Jacqueline Kennedy's Search for a New Life

BY SYLVIA ASHTON

■ A YEAR has gone by. A widow's weeds should be put aside. The keening should be over, the weeping ended.

Should be, yes. . . .

A widow at 35. Young and beautiful and rich and cultivated. Still, a woman alone. Her two children, yes. She lives for them and with them, in their child's world, a daytime world. But when evening comes, evoking nightmarish memories, she is a woman alone.

Does she pray for surcease from the pain in those still, dark hours? Can she shut out the horror? Remember only the noble dignity of him as he lay dead, who was, it seems, only hours ago quick and smiling at her side?

DATELINE: DALLAS, TEXAS, FRIDAY NOVEMBER 22, 1963

HEADLINE: OUR PRESIDENT ASSASSINATED

HEADLINE: THE FIRST LADY LEANS OVER HER HUSBAND'S BODY

It was 8:45 A.M. in Fort Worth. When he left their hotel room, she remained to put the finishing touches to her appearance. She had rarely accompanied him on his trips about the country. Almost never on political trips. But he wanted her along this time.

She chose to wear a pink-raspberry suit with navy at the collar, the sleeves, the pockets and a matching pillbox hat. Her eyes were large and luminous, reflecting the shyness she always felt when facing crowds.

The President preceded her to the parking lot across the street to address them.

"Mrs. Kennedy is organizing herself," he quipped. "It takes longer, but, of course, she looks better than we do when she does it." And a few sentences later: "Nobody wonders what Lyndon and I wear!"

There was an ovation for Jacqueline Kennedy at the Chamber of Commerce breakfast there in Fort Worth. She stood beside her husband, and together they smilingly acknowledged their welcome. Her nervousness was gone now.

Soon, in the hot glare of the Dallas sun, his head would be bathed in blood. Soon the blood would stain her skirt, her stockings, her shoes.

And now she stands alone . . . "Mrs. Kennedy is organizing herself. . . ."

She has seen the face of death too soon. She is so young for the towering tragedy she now knows so well.

Just nine weeks before the shots rang out upon the brilliantly lighted stage of death in Dallas, just nine weeks before the lifeblood of her husband would not be stanched, her second son was born and died—Patrick Bouvier Kennedy, 39 hours and 12 minutes old. And some years before, another death, her first child, a girl born prematurely. Heavy burdens of pain for a young mother, pain that does not heal. Then shots that felled her husband pierced her heart. No, tragedy was no stranger to Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy.

When John Fitzgerald Kennedy set his sights on the Presidency, she told a friend: "It's not the right time of life for us. We should be enjoying our children, traveling, having fun."

A premonition? Or the infringement on their private lives that she resented so strongly at first?

President Kennedy described her once as "a romantic by temperament in the old-fashioned sense of the word." And a member of the Kennedy clan talked of her Dresden-like fragility and how it contrasted so sharply with the much-vaunted "vigah" of the rest of the family. "Jackie was really prepared for one eventuality in life—to be exquisite," she said.

It no doubt pleased Jacqueline Kennedy that her New England husband could overcome his own reticence concerning flowery phrases to call her "a romantic." And she was exquisite, truly, but as First Lady, as the nation knows, she was so much more.

Her competence, her efficient management of the gigantic task, caused her husband to amend his earlier appraisal. "My wife is a very strong woman," the President told a reporter. "Romantic by temperament, yes—and sensitive, intuitive."

A FEW YEARS AGO her mother, Mrs. Hugh Auchincloss, described Jacqueline as a girl who "has marvelous self-control and discipline which conceals a certain inner tension. She feels very strongly, very intensely about things."

When will the inner tension begin to uncoil?

When will Jacqueline Kennedy find peace?

Perhaps never. Perhaps when her chosen goal is accomplished—the building of the John F. Kennedy Memorial Library on the Charles River in Boston. This is the job he wanted done; it is what she must do.

"Mrs. Kennedy is organizing herself. . . ."

