

# **Murder at Ford's Theater**

**by Bob Conroy, 1938-2014**

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## **Good Friday, 1865**

Jerry Carney was fascinated by the theater. Life there was colorful, brash, and bold—everything that life at home with his widowed mother wasn't. She was stern and unforgiving. She incorrectly imagined she saw too much of her hard-drinking and wife-beating late husband in her only son. Worse, she fervently believed that anyone connected to the theater was also connected to Satan and likely going straight to hell. She had, of course, forbidden him from going anywhere near Ford's Theater. Jerry, of course, disobeyed her at each and every opportunity.

At thirteen, he was becoming fascinated by the actresses, many of whom were heavily made up, and far more open and friendly than any of the older women he knew. He defined older as anyone born before he'd been. That the women had noticeable breasts and hips was also intriguing and sometimes caused embarrassing changes to his body that he tried to hide.

This evening he'd slipped out his bedroom window while his mother, who'd just come home from a day of cleaning other peoples' houses, was next door complaining to her neighbors about her miserable life. Jerry felt he was owed some free time after spending so much of the day at church and listening to the priests chant and wail in Latin. They said that Latin was a dead language and, in Jerry's opinion, it deserved to die.

Mom would kill him if she ever found out that he'd gone to Ford's Theater on Good Friday, but what the hell, he figured. She'd also beat him if she heard him swear like that, but it was what so many adults said, so how could it be wrong?

He arrived at Ford's Theater early in the evening. As always, the theater was almost full. Gaily dressed women and men in blue Union Army uniforms were everywhere, along with a number of prosperous looking civilians who'd probably made a fortune in war contracts. Ford's was the finest theater in Washington, D.C., and the play was a comedy entitled *Our American Cousin*, with Harry Hawk playing the lead.

There was a feeling of jubilation in the air. After all, hadn't Robert E. Lee surrendered the forces under his command, the vaunted Army of Northern Virginia? And there were rumors that the other, smaller, Confederate armies were going to lay down their arms as well. Peace was at hand. Jerry had mixed emotions about that. He didn't want to see people die, and some older friends had fallen in battle, but he also wanted a shot at the glory that came with being a warrior.

Boys only a few years older than he had gone off to war, and some of them, he thought ruefully, hadn't come back, or, if they had, they'd been somehow changed. What puzzled him was that they wouldn't talk about it. Could it have been that awful? He desperately wanted to find out.

He walked backstage. Nobody stopped him; they were too used to his presence. Some of the actors actually said hello, which made him brim with pride. One of the younger actresses patted him on the head and he felt a warm feeling go through his body. Warm feelings like that were happening a lot lately. He guessed it again had something to do with growing up. Too bad there was nobody he could ask. His mother was one of those devout Catholics who thought that anything to do with sex was a sin, and his friends would just give him a smart-aleck answer.

His buddy, Pete Hayes, was waiting for him. Pete was a couple of years older and thought he knew everything, which was sometimes very annoying.

„Guess who's going to be here tonight?“

„I heard rumors that it might be Lincoln,“ Jerry said.

„Yep, and General Grant's gonna be with him.“

„Jesus,“ said Jerry, swearing again.

He'd seen Abraham Lincoln on several occasions, but never General Grant. After being appointed to command the Union armies, the general hadn't spent all that much time in the nation's capital. Grant was a national hero. He was the man who'd defeated Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia and captured Richmond. Jerry would be thrilled to see Grant. He would brave his mother's considerable wrath by hanging around until he did. Maybe he would even have a chance to meet the great man.

Lincoln and his guests were not scheduled to arrive until later and would take their seats in a box overlooking the main floor of the theater. Jerry cautiously walked upstairs in order to get by the security guard, a former policeman named John Frederick Parker. This usually wasn't much of a problem since Parker was generally drunk. However, he was a big, burly, and nasty drunk and he'd taken swipes at Jerry and others when they got too close to him.

This night Parker was nowhere to be seen, which Jerry thought was unusual. After all, his job was to keep people from barging in on the Lincolns and interrupting their evening. How could he do that if he was across the street swilling beer? Maybe he'd be back in a few minutes.

