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The Road to Dallas

Kimberly Webb Reid

On November 21, 1993, the world dozed in watery light and I felt off-balance as the northern hemisphere listed away from the sun. Seasonal blues made watching PBS all day seem like a reasonable choice. Onscreen, a Ford Lincoln Continental zipped through Zapruder's frame. Tomorrow would be the thirtieth anniversary. Old news footage aired to commemorate the assassination, and I watched as if America's end of innocence were happening live along with my own. Seeing Jackie statuesque in bloodied nylons, I mourned like I'd discovered the thirty-fifth president was my long-lost grandfather. I was thirteen and had never heard of Camelot when I became a believer.

A few years later, I went to college and roomed with Mak, a high-school friend who went by her initials. Greaves Hall sported a rusty fallout shelter sign—a relic from before Kennedy told Krushchev to point his Cuban missiles the other way. Now our basement could host movie nights and block the noise of a timer wailing upstairs like an air-raid siren as the oven incinerated Mak's forgotten tater-tots.

Mak hung beads in our doorway and magazine clippings everywhere else because her sisters had established the truth that freshmen décor must be funky. I taped one picture over our bunks. The 1951 Newport debutante of the year would guard my sleeping subconscious and program me to keep it classy. At my age, Jackie studied at Vassar and aimed for Paris, but I couldn't afford a French finishing experience. I'd intuit one by imagining she was watching me, judging.

Jackie's glare had no effect on Mak. She walked barefoot around campus wearing a leopard-print blanket tied around her shoulders and

her sister's dairy princess tiara, but she pivoted from cape-wearing kid to doting dorm mom when the occasion warranted. One day she hauled me in to the health clinic and paid for the visit because I was too food-poisoned to care. I paid her back, but she never cashed the check.

If she had come with me when I visited our hometown for the weekend, maybe I wouldn't have gone bowling with friends of a friend and felt compelled to pretend I didn't need gutter bumpers around these strangers. Christa and Ethan were my age but so much older. They could have been on the cover of *Life*, looking regal in rented shoes like Jackie did in pearls. Christa and I were both tall redheads, I the splotchy variety with invisible eyelashes and she the porcelain—auburn and striking. I missed all but a few pins the whole night. She laughed with me like bowling was supposed to be a joke.

Back in the bomb shelter, Mak glitter-glued magazine clippings to her aloe vera's pot and supplied the plant with a pet gummy shark. In a few years, she'd teach English in China, maybe go on a mission, and then meet her husband. "I had a dream I was in a relationship with someone who looked like Tyler Robinson, but not him," she said. Tyler had been a senior when we were freshmen and probably didn't know who we were. "Someday I'll be with my husband, and I'll remember my dream and say, 'Oh, so you were the one I saw!'" Mak was psychic sometimes. She lived like there was a red carpet laid out to her future and all she had to do was walk barefoot out the door.

Not a carpet, she discovered years later. A thread. "In China, there's a belief that an invisible red thread ties people who are destined to meet," she would later explain. "The thread can be stretched or tangled, but never broken."

Maybe it was the mystical Thread of Fate making me feel adrift when I watched a BYU fireside and saw Christa and Ethan smiling in the audience like ambassadors from an alternate world. I'd always known I'd never become the fancy photojournalist-turned-First-Lady pinned to my wall; it was too far a stretch. But Christa and Ethan exuded a cozier version of Kennedy class. Its sparkle shone so close to home it had visited Heber City's Holiday Lanes, of all places. Almost within my reach. I couldn't afford Paris, but I could go to Provo.

Mak frowned as I packed the Jackie photo away, but I trusted we'd stay connected as she prepared for China and I went looking for Camelot. Mak wouldn't come across the red-thread theory for almost two decades, and already I was a believer.



The idea of the universe as one giant string maze is appealing to tentative souls like me. If there's a thread with my name, I don't need to agonize over every crossroad. I need only follow the yarn, like Theseus in the labyrinth. But that kind of thinking is also intimidating. If there's one right way, there must be infinite ways to get tangled up and bump into dead ends, as it seems most people do, some more infamously than others.

On the morning of Kennedy's impending demise, he had a premonition. "Last night would've been a hell of a night to assassinate a president," he said to his wife of the jostling crowds and dark raincloud cover. "If somebody wants to shoot me from a window with a rifle, nobody can stop it, so why worry about it?"

That's the thing about being psychic only sometimes. You never know when to listen to yourself.



Mak met Dave sooner than planned. She'd ditched the cape but still seemed young to get married. The date was set, then canceled, then set again. In the midst of the drama, Mak's mom observed, "Dave looks like Tyler Robinson, doesn't he?" Mak had forgotten her dream.

Wearing a Mandarin-style sheath dress she picked up at a consignment store, Mak married with the promise that she and Dave would teach English in Asia together. Except Dave backed out. They moved to Arizona instead and had a baby. When I visited them six months later, I felt static crackling as soon as they met me at baggage claim. Thunderstorms poured on the desert that night as Mak whispered about scanning for exits. Prophetic dreams or not, she had discovered that Camelot was—in the astute words of Monty Python—only a model.

