

Almost Camelot

by Gregory K. Carter

We used to fiddle with our stamp collections, Tommy Sander and I, after school. In the Fall of '63, we were both first graders fumbling our way through life. To ease the stress, kick back after a hard day's work learning letters or writing sentences with pencils fat as cigars or stuttering through yet another of Jack and Janet's prosaic adventures, we would head down to my den, pull up a chair, crack open our albums on a folding table and mount stamps until supper time.

"What's on the Early Show?" Tommy would usually ask.

"Something about a monster eating Delaware. Wanna watch?"

It was always something about a monster eating Delaware or the *Thing Without a Face*, or the *Creature with Three Heads*, so naturally we had to watch. We didn't have much choice anyway. On a good day, with the clouds just right and the weather just so, and with a spot-free sun, we could get three channels tops. Four, if you counted PBS, and we didn't.

So after school we would sit there and watch snowy, black-and-white monsters scare women with their hideous looks and brusque demeanor. This foreshadowing of our teen years flickered away in the background as we glued stamps in place with Elmer's Glue All.

All too soon night would fall, bedtime arrive, morning break shortly after, and another

school day would begin. I might start the day accidentally breaking a few crayons, or getting lost after lunch -- Follow that up by getting beamed on the softball field, and maybe kill the guppies with what I swore was fish food instead of Decon rat pellets. My academic performance fared much the same. *Us, Vs and Ws, Js and Is* looked to me like mere variations on the same theme. When reading aloud, I could have been mistaken for an Eastern European aping a Tennessee accent. *When Yack yumps on Yanet's Vagen...* The bell would always ring, though, and the yellow bus would then mercifully take me where my stamps awaited.

One day Tommy arrived at our stamp table with a newspaper tucked beneath his arm. *Hey, Darryl. Did you hear the news?* he asked, pitching the paper in my lap. *President Kennedy's coming to Tri-Cities airport.*

I looked at the picture of Airforce One below the headlines which looked to me like: *Kennedw to Arrjue at Trj Cjtjes thjs Thysdav. Als he bringing his jet?* I asked.

He has to. They've already printed the picture of the jet, and if he shows up without the jet that would be like false advertising.

Can you guess what Tommy wants to be when he grows up? Just slip on a banana peel sometime in a grocery store and give him a call. He'll treat you good.

Just think of it, Darryl, the President of these United States of America coming all the way to Blountville, Tennessee.

What I wouldn't give to see that jet. Four engines it had. Probably had ejector seats in first class and rocket launchers in the cargo bay.

AYou going to see him?@he asked me.

AWe can't go,@I pointed out. AIt's on a school day.@

AAre you sure?@

AYeah. That day starts with a T,@-- I knew my Ts -- Aand everyday that starts with a T is a school day.@

ASurely we can skip just one day.@

AYou can't do that, Tommy. It's illegal. The jails are full of kids who tried stunts like that.@

Tommy shivered. AThink he could...maybe come on Saturday, then?@

ASure. He's the President. He can do anything.@

For some reason, Mr. Kennedy chose not to change his schedule. It wouldn't matter, though. For Tommy's parents and my parents had decided that such an event would be worth missing one day of school, and we guessed, risk incarceration as well.

Once the spirit of truancy was unleashed, it spread like wildfire throughout the neighborhood. First Tommy, then me, next that weird kid that had blown his big toenail off with a firecracker, and soon every kid for three blocks would be going to see that jet. And the President, of course.

Everybody at school was going too, except one.

AHow about you,@I asked Danny Slank. AYou goin'?@

ANah. My Dad won't let me. He says Kennedy's a Communist.@

The rest of us needed a ride, though, so Mr. Preston volunteered. On Thursday morning we would hop aboard his World War Two Army Surplus truck and head out to the

airport. The truck's bed was still covered with its tattered green canvas. You sat on a wooden slab, and held on by poking your fingers through holes in the canvas to keep from falling out the back. A big white star covered each olive drab door. Only its massive oil leaks kept the truck from rusting apart. We thought it was the coolest thing we had ever seen.

The day before the Presidential visit, my mother got this call from Mrs. Fetchum, my teacher.

AMrs. Clay, your son can't tell his Vs from his Ws from his Us.@

AOf course he can.@

AMelissa Jameson says he can't.@

AWho's Melissa Jameson?@

AMy best student. She knew all her letters by the second day of class. Your son has a crush on her, you know. For a boy who doesn't know his Vs and Ws and Us, he's way out of his league, Mrs. Clay. Way out.@

ADarryl,@ Mom asked after hanging up. AYou *can* tell the difference between your Vs and Ws and Us, can't you?@

ASometimes,@ I answered. Alf they're printed real big.@

That answer robbed me of the chance to see the president and his big jet, thanks to Mom's V, W and U anxiety attack. AYou just can't afford to miss school, Darryl. You can see the president another time. He'll be back this way again,@ she promised. AYou'll see.@

By then, I thought, I'd have those letters down cold. Besides, I trusted my mother. Mothers knew everything -- except maybe about stamps and baseball cards and jet planes.

Yes, President Kennedy would return soon someday, and by then I'd be ready.

The next day, just as a rusting World War Two relic grunted down the road with its bed full of laughing kids, I boarded the school bus alone. I sat alone. I walked off alone, and entered a classroom with two other people in it. Me, Mrs. Fetchum and Danny Slank -- future president of the Upper East Tennessee chapter of the John Birch Society.

I missed seeing the president that day, and so did Tommy. Somehow the Secret Service took Mr. Preston's army surplus truck all wrong. Tommy and the others spent the day in a tiny gray room with a bright light beamed at their eyes, strange men asking them strange questions. But at least the six hours straight of *V*, *U* and *W* drills rendered me functionally literate. I couldn't wait to read the new *Jack and Janet* chapter to Melissa Jameson.

Eight days later I was sitting beside Melissa and explaining space exploration to her. "Know where moon craters come from?" I asked her.

"No," she answered.

"Rockets," I said. "The fire coming out of rocket engines is what makes moon craters. I'm gonna be an astronaut, you know."

Just as I thought a romance might evolve right there, toad-faced Principal Van Horne made an announcement in his thick-tongued voice. *Something, something...* "in Dallas...something..." Kennedy assassinated."

I didn't know this word -- *assassinated*, so I asked Tommy Sands. "What's *assassinated*?"

He didn't answer, he just cried, and Melissa Jameson cried, and the teacher cried, and then I cried, but still didn't know what *assassinated* was.

By noon, though, I knew. They let us out, then, right after lunch. I came home, locked myself in my room, and pasted stamps in my little album until bedtime.

In the years ahead there would be more stamps to mount, more white spaces to cover over. After school, Tommy would come by, and we would sort them all out. Little bits of paper commemorating butterflies or wild animals or weird plants or people we had never heard of. But one face on these stamps we recognized. There were lots with his face. Born 1917, died 1963. He used to fly a big jet and smile a lot and make people laugh and do good deeds. We never said so, but I'm sure Tommy and I thought the same thing. Here, on this very stamp, was someone I almost knew.