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The Last Confessions of E. Howard Hunt

He was the ultimate keeper of secrets, lurking in the shadows of American history. He toppled banana republics, planned the Bay of Pigs invasion and led the Watergate break-in. Now he would reveal what he'd always kept hidden: who killed JFK

ERIK HEDEGAARD

>> *Who assassinated JFK? The conversation continues in our politics blog, [National Affairs Daily](#).*

Once, when the old spymaster thought he was dying, his eldest son came to visit him at his home in Miami. The scourges recently had been constant and terrible: lupus, pneumonia, cancers of the jaw and prostate, gangrene, the amputation of his left leg. It was like something was eating him up. Long past were his years of heroic service to the country. In the CIA, he'd helped mastermind the violent removal of a duly elected leftist president in Guatemala and assisted in subterfuges that led to the murder of Che Guevara. But no longer could you see in him the suave, pipe-smoking, cocktail-party-loving clandestine operative whose Cold War exploits he himself had, almost obsessively, turned into novels, one of which, *East of Farewell*, the *New York Times* once called "the best sea story" of World War II. Diminished too were the old bad memories, of the Bay of Pigs debacle that derailed his CIA career for good, of the Watergate Hotel fiasco, of his first wife's death, of thirty-three months in U.S. prisons -- of, in fact, a furious lifetime mainly of failure, disappointment and pain. But his firstborn son -- he named him St. John; Saint, for short -- was by his side now. And he still had a secret or two left to share before it was all over.

They were in the living room, him in his wheelchair, watching Fox News at full volume, because his hearing had failed too. After a while, he had St. John wheel him into his bedroom and hoist him onto his bed. It smelled foul in there; he was incontinent; a few bottles of urine under the bed needed to be emptied; but he was beyond caring. He asked St. John to get him a diet root beer, a pad of paper and a pen.

Saint had come to Miami from Eureka, California, borrowing money to fly because he was broke. Though clean now, he had been a meth addict for twenty years, a meth dealer for ten of those years and a source of frustration and anger to his father for much of his life. There were a couple of days back in 1972, after the Watergate job, when the boy, then eighteen,

had risen to the occasion. The two of them, father and son, had wiped fingerprints off a bunch of spy gear, and Saint had helped in other ways, too. But as a man, he had two felony convictions to his name, and they were for drugs. The old spymaster was a convicted felon too, of course. But that was different. He was E. Howard Hunt, a true American patriot, and he had earned his while serving his country. That the country repaid him with almost three years in prison was something he could never understand, if only because the orders that got him in such trouble came right from the top; as he once said, "I had always assumed, working for the CIA for so many years, that anything the White House wanted done was the law of the land."

Years had gone by when he and St. John hardly spoke. But then St. John came to him wanting to know if he had any information about the assassination of President Kennedy. Despite almost universal skepticism, his father had always maintained that he didn't. He swore to this during two government investigations. "I didn't have anything to do with the assassination, didn't know anything about it," he said during one of them. "I did my time for Watergate. I shouldn't have to do additional time and suffer additional losses for something I had nothing to do with."

But now, in August 2003, propped up in his sickbed, paper on his lap, pen in hand and son sitting next to him, he began to write down the names of men who had indeed participated in a plot to kill the president. He had lied during those two federal investigations. He knew something after all. He told St. John about his own involvement, too. It was explosive stuff, with the potential to reconfigure the JFK-assassination-theory landscape. And then he got better and went on to live for four more years.

They sure don't make White House bad guys the way they used to. Today you've got flabby-faced half-men like Karl Rove, with weakling names like "Scooter" Libby, blandly hacking their way through the constraints of the U.S. Constitution, while back then, in addition to Hunt, you had out-and-out thugs like G. Gordon Liddy, his Watergate co-conspirator and Nixon's dirty-tricks chief, who would hold his own hand over an open flame to prove what a real tough guy he was. It all seems a little nutty now, but in 1972 it was serious business. These guys meant to take the powers of the presidency and run amok. Hunt, an ex-CIA man who loved operating in the shadows and joined Nixon's Special Investigations Unit (a.k.a. "the Plumbers") as a \$100-a-day consultant in 1971, specialized in political sabotage. Among his first assignments: forging cables linking the Kennedy administration to the assassination of South Vietnam's president. After that, he began sniffing around Ted Kennedy's dirty laundry, to see what he could dig up there. Being a former CIA man, he had no problem contemplating the use of firebombs and once thought about slathering LSD on the steering wheel of an unfriendly newspaperman's car, hoping it would leach into his skin and cause a fatal accident. But of all his various plots and subterfuges, in the end, only one of them mattered: the failed burglary at the Watergate Hotel, in Washington, D.C., in the spring of 1972.

