

Man vs. nature

Kennedy tragedy helps shed light on meaning of life, death

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DALLAS, Texas — From room 2523 of the Hyatt Regency Hotel, you could see everything. You close your eyes and imagine the motorcade, as it went on to Elm.

It laid out in my mind, perfectly (my thanks to Oliver Stone's movie "JFK" for making it seem so logistically simple when you see it in real life). And then, when you get down there, you find a small metal X in the middle of the road, marking the exact location where John Fitzgerald Kennedy was first hit with a sniper's bullet on Nov. 22, 1963. Twenty thousand cars pass over this X every day, I'm told by a hot dog vendor, who looks like he's been there long enough to know and bored enough to count.

Directly across from the X is the JFK memorial plaque. It's small, about the size of place mat, and has a cross on it. The plaque is adorned with flowers, not of this man's passing, but that of his son, JFK Jr. John-John. The son who, if we believe what the newscasts told us, was loved by a nation as if he were everyone's son. (Apparently, my parents missed out on the coast-to-coast meeting that decided this proclamation years ago.)

The flowers had wilted by then, six days after the plane had plunged

into the sea Friday night. It was the day JFK, Jr. and his wife, Carolyn, were buried in the water. The 22nd of July, 1999.

There were women and children, mostly. Many of them had camcorders to record the event. Camcorders are much smaller than I'd remembered them being.

To the left was the grassy knoll, about half the size of what I thought it'd be. I expected a well manicured lawn, like a putting green. I found crab grass.

Up the hill from the plaque were the peddlers, about ten. Conspiracy mags, newsletters, videos of the Zapruder film, all available at a low, low price of \$10.99, some even lower than that. Business was up these days, one salesman said, in the shadows of the white pillars that adorn the site. A Kennedy death can do that.

A family is looking at the plaque. A man, his wife, his son. The father, specifically, is eyeing a card, written by a child. It's a regular piece of paper, folded in half with crayon stick faces at the four corners. All of them are crying. The letter is to the mother of the two Besette women.

"Sorry about the death of your two beautiful daughters," it says in red marker. Unforgettable.

Another card exclaims, "Free at last!" It babbles on about John-John passing to a better place where he can be with his father. The card is signed "The Warren Family."

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The boy's getting tired, it seems. He wriggles out of his father's hand. "I want to GO!" the boy screams. The father spans him, hard. But they leave. And down the block, the boy is spanked again. He hugs his mom, slumping into her arms.

They head in the direction of the museum, where one gets an up close an personal look at the Book Depository, plus the angle Lee Harvey Oswald had shoot to from to change this nation forever. I'm with Jim Garrison. No way he did it by himself. No way.

"Hell," I said a few days later, "how he could he shoot through that tree anyway? It's right in front of him."

"Well," columnist and JFK-site alumnus Mark Baldrige said, "the tree was probably a lot smaller 36 years ago." Good point.

The JFK memorial itself is five or six blocks away, amidst the legion of glass palaces that dot the Dallas skyline, as pretty as I've seen in any big city. The memorial is no feat of architecture, just four walls, raised just high enough off the ground for children to play under it, which two beautiful twin girls were. It had a lot of graffiti on it at one time; maybe they should have kept there. The thing needs a little color.

Even more flowers for JFK. Jr. and that Free at last proclamation from the Warren has made it over here, too. There's a big picture of the dearly departed and his family here, too. Ted's in the corner of the picture, his face bloated and red. Another conspiracy museum, this one a whole lot more commercial is nearby. Out front, it has a list of daily specials on a blackboard, as if it were a restaurant. Time to walk back.

Inside the hotel, an hour later, CNN is blaring. I step over to the window, look down at the site again. Beyond the knoll, behind the wall, is the gravel parking lot, where the second gunman could have fled. The train tracks where they found the "clean" hobos. It's an amazingly confined, tight setup, perfect for the turkey shoot that has been described in various theories. The peddlers, the knoll, the museum, the cards, the two blond twins — they seem so American, so presidential. So JFK.

More than remorse, more than sadness, more than regret, I feel a strange spookiness about it all. *What a plan*, I think to myself, and come to my own personal realization that behind the Kennedy legacy lies this grand architectural, geographical subplot, by Oswald or whoever, that has plotted America's course in the past three decades.

