

CHAOS

JOHN AUSTIN SLETTEN

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For Mom and Dad

Mom taught me the love of writing
Dad the sagacity of writing what you know

To My Children

Chad and Kelly
Joe, Dan, Chris
For putting up with me

To the Future

My Grandsons

Ethan Christopher Sletten
Joseph Warren Sletten

May the force be with you

Acknowledgements

This book is a sequel to *Deceit*. It is the continuation about individuals and institutions that abuse power ... and the collateral damage to the innocents.

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John Austin Sletten
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
May 1, 2012

Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or
the present are certain to miss the future

John F. Kennedy



Oh, what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practice to deceive

Sir Walter Scott

Prelude

Monday - Labor Day

September 1, 2008

Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts

I'm sitting in the back end of a rickety old Martha's Vineyard tour bus. It's a beautiful sun-spanked kind of day and the bus ride has been a very *put your feet up* type excursion on the *Up-Island Tour*.

The bus driver is aflame with animation as he describes each and every thing visible with passionate timbre. He has pointed out the post office twice, once coming and now going after making a U-turn. We had started the day at nearby Chappaquiddick Island where we looked at the sight of Ted Kennedy's unsuccessful bridge crossing joining Chappaquiddick with Edgartown. This occurred in the wee hours of the morning on July 19, 1969. Little did I know how this event would be a precursor for the turmoil about to invade my life's experiences? So as I traveled Highway 212 east to west in South Dakota that day listening to the news blurbs about the Kennedy ignominy, life seemed so unsettled.

We had boarded the bus in Edgartown and were now traveling the Edgartown-West Tisbury Road passing by the airport where John F. Kennedy, Jr. was scheduled to land on that fateful evening in July, 1999.

As we trek along I realize I am touring with a bunch of old people who are probably reminiscing about the same past episodes. Looking from the back of the bus to the front, I see nothing but bald heads and gray hair. They seem older, but perhaps I am just as old, having turned sixty-four in June. But I have never thought of myself as approaching that age category; I'm not bald and I don't have gray hair. When I was a kid everybody seemed to have been dead or looked like they should be when in their *sixties*. However,

I was on this bus and so were they, so circumstances were dictating all present were going down the back stretch of life.

As we voyage toward the sea via South Road, the tour guide points out where Jackie Kennedy's Martha's Vineyard Estate encompasses what seems to be most of the island. We journey near South Beach and Stonewall Beach to the Chilmark Center and around Memensha Pond. Somewhere in this area the bus comes to a complete stop in the middle of the road. Here the driver tells us to look down the hill which is on my right. I see an old cemetery, and the tour master makes it known that this is where John Belushi is interred. Right here at Abel's Hill Cemetery in Chilmark, adding that his body may not be lying under his stone because of vandalism. Actually, he should have said the body has been relocated, but the headstone remains. The old college fake-out, I'm thinking, while picturing Dan Aykroyd driving his Harley Davidson to Abel's Hill that day, where James Taylor sang *That Lonesome Road* under a light snowfall. But I didn't hear the rest of the story because my cell phone rang and a name and number scrolled across the display: *Mary Shanahan*. The area code was 301. *Maryland*, I whisper to myself.

I was so taken aback that I didn't answer the ring. Quickly I did the math. I hadn't heard from her for twenty-three years. My curiosity was keen and zany with apprehension. Although I often thought about her as I did my wife Ellen, who had passed away mysteriously in 1985, I never thought I would hear from Shanahan again. It was our covenant, and we had both agreed to keep our pact, no matter what, so very long ago. Something must be terribly wrong, I am thinking as the bus climbs up Lighthouse Road and beyond to the tip of Gay Head, where stands the lighthouse and a twisted strata of multicolored cliffs. They are rugged and tinted beautifully, like a rainbow.

I walk to the furthest point on a cliff's edge. I gaze down into the Vineyard Sound and back up a few steps, not liking being too close to the sheer drop off. Then I study my cell phone. It still reads *Mary Shanahan*, but I know it wasn't her who had placed the call. She would have never broken our concord. I laugh because

it was more like a direct order from headquarters under threat of court martial. It's jocular to think about it that way, but the times of our life together were staged in that manner and by those kinds of directives. I look around and see nobody nearby, so I dial the number.

On the second ring a voice picks up, "Hello," she says.

There is a pause. "Mary?" I ask.

There is a longer awkward moment. "No, this is Mary Ellen."

I hope this isn't some kind of a joke. I had broken my treaty, too, by calling back. I never made such a gaffe in the more disciplined days of my life.

"Hey," I ask, "what's this all about?"

