and you had discovered the $E=MC^2$ of power and sex. Put that equation to work; feed it intravenously into the lifeblood of every single man and woman yearning for a piece of that indefinable something, that tantalizing promise of some personal relationship to the great American Dream, and you had the potential to make the country your lapdog.

That equation was operating now in the applause, which seemed to want to go on forever. When it finally did subside, Senator Bradley continued as earnestly as before. “My fellow citizens, I believe in the Constitution of the United States of America, and I strongly support our president. Every morning that I wake up, my first thought is of how truly privileged I am to be an American. But because I cherish that privilege, I feel obligated to criticize our president and my colleagues in Congress when they fail in their responsibility to do everything they can to protect Americans. And I do this on a bi-partisan basis. The sad fact is that now more than a decade since 9/11, we remain extremely vulnerable to terrorist attacks.

As the applause swelled once again, Winthrop began tuning out Bradley’s voice. He knew all the rest anyway since he had lived it and written it—not real writing, actually just talking points to orchestrate the ending of the show. They were Bradley’s ideas, but Winthrop could see where he had a point: America and Americans, to this very day, despite all the history and despite all the rhetoric, still, in many ways sitting-duck terrorist targets. It was admittedly a long history, seriously straining the attention span of the ALJ audience: Over the last thirty or more years, planes hijacked, marines blown up, Americans held hostage. The Reagan PR diversions of Granada, Libya, Nicaragua and Panama. The smart-bomb farce of Desert Storm. The paralysis over Bosnia. The Olympics bombing. The USS Cole embarrassment. The multifarious implications of the first World Trade Center and Oklahoma City truck bombings. The specter of enemies without and within. Then, of course, 9/11, followed by the monumental disasters and distractions of the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention the seemingly endless travesty of Osama Bin Laden evading justice until he was finally nailed by President Obama and a band of courageous Navy Seals.

In recent years when it came to the so-called War on Terrorism, Bradley had been viewed increasingly by his fellow progressives as a neocon-pandering crank, a not-so-closeted proponent of Big

Brother video and cyber-based surveillance tactics. After all, where were the attacks? Then came the Boston Marathon bombing, and Bradley's critics went silent.

All of this Winthrop knew—Bradley's fears about the country's vulnerable borders, harbors and power grid as well as the controversial need for surveillance everywhere. They were Winthrop's fears as well. It was all so disturbing. It was all so depressing, but it was reality. A new normal that would never feel normal and would never go away. For the moment he turned down the sound on Bradley as he often did at home watching Benny Hinn or Pat Robertson or classic video of his all-time favorite televangelist, the crybaby, Jimmy Swaggart, and just looked on. It really was amazing. Jones and Bradley were both so full of energy, so full of telegenic beauty, so full of light—they virtually vibrated—giving off the particles and waves of celebrity. They seemed almost destined to be famous, destined to be idolized. After all, could John Lennon or Paul McCartney have not been famous? Could Madonna have been anything but a star? What about Tiger Woods or Beyonce? Jones and Bradley inhabited that same privileged plane of existence. They were different from the rest of us. They were beyond us all. We could applaud their brilliance but never hope to touch them.

"Jack Winthrop?" a woman's voice whispered into Winthrop's ear.

"Yes."

"Danielle Jackson."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Danielle."

"Abe and I are absolutely delighted that you've joined us."

Apparently they were very delighted, indeed. For Danielle had somehow succeeded in generating an inordinate amount of publicity over the announcement that he had joined the ALJ team. More, it seemed to Winthrop, than he had ever garnered on his own, even for his two Pulitzers. Danielle's press release had not only gotten plenty of play in the New York media, it was also all over the Web, having been picked up by the *HuffPost*, the *Daily Beast*, *Politico* and a

host of other sites as well as being liked and retweeted thousands of times.

“I’m absolutely delighted, too, Danielle,” Winthrop replied.

“Jack, I know the ending for today’s show is just a knock-off for you,” Danielle continued, “But I suggested to Abe that it would be fun to have you do it.”

“Once again, it’s a pleasure.

“We’re excited about the parade, too. I know there’ll be a wonderful turnout. The African-American community fully supports it. Abe is a great draw, and having Jason on board doesn’t hurt either.”

As Danielle and Winthrop spoke, the African-American Day Parade was about to begin, awaiting only the arrival of Jones and Bradley. The theme of the parade was “Black and White Together.” In the front line at 42nd and Fifth, the site of the New York Public Library, marching ahead of neighborhood groups from across the city were the Reverend Al Sharpton, Alicia Williams of the Urban League, Isaiah Woods of the NAACP, Representative Arthur Lyle from Harlem, Mayor Martinez, Governor Ross and Cardinal Boyle.

The Clintons, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, were no-shows. Bill was on an Asian tour, picking up a fast million or two from some speechmaking in Tokyo, Hiroshima, Hong Kong and Seoul. Meanwhile, Hillary was in Washington. Rumor had it that she was locked behind closed doors with a team of advisers, planning her 2016 run.

