'I Don't Believe in Violence'

Dark Night With Robert

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ROBERT F. KENNEDY, junior Senator from New York, thoughtfully inspects a jodhpur boot dappled with red Virginia mud and tries again to close the door on 1968.

"I think in 1968 President Johnson will be renominated and run for re-election, and I think Hubert Humphrey will be on the ticket with him."

Sen. Kennedy pulls himself deeper into a shaggy gray turtleneck sweater, suggesting a tousled tortoise trying to get away from questions that have been asked too often.

"No, I'm not interested in running for vice president in 1968. It sounds presumptious, I guess. Nobody has asked me to. But I'm not in the least interested."

A door opens, and little Bobby, going on 12, comes in to report bad news from school. He kisses his father on the forehead. "I got a bad grade today," he says. His voice is scarcely audible.

Nineteen sixty-eight receeds briefly. "In what subject?" His father's voice is gentle. Little Bobby pokes ineffectually at a dangling shirttail and answers. Math. His father looks pained and tries, with no more success than any father would have, to pin down the reason. There is something about a lost book, complicated by three days absence due to illness. Finally Sen. Kennedy says they'll talk about it later, and Bobby, still trying to tame the shirttail, leaves the room.

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NINETEEN SIXTY EIGHT is replaced by 1972.

"Well, 1972 is six years from now," the Senator says. "That's a long time. It's a long time in human life, and a long time in politics."

The terrible shadow of a day in November three years ago crosses his mind.

"And fate has a way of taking a hand, too," he says. He pulls the neck of the sweater up over his chin while he thinks. "Nobody can possibly foresee what the political situation will be in 1972. What would it mean, for example, if the racial situation in our core cities got worse, polarized, by then?"

He pokes moodily at the much-mended knee of his riding pants. "In some age groups in Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant unemployment is as high as 70 per cent. We talk about the revolution in human aspirations, but what we've done for the past six years is to tell these young people that they're no longer condemned to be second-class citizens, and then we've given them no place to go.

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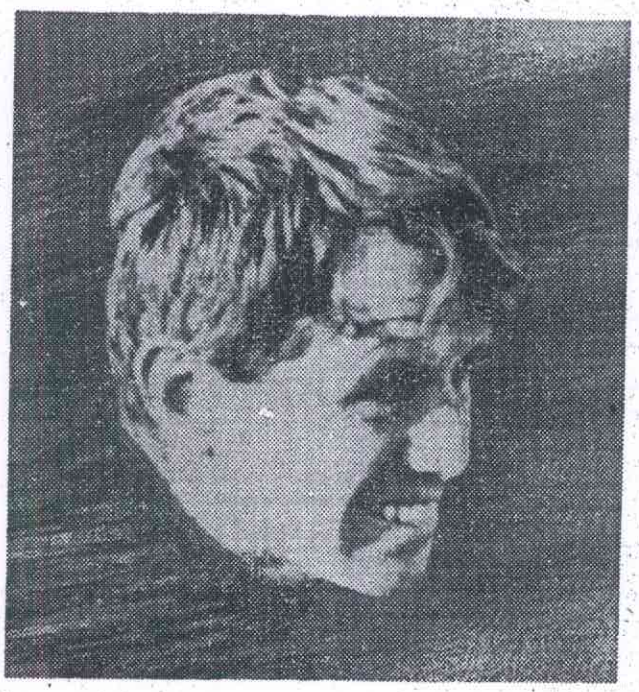

"They aren't dumb. They know our society is spending $7 billion to send men to the moon. They see the new buildings on Fifth and Madison avenues. They understand about corporate profits. But they're left out of it. The war on poverty has been cut to $30 million in Harlem, which isn't a drop in the bucket in a city where public welfare already costs $600 million a year.

"Maybe Chief Parker (he was talking about the late William H. Parker, who was superintendent of police in Los Angeles at the time of the Watts riot) believed the answer

Kennedy

was to put them all in jail. Maybe Ronald Reagan believes that. But I don't think it is the solution."

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"I DON'T believe in violence," he says, and there is a pause while the lurking shadow of that earlier November day flickers blackly across his mind. "I don't condone lawlessness or violence in the streets, but . . ." He retracts into his turtle neck briefly. "You know that there are not many candidates for public office — Democrat or Republican — who can go into places like Harlem and make a speech? There is no communication." Again the word polarization describes what he most dreads. "By 1972 there could be polarization of the civil rights struggle, black against white. A disaster. Trying to plan that far ahead just doesn't make sense."

