

PROLOGUE

This book is not ideological or partisan. It's about thirteen women and a piece of American history hiding in plain sight. Kennedy men have been valorized and lionized for nearly a century, but the women they've broken, tormented, raped, murdered, or left for dead have never really been part of their legacy.

They must be. None of this is history. As William Faulkner wrote, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." The Kennedys remain a powerful and frequently destructive force, both in our politics and our culture. As of this writing, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a prominent conspiracy theorist and anti-vaxxer who has made racist and antisemitic comments, is running for president of the United States. He has raised tens of millions from big donors, almost all based on legacy. He remains unbothered and unquestioned about the circumstances leading to the suicide of his second wife, Mary Richardson Kennedy, in 2012 — a fragile woman whom he tormented toward the end of their marriage and in the lead-up to her suicide, cheating on her, cutting off her credit cards and access to cash, trying to forcibly hospitalize her, telling her she'd be "better off dead." He continues to smear her reputation, telling the press in December 2023 that yes, he had flown on the late pedophile Jeffrey Epstein's private plane not once, as he previously claimed, but twice, and that was only because Mary had a "relationship" with Epstein's chief procurer, the convicted child sex trafficker Ghislaine Maxwell — an assertion that several people who knew Mary well told me is impossible, given her character, her morality, and her devout Catholicism. RFK Jr. also, incredibly, has been given a huge pass for his false accusation that the savage 1975 sexual assault and murder of fifteen-year-old Martha Moxley was committed not by his once-convicted cousin Michael Skakel but by two teenagers from the Bronx, one Black, one mixed-race—teenagers he publicly named, endangering their lives. RFK Jr. wrote that one of the teens was "obsessed" with Martha's "beautiful blonde hair" and that both young men decided to go "caveman" on her.

Imagine anyone but a Kennedy leveling such racist, baseless accusations. The media would, rightly, be aflame with indignation. Yet all these decades later, the Kennedys benefit from a perverse double standard—in the press, in the justice system, and in the court of public opinion.

It's a double standard that is clearest and most insidious when it comes to the crimes that Kennedy men have committed against women and young girls. What was done to Mary and Martha are only two recent examples. Any victims who dare to fight back will find themselves confronting the awesome power of the Kennedy machine, one that recasts any woman, no matter how wealthy or famous or powerful, as crazy, spiteful, vengeful; a drug addict, a viper, a seductress. Whatever grievous harm a Kennedy man may have done to her, the message remains clear: She was asking for it. It was her fault.

Thus Camelot, that fairy tale of Kennedy greatness and noble men, still stands.

The late Ted Kennedy, vaunted "Lion of the Senate," drove off a bridge and left a twenty-nine-year-old woman to die in three feet of water—his passenger Mary Jo Kopechne, whose life could have been saved. Yet that criminal act has successfully been transformed into "Ted's tragedy," an awful event that unfairly kept him from ever becoming president of the United States. Ted Kennedy served out the rest of his life in Congress and was given a statesman's funeral with wall-to-wall news coverage, while Kopechne's name was barely mentioned. He was memorialized by Ellen R. Malcolm, the founder of EMILY's List, as "a true champion for women." Cecile Richards, then-president of Planned Parenthood, lauded him as "a true champion of women's health and rights." Neither woman mentioned Mary Jo Kopechne.

This well-known drunk and serial sexual assaulter has been the glorified subject of two recent biographies, both by men: a two-volume treatment hyperbolically titled *Catching the Wind and Against*

the Wind, respectively, by prize-winning author Neal Gabler, and Ted Kennedy: A Life, by prize-winning historian John A. Farrell. The latter describes Kopechne as “attractive but not gorgeous”—that observation, why?—before noting that she had the bad luck to be in a vehicle that passively “left the bridge,” as if, like the car in Stephen King’s Christine, it had a mind of its own. As if that car hadn’t been driven by a drunken Ted Kennedy, his driver’s license expired. As if Ted hadn’t sped down an unlit dirt road and careened off a small bridge with such force the car flipped and landed on its roof, the windshield smashed in.

