

The Tide of Events

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John Kennedy didn't want to have this fight again, but he also knew there was no way around it. He and his wife, Carolyn Bessette-Kennedy, had been invited to his cousin Rory's wedding at the family's private compound in Hyannis Port. "And . . . here we go again," he told his personal assistant, RoseMarie Terenzio. He cursed under his breath, dreading the argument he knew was in the offing with his wife over it.

The problem John faced was that from the first time Carolyn ever set foot on the family's property some four years earlier, she didn't feel that she fit in with his family. While he and his relatives always felt insulated against the world at the compound, cocooned within its familiar, pleasant surroundings, she just felt exposed, as if her deepest insecurities were on display. On some level, he understood that only a person who'd actually been raised a Kennedy could truly fathom the complex machinations of the family's culture—the competitive nature of their sportsmanship, the constant and not-so-gentle ribbing of one another, their unique camaraderie and secret language, not to mention their constant obsession over the family business: politics, of course. The Kennedys had always existed in an exclusive world, and even John had to admit that sometimes they weren't welcoming to outsiders.

In truth, Carolyn wasn't really that close to Rory, the late Senator Robert F. Kennedy's daughter. Was she really expected to be friends with every one of John's twenty-seven cousins and their spouses and other partners, as well as all his aunts and uncles? That wasn't the primary reason for Carolyn's trepidation, however. Nor did it have to do with the feelings of inadequacy that somehow always washed over her whenever she was around the Kennedys. She'd dealt with it all in the past and had managed to get through many uncomfortable visits. The truth about this upcoming wedding was that she had a sinking intuition, maybe even a premonition about it. Whatever it was, it was telling her not to go.

To John, Carolyn's reasoning seemed pretty weak. "You just don't want to?" After four years of tolerating his relatives, he didn't understand why she couldn't just endure one more party. So John went ahead and sent back the RSVP for two. It was a family obligation, he decided, and Carolyn would just have to sort through her emotions about it and attend. She was a Kennedy by marriage, and sometimes Kennedys had to do what they didn't want to do for the sake of the greater good. The storm would pass.

John was wrong; Carolyn wouldn't let the storm blow over. In fact, it just grew in intensity. "They had a pretty big argument about it," said a very good friend of Carolyn's. "What was at stake for her was more than

just getting her way. It had to do with respect, with being visible in her marriage, with being recognized . . . acknowledged. In a family full of loud voices, one thing Carolyn had learned about being around the Kennedys was that she had to speak up if she ever wanted to be heard.”

The irony of this marital dispute would not have eluded anyone aware of John’s personal history. He and Carolyn were actually of the same mind, at least in some important respects. Especially in recent years, John had been battling preconceived notions of how he was supposed to act as the namesake and only son of America’s thirty-fifth President, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, and First lady Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis. Like Carolyn, he didn’t like being told what to do either, and he roundly rejected the cookie-cutter version of how a Kennedy of his generation was supposed to act. If he squinted at the equation hard enough, he probably would have been able to identify with Carolyn’s side of it. However, as often happens when a person is in the middle of a big fight, he could only see his side. “Carolyn’s not going,” he glumly told RoseMarie Terenzio a few days before the Saturday wedding. “I just have to accept that I’m going alone.”

“But John, that’s only asking for trouble,” RoseMarie said.

“Well, I’m not going to fight her on it anymore,” John said, seeming fed up with it all.

“It’s just not good, John,” she said. Not only did RoseMarie feel Carolyn should be present as John’s spouse, she worried that her absence would send a message to the world about the state of their union. It would definitely spark a firestorm of rumors, she felt, which, as usual, she would then be responsible for containing. After all, John was a special case in the Kennedy family. Any of them could show up without their partners and it wouldn’t have mattered much to the press. It’s not as if Ethel’s son Bobby Jr. or Ted’s son Teddy Jr. would have caused a media sensation by going stag to a cousin’s wedding. However, as the most popular member of the new generation, all eyes were always on John—and even more so in recent years since taking Carolyn as his wife. His being alone would be noticed, and the following week would find RoseMarie inundated with queries—all of which could be avoided if Carolyn just went to the doggone wedding. Therefore, without being asked to do so by John, she slipped into his office and called Carolyn herself.

RoseMarie, a New York Italian American, was known to be a straight shooter, forthright and blunt. “Carolyn, are you fucking kidding me?” she asked, getting right to the point. “What are you doing? You’re smarter than this. You don’t want to put John in a position where he has to explain where you are, and you don’t want to put yourself in a position of being judged. You get enough of that.” Somehow RoseMarie was able to convince Carolyn that her judgment was being crippled by emotion.

Eventually, Carolyn agreed to accompany John to the wedding.

Of course, when Carolyn told John she'd changed her mind, he was elated. He promised that this would be the last time he'd ever insist that she go with him to this kind of family event at the Kennedy compound. "I'll owe you one" is how he put it. He would fly them both up to Hyannis Port in his Piper Saratoga, he said. They'd attend the wedding, spend the night, and leave the very next day. She wouldn't regret it. "Just wait and see," he assured her. "Things are going to be great." Then he flashed his dazzling smile, usually her cue to melt into his arms. What she didn't do, though, was tell him how she really felt. That deep sadness she'd been trying to shake for longer than she cared to admit somehow now felt even more acute.

"She told me she felt manipulated and compromised," said Carolyn's trusted friend, "as if she had no authority over her own life. She said she was putting John on probation. 'I'm going to give it three more months and see how I feel,' she said. 'Are you sure you're not just pissed off because you don't like being told what to do?' I asked her. She admitted that this might be the case. She felt she needed a cooling-off period and that in a few months she'd have more clarity. They'd been having a lot of marital problems lately, she said, and she was worn down by them."

Was she thinking divorce? "Who divorces John Kennedy Jr.?" she asked. "You'd have to be insane, or at least that's what people will think." However, she said that if she decided on it she would steel herself for a serious fight and get through it as best she could. Even though she was thrown by events from time to time, Carolyn had demonstrated a new kind of focus and determination ever since she married John. Maybe in that respect she was becoming a little more "Kennedy" than even she knew. Whatever the case, Carolyn said she actually felt better about things because at least now she had a plan. She just needed more time.

As for John, there wasn't as much joy in his victory as Carolyn believed. He knew she felt bullied. "This same fight you keep having with her about being with your relatives, it has to stop," his good friend John Perry Barlow told him. "It's not good, John. Not for you. Not for her. Definitely not for your marriage."

John had to agree. He'd set it all straight after Rory's wedding, he decided. Like Carolyn, he, too, just needed a little more time, not to figure out how he felt, but instead how to fix things with the woman he truly loved. Who knows? Perhaps John, a real student of history when it came to his father's administration, could hear the words of President Kennedy echoing in his head: "The hour of decision has arrived. We cannot afford to wait and see what happens, while the tide of events sweeps over and beyond us. We must use time as a tool . . . We must carve out our own destiny."

John knew what his destiny held, and it was to be with Carolyn. He wanted to make it right with her.

He was thirty-eight. She was only thirty-three. They had all the time

in the world.

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