The Inheritance

By Jimmy Breslin

He was on a plane that was coming toward the airport, coming with its landing floodlights running over the water and onto the sand of Rockaway Beach and the marshes of Jamaica Bay, coming to John Fitzgerald Kennedy International Airport while Lyndon Johnson was telling the nation that he was not going to run again. The candidate for president of the United States landed in a plane at an airport named for his brother, and everybody who was waiting for him was certain that now another Kennedy would be president. When you look at it, maybe there was no other way that it could have happened.

It starts with Dallas. Dallas was five years ago, and five years is a very long time in America, but Dallas still is a thing that happened yesterday. And the pictures of John Fitzgerald Kennedy are everywhere. They are in the classrooms and churches and saloons and, always, the kitchens and living rooms. And this friend of mine brings his son around to the house to ask about a college and you say to the kid, what high school are you in, and the kid says "John F. Kennedy Memorial High." And the big green signs on the expressway in Chicago read "Kennedy Expressway." The name is so much more than a memory; it is an emotion.

When you have this at the beginning, everything else becomes just a series of steps. In August of 1964, on the boardwalk at Atlantic City, the smell of creosote came up through the wood and the musty hotels were crowded with people wearing buttons for Lyndon Johnson's convention. And Stephen Smith, who is Robert Kennedy's brother-in-law, stood on the boardwalk talking to Debs Myers, a round, gray-haired man who counsels Democrats in New York. Smith shook hands and left.

"What was that about?" Myers was asked.

"That was the first muscle for Bobby," he said. "He's moving to New York and running for the Senate."

That was the first step. And while everybody was in the convention hall cheering Lyndon Johnson that night, Kenneth O'Donnell was drinking Scotch in a ramshackle joint across the street. He introduced the guy with him. "Say hello to Jesse Unruh," he said. There was only small talk, and the future was to be eight years of Lyndon Johnson. But O'Donnell and Unruh were together, and nearly all of the others were to stay together, and Robert Kennedy took the first step and ran for the Senate in New York.

There was almost no conversation, in Atlantic City in 1964, about a place called Vietnam.

One year later, in the middle of a summer day, President Johnson was on television, announcing he was sending the First Air Cavalry Division to Vietnam. And Bobby Kennedy, a United States senator, sat in a car going down the East River Drive in New York, talking about the country putting too much military emphasis on Vietnam. "Everytime we

". . . Now everybody thinks another Kennedy will be president. Maybe there was no other way it could have happened . . ."

Photographs by Steve Schapiro

send somebody to Saigon, it's always a general or a defense expert," he was saying. "You never hear about them sending an educator or a farm expert, do you?"

If you knew nothing, and just stood back with a drink and watched and listened, you could see it all slowly falling into a pattern after that. They had no conscious design and they all went their own ways. But the thing was always there.

Ted Sorensen, a lawyer now, was standing at the bar during a party in a penthouse on Park Avenue and he talked about a speech on Vietnam which Kennedy had given in the Senate.

"I think it was a mistake," Sorensen said.

"Why?"

"Because Bob Kennedy is the only hope in this country for your children and my children. And we can't afford to have him in controversies this early."

He sounded like a young priest talking about God, and I wanted to chalk it off to Scotch. But the line stayed with me and I've often wondered what the hell is it all about with these people.

And then one day Pierre Salinger was walking through the airport in Los Angeles and he was saying, "If we wanted to, we could stampede a convention and get Bob Kennedy the vice presidency. Stampede a convention. But I don't know if that's a good thing."

Robert Kennedy moved through the months, climbing a mountain to get on a magazine cover, going to South America, touring the country, then making a speech at Berkeley which gave all the appearances of a man about to do something. When Jacqueline Kennedy decided to sue *Look* magazine over the book by William Manchester, Robert Kennedy joined her because she was family. It was one of the worst shows ever seen. But there was almost nothing in it that lasted, and Kennedy kept walking, conscious of some of the steps, taking others without thinking of what they meant.

"A plan," he was saying one day. "How do you plan on anything in life? Do you know what daily living is? It's Russian roulette. That's all life is."

And then it was last November. On a Saturday night in Cambridge, Mass., at a meeting of Young Democrats in a small hotel banquet room, John Kenneth Galbraith got up and said, "Tonight, on this very special night, we welcome back to the academic community my old friend, my dear friend, Eugene McCarthy."

Everybody in the room got up, and it was clear they were not doing it for a man who was present just to make a speech. And when the night was over, Galbraith was smiling and he was saying, "Gene McCarthy will win in New Hampshire and Massachusetts and Wisconsin and we will have a new president." Galbraith was asked if he meant McCarthy actually could make it. "Well," Galbraith said. "Well, let's just say it will be somebody other than Lyndon Johnson."

