



EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
**INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH SHANNON**

April 28, 2009  
Boston, Massachusetts

**Interviewer**  
Janet Heininger

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TRANSCRIPT

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**Heininger:** This is an interview with Elizabeth Shannon on April 28, 2009, in Boston. Let's start at the beginning. Tell me when you first met Ted [Kennedy], and what were your first impressions of him?

**Shannon:** I first met him at a dinner at the White House in 1962. I sat at a table with Ted and his then wife. We had a great time. We had a lot of fun. The President had just come back from his trip to Ireland, and Bill [Shannon] had written the speech that he gave at the Dáil, which is the Irish Parliament, which had been a great success. We were invited to dinner as a thank-you for that.

The President had had a wonderful time in Ireland, more than he thought he would. He said to Bill, "You know, they really wanted me to go, so I went, but I didn't know I was going to love it as much as I did." I can remember so clearly standing in front of the fireplace in the green room—he reached out and poked Bill in the stomach and said, "When I finish here, my last signature I'm going to put on a piece of paper is to appoint myself Ambassador to Ireland." Then he laughed and said to Bill, "When I'm finished with it, you can have it." We thought about that conversation as we were flying over there 15 years later to go to Ireland when Bill was appointed Ambassador.

Anyway, that would have been the first time I met Ted. I didn't see him as much in those years as we did Bobby [Kennedy] and Ethel [Skakel Kennedy], who were good friends of the [Arthur, Jr.] Schlesingers, as were we, and we used to go to dinner there a lot. Or Bobby would call up Bill on the telephone at home and rant and rave about some column or editorial that he'd written about the President that was critical. Bobby was really the President's watchdog. Those years passed, and then of course the President's death and so on, and we moved on into other things. I didn't see much of them in Washington in those years. Then we moved to Ireland, and Ted was enormously helpful to Bill in that appointment.

[Jimmy] Carter did something really smart. He created an ambassadorial advisory board, which no President that I know of in the past had done, and certainly none has followed it, because he really wanted to send good people to represent him. Even though they were Presidential appointees in the past, basically whoever wrote the biggest check got the plums. So Carter created this board and it was nonpartisan, and they met in Washington during six months right after his inaugural, and vetted all the nominees, of which there were more than 300 who wanted to be Ambassador to Ireland.

**Heininger:** Very true.

**Shannon:** They would narrow the choice down to five for each country, and send those five names to the President, and that was then his choice to make. They found five that were eminently suitable to go to that country for reasons other than a fat checkbook. Bill was one of those five names sent forward for Ireland, and at that point the President called [Thomas P.] Tip O'Neill and said, "It's Ireland so it's your call." He and Ted and a Congressman from Worcester named Joe Early, who was a huge supporter of Bill, and [Daniel Patrick] Moynihan—they were Irish Mafia that was in Congress in those days—they all wanted Bill, so they sent word to the President that he was their choice.

I don't know if Ted came at all to Ireland during those years, but we didn't see him. When our friendship, which included me, blossomed after we were back here in Boston. Bill, when he left Ireland, came to teach at Boston University, and Ted asked him to write a biography of his childhood. He just wanted the childhood memories.

He began coming here to our house. They'd sit in the library like this with the tape recorder on, and he would talk and Bill would ask him questions and he'd just reminisce. That was really a wonderful project and they both enjoyed it. Once in a while Bill would go down to Hyannis and do it there, but for the most part he'd stop by here on his way home for the weekend. They would talk and he would tell wonderful stories and Bill's secretary or sometimes I would transcribe the tapes.

They were maybe halfway through that or three-quarters of the way through that when Bill got sick. He had Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma and died of that about six months later, so he had stopped the project. Ted was enormously considerate and would come to the hospital to visit him and sit there and they would talk. They really loved, the two of them, Boston Irish history, in which Bill was immersed. He wrote the book, *The American Irish*. They would roar with laughter over stories that they would reminisce about, these old Boston Irish pols and the way they were and things they did. Then Ted spoke at Bill's funeral, one of three or four people who spoke, and gave a beautiful, eloquent talk, I remember, and at the end broke down in tears. He was very emotional.

He was very kind to my sons and me. The day we came home from the funeral, that day or maybe the next day—I have three sons and they were all home, and he came by the house and picked us up, and said, "Drop everything and get in the car and we'll go down to the Ritz and have dinner." He did kind things like that. He made some overtures that he would like to see me or have me come out to Hyannis, and I said to him, "I'm in mourning, and I won't be doing any of that for at least a year."

About a year later, I had a wonderful memorial evening for Bill at the Kennedy Library, where we announced the Shannon Fellowship, which was a fellowship that I established in Bill's name to bring over a student from Ireland to study at BU. I had people speak and had some music. Ted was there, and invited me to come sailing up in Hyannis, well, actually to go to Nantucket, get his boat and sail across. I did, and it was the worst sail. I'm not much of a sailor, anyway. I don't really enjoy it a lot. Maybe on a hot summer day and a very smooth sea—

**Heininger:** A fair-weather sailor.

**Shannon:** It was freezing cold and it was rough. I remember going down below to use the bathroom and the boat lurched and I lurched off the john and hit my nose against the window and had a nosebleed and banged my eye, and I thought, *Oh, why am I doing this?* And I was seasick. *Why am I doing this?* Anyway, we got to Hyannis and got off the boat, thank God, and had a very nice weekend. I think it was a Thanksgiving weekend.

For the next nearly three years, we saw one another, and he couldn't have been a sweeter, kinder suitor. We did a lot of things together. I went down to Palm Beach right after Christmas and spent a week with him. His brother-in-law, Smith—

**Heininger:** Steve Smith.

**Shannon:** Steve was dying of cancer and he was there with Jean [Kennedy Smith] just resting. It was beautiful weather there and we had a nice time, the four of us together. I liked Steve so much. I hadn't known him that well, but he and I visited a lot that week and I really enjoyed him and liked him. So did Ted.

**Heininger:** He was very close to him.

**Shannon:** Yes, he was. Some of the kids were there, too. I think maybe Patrick [Kennedy] was there. I would go to Hyannis every other weekend, usually in the summertime, and we'd sail, nicer seas this time. Teddy [Kennedy Jr.] was often along at that time—that was before he was married—and Patrick too, and Kara [Kennedy]. He gave a birthday party for a bunch of her girlfriends. We just had a good time together. In the winter I didn't go to Hyannis so often but I'd often go to Washington and stay there and see him, and bring him to see some of my friends.

We just had a very nice time, but it was clear that I wasn't right for that family. I was far too independent and that family kind of takes you and envelopes you. So in the end we parted, but he was very sweet and very kind and very fun to be with and full of jokes and full of good times. He had some bad habits—Don't we all? And I thought those were not such a good example for my own sons. I'm glad he found a good wife, he needed a wife to stabilize him. My youngest son was only 15 when Bill died. They were still teenagers at home, and I just didn't want to bring another man into their life at that time, particularly one that would have really changed their lifestyle so much.

So, putting all of that together, a future didn't work out for us but I always have the fondest of memories of that period with him and think that he's basically an enormously kind and good-hearted man who has made some bad mistakes in his life, but has done so much for his family and this country. He'll go down, obviously, as one of the great Senators. We saw eye-to-eye on every political issue. Maybe I was even more liberal than he, and I would really love to see him live long enough to see a healthcare program in this country. (Obviously, that didn't happen.)

**Heininger:** I'm sure he would too.

**Shannon:** I know. He worked for it all his Senatorial life and knows how badly it's needed, and knows everything there is to know about it. [Barack] Obama is the one President who might

make it happen, and I'm sure it would if we weren't in this damned economy situation, which has put a hold on everything.

Once in a while when I'm in Washington for some event or other, I see him. [William] Clinton always had a big Irish wingding on St. Patrick's Day, and I was always invited and would go, and always saw Ted there. When Clinton was elected, I put my name forward for Ambassador to Ireland and asked for Tip's support, which he gave me. The *Boston Globe* wrote an editorial supporting my candidacy. I thought I pretty much had it sewn up. Ted and I went to dinner one night here and he told me about Florida and about the—

**Heininger:** Palm Beach?

**Shannon:** The Palm Beach episode with all those people.

**Heininger:** Willie [William Kennedy Smith].

**Shannon:** He said, "Jean is furious with me, because she thinks that I really dragged her son into this situation." He said, "I have to make it up to her so I'm going to support her candidacy for the Ambassadorship." And he did, very strongly. He went to the President and said, "I really want this to happen," so it did. I was miffed by that but you know, that's politics. You don't get into the game unless you're willing to either win or lose.

So she went off to Ireland instead of me and she was there a long time. I know she found it very difficult at first, but eventually got into the rhythm of it and then got very involved in Northern Ireland. She's back now. I ran into her on the streets of New York not so long ago, but I don't see her socially or visit with her any more.

That's about all until you pump me with some questions.

**Heininger:** I've got plenty of them. You've given me much fodder here. Let's go back to the very beginning, that dinner where you sat with Ted and Joan [Bennett Kennedy] at the table. Had you or Bill had any interaction with Ted prior to that?

**Shannon:** Not a lot; Bill was very close to the President, I mean quite close to him. In fact the President wanted Bill to come and work in the White House. But we were just courting and about to get married and he thought, probably wisely looking back, that that was not a good way to start a marriage. In fact, it wouldn't be. You know, you don't have a life.

