HIS VERY BEST

JIMMY CARTER, A LIFE

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PREFACE

My previous books—on Franklin D. Roosevelt and Barack Obama—stressed the influence of character on the presidency. I began this one more than five years ago with the same theme in mind. But after the election of 2016, I felt a new urgency. It seemed to me there was no better time to reexamine our superficial assessments of Jimmy Carter. I write out of a fragile hope that the life story of the thirty-ninth president might help light our way back to some sense of decency, accountability, and seriousness in our politics.

I first met Carter—for a split-second handshake—on the South Lawn of the White House on the Fourth of July 1978, when I was a college intern in his speech-writing office. In early 1980, like so many Americans, I grew disillusioned with him and made the mistake of working for a few weeks as a part-time volunteer on Ted Kennedy's campaign against him in the Democratic primaries.

Thirty-five years later, I found myself drawn back to a perplexing leader and to his virtuoso achievement: the 1978 Camp David Accords, which brought peace to Israel and Egypt after four wars and became the most durable major treaty of the postwar era. If he pulled that off, I figured, there must be more to Jimmy Carter than the easy shorthand: inept president who becomes a noble ex-president. When I learned that he would almost certainly have begun to address global warming in the early 1980s had he been reelected, I was hooked. I set out to paint a portrait of perhaps the most misunderstood president in American history.

Carter's prescience on the environment and several other issues was not the only thing that surprised me about him. I knew about his human rights policy but had no clue how much it advanced democracy around the world.

I had no idea that ratification of the Panama Canal Treaties, a squeaker in the US Senate, prevented a major war in Central America. Several of Carter's unheralded accomplishments are especially relevant today: normalizing relations with China, which helped set in motion four decades of breathtaking global change; insisting on the first genuine racial and gender diversity in the federal judiciary; curbing redlining, which had so damaged black neighborhoods; providing the first whistle-blower protections and the first inspectors general; and extending the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) for the first time into global health, which presaged the work of his postpresidency. I concluded that he was a surprisingly consequential president—a political and stylistic failure but a substantive and far-sighted success.

From the start of my research, Carter's journey from barefoot farm boy to global icon struck me as an American epic. I wanted to understand how he evolved from a short, timid kid nicknamed Peewee into an ambitious and born-again governor of Georgia; how, straddling two worlds, he advanced miraculously from obscure outsider to president of the United States; how he stumbled as a leader but succeeded in reinventing himself as a warrior for peace.

Carter is warm in public and brisk—sometimes peevish—in private, with a biting wit beneath the patented smile. He is always struggling to do more—for himself and for the world—and to pass what his US Naval Academy rule book called "the final test of a man": honesty. Like all politicians, he exaggerated at times and broke a few campaign pledges. But he fulfilled his famous promise in his 1976 campaign and did not directly lie to the American people, which is no small thing today.

The title *His Very Best* reflects Carter's intensity and his sense of obligation to God, country, humanity, and himself. In his daily, even hourly, prayers, he asks not just "What would Jesus do?" but "Have I done my best?" After cantankerous admiral Hyman Rickover sternly asked the nervous young lieutenant in a job interview for the nuclear navy if he had done his best at Annapolis—and he confessed that he had not—Carter disciplined himself to make the maximum effort in every single thing he did for the rest of his life. (He also entitled his campaign autobiography *Why Not the Best?*) When awarding Carter the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002, the chairman of the Nobel committee said, "Carter himself has taken [from Ecclesiastes 11:4] as his motto: 'The worst thing that you can do is not to try.' Few people, if any, have tried harder."

Whether sprinting as a naval officer through the core of a melted-down nuclear reactor, or laboring to save tens of millions of acres of wilderness, or driving a hundred miles out of his way on rutted roads to talk to a single African farmer, or turkey hunting at age ninety-five, Carter was all in, all the time. Calling him the least lazy American president is not to damn him with faint praise; his long life is a master class in making every minute count.

This is the first full-length independent biography ever written of Jimmy Carter. (His major political contemporaries, Ronald Reagan and Edward Kennedy, have each been the subject of a half dozen.) Fine authors have bitten off chunks on Carter's campaigns, his faith, his presidency, and his postpresidency, and insightful former aides and Cabinet officers have had their say. My more comprehensive book is not in any way "authorized" or "official," but I could not have completed it without the generous cooperation of all the Carters. My beloved longtime editor, the late Alice Mayhew, was also Carter's editor at Simon & Schuster, and she smoothed the way.

Over the last five years, I interviewed the former president more than a dozen times in his home, at his office, over meals, in transit, and by email. I watched him teach Sunday school in Plains, Georgia, and I helped build a Habitat for Humanity house with him in Memphis. I also interviewed Rosalynn Carter—who was kind enough to share for the first time Jimmy's love letters from the navy and portions of her unpublished diaries—as well as their four children, other members of his famously colorful family, and more than 250 people who know him, including former presidents George H. W. Bush and Barack Obama, former vice president Walter Mondale, and several surviving members of the Carter Cabinet. I spent countless hours reviewing thousands of pages of documents at his presidential library in Atlanta and scouring oral histories and unpublished diaries.

My most memorable interviews took place in Plains, the tiny town in southwest Georgia that Jimmy and Rosalynn—married for nearly seventy-five years—have always called home. They met there as infants more than nine decades ago. Jimmy's mother, a nurse, delivered Rosalynn, then brought her nearly three-year-old son over to see the new baby. Plains is a friendly place, but I learned of its harsh past, with a county sheriff described by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as "the meanest man in the world." I concluded that the intensity of Carter's commitments in the second half of his life has been at least partial atonement for too often staying silent amid the brutal abuses of civil rights in his own backyard. This stutter-step journey

from silence to action on race, rights, and reconciliation has many lessons for citizens of the twenty-first century.

Carter's storied 1976 presidential campaign upended American politics. By beating George Wallace in the Florida primary, he vanquished the racist wing of the Democratic Party, then—with Joe Biden as one of his earliest supporters—took the White House in a brilliant campaign that offered healing, love, and truth. But Carter's presidency bogged down, for reasons often beyond his control. In his last two years, swamped by the Iran hostage crisis and a dismal economy, he was often flailing. One day I asked him to identify the biggest myth about his time in office. He answered: "That I was weak. I made many bold decisions, almost all of which were difficult to implement and not especially popular."*

This is true. Carter was not fundamentally weak. As governor, he was dubbed Jungle Jimmy for his combative nature; "gonzo" journalist Hunter S. Thompson called Carter "a bastard," and he meant it as a great compliment for a man he helped make president. But in Washington, Carter let perceptions of weakness harden and obscure significant—even visionary—achievements. One of my challenges was to separate real weakness from the temporary and often unfair judgment of his contemporaries. In the end, I concluded that his presidency is underrated and that his postpresidency—while pathbreaking and inspiring— offered him fewer levers for change and was marred at times by his ego and is thus a bit overrated.

Like "weak," the easy depiction of Carter as "incompetent" is not just misrepresentative of his presidency; it's ironic—even ridiculous—to anyone who knows him and his intense dedication to self-improvement, as reflected in the more than two dozen books he wrote on subjects ranging far beyond politics. The man has been frighteningly competent at almost anything he tried to do, professionally or recreationally.

He was the first American president since Thomas Jefferson who could

*A partial list: pardoning Vietnam War–era draft dodgers; imposing nettlesome energy conservation measures; deregulating natural gas prices; canceling dams and other water projects; reducing troop levels in South Korea; canceling the Clinch River Breeder Reactor Project; canceling the B-1 bomber and the neutron bomb; signing the Panama Canal Treaties; returning the Crown of St. Stephen to Communist Hungary; cutting the budget; appointing a Federal Reserve Board chairman to raise interest rates; imposing a grain embargo; boycotting the 1980 Summer Olympics; reinstating draft registration; not attacking Iran; resettling Cuban refugees; preventing development on tens of millions of acres in Alaska.

fairly claim to be a Renaissance man, or at least a world-class autodidact. Over the course of his life, he acquired the skills of a farmer, surveyor, naval officer, electrician, sonar technologist, nuclear engineer, businessman, equipment designer, agronomist, master woodworker, Sunday school teacher, bird dog trainer, arrowhead collector, land-use planner, legislator, door-to-door missionary, governor, long-shot presidential candidate, US president, diplomat, fly fisherman, home builder, global health expert, painter, professor, memoirist, poet, novelist, and children's book author—an incomplete list, as he would be happy to point out.

Midway through my research, it struck me that Carter was the only American president who essentially lived in three centuries: His early life on the farm in the 1920s, without electricity or running water, might as well have been in the nineteenth. He was connected—before, during, and after his presidency—to many of the big events and transformative social movements of the twentieth. And the Carter Center, the nongovernmental organization he founded, is focused on conflict resolution, global health, and strengthening democracy—cutting-edge challenges of the twenty-first.

Beyond longevity lies more complexity than applies to most political figures. Carter is a driven engineer laboring to free the humanist within. He once told me that he could express his true feelings only in his poetry, which hints at why he has proved so elusive to journalists and scholars. "Never say you know the last word about any human heart," wrote the novelist Henry James. So this book cannot fully capture the redemptive life of Jimmy Carter. But I've tried my best to get as close as I can.

Jonathan Alter
Montclair, New Jersey
July 2020

AUTHOR'S NOTE

A note on usage: to accurately convey the vicious racism of Carter's youth and young adulthood, I occasionally quote the N-word but never use it in my own voice. Otherwise I use *black*, the most common usage of the 1970s, when Carter was in government. For older white southerners, like Carter's mother and father, I sometimes use *Miss* or *Mr.* before their first names because that is how they were widely known, though the failure to apply such honorifics to black southerners is yet another racial double standard.

PROLOGUE

JUNE 1979

It was just hours before the first day of summer, and the sunny weather in Washington, DC, was perfect for a leisurely drive in the country. But June 20, 1979, was the wrong day for Wednesday golf or a picnic at Bull Run. That week, more than half of the nation's gas stations were running out of gas.

The morning's *Washington Post* reported that local authorities were inundated with requests for carpools from angry motorists who couldn't get to work, yet a small collection of harried reporters and dignitaries managed to find transportation to the White House. There the beleaguered president of the United States was preparing yet another announcement that would lead to eye rolling in the press corps and make little news. The only thing that stood out then about this seemingly minor event was its unusual location: the West Wing roof.

The spring and summer gas shortages marked the worst of a depressing 1979, a year that would later see the seizure of American hostages in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. "Gas stations closed up like someone died," John Updike wrote in his novel *Rabbit Is Rich.* For a generation bonded to cars the way the next would be to smartphones, this was traumatic. Millions of Americans missed work, canceled vacations, and pointed fingers. Public opinion surveys in June 1979 showed Carter's approval ratings in the Gallup poll plummeting to 28 percent, the lowest

of his presidency and comparable to Richard Nixon's when he resigned five years earlier. Vice President Walter Mondale later cracked that the Carter White House had gone to the dogs—and become "the nation's fire hydrant."

As usual, the president had few options. A month later, he would offer new, ambitious energy goals as part of his infamous "malaise" speech (though he never used the word), in which Carter delivered a jeremiad against empty materialism. But events all year were largely out of his control, wreaking havoc on the American economy. First came a decision by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to jack up global oil prices by 14.5 percent virtually overnight—an effort to exploit strikes in Iranian oil fields against the teetering shah of Iran. After the shah fled into exile and was replaced in February by the radical Islamic fundamentalist Ayatollah Khomeini, Iranian oil exports to the United States ceased altogether. Over the next eighteen months, oil prices doubled to nearly $40 a barrel. This represented an astonishing thirteenfold increase in a decade. "Energy is our Vietnam," a White House aide told *Newsweek*.

By the following year, inflation—driven in large part by energy prices—would pass 12 percent, with unemployment over 7 percent for a combined "misery index" of nearly 20 percent. Yet harder to imagine in the twenty-first century was that interest rates in 1980 hit an eye-popping 19 percent. Even if everything else had gone right for Jimmy Carter in 1979 and 1980—which it most definitely did not—that was a gale-force economic wind blowing in his face as he sought reelection against former California governor Ronald Reagan.

For two years, a clean-energy pioneer named George Szego had been lobbying the Carter White House to take a look at something he'd cobbled together at his little manufacturing company in Warrenton, Virginia. Szego, an engineer who had fought in the Battle of the Bulge, was hard to ignore. After some hesitation, Carter—himself an engineer—handwrote a reference to this emerging technology into a 1978 speech. Now, a year later, he was making good on his pledge to install it.

At one thirty on June 20, the president climbed an inner staircase to the roof of the West Wing, known as the West Terrace, where he emerged into the bright sunlight for an energy announcement that had nothing directly to

do with gas lines. "I've arranged for this ceremony to be illuminated by solar power," Carter joked, as the audience squinted into the sun. He proposed $1 billion in federal funding for solar research, a $100 million "solar bank" offering credits to home owners who installed primitive solar units, and a goal of 20 percent of the nation's energy coming from renewable sources by the year 2000—just one part of his effort to prepare the United States for a greener future.

The event was meant to publicize an energy source that for years had been of interest mostly to tinkerers and readers of the counterculture *Whole Earth Catalog* but was finally beginning to make its way into the liberal mainstream. To symbolize his commitment to solar, Carter dedicated the rooftop installation of a $28,000 hot water heating system—built by Szego—that would be used for portions of the ground floor of the West Wing.

Like so much else about his presidency, placing a solar unit on the White House roof did Carter no political good at the time. His critics, if they noticed at all, saw it as a stunt to deflect blame from the gas crisis. Carter understood this but didn't care. He meant for the solar panels—visible from Pennsylvania Avenue—to be a symbol of his faith in American ingenuity to tackle the nation's toughest long-term problems.

The president's goal was to develop clean, nonpolluting energy sources and independence from Arab oil. He didn't mention combating climate change, though, the following year, his White House would raise the first official warnings about global warming anywhere in the world.

Carter mentioned how President Benjamin Harrison (he mistakenly called him William Henry Harrison) introduced electric lightbulbs to the White House in 1891, before they were commercially viable or technologically advanced. "A generation from now," Carter said, "this solar heater can either be a curiosity, a museum piece, an example of a road not taken—or it can be a small part of one of the greatest and most exciting adventures ever undertaken by the American people: harnessing the power of the sun."

As it turned out, the thirty-two solar panels became both museum pieces *and* inspirations. President Reagan cut research-and-development spending on alternative energy by two-thirds, wrecking Carter's commitment to clean energy. In 1985 Reagan let Carter's tax credits for solar expire, bankrupting George Szego's company and dozens of others and ceding clean-energy leadership to other countries. With oil prices falling, Reagan's

chief of staff, Donald T. Regan, described the roof panels as "just a joke" and ordered them taken down in 1986 as part of a renovation.

