

American Psychosis

*How the Federal Government Destroyed
the Mental Illness Treatment System*

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CONTENTS

Preface ix

Acknowledgments xi

1. Joe Kennedy: A Man with Problems 1
2. Robert Felix: A Man with Plans 17
3. The Birth of the Federal Mental Health Program: 1960–1963 37
4. The Short, Unhappy Life of the Federal Mental Health Program: 1964–1970 61
5. The Death of the Federal Mental Health Program: 1971–1980 75
6. The Perfect Storm: 1981–1999 93
7. Dimensions of the Present Disaster: 2000–2013 115
8. Solutions: What Have We Learned and What Should We Do? 139

Notes 169

Index 195

1

JOE KENNEDY: A MAN WITH PROBLEMS

September 1, 1939: Ambassador Joseph P. Kennedy was preoccupied with two deeply distressing problems. The first had become apparent at dawn that day, when German tanks rolled into Poland. This was a clear invitation for Britain to declare war, as Britain had publicly guaranteed Poland's independence. Two days later Parliament obliged, and Kennedy immediately telephoned the president. According to Michael Beschloss's history *Kennedy and Roosevelt*, "Roosevelt could barely recognize the choked voice from across the Atlantic. . . . [He] tried to comfort his old ally, but the voice was inconsolable. Over and over Kennedy cried, 'It's the end of the world. . . the end of everything. . .'"¹

Joe Kennedy knew that "everything" included his own aspirations to run for president in 1940. Anticipating that Roosevelt would not run for a third term, Kennedy had spent the previous 2 years carefully positioning himself. A recent poll had ranked Kennedy fifth among possible Democratic nominees, and some pundits claimed that Roosevelt had appointed him as ambassador to Britain to remove him from the American scene. In London, Kennedy had joined Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain as a major voice for the appeasement of Hitler, even as the Nazis were sweeping over Austria and Czechoslovakia. According to Beschloss, "both Kennedy and Chamberlain interpreted Hitler's eastward expansionism as a bid mainly for resources and markets." Indeed, just 1 week prior to the German invasion of Poland, Kennedy had assured Roosevelt that Hitler had limited ambitions and that once these had been achieved Hitler would "go back to peaceful pursuits and become an artist, which is what he wanted to be." As Kennedy was painfully aware, Hitler's signing of a nonaggression pact with the Soviet Union and his invasion of Poland were not the acts of an artist.²

* * *

On that September morning, as his own political ambitions were being crushed beneath the treads of Hitler's tanks, Kennedy was also preoccupied with another problem, one that was profoundly personal. The problem was his eldest daughter, Rosemary, who would turn 21 years old in 2 weeks. Recently, he had received disturbing reports that something was wrong with her, something more than the mild mental retardation she had experienced since birth. The retardation had been a source of great distress for the

family, especially for Joe, who expected his children to be strong and accomplished, like himself. Few people knew of Rosemary's mild retardation, because superficially she looked normal and the family fiercely protected her. As Rosemary grew older, they placed her in convents, where, thanks to Joe Kennedy's bounteous bestowments on the church's hierarchy, they could be assured that she would be kept safe and out of view.

At the time, Rosemary was living in a convent in Hertfordshire, northwest of London. The convent trained Montessori primary school teachers, and Rosemary read to the children each afternoon. It was a highly structured environment, in addition to which Rosemary had a full-time female companion, hired by the Kennedys, to watch over her. In recent weeks, however, Rosemary had been exhibiting increasingly severe mood swings and had to be admonished to not be "fierce" with the children. Her recent letters had included "eerie ellipses," suggestive of an emerging thought disorder. Disturbed by the reports he was receiving from the convent, Joe consulted privately with London's leading child development specialists. He was perplexed and infuriated by what he was being told; mental retardation had been a family disgrace, but mental illness would be a debacle. Such things could not be allowed in the Kennedy family.³

