



**GREAT
EXPECTATIONS**

A Novel

**VINSON
CUNNINGHAM**

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HOGARTH
LONDON / NEW YORK

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Published in the United States by Hogarth, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Cunningham, Vinson, author.

Title: Great expectations: a novel / by Vinson Cunningham.

Description: First edition. | London; New York: Hogarth, 2024.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023041470 (print) | LCCN 2023041471 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593448236 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593448243 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Political fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3603.U68 G74 2024 (print) | LCC PS3603.U68 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20231023

LC record available at lcn.loc.gov/2023041470

LC ebook record available at lcn.loc.gov/2023041471

Ebook ISBN 9780593448243

randomhousebooks.com

Book design by Susan Turner, adapted for ebook

Cover design: Anna Kochman

Cover image: *The Gulf Stream* by Winslow Homer/Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,
USA/Bridgeman Images

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I'm Nobody! Who are you?

—EMILY DICKINSON

I

1

I'D SEEN THE SENATOR SPEAK a few times before my life got caught up, however distantly, with his, but the first time I can remember paying real attention was when he delivered the speech announcing his run for the presidency. He spoke before the pillars of the Illinois statehouse, where, something like a century and a half earlier, Abraham Lincoln had performed the same ritual. The Senator brought his elegant wife and young daughters onstage when he made his entrance. A song by U2 played as they waved. All four wore long coats and breathed ghosts of visible vapor into the cold February morning. It was as frigid and sunny out there in Springfield as it was almost a thousand miles away, where I sat alone, hollering distance from the northern woods of Central Park, watching the Senator on TV.

“Giving all praise and honor to God for bringing us together here today,” he began. I recognized that black-pulpit touch immediately, and felt almost flattered by the feeling—new to me—of being pandered to so directly by someone who so nakedly wanted something in return. It was later reported that he had spent the moments before the address praying in a circle with his family and certain friends, including the light-skinned stentor who was his pastor in Chicago. Perhaps the churchy greeting was a case of spillover from the sound of the pastor’s prayer. Or—and from the vantage of several years, this seems by far the likelier answer—the Senator had begun, even then, at the outset of his campaign, to understand his supporters, however small their number at that point, as congregants, as members of a mystical body, their bonds invisible but real. They waved and stretched their arms toward the stage; some lifted red, white, and blue signs emblazoned

with his name in a sleek sans serif. The whole thing seemed aimed at making you cry.

I wonder now (this, again, with all the benefit and distortion of hindsight) whether these first words of the campaign and their hungry reception by the crowd were the sharpest harbinger—more than demography or conscious strategy—of the victory to come. Toward the end of the speech, during a stream of steadily intensifying clauses whose final pooling was a plea to join him in the work of renewal, he wondered “if you”—the assembled—“feel destiny calling.” In bidding goodbye, he said, “Thank you,” and then, more curiously, “I love you.”

Despite his references, overt and otherwise, to Lincoln—and, more gingerly, to King—his closer resemblance was to John Winthrop making phrases on the ship *Arbella*, assuring his fellow travelers that the religion by whose light they’d left Europe in 1630 could cross spheres, from the personally salvific to the civic and concrete. If you could love God and love your neighbor, Winthrop promised, you could build a city, too, and that city could be a great monument to the Beloved. That swift motion—God to *polis* and back up, shingly, to God—made Winthrop an unintentional paganizer. His attempt to subjugate politics to sacred things had only, over time, made the holy more worldly, more easily used by the likes of the Senator. I was only freewheelingly guessing; feeling bright, disconnected, and experimental; trying to bring a few loose intimations into closer communion with one another—but I thought I sensed a quality similar to Winthrop’s in the Senator. Or maybe, I thought, doubling back as I’ve always done, he was the well-developed melody of which Winthrop was the earliest theme. The Senator had invoked God at the top of his text, a numbingly common move in these settings, and sounded comfortable, even natural, doing it, which was becoming somewhat more rare. He seemed to have resolved an older generation’s jittery and overscrupulous tension about church and state. He’d figured out how to say aloud and with good cheer and without seeming to be some nationalist-imperialist pervert what had been implicit for too long: that now we had a country that could more or less plausibly claim—as much by

dint of its world-shredding misdeeds as by its misty glories—not to serve God but to *be* God. Render unto Caesar and rest your conscience. Without any off-putting intensity, the Senator insisted, above all, on faith. “In my heart I know you didn’t just come here for me,” he said. “You came here because you *believe* in what this country can be.”

