

# The First Ladies' Secret

A Short Story by Nancy Pickard  
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*Harry Truman woke up alone* in his bedroom in the White House, startled awake by three strong knocks on his door. In response, the president hurried himself out from under the bed covers, into his bathrobe, and across the wide carpet, calling, "Who's there?" But upon flinging open the door to find out what emergency of national security was critical enough to roust him at 4 o'clock in the morning, he found: no one.

*Dammit!*

He knew goddamn well that he'd heard three solid knocks as clear and real as if he'd hit himself three times on his own hard head. The president peered down the long, carpeted hallway in both directions, and saw no one. He went and looked into the rooms of his absent daughter and wife, but they were as empty as they ought to be, with Bess and Margaret back home in Independence.

When he returned to his own room, he left his wife's door open.

After locking his bedroom door, the president went back to bed, only to be roused again by the sound of footsteps in his wife's room. Once more, he rushed out of bed to look for the intruder, but again, he found no one there.

Feeling considerably more unnerved than the commander in chief of the armed forces of the greatest military power in the universe liked to feel, he hurried to check things out with the Secret Service. But the men who were guarding him insisted they had seen nothing, heard nothing, and had admitted no one to the family's private quarters. Of course, they insisted on checking things out. Eventually, they declared the Executive Mansion safe enough for its most important occupant to return to bed.

There he returned, but not sleep.

First, Harry wrote about the incident in a letter to Bess, telling her this verified what he'd always suspected: There were ghosts in the White House. Mary Todd Lincoln had called it the Whited Sepulcher for good reason. This thirty-third president and his First Lady usually called it the Great White Jail, but tonight it felt like a living grave to him.

He was a man who usually told his wife everything.

But this time he held back from telling the Boss the entire truth: he could tell her there were ghosts, all right, and he could tell her the straight fact of the knocks at the door. But what Harry Truman could never confide, not even to Bess, was that he knew what those three hard knocks must signify: *the presence in the house of an ancient evil.*

A no less ancient oath bound him to secrecy about it.

Deep in his bones, the president of the United States experienced the summons as an urgent warning meant specifically for him: *If there was, indeed, something old and evil lodged*

*within these two-hundred-year-old walls, it must not under any circumstances be let loose upon the land.* There was enough wickedness already abroad in the world, as he knew better than anyone else, and there were troubles aplenty right here at home. President Truman slept restlessly through what remained of the haunted night; but he awoke full of resolve and vinegar, knowing exactly what he must do.

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Edith Helm passed a mimeographed copy of the First Lady's weekly schedule to the president of the Women's Press Club. "Mrs. Truman," it said, "will hold a press conference at 3 p.m. tomorrow."

The president of the Women's Press Club read the note, did a double take, read it a second time, and then look up with an astonished expression on her face. "Mrs. Truman will hold a—what?"

"Press conference," replied the elderly social secretary, as if it were the most common announcement ever issued from either Blair House or the White House.

"Are we talking about Mrs. *Harry* Truman, Edith?"

Mrs. Helm's eyes crinkled just a bit at the corners, betraying both her amusement and her understanding of the journalist's incredulity. "The very one," Edith assured her, calmly.

"I wouldn't miss this!"

*That, Edith thought, as she smiled graciously, is exactly how we hoped you'd feel.*

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The next afternoon, Bess Truman patted her neat cap of gray curls nervously, and thought to herself, "You'd better appreciate this, Harry." She stared out at the uplifted, avidly curious faces of the very women she had worked so hard to avoid during Harry's first term, and opened

her mouth to speak.

Quickly, the female journalists took up pencils and pads which had grown dusty from lack of anything to write about this matronly woman standing in front of them. Several of them were old enough to remember Cal Coolidge, and they sarcastically joked among themselves that Mrs. Truman made “Silent Cal” look verbose. From the point of view of the press women, Bess was an acute disappointment in everything from fashion to social activism; she was so drably different from active, forthcoming, controversial, *talkative* Mrs. Roosevelt.