As part of today’s festivities, there would be some speechmaking at the Grand Army Plaza at 58th and Fifth, with Bradley and Grand Marshal Abraham Lincoln Jones highlighting the program. Then the parade would pick up again and continue marching north toward Harlem and another round of speeches at the site of a show-piece community redevelopment project.

On stage at Radio City, in honor of the parade, Bradley was winding up his critique of race relations in America. “Abe, if there is one thing that history has taught us, it is that the struggle for freedom

and equality never ends. Let us never forget . . . the courage of Rosa Parks. Let us never forget the vision and the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. and let us never forget those who, I fear are now long forgotten—James Byrd Jr. . . . Amadou Diallo . . . Abner Louima.”

“Amen, brother. You have always been with us. One hundred percent. That’s why I have always said, that Jason Bradley is the blackest white man I know.”

It was then, amid the laughter and applause, that Winthrop saw her for the first time. Live and up close, that is. He had, of course, seen Sheena Bradley many times on television. She was the darling of the talk show circuit. But it was her magazine work that had made her famous. With her natural ash blonde hair, pale blue eyes, and perfect figure, she had become the ultimate American super model. By now, she had appeared on dozens of magazine covers.

Since Jason won reelection to the U.S. Senate, Sheena had chosen her public appearances with the greatest of care so that every one was a special media event. Today, for example, the ALJ Show would be blessed with her presence, but the parade would not.

At the same time, Sheena had stepped up her photo work. In recent months, *Cosmopolitan*, *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* had all featured Sheena on the cover. What’s more, the first week in August, she was the cover story in *People*. *New York* put her on the following week. And this year, she would again grace the cover of the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue.

On the merchandising front Sheena was riding high. Her *Sheena* line of swimsuits and leisure wear, sold exclusively through Macy’s, was a cottage industry in itself. There was even a Sheena doll. Last year, it had outsold Barbie 2 to 1. As inspiration for doing today’s show, Winthrop had gone out and bought one. Back at Winthrop’s apartment, a naked, plastic Sheena was hanging upside down from the nozzle of the shower.

On stage, Bradley was talking about the Sotheby’s auction. Just then Sheena breezed by Winthrop and Danielle. “Way to go, Jacko,”

she said and made her entrance. The laughter died on the spot as the audience sucked in its breath. For a moment there was the silence of revelation. Then came the roar. Unrestrained. Animal. This was it. This was Life. The audience knew it. And, for once, they were there while it was happening.

Sheena glided across the stage bathed in light. The camera panned to Jason, capturing take upon take. Behind his plexiglass desk, ALJ stood transfixed in admiration, unable, it seemed, to breathe. Now, the embrace. Sheena and Jason were together, framed by the camera.

The audience response was immediate, visceral, rising out of the depths of adulation in a British invasion shriek. Winthrop held his breath. The audience had become an adoring mob. There were just seconds left in the show. Winthrop felt a pressure against his left hand. Danielle was squeezing it hard. "Sheena," she said. "She's beautiful."

The camera moved in closer on Sheena and Jason. Ten seconds of airtime remained. Sheena and Jason smiled, waved. Five seconds. "We love you, America," said Sheena, and the credits rolled.

EXITING RADIO CITY, Winthrop turned east on 50th and walked the long block from Sixth to Fifth Avenue. At Rockefeller Plaza the flags of the world hung dead from their poles. As Winthrop turned north on Fifth and headed for the Grand Army Plaza, he could see the park shimmering in the airless August heat like some weird urban mirage.

Fifth Avenue was even more jammed with people than usual. Normally, most would be hurrying as if they had somewhere extremely important to go. Today, many of them stood behind police barriers and stared down toward the 40s, waiting for the first glimpse of the parade. It was strange to see so many blacks in the Fifth Avenue 50s. The cops were out too, lining the streets at intervals, looking corrupt and bored.

At St. Thomas's a crowd had gathered around an armless young man with long, luxurious blond hair. He was painting with his feet in imitation high-Renaissance style. The subject of the sidewalk painting was the Holy Family. A few people placed dollar bills or coins in a Gucci shoebox.

The week before, Winthrop had seen a young, undernourished black woman lounging on the steps of the church. She had pulled the top of her dirty smock down to her waist. Her long thin breasts

hung low. The oddly disoriented smile on her face suggested that she had done something very clever indeed. How easy it was to beat the heat! She was one up on all the overdressed sweating fools of the city. Some people, probably tourists, did double takes. Most, like Winthrop, glanced peripherally at the woman and moved on.

Today, however, Winthrop stopped. He had plenty of time to get to the plaza and stake out the scene. Plenty of time, too, to take an undercover break. Two fat, middle-aged white guys wearing bad blue suits huddled together in a little pocket of white people a few yards away from Winthrop. Probable cause, Winthrop thought. He raised his invisible antenna and moved closer while continuing to stare downtown.

