

The Grassy Knoll

a short story by
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The destination for man's first trip through time was an easy decision. Given the opportunity to solve one of history's mysteries by observing it firsthand, the project team was unanimous. Mankind was finally going to learn the truth



behind the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas, Texas on November 22, 1963.

The idea had been proposed by Larry Tolbert, the man chosen to carry the risks and glories of being the world's first time traveler. The date was before he was born, so it avoided the classic time-travel paradox of existing in two places simultaneously. On the other hand, it was recent enough that he would encounter no language or cultural differences. In fact, it was recent enough that they could still find money from that era for Larry to take with him, an important factor because their equipment could not yet pinpoint dates or locations precisely.

Most importantly, the Kennedy assassination was a mystery he could solve without doing anything that might alter history. All he had to do was show up, stand on the far side of the Plaza, and watch to see how many gunmen there were. In the confusion afterwards, no one would notice as he stepped back into the shadows and simply disappeared.

What the project leaders didn't know was that Larry had personal reasons for his proposal. His grandparents had lived in Dallas in the early 1960s, and on that fateful day they had joined thousands of others to watch the handsome president and his beautiful wife pass through the city's streets. On Grandpa Tolbert's shoulders sat Larry's father, then only five years old, who waved a small American flag as the motorcade went by. Before the family got back to their car, word of the shooting had raced through the crowd back up the parade route. Soon after they got home, the horrible news was confirmed: The president was dead.

Two days later, the family was watching a live television broadcast from the Dallas police headquarters when nightclub owner Jack Ruby stepped forward and put a bullet in the stomach of Lee Harvey Oswald, the man who was said to have killed the president, but who denied the charge and called himself a "patsy."

Throughout Larry's childhood, these dramatic events were the main topic of conversation in the Tolbert household. At least, they were the main topic of any conversation involving his father. It was clear to Larry that this historic moment had an enormous impact on the generation that observed it. The assassination apparently caught everyone off guard, shaking a nation that was feeling good about itself after nearly twenty years of post-war prosperity. America at that time saw itself as a beacon of freedom against the still-growing threat of godless communism. Government leaders were respected and trusted, even by the news media. To suggest that the assassination was the work of a conspiracy, either from within or without, was to question the security of the nation. The only acceptable explanation was that it had to be the work of a lone, crazed gunman.

But from the beginning, there were troubling discrepancies about what had happened in Dallas that day. Larry knew all about these discrepancies, because his father never stopped talking about them. Mr. Tolbert read every magazine article and brought home every book that

came out on the subject. Everything he heard or read launched another round of passionate summations, as if he were the prosecuting attorney and his family the jury.

“Okay, first of all,” he would say during supper, his mouth half full of mashed potatoes, “Oswald took the job at the Texas Book Depository less than two months before the assassination, a job that just happened to be right on the president’s parade route. That’s quite a coincidence. He has a family in the suburbs, but he rents a room in a boarding house and stays in the city during the week. Who does that? This was just a temporary set-up. Oswald was on assignment.”

“Yes, dear,” Larry’s mother would say.

“Second, the police were broadcasting Oswald’s description just moments after the assassination, including his height and weight. The description supposedly came from someone who saw Oswald from the ground, but how could you possibly tell someone’s height and weight when you’re looking up at someone in a sixth-floor window? You couldn’t. Oswald was betrayed. He was set up.”

“No one’s disagreeing with you, dear,” Mrs. Tolbert would say.

“Just look at the news films shot immediately after the assassination. A policeman and a whole crowd of people rushed up the grassy knoll because they heard shots fired from that direction. Multiple witnesses reported hearing gunshots coming from different directions. These were people who were right there, speaking just after the event. Yet the Warren Commission just ignored their testimony. It’s the most obvious cover-up in history. Why doesn’t the media expose it for what it is?”

“We don’t know, dear.”

“In just the last several months leading up to the assassination, Oswald suddenly does a bunch of stuff to build a public reputation as a communist. He goes to New Orleans and gets

himself on local television passing out pro-Castro leaflets. He's unemployed, yet he somehow has rented office space for his one-man pro-Castro organization. Someone was helping him cultivate a pro-communist reputation. He was cooperating because he thought he was going to infiltrate the communist underground. What he didn't know was that they had other uses for him. They were going to throw him to the wolves.”

It was understood in the Tolbert household that the word “they” referred to shadowy figures within the government, the only question being whether these unnamed agents were acting under official orders or as part of a rogue operation.

One night, Larry's mother innocently asked why it mattered whether there had been a conspiracy. “Either way,” she said, “the president was killed. What difference does it make whether there was one gunman or twelve?” Larry's dad glared at her in disbelief, then got up and left the table. He refused to speak to her for a week.

After that, Mrs. Tolbert prohibited the subject at the dinner table. When they first got an Internet connection, she just looked at the computer screen and said flatly, “Well, that’s the last we’ll see of your father.” She was pretty close to being correct.

It was only at her insistence that family vacations took place somewhere other than Dallas at least every other year. Larry's father always wanted to go there for his “research,” and besides, he still had cousins down there with whom they could stay for free. He would take Larry to Dealey Plaza and stand with him on the railroad overpass at the foot of this sacred shrine.

“Okay,” he would say, “you see how Main Street comes straight down the middle of the Plaza? Then Elm and Commerce come curving down to meet it, forming large grassy areas on each side of Main. Now, if you were bringing the President of the United States through here, you would take him right down the middle, right? That way, you wouldn’t have to slow the

motorcade down to turn right onto Houston Street at the top of the Plaza, then to turn again onto Elm Street. Plus, large crowds could see him by standing in the open spaces on each side of Main. There's not as much room for people on the side over there on Elm Street. And why is there not much room over there?"

