

The President Has Been Killed

By Rachel Howard

On November 22, 1963, Michael's father woke him up early. He opened Michael's bedroom door with a bang, holding an alarm clock shaped like a cat in his hand, a wake-up song trilling as he danced around Michael's bed.

"Time to get up, son! It's a beautiful day."

Michael groaned and cracked his eyes open. His mother was standing in the doorway with her arms crossed, smiling indulgently at her husband. She was still in her nightgown, but Michael's father was already dressed in a suit and tie for work.

"Happy birthday, Michael," she said.

"Thanks, Mom," Michael said. "Dad, can you turn off that racket?"

"You don't like the alarm clock?" his dad said doubtfully, looking down at the tinny cartoonish thing. He cranked it to turn it off.

"Anyway!" Michael's mother said, "I have breakfast all prepared for you—chocolate-chip pancakes with bananas and syrup on top. Go ahead and get dressed, and we'll meet you in the kitchen."

Michael's father tousled his hair on his way out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Michael stretched. He was fifteen today, only three months into high school. He got out of bed and pulled the shades up on his window: his father had been right; it was a beautiful day. The sky was a clear blue, and the tall pine trees in the backyard waved in a slight breeze. Los Angeles was a good place to have a birthday in November. Michael's cousins lived in New Jersey, and their birthdays, in October and December, were always cold and wet.

He whistled as he got dressed, and then walked through the long ranch-style house to the kitchen, where his mother was sitting with the baby and his father was standing by the sink drinking coffee out of a mug.

"Ah, the sleepyhead finally rises!" his father said.

Michael sat down to a plate of delicious-looking pancakes and immediately dug in. On a wood stand, the small black-and-white television was turned on. Walter Cronkite was talking about President Kennedy's trip to Texas and what Mrs. Kennedy was wearing.

"Oh, I love that little pillbox," his mother said, as an image of the first couple walking down the steps of an airplane popped up on the screen.

"That woman has more style than what-all," his father said, taking a seat next to Michael at the table.

"She really is the most elegant woman I've ever seen," Michael's mother said.

"Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to be her friend. You know, I bet she is the best

confidante a woman could have. Remember that Christmas special? She makes just the most lovely home—so welcoming, too.”

Michael’s mother had forced the whole family to watch the Christmas special a year earlier, when Mrs. Kennedy had welcomed a whole crew of cameramen into the White House to show off how she’d had it decorated. Michael’s Aunt Martha, who wasn’t much impressed by Mrs. Kennedy (she seemed to be the only one), said that wasn’t it odd that Mrs. Kennedy acted as if she herself had decorated the whole thing when clearly the servants had done it.

“I better be off to work,” Michael’s father said. He rose from the table and kissed Michael’s mother and the baby. “Listen now, son: you have a *terrific* day. This is your fifteenth birthday, after all. It will never happen again! I’ll see you all at dinner tonight. Lobster, Karen?” he asked, looking to Michael’s mother, winking.

“Have a good day, dear,” Michael’s mother said, rolling her eyes.

Once he left, the kitchen was quiet but for Walter Cronkite’s voice and Michael’s baby sister’s cooing. Michael finished his breakfast quickly and shoved his school things into his bag. “See you later, Mom,” he said.

“Get to school safe,” she said. “And happy birthday.”

Michael’s bicycle was where he had left it at the bottom of their long hilly driveway. He scooped it up and careened off down the hill toward school, falling in line with other kids already on their way.

At school, Michael locked his bike in the usual spot, where his best friend Freddy was waiting for him.

“Happy birthday, Mikey!” Freddy said, giving him a one-armed hug. They walked into school together, discussing the astronauts and whether or not they were able to go to the bathroom in their space suits.

“Ew, that is *so gross*,” Helen, Freddy’s twin sister said, overhearing them as they sat down in homeroom.

“It’s a legitimate concern, Helen,” Freddy said, wide-eyed and innocent.

The morning passed the way school mornings always did—like the drip-drip of a leaky faucet. Michael just couldn’t get the hang of school. He hid all of his report cards from his parents.

