

No Greater Love: The Assassination of a President

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After the Warren Commission, after the Jim Garrison affair, after countless books, films and documentaries, there is still another possible explanation for the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

When the young woman came into his office, Prof. Blackmore assumed she was a graduate student interested in his philosophy course. She was in her late twenties and fairly attractive-not beautiful-but rather nice looking. Her first words destroyed nearly forty-five years of complacency.

James Blackmore had been teaching the same classes at an undistinguished state university for thirty-five years. Each term he offered a survey course on the history of the Middle Ages, an upper-division course on the Reformation, and a graduate-level seminar on Medieval Philosophy. The courses, and the passing of the years, had become almost seamless for Blackmore. It had been many years since he bothered to revise his notes. There was something very comforting in the unchanging nature of his subject. Blackmore highly valued stability in his life. In many ways he had taken on an aura of long dead history that some of his students felt mirrored the subjects he taught. Still, Blackmore was essentially a kind person and generally well liked by most of the continual parade of students.

"I'm Nancy Hillyard from the *New York Times*. Could I talk to you for a few minutes?"

Time doesn't really pause, but for Blackmore the next moments seemed to stretch into eternity. Finally, he recovered enough to offer his visitor a chair.

In a dry tone, he asked, "What can I possibly do for you?"

"This will probably sound a bit crazy to you," she replied. "Two years ago I did a story on all of the wild variations on the Kennedy assassination -JFK's, that is. It got some favorable letters, and my editor was very pleased. I'm here now because of one piece of mail prompted by that story."

"Go on"

A slight grimace crossed her face . . . puzzlement at Blackmore's almost total lack of reaction. "Actually, it wasn't a letter . . . just a picture . . . this picture."

She pulled an 8x10 photograph from her briefcase and handed it to Blackmore. The scene, obviously taken with a wide-angle lens, showed one of the well-known views of the assassination. At one corner of the photograph was the famous "grassy knoll."

"That's interesting. I don't think I've ever seen one from this particular angle . . . and I have read rather extensively on JFK's assassination. But I don't see how I can help you. My field is the Middle Ages. May I ask why you came to me?"

"I have another picture," Nancy said. "This one is a blowup of a section of the first picture."

The second shot she handed him obviously was an enhanced view of the corner of the knoll, centering on some small bushes.

"Yes?" Blackmore said quizzically, "What am I supposed to see?"

"Look closely at the center of the bush- does that look like a face to you?" Nancy asked.

"Not very much," Blackmore replied. "I still don't know why you are here, Ms. Hillyard."

Although his expression didn't change, Nancy did notice a small tremor in Blackmore's hand holding the picture.

"Please call me Nancy, Professor. You know, it's very interesting what has happened in the past few years with photographic capabilities and computers. Before the developments in space technology, we never could have gotten this image any clearer. But now, let me show you what a computer enhancement of this image brought out." She handed him a third picture.

At first, Blackmore didn't take the photograph from her. Instead, he turned towards the window and stared at the gray fall landscape. Finally, he reached out and took the picture from Nancy. He looked at it for long minutes.

When Blackmore looked up again, he said in a very even voice, "Does this mean you've finally verified the existence of another assassin?"

"It's a bit more than that," Nancy responded. "I have one last photograph to show you. It's the result of a computer process called morphing that can show how a person's appearance will change with time. We applied the process to the computer-enhanced version of the face you saw in the other photograph." She handed him the last picture.

Blackmore sat very still, staring at a picture that definitely had some similarity to what he saw in his mirror each morning.

"It's taken me two years of research to get from this picture to your office." She leaned forward in her chair and said with a catch in her voice, "Would you care to comment?"

Nancy, despite her youthful appearance, was a seasoned reporter. She watched Blackmore's face very closely. There was no worry, no fear, barely any reaction at all, except for what appeared to be a fleeting expression of sadness . . . the last emotion she expected to see.

"I should have known the lawyer in Bobby would make him document this, even if he never meant it to be seen," he said.

Of all the possible responses Nancy thought she might get, these words threw her completely. "Bobby?" she said on a rising note of almost hysteria. "Bobby Kennedy? Robert F. Kennedy? What in God's name do you mean?"