"Because of the grassy knoll," Larry would respond dutifully.

Then Larry and his father would walk up to the side of the Plaza near the grassy knoll. "Here's where Abe Zapruder was standing," his father would say, referring to the man whose home movies captured the best images of the final, fatal shot. "When you watch the Zapruder film, you can see Kennedy's right temple explode and his head go back and to his left. The 'official' explanation is that it was an exit wound, but you can see it hit Kennedy in the right forehead, and you can see tissue from his forehead splatter from the impact. The shot came from over to our right."

"From the grassy knoll," Larry would say.

"From the grassy knoll. Dozens of witnesses--including almost two dozen police officers--testified that shots came from the grassy knoll. One witness said he saw the puff of smoke when the shot was fired. Those who swallow the 'official' explanation want us to believe that all those people, who were standing right here when it happened, were mistaken. They want us to believe that a shot that looks like it came from the front really came from the back. They want us to believe that Oswald not only got off three shots in eleven seconds, but that his aim got better with each shot, even though he was using a bolt-action rifle that caused him to lose his sighting each time he cocked it. They want us to believe his aim got better each time even though he was shooting at someone in a moving car, and someone who was moving around in that car after being shot in the throat. And they call *us* nuts!

“They’re the ones telling us to ignore our senses, to ignore the obvious. They’re the ones accepting things on faith, either without evidence or against what the evidence shows. They’re the ones who leave multiple questions unanswered. They’re the ones who have to perform all kinds of mental gymnastics to maintain their position, when there’s a simple explanation for it all.”

“There was a second gunman on the grassy knoll.”

“There was a second gunman on the grassy knoll. Of course, the conspiracy theorists do contribute to the problem. They keep looking at all the old photos and trying to figure out if they can see someone standing behind the stockade fence. Idiots! A professional hit man doesn't stand up and shoot over a fence. He crouches down and shoots through a hole in the fence, or through a board he's loosened beforehand. Behind the fence is a parking lot, so he's hidden on that side by the parked cars. He fires the shot, jumps into a waiting car, and they drive out of the parking lot before anyone has time to react.”

Then Larry and his dad would go up to the most sacred spot of all, the Sixth Floor Museum in the old Book Depository building. “Now look at the view Oswald had,” Mr. Tolbert said. “See how it looks straight down on Houston Street? When the car turned right onto Houston, it came straight toward his window, giving Oswald a clear, straight-on shot with Kennedy's entire torso exposed to him. If he had fired then, he could have stood back in the shadows and fired from inside the building, where he couldn't be seen. Are we really supposed to believe that Oswald let the car pass under him, turn left into the Plaza, then drive half a block down the hill, forcing him to fire at an angle with nothing visible but the back of the president's head? Ridiculous. There's only one possible reason he let that car pass by him before firing.”

“He was waiting until the man on the grassy knoll could also fire,” Larry said.

“Exactly.”

After dissecting the Plaza, they would go to lunch and talk about the assassination. Or, rather, Larry would listen while his father talked about the assassination. Like many rabid conspiracy theorists, Mr. Tolbert had developed a theory that was all his own.

“Actually, the number of gunmen is not where the real mystery lies in the Kennedy assassination. Everyone thinks that's the big question, and that's what everyone focuses on, but they're missing the real issue. Oswald could have been part of a conspiracy even if he was the only gunman. The key to this mystery isn't the grassy knoll.”

“It isn't?”

“The key to this mystery lies in what Oswald did after the assassination. Supposedly, he crammed his rifle between some boxes by the stairwell, ran downstairs, then got on a city bus to go back to his boarding house. When the bus got stuck in traffic, he jumped off and got a taxi. But get this: He took the time to ask for a bus transfer before getting off the bus! Does that sound like a man who's in a panic? At the boarding house, he got his handgun, then headed across town, supposedly killing a cop on the way. He ducked into a movie theater, where he was captured. Now, let's look at the different options here:

“First, let's say you're a lunatic acting alone, and you've decided to assassinate the president for the glory it will bring you. In that case, you're going to let yourself get captured, and you're going to brag about what you did. But Oswald tried his best to avoid capture, even to the point of getting a black eye while trying to fight the police off in the theater. Once he was captured, he never admitted to killing the president, so glory was not his motive.

“Second, let's say you're a lunatic acting alone, but you don't want any glory. You don't want to be identified or captured. In that case, you're just going to run away, right? Even if you don't have an actual escape plan, you're going to get out of town as fast as you can. But that's not what Oswald did. He didn't go back to his boarding house to grab a suitcase; he went back

and grabbed a gun. He clearly didn't want to be captured, but he didn't just run away. So that scenario doesn't hold together, either.

“Third, let's say you're totally innocent, and you've been framed. You were never in that sixth-floor window; someone planted a gun with your fingerprints on it. Well, we can rule that out right away, because Oswald left work and went home to fetch his gun. If he hadn't been involved in the shooting, he would have remained at work like everyone else. He wouldn't have known he had been framed until he was arrested. Besides, if you've been framed, you're going to scream to high heaven that you've been framed, but Oswald didn't do that. He didn't act like an innocent man. On the contrary, he acted like a man who knew something, but wasn't telling.

“He didn't say he'd been framed; instead, he called himself a 'patsy.' A patsy is someone who's been set up by people he knows. Calling himself a patsy was practically a confession that there was a conspiracy.

“Okay, so let's look at the options for a conspiracy. Let's say you're part of a highly professional conspiracy, an inside job that involves levels so high they can alter the president's parade route. In that case, you're definitely going to have an escape plan, right? And it's not going to include leaving the murder weapon where it's sure to be found with your fingerprints on it, then going outside and getting on a city bus. So that doesn't fit, either. Unless you really are a patsy. So let's look at the options there.