“What the hell is this shit? Did they finally decide St. Patrick was a fuckin’ nigger? No wonder the snakes left Ireland.”

“It’s August, Herb. The St. Patrick’s Day Parade’s in March.”

“Didn’t you hear, Stan? A couple of years ago they figured out Christ was one of them too.”

“So the Baby Jesus is one, too, huh? We’re in a lot of trouble then, Herb.”

“Yeah, haven’t you ever seen those fuckin’ crosses with the black Jesus? I figure if Christ is one of them, why not the goddamn saints? This has got to be St. Patrick’s Day.”

“It’s the black parade, Herb. Did you you hear who the Grand Marshal is.”

“Grand Marshal. What the fuck is a Grand Marshal?”

“C’mon, Herb. It’s the guy who leads the fucking parade. Anyway, it’s that talk show guy, Abraham Lincoln Jones.”

“That fuckin’ loudmouth from TV?”

“The same.”

“Well, Stan, I have just one word to say to Mr. Jones.”

“What’s that, Herb?”

“Shutthefuckupyoufuckin’nigger.”

Having struck gold, Winthrop crossed the street. A woman with

a Southern accent was asking directions to Trump Tower. No one admitted knowing it was only two blocks away. Two small black boys begged her for a dollar. “Please, Miss,” one said. “It’s for the subway. I needs a dollar to get home.”

The woman opened her purse. Immediately, two other little boys—both white—appeared. “Me too,” they said. “Please, Miss, just a dollar.”

Winthrop moved on. Armani, Abercrombie & Fitch, Prada, Tiffany, Louis Vitton. At the corner of 56th Street, a grizzled old man was doing birdcalls. A column of stacked paper cups sat at his feet. Winthrop looked down. The cups were empty.

At Trump Tower the flow of the crowd pushed Winthrop up against the display window where a female mannequin dressed entirely in black leather was performing geometrically precise gyrations. With his nose pressed against the window, Winthrop stared at the animatronic doll.

“How’d you like to get that babe in bed, pal? She’d make mince-meat out of your pecker,” a pirate voice shouted in his ear.

By the time Winthrop could turn his head, whoever it was had gone. Fighting his way through the crowd at the window, Winthrop reached the glitzy, golden entrance of Trump Tower. “Welcome,” the sign said, “to the most extraordinary shopping experience in the world, Trump Tower.”

At 57th street Winthrop could just barely discern the parade approaching. In the distance music played indistinguishably. For all Winthrop knew, it could be the Rosa Parks High School Band performing a John Philip Sousa-like arrangement of “Respect.” On the 11 o’clock news on Channel 2 the previous night, Jeff Goode had done a mildly humorous, life-affirming “Goode News Story” on preparations in various high schools for the African-American Day Parade.

Goode was fast becoming a New York institution. Each year he won an Emmy for his human-interest stories. For the last three years he had been named New York Newsperson of the Year. He

had also received special humanitarian awards from the Knights of Columbus, B'nai B'rith and the New York Chamber of Commerce. To Winthrop, Goode projected the hyperbolic good cheer of a pedophilic priest, whose heartwarming homilies were the highlight of Mass each Sunday.

Goode's feature had focused in part on Charles Benchley, the young white principal of Rosa Parks High School in the South Bronx, who stressed the importance of the participating bands performing popular black music in the African-American Day Parade. The interview was conducted on the high school football field. In the background the Rosa Parks band was playing Stevie Wonder's "Place in the Sun." "As the lead band in the parade, we will be paying a special tribute to black music from the 1960s to today," said Benchley. "That means Motown, soul, R&B and hip hop."

Winthrop wondered if Mr. Benchley would ever consider doing a brassy, high-stepping arrangement of 50 Cent's "In My Hood." Meanwhile, the clip had segued to a shot of Goode, dressed in full band regalia, strutting and playing the cymbals. Goode was shouting over a spirited rendition of "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag." "This is Jeff Goode with Goode News from the South Bronx!"

At 57th, Winthrop crossed to the west side of the street. A noisy, shifting crowd, about 50 percent black, filled the plaza area and spilled into the streets. Both 58th Street and Central Park South were closed to traffic. Winthrop circled left by the Plaza Hotel and crossed over to the park side of the Grand Army Plaza, where General Sherman sat on his horse, congratulating himself on the burning of Atlanta. Despite the absence of the hansom cabs, the smell of horse manure and urine hung in the overheated air.

Looking over the heads of the churning crowd, Winthrop brought his binoculars into focus at relatively close range on the wooden stage that had been erected in front of the Pulitzer Fountain. Eight folding chairs lined the rear of the platform. The front of the stage was festooned with traditional red, white, and

blue bunting, and at each corner of the platform a limp American flag hung from a pole. In an attempt to provide an authentic ethnic touch someone had placed various examples of African-American sculpture at strategic points about the stage.