With faint hope, they poised their pencils.

The only other time Bess Truman had ever issued a public statement was to encourage the American housewife to be thrifty in the aftermath of the war, in order to assist America’s humanitarian efforts abroad, and that was hardly a major news scoop.

Pencils ready, they waited, expecting not much.

But the First Lady surprised them.

“I wish to say a few words,” she said, meaning that quite literally, “about the renovation of the White House. As you know, it is literally falling down inside. Why, a leg of Margaret’s piano crashed through the floor just the other night! It is unsafe for residence, which is why we have moved across the street to Blair House.”

Mrs. Truman paused to draw breath.

“Now, some people want to tear the White House down, and build it up again from scratch. The president is strongly opposed to that idea, and so am I. We must all support the alternative plan, which would hollow out the interior of the building, but keep the original walls intact. I urge every American family to support this plan to keep the White House standing.”

Grimly, she surveyed her audience.

“Thank you.”

And that was that; no questions allowed. But for the assembled and news-starved women journalists, it was fairly satisfying. Bess Truman, who never came out in public either for or against anything, had actually taken a controversial stand on an issue of great public interest.

“Everybody knows,” a report for the *New York Times* whispered to a reporter for the *Daily News*, “that the president’s plan will cost twice as much, take twice as long to complete, and be twice as difficult to accomplish.”

“Congress will never stand for it,” the *Daily News* whispered back.

They grinned at each other.

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In the back halls of the Senate Office Building, it appeared to onlookers that three prominent senators had gathered together to share cigars and private jokes. So luminous were the three on the horizon of political power that everyone passing anywhere near them allowed a wide, respectful berth, as if orbiting a constellation of radiant suns: Get too far away from them and you’d find yourself out in the cold, but get too close, and you could burn up in the heat of their ambitions.

Their public laughter disguised their private agenda.

“Never underestimate the power of symbolism,” said the eldest one, quietly, while the other two feigned an air of jovial listening. “Tear down a potent symbol, and you may tear down with it an entire system of government.”

“Joshua fought the battle of Jericho,” said the one of the trio with the largest constituency. He smiled, waiting for the third member of their coalition to complete the familiar quotation.

The third man obliged, smiling through his cigar smoke.

“And the walls came a tumblin’ down.”

They laughed, a rich, chesty sound of merriment that could issue only from behind the well-tailored vests of supremely confident men seated at the heart of power.

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Harry had made the issue plain to Bess one night when, as was their custom, they closed themselves together in his study at 9 p.m. There, in privacy at last, he could sip a glass of his favorite bourbon, Old Granddad, and confer with her about the issues of the day, while she edited his speeches.

“Bess, there are sons-a-bitches who want to tear this country down, and there’s hardly ever been a better time for them to do it. Why, we’re still recovering from the war, and right on top of that, I don’t have to tell you, we had almost two million men out on strike in the mines and the railroads, in the electrical and meat industries, in steel and automobiles. I’ve got that damned lying Bolshevik son-of-a-bitch blocking all our best efforts to get aid to Eastern Europe, and we’ve still got people starving in Greece and Turkey, and more trouble brewing over Palestine. I’ll tell you, Bess, sometimes I do think we’re going to end up going to war in Korea, when all I’ve ever wanted to be was the president who kept us at peace.”

She let him vent it all, not even remonstrating with him over his salty language. Bess, herself, had been known to swear a bit, if a private occasion demanded strong talk.

“And now,” he continued, her husband who loved history almost as much as he loved her and Margaret, “this very house we’re living in has absolutely got to be rebuilt, and no delay about it. I can see those bastards over on the Hill have their eyes on it. They know what it would mean to the American people—to the world—to see this great symbol of democracy flattened to

the ground during these dangerous days. We cannot allow that to happen, Bess. George Washington built these walls. He insisted they be constructed of stone, he had a hand in every inch of the planning, and he entrusted it to the rest of us small fellows who would come after him. We can't let the president down, Bess."