“Maybe someone talked this sad, unbalanced man into doing the unthinkable. If that was the case, we'd be back to square one: A loner who doesn't want glory but didn't plan an escape. A man who doesn't want to be captured but didn't just run away. So that's no help.

“And if he was a knowing and willing participant in a conspiracy, in what way could he have been a patsy? If he fired even one bullet at the president, how can he claim to be taking the fall for others? And again, if he was part of a conspiracy, why did he have no escape plan?

“I’m telling you, none of the options fit the facts,” Mr. Tolbert concluded. “There’s something here that’s not explained by either the conspiracy theories or the lone-gunman theories. The true mystery of the Kennedy assassination lies in what Oswald did after the assassination, and why. That’s the key to the whole thing. Find out why Oswald did what he did at that point, and you’ll have the answer.”

Larry enjoyed these trips with his father. He was fascinated by the subject. He read every book and magazine his father bought. The grainy black-and-white photos seemed to him to be windows into another world now long passed. He loved the trim Texas fashions of the day--the men with military haircuts who wore string ties and cowboy hats with business suits, the ladies with carefully coiffed hairdos and cloth gloves even in summer. It was a time when men were men and women were women, a time when people were proud to be Americans. Larry liked to close his eyes and imagine himself living back then, when life was simpler and people were more sure of themselves.

Even as a child, he wished he could go back in time, not only so he could live in those days, but also so he could prevent the assassination. He pictured himself in the Dallas of 1963, knowing what was about to happen. While everyone else was waiting for the president’s motorcade, he would walk up to the sixth floor of the Texas Book Depository. He would enter the huge open storage area quietly, so Oswald wouldn’t hear him. While Oswald was busy lining up his shot, Larry would tiptoe up behind him. Then, at the very last moment, he would grab the gun and knock Oswald to the ground. He would save the president’s life, but no one would know it. He would be the best kind a hero--one whose heroic deeds were known only to himself.

As Larry grew into adulthood, he began to recognize that his father’s obsession with the assassination was unhealthy, or at least immature. It first occurred to him in college, when he

took an introductory course in psychology. For his main research paper, he studied the effects of war on children who grow up in areas of chronic unrest, such as Belfast or Lebanon. He came across a photo of a small child, dressed in rags and standing amid rubble, who had a sad look in her eyes that seemed somehow familiar to Larry. Then he realized why. It was the same look that his father's eyes had always had.

Staring at this photograph, it dawned on Larry for the first time that his father, as a five-year-old boy, had actually been traumatized by the disturbing events that played out before his tiny eyes that November. Not only had the leader of his country been slain just moments after seeing him, but two days later he had seen a man murdered on live television. Everything that came after the assassination as he grew up in the 1960s--the race riots, the anti-war protests, the other assassinations--must have seemed to this young boy to be signs that the world was falling apart. And it all began that day in Dallas.

Later, Larry wondered if his own childhood desire to go back in time and stop Oswald had subconsciously been a desire to free his father from the burden that ruled his life. Had Larry, as a child, somehow discerned the hidden pain that his father had suffered in his own childhood? Was his desire to live in the simpler times before the assassination actually the wish-fulfillment of his father, passed down unspoken from one generation to the next?

Whatever the case, Larry's inherited fascination with the assassination set the course for his life. From an early age, he knew he wanted a career in the Secret Service or the military. When he learned that the Air Force would pay for his education, he joined right out of high school. When he learned that they would pay for further schooling if he re-enlisted, he decided to make a career of it. He got his masters degree in microbiology, taught for several years at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, then went back for his doctorate. By his mid-30s, he was in Virginia doing scientific research for the government. When it was announced that they

were accepting volunteers for a new research project that would be “bigger than the space program,” and when a rumor began to spread that the project had to do with time travel, he volunteered immediately.

The testing process was rigorous, but he had stayed in good physical shape, and with both a scientific and a military background, he was the perfect candidate. In fact, he was hardly surprised when he was chosen to take the first trip through time--it seemed to him to be nothing more than the fulfillment of his destiny. It was as if everything in his life had been leading to this. His childhood daydream of sneaking up behind Oswald and preventing Kennedy's assassination seemed less a fantasy now than a prediction.

But that fantasy clashed strongly with the training he was given. The "prime directive" of the program was that they could do nothing to interfere with history. Theoretically, the slightest change in the past could trigger a series of events that would completely alter the course of history, possibly with catastrophic results. Some scientists warned that altering history could literally destroy the universe, but even the best-case scenario suggested that the time traveler would be launched into an alternate future from which he could never escape. For example, if Larry went back in time and stopped the assassination, he would return to a world in which the assassination had never taken place, which meant he could not have gone back to prevent it. Whether such a paradox would destroy the universe, splinter time into alternate paths, or merely maroon Larry in a world he wouldn't recognize, it was clearly a risk too great to take.

These dangers were drilled into Larry and his comrades throughout the training process. Larry understood the gravity of these dangers, and on a conscious level, he agreed with the official policy. Besides, his military background had conditioned him to follow orders. Still, somewhere deep inside, untouched by all the training and conditioning, was the notion that he had a destiny to fulfill.

Larry's knowledge of the subject shortened the training process significantly. He had already been to the former site of Jack Ruby's nightclub, seen the inside of the former Dallas police headquarters and the Book Depository building, and examined every square inch of Dealey Plaza. When the time came, he was more than ready.

