

Conspiracy

By Jay Cuze

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As he followed Morgan down the long featureless hallway, Wilson couldn't help wonder why he was chasing Morgan instead of the other way around. Morgan had just arrived in D.C. that morning; Wilson had been cooped up in that second-rate Washington hotel for the past three weeks. But no, Morgan must lead.

Wilson had felt impotent from the start, follower, not leader, his common sense bought off by a promise of a once-in-a lifetime opportunity. He'd followed sheepishly after Morgan's vintage car in his own battered Yugo into and through a seldom-visited part of town. He'd parked next to him amid shards of concrete in a almost empty lot, then followed passively step after step (slightly out of breath, but unwilling to admit it) up three flights of stairs in a seemingly-abandoned building. Ensnared with a dozen others on the building's top floor, he'd listened to Morgan's proposition, and found it absurd, his own role in the plan impossible of fulfillment. Why me, he'd asked himself then. Perhaps he ought to have asked himself this two or even three times before he made a commitment.

Chapter 1

The group formed a tableau of the sixties brought forward in time: Morgan, their flamboyant mid-twenties leader, with his long hair and long, thin mustache, could easily have doubled for his namesake, Morgan the Pirate. Tall, a bit over six feet, and handsome, but for a few residual acne-scars, Morgan wore his long hair down to and spread out along his shoulders like a proper sixteenth-century gentleman. The hair made a political statement just as it had both forty and four hundred years before.

Debra Gray, only a few years younger than Morgan, neatly attired in a proper white blouse and gray skirt, went braless and wore granny glasses she'd purchased at a thrift shop. With his Mohawk, nose ring, and single earring, Oscar Lahud (Lamud?) would be better identified as skinhead '90's, or maybe '80's punk. Still, a sixties love child would surely have exclaimed, "He's just doing his own thing, man."

The majority of the other faces at the meeting were also familiar to Wilson, either from his stint as advisor to the college newspaper or as former students in his journalism classes. Many subtle and not-so-subtle changes had taken place in the years intervening. Debbie's outward dress was as conservative as ever, but her braless condition was new. (Will the real Debra Gray please stand up.) Caitlin, a silent almost invisible presence in the past, now numbered among the most vocal of participants. Morgan? Well Morgan had always been outspoken, a heroic figure the students listened to as much or more than they listened to their professors.

Making it all seem believable, Alfred Williams, Morgan's childhood friend and the group's token conservative, had shown up as always in a suit and tie. Morgan had made Alfred take off his suit jacket and put on Morgan's leather one in its place. Not so much, Wilson suspected, because Morgan wanted Alfred to blend in with the crowd, but so Morgan could show off the pirate shirt with puffy sleeves and lace at the collar he wore underneath.

The real puzzle was why Wilson himself was at the meeting, trying and failing to look like something other than a hapless academic. The answer, he supposed, was because Morgan knew, Morgan understood. While Wilson might favor the standard patches-at-the-elbows garb of an underpaid instructor at a backwater university, inside he was still an unrepentant hippie, a child of the sixties.

He did and he didn't belong with this group. He'd had a life—marriage, children, while the lives of the others had barely begun. He'd been their trusted mentor and collaborator once, a source of both wisdom and approbation for some of them. But that had been four years before. Not now, not still, surely?

Surely each one of his former students ought already have attained their vision, found a secure niche in which to spend the remainder of their lives.

He sniffed; men's cologne; none of that in the sixties. Bell bottoms, puffy shirts, wild colors for men's clothes, sure. In 1968, the odors of Patuoli and hemp could occasionally be discerned on the bodies and clothes of men as well as women, but never cologne. Another major difference from the era of peace and love Wilson remembered so fondly were the half-dozen youngsters of Middle-Eastern and Asian extraction gathered at the conference table.

Comprising at least half of the group Morgan had assembled, their real names unpronounceable, they were the true symbols of the new 21st century.

Oscar was Lebanese. Caitlin—a sweet Irish colleen, if one were to go strictly by the name—was the child of Iranian parents. She spoke English and Farsi with equal facility. Her hair was jet black, her looks exotic, but she smelled—Wilson leaned forward his face next to hers to be sure—distinctly American.

Several of the new faces Wilson didn't particularly care for. Oscar was one, and an Ali something or other, whose face might well have headed an Al-Qa'ida recruiting poster, was another. A third Arab had gone without introduction so far. All three were unshaven, not quite bearded but far from clean cut. Wilson didn't care for Arabs, distrusted them. Who did trust them since September 11th? But they were to get along, children of all nations united in the American way. Surely this, too, had been a dream of the sixties.

What Morgan had to propose was the creation of a sixties-style counter-culture newspaper for the Tri-City area. A true alternative to the "captive" media.

Morgan would be editor and publisher. Wilson would be advisor to the publisher—with his name on the masthead if he so desired—just as he had been mentor and advisor when Morgan was a student at Western State and editor of the college paper there.

Morgan had been a good but not a great editor. A B at best, though the new century insisted that he, like every other student, receive an A. Morgan had made few changes to the paper's contents—complaints about cafeteria and dormitory food service, names on the Dean's list, games won and lost. But he'd drastically altered the paper's style. Student columnists, Debra and Caitlin

foremost among them, suddenly had opinions. And, after one unhappy incident, Wilson had been forced to read and reread each issue in advance to be sure those opinions would never again offend the college administration.