After languishing in a government warehouse, the panels were rescued by a professor at Unity College in Maine and used on the roof of the school dining hall. Eventually they were sent to the Smithsonian, the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum, and a museum in China. It wasn't until 2010 that President Obama put new-generation panels back on the White House roof and dramatically expanded funding for clean-energy development.

Solar power has since become the fastest-growing source of electricity in the United States. It represents just one of many ways a significant American president—buffeted by events—peered over the horizon.

Throughout Jimmy Carter's long life, classmates, colleagues, and friends—even members of his own family—found him hard to read. The enigma deepened in the presidency.

He was a disciplined and incorruptible president equipped with a sharp, omnivorous mind; a calm and adult president, dependable in a crisis; a friendless president who, in the 1976 primaries, had defeated or alienated a good portion of the Democratic Party; a stubborn and acerbic president, never demeaning but sometimes cold; a nonideological president who worshipped science along with God and saw governing as a series of engineering problem sets; an austere, even spartan president out of sync with American consumer culture; a focused president whose diamond-cutter attention to detail brought ridicule but also historic results; a charming president in small groups and when speaking off the cuff but awkward in front of a teleprompter and often allergic to small talk and to offering a simple "Thank you"; an insular, all-business president who seemed sometimes to prefer humanity to human beings but prayed for the strength to do better.

For some in Carter's orbit, his impatient and occasionally persnickety style—a few dubbed him "the grammarian in chief" for correcting their memos—would mean that their respect would turn to reverence and love only in later years. Only then did many of those who served in his administration fully understand that he had accomplished much more in office than even they knew.

• • •

Carter's farsighted domestic and foreign policy achievements would be largely forgotten when he shrank in the job and lost the 1980 election.

He forged the nation's first comprehensive energy policy and historic accomplishments on the environment that included strong new pollution controls, the first toxic waste cleanup, and doubling the size of the national park system. He set the bar on consumer protection; signed two major pieces of ethics legislation; carried out the first civil service reform in a century; established two new Cabinet-level departments (Energy and Education); deregulated airlines, trucking, and utilities in ways that served the public interest; and took federal judgeships out of the era of tokenism by selecting more women and blacks for the federal bench than all of his predecessors combined, times five. Ruth Bader Ginsburg, whom he appointed to the appellate court, said Carter "literally changed the complexion of the federal judiciary," though he never had a Supreme Court vacancy to fill. Carter did the same for the executive branch, while empowering for the first time the vice president and the first lady, both of whom were given far more responsibilities than any of their predecessors.

So much legislation passed on his watch that major bill-signing ceremonies—a rarity in later administrations—were greeted by the jaded press with yawns. While Carter served only one term, he was, unlike Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, backed by a Democratic Congress for all four years, with a Senate where filibusters were rare. This meant that for all of his problems, he enacted more of his agenda than any postwar American president except Lyndon Johnson, whose legislative program was so big it made the next Democratic president's look underwhelming by comparison. Even little-publicized Carter bills changed parts of American life, from requiring banks to invest in low-income communities to legalizing craft breweries. While Carter suffered several painful defeats—on tax reform, welfare reform, consumer protection, and health care—he won much more than he lost. This scorecard went largely unnoticed, in part because the aggressive post-Watergate press tended to assume the worst about him.

Carter was a Democratic president, but he accomplished many things commonly associated with Ronald Reagan. It was Carter, not Reagan, who ended rampant inflation by appointing Paul Volcker as chairman of the Federal Reserve Board; Carter, not Reagan, who cut the deficit and the growth rate of the federal workforce; Carter, not Reagan, who first broke

with the Richard Nixon–Henry Kissinger policy of detente with Moscow by inviting Soviet dissidents to the White House and building the MX missile. Contrary to his reputation, Carter—after some hesitation—showed toughness by placing intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe. His Pentagon developed the B-2 stealth bomber and other high-tech weapons that the Soviet Union could not match. He sharply increased the defense budget and approved covert aid to anti-Communist Afghan rebels—the mujahideen—who helped turn Afghanistan into the Soviet Union's Vietnam.

And yet Carter also took risks for peace—and paid a political price for avoiding escalation, most conspicuously in the case of the Panama Canal Treaties. Ratified despite fierce opposition, the treaties prevented the deployment of more than a hundred thousand troops to the Canal Zone and dramatically improved the image of the United States across Latin America.

Carter was the first president with a policy devoted explicitly to promoting individual human rights in other countries. While applied unevenly, the new approach helped hasten the demise of more than a dozen dictatorships, gave hope to dissidents worldwide, and set a new and timeless global standard for how governments should treat their own people. Conservatives who had once thought it naive later admitted that the policy helped win the Cold War. And in the wake of the Vietnam War and CIA abuses that left the United States deeply unpopular in many parts of the world, the humble and respectful approach of the Carter administration offered a model for repairing America's global reputation in the 2020s.

Carter himself made a good argument that his most lasting foreign policy achievement was walking through the door that Richard Nixon had opened to China in 1972. He ended Nixon's and Gerald Ford's unworkable "two-China policy" (which tilted toward Taiwan) and established full diplomatic relations with Peking, a move that launched the world's most important bilateral relationship.

Four decades on, the 1978 Camp David Accords survive as a world-historic achievement—the most successful peace treaty since the end of the Second World War. On at least three occasions, Egyptian president Anwar Sadat or Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin packed their bags to leave Camp David and wreck the summit. Over and over, Carter's inspired tenacity—his wheedling, cajoling, improvising, insisting—saved the day. Franklin Roosevelt's wartime diplomat, Averell Harriman, exulted, "What

he has done with the Middle East is one of the most extraordinary things any president in history has ever accomplished." Few remember that the deal nearly collapsed after Camp David. Six months later, at great political risk, Carter traveled to Cairo and Jerusalem and painstakingly put the whole thing back together. After his presidency, Israelis and American Jews grew concerned about Carter's pro-Palestinian sentiments. But deeds are more important than words. The Israelis and Egyptians have not fired a shot in anger in more than forty years.

Beyond faith, ambition, and grit, there was one constant in the complexity of his story. Today almost every politician wants to be seen as an outsider; Carter was the real thing. As a six-year-old, he was viewed as a country bumpkin when he ventured from his farm in tiny Archery, Georgia, to go to school in the daunting metropolis of Plains, population 406. He was a defiant outsider at the Naval Academy, where he was hazed more viciously than most other plebes, and at sea, where his shipmates thought he spent too much time reading manuals in his bunk. Back in Plains, his tolerant views on race set him outside the circle of his white supremacist neighbors, and in the Georgia State Senate, he never joined the poker games. When, after a period of depression and a born-again experience, he went door-to-door as a Baptist missionary in Pennsylvania and Massachusetts, his accent stuck out. He was elected governor by campaigning against Atlanta's insider "big money boys," then became a pariah to the rednecks who had put him in office. Beginning at 0 percent in the polls, he essentially invented the now-commonplace outsider presidential bid, which was both a campaign strategy and an authentic reflection of his nature. And in office, he avoided clubby relations with Congress and the Washington establishment.

Even Carter's political orientation lay outside the standard categories. He wasn't an angry populist, like his grandfather's patron, Tom Watson, or a devotee of the New Deal, which his father came to loathe. His political roots are easier to discern in the progressive traditions of the turn of the twentieth century, which stressed reform and rejection of special interests. The rest was hard to pigeonhole: he shared Theodore Roosevelt's conservationist ethic and championing of health and safety regulation; Woodrow Wilson's diplomatic courage and global ideals; Calvin Coolidge's personal and budget austerity; Herbert Hoover's engineering background and

humanitarian impulses; FDR's longheaded concern for future generations; and John F. Kennedy's "idealism without illusions." His altruistic post-presidency was rivaled only by that of John Quincy Adams—another one-term president—who worked against slavery when he was elected to the House of Representatives after leaving office.

Carter's favorite president was Harry Truman, who was also unpopular in office but grew in stature over time. He placed Truman's famous sign, "The Buck Stops Here," on his desk in the Oval Office and took the idea of accountability so seriously that, when running for reelection, he gave himself poor to middling grades on national television. Like Truman, Carter believed his Baptist faith required a strict separation of church and state. He rarely spoke of his devout beliefs—even to aides—and made a point of not allowing prayer breakfasts or other religious events at the White House. But he occasionally talked to world leaders in private about religious freedom (a conversation with Deng Xiaoping helped spread Christianity to millions in China), and he infused his politics with what one of his speechwriters called a "moral ideology." He thought US control of the Panama Canal a moral injustice to Panamanians; wasteful water projects a moral offense against fiscal responsibility; environmental degradation a moral betrayal of the planet; and war—anywhere—a moral assault on the deepest human values.

Carter's high moral purpose sometimes made him look sanctimonious, especially to skeptics who failed to notice there wasn't enough hypocrisy to bolster the indictment. The critics didn't know yet that there was little to hide. But if his integrity and values were authentic, the gap between the public and private man could be wide.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, his national security adviser, was hardly the only one to notice that Carter had "three smiles": the radiant, toothy, and sometimes contrived grin that delighted crowds and cartoonists; the tight-lipped rictus when he was angry but didn't want to show it; and the relaxed and welcome smile he flashed in private when he found something funny or got off a dry, biting line.

The striking blue eyes told a similar story: loving or contemptuous, soulful or stern. When he was governor and president, the easiest way to get a glare from Carter's icy blues was to move from the merits of a decision to the politics of it. He drew a bright line between campaigning—which he did for governor in 1970 and president in 1976 with a canny grasp of

all the angles—and governing, where his high-minded disdain for politics exasperated other politicians and came off as naive.

Carter's 1980 defeat had many causes—the divisive Kennedy challenge in the Democratic primaries; the prolonged captivity of the hostages in Iran; the wretched state of the American economy—but Carter's nature played a role. He seemed as if he were carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders—never a good look. And while he had millions of admirers who liked his Everyman qualities, his modesty stripped him of the aura enjoyed and exploited by other leaders.

Unlike most who reach the summit, Carter did not always possess what soldiers call "command presence." He could bark out orders but lacked an intangible quality that makes people want to charge up the hill behind. This made him an unusual historical specimen: a visionary who was not a natural leader.

Rosalynn, his full partner and closest adviser, thought he was a leader of a different kind. "A leader can lead people where they *want* to go," she said in 2015. "A great leader leads people where they *ought* to go." Her husband was not a great leader—no historians consider him in the first rank of American presidents—but Carter was a surprisingly significant one, a man who lived the advice of the columnist Walter Lippmann to "plant trees we will never get to sit under."

The planting began in a distant America, setting on the horizon, where a real-life Huck Finn launched his own restless adventure.

Age thirteen, Archery, Georgia, 1937.

PART ONE

SOURCES OF STRENGTH

1

DADDY AND HOT

When he was old and allowed himself a reverie, he remembered the soil and the way it felt as it caressed his bare feet. From early March until late October, he almost never wore shoes, even to school. The loam of southwest Georgia was made of dark sand and red clay that spread over his face and his clothes and his house—one day as powder, the next, he said, as pellets the size of grits.

The blue-eyed, freckle-faced boy enjoyed a carefree idyll in the early 1930s that was little different than it would have been in the 1830s or 1730s or even—he liked to say—two thousand years ago, when Jesus Christ walked the earth. Time was measured not by clocks or pocket watches but by the sun and the clanging of the cast-iron farm bell. Until he was eleven, his homestead had no running water, no electricity, no insulation, and no mechanized farm equipment; only slop jars and outhouses, hand-pumped wells, kerosene lamps, ancient mule-driven plows, and black laborers to work the land in a feudal system just one step removed from slavery.

In other ways, he experienced many of the technologies that were coursing through the twentieth century. His boyhood on the farm coincided almost exactly with the years of the Great Depression, when his family suffered along with the rest of the country. But they were well-to-do by local standards and boasted a telephone (on a shared "party line" with two other families and an operator, Miss Gladys, who knew everyone's business), automobiles

(a Plymouth and later a pickup truck), and a large battery-powered radio, shaped like a cathedral, which everyone sat and stared at while the voices of *Little Orphan Annie*, *Amos 'n' Andy*, Jack Benny, Glenn Miller, and Franklin D. Roosevelt crackled across the small parlor. Atlanta was 160 miles north—as distant as Moscow or Peking, he wrote later, though dreams of the outside world were never far from his mind.

His first universe was Plains, named for the Plains of Dura, the land near Babylon in the Book of Daniel where ancient Israelites refused to bow down to idols. The perfectly flat and circular town, a mere mile in diameter, had been founded only forty years earlier by enterprising merchants anxious to convert the cotton bales that lined the unpaved roads into an outcropping of low-slung buildings that might bring prosperity for themselves and local farmers.

In summer, Plains lay inside "the gnat belt." Locals learned from childhood the subtle gesture later known as "the Georgia wave": flicking the annoying if harmless insects away from their faces or more often ignoring them altogether. In winter, it was surprisingly cold, and the boy's most unpleasant childhood memories were of shivering all night, even under blankets. Set on the western edge of Sumter County, Plains looked like a movie facade and consisted mostly of a one-sided Main Street—a mere one block in length—that local farmers would visit on weekends by horse and buggy or Model T, eager to get out of the fields to shop and converse. Fewer than half of the town's residents were white.

One of his earliest memories came when he was four years old and first visited the clapboard three-bedroom farmhouse that his family would move to in the country, nearly three miles up the road from Plains. The modest Arts and Crafts "kit house" had been built by the previous owner from materials shipped in a boxcar from Sears, Roebuck, whose catalogue was often a family's only connection to the bounty of the wider world. That day, the front door was locked, but the small boy was able to slip through a window, then come around and open the door from the inside. Daddy's smiling approval of his first useful act remained vivid in his mind. It would not come often.

The house where he was raised lay a few hundred feet down a dirt road—also known as US Route 280—from a tiny dot on the map called Archery, Georgia, home to fewer than thirty farm families, most of them dependent on his father for work. All but the boy's and one other family were

black, a circumstance of his early years that would give him genuine comfort with African Americans and, four decades later, ease his way when he spoke carelessly and needed their forgiveness. West of the family farmhouse, beyond his father's small commissary and the half dozen tenant farmer shacks he owned, was the home of the white foreman of a maintenance section of the Seaboard Air Line Railroad, plus shacks for the five black railroad workers. The center of the tiny town, if it could be called that, was an African Methodist Episcopal church, which stood across from a small store for black customers, its roof covered by flattened Prince Albert tobacco cans.

