

Watching Bobbie Die

by James Lloyd Davis

After the Tet Offensive, the field office sent me home, said I was “over the top, head-wise.” The Tet really screwed with my head. When I got to LA, they put me to work culling combat photos, writing captions for the wire, so I got out of the habit of carrying my camera.

I drank a lot.

Sometimes, I'd wake up in strange places.

Then Bobby Kennedy came to town.

I was emotionally invested in Bobby, since he seemed to be a natural force of some kind, fitting all the clichés I'd never use, like “moral compass,” or “beacon of hope,” more so than his brother John ever was.

It was all about the war.

In 1968, there was this death lottery. If you lost, you went to a war that nobody really wanted, a war that never ended, bombarded people daily with body counts and film clips on the TV nightly news, just before dinner.

I'd seen the war up close. Saw dozens of young men die. Took their pictures as life and remembrance drained from their gaze, replaced with some odd veneer of resignation, a turning inward.

Like many, I didn't believe we had any reason to be in Vietnam. But, no matter how bad things seemed to be, I still believed something could happen to make it right again, something that would make all the difference. Like many people, I thought that ‘something’ was someone and that ‘someone’ was Bobby Kennedy.

I'd asked for the assignment that night, but they had plenty of guys with cameras. I went to the hotel anyway, got in with my old press pass from ‘Nam and more or less hung out with campaign workers while Bobby made his speech.

Managed to get onstage as he finished up, followed the crowd as they followed Bobby, first one way and then another. Heard the shots and on instinct, ran forward, saw bedlam, saw what everybody

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else saw in the picture next morning, the one that went out on the wire. Bobby on the floor, legs out, arm out, hand in a fist. Saw that kitchen worker in a white coat, the one who gave him a rosary, kneeling beside him. Never saw the shooter. Didn't have a camera. So I just stood there, like half the people in the room.

Stood there watching Bobby die.

Years later, I said to some woman, "That moment? I was thinking, 'Bobby's a tough little guy. Hell, he climbed mountains, jogged every day like a Marine.'" I told her I thought Bobby would make it. Told her how he was trying to get up.

Truth is, I knew he was as good as dead, but like so many soldiers I'd seen get shot to death, he didn't quite know it yet. Sure, he tried to get up, but he had that look in his eye.

Something happens. The body knows what the mind does not. If you know what to look for, the signs, well, the eyes always tell you the truth. The guy is never looking at you, or anybody. He's looking at something you'll only see once.

Bobby saw it. I knew he saw it.

Afterward, back in the auditorium, I sat in a chair.

People with little red, white and blue 'Kennedy and Peace 1968' buttons on their jackets and shirts were crying, embracing one another. Some just walked around in a nervous fit, some back and forth, like any moment they're going to take off, like runners in a marathon when they don't yet believe the race is really over.

