

Part VI
The DEATH OF THE PRESIDENT

Chapter 24

That Day in Dallas

Eleanor Williams

Who doesn't remember that day in Dallas when Jackie stood splattered in blood beside a hearse carrying her husband's body? That day in Dallas when Jackie in her blood-stained pink suit stood in a crowded Air Force One and watched helplessly as Lyndon B. Johnson took the oath of office? Not one of us will forget Caroline Kennedy in the rotunda, kneeling before her father's coffin, nor John F. Kennedy, Jr. saluting his father's casket as his mother held his hand. Not one of us will forget Jacqueline Kennedy sheathed in veils, flanked by her brothers-in law, Bobby and Teddy, reaching out for the American flag that covered her husband's casket, face tear-streaked. Nor will we forget that the same day she buried her husband, she held a small birthday party for their son, John F. Kennedy, Jr. It was his third birthday.

Some images remain in our hearts and minds forever. It doesn't matter that I was only a little girl in elementary school; it doesn't matter that my parents voted Republican; nothing mattered but the fact that my forty-seven-year old president was assassinated and later we would all watch his brains spatter over his wife in her hot pink suit, red roses tossed to the floor of the limo, on the Zapruder film, over and over and over again. Dallas. 12:30 p.m. Death. Walter Cronkite wiping away his tears. The announcement on our black-and-white TVs and knob radios at 1:06 p.m.

JFK and Jackie had become icons to me as a little girl. I bought and still have every magazine about Jackie—her clothes, her sister, her relationship with JFK, her stillborn little girl, and then Caroline. I had articles on their house in Georgetown, how she loved to redecorate and buy couture clothes and all the bills would be sent to Joe Kennedy—the man some say bought his son the presidency. Who some say bought all the copies of *Why England Slept* and put them in his attic to get it to the bestseller list. My parents gave me a book for Valentine's Day called *I Was Jacqueline Kennedy's Dressmaker* and it was filled with designs Jackie had made herself—these were the years before the marriage, before the White House, before the killing.

In Miss Bonn's third grade class in the old Longfellow school with its scary cloak closets, where I spent a great deal of time for talking out of turn, we held a mock election in the fall of 1960 after one of the debates that we had been assigned to watch. The class elected Nixon. I'll never forget that—what kind of a third-grade class was I in, anyway? It was a third-grade class in Binghamton, New York boasting a one-percent minority population—any minority.

My parents had a huge fight on election day—November 10, 1960—I still remember my father literally trying to strong-arm my mother—he in his dark suit with a crisp white shirt, narrow dark tie—and because I had to polish his shoes, I knew he wore

garters to hold up his socks beneath those slacks of his—she in her Donna Reed red-and-white housedress—hair looking fresh from getting it “done” at Tony’s Salon—or perhaps, she’d just had a comb-out—at any rate, I was home for lunch with my three siblings—in those days we walked home for lunch every day—and then back for the afternoon classes. My dad came home for lunch, too—and he could not believe she was going to vote for Kennedy! He had a lot of issues with Democrats and their spending and he particularly hated the Kennedys. He was a doctor and the Democrats—especially Kennedy—wanted to use his money for social welfare issues. Thieves, those Democrats! To use his hard-earned money for people too lazy to work. How dare they?

My mother stood up to him—eyeball to eyeball—and a slap or two may have been exchanged, but I’m willing to bet, she voted for Kennedy—not because of his politics, but because of his wife and her clothes and her little girl, Caroline. Plus both women were pregnant. It turned out that my mother gave birth to my sister Carolyn just hours before Jackie gave birth to the little boy everyone—except his family—called John-John. My mother was so proud to have given birth first.