For the moment, it seemed as if Harry Truman had forgotten that he was, himself, "the president." He seemed to be speaking, Bess thought as she gazed at him, as a plain citizen, in defense of the bedrock principles of the country he loved.

"What do you want me to do, Harry?"

"Help me, sweetheart," he pleaded, holding his hands out wide.

"All right," Bess agreed, taking him by surprise with her quick capitulation. For once, she who loved to argue, didn't. "I'll write some letters."

He was grateful, for reasons that he couldn't tell her.

She was willing, for motives that she couldn't reveal, not even to her husband, the president of the United States. . . especially, not to Harry.

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Bess Truman knew personally four former First Ladies, and she wrote privately to each of them. Not one of the letters was dictated; she personally penned, signed, sealed, stamped, and mailed them. It was imperative they be seen by no eyes other than those for whom she intended them.

"Dear Mrs. Preston," she wrote to the former Frances Cleveland, who was the eldest of the surviving First Ladies. In her letter, Bess appealed strongly to the historic connection between herself and the tall woman who now lived in Princeton. She liked Frances Cleveland Preston, because Frances liked Harry.

“Dear Mrs. Wilson,” she penned next, imagining that formidable widow in the stands at a game played by her beloved Boston Red Sox baseball team. Bess felt less sanguine about Mrs. Wilson who did *not* like Harry. Still, the First Lady knew that this time, above all times, she must not allow personal feelings to stand in the way of the right thing to do.

“Dear Mrs. Coolidge. . .”

Bess knew that Grace did not approve of Harry’s absolutely right decision to drop the bomb and end the war, but surely she would approve of this campaign, even if she was a Republican. There were times when partisanship must be left behind. And, after all, they were “sisters” who had endured (or enjoyed, though Bess found that nearly impossible to believe) the Great White Jail that she and Harry were struggling so hard to save for General Washington and posterity.

“Dear Eleanor,” she wrote warmly.

Mrs. Roosevelt might have left the White House family quarters in a mess behind her, but for Bess there was no doubting the sincerity of Eleanor’s devotion to good causes, nor her kindnesses to the Truman. In each of the other three letters, Bess had had to hint, to drop clues, to suggest by careful implication that which she meant them to infer. But to her immediate predecessor she could write easily and bluntly, because it was Eleanor Roosevelt who had passed on to Bess the secret in the first place.

“I hardly know whether to credit this story, or not, Mrs. Truman,” the exhausted widow of Franklin Delano Roosevelt had confided over a very private tea one afternoon. “But duty binds me to pass it on to you, as it was passed on to me.”

“The First Ladies’ secret,” she had called it, with an ironic twist to her mouth. Neither she nor Bess had mocked it, however, for it was very old—even if it were false—and they



supposed there was always the unlikely chance that it was true.

“But you mustn’t tell the president,” Mrs. Roosevelt had warned her, before she left that day. Bess noted how courageously the widow pronounced those unlikely and unwelcome words, “the president,” in reference to the man from Missouri. How awful it sounds to both of us, Bess thought, feeling compassion for the widow and dread for herself. If there was ever anything Bess Wallace Truman had never wanted to be in her life, it was First Lady of the United States. And now it even meant she must be entrusted with a secret she could not confide to Harry! But Eleanor Roosevelt made clear the reason: “If you tell a man about a mystery, he will feel compelled to solve it,” she said, firmly, “even if it means tearing down stone walls to do it. And that is one thing we cannot allow to happen. These old walls and their secrets must stand undisturbed.”

With an uncharacteristic gesture, Mrs. Roosevelt had grasped her successor’s hands. “None of us have told our husbands, Bess. We have passed this strange secret down through the years, but only among ourselves. Will you keep it, too?”

Reluctantly, feeling resentful and put-upon, Bess agreed to it.

And now here she was, into the second term she had desired even less than Harry’s first one, and writing these letters she had never dreamed she would have to write, calling upon esteemed women to assist her in keeping a secret she couldn’t even be sure was true!