The way it happened, Hunt enlisted some Cuban pals from his old Bay of Pigs days to fly up from Miami and bug the Democratic National Committee headquarters, which was located inside the Watergate. Also on the team were a couple of shady ex-government operators named James McCord and Frank Sturgis. The first attempt ended when the outfit's lock picker realized he'd brought the wrong tools. The next time, however, with Hunt stationed in a Howard Johnson's hotel room across the way, communicating with the burglars by walkie-talkie, the team gained entry into the office. Unfortunately, on the way into the building, they'd taped open an exit door to allow their escape, and when a night watchman found it, he called the cops. The burglars were arrested on the spot. One of them had E. Howard's phone number, at the White House, no less, in his address book. Following this lead, police arrested Hunt and charged him with burglary, conspiracy and wiretapping. Abandoned by his bosses at the White House, he soon began trying to extort money from them to help pay his mounting bills, as well as those of his fellow burglars, the deal being that if the White House paid, all those arrested would plead guilty and maintain silence about the extent of the White House's involvement.

That December, his wife, Dorothy, carrying \$10,000 in \$100 bills, was killed in a plane crash, foul play suspected but never proved. Two years later, impeachment imminent, Nixon resigned his presidency. And in 1973, E. Howard Hunt, the man who had unwittingly set all these events in motion, pleaded guilty and ultimately spent thirty-three months in prison. "I cannot escape feeling," he said at the time, "that the country I have served for my entire life and which directed me to carry out the Watergate entry is punishing me for doing the very things it trained and directed me to do."

After his release, Hunt moved to Miami, where he remarried, had two more children and spent three decades living a quiet, unexceptional life, steadfastly refusing to talk about Watergate, much less the Kennedy assassination. His connection to the JFK assassination came about almost serendipitously, when in 1974 a researcher stumbled across a photo of three tramps standing in Dallas' Dealey Plaza. It was taken on November 22nd, 1963, the day of Kennedy's shooting, and one of the tramps looked pretty much like E. Howard. In early inquiries, official and otherwise, he always denied any involvement. In later years, he'd offer a curt "No comment." And then, earlier this year, at the age of eighty-eight, he died -- though not before writing an autobiography, *American Spy: My Secret History in the CIA, Watergate & Beyond*, published last month. Not surprisingly, those things he wrote down about JFK's death and gave to his eldest son don't make an appearance in the book, at least not in any definitive way. E. Howard had apparently decided to take them to the grave. But St. John still has the memo -- "It has all this stuff in it," he says, "the chain of command, names, people, places, dates. He wrote it out to me directly, in his own handwriting, starting with the initials 'LBJ' " -- and he's decided it's time his father's last secrets finally see some light, for better or for worse.

Out in eureka, a few days before his father's death, St. John is driving through town in a beat-up mottled-brown '88 Cutlass Sierra. He is fifty-two. His hair is dark, worn long, and despite his decades as a drug addict, he's still looking good. He has a Wiccan girlfriend named Mona. He's also an accomplished and soulful guitar player, leaning heavily toward Eric Clapton; he can often be found playing in local haunts during open-mike nights and is working on putting a band together, perhaps to be called Saint John and the Sinners or, though less likely, the Konspirators. He's got a good sense of humor and a large sentimental streak. The last time he saw his father, in Miami, was a week ago.