**Heininger:** Never home.

**Shannon:** Never home. So he didn't. As I say, he did have a lot of interaction with Bobby. At that time he was on the editorial board of the *New York Times*, so he wrote all the editorials on domestic policy. He would be in touch with or involved with or talking with their offices a lot, but not so much with Ted in those years. I don't remember a lot of interaction.

**Heininger:** First of all, what was Bill's sense of Ted in comparison to his brothers, and what was your sense of Ted in comparison with his brothers?

**Shannon:** Well, like a lot of people, Bill really idolized and worshipped John Kennedy, and had that feeling of Ted as the little brother, but still always thought that—I can remember conversations about this—thought from the beginning that he was a very astute politician and had the kind of charisma and intelligence and drive, and so on, that would keep him in national politics, and that Bill had hoped would lead him to the Presidency.

We went to live in London for a year. Bill had said, “If [Richard M.] Nixon is elected, I’m going to leave the country.” And we did. He won the Alicia Patterson Fellowship. You can go anywhere in the world you want for a year and kind of rev up your motor and do whatever you want. We went to London and he observed British politics.

We had just gotten there. We had only been there a week or two, and he got up Sunday morning to go get the Sunday papers—he’d walk down to the corner and get and bring them back—and his face was just a black cloud. I said, “My God, what happened?” He was so angry. He threw all the papers into a big pile on the bed and said, “There goes the Presidency for Ted Kennedy.” The story of Chappaquiddick had broken and was in all the London papers. He was just infuriated and hurt and disappointed in that, and also felt that it would be the end of Ted’s political career in its entirety. As it turned out, it wasn’t, but it came very close to being.

We stayed a year in London and came back to Washington. Then when we went to Ireland, Ted and Bill were often in contact about Irish issues. While we were in Ireland, the Taoiseach of Ireland, the Prime Minister, made a state visit to America. Of course there were a lot of dinners and lunches and things for him, and Ted was always there and always involved himself in Northern Ireland—always took an interest in what was happening.

Bill and Ted and John Hume, who was so key in Northern Ireland to negotiating the peace as it finally evolved, were close and that brought Bill and Ted close together on all kinds of issues. They would meet and talk over those interim years a lot. I’m sure that every time Bill was in Washington—We lived in New York for the first three years that we were on the *Times*. He would go to Washington once a week and see people, and he’d always go see Ted.

When we went to Ireland and then came back here to Boston, Bill taught at the Boston University, but he wrote a column for the *Globe* that was then syndicated to a lot of papers, so he kept his finger on the pulse. His heart was always really in Washington and in politics. So then he and Ted saw more of each other again. I think his opinion grew enormously positive as Ted’s reputation grew in stature, becoming such a powerful and effective Senator.

**Heininger:** Was he surprised by Chappaquiddick?

**Shannon:** Oh yes, he was. Bill was a little bit of a hero-worshipper. Not in so many other people, I mean, he wrote the most vicious editorials and columns about Nixon, or the ones that he disliked! It’s kind of an Irish trait: if they’re one of your own, they can do no wrong; if they’re not one of your own, beware, because they may do every wrong. Yes, he was surprised and disappointed. I don’t think he could ever bring himself to—Bill was a little straight-laced and a little bit of a prude, and I don’t think he could ever bring himself to realize what a womanizer Ted was, and how he might have gotten himself into that kind of a fix.

**Heininger:** Given how he felt about the Kennedy family and how close he had been to Jack and then to Bobby, and then thought that Ted, after Bobby's death, could carry on the legacy, he was very disappointed discovering there were feet of clay here.

**Shannon:** Right. Very! He thought, at the time that it happened, that Chappaquiddick would be such a disastrous scandal that he would never have a political career after that. Of course, time passed and he did challenge Carter in that election, but that was a terrible disaster for Kennedy politically.

**Heininger:** And Chappaquiddick played a role in that.

**Shannon:** It did of course.

**Heininger:** It definitely did. From Bill's sense, did Kennedy ever recover from discovering that there were feet of clay here, in his estimation? Did Bill ever regain his view of Kennedy, or did Ted really have to re-earn the trust?

**Shannon:** I think Ted re-earned it by the role that he played in the Senate, once he decided—I guess after that failed attempt at the Presidency, he gave up his Presidential aspirations and concentrated on the Senate and was really doing such good work there. Yes, I think he did rebuild his trust and Bill came to admire him hugely. And to like him.

**Heininger:** But it took a lot of time.

**Shannon:** It took a while, yes.

**Heininger:** It took time. What was your sense at the time? How did you view Chappaquiddick?

**Shannon:** Well, I thought it was a terrible thing that he did. I mean, accidents can happen to everyone. The accident happened, and I don't know, perhaps because he had been drinking too much and driving when he shouldn't have been. I was disappointed that he didn't go straight to the police and say, "A terrible thing has happened." He had tried in some ways to evade it and of course didn't, which was stupid. You had to say that this was a man who was scared out of his wits for what had happened and what he'd done, and at that time didn't have the courage to face it in a manly way, as we had all hoped that he might have. But he didn't.

**Heininger:** Did you feel about Ted the same way that Bill did?

**Shannon:** No. I never had the sort of hero worship.

**Heininger:** You didn't have the stars, OK.

**Shannon:** I didn't have any stars in my eyes about him.

**Heininger:** No stars. While you were disappointed, it wasn't the same as having the stars stripped from—

**Shannon:** He just didn't loom large in my life. Well, no political figures did. I had small children, and my life and my work and my writing and those things loomed large in my life. Bill's life, aside from his family, focused on political figures and politics, and in that realm, Ted loomed very large. As I say, he did regain his trust. Particularly, when they began working on this book together, I think there was huge mutual admiration between the two of them. I'm sure there was.

**Heininger:** But you'd never had quite the same stars in your eyes about him and therefore you were probably more realistic all along about the human flaws that Ted had and has.

**Shannon:** Yes.

**Heininger:** So it wasn't a case of having to re-earn your respect, to get beyond the disappointment, but not re-earn the respect like Bill had to do.

**Shannon:** Right.

**Heininger:** Do you think that when Bill went to Ireland and was backed so strongly by Ted, that that helped in his process of regaining his respect?

**Shannon:** I'm sure that it did. You know, I'm sure he was grateful for Ted's support. But Bill was very hardnosed about political issues and cared very much for them, so what really cemented that or regained that trust and admiration was Ted's role in the Senate. He really admired him as a Senator, the way he used his Senatorial privileges as a voice for the things that he cared so much about, that Bill cared so much about. They really saw eye-to-eye on most political issues. I can't think of one that they might not have. Then for Bill it was probably easier just to look over or forgive him for foibles that he knew were there.

**Heininger:** But you said he never was—I don't want to put words in your mouth, but do you think he was less willing to acknowledge the womanizing that Ted was engaging in?

**Shannon:** Yes. He kind of pretended that wasn't there, or else had the thought, which is valid too, *That doesn't make any difference to me. That's his personal life. What he does in his personal life is his personal life. What I'm interested in is this man as a United States Senator and the work that he does in the Senate, and the political issues that he takes on-hand to battle with* and so on. A lot of men are like that. Women are more interested in, "What is he doing with *her*?" And men would be asking, "What's he doing with that bill that's coming up on the floor tomorrow?" That's a difference.

**Heininger:** He was part of a press coterie at the same time earlier, when Jack was President, who had in many ways turned a blind eye to Jack's womanizing. This wasn't the way the press is now. There was not the intense scrutiny of a President's personal life.

**Shannon:** The way it would be today. Oh no, all that press in those days in Washington—I was very young. I came to Washington right out of college and got a job on the old *Washington Star*, and I met Bill through someone who introduced us as two—well, he as a very established journalist, me as a very budding journalist. The press corps in Washington were our friends.



That's the circle that we moved in and knew everyone. And they all knew everybody. And they all knew about John Kennedy's womanizing.

You couldn't go to a party in those days when some girl wouldn't sit down beside you on a sofa and after two glasses of wine tell you how she'd slept with the President. And probably one out of four of the stories were true. The press just decided to look the other way. There were wild stories about the President in those days. Well, you know them all. Everybody does now. But during his Presidency, the press absolutely did not write a word.

**Heininger:** Not a word.

**Shannon:** He was the perfect husband, the perfect father, and the perfect President.

**Heininger:** And that's what the pictures all showed. Big feet of clay but the pictures all showed this wonderful, beautiful family man.

**Shannon:** Family man, yes, with his little girl on his knee, his little boy. There was another darker side to all of them. I suppose that's true of most families.

**Heininger:** So with Ted it was the same process of—

**Shannon:** You know, they always—I don't play amateur psychology, but I do think that they all hugely admired their father. I can only speak for Ted. I don't know how the relationship was with the other men to their mother. Ted had very ambivalent feelings towards his mother. He loved her and he was very good to her in Hyannis on weekends.

Every Saturday it was the routine before we'd either go out or he'd have people in, or whatever we were going to do. At six o'clock we would all be dressed up down in the living room, and this guy would come, some guy who lived in Hyannis who played the piano. We'd sit there, drinks were poured, and he would play all these old songs. They'd roll down Mrs. [Rose] Kennedy in her wheelchair, bring her down on the elevator all dressed up to her teeth, makeup on and jewelry, a pretty dress, her hair done, and everything. She'd sit there, and he'd play and Ted would sing to her.

