

Sarah Vowell "Assassination Vacation" April 20, 2005

TOPIC: ~~ASSASSINATION VACATION~~

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Thank you, thank you so much. I'm very proud to be here. I almost wish I were announcing I'd just joined the KKK just because that would be okay here.

I guess I am unfortunately still against them. This book is just about the assassination of Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley and traveling around to historic sites and looking at plaques and markers and monuments and statues to see how those things are remembered, or in Garfield's case not remembered. I mean it's really a lot about as much about traveling as it is about, where there are two words in the title. And it's about the second one almost as much as the first.

One night last summer all the killers in my head assembled on a stage in Massachusetts to sing show tunes. There they were John Wilkes Booth, Charles J. Guiteau, Leon Czolgosz, in tune and in the flesh. The men who murdered Presidents Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley were elbow to elbow with Lee Harvey Oswald and the klutzy girls who botched their hits on klutzy Gerald Ford harmonizing on a toe tapper called "Everybody's Got the Right to be Happy", a song that I cheerfully hummed walking back to the bed and breakfast where I was staying.

Not that I came all the way from New York City just to enjoy a chorus line of presidential assassins. Mostly I came to the Berkshires because of the man who brought one of those presidents back to life. I was there to visit Chesterwood, the house and studio once belonging to Daniel Chester French, the artist responsible for the Abraham Lincoln sculpture in the Lincoln Memorial. A nauseating four-hour bus ride from Port Authority just to see the room where from patriotic chiseler came up with a marble statue. For some reason, none of my friends wanted to come with. Because I had to stay overnight and this being New England the only place to stay was a bed and breakfast. It was a lovely old country mansion operated by amiable people. That said, I am not a bed and breakfast person. I understand why other people would want to stay in B&Bs. They're pretty and personal. They're quaint, a nice way of saying no TV. They are romantic, i.e. every object large enough to have a flower printed on it is going to have a flower printed on it. They're cozy meaning that a guest has to keep their belongs on the floor because every conceivable flat surface are covered in knickknacks, except for the one knickknack she longs for- a remote control. And the real reason Bed and Breakfasts make me nervous is breakfast. If it's not queasy enough to stay in a stranger's home and sleep in a bed bedecked with 19 pillows. In the morning the usually cornflake consuming, wheat intolerant guest, is served flowery baked goods on plates so fancy any normal person would keep them locked in a china cabinet even if Queen Victoria herself rose from the dead and showed up for tea. The guest normally a silent morning reader of newspapers is expected to chat with the other strangers staying in the strangers home. At my Berkshire Bed and Breakfast, I'm seated at a table with one middle aged Englishman and an elderly couple from Greenwich, Connecticut. The three of them make small talk about golf, the weather, and the room chandeliers, one of which is apparently Venetian. I can not think of a thing to say to these people. Seated at the head of the table, I am the black hole of breakfast, a silent void of gloom sucking the sunshine out of their neighborly New England day. That is not the kind of girl my mother raised me to be. I consider asking the Connecticut couple if they have ever run into Jack Parr, who I heard had retired near where they lived. But I looked like I was born after Parr quit hosting *The Tonight Show* because I was. And so I'd have to explain how much I liked watching tapes of old programs at the Museum of Television and Radio and I didn't want to get too personal.

Its seems that all three of them attended a Boston Pops Concert at Tanglewood the previous evening and they chat about the conductor. This, I think, is my "In." I too enjoy being entertained. Relieved to have, anything to say, I pipe up, "I went to the Berkshire Theatre Festival last night." "Oh did you see Peter Pan?" the women asked. "No"

I say.."assassins"... "what's that" wonders the Englishman, and to make up for the fact that I've been clammed up and moping I speak too fast merrily chirping.. "it's a Steven Sondheim musical

in which a bunch of presidential assassins, and would be assassins, sing songs about how much better their lives would be if they could gun down a President" Ohhh.. remarks Mr. Connecticut.. how was it?

