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Dark Parallels Brought Kennedy Brothers' Deaths

Both Were at Peak of Youth, Power

EDITOR'S NOTE—There was an awful symmetry about them—those four days that began in Dallas for one brother and in Los Angeles for the other. Here is a moving account of the events that saw Robert Kennedy killed, and the dark parallels to that other assassination four and a half years earlier.

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and
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"O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee. . ." the priest said, for him and for us, in the hotel kitchen in Los Angeles.

"O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee. . . the priest said, for him and for us, in Trauma Room One in Dallas.

Whose was the offense? Whose was it not? . . .

Again the same searing structure of events. Four days then, four days now, yet another nightmare in the American dream. Again the same remorseless rhythm of events. Cheering crowds on a note of triumph. And the guns go off. And one kills a President named Kennedy, who had been a senator, and the other kills a senator named Kennedy, who might have been President. Shock, horror, profound disarray in the American Republic, the agony of looking inward, deep into our national soul. "My God, we cry now, as we cried then, "what are we coming to?"

LOCKED IN HISTORY

Four days in 1968, four days in 1963. Two events, two men now locked together into history by name and style and purpose and by the manner of their coming and the manner of their going. . .

Both came to their last place for political reasons, Robert Kennedy to California on the road, he hoped, to the Democratic presidential nomination; John Kennedy to Texas, to help unify Democrats there on the road, he hoped, to reelection in 1964.

John Kennedy wanted to be president, he said, because that was the "ultimate center of action" to affect his time. Robert Kennedy wanted to be president, he said, because in the presidency, more than any other place, "changes can be made in the direction of the country." Because, too, said a friend of Robert Kennedy, "he feels a sense of incompleteness about his brother's administration . . . and this is almost the last mountain to climb."

And people everywhere, in screaming, leaping crowds they both attracted, noted similarities in the two brothers. More than differences, similarities would be remembered.

The elan of youth, money, motion, confidence, style. The Kennedy mystique, it was called. And between them, the same sense of irony, self-deprecating humor, aversion to pomposity, the same manner of speaking, right hand pumping, same accent, cadence and rhythm.

Robert Kennedy exhibited less detachment and poise. He used humor more. He laughed less and that led you to notice his eyes, and in those eyes was the big difference between the two men in the years that one lived and the other didn't. In those blue eyes and on that taut angular face of Robert Kennedy there was a look of infinite sadness, of terrible hurt, and people who knew him said it wasn't there before Dallas.

Robert Kennedy believed with Julius Caesar that death, a necessary end, would come when it would come and did not fear it.

Kennedy, a man who climbed mountains, skied, canoed in rapids and played a hard game of touch football, was asked recently if he enjoyed physical risk. He said it was "part of a man's life." He quoted an essayist: "Men are not made for safe havens."

About two weeks ago, he remarked to the French writer, Romain Gary:

"There is no way to protect a candidate during the campaign. You must give yourself to the crowd and from then on you must take your chances. In any case, you must have luck to be elected president of the United States. You have it or you don't.

"I know that there will be an attempt on my life sooner or later. Not so much for political reasons but through contagion, through emulation."

RFK Shared Sense Of Brother's Fatalism

He shared his brother's fatalism, a sense of the inevitable.

"If anybody really wanted to shoot the president of the United States," President Kennedy remarked on the last morning of his life, "It is not a very difficult job. All one has to do is get —on—a high building some day with a telescopic rifle and there is nothing anyone could do to defend you against such an attempt."

At the start of the last week of his life, Robert Kennedy was giving himself to the crowd at Oxnard, Calif., standing on the seat of a convertible as it inched through mobbed streets. Someone shouted, "That guy has a gun!" An aide raced back to the convertible and cried to the senator "Get down! Get down!" The gun, wrestled from the man's hands, proved to be a toy. Robert Kenedy did not know that. But he did not get down.

At seven minutes after midnight, June 5, 1968, Robert Kennedy was very much up on his feet and up in spirit. After losing to McCarthy in Oregon, he needed to win the California primary, in the politicians' phrase, to stay alive.