Ted escaped. He left Mary Jo in that car upside down, forced to crane her neck at an awkward, painful angle as she struggled to breathe through a tiny pocket of air, surrounded by dark water, waiting for help that never came.

After the accident, guess who was at fault? Not Ted but his victim, Mary Jo, for being a single woman in this married man’s car late at night.

The Kennedys have a way of quashing anything or anyone—a book, a miniseries, an interview—that contradicts their golden image. They typically do this through power or payoffs. Caroline Kennedy and Maria Shriver personally lobbied the History Channel to kill The Kennedys, a 2011 miniseries that one family loyalist called “vindictive” and “malicious” in the New York Times, and were successful.

In one of the saddest ironies, even the most powerful Kennedy women would like this history erased. And such efforts have allowed this lie, this cancer in the American body politic, to further metastasize. It’s time to do right by the women and girls—and ourselves—by excising it.

Their stories are not told chronologically. Some women are paired throughout and some stand alone, but their unique experiences resonate in ways that link them across twentieth- and twenty-first-century America politically, historically, culturally, and socially. Some—such as Jackie Kennedy Onassis, whose life progressed along the path of modern American feminism, going from high-society debutante to First Lady to trophy wife to sexually liberated New York City career woman—will reappear; other girls and women have shorter stories, shorter lives.

Through deep reporting and interviews with many who have never spoken before, this book seeks to understand what being a woman among Kennedy men felt like over the years. I have taken some creative license here, but each of these stories is anchored by years of research. Many of these women are complicated; they, too, were attracted to money, fame, power—and that’s okay. We have made great strides in realizing that few girls and women ever make perfect victims. No one in these pages, despite what the Kennedys might have you think, deserved what happened to them. Not one deserves the stains on their legacies wrought, with great deliberation and zero remorse, by the Kennedys. This book is intended as a corrective, a new take on some women we think we know and some we’ve never really met, neither in full nor in fact.

Think about this: Jacqueline Kennedy, a thirty-four-year-old widow and mother who held the nation together after narrowly escaping the assassin’s bullets that killed her husband—who signaled to the world that America would not only survive this trauma but emerge stronger—was, upon her remarriage five years later, castigated as a whore who had sold herself to the highest bidder. That mantle hung over Jackie’s fascinating, difficult, creative, controversial life until the day she died. A man would never have been so denigrated. What happened to Jackie would be unthinkable today.

The Kennedys remain very much with us. But what is the Kennedy legacy, really? How should we define it? Do the Kennedys deserve to remain a power center in American life and politics? Or should we relegate them to their inglorious past? If not, what should we now demand of any Kennedy who seeks power?

We can answer only by fully reckoning with how the Kennedys have brutalized women throughout generations. The pattern originates with the ruthless patriarch, Joseph P. Kennedy Sr., a

financially and sexually rapacious man who fathered nine children. His path to power would be through his sons; his daughters were bred for marriage and babies, worthless as anything else in his eyes. Ever the overachiever, Joe committed two original sins. The first was political, and it would keep him from ever becoming president: his open admiration, as United States ambassador to the United Kingdom, of Adolf Hitler and his bloodless acceptance of the looming death of Western democracy. That was followed by his personal original sin: the unthinkable act he committed against his beautiful young daughter Rosemary, who suffered a fate worse than death. These are the poisonous roots from which all Kennedy misogyny and violence—psychological, physical, political, and personal—has flourished.

This book's title comes from the most famous line of John F. Kennedy's 1961 inaugural address: "Ask not what your country can do for you..."

"Ask not" has also forever been an admonition to women in the Kennedy sphere: Ask no questions. Don't ask for help or respect, for fairness or justice.

This book takes that as a dare. Ask not?

Let's.

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