Oh my god.. I gush.. even though the actors were mostly college kids I thought It was great.. the orange haired guy who played the man who wanted to fly a plane into Nixon was hilarious and I found myself strangely smitten with John Wilkes Booth every time he looked in my direction I could feel myself blush

Apparently talking about going to the museum of television and radio is too personal but I seem to have no problem revealing my crush on the man who murdered Lincoln.

Now a person with sharper social skills than I might have noticed that as these folks ate their freshly baked blueberry muffins and admired the bed and breakfast teapot collection they probably didn't want to think about presidential gunshot wounds.. but when I'm around strangers I turn into a conversational Mount St. Helens.. I'm dormant, dormant, quiet, quiet.. Old guy loners build log cabins on the slopes of my silence and then boom.... it is 1980... Once I erupt they'll be wiping my verbal ashes off their windshields as far away as North Dakota. I continue but the main thing that surprised me was how romantic assassins were.

Romantic?.. sneers a skeptic.. totally! I rebut, there's a very tender love scene between Emma Goldman and Leon Czolgosz ... blank stares.... You know he was the anarchist who killed McKinley in Buffalo 1901... the authorities initially suspected Goldman had helped him but all it was, was he had heard her speak a few times about sticking it to the man. He'd matter but she wasn't his co conspirator anyway.. the play dramatizes the moment they meet he stops her on the street to tell her that he loves her and the guy who played Czolgosz was wonderful he had this smoldering eastern European accent.. actually he sounded a lot like Dracula but in a good way if you know what I mean...

He told her Miss Goldmann I am in love with you, and she answered that she didn't have time to be in love with him which was cute but this was my one misgiving about the performance I thought that the woman playing Goldman was too lady like too much of a wallflower.. wasn't Emma Goldman loud and brash and all gunghoe... here was a woman who's words inspired a man to kill a president... and come to think of it one of her old boyfriends shot the industrialist Henry Frick.. maybe I'm too swayed by the way Maureen Stapleton played Goldman in the film reds.. she was so bossy.. I remember Stapleton in that Woody Allen movie Interiors... Geraldine Page is all beige this and bland that so her husband divorces her and hooks up with noisy klutzy Maureen Stapleton.. who laughs too loud and smashes pottery and wears a blood red dress to symbolize that she is a live capital A... wait I lost my train of thought where was I...

Englishmen.. I believe Dracula was in love with Maureen Stapleton.. oh right I didn't even mention the most touching part.. Squeaky Frome and John Hinkley sing this duet a love song to Charles Manson and Jodie Foster... Hinkly and Squeaky sing that they would do anything for Charlie Manson and Jodie Foster and I really believed them... Squeaky was like I would crawl belly deep through hell.. and Hinkley's all .. baby I would die for you.. it was adorable.. Mister Connecticut looks at his watch and I simultaneously realize that I've said way too much and that saying too much means that I might miss my bus back home and I really wanna go home.. I yell "nice meeting you" and nearly knocked down the teapot collection in my rush to get away from them.. now before I leave I have to settle up my bill with the friendly B and B owner.. his first name.. Hinkley..... thank you

Thanks... ummm... I'm kinda reading some tangents tonight. The book is actually about Presidential assassinations.. umm.. if you're into that.. but uhhh.. I was gonna read this other part one of the ummm... it was this .. It is kind of a tangent from the Garfield assassination even though it sort of involves the Garfield assassin.. In his younger days, it was just this whole world that I was so thrilled to kind of step into and this was one of my favorite parts of the book to work on just because it was so fascinating to me... hopefully to you.. that was a bad rhetoric to give a build up

Someone sent me this story pitch for this "merkin" life recently and the guy .. the whole pitch was like.. wait till you get a load of this story .. its just gonna blow you away!! And he just kept mentioning that over and over and he told the story and it was like ehh.. you know.. maybe next time just don't.. just like.. go more low key on the build up

But I digress...