Shaking her head in exasperation at her own fate, Bess picked up her pen again. While she was in the mood, she might as well write to her friend, Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn, to solicit his support for the cause. She decided she would write as well to the wives of important senators and representatives. Mrs. Lyndon Johnson, for instance. And she would even write to some of the wives of the rising young men, like that nice young woman who was

married to Congressman Gerald R. Ford. Bess paused, trying to remember a name to match the pretty, smiling face at the White House tea for congressional wives. It was always harder to remember the names of Republicans.

“Oh, yes. Betty, that was it.”

*“Dear Mrs. Ford. . .”*

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The vote within the commission appointed to oversee the renovation of the White House was not even close.

“I don’t understand how this could happen!” The eldest of the trio of cigar-smoking senators spoke quietly, furiously, through clenched teeth. His jowly face, so familiar to millions from newspaper photographs and movie newsreels, looked thunderous. If the other two had been senatorial pages, they might have feared for their jobs. “One vote! We got only one vote to go our way on that damned commission! That son-of-a-bitch in the White House is going to get his way with that damned shack, and I don’t understand how his could happen!”

He glared at them, but they shrugged, licking their lips.

Finally, the one with the vast constituency offered up an idea. “There was overwhelming public sentiment for retaining the original structure. Mrs. Truman lobbied for it, you know. I hear she got the former First Ladies to talk it up, and she sicced Eleanor on to it.”

They snickered at the name of the busybody widow.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” The third senator spoke smoothly, his agile mind already moving onto his next opportunities for influence. “What possible difference could they make? A coffee-klatch of First Ladies? Preposterous.”

Their roar of derisive laughter attracted the admiring—and wary—attention of the

secretaries and other senators eddying around them.

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In Blair House, Bess Truman penned careful, private notes of appreciation to the four former First Ladies. Only to Eleanor, did she come right out and write the words, “So our secret is safe, at least for the duration of this latest renovation of the building. Rest assured, I will pass it on to the next woman to live here.”

It was an eventuality which could not happen too soon, in Bess’s view. She longed to return to the other roomy white house, the one in Independence, where there might be secrets, but they did not have to be coddled and kept from Harry. But yes, she would do her duty, and pass on the secret of the First Ladies, even if that meant she had to tell the wife of a Republican.

Bess sat back in her chair and closed her eyes.

When the head usher peeked in a few minutes later, he assumed she was napping, and quietly tiptoed back out again.

Behind her closed eyelids, Bess was attempting to visualize the secret that Eleanor Roosevelt had whispered to her. She wasn’t a very imaginative woman, she well knew, and she was finding it difficult to see a scene set so far back in time, with so many veils of mystery shrouding it. . .

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*There wasn’t a decent quarry close at hand and there weren’t qualified craftsmen to cut or work the stone, even if it could be easily had, which it couldn’t.* And still, the general insisted the new residence for the president—the first building to be erected in the new Federal town, as Jefferson called it—be constructed of stone.

Masons from Scotland were imported, six of them from a single lodge, hired to perform

the delicate work of carving the stones after the slaves had cut them into blocks. But the Scotsmen loathed slavery, and they had refused to come at all until the Americans agreed to allow them to hire freemen as laborers.

It didn't keep the Americans from using slaves, of course.

And on a late August afternoon, when twilight was just beginning to slip across the long marsh leading from the Potomac to the ridge upon which the residence was being built, three of the Scottish masons stopped their work and watched in horror as a bricklayer whipped his slave.

There was no one else about.

The three Scots had worked late, in order to hurry this job they hated in this land where they felt so foreign. Thinking they were alone on the ridge, they had continued to sculpt delicate garlands and acanthus leaves from the grayish white stone which would eventually be whitewashed to seal it.

But down by the brick kilns where were kept burning night and day, there had come outraged shouts and then the unmistakable horror of the singing and *thwap* of bullwhip on human flesh. Too often, the Scot heard it. Sometimes the slaves, male or female, cried under the whip or rod, which only resulted in a harder, longer lashing or beating; the stoic ones bit their dark lips until blood ran down their chins.

