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A KISS, A WINK, A GRASSY KNOLL

The assassination of John F. Kennedy touched a generation--and spawned a wealth of conspiracy theories

Edgar met Natalie when they worked together reprocessing the Zapruder film for use in a music video. He enhanced the images and she edited them anew into an unending loop. They were entwined within their own conspiracy before the job was done.

Not long after, he invited me to his Twenty-fourth Street apartment for dinner, to meet Natalie as well. With trepidation I agreed. Since high school I'd watched him perform his rituals with the blind regularity of a tribe which offered up its virgins without remembering why. A woman showed interest in him, he'd thrust his head into the maw of love; yet, if his feelings were reciprocated, the couple soon found themselves unable to develop their tryst into more than a brief corresponding of mutual obsessions; for as the woman's lessened, his grew, and after so long she would pass again ghostlike into the night.

"It's different this time," he avowed. As ever I chose to believe, the romantic in my soul leading me astray.

After dinner we sat in his living room, talking. Each minute spent in Edgar's cigarette cloud surely stole a more distant minute from my life, but he was always memorable company. Our conversation flowed as freely as the wine Natalie poured for herself; she was attractive, intelligent, and cheerfully argumentative. Edgar clasped her hands in his and constantly stroked her wrists, as if forever needing to be taking her pulse. "Look at what we've done," he said, getting up and inserting their tape into one of his machines that I might judge the fruit of their womb. His television was wall-size; in its blurs I could guess at every shadow. "The group hasn't had any luck getting airplay," he said. "Not even in clubs."

"For reasons of taste, perhaps?" I asked.

Natalie nodded and drew in his smoke as he exhaled. "Exactly. At the band's request the director blue-screened space babes on top of our loop. You can see everything in those garter belts they're wearing."

"And the images bleed at the edges," he added. "The lines overlap. Ours is the pure, if less artistic, version."

Natalie kissed him. When she did they seemed to forget that their surrounding world contained anyone, or anything, other than themselves. Coeval in age, at that point they coexisted in mind as well. Natalie was genuinely different;

something about her forewarned me that she was as careless as Edgar in allowing her lines to bleed into another's. Perhaps that was what each had sought, after all: someone with whom they could sacrifice their soul, that for others, if not themselves, a splendid harvest might later be gathered.

The taped played. "You've done an excellent job," I said. By its look both film and Kennedy could have been shot the day before.

"Considering I used a dupe negative," said Edgar, touching the tip of a fresh cigarette to his old one; he claimed to use a lighter only upon awakening. "It's like washing a window that's never been cleaned before."

The Lincoln emerged from behind a street sign. Kennedy lifted his arms as if shielding his face and reached for his throat's new-made wound. The First Lady stared, seeing all; the governor, one seat ahead, appeared unaware of anything untoward. The President clutched his neck, and then the governor was hit. His cheeks inflated with air forced from the lungs, as if he'd been punched in the stomach by someone unseen.

"The second shot," said Edgar. "You saw the film jump, before the car came out from behind the sign?"

"That wasn't deliberate?"

"Not on our part," said Natalie, her bracelets clinking together as she brushed Edgar's hair from his face. Kennedy slumped toward his wife. "The third bullet fired hits a curb," Edgar said. "The fourth strikes at frame 313." Mrs. Kennedy climbed onto the trunk as the Lincoln raced out of the red mist, as if trying to bring the car to a stop and push it back to where it had been seconds before. The camera panned right, and all disappeared into a fog of trees rising from the grassy knoll. The film relooped; the Lincoln swung slowly onto Elm Street. The crowd cheered as it always had, the President waved as he always would; the unenlightened might believe that God, touched by the First Lady's efforts, reconsidered and pressed rewind, that the scene should replay as intended, that no one be hurt. "Where the film jumps, that proves it."

"Proves what?" I asked.

"That the film was edited," he said. "At the time, certainly. Five, six frames gone, by my estimate. There've always been suspicions."