On the day of the historic first trip, he smiled at himself in the mirror. They had dressed him in black patent-leather shoes, straight-legged black slacks, a white short-sleeved shirt, and a thin black tie. He had been letting his military haircut grow out a bit in recent years, but now they had given him a flattop. He was amazed to find that he looked just like the men in those old photos he had pored over as a child. It was a bit of a shock to realize that he was now older than many of the policemen and reporters had been on that tragic day. He certainly didn't feel equal to those icons of world events, but then, he was about to enter the annals of history himself.

The process began with swirling lights and tingling sensations, then everything went black. Larry woke up lying in a field of grass under the wide Texas sky. Making his way cross country, he soon found a two-lane highway with a good bit of traffic. Hitchhiking was still considered safe in 1963, so he had no trouble catching a ride. He learned from the driver that he was more than 100 miles south of Dallas and, more importantly, that he had arrived a week early. Where someone else might have been irritated, he was thrilled. He would get to live in the Dallas of 1963 for an entire week, just as he'd always dreamed.

The very first evening, he went to Jack Ruby's nightclub. He went there not only to catch a glimpse of Ruby, but also to fulfill another childhood fantasy. Perhaps the most appealing images in all the books and articles on the Kennedy assassination were the old black-and-white publicity photos of Candy Barr, the legendary stripper who worked in Ruby's club. Dressed up as a scantily-clad cowgirl, with a little girl's face perched incongruously above

enormous breasts, she had been the cause of Larry's first boyhood sighs. At an age when his friends had crushes on their second-grade teacher, we would sit for hours gazing at Candy Barr's photo. And now he would get to see her in person!

The nightclub was dingy, but the patrons were all dressed nicely, as people did in those days. Every man wore a jacket and tie and carried a hat; every woman wore a dress and necklace. Almost everyone was drinking cocktails, but even when someone ordered a beer, it was served, with a touch of class, in a tall, thin glass. There was a comedian on stage when Larry sat down, and the audience laughed heartily, although Larry didn't see the humor. He wondered whether he would have gotten the jokes had he lived in 1963, or if everyone was just laughing because of the alcohol.

Then the lights dimmed and the music started, and out she came. Candy Barr. Beautiful, sultry, looking so young and yet oh-so-mature. Larry felt like he was watching a movie. Could he really be sitting here, looking at Candy Barr herself, in real life? Her act was campy and old-fashioned--with lots of teasing and very little stripping--but he didn't care. He was mesmerized.

She was just finishing her first dance when Larry was momentarily distracted by a flash of light. A door next to the stage had opened and quickly closed. All he saw was the silhouette of a man emerging from the back hallway, but he knew immediately that it was Jack Ruby. He followed the shadow of Ruby's form until it emerged into the half-light near the bar, and there he was: Short, tough-looking, with a face only a mother could love. Candy Barr danced on, forgotten, as Larry stared at the man who killed Oswald.

Or who would kill him, the following week. Did Ruby already know that? Was shooting Oswald part of the plan all along, or would Ruby be forced by unforeseen circumstances to take such a drastic action? Larry's mind raced with ideas for finding out the truth over the next few days. Perhaps he could trail Ruby and Oswald, to see where they went

and who they talked to. Or he could just hang around the night club, hoping to overhear a conversation. Perhaps he could apply for a job as a bouncer or something, so he would be here if Oswald ever came by. He might even be able to sneak into Ruby's office and uncover some incriminating evidence. Perhaps he could befriend one of the two men, and find something out that way. Maybe he should go over and try to strike up a conversation with Ruby right now.

Suddenly he froze. He had been staring at Ruby, lost in thought, and Ruby had noticed him! Ruby was looking at him suspiciously, a scowl on his face, wondering why he was being stared at. Larry looked quickly down at his table, then back up at the stage. His heart was pounding. He realized with a sickened feeling that, no matter how unreal this whole thing seemed, he wasn't watching a movie, and he wasn't looking at his old photographs. These were real people, and not very nice people, either. Jack Ruby operated on the fringes of society under normal circumstances, and now he was quite possibly involved in a conspiracy to kill the President of the United States. Staring at such a man at such a time was not a very smart thing to do.

Just then, an employee of the nightclub came up to Ruby, apparently with some urgent problem. As soon as Larry saw that Ruby had turned away, he left some money on the table and walked quickly out of the club. To work off his nervousness, he wandered around the city for a while.

He was embarrassed by his silly ideas of spying on these men. If Ruby really was involved in the assassination and Larry tried to stick his nose into his business, Ruby might just have him killed. If he befriended Ruby or Oswald and tried to get information from them, they would immediately grow suspicious, perhaps canceling the assassination plans. Whoever was behind the conspiracy might then try to kill the President in a different city at a different time, and who knows what the consequences might be?

For the first time, Larry understood all the concern about changing the course of history, and he saw just how easy it would be to do so. Something as simple as staring at Jack Ruby in his nightclub, with the assassination just days away, had caused Ruby to become suspicious. Because of that tiny mistake on Larry's part, the course of history could possibly be changed, and he would return to a world he wouldn't recognize.

One thing was for sure: He could forget about his childhood fantasy of sneaking up behind Oswald in the Book Depository and preventing the assassination. He realized now how doing so really could splinter the future, perhaps even destroy the universe. Besides, in order to see whether there was another gunman, he would have to be standing in the Plaza, where he could see the grassy knoll and hear the number of shots. He returned to his hotel room determined to follow his orders to the letter.

