

The Court Martial of John F. Kennedy

By T.R. Healy

“Turn around,” Russell Marney muttered to himself as he followed his son’s midnight blue Mustang down another dark and narrow street. “Turn around, damn it!”

He had been trailing Russ for nearly twenty minutes, from one end of town to another, always staying a couple of car lengths behind so he would not be spotted. All along, he hoped his son would stop at some place he was familiar with, at his last girlfriend’s place or one of his friends from high school, but he just kept driving farther and farther into areas of town Russell had not been to in years. He just could not believe Russ was in this part of town, which was known as Torn Hills because of the barren hills that overlooked it, wished somehow he could will him to turn around and return home. Nothing good happened down here. Not years ago when he used to drive to Torn Hills to buy six packs of malt liquor as a high school kid, and definitely not these days.

Driving past a burnt-out church, he suddenly heard a scream and looked in the rearview mirror and saw a woman in skintight jeans running across the street, her high heels in her hands. He didn’t see anyone running after her so he assumed she must be wrestling with her own demons. People in Torn Hills had a lot to scream about, he reckoned, and nothing he could do for her tonight was likely to relieve her pain so he continued on, his eyes back on his son’s Mustang.

He was so worried he felt like screaming, too, sure his scream would be much louder than the woman’s. But he couldn’t, however much he wanted to, because Russ might hear him and he could not let him know he was following him.

“Mind your own business,” he remembered his son snarling at him a few nights ago when he confronted him again about some of the people he was hanging out with at the community college he attended, “not mine.”

“But you are part of my business.”

“Well, you’re not part of mine. Not anymore.”

“Oh, son, how can you say that?”

“Because it’s the truth.”

Russ, who just turned nineteen, still lived at home though he had moved out of his bedroom to the spare room above the garage. He was not just his only son, but ever since his mother passed away five years ago, his best friend. They were as close as a father and son could be, he believed, certainly closer than he ever was with his father, Big Russ. They fished together and played tennis, attended concerts and basketball games, sought one another’s advice on all sorts of matters. That closeness started to diminish some after Russ enrolled in college, as Russell expected it would, but it still was very strong. Or so he thought until a couple of months ago when Russ began spending more and more time with friends he made in school. Repeatedly he urged his son to introduce him to them, and he said he would but, so far, he had yet to meet a single one. And he became concerned, especially when his son began spending more and more time away from home, so one evening he called one of Russ’ old high school friends, Tim Gargan, and asked if he had met any of these people.

“Yeah, Russ introduced me to a couple of guys he met in college a few months ago.”

“What did you think of them?”

Not sure what to say, he was silent.

“Hello, Tim, are you there?”

“Yeah, I’m here, Mr. Marney.”

“So what sort of guys are they?”

Again, he hesitated. “Not the sort I expected to see Russ with, if you want my honest opinion.”

“In what way?”

“They just seemed too eager to take risks, unnecessary risks really, and as you well know that’s not Russ. He’s not one ever to do something if he doesn’t have a pretty good idea of what the outcome is going to be.”

Halfway through the next block, his son slowed down, and so did he, worried again that he may have been spotted. His heart thumped against his ribs and, instinctively, he pressed his right hand against his chest as if to silence it. Still it banged, loudly, emphatically. He was tempted to turn around and leave when, all of a sudden, his son pulled over to the curb, just a few feet from the corner, and turned off his engine and headlights. He pulled over, too, parking behind a wheelbarrow someone had left in the street.

To his surprise, his son remained in his car as if waiting for someone, and, sure enough, a lanky guy in a knitted prayer hat appeared from behind a crumbling stone wall. Slowly he limped over to the car and leaned his head through the driver's window for a moment then leaned back and removed a small package from his back pocket and handed it to Russ who then handed him something that his father assumed was money.

"Sons of bitches," he growled, realizing Tim was right about the people Russ was hanging out with at school. "Goddamn sons of bitches."

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For a long moment Russell stared at the rusted rim attached to the backboard above his garage door then, almost before he realized it, he shot the old Rawlings basketball and watched it fall straight through the center of the rim. A grin quickly appeared in the corners of his mouth. There was no longer a net hanging from the rim so he made a soft, swishing sound with his tongue as if one was still there.