And now it was all coming down to where it was going to go. And there was a night in the first week of March, when Kennedy was standing in Apartment 14F of the United Nations Towers in New York and there was strain in his voice and people were arguing with him about what he should do.

"Don't I deserve one chance in ten if I run?" Kennedy said.

"How bad do you really believe things are in the country?" he was asked.

"Very bad, the worst it has been in history. We stand a chance to lose it all."

"Then you don't deserve any chance, you just run," he was told.

"I certainly should have some chance, shouldn't I?" he said.

"How do you know what chance you have? You above all people ought to know you can't figure on tomorrow."

"Well, there are certain things you take into consideration, don't you?" he said.

Somebody in the room who had been drinking looked at him coldly. "You can't be sure that you'll come back alive from a trip to Dallas," the man said.

Kennedy walked out of the room. He went down a long hallway to the bedroom. When he came back, he sat on a chair and looked at the floor.

"I don't want to be maudlin, but I've thought of all those things," he said.

"Well then there's nothing else to think about," somebody said.

The night after Eugene McCarthy finished his delightful walk in the sun in New Hampshire, Robert Kennedy was ready to run. With cold indifference to McCarthy,

and to the people who had helped McCarthy, and with the basic meanness that anybody who runs for the presidency must have, Robert F. Kennedy announced he was going to try and get the nomination away from Lyndon Johnson.

He flew to Kansas to start his campaign. Ethel Kennedy was with him. Ethel Kennedy is in terror when a plane takes off or lands. Three people in her family died in air crashes. Rene Carpenter, Mrs. Scott Carpenter, came along to hold her hand.

"She's so nervous, she breaks her fingernails holding onto you," Rene Carpenter was saying.

Robert Kennedy sat on the other side of the aisle.

"Do you think of your brother much at a time like this?" he was asked.

"I think of him often, very often."

"Any particular thing about him?"

He stared out the window and said nothing.

Later, at the airport in Topeka, he stood in the soft night air and said, for the first time, "I come here to *ahsk* for your help and your hand. I run for the presidency of the United States."

Bluntly, openly, without any hesitancy at all, he was a carbon of his brother. The mannerisms were the same and the lines in the speech were the same. One minute it is too painful to talk about, the next minute he gives his impression of his brother and he uses his brother's words and then he liberally mentions his brother. "When President Kennedy was here in Kansas..."

It is one of the things about him which has to be resolved. The people who are against him will lean on this fact forever, They will not take into account the minor fact that maybe he reminds you of his brother for the simple reason that they were brothers and came out of the same family and same houses and same life.

Now it was a fight, and now there were two musts which came before everything. New York and California. Kennedy had to have the delegates from both states before he could bother to dream about winning at a convention. And he had to have New York for another reason. If he were to lose his own state, then he would lose a career while he was losing a convention ballot. Once during the start of his move he hung over his seat on the Washington shuttle and he said, "It'll mean a bloodbath in New York, but I've got to have it."

Lyndon Johnson's speech on television ended the problem of coming at a convention from outside the regular structure. But at the start, there was something in the campaign of Robert Kennedy which showed there was a reason for trying a thing that history said was impossible. A reason that goes far beyond the emotional reaction to the name Robert Kennedy.

Last month at the University of Kansas at Lawrence, a student got up in the field house and asked a question and since the question couldn't be heard by others, Kennedy repeated it. "The question," he said into the microphone, "is what would I do if I were 21 and I was morally opposed to the war and I was about to be drafted."

The shout came from the upper tier. It came from a student who stood up and held up his arm and shouted. Shouted in Kansas, where the flag and duty and Liberty and anti-Communism are life itself.

"Resist!"

The field house erupted into a shaking, rolling noise.

On the Saturday morning at 9 a.m. when Robert Kennedy was to leave New York for California to challenge a political system, the day was overcast. At a couple of minutes before 8 a.m. we sat in Gibby's Bar, which is 20 minutes from the airport. Gibby is a 500-pound man. He was standing at the bar looking at the register tapes from the night before, and counting out a bank for the day bartender. Gibby counted slowly, and he kept making mistakes and started all over again and finally he slapped his hand on the bar and closed his eyes.

"What the hell do they want off me?" he mumbled.

Gibby had a stepson named Gregory who was in Vietnam and had nine days to go before he was to come home. Gibby had champagne and canned hams stacked in the cellar of the bar for the big party. Up the block, at his house, there was a big sign saying "Welcome Home Gregory" in the cellar. At 10 p.m. on Saturday night, March 16, while everybody in the bar was drinking for St. Patrick's Day, Gibby looked out the window and he saw these two Military Policemen looking at the street addresses and Gibby knocked over glasses while he came out from behind the bar and ran onto the street after the two MP's who were looking for his house so they could tell the mother that Gregory had been killed on a search and destroy mission outside Saigon. And now, a week later, on this Saturday morning, the body was back. It had come in during the night. It was down the block at Schwille's Funeral Home. And Gibby was trying to arrange his saloon so he could begin the business of mourning.