"But the notion of missing

I was in second grade when the principal announced that school was closing early, the president had been ambushed. footage, that's a new one," Natalie said. "The key to the complicities,"

I was in second grade when the principal announced that school was closing early, that the President had been ambushed. I imagined rustlers, guns drawn, leaping up from behind sagebrush. Edgar never before demonstrated any greater

awareness of complicity than my own, but then, this was one of his traditions, that the fascinations of his other became his own within seconds of his hearing of them. Romance enabled Edgar to allow others to plot his life in advance as carefully as the route of a motorcade through an unsecured city. "You started reading up on this for the project?" I asked. The film jumped; Kennedy lifted his arms Edgar raised his own and pointed to a stack of books atop a black console,

"Natalie lent me part of her collection."

"What would be on this missing footage?" I asked. "The first shot," he said. "If the film originally showed that initial impact, the official timing would be demonstrated false. The single-bullet theory would be demolished, and with it, the single-assassin theory." Edgar smiled. "Takes two to tango." She kissed him, again.

"But it happened so long ago," I said. "What's to be gained from seeing missing footage, were it to exist, and if it were still in the film?"

"Understanding," they said as one, blushed, then nuzzled. "Has America ever been the same, since? And can anyone say exactly why that should be so? The child comes home from school and finds Father lying in a pool of blood in the living room: Will the child's life afterward ever be the same? If you don't understand what actually happened in the past, how can you ever relate to the present?" Perhaps, I hoped, this bespoke an awareness of how that specific inquiry might be applied to his emotional state as well as his political, "But knowing there were two assassins won't mean we'll ever know who they were," Natalie said.

"It could still make a difference," Edgar said. "Misperception, that's where all the trouble starts. Thinking you understand when you really don't. But if you do truly understand the past, you can start making sense of the present, and then, finally, you can move on to the future-

"The future's something else," she said. "Let it happen and worry about it as it comes."

"The point is," he said, ignoring hers, "the waves from this particular storm break even today on the unlikeliest shores. What were you saying the other evening, Natalie? When we met the musicians at the studio?"

"The assassination's why drums became so important in popular music after 1963," she said. "I meant to tell that to Lawrence-

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"Why the big beat's essential. Do you remember hearing anything else that weekend? When you think of Kennedy now, what do you hear?"

"A psychic necessity, you could say," said Edgar.

"You could," said Natalie, rolling her eyes. "A heartbeat you had to hear ever after, to know you were still alive. That's what I'd call it." T Some opinions concerning history are best left alone; I let it go. Natalie said she had to leave, not long after. That she wasn't even spending the night shocked me more than that she wasn't yet living there. Edgar moved his ex-wife into his apartment halfway through their first date.

"What do you think?" he asked, once she'd gone. I told him. "It's so wonderful," he said, agreeing; I knew he would. "We have so much in common."

"Just keep your head on straight about this and it'll work," I said, "You know how you tend to behave, though-"

"It's not like that with Natalie, it's not-"

"Why'd she leave?" I asked, "Does she do editing in the evening?"

"Her husband's expecting her." He looked away from me, that he wouldn't see the expression he knew he'd find on my face. "That is, Lawrence-"

"Her husband?" I repeated. "Does he know about this?"

"Not yet," Edgar said. "No one knows she's seeing me. It would hurt her too much if anyone knew, so don't let on." I took my coat from the closet. "We work around it. It's no more uncertain than any relationship. More complicated."

"Be careful," I said.

"She's worth it," he said. "It's different this time. It is. It really is." Concluding his litany, he smiled and shook my hand goodnight, for the moment seeming to believe what he'd told me.

They kissed, they were happy; how easy a state is that to even attain, much less possess? But circumstances demanded that their shared world remain circumscribed; it must have been impressed upon them each day how their life together could be appreciated to no greater degree than might frames snipped from a film, or undeniable facts lacking a theory, however ultimately provable. They slipped sounds of love over the lines of pay phones, passed cryptic messages to one another that no one else could decode--met by serendipitous arrangement, if not at Edgar's, in bistros in the afternoon, where no eyes saw their wordless kisses, no ears heard their silent secrets. No recriminations, no confessions, no footprints left visible in the grass: Those rules their plot required.