**Heininger:** Wow.

**Shannon:** It was very nice. He'd hold her hand and he'd sing all these old songs that she would know, like old Irish songs and songs that were popular songs in the '20s. And he'd talk to her. He liked that very much and he was sweet to her and good to her. One day he was telling her, "Oh, mother, I was talking to—" and he named off a bunch of her old women friends from 40 years ago, "—and they were all saying how beautiful you were at that party," some little story like that. "And then they all wanted me to take them to dinner." She would sit staring straight ahead. She was old and had Alzheimer's or senile dementia, and strokes and everything. But all of a sudden when Ted said that about her friends, her head popped up and she said, "Well, you'll have your hands full." Just like that. She hadn't said anything that was logical for months, and she just said that! My father, who was in the same situation in his last years, would do the same thing. Every once in a while something would come out of his mouth.

**Heininger:** Something would trigger it.

**Shannon:** Yes, it would trigger it. I remember I had Daddy at a home here when he was about 90 and had Alzheimer's. I had him out in his wheelchair in the garden of this home, pushing him, and this very fat lady crossed our path. Daddy was just sitting there, his eyes all clouded over, and all of a sudden he looked at her and he looked at me and he said, "Now she should go on a diet." He hadn't said boo to me for months.

So it was the same issue with Ted and his mother saying, "You're going to have your hands full." And he ran upstairs and wrote it down in his little book so he could remember little things that she had said. But also, she had really not been a good mother to him when he was a little boy. You know, here he comes along the last one, and she's so sick and tired of having babies, and she just didn't take care of him.

In his reminiscences to Bill about childhood, he told one of the most poignant stories. She wanted to go off to Europe for the fall, and she didn't want him with her. I don't know why she didn't just get a good nanny—but anyway, she wanted him to be in school with Bobby. She put him in Bobby's care, and Bobby was about 10, and she put them both at Portsmouth Priory, which is a Benedictine academy in Rhode Island. They said, "We don't take—" What would he have been? Four, I guess—"—four year-olds." They start at seven or whatever. "Well," she said, "make an exception." So here was this little boy, probably not four, but maybe five or six, way too young for the rest of the school, with all these older boys. He was so lonely, he said, and scared, you know, nobody even near his age.

He had this pet rabbit that somehow he had acquired. He loved this pet rabbit, and he was sort of pouring out all his love and emotion on it, and one day he came home and some of the big boys had killed the rabbit and put it in his bed on his pillow, this dead rabbit. He was crushed. He was heartbroken. Boys can be so cruel. I thought that was such a poignant story.

**Heininger:** Oh.

**Shannon:** Doesn't it break your heart?

**Heininger:** Oh, it breaks my heart.

**Shannon:** Yes, it breaks your heart. His mother should have been home taking care of him. That's where she belonged.

**Heininger:** That's terrible! That's horrible. Oh my. That's an absolute heartbreaker.

**Shannon:** Yes, it's an absolute heartbreaker. So despite the fancy pictures that you see with them all dressed up and dolled up in their nice little haircuts and shorts and shirts, I think he had a very lonely childhood. The reason he's so close to Jean and feels, which he does, always has, is that they were the closest in age and she really sort of minded him. They would always band together and try to be company for each other.

But after the first few dozen, half-a-dozen of those children, I think Mrs. Kennedy just bailed out. She was very self-centered and liked her fancy life and loved all the things that really are not

conducive to creating good values in your family. She loved jewelry and clothes and rich people and fancy houses and parties. She was also very devout, always there at church, a daily communicant, I think.

**Heininger:** A bundle of contradictions. Here she was, with her husband having been engaged in his well-known affair with Gloria Swanson, sticking her with all these kids, and then, in succession, losing them.

**Shannon:** But losing her children, like her firstborn in the war, and then shortly thereafter, when her daughter married, she just cut her off. She said, “That’s it. I never want to see her here. To me, she’s dead.” How can you do that to a child just because of religion, or because he was divorced, or whatever it was?

**Heininger:** I can’t understand it. It’s such a bundle of contradictions.

**Shannon:** And holding her head up when he brought Gloria Swanson with him everywhere. He brought her home with him. To go back to what I said about how the boys admired their father and loved him—In his way, he was a good father to them. He certainly took a great interest in them. Ted said he wrote him a letter almost every day that they were apart, every one of his sons. They were often admonishing him for something, but at least there was that interest. They thought he was the cat’s meow and everything he did must be all right.

I think boys learn a lot about life and how to be and how to behave from their father. They say they learn everything at their mother’s knee, but they don’t. They learn it from the example, if they have a father, that he sets. Joe [Joseph P. Kennedy] set a terrible example in terms of marital fidelity. They thought, *He did that. That’s what we can do. That’s what we should do!* I also think there really was something almost a little—what would you say? “Neurotic” is mild. The mild word for needing to have every woman that crosses their path, if they felt that she was of some interest to them at the time.

**Heininger:** Well, and the example that was also set of the women just stoically bearing it, too.

**Shannon:** Right.

**Heininger:** That’s what women were supposed to do.

**Shannon:** That’s what they were supposed to do. He made her a good living. Anything she wanted—she wanted a new diamond necklace, she got a new diamond necklace. Anything she wanted, she had—a house with many servants. She had that ambassadorship in London. Ted said she was just in her element in that. Therefore, she’d better just shut up and mind her business and let him go.

**Heininger:** It’s a very conflicting message that this sends to children.

**Shannon:** It is.

**Heininger:** And particularly children where there’s a large brood of them.

**Shannon:** There's no real time for any of them.

**Heininger:** Right. And immense political ambitions projected onto some of them.

**Shannon:** Each one.

**Heininger:** Well, but particularly some of them.

**Shannon:** The boys.

**Heininger:** The boys, not the girls. It must have been awful being the youngest in a family like that, where all this attention was lavished on the older boys, carried out ultimately, and no time and attention for Ted.

**Shannon:** No, there really wasn't any. And then of course losing them. He was a little boy. His big brother was killed and then his next brother was killed. But when he really lost it was when Bobby was killed. I don't know whether it was just like, "How much of this can I take?" or whether he was just so much closer to Bobby, but he's told me he went into a real tailspin.

After John was killed, I think he felt, *Well, we all have to carry on, and we will carry on*. Of course he still had, I suppose, hopes of—they each had hopes of a successive Presidency, and if things had been different, he would have probably done that. If it hadn't been for Bobby's assassination, he clearly would have been elected and probably would have been a very fine President, maybe better than his brother, in my terms. And if it hadn't been for Chappaquiddick, Teddy certainly would have been elected President.

**Heininger:** It is an extraordinary tale. If you were writing a soap opera, you couldn't write a soap opera like this.

**Shannon:** Oh no. Everybody would say, "Oh, come on."

**Heininger:** "Come on, that's just beyond the pale of what's believable."

**Shannon:** Right.

**Heininger:** You have all these kids. All right, so one's lost—the one on whom the attention was all lavished, who was expected and groomed to carry out his father's political ambitions, dies in World War II, but that's OK, he's a war hero. Then comes Kathleen [Kennedy Cavendish], but she marries wrong, and she's a girl, anyway. Then she dies, and the ambitions are placed on Jack, and he succeeds far beyond what anybody would have predicted, coming out of an Irish Catholic family, and then he's killed.

**Shannon:** And then he's killed. He also succeeded over huge odds of ill health, all of which was hidden at the time.

**Heininger:** Yes, which was hidden.

**Shannon:** Ted told me a funny story too. You know, they all were in some ways afraid of their mother, afraid of her wrath, because she was tough on them all. They mostly just wanted to keep the peace with her. One time, when John was President, he was home in Hyannis and Mrs. Kennedy said, “Now you boys will all have to go to Mass today.” They said, “We will. You go to the early, and we’ll go to the late,” or, “You go to the late and we’ll go to the earlier.” Anyway, they wanted to get out of it and in some way they did.

They were playing ping-pong in the garage when they were supposed to have been at Mass, and she unexpectedly came back. They heard her car coming up the drive and John hid under the ping-pong table. Teddy said, “He’s President of the United States and he’s hiding under the ping-pong table because he wasn’t at Mass and his mother’s going to give him hell for it.” So in those ways she ruled the roost, but then in other ways she just let her husband run roughshod. Of course it was he who had that lobotomy done on Rosemary [Kennedy] without her knowledge, which just totally ruined her, because he was so afraid of what she might do that would embarrass them all.

[BREAK]

**Heininger:** This is resuming the interview with Elizabeth Shannon.

**Shannon:** Mrs. Kennedy lived out her last years in wonderful comfort—Well, that’s what money can buy—in the home in Hyannis, though he could have put her someplace. She had her bedroom and her nurses and they were really nice women, really, really nice. He was there every weekend, at least certainly through the summer and fall months, and always went in first thing in the morning to see her and chat a little bit with her. Then, as I said, every Saturday evening, he had the music, and on Sundays a priest came and mass was said in the dining room. He was good to her, whatever his feelings about her were, which were also probably kind of ambivalent. I think there were things about her he admired, but certainly their father and their father’s attitude towards women screwed up their attitude towards women.

He seems to be, and I hope he’s very happily married now. I think it’s hard for him to relate to women in the way that you would hope that a man in your own life would. That relationship is just elusive for him, and maybe for all of them.

**Heininger:** What did you see of his relationship with Joan?

**Shannon:** In starting this book, which was never finished, Bill was interviewing a lot of people who had known Ted and Joan when they were young. One was a woman who had been the Kennedy children’s nursemaid when they were babies when she was very young. Then, in her middle age, Ted and Joan brought her back to help take care of their children. She lived out in one of these towns just south of Boston, and we went out to see her. I went with Bill for that interview. She was very hard on Joan but she loved Teddy. He was clearly her little star. She’d taken care of him as a little boy and had enormous responsibility for him because Mrs. Kennedy was toodling off, or whatever she was doing.