"Tell Kennedy I'm praying for him," Gibby said. A month ago, Gibby hated Kennedy's name. Gibby voted for Richard Nixon in 1960.

My cab came, and it moved through streets that were just starting the day and onto the expressway to the airport. The plane was filled with magazine photographers leaning over seats with their cameras held up and television crews struggling down the aisle with aluminum equipment boxes. When Robert Kennedy came onto the plane, the photographers began working. Gray hair has worked up from the sides and woven its way through Kennedy's hair. The gray contrasts sharply with this pile of hair which comes down on his forehead and stands for the electric guitars and surfboards and posters and splashes of colors which are the ways of the young, these people Robert Kennedy always seemed to be counting on for the future, for 1972. His face, sad-eyed, angular, seemed hollow. He had been up all night getting back from a dinner in Binghamton, N.Y. Robert Kennedy's face always seems to reflect the position he is in. On television interviews, when there are only lights and cameramen in front of him, he is uncomfortable. And he becomes a thin, beleaguered looking guy whose neck seems to shrink until it becomes a chicken neck and his voice gets thin and halting. He hates these cold, studio television shows, and he does very badly on them. When he appeared with Ronald Reagan, answering questions from students in London, Kennedy was a fumbling, halting little boy. Reagan seemed so strong and confident and smooth that nobody noticed that Reagan made one of the immortal statements of our time. Ronald called our Bomb "that great weapon" and said that we always should remember we have never used it. But when Kennedy has a big crowd in front of him, particularly a college crowd, say 20,000 in the field house at Lawrence, Kansas, the eyes flash and his face begins to work. Smiling, emphasizing, fighting—the voice gets hoarse and loud and much more powerful. He is not the brother. He is rough, and emotional. But strong. Very strong.

Kennedy took off his jacket when he got to his seat. He reached up for pillows. He dropped five pillows onto the floor. He threw a blue blanket on top of them.

"I need some sleep," he said.

"This thing is only starting and you're tired already," a photographer said.

"I'll be all right," he said. He looked up and saw a television crew swaying through the aisle to film him sleeping on the plane floor. "The question is, how are the people going to stand it? Look at all the cameras. This is only March. How are they going to be able to take us all from now until November? If we're starting off with so much this early."

"Well, one thing should help. We know that the public has a great attention span," somebody said.

Kennedy laughed. He waved his hand around in the air. "It's wonderful," he said. "They see so many things and hear so many things, and everything is flying around and they think they heard something and they don't know where they heard it. Crazy."

"If you talk to them for more than two minutes and thirty seconds on one subject, they go off into space on you," somebody said.

"I know," he said.

"They walk around," another said, "with a Nash Kelvinator Refrigerator

opening up in their heads, two girls running along the beach to get a cigarette, 35 gunshots in a cowboy saloon and someplace in there, a sentence about Khe Sanh they heard somewhere."

"What do you think we should do about it?" he said.

"I don't know. I know the people are going to be so tired of politics by November, all they'll want to see is Mickey Mouse on television."

Kennedy hunched up under the blanket and closed his eyes.

Charles Spaulding, a New York investment banker who worked in the 1960 campaign because he was John F. Kennedy's friend, was a few seats down, drinking a cup of coffee. "It seems like everything stopped," he said. "I can remember this same plane trip in 1960. And his brother was asleep on the floor the same as he is now."

Two of Kennedy's sisters, Jean Smith and Pat Lawford, sat together on the other side of the aisle from their brother. Kennedy slept on the floor while cameramen stood over him, holding up lights, and taking footage. He got up an hour before the plane was due in San Francisco and he sat talking to campaign aide Fred Dutton and when the plane started to come down into San Francisco, the two sisters had their compacts out and Jean Smith said, "How do we look?"

Somebody sitting in front of them said, "All right. You know, it *is* eight years later."

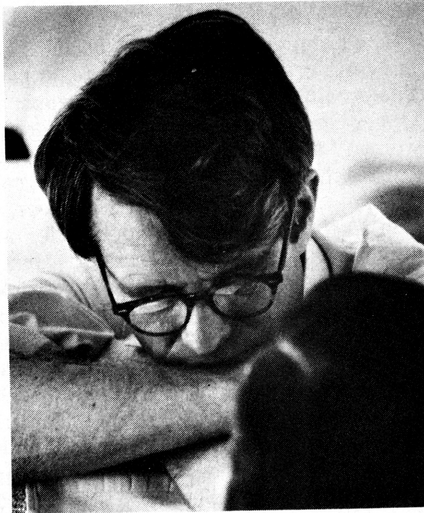
The two women let out a yell.