After that first evening it seemed to me that I only saw them from afar, however near they may have been; glimpsed them but peripherally, as through an upper-floor window washed too infrequently to be anything other than opaque. When the three of us were able to meet, our conversations took on a disconcerting predictability. Natalie always had to go home by ten; before eight-thirty their monologue concerned the trials of forever working around

Lawrence, and after, the words dealt solely with assassination arcana: geometric equations regarding wound ratios, or the noms de guerre of tramps arrested near the triple underpass after the shooting, or the misperception of a fence shadow as the silhouette of six Cuban gunmen.

Sometimes I wondered if they would ever again recall that existence proceeded nevertheless after 1963. After another month I discerned their monologue becoming solely Edgar's; when Natalie interrupted, it was only to remind him of those areas of their concept with which Lawrence disagreed. Her husband had his own theories.

One night I ran into the three of them at a party in Soho; that evening it was evident who accompanied whom. Afterward I went with them to a coffee shop, as one hurries to see the results of a friend's automobile accident. Lawrence was a teacher, and twenty years older than Natalie.

"My course is called 'Kennedy Post-mortem,' " he told me.

"A postmodern approach?" I asked.

"Neopost," he said. As dog owners, over time, take on the less ignorable characteristics of their pets, so his look inferred an almost genetic relationship to his subject, as if he might have been a previously overlooked Kennedy brother, perhaps snuck into this world from one parallel, where the men of that family refrained from entering politics and became instead shoe salesmen, bouncers in Irish bars, or teachers at the New School.

"I've been tackling the question of direction-" Edgar began, bringing up the usual topic of conversation.

"We agree that a cross fire was involved," said Lawrence.

"Evident," said Edgar. Neither he nor Lawrence, I noticed, looked directly at one another as they spoke. "And the missing footage could demonstrate that, at the expense of some of your ideas-"

"Missing footage's a red herring, not unlike Oswald," said Lawrence. "The construct works without the introduction of superfluous facts that so-called missing footage might show."

"Which construct do you mean?" I asked. Lawrence stared at me, as if forgetting exactly who I was and how I had come to be sitting so near. Natalie sat between him and Edgar, looking from one to the other as she listened.

"What's the context?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Edgar's fallen prey to the usual misconceptions, I think, that after the assassination some enormous cabal sprang forth full-blown to fudge the

evidence as it was discovered. When would there have been time to edit the film? Who would have okayed the changes? My orbital points--that is, my essential theses--work better, I believe, so we'll go with those."

I could tell he knew about Edgar and Natalie, even if he didn't know; call it perception, call it inspiration, call it what you like. When Lawrence looked at his wife it was clear to me how much he hated to love her.

"What are your essential theses, by the way?" I asked, cognizant of how deftly he had thus far avoided mentioning them.

"There were at least two assassins in each location," he said. "Two on the knoll, two in the Dal-Tex building, two at the Texas School Book Depository. Possibly three in the Depository, though on different floors."

"How could that many people keep a secret?" Edgar asked. "Besides, they'd have been shooting each other--"

"Deliberately, perhaps," said Lawrence. Glancing up from the table, I was taken aback to see Natalie wink at me and smile. I looked away.

"Your theories could run concurrently," I heard her say; she was as attuned to her husband's conceits as she was to Edgar's. "There's no reason for them to be mutually exclusive."

"Nor reason for them not to be," said Lawrence.

"Can't you see how impossible this is?" Edgar asked, taking a pen and sketching lines upon the paper tablecloth. "Leaving acoustics aside for the moment, how many others would have been caught in such a cross fire?"

"By my estimation," Lawrence said, "twenty-seven shots were fired. Most missed."

"You're not hearing me," Edgar said; he scrawled a sharp-edged triangle atop his map of Dealey Plaza's streets. Waiters passed by, glared, and didn't offer refills. "That's the essential form, right there. Anything else would be impossible. The angles would never align, following your plan."

"The lines of fire are superimposed," Lawrence said. "One over the next, over the next, and all aiming in similar directions. Undoubtedly some shots were fired into the air to confuse. Sparrows fell from the sky into the plaza, minutes after the shooting."