"Where are you Jack?" she asks, with her voice starting to break down slightly.

"My name is not Jack; maybe you called a wrong number." I protest, then suggest.

"Well, then, John or whatever your name is today, where are you?" She queries with an ireful tone in her voice.

"I'm standing atop a cliff in Martha's Vineyard over-looking the Sound. Why do you want to know where I am? Or should I ask what business is it of yours?" I reply.

My remark causes a really long hiatus before she alleges. "you are my business, Jack. I just buried my mother, Mary Shanahan, today. I'm pretty much all alone and I need someone to straighten out my life for me. Perhaps you can help me put pieces back in the puzzle. Are you on vacation?" She asks. Then she says, "If you are, will you please get back to me when you return home? Will you please call me?" she stresses, sounding desperate before she starts to cry.

I see my wife, Kathy, beckoning me to come down the hill while pointing toward her watch. "Mary Ellen, I'll call you on Friday. I have to get on the tour bus right now, but I will call you on Friday." I say, softly, while signaling my wife and beginning my descent down the hillock.

"Thank you," she says, while still crying to some extent.

"Where do you live?" I ask.

"I'm staying at Mom's house. You know the place; it's where you two lived together at 6001 Princeton Avenue in Glen Echo, Maryland. It's where I grew up."

As I was approaching the bottom of the slope I could see Kathy and her parents standing by the bus eating ice cream cones. "I have to get on the bus, but I'll call you Friday or sooner if I can find some time alone. Hey kid, keep your chin up, and I'm so sorry for *our* loss."

"Don't you mean: *Here's looking at you kid.*" she says. "Mom told me everything, Jack, and thanks for saying *our* loss. It's important to me. Mom loved you so much she never had another man in her life. *Why would I want somebody less than what I once had,* she would always say."

"I hope she didn't tell you everything," I retort. "I'll call you soon, honey." I say as naturally as if she was Mary Shanahan. I click off the cell phone and wipe away tears that had gathered in my eyes.

As we travel back to Edgartown along the Vineyard Sound, my mind is totally on the telephone call. I can't imagine Mary Shanahan dead. I did the arithmetic. She was twelve years younger than me and we shared the same birth date: June 13th. If the voice on the phone was born late August or early September, 1985, she is probably my daughter. Does the story ever end, are my thoughts, as the driver announces for the third time the post office is on the right.

Wasn't it Thoreau who spoke of the endless struggle to see what is right in front of us, I rationalize as I meet up with my wife and in-laws?

"You've been as silent as a cigar-store Indian," my father-in-law states.

"Oh, that walk up the mountain slope wore me out," I riposte.

I'm reflecting about Shanahan while we have lunch. She would've enjoyed my dilemma: no alcoholic beverages at this place. I'm pondering. All I want is a beer and they don't sell beer, wine or anything alcoholic. But this small inconvenience wouldn't have mattered to Mary one bit. She always complied without a whim-

per or the slightest indication of recalcitrance. She was bright, spoke well and persuasively, and could deliberate on her feet. She also had that certain charisma about her. I was really going to miss her even though I hadn't seen her for twenty-three years. But I always knew she was there, just a phone call away. She was always a burning light within my darkness, just like Ellen. They are both gone forever now. Times like this happen in life.

The future is like heaven – everyone exalts it but no one wants to go there now. **James Baldwin**, “*A Fly in Buttermilk*”

Chapter One

*220 Runnymede Avenue
Jenkintown, Pennsylvania
Wednesday, January 23, 1985*

Was this really what I couldn't wait to happen? Here I am, home alone with a cup of coffee and the Philadelphia Inquirer newspaper. The telephone is not ringing and I'm imagining and wondering what is going on at 1700 K in Washington D.C., at Atlantic States Surety. I'm supposing I will never see any of those people again. It is a difficult pill to swallow. Even though I'm always working both ends of the stick, I'd acquired several close friends this time around. Once again, at a moment's notice they are simply gone. And I believe in memories, not memorabilia.

I miss Mary Shanahan immensely. We said our tearful good byes on December the 27th just past, while making a pact that we would not communicate with each other again. I didn't really think all communiqué would stop, but that was the plan. I miss talking with her and all the strategy that surrounded us in our work atmosphere. She has my telephone number, and Mary had given me her parent's number in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Of course, I knew the number in Glen Echo, Maryland, where we clandestinely lived together for nearly a year. I had a gut feeling she might stay there for a while. The rent was right and the landlady was a good friend and mentor. Mary would probably need some moral support. No, I decide, I will not call her right now, but how I miss her coast-to-coast smile.

