

## PROLOGUE

# The Torch

## 2008

It was on the sunny spring day of Tuesday, May 20, 2008, that I emerged from a medicated drowsiness in a Boston hospital bed and looked up into the face of a doctor who explained to me in a somber way that I was about to die, and that I had best begin getting my affairs in order and preparing my friends and family for the end.

As I lay in that hospital bed, my friends and neighbors on Cape Cod were just then getting their boats ready for the summer cruises and races. I intended to be among them, as usual. The Boston Red Sox were a good bet to defend their world championship. There was a presidential primary campaign in progress. My Senate colleagues were pushing forward on our legislative agenda. I had work to do.

No. As much as I respect the medical profession, my demise did not fit into my plans.

I was hardly “in denial” that I faced a grave and shocking threat to my life. The first symptoms of what would prove to be a malignant brain tumor had struck me three days earlier. They’d descended on me as I padded toward the kitchen of the Hyannis Port house that has been the center of my life and happiness for most of my seventy-six years. I was intent on nothing more than taking Sunny and Splash, my much-loved Portuguese water dogs, for their morning walk. My wife, Vicki, and I had just been chatting and having our morning coffee in the sunroom.

Life seemed especially good at that moment. The sixteen years of my marriage to Vicki had been good ones. Her acute understanding and love of *me* had made her my indispensable partner in my life. We shared countless joyful hours aboard my antique wooden schooner *Mya*, including nights of sailing along the coast, guided by the stars. Vicki had given me such a sense of stability and tranquillity that I had almost begun to think of life in those terms—stable and tranquil. But never boring. Certainly not with this funny, passionate, fiercely loyal, and loving woman.

Vicki and I had enjoyed an especially exhilarating winter and early spring. On January 27, thrilled and inspired by Barack Obama and the hope he embodied, I took the podium at American University in Washington to endorse his quest for the presidency. The best hopes of the past and present converged around me. My niece Caroline Kennedy stood at my back, alongside my own son Patrick and the candidate himself. The crowd roared its approval for my message. And I felt myself lifted—with a renewed optimism for my country, and by the unexpected notes of an old bugle, calling me once again to the campaign trail. Other years, other hustings, other adventures swept out of the past. “It is time again for a new generation of leadership,” I declared to the cheering crowd in front of us, as another voice echoed down the corridors of my memory: *Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans . . .*

I felt joyous and exuberant through the inevitable exhaustion of the Democratic primary campaign, as I had felt in Wyoming and West Virginia in 1960 for Jack, and in Indiana and California in 1968 for Bobby. “No one said we couldn’t

have a little fun!" I shouted to a Latino crowd in San Antonio before belting out "Ay Jalisco No Te Rajes" in my version of Spanish. I had so much fun that I sang it again in Laredo. By mid-May, Obama had won the crucial North Carolina primary and had taken the lead in committed delegates. Some commentators were declaring the race already over. I certainly intended to keep on campaigning for him through the late spring and summer, but there was time to steal away for a few sails on Nantucket Sound.

On May 16 I took part in a ceremony at a favorite historic site of mine, the New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park, where I joined Massachusetts congressman Barney Frank and others to cut the ribbon at the Corson Maritime Learning Center. Barney and I had secured appropriations for repairs and other improvements to the building after it was damaged in a 1997 fire. I felt especially good that day, and threw away my prepared remarks to speak from my heart about my love for New Bedford, and the sea, and for the connection to our history that the park represented. Vicki told me afterward that Barbara Souliotis, our dear friend and the longtime chief of staff of my Boston office, who was sitting beside her, turned and whispered, "He's really *on* today!" I certainly felt "on." Change was in the air. And tomorrow, Vicki and I would enjoy our first sail of the year.

But that next morning, everything changed.

I had just meandered through the living room and had come within two steps of the grand piano that my mother, Rose, used to play for the family more than half a century ago as we gathered for dinner. Sometimes Jack, young and thin in his customary rumpled pullover, would stand at about the spot where I passed just then, and sing a solo to Mother's

accompaniment.

Suddenly I felt disoriented. I moved toward the door leading to the porch, where several spacious chairs face the lovely prospect that I've known since childhood: a view to Nantucket Sound and the several masted boats at anchor in the nearby harbor. "Well," I told myself, "I'll just go outside and get some fresh air."