I suspected at first that he was only stringing Edgar along, taking some indefensible pleasure in academic sadism; then I realized that he believed in what he said, and that made it all the more troubling. The plaza's three streets, I saw, curved into a tip just before they thrust themselves through the underpass's opening. Natalie smiled at me again. "No," said Edgar. "Nothing more than an acute triangle with three simple vertices. You're making this so much more complicated than it has to be."

"Lawrence's points are as valid as yours, Edgar," Natalie said. "Don't push it."

"Certain evidence, too, is believed to exist," Lawrence continued, his smile showing how aware he was that his manipulations were so subtle that there was no need any longer to acknowledge the existence of another's argument, "suggesting that Kennedy wasn't killed, that he was impersonated in the presidential limousine by Officer Tippit." Edgar sighed, looked at the angles into which he'd allowed himself to be drawn.

"He may still live in peaceful seclusion," said Lawrence, "on a farm in Montana, or on a Pacific island. Who can say?"

When Natalie winked at me, when she smiled, I understood the compulsive attention that in private her presence demanded from them, however distant appeared her public relationships. As Lawrence unfolded the blueprints of his illusory structure, so as well I felt the inner peace that an impossible surety might lend to souls that toss and turn in the night. Closing my eyes I almost believed I saw a hidden isle, way west of Sumatra: There, in a palm-shaded grove, the Kennedy brothers creep into Marilyn Monroe's grass hut to cover her skin in coconut milk; John Lennon strums a ukulele as Jim Morrison serves fresh tropical fruit to Hitler, afterward emptying the Fuhrer's bedpan; James Dean, horribly disfigured, lies on the beach, listens to the surf, dreams of the open road; as evening falls, all gather for their torchlit ritual, dropping to their knees in prayer, searching starscarred black velvet skies for Elvis, who in his glory will one day descend from heaven in a shiny silver mother ship, accompanied by a retinue of Venerians, Jovians, and the Lindbergh baby.

I stared at the triangle; to my eyes it appeared not acute, but obtuse.

"It's like arguing with someone who's sure the earth is flat," Edgar said to me, several weeks later. "I'll never win."

He'd called after midnight, asking, begging, truly-if we could talk. Natalie and Lawrence were away for the weekend, attending a conference in Philadelphia. "If you were working on something, you wouldn't be so preoccupied with this," I said, "and I'm not talking about these theories. Don't you have any new assignments coming up?"

"I've been putting them on hold," he said. "They might not have even gone to the conference. There may not even be a conference, for all I know-"

"Why would she tell you there was if there wasn't? You trust her, don't you?"

"I don't trust him. I do trust my perceptions. Something's scaring him and he's taking it out on her. You've seen them together. He pulls the strings and she goes along. He's been able to make her do anything he wants-"

"I wouldn't think he'd be making her go out with you," I said, "and if he's scared I'd imagine it's because he knows you and his wife are up to something,

even if he's not sure what. And he may be crazy but he's not stupid."

"He's keeping her from me. We get along so perfectly. It's not fair-"

"Edgar, they're married, that's reality."

"Reality's what you make it," he said. "They have nothing in common. Why can't she see?" It was so late, and I was so tired, and unable or unwilling to think of anything else I might say to him which he might heed; whatever I said in this mood of his would harm as much as help, I suspected. "Why won't he let her see? What's he got to hide? Do you really think he's as crazy as he seems? He can't be, she wouldn't put up with it. It must be some sort of act."

"Some sort of game, perhaps." It's a bad situation, I wanted to say; get out of it. "Be careful, Edgar."

"I don't see how she stands him."

"Talk to her about it," I said. "When's she get back, Monday?"

"I think so," he said. "She wouldn't tell me."

Having so much undesired expertise now concerning these matters, I am aware of the existence of a photograph of President Johnson, taken aboard Air Force One, moments after the swearing in on the afternoon of November 22, 1963. Old Lyndon looks away from the camera and turns to face a fellow Texas politician. The image forever preserved captures the man giving his new President a wink and a smile. Much could be made of that, were one of suspicious mind; yet, if in any given instant less, as well as more, beats unseen beneath the unpierceable shell, then a wink may be no more than a reflex, a theory nothing but a dream, a hope only delusion; that in every instance the most evident is least certain. It unnerved me, recalling how I was so excited by her wink, her smile; and they loved her.