At noon, Michael and Freddy were sitting at the lunch table in the far right corner of the cafeteria, where they always sat. The cafeteria was loud, screams and laughter reverberating off the cement walls. Michael’s mother had packed him a miniature cake with lemon frosting, Michael’s favorite. Suddenly, the principal’s voice crackled over the public address system, a not infrequent occurrence but one that always signaled something important.

“Students, students—attention please.”

As if the principal were standing right there in the cafeteria, telling them all to hush, the students became quiet.

"I regret to inform you that President Kennedy has been killed."

The silence in the cafeteria became thick with fear. Michael's heart started pounding, and his arms felt like lead. He began to sweat.

"Please return to your homerooms immediately for more information about this event from your teachers."

There was a rush to the cafeteria doors. President Kennedy was one of the most vital, wonderful men Michael had ever seen. His Boston accent had made Michael think of power and intelligence; he couldn't believe he would never hear it again.

Michael and Freddy sat down in their homeroom next to Helen, who was crying hysterically. Only then did Michael realize he had left his miniature cake in the cafeteria, the lemon frosting likely dripping all over the plastic table.

Name: _____ **Date:** _____

1. Where is Michael when he finds out that President Kennedy has been killed?

- A) at home
- B) in homeroom at school
- C) in the school cafeteria
- D) outside the school

2. What is the turning point in this story?

- A) Walter Cronkite's broadcast of the Kennedys' trip to Texas
- B) Michael's arrival at his school
- C) the principal's announcement of President Kennedy's death
- D) the students' return to their homerooms from the cafeteria

3. President Kennedy was an important figure to Michael. What evidence from the passage supports this conclusion?

- A) President Kennedy was one of the most vital, wonderful men Michael had ever seen.
- B) Walter Cronkite was talking about President Kennedy's trip to Texas on the television.
- C) Michael's mother had forced the whole family to watch the Christmas special a year earlier.
- D) After the principal's announcement, Michael and Freddy sat down in their homeroom next to Helen, who was crying hysterically.

4. Based on the passage, what was Mrs. Kennedy most widely recognized for?

- A) her sense of humor and pleasant personality
- B) her style and taste in clothing and decorations
- C) her willingness to travel publicly with President Kennedy
- D) her ability to keep a friend's secrets

5. What is this passage mostly about?

- A) how Michael celebrated the morning of his fifteenth birthday with his family and friends
- B) how Michael found out that President Kennedy was killed, and his day leading up to that point
- C) how Mrs. Kennedy was a style icon for women across the United States in the early 1960s
- D) how the death of President Kennedy affected all schoolchildren of that era

6. Read this paragraph from the story.

“Michael’s mother had forced the whole family to watch the Christmas special a year earlier, when Mrs. Kennedy had welcomed a whole crew of cameramen into the White House to show off how she’d had it decorated. Michael’s Aunt Martha, who wasn’t much impressed by Mrs. Kennedy (she seemed to be the only one), said that wasn’t it odd that Mrs. Kennedy acted as if she herself had decorated the whole thing when clearly the servants had done it.”

In this paragraph the author notes opinions of Mrs. Kennedy. How does she do this?

- A) by illustrating two similar reactions to Mrs. Kennedy’s decorations
- B) by highlighting Michael’s Aunt Martha’s opinion of Mrs. Kennedy as unusual
- C) by discussing Mrs. Kennedy’s Christmas special in full detail
- D) by describing Michael’s Aunt Martha and her relationship with Michael

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Michael’s morning passes the way school mornings always do. _____, his day takes an unexpected turn when he finds out President Kennedy has been killed.

- A) However
- B) For example
- C) Consequently
- D) Moreover

8. When the principal announces that President Kennedy has been killed, Michael rushes straight to homeroom from the cafeteria. What does Michael leave behind?

9. How does Michael feel when he finds out that President Kennedy has been killed? Use two specific pieces of evidence from the text to support your answer.

10. Based on the information in this story, how important were President Kennedy and Mrs. Kennedy to regular Americans like Michael and his family in the early 1960s? Give three examples from the text demonstrating their importance.