She said Joan was a drunk even before he married her, that she always drank too much and would fall over, and Ted was very smitten with her and thought she would be the perfect wife simply because she was blonde and pretty and Catholic. Those are the three things she really had going for her. And she was a very talented pianist. This woman told us that when Ted was going off to the hospital with Teddy [Kennedy, Jr.] when he was having his surgery on his leg, he sent the car out to pick up Joan to bring her to the hospital, and she had just fallen on the floor dead drunk and she couldn't come to the hospital. I think her alcoholism ruined the marriage. How it would have gone without that, I don't know.

**Heininger:** It's interesting you say that the nursemaid was reporting that her problems with alcohol, whether it was full-blown alcoholism at the time, were actually there before he married her.

**Shannon:** Yes, so he was not the cause of all this.

**Heininger:** And then, as you say, you ultimately decided that you couldn't fit into the pressures of this kind of family. Do you have a sense that Joan was simply too fragile to fit into this family?

**Shannon:** Oh, I think so, yes, I really think so. They're tough. And the sisters are tough. I remember we were at a dinner in Hyannis not too long after I started going out with him, and they were all there. It was somebody's birthday, I think. We were talking at the table. I was trying to reminisce. We were talking about this and that, and you couldn't open your mouth. They were down your throat, or you got it wrong, or they'd interrupt. They were just big, strong, tough women who had done a lot, I mean, some of them particularly. Well, not Pat [Kennedy Lawford], but the others have done a lot of interesting things with their lives, and also had nice, interesting husbands, I thought. I liked the husbands a lot more.

It could be that Joan—she and I came home from a party together one night. I drove her home. I was going out with some man then, a nice fella. I think she met him at this party and she said to me, "Liz, you always find nice men. Find me a nice man like that too." She was lonely. You know, it is hard to be Joan Kennedy, and then also with her problems as well. Life dealt her a harsh blow. Her children love her. They're very close to her.

**Heininger:** They're very attentive to her.

**Shannon:** Attentive, and take good care of her. I remember we went to some lecture together over at Harvard. She was taking notes of everything that was said, and she said, "Patrick's writing a paper—" he was in college—"and this is going to be so helpful to him. I'm going to send him all this information." She was involved and interested in trying to be as good a mother as she could. She is fragile and I just don't think that Ted had it in his makeup and personality to be the kind of attentive, "I'm really all there for you" kind of husband that some of us want and need, some of us more than others.

**Heininger:** And the role model that had been set for them, for all of those boys, was not that that's the kind of husband that you should be. That isn't what their father had been. They had seen their mother—I mean, to have a mistress flaunted in your household—

**Shannon:** Unbelievable. At least to me.

**Heininger:** An unbelievable role model, particularly for boys, also for girls too. I don't know how you marry into a family like that and manage to hold your own.

**Shannon:** No, you give up your own persona, in effect. You become the person who is the wife of, or the daughter of, or the something of, a Kennedy.

**Heininger:** Did you have any experience, in the years that you were married to Bill, as to how Jackie [Kennedy Onassis] dealt with it?

**Shannon:** I think she was a very unhappy woman while she was married to him, and she dealt with it by going off with her friends and leading a very nice life of comfort and ease. She loved the country and she loved to ride and she loved to sail in Europe. She just did exactly what she pleased, particularly once she had a boy for him. Ted loved Jackie. He was close to her. But she was unhappy and confided in her sister and some others about it. You know, he did just what his father did. He brought his women to the White House.

**Heininger:** Where she was supposedly the star.

**Shannon:** Uh-huh, and such a beautiful and elegant woman.

**Heininger:** How do you be a star when your husband is—?

**Shannon:** Yes, how do you hold up your head? What does it do to your self-confidence as a woman?

**Heininger:** How do you hold up your head?

**Shannon:** The other thing you could do, but I don't think she did, was to go out and just say, "Well, the hell with you," and find a man of your own that's loving and kind and could give you the sort of relationship that you'd want. But I don't think, until he died, that she did that. Then she took up with Onassis. She also was noted in Washington to be a spendthrift. She loved lavish things.

She gave up a lot to marry Aristotle Onassis. And the Kennedys—Oh, boy, they were so angry about that. Ted told me that he was sort of nominated to be the one to fly to Greece and sit down with Onassis and say, "We really don't think this marriage should come off." He did. He went over, and I guess they sat down in his office, and Onassis said, "What can I do for you?" And he said, "We really don't think this is the right marriage for either one of you." Onassis said, "Well, fuck you." And he got up and left, and that was the end of that.

**Heininger:** Yet somehow she raised two good kids.

**Shannon:** She did. She was, above all, really a wonderful mother, and tried her very best to keep them out of harm's way. Well, when I say "harm's way," out of the café society limelight, and off of drugs. Caroline [Kennedy Schlossberg], that must be a very sad life for her. What a sad

episode, her little thrust to get into politics, and then just to say, “No, thank you. I’ve changed my mind.” What was that all about? I have no idea.

**Heininger:** There’s still a double-standard out there, and she got it full bore. “Who does she think she is, just because she’s a Kennedy? She hasn’t earned it.”

**Shannon:** Well, she hadn’t.

**Heininger:** No, she hadn’t.

**Shannon:** She’s a wonderful woman who has done some admirable things, but she’s a terrible politician. She’s not charismatic. She doesn’t have the kind of personality and verve that you generally think is needed to go into politics. Anyway, she’s probably a lot happier. I think Ted pushed her on that a lot.

**Heininger:** What did you see of Ted’s relationship with her? He seems very close to her.

**Shannon:** To Caroline? Oh, he is very close to her. He just adores her. He loved Jackie. I don’t know about John [Kennedy, Jr.]. I don’t have any sense of whether they were close, or not so close, or what John thought of him. He certainly tried to play the patriarchal role for the whole family, which he was when they lost so many of their own, and to be a father to all those kids.

**Heininger:** That’s actually a very interesting issue. How do you father your own three children when you have a wife who is fragile and an alcoholic, and assume responsibility for fathering all these other fatherless children? What did you see of how he balanced those responsibilities?

**Shannon:** Well, if they needed him for something, he would make himself there for them, in little ways, at occasions where he had to give away a bride or where he had to go to a first communion. For those occasions, he was there.

In bigger ways, he was ambitious for them. He’s been always terribly disappointed in Patrick’s political career. Patrick has not been the kind of—Teddy is the star of that family and a lovely man. I was very fond of him and admire his wife as well. But he just refused the political life entirely, at least so far! Patrick took it up, but he has his own serious problems. That’s one reason I think he wanted Caroline to go for this, to get a Kennedy placed in the Senate so that as he went out she would be there. The thought that that won’t happen I’m sure is a terrible disappointment to him. I know he had sort of ambivalent feelings about Joe [Kennedy II], and I don’t think he’s going to go anywhere in politics again anyway. I don’t know whether he’ll come back and do something in Massachusetts, but I doubt it.

**Heininger:** And Kathleen has made a life for herself in Maryland, not seeming to have ambitions for the national politics.

**Shannon:** Yes. She’s a good woman. So he’s done for them what he could. And Kara [Kennedy Allen] seems to have a nice life with her husband and she seems to have overcome, one hopes, this awful cancer, and is raising her children. He likes kids. He really does enjoy children. He has a quality that I really enjoyed in him that my oldest son, Liam [Shannon], has too, really a childlike quality, where you just never “grow old.” There’s a side of you that always has the fun



of a child. He enjoyed that and it was fun to watch him with all those kids. I think they enjoyed him too. And Ethel was always there overseeing her brood, with lots of priests hanging around. She did her best, I guess.

**Heininger:** Well, we know that when he married Vicki [Reggie Kennedy] and became stepfather to her children, he was just delighted to have children in the house again.

**Shannon:** Right.

**Heininger:** There's much to be said for someone who just really likes children. Not everybody does.

**Shannon:** No.

**Heininger:** They are, after all, noisy and messy.

**Shannon:** Rambunctious.

**Heininger:** And eat the whole refrigerator out.

**Shannon:** No, he really liked that. He has enjoyed her children. That was sad he couldn't give the commencement address at her daughter's commencement—but not bad to have Obama stand in for him!

**Heininger:** Yes, well. *[laughs]*

**Shannon:** His choosing Obama over Hillary [Clinton] was an interesting move on his part. I've heard that his office was really—When Bill Clinton came to see him to ask for the endorsement and he didn't get it, that was a huge episode. Anyway, he had his reasons, whatever they were. The Kennedys did a lot for him. I thought that was interesting. Certainly one of Ted's great qualities is loyalty to the people who have been there for him, but he just didn't want to do that. I'm not sure why.

**Heininger:** From what we understand, Caroline was very influential and it was her children's being energized by someone with a vision that seemed almost Kennedy-esque, that was a very influential part of it, a recognition that Obama could take the country in a different—

**Shannon:** In a different direction.

**Heininger:** A new direction, yes—nobody knowing at the time that the economy was going to implode.

**Shannon:** We have all this and what do we do?

**Heininger:** We sure need a new direction.

**Shannon:** Right.

**Heininger:** But you're right, it was a surprising move for him, given his history of loyalty and his loyalty to the Clintons. From what we understand, Hillary had expected to get his blessing.

