CHAPTER 1

The Seventh Kennedy

ROBERT FRANCIS KENNEDY, the seventh of nine children born to Joseph Patrick Kennedy and Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy, was bound to his family with a force of extraordinary magnitude. His birth order in this tight-knit family would shape his character, mold his private and public personalities, and determine his family and public roles—in short, his place in the family would determine his place in history.

No family in U.S. history has produced holders of high political office in such proximate abundance.[1] Multiple members of the Adams, Lodge, Taft, Roosevelt, and LaFollette families achieved high office, but usually decades apart. Comparisons with the Adams family come most readily to mind. Massachusetts, as a member of Congress once noted, has given the nation many great families, but in the case of the Adamses "these blessings were staggered over the centuries"—the Kennedys arrived "in one big batch!"[2] In 1963 Joseph Kennedy's oldest living son, John, was president of the United States; his next oldest, Robert, was attorney general; and his youngest, Edward, was a U.S. senator from Massachusetts. "One Kennedy is a triumph, two Kennedys at the same time are a miracle," *New York Times* columnist James Reston observed, "but three could easily be regarded by many voters as an invasion."[3]

The Kennedy brothers' arrival on the political scene represented the realization of family ambitions and was the product of long, deliberate, and exhaustive family efforts, especially of its patriarch Joseph P. Kennedy. The enormous increase in government power during the Depression had convinced him that "in the next generation the people who run the government will be the biggest people in America."[4] He determined then that at least one, perhaps all, of his sons would be among their number.

The Kennedys and the Fitzgeralds

The Kennedys' political aspirations reflected their Irish American heritage. "The search for power," according to historian and former U.S. ambassador to Ireland William Shannon, "has been the main motif of Irish history in the country." In the Boston of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, politics offered Irish immigrants and their offspring the best chance at access to that power.[5]

Robert and John Kennedy descended from famine-generation Irish Catholics who shaped Irish American culture in the eastern cities of the United States. The potato blight drove their great-grandfather, Patrick Kennedy, to emigrate in 1849 from Dunganstown in County Wexford to Boston. There he worked as a barrel maker, married Bridget Murphy, and died of cholera in 1858. Patrick's son, Patrick Joseph "P. J." Kennedy, worked as a dockhand, saved his money, and bought a saloon, then another and another. Before he was thirty P.J. opened a liquor import business and branched out into banking and politics.[6]

In 1887 P. J. Kennedy married Mary Augusta Hickey, the quick-witted, capricious daughter of a successful Boston businessman. P. J. Kennedy's income afforded his family a comfortable life that included a four-story house in East Boston overlooking the harbor, servants, and vacations in Maine and Palm Beach, Florida. Not rich by Boston Brahmin standards, nor members of the upper echelons of "lace curtain" Irish society, the Kennedys rose far above the poverty of "shanty Irish" immigrants.[7]

A large man with thick red hair, bushy eyebrows, and piercing blue

eyes, P. J. Kennedy had about him an air of dignity and wisdom. East Boston saloon patrons respected this teetotaling, no-nonsense tavern keeper, and Kennedy's Haymarket Square saloon became a gathering place for local politicians. A local ward boss, P. J. served eight successive terms in the state legislature and earned a reputation for behind-the-scenes political brokering. By the early years of the new century, he had gained a seat on the powerful four-member Board of Strategy, which controlled Democratic party patronage in Boston, and for a time he figured prominently in Boston politics.

Mary Hickey Kennedy wanted her only son, Joseph Patrick, to "be somebody" in a way her husband was not, an ambition she knew he would have small chance of fulfilling in East Boston.[8] She pressed P. J. to enroll Joseph in the Boston Latin School, a select high school founded in 1635 whose alumni included Samuel Adams, Benjamin Franklin, John Hancock, five other signers of the Declaration of Independence, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Then still thoroughly Protestant and Yankee, Boston Latin offered Mary Kennedy's son access to the edges of upper-echelon Yankee society. Joseph Kennedy later acted upon that same calculation in the education of his own sons.[9]

Tall, lean, and sandy haired, Joseph Kennedy excelled at baseball and politics at Boston Latin. Popular enough to win election as class president, he still failed to crack the barriers of social snobbery erected by the sons of proper Bostonian families. At Harvard University, he felt similarly rebuffed. Despite his determined cultivation of star athletes and popular classmates—a process "without scruple," a classmate recalled—and despite his admission into several upper-echelon clubs including Hasty Pudding, Kennedy never received an invitation to join Porcellian, Harvard's most exclusive club. Having conditioned himself to settle for no less than the best, he was embittered for life by the Porcellian rejection.[10]

Joseph Kennedy acquired many acquaintances at Harvard, but few close friends. Most classmates knew him to be a sharp financial operator who earned $10,000 in a tour bus venture and in Boston real estate while still an undergraduate. By then Kennedy was convinced that money, not politics, would prove his passport to acceptance, a conviction probably solidified by his father's surprise defeat in the 1908

primary race for Boston street commissioner. P. J. Kennedy's loss to a political unknown after twenty-five years of faithful party service shocked the still impressionable young Kennedy and ended any illusions he may have had concerning elective politics. Joseph Kennedy cynically concluded that partisan loyalty and political power could be bought. Certain that real power, lasting control, and personal independence emanated from wealth, he pursued money.[11]