He inherited his love for the game from his father who for many years was a high school basketball coach. And though he was not a very good player, seldom getting off the bench when he played for his father in high school, he was an excellent outside shooter who could sink jump shots from just about any spot on the court. Even after he got married, he continued to shoot, either at some basket in a park or later at the one he put above his garage. Night after night, before dinner, he shot at least sixty shots, diligently moving from one side of the basket to the other side. Often, as he did as a boy, he imagined he took and made the final shot in

some crucial game---a shot that would be remembered for years by those who saw it.

Russ often shagged balls for him when he was shooting, the scarlet shorts he wore then so long they almost touched the tops of his hightops. Constantly he pestered him to show him how to shoot a jump shot but for a long time he refused, concerned if the youngster started too early he might develop some bad habits. Instead, he started him out shooting two-handed set shots a foot from the basket, figuring that was the surest way to develop the proper grip and release of a basketball.

It was because of Russ' enthusiasm for the game that he mounted the hoop on his garage so the boy could practice at home as much as he liked. He always wished his father had put up a hoop at their house but he refused because he wanted him to take the initiative and go to some park or schoolground if he wanted to play ball.

"You'll never improve if all you do is shoot by yourself," his father told him whenever he asked if he could have his own basket.

Staring again at the rim, the worn basketball poised on his left hip, he knew his father was right, however much he hated to admit it. He never did become a complete player, just someone who seldom missed a jump shot when no one was around d to guard him.

Russell and his father were not close. Certainly not as close as Big Russ was with some of the youngsters who played on his teams. Those guys he would wrap in his arms after victories, hug them as if he had known them for many years. Russell often felt his father was disappointed with him. He knew he was embarrassed that he was not a better basketball player, a coach's son should not be a bench warmer, but it was not just as an athlete that he had not lived up to his expectations as his only child. They seldom had anything to say to one another. They were just so different, strangers practically, not much closer than guests at the same hotel who stayed in their rooms and kept to themselves.

About the only thing they shared was an interest in President John F. Kennedy. Big Russ,

as a high school student, worked in the 1960 presidential campaign as a “Kids for Kennedy” volunteer. He handed out buttons and brochures, planted signs in lawns, addressed envelopes, hung ribbons and balloons. He did whatever he was asked so hopeful was he that an Irish Catholic candidate might succeed to the highest elected office in the country.

“The day JFK was elected was a victory for all Irish Catholics,” his father claimed. “No longer did we have to hang our heads in shame and tolerate the nasty remarks of others. No longer were we thought of as second-class citizens. We were as American as anyone after his election.”

Years later, after the assassination, after Big Russ became a history teacher, the influence of President Kennedy was still very evident. Not only did he rigorously endorse and defend nearly all of his policies and programs in his classrooms, but, consciously or not, he also adopted some of his mannerisms. Frequently he tucked his left hand inside the pocket of his suit jacket, and when he wanted to emphasize a particular point he was making, he closed his right hand into a fist, with the thumb sticking out of the top, and gently wagged it with his wrist. He also added an “r” sound to some of his words and even quoted Robert Frost on occasion.

Russell looked forward to talking about the young president with his father, not because he was that fond of him or his administration, but because it enabled them to have an extended conversation for a change. Usually he and his father only engaged in small talk about basketball or the weather or some program they saw on television, but when they talked about Kennedy, his father seemed genuinely interested in what he said. So, for several weeks, he became almost as interested in the slain president as his father and read one article after another about him and his programs and aspirations. He never spent so much time in the library as he did those weeks when he was researching the life of John F. Kennedy. He wanted to be as knowledgeable as he could about the man so that the views he expressed were responsible and accurate and informed. Above all, he wanted to gain the respect of his father with all the information he had gathered. If he couldn’t impress him on the basketball court, he hoped to do it in their conversations about Kennedy.

“You’ve certainly done your homework,” his father complimented him one evening after they discussed the Bay of Pigs invasion. “You’ve told me two or three things I didn’t know about that fiasco.”

“I did?”

“You certainly did, son.”

His eyes brightened not only with surprise but satisfaction.

“I ought to invite you to speak to my U.S. History class this spring when we start to study the Kennedy presidency.”

One of his father’s most prized possessions was a reproduction of the PT-109 tie clasp that Kennedy and his supporters distributed during the presidential campaign. The gold-toned clasp was modeled after the plywood patrol boat that Kennedy commanded in the South Pacific during the Second World War. Because he was so young some voters were concerned if he had the experience and strength and determination to be the leader of the country. The tie clasp was a not too subtle way to inform people that as a naval officer he fought the Japanese and was commended for his admirable service.