That was about it for Archery. Most of the rest was 350 acres of his family's property—not just land but proving ground. The boy took to the soil with an ardor that he would one day apply to every endeavor. He planted himself, early, in futile anticipation of the approval of the person who meant most to him. For the rest of his life, he would pressure himself to measure up to his father's expectations—and his own—and push harder on all fronts when he did not.

Like nearly every white man in the county, Daddy was comfortable upholding a system of rigid segregation and quiet repression that he and most of his family assumed was the natural order of the universe. Within that pernicious system, he prided himself on treating black people with what he, in his blinkered fashion, considered respect. When the boy grew up and became a liberal, he made no secret of his father's racism, but he sometimes sugarcoated the brutal realities of the time.

Daddy always wore a hat—gray felt fedora in winter, straw Panama in summer—and went nowhere without a Home Run or Picayune cigarette dangling from his lips. He was a merchant by background and never one to bend his back much working in the fields. But he refused to pay for skilled labor he could do himself and so became not just a farmer and forester but also a herdsman, blacksmith, carpenter, and shoemaker. One of the first places the slight, strawberry-blond boy could work alongside his father was in the small machine shop where he turned a hand crank on the forge blower as fast as he could to keep the fire going.

His father called him "son" or Hot Shot—Hot for short—a nickname that, depending on Daddy's mood, recognized his potential or knocked him down a notch. It seemed to fit the boy, one of his sisters said later, because his emotions ran deep, and he was always in a rush to do something significant with his life. Like other southerners addressing their elders, Hot called

his father "Sir." He was "my hero" and "best friend." He "worshipped him" even as he waited in vain for outward signs of love and pride.

When he was very young, he fished sometimes with Daddy in Choctawhatchee Creek, a mile north of Archery, where the family fields drained. The Choctawhatchee flowed into other creeks that led near Albany, Georgia, to the Flint River, a great waterway the boy would someday have the power and the passion to protect. Hot spent hours exploring the creek with his playmates and developed there what he called later "an immersion in the natural world that has marked my whole existence."

Daddy introduced the boy to the deep Christian faith that would become a central part of his life. He made church and religion not just instructive but fun by taking Hot and his fellow Sunday school students—the Royal Ambassadors, a kind of Baptist Boy Scout troop—to the local grain mill for sleepovers. After fishing and swimming in a nearby pond and sword fights with corncobs, the boys would gather around as Daddy read Saint Paul's letter to the Corinthians and urged them to be "ambassadors for Christ." Then they lay down to sleep on bags of grain with an aroma so sublime that the boy could still conjure it seven decades later.

Once in a while, Hot was allowed to tag along when Daddy and a buddy went hunting just after sunrise. For quail, he would shout "Point!" as one of the dogs froze—a sign of birds to be flushed. For doves, the responsibilities grew: He ran ahead to retrieve the fallen birds, then arrived at grade school a few minutes late. The feathers still clung to his sweater, a silent boast to classmates that his father had brought him along at a younger age than the other boys could claim. Before long, he was a fine shot himself, a skill he would carry into his midnineties.

Daddy was a stickler for the truth. Hot would say later that his basic integrity and contempt for lying came from him. But there was a harsher side. Much of the time, he was mercilessly competitive with his firstborn son, as Hot would replicate later with his own three sons. Daddy didn't compete at picking cotton or other work in the fields—which he mostly avoided—but he always had to prove he was better on the crude red clay tennis court he built, where his wicked slice beat Hot every time. The same went for fishing and hunting. Constantly losing to his father cut deep. In 1996 the boy, now a former president of the United States, wrote plaintively, "Today I think I could hold my own with him as a marksman and could even outdo him with a fly rod."

South Georgia had a 245-day growing season—an unrelenting pace for the sharecroppers, of course, but also for the family. Hot's complexion was so fair that he sunburned easily, so his parents never let him stay out in the fields at midday. But that hardly offered a reprieve from work. As a child, one of his least-favorite chores was to make several consecutive trips carrying a two-and-a-half-gallon bucket of water in each hand from the spring down a steep incline to faraway fields, where the farmhands often drank one or two dipperfuls before carelessly spilling the rest, a wasting of a precious resource he noticed more than their working conditions.

Mopping cotton was worse. "We despised it," he remembered. An infestation of boll weevils in the 1920s and 1930s ravaged cotton fields across the South, forcing many farmers to turn away from their cash crop. The only way to fend off boll weevils was to mix arsenic, molasses, and water and apply the poisonous concoction to the central buds of every cotton plant. The idea was to attract the insects, then kill them, but mopping often did neither, while leaving a gooey mess—the boy's first evidence of unintended consequences. To protect against the swarms of flies and bees, he wore long pants that became so sticky with hardened molasses that at night they seemed to him to be standing at attention in the corner of his bedroom.

Avoiding chores brought an icy glare from his father that he would later make his own. When Hot was seven, as his family bundled into the car for a picnic, he admitted he had not pruned the watermelons. Daddy stopped the car, opened the door, and told him to get out. "He wasn't going to the picnic," his aunt Sissy remembered. She got out, too, and stayed to help him. "My heart just broke for that little boy," she said. "I'll never forget how he looked out there in the watermelon patch—so little and forlorn." Much later, he attributed his tenacity to his father's insistence that he finish whatever he started. Daddy demanded perfection, and his son would try all his life to provide it.

After school, Hot helped milk eight cows, feed the hogs, and wring the necks of chickens—but these tasks were a small portion of what he eventually did on the farm. Every tool he was allowed to use was a step forward in maturity. Hot started with a hoe, then a hatchet for weeding and chopping stove wood. A big day came when he was allowed to harness a docile mule, Emma, and hitch her to a primitive turning plow. Soon he was less an

ordinary boy than a newborn farmer, anxious to learn anything he could about the land. He said later that aspiring to do this work—a man's work—"equaled any other ambition I've ever had in my life."

Finally, after much pleading, Daddy entrusted Hot with the cultivation of his precious crops, a sophisticated task assigned to only a few skilled farmers. He started with corn and sweet potatoes and moved on to cotton—dethroned as agrarian king by depressed prices yet still vital—and peanuts, now the dominant crop in Sumter County. They grew awkwardly in the ground like potatoes but were in great demand everywhere to help feed the new national craze for peanut butter that had begun during the First World War.

Covering as much as twenty-five miles a day, he learned to use turning plows, harrows, and planters. He steered Emma down the rows of the growing plants, commanding her to turn right ("gee") or left ("haw"). Mistakes from an errant blade or poorly handled mule were easy for his father or the black foreman, Jack Clark, to discover. But Hot liked that his skill could be assessed in relation to others'. It was the same habit of mind that would draw him to engineering: "I felt that this was doing all I could possibly do, and that no one on the farm, no matter how strong or experienced, could do it better."

Plowing was a complicated job for a young boy. It required him to acquire broad knowledge of all the elements of successful cultivation: topography; absorption of rain; drainage; crop rotation; clodding (pressing oil from meal); preserving moisture in seedbed preparation; juxtaposition of fertilizer (usually guano, from bird excrement) and seed; insect control; and how to mix, measure, and apply fertilizer—all done in hard, often unforgiving red clay soil under a broiling Georgia sun.

Mules—well known to be smarter than horses—had a way of feigning exhaustion, and Emma was no exception. With temperatures often over one hundred degrees, an aspiring farmer had to learn when his mule was genuinely suffering sunstroke—and when a boy his age might keel over, too. All of this required a prodigious work ethic, a fierce discipline, and an attention to detail that Hot learned when he was barely old enough for school.

On most family farms, little or nothing is discarded, but Daddy took this to extremes. One winter, he cobbled too many high-button ladies' shoes with pointy toes that hadn't been popular since the turn of the century and weren't selling well in the stores. Hot had to wear them to school, where the mocking laughter would echo for him through the years.

There were compensations: a baby alligator, a bulldog named Bozo to help him hunt squirrels, and a pony—a gift that greatly excited him on his seventh Christmas—he called Lady. But his father believed that everyone and everything on the farm—even Lady—must always earn its keep. "There always seemed to be a need for a reckoning in the early days / What came in equaled what went out like oscillating ocean waves," he wrote decades later in the title poem for a collection of his poetry called *Always a Reckoning*. When the colt that Lady bore every year or two didn't fetch a high enough price to pay for Lady's hay and corn, Daddy wanted Hot to make better use of her. "How long since you rode Lady?" he asked, as if even his son's playtime contained a lesson about earning one's way in life.

Daddy didn't like to spend money on veterinarians, so Hot learned to treat problems such as scours, mastitis, and screwworm, and what to do when a calf wouldn't descend to be born. In the slaughterhouse, Daddy and Jack Clark would shoot several two-hundred-pound hogs with a .22-caliber rifle, then slash their throats and let the blood drain into a large pan. When he was small and repelled by this process, his father turned to Jack and said, "The sight of blood is too much for the little boy."

It wasn't. Before long, Hot would eagerly help boil the huge hogs in cast-iron kettles to loosen their hair, then scrape off the follicles with dull knives before washing the liver, heart, kidneys, and other organs and preparing the small intestines to be sausage casings. Chores that others might try to avoid were for him a way to feel closer to his father. As a preteen, he castrated two-week-old piglets, shot edible wild game, and accompanied Daddy to the meetings of the area's eight-family beef club, where the host would slaughter a steer with the help of the group before everyone went home with delectable innards. "We never heard of anything as strange as a vegetarian," he wrote later. The family often gorged on fresh brains, scrambled with eggs.

After school, on weekends, and during blistering summers, Hot joined the black tenant farmers and day laborers his father employed not just in the work of picking cotton and shaking and stacking peanuts, but also in pulling worms and boll weevils out of cotton by hand; planting corn (used for fuel and feed), raising okra, peas, collards, turnips, and cabbage; harvesting timber, then clearing new ground with crosscut saws and dynamite under the stumps; shaking trees until swarms of honeybees dropped into one of the farm's two dozen beehives, then processing the honey (this ended when Daddy was so badly stung that he landed in the hospital); bottling the vanilla

and chocolate drinks that his father sold in the surrounding area under the label Plains Maid; shearing sheep for wool and plucking geese for the fine down that filled handmade bedcovers that they transported fourteen miles to Americus, the county seat, for sale in the fancy stores.

As he grew older, the one chore Hot tried to avoid was cutting twenty-five acres of sugarcane and hauling the heavy stalks to the mill in his father's pickup truck, which he was allowed to operate as soon as he could see over the dashboard. He found cutting cane stalks with a machete dangerous and unpleasant, especially with so many rattlesnakes and water moccasins in the sugarcane fields. He preferred working in the mill, where he learned to fire the boiler and burn the stalks.

Above all else, he looked forward to working alongside Daddy in his combination blacksmith and carpentry shop. He learned to use a sledgehammer, tongs, and anvil to shape and sharpen steel plow points; to shoe mules and horses; to build steel rims for wagons and buggies; and to repair almost any piece of broken equipment. Daddy taught him welding, cobbling, and cabinetry. His love of woodworking would endure throughout his life.

The multiple skills required for committed work as a farmer and artisan would give him the confidence to set his mind to any task and qualify him for a simple adjective long out of fashion but once high praise: able.

Daddy could be amusing with his friends but had little sense of humor about himself. He once ordered by mail a fancy suit that was so big that it engulfed him like a child when it arrived. Daddy sulked all day about it and skipped church. "And no one in our family blinked or smiled," Hot wrote later. But he likely derived some satisfaction from seeing his father fail to measure up, or he wouldn't have later written a poem about it.

The most memorable rebuke from his father came when Hot was about ten. After a sharp piece of wood penetrated deep into his wrist, causing intense pain, Hot stayed home from the fields. "The rest of us will be here working while Jimmy lies here in the house and reads a book," his father snapped. With Daddy's approval at risk—he called him "Jimmy" instead of "Hot" only when disgusted with him—the boy wrapped a belt tightly around his wrist and pushed it up against a fencepost until the piece of wood was ejected in an eruption of pus. Then he pedaled on his bicycle as

fast as he could to join his father in the cotton field. "It's good to have you back with us, Hot," his father said.

Hot remembered all six times his father whipped him, the punishment administered with a long, thin peach tree switch. There might have been many more had his mother not stood between her husband and her children. The first, when he was four or five, was for stealing two pennies from the collection plate at church. "That was the last money I ever stole," he wrote, an assertion that even his worst enemies would never contest. He was whipped for playing with matches in the barn, and for three offenses against one of his sisters, including shooting her in the rear with a BB gun after she'd hit him with a wrench. The final whipping came when Hot retreated to his tree house during a noisy party his parents hosted and didn't respond when his father called for him. By this time, the boy had grown a little sullen and uncooperative; it was the first shadow of his implacable, prickly side.

One day Daddy asked Hot to come with him while he picked up a holiday turkey at a nearby farm owned by an attractive young widow. Hot thought this was strange; they had plenty of turkeys on their own farm. His father, who seemed to know the Webster County property well, directed him to the pen out back and told him to pick out a turkey while he went into the house. Hot followed his instructions and waited a long time. When his father and the dark-haired woman finally exited together, he suspected strongly that they had been doing more than discussing turkeys. His willingness to volunteer this story nearly seventy years later suggests that he never fully extinguished his resentment toward his father.

Hot wondered why—even in the nearly thirteen years before his younger brother was born—Daddy never suggested that he might want to run the farm after he was gone. Why did he treat two of his younger siblings with greater tenderness? Why had he never "showed much emotion or love toward me"? Only much later would his mother tell him that Daddy had wept from missing him when Hot went to stay with his grandparents in Columbus, Georgia, for a week. But this did little to salve the wound. He "despised the discipline he used to shape what I should be." In a poem written decades after his father's death, he confessed:

This is a pain I mostly hide,
but ties of blood, or seed, endure,
and even now I feel inside

the hunger for the outstretched hand,
a man's embrace to take me in,
the need for just a word of praise.

In time Jimmy Carter would understand that the inner steel that took him so far was forged in Earl Carter's foundry and on his farm.

2

THE CARTERS AND THE GORDYS

The tangled history of America is written in Jimmy Carter's genes. One of his ancestors, William Almy, arrived from England in 1630 with John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Winthrop described the new land—in words invoked later by Ronald Reagan—as a shining "city on a hill." Other forebears, Quakers and Baptists, spread to New Jersey, Virginia, and North Carolina. Isaac Carter bequeathed fifty-eight slaves to his children, among them the first James Carter, who commanded a company in the Continental army during the American Revolution before moving to Wilkes County, Georgia, in 1787. This was the year Georgia became the fourth state to ratify the US Constitution—after insisting along with other southern states that the new nation's founding document protect the institution of slavery.