Immobilized with shared hatred and helplessness, the Scots watched this slave—a huge black man—raise his hands and grab the thick whip from his master's grip. As quick as one might kill a dog, the slave rose to his feet and wrapped the whip around the white man's neck, squeezing until his master fell limp to the ground.

Astonished, hardly believing what they had just witnessed, the Scotsmen stared, and one of them yelled out, no words, just an inarticulate sound wrested from his gut. The slave, hearing

it, looked up and saw them for the first time. Terror replaced the fury on his face, and he started to run away. But then, they saw him fall to his knees, and bow his head down to the ground. He seemed to be simply awaiting his fate, which he assumed they would dispense.

As if they were one man, the three Scottish stone masons walked quickly toward the gruesome scene where the master lay sprawled and the slave remained sunk upon the ground in an abject posture. When they reached the dead man, one of the Scotsmen bent down and lifted up a stone from the ground.

He looked at his brethren.

And then he raised the stone and brought it down upon the head of the dead brickmaker

A second Scotsman picked up another stone, and he followed the first blow with a second.

The third of their band did the same.

Three men. Three blows. Evil for evil.

Astonished, the slave stared at them from his bowed position. They bade him rise, and together, the four men slipped the brickmaker into one of the ever-burning kilns, where he was quickly cremated. Now not knowing what to do with the slave whose life they had saved, the Scottish immigrants let him slip away into the forest.

The Scotsmen never knew what became of him, and they never asked. But at their feet, where the master had died, there lay three stones, splashed now with red. Each stone bore a “mason’s mark,” the unique symbol by which stone craftsmen were identified and paid. The men inserted the bloody stones into the rising walls, in such a manner that no one would likely ever see the stains.

Then next day, ashy new bricks were laid against the stones, hiding and insulating the

interior walls with their telltale marks.

It was the slave who told Mrs. Washington. He had come, in later years, into the relative safety and anonymity of her ownership. It was a confession, of sorts, on his death bed. *“White and black blood got spilled in the president’s house, Ma’am. My master, he was murdered, and his body lies hidden in the bricks and stones. White blood got spilled on the stones and black blood, too.”*

By this time, the president was dead, and so she could not tell him. But Martha Washington could do the next best thing. No, she wouldn’t tell that awful crotchety John Adams who had always made life so difficult for the general, but she could tell intelligent Abigail the secret that no must ever know: No one must ever be allowed to take apart the stones of the White House walls. Not if the body of a murdered slave master was hidden there. The general had so firmly believed in the power of symbolism to help keep their new government standing, and he had spoken to his wife of the issue of slavery as being the single issue which, if ignited, could bring it tumbling down. If their enemies knew that the symbolic home of democracy was built upon the blood of slave and master. . .

*“My dear Mrs. Adams. . .”*

Mrs. Washington invited Mrs. Adams to tea.

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Most Worshipful Harry S. Truman, thirty-third degree charter member and first Worshipful Master of Grandview Lodge No. 618 and former Grand Master of the Grand Lodge, Ancient Free and Accepted Masons, State of Missouri, stood alone in the gutted White House, looking up.

His blue eyes were seeing exposed beams, but his inner eye was looking at imagines of

his Masonic brothers: George Washington, James Monroe, James Polk, James Buchanan, Andrew Johnson, James Garfield, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Benjamin Taft, Warren G. Harding. They had all lived here, except for Washington. They had represented the best and the worst, as far as presidents went, and those were only the ten, not including himself, who were publicly known to have been Masons. First among them, always and forever, in Harry Truman's view, was the general himself.

Harry Truman knew his Masonic lineage as well as, or better than, he knew his country's history: George Washington had been initiated as an Entered Apprentice in the Lodge at Fredericksburg, Virginia, in 1752, for an entrance fee of two pounds, three shillings. After attaining the rank of Worshipful Master, he was elected to be Grand Master of Masons throughout the United States, although that had never materialized into a real position.