A group of Right-to-Life demonstrators had set up along the police barriers at the Central Park South and Grand Army Plaza street signs. Some held signs showing a dismembered fetus lying at the bottom of a garbage pail. At the top of the sign was the word “SHAME” printed in big red capital letters. The rest of the Right-To-Life placards were word signs bearing such messages as Abortion Is Murder, Death To Abortionists, and Baby Killer Bradley. One sign attacked Cardinal Boyle, apparently for marching with Jones and Bradley, or for that matter with Mayor Martinez or Governor Ross, who were also Pro-Choice. Judas Boyle—Betrayer of God’s Children—said the sign in blood red lettering that might have been used to advertise the latest Hollywood scary movie.

Throughout the past several weeks, the cardinal had been under intense pressure from Pro-Life groups to refuse to march in the parade. At the same time, the Urban League, the NAACP and other black organizations had gone on record to say that the parade was essentially nonpolitical and that Cardinal Boyle’s absence would be interpreted as a racist affront against all African-Americans. The day before the parade the cardinal’s office issued a press release that called upon all political and community leaders to support the right to life while expressing the cardinal’s strong support for Personhood bills and amendments across the country. It also spoke of the African-American Day Parade as a wonderful opportunity to promote racial harmony and celebrate black pride. So despite the protests of the Right-to-Lifers, Cardinal Boyle was now non-politically marching up Fifth Avenue with Abraham Lincoln Jones, Senator Bradley, Mayor Martinez, Governor Ross, Al Sharpton, et al. Within minutes he would stand on the wooden platform at the Grand Army Plaza and invoke God’s blessing on the day’s festivities.

In addition to the Right-to-Life protesters, Winthrop observed other small groups of demonstrators as well. Just a few yards from the Sherman monument, the New York LGBT Coalition was pleading for more funding for HIV vaccine research. A handful of people were waving signs that criticized Martinez for failing to provide suitable housing for the homeless. And in front of the stage, several blacks in traditional Zulu tribal dress held signs that condemned America as a land of racism and hate.

Suddenly, Winthrop's attention was caught by a voice bellowing directly behind him. Without lowering his binoculars, Winthrop shifted his view a little to the right. In New York City, it was an unquestioned tenet of the street that you never looked anyone directly in the eye. Consequently, years of living in the city had enabled Winthrop to develop his peripheral vision to an acuteness matched only by the hexagonal lenses of a house fly. Looking out of the corner of his eye, Winthrop saw a burly black man, perhaps thirty-five years old, wearing camouflaged army fatigues and holding a large rectangular piece of brown cardboard covered with words written illegibly with a blue ballpoint pen. The man was hysterical.

"Wake up, black people!" he shouted. "God is dead. Where is God? Who is God? God is the white man, walking the streets. God is the white man burning and pillaging and raping our women. God is that white man over there, looking at you through a glass, spying on your brain. Picking his next victim. Who he gonna shit on next? Who he gonna use? Who he gonna let live and who gonna die? Whoever that is, black people, you know the color of the corpse. The corpse is always black. Because this is the white man's world, black people. Open your eyes. The white man is everything. God is the white man. He white, black people. He white! He white! He white! And, black people—you are fuckin' black!"

No one, black or white, seemed to pay the least attention to the man. Winthrop, the white God, shuffled outside the range of the rant and concentrated on the approaching parade. The music was

certainly getting louder. The Rosa Parks Band was banging out “Sweet Soul Music” as the head of the parade passed Trump Tower and crossed 57th Street. Just ahead of the band were the politicians, the activists, the cardinal, Jason Bradley and the Grand Marshal himself, Abraham Lincoln Jones.

As the head of the parade breezed by, loud applause would erupt from both sides of the street. Not just some festive clapping, but real cheers, punctuated by exuberant cries and whistles. As the parade drew closer to the plaza, Winthrop was struck by the degree to which Jones and Bradley stood out from the rest of the parade leaders. As usual, Jones looked like the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. His pure white suit shone like a vision. While everyone else died of the heat, he stayed cool and dry, moving, it seemed in his own transcendental atmosphere, complete with air conditioning and smog control. Bradley, on the other hand, was marching as the hard-working man of the people, with his jacket swung over his right shoulder, his collar loosened, his tie hanging low and his shirt-sleeves rolled. The image was a political cliché, but with Bradley, who was obviously so comfortable at the center of a crowd, it somehow worked.

As the parade drew nearer, the cheers grew louder. The Right-to-Lifers were chanting something, too, but it was impossible to hear them above the din. With his binoculars, Winthrop scanned the floors of the Plaza Hotel, the Sherry-Netherland and Bergdorf Goodman. People were gathered at the windows and looking out. The whole plaza area was packed. Suddenly, Winthrop’s thoughts were interrupted by a question. “Hey, man, you security?” The voice belonged to a middle-aged man with black shoulder-length hair streaked with gray. He was wearing a tie-dyed shirt, beltless bell-bottom jeans torn at the knees and brown shit-kicking cowboy boots with pointed toes.