"I guess I'll have to explain something to you . . . but not here in my office, it isn't secure."

Nancy thought about possible dangers for a moment, but the thrill of a possible Pulitzer Prize overrode her good sense. "All right, where do you want to go?"

"Could we just take a ride in my car?" Blackmore said, "You really don't have to worry."

She hesitated moments longer. She had come on a very slim lead- and on her vacation at that. She hadn't even had the nerve to tell her editor about the developing story. A friend at the paper taught her to do the computer enhancement work on the first photo. Another did the aging work on the small segment that turned out to be Blackmore's picture but didn't know the context. Nancy thought about how shaken she had been when she first saw Blackmore and realized how close was the resemblance. Now, his totally unexpected reaction put her way off balance. The reality that she could be sitting in the same room with one of President Kennedy's assassins was beginning to sink in on her. She almost laughed at the thought that he had the nerve to ask her to go for a "ride!"

But her reporter's zeal again took over for her good sense. Besides, she was having a hard time maintaining a belief in Blackmore's involvement when she looked at this graying, stoop-shouldered academic. It seemed inconceivable that this person could have been a part of the assassination.

Finally she said, "OK, but I'd rather just walk around campus with you."

"Fine," Blackmore replied, "but I have to ask this- are you taping this conversation?"

"I have a tape recorder in my purse, and I would like to use it if you don't object."

"I'm afraid I do. I'll have to ask you to leave the recorder here. It will be quite safe."

Nancy couldn't see she had a choice if she wanted the story. She took a tiny recorder from her purse and left it on his desk.

They went out into a misty world of old granite buildings spread around a green park-setting. As they walked around the campus, Nancy listened while this unassuming little man told her a story that grew more implausible the more he talked.

According to Blackmore, he left the Marines after serving in Korea. He became involved with Kennedy during his first Senate campaign in 1952. He was able to meet JFK on a number of occasions and developed a deep affection and loyalty for the politician. Kennedy, in turn, arranged for a scholarship for Blackmore at Georgetown University and later got him a job with the State Department. Their friendship was low-key, and very few people in Kennedy's circle were aware of Blackmore.

Blackmore worked in Washington for a number of years, never again meeting Kennedy in person, but he corresponded occasionally with the Senator and then President. until early in 1963 when he received a letter from the President, asking Blackmore to visit the White House.

"Of course I went. I admired the man tremendously and would have done a lot more than just visit if asked. And I did do a lot more, eventually."

On April 14, 1963, Blackmore met privately with the President in the Oval Office. It had been years since the two had been together, and Blackmore was shocked at the toll the office had taken on

the man. Kennedy looked physically ill.

After a short general conversation, JFK asked, "You were a sharp shooter, a sniper in the Marines, weren't you, Jim?"

The question was so unexpected that Blackmore hesitated before answering. Then, "Yes sir, that's true- I even won a few matches. And they used me as a sniper in Korea"

Marine snipers have a motto, right?" Kennedy continued.

"Yes sir, we do--one shot, one kill."

"That was quite few years ago . . . have you kept up your skills?"

"I go out on a range several times a year. It's like riding a bicycle . . . it doesn't take a lot to keep the eye in shape."

"And I understand you stayed in the Reserve, right?"

"Yes sir and I am still a Master Sergeant in the Marine Reserve."

Now Kennedy seemed to have a real problem continuing. He looked out on the garden for a few moments, and then stared directly into Blackmore's eyes.

"I have a great need for your sharp shooting skills. I may have to ask you do something that I never thought I would ask of any man."

"Mr. President, you know how much I admire you, and how strong my feelings are for my country. I can't think of anything you could ask that I would not do."

"Even if I asked you to take your rifle and kill someone from a distance?" Kennedy said.

Blackmore had realized where the conversation was leading, and he didn't hesitate in replying, "Mr. President, I know you would never ask such a thing unless it was a matter of national security. I would consider it an order from my Commander-in-Chief." After a few seconds pause, he continued. "Who is it- Castro?"

"No," Kennedy replied, "It's me."

Blackmore knew he could not have heard the man correctly. His jaw dropped open and all he could get out was, "What . . . what . . . what?"