"Well, we did it, Sir," Harry Truman said to the vast, echoing space where a silent bulldozer waited for the construction workers to arrive again in the morning. An idle dump truck towered above the head of the thirty-third president as he spoke over the centuries to the first. "We saved your walls, Mr. President."

He repeated to himself a question which was a part of the Masonic examination ritual:

*"What is the best part of a wall?"*

To which he gave the ancient answer: *"Union."*

*"What is the strength of our craft?"*

He knew that answer by heart, as well: *"That which fire and water cannot destroy."*

President Truman gazed around as if he hoped the ghost of the general would step forth and tell him why these walls were so important, beyond their ancient symbolism for democracy. The British had tried to bring these walls down by fire in 1814, but they had failed, and the walls

stood. There had been other fires, and onslaughts of water to fight them, but the walls remained intact. They had been threatened anew by the renovations now underway. Harry Truman was positive the present work had posed a danger of an even more profound and hidden nature, although he had not been able to fathom what that might be.

The warning had come to him with the three ghostly knocks at his bedroom door. To a member of the secret brotherhood, three blows could mean only one thing, as President Truman well knew from Masonic lore. . .

*His name was Hiram.*

*If the legends were true, he was King Solomon's builder.*

*It was his guild of stonemasons who held the secrets of geometry by which the glorious Temple was constructed. They were secrets in a deadly serious sense, for men's livelihood depended on them. Give away the sworn secrets of your guild, and you gave your brothers' jobs away. Steal the secrets of another guild and you might steal your way out of poverty, into affluence and even honor.*

*No other guild was as honored as the stonemasons.*

*Stonework, the legends said, had passed from Ancient Turks to Ancient Egyptians and then down through the centuries to the craftsmen who followed them.*

*One evening, when Hiram was passing late through the city gates, three thugs from another guild assaulted him. When he would not betray his guild's secrets, with three vicious blows they slew him.*

*For Freemasons ever after, three blows would represent ancient evil.*

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Harry Truman stood alone in the gutted, empty residence of presidents and their First



Ladies. With Bess's help, he had answered the urgent summons of the three blows. A man couldn't ask for a finer sweetheart, he thought, than a wife who aided her husband without question. He sensed there was a mystery within these walls which he could not penetrate, but he was content to let that be so, so long as these stones might stand.

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**Author's postscript**, nine years after writing the story:

I love this story, but I do wonder what readers make of it. Everything in it except for the actual murder mystery and the "secret" is based on fact, but do readers realize that while they're reading it? The opening scene comes directly from a letter that Harry wrote to Bess. He did hear, or think he heard, three hard knocks, etc. He did think the White House was haunted. He was a Mason, just as I have described him to be. Bess did hold those press conferences, though I made up the dialogue. She did edit his speeches. They did meet in the evenings for drinks and talk, just the two of them. The White House was gutted and rebuilt at that time, and there was exactly the contention I've described. The parts I've written about George Washington's involvement are true. Scottish masons were brought over to do the work; they did loathe slavery and the time they had to spend here. The Masonic legend and ritual are as true as I could make them.

My plot is invention, but it rose directly out of history.

And speaking of plot, I wonder now what readers make of that, too. My take on it is that (SPOILER AHEAD) when the slave confided his secret to Martha Washington she misunderstood it to mean the actual body of his master was buried in the walls. The truth was that it was there, but nobody would ever have known that because it was only ashes, in the bricks. Whether or not a skeleton was there was not the point, however; the point was that in a rather spooky and intuitive way all of these people understood at some level how crucial it was/is to keep the White House standing—come fire or the wrecking ball—because of its importance as a symbol for its own citizens and for the rest of the world. Harry did his part because he believed he'd been warned by a Masonic ghost, whether he really had or not, and because he revered the First President, and Bess did her part because she'd been warned by her predecessor, whether the rumor was actually true or not. If I were writing this story over, I might make all that a bit clearer, I think, but I still love it, even if I do say so myself. Researching it was so much fun that it made me wish it was for a novel instead of a short story.