**Shannon:** Oh, she did. She did. That was a blow. Certainly his endorsement was one of a lot of things that put Obama's candidacy in place.

**Heininger:** Plus, Ted does love to campaign. He was really energized by the campaign.

**Shannon:** Yes, he does. Politics is his life. And he's always been able to attract and keep a wonderful staff. They're always there for him. His staff is wonderful. The best one in Washington. Some of his friends have been not the best people for him to hang out with, but the staff, insofar as I knew them or have known them over the years, and I've known a lot of them over the years, they really have been wonderful, first-rate people and have guided him well. And he's good to them.

**Heininger:** We hear exemplary things about his staff, just very high caliber, hardworking, dedicated, and he's very loyal to them.

**Shannon:** He'll do anything for them.

**Heininger:** What did you see of Ted's relationship with his own children?

**Shannon:** He was enormously close to them and good to them and had fun with them. They were always hanging around Hyannis in the summertimes when we were there, sailing. I remember once Kara had a birthday, and she had about 12 girls there for a birthday party, and we went to the birthday party. He couldn't wait to get out of there. He kept saying, "Eat fast, so we can get out." But he was there, nevertheless. He was always there.

Then I was there once and he had a big house party with all his friends from law school, or three or four of them, the close ones. I guess they did that every year. They had a—What do you call it? A lobster—?

**Heininger:** Like a clambake?

**Shannon:** A clambake on the beach. Right as we were preparing for it and they were all there, he got a call that Steve Smith had gone into his—

**Heininger:** Final decline?

**Shannon:** —the coma, or final stages. He asked me just to stay on and put on the clambake. The cook at that time wasn't very experienced about clambakes and there was a huge high wind and sand was in everybody's food. But we did it, and his kids were all there for him. He truly enjoyed them and liked them. But Teddy is a star. Teddy is very smart, and he beat his problems with various bad habits that he had.

**Heininger:** Substances.

**Shannon:** He beat it a long time ago and has stuck with it and has a very nice wife and children. Ted's children have given him a lot of pleasure.

**Heininger:** What was it like being at Hyannis? Did you enjoy your time there, or was it a difficult environment to be in?

**Shannon:** Well, I did enjoy it. He did everything in the world to make things fun for me, but it was kind of being on a stage. He had a lot of, I thought, hangers-on friends who would come and just be there, and he'd have to be on stage for them in a way, to be the way they expected him to be. There were very few times that we got to go off and be by ourselves, and that's when I really enjoyed him the most.

I was down in Palm Beach and it was New Year's Eve, and he wanted to take me out to dinner. We were there at the house and there was not much going on and Steve was ill and he said, "I'll take you out. It's New Year's Eve." We went to a nice restaurant, and every three seconds somebody comes up to the table and wants to talk or wants to berate him or wants to admire him or wants to—There was just no time. It was very hard unless you're home alone, to find time to be alone. He also likes people. He likes being surrounded by people. I think that gives him comfort. If you're alone, you can get a little introspective, and maybe that's not his best role.

But life there was fun. Except for the sailboat, and we'd go out all the time on the sailboat in the summertime, we stayed in the house. Once in a great while we'd go out someplace for brunch, and he always had a priest in on Sunday to say Mass for his mother. They'd bring Rose down in her wheelchair so that she could attend Mass and go to communion. I'd either go to Mass with him—I was raised Catholic, but I'm not a practicing Catholic any more. But I would always go down and attend the Mass with these priests that would come. He's a believer, and I guess Vicki is close to her religion and church, so now he gets probably a lot of comfort in his religion.

**Heininger:** You don't strike me as the touch football type.

**Shannon:** Oh, no!

**Heininger:** It has always struck me that when that family gets together there's this emphasis on intense physical activity and competition with the touch football, that I would think would be very uncomfortable for outsiders to come into.

**Shannon:** Oh, yes. And I was not a sailor. I liked the ocean and the pool and I liked to swim, but just to swim by myself. They'd play all these pool games. They were always playing games, pool games, and I would think, *That's what I had to do with my children when they were little*. I'm not really a game player, and that part of life in Hyannis just left me cold. I think it left Jackie cold too. She didn't like that. Of course I don't think the President—That was more Bobby and all of his kids, I think. It wasn't Ted too.

**Heininger:** It strikes me that even when you would go out, just the two of you, he'd constantly be approached by people. So he's always on a stage. But you said that even in Hyannis, with kind of hangers-on and always so many people around—How did you ever find any time to be alone?

**Shannon:** Well, we didn't, really. We really didn't. He'd either fly home to Boston and send a car to meet me and the driver would take us together to Hyannis—But we're with the driver. You're not going to talk about much except politics and things like that. At home, there were always people there, plus the servants, who were very nice. I liked them a lot. So there really was no time to create the kind of intimacy that most people like and seek in a relationship.

He surrounded himself with people there. He felt comfortable with the people if they were his friends that he'd invite to stay in the house for weekend parties. There were always parties on weekends because he liked to be with people. He didn't like to be alone. The people in the restaurants who would come up—That was a nuisance, but that's the role of anybody who is a celebrity. You have to put up with that. People are amazingly rude about intruding on a person's private time. But the parties at home he instigated, and invited women—He liked to have them there. He always liked to surround himself with his friends and people. He liked for his friends to have a good time. He was a generous man. He likes a party.

**Heininger:** And weren't there always nieces and nephews around, and other family members? I would just think there would be a lot of noise and a lot of—

**Shannon:** Yes, there were always a lot of people. The kids were there. Patrick always seemed to have a girlfriend there, and Kara always was there with that nice boy that she then married and her friends. She had a lot of girlfriends and she'd invite them. It was always filled with people. And the family would gather. The sisters and their husbands would come, and they were often there for dinner, too, or out there for the evening, or to go sailing. And then a couple of friends who were close to him who lived in Hyannis would congregate. There was never really a quiet time. There were quieter times in Washington, when I'd go to Washington and stay in his house there, although we'd always go out to something, a political thing or a dinner with his friends. But in the house it was just usually us, and a couple of help—a cook and a maid.

**Heininger:** Ironic, to think of Washington as being a quieter place to be. *[laughs]*

**Shannon:** I know it, but it is. He did that. Hyannis was really his place to party, and I think he thought of it that way. On his weekends there, he could leave Washington behind. There was no press in Hyannis—unless there had been some episode—that came and bothered him or followed him. That was true for him too out on the boat and one of the reasons he loved the boat so much.

**Heininger:** If you think about it, maybe if you've got all these people surrounding you in Hyannis, and this hectic political life in Washington, the only place you can be alone, where the press aren't zooming their cameras—

**Shannon:** Is on your boat.

**Heininger:** Is on the boat. When he would go out in the boat, would there always be large groups of people on the boat, or did he often just go out by himself? Or with one or two people?

**Shannon:** I've heard that now they tend to go more by themselves. It's a big boat. You'd have to have a crew. And now, especially, you have to have a crew. He always had a crew of two or three boys that he'd hire for the summer, and their job was to really get things organized and run

it and so on. But he always had ten or twelve people onboard for a party. It was never just to sail. It was a party. We'd maybe sail to Nantucket and spend the night there.

**Heininger:** That's a long sail.

**Shannon:** Yes, it is a long sail.

**Heininger:** That's open water, that's heavy seas. It's not often flat.

**Shannon:** No.

**Heininger:** I'm a big sailor, but that's—

**Shannon:** The mother of the cook was an old hand who had been at the house for a long time, a nice old lady—I can't remember her name. She used to put a patch on me.

**Heininger:** Ah, the scopolamine patch.

**Shannon:** I guess that's what it was.

**Heininger:** Did it work?

**Shannon:** Yes, it really did help a lot.

**Heininger:** You didn't go to sleep with it? It makes a lot of people drowsy.

**Shannon:** Well, you really couldn't sleep!

**Heininger:** Not with the other 12 people around you.

**Shannon:** Sitting on a boat that's going like this. There was lots and lots of drinking on the boat, too. I always used to think, every time we'd get home safely from wherever we were sailing, that we were a little bit lucky.

**Heininger:** Were these the years when he was drinking fairly heavily?

**Shannon:** Yes.

**Heininger:** Did you also have a sense that he was seeing other women at the same time?

**Shannon:** I don't think so, because we were so often—Maybe he did in Washington when I wasn't there. I never really knew and I never much cared. I guess another thing about it was, although it was fun to go out with him and he was an eligible bachelor and a nice man and he'd been such a good friend of Bill's, I never fell in love with him. You know, when you're in love with someone, you care about everything, and if they were seeing somebody else it would hurt enormously, but if you're not, you're a little bit removed. I didn't really know and I didn't really care.

**Heininger:** But you know, to have fallen in love with him, you would have had to have fallen in love with a lifestyle that it sounds like you would not have been all that happy with.

**Shannon:** No.

**Heininger:** Too hectic, too many people, too little time to really focus on a relationship.

**Shannon:** Right. Well, too little time for myself. I have always worked, and I love my job here at BU, and I also was very involved in those years with my own kids, and it took me away from them a lot. My son was a teenager here at home, and I'd go down there for weekends. I mean, he was perfectly able to stay by himself or with his brother, who was here too, but I thought, *this is giving up everything. I'd have to give up my house, my life, my job.* Not my kids, but too much. And the heavy drinking kind of worried me too.

**Heininger:** Did you see him yo-yo with both the drinking and the weight, which, particularly in the '80s, were really up and down all the time?