Nearly half a century after the Summer of Love, a hippie. Winthrop was ready to call the Museum of Natural History.

“You know, you security guys are cool,” the man continued. “You don’t talk. You don’t smile. You just look cool. But you know something? I don’t like your guy, Bradley. He’s too smooth for me. And he’s too much of a capitalist. But, you know, I voted for him anyway, man, because I really got into his commercials. He was always using Grateful Dead music for the soundtrack. Showing respect for Jerry. “Truckin’,” “Uncle John’s Band.” It was cool, man. Nobody else would do that.”

Winthrop knew there were no such commercials.

“Hey, maybe Bradley will run for president. Did you think that someday we could actually have a Dead Head in the White House?”

“When have we ever had anything else?” Winthrop replied.

The man stared blankly for a moment as if he had somehow lost his place. Then, suddenly, he lit up again. “Hey, who’d you vote for anyway, dude?”

“Abraham Lincoln,” responded Winthrop, still looking through his binoculars.

“That’s cool,” said the man as he faded back into the crowd.

The real security people were positioned at strategic points about the plaza and along the parade route. Winthrop knew several of their faces. He also spotted a number of likely candidates standing close to the stage, including some very intimidating black guys who may have been part of ALJ’s private security force. Whether black or white, the security people were really not all that difficult to spot. They all seemed to buy their suits from the same retail store. Most wore dark glasses. And they all had that tense look of barely suppressed frustration that came from carrying a concealed weapon that they rarely had the chance to use.

When the parade reached 59th Street, the kids from Rosa Parks shifted to marching in place, while Jones, Bradley and the rest of the front line notables made their way to the plaza. As the group left the rest of the parade behind, they were surrounded by uniformed police and security that held back the cheering crowd. Some people

were doing their best to push through anyway, hoping perhaps to touch Jones, Bradley or one of the other notables.

In a crowd such as this there was always the possibility that a celebrity's admirers might trample him. In the early spring of 1968, a prepubescent Winthrop had been part of a frenzied mob that surrounded Bobby Kennedy's open car as it made its way down Northern Boulevard in Queens. Winthrop would never forget how Kennedy hung virtually upside down over the rear of the car while two secret service men held tenaciously to his legs and struggled to pull him back into the rear seat. Meanwhile, the crowd—mindless, oblivious, crazed with love—continued to pull Kennedy out of the car. Winthrop was right in there with the rest of them, straining to touch Bobby.

That day, Winthrop was lucky. A surge of the crowd pushed him toward the rear of the car, and he was within reach of RFK. Just as Winthrop was about to be shoved away, he shot out his right arm over the shoulder of the man in front of him. The man had been spun around and was now staring Winthrop in the face. Stretching as far as he could, Winthrop succeeded in grabbing Kennedy's hand. The contact lasted no more than a second. It was human flesh upon human flesh. Warmth against warmth. Then the mob surged again, and Winthrop was whipped away from the car.

Moments later, the secret service men were able to pull Kennedy back into the car. In the meantime, Winthrop had moved out of the mob and was running ahead several blocks to get beyond the madness and catch a glimpse of Kennedy when his car had cleared the crowd. In a few minutes, Winthrop saw the open car slowly approaching. Bobby was sitting next to Ethel. Formerly coatless, he had pulled a trench coat over his suit like a cape.

As the car passed, Winthrop caught the expression on Bobby's face. It was neither a look of triumph nor a look of fear. It was not even relief at having emerged from the crowd unscathed. Instead it was a look of numbness, the look of a man who had been through

long wars and was in a war again. As Kennedy passed and his car drove out of sight, Winthrop thought of the Emily Dickinson poem he had read that day for the first time in his fifth-grade English class. "The nerves sit ceremonious like tombs . . . This is the hour of lead." After Joe, after Jack, thought Winthrop, Bobby had entered "the hour of lead."

A few days later, Winthrop saw Bobby Kennedy again. Kennedy was on television. He was addressing a crowd in an Indianapolis ghetto. Again, he looked numb. Someone had just murdered Martin Luther King Jr. "Martin Luther King Jr. dedicated his life to love and to justice for his fellow man," Kennedy told the crowd, "And he died in making that effort."

Two months later, Bobby Kennedy was dead. A political junkie even then, Winthrop had stayed up late, hoping to hear the results of the hotly contested California Democratic primary. With school the next day, he had been finally forced to retire with the outcome still in doubt.

When Winthrop awoke for school in the morning, he learned that Bobby had been shot in the head. He didn't need to hear anything more. The official word had not yet come, but in that moment Winthrop knew that Bobby was dead. "The nerves sit ceremonious like tombs," he thought. It was then that Winthrop himself entered "the hour of lead." And Winthrop knew that for him the hour would last a lifetime.

