

# HERB CAEN



## A Death in the Family

THE FLAGS were at half-staff again yesterday morning on the towers and parapets of this overcast and downcast city. They seem to be at that position of mourning so often these days: Camelot's brief shining hour, which might have flickered to life again, is now dead and cold beyond hope. The banners there will be frozen at half-staff forever.

★ ★ ★

ONE TENDS to forget that this is, in general, a laughing city, even a city that can laugh at itself. Gripmen banter with tourists, traffic cops holler good-naturedly at errant pedestrians. Bartenders tell jokes above the bang of the dice cups, and men who are strangers will smile knowingly at each other as a lovely girl in a miniskirt walks past. But there was no laughter in San Francisco yesterday, and precious little conversation. I have never before experienced such a dispiritedness and lassitude — mixed with a solicitude for each other's feelings. There had been a death in the family of all of us, and we fell silent in our respect.

★ ★ ★

IT WAS almost macabre to see Pierre Salinger on the TV screen again yesterday morning. Poor Pierre, a little older, his sideburns a little longer — a man who must be wondering about his peculiar fate. For the second time in his life, he was briefing the press on the death by assassination of a Kennedy, again giving the details of the procession, the final resting place in Arlington. The Kennedys, the golden family with everything and nothing — saddled with all the sorrows money can buy. And Pierre Salinger, their spokesman of tragedy, reciting the litany of funeral detail in a voice that broke only occasionally. There is a final gallantry about the Kennedys and the people close to them . . .

★ ★ ★

"IT IS NOT a conspiracy," is the official reassuring message you keep hearing on the radio. As though it matters. Of course it's a conspiracy, and it involves all of us, even if it's only a conspiracy of silence. The conspiracy involves everyone who has not spoken out against the shame of our Vietnam policy, has not spoken out against prejudice and class hatred. It involves everyone who, when confronted with the evidence of injustice, poverty and malnutrition in the richest country in the world, has said, "Well, it's not my problem — what can I do about it?" The conspiracy involves those who continue to say that a strong gun control law is not the answer "because an assassin can always find a gun." Of course it's not the answer but it's the beginning of one. A resolve has to start somewhere.

★ ★ ★

RELAX, "It's not a conspiracy." And perhaps it is only a fantastic coincidence that the three assassinated leaders shared a common dream and were fighting to achieve it. Each was young, vital and passionately concerned with justice. Each had a strong drive to improve the texture of American life, and felt strongly for the underprivileged. Certainly there is some kind of pattern there. In the radio interviews on the streets yesterday morning, it was the poor who were crying over the death of a friend.

★ ★ ★

ROBERT F. KENNEDY, a man who was loved and hated — and who could be proud of his enemies; they called him "ruthless" because they misread his passion (or perhaps they read it too well). A few nights before the election, editor Hodding Carter, astronaut John Glenn, editor John Siegenthaler, Tom Sorensen and others gathered around a table at Jack's to discuss ways of counteracting the "ruthless" label. These are men who knew Bob Kennedy intimately, and the discussion got nowhere, for they knew his dedication, and the ways it could be misinterpreted. "How can you fight a myth?" John Glenn finally sighed. The truly ruthless man was soon to be waiting in the wings of the Ambassador Hotel.

★ ★ ★

ROBERT F. KENNEDY. When he lit one of his occasional cigars, you wondered if the lighter was the one Jack Kennedy had given him after his election to the Presidency — the one inscribed "After Me Why Not You?" It was in Oregon, during a speech in a high school gym, that a Kennedy balloon escaped from a rooster and drifted up to the rafters. Following its slow flight, Bob Kennedy said dreamily: "Sometimes I wish I were a balloon." Then it burst. "I wonder if that has any special significance," he mused.

★ ★ ★

AND IT WAS Robert F. Kennedy who said after his brother's death: "Sorrow is a form of self-pity — we have to go on." Brave words and true, but sorrow must not be without significance, nor should moments of high tragedy be dismissed with a "Well, it was one of those things." "The gun," somebody observed yesterday, "has replaced the old-fashioned poke in the nose as the American way of settling things," and it was Eugene McCarthy who pointed out "This is no longer a frontier society." Anybody who watches TV and reads the propaganda of the gun lobby will not miss his point.

★ ★ ★

AND NOW the lights are out for good in Camelot. The banners are at mourning, and already the Kennedy bumper stickers are starting to turn yellow and fade. The parade is over.