I wondered why, for so long, I'd turned a blind eye to the real lessons Jackie offered. They weren't all about poise and fashion. She was also a savvy editor who had pulled off the best substantive job of her career in the wake of the assassination. Jackie redacted history, composed a fairytale, and buried the shame of a shoddy marriage beneath an eternal flame. The truth was out now for anyone willing to read it: JFK was a rake. There had never been any Camelot, only staged photos and shallow anecdotes finessed into a narrative arc to serve up a sad but meaningful ending.

I should have seen the reality check coming. Not long after my PBS binge, my mom showed me a photo her brother Bob had mailed home from his 1966 military assignment in Hawaii. Jackie glanced past my

uncle's camera with what seemed like a strained smile. She looked faded, missing some makeup or maybe just lacking the glamour of professional lighting, as she stood sandwiched between pictures of my own average family. I could have taken that photo to hang on my wall, but something about its ordinariness made me uncomfortable. Almost like it was telling a lie.



After the Phoenix weekend, I went home to my Church magazines job, where I shaped based-on-true events into inspirational stories by leaving out minutiae and polishing highlights to a shine. I had learned all about staging photos, but I aimed to illustrate the heart of truth and not fabricate myths. I, too, had grown up to be a professional editor. I managed to travel the world without gaining much style and ignored feeling lonely as I trudged to my office past Temple Square brides. Colored sashes were popular then, and often a splash of red stood out against white wedding dresses. The happy couples' regular presence made me think about marriage more often than a 1950s debutante.

At general conference, newlyweds cleared out and magazine photographers closed in on the masses. Then photos papered my office hallway floors. Designers paced, scouting for compelling images to print alongside sermons. When the conference issue landed on my desk, I scanned the pages to see which pictures made the cut. Two people I recognized stood frozen midstep, holding their laughing toddler's hands as they lifted her toes off the ground. Christa and Ethan's daughter looked as captivating as Caroline Kennedy dancing in the Oval Office, but this moment hadn't been calculated to generate public approval. Their candid happiness awakened a dormant hope inside me. They weren't mascots of an impossible ideal but messengers promising that something genuinely idyllic had visited the plaza outside my workplace—almost within my reach. If I was ever tempted to forget, they'd reappear in the magazine.

Eventually my sense of fairness overrode my secret fangirling, and I sent the photography team a memo. It wasn't fair to the other thousands of conference attendees that Christa was noticed so often only because she had hair the color of goldstone. Then I remembered: photos were printed in grayscale for the selection process. It wasn't Christa's hair that stood out to BYU camera operators, Church magazine designers, and bowling alley tagalongs. Her modest elegance made her an easy symbol of the quintessential Latter-day Saint woman the same way the media

loved portraying Kennedys as trendy but otherwise typical Americans. My chances of achieving Christa's level of normal were as unlikely as my moving into the White House.

And yet unlikely things happen all the time. Once a young serviceman inched toward the gangway with his platoon, waiting to board a Vietnam-bound ship, when he and a marine named Oswald were ordered to step out of line. Without explanation, they were reassigned to Hawaii. My family has speculated that perhaps the military brass decided last minute not to send an Oswald to fight communism, but even if that were true, we can't figure any reason my uncle was picked to go with him. Uncle Bob surfed and sent home a picture he took of Jackie Kennedy and never knew why he didn't go to war. Sometimes the red thread makes no sense.

Other times, the unlikely is too meaningful *not* to see some design in it. One day as I sat in a photography brown-bag meeting at work, watching a professional photographer's slideshow of all the happy families his lens had captured, I tried to calculate the chances of my going home to an empty house for the rest of my life. A familiar image blinked onto the wall.

"I stalked this family to get that shot," the photographer beamed.

Here they were again, still smiling and lifting their giggling toddler off the ground. What were the odds of my running into Christa and Ethan yet again? They stood suspended by light in my space like angels checking in to confirm their original message hadn't been lost. *Keep believing. Someday you might be more like us.* A tenuous link had stayed intact over the years, never breaking, though it seemed an impossible stretch. If I could believe that, I could believe in almost anything.



Within a year or two, I found a fiancé. We agreed to pose for a Church magazines photo shoot, a favor to a coworker. How chic were we? Not very. Even the best lighting and staging couldn't completely alter the facts.

Mak and Dave made peace and moved to Dallas, while Russ and I went to D.C.—not the White House, but a whitewashed condo overlooking the beltway. Beyond the sea of silent headlights, an eternal flame flickered.

One summer afternoon, we took our young daughter for a walk in Arlington. Kennedy's weak flame licked at the oppressive air as if depressed to still be burning in this humidity. I wondered how Jackie

had managed to get such an ostentatious grave marker approved. Did the expense of a president's monument depend only on how dramatically he exited office? To me, Kennedy's legacy included at least as many embarrassments as victories, the most offensive being his predatory lust for a legendary number of mistresses. Feeling smug, I decided Jackie had chosen an apt symbol for her husband's memory after all.

And yet, if I harbored such disdain, why had I braved the miserable heat index to pay my disrespects?