**Shannon:** Yes, he did. It did yo-yo. But he'd always do a January fast. He never drank. He lost a lot of weight and got himself looking better and in shape. He was very heavy most of the time I was with him. Those were not his best years, I think.

**Heininger:** Which were the years that you were seeing him?

**Shannon:** The early '90s.

**Heininger:** Right before he met Vicki.

**Shannon:** Yes.

**Heininger:** Do you know Vicki?

**Shannon:** No. I've met her a couple of times just at parties and things, but no, I don't know her.

**Heininger:** What's your relationship with him been like since you parted?

**Shannon:** With Ted?

**Heininger:** With Ted.

**Shannon:** Oh, really none. A few times we've had lunch together just to chat, and I see him at various events in Washington that are usually Irish-centered. If I'm there, he's often there, and we just see each other and chat, but otherwise we have no relationship. Then this time around when Obama was elected, I went to him again for the ambassadorship, and this time he had nobody else to support. He didn't have Jean to support, and he wrote a wonderful letter for that.

**Heininger:** Did he?

**Shannon:** Yes, but I didn't get that. Mr. [Daniel M.] Rooney, I guess had been hugely helpful to Obama in Pennsylvania, so he went. So things like that. Or I'll write him. I thought it was very

funny that he was knighted, and I wrote him a funny letter, which he answered with a funny letter back. We certainly have stayed friends. Maybe he was disappointed in me for a little while, but certainly he doesn't hold any grudges and I'm glad he found Vicki. She seems to have been, from all I can tell and what friends have said, she's been wonderful for him.

**Heininger:** He seems very happy with her.

**Shannon:** And his dogs, he loves his dogs.

**Heininger:** Most of the interviews we've done with him have been with the dogs. In the future, people will read these things, "Down, Splash!"

**Shannon:** Yes, right. They're wild dogs, those Portuguese Water Dogs.

**Heininger:** What did your kids think of him? Did they have any interaction with him?

**Shannon:** They told me they were relieved when we stopped seeing one another. My kids were very close to their father and they loved him very much. Even though I waited a year to see Ted at all, I think that it wasn't the kind of man they would have hoped for, for me. But they were very nice and polite and interested in him. You know, he's a big famous figure. They told me afterwards that they were relieved.

**Heininger:** Do they like your current fiancé?

**Shannon:** They do, thank goodness, yes. Well, they're all grown and married now too, and that makes a big difference.

**Heininger:** It makes a big difference.

**Shannon:** It makes a big difference, but they do like him very much. Yes, that's happy. I like his kids too. He's widowed.

**Heininger:** Tell me about the process of Ted working with Bill on the book of reminiscences about his childhood. He really wanted to focus just on his childhood?

**Shannon:** Yes. But Bill didn't. Bill wanted to carry it up through Chappaquiddick. But Ted—I mean, there's so many books written about him, and he felt that he never told his childhood stories and that that would make a good book and an interesting book. Bill used to say, "Sometimes I feel like his psychiatrist. Sometimes I think he just wants to tell these stories." But he wanted it too, for posterity, because they were important. Now someone has all that material. I've given it all up to the—What's his friend's name, who runs the Library now?

**Heininger:** Lee Fentress? Did it go to Lee Fentress?

**Shannon:** No. Who runs the Kennedy Library now?

**Heininger:** I can't even remember. This is bad. [ed. note: Thomas Putnam]

**Shannon:** I can't remember his name. Anyway, we negotiated that. So I hope that will all be—There's a new book just out, isn't there, about Ted? I hope that will incorporate a lot of that material, because a lot of it was really fascinating, just reminiscences of childhood—stories.

**Heininger:** It's interesting that somebody who has been as prominent a politician as he's been would want to talk about a childhood that in fact can't have been terribly happy.

**Shannon:** I know. The politicians usually like to make everything glowing, platinum.

**Heininger:** Glowing, yes.

**Shannon:** No, he didn't. He was very open about—There were some cute stories and funny stories. I remember one of them: He was in the Army and he was stationed in Paris, and his mother came to Paris to see him, and he got a furlough for overnight, to go with her to a dance. She brought his black tie. Either she was out at his base, or he brought some of his buddies and she was taking him to lunch, and she said, in front of all his buddies, "Oh Teddy, I forgot your dancing shoes." He said, "I had to live with that for the rest of my Army days." He had little reminiscences like that. But a lot of it was bleak.

**Heininger:** Why did he choose Bill?

**Shannon:** I think he trusted him. He liked him and admired him. Bill's book on the American Irish ended with a chapter on John's being elected. After President Kennedy died, he would add to it, and there would be a new one, and Ted wrote a chapter.

**Heininger:** He revised it.

**Shannon:** He revised it to take into account the President's death. They worked on that together. And Bill, even though he was a journalist when Kennedy was President, helped with a lot of the speeches, and helped during the campaign a lot. I think Ted admired his writing and admired his intellect and his wit, and he knew that Bill, unlike a lot of writers, probably most that he could find, knew and understood the Boston Irish. That was his milieu. That's what he wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on. He grew up in Worcester and he went to Harvard like the boys did, or Ted did until he got thrown out. So he just thought he would be the one to—

**Heininger:** He would understand where he was coming from.

**Shannon:** Also, he really trusted him and knew that a lot of these stories were just so intimate and he could tell Bill, and I suppose when the book was finished—like your archives here—if he wanted something not to go in, then he would leave it out. So the process was that Ted would come by, usually on a weekend afternoon, and they'd sit in that little library in there, and we could close the door. They would sit in there with the tape recorder on, and I'd often, if I was home, bring them tea.

**Heininger:** Not his preferred—

**Shannon:** Then at five o'clock, Bill would always say, "Well, we've had our tea. Now I think it's time for some Irish whisky," so thankfully they would switch to Irish whisky and then they'd



sit in there until they were finished with that session. They did that a lot. There were a lot of sessions.

**Heininger:** How many months do you think it covered?

**Shannon:** I think that they worked on it about eight months.

**Heininger:** That's a lot.

**Shannon:** There would be pauses if Ted was not well enough to do something, or working on something, or a holiday, or if we'd be off. It wouldn't be, I don't mean—

**Heininger:** Not every week.

**Shannon:** Not every week, but a lot. I remember Bill going down there to Hyannis a lot of times and they'd do it. There was a lot of material there and it was really sad that he got ill and couldn't finish it. Ted had really hoped to have a nice book out of it. I think they were going to decide, even before they had finished, about how far it was going to go—if it would really stop when he went to college, or would it go through the episode of cheating at Harvard, or would it really go up into the—Bill wasn't really interested in the childhood stories. He was so much more interested in the—

**Heininger:** In the politics.

**Shannon:** In politics and in the Senatorial stories, and how he fought different fights and how he related to other members of the Senate. That's the book he really would have liked to have written, but he took this on. He thought it would be interesting. Also, they really liked each other. They were friends. They liked and admired each other. Ted may have also, in some way, just by intuition, have known that Bill was not pejorative about him and his lifestyle, that he just accepted it for what he was, and would just write about the stories that he was given.

**Heininger:** Did Bill have a sense that Ted was really being very candid with him, or was it a process of constantly peeling back the layers? Because you said that when you did the interviews with the women in Ireland—

**Shannon:** Well, that was sometimes true. Ted can be eloquent and articulate and give fine speeches, fiery, dynamic, charismatic speeches, but he also has this odd inarticulateness when it comes to expressing something personal or maybe somewhat hurtful in himself. He can be totally inarticulate. In some of the tapes Bill would play back, there would be, "Oh, ah, er..." He could hardly get a sentence out. Other times, these fabulous stories would just flow out of him.

Now, he was very practiced in his storytelling, and a lot of these stories I'm sure had been told before and honed and made into—like every Irishman does—made into a really good story. But others, for instance the story of the bunny, the little rabbit being killed—those were not honed stories, in fact perhaps never told before, so that was hard to pull out of him. They had to go back over things like that that were maybe hurtful. Some of the stories of his mother—I mean, I don't think she was ever cruel to her children, or certainly not cruel to Ted, but just indifference—that's hurtful to a child. And knowing that you're the last, and perhaps unwanted.

I had for years in Washington an Irish girl who worked with us as a mother's help. She would help me with the children and the house and all, and she was lovely. We became very close friends. She was one of ten, and she was the second youngest of ten in a family in West Clare in Ireland. I thought maybe it would be fun to be part of such a big family, but she used to say she hated it and that she would have only two children, never any more. She said, "I loved my mother and she was so good to us. She was always so busy and working so hard and cooking and cleaning, and washing and sewing for all of us." She said, "I never once in my whole life climbed up on a knee like your boys do." Liam (my son) and I would sit for hours and I'd read him stories. She said, "We never, ever had that."

I think Ted felt the same way. It was just a series of nannies and nursemaids and being shuffled here and shuffled there. His mother would go off and leave him for long periods of time. She'd go down to Florida when he was up here, or she'd go to Europe with her girlfriends and leave him here. Certainly his father was not ever around much, except to come home for weekends and see them. So it was a lonely childhood and he did want to tell that story. I don't know how much of it will be in this new book that's out about him. Have you seen that?

