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Our Man Hoppe

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The Place Where
It Happened

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Dallas

"LIFE," PRESIDENT KENNEDY once said, "is unfair."

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IT'S BEEN three years now. In the watery autumn sunshine the winter rye is forcing up tender shoots, creating patches of light green on the grassy knoll. The dead leaves from the scattered oak trees crunch underfoot.

There towers the Texas School Book Depository, square, solid and unchanged. How close it is. How easy a shot. Three girl clerks in bouffant hairdos skitter up the steps, laughing.

There stands the wooden picket fence, where some swore they saw puffs of smoke. There is the railroad overpass, where some say they saw more assassins. And here the three-lane highway dips. Here is what happened.

The trucks, the buses, the cars roar over the spot heading for Fort Worth and out across the Texas plains.

At the entrance to the little plaza through which the highway dips, near a huge statue of some pioneer and on a low wall behind an old historical obelisk, they have finally erected a plaque. It briefly tells the story. A bronze map adjacent shows the parade route and the location of a "John F. Kennedy Memorial Plaza" a block away.

The memorial plaza is a weed-filled lot — an Allrite auto park. "They're talking about putting a two-story underground garage there with a little park on top," says an old man. "But seeing it took them three years to get that plaque up, it'll take them six years to get the park."

Behind the plaque is a row of 14 floral offerings. One a bouquet of wilting yellow

chrysanthemums, carries a faded note: "In loving memory from a Christian patriot." Most of the rest are plastic roses on styrofoam wreaths, advertising "The James Haynes Gar," "The Democratic Council of Clubs" and the like.

On the grassy knoll right next to where it happened two workmen are lying in the sun and a gardener is moving sprinklers. The gardener was there when it happened. He doesn't mind telling about it. But he doesn't want to give his name.

"I heard the shots all right. Sounded to me like they all come from the same direction. But I couldn't swear to it, though." And then he went on to grumble about the long dry spell and how "we haven't had but one little spurt of rain for months."

Five tourists are now studying the map next to the plaque, frowning and pointing like amateur detectives as they argue about where the shots could have come from. Downtown, you can still buy picture post cards of the scene.

"But one thing we don't want," a Dallas businessman said uneasily, "is to make a tourist attraction out of it."

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AND AS I stood there amid the gas fumes and traffic noise of where it happened, I was suddenly and briefly filled with a great rage.

It wasn't a rage at plastic flowers or secret guilts or crass commercialism or that the world goes on as it has always gone on. Nor was it that the scene of what we think of as "a noble martyrdom" seems, on visiting it, simply a lousy place to die. That what enraged me, I think, was the full, shocking realization that life is so damned unfair.