As he relaxed over the next few days, however, his old childhood fantasy kept coming back to mind, and he began to waver in his convictions. Was he really going to come all this way only to miss this incredible chance? Was he really going to stand in the Plaza and watch the assassination when he could just as easily prevent it? It was true that changing history might have catastrophic results, but wasn't it just as possible that the results could be beneficial? He might go home to a world he didn't recognize, but wasn't it possible that it would be a better world? Perhaps by stopping the Kennedy assassination, he would also prevent the other assassinations of the 1960s, along with at least some of the unrest. Some historians believe Kennedy was assassinated because he was going to pull the nation out of Vietnam, and that alone would have saved lives and prevented a great deal of the tension from that period. Most important in Larry's eyes, preventing the assassination would free his father of his awful burden, and that could only make life better for the whole family.

But then, if he freed his father from his lifelong obsession and prevented some of the

unrest of the 1960s, his father would grow up to be a different person than he was and, being a different person, he might marry someone other than Larry's mom. In that case, Larry would never have been born, in which case he couldn't come back to stop the assassination. Would such a paradox destroy the universe, or would Larry himself simply disappear into thin air the moment he stopped the assassination?

On the other hand, he was almost certain that Oswald hadn't acted alone. Didn't the Zapruder film prove that it wasn't Oswald's bullet that delivered the death blow to President Kennedy? If that were true, he could stop Oswald and still not change history. He could sneak up behind Oswald and knock the gun away, and if the assassination still took place, he would know there was another gunman without having to actually see him. He could fulfill his destiny without endangering the universe. If the assassination didn't take place--if it turned out Oswald really had been the lone gunman--then he would have changed history, for better or for worse. But all things considered, wasn't it a risk worth taking?

Maybe so, but it was still a risk. No matter how convincing an argument it might be, Larry knew it was just a rationalization for what he really wanted to do. For the next several days, he wrestled with these thoughts, going back and forth in his mind.

On the morning of the assassination, there were no such concerns on his mind. He was cheerful and excited as he showered and shaved, but not because of his mission. He had a personal matter to take care of first. He was going to get to see his grandparents again, alive and in person. He got to the parade route an hour early to find people already standing in place. He knew exactly where to go, because his father had often shown him the spot where they had been standing. Sure enough, not long before the motorcade was due, a young couple with a small boy made their way through the milling crowd and stood beside him. They were young and handsome in their coats and hats, and their little boy was holding a small American flag.

Larry had prepared himself for this moment. He knew he would be tempted to fly into their arms, to hug them and be held by them the way he was as a boy. He would want to tell them how much he loved them and how much he missed them, to eke out one last moment with them before saying goodbye to them forever. But he knew that any act of familiarity on his part would only confuse them, perhaps frighten them, and make it impossible to hold any sustained conversation. He was prepared to talk to them as any stranger might under the same circumstances, even if inside he was longing for a deeper connection.

“Not a bad day for it, huh?” he said nonchalantly to his grandfather.

“No, not too cold,” came back the familiar, comforting voice. “Bit breezy, though.”

“I guess this is my lucky day,” Larry said. “Just flew in on business, and now I get to see the President.”

“Yeah? What business you in?”

“I’m in the insurance business,” Larry said, knowing this would give them something to talk about.

“No kidding? So am I,” his grandfather said. “What company?”

“Metropolitan Life. You?”

“Mutual of New York.”

“Well, nice to meet you,” Larry said, offering his hand. “My name’s De Niro. Robert De Niro.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. De Niro. I’m John Tolbert, and this is my wife Kate.”

“How do you do, ma’am?” Larry tipped his hat to his grandmother, who looked so young and beautiful. The photos of her at this age had not done her justice. She smiled and nodded. Larry’s approach had worked, even though it was killing him inside.

“And this is our son Jim,” Grandpa Tolbert said.

He turned his body so the boy, sitting on his shoulders, was facing Larry.

“And how are you, young man?” Larry held his hand up for a handshake, but the boy turned his head away shyly.

“It's okay, Jim,” his mother said. “Shake the man's hand.”

Larry's father reached out a tiny mittened hand. Larry took his hand and shook it once, very formally. When he did, the boy looked directly at him for the first time. The moment their eyes met, something happened. Larry almost caught his breath in surprise. The face was so young and innocent, the skin so smooth and pink, the eyes so wide and untroubled. The sadness that Larry had seen in those eyes his entire life--the same sadness he had seen in the photo of that war-torn child--was completely absent. It was as if Larry was seeing his father for the first time, free of the fear and bitterness that marred his life and suppressed his true nature. He was seeing what his father would have been had he never experienced the trauma that was about to ensue.

More than that, it was as if this virginal young face was representative of the whole nation at that pivotal juncture. At this moment, Larry's father felt safe and secure and happy, and so did the nation. But that would all change in a flash, and things would never be the same again. Only Larry had the power to prevent it.

As he looked into his father's eyes, he knew what he had to do. He couldn't pass up this chance, not after having come so far. Stopping Oswald was taking a risk, but he had to do it. If there was a gunman on the grassy knoll, it wouldn't change history, but at least he would know that he did what he could. And if there were no other gunmen, this young boy would go home today with nothing but happy and inspiring memories of a beloved president who would go on to do great things. If that meant that Larry himself would never exist--if it meant that he would disappear into vapor the moment he stopped Oswald--it was a sacrifice he was willing to make.

“Well, it was nice meeting you,” Larry said to his grandparents. “But if you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll move down a few blocks to where it’s less crowded.” They smiled and nodded. Larry pushed his way out of the crowd and hustled down the sidewalk, hugging the buildings to avoid the people. Many people were carrying transistor radios, and Larry overheard the newscast announcing that the motorcade had left the airport and was on its way. He traversed the three blocks, turned right, and crossed the street at an angle. No one stopped him as he entered the Book Depository building.