Big Russ kept the tie clasp separate from his other pieces of jewelry, which he left loose in a small ceramic bowl on his dresser. Wrapped neatly in a small velvet cloth, he stored it in an empty Nabisco tin that he kept locked in his desk drawer. He only wore it a few times a year.

Always on Saint Patrick’s Day, and sometimes on his birthday, and when he remembered on the anniversary of the “Ich bin ein Berliner” speech.

Russell initially confined his reading to the three years Kennedy served in the White House. Then, aware of how much the tie clasp meant to his father, he began to read about Kennedy’s service in the war. Always his father spoke of it as distinguished, at times even heroic, a true reflection of the character of the future president of the United States. So he was surprised when he discovered that others were not as impressed with Kennedy’s performance

as a combat officer.

The primary mission of PT boats stationed in the Solomon Islands was to interdict the late night shipment of enemy troops and supplies through a passage in the islands called by American sailors the "Tokyo Express." It was a difficult assignment to carry out, however, because the Japanese vessels were so much larger. Not only were PT boats smaller, they were very brittle, their three engines unreliable, and their torpedoes often defective.

On the night of August 1, 1943, PT-109 was one of three boats patrolling for Japanese ships in a body of water called the Blakett Strait. A little after two o'clock in the morning the Amagiri, a Japanese escort destroyer, smashed into the 109's starboard side, shearing off a sizable chunk of the boat. Quickly the engines burst into flames, and Kennedy ordered everyone to jump into the water. Two of the thirteen crew members died as a result of the collision. It was the first time a Japanese destroyer had rammed a PT boat, and, as it turned out, the only time it happened during the war.

Over breakfast one Saturday morning, a stack of note cards beside his plate, Russell went over some of the surprising things he had learned about Kennedy's service as a PT boat skipper. His father listened closely, seldom interrupting him as he described the hit and run tactics employed by the 109 and other PT boats. Also, he spoke about the 109 crew, noting among other things how fond they were of a concoction known as "torp juice," which was a mixture of pineapple juice and grain alcohol used in torpedo motors. But when he discussed the sinking of the boat his father's face started to redden, as it so often did when he argued with referees, and he began to fidget with his silverware. Still he was quiet, though, letting his son speak until the issue of culpability was raised.

"Afterward, when Kennedy was asked how his boat could have been struck by a destroyer," Russell read from one of his note cards, "he admitted his confusion, saying, 'I actually do not know. It happened so quickly.'"

“So what are you saying, son, that he was to blame for the loss of his boat?”

“I don’t know if he was or not,” he answered. “I’ve still got some more reading to do.”

“Well, I wouldn’t bother. The man was a hero. He got a medal to prove it, as you well know.”

He started to reply but his father raised his right hand, making it clear he had heard enough, and sprang out of his chair as quickly as he sprang out of chairs during ball games. He was confused, figured his father would want to know who was responsible for the loss of the 109. Even so, he thought his father would return to the breakfast table to resume their conversation but, instead, he got in his car and roared out of the driveway. He was disappointed, angry even, as he idly shuffled his note cards. And he suspected then that the only reason his father ever listened to what he had to say about Kennedy was because he always confirmed everything he believed about the President. As soon as he breathed a hint of criticism, his father became upset and refused to hear another word. That was the way he was when anyone dared to question plays he called in a game.

Not budging from his chair, he stared at the thick stack of note cards for several minutes, thinking of all the work he had done just so he could have something to talk about with his father other than basketball and the weather. Dejected, he was tempted to throw the cards in the waste basket but, instead, he decided to continue reading about the sinking of PT-109. He was interested in finding out who was responsible even if his father wasn’t.

The more he read the less inspiring did Kennedy’s performance appear that night. To be sure, none of the members of his crew thought he was at fault for the collision. However, there were others, particularly his immediate supervisors, who thought otherwise and believed the young officer was negligent. They thought he demonstrated poor judgment and were baffled that he was unable to detect the Japanese destroyer since the water was so phosphorescent that evening. In particular, they criticized him for failing to have anyone monitoring the radio at the time of the collision. Once before he had escaped serious reprimand for his lack of judgment, possibly even court martial, when he plowed the 109 into a fuel dock while racing

another boat, thereby earning the sobriquet “Crash Kennedy.”