With war now a certainty, Joe Kennedy would remain in London as ambassador, but it was necessary to send his wife, Rose, and the children—Jack, Kathleen, Eunice, Pat, Bobby, Jean, and Teddy—back to the States. Joe Jr. was already there, at Harvard Law School. That left only Rosemary, and it was decided to leave her at the convent in Hertfordshire; she was happy there, and it was far from the eyes of the American press. Two months later, reporters from the *Boston Globe* realized that Rosemary had been the only Kennedy child left behind in England and wrote to her, asking for an interview. Joe Kennedy's aide penned a reply for Rosemary, which she dutifully copied. She said that she "thought it [her] duty to remain behind with my Father." Further, Rosemary implied that she had responsibilities that necessitated her staying in England. "For some time past, I have been studying the well known psychological method of Dr. Maria Montessori and I got my degree in teaching last year. Although it has been very hard work, I have enjoyed it immensely and I have made many good friends." The reporters were apparently satisfied and did not pursue the matter further.⁴

ROSEMARY'S BIRTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Rosemary had been born on September 13, 1918, at the Kennedy home in Boston. Jack had been born 15 months earlier; Rosemary and Jack were thus closer in age than any other Kennedy children. Joe Jr., the first of the nine Kennedy children, had been born 3 years earlier. As the eldest Kennedy daughter, Rosemary was christened Rose Marie after her mother; the family called her Rosie, but the rest of the world would know her as Rosemary (Figure 1.1).



FIG 1.1 Joseph Jr. (left), Rosemary (center), and Jack (left) as young children. Rosemary was born less than 16 months after Jack and the two were closer in age than any other of the Kennedy children. Jack and Joe Jr. were very protective of their younger sister. (AP Photo)

It was an inauspicious time to be born in Boston. Two weeks earlier, cases of influenza had been diagnosed among military personnel awaiting transportation to Europe. The disease spread quickly across Boston, and by September 11 there had already been 35 deaths. The epidemic was unusual in its predilection for young adults, its lethality, and its propensity to cause severe psychiatric symptoms as it spread to the victim's brain. At the Boston Psychopathic Hospital, Karl Menninger, who had just graduated from Harvard Medical School, was making notes on 80 patients who had been admitted between September 15 and December 15 with influenza and symptoms of psychosis. Menninger would subsequently publish five professional papers on these cases, thereby launching his psychiatric career.⁵

Probably of greater consequence for Rosemary was the fact that a milder wave of influenza had passed through Boston the previous spring. According to Alfred Crosby's history of the epidemic, "flu had been nearly omnipresent in March and April." This was when Rose Kennedy was in the third and fourth months of her pregnancy. Although it was not known at the time, a later study reported that "maternal exposure to influenza at approximately the third to fourth month of gestation may be a risk factor for developing mental handicap." Another study showed that the intelligence scores

of individuals who had been in their first trimester of development *in utero* during an influenza epidemic were lower than the scores of individuals born at other times. Even more alarming was a study showing that individuals who had been *in utero* in mid-pregnancy during an influenza epidemic had an increased chance of being later diagnosed with schizophrenia. This specter would later haunt the Kennedy family.⁶

Rosemary was said to have been “a very pretty baby” but “cried less” than her brothers had and did “not seem to have the vitality and energy” her brothers had shown. She was not as well coordinated, was unable to manage her baby spoon, and later could not steer a sled down the hill in winter or handle the oars of a rowboat in summer. She tried to join in the games of her siblings and their friends, but “there were many games and activities in which she didn’t participate” and often was remembered as being just “part of the background.”⁷

By the end of kindergarten, it was clear that something was seriously wrong with Rosemary when she was not passed to the first grade. Rose Kennedy consulted the head of the psychology department at Harvard, the first of many such consultations. The experts were unanimous in their opinion: Rosemary was mildly retarded. Terms used for such people in the 1920s included “feeble-minded” and “moron.” The early 1920s was the peak of the eugenics craze; male morons were said to have a high proclivity toward criminality, and female morons, toward prostitution.⁸

