

*CHAP. 102
11*

Transcript from Mrs. Johnson's tapes relating to November 22, 1963

It all began so beautifully. After a drizzle in the morning, the sun came out bright and beautiful. We were going into Dallas. In the lead car, President and Mrs. Kennedy, John and Nellie, and then a Secret Service car full of men, and then our car - Lyndon and me and Senator Yarborough. The streets were lined with people - lots and lots of people - the children all smiling, placards, confetti, people waving from windows. One last happy moment I had was looking up and seeing Mary Griffith leaning out of a window waving at me. Mary for many years had been in charge of altering the clothes which I purchased at a Dallas store.

Then almost at the edge of town, on our way to the Trade Mart where we were going to have the luncheon, we were rounding a curve, going down a hill and suddenly there was a sharp loud report - a shot. It seemed to me to come from the right above my shoulder from a building. Then a moment and then two more shots in rapid succession. There had been such a gala air that I thought it must be firecrackers or some sort of celebration. Then in the lead car, the Secret Service men were suddenly down. I heard over the radio system, "Let's get out of here," and our Secret Service man who was with us, Ruf Youngblood, I believe it was, vaulted over the front seat on top of Lyndon, threw him to the floor, and said, "Get down."

ABE TORTAS PAPERS, Central Commission, folder #2

RELEASED PER P.A. 102-526 (JFK ACT)
ARA WDP DATE 6/23/01

Senator Yarborough and I ducked our heads. The car accelerated terrifically fast - faster and faster. Then suddenly they put on the brakes so hard that I wondered if they were going to make it as we wheeled left and went around the corner. We pulled up to a building. I looked up and saw it said "Hospital." Only then did I believe that this might be what it was. Yarborough kept on saying in an excited voice, "Have they shot the President?" I said something like, "No, it can't be."

As we ground to a halt - we were still the third car - Secret Service men began to pull, lead, guide and hustle us out. I cast one last look over my shoulder and saw, in the President's car, a bundle of pink, just like a drift of blossoms, lying on the back seat. I think it was Mrs. Kennedy lying over the President's body. They led us to the right, the left and onward into a quiet room in the hospital - a very small room. It was lined with white sheets, I believe.

People came and went - Kenny O'Donnell, Congressman Thornberry, Congressman Jack Brooks. Always there was Ruf right there, Emory Roberts, Jerry Kivett, Lem Johns and Woody Taylor. There was talk about where we would go - back to Washington, to the plane, to our house. People spoke of how widespread this may be. Through it all, Lyndon was remarkably calm and quiet. Every

face that came in, you searched for the answers you must know. I think the face I kept seeing it on was the face of Kenny O'Donnell who loved him so much.

It was Lyndon as usual who thought of it first, although I wasn't going to leave without doing it. He said, "You had better try to see if you can see Jackie and Nellie." We didn't know what had happened to John. I asked the Secret Service men if I could be taken to them. They began to lead me up one corridor, back stairs and down another. Suddenly I found myself face to face with Jackie in a small hall. I think it was right outside the operating room. You always think of her - or someone like her as being insulated, protected - she was quite alone. I don't think I ever saw anyone so much alone in my life. I went up to her, put my arms around her and said something to her. I'm sure it was something like, "God, help us all," because my feelings for her were too tumultuous to put into words.

And then I went in to see Nellie. There it was different, because Nellie and I have gone through so many things together, since 1938. I hugged her tight and we both cried and I said, "Nellie, it's going to be all right." And Nellie said, "Yes, John's going to be all right." Among her many other fine qualities, she is also tough.

Then I turned and went back to the small white room where Lyndon was. Mr. Kilduff and Kenny O'Donnell were coming and going. I think it was from Kenny's face and Kenny's voice that I first heard the words, "The President is dead." Mr. Kilduff entered and said to Lyndon, "Mr. President."

It was decided that we would go immediately to the airport. Quick plans were made about how to get to the car. Who to ride in what. It was Lyndon who said we should go to the plane in unmarked cars. Getting out of the hospital into the cars was one of the swiftest walks I have ever made. We got in. Lyndon said to stop the sirens. We drove along as fast as we could. I looked up at a building and there already was a flag at half-mast. I think that is when the enormity of what had happened first struck me.

When we got to the airplane, we entered airplane #1 for the first time. There was a T.V. set on and the commentator was saying "Lyndon B. Johnson, now President of the United States." They were saying they had a suspect. They were not sure he was the assassin. The President had been shot with a 30-30 rifle. On the plane, all the shades were lowered. Lyndon said that we were going to wait for Mrs. Kennedy and the coffin. There was discussion about when Lyndon should be sworn in as President. There was a telephone call to Washington - I believe

RELEASED PER P.A. 100-523 (JFK ACT)
ARA WDP DATE 6/23/01

to the Attorney General. It was decided that he should be sworn in in Dallas as quickly as possible because of international implications, and because we did not know how widespread this incident was as to intended victims. Judge Sarah Hughes, a Federal Judge in Dallas - and I am glad it was she - was called to come in a hurry.

Mrs. Kennedy had arrived by this time and the coffin; and there - in the very narrow confines of the plane with Jackie on his left with her hair falling in her face, but very composed, and then Lyndon, and I was on his right, Judge Hughes with the bible in front of him and a cluster of Secret Service people and Congressmen we had known for a long time - Lyndon took the oath of office.

It's odd at a time like that the little things that come to your mind and a moment of deep compassion you have for people who are really not at the center of the tragedy. I heard a Secret Service man say in the most desolate voice and I hurt for him - "We never lost a President in the Service," and then Police Chief Curry of Dallas came on the plane and said to Mrs. Kennedy, "Mrs. Kennedy, believe me, we did everything we possibly could."

We all sat around the plane. We had at first been ushered into the main private presidential cabin on the plane - but

Lyndon quickly said "no, no" and immediately led us out of there; we felt that is where Mrs. Kennedy should be. The casket was in the hall. I went in to see Mrs. Kennedy and though it was a very hard thing to do, she made it as easy as possible. She said things like, "Oh, Lady Bird, it's good that we've always liked you two so much." She said, "Oh, what if I had not been there. I'm so glad I was there." I looked at her. Mrs. Kennedy's dress was stained with blood. Her right glove was caked - that immaculate woman - it was caked with blood - her husband's blood. She always wore gloves like she was used to them. I never could. Somehow that was one of the most poignant sights - exquisitely dressed and caked in blood. I asked her if I couldn't get someone in to help her change and she said, "Oh, no. Perhaps later I'll ask Mary Gallagher but not right now."

She said a lot of other things like, "What if I had not been there, Oh, I'm so glad I was there." and a lot of other things that made it so much easier for us. "Oh, Lady Bird, we've always liked you both so much." I tried to express something of how we felt. I said, "Oh, Mrs. Kennedy, you know we never even wanted to be Vice President and now, dear God, it's come to this." I would have done anything to help her, but there was nothing I could do to help her, so rather quickly I left and went back to the main part of the airplane where everyone was seated.

The ride to Washington was silent, strained - each with his own thoughts. One of mine was something I had said about Lyndon a long time ago - that he's a good man in a tight spot. I even remember one little thing he said in that hospital room - "Tell the children to get a Secret Service man with them."

Finally we got to Washington with a cluster of people watching. Many bright lights. The casket went off first, then Mrs. Kennedy. The family had come to join them and then we followed. Lyndon made a very simple, very brief and I think strong talk to the folks there. Only about 4 sentences I think. We got in cars, we dropped him off at the White House and I came home.

#

RELEASED PER P.A. 102-526 (JFK ACT)
ARA WDP DATE 6/23/01