

CHAPTER
20

Section 2

LITERATURE SELECTION *from Paper Wings*
by Marly Swick

Twelve-year-old Suzanne Keller, the narrator of Paper Wings, comes of age during a turbulent time in our nation's history. As you read this excerpt from the novel, think about the different reactions of Suzanne's mother, her classmates, her teachers, and her bus driver on the day that President John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

Lee Harvey Oswald might as well have shot my mother through the heart. Sometimes in my confused memories of those days, when I try to reconstruct my mother's erratic behavior after the assassination, I see Jackie's face—disbelieving and devastated behind her black veil—instead of my mother's Scandinavian paleness and crumpled Kleenexes. I was only twelve at the time and there is no clear division in my memory between the public and the private world; to me, the public world was part of our household, a sort of light show emanating from our Magnavox console sitting in the corner of the family room, a backdrop to our daily lives. As far as I was concerned, our family might just as well have been riding through Dallas in that black open-air limousine, the bright sun shining, surrounded by useless Secret Service agents. My own version, if you will, of the single bullet theory.

Over the years, standing in line at various supermarkets, I would read those *National Enquirer* stories claiming that Kennedy was still alive. A vegetable in a wheelchair on a Greek island. Or a prisoner of Castro's in Cuba. And I would imagine, for an instant, my parents still married, celebrating what would have been their fortieth, their fiftieth wedding anniversary, having successfully weathered one crisis after another side by side—instead of what really happened. I recognized in those tabloid headlines my own inextinguishable desire to rewrite history. To imagine, at least, some weak flicker of that one brief shining spot having endured in the darkness of obscurity. We were, after all, a generation raised on happy endings. War was Bob Hope entertaining the troops. Marriage was Lucy and Ricky. Old age was Jimmy Durante—"Goodnight, Mrs. Calabash, wherever you are." Disease, death, disaster happened on the

news to foreigners in foreign clothes speaking foreign languages.

The day that Kennedy was shot they sent us home from school early. I was standing in the girls' locker room, having just changed into my blue gym suit, when the principal's voice crackled over the intercom, solemnly informing us that the President was dead. The locker room smelled of sweat and wet towels and sickly-sweet deodorants. I felt sick to my stomach and scared as I put my camel-hair

coat on without bothering to change back into my school clothes. The usual shrill bouquet of girls' voices had withered. A couple of girls spoke in hushed tones, but most of us just stood there silently, too shocked to open our mouths.

When I walked outside, the cold blast of November air felt good after the steamy, overheated locker room. The yellow school buses were lined up by the curb waiting for us. As I stood in line I took a couple of deep breaths and the nausea passed. There was

snow on the ground melting into my white sneakers with my last name, "KELLER," printed in Magic Marker on the rubber heels. My legs were bare except for white popcorn anklets. I started to shiver. The bus driver opened the doors, and we filed onto the bus. The boys didn't push and shove and call out insults the way they usually did. I could see that Mrs. Sparks, the bus driver, had been crying. Usually she barked orders at us; today she just stared out the windshield as if we weren't even there. I remembered that during the campaign she had worn a Nixon-Lodge button on her plaid lumber jacket, but she seemed sad anyway. The bus was almost full. An eighth-grade girl I didn't know sat down in the empty seat next to me and whispered something to her friend in the seat in front

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of her. Usually I sat with Kim, but she had stayed home with a cold that day. I clutched my skirt and sweater and tights into a warm ball in my lap and felt lonely. As the bus pulled away from the curb, my English teacher, Mrs. Ritchie, smiled and waved at me and I waved back. She had a clump of pink Kleenex clutched in her hand. When I turned my head around a second later, she was sobbing and the handsome new shop teacher, Mr. McDuffy, had his arm around her shoulders. In class that morning, right before gym, I had given a book report on *The Story of My Life* by Helen Keller, and as the disquietingly quiet bus pulled away from the curb, I recited to myself the sentences of the report I had learned by heart and my cheeks burned as I remembered how the boys in the class had laughed when I read aloud the first letter Helen had ever written to her mother, which I thought was very touching: “Helen will write mother letter paper did give helen medicine mildred will sit in swing mildred did kiss helen teacher did give helen peach george is sick in bed george arm is hurt anna did give helen lemonade dog did stand up.” My mother’s married name happened to be Helen Keller, so I had always felt a special personal connection to her, as if we were distantly related.

The bus wheezed and groaned along Nokomis Road. As we got closer to our neighborhood, I wondered if my mother had heard the news yet. She didn’t usually listen to the news until Walter Cronkite. She might not know. I didn’t want to be the one to tell her. My mother loved Kennedy. I hoped my sister would get home first.