In 1825 the Creek Indians discovered they had been swindled by the state of Georgia. The tribe sold millions of acres to the state for a mere $200,000 in the Treaty of Indian Springs. The traitorous mixed-blood Creek chief who negotiated the fraudulent deal was executed by other chiefs, but it was too late. A lottery was established for white settlers, many of whom were eligible to win Indian land for as little as four cents an acre. The Carters bought land in the late 1820s at those absurdly low prices, and in the 1830s they acquired hundreds more acres, some of it vacated by Indians forced west by President Andrew Jackson on the infamous Trail of Tears.

While Carter pleaded ignorance during his 1976 presidential campaign as to whether his ancestors held slaves, he acknowledged as much after leaving the presidency. By then, he also noted readily that his family's property in Sumter and Webster Counties had originally belonged to the Creeks and other tribes. "To have it taken away from you is terrible," he said in 2006 in reference to the land his ancestors grabbed, comparing the treatment of Native Americans to the plight of the Palestinians in the Middle East.

There was violence in the blood of the peacemaker. Jimmy's great-great-grandfather Wiley Carter shot a neighbor who had publicly accused Carter's wife of adultery. Wiley's son, Littleberry Walker Carter, was stabbed to death in a dispute over receipts from a merry-go-round, and his wife committed suicide on the day of his funeral. Littleberry's son, William Archibald ("Billy") Carter, Jimmy's grandfather, was killed in a dispute over a stolen desk.*

Littleberry and his two brothers fought under Confederate general Jeb Stuart in what Jimmy, when talking to fellow southerners, often called the War Between the States. The Carter boys took part in twenty-one battles, including Gettysburg, where they laid down artillery fire intended to cover Major General George Pickett's fateful assault on the Union lines. Their barrage—and Pickett's Charge—failed, and Gettysburg turned the tide of the Civil War, as President Carter explained to Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin 115 years later when they came over from nearby Camp David to tour the battlefield.

Wiley Carter left his descendants forty-three slaves and $22,000 each ($300,000 today)—a significant legacy. But after the war, the slaves were freed, and Confederate money was worthless. All they had left was their land. When Reconstruction ended in 1877, the Carters and other white landowners could once again exploit black labor and control state and local politics without fear of interference.

When Billy Carter was killed in 1903, his bereft widow, Nina, couldn't cope with his loss. So control of the family shifted to their sixteen-year-old son, Alton, whom Jimmy later revered as a father figure. Alton sold the sprawling timber farm and moved the family by mule train from Arlington,

*"I haven't been very belligerent in my life," Jimmy Carter chuckled when he was in his nineties, just home from yet another peace mission. "Maybe because of that ancestral background."

Georgia, to the newly incorporated and thriving town of Plains. Alton helped raise his four siblings and made sure his younger brother, James Earl Carter, Jimmy's father, got some schooling. Earl made it through the tenth grade at Riverside Military Academy in the Blue Ridge Mountains, which was the most education any Carter had ever received until then.

Earl was already an able detail man—a trait he would pass down to his older son. During the First World War, he joined the Quartermasters Corps and rose to sergeant, though he never shipped out for Europe. He returned from the army to resume work in Alton's general store—the Plains Mercantile Company—before leaving with his brother's permission to start J. E. Carter's, a grocery and meat market just down Main Street, with a "pressing club" out back where a black worker cleaned and ironed clothes. He owned an icehouse, began brokering peanuts, and borrowed $7,000—the only debt of his life—to buy seven hundred acres of good farmland in nearby Webster County, where he parceled out some of the land to sharecroppers. Alton marveled that his affable brother Earl was one of those men who "make money every time they lay down their hands."

By the time of his death three decades later, Earl Carter owned a successful seed and fertilizer warehouse, a fire insurance and mortgage company, and nearly four thousand acres of farms across two counties, worked by two hundred men at harvest time. Much of the land was assembled through farm foreclosures, under which Earl would take possession of property when the owners couldn't repay the loans he'd made to them. Jimmy Carter makes no specific mention of the foreclosures in his memoirs. To his wide circle of friends, Earl was known as a warm and gregarious man, an exceptionally hard worker who also knew how to have a good time.

Jimmy's mother was Lillian Gordy Carter, a woman so captivating and irreverent that, during the Carter presidency, she became a frequent guest on the *Tonight* show. The Gordys were descended from slaveholding Scotch-Irish and French colonialists who settled in southwest Georgia in the 1830s, also on land vacated when the Indians were forced westward. Several fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War.

Lillian's grandfather, James Thomas Gordy, a plantation owner and county tax collector, fathered children with his white wife, Harriet, including Jimmy's grandfather. He also fathered a son with his slave Esther

Johnson. Their son, Berry Gordy, became the largest black landowner in Washington County, Georgia. His grandson, Berry Gordy Jr., was the celebrated African American founder of Motown Records. Jimmy Carter and Berry Gordy thus shared the same great-grandfather, though neither made note of it.

Lillian's father was James "Jim Jack" Gordy, born in 1863, and named after James Jackson, the young Revolutionary War hero who accepted the British surrender at Savannah and became an early governor of Georgia. Tall, lean, bow-tied Jim Jack was a dandy who skipped town and left his first fiancée at the altar, which led his second fiancée, Ida Nicholson, Jimmy's grandmother, a quiet but strong woman, to insist that he be standing in the church before she dressed for the ceremony and married him. Ida later told Jimmy's sister Ruth that after the wedding, she set aside an hour a day to be alone and scream as loud as she could: "Damn! Damn! Damn!"

Ida grew up hiding her dime-store novel habit by pretending to read the Bible in the parlor. She passed down the reading obsession to her daughter, Bessie Lillian, born in 1898, the fourth of their nine children, including two cousins who moved in when Ida's brother committed suicide. Like her son, Jimmy, and granddaughter, Amy Carter, Lillian grew up as a bookworm. "I read the almanac, the encyclopedia. I simply had to have something to read," she remembered. When she didn't, she settled for works by Cicero—in Latin. "Some think I'm queer," she said later, though her eccentricities seemed well tolerated by friends and family in both childhood and adulthood.

Jim Jack was a politically engaged former schoolteacher who served for thirty-three years as postmaster of Richland, Georgia, and for a time as a revenue agent charged with destroying bootleg liquor stills. At the post office, he let Lillian, who claimed she was his favorite, sit with him while he worked, and she witnessed him soaking up intelligence from all quarters. He was nimble enough with patronage to hold his postmastership for four decades through both Democratic and Republican administrations in Washington. Jimmy later likened his maternal grandfather to a pollster without polls. He could forecast local election returns with astonishing accuracy and was known as one of the most politically savvy men in Webster and Stewart Counties.

Starting in the 1890s, Jim Jack had political ties to Tom Watson, the fiery agrarian rebel who most personified turn-of-the-century southern populism—the original class-based movement that led to many checks on American capitalism before curdling into racism. Watson ran for vice

president and later president on the ticket of the People's Party, an innovative third party implacably opposed to "moneyed interests." Much of the People's Party platform from the 1890s—including the creation of a federal income tax and the direct election of US senators—became law in 1913 under President Woodrow Wilson.

When he ran for president, Carter claimed repeatedly that it was his maternal grandfather who gave Congressman Watson the idea for the landmark Rural Free Delivery (RFD) legislation that dramatically expanded American postal service, then the closest connection most Americans had to the federal government. The family long assumed this to be true, but it almost certainly was not. (The idea appears to have originated in Indiana.)

Jim Jack named one of his sons Tom Watson Gordy, hosted Watson overnight in Richland, and helped manage a region in his 1920 US Senate campaign—all in the period after Watson became a virulent racist and anti-Semite who incited the lynch mob that in 1915 hanged Leo Frank, an innocent Jewish businessman wrongly convicted of having murdered a thirteen-year-old girl. Jimmy's mother grew up revering Watson anyway.

Lillian claimed that while "Watson hated blacks," her father was more enlightened. She said he instilled tolerant views on race and religion that she, in turn, conveyed to her children. But there is no record of Jim Jack ever taking issue with the famously vitriolic racism and anti-Semitism of his hero. When his daughter Elizabeth decided in 1933 to marry a Jew, Louis Braunstein, she did so in secret before moving to Chattanooga, Tennessee. Jimmy remembered his Uncle Louie as the strongest man he ever knew—a man who could do twenty-five chin-ups with one arm, though he couldn't change a flat tire.*

The influenza pandemic of 1918 killed fifty million to a hundred million people worldwide, including one of Lillian's beloved sisters. This inspired her to be a nurse, a career decision that eight decades later would influence her son's passion for curing devastating global diseases. In 1921 she moved eighteen miles down the road from Richland to Plains to work as a nurse in training at the Wise Sanitarium, a sixty-bed hospital that local boosters called "the little Mayo Clinic."

*When Carter mentioned that to Jerry Rafshoon, a close adviser who grew up Jewish in the South, Rafshoon replied, "Mr. President, we don't change tires. We hire rednecks for that."

Lillian Gordy met Earl Carter at a dance but was later turned off after watching him do ostentatious half gainers off a diving board into frigid water. "I just didn't like his looks," she remembered. Earl's nickname was changing from Turtle to the more impressive Turk, but he still looked like the former: short, bespectacled, and balding.

Even so, Earl fit Lillian's life plan for herself. After they were caught in a downpour in his Model T, she warmed to him. Earl, then twenty-nine, proposed marriage, Lillian said, mostly because he was upset that his younger sister—newly pregnant—had just announced her engagement. He wanted to be married first. At the time, Lillian was training for several weeks at Grady Hospital in Atlanta. Earl sent the ring to a doctor there, who presented it to her, an approach she didn't appreciate. In an oral history, Lillian sounded as if she agreed to marry Earl so that she could end her Atlanta training, which she disliked.

But over time she came to love the man who called her "Darlin'"—an endearment Jimmy would later pick up and use with his wife, though it came out as the full "Darling." "He was the kind of Christian who didn't mind if you took a drink," Lillian said. "He was happy all day. He smiled just like Jimmy does." One night shortly after their wedding, they wandered into the yard outside their rooming house at 100 West Church Street and settled under a pecan tree, where they conceived a child.

James Earl Carter Jr. came into the world weighing eight and a half pounds at seven o'clock sharp on the morning of October 1, 1924, in the Wise Sanitarium, making him the first American president to be born in a hospital. Lillian wrote his nickname on his birth record: "'Jimmy' now—but later of course it will be 'Jim.'" (It never was.) Earl was ecstatic. "He was oohing and aahing so much you'd have thought the baby was Jesus Christ," Lillian deadpanned in 1977. "I knew he wasn't, of course, because I knew I wasn't a virgin."

Gloria would follow in two years. Nicknamed Go-Go, she was taller and more rambunctious than her diminutive older brother and described by Lillian as "more or less the leader of my children," suggesting that birth order (or future positions in life) would not automatically confer leadership qualities on Jimmy. The siblings quarreled often but drew closer as adults living in the same town. Years later, Lillian said that while she

had four brilliant children, Gloria was the "most brilliant" and that Jimmy agreed with that assessment.

Ruth, five years younger than Jimmy, was named after one of Earl's former girlfriends, who had died in a car accident. The crash was blamed on a black man who mysteriously disappeared in the aftermath.* While Jimmy and Gloria chafed under their father's discipline, Ruth—whom Earl considered "so much prettier than Shirley Temple"—became his pet. Ruth, nicknamed Boop-a-Doop, enjoyed special stature in the family because as an infant she had nearly died from an undiagnosed illness. When she recovered, Earl held up the baby and said, according to family lore, "She'll have whatever she wants." Ruth later came to believe that her father's doting on her and favoring her so conspicuously over Jimmy and Gloria was "not altogether healthy" and at the root of her depression in the years before she became a well-known evangelist.

Billy came nearly thirteen years after Jimmy, when Lillian was thirty-nine. He was, Lillian said, "a mistake." Earl was the kind of husband who, when informed his wife was pregnant for the fourth time, offered her $1,000 if she had twins. He gave her $500 for Billy, who was born in 1937 and nicknamed Buckshot or Buck. Hot and Buck barely knew each other growing up, which complicated their relationship when the brothers later worked together in the family business. Billy looked exactly like his father and inherited his good ol' boy nature; he was much closer to Earl than Jimmy was, in part because Earl felt that he had "failed with Jimmy," as Lillian put it, by being too strict. He overcompensated by spoiling Billy, who had a near-photographic memory but little of Jimmy's self-discipline.

After his death, Lillian depicted Earl as a "great man" who backed her in her nursing ambitions, but she admitted that "I always accused him of being kinder to everyone else than he was to me." In later years, the same complaint was sometimes made about Jimmy by certain family members. Jimmy also inherited a fanatical punctuality from his father, who once told a doctor who had kept him waiting, "I'm just as busy as you are."

It was true. Earl loved the adage "idle hands are the devil's workshop." By the 1920s, he was a small-town man on the make; a diversified entrepreneur

*Bryan Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative determined later that at least three lynchings of black Georgians took place in Sumter County in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries but could not calculate the number of disappearances.

rather than a tiller of the soil. "He never plowed an acre. He never hoed a row of corn," Lillian remembered. "He had blacks do that." After Jimmy went into politics, he sometimes implied that he grew up poor. When discussing his favorite book, James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a depiction of dire poverty in Depression-era Alabama, Carter claimed to an interviewer, "It told accurately what I knew as a child." He might more properly have said, what he *saw* as a child—in the shacks of his family's tenant farmers.

In 1940 those tenant farmers went on strike against Earl Carter and several other landowners in the area. They sought a pay increase from $1.00 a day to $1.25. Earl granted it but no other concessions. He walked to their shacks and told them they had a choice, which he considered a Christian gesture: they could pay what they owed him (mostly from his commissary) and be off his property with their possessions by sunrise, or they could show up as usual at the peanut picker the next morning. Jimmy never doubted that they would remain. "A buck a day wasn't bad pay then," he wrote.

In looking back, Carter liked to recall that his parents treated their black hired help "with great fairness and affection." Perhaps so, relative to other white landlords. Earl did agree at one point to sell 210 acres of his Webster County property to one of his black tenant farmers, an unusual act for the time. But this was hardly enough to distinguish him much from the brutal norm in the Jim Crow South. When Vern Smith, a black reporter for *Newsweek*, went to Archery in 1976 and talked to a few retired field hands with the promise that he wouldn't use their names, they painted a familiar picture. "Mr. Earl, he was sort of a hateful man," said one. "People in those days were *all* kind of mean, and I guess he had to along with the rest of 'em."