One winter night in my kitchen as I poured peppermint tea into my friend Lisa's cup she said that she liked my teapot and I told her that my happy yellow teapot has a kinky back story involving a 19th century vegetarian sex cult in upstate new York whose members lived for 3 decades as self proclaimed bible communists before incorporating into the biggest supplier of dinnerware to the American food service industry. Not to mention harboring their most infamous resident...an irritating young maniac who years after he moved away was hanged for assassinating President Garfield

It goes without saying that in order for me to buy my teapot on the cheap at the Oneida Limited Outlet Store at the Sherrel Shopping Plaza the second coming of Jesus Christ had to have taken place in the year 70AD.. to the Oneida community 70AD was the year the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed.. marks the beginning of the New Jerusalem, which means we've all been living in heaven on earth for nearly 2000 years... everyone knows there's no marriage in heaven though one suspects there's no shortage of it in hell, soooo... the Oneidians said.. we're here in heaven already saved and perfect in the eyes of god, so lets move upstate and sleep around

I'm paraphrasing... John Humphrey Noyes.. the founder, leader and guru of the Utopian Oneida Community wrote in 1837.. in the holy community there is no more reason why sexual intercourse would be restricted by law, then why eating and drinking should be.. and there is a little occasion for shame in the one case as in the other... any theologian who assure his fellow Victorians that fondling one's neighbors wife is as ordinary as frying an egg was bound to attract a following... and in 1848 Noyes and 45 cohorts moved to Oneida to pursue what they called group marriage.. eventually building the 3-story brick mansion house that remains today as a combination museum/apt. building and hotel... I spent a night there... the next morning Joe Volesky a retired Oneida native who taught high school American History for 36 years gives me a guided tour. Volesky points to a yellowing photo of John Humphrey Noyes hanging on the wall.. on paper Noyes resembles a bearded old fashioned every man, your great grandfather or mine.. seems unthinkable that the head poking out of that starched collar was coming up with dogma about ejaculation.. the same thing could be said about this house we trapse around... it looks like the past which is to say upstanding and chaste.. even though its small clean chambers witnessed more nooky than all the bedrooms on MTV's cribs combined.

Volesky shows me an antique cabinet in which members of the community famous for their homegrown produce.. dried herbs... the Oneida community was an upstate tourist attraction right from the start. Second Volesky says to Niagara falls. I'm taking the same guided tour offered 150 years ago to prim rubbernecks who came here to peep at sex fiends. I wonder how many of my vacationing fore bearers went home disappointed. They thought they were taking the train to Gomorra but instead they got to watch herbs dry.

Volesky opens a drawer in the herb cabinet so I can get a whif he mentions that back in the day that when one tourist was shown the cabinet she rudely asked her community member guide what's that odor? To which the guide replied.. perhaps it's the odor of crushed selfishness.

Volesky grins.. how bout that for a utopian answer.. to my not particularly utopian nose crushed selfishness smells a lot like cilantro.. paintings of John Humphrey Noyes and his wife Harriet hang at the top of the stairs.. Noyes was married.. he was an abolitionist known to compare wifery up north to slavery down south yet Noyes married Harriet in 1838. He sent her a proposal letter that made up in candor what it lacked in woo.

Referring to Harriet not as his sweetheart but as his "yolk fellow" as if they were to be oxens strapped together hauling hay.. Noyes informed her that his intentions towards said "yolk fellow" will be not to monopolize and enslave her heart or my own but to enlarge and establish both in