**Heininger:** I just have been told about it a couple of days ago, so I have not seen it yet.

**Shannon:** I haven't seen it either. I didn't even know. I just saw an ad for it in the paper the other day. I think people feel like, "Ooh, another Kennedy book." But there are things still—

**Heininger:** There is much that's not told, in part because the stories can be very polished.

**Shannon:** Right, and honed and made to fit the image. Certainly Ted, like all the Kennedys, wants that image to be the image that the world sees and the public sees, although I'm a little surprised that he's doing this and telling everybody just to say what they want to say, because I'm sure that if they really do that, some of his men friends, one or two of his real pals, could tell some hairy stories, stories that would debunk the myth.

**Heininger:** He's very much of a historian. He has very much of a historical sense. As you say, the Boston Irish milieu of this is understanding where the past comes from or where it's led to. He recognizes that he is a historical figure and an important historical figure, and there is much more there than just what is going to be written down. He's been very explicit with us: "Please ask people to be candid. I really want that."

**Shannon:** Does he want them to be candid about his womanizing?

**Heininger:** You know, we said when we went into the project, "We can't do this if there are certain subjects that are going to be off limits." And he said, "Nothing is off limits." Much of it is out there in the press, anyway.

**Shannon:** Yes, it is. It's all been written about. That one book by one of his former staff members—of course they got that off the shelves in a hurry—there was a lot of gossip in that.

**Heininger:** Our sense is that he really wants the fullest story told, and it's a real risk, as you say. When you undertake oral history and you cede the control over it to someone else, it takes a lot

of trust to be able to do that. And to give explicit instructions: “Please tell everyone to be candid. I want the real story told.”

**Shannon:** It is. He is enough of a historian and the keeper of the family’s role in life to want that, because you want the full man. You don’t want—

**Heininger:** The airbrushed image is not a picture that’s reality, and I think he understands that.

**Shannon:** I think so too. He also understands that if life around him had not been such a soap opera, if he hadn’t lost his brothers and sister, his own life would have shot off on a different trajectory and it might be different. But this is the way it is and this is the way it’s been, and that’s what life has handed him and handed his family, and so it’s important just to tell the story.

**Heininger:** And from an objective observer’s standpoint you could say, “Look at the crucible out of which he came, and look at what he’s accomplished.” We all have frailties and foibles and bad habits and bad behavior, but if you weigh it all, where is the balance going to come?

**Shannon:** That’s right.

**Heininger:** He’s accomplished so much.

**Shannon:** And most of his bad habits are self-inflicted wounds. He’s never done anything bad that I know of to anyone else. Chappaquiddick was a bad thing but it was an accident. I don’t think he has knowingly ever, that I ever saw or knew or heard of, been bad or cruel to people. And the good that he’s done for people, both in small individual personal ways and in big, broad sweeps of playing his role as a Senator representing them and representing his state and his country—I think he’s been fabulous. I really think he’s been a giant in that.

**Heininger:** And the individual, thoughtful gestures—

**Shannon:** Endless.

**Heininger:** Are extraordinary, absolutely extraordinary. From our perspective of engaging in this project, and hearing so much of this, how does he ever sleep? I have trouble enough getting my kids to write their thank-you notes.

**Shannon:** That’s right. The little handwritten notes that he always answers.

**Heininger:** And it’s not just staff work either.

**Shannon:** No. It’s a great staff that can provide the foundation for that, but many other—I know plenty of Senators with a very good staff; they just don’t bother to do all that. He really cares. The people that he really knows and likes and does all this for, he really cares about them. He would tell me endless stories about the personal lives and the children of, the illnesses of, just menial people around him. That’s a great quality.

**Heininger:** That most people would not engage their energies to do something about.

**Shannon:** No.

**Heininger:** That he does. So when you raise a question—Does he really want people to be candid? Yes. Because the airbrushed quality is not what he’s looking for. I’m no armchair psychologist either (sitting in an armchair, she says) but I think he wants the full story told, and recognizes that there is going to be much written, and there has been much written, and there will be much more.

**Shannon:** Right, and it’s best to get it—to have the straight story instead of the innuendo. A lot of people I know, I mean hundreds of people who were just on the verge of Ted’s life, tell stories and write stories and they think they’ve got something interesting to say, or juicy to say, or something about it, and it’s based on half-truths or partial truth. If you can go to all the people who really have been close to him, you get the truth, and that’s not a totally whole—You know, he’s not St. Francis in his garden with his animals, but at least you get the good.

**Heininger:** Well, and time is passing, particularly for a project like this. There are people that we have wanted to interview who would be very important for capturing a certain era of his life, that we’ve lost. There are people who have died, there are people whose health has declined, whose perspectives could have been very important in illuminating some particular area at some particular time, that we’re losing.

**Shannon:** It’s important to get it down now, and it’s important to get a real litany of all the very small, kind things that he would do. I remember, we were going out—We were in Hyannis one weekend, and I had a friend whose husband was thinking of starting his medical practice and moving from Boston to the Cape. He did a lot of surgery on Nantucket and he thought if he lived down on the Cape.... I mentioned this to Ted and he said, “Oh, let’s go house hunting for them and we’ll find a house.” I said, “Well, you don’t have to do that. I just mentioned it.” He said, “That will be fun.” He called a real estate agent and we spent that whole morning looking at houses. They all were so excited. They thought, *Is Ted Kennedy going to buy a house?*

We found a house that had a little annex, which could have been this doctor’s surgery, that we thought was perfect. He told them to hold it, and we did and it turned out it didn’t all happen. For one thing, the doctor left his wife, who was my friend, and so that all fell through. But just to spend his whole morning house hunting because I thought I’d like to help my friend find a house. Those are the kinds of little things that he does. And you multiply that by thousands.

**Heininger:** Times 45 to 50 years, too, and it’s a huge record. It’s a huge record of thoughtful gestures and caring about things very small to very big too. It’s quite extraordinary.

For just a minute, let’s switch back to the politics. Your husband, coming out of the Boston Irish milieu, and Kennedy coming out of the Boston Irish milieu—What do you think the Kennedy legacy has been for the American Irish?

**Shannon:** It’s in a way what Obama is going to be for the American blacks. In Massachusetts, the Irish had been in political power for a long time when John came up on the scene, but a Catholic had never been President. He broke all kinds of glass ceilings, in terms of being the first Catholic President, but also in terms of—I’m not from Massachusetts. I grew up Catholic and

Irish in Texas, but in Texas you don't have this Irish sense that you have here. You never even know you're Irish in Texas.

**Heininger:** Not in Texas.

**Shannon:** Either you're Anglo or you're Mexican.

**Heininger:** Right.

**Shannon:** One or the other, and that's all. When I came to live in Boston, I noticed—and it's still true even today but John Kennedy's election did a lot to dispel it—there's a real chip on the shoulder that the Irish Americans have in Boston. They're still looking for a slight. Even Ted, in a funny, funny way—We were at dinner once at the Ritz, and our waiter was slow, or maybe something wasn't done quite right, and he said, "Oh God, you come in here as an Irish Catholic and they won't serve you right." It was said as a joke, but it had never in a million years occurred to me to think—I mean, this was a waiter who was not very well trained in his job and Ted made it into an Irish slur!

So the legacy of John being elected President and then Bobby and then Ted being in the Senate so long, has really given a maturity to the Irish American tradition of the way they think about themselves, and dispelled forever the, "We're just off the boat," kind of mentality. It's just gone forever.

**Heininger:** Do you think the Kennedy family is now, unlike when Jack was elected—Do you think they're viewed as an Irish Catholic family by the country?

**Shannon:** Not any more. No, not really. Ted, his parents, brothers and sisters, yes, but the next generation, no.

**Heininger:** Isn't that an interesting transformation? They're viewed as the Kennedy family.

**Shannon:** They're viewed just as the Kennedy family, yes. I do think they transformed the way the Irish Americans think about themselves, but they'll have their detractors forever. It's a little sad, in a way, that part of the greatness of what they've given in their legacy to America has to be tarred by this brush of their relationship to women. But then, I don't know, look at Franklin Roosevelt, in my mind one of the greatest Presidents we ever had. Look at what he did and look at the way he lived his life. Now, Eleanor [Roosevelt] was not exactly a Jackie Kennedy, but FDR had his lady friends and that was painful to Eleanor.

Nevertheless, for whatever their reasons, their needs, that's the way he was. So you look at what they've accomplished. You have to look in the end at what they accomplished for their country and for the constituency that they served. Of course the great sorrow for the whole family and the whole Kennedy legacy is that Jack had such a short time to prove his worth, and Bobby certainly too. They will go down, in some ways, as one of the great American families, great stories, but also as somewhat of an enigma. And the great accomplishments that will be written about in the history books in 50 years will be Ted's, because what Jack and Bobby did really—

**Heininger:** Were aborted.

**Shannon:** They were just all aborted in their infancy, and nothing happened really. They gave people a lot of hope and they gave people a lot of inspiration when they lived, but nothing happened. Ted's legislation and his role in the Senate and his role as a leader in the Senate will be the lasting legacy. That's an irony, but a happy legacy for Ted.

**Heininger:** Isn't that fascinating? I think you're absolutely right, but would his mother have ever thought that?

**Shannon:** No.

**Heininger:** Would his father have ever thought that?

**Shannon:** No. He was just the little brother. They had all these superstars, and their greatest superstar was just there in the wings, waiting to have his moment.

**Heininger:** And in a different venue.

**Shannon:** Yes. And he certainly has learned, as none of the rest of them did, because they just weren't there, how to make the Senate his platform. He also has this enormous quality that sadly doesn't exist in the Senate any more, of being collegial with his opponents.