“You’re Bonnie Keller’s sister, right?” the eighth-grader asked, suddenly turning her attention to me.

I nodded. My sister was a senior, a cheerleader, and I could tell that this girl, overweight with mousey hair, thought of Bonnie as distant royalty.

“Is she still going with Roger Branstead?”

“Yeah.”

The girl let out a dreamy peasant girl’s sigh.

I shrugged. Behind his back my father and I referred to him as Roger Braindead.

The girl leaned forward and whispered something to her friend, who whispered something back.

They seemed to have forgotten all about the President. I glanced across the aisle at Keith Matsumi. His eyes were closed and he was clutching his black violin case against his rib cage, a serious but serene expression on his face, as if he were listening to some sad, majestic music composed by someone long dead. He opened his eyes and I looked away. Two years earlier, in fifth grade, his mother had come to our class and taught us how to make origami Christmas tree ornaments: red and green paper birds. Most kids acted bored and embarrassed when their parents came to school—especially their mothers—but Keith had looked proud and respectful. The bus turned onto Mountain Laurel Drive and wheezed to a halt at the corner. I said “Excuse me” and crawled over the girl and clambered off the bus along with Denise DiNardo, Kevin Crawford, Keith Matsumi,

and the Dinsmore twins, Ricky and Robby. The boys walked off together. I took Denise’s hand—she had just started second grade and I baby-sat for her sometimes. She looked confused and frightened, as if she realized that something bad had happened but didn’t know what.

“The President died,” I told her as we walked toward her house, which was just on the other side of the Quaves’ house. “He was shot,”

I explained, as if trying to explain it to myself. It still didn’t seem real. Her mittened hand grabbed mine tighter and she started to cry.

“Is my daddy hurt?” she asked.

“No,” I said, “your father’s perfectly okay.

There’s nothing to worry about. This is just something far away. In Washington, D.C.”

Mrs. DiNardo saw us coming and opened the front door holding Denise’s four-year-old sister, Dianne, in her arms. Denise ran up the neatly shoveled walkway and grabbed her mother around the waist, crying, even though she didn’t know what about. I turned around and headed across the street to my house. It looked just as it had that morning when I’d left for school. You couldn’t tell that anything had changed. At the front door I cupped my hands and peered in through the glass. It didn’t look as if my sister was home yet. Her coat wasn’t hanging on its hook in the hallway. I couldn’t see my mother, but I could hear the TV. I opened

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the door, hung my coat up, set my books and clothes down on the hall table, and followed the sound of the television into the family room. My mother was sitting on the floor in front of our TV set, crying into a bath towel. Her hair was wet and soapy. She was wearing a white brassiere and black slacks. Apparently she had been washing her hair in the kitchen sink, something she did twice a week, when Kim's mother knocked on the back door with the news. It was chilly in the family room—I could see goose bumps on my mother's arms—but she seemed oblivious to the fact that she was half naked and trickles of water were running off her neck and onto the carpet. When she looked up and saw me standing there, she caught her breath and bit her lip until she stopped crying. Then she took a deep, deep breath and said, "This is the worst thing that has ever happened."

I took a couple of steps closer to her and patted her awkwardly on the shoulder, trying to think of something to say. On the television screen Vice President Johnson was taking the oath of office. Jackie's nylons were splattered with blood and her hand rested on the coffin next to her. I walked over and changed the channel. As if maybe it was just a sad movie. A real tearjerker. "What are you doing?" my mother asked. I didn't answer her. Back then we only got three channels. It was the same picture on all three stations. That's how I knew it was real.

Activity Options

1. With a small group of classmates, do an oral history project about Kennedy's assassination. Conduct interviews with adult family members and others in your community to collect their recollections and reactions to this national tragedy. Before you begin this activity, draw up a list of questions, such as "Where were you when you heard the news that Kennedy had been shot?"
2. Mrs. Keller—as well as other characters in this passage—are devastated by the assassination of President Kennedy. What recent historical event made a deep impression on you? Why? Write a brief personal narrative about this event. Share your narrative with the class.
3. The following chart describes various emotional reactions to grief. Study the chart. Then discuss with classmates which characters exhibit these different reactions and why you think so many Americans were greatly affected by Kennedy's death.

Shock and disbelief	Guilt
Emotional release, such as crying	Hostility and resentment
Depression and loneliness	Dejection
Physical distress	Reconciliation
Panic	Adaptation