Joe and Rose Kennedy determined to prove the experts wrong. From primary school onward, Rosemary was sent to convent schools and provided with special tutors. For example, at the Sacred Heart Convent in Providence, Rosemary was taught in a classroom by herself, “set down before two nuns and another special teacher, Miss Newton, who worked with her all day long.” The Kennedys also “hired a special governess or nurse with whom Rosemary lived part of the time.” When Rosemary was at home, Rose Kennedy spent hours with her on the tennis court, “methodically hitting the ball back and forth to her” and helping her “to write better, to spell, and to count.” The intense work helped Rosemary eventually achieve a fourth grade level in math and a fifth grade level in English, but she could go no farther. To those outside the family, the Kennedys pretended that Rosemary was normal. In *The Kennedy Women*, Laurence Leamer claimed that “even cousins and other relatives beyond the immediate family did not know about Rosemary’s condition.”⁹

Among the Kennedy siblings, Eunice, almost 3 years younger, took a special interest in her older sister. Eunice was the most religious of the five Kennedy girls, and “many thought that Eunice would one day become a nun.” She “made a special point of spending time with Rosemary . . . integrating her into their lives.” According to one family friend, “Eunice seemed to develop very early on a sense of special responsibility for Rosemary as if Rosemary were her child instead of her sister.” Ted Kennedy

later recalled, “Eunice reached out to make sure that Rosemary was included in all activities—whether it was Dodge Ball or Duck Duck Goose. . . . Eunice was the one who ensured that Rosemary would have her fair share of successes.” As teenagers the two sisters became close, traveling in Europe together in the summer of 1935. As Eunice later recalled: “We went on boat trips in Holland, climbed mountains in Switzerland, went rowing on Lake Lucerne. . . . Rose[mary] could do all those things—rowing, climbing—as well or better than I. She could walk faster and longer distances than I could. And she was fun to be with.” Like her mother, Eunice was determined to make Rosemary seem as normal as possible.¹⁰

Responsibility for protecting Rosemary also fell to her older brothers, Joe Jr. and Jack, who was closest to her in age. This was especially true as she matured. She was described as “an immensely pretty woman,” according to some observers the most attractive of all the Kennedy sisters, and amply endowed. This, combined with her sweet demeanor and natural reticence, attracted young men, and it fell to Joe Jr. and Jack to warn them off. In summers they would escort her to dances at the Hyannis Yacht Club. As described in *The Kennedy Women*, “Jack put his name at the top of his sister’s dance card and went around the room, getting his friends to help fill out the rest of the card.” When writing to her from college, Jack’s letters were described as “sensitive and warm,” and a biographer described him as being “as generous toward his sister as any of the children.” Rosemary’s problems were thus indelibly etched upon Jack Kennedy’s conscience, as would later become clear when he assumed the presidency.¹¹

During their first year in London, the Kennedys had continued to include Rosemary in all family social activities. On May 11, 1938, Kathleen, age 18 years, and Rosemary, age 19 years, were presented to King George and Queen Elizabeth in a formal ceremony at Buckingham Palace. A few weeks later, Rose held a coming-out party for Kathleen and Rosemary, complete with 300 guests and an embassy official as Rosemary’s escort. In September, Rosemary joined Eunice, Pat, Bobby, and their governess for a 2-week tour of Scotland and Ireland. Then, in December, Rosemary joined the family for a ski holiday at St. Moritz. According to *The Kennedy Women*, “Rose’s main concern at St. Moritz was her eldest daughter. . . . a picturesque young woman, a snow princess with flushed cheeks. . . . [who] was attracting the attention of young men who took her cryptic silences and deliberate speech as feminine demureness.” In March 1939, Rosemary joined her family to attend the investiture of Pope Pius XII in Rome, and on May 4, Rosemary was in attendance at the dinner given by the Kennedys for the King and Queen prior to the royal visit to the United States. Thus, until mid-1939, when she was almost 21 years old, Rosemary was very much part of the Kennedy family, protected by them and apparently functioning at a socially appropriate level (Figures 1.2 and 1.3).¹²



