

# FEATURES

## The Day They Killed My President

By Maria S. Judge

November 22, 1963, was a sunny fall day

in Dallas, Texas.

It was also a warm spring day in Santiago,

Chile.

A year earlier my father had answered

President John F. Kennedy's call for young

Americans to serve the cause of peace by liv-

ing and working in developing countries. Dad,

who was 48-years-old and married with seven

children, may not have been the typical young

candidate Kennedy had in mind when he laid

out his vision for the Peace Corps, but Dad

joined enthusiastically as director of the third

group of volunteers to work in Chile.

He packed up his home and family and

moved us to this long skinny country, thou-

sands of miles south of the equator, where the

opposite seasons were just one of the many

things we had to get used to so far away from

home.

I was nine-years-old that November of

1963. My sister Ceci was six. Exactly six. It

was her birthday. She couldn't wait for classes

to end that Friday because Mom was organiz-

ing a party at home after school.

In the middle of the afternoon I left my

classroom to go to the bathroom. When I

came back a few minutes later, I saw that our

teacher's husband had come in and was talk-

ing with her at the front of the room. They

looked very serious.

"What happened?" I asked my friend

Martisol, who sat next to me.

"Oh, I have a funny joke," she said, and

begun to tell it.

"No," I interrupted her. "What are they

talking about?" I was afraid I had missed

something important.

"Oh," she said casually. "Mataron al presi-

dente." They killed the president.

"President Alessandri?" I asked her in sur-

prise. I figured it had to be the president of

Chile, because he used to walk to work in the

morning all by himself, with no bodyguards or

security. My father ran into him one morning

to chat.

Dad told him all about the projects

that his Peace Corps volunteers were doing in

Chile and the president was very impressed by

their hard work. He seemed like a nice man,

and I thought Martisol was taking his death

very lightly.

"No, not Alessandri," she said, shaking her

head. "Your president?"

My president? I thought. How could that

be? He was the reason we came to Chile. He

couldn't enjoy myself at the birthday

party that evening. It seemed wrong to cele-

brate when something so terrible had hap-

pened. I thought my family was heartless for

going on with the party. Didn't they have any

feelings? We were in Chile because of the

Peace Corps, and now the man who started

that program had been killed. I thought

mourning was called for, not celebration.

Our neighbors, the ambassadors of

Uruguay and Yugoslavia, paid condolence

calls. Bobby, one of the volunteers, came by to

help Ceci celebrate her birthday and to give

me a ride home. She heard the news that afternoon at

La Victoria, the slum where she worked as a

nurse. She was treating a sick child when a

woman leaned in the window and told her that

President Kennedy was dead.

"Was it an automobile accident?" Bobby

asked.

The woman shook her head no.

"A heart attack?"

She shook her head again.

Another woman leaned in and put her fin-

ger to her head as though she were holding

gun, and Bobby realized he had been shot.

She drove to the Peace Corps office in down-

town Santiago and joined the other volunteers

who stood around feeling helpless as they

tried to get a radio broadcast.

As Bobby looked out the window she saw

the Marine guard come out of the United

States Embassy across the street. He took

down the flag, and put black ribbons on it. Just

then the Chilean army band at the Presidential

connect

it with the tragedy in Dallas. She

thought something had happened to me at

school.

"I'm so sad about President Kennedy," I

gasp between sobs. I could barely get the

words out.

Miss Betty called later to see if the party

had been canceled. She thought we might be

too upset to celebrate. But Mom explained that

Ceci was six, and the only thing that would

upset her was the cancellation of her party.

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President Alessandri walked out of the palace

and across the street to the U.S. Embassy.

Bobby and the other volunteers stood there

and watched and wept.

On Saturday morning, I got up early and

sat on the front steps, waiting for Dad to bring

home the morning newspaper. I pored over the

stories and the pictures in *El Mercurio*, des-

perate to find out every detail of information.

There was a picture of President Kennedy rid-

ing in the motorcade, another picture of him

meeting with world leaders, a picture of him

with his brothers and sisters (he had a lot of

them, something else to personalize the situa-

tion for me) and yet another of him playing

with his son John-John.

There was Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy riding

in the car in Dallas in her white hat and suit (I

wouldn't find out it was pink until years later

when I saw a color picture), and there she was

on the plane watching sadly while the new

president was being sworn in. There was a pic-

ture of President Alessandri leaving the U.S.

Embassy where he had expressed his condo-

lences to Ambassador Cole. No article was too

long or complicated, no picture too obscure

for me to review in great detail.

I soaked it all in and kept my lonely vigil

on the front steps for several days until the

story moved off the front pages.

The Chilean press gave a great deal of cov-

erage to the assassination and the Chilean peo-

ple were very affected by the death of John F.

Kennedy, a man they revered greatly for his

humanity, his courage, and his Catholicism. A

week after the assassination Mom was in a taxi

cab, and the driver asked what her country

would do now that the president was dead. He

explained how the United States presidential

succession system operated, and assured him

that things would proceed in an orderly fashion.

The cab driver was saddened by this loss. I

knew just how he felt.

Maria

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