the free fellowship of God's universal family. In other words.. Harriet, don't wait up. Noyes married Harriet in their native Vermont a full decade before leading his flock to Oneida while his proposal is not one of history's great love letters, I've received more sentimental invoices from my attorney. Noyes' sympathy for Harriet's childbearing heartbreaks early on in her marriage had a profound influence on the future sexual practices at Oneida, specifically what he came to call "male continence." A sexual technique that's about as fun as it sounds. Harriet gave birth 5 times in 6 years but only one of those children lived. "This experience is what directed my studies and kept me studying," Noyes later recalled. After our last disappointment I pledged my word to my wife that I would never again expose her to such fruitless suffering. At first Noyes recounts he simply vowed not to touch her, then it occurred to him that genitalia have two functions.. the reproductive which led the aforementioned catastrophes and the social. He concluded that one function has little to do with the other and that he could eliminate the possibility of eggs being fertilized by not ejaculating. "I experimented on this idea," he wrote, "and found that the self control which it requires is not difficult, that my enjoyment was increased, that my wife's experience was quite satisfactory as it had never been before, that we escaped the horrors and the fear of involuntary propagation." Noyes broke down the sex act into 3 parts: The beginning marked by the simple presence of the male organ in the female, the middle involving a series of reciprocal motions, and of course the end.. an ejaculatory crisis which expels the seed.

Naturally ones thoughts turn to canoeing.

Noyes describes sex as a day trip to the nearby Niagara River. The skilled boatman, he asserts will learn the wisdom of confining his excursions to the region of easy rowing. If not, its over the falls and splat. At the Oneida Community not ejaculating wasn't just a hobby it was a whole way of life. In fact, Noyes points out the Oneida community in an important sense owed its existence to the discovery of male continence. At its core the Community was about sharing. Sharing love, sex, food, chores, money, decisions, time. The only thing the Oneida men were supposed to keep to themselves was their sperm. When I asked Volesky why masturbation was also frowned upon., he said "self-pleasuring takes you away from the group." One of the corollaries of Noyes' theory of group marriage was a taboo against special love and a system of defenses to guard against all kinds of intense passion. Consider the following set of problems and the ingenious way in which they resolved.

Young people were always getting crushes. Young people only want to sleep with one another. Older people would like to enjoy sex but they aren't as attractive as younger people. Oneida men are supposed to practice male continence but perfecting male continence takes practice and until teenage boys know how to control themselves, their female partners are in danger of impregnation.. so here's what they did:

Post-menopausal women deflowered young boys.. that way .. conception is avoided and older women enjoy the pleasure of the flesh. Young girls annoyingly prone to falling in love, were ushered into womanhood by an older male. Usually an experience boater like Noyes himself... and if his proposal to Harriet is any indication, Noyes had a knack for deflecting mush sentiment by making a girl feel like part of a team.

The admonition against special love meant not only a ban on falling in love. It applied to all expressions of over the top passion... for example, a little girl who had grown too fond of her favorite doll was marched into the kitchen and told to toss it into the fire. A gifted violin player in danger of becoming a virtuoso and thus too attached to his instrument handed it over to the Oneida authorities and never played again. When a visiting Canadian teacher complained that the community did not foster genius or special talent, Noyes was delighted replying, "we never expected or desired to produce a Byron, a Napoleon or a Michaelangelo." And you know you've reached a new plateau of group mediocrity when even a Canadian is alarmed by your lack of individuality.

Where did the other violinists, the ones who are kinda good but not too good performers go?

Volesky ushers me into the grand room came to be known as the Family Hall, a recreated 19th century opera house.

Every night, Volesky says the group assembled here for a family meeting in which Noyes lead them in a discussion of spiritual and business issues. Volesky points at a pleasant old photograph of the room in which people are sitting in rocking chairs or knitting or both but before enjoying the evenings aggressively second rate entertainment they would engage in what they thought of as a cleansing ritual.. the enchantingly named "mutual criticism." Mutual criticism required a member of the group to stand up in front of everybody and listen to the enumeration of his or her faults. The bright side of being that night's subject for criticism was the rare treat at Oneida of being the center of attention.

The downside was that everyone you knew and loved was allowed and even encouraged to look into your eyes and ask you what your problem is.