Earl Carter was the most prominent figure for miles around, with one exception: Bishop William Decker Johnson of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Bishop Johnson—short, reddish-brown face, impeccably dressed, possessing a doctorate in theology—was so brilliant that he was certified to teach public school at age fourteen. The son of an important church elder, he supervised hundreds of AME churches across five midwestern states, but home was Archery, described in 1916 by the *Centennial Encyclopaedia of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* as "a little village founded by [Johnson] for the education of the poorest of the poor." He auctioned off twenty-five

small plots to black families and built St. Mark's AME Church, which included a chapel, a private industrial school, an insurance company, and a publishing company. Johnson traveled incessantly, but when he came home, it was always a major occasion in the wider community, with the choir from Spelman College often coming down from Atlanta to perform. As a child, Jimmy would marvel over a picture of the bishop standing in front of the Eiffel Tower, and he occasionally accompanied his mother to hear Johnson's sermons at St. Mark's, which featured singing and clapping that was alien to anything Jimmy experienced at Plains Baptist Church. Earl, not surprisingly, did not venture into black churches.

To Jimmy, Bishop Johnson "seemed the epitome of success and power," and he noticed that the bishop defied certain Jim Crow social norms. He would never enter their house from the back, like other black visitors. And yet he would not be so defiant as to approach the front door, an affront to Mr. Earl. Instead, he would pull up to the Carter home in his chauffeured Cadillac or Packard and sound the horn or send his driver round back to let the family know he had arrived. When Earl came out to greet him, the bishop would either sit in the car talking to him out the window, or the two men would stand together under the shade of a large magnolia tree in the Carters' front yard—safe territory for them to converse as relative equals without violating the rigid racial mores of the South.

When he was young, Jimmy mistakenly believed that Bishop Johnson had achieved all of his great success after being born poor in Archery. But he nonetheless absorbed an early life lesson: that it was possible to start out in a tiny rural area and rise to the top without losing ties to home. Carter noted later how remarkable it was that the first eminent person he ever met—the first who could move an audience with words and offer genuine leadership—was black. He wrote that the bishop's good education, along with his social and professional prominence, influenced his attitudes on race and may have kindled his own ambitions. Johnson died when Jimmy was eleven, and his funeral was the most elaborate event anyone in the Plains area could remember, with "Cadillac after Cadillac after Cadillac" bringing senior AME officials from all over the country to Archery.

While Bishop Johnson helped recast Jimmy's ideas of black achievement, it was a black husband and wife down the road who ended up shaping much of his character. On many nights when he was young, Jimmy stayed overnight in the one-bedroom cabin of Jack and Rachel Clark.

Jack Clark, the unofficial foreman of the Carter property, was a gruff, middle-aged black man who always wore clean overalls and carried himself with an air of authority. Earl told his six-year-old son that he should learn about the farm from Jack, so Jimmy followed Jack around with an endless string of questions. Jack rang the big farm bell at around four o'clock every morning to get everyone up "an hour before daylight," which became the title of Jimmy Carter's finest book, published in 2001.

Jimmy would often sleep on lumpy cornstalks on the floor in the main room, where he could peer through the cracks between boards to the earth below. He spent many evenings playing cards and checkers with the Clarks and their relatives, and said that he felt more comfortable there than anywhere in his own house except for his bedroom.

After his mother and siblings died in the 1980s, the former president often suggested that he was raised by Rachel Clark, whom he rarely mentioned when Lillian was alive. "I knew Rachel Clark in many ways better than my mother," he said in 2006, weeping at her grave.

Rachel, born in 1890, was a stately, light-skinned black woman who wore print dresses made from rough-hewn sacks of flour or guano. She signed her name with an *X*. For Jimmy, she had a "gentle touch" and "the aura of an African queen." Later, he would compare her to King Solomon's daughter. He was also impressed by her manual dexterity, which made her the fastest cotton picker for miles around.

When it rained, and the cotton bolls were too damp to pick, Rachel took little Jimmy on excursions. Earl had thrown him into a pond at age three with the words "Swim, son, swim." But it was Rachel, not Daddy or Mama, who taught him the names of flowers and birds and how to fish, using a mixture of crawfish, lizards, crickets, and worms on exactly seven fishing poles to catch perch, catfish, and bass, the latter mistakenly called "trout" by white folks. The stream she favored was a few miles from the homestead, and Jimmy soaked up knowledge and inspiration all the way there and home again. It was "God's holy way" that we be stewards of the earth, she told him, an important early instruction for a boy who would someday fulfill this duty on a historic scale.

It was Rachel, his surrogate mother, who imbued Jimmy with the spirituality that would guide him over time. "Much more than my parents, she talked to me about the religious and moral values that shaped a person's life,

and I listened to her with acute attention," Carter wrote. "Without seeming to preach, she taught me how I should behave." In a long poem entitled "Rachel," he wrote that on their fishing expeditions, "She'd tell how praying gave her life a lift, and how it made her act and not just talk—like staying up all night with someone sick. It wasn't empty preaching, like in church. Sometimes I wasn't glad to reach the creek." On the way home, she would put fish she caught in Jimmy's sack so that it would seem as if he'd caught more. "Those might have been the best days I have known," he concluded.

Jack Clark died in the 1960s, but Rachel lived to see Carter as president. In an oral history, she modestly denied doing anything special for him but allowed that the president told her: "You're the cause of me being what I am." Carter would say the same thing publicly on several occasions in his later years.

As a young mother, Lillian was a gaunt, mildly depressed woman with few close friends—a character from a short story by Flannery O'Connor or Eudora Welty. She left all cooking and most child rearing to the black help. If Earl was "Daddy" to the children, Lillian was usually "Mama" but sometimes the more distant "Mother." She admitted that her husband was "a more affectionate father than I was a mother" and did more around the house. When the children were old enough to attend school in Plains, they ate their noontime "dinner" around the corner from school with their aunt Ethel (Earl's sister) and uncle Jack, a veterinarian who was often compensated for his services with opossums. On the campaign trail, Jimmy joked that he'd eaten more opossum—with its "sickly sweet taste"—than any man his age in Georgia.

From the time he first ran for president, Carter's story was always that his father was a tough conservative and his mother a tender-hearted liberal. While this was broadly true, and the tension therein helped forge his character, his mother was a progressive on race mostly in comparison to her neighbors.

Beginning with his 1976 presidential campaign, Carter cast Lillian in the role of integrationist. He liked to say that when he was growing up, his mother was the only person he ever heard praise Abraham Lincoln. In speeches and three of his books, he told the story of how, in 1938, Bishop

passed just seventy-five feet from the house, and he often saw black families with calcium deficiencies eating chunks of chalk from deposits in roadside excavations. Some men preferred prison, where at least they could eat. At his mother's instruction, Jimmy brought lemonade to chain gangs.

Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous First Hundred Days program in 1933 brought hope to much of the country, but it angered many landowners. The Agricultural Adjustment Act, which aimed to raise rock-bottom farm prices by reducing supply, required farmers to plow up their crops and slaughter their piglets in exchange for cash. Earl Carter, who had enthusiastically voted for FDR in 1932, joined other successful farmers in considering these "sacrilegious" acts. "This was my first picture of the difference between political programs as envisioned by Washington and their impact on the human beings I knew," Jimmy wrote later.

Mr. Earl's hero—and Roosevelt's sharpest critic in Georgia—was Governor Eugene Talmadge, a short, bespectacled Democrat known as the Wild Man from Sugar Creek. First elected governor in 1932, Talmadge claimed to be Tom Watson's populist heir, but he resembled more closely later racist demagogues who pretended to side with ordinary people even as they catered to the wealthy.

Arriving at the edge of a small town, Talmadge would strip off his fancy suit in favor of blue bib overalls or old work trousers held up by his trademark red suspenders. Then he ditched his shiny limousine and walked ostentatiously to the rally, where as many as thirty thousand people would watch him mount a tree stump for his fear-mongering rant. "The working man in Georgia has got three great friends: Jesus Christ, the Sears, Roebuck catalog, and Old Gene Talmadge!" he yelled. "And the working man of Georgia has got three common enemies." Here he would pause for dramatic effect as his mouth curled into a sneer: "Nigger, nigger, nigger."

Carter wrote later that at age ten, he went with his father to a Talmadge rally and barbecue in Albany. In two books, Carter ignored Talmadge's wildly racist rhetoric and wrote blandly that, while a strict segregationist, Talmadge always made sure a few black farmers had been placed close to the front. He also failed to mention that the incendiary governor had in 1933 spent the night at his house in Archery.

Despite his anger at FDR, Earl went on to serve as a county director of the Rural Electrification Administration, the transformative New Deal program that brought power to much of the American countryside. Even so, he remained so upset about farm policy that he never forgave Roosevelt

and—unusual in heavily Democratic Georgia—never again voted for him or for any national Democrat. As for Jimmy, he revered FDR. Like most Democrats of his generation, he grew up knowing no other president. But when he entered politics, the New Deal became something mostly to invoke on ceremonial occasions. It wasn't in his DNA.

Throughout much of Sumter County, Lillian was highly regarded for her nursing. Even her unusual practice of tending to black patients and delivering their babies—in exchange for nothing more than two dozen eggs or a basket of blackberries—was viewed with indulgence and grudging respect by local whites.

For white patients, she received $6 for a twenty-hour nursing shift—good pay during the Depression—though she said she often waived those fees, too. While Earl was proud of her work and paid for all of her medical supplies, he occasionally teased her by calling her "Eleanor" (as in Roosevelt) for the way she was always making sure everything was going well in the black houses. She didn't find it funny.

Carter's later interest in global health issues owed much to his mother, who treated her family and many others in the area for ground itch, boils, sties, abrasions, and the other common afflictions of rural life. Among the worst was hookworm, which, left untreated, could consume all vital nutrients in the body. Lillian put medicine between her childrens' toes, which prevented the tiny parasites from migrating to the small intestine. Carter noticed that poor families weren't so lucky. This informed his later efforts to combat guinea worm, river blindness, and other diseases in Africa and beyond.

For much of his childhood, Jimmy would barely see his mother for days on end. Lillian was often on duty from two in the morning until ten o'clock at night, with the four hours between the eight-hour shifts just enough time to shower and perhaps wash her uniform before returning to her patients. Jimmy and Gloria dubbed a sturdy black table in the front hall "Mother" because it was where she left them notes when they arrived home from school to find the house empty. As adults, they teased Lillian that the table had been their real mother. But she had no problem with them being what were later known as latchkey kids. "Children who cling to their mothers," she insisted, "grow up to be babies." Any of Jimmy's regrets about being left alone by her were always transcended by his appreciation of her example of

social action. He wrote a short poem in the 1980s entitled "Miss Lillian." The opening stanza read:

She would nurse
and when they couldn't pay
she would still be there.

3

MISS JULIA

Lillian always said of her family: "We weren't poor, but we were country." Jimmy saw himself as a country boy from Archery, and his sense of being an outsider—critical to his political success—began in the fall of 1930, when at age six he entered the all-white school in Plains. "I never considered myself part of the Plains society," he wrote of the remote town of about 650. "I always thought of myself as a visitor when I entered that 'metropolitan' community."

In Archery, most—though not all—of his playmates were black. His favorite was Alonzo Davis, known as A.D., who lived on the Carter farm with his aunt and uncle. A.D. was roughly Jimmy's age, but his family didn't know his date of birth. His aunt decided to make it October 1, 1924—Jimmy's birthday—so that the two boys could celebrate together.

Jimmy fondly recalled how he and A.D. would take the train thirteen miles to Americus to see movies at the Rylander Theatre, though Jim Crow laws forced them to sit in separate railroad compartments and separate sections of the theater. Carter wrote that "we accepted [segregation] like breathing or waking up in Archery every morning." A.D., by contrast, remembered an awkward outing when Miss Lillian brought him along to the Rylander to sit up front with the family and—after enduring stares—he excused himself and fled upstairs to the balcony reserved for black patrons.

She asked him, "Why did you go up there, A.D.?" He replied, "I didn't see nobody in there colored but me."

In elementary school, Jimmy was teased for sounding black. Influenced by the inflections of farmhands and playmates, he pronounced "going" as "gwine," "river" as "ribber," "rinse" as "rench." "I rid in the wagon and driv the mules!" he bragged to his parents. Even after he improved his English, Jimmy still felt divided: "From age six until I entered high school, I was two different people: a self-confident young man on the farm with my family and close friends, and a timid and somewhat defensive boy in school with my classmates."

Jimmy was baptized at age eleven in the tank under the pulpit of the Plains Baptist Church. According to the tenets of his faith, which rejected infant baptism, he was thus "born again," though his genuine spiritual rebirth would come three decades later. No pastor at the Baptist church—or at the Methodist church the family also often attended—left any lasting impression on him. The religious activity he remembered most from childhood was collecting nickels to send to Baptist missionaries in China—a devotion he recounted in 1979 to the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping.

He memorized Bible verses in Sunday school starting at age three but experienced early doubts. Baptist doctrine said that not just Jesus but all believers would be resurrected, even if that meant separating parents from children. By the time he was twelve or thirteen, Jimmy was so anxious on this point that just before "Amen" in his prayers, he would habitually add: "And, God, please help me believe in the resurrection." He had "a nagging degree of skepticism" about the relationship between faith and the science he was learning in school. Jimmy—like both of his parents—often found the services boring. He mostly remembered a game where he and Gloria would amuse themselves evaluating the physical appearances of congregants and guessing how long couples had been married based on how much they looked alike.

When Jimmy and A.D. were fourteen or so, their relationship changed. Jimmy noticed it one day when they approached the pasture gate to the Carter fields. A.D. and the other black teens went ahead to open it for him, then stood back. Jimmy hesitated, thinking it was a prank—maybe they had playfully planted a trip wire for him to fall on his face or hatched a plan to slam the gate on him. It wasn't a joke. They knew intuitively—or their

delivery, a habit he never quite shook. Miss Julia routinely shouted "Projection!" at Jimmy from the back of the room, and over time his confidence grew.

Miss Julia was kind but tough, often asking students, "Where is your brain today?" When students tried to take advantage of her near blindness by illicitly chewing gum, she could hear the snapping or—if they stopped chewing—smell the Beech-Nut or Juicy Fruit on their breath.

Jimmy grew up to be intensely competitive, a product in part of Miss Julia's approach. She awarded gold stars for every ten books read and small bronze medals for every twenty, and Jimmy usually won the most of both in town. The achievement ladder he had begun ascending on the farm now extended to academic life—an ambition less about people pleasing than natural curiosity and a drive to check off whatever boxes of success he could identify.