“Your Love Keeps Lifting Me” played him off the stage. The campaign, just beginning, was still a scarcely glimpsed frontier. I can’t say that I thought he would win.

—

I REALIZE ONLY now, too late for it to matter much, that the Senator reminded me of my pastor, who had died not long before the beginning of the campaign and, in those days, was often on my mind. Both men were tall and skinny, both hooked their thumbs slightly and used their other outstretched fingers as scythes cutting syntax into the air. Both had the complexion of a cardboard box left out to bleach in the sun. The pastor wore glasses, like I did, but the Senator didn’t. Both had smooth, flexible voices that could sound rough in a pinch. Their similarities aside, though, that enigmatic word—*destiny*—must have put me in mind of my pastor, too. I can remember one Friday night, many years earlier—I must have been twelve—at a Bible-study session in the former Elks lodge in Harlem where our church held its services. My pastor had slowly paced the two long aisles of the church. Wearing a zip-up sweater and soft slacks instead of his Sunday robes, he gave a long disquisition on a topic he loved: the many ways in which the future belonged to God. We believed in predestination, he said, not in destiny; the latter word, despite what it shared in etymology with the former, contained no implication of an Author, and had therefore been co-opted by the squishy New Age. As he talked, he held the microphone loosely but securely, like how good tennis players hold the racket. He looked around the room, catching gazes and letting them drop, smiling prettily even as he

unfolded mysteries that terrified me. The truth, he said, was that your life—and *this* was freedom—was a gesture minutely choreographed by God. To seek salvation required free will, but the one who had planted, and could count, the hairs on your head had also engineered your mechanisms of choice. Your heart could open only if He'd given it a hinge. He chose you before you chose Him, and so it was with every other eventuality, no matter how hidden or seemingly accidental. You are not *lucky*, my mother often said, you are *blessed*.

—

DESPITE MYSELF, AND not without some reservations, I find that I do believe in luck, in flukes, in the meaningless harmony of certain sequences. Take the one whereby I landed on the Senator's campaign, only a month or so after watching his big speech. I'd flunked out of college after learning, aged twenty, that I would soon become a father and, after a year of occasional classes at the City University and weekends spent staring at my little daughter, found a wintertime job as a private tutor. My first and only student was a kid of thirteen or fourteen named Thadd Whitlock, whose mother, Beverly Whitlock, had once appeared on the cover of *Black Enterprise* magazine; she also—and here was the luck—served on the board of my high school, where people still vaguely remembered and liked me. Somebody who knew that I was back home and had strayed from the path had passed along my name. Thadd was sweet and gangly, with an indecisive almost-Afro, ashy elbows, and a mouth crowded with braces and spit. His parents had divorced when he was very young; from the beginning he expressed to me a mild, unsecret dislike for them both.

Once a week, we worked on what Beverly called his "opportunities for improvement," English and math. Thadd's problem, such that he had one at all, seemed to be a simple, sometimes willful indolence. Often, after settling himself at the table in Beverly's long, sparsely decorated living room, he

would fold his thin forearms, skin to tabletop, forming a cushion on which he finally, with a flop, rested a cheek. In this naptime position, he'd say, "I had a long day. I don't know how much I'm gonna be able to focus." He'd take a look at the short stories I'd photocopied (Hawthorne, Jackson) and shrug. "I mean, that looks like a *lot*." Soon I started bringing sections of the newspaper—sports, politics, reviews of movies he'd seen—and having him read those instead. This was better: he laughed as he read, or nodded his agreement, or got surprisingly mad, and afterward I'd make him tell me, aloud or in writing, why. When he had math homework, I'd watch him scrawl his way through equations, then point out his errors, usually born of inattention. I assumed, but never said, that he had ADD.

I didn't see Beverly much. She was usually still at work when I got to her building, just south of Central Park. A doorman let me go up to the apartment, where Thadd was home alone. I sent weekly emails to Beverly about his progress.