The pilot said over the loud speaker, "For those of you with the Kennedy party, please remain on board. There is quite a large delegation waiting outside. For others, please use the front exit and we'll try to get you a police escort through the crowds."

The front door opened and Pierre Salinger walked into the plane, smiling, shaking hands.

Robert Kennedy borrowed his sister's hairbrush and ran it across his hair. He waited until the plane was empty and then he came out with Salinger, his two sisters and Jesse Unruh. About 200 photographers and newsmen waited at the bottom of the steps. At the top of a ramp, signs and faces pressed against the glass. Kennedy walked up the ramp and he let his body go limp as he came through the door and into a mob that screamed and pushed and clawed at him. You let your body go slack to avoid injury. The people with Kennedy, a bodyguard and other assistants and the airport police, pushed against the crowd and guided this smiling rag-doll body into a tangle of signs and people and it took a half hour to get through.

This pushing and grabbing and screaming is the inheritance of Robert Kennedy. He has had it from the start, from the morning at the Fulton Fish Market in New York when he made his first day's campaign for the Senate. The fish market workers bulled against each other to touch him. And then there was Jones Beach and 300,000 people running across the beach and their feet raising so much sand that it hung in the air like dust and choked everybody. And in Harlem, when he was speaking on the street during a local campaign for a judge, the kids began to race after his car and there were so many of them and they were running so fast that the sound filled an entire block.



". . . Kennedy did not begin his campaign in March. He began it on a November of another year..."

In California, he finished the first day with reddened, scratched hands and fingernail marks on his cheeks. His secretary, Angela Novello, stood in the crowded motel room in San Jose and looked for cuff links.

"They tear the cuff links from his shirts," she said.

"Get round ones," somebody said. "The square edges can cut somebody's hand. Cut his, too."

"They seemed starved," Kennedy said. "They show it in the faces. They're starved for something."

"For what?" he was asked.

"To be drawn together. To look for a way out of the war. They hate the war. Anything you say about it. They hate it."

Downstairs, the two who write most of his speeches, Adam Walinsky, 31, and Jeff Greenfield, 24, stood waiting for a table, talking about the crowds and the reaction to the words.

"Can you imagine what it was like in 1960?" Greenfield said. "Do you know what the campaign consisted of? Quemoy and Matsu. A missile gap. Can you imagine anybody running on a missile gap today? And gross national product. It was slipping. We were going to fall behind Russia. Did you ever hear of anything so silly as that for campaign issues?"

"It was innocence in 1960," Walinsky said. "These are issues. This thing is entirely different."

Kennedy was talking about this later. "I haven't heard anybody mention Catholics," he said. "That was very important once, wasn't it? And my age. Forty-two. Nobody's bothered to bring that up yet. Yes, it is much different this time."

It is different because of the years and because the things that trouble the country are wider and deeper. And the candidate this time is Robert, not John Kennedy, and Robert Kennedy is different. He can become an issue by himself. He started out with the McCarthy Committee and now he is a liberal. How the hell can you change this much in life? As attorney general, he was in favor of wire tapping, and this is straight from McCarthy. And then there is the personal animosity between him and Lyndon Johnson. Oh, don't worry about that being a rumor. There was one night when Kennedy got into the elevator in the apartment house in New York and the man running the elevator gave him a newspaper and Kennedy looked at the picture of Johnson on the first page. "There he is," Kennedy said. He smiled. He put the paper down. "You know what he told me one day?" he said. "He told me that he has these hats and when he's out campaigning and there's a crowd he takes his hat and throws it into the crowd. Then he watches them fight for it. He told me it's fun."

These were the stories, and they would have come from both sides and would have taken up our summer. For the personal dislike was there. And if you know anything about Robert Kennedy, you know that he does not lie, that he knows how to laugh, particularly at himself. Above all, he can fight. He can fight like hell. But in one night, Lyndon Johnson took the grubbiness out of Democratic politics in 1968. And now Robert Kennedy, older and wounded by the years, runs a national political campaign for himself, not for his brother, and it is eight years later and everybody says the time has made it all different.

And then you get on a plane in New York and it lands in California and you come out of the door and find there has been no change.

One hand goes into the jacket pocket. It comes out, and the finger points. And now the voice gets loud and a little hoarse and the New England accents roll out and people who were all through it once before are shaken by the sameness.

"I come to California to *ahsk* for your help and your hand."

How long it will last and how far it will go is up to the system, and the tomorrows of daily life. But when Robert Kennedy began his campaign to become president of the United States, it was not in March in California. It was a November of another year and another place and everybody was there again. ■