

# A DAY TO REMEMBER

By John S. Halbert

During my college freshman fall semester, between classes I joined the crowd in the Student Union snack bar, where things were always going full blast. By now, most of us had settled into a regular routine. But on a fateful Friday in November---everything changed.

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*Friday, November 22, 1963:*

My college mornings usually consisted of listening to the radio while I readied to leave for the first class---Paul Harvey's news followed by Howard Cosell speaking of sports. On this particular day, however, I pulled down from the shelf comedian Vaughn Meader's '*FIRST FAMILY*' phonograph record album that had been so popular the year before and put it on the turntable. An amusing satire of the Kennedy family, I planned to take it with me that night to a party at a friend's house. In the year since the recording came out it had become the biggest-selling album in history (and would remain so for nearly another decade). That morning, I listened to a couple of cuts while readying for class---the first time I had played the record in some months. The comedy routines sounded as slick as ever. With a hasty breakfast and few quick gulps of coffee, I stashed the record under the front seat of the Buick and headed across the O'Neal bridge toward Florence State. It looked like it was going to be a cool, cloudy day on that Friday, November 22nd, 1963.

At eleven o'clock, after a History class, I walked across the campus to the Student Union Snack Bar. After buying a soft drink, I chatted for a few minutes with the crowd sitting around the table, then headed next door to O'Neal Hall, a massive, multi-storied brick building topped by a hulking bell tower. In addition to being a dormitory housing several hundred women students, its basement cradled the offices of the '*FLOR-ALA*', the campus newspaper. As the "Exchange Editor", my job involved swapping copies of our newspaper with other schools' student publications around the country. It was a quiet day in the office---on this particular mid-day Friday I was the only person there. With no distractions, I spent the next hour opening letters and re-arranging some files.

But about forty minutes past noon, Malcolm White, the paper's business manager, burst wide-eyed through the doorway, a transistor radio pressed to his ear. "Kennedy's been shot!"

I pushed past desks and made for the exit. Malcolm had spun about and was already vaulting up the basement steps two-at-a-time with me close on his heels. All I could make out, as he stammered along out of breath, was that something terrible had happened to the President of the United States.

The two of us rounded the corner of the Student Union Building, flung open the double-front doors and dashed inside. At the television viewing area, just inside the glassed-in front, a crowd was already congregating. On the black-and-white screen, a newsman held a telephone to his ear. The expression on his face was one of consternation and stunned disbelief.

Every few seconds he offered a comment or two---evidently repeating what was being said to him from somewhere else.

Those in the gathering exchanged uneasy glances as we listened to the stunning story unfold. The newscaster was saying that President Kennedy had been shot by a sniper in Dallas, Texas during a parade and had been rushed to a hospital! His condition was not known, but it was believed the President's wounds were very serious. Over the next few minutes the story became even more chaotic: a Dallas police officer had been shot---possibly by the same gunman who had shot President Kennedy. The Secretary of State's official jetliner had turned around over the mid-Pacific and was returning at full speed to the United States. (Pierre Salinger was also aboard the plane.) The Pentagon was on full alert. There was a news report that the governor of Texas, who had been in the same car as the President, had also been shot; Mrs. Kennedy was believed to be safe. Meanwhile, Vice-President Lyndon Johnson, who was also in the parade, was now at a secret location, in case there was a widespread assassination plot underway. A priest had been seen entering the hospital's emergency room---an ominous sign.

A few minutes later, the TV newsman slowly lowered the telephone receiver and looked crestfallen into the camera. "We have just received word that the President is dead! That is the word from the Parkland Hospital in Dallas." The newscaster swallowed hard, trying to compose himself as more information was coming over the handset. "The President was pronounced dead at one o'clock Central time," he went on. "According to an assistant White House Press Secretary the President died of a gunshot wound in the head. Repeating: President Kennedy is . . . dead."

In the Student Union everyone gasped. Several girls started crying. Most of the dozens who had crowded into the TV viewing area just drifted away; deep in their own thoughts. No one was saying much of anything---the day had become too somber for words.

I stepped outside into the chilly, overcast Friday afternoon air. Across the way, lights in the windows of several buildings indicated that some classes were still in session. No one in there as yet had any idea of the stupendous events taking place at that very moment.

