**ENCOUNTERS WITH GREATNESS:**

**THE NIGHT JIMMY CARTER SAVED MY LIFE**

--In memory of my parents, Earl and Lillian, my

 Brother, Billy, and my sisters, Gloria and Ruth

 Jimmy Carter, 2003

Saturday, January 20, 2007, marked the 30th anniversary of the inauguration of Jimmy carter as the 39th President of the United States. (It also nearly marked my last decade on earth.) The University of Georgia, to celebrate this historic presidential occasion, hosted a conference, “The Carter Presidency: Lessons for the 21st Century,” honoring Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter. Many dignitaries from the Carter Administration attended, including Walter Mondale, the 42nd Vice President of the United States; a number of distinguished presidential scholars; and local town folk such as my wife and me. The conference was carried on C-SPAN and a book of the presentations was published by the University of Georgia press. Sound bite clips of the event were shown on ABC, CBS, FOX, and NBC evening news.

My wife and I did not pay the $300 per person fee for the entire three-day conference. We attended the 4:00 p.m. free open-house Town hall meeting on Saturday, entering the back of an ever-growing line at 2:00 p.m. The Mahler Auditorium at the Georgia Center for Continuing Education seats 400 people. When the tickets were handed out, my wife and I received numbers 388 and 389. The other 600 plus people in line went to overflow rooms to watch the event on live video. Jimmy carter fielded a broad range of tough questions from the audience, some relating to his just published book, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, his 21st book. He was an impressive, articulate, energetic, and obviously a highly intelligent and honest man.

That evening we attended the Inaugural Anniversary dinner, at 7:00 p.m., preceded by a 6:30 social reception. Some 600 people attended the $150-a-plate dinner, individually served: chilled shrimp cocktail, bacon-wrapped quail, filet of beef Danielle, haricot verts bundles, stuffed Roma tomatoes, rosemary herbed potatoes, and mango coconut mousse torte. We stopped on the way home for a Big Mac and fries.

Just as seating was beginning for the banquet, I saw my wife Emily talking to a tall, thin, elderly gentleman. I walked over and she introduced me. He said he was just a country boy from the Appalachians of east Tennessee, where my wife first began teaching first grade. Emily said, “Let’s see if we can find a table for three.” As we approached a half-seated table, eight chairs to a table, Emily said, “Why don’t we sit here?” I replied, noting a sign that read “Reserved.” The man, Mr. Whitmore, said, “It’s all right. We can sit here.”

Early in the festivities following our meal, before Walter Mondale introduced Jimmy Carter for his keynote speech, president Mike Adams, merely the president of the University of Georgia, asked everyone in the audience who had served in the Carter Administration to come to the stage. Our entire table cleared, except for Emily and me. I asked Emily in a whisper, “Who is Mr. Whitmore?” To which she replied, “He’s the CEO of the Carter Presidential center. He handles tens of millions of dollars.”

Our first encounter with greatness, at least of sorts.

During the social half-hour, with so many tightly-packed bodies and myself now partitioned from my wife by clumps of gaily chatting, gesticulating, and too many perspiring—I mean glowing—plumpish people, I maneuvered my way outside to gain some cool, fresh air.

I had only begun to enjoy the change of environs when a man with a phone plug in his ear, a secret service agent, asked me to step back inside. He said the motorcade was about to arrive. I of course obliged. But I stopped immediately inside the door, as I realized that the other people in the lobby did not know that president Jimmy Carter and wife Roslyn were about to enter.

I glance out the windowed door, expecting to see a stretch limousine with a police escort and flashing lights. Instead a regular Chevrolet sedan led the unimpressive, mundane motorcade, packed with agents, and then a large SUV, from which jimmy carter exited. Rosalyn’s retinue was in yet another ordinary vehicle.

To almost everyone’s surprise, except mine and of course the plain-clothed secret service entourage, jimmy carter suddenly appeared. I was apparently the first one he saw—and always the politician—he said, “Hey,” and with his habitual grin reached for my hand. Then, just as suddenly, I was relegated to oblivion, and now many others surged forth, but the secret agents closed a barrier around the president and only a few, perhaps the people he knew, shared my honored handshake. This was not the time he saved my life.

It was an evening we will always remember. My wife Emily, just before the dinner, exiting the lady’s room, came face-to-face with Vice president Mondale, who spontaneously hugged her. Our fleeting encounters with greatness! Yes, it was a most memorable evening and a genuinely remarkable keynote address by the 39th U.S. President and former governor of the State of Georgia.

But the most unforgettable event was yet to occur.

I was leaving the rear exit to take a shortcut to the parking deck to bring the car down to street level to obviate a fairly long, high-heel walk for Emily, when, abruptly, a man with a large knife came at me demanding my wallet, knife at my throat. Just as abruptly, Jimmy carter appeared, surrounded by a bevy of secret service agents.

I claim it was jimmy carter himself who shouted the warning, though in reality I could not be sure in my numbed and panicked paralysis. The secret service immediately subdued the startled attacker with a flood of pepper spray, the agents now protecting both jimmy carter and me.

Moments of Greatness.

This near mugging and would-be robbery—and possibly my encounter with a grim skeleton with a scythe—occurred exactly 25 days from Christmas 2006, which was December 25, amply justifying this as a Christmas Story. Thank you, president Jimmy Carter.