FIG 1.2 Rosemary (right), with sister Kathleen and their mother Rose, arriving at Buckingham Palace to be presented to the Queen in June, 1938. Rosemary was mildly retarded but 1 year later she developed the initial symptoms of what became a severe mental illness. (Copyright Bettmann/Corbis/AP Images)

A KENNEDY PROBLEM

Rosemary's status within the family changed during the summer of 1939, as the earliest symptoms of her mental illness became manifest. She remained in England when all of her family, except her father, returned to the United States in September. And when



FIG 1.3 Rosemary and her father in London in 1938. (Copyright Bettmann/Corbis/AP Images)

Joe Kennedy traveled to the States on November 29 to join his family for Christmas, Rosemary remained at the Hertfordshire convent. The people who were increasingly in charge of Rosemary's life were Edward M. Moore and his wife, Mary. Moore had begun working for Joe Kennedy in 1915. He was not only Kennedy's most trusted assistant but also Rosemary's godfather and the namesake of the youngest of the Kennedy children, Edward (Ted) Moore Kennedy. During the 3 months when Joe Kennedy was absent from England, from December 1939 through February 1940, the Moores remained there and looked after Rosemary's needs. The distance between Rosemary and her family at that point can be measured by the fact that she only learned of her father's return to England when she read about it in the newspaper.¹³

Throughout the spring of 1940, the Nazis marched inexorably across Europe. Norway and Denmark fell, then Belgium and the Netherlands. It seemed just a matter of time before German bombs would fall on England, and Joe Kennedy predicted that the country would fall by July. Having the Nazis overrun England and capture Rosemary was not a welcome idea, so finally, in May of 1940, the Moores escorted Rosemary back to the States by way of Lisbon. Reporters were told that she had remained in England "to continue her art studies" (Figure 1.4).¹⁴



FIG 1.4 Rosemary, Jack, and younger sister Jean in 1940, shortly after Rosemary had returned from England. At that time, she had begun showing symptoms of mental illness, in addition to her mild mental retardation. (AP Photo)

Joe Kennedy remained in London for five additional months, returning on October 22, just prior to the election. Wendell Wilkie, the Republican nominee, was proving to be a tougher foe than Roosevelt had anticipated. Kennedy represented a significant block of American voters who wanted America to stay out of Europe's war, so Roosevelt strongly urged him to publicly endorse his reelection. Although Kennedy suspected that Roosevelt would bring America into the war if given the chance, he endorsed him. When later asked why he had done so, Kennedy replied: "I simply made a deal with Roosevelt. We agreed that if I endorsed him for President in 1940, then he would support my son Joe for governor of Massachusetts in 1942." Although he had not yet finished law school, Joe Jr. was regarded as the most promising of the Kennedy children and "had made no secret of his ultimate intention to become president of the United States." Because Joe Sr.'s own political career was by then "in ruins," he was ready to pass his mantle of aspiration to his oldest son. As historian Alonzo Hamby noted, "he expected his children to achieve his frustrated ambitions for social acceptance and political recognition and deliberately guided them along that path."¹⁵

What limited information is available suggests that things did not go well for Rosemary after she returned from England. According to Peter Collier and David Horowitz's *The Kennedys*, "the basic skills she had labored so hard to master in her special schools were deteriorating." She lived with the Moores, at a convent in Boston, at a "special camp" in Massachusetts, and with her family for various periods. One Kennedy guest recalled that "it was embarrassing to be around Rosemary. . . . She would behave in strange ways at the table. . . . She would appear there standing in her nightgown when everyone else was moving ahead so rapidly." For one dinner party, Rose "didn't feel comfortable having Rosemary around" and asked her governess to take her to her home for the weekend.¹⁶

By the summer of 1941, Rosemary's behavior had become increasingly alarming. According to Doris Kearns Goodwin's *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys*, Rosemary's "customary good nature had given way to tantrums, rages and violent behavior. Pacing up and down the halls of her home, she was like a wild animal, given to screaming, cursing, and thrashing out at anyone who tried to thwart her will." For no apparent reason, "she would erupt in an inexplicable fury, the rage pouring out of her like a tempest from a cloudless sky." One significant episode that summer involved her 78-year-old grandfather, John F. Fitzgerald. "Rosemary, who was sitting on the porch at Hyannis, suddenly attacked Honey Fitz, hitting and kicking her tiny, white-haired grandfather until she was pulled away." Fitzgerald had been a three-term member of Congress and three-term mayor of Boston and was still regarded as one of the most powerful men in the city.¹⁷

