

Introduction:

Troublesome details the early life of Rosemary Kennedy, sister of John F. Kennedy, who underwent a lobotomy at 23 years old. Having always been drawn to the overlooked tales of marginalised figures, I felt compelled to retell Rosemary's tragic narrative in order to give voice to a young woman who was forcibly silenced for 'troubling' the pristine image of her prominent family. Set between 1918 and 1942, I aimed to interrogate the culture of the early 20th century America that upheld such an extreme stigma around female mental health, and enabled the often fatal practice of female suppression through the use of lobotomy.

Troublesome

Rosemary was contorted - she had been so for several hours. Legs splayed like some trussed-up pig, limbs woven in and amongst each other, knotted and twisted in an intricate embrace: she was a ravelled string of yarn. She rose and fell, like a lamb placing its own fragile neck on the butcher's block, in grim acceptance of her own fate. Her mother's cold fingers were pressed into her side, yet Rosemary remained obstinately unmalleable: the sweeping gesture of the royal curtsy, the arc of the back, the gentle lowering of the knee and the demure tilt of the head were all motions denied to her.

'Try again Rosie, you're so nearly there!'

Rose Kennedy Sr was always the first to recognise the descent of the red mist over her daughter. It began as it always did: a tremoring of the lower lip, the furious swiping away of hot, bitter tears, soft hands curling into fists. The girl's life had been peppered by such fits since she was a baby: during Rose Sr's labour, a virulent strain of Spanish influenza had passed through the hospital, and the doctors had ordered Rose to keep her legs firmly shut, despite being in the midst of giving birth. Consequently, poor Rosemary had been deprived of much oxygen for the first hour or so of her life, and the effects were disastrous. The child seemed permanently in the grip of fury, and anxious teachers remarked to her parents that she wasn't quite developing at the rate of all the other children, and might she be more comfortable at a school designed for a girl of 'her needs?' Her parents, royalty amongst the Boston Catholic set, quietly shuttled her away to a boarding school for the intellectually disabled in Pennsylvania, where the truth of their daughter's mental limitations could be more readily concealed.

At 15, Rosemary was sent to the Sacred Heart Convent in Elmhurst, Rhode Island: it was here that the loneliness, like a maggot burying itself in the fleshy chambers of her heart, took hold. Rosemary was educated not with the other girls, but in a classroom of her own: it was cold, for Miss Newton, her teacher, believed that the frosty November drafts were 'good for the countenance.' Rosemary's only company during the pale-blue hours of the long school day was the aforementioned Miss Newton, and two nuns who gripped their rosary beads more tightly when the girl walked near them, for they asserted that Lucifer had come to dwell within her, finding no other explanation for Rosemary's destructive temper. The other girls were callous strangers: what desire had they to share their surreptitious conversations, their gleeful gossiping, with a girl whose intellect mirrored that of a seven-year-old? Rosemary's family was well-renowned, and the visits from her handsome brother Jack earned her enough respect to save her from any real concerted efforts at bullying.

But certainly, she was all alone.

She was so alone that she wanted to scream, and often she did; her wounded howling was often muffled behind the palms of Miss Newton, whose citrus-scented fingers attempted to silence the

troublesome girl. Troublesome; it was a word often used to describe Rosemary, for those attempting to explain her violent condition were often in want of a better word, a more exacting word, a kinder word, even. Yet they always settled on 'troublesome'.

On her eighteenth birthday, Miss Newton and the nuns bade a relieved farewell to Rosemary, as she returned home to Brookline. Here Rosemary's days were filled with outings to the opera, tea dances, dress fittings and the like, where her mother ensured that not only was she clothed in puff-sleeved dresses of crepe-de-chine and silk, but also draped in a veil of silence. Handsome brother Jack had begun to cut quite the impressive figure in politics, styling himself as John. F. Kennedy, whilst Rosemary's father, Joseph, had been named US ambassador to England. Whilst Rose Sr was delighted at her family's ascendancy into social spheres she had but dared to dream about, she worried about how her daughter might navigate this cruel world. She concluded that taciturnity, save for rehearsed speech, was the best course of action.

Though Rose Sr might have hoped that the episodes of anger were of a juvenile nature, as adulthood ushered Rosemary into the world of high society, the rage intensified. It consumed her like a wave - it lashed against her sides in fiery tongues, it doused her in liquid ire, it drowned her in a gloom of fury - and when it washed away she wept, for sorrow lingered in its salty shores. Of course, the anger often lapsed: in these brief instances, she was a sweet creature, filled with gaiety and affection and the stuff of real kindness. Despite truly loving her daughter, and recognising her innate goodness, Rose Sr simply couldn't understand the girl. And so, when Joseph suggested that Rosemary be presented at court as a debutante, Rose leapt at the chance, believing that she could find some common ground with her daughter on the basis of their shared femininity.

Thus preparations for Rosemary's debut started, for she was to be presented to King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, at Buckingham Palace, no less. Arrangements were made and rehearsals for the *royal curtsey*, an archaic ritual of the societal debut, began. Arc. Lower. Tilt. Rise. Arc. Lower. Tilt. Rise.

For five hours she practiced the curtsey without respite, until her mother, with an almost imperceptible nod of her head, whispered,

'Yes.'

The evening was mottled with shafts of yellowing, pestilent light, as candles dressed the pale debutantes in a jaundiced hue. Rose Sr slapped her daughter's wrist as she began fidgeting with her taffeta hairpiece.

'*Stop it,*' she hissed, 'you are a *lady*. You will *not* embarrass us, not here.'

Rosemary's lower lip wobbled.

