

The Thousandth Day

by Linda Hanley Finigan

“Someone shot President Kennedy.”

Molly and her best friend Jenny Barnes were in the locker room after gym class at Merriwether School for Girls in New York City. It was a Friday afternoon and Molly Drayton had just stepped from the shower. Jenny hadn't finished dressing yet. She'd thrown a cardigan over her slip. Jenny put a hand on Molly's arm and repeated what she'd just said. *“Someone shot President Kennedy.”*

“What do you mean?”

“They shot him.”

Molly struggled to make sense of those words. The same rays of sun drifted down from overhead windows as they had a moment before. Nothing in the room had changed. She looked around, hoping to judge something from the faces of her high school classmates, but the only thought that came with any clarity was that surely he would not die. Something would save him as it had so many times before. When scarlet fever almost killed him as a child, when PT-109 was destroyed in the war and he was given up for dead.

She pictured the President leaving the hospital a few days later, hobbling on a cane. Jackie beside him, Caroline and John-John dashing from a waiting limousine. Maybe he'd be in a wheelchair? Molly allowed her imagination of what was the worst that could possibly happen to ascend an additional rung. In a wheelchair. Like FDR.

He couldn't die. She'd looked into his eyes, felt the warmth of his living hand.

John F. Kennedy spoke to her.

As soon as Molly spotted the campaign motorcade route in *Newsday*, she'd begged Zed Pierce to take her. A handyman around the house, Zed occasionally chauffeured Molly's executive father to the airport or the city. Tall and gaunt with his hair brushed back in a

greaser's pompadour, he lived alone in the caretaker's apartment above the garage.

He looked a little like one of the popular boys on *American Bandstand*, not exactly good-looking but a really great dancer. Molly didn't know how old he was, maybe in his late twenties. Molly was twelve. She'd barely ever spoken to him, though secretly she always wanted to. Making her way up the garage stairs, she steeled herself to be fearless. *Profiles in Courage!*

"Can you drive me somewhere?" She spoke in a rush. "Can you take me to see JFK this afternoon when his motorcade comes down Hempstead Turnpike?"

Zed looked up from his magazine. "Yeah, I guess," he said. "If it doesn't take too long."

She couldn't believe that he agreed.

He took his own car, a beat-up old Dodge that smelled of gasoline and cigarettes. Zed parked several blocks away on a side street and Molly tagged along behind him. Zed marched straight ahead, not looking back, his hands shoved into his pockets, another cigarette dangling from his lips.

Streams of people lugging picnic coolers and lawn chairs filled the sidewalks. Even the air seemed different, carrying the charge of the crowd. Young children waved homemade banners. Two little girls ran along the curb unfurling a tattered bed sheet on which they had lettered in red, MASSAPEQUA LOVES YOU, JFK!!

An excited tide was sweeping them all toward the motorcade route. Zed flashed her a smile. "You bring any signs with you, Margaret Ellen?"

"I wish I had!" It hadn't occurred to Molly to make a sign. If she were carrying a sign, Kennedy might actually have noticed her. He might tell the driver to stop while he singled her out from the crowd. If only she'd asked for a ride to the rally itself. She realized now the motorcade would swoop past in a second. When she glanced up at Zed he laughed as though something were funny, and flicked his cigarette into the gutter.

From far down the avenue, Molly caught the first distant strains of a marching band, a bouncy drum roll followed by a blast of off-key trumpets. "He's coming!"

"Good." Zed looked at his watch. "You've got twenty minutes."

Molly turned back to the crowd. Parents craned their necks, hoisting children onto shoulders, everyone angling to get a better view of the approaching band. Two blue and orange patrol cars sealed off a section of side streets as the band drew closer, the steady drum cadence carried on the wind before easing into a jazzy introduction to "Happy Days are Here Again."

A dozen teenage girls trotted into view, lifting their long legs in time with the music. They wore short pleated blue skirts, knee socks, and candy stripe jackets beneath straw hats with blue "KENNEDY" headbands.

The cheerleaders fanned out across all four lanes, executing a rolling series of cartwheels, their skimpy blue skirts flying up to reveal red panties. The crowd applauded heartily and Molly was mortified to hear Zed whistling, too.

"Give me a K!" the girls shouted in unison as they landed on their feet.

"K!"

"Give me an E!"

"E!" Molly volleyed each letter back in turn, giddy with excitement.

"Give me a Y! What's that spell?"

"KENNEDY!"