Even the Japanese commanders were not certain about what exactly happened. The captain of the destroyer claimed he gave the order to pass astern of the 109 and believed the collision was an accident while the skipper of the vessel insisted he deliberately crashed into the boat. It was all very nebulous, as Kennedy acknowledged many years later to a biographer shortly after the Bay of Pigs debacle, “That whole story was more fucked up than Cuba.”

If his father were not so stubborn, if he would have listened to him, Russell would have pointed out that there was plenty of blame to go around. But he knew Big Russ wouldn’t listen to him anymore about this subject so, out of sheer spite, he decided to organize his thoughts in writing, as if preparing a paper at school, and make the argument that Kennedy should have had his crew better prepared for their assignment. Above all, he should have insisted that they stay alert because he knew that it was very likely that Japanese vessels would be returning through the route they came after making their delivery of men and supplies. His defenders claimed it was too dark out that night to see the advancing destroyer but crews on other boats saw it and even radioed the 109 but received no response.

For almost a week, he worked on the paper after school, arguing as cogently as he could that Kennedy was primarily at fault for the collision that destroyed his boat. He intended then to present it to his father on his birthday, which would be in another week, but when that day arrived all he gave him was a card. He suspected it was unlikely he’d read the paper, not after he saw the words “court martial” in the title, and if he did, he would dismiss it as all nonsense. So he put the paper away in a drawer and never showed it to anyone and never looked at it again. He didn’t regret writing it, only regretted that he didn’t have the nerve to present it to his father.

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“No more bets,” Russell announced wearily as he watched the tiny white ball spin around and around the roulette wheel. “Please, no more bets.”

No doubt because he was so tired the ball seemed to creep around the slatted wheel, moving so slowly he wondered if it was ever going to stop. Finally, when it did, he gasped, "Nineteen, black, is the winner," and set the clear blue marker on the number. Then, after he paid off the winners, he took his first break of the night and went out on the south terrace to smoke a cigarette. He needed one. He could barely keep his eyes open the past five minutes. During the week, he drove a bread truck and on weekends for the last three months he worked as a croupier at an Indian casino on the edge of town. He enjoyed the extra income but the schedule was brutal and he didn't know how much longer he could continue working two jobs.

"You look like you're having a hard night," Wes Landry, another croupier, remarked after he joined him on the terrace.

He shrugged, exhaling a plume of smoke.

"Someone give you a hard time at the roulette table?"

"Oh, there's always a couple of people who think they got down their bets in time and are pissed off when you tell them they didn't. But that's not what's bothering me."

"What is it, Russell?"

"Russ, my son. I'm worried about the direction he's headed in."

"And what direction is that?"

"Down a dark road," he answered cryptically, exhaling more cigarette smoke.

Wes narrowed his eyes. "I don't understand. I thought he was going to college."

"He is."

"So what's the problem?"

Stubbing his cigarette into the corner of the bench he was sitting on, he proceeded to tell his colleague about his suspicion that his son was using drugs. "I didn't want to believe it but I am afraid it's true. And three nights ago I followed him out to Torn Hills where I watched him purchase something from someone on the street."

"And you think he was buying drugs?"

"He sure as hell wasn't buying Girl Scout cookies from this guy. That's for damn sure."

“You say anything to him about it?”

He shook his head. “I didn’t want to tell him I followed him. I was too embarrassed.”

“You should say something, Russell.”

“Oh, if I did, he’d just deny it, or, worse, tell me to get lost and move out and go stay with the people who got him involved with drugs in the first place.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I worry about the kid all the time and I just don’t know what I should do.”

Wes, silent, leaned back and stared at the bright string of lights that surrounded the parking lot. “I think you have to confront your son,” he said adamantly, “and make it clear to him that what he’s doing is wrong. All it can do is ruin his life.”

Russell sighed. “I don’t know if it will do any good, to be honest.”

“Maybe not, partner, but you should try. If you don’t stop him, someone with a badge will.”

His fingers dribbling against his knees, Russell inclined his head his head in bewilderment.

“A couple of years ago, a cousin of mine was having a problem with her youngest boy who was hanging out at this garage after school with some pretty rough people who were drinking beer and doing I don’t know what else. So, late one night, she and her husband went there and performed what she described as an interdiction.”

He winced a little when he heard that word, remembering it from all the reading he did about PT-109 when he was trying to impress his father many years ago.

“So, if you should ever consider doing something like that, I’d be glad to go along with you.”

“I’ll have to think about that, Wes.”