Shortly after the attack on her grandfather, Rosemary was sent to live at St. Gertrude's School for Arts and Crafts, one of the first schools in the United States

offering academic training for retarded children. It was part of a Benedictine convent in northeast Washington, D.C., located on Sargent Road, adjacent to the campus of Catholic University. Rosemary's sister Kathleen had already moved to Washington in August to take a job with the *Washington Times-Herald*. In October, Jack also moved to Washington to work at the Office of Naval Intelligence and lived at Dorchester House, on 16th Street. Kathleen and Jack could both, therefore, keep an eye on their increasingly unpredictable sibling.

What had become painfully clear was that something had to be done. Joe and Rose were afraid that their daughter would become pregnant, a potentially disgraceful situation for a Catholic family with political ambitions in an era when abortions were not a realistic option. Their fears only increased when Rosemary figured out how to escape from the convent and wander the streets of northeast Washington at night. In Goodwin's *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys*, Ann Gargan, Rosemary's cousin on her mother's side, recalled the Kennedy dilemma:

She was the most beautiful of all the Kennedys. . . . She had the body of a twenty-one-year-old yearning for fulfillment with the mentality of a four-year-old. She was in a convent in Washington at the time, and many nights the school would call to say she was missing, only to find her out walking the streets at 2 a.m. Can you imagine what it must have been like to know your daughter was walking the streets in the darkness of the night, the perfect prey for an unsuspecting male?

In *The Kennedy Women*, Laurence Leamer added that "the nuns would find her wandering in the streets, her story disconnected and vague, and they would bring her back to the convent, ask her to bathe, and warn her never again to walk into those nighttime streets. Soon she would be off again. . . . The family worried there were men who wanted her and men she may have wanted. . . . The family feared that Rosemary had lost all control. . . . They feared that she was going out into the streets to do what Kathleen called 'the thing the priest says not to do.'" Edward Shorter, who had access to the Kennedy archives for his book on them, claims that "apparently in the course of these wanderings [Rosemary] was having sexual contact with men."¹⁸

It is not possible to give a definitive diagnosis of Rosemary's illness without access to her files. The Kennedy Foundation has kept them closed and rejected applications to view them, including my own request in October 2010, despite the fact that all the principals had died. According to FBI files, Joseph Kennedy's attorney confirmed that Rosemary had suffered from a "mental illness" for "many years." In her autobiography, Rose Kennedy herself acknowledged that "there were other factors at work besides retardation" and added: "A neurological disturbance or disease of some sort seemingly had overtaken her, and it was becoming progressively worse." Dr. Bertram S. Brown,

former director of the National Institute of Mental Health, indicated in a 1968 interview that Rosemary “may well have had a schizophrenic illness,” based on his discussion with psychiatrists who had been involved with the Kennedy family. What can be said with reasonable certainty is that Rosemary had developed a severe psychiatric disorder with psychotic features that fit somewhere in the clinical spectrum of schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, and bipolar disorder with psychotic features. This development should not have been completely unexpected; several studies have reported that between 4% and 8% of children who have mild mental retardation subsequently develop schizophrenia or other psychosis when they reach maturity. And, as noted previously, individuals exposed to the influenza virus prior to birth have an increased chance of later developing schizophrenia.¹⁹