The Presidency—from a little girl’s POV—Clothes and Crises

Mostly Jackie’s clothes. I designed my Barbie doll’s clothes after Jackie’s—complete to her wedding gown, heavy satin, a long train, a frilly veil. And there are the dinner party clothes. A Grecian-style dress. Upswept hair. Pablo Casals at the White House. Jackie’s restoration of the President’s home and her televised tour. Glued to the black-and-white RCA. Jackie giving a speech in Spanish. The French going berserk over Jackie, leaving JFK to introduce himself as the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris. Horses—like at our own farm. My family lived in Binghamton, New York, but we had a farm out in the hills of the Pennsylvania Endless Mountain—a place we always called the farm and we had horses and cows and sheep—even a maple sugaring facility. Jackie in jodhpurs—just like mine—horses nibbling apples from her hand just like they did from mine. Caroline and her pony, Macaroni. Caroline and John-John playing beneath the Oval Office desk. Sometimes my siblings and I went to my father’s office—we were afraid of those visits, no game playing or joyous smile—always somber occasions—your great-grandmother fell and broke her hip. Your grandfather has had a heart attack. Your aunt has polio. Your mother has cancer. Such a contrast to the Kennedy family sailing in Hyannisport. A favorite image—the two brothers, Jack and Bobby walking across the White House lawn, heads close together. Jackie and her sister Lee atop a camel. Jackie starting a play school in the White House for her children—a circular room with a lot of sunshine. I loved all these images and incorporated them into my own consciousness until it seemed as if the Kennedys were my family, too.

Crises

I know about the Baby of Pigs disaster because my father talked about it and the Communists incessantly. He said Nixon proposed the Cuban attack, Eisenhower planned it, RFK championed it—but JFK approved it and had the CIA carry it out. Fiasco.

We had a shelter beneath our basement should there be a nuclear attack at our Binghamton house—plastic garbage cans filled with soup and baked beans and sardines lined the basement walls. Fear crept into my heart that lasted the next years—fears about more than my father, fears about the communists. I lay in bed awake night after night, afraid of them and what they might do. Like McCarthy, the Red Scare loomed large in my mind. Tangible. My little brother and I held hands on the way home to and from school, fearing that Communists lived in one or more of the houses we passed.

And then the real deal—the real fear—the thirteen days where we lived cowering and afraid. The Cuban Missile Crisis—October 1962. On what might have been the fatal day, my family was gathered as always around the kitchen table at exactly six p.m. for dinner. My baby sister sat in a high chair between my mother and father. The other four of us children clustered close together as my father said to us, “Well, you may as well tell each other good-bye tonight. It’s probably the last time we’ll see each other.”

I understood nothing but the racing of my heart and my cold, clammy hands. Never see my beloved brothers Charlie and Pete again? My sisters Jan and Carolyn? What about our dogs, Helga and Duke? Our cat Judy? The horses? What about my grandparents? My father was calm. He kept on eating. He didn’t tell any of us good-bye. I remember an image of Khrushchev taking off his shoe and slamming it on the table—what table? Where? I don’t know. I picture him sitting at our own kitchen table, bald head gleaming, as he slams down that shoe over and over again. I know I was afraid.

The next morning I woke up—shocked to see my sister Jan sleeping in the twin bed beside me. I crept around the house—Duke and Helga were okay—baby Carolyn was in her crib—Charlie and Pete were in the bunk beds, my parents in their room. We had survived the crisis—but I wonder if that scared little girl survived, if she isn’t still somewhere in my heart?

The U.S. emerged victorious and that year for Christmas my father bought Vaughn Meader’s record album *The First Family* recorded during those terrifying thirteen days. I played it over and over and over again. I thought it was funny the way at the end the president says, Goodnight, Jackie, Goodnight, Caroline, Goodnight, John-John, Good night Bobby—and so on—I think I thought the record was the Kennedys, and I liked listening to them talk to each other. Sometimes I’d sit my Barbie and Ken dolls and my Ginny dolls, who served as their children, in front of the record player to listen to my Kennedy family.