As Jones, Bradley and the others reached the stage, a black street musician began playing "Soul Man" on his trumpet. Right on cue, Jones launched into a frenetic dance, transporting himself with skill and rhythmic variety to his seat at the back of the stage. Bradley followed closely behind Jones. He trotted briskly up the steps of the stage, his smile beaming, his right hand waving. With a mocking, jocular flick of the wrist, he saluted the musician, dispensed more smiles and waves to the cheering crowd and took a seat next to Jones. Cardinal Boyle, Governor Ross, Reverend Al Sharpton, Alicia

Williams, Isaiah Woods and Arthur Lyle seated themselves as well, while Mayor Martinez moved directly to the mike.

As far as Winthrop was concerned, Martinez could have been elected mayor only in New York City. He personified the grotesque hyperbole of the city itself. Martinez was loud, egomaniacal, and combative. The word “extroverted” failed to do the man justice. While campaigning for office, he would plunge into a crowd with the enthusiasm of a fat man competing in a belly flop contest. “Qué pasa?” he would shout with a huge grin spread across his face. “Estás!” the crowd would roar in return, and everyone was pleased with himself.

“Hello, everybody!” Martinez bellowed into the mike. “I’m happy to be here today for two reasons. Number one, all of us who are participating in today’s African-American Day parade are here to honor all African-Americans. And in honoring African-Americans, we honor America as well. America’s the most ethnically diverse nation on earth. It is truly the great Melting Pot, and New York City is the most ethnically diverse city in the world. That is our strength. That is what makes America, America and New York, New York.

“Now the second reason that I’m happy to be here today is that I have the opportunity to march and to share the stage with so many distinguished guests. Our time is short, so let me introduce our first guest, a man who has dedicated his life to serving all people, Cardinal John Patrick Boyle.”

Boyle was certainly no hero to the black community, but the cheering and applause were wildly enthusiastic. Winthrop attributed the enthusiasm as much to the crowd’s sense of festivity and urge to expend energy as to their desire to welcome the cardinal.

There then ensued some unintentional comedy, at least from Winthrop’s point of view, as the pressures of time and the multiplicity of notables prompted the speakers to bob in and out of the spotlight with amazing rapidity. Ignoring the signs of the Right-to-Life demonstrators, Boyle offered a prayer for racial harmony,

blessed the parade and sat down. Then Martinez bounced up again and introduced the Reverend Al Sharpton. Reverend Al praised the African-American Day parade as a celebration of activism, exhorted the crowd to engage in activism every day, and then promptly introduced Alicia Williams. Ms. Williams quickly praised the work of the “Crack Down on Crack” youth groups and the “Just Say No Kids” who were marching today, called up Isaiah Woods and sat down. Woods made a quick, commercial-like pitch for ongoing community development in Harlem and the Bronx and called up Representative Lyle as a champion of the same. As a beneficiary of a rhetorical tradition distinguished by the likes of Mohammad Ali, Jesse Jackson, and dozens of hip hop artists from Snoop Dog to Jay Z, Lyle punctuated his brief address with doggerel rhymes such as “unity in the community” and “black and white must join the fight.” Then he took great pleasure in introducing Governor Bill Ross and sat down.

With apparently nothing to say regarding African-Americans or the parade, Ross got right down to the task of creating a good usable sound bite for the local evening news. The original plan was for Ross to introduce Abraham Lincoln Jones and for Jones, after a bit of entertaining improvisation, to introduce Jason Bradley. Ross, however, had decided to add some minor theatrics to the mix. “We are honored today,” he began, “to have with us as Grand Marshal of our parade one of the most popular and talented men in America. To introduce him to you, I’m going to need a little help. So let’s all welcome back Mayor Hector Martinez.”

The mayor returned to good-natured, if mild, applause. Yes, thought Winthrop, the two of them do belong together. Ross was fast becoming almost as big a clown as Martinez. Meanwhile the crowd had grown too large to be contained within the Grand Army Plaza. It now filled Fifth Avenue between 58th and 59th Streets and extended to the GM Plaza on the East side of Fifth.

Despite the anticlimactic reappearance of Martinez, Winthrop could feel a shift in the crowd’s attention. There was a new

concentration, a greater intensity. They were about to commune with a star. To be followed by a bona fide member of a truly elite group—twenty-first century political royalty. But first they would be treated to the vaudevillian antics of Ross and Martinez.

“Well, Mayor, are you ready?”

“You know me, Bill. It’s always my pleasure to assist the governor. And this time especially since we’ll be introducing a good friend of ours. But, more important, he’s a friend to all Americans, black, white, Latino.”

“And let’s not forget Asians.”

“A friend to all Americans whatever their ethnic backgrounds. A champion of equality.”

“He’s certainly that, Hector.”

“And a true people person. But without further ado, Bill, let’s introduce him—with apologies to Barry Bream!”