THE LOBOTOMY

One of Joe Kennedy’s goals in life was to achieve respectability for himself and his family. As an Irish American in Boston, he had grown up in an era when “Paddy” and “Mick” occupied the lowest rungs on the social ladder. At college, according to Beschloss, “Kennedy seemed to seek out wellborn Harvard men, one of whom told him that he was being watched for signs of the behavior commonly thought of as Irish. Perhaps to escape the Irish stereotype, Kennedy neither smoked, drank or gambled.” In 1922, when Kennedy applied for membership in the Cohasset Country Club, his wife “was snubbed by the Cohasset matrons and Joe was blackballed.” Years later, he remembered it clearly: “Those narrow-minded bigoted sons of bitches barred me because I was an Irish Catholic and son of a barkeep.” On another occasion, after having been referred to in the newspaper as an “Irishman,” Kennedy exploded: “Goddam it! I was born in this country! My children were born in this country! What the hell does someone have to do to become an American?”²⁰

Joe Kennedy’s Irish roots and Catholic faith were thus significant impediments to respectability. Rosemary’s mental retardation was yet another barrier, given beliefs about the genetic origins of mental retardation that were prevalent early in the twentieth century. But to have a daughter who was seriously mentally ill and in danger of becoming pregnant out of wedlock was perhaps the greatest impediment of all. In 1941 Freudian theories regarding the cause of mental illness were prominent, and standard textbooks of psychiatry, such as Aaron J. Rosanoff’s *Manual of Psychiatry and Mental Hygiene*, claimed that schizophrenia and related diseases were caused by “chaotic sexuality” resulting from “inborn psychosexual ill-balance... mainly between the factors within the individual which makes for maleness and those which make for femaleness.” Joe and Rose Kennedy had grown up in an era when the epithet “crazy Irish” was commonly directed at families like their own. As early as 1854, a Massachusetts

Commission on Lunacy had reported that Irish immigrants were disproportionately represented in the state's asylums. In the Boston Lunatic Hospital, for example, 80% of the inmates were Irish, compared with 31% of Boston's population. For a socially and politically ambitious Irish family like the Kennedys, having an insane family member was the definitive disgrace.²¹

The decision of Joe Kennedy to seek a lobotomy for Rosemary should be viewed in this historical light. The operation, which involves surgically severing the connections between the frontal lobe and the rest of the brain, had been pioneered by Dr. Edgar Moniz in Portugal in 1935. It had subsequently been introduced in the United States in 1936 by Drs. Walter J. Freeman, a neurologist, and James W. Watts, a neurosurgeon, in Washington. By 1941 Freeman and Watts had done lobotomies on almost 100 mentally ill patients and were claiming good results for many of them, especially those with symptoms of agitated depression and obsessive-compulsive symptoms. As Freeman later described it: "Disturbed patients often become friendly, quiet and cooperative. . . . The results are usually quite good, especially from an administrative point of view." However, "patients . . . with schizophrenia fared poorly by comparison," according to Freeman's biographer, who examined his records.²²

Joe Kennedy's decision to have Rosemary lobotomized was made after careful consideration. According to one account, "when he was in England he had talked with doctors about a pioneering operation called a prefrontal lobotomy," suggesting that he was exploring this option in 1940, even before leaving England. The first lobotomy in England would not be done until the following year. Kennedy probably also got information from his daughter Kathleen. In 1941 she had gone to work for the *Washington Times-Herald* and had befriended John White, who was writing a series on mental illness for the paper. According to White, Kathleen quizzed him "rigorously" about it. She would "draw me out on the details—not just draw me out but absolutely drain me." Later she told him "it was because of Rosemary. She spoke slowly and sadly about it, as though she was confessing something quite embarrassing, almost shameful."²³

For Joe Kennedy a lobotomy offered a definitive solution to the one problem that had defied him. Rosemary's retardation had been a source of great frustration to him, for money alone would not fix it. For example, when Rosemary was 10 years old, actress Gloria Swanson, Joe's mistress at the time, recalled his becoming enraged when he offered to donate money to a hospital "if they would guarantee that it could cure Rosemary," which, of course, they could not. Joe Kennedy's frustration in the face of his daughter's severe mental illness must have been several times greater than that engendered by her mild mental retardation.²⁴