As he climbed the six flights of stairs, he moved with purpose, a feeling of real joy growing inside him. Ever since childhood he had dreamed of saving Kennedy, and now, against all the odds of the universe, he was being given that opportunity. It couldn’t just be coincidence; it had to be fate, or God. This was his destiny, no matter what the repercussions might be.

The sixth floor was filled with stacks of boxes, some as high as his head. The hard, dusty floor made no sound, and he worked his way quickly around the boxes toward the southeast corner. He snuck up behind the wall of boxes Oswald had set up to form his “sniper’s nest.” Larry had seen this configuration many times--in the old photos and recreated in the Six Floor Museum--but now he had to contend with the logistical challenge it presented. It wouldn’t be like his childhood daydreams, that was for sure. He would have to circle the end of the boxes and approach Oswald head-on. He would have to move quickly and hope that Oswald was too intent on his target to notice him.

Larry could hear the sound of cheering crowds echoing off the office buildings, and he knew that the motorcade was approaching. When the cheering erupted from just outside, he braced himself. Standing hidden from Oswald, he could see the Plaza off to his right through the row of windows in front of him. He caught a glimpse of the lead police motorcycles as they descended into the Plaza and knew it was time.

Larry glanced around the corner of the boxes and saw to his dismay that Oswald already had his rifle out the window. Before he could move, he heard the first shot. That was okay, because he knew the first shot had missed, but now he had only seconds. As Oswald cocked the rifle and began to level it for his second shot, Larry circled the boxes and moved toward him. Oswald's head was halfway out of the window and his eye was on the scope, so he didn't see Larry. The rifle was outside the window where Larry couldn't get to it, but Oswald's right arm, resting on a wooden block he had set up, was easy to get to. Larry grabbed Oswald's elbow, lifting it up and pushing it out just enough to mess up his aim. Oswald fired almost simultaneously, leaving Larry wondering if he had gotten there in time.

He stepped back several steps so he could look out the window to his right. As he did so, he heard another shot from outside. He watched in agony as the president's head snapped backwards. Civilians screamed and ducked to the ground. Jackie Kennedy made her famous dive over the trunk of the car, and the motorcade sped off under the railway.

Dozens of eye witnesses and decades of conspiracy theorists had been right: There had been a second gunman on the grassy knoll. Larry had gambled and won. He had fulfilled his destiny--and his mission--and he had not altered history. He had not been able to save his dad and his country from the trauma caused by the events below, but he had done all he could.

He turned and looked at Oswald, who was staring at him in astonishment, still holding the rifle in one hand. Larry's military instincts prepared him to dive for the weapon at Oswald's slightest move. But Oswald surprised him.

"You goddamn fool," Oswald said, anger in his voice. "Do you know what you've done?" This wasn't the reaction Larry had expected from a man just caught trying to assassinate the president. He expected desperation, an attempt to escape, a stammered excuse, a plea of innocence. Anything but anger.

“Yes,” Larry said confidently, almost heroically. “I’ve stopped you from killing the President of the United States.”

“No,” Oswald said, shaking his head and uttering a short, sarcastic laugh. “No, you haven’t. You stopped me from saving the President of the United States.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you idiot, that I was going to shoot the other gunman down there and prevent the assassination.” Oswald saw from Larry’s blank stare that he didn’t understand. “I’m an undercover agent,” he said in an exasperated voice, as if explaining things to a child. “I infiltrated their team. That way, when they made their move, I could be here to stop it. Is that clear enough?”

Larry nodded dumbly, searching to regain his voice. “Yes,” he stammered. “But . . . but why let it get this close? If you knew the time and place, why not just arrest them?”

“Because they have people on the inside, and we don’t know who they are. If we played our hand, they’d be tipped off.” Larry nodded again. Oswald looked at him in disgust for a moment longer, then started moving toward him. Larry leapt backwards, ready to fight, but Oswald surprised him by calmly walking right past him. The image of Oswald as a crazed, lone gunman had been so fully burned into Larry’s consciousness that it took him a moment to figure out Oswald’s calm demeanor. Then he understood. Oswald was an undercover agent who had tried to stop an assassination. He had done nothing wrong, so why should he be worried about anything? After all, he didn’t shoot the president.

Oswald had no idea of the danger he was in; the danger Larry had placed him in. Larry had to tell him, and fast.

“Listen, don’t ask me how I know this, but they’re going to pin this on you,” Larry said. Oswald responded with a snort and kept walking. “I’m serious. They’ve already given your

description to the police. They're going to be up here any minute.” Oswald turned and looked at him, his face growing serious. “Trust me on this,” Larry implored. “You've got to get out of here.”

“How would you know all this?” Oswald asked. Then he waved off Larry's answer with his hand. “Oh, I see. You've had an attack of conscience, huh?” Oswald thought Larry had been sent by the people who wanted the assassination to succeed. He thought Larry had jarred his arm so the man on the grassy knoll could do his work. So if Larry said they were going to pin it on him, he probably knew what he was talking about. “Of course,” Oswald said thoughtfully. “They can't let people know who really did it. They'll have to make someone the patsy.”

“Who? Who really did it?” Larry asked. But Oswald was thinking furiously, trying to decide what to do. “I've got to find Ruby,” he said nervously. He started to move forward, then paused. “I'd better get my gun first. Why didn't I bring my gun?” He glanced down at the rifle in his hand, then looked around for a place to hide it. He walked a few steps to his side and shoved the rifle down between some boxes, then disappeared down the stairwell.

Larry turned around and looked out the window at the Plaza below. People were just picking themselves up off the ground. He knew there were policemen running into the building at that very moment, headed his way. His hand went into his pocket and grasped the small device with the button he would push to return to his own time. For a few moments he stood watching the Plaza slowly come back to life, thinking about what had just happened.