Two weeks after, Edgar called me following a prolonged silence, during which time I began to wonder if they had somehow managed to slip back through the years, to take what they imagined as their safer place in a bygone era, or perhaps attempt to change what had gone before, and so at last bring a possibility into their present that they could in no other way have. "People were trying to find you, Edgar," I said. "You missed out on at least one job that I know of. Where've you been?"

"We went out of town for the weekend," he said. In the background I heard Natalie cough. "Seized the moment. Lawrence had to go out of town for another conference. Natalie decided not to go, We had three days to ourselves, It was so wonderful."

"Where did you go?"

"Dallas." When he told me, I couldn't imagine why I should have been surprised.



"It was like a honeymoon. We went to the Depository on Saturday afternoon and took the tour. It's a museum now, they even have the boxes in the right place on the sixth floor. You didn't get my postcard?"

"No-" Natalie seemed to be saying something, but I couldn't hear her well enough to understand.

"It might have been intercepted," he said, "You understand?" Deciding that I did long before I could reply, he continued. "We had dinner at a wonderful restaurant."

"Friends've told me of good restaurants in Dallas " I started to say.

"And then we went back to the plaza," he said. "There was a full moon, and you can see the stars down there at night. It was so warm, even at this time of year. The homeless are able to sleep on the grass. No one else was around. We were walking along the pergola, it's like a little concrete porch. It's where Zapruder was standing. At that moment I realized how apparent it was that it'd never work."

"You did?"

"The plaza's too small," he said. "There couldn't have been so many people shooting, everyone would have been killed, Talk about red herrings, you'd think he was using it as a cover story. She could see how idiotic his theory was then. I know she could. I kept saying, 'You see,' and she kept nodding. She saw. Then we both saw."

He'd lowered his own voice enough that I could more distinctly hear Natalie's. I couldn't tell as to whom she might be speaking. "There wasn't any way around it-" she was saying. I supposed she referred to whatever it was that they'd seen.

"I don't follow, Edgar."

"We saw the car," he said. "Kennedy's car. It turned the corner and came down Elm Street, soft edged and white like a bridal veil. We couldn't see who was in it."

"Maybe somebody," I began, started again. "Maybe somebody else borrowed it for the evening--"

"I said, 'You see?' and she saw."

Again, in the background, I heard Natalie speak. "He asked where I'd been. I couldn't lie anymore--"

"Edgar," I said, as she began to cough, "who's Natalie talking to?"

"Natalie?" he said. "Oh. She's talking to me."

"But you're not talking to her-"

"She's not here," he said, his words sounding suddenly as if they issued from an unexpectedly abstracted mind. "Not as a physical presence. This is when she came over the other night. I have her on tape."

"How could I hurt him like this, he said-" Natalie's voice recounted.

"For history," Edgar said.

"He threw a glass at the wall," I heard her say. "It almost hit me in the head."

"It helps," he concluded, and then returned to his preferred reality. "We ran across the knoll hand in hand as it passed us, and then we watched it go into the underpass and fade away. I wanted to make love to her, there on the knoll." He began to whisper, as if into her ear, "What she saw upset her too much, she told me. I understood. But wouldn't it have been romantic?"

Natalie called me a week after that, asking that I come at once to Edgar's apartment. Their film was playing when I arrived; Edgar was watching, hitting pause repeatedly, studying the frames in normal ratio and then punching enhancement, enlarging areas of each image until nothing but phosphorescent glare filled the screen. Natalie stood behind him, stroking his shoulders.

"Look who's here, Edgar," she said.

"I see him."

As the climax approached, Edgar zapped through the sequence more rapidly, stopping at frame 313. Kennedy's head flared as brilliantly as a tropical sunset; bits of skull flew through the air like seagulls, and he sank into the seat as if beneath the waves.

"Now watch," Edgar said. "I'll show you. You'll see." Thumbing the button again, he allowed the tape to progress until the knoll's trees appeared, casting noonday shadows as sharp edged as knives. The foliage's blurs could have hid a limitless number of snipers, or rustlers, or Cuban gunmen, deep within the leaves. "He'll wish this footage was missing. Sure as death in Texas."