"I sat by his bedside holding his hand for about ten hours the first day," St. John says somberly. "He hadn't been out of bed in ten weeks, had pneumonia twenty-seven times in the last sixteen months. He's such a tough old motherfucker, that guy. But he had all this fluid in his lungs, a death rattle, and I thought, 'Any minute now, this is it, his last breath, I'm looking at it right here.' A couple of times my stepmom, Laura, would say, 'Howard, who is this?' He'd look at me and her, and he didn't have a clue. Other times, he would quietly say, 'St. John.' He said he loved me and was grateful I was there."

At the moment, Saint doesn't have a job; his felonies have gotten in the way. He has to borrow money to put gas in his Cutlass. Beach chairs substitute for furniture in the tiny apartment where, until recently, he lived with an ex-girlfriend, herself a reformed meth addict, and two kids, one hers, one theirs. "I would've loved to have lived a normal life," he says. "I'm happy with who I am. I don't have any regrets. But all the shit that happened, the whole thing, it really spun me over."

And not only him but his siblings, too -- a brother, David, who has had his own problems with drugs, and two older sisters, Kevan and Lisa, who still hold their father responsible for the tragedy of their mom's death. Dorothy Hunt was staunchly loyal to her husband and, after his arrest, helped him with his plans to blackmail the White House. On December 8th, 1972, carrying \$10,000 in what's regarded as extorted hush money and, some say, evidence that could have gotten Nixon impeached, she boarded United Airlines Flight 553 from Washington to Chicago. The plane crashed, killing forty-three people onboard, including Dorothy. The official explanation was pilot error, but St. John doesn't believe it. He thinks that the Nixon White House wanted to both get rid of his mother and send a message to his father. Nonetheless, he says he tries not to place blame.

"She got on that plane willingly and lovingly, because that's the kind of woman she was," he says. "They had lots of marital problems, but when it came down to it, she had his back, and she could hang in there with the big dogs. She was really pissed at Nixon, Liddy, all those guys, and she was saying, 'We're not going to let them hang you out to dry. We're going to get them. Those motherfuckers are going to pay.' So I've never held what happened against him. I had bitterness and resentment, but I always knew he did what he had to do given the circumstances."

And at times, he even seems to think of his dad with pride: "Did you hear that the character that Tom Cruise plays in the *Mission: Impossible* movies is named after him? Instead of Everette Hunt, they named him Ethan Hunt. I know he's been portrayed as kind of an inept, third-rate burglar, but burglary wasn't really his bag. My dad was a really good spy, maybe a great spy."

But then he starts talking about what it was like growing up the eldest son of Everette Howard Hunt, and a different picture emerges. "He loved the glamorous life, cocktail parties, nightclubbing, flirting, all that," Saint says. "He was unfaithful to my mom, but she stayed with him. He was a swinger. He thought of himself as a cool dude, suave, sophisticated, intellectual. He was Mr. Smooth. A man of danger. He was perfect for the CIA. He never felt guilt about anything."

In the early days of the cold war, the CIA's mandate was simple: to contain the spread of communism by whatever means necessary; it was tacitly given permission to go about its dirty business unfettered by oversight of any kind. For much of the Cold War, it was answerable to no one. And if you were lucky enough to become one of its agents, you had every right to consider yourself a member of an elite corps, a big swinging all-American dick like no other.

The middle-class son of a Hamburg, New York, attorney, E. Howard Hunt graduated from Brown University in 1940 with a bachelor's in English, joined the Navy during World War II, served in the North Atlantic on the destroyer *Mayo*, slipped and fell, took a medical discharge and wound up in China working under "Wild" Bill Donovan in the newly formed Office of Strategic Services. When the OSS was transformed into the CIA, Hunt jumped onboard. He loved action as much as he hated communism, and he soon began operating with a level of arrogance entirely typical of the CIA. He was instrumental, for instance, in planning the 1954 coup in Guatemala that overthrew the left-leaning, democratically elected president, Jacobo Arbenz, and ushered in forty years of military repression, which ultimately cost 200,000 Guatemalans their lives. Years later, when asked about the 200,000 deaths, E. Howard said, "Deaths? What deaths?" Like Saint says, he never felt guilt about anything: "He was a complete self-centered WASP who saw himself as this blue blood from upstate New York. 'I'm better than anybody because I'm white, Protestant and went to Brown, and since I'm in the CIA, I can do anything I want.' Jew, nigger, Polack, wop -- he used all those racial epithets. He was an elitist. He hated everybody."

