



McCollis  
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BY MRS. JOHN CONNALLY,  
WIFE OF THE GOVERNOR OF TEXAS  
as told to Michael Drury

It is good to wake up in the morning and not have to fight memory. It is not good living to be scared all the time—and I have been truly scared since last November twenty-second, the day the President of the United States was shot and killed, and my husband, John B. Connally, the Governor of Texas, was severely wounded. I have been scared, but I have also been warmed and comforted by the people of this nation, by my family and friends; and I have learned to cherish the bounty of every day, almost every moment.

When Martin Westbrook, our gardener at the Governor's Mansion, fills this house with snapdragons and anemones, or jonquils, or roses, I find reasons to go near the flowers and touch them or smell them. When the fields at our ranch near Floresville are carpeted with bluebonnets—the Texas state flower—filling the sky with fragrance, and the red-and-white cattle are knee-deep in coastal Bermuda grass, I just want to stand still, looking and listening. When our daughter, Sharon, says good-night after a perfectly ordinary day in our family life and adds, with fourteen-year-old exuberance, "Oh, Mother, I had such fun today!"—then a miracle has touched me, and I know it.

I knew it before my husband very nearly lost his life from an assassin's bullet, but I know it more deeply and truly now. The terrible events of that day did not so much change me as intensify me. They did not make me over; they confirmed what I am and what I believe.

That day was an indescribably horrifying experience. For weeks it was the principal thing in my mind, and the moment I wasn't occupied, it would start playing itself over and over in my head, like a record. It is almost impossible to relate in any sen-

sible sequence. Many of the surrounding details were not clear to me till long afterward, and it is frustrating to try to tell slowly and rationally something that happened so fast and irrationally.

I had known of the coming Presidential tour for about two weeks before it happened, and I was immensely excited and pleased. We were going to hold a reception for the Kennedys here in Austin. In fact, we would have come here straight from Dallas. I had never entertained a President and his lady before. There was an air of excitement throughout the house; though the time was brief, I had made arrangements for the children to meet the Kennedys. Instead, our seventeen-year-old son, John, met Mrs. Kennedy at the graveside of the President at the funeral in Washington; Sharon and Mark, the younger children, have never met her.

The historic 108-year-old mansion had been scrubbed and polished; the staff and the extra people we had hired for that evening were thrilled. We all wanted everything to be just right. The hall carpet is a light gold, and it gets a lot of traffic from tourists and the general flow through the house. It had, of course, been cleaned; but two days before the trip, I decided it should be done again, and the carpet cleaners were just finishing as I left. Mrs. Kennedy sent word that she wished to wear a theater suit to our reception, and I was glad, as I had a lovely black velvet suit with a white silk-organza blouse that I had not yet worn.

We were to go to San Antonio to greet the Kennedys on their arrival in Texas, November 21, and getting there was something of a scramble. I went from Austin; John flew in from Houston, where he had made a luncheon speech; Vice-President and Mrs. Johnson came from Washington and got there before either of us; but we all managed to be waiting at the airport when Air Force One touched down. John and I as state hosts, rode with the

Kennedys in the car to Brooks Air Force Base, where the President spoke.

There are two points I would like to make right here. One is that at no time in any of the cities did we use the bubble top on the car. I have never seen it. The limousine was open throughout the trip. The other point is this: News photographers and private citizens sent us many pictures they had taken during those two days, and it is surprising now to notice how many different ways we sat in that car. Sometimes Mrs. Kennedy and I were on the jump seats, with the two men in back; sometimes John or I would ride in back with the Kennedys, with the other of us on a jump seat. Once Mrs. Kennedy and my husband changed places while the car was in motion, so that the wind would not blow her hair so much. I am not wholly sure what this adds up to—that the assassin had to be an excellent marksman, perhaps—but I think it is interesting to note that he could not possibly have known our seating arrangement in advance; we did not know it ourselves, except that the President did always sit in back, where he could be seen.

The morning of November 22 was gray and rainy. We were all in the Texas Hotel in Fort Worth, where the President spoke at a huge breakfast for 2,500 people. Across the street from the hotel was a parking lot with a speaker's stand and some microphones, where Mr. Kennedy went—hatless, as usual—to say a few words informally to the crowds who could not get into the hotel ballroom. When I got up that morning and looked out the window, there were already people waiting under raincoats and umbrellas. I was sorry about the weather, but I was proud of the people of Texas.

We had flown into Fort Worth the night before at midnight, and even at that hour, the streets were lined with cheering, friendly crowds. San Antonio and Houston had been the same. Our hotel lobby was jammed with noisy, happy people. Fort Worth was home to us. We had lived there for eleven years. It was in Fort Worth that John was asked to be President Kennedy's first Secretary of the Navy, in 1961. Fort Worth was our headquarters throughout the 1962 campaign for governor.

After breakfast we flew in the President's plane to Dallas, where we were again met by the bubble-top car and the weather had cleared to brilliant sunlight. The sky had that clean, washed look it gets after rain. By coincidence, both Mrs. Kennedy and I were wearing pink wool suits—something I would have avoided if I'd known.