When Jimmy was in fifth grade, Miss Julia pushed him to read Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Jimmy assumed beforehand that it was about cowboys and Indians before plowing through all 815 pages. The novel's dissection of Russian feudal society might have been Miss Julia's subtle way of exposing Jimmy to the feudal social structures of the American South. Tolstoy, who corresponded with a young Mahatma Gandhi, combined deep faith with abhorrence of injustice, and Carter read *War and Peace* several more times over the years and mused on its complex themes. Carter came to believe the novel's main messages were that "common, ordinary people" can change history, and that peace is not enough; one must work tirelessly for it.

Miss Julia made all of her students memorize the poem "If—" by Rudyard Kipling, then tested them on it. When explaining the line "If you can make one heap of all your winnings and risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss," she told the class that she didn't think of a gambler when she read that passage, but perhaps of a man in a political campaign. During Carter's 1970 campaign for governor, a former classmate, Kathryn Bacon Maudlin, wrote him that when Miss Julia analyzed that line, "I thought that her eyes rested on you as she looked around the room."

Jimmy got close to straight As, except in music, one of the only areas of life where he never showed much ability beyond appreciation. Students were also graded every month in "health," "conduct," and "teeth" (where an "OK" sufficed in place of a letter grade). "Good health is good teeth," Jimmy wrote

in his eighth-grade workbook, recognizing early the importance of what would become his political trademark. Under the heading "Healthy Mental Habits," he put as number one: "Expecting to accomplish what you intend." He also stressed the importance of making quick decisions and sticking to them, "expecting to like other people and have them like you," and "welcoming fear[lessly] all wholesome ideas and experiences." He ended with a little essay: "A person who wants to build good mental habits should avoid the idle daydream; should give up worry and anger; hatred and envy; should neither fear nor be ashamed of anything that is honest or purposeful."

More playfully, he wrote in Virginia Harris's eighth-grade yearbook:

Now I lay me down to sleep
With a bag of peanuts at my feet,
If I should die before I wake
You know I died with a stomach ache.

Jimmy was in good standing socially in high school in part because of the economic standing of his parents. Starting at age twelve, he could pick up dates for church socials in his father's car. The poor students—whose clothes were made of old sacks and who often smelled or had lice because they couldn't afford to bathe regularly—were often the targets of abuse. While he didn't join in the insults, he didn't come to their defense, either.

Throughout his life, Carter was proud of being a member of Future Farmers of America, where he excelled in everything and especially enjoyed carpentry. He was pleased to be designated a "schoolboy patrolman," a class honor that meant he was the one responsible for keeping order on the school bus, which did not always endear him to his schoolmates. He loved sports but couldn't go out for baseball because, like other farm boys, he was needed in the fields at home after school. Jimmy didn't want his less privileged classmates to know he played a "sissy sport" like tennis, so he took pains to hide his racquet from them. He ran track, and his quickness won him a place on the varsity basketball team despite being five foot four—by far the shortest player, and nicknamed Peewee after a cartoon character.

Dances, mostly church sponsored, included prom cards that matched boys and girls in fifteen-minute intervals for dancing or—more often—taking a walk in the quiet night together, where "heavy petting" was as far as even the fastest girls would go. Jimmy steadily dated a studious brunette,

Eloise "Teenie" Ratliff, who came from a less well-off family. Annie Mae Hollis, the Carters' cook, said she was his first true love.

Jimmy misbehaved only once, when, at the end of senior year, he and his male classmates decided to play hooky on April Fools' Day by traveling as a pack to Americus. Of the thirteen boys in the class, all but Thaddeus Jones skipped school. "It's just not right," Thaddeus told them, to taunts of "sissy." When the boys returned to Plains, a male teacher gave them each seven licks, and an angry Earl grounded Jimmy for a month. Carter claimed later that the incident cost him his chance to be valedictorian; others recalled that Teenie Ratliff had slightly better grades, anyway. In the years ahead, he would not always stand up and say, "It's just not right," most conspicuously when it came to the evils of segregation. But he reflected later that the ill-fated escapade reinforced for him the importance of nonconformity and even stubbornness, and it would cure him forever of blindly following the tribe.

Teenie apparently thought Jimmy was already a little too stubborn—and tight with his money. She dumped him for an older, more mature boy with his own car, Lonnie Taylor (the ringleader of the ditching escapade), whom she married. A few other girlfriends followed, though Jimmy took and kept a private oath not to say "I love you" to any girl other than the one he intended to marry.*

The Carter family entered the twentieth century in 1935, when electricity and indoor plumbing came to the farm. Jimmy said later that the day they turned on the lights in his house was one of the most important in his life. The same year, Mr. Earl consulted a mail-order catalogue and bought a windmill with an elevated water tank and pipes. This replaced the well pump and provided tap water for the kitchen and a bathroom with a toilet.† Earl even rigged up a makeshift shower by running water through a large tin

*Of the twenty-six members of the class of 1941, Jimmy was the only one who went on to graduate from a four-year college. Thaddeus Jones was the only member of the class killed in the Second World War.

†Carter wrote of how, when Earl wasn't around, Lillian would occasionally allow A.D. and other blacks to use the new toilet. This was a big change. The outhouses, where Carter said his family wiped themselves with newspapers or pages from the Sears catalogue, had been off-limits to black workers. Even in winter, they were forced to defecate in the woods, using leaves or corncobs.

can with small holes punched in the bottom. Until wind power, Carter recalled, the farm's only energy source came from corn, which fed the animals that worked the land and were eventually consumed. When Carter became president, he intuitively understood alternative energy sources because he had used them growing up.

Another invention that changed their lives was radio. The Carters liked to sit on their front porch and listen to crackling-static renditions of "Yes Sir, That's My Baby" and "Sweet Georgia Brown." Jimmy hungered for sports and news, too. The balloting for president at the 1936 Republican National Convention, which eventually nominated Governor Alf Landon of Kansas, went on so long that the batteries powering the Carters' radio ran out. Jimmy was so entranced that he carried the big radio into the yard and hooked it up to the car battery so he could keep listening.

In 1938 the family gathered to listen to the famous boxing rematch between heavyweight champion Joe Louis and Max Schmeling, the German boxer who had defeated Louis two years earlier. In Georgia, almost all whites were for the white German (a Nazi) and blacks for the black American. The Carters, as usual, were a little different, with Earl backing Schmeling and Lillian behind Louis. There were no bets in Plains because "no white man would ever bet with a nigger," as "Uncle Buddy" (Alton Carter) explained later. "That just wasn't done." But when a delegation of black tenant farmers came to the Carters' back door and asked if they could listen to the prizefight, broadcast live from Yankee Stadium, Mr. Earl agreed to put the radio by the window and turn up the volume so that they could follow the fight together from under a large mulberry tree in the yard. Louis knocked out Schmeling two minutes and forty-five seconds into the first round.

All that the Carters could hear from outside was a quiet "Thank you, Mr. Earl. Good-bye," as the black farmers walked silently across the railroad tracks and entered a tenant shack. Several of those in the shack were old enough to remember that a black man had been lynched in Americus in 1910 for getting too excited about the victory of Jack Johnson, the first African American heavyweight champion, over Jim Jeffries, hailed as "the Great White Hope." But the jubilation could be contained for only so long. From a distance, "We could hear them screaming for two hours, they were so happy," Lillian remembered. "Daddy was tight lipped," Jimmy wrote later. "But all the mores of our segregated society had been honored."

Earl was in no position to complain about loud celebrations. The Carters often entertained at home, and the noise kept their young children up well after midnight. When Jimmy was sixteen, his father decided that he wanted a better place to hold parties. With the help of his son and a mule-drawn scoop, he dammed a small stream two miles from home to create a pond and built a cabin on the high bank, which he equipped with a jukebox, billiards, and a Ping-Pong table. Every so often, Jimmy was awakened and told to take a team of mules to the Pond House to pull the car of a drunken reveler out of the water. He would be pulling hard-living family members out of trouble for the rest of his life.

With Earl's encouragement, Jimmy learned to be a tireless entrepreneur when he was six years old. Before long, he earned more than many grown men in the area, who lived on less than $1 a day. Jimmy picked peanuts off the vine (owned by his father) and stacked them in his little wagon, washed them, and soaked them overnight. At four o'clock he rose to boil the peanuts and fill twenty paper bags with a half pound each. Then he pulled the wagon down the railroad bed two miles to Plains to sell his wares—five cents a bag—out of a wicker basket on Main Street. Some of the men at the filling station liked to eat their peanuts with their "dopes," which is what Cokes (Coca-Cola was born in Georgia) were then called. There he began learning about the world beyond his family: the black worker killed for "impudence bordering on assault"; the spinster who stood nude in her window as her suitor drove past. It turned up in his poetry:

Almost ignored, an omnipresent boy,
I learned how merchants cheat, which married man
Laid half-a-dollar whores, not always white;
The same ones touting racial purity
And Klansmen's sheeted bravery at night.

When he was nine years old, and it was Gloria's turn to sell peanuts in town, his father helped him use the proceeds from his boiled peanuts to buy five bales of cotton at the depressed price of five cents a pound and store them for a few years. After the local undertaker died, Jimmy sold his cotton at eighteen cents a pound and bought five tenant cabins from the

seemed strong. Appointments to service academies are secured through members of Congress, and for years, Earl had contributed money to the campaigns of Democratic congressman Stephen Pace—a champion of peanut farmers in Washington—in anticipation of this moment. Every year Jimmy was in high school, his father brought Jimmy's report card over to Pace's house in Americus when he was home on congressional recess. But Earl was unable at first to secure the favor that he expected. Pace, a graduate of the Georgia Institute of Technology, wasn't impressed by the science and math curriculum at Plains High School, which didn't even offer chemistry. He suggested Jimmy enroll at Georgia Southwestern College, a two-year junior college in Americus, and try again the next year.

Carter later downplayed the year he spent at Georgia Southwestern, omitting it from *Why Not the Best?* He joined a fraternity and ran for freshman class president and for the title Mr. Southwestern, losing both times. Jimmy grew serious about Marguerite Wise, daughter of Dr. Bowman Wise, who, as the town's obstetrician for white babies, had delivered him into the world. He said later that he would have likely stayed with Marguerite had her mother—no admirer of Lillian Carter—not objected. The Wises were a slight cut above the Carters socially, part of local Sumter County society, where the women wore hats and gloves and held teas, all of which Lillian detested. (It didn't help that Lillian was still close to Gussie Abrams, whom the Wise family considered a home wrecker for her long affair with Bowman's brother, Dr. Thad Wise.)

Another date, with Roxy Jo Logan, ended badly when Jimmy—showing off his tumbling skills—fell into a hole and broke his wrist, landing him in the hospital in Atlanta for ten days. Carter was always a good athlete, but this kind of embarrassing recreational mishap would recur periodically for the rest of his life, a sign that he simply didn't know when to quit, even if pressing on wasn't good for him. Sometimes he was just unlucky, like the time he peed on an electric fence and got shocked.

Shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor catapulted the United States into World War II, Jimmy left home for the first time and lived in a dorm in Americus during his second semester at Georgia Southwestern. He still worried about his flyweight body preventing his admission to Annapolis. Gloria remembered that at one point he quit a part-time job so that he could lie on his dorm bed and eat bananas. He figured that if he used little energy, he could put on more pounds. Jimmy also tried, without

much success, to improve his posture, which would never be good. He felt he wasn't making any progress on his great ambition and, according to his lifelong friend B. T. Wishard, weighed an alternative career path, such as running for governor of Georgia one day—an ambition Carter later insisted he never had at the time.

In early 1942 Congressman Pace refused once again to recommend him for the Naval Academy. This time, though, Mr. Earl stubbornly refused to leave Pace's Americus porch until he had a more definitive answer about his boy's future. Finally, Pace promised an appointment the following spring if Jimmy took math and science classes that weren't available at Georgia Southwestern. That led to a year at Georgia Tech and acceptance into the Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps.

Carter said later that of the four colleges he attended over the years, Georgia Tech was by far the most difficult. The only way he won a degree, he joked on a visit to the Atlanta campus in 1979, was by becoming president of the United States and picking up an honorary doctorate. In truth, he developed strong study habits there and ended up in the top 10 percent of his class, though he received a C in second-quarter Spanish and a D in differential calculus, which he later mastered.

During the 1942–43 school year, the first full year of war, Jimmy listened to war news on the radio and, like other young men his age, was eager to see action. He spent his spare time rooting for the Tech Yellow Jackets football team. Unlike others who ended up in politics, Jimmy wasn't a networker. His roommate in 308 Knowles Hall was a go-getter named Robert Ormsby, who grew up to be president of the Lockheed Corporation. They weren't close.

At noon on June 26, 1943, Earl and Lillian saw Jimmy and his friend Evan Mathis off on the Silver Meteor to Washington, DC, where they would transfer to a bus for Annapolis. Jimmy's anxious parents departed the train station bereft and chose to be apart in their misery. Lillian went fishing alone and wept, while Earl drove with a friend in the opposite direction to fish and drink whiskey until dark. Jimmy was nervous on the long ride north but also excited. He had never been out of the South before.

After registering for school and passing the dreaded physical, he wrote to his parents: "Dear Folks, I have almost finished my second day, and can still say that I'm not ready to come home." It would be more than a decade before he was finally ready to do so—the most important period of growth and change in his life.

4

ANNAPOLIS

When Carter arrived at Annapolis in the summer of 1943, he found an institution shadowed by war. Scores of officers in each of the wartime classes were killed in action not long after being commissioned. The same week Carter was sworn in, President Roosevelt signed an order requiring midshipmen to complete four years of academic work in three. This meant that Carter's class of 1947 would graduate in 1946, with the expectation that all would likely take part in a war they were eager to fight in.

But Annapolis also offered a temporary sanctuary. The makeup of its student body—white, mostly small-town Christians with connections to the navy or to important local politicians—was unchanged since the founding of the Naval Academy nearly a hundred years earlier. So were many of its storied traditions, including "Plebe Summer," the harsh—often vicious—boot camp introduction to navy life. "Look to your right, look to your left," the brutish instructor informed the plebes. "By the end of the summer, one of you won't be here anymore."

That was an exaggeration, but Carter still feared he would wash out, and not just because he was short and skinny for his age. Many of the plebes had gone to prep schools or traveled widely before entering the Naval Academy; Jimmy had neither seen the ocean nor been on a boat bigger than a fishing dinghy. "I was a landlubber in every respect," he remembered.

Like all 2,600 midshipmen, Carter lived for his whole time at Annapolis

in mammoth Bancroft Hall, an imposing Beaux Arts pile that in those days was the largest school dormitory in the world. On their first day there, plebes were issued the academy rule book, *The Blue Jacket's Manual*, which Carter so valued that he held on to it long after graduation.