'I just - all I mean to say is - I just want your day to be perfect, my darling. Happiness - that's all I want for you, my sweet, purely happiness.'

Rose smoothed her daughter's hair back, tucking a wayward strand behind her ear.

Various Honourables and Viscountesses glided past the King and Queen, curtsying deeply in appropriate deference. Soon Rosemary ' - the eldest daughter of his Excellency, Ambassador Kennedy - ' was called forward to pay obeisance to the expectant monarchs. Blood roared in her ears as she approached the royal couple, and she wondered for a moment if her delicate heels had been exchanged for wooden clogs, for each step was leaden and slow. A Persian rug - o instrument of torture! - had been laid across the marble floor, awaiting the inevitable slip of the poor debutante.

As Rosemary attempted the fiendish royal curtsy, she tripped: it was as though the stumble was spun into existence by some vindicative fate. No one could deny the conspicuousness of the stumble; not even Eve suffered so great a fall. Scrabbling for the last remnants of her dignity, Rosemary rose from the doomed curtsy and hurriedly rushed into the crowd. Never before had she been so aware of the weight of her own tongue, of the hard swell of the back of her throat: she looked to her mother through a nebulous haze of tears for some word of reproach, but she remained silent.

Rose Sr never spoke of the incident again; when asked about her daughter's debut, she proclaimed, with vacant eyes, that it had been a great success.

When the Kennedys returned home to Massachusetts, Rosemary's condition worsened. Her instances of rage, once characterised as bouts, took on a prolonged nature, and her melancholy couldn't be dampened. She was violent, too - once she hit her own mother square in the jaw. Physicians concurred that she had certainly regressed, and Joseph in particular despaired at his maddening daughter. He struggled to locate that paternal urge that swelled so quickly with his other children - he couldn't recognise this unfathomable creature as his own. He was therefore overjoyed when an old friend, a neurologist, offered over lunch news of a new medical procedure for 'girls like Rosemary.'

'It's wonderful, not *nearly* as radical as it sounds. I know dozens of girls with dear Rosemary's predicament who have been completely transformed by it. You see, they drill two small holes into the skull, and... well, I won't bore you with the details, but it's this revolutionary surgery that's all the rage in Europe. I'll contact a friend in Boston who'll sort Rosemary out in no time.'

Joseph was usually predisposed to scepticism, yet it took little persuasion for him to agree to Rosemary's lobotomy. He didn't consult Rose Sr on the matter, which admittedly did cause him a degree of guilt, yet he reasoned that if the lobotomy was as effective as the doctors claimed, Rose would be too delighted to be angry. Two weeks later, he bundled his daughter into the car and drove her to a surgery in West Massachusetts, furiously suppressing his malignant guilt.

The operating table was cold, and the blade pressed against Rosemary's scalp even colder. Having been mildly sedated, the doctors began to insert the scalpel through the holes in her skull, making small incisions into her brain. The surgeon, Dr Freeman, swung the blade back and forth like the hands of a pendulum clock, severing ribbons of brain tissue. Every so often, he would ask Rosemary questions, to check whether she still maintained brain function.

'What's your full name, dear?'

'Rosemary - Rosemary Kennedy. Where's my mama?'

'She'll be here soon child. Focus now dear.'

With gentle nicks of the scalpel, Freeman forayed into the cavities of Rosemary's frontal lobe.

'How old are you, dear?'

'Twenty-three years old, sir. I-I want to see Mama.'

'Soon, sweet child, soon.'

Freeman enjoyed a rapier flourish of the wielded instrument, slicing at another tentacle of tissue.

'Recite the Lord's Prayer for me, sweetheart.'

'I... Ma-'

'Try again for me dear. Our father who art in heaven...'

'Ar... I-I- Ma...'

Freeman put his scalpel down.

'Once more now, Rosemary. The Lords Prayer... You recite it every Sunday, in church.'

Rosemary managed a strangled gargle.

'Just... try your name dear. Tell me what your name is, child.'

Rosemary choked once again, releasing an incoherent garble of sounds.

Freeman held up three quivering fingers.

'Count my fingers, Rosemary.'

Her eyes lolled back in her head saliva dribbled from her lips.

'Rosemary? *Rosemary!*'

Freeman addressed Joseph with more than a little fear, his heart beating wildly in his chest.

'Well?'

'Unfortunately, sir, the procedure did not go to plan... such outcomes are always a risk, of course, but your daughter's mental function has been, well, somewhat damaged by the procedure...'

'Speak plainly to me, Freeman. What have you done to the girl?'

'The procedure has rendered her unable to speak, and - well, her intellect has regressed to that of an infant. I am terribly sorry again Mr Kennedy. I can recommend several institutions, however - well, to be blunt, this surgically-induced 'childhood' might make life somewhat more manageable for your family, sir...'

Freeman trailed off in his speech.

Joseph cradled Rosemary, now sleeping in his arms. She looked strangely at peace, younger even, her complexion still, her iron-wrought expression smoothed... Joseph would never admit it aloud but he dared to breath an internal sigh of relief. Though she would be eternally subdued, like some petrified babe, perhaps Freeman was right: now she would be less difficult, more easily contained in some quiet institute. Perhaps now that she had been stripped of the little intellectual dignity she possessed, she would be calmer, more docile, yes -

Certainly less troublesome.

Rosemary Kennedy spent the rest of her life alone in institutions: her family did not visit her until 20 years after the operation. She died aged 86 of natural causes: the miserable, isolated and mute existence she endured following her botched lobotomy finally drew to a close in the year 2005. Rosemary Kennedy was one of approximately 50,000 victims of lobotomy in the United States.