This week, Thadd and I focused on the Writing/Reading side of our studies more heavily than the Math. I wanted to steer us a little away from the newspaper articles we had been reading previously and back toward some literature. After trying to get through a bit of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, I decided that the play might be a little dense and slow-moving for Thadd's taste. I wanted to stick with drama, though, because 1) it's much faster to read than prose fiction, and 2) Thadd has shared with me his interest in acting. I decided that the next play would be Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun*. It was a little difficult to start; for some reason, Thadd decided before reading the play that it just wasn't something he'd like. I told him that there was no way to know whether he'd like it or not unless he tried. After a scene or two, he seemed to warm up. Toward the end of last week's session I tried something with Thadd that I haven't before: I gave him small sections of the reading to do on his own, along with some questions to answer.

The reading went fine; I could tell that he had read what had been assigned to him. The questions I gave him were another story—he'd forgotten about them. We also read a few poems (Ginsberg, Hughes, Brooks) this week and Thadd did some writing comparing them and mining them for their central themes. He did a generally good job, although he needs to make sure that he's writing in complete sentences at all times. He should also work hard to make his handwriting as legible as possible.

Beverly overpaid me, as far as I could tell. At the end of my sessions with Thadd, she'd show up in a long coat, flecked gray with a velvety black collar, and stick a plain white envelope into my hand. Two unincreased hundreds for two hours' work. Her hair was often tied back into a loose, glossy bun. Her brows were full, almost bushy, and her dark, sparkling eyes almost always looked wet. At rest, her plush lips sat slightly open, showing her perfectly even teeth. She always looked ready to smile or to talk. She had a firm, quick way of asking how things had gone—was Thadd cooperating, did he seem to me hostile or sad—and, no matter my answer, allowed no hint of worry to mar her beech-colored face. I'd promise my weekly report and quickly leave. Sometimes, when Beverly was away at meetings or out of the country, the doorman would slip me the envelope on my way out.

One day, the doorman didn't have my envelope. "Says she's sorry," he said, "but she forgot to leave the money. Says to call her." The doorman's big, close-set eyes funneled into a straight, sharp wedge of a nose and, below, a mustache that looked like the fur lining of a coat. He smirked nicely, and I took this—it was the first time I'd seen him approximate a smile—as an expression of our mutual status as inconvenienced employees. "Thanks," I said, wondering, not for the first time, about the doorman's ethnicity. He spoke with an unplaceable accent.

"Fucking euro's killing me," Beverly said when I called, in a way that intimated, mistakenly, that exchange rates played an irritating role, any role, in my life, too. "When I'm back I'll pay you double, I promise; I left in a rush—but listen, I wanted to ask you something else."

She was part of a loosely organized group of former midwesterners, now geographically diffuse, all known names in their various fields, who were patrons of—and proselytizers on behalf of—the young junior Senator from Illinois. “I’ve been a supporter since he ran for *state* senate, right?” Beverly said. Now he was running for president, and his campaign had asked if she knew anybody young and competent. (The thought that, by asking Beverly, they had also been implicitly seeking somebody *black* swung athletically through my mind.) Had I heard of him? “I know you talk lots of politics with Thadd, right?” She said *right* a lot. Sometimes it was a question punctuating her phrases. Sometimes she said, “Right, right, right” as a complete sentence, very briskly, a way to answer something you’d said without producing a real response. Either way, it made you feel in the know, on her wavelength.

Yes, right, I’d heard of him, I said. Within a week I had an interview. After another week I started.

—

EXILED FROM SCHOOL, I now lived back at home with my mother, just south of Columbia University, in those blocks between 100th and 110th where the Upper West Side starts its softening into Morningside Heights. Mom and I were close. Sometimes she sprayed me with the battery of sighs (comic) and stares (insinuating her insight) that had been her weapons when I was a kid. She was short, with smooth, dark skin and a prosecutor’s ersatz innocence in her eyes.

When I told her about this job that had arrived from nowhere, she tucked her small mouth into a pretty purse and worked her eyebrows into glyphs. “Davey,” she said, unprompted and without the consolation of any answer from me. “Davey!” Just as she’d acted, prophetically, in the months before I’d admitted to her, in a letter from school, that my girlfriend was pregnant. “Davey, tell me again how you know this woman? Bethany?” She

purposely botched people's names when she was working up some prescient dislike. "She's just giving out jobs?"