“Of course. But if you decide to do it, just let me know and I’ll be more than happy to join you.”

“I will.”

Later that evening, before he went to bed, Russell unlocked the small cedar chest in his closet and took out the dented cookie tin in which his father kept his PT-109 tie clasp. He had not looked at it in years, not since he brought it home shortly after his father passed away not quite seven years ago. Carefully he unwrapped the piece of velvet cloth that it was kept in then held it up to the closet light. He was still amazed how much the tiny item meant to his father. From the reading he did about Kennedy he remembered that thousands of bronze tie clasps were provided to the candidate and his supporters to hand out during the campaign. Five clasps, however, were modeled in gold for him to wear, and though he was cautioned not to hand any of them out, he did, along with the bronze ones.

If only his father had one of those, he thought, pressing the clasp against his pajama top, then it would be worth a pretty penny. He really wasn't sure why he still kept it other than that it reminded him of one more futile attempt to make a connection with his father.

All of a sudden something struck the right side of his car and, startled, Russell looked in the rearview mirror and saw an angry man in the crosswalk. He was so focused on keeping up with his son, who was three car lengths ahead of him, he didn't even notice the pedestrian until now and assumed he must have come close to hitting him for the guy to be so livid.

"Damn," he groaned in consternation. "You could have killed someone, you idiot."

At once, he smacked the heel of his right hand against his forehead.

"Stay alert," he scolded himself as he trailed his son around a jagged corner, "or go the hell home."

Earlier, he had seriously considered asking Wes to join him tonight but at the last minute decided not to, figuring the less people involved in what his friend described as an "interdiction" the better. He wished now he had asked him along because he was sure Wes

would have spotted that person in the crosswalk. He was just damn fortunate he didn't hit the guy and wondered if, perhaps, it was because he was carrying his father's PT-109 tie clasp in his jacket pocket. One season, near the end of his coaching career, his father somehow managed to lead a very undersized team into the finals of the City Championship and, on an impulse, wore the 109 tie clasp the night of the game. Though they were definitely not the better team, they were that night, and he always believed the tie clasp was a factor in their surprise victory.

"Many, many years ago, son, tribesmen in Africa were known to carry with them the feet of animals because they believed then they would be able to run as fast as the animals," he told him after the game. "We were just a tad bit quicker than our opponents tonight, and I believe this tie clasp might have had something to do with that."

He had never been one who prayed a lot or wore charms or medallions but tonight he needed all the good fortune he could muster. So, remembering that title game his father's team won, he slipped the lucky tie clasp into his pocket before he got into his car. It couldn't hurt, he figured, and just might help.

Slowly he drove past one familiar block after another, well aware this was the route Russ took the previous time he followed him to Torn Hills. Foolishly he had hoped his son would be going somewhere else tonight, a café, a theater, some place that would not cause him to worry, but all along he knew where he was headed. And, as before, the realization sickened him. Sometimes, when he followed his son, he wondered what his father would have done if he suspected he was doing something really bad. Probably he would scream at him for a few minutes, maybe even throw a basketball at him as he used to do to players in practice until he was reprimanded by a principal, but other than that he had no idea what he would have done. He was pretty sure, though, he wouldn't be following him around town as he was following his son. He would have considered that ridiculous, pathetic even, a sheer waste of time.

He passed the burning oil drum he passed the other time he trailed his son, passed the yellow Caprice still sitting on cinder blocks, passed an upside down American flag hanging from the porch of a house that looked as if it might collapse any minute. He was tempted to beep his

horn to see if the blare might bring it down but couldn't take the risk that Russ might spot him.

God Almighty, what was his son doing in this pitiful place? he wondered as he passed the faded flag snapping in the wind. He thought he knew him better than anyone but he had no idea why he was down here.

Around one corner then another then Russ pulled over to the curb in front of the boarded-up liquor store where he had stopped the other time and, as before, Russell parked on the opposite side of the street. Not sure if this was really happening, he closed his eyes, hoping it was all a dream, but when he opened them he saw the same lanky figure limping toward his son's car.

"Leech!" he shrieked, squeezing the steering wheel with both hands. "Goddamn leech!"

Abruptly, then, he pressed his hand down on his horn and the guy approaching his son immediately turned around and stepped back into the shadows. Then he got out of his car and switched on the flashlight he brought with him and pointed it at his son, anxiously rubbing the 109 clasp in his pocket.

The End

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