With that, Mayor Martinez and Governor Ross clapped their arms around each other’s back, hunched together over the microphone and with huge, self-satisfied grins intoned in unison the famous intro, á la Barry Bream: “Hello, America. From the Grand Army Plaza off New York City’s Central Park, it’s *The ALJ Show* starring Abraham Lincoln Jones. And now here’s the Emancipated Mouth, the Black Hole that swallowed America, the Master Blaster of Talk Show Disaster—Abraham Lincoln Jones!”

The crowd went crazy. The obliging street musician played “Soul Man.” And Jones strode majestically toward the mike. Martinez got to him first, and the two men embraced. It was Ross’s turn next. Then the three of them locked hands and raised them high over their heads in an attitude favored by victorious boxers, Las Vegas entertainers, and Richard Nixon.

Winthrop, squinting into his binoculars, studied their faces. Ross and Martinez wore identical grins—ecstatic, farcical, mask like; Jones somehow maintained his separateness and dignity even as he postured for the crowd and the cameras. Rather than smile, he

exuded a composed self-assurance that said, “I am better than these political hacks. I know it, and you, if you’re hip, know it, too. They use me and my blackness, my celebrity, yes, but I use them even more, and I will continue to use them and their phony-ass power connections every chance I get.”

Yes, thought Winthrop, Jones was cool. He was in control as much as anyone could be. And he knew what he was about. Definitely.

With Ross and Martinez returned safely to their seats and the crowd noise subsiding, Jones addressed the audience. “Thank you, friends. Thank you, brothers and sisters. I know I’ll sound like a white politician when I say this, but I’m going to say it anyway. Today is a great day for African-Americans. It is a great day. Think about it. What do we have here today? We have a big crowd gathered around a black man who’s standing on a wooden platform. There was a time in this country when that would have meant one thing and one thing only. A lynching party. Today we’re having another kind of party. It’s a party to celebrate African-Americans. To celebrate black people. Well, then, let’s celebrate!”

Suddenly, Jones began to gyrate. It had become one of his trademarks—breaking into a wild, spontaneous dance. He had done it hundreds of times over the years on *The ALJ Show*, sometimes celebrating a moment of truth, at other times violently interrupting the drone of banal talk. “I feel uptight! Let’s get down!” he’d shout into the middle of a guest’s self-important sentence, and the audience, which had felt uptight, too, roared its approval. Another guest had gotten the hook!

Then as Jones danced toward the huge pink star that marked his spot at center stage, the band would break into “Dancing in the Streets,” and the entire studio audience would get up and dance. And the camera would pan from ALJ to the audience to the band to Barry Bream and back to ALJ, televising the dance, nothing but a crazy dance right on into the commercial break.

When *The ALJ Show* returned, the dance would still be going on,

running on its own steam, and so it would continue until Maestro Jones kicked into a climactic, improvisational, ever accelerating movement that put his signature on the dance and, with stage lights flashing, brought the commotion to a close. Then when the cheering and shouting and whoops and hollers had finally died down a bit and Jones had caught his breath, he would characteristically allude to the segment with his now forlorn, dispatched guest. “Whooe!” Jones would shout. “That conversation was Death Valley Days! That was the Reagan administration on blown out tires! That was a genuine, twenty-mule-team bore ass!”

As Jones cavorted on the stage at the Grand Army Plaza accompanied by the lone trumpeter’s interpretation of “Dancing in the Streets” and as many people in the crowd enthusiastically joined in with their own free-form choreography, Winthrop knew that ALJ’s dance was only partly a celebration of African-Americans. It was a criticism, too, of the speakers who had preceded the Emancipated Mouth. In effect, Jones had just given the hook to Hector Martinez, Bill Ross, Cardinal Boyle, Al Sharpton, Alicia Williams, Isaiah Woods and Arthur Lyle.

Winthrop shifted his binoculars to Jason Bradley. He had almost the same look of composed self-assurance that Winthrop had seen on Jones’s face just moments before. As far as Winthrop could see, there was only one difference in Bradley’s expression: the most subtle trace of a self-satisfied smile, bearing witness to the fact that Bradley was certainly on Jones’s wavelength. He knew that the other speakers had been dismissed, even if they did not know it themselves. They were still there physically, but they were now of no account. Politically and spiritually it was now just Abraham Lincoln Jones and Jason Bradley alone together on the Grand Army Plaza stage.

“Whooe! That felt good!” Jones shouted, his dance now completed. “We got a real party going on here! Yeah! But we got some other business, too. Some serious citizen business. Like introducing

my man, Jason Bradley, Mr. J.B., Senator Bradley, our personal advocate in Washington.”

Jones and the crowd worked together like a good team. At the mention of the senator, he paused and they came in on cue with cheers and applause. People began chanting Bradley’s name, and there was a renewed outbreak of dancing in some quarters. Winthrop again studied Bradley’s face. He was smiling broadly now. It was a good-natured smile, very pleased, with that same look of composed self-assurance. It was, Winthrop knew, the smile of a man in power, radiating the warmth and benevolence that came with a liberal’s sense of control. My authority is liberating, it seemed to say. Follow me and I’ll set you free. At the same time, Jones’s face was absolutely beaming for he remained the center of attention. He was the great orchestrator of the crowd’s responses. And he luxuriated in that role.