At 12:07 a.m. he was still a viable candidate. The returns showed him ahead of Sen. McCarthy by a percentage point, 44 to 43, but Los Angeles County was just beginning to roll in, roll in heavily for Kennedy. Los Angeles would make him a winner, politically speaking.

Robert Kennedy, his wife Ethel, and a few aides took the freight elevator down to the kitchen, just behind the ornate, fiercely lighted Embassy Room, where 2,000 supporters awaited his triumphant entry. The route was odd. Typical Kennedy style was not to slip in the back way. Typical Kennedy style

was to plunge straight through the crowd, through the clutching and tearing and wild adoration. But that would have meant delay and the people had been waiting long enough in the hot room. Besides, Robert Kennedy had planned a small victory party with a few friends at a night spot called the Factory and the hour was late. He decided he would make his speech and leave by the kitchen, too.

He made his way to the podium and smiled the subdued, crinkle-eyed smile, the Kennedy smile, and waved still the din of victory.

"I want," he said, "to express my gratitude to my dog Freckles who's been maligned and I don't care what they say—as Franklin Roosevelt said—I don't care what they say about me but when they start to attack my dog. . ." Typical—open with a few easy gags and then to the serious stuff.

The nomination was still long, long away, and there was a national television audience watching, and Robert Kennedy restated again his goals and his beliefs in his intense way. Working together, he said, Americans could put an end to "the division, the violence, the disenchantment with our society." America, he said, is "a great country and a selfless country and a compassionate country."

And, as he had begun, he ended on a buoyant note. "So my thanks to all of you and on to Chicago and let's win there," he said.

Then he stepped down from the podium and into the cheers . . . .

CROWDS CHEER

The cheering was reaching a climactic roar that day in Dallas as the President's motorcade rolled on toward Houston and Elm. Despite advance signs of extreme anti-Kennedy feeling there, John Kennedy was receiving a tremendous reception.

"Mr. President," said the wife of the governor of Texas, "you can't say Dallas doesn't love you." John Kennedy agreed. The motorcade was now only about 30 seconds away from the Texas School Book Depository. . . . . .

At 12:16 a.m., Robert Kennedy followed a procession of aides and friends out the rear door of the Embassy Room into the kitchen. Roosevelt Grier was with him, the huge lineman of the Los Angeles Rams, and Rafer Johnson, the Olympic athlete, tall and quiet and broad-shouldered, and Billy Barry, always Bill Barry, the big, grinning Irishman who was Robert Kennedy's bodyguard and devoted friend, and Milt Gwirtzman of the "issues staff," and several others, all anxious to get to that party at the Factory And, of course, Ethel Kennedy was there, pregnant again but looking bright and chirpy as usual.

They all passed through the crowd in the kitchen corridor—hotel employes, reporters and others, strangers.

Robert Kennedy stretched across a long steel work table to accept the reaching hands of the kitchen crew and he was smiling when the bullets hit. One hit him in the armpit and coursed upward and one hit him behind the right ear and ripped into his brain. And the gunman was still firing.

Robert Kennedy made no outcry. He fell backward to the floor. In one awful moment the world went mad again, and screams and curses and cries filled that hotel kitchen. The gunman was clearly visible. Bill Barry grabbed him; and Roosevelt Grier grabbed him, and Rafer Johnson grabbed him. Again and again Grier hit the hand holding the pistol against the steel table. The gun fell finally, and Rafer picked it up. Grier cried, "Don't let anything happen to him. We want him alive!"

On the floor, Milt Gwirtzman cradled the bloody head of Robert Kennedy in his hands and a priest placed a rosary in the senator's hand, and he took it, and the priest began the ancient act of contrition, "O my God, I am heartily sorry. . . ."

And there were others on the floor, some here, some there, five others wounded in all, bleeding and crying out, and the crowd became thick with friends and strangers, political supporters and the uncommitted, screaming and weeping and crying out like men atop a mountain cursing the sky in a tempest, crying and cursing and pleading, Oh, no, no, no, not again, oh, no, no, no, not again. And the police came and Bill Barry shoved the gunman at them and they took him away. And outside red lights flashed and sirens wailed and millions watched on television in another electronic marvel of bringing madness into their living rooms. And the ambulance came and men with a stretcher took Robert Kennedy away, took him away, and that big man, that big black man, that gentle man, Roosevelt Grier, wept like a baby.