In the early Fifties, his father could often be seen cruising around in a white Cadillac convertible; he loved that car. He also loved his cigars and his wine and his country clubs and being waited on by servants and having his children looked after by nannies. He was full of himself and full of the romantic, swashbuckling, freewheeling importance of his government mission. He had quite an imagination, too. When he wasn't off saving the world from Reds, he spent much of his time in front of a typewriter, hacking out espionage novels, some eighty in all, with titles such as *The Violent Ones* ("They killed by day, they loved by night") and *I Came to Kill* ("They wanted a tyrant liquidated, and cash could hire him to do it").

Wherever E. Howard was stationed -- he'd pop up Zelig-like in hot spots from Japan to Uruguay to Spain -- he and his family lived lavishly and well, all presumably to lend credence to his cover job as a high-ranking embassy official. One estate was as large as a city block, and one dining table as long as a telephone pole, with the parents sitting at distant opposite ends. Sadly, he treated his children the way he and the CIA treated the rest of the world. They were supposed to bend to his will and otherwise be invisible. God forbid during a meal one of them should speak or rattle a dish.

"Whenever I made a sound, he looked at me with those hateful, steely eyes of his, a look of utter contempt and disgust, like he could kill," St. John says. "He was a mean-spirited person and an extremely cruel father. I was his firstborn son, and I was born with a clubfoot and had to have operations. I suffered from petit-mal seizures. I was dyslexic and developed a stutter. For the superspy not to have a superson was the ultimate disappointment, like, 'Here's my idiot son with the clubfoot and glasses. Can we keep him in the closet, Dorothy?' "

Later, E. Howard moved the family to the last home it would ever occupy as a family, in Potomac, Maryland. It was called Witches Island. It was a rambling affair, with a horse paddock, a chicken coop, the Cold War bonus of a bomb shelter, and a fishing pond across the way. E. Howard wanted Saint to attend a top-flight prep school and one night took him to a dinner at St. Andrew's School, to try and get his son enrolled. In the middle of the meal, Saint leaned over to his dad and whispered, "Papa, I have to go to the bathroom." His father glared at him. Pretty soon Saint was banging his knees together under the table. "Sit still," his father hissed. Saint said, "Papa, I really have to go."

"I ended up pissing in my pants at the dinner," Saint says. "Can you imagine how humiliating that was? Unbelievable." He didn't get into St. Andrew's. He ended up settling for a lower-tier boarding school called St. James, near Hagerstown, Maryland. His second year there, in 1970, after being repeatedly molested by a teacher, he broke down and told his mother what was going on. She told his father. And rumor had it that E. Howard came up to St. James with a carload of guns to make the teacher disappear. "He was really, really pissed off," says Saint. "He wanted to kill." In any case, at the school, neither the teacher nor St. John was ever seen again.

That same year, his father retired from the CIA after being relegated to the backwaters for his role in the Bay of Pigs. He went to work as a writer for a PR firm. He was bored and missed the hands-on action of the CIA. The following year, however, his lawyer pal Chuck Colson, who was special counsel to Nixon, called him up with an invitation to join the president's Special Investigations Unit as a kind of dirty-tricks consultant. He signed on. He really thought he was going places.

Around the time of St. John's Miami visit in 2003 to talk to his ailing father about JFK, certain other people were also trying to get things out of E. Howard, including the actor Kevin Costner, who had played a JFK-assassination-obsessed DA in the Oliver Stone film JFK and had become somewhat obsessed himself. Costner said that he could arrange for E. Howard to make \$5 million for telling the truth about what happened in Dallas. Unbeknown to St. John, however, Costner had already met with E. Howard once. That meeting didn't go very well. When Costner arrived at the house, he didn't ease into the subject. "So who killed Kennedy?" he blurted out. "I mean, who did shoot JFK, Mr. Hunt?"