Natalie walked away and sat on the couch, covering her face with her hands, hearing Edgar laugh.

"One frame more," he said. The Lincoln disappeared beyond the underpass. Edgar brought up the picture until the trees appeared only as a brownish-gray smear, and whatever lay beyond them might as well have been seen through an uncleaned window, or from the vantage of sparrows. "There he is. A cover story, that's what it was. No wonder it was so ridiculous. This is so simple once you know what you're looking for."

"Who do you see, Edgar?" I asked, wondered why I asked.

"Lawrence," he said, the screen's cathode glow lighting his smile, brightening his eyes, shooting rays through his face. "The second gunman. He knows I know. I know he knows. We've always known."

Second gunman, third, fourth, or fifth; who can say? Natalie began to cry. Edgar drew on his cigarette; smoke blurred his edges, fogged his words, "No wonder he never liked me," he said, "No wonder,"

Some wonder for too long why history happens as it does, why the past unspooled as it did, and thereby assure that in remembering too well what has been, the condemnation unto perpetual repetition is carried out; others gaze too deeply into the face of other enigmas, ones ultimately greater and no less likely to elude conclusions by which one can live, or even sleep: why love lingers where it shouldn't, or why it runs when it should stay. In gathering a harvest of scattered facts, the reaper must remember that, once planted, seeds shall grow as they will, and one must make do with the crop resulting.

Their project won some award; neither attended the ceremony. Edgar went away for a while and then returned to his work, his art improved if not his life. I didn't know what happened to Natalie; a year later I ran into her at the Whitney, in the video galleries. She was alone, and we went to the museum's restaurant and talked over a doubtful lunch. "I didn't know how to help him anymore," she said. "That's why I called you that night, so you could come over, You were always so nice to me."

"Why shouldn't I have been?"

She prodded the food on her plate with the tip of her knife. "Everyone has their reasons," she said. "How's he doing?"

"No worse than ever," I said. "He's working."

"That's good," she said. I never wanted to hurt him."

"How's your husband?"

"We separated. My friends say it's as well, relationships with academics are rarely healthy. I was thinking about them only this morning. Lawrence and I had a past, certainly, but Edgar and I could have had a future, if we'd have only let it happen. I never wanted to hurt anybody."

For whatever reason, I found myself asking one more question. "What was your theory?"

"About what?"

"Kennedy."

"It matters?" she asked. "Once I believed a husband's obsessions should be the wife's as well for a marriage to work. After I saw I was wrong, I stopped thinking about it, and when he started teaching he never talked about the assassination at home anymore. I was as glad he didn't.

"Then Edgar and I started working on the project. He seemed so interested, and I knew I was. It should have worked, perhaps. Still, we thought we had something in common, and it wasn't something of ours." She finished her drink. "Edgar had the better theory, but in practice"-Natalie gave me a wink without a smile, knowing as I knew how, through a complicity so deliberate as theirs, I'd allowed myself to become as tangled up in secrecy, avoiding truth perceived, however rightly, as being too hurtful to tell to those most harmed by its absence-"well, You know."

To conclude my story of Edgar and Natalie by saying that one wound up kissing the other's casket would be romantic, perhaps; but there were no rites of state, no unending lines of mourners, no accompanied procession into glory. Natalie went her way, Lawrence went his; Edgar continued to toss himself onto his eternal pyre. Sometimes he called and told me of his newest girlfriend. "It's different this time," he said, and said, and said again.

Some autumn nights in Dallas, a ghost Lincoln swings slowly onto Elm Street. Those at rest in Dealey Plaza, atop the grassy knoll or on the pergola where Abraham Zapruder stood to shoot, awake from their nightmares, glimpsing the vision passing through the mist. Three figures are in the car, two men and a woman inextricably involved. Their heartbeats sound as drums. One man has no idea what is happening, but is sure he's all right. The woman, seeing what is happening, stares at the other man, the one sitting beside her, and wishes she could reverse time and save what had been. The man beside her understands what is happening. He's read the books on ritual and romance; he's foreseen the conclusion. This still seems different from what he always imagined. He slumps, as if hoping that the woman will comfort him. When she reaches over to touch his head, it isn't there anymore.