He takes a pro forma sip of beer. "Beer makes me sleepy," he says. He treats it with great restraint. A bottle of beer has a life expectancy of two hours in his hands.

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"IF I tried to condition everything I did, every vote I cast, on 1972, it would be nonsense," the Senator says. "It would castrate me politically. Things change too rapidly. Look at what's happened in the last two. Two years ago everyone thought Lyndon Johnson had destroyed the Republican Party. And now look at it. A long way from dead. The Republcans actually have more attractive young candidates than the Democrats. Guys like Percy and Hatfield and Rockefeller."

Christopher Kennedy, who is 3, wanders into the room, and Brumis, the huge Newfoundland, growls. It's only an early warning growl, but Brumis is big enough to make one bite of Christopher, and Sen. Kennedy speaks sharply. Christopher shakes hands, draws another growl from Brumis, and disappears toward the rear of the big, marvelously untidy, dog-ridden (Brumis is one of five), child-rich (Chris is the eighth of nine) Kennedy house in McLean.

Soon there are apeman yells from the back of the house.

"Tarzan," Sen. Kennedy remarks.

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INEVITABLY the Warren Commission is mentioned, and for the first time Sen. Kennedy freezes up. "I've made it a practice not to comment on the Warren Report," he says

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shortly, and you can read anything you like into the words. Disapproval? Maybe, but perhaps more likely the simple human desire not to see an old agony return. The only clue are his next words, spoken with deep, angry feeling: "That thing in Life last week — terrible."

He is talking about Life's big takeout on the assassination, a typical slick-magazine sprawl complete with film clips of the young President being mortally wounded. He shakes his head and says the word again. "Terrible."

But the book is another thing. The book is not an interdicted subject. The book (nobody needs to call it by its name) is William Manchester's soon-to-be-published "Death of a President," which is sometimes described as the authorized version of the black day in Dallas.

Is it, in fact, authorized by the family of the late President?

"The history of it," he answers quietly, "is that a lot of books were being written, information was coming out in bits and pieces, and much of it innaccurate." He retreats momentarily into the sweater. "A lot of people were trying to make money out of it." In his voice are cold anger and incredulity. "So we thought perhaps that it might be better if everything were made available to one person. We thought it might . . ."

But it won't. Ad hoc experts on the book claim there are 200 potential headlines in it, many of them vastly unfavorable to President Johnson. Will the book further exacerbate the already tense reaations between the Kennedy's and Mr. Johnson?

The question is put: Is the book going to cause anguish in high places?

"Yes, I'm afraid it will."

Is the book sound as history?

"I haven't read it. I don't plan to read it. But I've talked to people whose judgment I respect who have read it. No, I don't think it is entirely sound."

Again the anger and disbelief at the thought that anyone would attempt to make money out of the death of John F. Kennedy. "We picked Bill Manchester to do it because he'd done a good biography of the President. He said he wasn't interested in making money on it at first. And now he's sold it to Look Magazine for $600,000."

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HE doesn't say it is so many words, but he doesn't like the book and he wishes it hadn't been written. He wants to talk about something else. Kids. Horses. Dogs. A basement full of snakes (one of the boys is an avid herpetologist). He laughs. "It's a regular zoo here."

The question now is Viet Nam.

"No, I don't see any immediate hope," he says. "None at all. Militarily we're doing well, but I don't believe that's the solution. I think the first step has to be a civilian government in Saigon, one that will negotiate with the Viet Cong. And I don't think the war can end in total surrender, nothing like the business on the deck of the Battleship Missouri.

"I don't think the bombing has seriously hurt morale in the north. We've solved their unemployment problem for them, putting them to work repairing bridges and roads."

He waves at a huge color TV. "Next to sex, man is preoccupied with violence. Violence on TV. Kids playing cops and robbers. Hunters out to kill something. Did you read the story about the child's pet deer that was wounded by a hunter at Middleburg? Really a sad story. The deer ran off into the woods, but it came back."

He sinks his chin into the rough wool of the sweater.

The logs hiss malevolently in the fireplace. They burn as indifferently as if this were anyman's fire. Outside everything is black, cold rain, lashed by the wind.

"Counting Viet Cong dead is not the way to do it," he says.