E. Howard's mouth fell open, and he looked at his wife. "What did he say?"

"Howard," Laura said, "he wants to know who shot JFK."

And that ended that meeting, with E. Howard grumbling to himself about Costner, "What a numskull."

But then St. John got involved, and he knew better how to handle the situation. For one thing, he knew that his stepmother wanted to forget about the past. She didn't want to hear about Watergate or Kennedy. In fact, E. Howard swore to Laura that he knew nothing about JFK's assassination; it was one of her preconditions for marriage. Consequently, she and her sons often found themselves in conflict with St. John.

"Why can't you go back to California and leave well enough alone?" they asked him. "How can you do this? How dare you do this? He's in the last years of his life."

But Saint's attitude was, "This has nothing to do with you. This stuff is of historical significance and needs to come out, and if you're worried that it'll make him out to be a liar, everybody knows he's a liar already. Is this going to ruin the Hunt name? The Hunt name is already filled with ruination."

So when Saint arrived in Miami to talk to his dad, the two men spent a lot of time waiting for Laura to leave the house. Saint painted the living room and built a wheelchair ramp. In the mornings, he cooked breakfast. In the afternoons, he plopped a fishing hat on E. Howard's head and wheeled him around the neighborhood. They drank coffee together. And watched lots of Fox News. And when Laura finally left, they talked.

Afterward, another meeting was arranged with Costner, this time in Los Angeles, where the actor had fifty assassination-related questions all ready to go. (The actor declined comment for this article.) Though the \$5 million figure was still floating around, all Costner wanted to pay E. Howard at this point was \$100 a day for his time. There would be no advance. St. John called Costner.

"That's your offer? A hundred dollars? That's an insult. You're a cheapskate."

"Nobody calls me a cheapskate," said Costner. "What do you think I'm going to do, just hand over \$5 million?"

"No. But the flight alone could kill him. He's deaf as a brick. He's pissing in a bag. He's got one leg. You want him to fly to Los Angeles and for \$100 a day? Wow! What are we going to do with all that money?!"

"I can't talk to you anymore, St. John," Costner said. And that was the end of that, for good. It looked like what E. Howard had to say would never get out.

One evening in Eureka, over a barbecue meal, St. John explains how he first came to suspect that his father might somehow be involved in the Kennedy assassination. "Around 1975, I was in a phone booth in Maryland somewhere, when I saw a poster on a telephone pole about who killed JFK, and it had a picture of the three tramps. I saw that picture and I fucking -- like a cartoon character, my jaw dropped, my eyes popped out of my head, and smoke came out of my ears. It looks like my dad. There's nobody that has all those same facial features. People say it's not him. He's said it's not him. But I'm his son, and I've got a gut feeling."

He chews his sandwich. "And then, like an epiphany, I remember '63, and my dad being gone, and my mom telling me that he was on a business trip to Dallas. I've tried to convince myself that's some kind of false memory, that I'm just nuts, that it's something I heard years later. But, I mean, his alibi for that day is that he was at home with his family. I remember I was in the fifth grade. We were at recess. I was playing on the merry-go-round. We were called in and told to go home, because the president had been killed. And I remember going home. But I don't remember my dad being there. I have no recollection of him being there. And then he has this whole thing about shopping for Chinese food with my mother that day, so that they could cook a meal together." His father testified to this, in court, on more than one occasion, saying that he and his wife often cooked meals together.

St. John pauses and leans forward. "Well," he says, "I can tell you that's just the biggest load of crap in the fucking world. He was always looking at things like he was writing a novel; everything had to be just so glamorous and so exciting. He couldn't even be bothered with his children. That's not glamorous. James Bond doesn't have children. So my dad in the kitchen? Chopping vegetables with his wife? I'm so sorry, but that would never happen. Ever. That fucker never did jack-squat like that. Ever."

