

November 1963

The school auditorium smelled fruity: like the squatty pumpkins in the Thanksgiving decorations were going bad. We fidgeted in our seats. I had no idea why we had been pulled out of class by the piercing bell, but here we were, waiting. Mrs. Needlemeier, my fourth grade teacher, looked down the row sternly at me, silently reminding us to keep still. She was old, maybe fifty. Her hair was pulled back in a tight bun. A heavy grey wool sweater was draped over her shoulders, a chain holding the sides together. She wore a mid-calf length brown skirt, thick support hose and the kind of shoes nuns wore, even though this school was about as far from Catholic as you could get. She fidgeted too: drumming a pencil impatiently on her bony knee.

Finally our principal, Mr. Isaacs, came to the podium and tapped on the microphone. The piercing screech of a failing sound system made us all cover our ears and scrunch up in our seats. He looked at the school secretary with annoyance; then raised his hand to silence the shrieking girls and laughing boys. His bald head had beads of sweat which began to trickle down towards his ears. His eyes looked red and his skin blotchy. His face clouded.

“I have a very sad announcement to make,” he said thickly: clearly holding back tears. “Our president, John F. Kennedy, has been shot and killed.” At that point the entire student body and staff of Palms Elementary School in West Los Angeles gasped in unison, and Mr. Isaacs began to cry. Eventually most of the students were crying too, and the teachers were trying their best to manage their classes as well as their own fragile emotions.

They sent us home early that day. As my sister and I walked the five blocks to our house, a walk I hated because I despised any kind of exercise, I felt an enormous sadness. I was only nine, but JFK was loved in our heavily Democratic household. I understood how huge this loss would be for my parents and their friends.

I was surprised to see cars parked in the driveway. I didn't expect my parents to be home. My mother's job as a nurse in a psychiatric hospital kept her working long hours. My father's job, a bill-collector for a law office downtown, was not as hard, but he was never home during the day. Our great-grandmother was our babysitter. Every day after school she greeted us with Hershey bars. Our parents being home meant we would not get our chocolate, and this made me tense and cranky.

"Kids, come sit down." My dad had an earnest look on his face. He patted the space on the couch next to him. Our mother's eyes were filled with tears. Her hands held a Kleenex which she alternately wadded up and picked at, until it was as shredded as the coconut bits on cupcakes.

I sighed. I knew this was because the president had been shot. My five and a half year old sister, Becky, wouldn't know this, but I knew it because I was smarter than her. Just to show how clever I was, I blurted out, "They told us about the president at school, Dad. We already know."

My parents looked at each other. I could not tell if they were disappointed I had spoiled their big announcement or if they did not know about the president and had something else to say.

My mother burst into tears. I had never seen her so upset. She cried a lot over little things, even when she was happy, but this was different.

"Um, the president. Yes, that's a terrible thing. But, uh, your mother and I need to tell you something else." The pause after this sentence went on forever. He finally continued. "We are, uh, well... You know sometimes people like each other and then they don't? Like at school you have a friend and then you aren't friends?"

My sister looked confused, but I knew what he was talking about. It happened all the time to me. I would have one friend and then she would make friends with the popular girls, and would become my biggest tormentor, to prove to them that she now hated me. Substantially larger than most of my

classmates, with freckled, pale skin and frizzy red hair, I tended to be at the brunt of a lot of teasing, and it was rare I had a good friend. So did this mean my dad now hated my mom and was going to be mean to her?

“Do you hate Mommy now?” I asked nervously.

“Oh, no no no!” He shook his head side to side. My mother’s sobs could have been heard a block away. Grammy was in the next room but I saw her peek around the corner. She looked really mad.

“Your mother and I still love each other, just not in the same way as we did before. We are not going to live together anymore. I am moving out and I have a place where you and your sister can come and stay with me on weekends. It’s closer to the beach; you’ll like it.” There was silence for a few moments, then, “We’re getting a divorce.”

He paused to see if we understood what he’d just said. Becky was playing with plastic cups and saucers from a doll house we shared; pretending nothing was wrong. I was trying to make some sense of it. I felt sad, of course. Two houses: where would I keep my Chatty Cathy doll? Where would our dog Maggie live? Would Grammy still give us chocolate after school? And why did the president die? To watch our mother so upset was scary, but I was more confused than afraid. My parents were getting a divorce today. President Kennedy died today.

Grief engulfed our house, and was strangely shared by a nation. Somehow this collective mourning seemed to pertain specifically to my life. I have never been able to think of one event without the other.