I can't but thinking that all those John Steinbeck books were exactly right; man is inevitably linked to his land; that humans didn't kill the first JFK, but that little space in Dallas did, just as surely as that ski slope killed Michael Kennedy, just as surely as the ocean swallowed JFK Jr.

The fallen president said it himself once, in a speech he made in 1962: "We are tied to the ocean," he said. "And when we go back to the sea it is to sail or to watch it, we are going back from whence we came." Man and his nature. An idea to live, and die, by.

Mark Baldrige's
*How I Spent My
Summer Vacation*



Episode 7

The doctor is out

Physical, mental ailments snowball on a hot July week

MARK BALDRIDGE is a senior English major.

My mother had a stroke last week, a minor stroke, one that left her just a little bit rattled. She says she's lost some coordination on her left side.

"When I reach up toward my left ear my hand just sort of flies by," she said.

She also claims her speech is somewhat slurred. I found this undetectable over the phone.

She's seeing a neurologist now. CAT scans and MRIs later he tells her the good news is that she doesn't have Alzheimer's.

"Well, if I can remember that, I'll tell all my friends," she says.

The bad news is that it turns out she's had several strokes before, she just didn't know it until now.

She'll have to see a physical therapist, for a while, and in the meantime they've got her taking an aspirin a day.

"You should take one too, Mark," she tells me. Always looking out for me, mom.

I called her last night to talk about movies and books (her favorite subjects) and to determine for myself just how much this stroke might have effected her.

She seemed the same, incomprehensible, telling those long, convoluted tales that always get me lost. Just as funny (I should say witty) as always and slightly acerbic.

As ever, same old mom.

Her favorite film, or one of them, is "Pulp Fiction" believe it or not. Probably not a lot of other 70+ year-old mothers laugh like she does when that poor kid goes SPLAT all over the back of John Travolta's car.

Got a sense of humor, mom.

A big fan of Thomas Harris, she's read his sequel to the best selling "The Silence of the Lambs," the as-yet equally best selling "Hannibal," which she pans as over-written and

improbable.

"A friend of mine just recently compared me to Dr. Lecter," I tell her.

"Oh you look nothing like him," she says — and I know she's not talking about Sir Anthony Hopkins.

To my mother, Hannibal the Cannibal is a genuine, if fictional, person who an actor or two may have occasionally portrayed for the silver screen (see Michael Mann's "Manhunter" for an earlier incarnation of everyone's favorite psychopath.)

"Maybe she meant Thomas Harris," she says.

"Do I look like Thomas Harris?" I ask, a little incredulous.

"Somewhat," she says, "Quite a bit, actually."

A glance at his website at <www.thomasharris.com> (go figure) confirmed this form me. I do look quite a bit like Mr. Harris, or will, once I've written a couple of best sellers.

At least mom's at home, comfortable among her things.

A friend of mine (I'll call her Anne) wound up in Lincoln General over the weekend, the fifth floor, psych ward.

She'd done herself some harm it seems and made the mistake of confiding in a professional.

"So it was either walk in here of my own free will or I'd be EPC'd to the Regional Center," she said.

Her talk is full of such technical acronyms and the jargon of the health care professionals with whom she spends, it seems, too much time.

I visited her yesterday and she seemed wired and strangely relaxed, an odd mix one only finds among people on antipsychotic drugs:

"The social worker comes in today and says, 'So do you think we can release you today?' Of course I think so, but the system is so confused here. They've already done all they can for me."

She reveals plans to move to another state, "Somewhere that cares about mental health more."

She thinks Nebraska is a little behind in this area.

"Were like 49th in funding, you know."

Poor girl, clearly delusional. It sucks to be sick, I know.

And the arcane practices of modern medicine can be frightening, doctors can be insensitive, hospital food bites.

So I'm running around today, trying to gather some cheer for these girls, and I don't have time to write this stuff.

I mean, they don't make greeting cards that say "A Stroke of Bad Luck" or "Sorry to hear you cut yourself again," do they?

So I've just got to sit myself down, sometime before this hectic day ends, with a scissors, a pot of paste and some black construction paper, and make a couple for myself.