

Chapter 26

The Day Kennedy Was Assassinated

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As we were in a strategy meeting on Second Avenue just north of Grand Central Station, New York City, the secretary rushed in announcing that something had happened to the President in Dallas. Details were sketchy and all she knew was that President Kennedy and Governor Connally had been rushed to a Dallas hospital.

After the meeting broke up a half-hour later, I walked over to Grand Central Station to take the subway back to Columbia University to get ready for a graduate class in apologetics, and while walking across that vast concourse at Grand Central, the ceiling far over head, the milling human herd lost in the vastness, Walter Cronkite came on the large television above the confused, skittering crowd to announce President Kennedy had died from a gunshot wound. There seemed to arise a psychological miasma starting at our feet, an emotional fog heightening to envelope the crowd; we stopped, people rushing just stood, shocked, silent, faces seemingly frozen unbelievably by surprise and utter confusion.

You could have heard a dime drop on the floor among almost a thousand people, the silence lasting three or four minutes, then a buzz of persons unknown to each other, talking, gesturing, commenting, exchanging ideas with strangers all at once. You don't talk to strangers in New York, but at that moment, we did.

Some staggered toward the exits, too stunned to speak; others looked around, seeking some kind of reassurance, many shaking their heads in the negative, trying to grasp history smacking them in the face, their fear visible and determinate, confounded by now-rushing unbelievable events in their new world suddenly turned upside down, instantly no longer safe or knowable, a place of tension and doubt, lost in overwhelming uncertainty.

We all walked more slowly, spoke more carefully, practiced--believe it or not for New Yorkers—more courtesy, deferring, letting persons go first through the doors. Was this really central Manhattan? Suddenly, we were in a different reality, life had become more precious, markedly less sure. We had realized that persons counted for something important, for what can never be replaced. Maybe we were more conscious? Maybe not? One could only hope.

For a brief moment, a city of millions had become a village. We didn't know what we would do, but those few minutes during which our masks came off, and pretensions

broke down, when we recognized the strangers around us as precious, that would stay locked in memory, and thus nothing was ever the same again.