

# IN MEMORIAM

# November 22, 1968



by Colin Rutledge

When I was young, John was a man who lived by the sea in a faraway country where it was always warm. He wrote about another man who was very good and who we all should love. They were friends. My dad told me that. He showed me a picture of them in my Sunday School book while I was tucked under his arm in the big chair in the living-room. Another time he showed me a different picture of John in "Life" magazine. He had his little boy and a pretty lady with him. Sometimes John was on TV talking but I never paid much attention.

"DOWNTOWN". Hang-on, hang on mummy's leg. Coats prying you out; fear thrusts you back. Watching your feet as you stretch out on cracks that gape forward into stairs. Step again, step up again. Under arms, hand in hand watching electric trains go out of the tunnel across the trestle. Divided by one long step at a time from mummy to see Santa Claus. big. shy. running

down the ramp. All the music of carols. At home phone call and mummy very heavy in her chair.

I have since learned that the world slows down during a crisis. Voices labor over breathing words into the thicker air and each action tolls rudely breaking the lugubrious flow of memories. Thus silence, not sequence, measures time and mushrooms it into an enormity. Because age is the criterion of tragedy, I was excluded. I became a viewer rather than an actor in the slow-motion world around me.

Supper in foreign voices. Assassination implication rough on tongues. Words prying you in; tone thrusts you out. Hearing milk spill into your glass, the

only safe sounds. Chew again snipper. Over your head hearing nothing. Divided by the chance to leave and the terror of getting to know. Alone. shy. sliding off the chair. All the silver on the table.

Standing in Saturday, sunny cloudy, dark early, sadness of November (and more). Streets full of people in slow motion. Son absolutely unreal. In the whole day all I can remember is a cleaner's bag flapping slowly back and forth, into my chest as I followed behind. Please God, make mummy tell me what is happening. There is a wrath and fury about death that pin-points each man in time; draws him into himself and makes questions about the practical insulting.

Sunday on TV shoot! shoot! your suspicions prying you forward; their confusion thrusts you back. Clocks moving through Washington on a wagon. Breaking your highways as you gape at the horse. step again, step up again. Under the big flag? hand to rifle to hand. breaking the silence of marble floors with paid attention. Divided by one long step from the witnesses murdering history. All the guilt in Dallas.

As I played my dad nudged me gently and pointed to the TV. The little boy I had seen in "Life" was standing with his mummy on the steps of a big building between two pillars.

"His dad is dead." I looked

into my father's eyes. Nothing ever told me more about death than those two quiet eyes. I understood more than anyone else in the room. I did not mourn for the decline in law and order nor did I know enough to pity a figure who had reached "True Romance" proportions. He wasn't my "friend" and the grandeur of a thousand famous men in mourning didn't impress me. Least of all did I understand the things "he stood for" and anyway it is these very things that can't be cheered for on a soapbox. Freedom can't be given; it must be won.

Adults have no heroes. Only when a man is smothered by his name does he become heroic. But for me, John, my father, my grumbling older brother were all heroes — no, gods. Magnificent gods that by stupendous wonders made the framework of everyday. Now John, the man who lived by the sea, was dead — incapable of more wonders — limited to my fearful world. I cried.

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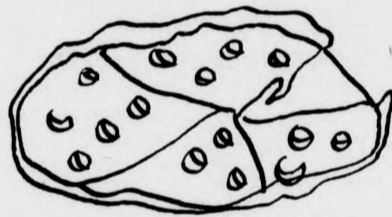
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