To pacify her, I showed her the ten-year-old *Black Enterprise* cover: "Beverly Whitlock Seals \$175 Million Deal," went the exuberant headline. In the picture, Beverly stood with her arms crossed, with the skyline—the old skyline, the one with both towers, still lively and pert like a pair of Dobermans—behind her, river water sparkling at the bottom of the photograph. "Mmm-hmm," said my mom. "Deal with who?"

Back then, Beverly had started one of the first black-owned investment banks. But to make it go big—thus went capital in America—she'd cut a deal with an even bigger white-owned outfit. She wasn't *owned*, I said, just *helped*. But I could see my mother forming a judgment and letting it harden.

—

I WAS EXPECTING the kind of place you see in movies about politics—a run-down storefront with concrete-colored carpeting studded with bits of crud and loose paper, and signs and posters all over the walls. But the campaign finance office was an undercover operation, and we fundraisers were, I quickly learned, apostles to the rich. The office was on an upper floor of a building, on the corner of Fifty-ninth Street and Park Avenue, whose deco façade was black and shining gold. A wood-paneled wine shop occupied the storefront. Ours was a suite of three small offices and a spacious front room, all rented from a boutique hedge fund across the hall. On the walls hung primary-color World War II-era cartoons of smiling businessmen in boxy suits and secretaries in skirts and pumps—each illustration was six or seven feet tall and emblazoned with graphic logos about the rewards of plain hard work. AVOID THE LOAFER!, one blared. I assumed that the posters were the punchline to some subtle joke whose premise I couldn't quite get. It wasn't an art-world thing—making fun of advertising with its harsh grammar and lurid images; scrambling its nefarious formulas until they added up to a

critique—and neither could I imagine that the hedge fund owner, whose name sounded formidable and vaguely British, didn't earnestly believe in the sacrament of effort, at the very least his own. Maybe the posters were funny just because they were old and because, after their dated fashion, they put forward an unassailable message in a straightforward way. The name of the Senator was nowhere—not so much as a sign on the suite's front door.

My boss, the office's director, with whom I'd had my brisk, friendly interview over the phone, was Jill Hunter. She had been an entry-level staffer on his campaign for the Senate only a few years earlier and now was responsible for his fundraising in New Jersey, Connecticut, and, most importantly, New York. (This was his world-famous opponent's home state, therefore a rich symbolic field tilled by Jill, and now, in a small way, by me. Every dollar harvested here would be fragrant with special meaning.) Over the phone she'd pointedly emphasized the velocity of her advancement as a way to say: *This could be you!* She was older than me, but not yet thirty. She walked me through the office with the vintage propaganda, showing me the room where she sat with her two deputies, Hannah and Ashley, and the smaller room that I'd share with another assistant hired only a week before, a pale kid with curly reddish hair who went by Howland, although his first name was James. Howland waved to me casually as I passed, wearing a grin that looked instinctual and sincere—*Homo americanus affabilis*—and made a grand flourish toward the desk that was now mine.

Jill had a softened southern accent: she'd grown up in North Carolina but had her professional sanding-down in political Chicago and on the transcontinental campaign circuit whose transient heart was in the gentrified neighborhoods of northwest Washington, D.C. She spoke in blunt, short, conspiratorial syllables that made you feel in on a joke. Total reverence she saved for the Senator—she called him that, “the Senator”—alone. She had a flat, diligently pretty face spattered with freckles. Her short nails were coated with clear polish. She wore dark blue heels and bare legs. As she led me through the office on that first day, both of her outer calves were ovals of hot, bright red, the color of a mortified or sunburnt face—

evidence of hours of businesslike crossing at the knee. Everybody here dressed like a banker or a lawyer. I'd worn my boxy black suit with a slight shine at the elbows.

Jill sat at the desk, between me and Howland, and started to tell me about the way our work went. Spreadsheets, lists of potential donors to call, detailed schedules of soon-coming events. The whole fast-moving day was a recruitment into the tedium behind the show.

"It's got its own kind of rhythm," Jill said in an abstract, airy way that let me know that she'd given this a lot of rhapsodic thought. "A lot of building and tending and plain old keeping up. Then, all of a sudden, a big show."

Her description matched patterns I already knew: rehearsal and performance, observation and drawing, study and speech.

"I get it," I said. "That makes a lot of sense to me."