The crowds were tremendous. We rode through downtown Dallas surrounded by cheerful, happy faces. I was delighted. It isn't easy to ride in a motorcade; you have to look pleasant, yet you don't want a frozen smile on your face. It is something of a strain, and as we neared the end of the run, we all began to relax and let down a little. It was a wonderfully triumphant moment, and unable to restrain my pleasure any longer, I turned on the jump seat and said, "Mr. President, you can't say Dallas doesn't love you." He did not reply, or if he did, it

was lost in the terror of what followed, for in that instant the first shot rang out.

I heard it, and though I handle guns myself and am familiar with rifles, I did not in that split second realize it was gunfire. I knew only that it was an ominous and frightening sound, that we were caught in something terribly wrong. I looked directly at the President. He clutched his throat with both hands, and I felt sure he was dead. His face went blank. There was no pain or shock or fear—just nothingness. His face was completely expressionless, as if the person had gone.

Sitting on my right, John turned very fast to his right, trying to look around at the President. Not getting him in his line of vision, he started turning to his left, and the second bullet hit him. I heard John say, "They're going to kill us all!" He recoiled to his right and slumped over, still upright in his seat. My one thought was to get him out of the line of fire, and I pulled him down onto my lap and bent over him. It did not occur to me that I might be hit, too; I thought my husband was dead, and I could not think beyond that.

As it happened, that instinctive action helped save his life, because the bullet had torn through his right shoulder and out his chest, leaving what is called a sucking wound. That means that every time you breathe, you take in more air through the wound than into your lungs, and you strangle. A doctor's first act would have been to close that wound, and when I pulled John down on my lap, his crouched position partially blocked it. Even so, if the hospital had been minutes farther away, we might not have made it in time.

I heard the third shot and the Secret Service command to pull out of the motorcade and drive to the nearest hospital; but after John was hit, I didn't look back again. Suddenly, I saw John's hand move, and I cannot tell you what hope, both blind and determined, flooded me. I kept whispering over and over, "Be still, it's going to be all right. Be still, it's going to be all right." I don't know whether I was talking to him or to myself. To both of us, I guess.

We pulled into the emergency entrance of Parkland Hospital, and it seemed to me an eternity before anyone moved. My husband was dying in my arms, and I wanted somebody to do something fast. To my awe, John, by some miracle of strength, pulled himself upright and fell over to the right door. Someone—a Secret Service man or a hospital attendant—scooped him up like a child and put him on a stretcher, and John is a big man. I was so grateful. I ran along beside them down a corridor to Emergency Room 2 on the left. The Kennedys were right behind us, but I didn't know that then, and the President was taken into the now sadly famous Emergency Room 1 on the right.

At the swinging doors, I stopped. My judgment told me I did not belong in there, but I hated to let John out of my sight, and I kept pushing the door open to see what they were doing. A few feet from

me across the hall stood Mrs. Kennedy. Once or twice our eyes brushed across each other's, but there was no communication in those glances. We were two women, strangely isolated and curiously linked by a world-shaking event. Both of our pink suits were now bloodstained. Both of us were too shocked to speak or think coherently or grieve. Eventually, someone brought two straight chairs, and we both sat down.

The activity was frenzied beyond belief—doctors, nurses, orderlies, Secret Service men, State Police, the FBI, aides, reporters, all coming and going. Even so, I felt terribly alone for a few minutes. The first person to talk to me was the Mayor of Dallas, Earle Cabell, who took my hands in his and asked if there was anything he could do. Then one of John's assistants, Bill Stinson, who had accompanied us throughout the tour and was in the Emergency Room, came out and said, "The Governor just said to me, 'Take care of Nellie.' I thought you ought to know." That was enough to keep me going—forever, if need be.

After they covered the chest wound, there was some discussion about turning John over to see if there were any other bullets, and from the table John said distinctly, "I / *continued on page 141*"

was shot only once." The doctors were startled. How strong he was! That he would fade into and out of consciousness was not surprising, but that he could take part coherently in the decision being made surprised them.

When they wheeled John out to surgery, I ran along with him. I had no idea where they were going, but I was going, too. Someone showed me a long, narrow room fitted out as a doctors' lounge, where I could wait. Dr. Robert Shaw, the thoracic surgeon, operated on John for over two hours, and through it all, he sent me messages through Bill Stinson, who stayed in the operating room: "Tell Mrs. Connally it is not as bad as we feared"; "Tell Mrs. Connally his heart and breathing are strong"; and so on. The complete surgery, including that on John's wrist and thigh, took three and a half hours.

There is much about that day in Dallas which is still undiscussed between John and me. We will talk one day, but I don't probe at him. He was very sick and deeply shocked.  
A reporter asked me not long ago if I valued my husband more because of nearly losing him. John Connally has always been what he is, and I find him a pretty remarkable man. John, Sharon, Mark, and I want him just the way he is. During our stay in the hospital, I asked him if he remembered heaving himself upright in the car when we were at the emergency entrance, and he said yes. I asked him what on earth he was trying to do, and he won't much care for my saying this, but I will: He said that in some corner of his half-conscious mind, he was aware that the President of the United States was behind him and that he, John, would have to get out of there before they could reach Mr. Kennedy. In deference to his President, John, though near dying himself, had somehow found the strength to move. That is the kind of man I'm married to.

THE END