A sudden vivid memory of one such scene came back to him. They were in the President's office, the President, the Vice President for Academic Affairs, the Dean of Arts and Science and Wilson. The Dean was doing all the talking: They did not want to interfere, but standards were to be upheld. Surely, Wilson as a Full Professor of Journalism must understand that. Advisor to the College Paper was no mere sinecure but an integral part of one's duties. And was his appointment as a full professor confirmed or merely temporary?

According to Morgan, the assembled group was to be both the staff and the owners of the new paper. The necessary capital was in hand, Morgan assured them—who had been the source of the monies, Wilson wondered? (He never did learn the answer.) How long would the monies last?—and they had the talent. What they needed were stories and ads.

The offices Morgan had rented in the loft of a former manufacturing plant were equipped with the necessary desks and chairs, some wood, some metal, as well as a number of early vintage PC's, two IBM Selectric typewriters, and, incredibly, a single Remington manual similar to the one on which Wilson had launched his own journalistic career decades past.

The desks were not new. Several of the wooden ones had initials carved in their upper surfaces and chewing gum was stuck beneath the one Wilson envisioned as his own. The seat of the chair that went with his desk had been mended at least once with masking tape. And though at one time the chair may

have proclaimed itself “an ergonomic miracle,” its adjustments now were frozen solid, and Wilson could use it just as it was or not at all.

“The TriCity Sentinel! How does that sound?” Morgan looked about him for agreement, and the answering murmurs from around the large open room confirmed that the name sounded just fine. (No discussion?! This wasn’t at all like the sixties. Students then were radical, disagreeing constantly as a matter of principle, outspoken even if only a blending voice in a crowd. Today’s young adult was content to lip-synch, voice no louder than the music in the background.)

They had the necessary stories and ads to carry them through an initial two issues, Morgan told them. But they needed a really “big” story if they were to have a truly successful launch. Could they do it?

Wilson wondered what Morgan had in mind—Bad Food in Local College Cafeterias? City Councilman Wins Lottery for Home in Development He Supported? These might make attention-grabbing headlines for a single issue, but were sure to be forgotten well before the next was released. Was this editorial meeting a pep rally or a serious discussion?

“Caitlin will tell us what that story is.”

Caitlin? The shyest of the shy? Wilson had found Caitlin’s exotic looks attractive but off putting when she sat in his classroom. He could see there’d been a few adjustments in the intervening years. A once hooked nose now was barely recognizable as such. The pale white tops of newly implanted breasts could be glimpsed rising from a scooped-neck blouse. But the final adjustment lay in the strong voice that emerged from Caitlin’s lipsticked mouth, self-assured and convincing.

“My aunt has told me that the President had at least six-months advance notice of the September 11th attacks.”

Could be, Wilson thought. A lot of speculation had been made in that direction. Even the captive media carried regular accounts of unheeded warnings from the FBI, the FAA, and the CIA, warnings that had been in the President’s hands well before September 2001. But where was the smoking gun? The proof that the President knew of the forthcoming attacks but had deliberately ignored the evidence. And who was Caitlin’s know-all aunt?

“We have reason to believe,” Morgan interrupted, “that the President and his advisors not only discussed the likelihood of the attacks but determined that it would be to the President’s advantage if the attacks took place.”

Truly, a “Big” story. If it were true. And if its details could be corroborated. Again, one had to ask, just who was Caitlin’s aunt and how had she come by her information?

“My aunt is with the Iranian embassy in Washington.”

The Iranian embassy? that well-known source of disinformation?

“I can see Paul is skeptical,” Morgan said. (Wilson’s lack of a poker face had kept him, despite a strong inclination, from participating in any card games over the years except for “Go Fish,” a game the child is supposed to win.) “The Iranian embassy is a frequent source of disinformation. Which is why at least two of you are going to Washington to get the facts.”

“Almost 90% of newspaper startups fail.” Morgan looked right at Wilson as he replayed word-for-word one of his former instructor’s lectures, “But if this story is true and we’re the first to cover it, we’ll have the subscribers and advertisers we need to carry the paper, our paper, through its first few months.”

We might even get a Pulitzer, I might get a Pulitzer, Wilson thought, but said nothing.

Again came murmured sounds of agreement, even enthusiasm, from around the conference table. Wilson was less sanguine about their chances. Two kids barely past college age were supposed to fly to the nation's capital, out scoop Woodward and Bernstein, and get the story that had somehow eluded the Washington Post, The New York Times, the Associated Press, and CNN? Only in the movies.

But Morgan was dead serious. So was Don Quixote. "Caitlin, Debbie, Paul, I'm counting on you to get the facts and the interviews, the why as well as the what and who. The rest of us, led by Oscar, will concentrate on selling ads while you're away."

Paul? Had Wilson just heard his own name coming from Morgan's mouth? Right: he was going to use the few weeks he had free of teaching duties—his so-called vacation—on a crazy adventure. The thought of spending a week or so in Debbie's company was appealing, but common sense—she was younger than any of his daughters—forced Wilson to put that thought aside.

"I teach journalism. I don't really do it. Any more."

"What about the San Diego bomber?"

Ten pairs of eyes turned toward him. The San Diego bomber had been a long time ago. A long time, Wilson thought. But he didn't say no to the forthcoming trip, took the tour of the new offices along with everyone else and barely cringed when he learned that Oscar, boots, rings and all, was to be the TriCity Sentinel's advertising manager.

Wilson wanted that story, wanted his name on its byline, on the awards that were sure to follow. Morgan had read Wilson's mind, as always, knew him better than he knew himself.