



JFK
**Reckless
Youth**

Nigel Hamilton

*The Kennedy family, 1934. From left: Pat, Joe Jr., Bobby,
Kathleen, Rose, Jack, Rosemary, Teddy, Joe Sr., Jean, Eunice
(Bachrach/John F. Kennedy Library)*

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Presbyterian schisms. Of the tiny Jewish quota of ten students, only two dared openly confess their religion, according to the secretary of the treasury's sons; and though Jack attended mass with his roommate Rip Horton off campus, there was no likelihood that, as a Boston-Irish Roman Catholic, he would ever be accepted by any of the socially desirable junior- or senior-year dining clubs, his friend Bud Wynne later admitted.

Princeton's provincialism was a comedown for Jack. Though later withdrawing the statement from his narrative of Jack's presidency at the personal request of Lem Billings, the historian Arthur Schlesinger was told by Jack's family that "Princeton had not greatly impressed him." This was undoubtedly true. "I think he was a little disenchanted with the country-club atmosphere of Princeton," Jack's best friend at Harvard would later recall. As Bud Wynne reflected, Jack had "wanted to come to Princeton as part of a rebellion against his father's distant wishes and expectations." Apart from his pals from Choate, however, Princeton itself appeared to have very little to offer Jack, and much that reminded him uncomfortably of boarding school.

Nor did Jack, normally so gregarious, make new friends at the college. "He stayed at Princeton about two months but he was sick the entire time he was there," Billings recalled. "He . . . he just wasn't well. He went to all of his classes, but just wasn't terribly well."

By early December the writing was on the wall. Together with his "roomies" Jack posed for a typical devil-may-care Christmas photograph, with lyrics based on Fred Astaire's latest hit, "Top Hat":

We're puttin' on our top hat
 Tyin' up our white tie
 Brushin' off our tails
 In order to wish you
 A Merry Christmas.

Dressed only in long white winter underwear, Rip Horton was waving a top hat, Billings wrestling with a huge bow tie, and Jack brushing off one of the tails of his frock coat. Humorous and irreverent, it was meant to show how much fun the boys were having at Princeton. Before it could even be posted, however, Jack was taken sick and dispatched to the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital in Boston for observation by Dr. Murphy.

Rip and Lem were at first caustic in their concern. "Tell us what time to arrive for funeral," they cabled on December 10. "Guess what Mrs. Warren [the cleaning help] thinks you have. She wants to know where you've been fu--ing around. As a matter of fact everyone is wondering that."

The doctors in Boston, however, were no nearer a solution to the puzzle of Jack's ill health than was Mrs. Warren. They recommended getting a second opinion from a Richmond specialist, Dr. Warren T. Vaughan. Thus on December 12, 1935, Dr. Vaughan cabled Jack from Virginia to say he would "see you tomorrow morning" for a medical examination, and cautioning that "the study may require three or four days."

The university physician, Dr. Raycroft, was not disposed to wait. On December 13 he wrote to Dr. Gauss, dean of the college:

You are probably familiar with the interesting case of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, [class of] '39. We have been in touch with his doctors ever since he came here and it now appears advisable for him to withdraw from the university for the purpose of having such examinations and treatment as his condition may require in the hope that he will improve sufficiently to return as a Freshman next fall. This arrangement for withdrawal should be dated December 12th.

It was the end of Jack's brave effort to stick things out. He would never return to the college, though. He'd been there six weeks—quite enough to cure him of wanting "to be a Princeton Man."

Leukemia

Jack's sudden departure from Princeton later gave rise to the rumor that he'd secretly gotten married and thus been forced to withdraw—an indiscretion then covered up by his powerful father, who managed to excise it from the court records. "Yes, he was married at Princeton," a classmate maintained. "Well, his father had that marriage annulled, but people who knew the Kennedys pretty much knew about it. It was such a short-lived thing, and then the annulment, and so he never mentioned anything about it." Yet another version had Jack marrying an English girl of low social standing, even a prostitute, and therefore being sent home from the London School of Economics when his father discovered what had happened.

Both stories were, however, intrinsically unlikely. It was Joseph Kennedy who was keeping the "terrific" twenty-four-year-old tart as his mistress in London, not Jack; moreover, Jack lasted only six weeks at Princeton, his career ended by genuine medical infirmity.

From Dr. Vaughan's clinic Jack made his way to Palm Beach. "Dear

Los Moine,” the convalescent scribbled to apologize for not having been able to smuggle Billings aboard the overnight train to Florida, “Am writing this ‘en-route’ if you know what I mean, although I don’t suppose you do. Did my best to wait. In fact stayed at Olive’s till 7:45 phoning J.P. [his father]. I had made a temporary compartment reservation for the trip down for Friday night and after phoning Dad and arguing with him for 20 minutes I talked to Mother who said there was no need to get a compartment as it was 30.00 extra. Of course that immediately wrecked everything as I could not possibly have sneaked you down any other way. Did my best as Olive will testify and my best is ‘as good as most and better than some,’ to quote a favorite expression of our late Head-Master, Dr. St. John.”

Apologies soon gave way to observant smut: “Just looked out the window in South Carolina and saw a little black boy taking a shit before the admiring gaze of 10 or twelve of his girl-friends. That’s a line you might use.” He hoped Billings would come down to Florida by bus; if not, that he’d drive down with Wynne and Merrick. (Billings didn’t.)

Father and son were now both in limbo. Though Joseph Kennedy sent a crate of whiskey to the White House, he was given no new position by Roosevelt, and soon accepted a series of cost-cutting commissions for RCA, Paramount, and, in due course, William Randolph Hearst. The days of being paid half a million dollars for sorting out Pathé were over, however, and he made do with lesser emoluments—\$150,000 from RCA and \$50,000 from Paramount—still substantial sums when hundreds of thousands of Americans were dying of malnutrition and millions were still without work.

Jack’s medical trial, meanwhile, recommenced after Christmas at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital in Boston. Once again the intimate examination of his body was unsettling for an eighteen-year-old—“the most harrowing experience of all my storm-tossed career. They came in this morning with a gigantic rubber tube,” he wrote to Billings in Princeton.

Old stuff I said, and rolled over thinking that it would [be] stuffed up my arse. Instead they grabbed me and shoved it up my *nose*. I didn’t know whether they thought my face was my ass or what but anyway they shoved it up my nose and down into my stomach. They then poured alcohol down the tube, me meanwhile going crazy as I couldn’t taste the stuff and you know what a good stiff drink does to me. They were doing this to test my acidosis. Soon I felt myself getting high. I had this thing up my nose for 2 hours and they just took it out (don’t be dirty Kirk) and now I have a “head-on,” and a “hard on” as when they had finished a beautiful nurse came in and rubbed my *whole* body.