

On a crisp February morning in 1952 at the Auchinclosses' Merrywood estate in McLean, Virginia, Jackie Bouvier sat on a straight-backed wooden chair in the hallway outside her mother's bedroom. While thumbing through a fashion magazine, she took a deep drag off her Lucky Strike.

Next to Jackie sat her sister, Lee, eighteen, and her stepbrother, Yusha, twenty-four, both also smoking and reading magazines. Sitting beside them was their half sister, Janet, six, and half brother, Jamie, who would turn five in a month.

"Each chair in the hallway was positioned against the wall," Jamie would recall many years later, "and next to each was a small table upon which was neatly stacked the latest magazines. There were ashtrays—as on just about every table in our home—and boxes of Lucky Strike.

"This was our family's morning ritual. Every day at about nine o'clock, we'd gather in this hallway, a makeshift waiting room of sorts on the second floor. There, we'd wait for an audience with the woman in charge—Mummy, of course."

Many years later, Yusha would remember this particular morning with clarity to his friend Cybil Wright, to whom he was introduced by the woman who'd become his wife, Alice Emily Lyon.

"Yusha told me Jackie and Lee had returned from the party in Palm Beach about a week earlier," recalled Cybil. "Lee had a crush on Jack Kennedy. 'Do you think he liked me?' she asked her sister. Jackie said she had a feeling he liked all the girls at the party. When Lee said he'd called and left a message for her, Jackie wanted to know if she'd returned the call. Lee said she wanted to wait until she spoke to their mother about it."

A door in the hallway opened, and the family's English nursemaid, Mamie Stratton—who was primarily responsible for Jamie and Janet Jr.'s care—came out and walked over to Jackie. "Mummy will see you now," she said. Jackie smiled, put down her magazine, and went to the doorway. Gazing inside the room, she saw Janet reclining on the bed in her silk robe, a breakfast tray before her with toast, coffee, and a single red rose in a vase. A telephone was extended by its cord onto the tray and, next to it, a lined yellow notepad. "Close the door, please," Janet told her.

"Every morning, Mummy would welcome each of us into her room to discuss whatever was going on in our lives," recalled Jamie. "Decisions were made. Usually, they were insignificant, such as how to best entertain a guest for lunch or what outfit might be appropriate for dinner. Was there a new art exhibit in the city? Should we go? Would there be a swimming lesson or tennis? Usually, these judgments were of little consequence. Once in a while, however, a decision would be rendered with an outcome so profound, it could really alter the course of things."

After about fifteen minutes, Jackie emerged, leaving the door open. "How is she?" Lee asked as her sister lit another cigarette. "Same," she answered. "She's anxious to finish with us so she can see her massage therapist."

From inside the room came the voice: "Lee, I'm ready to receive you now." Lee looked at Jackie, and Yusha and Jamie and rolled her eyes at her mother's silly, old-world formality. She rose, walked into Janet's chamber, and closed the door.

Ten minutes later, the door flew open, and Lee bolted from the room. Dabbing her eyes, she was upset.

"I hope you're satisfied," she said, glaring at Jackie.

“Lee, wait,” Jackie said as Lee began down the hall. “Don’t be ridiculous,” she added as Lee began to descend the winding staircase. “You can have the next one.”

“What about John Husted, your *fiancé*?” Lee shouted up the stairs.

“What about him?” Jackie answered.

Janet had firmed up her decision that Jackie, not Lee, should be with Jack Kennedy, and, despite what she felt earlier, Jackie wholeheartedly agreed. It was a calculation based on two factors. First of all, Kennedy had more money and better earning potential than Husted. Secondly, Jackie was older, and it was time for her to get “settled.” Lee had more time. While they didn’t know it at the time, this decision would lay the whole world at the feet of the older sister and condemn the younger one to a life of wondering, “What if . . . ?”

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