In a daze, I re-crossed the street to Bibb Graves Hall, where Nan, the blonde freshman coed I had been dating, was in a History class on the third floor; she needed to know what had happened. In a few minutes the bell rang and people began bustling out through the doorway. Pushing my way past the surging students into the classroom, I spotted her stuffing a book into a satchel.

"Nan!" I called to her, "President Kennedy's dead! He's been shot!"

The girl turned and blinked at me.

But the teacher, a stickler for protocol, had a more pointed reaction. "Young man, that's not very funny! And who are you, anyway? Why are you in this room?"

It's true!" I wrung my hands. "President Kennedy's been shot, and he's dead! It's on TV right now!"

I grasped Nan's hand and guided her out of the room. She was full of questions. What was this about the *President*? He was *shot*? We bundled down the broad, twisting main staircase to the first floor and ran outside.

Here and there little knots of students huddled in deep discussion. Up and down the campus streets and in parking lots, others were gathered around car radios, trying to get the latest information. By now, there were rumors that the shootings were only the first in a widespread plot of mysteriously-planned assassinations, adding to the dread. The chilly, gray overcast day now matched the melancholy mood of the worried radio listeners. Nan's carpool friends came up,

wanting to leave. I told her I would see her that evening at her home.

At four-o'clock, I had an Economics class. The instructor, a wispy, white-haired, elderly gentleman, was shaken by the events. "Ladies and gentlemen----" he groped for words, ". . . I don't feel that we should have class today, so you are dismissed."

He hung his head and trudged out of the classroom.

People drifted from the building. Outside, the temperature had taken a noticeable drop and the late afternoon was now quite cold. Dreary, dark-gray clouds that hung heavily overhead punctuated the sadness and uncertainty that now weighed upon us.

I drove directly to Colbert Heights, where Nan lived with her family in a rural community that stretched along a ridge of hills overlooking the region. The atmosphere in their home on that Friday evening was as somber as that of the rest of the country. No one had even turned on a light; the only illumination in their living room came from the television screen.

Nan and I sat together on the floor with our backs against the wall as the flickering images of Air Force One appeared on the screen from Andrews Air Force Base at Washington, D.C. The jetliner bearing President Kennedy's body, the newly sworn-in President Johnson, Mrs. Kennedy, and the rest of the Chief Executive's entourage slowly taxied up to the ramp toward a bank of floodlights.

A detail of military men rolled up a portable staircase to the aircraft. Presently the front door opened, and Lyndon Johnson---the new President, looking weary, I thought---descended the wheeled steps onto the windy tarmac where microphones were set up. A piece of paper fluttered in his hand. Looking worn and shaken, he adjusted his eyeglasses and spoke. "This is a tragic day for all of us . . ."

I glanced at Nan and felt for her hand. In the dim, flickering light her warm, soft tears dropped onto our clasped hands as with a velvet caress. While Lyndon Johnson continued with his homily, the camera focused on the shadowy rear door of the airliner, where the casket of the late President John F. Kennedy was being slowly lowered---so painful-like, it seemed---to the ground on a portable scissors elevator. The airplane and the tarmac glistened in the glare of the lights; it had been raining. In a few minutes, the new President Johnson (how strange that sounded!) finished his remarks.

Since there was nothing else we could add to this day that would surely go down in history, in the darkness we clung to each other as Nan wept in grief for all our innocence that was now lost.

On the way home, I thought about President Kennedy's visit to Muscle Shoals, almost exactly six months earlier. I recalled the exuberance of the crowd and how exciting it was to have been only a few feet from the President of the United States while he delivered his address. Now, he was gone---his handsome features pulverized by some sniper's bullets.

Forty-five minutes later, when I pulled into the driveway at High Point, something slid against the heel of my foot. Switching off the engine, I reached down and on the floorboard my groping fingers encountered the "FIRST FAMILY" record album I had stuck under the seat early that morning in anticipation of a festive party.

Staring at the album, I realized how utterly outdated it now was. As I carried the record into the house, I reflected how ironic it was that on this day---of all days---I had taken down the album, played it, and carried it in the car with me all day. The jokes and skits that had sounded

so amusing that morning would now be forever hollow and frivolous.  
I replaced the record in its slot on the shelf.  
I never again played it.