And then—another crisis—a more heartbreaking crisis—so much more personal. The Kennedys were my family, afterall. August 7, 1963, rolled around and Jackie gave birth to Patrick Bouvier—a baby with heart problems who could have lived longer than his short forty-eight hours had he been born in recent years. My family lived in Binghamton, New York, but we were out at the farm when little Patrick was born and died. My mother and I sat next to the radio for hours. Later, in books, I read that that baby brought the Kennedys closer together, that that was the first time anyone had seen

JFK cry—and I cried reading this. Two dead babies. Both buried now beside their parents in Arlington Cemetery. The stillborn baby’s grave says Baby Kennedy—but Jackie had named her Annabel. I wanted to name my daughter Annabel, but my mother didn’t like the name. I know that Jackie Kennedy should have been my mother.

The killing begins: JFK, Martin Luther King, RFK—affecting an entire generation—but assassinating my president was right up there with the old hymn, Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble—Were *you* there when they assassinated my president?

I was. I was there. And I still tremble.

I am now in sixth grade, having skipped fourth grade— eight of us skipped and went on through high school together taking what were known in New York State as the Regence Classes.

On November 22, 1963 after lunch, we exalted eight were in Mrs. Kosack’s class at the MacArthur school library. It was a brown room—brown textured carpet, light-brown maple round tables, brown maple chairs, brown tweed drapes. The room smelled of fresh paint—beige—and that lovely, musty odor of books. The clock was round—a big black and white one high on the wall not far from the Intercom system. The Intercom system was a way for the front office to make announcements—and the voice of whoever gave the announcements came through this big round metal thing with a grate over it. Mrs. Kosack kept a sharp eye on her students, and even I wasn’t whispering. It was then—and I don’t really remember the time—only that it was after lunch in the library—that the deep voice of MacArthur Elementary School’s principal, Ben Gold, in Binghamton, New York, told school children all over the building that my president had been shot in Dallas. Time passed before he came on again—a time in which we were all dead silent and Mrs. Kosack stood ramrod still in the corner beneath the clock. “President Kennedy has been killed,” he said.

I don’t know what he said after that. I know we were dismissed from school. No one’s mother worked outside the home in those days. It was safe to let us walk home. What wasn’t safe was for my president to ride in an open motorcade through Dallas.

Images: Jackie climbing across the back of the car to get to Clint Hill, the secret service man. The grassy knoll. The crying people. One girl with cat-eye glasses and a headscarf.

My biological family was headed to the farm that weekend. We jammed into my parents’ two vehicles. I rode with my mother, the radio on—all of us quiet, listening, listening. That’s how we spent the weekend, but by then we had a black and white TV at the farm, too, and we turned it on and left it on. We ate our meals in front of it on those old metal TV trays, black metal with a pink flowered design in the middle.

Sunday, November 24—my father's birthday—we didn't go to the church; we attended at the farm. We always went to church. Our not going only made that black and white TV and its reportage of Jackie and her children that much more terrifying. Unearthly. And so I was there when Jack Ruby shot Lee Harvey Oswald—just darted out in front of the entourage guarding the man—I still can picture that big cop in a suit wearing a ten-gallon hat.

Lee Harvey Oswald pronounced dead. Information that he shot J.D. Tippett, a police officer using a revolver, as he, Oswald, walked the streets after leaving the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository building, a rifle left among a clutter of cartons. Did you know that Jackie took the time to send Officer Tippett's wife a sympathy note?

Monday, November 25—birthday of my sister and JFK, Jr.—the day my president was buried—I see that flag-draped coffin, that prancing riderless horse—all those international dignitaries marching, marching—and at the front of this cortege, Jackie, flanked by Robert and Edward Kennedy. No school that day. And I sat in front of the TV in Binghamton now—watching these seminal events in my life take place.

Within weeks I joined the Girl Scouts so that I could go with them to Arlington Cemetery to see if JFK's grave is really there, that there is a white picket fence surrounding the area and an eternal flame. We're not Catholic, of course, the Catholics are all immigrants according to my parents, we're Episcopalians come over no doubt in 1607 to the Jamestown Colony, and no one in our family crosses him or herself, but Jackie does and now I do, too. I put my knee to the ground, bow my head and cross myself. And I cry. If only I had a veil.

My husband wasn't born when JFK was elected. Sometimes I think that if anything could tear us asunder, it would be that he wasn't there when they assassinated my president. It didn't break his heart. Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.