Thus, in the fall of 1941, Joe Kennedy went to Dr. Walter Freeman to arrange for a lobotomy for Rosemary. Freeman's office was in the LaSalle Building at Connecticut Avenue and L Street NW and was described as "a palatial penthouse in which patients

waited in a 50-foot-long living room.” Freeman, 45 years old at the time, had graduated from Yale University and the University of Pennsylvania Medical School and had trained in neurology in Europe. He had been raised as an Episcopalian with a Catholic mother and had visited Germany just prior to the outbreak of war. Like Kennedy, Freeman had publicly said many favorable things about Germany, so much so that the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1942 investigated Freeman’s “patriotism and political beliefs.”²⁵

For Walter Freeman, Kennedy offered a rare opportunity to do a lobotomy on the daughter of one of the nation’s most powerful and influential men. According to Freeman’s biographer, “he yearned to make an indelible mark on the treatment of the mentally ill.” At the time Kennedy approached him, Freeman was making the final corrections to his book, *Psychosurgery: Intelligence, Emotion and Social Behavior following Prefrontal Lobotomy for Mental Disorders*, which would be published in 1942. Freeman regarded his book as “absolutely necessary to the popularization of psychosurgery.” Freeman was an aggressive self-promoter in trying to get lobotomies established as a standard psychiatric treatment, despite intense criticism from many of his medical colleagues. He even hoped to win a Nobel Prize in Medicine for his work; the award instead went to Moniz in 1949.²⁶

Thus, in mid-November 1941, Rosemary Kennedy was operated on at George Washington University Hospital by Dr. Watts, with Dr. Freeman supervising. Because Freeman was a neurologist and not trained to do neurosurgery, Watts did all the actual procedures until 1945, when the two men parted company. Watts was interviewed in 1994, shortly before his death. As described in Ronald Kessler’s *The Sins of the Father*, Watts confirmed that Rosemary did indeed have a severe mental illness. After mildly sedating Rosemary and drilling two small holes in the top of her skull, Watts inserted a knife and “swung it up and down to cut brain tissue. . . . As Dr. Watts cut, Dr. Freeman asked Rosemary questions. For example, he asked her to recite the Lord’s Prayer or sing ‘God Bless America’ or count backward. . . . ‘We made an estimate on how far to cut based on how she responded,’ Dr. Watts said. When she began to become incoherent, they stopped.” Given Joe Kennedy’s desperation for a definitive solution and his propensity for offering large sums of money to those who might help him solve his problems, it seems reasonable to assume that Drs. Freeman and Watts would have erred on the side of cutting too much rather than too little.²⁷

And err they did—the lobotomy was an unmitigated disaster. As one family member described it in later years, the operation “made her go from mildly retarded to very retarded.” According to Ronald Kessler, Rosemary could no longer wash or dress herself and was “like a baby.” She had also lost most of her ability to speak: “She is like someone with a stroke who knows what you are saying and would like to let you know

that she knows but she can't." This was in stark contrast to the usual descriptions of her as "just chattering all the time" prior to the surgery. In *The Kennedy Women*, Laurence Leamer described the lobotomized Rosemary as "like a painting that had been brutally slashed so it was scarcely recognizable. She had regressed into an infantlike state, mumbling a few words, sitting for hours staring at the walls, only traces left of the young woman she had been" (Figure 1.5).²⁸

The effect of Rosemary's lobotomy on her family was understandably profound. Rose, who had spent so many hours trying to help her daughter, was devastated. Years later, after Jack and Bobby Kennedy had been assassinated, Rose said that she was "deeply hurt by what happened to my boys, but I feel more heartbroken about what happened to Rosemary.... The assassinations hurt, but it was a different kind of hurt." Eunice, who loved and cared for Rosemary perhaps more than anyone in the family, was probably the most profoundly affected. A student at Manhattanville College in Purchase, New York, at the time, she "began to act strangely... and distanced herself even more from life and study at the college. She missed so many classes that one of her schoolmates... tutored her in chemistry." After Christmas recess Eunice abruptly left Manhattanville and transferred to Stanford University. There she was joined by her mother, according to one Kennedy biographer, suggesting that the family was concerned about her. At Stanford, Eunice was remembered as "a silent, sullen presence leaving almost no deep mark on the lives of women with whom she had lived for three years," suggesting an ongoing depression.²⁹



FIG 1.5 Neurosurgeon James Watts (left) and neurologist Walter Freeman (right), doing a lobotomy in 1942, a few months after having operated on Rosemary Kennedy. (Harris and Ewing Studio, courtesy of Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University).