The manual is a time capsule of values that Jimmy took to heart: "Those who serve in ships are expected to exhibit obedience, knowledge, fighting spirit, reliability, initiative, loyalty, self-control, energy, courage, justice, faith in ourselves, cheerfulness and honor, but above all comes absolute truth, the final test of a man." Carter said later that "telling a lie was the worst thing that you could do at Annapolis. You were gone if you told a lie about stepping on the grass. You were out." Several of the other virtues in *The Blue Jacket's Manual*—especially knowledge, energy, self-control, and justice—also became deeply embedded in him.

Among the poems that midshipmen were required to memorize verbatim was "Invictus," by the nineteenth-century English poet William Ernest Henley, which Jimmy had already learned by heart in high school. It would be a few years before Jimmy would develop a strong interest in poetry, but he remembered the poem later as "a miniature sermon on how to live." He connected to the immortal lines "I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul," even if he knew he wasn't yet.

Jimmy and his classmates were also made familiar with the famous speech by President Theodore Roosevelt, a onetime assistant secretary of the navy, about "the man in the arena, whose face is marred by dust, sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who fails." Throughout his life, Carter would put himself at risk, as Roosevelt recommended, and be a man "who at best in the end knows the triumph of high achievement, and who at worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly."

Even for the many plebes who, like Carter, had already taken college courses, academy classes were rigorous, and no one failed quietly. "Bilging" (flunking)—a common condition in the era before grade inflation—left one "in the bush" or "on the tree." Each week, "bush" and "tree" notices were posted for all to see on company bulletin boards, with offenders restricted to campus and forced to cancel dates with a "hot new drag."

Annapolis alumni often recall that their daily lives as midshipmen seemed to consist largely of lining up in formation and marching somewhere at the sound of bells. Among the punishments Carter said he endured were

saluting thousands of times in a row, running a commando obstacle course at dawn, and rowing back and forth across the Severn River. Plebes also had to worry about being "fried"—cited on a whim—for anything that displeased upperclassmen. Unlike instructors, these students were empowered to inflict physical punishment.

The hazing was brutal, especially for Carter. "I don't think there was anyone who got more licks with the bread pan, or a broom at night," an exaggerating Carter said at his fiftieth reunion in 1996, while noting with a wan smile that plebe year prepared him well for a later life in politics. Admiral James Stockdale, a Carter classmate and the running mate of Reform Party presidential candidate Ross Perot in 1992, went further: he was sure that surviving the hazing of 1943–44 helped keep him alive during nearly eight years of captivity in North Vietnam.

Hazing likely did little to produce better officers, whose quality did not lessen after the practice slowly ended in the 1960s and 1970s. But it did instill stubbornness—one of Carter's core traits, according to his wife—and weed out weakness. "If one ever showed any weakness, he was assaulted from all sides with punishment and harassment and forced out of the academy," Carter recalled. He was strong and tough minded, but something about Jimmy—his small stature, shy demeanor, refusal to threaten violence—could make him *look* weak, thus subjecting him to more than his fair share of abuse.

The rituals were arbitrary and capricious. Carter was class of 1947, which meant that any upperclassman had the authority to order forty-seven push-ups—or ninety-four deep knee bends, double the class year. Plebes could be commanded to sleep overnight on top of lockers, march double time in the hot sun, or sing a silly song they had been ordered to memorize. "Square meals" were not nutritious cuisine but a demand that a plebe spend the meal lifting his fork or spoon vertically from the plate and moving it at a 90-degree angle into his mouth. "Pushing out" meant squatting in the mess hall without touching the seat or the back of the chair, a position that plebes could be required to assume for as long as a half hour. They could also be ordered to "submerge," which meant to eat under the table like a dog.

To torture plebes, upperclassmen would stage "cruise box races," in which plebes would be locked inside the wooden trunks used to store belongings for summer cruises, and then race against one another to change into a completely different uniform, with different shoes, socks, tie, trousers, belt, shirt, and jacket, plus a detachable collar, all while scrunched

had failed to graduate a single African American midshipman.* After three were driven out of the academy in the 1930s amid appalling racism, Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr. of Harlem was so determined to break the color barrier that in 1945 he nominated twelve African Americans. At the end of a rigorous screening process, a Washington, DC, native named Wesley Brown was the only one to enter the academy, class of 1949.

Brown was determined to make it through, and he had help from a group of friendly upperclassmen that included Jimmy Carter.

Two years ahead, Carter was not the most outspoken student in his support for Brown. A Jewish midshipman, Howie Weiss, went so far as to alert his congressman that Brown was being subjected to unwarranted demerits. Carter, too, did the right thing, but more quietly. The price was higher for him because he was a Georgian. "He was treated as if he was a traitor" for lining up with Brown's supporters, a classmate, Walter Moyle, recalled.

Carter and Brown were teammates on the cross-country team, and Carter liked to say that he spent his last year on the team looking at Brown's backside as the plebe led the pack. Even though he was already a star, Brown recalled having to "come around" to rooms of upperclassmen for forty-nine pushups and other hazing. But when he passed Carter's room, Jimmy "told me to hang in there" and later put his arm around him in encouragement. When they parted, Brown—who would become the first African American to graduate from the US Naval Academy—heard another midshipman say of Carter, "Goddamn nigger lover."

Jimmy's second and third years at the Naval Academy were devoted to military training, including learning how to take off and land aging seaplanes on the water. It was a skill—like so many others—that he enjoyed tackling but one that apparently cured him of any desire to be a naval aviator. His first sea duty was on a creaky World War I battleship, the USS *New York,* where he did everything from cleaning the constantly overflowing heads (toilets), to manning a 40-millimeter antiaircraft gun during alerts. Jimmy went far beyond the curriculum in learning to identify the silhouettes of hundreds

*West Point did slightly better. In 1936 Benjamin O. Davis became the first black graduate of West Point in the twentieth century.

of friendly and enemy aircraft and ships, which—like his early efforts on the farm in Archery—further fueled his drive to master each new challenge.

With the war nearly over, Carter was fatalistic about his chances of seeing action. He didn't yearn for it like so many of his classmates, focusing instead on classes and sports. Besides varsity cross-country, he played football (the under-140-pound team) and intramural baseball and basketball, with some boxing, wrestling (during which he broke his right shoulder), quail hunting, fishing, and canoeing in rough water when he had the chance. Jimmy also taught Sunday school to the children of faculty at the US Naval Academy Chapel and at the local Baptist church, where his evident piety—a contrast to much of his class—helped keep him grounded in the values of home. He would preach the gospel in one way or another for the rest of his life.

In his second year, Jimmy lived in Bancroft 2259, where one of his roommates, Bob Scott of Phoenix, deepened his interest in classical music. They used their combined $14 monthly pay to buy all four versions of Sergey Rachmaninoff's concertos, with Bob instructing Jimmy on which were superior and why. One of Carter's fondest memories of Annapolis was of Bob turning up the volume on the Victrola during the final movement of Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde*—"Liebestod"—and fifteen or twenty midshipmen standing outside the door listening. When they graduated, the two flipped a coin, and Jimmy got the record collection, while Bob took the record player.

Despite Carter's interest in his classes, *Lucky Bag*, the navy yearbook, dispelled any hint that Jimmy was a "slash"—a grind. "Studies never bothered Jimmy," the editors reported. "In fact, the only times he opened his books were when his classmates desired help on their problems." Al Rusher, a future banker from Arkansas who lived down the hall senior year, remembered "an extremely smart" Carter cheerfully helping him with math and other homework, and another friend, Red Herzog, recalled Carter's dorm room as akin to a study hall. For the rest of his life, Carter would usually be smarter than the people around him, but he trained himself early to avoid intellectual arrogance and snobbery.

The help he offered classmates wasn't only academic. Just after Christmas of his senior year, Al Rusher's roommate and closest friend committed suicide by jumping out of an upper-story Bancroft window. Rusher remembered being traumatized afterward, and how Jimmy had invited him to move in with him and three other roommates, despite the crowded

quarters. Rusher, who stayed closer to Carter than any other classmate, was grateful for his compassion and sensitivity.

Like so many others of his generation, Jimmy broke down sobbing on April 12, 1945, upon hearing of the sudden death of Franklin Roosevelt, who had been president since he was eight years old. He feared for the future. On August 7, he was on a decrepit destroyer for his summer cruise in the North Atlantic when the loudspeaker blared: "Now hear this! Now hear this!" President Truman came on to announce the dropping of the first atomic bomb, on Hiroshima, Japan. He remembered Truman's flat and nasal voice as the commander in chief explained: "The force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed against those who brought war to the Far East." Nazi Germany had surrendered in early May; now, after the dropping of a second atom bomb, Japan would do the same.

Two months after the war ended, Jimmy turned twenty-one. Earl Carter, a chain-smoker, had promised his son a gold watch if he didn't smoke until he was an adult. That fall, Jimmy went to the store in Bancroft and bought a pack of cigarettes. After one puff, he never smoked another, which he believed was among the most important decisions of his life. Almost all of his immediate family would die prematurely from pancreatic cancer, at least in part from smoking.

As graduation neared, Jimmy effortlessly found his place in the top tenth of the class, officially graduating 60th out of 820, though he was under the misimpression that he was 59th. This was much higher than most modern presidents, including Dwight D. Eisenhower, who finished in the bottom half of his class at West Point. But Ike had been a football star, while Carter admitted that he "did not really excel in any aspect of the academic or military life." Carter left surprisingly few impressions on most classmates and faculty.

Captain Ellery Clark, coach of the Annapolis cross-country team, was an exception. He thought cross-country defined Midshipman Carter's approach to life. "Long-distance runners are a breed of their own," Clark remembered. "They are generally thin, somewhat introverted, friendly as a group, dedicated to self-improvement, [and] intelligent." Clark was especially impressed by Carter's stamina, consistency, and ability to nose out competitors at the finish line.

Red Herzog described his friend as "a loner," someone friendly enough

but who "did not need other people's close bond of friendship to support his own ego and personality." Like Barack Obama at the same age, Carter was already self-contained and unneedy—rare qualities in politicians. This quiet confidence and security gave him an edge as he moved through life—a sense that he'd earned his self-respect. It would also make him seem aloof and distant in ways that would hinder him politically.

Jimmy missed the war, but his beloved uncle—his inspiration for leaving home and discovering the world beyond Georgia—suffered in ways that would create an awkward drama in his family.

In mid-1941, just as he was graduating high school, Jimmy received a postcard from Tom Gordy saying that he had been transferred to the Pacific island of Guam, where he manned a radio shack. On December 8, 1941—the day after Pearl Harbor—the Japanese attacked Guam, and Tom was declared missing in action. Soon after, Tom's wife, Dorothy, and their children moved to Archery, where Jimmy's grandparents were then living. In December 1942 a letter from Tom to his mother (Jimmy's grandmother) arrived, relieving his family. "I am well and safe in Japan," Tom wrote. He didn't mention one of his prison duties: burying decapitated American POWs.

That was the last the Gordys and Jimmy heard from Tom for three and a half years. Dorothy, lonely being trapped in rural Georgia with her husband's hostile family, to whom her "city ways were considered strange," as her nephew Jimmy wrote later, returned to San Francisco to live with her parents.

In 1943 the Red Cross declared Tom officially dead. The following year, Dorothy married a fireman.

But Tom Gordy was very much alive, though he was tortured in a slave labor camp and survived on barley soup containing horse hooves—with iron shoes still attached—or bits of cat, dog, and snake. At one point, Gordy injured his hand badly. The only relief he found was to wrap a rag around it and urinate on it, or have a buddy do so.

After the Japanese surrender, Tom returned home weighing less than a hundred pounds. He wrote Jimmy at Annapolis to say that he and Dorothy still loved each other and that Dorothy decided to have her second marriage annulled so that they could be reunited. Jimmy thought this was the beautiful end to his aunt and uncle's wartime love story.

But it wasn't. Jimmy's grandparents and all of Tom's sisters—including

Lillian—convinced Tom that Dorothy had committed adultery and that he must divorce her. In his poem "The Ballad of Tom Gordy," Carter wrote:

Tom Gordy soon regained some strength
and craved a normal life,
But mother and sisters told him lies
about his absent wife.

Tom complied reluctantly and soon married someone else, but Jimmy, "furious with Mama," never forgot what happened to his aunt. He made a point of visiting her in 1949 when his submarine docked near San Francisco for repairs. Jimmy was afraid he wouldn't be let in the house, but Dorothy and her family greeted him warmly. In one of his infrequent letters to his parents, he went out of his way to say how wonderful Dorothy seemed and how much he enjoyed the visit, where he "danced and sang" all night. Much later, he described the evening as "one of the most delightful uninterrupted celebrations I have ever known."

Long after Miss Lillian's death, Jimmy still refused to downplay his mother's unforgiving attitude toward her sister-in-law. Carter loved his mother deeply, but he mentioned her mistreatment of Aunt Dorothy in four of his books. At some level, he understood that his recognition of this long-ago injustice was an important part of his journey to remembering his moral duties in a troubled world.

The class of 1947 (though its members graduated after three years in 1946) would eventually become the most accomplished in the history of the US Naval Academy. Besides producing Annapolis's only president of the United States and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, the class included thirty-four admirals (five of them four-star) and many future government officials. At graduation, the star of the class was Stansfield Turner, later an admiral and Carter's director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Jimmy's parents came up for their son's graduation and to see him commissioned as an ensign. For the second time that year, they brought someone with them: an eighteen-year-old girl from Plains named Rosalynn Smith.

$18.25 a month in insurance. Allie, only thirty-four, went to work as a seamstress and later a postmistress—a job she held until the year before Carter was elected president. Rosalynn, shaking off feelings that somehow she had been bad and that God didn't love her anymore, helped raise her three younger siblings. She studied hard—rising at five in the morning to do extra homework—and avoided smoking and drinking, as her teetotaler father had requested. Less than a year after Edgar's death, Allie's mother died suddenly, too, leaving the family no money.

Rosalynn thought constantly about how her father would react to everything she said or did. She made money shampooing hair and set her sights on enrolling in secretarial school at Georgia Southwestern, with ambitions of someday becoming an interior decorator.

Before graduating at the top of her class at Plains High School, Rosalynn—by now a dark-haired, gray-eyed beauty—had fallen in love with the picture of handsome Jimmy Carter in uniform that was pinned to the wall of Ruth's bedroom. Part of his appeal was that he had escaped Plains, as she longed to do. She had spoken to him only once, while eating ice cream in town one day, but plotted with Ruth to cross paths with him during his monthlong home leave in the summer of 1945, when Rosalynn had just finished her first year of college. Finally, three days before he was to return to Annapolis, they chatted at a picnic at the Pond House, where Jimmy teased Rosalynn for making sandwiches with salad dressing instead of mayonnaise. Ruth was going to Americus that night with her boyfriend and suggested that Jimmy ask Rosalynn to come on a double date.