Jerry was on his way up the stairs when Pete grabbed his arm, „Bad news, Jerry. Grant ain't coming. Lincoln's gonna be with someone named Rathbun and his fiancé, a woman named Clara Harris.“

Damn, thought Jerry and he decided it wasn't worth sitting in a hallway waiting for someone he'd seen before, even if he was the president. He'd also seen Clara Harris before. She was a senator's daughter, aloof, and quite buxomly. She'd caught him staring at her breasts once and had glared at him until he'd turned away.

Disappointed, he went downstairs and just watched the play from backstage, occasionally wandering out front to see if anything interesting was happening. When they got tired, he and Pete sat on the floor and rested their backs against the wall. Jerry was beginning to wonder if the trip to the theater was going to justify all the problems he was going to have with his mother when he finally got home. There was very little likelihood that he could sneak in without her seeing him. Hell, he thought, she probably already knew he was gone. Thankfully, she would never come to the theater looking for him. That would be entering Satan's domain.

„Hey,“ said Pete, „isn't that Booth?“

Jerry agreed that it was John Wilkes Booth, one of the preeminent actors of the day. Jerry didn't try to say hello. Booth had a reputation for being stuck up and rude to those he felt were normal mortals. This evening, Booth looked even more out of sorts than usual. He was nervous and seemed to be sweating. He looked around quickly, his eyes glancing over both Jerry and Pete, and quickly dismissing them.

Booth turned and quickly went upstairs. „He's heading for Lincoln's box,“ said Pete. „I wonder if he was invited as well those other two?“

Jerry laughed. „If he wasn't, he'll have a hard time getting past that prick Parker.“

„Don't worry about that. I saw Parker leave while you were out front looking down women's dresses. He hasn't come back yet.“

Jerry stood up and stretched. „I'm going to see if Booth gets in.“

Jerry took the steps and found himself looking at Booth's back. The actor's left hand was on the knob and there was something in his right hand. Oh, Jesus, it was a gun. He didn't know all that much about guns, but even he recognized it as a single shot Derringer. What the heck was Booth doing with a gun? Then it dawned on him.

„Murderer!“ Jerry yelled at the top of his voice and Booth wheeled. „Murderer!“ he yelled again and was aware of commotion beginning from the main floor below.

Booth screamed and pushed the door open. It took only a second and Jerry was on Booth's back, punching him. Booth pushed him away like he was a bug and entered the box. Lincoln was standing, a look of shock on his face. Booth fired at the same instant that Lincoln's strong grip yanked on his arm and propelled him over the railing and onto the theatergoers below.

There was pandemonium. Major Rathbun had also fallen over the rail while attempting to grab Booth and Clara Harris was screaming wildly. Men and women were yelling and trying to leave the theater. A stampede was starting. Jerry entered the box and leaned over. Booth lay across some chairs. His back was twisted and contorted. Rathbun had landed on his head and there was blood all over the place. Jerry thought he was going to be sick, but he gathered himself.

„He tried to kill Lincoln,“ Jerry yelled and pointed at the unmoving Booth.

Booth was still alive and again he screamed his anger and frustration. He howled but his body didn't move. His back was broken.

Sickened by the sight, Jerry turned away and looked at Lincoln. The president was pale with shock and looking at his wife. Her eyes were wide open and there was a bloody hole in the middle of her forehead. Booth had missed Abraham Lincoln but had murdered Mary Todd Lincoln.

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Jerry Carney sat on a bench in the park that was directly across Pennsylvania Avenue from what many people called the White House. The president's house was ringed with blue-coated Union soldiers. All were looking outward for attackers. There would not be another chance for Southern assassins to murder Abraham Lincoln.

Some of the soldiers recognized him; they knew him as the boy who'd saved Lincoln's life by screaming and jumping on John Wilkes Booth's back. He always smiled when someone said that. That evening had changed his life in so many ways. For one thing, he no longer wanted anything to do with the theater. That life now seemed shallow and artificial. He'd gotten his name in the papers and had met both Lincoln and Grant. He was shocked to realize that he had grown to where he was almost as tall as the Union general. Congress had voted him a medal that was in his bedroom at home where his mother no longer gave him a hard time about much of anything. In fact, they'd made up a truce—he wouldn't go to the theater if she didn't push him to go to church. Given his current attitude about the theater, he was the big winner.