Of course, with Bradley as the main political speaker and Jones as the Grand Marshal, the parade enjoyed an incomparable advantage. It was the electricity of celebrity, the synergy of charisma, with two powerhouse personalities sharing their energies, each lending force to the other. That combined energy was now operating at full power.

“Let me tell you why I support this white dude sitting here,” Jones continued, gesturing toward Bradley. “I’m for Jason Bradley, and you all are for Jay Bradley because he’s for us. He’s on our side. He’s for blacks. He’s for Latinos. He’s for women. He’s for gay and lesbian people. He’s for transgender people. He’s for the poor and the homeless. He’s for all of America’s minorities. And he knows—like you and I know—that when you add together all us minorities, you get a big majority. You get the real America. The America we honor. The America we love. That’s what Jason Bradley stands for. A-M-E-R-I-C-A. America! That’s what he’s fightin’ for now as your senator. And that’s what he’ll fight for some day when he moves into that big white house on Pennsylvania Avenue. Hey! I sure can sound like a white politician when I want to, can’t I?”

“Well, enough of this politicking. Let’s bring the man himself to the mike. Here he is. My good friend and blood brother. The man who stands for freedom and equality. The man who stands for justice, with the best looking political wife this country’s ever seen. Better than Jackie Kennedy! Better than Dolley Madison ice cream! Let’s let him know we love him—Senator Jason Bradley!”

As Bradley stood up, the crowd reaction surprised Winthrop. He had expected a big response, but the noise was unbelievable, as if Bradley were a kind of rock star.

Observing the pandemonium, Winthrop wondered, as he often did during such displays, what really was motivating the crowd to behave as they did. Did they seriously believe that Bradley either as legislator or chief executive would ever significantly change their own individual lives for the better? That was rather like believing in a personal God, was it not? Was it also possible they believed that Bradley would make America a better place in which to live? Did he perhaps favor some particular piece of legislation or budgetary allocation that they believed would help resolve a serious social problem? Did they believe that one person could make a difference? Could Bradley, through the force of his personality, inspire Americans to be more tolerant, more understanding, more compassionate? Could he help achieve a new era of freedom and equality for minorities? For blacks and Latinos? For gay, lesbian and transgender people? Could he help create jobs for the poor? Could he provide housing for the homeless? Could he ensure the safety of city streets and subways? Could he deliver homeland security? Could he promise the American people a future of peace and prosperity?

Did such ideas ever cross their minds? Or was Bradley really just another rock star to them? A sexy image? Or was the sports analogy more appropriate? Did Bradley’s political success translate into their success as well? Were they fans of the Bradley team? Were they wearing the Bradley uniform? Were they rooting for their team

to win it all so they could chant, “We’re number one! We’re number one!” over and over again?

In fact, even now as Bradley and Jones embraced on the stage, shouts of “ALJ! ALJ!” were mixing with the chant “Bradley’s the one!” One young man with a blond crew cut and a thin, wiry build was acting as the main cheerleader for Bradley, bouncing around acrobatically in the comic, frenetic manner of the San Diego Chicken or the Phillie Phanatic. With every passing second, more and more people were taking up the cheer until it seemed that almost half the crowd—indeed nearly all the white people in it—were shouting “Bradley’s the one!”

As the crowd noise rose to a deafening level, Winthrop again scanned the plaza area with his binoculars to get an overall panoramic sense of the scene. Up and down the crowd he went. Over the Grand Army Plaza. Across Fifth Avenue to the GM Plaza and the huge Apple store façade. Then back beyond 59th Street and up the side of the Sherry-Netherland, where people were gathered at the windows. Visually, Winthrop climbed the floors of the Sherry up near to the top of the tower.

It was then that he saw it. With the distorted vision of first impression, it looked initially like a metal pipe or rod projecting from the hotel window high above Fifth Avenue. But in the next split second, Winthrop knew what he was seeing: the long barrel of a high-powered rifle pointing in the direction of the Grand Army Plaza stage. Then he heard the shots, muffled by the overwhelming din of the crowd, acting as a great, collective human silencer.

But the shots were not coming from the long, dark rod at the top of the Sherry. While the gun in the sights of Winthrop’s binoculars maintained a deadly, watchful silence, rifle shots came with mindless, sickening rapidity from across the plaza, from the area of the Plaza Hotel.

As the last shot sounded, the rifle near the top of the Sherry receded from view. Winthrop wheeled toward the Plaza and

scanned the windows of the hotel, but the gunman was already gone. In a flash he whipped around the stunned bystanders who stood in his way and was up the side of the Sherman monument to gain the proper vantage. Then he quickly trained his binoculars on the stage. Abraham Lincoln Jones was lying motionless by the side of the podium. Jason Bradley lay thrashing on top of Jones. And there was blood on their clothes and blood on the stage.