The Bureau tells me I'll be giving depositions for some time. They tell me some will be done by telephone where I'll go to the FBI offices at 6th and Arch in Philadelphia and be deposed with a court reporter and an attorney present. However, I will have to be in Washington D.C. at least two days a month to give testimony

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to a Federal Grand Jury. All this will be a blend of memory and distortion, fact and fiction, repetition and exaggeration. What really scares me, though, is returning to Washington so soon for fear I might see somebody I know, or worse yet, someone might see me. Somebody who might want to kill me for what I have knowledge about? Who can I really trust? Nobody, I'm certain. But so far I haven't heard from them.

I find myself pacing from the kitchen to the front door and from the front door to the patio porch in back of the house. It is a sunny, cool, breezy day. The trees are bending slightly from the wind trying to stir remnants of verdures from the beauty of the autumn colors which not long ago tinted the surrounding elegant trees. I feel so sadly that coffee just isn't cutting it for me this morning. I pull a bottle of Jack Daniels out of the liquor cabinet and pour a stiff drink. Then I put on a Rod McKuen album, *The Sea*, and sit down at the kitchen bar to ruminate.

That last week at Atlantic States Surety had gone pretty much as planned. Mary Shanahan and I finished purging files after making the necessary copies according to my line up. We filled four briefcases full of information and walked them to my vehicle, one case at a time. I unloaded the briefcases into a footlocker I had arranged in the trunk of my car. These were copies of original documents I wanted for my records. Once copied, Mary neatly filed the originals back into the file cabinet or safe in our office. Next we filled the briefcases with C&B Leasing lease agreements and bank statements. We left nothing behind regarding the leasing company. We worked on this project from nine to five o'clock religiously those last few days. With very few people around and with no receptionist, the task went from impossible to doable – we simply got it done.

On the final day I stopped at four o'clock to see the auditors. They were in their lair smoking cigarettes and contemplating with each other about what they should do next. I asked them if they needed anything and they said more cooperation, but there didn't seem to be anybody around this week. I told them we're operating with a skeleton crew until the first of the year. But if

they needed something specific, I would be happy to find it for them. They nodded, giving me a shit-eating grin. I wished them a Happy New Year, knowing full-well I'd never see them again. I've learned problems unresolved never go away; they just hide in dark corners where they fester and simmer and eventually boil over. I'm thinking about this analogy as I walk away from them forever.

The next stop is the Claims Department to see if the auditors have been badgering Joe and Maggie. "We haven't even seen them today, Jack," Maggie Little reports astonishingly. "So when life gives you lemons, you make lemonade." she adds.

Joe Neverson, the Claims Attorney's office door is wide open when I walk into his working quarters. He motions for me to sit down in the chair in front of his desk. I do and wait for him to get off the phone. When he does I smile. He does the same, asking me how the purging is going.

"Done," I say. "I got the pay checks out, including your monthly fee, and made a transfer from A.S.S. Associates into the payroll account. Tell whoever you care about to go directly to the bank and cash their checks."

Joe told me Corrigan had called him today and wouldn't be back in the office until next Wednesday, the 2nd day of January. He said Richard sounded strange, like he was upbeat and his old energetic self. Corrigan didn't ask about the auditors or anyone else. He just wished everybody a Happy New Year. Ass-covering is very time-consuming and stressful. Eventually men in authority are like horses. They show fear, and they'll knock you around. Then they act blasé, and they'll leave you alone.

I told Joe, "I've done a lot of thinking and I keep asking myself why I should give the auditors any help. Tomorrow Shanahan and I are going to boogie! I'm leaving you in care of all the resignation letters, including mine, and leaving at high noon for Philadelphia. And, yup, that's the way I'm playing it. Fuck 'em all!"

Joe studied me and gave me a crooked smile. Then he laughed, saying, "You've got more guts than I do, Jack. But good for you if that's the way you're playing it."

I come back, "I don't know if it's guts, Joe, or stupidity. And I

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might have an advantage you do not. I'm not sure, though. Anyway, I've had enough of this shit!"

"How about Mary; is she okay?" Joe asks, with disquiet and his incessant obsequious grin.

"She's already resigned, like me. Her last day is today, too." I report. "It's so goddamn obscene, there are no words for it."

Joe shakes his head. "God, I'm going to miss you guys. We've had a lot of fun."

"Ellen took the three boys to Pennsylvania today. Between you and me, that is where I'm going to be living too." I tell Joe because somebody has to know how to get in touch with me. "I have a secure line there; you know the number. You know, Joe, having a long desired goal, once achieved, turns out to be much less than expected."