**Heininger:** With everyone. It's just amazing. It's a story that the public really doesn't understand at all. Many in the public may see him as the raging liberal, and yet the friendships cross the aisles and the legislation is always across the aisles.

**Shannon:** His mother's funeral, which I went to, was in the North End in St. Stephen's Church, and I was just looking at the men coming down the aisle when it was over, and I thought to myself, there are more Republicans than Democrats here. He walked out of the church with Orin Hatch. He knows that's how you have to work with people.

In thinking about him and his life thereto, I get cross with some of the people who were "his friends," not Congressional colleagues or people in politics, but his personal friends, because he is kind and fun and generous. Some of them were not good friends to him. I remember having a conversation once with several of them who were at Hyannis at the end of the party. He had gone to bed. Anyway, he wasn't there, and I was saying, "Instead of encouraging him in some of this drinking and other things, you should really be the ones to be a good big brother." They clearly weren't going to play that role at all because if they did they thought they might not be the ones that he would then choose for his best friends. He was badly served by some of them.

He was fabulously served by his staff, who did everything they could for him, and to make his role—He owes them a lot, he knows he does, for the staff work that they did, but he himself chose them and he chose really good people. That's important in a career, you know, who you get to work for you.

**Heininger:** But it would be hard to be a friend for someone in the position that he's been in. Friendship involves intimacy and a recognition of all the frailties and the adversities that people have to go through, and an acceptance that—I think it would be very hard for many people to be genuine friends for him. I just think anybody who is well-known—It's really hard.

**Shannon:** It's probably hard. From what I hear, too, Vicki has been very good at sorting that out, and maybe not having open house all the time for some of these hangers-on that I'm sure she saw couldn't be the best company for him. We tend to be influenced by the company we keep.

**Heininger:** One last question for you on the political dimension: What do you think his role has been in helping to bring peace to Northern Ireland?

**Shannon:** Well, sort of peripheral. In the end, the Northern Irish had to solve their own problems. George Mitchell was enormous in the role that he played there, as the ombudsman. He thought he was going for a couple of months, and two years later he was still at it. Certainly the fact that people like John Hume could come to the Senate in those days and have access to Senator Kennedy was important for him in terms of his prestige and standing back in Northern Ireland. But in the end it was not always major in his projects that were important to him.

I know he depended upon Bill and upon Sean Donlon, who was then the Irish Ambassador in Washington during part of those years, and John Hume, and the other people, the friends he made. He took their judgment and took their words and gave support to whatever they had done. I don't think he ever really initiated a major effort. He certainly supported Jean when she got very involved in it, and supported her wanting to invite Gerry Adams to the United States during that whole brouhaha when the State Department yelled and screamed and said no, and she prevailed. He was very influential in making that happen. But he wasn't—I don't think Northern Ireland loomed quite that large in his scope of things. He's a real Massachusetts Senator, and interested in legislation for the United States that can be helpful. He's not a big world traveler. He stays involved, which is one of the reasons he's so effective. He stays involved in domestic issues. What do you think?

**Heininger:** I think your first statement is absolutely on target. The Northern Irish had to decide that they wanted to make peace for themselves.

**Shannon:** No one can make peace except the warring parties.

**Heininger:** No.

**Shannon:** It had to come from within them.

**Heininger:** Other people can facilitate it, and it takes other people usually to facilitate it, but you have to—

**Shannon:** It does, but it takes both sides willing to say, "We will sit down and we will talk."

**Heininger:** And you can go for many, many, many, many years before they reach that point, and you still have to have the open dialogue and keep the lines of communication open, but in the long run, they have to come to peace themselves. They have to decide. They're the ones who have to live with each other, not anybody else.

**Shannon:** Right, they do. I'm sure it's true within every conflict. Each side thinks that they're unique, and each side thinks that their problems are more difficult to solve. I remember talking to

my women friends in Northern Ireland. It was when Carter had brought [Anwar] Sadat together with—

**Heininger:** [Menachem] Begin.

**Shannon:** Yes. I was trying to organize a peace conference, which I held here at BU, bringing over 80 women from Northern Ireland to talk about issues, after my book was published. I said to them, “If Begin and Sadat can do this, you guys can sit down and do this.” And one of them stood up and said, “Not on your life. We hate each other a lot more than they hate each other.” You know, like, “Don’t take our hate away from us. What are you talking?”

**Heininger:** You’re right. Everybody’s hate is worse than other people’s hate.

**Shannon:** Yes, right.

**Heininger:** But he’s cared a great deal about it.

**Shannon:** Oh, I think he does.

**Heininger:** He was important in facilitating that.

**Shannon:** He loves his Irish heritage. I think he loves his *Boston* Irish heritage more than his Irish heritage. Once I gave him a beautiful book of poetry that I had Seamus Heaney autograph for him, and he really treasured that and loved it, and he used to like to read it. So he loves the art and the literature of Ireland, but his heart isn’t there like it is with some people. His heart is here.

My husband was the same way. He always said, after we went to Ireland, that I got more involved and interested and wrote more on Ireland rather than the Irish Americans. But he was interested in Irish America and so was Ted. They loved those stories and they’d tell the same old stories again and again and again, and scream with laughter at them. And they always related to the Boston Irish and the Boston pols, what they tried to do and where they came from and how they accomplished what they did and so on, more than Ireland itself. I think, in an odd way, Bill didn’t really “get” Ireland, even though his parents were Irish immigrants.

**Heininger:** That may be because you may have been of Irish heritage, and you may have been raised Catholic, but you came from Texas.

**Shannon:** That’s right.

**Heininger:** That’s not the same.

**Shannon:** No, it’s not the same, and that had a lot to do with it. I could never really relate in the way that they did, to the Boston Irish. It just wasn’t in me. So when I really got interested in Ireland was when I was in Ireland. My Irish friends and their issues and the causes, they’re what involved me intellectually and emotionally. The Boston Irish I always hold a little bit at arm’s length, because I just don’t feel real comfortable in where they are.

**Heininger:** It’s a different history.



**Shannon:** Yes, it's just a different history. I was always curious and never really knew and never really talked to him too much about—I'm wondering where Ted's Catholicism is with him. I don't know how deep it is, or whether it's—I know he's a churchgoer and I know that he did that for his mother in those years when she was alive, but I would be curious to know really how deeply religious he is. Except for that short time at Portsmouth Priory, he never went to Catholic schools, so he didn't have a "Catholic education." I know that he didn't particularly like his mother's deep piety.

Although, he also loved to tell stories about his father, old Joe, and the Cardinal, and how they go off together and go sailing together and drink Bloody Marys and solve the world's problems. So Catholicism is deeply embedded in his life history and life blood, but I don't know, just in terms of real religion, how deep that goes with him. I never really knew.

**Heininger:** It's interesting. You make a point that, with the exception of the Benedictine priory that he and Bobby went to for a short period of time, the boys were not sent to Catholic schools but the girls were.

**Shannon:** But the girls were.

**Heininger:** The girls all were.

**Shannon:** Bill's mother and father were from Ireland, and his father died when he was young, leaving his mother widowed and very poor. She had two boys and three girls, and the girls all went to Catholic school and the boys never went to Catholic school. She wouldn't send them. I asked her once why she did that and she said they had to live in the world and they didn't need all that, but the girls, they did. I couldn't figure it.

**Heininger:** That's very interesting.

**Shannon:** It's just a whole different way of looking at life. Those girls—some of them were just as ambitious and smart as the boys, but their role was to be mothers and wives. And until Jean took on the ambassadorship, I don't think any of them ever really "held a job." I mean they were very involved in all the volunteer stuff that they did, but it was all—

**Heininger:** Doing it for volunteer charity work is a very traditional woman's role, not a paying job. That's a very interesting observation.

**Shannon:** It's funny that Kara hasn't really worked, either. Caroline—well, she hasn't either, really. She got a law degree. She wrote some children's books.

**Heininger:** She's written constitutional law books too.

**Shannon:** Did she?

**Heininger:** Yes, she's written several.

**Shannon:** So she has done that.

**Heininger:** Yes. What did you see of Ted's relationship with Rosemary, or how he felt about Rosemary?

**Shannon:** His aunt?

**Heininger:** No, his sister.

**Shannon:** Of course she's his sister. I was thinking of Caroline's aunt. We really almost never talked about it, and I don't remember that in the interviews as they went along, that Bill did with him, that they ever talked about her very much.

**Heininger:** Really?

**Shannon:** No. I think he was closest to Bobby and then to Jean. I think that Rosemary, by the time he really was old enough to have known her or made a relationship with her, she was gone, so I don't think he spent very much time with her at all.

**Heininger:** Well, Jack was 15 years older than he was, and Kathleen was older than Jack, and Joe was older than Kathleen. That's a huge age spread.

**Shannon:** It's huge, yes. Yes, that's like they were uncles or—it's generational.

**Heininger:** It's a generation there. I mean, even 15 years can be almost a generation.

**Shannon:** How much older was Bobby than Ted?

**Heininger:** Two years, three years.

**Shannon:** I think a little more than that, maybe, but certainly the only one that was even remotely close. I think Bobby was born in 1925. I know Ted was born in 1932.

**Heininger:** Jean was clearly the closest in age to him.

**Shannon:** She was the closest in age and the closest as a sibling. Bobby was always small, so by the time Ted was four or five, they were almost the same size. That kind of brought them a little bit closer.

**Heininger:** Well, this has been fascinating.

**Shannon:** I hope it's been helpful, too.