A senator from Pennsylvania wanted to be his sponsor so he could go to West Point, and that seemed like a very good idea. When told there might be an issue with residency, the senator had said not to worry about it. Even though Jerry had seen the horror of violent death up close, he still wanted to be a soldier and the idea of a free education intrigued both him and his mother. He knew he had to get better at math and had already begun studying.

A squad of soldiers marched across the White House lawn. Jerry wondered what was going on inside. Only a few weeks ago, it was quite easy to get into the White House. Long lines of job and contract seekers, parents of soldiers, and many

others were granted access to both the president's house and the president. Not any longer. The place was a fortress. Abraham Lincoln had become a remote presence.

Everybody said the war was over, but there was still fighting, especially west of the Mississippi—and everyone wondered just what Abe Lincoln was going to do about it. Hell, Jerry thought, the war might still be going by the time he became a lieutenant. If he lived to be a hundred, he'd never forget the horror that Mary Lincoln's face had become thanks to John Wilkes Booth.

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Abraham Lincoln sat in his rocking chair and looked at the bed that he and Mary had once shared. Many people had ridiculed her. She was too short and too plump for him, they said, or maybe he was too tall for her, causing the couple to look ridiculous. Then her enemies said that she had too many relatives in the Confederacy to be a loyal American. They also said that she was profligate with Lincoln's money, buying numerous pairs of gloves and other unnecessary paraphernalia. She was always exceeding whatever budget she had.

It was also said that she'd entered into some questionable business dealings, mainly the selling of political favors in return for the forgiveness of her debts. Mary Todd Lincoln had not been a particularly good president's wife, except for one thing.

He loved her.

Abraham Lincoln sat in the rocker and let the darkness take over and the endless tears pour down his cheeks. He'd suffered from bouts of what some people called the „hypo“, which some said was short for hypochondria. People who didn't understand mental illness had a hard time believing it really existed.

But Lincoln knew. It was an animal that had taken control of him in the past and it was in total control now. The beast within his soul wanted to be fed and he would feed it with unbridled hatred. Once he had held to the idea of a peaceful reconciliation with the Confederate states, but no longer. They had killed Mary and they would pay. The Southern states would scream in pain. The North would take reparations from them and leave them destitute for a hundred years. The men and women of the South would live as serfs. They had killed Mary and deserved it.

Booth was the first to hang. His limp and unresisting crippled body had to be carried to the scaffold. He'd howled and cursed when his head had been covered, but he'd stopped quickly when the latch had been sprung. Lincoln had enjoyed that. He hadn't stayed to watch the others swing. They hadn't killed Mary. Booth had. And so had the Confederacy.

But now to the South's barren future. Lee and the other military leaders would not be executed. Instead, they would spend the rest of their lives in prison, probably in dank and unhealthy Fortress Monroe, or perhaps the military prison at Alcatraz in San Francisco Bay. He laughed harshly. That would keep them out of the way.

Jefferson Davis would be tried for treason along with his key cabinet leaders and most of them would be hanged. Davis had tried to defend himself by saying

that he'd known nothing about Booth's plans, but that was plainly inconceivable. John Wilkes Booth had been Davis's man.

Some were saying that the South would rise again and the new rebellion would be most terrible. Let them try. They would not succeed, at least not in his lifetime. Not in the lifetimes of his great-grandchildren.

Sometimes Clara Harris would visit him, but he discouraged it. Her fiancé had also died that terrible Good Friday and she was lonely. Maybe someday he could open his soul to someone else and maybe it would be Clara Harris, but not this day. He hunched forward, an action that someone said made his craggy visage look more like that of a predator.

Yes, he thought, a predator, and the people of the South are my prey. I will be the terrible swift sword of justice.

*Author's Note: In our timeline, Major Rathbun was badly wounded by Booth after he killed Lincoln. After recovery, he and Clara Harris were married. A number of years later, an increasingly moody and despondent Rathbun murdered Clara.*