Joe contemplates my words. "Yeah," he says. "you are right. Life is basically disappointing."

"Mary and I are going to the St. Regis." I announce to Joe Neverson. "We'll see you there?"

"I wouldn't miss this farewell for anything," Joe says. "Hey, tell Maggie to come in here on your way out. See you shortly."

When I return to my office, Mary is busy as hell putting everything where it should be. She looks at me with those bright green eyes. "Your wife called." she says. "They arrived safely at home in Pennsylvania. She said no need to call – tell him I'll see him when he gets here." Mary's voice cracked at the end of her message. She said, "No matter how thin I make my pancakes, they always have two sides."

I put my arms out and she falls into my chest, hugging me profusely. I whisper in her ear: "Let's gather our personal stuff and put it in the car. Then we're going to the Library. Joe and Maggie are going to meet us there. This is our night."

Shanahan perks up. "No," she says, "It's my fucking night!"

We are shocked when we walk into the Library Lounge at the prestigious St. Regis Hotel. They had a table for six in the middle of the lounge. Along with Maggie and Joe were Ted Masters and a smiling Richard Corrigan. "Jack and Mary, welcome." Corrigan greets us. "Ray Bertrand hopes to join us too."

“Say nothing,” says Corrigan. “Joe told me your decision. By the way, Ray and I aren’t going to Australia or anywhere else either. You’ve done a great job, Jack, and all of us appreciate it especially since you came here from outer space a year ago. It was outer space, right, Jack?”

Two hours later the table looked like a sea of glasses. Ray Bertrand had arrived and joined in the festivities. Maggie had Mary drinking her ass off and laughing. I was so happy to see Shanahan cheery. I took a moment to realize these were the best friends I have ever had and more than likely would never see again. And that tonight is a magical moment to commemorate our experiences together.

We enjoyed dinner right at the table: petit filet mignon for everybody. Afterwards the drinks started to flow again. I had Maggie get us a suite for four, telling her I’d pay for it. I didn’t know how Richard and Ray were going to get home, but when Bertrand’s wife showed up it all fit. What a great lady, that Peggy Bertrand. She was always there, like Ellen. So we kept drinking until last call, except for Masters, who had the sense to go home after dinner. It was propitious of him to come after his year of personal disaster at Atlantic States.

Our stay at the Regis was sophomoric. Joe slept with Maggie and I with Mary. Our beds were separated by a reading lamp. A suite was not available, which Maggie failed to mention, but she did get us a room. And when we got to the room we all kind of passed out. Everybody was sound asleep when heads hit the pillows.

It was a great night and apropos to ending a life-changing, exciting activity with people who love me as much as I love them.

A loud knock at the door interrupts my brown study. I turn the music down, park my drink, and walk to the door. When I open it there are two fledgling people with note pads. The one I notice first is a young lady dressed to the nines. She has a very nice smile and a spectacular figure. The other is a young man extraordinarily handsome, who asks, “Are you Jack Oleson, the Controller for Atlantic States Surety in Washington D.C.?”

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“And may I ask who is asking such a preposterous question?”

The young lady came forth announcing, “The Washington Post.”

“The Washington what?” I query.

“Come on, Mr. Oleson. Don’t give us a bad time. We just want to ask a few questions.” The young stud appeals while I check my watch. It is noon.

“Mr. who?” I ask.

“Would you two like to come inside?” I ask, with a smile. I open the front door and they walk into the house. “What would you like to drink?” I ask. He says coffee, and she requests a coca cola. I refresh my Jack Daniels.

We sit down at the dining room table and I ask them why they are here to see me. They tell me they had been given an anonymous tip that I was the Controller for Atlantic States Surety, which was taken over by the Commonwealth of Virginia. The informant also says that I am thought to be an undercover agent for the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

“Now if I was all these things, do you think I’d be here talking with you?” I smile shrugging my shoulders.

I was enjoying the conversation as I truly hated the boredom of the day up to this point. I would love to give them the whole story, but they wouldn’t understand or be able to handle it. They were simply rookies. So I just strung them along for my own amusement, fishing out of them what was going on at Atlantic Surety Company in Washington D.C. They apologized for bothering me and I wished them well. I told them I was an accountant, but not the accountant they were looking for. FBI? I told them I’d seen the movie “*G*Men once, starring James Cagney.

I turned Rod McKuen back on and continued my drinking reverie of the past year’s events. Ellen would be home for lunch soon. Or would she? I wasn’t sure of anything anymore. I just know rivulets of doubt were beginning to seep into my image of everybody.

It is sometime advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves. **Ralph Emerson**