She was shocked at the suggestion of a gossiper that she would take her children and live abroad after the assassination. "I would never do that," she remonstrated. "Never."

He is in Arlington National Cemetery. She would live nearby.

The couple lived in Georgetown, one of the oldest sections of Washington. And it was in Georgetown that Jacqueline Bouvier and John Kennedy first met. They were introduced by a mutual friend, newspaperman Charles Bartlett, Washington correspondent for the Chattanooga *Times*. Jacqueline — chic, bright-eyed, and charming—was working for the Washington *Post* as a reporter-photographer. He, of course, was one of Washington's most eligible young bachelors and the junior Senator from Massachusetts.

He had his full share of the Kennedy family tradition: good looks, good spirits, intelligence, enormous wealth. He had everything, that is, except an immunity to tragedy. A year later Jacqueline pledged to share it all, "until death do us part."

And beyond.

She and the children needed time and peace and quiet after husband and father was gone—time to readjust to an unaccustomed rhythm of life, peace for a drawing together, quiet in the sense of being out of the spotlight. All this Mrs. Kennedy wanted so desperately for Caroline and John Jr.

But in Georgetown there was no peace and quiet. Except late at night, at his grave.

People came from miles around, gawked at her home, slept overnight in their cars in the hope of catching a morning glimpse of Jacqueline Kennedy or the children.

She made a desperate attempt to go on with her chosen tasks, working on the Kennedy Library plans and taking care of her children. But the rumble of sight-seeing buses, the booming voices of the barkers as they pointed out the house, the littered lawn—another kind of nightmare, all too real, furnished a cacophony of sound, making work or play or life in her new home nearly unbearable.

FINALLY she kept the windows closed, blinds lowered, curtains drawn. Venturing out of the front door meant confrontation with clicking cameras, with people, people, people. Go to the village? This, too, became an intolerable experience. Souvenirs were displayed everywhere; "I Love You, John Kennedy" was engraved on lockets, on charms. Embroidered pillows also carried the message. The commercialism was completely frightening.

As she waited for news of her husband at Parkland Hospital in Dallas, a medical student observing her said: "The look in her eyes was like an animal that had been trapped. Like a little rabbit—brave, but fear was in the eyes."

And back home in Georgetown, trying to assemble and sort out the pieces of her life and the lives of her children, the fear returned. She was truly, cruelly trapped.

Her family was worried. Princess Lee Radziwill, her sister, told friends, "We've got to get her out of there."

After a time it became all too painfully clear to Mrs. Kennedy that for any kind of peace of mind, any kind of plan for living, she'd have to remove herself and her children from the circuslike atmosphere that had transformed the sleepy town of her earlier choice. She decided to move to New York. Last spring Mrs. John F. Kennedy became the owner of an apartment on Fifth Avenue.

You enter a cool marble hall, through heavy double doors that are faced with intricate iron grilles. Old-fashioned engravings hang on the walls—hunt scenes and forest glens. It all is very quiet. Very unassuming. Cool. Impersonal.

Even with the doors closed behind you, the roar of Fifth Avenue traffic filters through. Doormen, elevator attendant move more or less at the ready, cool custom-made smiles set on their faces. Not friendly. Not unfriendly. Impersonal. That's the key.

The apartment house at 85th Street is no glossy, cylindrical glass edifice, no avant-garde architect's dream. It is a solid building that was constructed in the 1920s to accommodate 35 families.

Practically across the street is the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and, of course, Central Park. The Kennedys live in a duplex suite on the 15th floor. The park looks beautiful from up there. Remote and quiet.

As one of the doormen points out, even if snoopers could climb the trees in the park to look into the apartment windows, they'd only get as high as maybe the seventh floor. But even the sightseers in New York aren't like that. They really don't snoop. Last summer, while the apartment was being readied, Mrs. Kennedy stood outside the building chatting with some friends for more than 20 minutes.

But let the doorman tell it: "She was beautiful. And maybe two hundred people passed by her or crossed the street near her. They looked, all right, but they didn't come up to her or say anything. There was one exception—a teen-ager came up and asked Mrs. Kennedy for her autograph.