Reading the accounts of community members moments in the critical sun, one thing that stands out is how specific the criticisms were. A young man was told that he didn't read enough and when he did he only skims things.

Though my personal favorite is the New Englander who is taken to task for his too frequent mention of Vermont. Standing in the room where the mutual criticism took place, I conjecture about how the process went for the future assassin, Charles J. Guiteau.

To give you an idea about Guiteau, in the glossary of a children's book about the Garfield assassination one of the vocabulary words children are supposed to learn by studying Guiteau is nuance... well Volesky replies he was here from 1860 to 1865 then he left and came back. From what I read, he was pretty annoying. He wasn't happy and yet he stayed here for 5 years.

Considering that Oneida's group marriage policy theoretically promised constant sexual trysts unfortunately for Guiteau those trysts had to be consensual. That no one wanted to sleep with Charles Guiteau is hinted at in his Oneida nickname, "Charles Getout."

Here's a distraction: When researching the Oneida Community, I couldn't help but notice that in their letters, community members referred to the Oneida Community as the "OC."

Coincidentally, the "OC" is the name of a night time soap opera on television's Fox Network I am currently obsessed with set in Orange County, California. The show's three biggest stars are Peter Gallagher and his legendary pair of eyebrows... eyebrows cozy enough to move in to a home a couple of rocking chairs with a nose between them like a table piled high with every book you ever loved. Thus, when I see the Oneida Community being referred to as the "OC" I cannot help but picture all the ladies of Oneida standing in line to curl up in Peter Gallagher's eyebrows trying in vain not to feel a special love.

The subject of Peter Gallagher's eyebrows I realize is a digression away from the Oneida Community and yet I do feel compelled indeed, almost theoretically bound, to mention that one of the reasons the Oneida Community broke up and turned itself into a corporate teapot factory is that a faction within the group led by a lawyer named James William Towner was the culprit. The communities most esteemed elders were bogarting the team members so they left in a huff for none other than Orange County, California where Towner helped organize the Orange County government, became a judge and picked the spot where the Santa Anna Courthouse would be built... a courthouse where it is reasonable to assume Peter Gallagher's attorney character on the "OC" might defend his clients.

As we stand in Oneidas family hall Joe Volesky tells me that when he first volunteered as a guide here he spent a lot of time thinking about the men and women who came here to lead such eccentric lives.

What was it like when these people were born in that generation of Americans, he wondered continuing so at that point I came across Jonathan Edwards in a sermon, "sinners in the hands of an angry god." Do you know it? Do I ever? Written in 1741 Edwards sermon describes us sinners as spiders that our creator dangles over the mouth of hell... it goes.. "the wrath of God burns against them. Their damnation does not slumber, the pit is prepared, the fire is made ready, the

furnace is now hot ready to receive them. The flames do now rage and glow." I love this sermon as literature because its diabolical lingo is so grim so harrowing that its almost cute.

"Wasn't so cute in yesteryear," Volesky says. Your first definition of you as a woman, me as a man, is that we are sinners. You're a sinner, I'm a sinner, you look at God, what do you see? An angry God. Sinners in the hands of an angry God.

Volesky says that thinking about that sermon and its notion that human beings are arachnids, god is about to flip into a fire helps him understand that the ways of the Oneida Community in which heaven is already here was like this incredible shot of oxygen because we're not so evil. That's behind us.. God doesn't have to be angry.

Interesting... I have this recurring nightmare in which I have to move back in with my old college roommate, and I'll admit that's what I was expecting to find at Oneida the 19th century equivalent of sharing a house with a friend that brought home a crazy drifter to sleep on our couch. A man who claimed the local car dealership was built out of needles nourishing the earth. And the week before I went to Oneida I had that claustrophobic dream again that I had to move back in with the girl who claimed to enjoy baking and always promised tomorrow was going to be muffin day even though tomorrow was never muffin day. It was muffin day maybe once. But Volesky inspired me to think about the claustrophobia of American culture in the 18th and 19th centuries. How women like me would've given anything for free willing life with drifter man and a muffin day instead of being doomed to a choice between mother superior and a husband your parents picked. How reassuring it must have been to have this place to know that it was here.