It all made sense now. Oswald was a government agent whose assignment was to infiltrate the assassination plot. That's why the government helped him create a public image as a disaffected American and a supporter of Kennedy's arch-enemy, Fidel Castro. That explained his very public pro-Castro activities in the months leading up to the assassination, the new job at the Book Depository that just happened to be on the president's parade route, and the

boarding house in town while his family remained in the suburbs. Oswald had been on assignment, just as his father had suspected, but not for the reasons his father thought.

Of course, Oswald would be operating in “deep cover,” so far removed from any federal agent that they could easily deny any connection. He was supposed to stop the assassination, but if he failed, the forces behind him would have a contingency plan, and that plan would be to throw him to the wolves. To sell the lone gunman theory to the masses. To make Oswald the patsy.

And how would they do this? By using the very reputation that had allowed him to penetrate the assassination plot in the first place, the pro-communist reputation that they had helped him establish. Oswald thought he was building that reputation to infiltrate the plotters, never realizing it would be used against him if he failed.

This explained why Oswald never said anything to the police after his capture--what could he say that anyone would believe? That’s why he was so tight-lipped and grim in the police station--he was caught in a trap with no way out. He was speaking the absolute truth when he called himself a “patsy,” but he also knew that he couldn’t prove it.

Now Larry knew why Oswald didn’t just flee the city. He needed to find Ruby, because Ruby was his liaison, his only contact, and therefore the only person who could save him. But Oswald also knew that Ruby might disavow or even kill him, and he didn’t even know if he could get to Ruby, so he went to get his gun first. That’s why he went back to the boarding house, and that’s why he started across the city instead of fleeing as he should have. That’s why he panicked and shot the policeman, if indeed he did that.

This explained Jack Ruby’s actions, as well. Once Oswald was caught, Ruby had to silence him to preserve the lone gunman scenario. Ruby was a dead man anyway, because if Oswald talked, Ruby would be the first one he would name. So Ruby hung around the police

station waiting for an opportunity to kill Oswald. When it was announced that they were moving Oswald to another location, Ruby knew he had to act fast, regardless of the consequences, and regardless of how sloppy it looked, even if it meant killing Oswald on live television while surrounded by police. If Ruby had let them put Oswald into that armored car and pull out of the station, he would never have gotten another chance, and by the time someone else got to Oswald, he might have spilled the beans.

Now Larry could hear the sound of footsteps pounding up the stairs from the floors below. He grasped the return mechanism and prepared to push the button. But even as he did, he realized that he had found not only the explanation for Oswald's actions after the assassination, but for all the discrepancies and loose ends that kept the conspiracy theorists busy for so many years. These loose ends weren't properly planned for because Oswald had been in position to prevent the assassination. Everything that happened afterwards--from the faking of the president's autopsy to Ruby's own death--were all frantic measures taken to hide the truth behind an assassination that was never supposed to happen in the first place.

But it did happen. And it happened because Larry had interfered. He had not only allowed the president to be assassinated, he had also sentenced Oswald to death. And Ruby. And the dozens of others who would die in the coming years. He had caused it all.

He was so distraught that he almost waited too long to push the button. The sound of voices at the top of the stairs brought him back to his senses. The stacks of boxes were the only thing that prevented the first man up the stairs from seeing Larry as he faded away.

He awoke to see a ring of expectant faces looking down at him. He squinted into the lights and tried to shake off the grogginess. He started to sit up, and several hands reached out to assist him.

“Are you okay?” they asked.

He nodded, rubbing his forehead. He was afraid to speak. He knew they were all dying to know what he had seen in Dallas, but he wasn't sure what he should tell them. He was afraid they were going to ask him before he could gather his thoughts. Luckily, before anyone could say anything else, the military officer overseeing the project stepped in.

“Okay, people, you know the protocol. First he gets a full physical exam, then a complete debriefing, military personnel only.” The group began to move back reluctantly, but as they did, one person said what they were all thinking.

“Can't he at least tell us if there was a second gunman?”

“No, he cannot, and no one is to speak another word. We have to make sure he has returned to the same world he left. Talking about what we know about his mission may influence what he remembers. Now please return to your stations and complete your duties.”

Larry sat silently through his physical exam, thinking. When the doctors finished, he was left sitting alone for several minutes. He dropped his face into his hands, so depressed he had to stop himself from groaning out loud. He had caused the one thing he had spent his life wanting to prevent. By doing so, he had caused all of his father's pain; the very pain he had wanted so desperately to alleviate.

For the first time, everything he'd ever known about the assassination fit together, starting with the mystery of the first shot--the one that missed. A man standing down by the underpass had been injured by a chip of concrete when a bullet hit the curb next to him. But if that shot came from Oswald, it was ridiculously high and wide to the right, leading conspiracy theorists to postulate a third gunman in the lower levels of another building. Now Larry knew the shot wasn't high and wide after all, because Oswald wasn't aiming at the president's limousine. He was aiming at the man on the grassy knoll.

Larry even smiled when he remembered the home movies of the Book Depository taken

by a man named Bronson just moments before the assassination. Some people thought they saw in that film the image of a second man in the window next to the one where Oswald was perched. The image was discounted because it only lasted for a frame or two. Now Larry knew why. He was the man in the second window, caught peering around the boxes and then leaping from behind the books to start toward Oswald.

Then he realized something else, something he hadn't thought about before. His hand went to his mouth. "Oh my God," he said quietly to himself.

Just then the door opened, and he was escorted into a briefing room where three military officers awaited him. They smiled and shook his hand, congratulating him on his historic journey. Then they motioned for him to sit in a large comfortable chair while they took their places behind a table facing him.