I didn't make it outside. Everything seemed hazy. I walked past the front door and into the dining room, where I lowered myself into a chair. That's the last thing I remember until I awoke in the hospital.

I learned later that I'd been discovered almost at once by Judy Campbell, our household assistant. Judy called out for Vicki, who was still in the sunroom, waiting for me to return. When Vicki saw me, she ran to my side and instructed Judy to call 911, and then my physician in Boston, Dr. Larry Ronan. As she waited for the local rescue team to arrive, Vicki wedged herself into the chair beside me and cradled my head. I was not aware of it then, but she held me tenderly, kissing my cheek and patting me and whispering, "You're going to be okay."

It took just four minutes for the first responder to arrive. He was a Hyannis police officer who told Vicki, "I was an army medic," to which my wife blurted, "Oh, thank God! Come in!" The paramedics arrived about half a minute later. No one knew how to diagnose me. They suspected a stroke. They prepared me for transportation—this took some time—and took me to the Cape Cod Hospital, where I was deeply sedated while they performed initial tests. Vicki was in constant contact with my doctors in Boston, who were in turn in contact with the Cape Cod team. The Boston doctors dispatched a medevac helicopter to transport me to Massachusetts General Hospital.

In fairly short order, I was airlifted to the hospital in Boston. Vicki, meanwhile, continued to focus on the necessary tasks. Sitting in the car while I was being readied, before we even left home, she phoned as many members of our combined families as she could reach. “The second I called 911,” she explained to me later, “I knew that this was going to be on the news, and I didn’t want everyone close to us to find out that way.” To every family member who asked Vicki, “Should we come?” she replied, “Yes. Yes. You’ve got to come.” Then, as the chopper hurtled through the air on its half-hour flight to the hospital, Vicki hitched a ride there with the Hyannis fire chief, Harold Brunelle, who is a good friend of ours. She continued calling family members all the way to Boston.

I came out of sedation in the late afternoon. It took me a while to realize where I was; I had no memory of anything after sitting down in my dining room in Hyannis Port. It soon became clear I was in a hospital room, and I was happy to see Vicki’s large hazel eyes studying me with obvious love and anxiety. The immediate cause of my collapse had been a generalized seizure brought on by the deeper affliction. Every muscle in my body had contracted severely, and I was in extreme pain.

The children poured into the room that evening. I savored their embraces, and we ordered in chowder from Legal Seafood and watched the Red Sox game on TV.

A biopsy the following Monday confirmed that I had a brain tumor—a malignant glioma in my left parietal lobe. Vicki and I privately were told that the prognosis was bleak—a few months at most.

I respect the seriousness of death—I’ve had many occasions to meditate on its intrusions. But I wasn’t willing to accept the doctor’s prognosis for two reasons.

The first was my own obstinate will to carry on in the face of adversity, one of the many habits of discipline that my father instilled in me and all of my brothers and sisters. We were taught never to give up, never to passively accept fate, but to exhaust every last ounce of will and hope in the face of any challenge. This was almost certainly the teaching that led our eldest brother, Joe Jr., to volunteer for a highly dangerous flying assignment near the end of World War II, one that in fact cost him his life. It fueled Jack's determination to stay alive as he floated in the Pacific after his patrol torpedo boat was rammed and sunk by the Japanese. And I am convinced that it accounted for the life force and cheerful resolve of our beloved sister Rosemary, who pursued laughter, games, travel, and social affairs well after it became clear that nature had placed severe limits on her intellectual capacity.

The second was the way the message was delivered. Frankly, it made me furious. I am a realist, and I have heard bad news in my life. I don't expect or need to be treated with kid gloves. But I do believe in hope. And I believe that approaching adversity with a positive attitude at least gives you a chance for success. Approaching it with a defeatist attitude predestines the outcome: defeat. And a defeatist's attitude is just not in my DNA. Anyway, I'd heard this brand of doom speak before. As hard as it was to hear the news about my own illness, it was nothing compared to the body blows I'd suffered when two of my children had been diagnosed with particularly lethal forms of cancer. When Teddy Jr., then twelve, discovered the lump below his knee that turned out to be bone cancer back in 1973, our doctors warned us that very few people survived this form of the disease. We were determined that Teddy would be an exception. His leg had to be amputated and he endured two