"She got it—and a fine, lovely smile, too. But it's not a pushy crowd here. That's why she likes it."

What about the people across the street, sitting on the benches, in almost constant attendance on the comings and goings of the occupants at 1040?

"Not a one of them comes over. It's like everybody knows she wants her privacy, and the people respect that."

IT IS DIFFICULT to imagine a woman of such beauty and dedication, so young, living out the pattern of her life as a widow, and yet many of her friends agree that she has chosen to be a public widow and that she is determined to fill this lonely role as a final gift to her dead husband. There are still others who insist that this is nonsense but that when she finally does marry, it will not be to a political activist.

She has had enough of sharing her husband with politics, they believe.

Artist William Walton, long-time friend of the Kennedys and head of the Fine Arts Commission in Washington, says, "People think she is timid and withdrawn, that she forced herself to be interested in President Kennedy's political philosophy.

"Nothing could be further from the truth. She is *very* political. She has always been. She just gives that impression of fragility, but in the terrible tragedy that struck she showed her great strength and will power.

"People are inclined to think that a girl who is beautiful and has perfect taste doesn't understand politics. Maybe they'd like to think of her that way. But the truth is that she has a very keen grasp of politics and of statesmanship.

"And she's a remarkable organizer. The way she's handling the Kennedy Memorial Library proves that."

It also proves her utter dedication to what she and the other Kennedys call Jack's "living memorial," and the shutting away of personal feelings, of thoughts of her own future as a woman—the lonely thoughts of a woman alone.

She lives constantly with the task of bringing to reality the dream that President Kennedy himself visualized when he chose the site for the library.

Says Mr. Walton, "She is planning everything—interviewing architects, screening tapes, making something herself, making sure the library will have the vitality he wanted it to have and not just be another archive, a repository of memorabilia."

Her husband had envisioned this place as a fitting "workshop" of politics and political science. He had said that he would spend his post-Presidential years there. He would confer with scholars, he would advise young people, he would confer with statesmen and scholars.

ABOVE ALL, it was not to be a tiptoe kind of mausoleum. He saw also an "institute" or training school. He wanted to raise the level of political action and bring scholarship down from the clouds, to train young people to bring to government the honesty and high idealism and courage that make a nation strong—that make him strong, that gave to his wife a strength and a dignity far beyond her years.

In a new foreword to his dead brother's prize-winning book *Profiles in Courage*, Robert Kennedy wrote: "At least one half of the days that he spent on this earth were days of intense physical pain. . . . I never heard him complain. I never heard him say anything that would indicate that he felt God had dealt with him unjustly. . . . He did not complain about his problems, so why should I complain about mine?—that is how one always felt."

It is how Jacqueline Kennedy seems to feel. She mourns with dignity. And if there are tears, they may fall only in the dead of night.

Her dark eyes sparkle at the few parties, the few functions she attends. Alone or with her sister or others, their luminosity is deep, but the sparkle still shields an inner sadness, for this young widow cannot banish the grief that descended with the horrendous holocaust just one short year ago. Not yet.

It is his light that illuminates her inner being, his light to which she frequently refers. At the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City she stood in a receiving line at a memorial reception, and when the time came for her to step up to the microphone to speak, in a scarcely audible voice she said: "Thank all of you for coming—all of you who helped President Kennedy in 1960. . . . May his light always shine in all parts of the world."

She caught that breathy voice in a small sob, and her eyes were wet with unshed tears.

Has she really chosen to become and remain a "public widow"? Perhaps it is inevitable that she will.

Such a woman does not weep.

There is no time for tears.

She has undertaken missions that may take a lifetime.

Her children—for them a good life, an unspoiled future.

The Library-Institute—it must be as he wanted it.

Dinners, functions of state, theater, museums, art galleries, travel—all of those, yes, and for them escorts will never be wanting.

But for Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy the hurt is not yet stilled.

With her two children, she walks the road alone.

There is no time for tears.

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