"Threw you a curve there, didn't I Jim? But, deeply as it pains me to say it, I meant exactly what I said." Kennedy went on, "I'm going to tell you something that is known in full only by two other people in the world- Bobby and Dr. Raymond Fuller. In nine months, give or take a month or two, I will be dead. In the last few months I'm told I will be hopelessly insane . . . totally out of control."

While Blackmore listened with horror, Kennedy went on to explain in a dead voice that he had

been diagnosed as having an inoperable brain tumor, malignant glioma. The diagnosis was confirmed at three different top-level medical research facilities by submitting anonymous examination information as a clinical case. Kennedy had accepted the finality of the diagnosis, particularly since it explained some symptoms he was having. Now he was trying to find the best way to deal with the future in terms of his responsibilities. After long talks with his brother, the two had come up with a plan they felt would be better for the country (and Camelot) than a lingering death with a mentally unbalanced President.

"I can't stand the thought of being another Wilson," Kennedy explained.

A plot to assassinate the President would be set in motion. Through third parties, with total secrecy preventing any connection with the Kennedy's, some mentally unstable person would be encouraged to act, believing himself to be an agent of the Cubans, the military, the Mafia, and/or the Russians. In this way, there would be a rallying of support for the government, and perhaps the shame of the Bay of Pigs would be erased. Everything would be set up in advance but the time and place would not be known by JFK . . . only Bobby, not even Jackie would know.

"But I can't take any chances with this, Jim. I don't want to be horribly wounded but survive. I want it quick and clean. I need a backup shooter than I can trust explicitly. I need you."

* * *

By this time Blackmore and Nancy were sitting on a bench looking across the river than ran through the campus.

"Over the next couple of months we set up the exact actions necessary to put the plan into effect. We selected Dallas as the location. Through intermediaries in the Mafia, who didn't know where the plan originated, we scripted the whole sequence with Oswald and Ruby.

Blackmore turned to her with tears in his eyes and finished, "So, he was my President . . . and I loved him . . . I did what he asked."

When he fell silent, Nancy sat stunned. The story was so impossible. Yet Blackmore's sincerity and continuing anguish even so many years later seemed so real. She found herself completely at a loss for words.

"Well," Blackmore said, "I suppose my story is very difficult for you to accept."

"That's quite an understatement. I have to believe you were involved in the assassination. I have the photographic evidence that at least you were there, holding what certainly looks like a rifle to me. I'm having a problem with the part about JFK's illness . . . that I find really unbelievable. There has never been any suggestion of that kind of medical problem."

"Do you think it would have been the subject of cocktail gossip?" Blackmore snapped. "And you do remember that the President's brain vanished before a complete autopsy?"

"But how could such a thing . . . the illness . . . the plot . . . everything have been kept secret? And where did the original picture come from?"

"You have to remember Jack was able to inspire enormous loyalty in his friends. Only his doctor and Bobby knew the truth about the tumor. But others knew parts of the puzzle . . . the Oswald connection. Even Garrison got hold of a part of it. If you know where to look, you can see some hints in the Warren report. Others, not knowing where the plan originated, were only too happy to help it move forward for their own reasons. The doctor died several years after Dallas and Bobby only five years later. The real puzzle now is how your picture surfaced."

"Then you have no proof at all of what you're asking me to believe?"

"No, that's not true. I have written proof."

"How could you . . . what possible written proof could you have?"

"I have letters from both the President and his brother in their own handwriting. They are orders from my Commander-in-Chief. There is also a Presidential Pardon."

"I'll have to see them," Nancy said.

"If I show you, will you consider dropping your story? At this point, it would only harm a good man's memory."

"I don't know," Nancy said, "I'll have to think about that."

"All right, I'll have to trust you for now. We'll need to go to my safe deposit box. We can just make it before the bank closes."

* * *

It was a small-town bank but apparently catered to some wealthy investors. The safe deposit area was lavish, with private, soundproofed booths for the customers. Blackmore retrieved a medium-sized box from the vault and escorted Nancy into one of the rooms. They sat down.