Not that it was all bad back then, in Potomac, at Witches Island. E. Howard played the trumpet, and his son was into

music too, so sometimes the pair went down to Blues Alley, in Georgetown, to hear jazz. Back home, E. Howard would slap Benny Goodman's monster swing-jazz song "Sing, Sing, Sing" on the turntable, and the two would listen to it endlessly. And then, sometimes, during the stomping Harry James horn solo, E. Howard would jump to his feet, snapping his fingers like some cool cat, pull back his shirt sleeves, lick his lips and play the air trumpet for all he was worth. It was great stuff, and St. John loved it. "I would sit there in awe," he says. But the best was yet to come.

It was well past midnight on June 18th, 1972. Saint, eighteen years old, was asleep in his basement bedroom, surrounded by his Beatles and *Playboy* pinup posters, when he heard someone shouting, "You gotta wake up! You gotta wake up!"

When he opened his eyes, Saint saw his father as he'd never seen him before. E. Howard was dressed in his usual coat and tie, but everything was akimbo. He was a sweaty, disheveled mess. Saint didn't know what to think or what was going on.

"I don't need you to ask a lot of questions," his father said. "I need you to get your clothes on and come upstairs."

He disappeared into the darkness. Saint changed out of his pajamas. Upstairs, he found his father in the master bedroom, laboring over a big green suitcase jumble-filled with microphones, walkie-talkies, cameras, tripods, cords, wires, lots of weird stuff. His father started giving him instructions. Saint went to the kitchen and returned with Windex, paper towels and some rubber dishwashing gloves. Then, in silence, the two of them began wiping fingerprints off all the junk in the suitcase. After that, they loaded everything into E. Howard's Pontiac Firebird and drove over to a lock on the C&O Canal. E. Howard heaved the suitcase into the water, and it gurgled out of sight.

They didn't speak on the way home. St. John still didn't know what was going on. All he knew was that his dad had needed his help, and he'd given it, successfully.

The next day, dressed in one of his prep-school blazers, he drove to a Riggs Bank in Georgetown and met his father inside the safety-deposit-box cage. His father turned him around, lifted his blazer and shoved about \$100,000 in cash down the back of his pants. The boy made it home without picking up a tail. Then his father had him get rid of a typewriter. Saint put the typewriter in a bag, hoofed it across the Witches Island property onto the neighboring spread and tossed it into the pond where he and his brother David used to go fishing.

"Don't ever tell anybody you've done these things," his father said later. "I could get in trouble. You could get in trouble. I'm sorry to have to put you in this position, but I really am grateful for your help."

"Of course, Papa," Saint said.

Everything he had done, he'd done because his father and his gang of pals had botched the break-in at the Watergate Hotel. Soon his mother would be killed in a plane crash, and his father would be sent to jail, and Nixon would resign, and his own life would fracture in unimaginable ways. But right now, standing there with his father and hearing those words of praise, he was the happiest he'd ever been.

Years later, when saint started trying to get his father to tell what he knew about JFK, he came to believe the information would be valuable. He both needed money and thought he was owed money, for what he'd been through. Also, like many a conspiracy nut before him, he was more than a little obsessed.

"After seeing that poster of the three tramps," he says, "I read two dozen books on the JFK assassination, and the more I read, the more I was unsure about what happened. I had all these questions and uncertainties. I mean, I was trying to sort out things that had touched me in a big way."

Touched him and turned him upside down, especially the death of his mother. He had been particularly close to her. She was part Native American and had sewed him a buckskin shirt that he used to wear like a badge of honor, along with a pair of moccasins. At the same time, Saint feels that he never got to know her. She told him that during World War II, she'd tracked Nazi money for the U.S. Treasury Department, and Saint believes that early in her marriage to his father, she may have been in the CIA herself, "a contract agent, not officially listed." But he isn't sure about any of it, really.

"In our family, everything was sort of like a mini-CIA," he says. "Nothing was ever talked about, so we grew up with all of these walls, walls around my father, walls around my mother, walls around us kids, to protect and insulate us. You grow up not knowing what really happened. Like, who was my mom, for Christ's sake? Was she a CIA agent? What was her life really like?" The one thing he does know is that when she died, so in large part did the Hunt family.