"What's that spell?"

Souvenir vendors hawking miniature flags and Jack and Jackie photo pins crisscrossed the empty asphalt as the cheerleaders moved on. The band switched to Kennedy's own theme, "High Hopes," the trumpets straying happily off key as the color guard appeared in their bright satin uniforms, an American flag held high.

The sound of the band sent goose bumps up Molly's spine. She peered out over the curb just as a formation of five motorcycle police roared into view on a chorus of sirens and gleaming metal.

She saw his car then, a long black Cadillac convertible, flags snapping smartly off the hood. There in the back, waving from side to side stood John F. Kennedy, his hair a surprising color beneath the streetlight, not brown the way it looked in black and white photos, but a tantalizing hint of red.

Cheers and applause exploded as a sea of people poured into the street to surround the open limousine. Molly ran with them. She thought Zed was still behind her, but in the crush, she wasn't sure.

Kennedy turned from side to side, smiling broadly, touching adoring hands. The limousine inched closer, and Molly saw that she would be in the front of the crowd, her hand outstretched amidst a dozen hands, a pack of bodies pressing in from every side.

Then, before she knew it, everything changed.

Kennedy began to pivot away. Instead of looking directly at her, instead of reaching out to grasp her hand, Molly saw him about to turn toward the opposite side of the street. He would pass where she stood with his back turned!

From somewhere above she heard Zed's loud whistle and then his voice, carried over the motorcycle engines and the din of the crowd. "*Hey, Jack!*" he shouted in a casual yet commanding tone, as though they were friends.

Hearing his name called this way, Kennedy swiveled around, the famous features gazing directly down, his jovial, dancing eyes meeting Molly's own.

He smiled then. He reached out, grabbed her hand and shook it hard.

"Nice to see you," JFK said. "How 'ya doing?"

"*I love you,*" Molly whispered, although she knew he could not hear.

Now, she glanced at the frozen faces of her classmates in a high school locker room and tried to imagine another motorcade, a different scene, but how could that be true? How could someone have shot John F. Kennedy? He was her dreamholder. All her dreams, whatever they were and most still unformed: romance, love,

marriage, children, an adult life that mattered, that made a difference. Maybe not on the scale of President Kennedy's, but a destiny, a reason for being in the world.

He couldn't be assassinated. He was President of the United States in the middle of the twentieth century, not some date buried in history. This was America. Things like that didn't happen here.

Only days before, she and Jenny had huddled in Merriwether's library, examining the *Newsweek* pictures of the dead Diem brothers in Vietnam, turning the page upside down for a better view of the assassinated President and his brother. Their necks twisted at odd angles, hands bound; blackened bullet holes riddled their starched white shirts. Assassinations happened in countries like that, faraway, unknowable places but not here, not now.

He may have been shot, but he wouldn't be killed. The bullets grazed his shoulder but were deflected off a passing car. The shots rang out, but they missed. At the very last second, just as she'd seen him do the night of the motorcade, President Kennedy turned away.

They were in Jenny Barnes' room in Haddington Hall when the announcement came. Molly closed her eyes, remembering his smile beneath the streetlight, the exact color of his hair, the touch of his hand. Jenny went down the hall to phone home.

Molly sat on the edge of the bed, staring down at her own body: two arms that felt disconnected, hands that seemed futile now. How could a death so brutal, unexpected, so wrong, happen to someone like John F. Kennedy? What did that mean for her own small, infinitesimal place in the world?

Jenny was out of breath when she returned. "My grandmother told me to take a train home right away. She said I should walk to Grand Central and not take the subway."

"Why?"

"That way I won't be caught underground if anything happens."

Molly stared at her blankly. "What more could happen?"

"In case the Russians attack New York."

"Attack New York?"

Ordinarily they would have howled at Jenny's grandmother and her outlandish fears. A survivor of two world wars in Europe, Lotte Hendrich had raised Jenny since she was a baby. Once, when she was still living at home, Jenny had persuaded her grandmother to let her go to a matinee in Greenwich Village, and Lotte had stuck a hat pin on the collar of her sweater so she could fight off the white slave traders who frequented movie theaters looking for young girls they could sit next to, whose veins they could shoot dope into and abduct to China.

Today neither girl laughed at Jenny's grandmother's precautions. "You don't think that could happen, do you?" Jenny asked. "The Russians aren't going to attack New York?"

"What do the Russians have to do with it?" Molly said.