"Captain Tolbert, please excuse the formality of this debriefing. We'll have a true celebration with the entire team soon. But first, do you recall the protocol laid out in your training?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you'll recall that this debriefing has two purposes. The first is to ensure that you have returned to the world you left; that nothing you might have done while on your mission has altered the course of history. The second is for you to inform us of what you learned on your mission. Is that the protocol as you remember it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Please begin by recounting the goal of your mission, as you understood it when you departed."

"Sirs, I was sent back in time to observe the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, 33rd president of the United States, at 12:30 pm on November 22, 1963 while riding in a

motorcade through Dealey Plaza in Dallas, Texas. The suspected assassin was Lee Harvey Oswald, who allegedly fired from a sixth floor window of the Texas Book Depository Building. Oswald was arrested after allegedly killing a police officer named Tibbet, then was subsequently shot in the stomach on live television by Jack Ruby in the basement of the Dallas Police Headquarters.”

The officers nodded and smiled, signifying that everything checked out. “Please continue,” one said.

“Sirs, in the world I left, there were questions about whether Oswald had acted alone. Many people suspected that there was a second gunman on the grassy knoll in front and to the right of the president's car. This theory seemed to be confirmed by a home movie of the assassination taken by a bystander named Abraham Zapruder. The final shot captured on that film causes the president's forehead to explode. The existence of the second gunman depends on whether that explosion was an exit wound or an entrance wound.”

Again the officers nodded and smiled. Larry continued.

“The best evidence suggests that there were three shots fired in Dallas that day. The first apparently missed its target. The second shot . . .” And here Larry paused, looking up at the officers and bracing himself for what was to come. “The second shot passed through the president's neck, causing him to clutch his throat, then hit Texas governor John Connolly, who was seated in front of the president.”

Larry stopped. The officers nodded and waited for him to continue.

“Sirs, is that correct? Is it true that the second bullet hit the president and the governor?”

“Yes, that's correct,” one of the officers said.

Larry looked down and closed his eyes for a moment. Now he knew for sure. He hadn't thought about it he was sitting alone in the examination room, but of course it had to be true.

Had Larry not interfered, Oswald's second shot would have hit the gunman on the grassy knoll and prevented the assassination. But in the world that Larry returned to, that second shot had still hit the president, just as it always had. This could only mean that Larry, when he knocked Oswald's elbow up and out, had moved the rifle down and to the left, causing Oswald to hit the president. The gunman on the grassy knoll had then finished the job.

A thousand science fiction stories had been right: Not only can you not change the past, but your efforts to do so may cause the very thing you're trying to prevent. What had seemed like nothing more than a clever plot device for old episodes of *The Twilight Zone* was really an ironclad rule of the universe. There was only one past, and it took place the way it took place, and nothing you can do can change it. If you try, you'll only create the outcome you wanted to change, because it's already happened, and it cannot be changed. And, after all, that was a lot easier to accept than all this nonsense about destroying the universe or splintering the future.

Larry smiled inwardly at the irony of his situation. He had just confirmed a fundamental principle of the universe, every bit as important as the discovery that the world was round, or that the earth circled the sun. His name should go down in history as one of the great explorers and scientists. Yet he had discovered this principle by deliberately disobeying orders and, for all he knew at the time, endangering the very existence of the universe. In making this discovery, he had caused the assassination of a president. With the discovery of this fundamental law, man's first trip through time had been an astounding success, but for all the wrong reasons.

“Captain Tolbert?”

And now he had a decision to make. On the one hand, he knew he had gotten away with it. All he had to do was tell them that, yes, there was a second gunman on the grassy knoll, and leave it at that. But it wasn't that simple. If they continued to go back in time, how many other catastrophes would be caused, or made worse, by their interference? Didn't he have an

obligation to warn them of the dangers? Besides, if they sent other missions back to learn more about the Kennedy assassination, wouldn't these teams eventually run into him in the Dallas of 1963 and discover the truth? It would be a lot better for him to admit the truth now than to have them find it out later.

“Captain Tolbert, please proceed.”

Perhaps they would be lenient with him, once they understood the importance of this principle to all future time travel missions. Either way, Larry knew he had no choice. Keeping his secret would be like discovering a huge waterfall on an uncharted river, but failing to warn those who come after him.

“Captain Tolbert, are you all right?”

Larry just sighed and shook his head resignedly. Then he looked up.

“Sirs, I have something to tell you,” he said.

The tech team had been waiting more than an hour when one of the military officers finally stepped into the break room where they were gathered.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I’m afraid I have some bad news. Captain Tolbert has stated that he did not travel back in time. All he remembers is blackness.” There was general consternation among the team, but the officer raised his hand to demand silence.

“As you know, this project has gone far beyond budget and experienced significant delays. As you also know, there are many within the Pentagon who believed this to be a colossal waste of taxpayer's money from the start. When the president receives my report, I think we can assume he will pull the plug. If he does, you will all be reassigned to other projects. For the time being, you may go home and enjoy some time off, with full pay, of course. I’m sure I don’t have to stress the importance of maintaining absolute secrecy about the existence of this project for the rest of your lives.” He paused. “I thank all of you for your hard work. Please be sure to

gather all personal belongings before you depart, as this facility will be closed for the foreseeable future.”

After he left, the team sat downcast. No one spoke for several moments. Finally, one of the team members started to stand up. “Hell, that was a bigger cover-up than the assassination itself,” he said. Everyone at the table nodded in agreement.

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The illustration utilizes the 13-cent John F. Kennedy stamp issued by the U.S. Post Office in 1967.