Once his father went to prison, Saint moved to Wisconsin, where he worked in a potato-processing plant and spent the rest of his time dropping acid. In 1975, he moved to the Oakland, California, area, started snorting coke and for five years drove a bakery truck. He was in a band and hoped to become a rock star, though touring alongside Buddy Guy was about the biggest thing that ever happened. Then he gave up coke and took up meth and a while later started dealing meth. Twenty years flew by. He had wild sexual escapades; he shacked up with two sisters -- "nymphs," he calls them. But mainly his life, like his father's, was a rolling series of misfortunes. He received insurance money after his mom died, and bought a house; a week later, it burned down in some drug-related fiasco. His brother David followed a similar path; leaving boarding school, he hooked up with Saint, and together they set about snorting and dealing away the years.

Finally, in 2001, on the heels of two drug busts, Saint decided to go straight. With his ex-girlfriend, their daughter and her son, he stayed in a series of shelters, then took them to live in Eureka, several hours north of Oakland. He's since earned a certificate in hotel management, but jobs don't last. And the questions and uncertainties about his father continue to circulate in his head.

"In some ways we turned out similarly," he says. "He was a spy, into secrets and covert activity. I became a drug dealer. What has to be more covert and secret than that? It's the same mind-set. We were just on opposite sides of the -- well, actually, in our case, I guess we weren't even on opposite sides of the law, were we?" That time in miami, with saint by his bed and disease eating away at him and him thinking he's six months away from death, E. Howard finally put pen to paper and started writing. Saint had been working toward this moment for a long while, and now it was going to happen. He got his father an A&W diet root beer, then sat down in the old man's wheelchair and waited.

E. Howard scribbled the initials "LBJ," standing for Kennedy's ambitious vice president, Lyndon Johnson. Under "LBJ," connected by a line, he wrote the name Cord Meyer. Meyer was a CIA agent whose wife had an affair with JFK; later she was murdered, a case that's never been solved. Next his father connected to Meyer's name the name Bill Harvey, another CIA agent; also connected to Meyer's name was the name David Morales, yet another CIA man and a well-known, particularly vicious black-op specialist. And then his father connected to Morales' name, with a line, the framed words "French Gunman Grassy Knoll."

So there it was, according to E. Howard Hunt. LBJ had Kennedy killed. It had long been speculated upon. But now E. Howard was saying that's the way it was. And that Lee Harvey Oswald wasn't the only shooter in Dallas. There was also, on the grassy knoll, a French gunman, presumably the Corsican Mafia assassin Lucien Sarti, who has figured prominently in other assassination theories.

"By the time he handed me the paper, I was in a state of shock," Saint says. "His whole life, to me and everybody else, he'd always professed to not know anything about any of it. But I knew this had to be the truth. If my dad was going to make

anything up, he would have made something up about the Mafia, or Castro, or Khrushchev. He didn't like Johnson. But you don't falsely implicate your own country, for Christ's sake. My father is old-school, a dyed-in-the-wool patriot, and that's the last thing he would do."

Later that week, E. Howard also gave Saint two sheets of paper that contained a fuller narrative. It starts out with LBJ again, connecting him to Cord Meyer, then goes on: "Cord Meyer discusses a plot with [David Atlee] Phillips who brings in Wm. Harvey and Antonio Veciana. He meets with Oswald in Mexico City. . . . Then Veciana meets w/ Frank Sturgis in Miami and enlists David Morales in anticipation of killing JFK there. But LBJ changes itinerary to Dallas, citing personal reasons."

David Atlee Phillips, the CIA's Cuban operations chief in Miami at the time of JFK's death, knew E. Howard from the Guatemala-coup days. Veciana is a member of the Cuban exile community. Sturgis, like Saint's father, is supposed to have been one of the three tramps photographed in Dealey Plaza. Sturgis was also one of the Watergate plotters, and he is a man whom E. Howard, under oath, has repeatedly sworn to have not met until Watergate, so to Saint the mention of his name was big news.

In the next few paragraphs, E. Howard goes on to describe the extent of his own involvement. It revolves around a meeting he claims he attended, in 1963, with Morales and Sturgis. It takes place in a Miami hotel room. Here's what happens:

Morales leaves the room, at which point Sturgis makes reference to a "Big Event" and asks E. Howard, "Are you with us?"