Yet now that the unthinkable had happened, anything was possible. Who knew what the Russians might do? During the Cuban missile crisis the year before, they'd worried about the Russians and what they could do. It seemed the world was ending. New York City would be a direct hit. Everybody knew that. On the scariest day, Molly and her classmates told each other goodnight, half expecting not to wake up the next morning. But the world didn't end.

Now it seemed it had.

"I'll walk with you to Grand Central," Molly offered.

She had no idea what she would do after that. Return to her room at school? Phone her parents? If she called home, she imagined her father would send Zed with a car to bring her home to Great Neck. Molly had no wish to go home. If her father were there, he'd figure out a way to blame the President for his own death. Too young, too inexperienced, too many enemies. Look at the Bay of Pigs.

Out on the sidewalk, Molly squinted at the surprise of bright daylight. Everywhere people congregated before doorways and store windows. Cars were pulled over, double-parked. Now and then, a motorist cruised slowly to the curb calling to no one in particular: *Is it true?*

How could it be true?

"Look, they're lowering the flags," Jenny whispered.

The two friends stood transfixed by the ritual, which seemed to happen at several buildings simultaneously, as though someone had choreographed it. Stores were closing, cheery displays of Christmas lights blinking off one by one. From the sidewalk, Molly caught sight of a TV in a lobby window. A collage of Dallas images flashed soundlessly across the screen.

The President's Lincoln convertible waited at a hospital emergency entrance, doors thrown open, Jackie's bouquet of roses still on the seat. In an endless loop of footage, Kennedy was still alive, smiling, waving to crowds at the airport that morning. Jackie in her pretty suit, cradling those now abandoned roses.

Molly stepped back from the crowd, turning her back on the TV. For the first time, she heard church bells tolling slowly at St. Patrick's, two blocks away.

"I'd better get going," Jenny said quietly. "My grandmother expects me on the next train."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going home. On the train, remember?"

Molly had forgotten. She caught a glimpse of Jenny's wristwatch. Only an hour? A single hour that she'd known Kennedy was dead? The mournful bells of St. Patrick's made it seem forever true. They would bury him in the ground. Everything he stood for, all that was over now.

"I'm going to light a candle," Molly decided.

"You're not even Catholic!" Jenny scoffed. Seeing Molly's expression, she quickly added, "Though on a day like today I'm sure that doesn't matter."

Molly asked, "Will you come with me?"

Jenny dug a schedule from her shoulder bag. "I guess I could get the next train."

They joined the throng streaming into St. Patrick's, stepping from afternoon sunlight into the dark incense-laden hush of the cathedral. A small group waited to light candles at a side altar beneath a silver crucifix. Molly gazed up at Christ's head bowed beneath a crown of thorns.

"Please, Jesus," she prayed to herself, but then did not know how to continue, what to ask. "Please don't let him really be dead."

Following the lead of those in front, she lit a long taper from an already burning candle, then carried the tiny flame as she searched the rows of red and blue glass cups, hoping to find one that seemed special. In the end, she picked a red one in the highest row and took it as a sign when the wick flamed up without faltering. A hint of incense filled the air.

The smell would return to her often, in other rooms. A decade of incense and candles, hope and smashed hope; violence, more than anyone knew, unspooling from that day.

She was aware of Jenny dropping a coin into a tin box beside her. "You have to pay a quarter," she whispered, "or a dime. Or something."

"Oh," Molly murmured, on the verge of real tears at last, ashamed at her childish, worthless prayer. He was dead. What did she expect God to do?

"I didn't have any change," Molly apologized, feeling the good intention of her prayer dissolve. "Please. Please God," she prayed again despite herself. "Just let it be a mistake."

But there would be no miracle. No future like the one she'd glimpsed in the electric charge of JFK's handshake. The past and future had parted, and Molly stood on the other side, where she did not wish to be.

Back outside, she and Jenny stood before a display window at Saks Fifth Avenue. Two men were removing the last mannequin, turning her body horizontal before passing the figure inside. Next, they brought out a red velvet chair and placed an urn beside it. One of the men began arranging a dozen red roses. The other carefully positioned an official posed portrait of President Kennedy on the chair. In the smiling photograph, he looked happy, hopeful, unaware.

Molly watched until the two men stepped down from the window. She wanted to watch until it was over. She told herself if she waited, if she saw it through to the end, it would mean something. There would be some message for her. But when the men left, they

disappeared into the store quickly, pulling a thick black curtain slowly closed behind them.