years of the most painful, taxing medication and therapy. But as I write this, Teddy is a happily married forty-seven-year old businessman and lawyer, and the father of two beautiful children. And then in 2002 my daughter Kara was diagnosed with “inoperable” lung cancer. She faced slim odds of survival, the doctor told us. As with Teddy, the family refused to accept this prognosis. We were told that every doctor we would consult would say the same thing, and I recall saying, “Fine. I just want to hear every one of them say it.” But when I brought together a group of experts in the kind of cancer Kara had, they didn’t all say the same thing. She did have an operation and aggressive chemotherapy and radiation. My wife, or I, or both of us, accompanied her to her chemotherapy treatments. I prayed for Kara, as I had for Teddy Jr., and frequently attended daily mass. Kara responded to my exhortations to have faith in herself. Today, nearly seven years later as I write this, Kara is a healthy, vibrant, active mother of two who is flourishing. And so, fortified with experience and our faith, Vicki and I decided once again to fight. I would live on for as long as I could. And in electing to live on, I would offer myself as an example to those struggling with the unacceptable news that there is no hope.

Vicki and I began to develop a plan of action. “Let’s just take it one step at a time,” we told one another.

The first step was to sail. Sailing, for me, has always been a metaphor for life. But on Wednesday, May 22, the day I left Massachusetts General, as Vicki, the dogs, and I stepped aboard *Mya*, docked and waiting for us at the pier in Hyannis Port, our sail was more than a metaphor: it was an *affirmation* of life. *Mya* cut smartly through the sparkling waters of Nantucket Sound under a brisk wind—the same waters on which Jack had taught me to sail more than sixty-five years

earlier. Everything seemed back to normal, except for the crowd of cameramen and reporters who awaited us onshore.

The culminating event of my hiatus on the Cape was the annual Figawi regatta on Memorial Day. In this spectacular season-opening race, some three thousand sailors in two-hundred-odd boats of all sizes compete in various divisions in a race from Hyannis to Nantucket and then, two days later, back again. Vicki and I, Teddy Jr. and his wife, Kiki, and our usual crew of good friends had won our division on the race back from Nantucket to Hyannis the previous year. I'd itched for the chance to defend my title, even after the symptoms struck; but my wise first mate was understandably hesitant. But when the weather report predicted clear skies and a strong southwest breeze for the almost due north race course back from Nantucket to Hyannis—perfect conditions for a schooner like *Mya*—Vicki smiled at me and said, "Let's do it." It was a glorious day. For the sake of the historical record, I will note that *Mya* finished second, with a crew that included Vicki, daughter Caroline, daughter-in-law Kiki, sons Teddy Jr. and Patrick, and our old friend Senator Christopher Dodd of Connecticut.

While we were sailing and digesting the news, we had asked our dear friend Dr. Larry Horowitz to line up a team of doctors to consult with us. Larry Horowitz is a Yale Medical School graduate and my former chief of staff, who had also served as staff director of my Senate subcommittee on health in the late 1970s. Larry immediately tapped into his vast network of contacts, and began feeding us advice on doctors as well as state-of-the-art medical centers. He brought them all together for a meeting in Boston.

I welcomed the doctors who had assembled from around



the country to advise us. "I want to thank you all for coming," I told them. "I want to approach this in a way that makes sense. I want to be prudently aggressive. And I want this process to be helpful to others. If I can show that there is hope for me, perhaps I can give hope to all those who face this kind of disease. I want to do that. I want to give people hope." By the end of the meeting, we had decided on a plan for surgery, followed by chemotherapy and radiation. Unlike some cancers, mine would be treated like a chronic disease, requiring continued treatment after the initial phase that Vicki referred to as "shock and awe."

We headed to Duke Medical Center in Durham, North Carolina, for surgery a couple of days later. Vicki recalls that I was on the phone nearly the entire trip, asking my Senate colleagues on the committee I chaired to help shepherd through some particular pieces of legislation that were important to me. I asked Barbara Mikulski, the able senior senator from Maryland, to take the lead on the higher education bill. To Chris Dodd I turned over the work on mental health parity. I conferred with Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi on some of the issues that we were working on with the House. I didn't want to leave unfinished work on the table. My personal affairs were in order, and I suffered neither dread nor anxiety. I intended to beat this thing for as long as I could. But it didn't hurt to have all my bases covered, just in case.