The effect of the lobotomy on Joe Kennedy is difficult to assess because most of his letters have not been made available. According to Amanda Smith, who had access to the Kennedy family files, “almost no mention of Rosemary survives among her father’s papers after the end of 1940. . . . Her correspondence ends, and she seldom appears except obliquely in the surviving family letters and papers.” One letter, however, provides a clue. Written in 1958 to Sister Anastasia at St. Coletta’s school and convent in Wisconsin, where Rosemary had been living for 15 years, the letter said: “I am still very grateful for your help. . . . after all, the solution of Rosemary’s problem has been a major factor in the ability of all the Kennedys to go about their life’s work and to try to do it as well as they can.”³⁰

* * *

Following her lobotomy, Rosemary was hospitalized for 7 years in Craig House, a private psychiatric hospital in Beacon, New York, best known for having had Zelda Fitzgerald as a patient. Because the hospital was only about 40 miles from Manhattanville College, that may be why Eunice abruptly transferred to Stanford 1 month after the lobotomy, to escape the painful reality of her sister’s condition. In 1948 the Kennedys sought a permanent home for Rosemary and placed her in St. Coletta’s School for Exceptional Children, a convent run by Franciscan nuns, in Jefferson, Wisconsin. Originally, the plan had been to place Rosemary in an institution in Massachusetts, close to her family, but the family was persuaded not to do so because of possible publicity. St. Coletta’s, by contrast, was a thousand miles away in rural Wisconsin. There, on the grounds, the Kennedys built a private house and set up a trust fund to provide for four full-time staff to care for her. She also had a dog and a car in which she could be taken out for rides. In 1983 the Kennedys donated a million dollars to St. Coletta’s, and Rosemary remained there until her death in 2005 at the age of 86.³¹

For the rest of their lives, the tragedy of Rosemary would hang over the Kennedy family, like Edgar Allan Poe’s raven:

And the raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon’s that is dreaming.

Rosemary essentially disappeared. According to Janet Des Rosiers, Joe Kennedy’s secretary and mistress, “Rosemary’s name was never mentioned in the house. I knew she existed because I saw the family photographs in the attic. But the name was never mentioned.” According to Kennedy biographers who had access to the family’s correspondence, there was “almost no mention” of Rosemary in Joe Kennedy’s correspondence after the lobotomy, as noted above, and Rose Kennedy did “not mention her

again in a letter for the next twenty years.” In addition, according to David Nasaw’s biography of Joe Kennedy, “there is no evidence that anyone in the family either visited or was in contact with Rosemary or the nuns for the first ten or so years” she was at St. Coletta’s. In later years, Rose and other family members did visit, but Joe never did. Evidence of the lobotomy itself also disappeared. According to Walter Freeman’s biographer, “Freeman’s correspondence and private writings are silent on the question of her surgery and its outcome.” It would be 20 years before the family would even publicly acknowledge that Rosemary had been mildly mentally retarded, and no family member has ever publicly acknowledged her mental illness.³²

According to Laurence Leamer’s *The Kennedy Men*, “the lobotomy is the emotional divide in the history of the Kennedy family, an event of transcendent psychological importance.” Plane crashes took the lives of Joe Jr. in 1944 and Kathleen in 1948, and assassinations killed Jack in 1963 and Bobby in 1968, but none of these deaths had as profound an effect on the Kennedy family as Rosemary’s lobotomy had. Plane crashes and assassinations can be viewed as acts of God, but the lobotomy was an act of a Kennedy. Rosemary’s tragedy was a family sin that demanded expiation. That opportunity would present itself in 1960, when John F. Kennedy was elected president.³³