—

TWO WEEKS LATER, the Senator was in town for a reception at a music producer's apartment, only a block north of the office. This was the first time I saw him in person—Jill and I stood waiting for him on the sidewalk outside a building with a high, stony, undecorated entryway. A black SUV pulled up, and he stepped out of a backseat, moving to button his black suit even before both of his feet had settled on the ground. He was tall and skinny with a graceful, Roman bearing: almost exactly how he looked on TV. His face, at rest, looked just a touch less calm. Behind him was a tall man with a buffed bald head who wordlessly and without much movement passed the Senator something that looked like a mint.

As the Senator walked into the lobby of the building, Jill fell into step with him and told him my name. He smiled and, for the first time since he'd left the car, stopped moving. His height was helped by an incredibly erect posture that looked almost practiced, the kind of talismanic maneuver meant

to send forth subliminal messages about confidence and power. In the same way, and engendering the same effect, he held his chin at a high angle, aimed not directly ahead but at a point on the ceiling several yards ahead. Proximity to the Senator made me feel slightly shabby. Unconsciously, I straightened out, too. Without looking down, I could count the dull, stressed-out spots on the dress shoes I'd only ever really worn to church before then.

“David!” he said peppily, repeating after Jill. He took my hand to shake it. Soft hands, tight enough grip. “Where you from?”

“Here,” I said, pointing vaguely uptown, behind my head.

“Huh. Real New Yorker. I liked living here.”

He went to Columbia, I knew, right near my mom's place. Whenever he set foot in Manhattan, one magazine or another made sure to run an old picture of him sitting on a park bench with a small Afro, wearing a tight bomber jacket.

“Well, welcome to it,” the Senator said. “Glad to have you here. It's gonna be a ride.”

Before I could come up with something else to say, he moved on. Soon he disappeared into an elevator, flanked by Jill and the bald aide. Jill had opened a folder she'd shown me an hour earlier, full of information about the producer and his guests, and was pointing down at it as the elevator doors slid shut. I stayed downstairs in the lobby beside a huge marble Last Supper-looking table, checking the names of incoming guests off a spreadsheet. They all looked happy to be where they were. The conversations I overheard had largely to do with polling data. From those who hadn't paid yet I collected checks. The freshly signed checks, casual and restrained in muted mints and grays, were all made out for twenty-three hundred dollars—the most you could donate without breaking the law. Before long I had more money sitting beside me than I'd earned in my entire working life. On the table was a big, smooth ceramic bowl, and sticking out of the bowl were several sheaves of nude, leafless vegetation.

After all the guests had come and the outstanding money had been gathered, I went upstairs, where the Senator was already talking to the crowd. The place was lit by candles and dimmed lamps. The audience of seventy-five or so was largely black. Two incredibly famous recording artists, he a rapper and she a singer, both given an extravizual glow by their renown, stood near the front of the throng. The men at the gathering (I watched them closely, searching for a way to be) had dutifully brushed hair and, I noticed, startlingly well-maintained cuticles. Understated signet pinkie rings abounded. The younger guys had sharp, rectilinear hairlines like mine. The older ones—those, that is, who hadn't shaved it all off—let their widow's peaks crag freely across their foreheads. Their suits were deep gray and midnight blue; cuff links peeked out over the rims of their sleeves. The women wore efficient cocktail dresses that cut closely under the folds of their armpits and tended to fall just above the darkening mounds of their knees. Their calves shone glossily. They had presses and perms that stretched to graze their shoulders and the tender places between their shoulder blades. Everybody looked less fancy than I had expected, and somehow this made them seem—to me, at least—more impressively rich. The room smelled like lotion and subtle cologne.

The televisual calm had crept back over the candidate's face. He spoke from a corner, behind a polished grand piano. The crowd had their backs to the window that was the living room wall. Over their heads you could see the East River slowly churning. The speech the candidate gave was a toned-down, smartened-up version of what he said on the stump in the early states: his same bright hope but for an in crowd; graduate-level electoral inspiration. He made in-jokes about the superstar couple—how he had them both on his iPod. He made lots of jokes, and organized his cadences around the crowd's laughs in the way he usually handled earnest cheers. He praised his host, the producer, exaggeratedly, called him everything short of a civic hero. The guy, cannonball bald with black plastic glasses, couldn't stop smiling. When things opened up for questions, only one person asked anything remotely challenging. It was a fairly famous writer, liberal cable-