

In Search of Camelot

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i

John F. Kennedy was dead. That is my earliest recollection of anything: the New Frontier exploding in bits of skull and hair over and over and over again on national television, compliments of Abraham Zapruder and the Eastman Kodak Company. My mother cried. I didn't. I played with my Tinkertoys.

"Why is Mrs. Kennedy wearing black?" I asked.

"Because she's in mourning, dear."

"But it's afternoon, not morning," I protested.

My mother saved the old issues of *Life* magazine devoted to the assassination. I have seen them: pictures of Jackie's bloodied dress,

Lyndon's upraised hand, Lee's final grimace. I'm told that these are the most valuable issues of *Life*.

Johnny, they hardly knew you. I didn't know you at all. What is Camelot?

ii

Body counts. That's what I remember about the Vietnam War: body counts.

Every night at six o'clock, Walter Cronkite told the nation how many American lives had been lost on an imaginary jungle battleground a hemisphere away. If their body count was greater than ours, then it had been a good day for Truth, Justice, and The American Way.

Body counts.

And every night at six o'clock, my grandparents anxiously awaited any news about Vietnam. Their youngest son—my uncle—was Over There in the army.

Fighting for apple pie.

Shooting for baseball.

Killing for Mom.

Body counts.

It happened like this: I am in grade school, but I am home today because of a cold. Mother is in the kitchen, ironing. The telephone rings.

"Aunt Kate just called," Mother said, trying to remain calm as we drive across town to my grandparents' home. "She said that Grandma and Grandpa got a telegram a few minutes ago." A pause. "Something's wrong with Uncle Willie."

My uncle was dead.

Body counts.

And every night at six o'clock, Walter Cronkite continued to tell the nation how many American lives had been lost on an imaginary jungle battleground a hemisphere away. But Uncle Wally never told us why.

iii

While Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dreams were slapping awake a

nation which had been sleeping since the Civil War, I was swimming in the backyard pool of my family's modest home, located in an all-white town.

All white, that is, except for one family: the Wilkes.

Charles Wilkes was in my fourth grade class. He was my age, but we were not friends. After all, he was black.

One day, Charles Wilkes came to our house and asked if he could swim in our pool. My father said yes. I was appalled. How could my father do such a thing?

Mercilessly, my friends and I taunted Charles Wilkes while he was swimming with us. We pushed him off the diving platform, and we held his head underwater. Less than a half an hour later, Charles Wilkes went home—crying.

"Whities!" he raged.

"Nigger!" we yelled. It was fun.

That was the day Charles Wilkes cried. That was the month the Wilkes family moved from our town. That was the year Martin Luther King, Jr. stopped dreaming.

iv

I stare at the simple white cross which marks the grave of Robert F. Kennedy in Arlington National Cemetery. Fresh roses, placed there by visitors earlier in the day, lay withering at the base of the cross.

This time, I remember everything: the cameras, the hotel, the speech, the cheers, the exit, the pantry, the shooting. I remember the anguished horror of a panicked nation wondering if it had gone mad.

Nearby, middle-aged men and women take Kodak photographs of the eternal flame at the gravesite of another Kennedy. Children of the children of the sixties race noisily about, blessed with ignorance of the immense tragedy represented by a single flickering flame.

And then there was Bobby . . .

I turn back to look at the small white cross which bears no identifying marks. They say Bobby wanted it that way. I stare again at the dying roses.

Was this Camelot?