"Be quiet," I whispered to my fidgety daughter. "This is considered a sacred place." A few tourists wiped away tears. We milled around the memorial the way I had circled Kennedy myths, as if we could discover a more satisfying ending than the one Jackie had constructed. Now she lay beneath the flame she helped ignite. Flanking the famous graves, two smaller markers were framed in stone and moss:

Baby Daughter. August 23, 1956.

Patrick Bouvier Kennedy. August 7, 1963–August 9, 1963.

I felt a jolt of kinship when I noticed the dates. My brother had died in August too, the same way Patrick had gone, struggling for breath with premature lungs while his mother awaited word at another hospital. Before Patrick was transferred, some say Jackie reached into his incubator to stroke his hair. My mom can't remember the only time she saw my brother alive, but my dad watched mother's and son's gurneys pass en route to recovery and the waiting helicopter. My mom reached into my brother's Isolette and held his tiny hand.

Now my own August baby strained against the chain rope, an only child because two others hadn't made it. The prominent and presidential names illuminated by sun and fire—lauded and slandered by press and people like me—dimmed in comparison to the unwritten titles they bore. Mother. Father. Hurting humans following the red thread to the same place we're all going, some more infamously than others.



After Russ's government stint, he got an academic job at North Texas. I carried the pain of a third miscarriage onto our flight for Dallas because we couldn't delay our move for another private calamity. Russ was already starting his teaching job a week late after attending a conference in Xi-an.

"How come he gets to go to China before me?" Mak had pouted when I'd told her our summer plans.

The agenda hadn't included my waiting in a hospital radiology exam room, listening past my own pulse for a fluttering fetal heartbeat. My

womb was as lifeless as the terra cotta warriors. Russ brought me five sets of hand-painted chopsticks, but one dropped and shattered. I considered it an omen that our family was destined to stay small. At least we could always sit together on a plane.

During liftoff, I remembered the Kennedy documentaries I'd binge-watched while on bedrest to distract myself with someone else's tragedy. Jackie had barely recovered from giving birth when she accompanied the president to a city neither she nor I wanted to go to, but it seemed she was at peace. Perhaps Patrick's thirty-eight-hour life had brought his wandering father home. Now, filled with dread and resolve, the first couple set out to win back "nut country," as Kennedy called it. Nothing says *fail* like a big white X in the road.

I didn't want to live in nut country, but it was the only offer we had.

As I surveyed the Dallas landscape from afar, I latched onto the idea that God, with his infinite string maze, was pulling us toward a Texan we were destined to meet, a doctor qualified to discover why I lost children faster than Jackie Kennedy. In the quiet hours after the documentaries ended, I had researched physicians and narrowed my choice down to two. The first had an alternative-leaning practice out in the country, and the other was a renowned obstetrician who served on Parkland's board.

I imagined being sent to the hospital for another emergency ultrasound. I'd pass an unassuming plaque on my way out, the marker of a nation's desolation adding weight to my own. *Original Site. Trauma 1. November 22, 1963.* Parkland's radiology department stands where Jackie kissed her dead husband's body from bare foot to face in an intimate moment she couldn't have staged.

When I heard that story, I wavered. Maybe Camelot wasn't an intentional manipulation but the same grasping we all do at funerals when we cling to rare and poignant scenes as if they are the whole. Jackie walked out of Parkland wearing her husband's blood like it was a messy thread lashing his departed spirit to hers, and she didn't want to let it go. I knew if I ever set foot in that hospital, I would feel her ghost walk with me. I chose the country doctor.



Though I didn't feel any pull toward Dallas, Mak claimed she felt it for me. "I always knew you'd end up here," she said. After we landed, she loaded us down with groceries. I wrote her a check. She never cashed it.

She and Dave soon caught a plane to Shanghai and brought home a daughter who had been waiting for them since before Mak searched for a path out of Phoenix. Their threads had been stretched and tangled, but

never broken. Mak knew she'd teach English someday. She just didn't know it would happen in Texas.

"Maybe we should adopt," I mused to Russ. What if, while I prayed for a heartbeat, our Chinese child's heart was already beating in rhythm to Russ's footsteps walking the roads of her homeland? It was a nice thought, but we didn't feel moved by it.

We still wait, tentative souls, watching our narrative emerge. There are pictures of terra cotta warriors and an incomplete set of chopsticks in an ornate wooden box. There are visits to the eternal flame and an X on Elm Street, and there are consultations with angelic messengers wearing scrubs, explaining the results of an alternative-leaning blood test. Trees shed their amber leaves on a solstice morning when my world sighs back toward the sun and a second daughter is born. The sunlight is so blinding in that Texas hospital room I almost forget what came before, the stumbling in darkness and feeling our way past fraying places. Someday I'll pick out the tangles, trim the ugliest parts, and splice the highlights together so seamlessly I'll believe they're the truest pieces, the only ones worth retelling, even to myself. I'll believe again in the myth—or maybe it's the truth. Camelot was here all along.

This essay by Kimberly Webb Reid tied for first place in the 2020 Richard H. Cracroft Personal Essay Contest, sponsored by BYU Studies.