It was 12:30 p.m. in Dallas when the bullet that counted for everything hit John Kennedy behind the right ear. It was 12:16 a.m. in Los Angeles when the bullet that counted for everything hit Robert Kennedy behind the right ear and lodged deep in his brain. John Kennedy, it is said, was hit by a rifle that cost $19.95. Robert Kennedy, it is said, was hit by a pistol that cost $30.95. The total cost of eliminating a president of the United States and a candidate for president of the United States was $60.90. How much other history can you buy these days in the world's most affluent society for $60.90?

The ambulance took Robert Kennedy to Central Receiving Hospital where he appeared, to Dr. Victor Baz, to be "practically dead." The patient had no pulse beat. He was not breathing. His heart gave no sound through the stetheoscope. Dr. Baz furiously massaged Robert Kennedy's chest over the heart. He gave him adrenalin and he gave him oxygen and then, at long last, he heard a heartbeat.

Watching the frantic ministrations, Ethel Kennedy thought her husband was gone, as his two older brothers and sister were gone before him, as her parents were gone. But Dr. Baz put the stetheoscope tenderly to her ears and held the cup to her husband's chest. Ethel Kennedy heard the heartbeat and smiled.

Surgeons Attempt to Save RFK Life

And another ambulance took Robert Kennedy now to another hospital, Good Samaritan, where surgeons would try to remove the bullet and bone splinters from his brain. The operation lasted three hours and when it was over he was still alive, barely alive, and one sensed prayers going up around the world as if to stop or deny or slow this latest madness.

While the doctors worked, the police worked. And the man they were concerned with was 5 feet 6, this man that Bill Barry and the others had thrust at them. He was Caucasian, had wiry dark hair, was fluent in

English and, according to police, was "very cool, very calm, very stable and quite lucid." Mayor Samuel Yorty said the prisoner had in his possession a schedule of Robert Kennedy's speaking dates for June and an entry which said, "Kennedy must be killed by June 5."

He also had, the mayor said, four $100 bills and a newspaper clipping dealing with Robert Kennedy's views on the Arab-Israeli question. The senator had made clear his support was with the Israelis.

Police identified the prisoner as Sirhan Bishara Sirhan, age 24, a Jordanian Arab born in Jerusalem who came to America when he was 12 but still was not a citizen. A grand jury indicted him for the murder of Robert Francis Kennedy. Los Angeles police took elaborate precautions to keep strangers from their prisoner. They remembered the one who was shot and killed in the jail in Dallas.

Robert Kennedy clung to life 25 hours and 30 minutes after the bullet entered his brain. And at 1:44 a.m., June 6, he died. With him at the time were his wife and the three eldest of their 10 children. And Jacqueline Kennedy was there, too, in Los Angeles as she had been there at the end in Trauma Room One in Dallas. The man who died in Dallas was 46 and president. The man who died in Los Angeles was 42 and not yet president.

And on the second day, he was flown to his adopted home in New York, in the great blue and white plane, number 87692, with the big flag painted on its tail and, in huge proud letters, "United States of America" printed across its side. This was the same plane that was carrying the Cabinet members across the Pacific in 1963 when the word came about John Kennedy.

And, in the blur of tears, LaGuardia Airport was suddenly Andrews Air Base, and 1963 was 1968 because there again was a gray hearse and the line of shiny long cars waiting and the television cameras waiting and behind them the silent watchers and, once again, a dead Kennedy was moved from his last airplane and lowered gently down in a fork lift.

And once again they lined up, lined up by the thousands, to view the body lying in state, this time at St. Patrick's Cathedral, and one man, a Negro, was asked by a television reporter why he was willing to wait in line for three hours and this man said, "because he was important."

And a great train carried Robert Francis Kennedy back to Washington and a great cortege carried him past the Senate Office Building and the Justice Department and out across the bridge to Arlington Cemetery and he was buried, buried near his brother, and the long journeys that began near Boston and paralleled each other to Washington and separated in Dallas and Los Angeles were now joined again.