If I had never gone to Oneida and talked to Joe Volesky, if I had simply read a book about the Community and bought my Oneida teapot at Macy's Herald Square.. I might have thought about fornicating Utopians as they brewed Earl Gray, but now when I watch the steam rise from the yellow spout I like to pretend I'm seeing people breath... Thanks!

Thank you...umm I'm just gonna read one other little tiny excerpt that umm, well, try and stop me I guess.

And then I'll take your questions... on February 12th my friend Ben and I get up very early to make the 6:30 train to Washington to attend the Lincoln's birthday wreath ceremony the National Park Service puts on at the Lincoln memorial every year. The ceremony is very cold and very long mostly elderly volunteers from archaic organizations placing donut shaped flower arrangements at the Lincoln statue's feet. And because he had been such a good sport about getting up so early I want to make it up to Ben. After lunch I settle up the bill and tell him I have a surprise for you.

I lead him around the corner to the court of claims building in the courtyard past the fountain I point at a plaque, chirping tadaaaa! This was the site of Secretary of State Seward's house where he was stabbed in bed the night Lincoln was shot.

Bennet looks at the plaque and then back at me wondering this is my surprise .. a plaque about Seward

Uh huh... he doesn't say anything for a while just stands there reading the plaque shaking his head.. it says on this site Commodore John Rogers built an elegant house in 1831 in it on April 14th 1865 an attempt was made to assassinate w.h. Seward Secretary of State by one of the conspirators who murdered Abraham Lincoln the same night.

Bennet looks at me rolls his eyes and silently trudges out of the courtyard.

I can theoretically grasp that a person might not get excited about a two dimensional engraving attached to government building marking the spot where the man who negotiated the purchase of Alaska was knifed by a friend of John Wilkes Booth. But this person, the person who was up for taking a 6:30 train in order to get to a Lincoln's 195th Birthday Wreath Ceremony, the person who, come to think of it, also went with me to Gettysburg for the 137th Anniversary of the reading of the Gettysburg address, the person who was so excited when we went to the Reagan Presidential Library even though I found it a little disappointing in terms of scholarship.

A person with whom I have spent Saturday night at the Chess Club chatting with a man who went

to Rckovik with Bobby Fisher for his match against Borris Fasky. I've prided myself on knowing my audience so I'm shaken by Ben's indifference as he trudges out of the courtyard. I harrang him with what I think are other juicy facts about buildings on Lafayette Square such as right next store:..Mark Hannah's house.

Who was he? Only William McKinley's best friend. Surprisingly this info also bombs. In fact home in New York I'm not ready to give up on making a case for the Seward plaque, cuz I love that thing.. I emailed Bennet the next morning that the court of claims building where the Seward plaque is hung was designed by John Carl Warnecke the architect who helped Jaclyn Kennedy with her historic preservation crusade to save Lafayette Square and after JFK was killed Mrs. Kennedy hired Warnecke to design his grave at Arlington and in the process I guess there's nothing more romantic than pouring over graveyard designs she and Warnacke fell in love.. she was having an affair with the man in charge of her slain husbands tomb... for some reason Bennet seems to think the sex and death gossip is more interesting than the Seward plaque. Seward plaque by the way has become our synonym for disappointment. When I break it to Ben that I'm having trouble getting Fiddler on the Roof tickets.. a musical he's keen on seeing because it reminds him of his grandmothers flight from the shdettle, he answers, "whatever, I can take it my people have been getting Seward plaqued for millennia"... thank you! Thanks. So now I'm gonna sit over there so hopefully you'll recognize me and I will take your questions.

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