Nancy felt as if she had been transferred to an alternate universe earlier in the afternoon. Everything had an air of hazy unreality. She still couldn't accept Blackmore's story, even as he opened the box and took out a large manila envelope in a sealed plastic bag. On the outside of the envelope Nancy saw the words, "Pandora Project." Opening it carefully, he handed her several papers.

As she read the top one, she realized it was nothing more than a copy of a social acknowledgment of a gift, sent to someone named Harold T. Hamilton, and dated June 30, 1961. The note was signed "John F. Kennedy." She looked up at Blackmore with a question in her eyes.

"Go on," he said.

Attached to the note was a typewritten letter on business stationery signed by a Jonathan Levitt. The stationery identified Levitt as an appraiser and handwriting expert. Levitt's letter attested to the authenticity of a president letter to Harold Hamilton, with a date matching the first letter.

"I still don't understand," Nancy said.

"That will give you a verified sample of the President's handwriting. Now look at the next two letters."

As she read the next two pages, Nancy felt an incredible mix of emotions. Shock . . . because the first letter was indeed from John F. Kennedy and the second from Robert Kennedy. Both letters referred to the Pandora Project. The contents recalled Blackmore to active duty for a temporary assignment; verified the orders given Blackmore, praised his devotion to duty, and pledged the commitment of the brothers to the project. The final paper was an official Presidential Pardon, forgiving Blackmore for any and all crimes committed between 1963 and 1964.

Finally, all of the afternoon's talk began to be real to Nancy. She felt a growing excitement as she realized she had the sole lead on one of the most important stories of the 20th Century. She also felt a tremendous awe . . . at the Kennedy's actions and the loyalty of this quiet little man sitting next to her.

But there was still an element of disbelief in her mind. "But why would they put such a terrible secret in writing?" she asked.

"Because they were decent men. If it had gone wrong, and I had been caught, they were determined that I wouldn't suffer for carrying out their commands." "I'd like to show you one other thing," Blackmore said.

From the safe deposit box he took a small black case. Opening it, he took out a small medal and hung it around his neck. The medal was a five-pointed star, backed by eagles, with tiny stars mounted on a circle at the center of the larger star. It hung from a blue ribbon with white piping.

"This is the Presidential Medal of Freedom," he said. "Jack said I deserved the Congressional, but there was no way he could get that." The quiet pride was clear in his voice.



For some moments, the two just sat. Then, "So . . . this is the first time in all these years that anyone besides myself has seen these things?"

"Yes-and now what are you going to do?"

As she stared at the medal, Nancy's mind gradually calmed. It was clear to her what needed to be done.

"You've lived with this terrible burden all these years. Someone else has known at least that the sole assassin theory was wrong, because they had the photograph. Whoever that was perhaps is dying and either is getting ready to talk, or has left some testament." "In my mind, you're a hero, Mr. Blackmore. You did a horrendous act out of the highest sense of duty. I think your story deserves to be told."

"But what would be the good of it," he asked. "It would ruin everything that Jack wanted to accomplish."

"No . . . no . . . I can't sit on this . . . it's the greatest story I'll ever cover."

"Are you sure?"

Nancy heard that note of sadness again in his voice. "Don't worry," Nancy said, "you'll be protected. Maybe we can keep your real identify secret. I don't know. I'll have to talk to my editor and think about how to break the story."

"Then I'm sorry," Blackmore said, "but I have one more thing to show you."

He drew another piece of paper from the envelope. Unfolding it, Nancy read:

In recognition of your highest devotion to Duty, Honor, Country, and to your President, by carrying out the orders of the Pandora Project, you have been awarded the country's highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. As the keeper of a vital secret of national security, you are charged most solemnly with the protection of this secret for the rest of your life. Should any third party learn of the Pandora Project, you are hereby specifically ordered to take all necessary actions to protect this nation's honor, including termination with extreme prejudice if necessary.

The document was signed John F. Kennedy, President and Commander-in-Chief.

As Nancy looked up, Blackmore took out a silver cylinder from the deposit box. Holding it towards her face, with tears beginning in his eyes, Blackmore said, "I'm really so very, very sorry . . ."

When he pressed the end of the tube, a small white cloud hit Nancy's nose and mouth.

She had only a brief moment to realize that Blackmore was still on duty-and there would be no Pulitzer-prize winning story after all.