By the time Joseph Kennedy graduated from Harvard in June 1912, he had won the love of Rose Elizabeth Fitzgerald, the attractive and vivacious daughter of his father's sometime rival, Boston mayor John Francis Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald's political career began in Boston's North End, where he built an ethnically diverse coalition held together by Irish machine politics. An indefatigable campaigner, the dapper and ebullient Fitzgerald served briefly alongside P. J. Kennedy in the state senate before winning election in 1894 to the first of three consecutive terms in Congress. Fitzgerald was denied renomination for a fourth term by the Board of Strategy, of which P. J. Kennedy was then a member, for reasons long since lost in the arcane world of Boston politics.[12]

Elected mayor of Boston in 1905, Fitzgerald failed in his bid for reelection two years later because of a major financial scandal. Denying his own fault, Fitzgerald implicated his closest political associate. Whether Fitzgerald's denials or his personal popularity convinced Boston voters, they put him back in the mayor's office in 1909. This campaign spawned the legend of Fitzgerald as Honey Fitz, the gregarious, back-slapping, quintessential Irish politician who knew every voter's name, attended every wake, and concluded each campaign appearance by leading the crowd of "Dearos," or political hangers-on, in "Sweet Adeline" or other popular Irish songs.[13]

During the investigations Fitzgerald had sent daughter Rose to a convent in Holland. She returned in time to celebrate her father's electoral vindication, then left for the Convent of the Sacred Heart in the Manhattanville section of New York City. Rose would have preferred to attend Wellesley, a private women's college outside Boston, but Archbishop O'Connell had told Fitzgerald it would be a poor example to Catholic girls in Boston if the mayor's daughter attended a Protestant college. "My greatest regret," Rose told an interviewer at age ninety,

"is not having gone to Wellesley College. It is something I have felt a little sad about all my life."[14]

Denied her choice of colleges, Rose wanted for little else. Standing in for her publicity-shy mother, Rose accompanied her father on official trips and events and immersed herself in the social life, culture, travel, and privileged existence afforded by her father's status. Mayor Fitzgerald harbored grand aspirations for Rose and objected to her romance with P. J. Kennedy's son. Although the Kennedy and Fitzgerald families vacationed and socialized together, Fitzgerald felt socially superior to the Kennedys, having maneuvered his family through the torturous terrain of Boston politics to the pinnacle of Irish society. He believed himself within hailing distance of—or perhaps only a strategically arranged marriage away from—acceptance by the Yankee elite.

In 1913 James Michael Curley, a boisterous, unpredictable Irish rogue, challenged Fitzgerald for the mayoralty. Curley, later caricatured in Edwin O'Connor's novel *The Last Hurrah,* expected Fitzgerald to drop out of the race and run for the U.S. Senate. When he did not, Curley threatened to expose Fitzgerald's relationship with a twenty-three-year-old cigarette girl, Elizabeth "Toodles" Ryan. Under stress, Fitzgerald collapsed from exhaustion and withdrew from the race on advice of his physician. Honey Fitz ran several more times for public office, the last time in 1942, but, unable to recover the voters' confidence after Curley's humiliation, he never won again.[15]

Meantime, Joseph Kennedy started his business career as a clerk in the Columbia Trust Company, a small East Boston bank founded by his father and other Irish businessmen. Drawing on his father's connections, he then won a civil service appointment as a bank examiner and set about learning banking from the inside out. He resigned the examiner's job when a hostile takeover threatened the Columbia Trust. Moving quickly to arrange proxies, borrow money, and gain majority control, Kennedy succeeded in blocking the takeover and successfully maneuvered his own election as bank president. In January 1914, at age twenty-five, Joseph Kennedy won recognition as the "youngest bank president in the country."[16]

The Toodles episode deeply upset Rose. She adored her father and had given up Wellesley for him. She refused to give up Joseph Kennedy.

Willing to concede Kennedy's success and chastened by the Toodles fiasco, John Fitzgerald agreed to the marriage. On 7 October 1914, Rose Fitzgerald and Joseph Kennedy exchanged vows in William Cardinal O'Connell's private chapel. They moved into a nine-room house at 83 Beals Street in the middle-class predominantly Protestant suburb of Brookline. Joseph Patrick Kennedy, Jr., was born in 1915, and John Fitzgerald Kennedy in 1917. Rose stayed home while Joe pursued his announced goal of making a million dollars by age thirty-five.[17]

In 1917, with the country at war, Kennedy resigned the presidency of Columbia Trust and accepted a position as assistant general manager of Bethlehem Steel's shipbuilding plant at Fore River Shipyard in Quincy. Like many Irish Americans, Joseph Kennedy was ambivalent toward the war, particularly after the brutal British suppression of the Easter Rising in Ireland in 1916. But Kennedy rejected patriotic war fervor less for ethnic than for economic reasons. He considered the war an enormous waste. He himself wanted no part in it and, through some adroit string pulling, secured a deferment from the draft.[18]

At war's end Kennedy joined the venerable investment firm of Hayden, Stone and Company. Given limited opportunities for advancement, he soon decided to strike out on his own, leaving Rose alone much of the time. She missed both her husband and the Boston social whirl. She also learned of Kennedy's deserved reputation as a ladies' man. Matters became intolerable in 1920. After a three-week separation and time alone at a religious retreat, Rose returned to Brookline vowing to eschew the role of martyred wife and to look upon child rearing as "a profession that was fully as interesting and challenging as any honorable profession in the world."[19]

Shortly after Rose returned home, John Kennedy nearly died from scarlet fever. The double shock of Rose's brief absence and his son's near death stirred Joseph Kennedy to attend with greater fervor to his family's needs. To preserve the marriage and the family, the couple developed a partnership built around the children. Loving respect for each other and mutual concern for the rearing of their children replaced their dissipated romance. The arrangement allowed them to pursue their separate interests without inflicting guilt on each other, but not without affecting their children, who gradually came to place more trust in each other than in their inaccessible parents.