E. Howard asks Sturgis what he's talking about.

Sturgis says, "Killing JFK."

E. Howard, "incredulous," says to Sturgis, "You seem to have everything you need. Why do you need me?" In the handwritten narrative, Sturgis' response is unclear, though what E. Howard says to Sturgis next isn't: He says he won't "get involved in anything involving Bill Harvey, who is an alcoholic psycho."

After that, the meeting ends. E. Howard goes back to his "normal" life and "like the rest of the country . . . is stunned by JFK's death and realizes how lucky he is not to have had a direct role."

After reading what his father had written, St. John was stunned too. His father had not only implicated LBJ, he'd also, with a few swift marks of a pen, put the lie to almost everything he'd sworn to, under oath, about his knowledge of the assassination. Saint had a million more questions. But his father was exhausted and needed to sleep, and then Saint had to leave town without finishing their talk, though a few weeks later he did receive in the mail a tape recording from his dad. E. Howard's voice on the cassette is weak and grasping, and he sometimes wanders down unrelated pathways. But he essentially remakes the same points he made in his handwritten narrative.

Shortly thereafter, Laura found out what had been going on, and with the help of E. Howard's attorney put an end to it. St. John and his father were kept apart. When they did see each other, they were never left alone. And they never got a chance to finish what they'd started. Instead, the old man set about writing his autobiography and turned his back on his son. He wrote him a letter in which he said that Saint's life had been nothing but "meaningless, self-serving instant gratification," that he had never amounted to anything and never would. He asked for his JFK memos back, and Saint returned them, though not before making copies.

There is no way to confirm Hunt's allegations -- all but one of the co-conspirators he named are long gone. St. John, for his

part, believes his father. E. Howard was lucid when he made his confession. He was taking no serious medications, and he and his son were finally on good terms. If anything, St. John believes, his father was holding out on him, the old spy keeping a few secrets in reserve, just in case.

"Actually, there were probably dozens of plots to kill Kennedy, because everybody hated Kennedy but the public," Saint says. "The question is, which one of them worked? My dad has always said, 'Thank God one of them worked.' I think he knows a lot more than he told me. He claimed he backed out of the plot only so he could disclaim actual involvement. In a way, I feel like he only opened another can of worms." He takes a deep breath. "At a certain point, I'm just going to have to let it go."

Out in Eureka, Saint has been reading an advance copy of E. Howard's autobiography, *American Spy*. In it, his father looks at LBJ as only one possible person behind the JFK killing, and then only in the most halfhearted, couched-and-cloaked way. He brings up various other possibilities, too, then debunks each of them.

But of all the shadings and omissions in the book, the only one that truly upsets St. John has to do with the happiest moment in his life, that time in 1972, on the night of the Watergate burglary, when he helped his father dispose of the spy gear, then ran money for him and ditched the typewriter.

The way it unfolds in the book, St. John doesn't do anything for his dad. And it's E. Howard himself who dumps the typewriter.

"That's a complete lie," Saint says, almost shouting. "A total fabrication. I did that. I mean, he never took me aside and thanked me in any kind of deep emotional way. But I'm the one who helped him that night. Me! And he's robbing me of it. Why?"

Like so many other things, he will never know why, because the next day, on January 23rd, in the morning, in Miami, the old spymaster dies.

Later in the day, Saint started reading a few of the obituaries.

One starts off, "Sleazebag E. Howard Hunt is finally dead."

"Oh, God," Saint says and goes looking for how *The New York Times* handled his father's death. The obit reads, "Mr. Hunt was intelligent, erudite, suave and loyal to his friends. But the record shows that he mishandled many of the tasks he received from the CIA and the White House. He was 'totally self-absorbed, totally amoral and a danger to himself and anybody around him. . . .'"

"Wow," Saint says. "I don't know if I can read these things. I mean, that is one brutal obituary."

But the *Times* is right, of course. E. Howard was a danger to anybody around him, and any list of those in danger would always have to include, right at the top, his firstborn son, St. John.

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