During vacations, Jimmy had been dating Annelle Green, the former Miss Southwestern. But Annelle was at a family reunion in Florida. That Sunday afternoon, Jimmy recalled, he was "cruising" with Ruth's boyfriend in a Ford with a rumble seat and spotted Rosalynn on the steps of the Plains Methodist Church, where she was about to attend a youth meeting. Jimmy jumped out of the car and asked her to a movie, the name of which no one could recall. Rosalynn hopped in, and they took her home to change clothes. He was waiting for her in the front bedroom of her house, where Miss Allie was impressed by "all those amazing teeth, so white, so white." Rosalynn entered, wearing a dress that he would never forget. Jimmy was

smitten. Nearly a half century after the double date, he would write of her in a poem entitled "Rosalynn":

I'd pay to sit behind her, blind to what
was on the screen, and watch the image flicker
upon her hair.

I'd glow when her diminished voice would clear
my muddled thoughts, like lightning flashing in
a gloomy sky.

On the ten-mile ride home, they kissed, which stunned her. She had never let a boy kiss her on a first date; her parents hadn't even held hands until they were engaged. "She was remarkably beautiful, almost painfully shy, obviously intelligent, and yet unrestrained in our discussions on the rumble seat of the Ford coupe," Carter later wrote. The next morning, Jimmy told his mother that Rosalynn Smith was the one he was going to marry. Lillian replied, "Jimmy, she's a little girl. She's Ruth's friend." Lillian said later, "What I was really trying to tell him was that I thought he was probably too sophisticated for her."

Jimmy's cousin Hugh Carter claimed in a book that Miss Lillian thought Rosalynn wasn't good enough for her son—that she was "from the wrong side of the tracks"—while Mr. Earl approved. Rosalynn eventually came to believe that the opposite was the case, explaining that it was Mr. Earl who didn't want Jimmy to marry her. "He had all these expectations for Jimmy, and an eighteen-year-old girl from Plains, Georgia, was not in them," she said. In the years ahead, she would occasionally be at odds with Miss Lillian—during Jimmy's early days as governor, they tangled well beyond normal mother-in-law problems—but at the time, she was perplexed by how nice she was to her. The Carters invited Rosalynn to accompany them to see Jimmy off at the station. "I didn't want to go. I didn't think it was right," Rosalynn recalled. But Miss Lillian insisted. Only later, when she learned what Jimmy had said to his mother after their first date, did she understand why she was so solicitous.

• • •

when he lost—his first real setback in life—but his mother said he was devastated. In later accounts, he made a point of noting that the Elizabethan scholar suffered a nervous breakdown at Oxford. Finally, at ninety, perhaps recognizing that this part of the Rhodes rejection story might sound gratuitous, he added that he grieved when he learned that the young man had killed himself.

After two years on surface ships, Carter was now eligible to apply to three elite programs: naval intelligence, naval air force, and submarines. Jimmy chose the latter and set out to be the first member of the Annapolis class of 1947 to join "the silent service." He was admitted to the six-month submarine school in New London, Connecticut, a highly competitive program for sixty junior officers where 15 percent of the class failed to graduate. Carter thrived in that meticulous culture, absorbing the details of all of a submarine's complex systems. While he easily passed the claustrophobia tests, they didn't prepare him for just how cramped conditions were aboard a small submarine, which stank of diesel fuel and sweat. He and his classmates went out on subs in the Atlantic most days to re-create the great submarine battles of World War II—his only real taste of what it felt like to be in combat.

Onshore, the Carters—broadened by travel and reading magazines like the *New Republic*—were becoming more liberal. Jimmy often cited the importance to him of the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, championed by Eleanor Roosevelt, which began his consciousness of the worldwide struggle for human dignity. Jimmy and Rosalynn remembered being the only ones at sub school who supported President Truman over Republican New York governor Tom Dewey, the humorless "little man on the wedding cake" who was expected to win easily. When Truman upset Dewey, no one they knew in New London wanted to talk to them about the election.

A reenergized Carter finished third in a class of fifty-two—a real achievement in the brainiest branch of the navy. With his "dolphins"—submarine insignia—he slid easily into new navy habits that would endure for a lifetime, like wearing his watch with the face on the bottom of his wrist so he could see it while gripping the periscope. (In the Carter White House, more than one ambitious aide adopted the same practice.)

Jimmy's first submarine duty was aboard the diesel-powered USS *Pomfret,* based at Pearl Harbor. But first he obtained shore leave in Plains,

where his high school girlfriend—Teenie Ratliff Taylor—had recently been killed along with her husband, Lonnie, and their two young children in a plane crash. There was little time to mourn. Just after Christmas 1948, Jimmy left Rosalynn and eighteen-month-old Jack in Plains, drove all the way to Los Angeles, and flew to Hawaii to report for duty.

On its first patrol, the *Pomfret* was caught in a severe storm that sank seven ships. Carter was violently seasick for five days, with cigarette smoke and diesel fumes in the cramped bunks worsening his agony. His only relief came on the perilously narrow deck, where at least he could vomit over the side.

One night, Carter was standing watch on the conning tower at about two in the morning, when suddenly a huge wave hit the boat. He found himself thrust inside the wave, swimming madly, certain he would be swept into the ocean and drown. He landed, bruised, on top of an artillery gun located about thirty feet behind where he had been standing. He held on to the barrel as tightly as he could. After what felt like an eternity, the wave finally receded, and he scrambled back to the bridge, where he tethered himself in place with a rope. Carter calculated later that if the sub had been traveling at a slightly different angle to the waves, he would have been lost at sea.

Families of the crew were mistakenly informed in Pearl Harbor that the *Pomfret* had sunk seven hundred miles south of Midway Island. Because Rosalynn was home in Plains at the time, she heard about the storm only after everyone was confirmed to be safe.

A few months later, a senior *Pomfret* officer who had been drinking heavily almost killed everyone aboard when he opened the valves on the starboard side, allowing water to pour into the tanks, while forgetting to open those on the port side. The sub rolled sharply to the right and nearly capsized before high-pressure air was furiously pumped into the tanks. "I realized how fragile was my existence," Carter wrote later. He didn't mention praying to survive, noting only that facing the possibility of death had left him a fatalist who no longer feared it. Carter was a less active Christian than in later years, though he led worship services for his crewmates on Easter and other occasions.

For much of 1949, the *Pomfret* patrolled up the east coast of China from Hong Kong, ostensibly protecting the Nationalist regime of Chiang Kai-shek, which was about to be driven off the mainland by Mao Tse-tung's Communist

K-1, the first new navy ship since the end of World War II and the quietest submarine yet built.

To qualify as one of the four officers aboard once the ship proved seaworthy, Carter needed to write a thesis. After struggling with advanced math at Georgia Tech, he had since mastered differential and integral calculus and now elaborated on a new way of determining the distance of a target ship by the beat of its propellers—essential technology for submarines. While the thesis wasn't quite as original as Carter sometimes claimed, it was well received, and several of his technical findings were later incorporated into naval sonar designs.

After serving on so many rattraps since Annapolis, the *K-1* felt exciting. Carter never seemed to be horrified by the shockingly close quarters onboard; others were. When an electrician's mate suffered a nervous breakdown from claustrophobia, Jimmy helped make sure he was fed intravenously and strapped down before being evacuated.

The *K-1*'s crew walked only when necessary—and in stocking feet—so as not to interfere with the state-of-the-art sonar array mounted forward on the main deck. The ship's official navy mission was to lie in ambush along Soviet submarine lanes, spot its prey, then "nail the enemy with homing torpedoes equipped with electronic ears." Carter's intensity aboard the *K-1* was even greater than on the *Pomfret.* Frank Andrews, the *K-1*'s captain, remembered him as "superb" at finding the bugs in their untested systems. Despite "the big smile and the big laughing," he was "all business, no fooling around; professional; organized; smart as hell." Another officer, Charles E. Woods, shared the stateroom with Carter and said he was as close to him as anyone on the submarine, "but it was not a relationship that I would call a close friendship. He knew his job better and he did it better, with less fuss and bother, than any of the rest of us."

Carter was closer to the enlisted men, including a hospital corpsman with whom he fished for striped bass in port and a quartermaster who helped him improve his celestial navigation. Jimmy, in turn, tutored enlisted men in math. For the rest of his life, he generally avoided prominent people as companions in favor of ordinary folks—often conservative or uninterested in politics—who could teach him a hands-on skill.

Carter was promoted to full lieutenant—his highest rank, equivalent to an army captain—on June 1, 1952, and that August, his and Rosalynn's third and final son, Donnel Jeffrey Carter, arrived. This meant that Rosalynn

was often caring for three boys under five by herself. The couple bought an early-model television set in order to watch New York Yankees games, and Jimmy enjoyed building furniture in the navy hobby shops, which allowed them to save money by renting unfurnished apartments.* "Someday I'd like to have a workshop with my own tools," he wrote his parents.

Other subjects were less pleasant to discuss with Earl and Lillian.

On Christmas leave in 1950, Jimmy—a strong supporter of Truman's desegregation of the armed forces—described how the *K-1* crewmen had voted unanimously to reject an invitation to a fancy party in their honor hosted by the British governor-general of the Bahamas. The reason: their black shipmates were not invited. At home, a sharp argument ensued. Earl snapped, "The governor-general was absolutely right," and left the room. "Jimmy, it's too soon for our folks here to think about black and white people going to a dance together," Lillian told him. This was the last time father and son ever talked about segregation and the last real conversation they would have for the next two and a half years.

*After the Milwaukee Braves moved to Atlanta in 1966, the Carters became Atlanta Braves fans.

6

THE RICKOVER WAY

Rachel Clark, Julia Coleman, Tom Gordy, and J. B. Williams all influenced Jimmy Carter's development, but he often said that Hyman Rickover had a more profound effect on his life than anyone besides his parents. Carter saw Admiral Rickover as resembling his father: "excruciatingly demanding," stingy with praise, and more than a little scary. Later, Carter's subordinates in the statehouse and the White House were struck by how much their Southern Baptist boss from rural Georgia had in common with the Polish Jewish immigrant from Chicago.

Carter liked to say that Rickover was "the finest engineer who has ever lived." This was, of course, an impossible claim to prove, but he was indisputably one of the half dozen most consequential admirals ever produced by the United States. A brilliant innovator and demeaning taskmaster, Rickover was simultaneously revered and despised throughout the military. John Dalton, a future secretary of the navy, said that after he went into government, he ran into Rickover and told him that he had once worked under him. "He was not the least bit gracious—not a pleasant person, no social skills," Dalton remembered.

Most engineering feats going back to the pyramids of Egypt are group efforts. This is also broadly the case with large submarines, which, like all complex modern projects, are designed and built by thousands of people. But one man was most responsible for safely attaching a nuclear power plant

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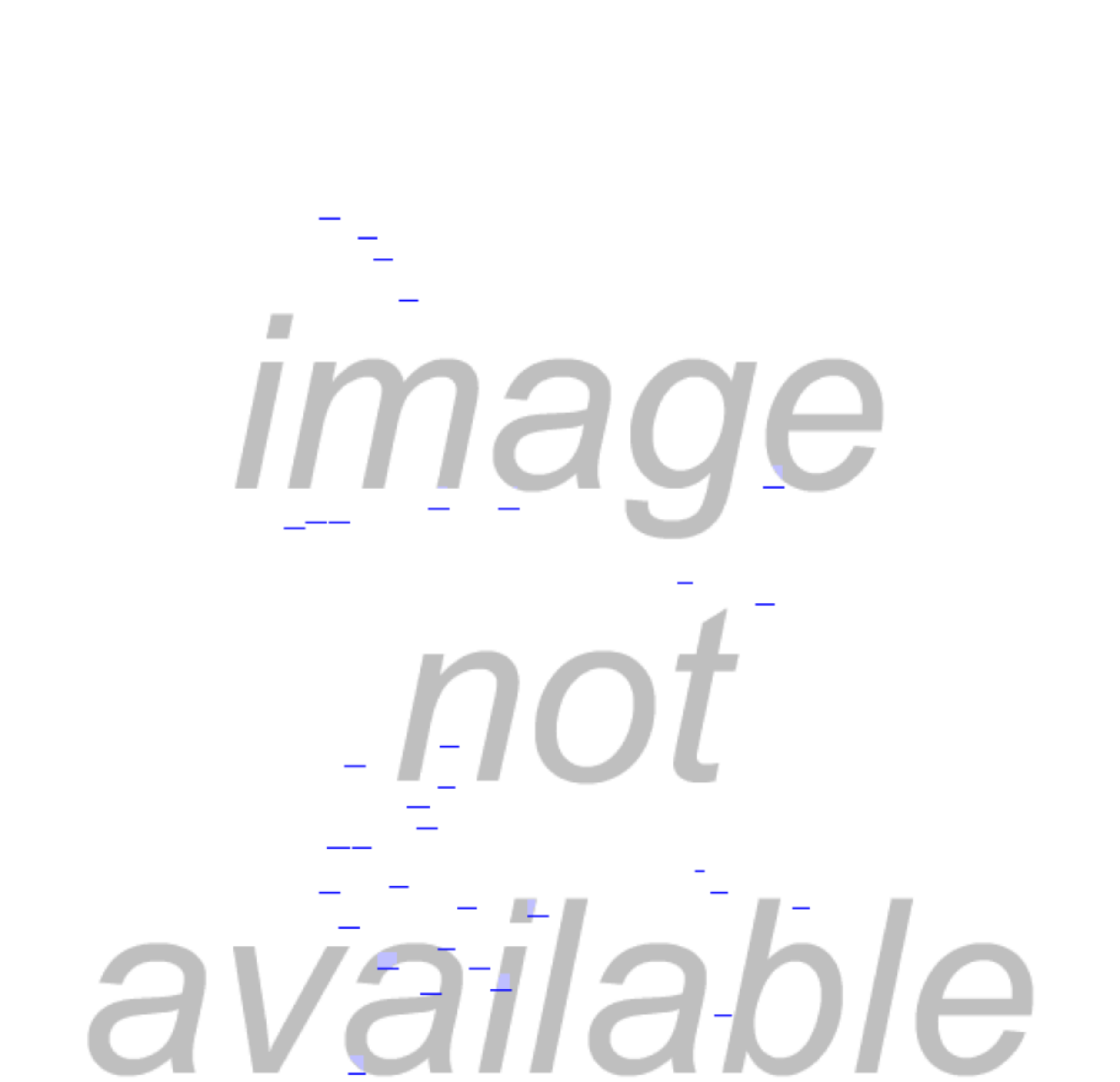
JC = Jimmy Carter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