The surgery accomplished everything the doctors had hoped. And as Vicki and I headed happily home to Hyannis Port a week later, we began planning our steps toward a secret goal that she and I had agreed upon the very day we committed to the surgery: if everything went as expected, we would travel to the Democratic National Convention in Denver

and I would address the delegates.

Being able to speak at the Democratic convention in August, as I had done at so many conventions past, became my mission and stayed in the forefront of my mind during my radiation and chemotherapy treatments that summer, as Vicki and I made the round trip by car from Hyannis Port to Boston five days a week for six weeks. The timetable was in our favor: radiation would end in July, and we'd been told that I could expect to regain much of my energy after that. The convention was to be at the end of August. It made for an ideal goal. I have always been a person who schedules his time, and I always try to be on time. Having open-ended free time makes me restless. I suppose you could say that preparing for the convention was also part of my recuperation that summer.

And so I embarked on a summer of rehabilitation, sailing, and planning to rejoin my fellow Democrats at the moment of their great celebration. I sailed nearly every day. Teddy Jr. delighted me by setting up his office in Jack's old house, nearly next door to us, and moving in along with Kiki and their children, Kiley and Teddy III. Kara and her two children, Grace and Max, also spent most of the summer on the Cape. Patrick was there a lot, as much as the congressional schedule allowed. Curran Raclin, Vicki's son and my stepson whom I had helped raise since he was nine, was working in Boston and often just drove down for dinner. Caroline Raclin, the newly minted Wesleyan graduate, was a frequent visitor. My sister Jean even rented a house in Hyannis Port for a while. And of course Eunice and Ethel and lots of nieces and nephews were already there. I decided that I was finally going to indulge my passion for Four Seas, the legendary ice cream that is freshly made on Cape Cod only in the summer. I may be the only

patient in the history of Massachusetts General who went through both chemotherapy and radiation and *gained* weight!

I soon began work on my convention speech, asking my longtime friend and old speechwriter Bob Shrum to come talk to Vicki and me. I knew essentially what I wanted to say at the outset, and Bob and Vicki and I have a synergistic way of working together.

As the summer lengthened, I felt my strength returning, just as the doctors had predicted. Still, there was no medical guarantee that I'd be able to follow through on my hope. We decided to keep this project a secret, but of course speculation eventually mounted that I *might* attend the convention.

We flew to Denver on Sunday, August 24, the day before the convention opened, in a chartered jet. With us were my internist Larry Ronan and some close friends and family members. Inside the private apartment in Denver that we had rented, my aides and I began a run-through of my speech on a teleprompter. After a minute or two I held up my hand. "You know, I really don't feel well," I said. I felt a sharp pain in my side and we didn't know what it was. I was taken to a hospital, where I was surrounded by three doctors, all of them, coincidentally, named Larry, which would have been funny if I hadn't been in so much pain.

Unbelievably, after making it through brain surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy and meeting my goal of being ready and able to address the delegates in Denver, I had been struck, out of the blue and for the first time in my life, with a kidney stone. As the doctors prepared to administer a very powerful pain medication, my wife, who is usually unflappable in a crisis, burst into tears. "If you give him pain medicine, then you will have made the decision for him about speaking tonight.

You can't take away his ability to make this decision for himself. He's worked too hard for this night." After doing a back-of-the-envelope calculation on how long the medication would stay in my bloodstream, the doctors assured her that it would be out of my system in time for me to speak, though, as they later told us, they did not think I would be feeling up to speaking in any event.

Now doctors from all over Denver had begun to descend on my room, Larrys and non-Larrys alike. A neurologist arrived, and a urologist, and several other -ologists. I welcomed them all, of course; but Vicki's preoccupation (and mine) was not diagnosis, it was the danger of overmedication and overpowering sleep well past my schedule for appearing at the Pepsi Center.

We were not vigilant enough. A nurse gave me more pain medication when no one was looking. The doctor had not yet changed the orders in the chart to reflect our private conversations. Vicki, shall we say, remonstrated with her. Yet there it was, the sleep-inducing drug, coursing anew through my system. How long before it would lift?

"What do you think?" I asked Vicki drowsily.

"You can just go out and wave," she replied. "Just go out there with the family and wave."

But I had not come all the way to Denver just to wave.

We worked on a compromise: Shrum cut my prepared remarks down to about four lines, in case my deep drowsiness persisted. Then, assuming the best—which by now was not as good as I'd hoped—he cut the original in half. That would be the version I would give if I was strong and awake enough to speak at any length at all.

The convention's opening gavel was scheduled for 6 p.m.

At around 4:30, I awoke and told Vicki, “I probably ought to get up now and see if I can walk and not fall flat on my face.” I made it from my bed to the end of the room. “I think I’ll go back to sleep now,” I said.

I didn’t sleep long. We would have to leave for the center no later than 6:30 if we had any hope of being on time. I had not had the chance to rehearse my remarks on the teleprompter and had not seen the text in two days. Nor would I again until I spoke it. We showered and dressed at the hospital. Someone was combing my hair as the aides stared at their wristwatches; someone else was wrapping my hand in an Ace bandage, to conceal the intravenous line still implanted there.

Larry Horowitz was on the phone with the Pepsi Center. They needed to know which version of the speech if any to put in the teleprompter. I said the original one that I had rehearsed at the Cape, but Vicki and Larry persuaded me that Shrum’s abbreviated version was probably a better idea.

“Let’s go,” I said. The three Larrys—Ronan, Horowitz, and Larry Allen, a wonderful young doctor we had met when I had surgery at Duke who had coincidentally moved to Denver—escorted us to a waiting van. Vicki and I sat in the middle seats, between the driver and the doctors. We sped off toward a convention hall I’d never been in, and a stage whose contours I did not know, to give a version of a speech that I had never seen. Even the full speech had become the stuff of distant memory.

*I can handle this*, I kept telling myself. *I can handle this*.

My niece Caroline Kennedy gave a beautiful and heartwarming introduction. After a spectacular film produced by Mark Herzog and Ken Burns, we heard the announcer’s voice: “Ladies and gentlemen, Senator Edward Kennedy.” This was it.

Showtime.

My wife walked with me out onstage and to the podium, held my face, and kissed me. And then she went to sit with the rest of our family. I could feel myself start to settle down.

And so on Monday evening, August 25, 2008, I fulfilled my personal dream that would never die. “It is so wonderful to be here,” I declared to the cheering delegates. “Nothing, nothing was going to keep me away from this special gathering tonight.”

I acknowledged the friends and family members in the hall: the people who had stood with me through the successes and setbacks, the victories and defeats, over the decades. I then made a vow that I would be on the floor of the United States Senate in January 2009 to continue the cause of my life—affordable health care as a fundamental right.

“There is a new wave of change all around us, and if we set our compass true, we will reach our destination—not merely victory for our party, but renewal for our nation.”

As I approached my conclusion, the final phrases of my speech demanded a high note—a bugle call. They were a conjoining of John F. Kennedy’s words and my own. I took a breath and gathered my strength, as Jack’s words and mine converged:

“And this November, the torch will be passed again to a new generation of Americans.

“And so with Barack Obama—for you and for me, for our country and for our cause—the work begins anew, the hope rises again, and the dream lives on.”

It is that passing of the torch and that living dream that have inspired me to write this memoir. For several years, long before the prospects for my longevity had abruptly come into question, I had been building an archive of my memories, both personal

and political, through an oral history project at the University of Virginia. I also had more than fifty years of personal notes and diaries that I kept. I'd supposed that they would be useful in an account of my life.

As I grappled with the dire implications of my illness, I realized that my own life has always been inseparable from that of my family. When I sit at the front porch of our Cape house, in the sunshine and sea-freshened air, I think of them often: my parents and my brothers and sisters, all departed now save for Jean and myself. And each alive and vibrant in my memory. I remember how each of us, distinct and autonomous from one another though we were, melded wholeheartedly into a family, a self-contained universe of love and deepest truths that could not be comprehended by the outside world.

My story is their story, and theirs is mine. And so it shall be in these pages.