

Janet Lee Bouvier Auchincloss Oral History Interview –JFK#2, 9/6/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: Janet Lee Bouvier Auchincloss (Hugh D. Auchincloss, Jr. and James Lee Auchincloss also present)

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Biographical Note

Auchincloss, mother of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy (Jackie), discusses the death of Patrick Bouvier Kennedy, Jackie and JFK's marriage, and John F. Kennedy's (JFK) assassination, among other issues.

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Janet Lee Bouvier Auchincloss—JFK#2

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Second of Two Oral History Interviews

with

Janet Lee Bouvier Auchincloss
(Also present Hugh D. Auchincloss and James Lee Auchincloss)

September 6, 1964
Newport, Rhode Island

By Joan R. Braden

For the John F. Kennedy Library

BRADEN: Janet, yesterday I think when we started this tape we were talking about Jackie [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] and you going to Franklin Roosevelt's [Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr.] swearing-in in the White House. I guess you were talking the story about Jackie's hair.

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: Yes. She was in a period of more exaggerated hairdos. I used to get a lot of letters from people saying, "Don't you think it would be better if she did her hair this way or that way," and sometimes I made mild suggestions and sometimes I didn't. Anyway, we got back to the White House and she rushed up to her room and I rushed up with her and paced the floor and she said, "It will only take me a minute to change, I'll just jump out of these slacks into a dress." I waited it seemed to me quite a long time, about fifteen minutes, and finally she emerged in a dress but her hair still looking really quite long and loose and slightly untidy, I thought, but I did not say anything because I thought it would make her self-conscious. We went over to the President's [John F. Kennedy] office very quickly. He was alone in the office and he was sweet and said, "Oh, hello, Mummy." We waited around a few minutes and talked about this or that and he said to Jackie, "I really think we ought to go in now because everybody's there waiting. They've been there for quite some time in the Cabinet Room"—and he said, "Don't you think maybe you—do you want to fix your hair first?"

Jackie looked at him in complete amazement and said, "But I just did." His face fell a little bit, but he just

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said, "Oh, all right," and in we went. We went with the President to the middle of the room and he spoke to the reporters and the photographers and the whole thing went on. I lurked behind whoever was there. He never once said "Oh, really Jackie. You know, honestly, you're going to have your picture taken; you'll probably be on television." She was perfectly oblivious to the fact that her hair did look a bit wild. Of course sometimes it didn't look wild. I'm sure that even Hugh D. [Hugh D. Auchincloss, Jr.], who has the patience of a saint, would have said to me, "Really, I think it looks as if you haven't fixed it."

BRADEN: "Go back and do something with it."

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: Exactly.

BRADEN: Well, I remember working in the campaign with Jackie, but we used to get lots of letters then saying, "Why did she wear slacks to the grocery store?" or "Why did she wear her hair this way or that?" And then after she was in the White House everybody—the same slacks, everybody thought they were absolutely marvelous, and whatever she did with her hair. And I remember mentioning this to Jackie, and she said "Yes, you know I'm absolutely the same now as I was before. Before they hated it, and now they love it." It just shows that she kept being herself.

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: I don't think they all loved it. I used to get a good many critical letters about her.

BRADEN: Did you? Even after she was First Lady?

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: Yes, but also many more sort of adulating ones (if there is such a word)—so that I think it is very silly to try to behave as you think people expect you to, because then you become simply a colorless creature.

BRADEN: I think that is what I've always admired most about Jackie. She has stayed exactly the same.

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: I don't know whether anybody ought to want to stay exactly the same; there must always be room for improvement. I do really think that you have to keep your own identity or you just become exactly like Mrs. Coolidge [Grace Goodhue Coolidge] or exactly like Mrs. Eisenhower [Mamie Doud Eisenhower] or exactly like Mrs. Truman [Bess Wallace Truman].

I think you must try somehow—within bounds there are certain things that obviously you can't do when

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you are very much in the public eye. I think Jackie, on the whole, was right to do what she thought was right or natural to her. What is right in your private life should be right in public life, it seems to me.

BRADEN: Exactly. What do you think was most important to Jackie?

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: I think it was terribly important to her that she was dedicated to the idea of making a comfortable, relaxing atmosphere and a sort of home life for the President and to see as much of the children [Caroline Bouvier Kennedy; John F. Kennedy, Jr.] as she possibly could and to allow him when he had time to see as much of them as he could, so that they would not be affected by being the cynosure of all eyes, if she could prevent it. I think she did this very well. It meant not doing other things, but I do really believe this is important. For very many years, it seems to me, in this country the President's wife played a very retiring role. You only saw her on state occasions. In this century, I think there have been some wives who appeared a great deal and some who didn't. I think each one must make up her own mind how she can help her husband the most.

BRADEN: I was always impressed, even during the times when the President was the busiest and must have been the most worried, he always seemed to take time to be with his children, and when he was with them was remarkably relaxed and gay and fun. And I remember your telling me some of the times when he was here and was this way with your children, with little Janet and Jamie [Janet Auchincloss Rutherford; James Auchincloss].

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: Yes. He was always—I don't know whether I've said this before, but it seemed to me that he was interested in what everybody in the world thought and felt. And he'd always ask your opinion on things that you didn't know anything about, whether it was politics or literature or anything else, because he was honestly interested in how everybody reacted. He was terribly understanding of young people.

Last summer during a very sad day at Hyannis Port, when Patrick [Patrick Bouvier Kennedy] was born and Jackie was in the hospital at the Otis Air Force Base, Janet was going to have her debutante ball here at Hammersmith Farm on the 17th of August. Patrick was born on the 7th of August and of course, Janet didn't want to have her party. She was frightfully upset about Patrick's death, and she was heartbroken for Jackie and for the President. Nobody discussed the party at all, but there were

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hundreds of children coming from far and wide. It was the President himself who said, "But of course, you *must* have the party. This is the kind of thing that has to go on. You can't let all those people down." A great friend of hers, Effie Taylor (daughter of Mrs. John Crawford and friend of Janet's whose uncle, Beverly Bogert was giving her a coming-out party), was having a party the night before, and had Janet's party been called, it meant that the Taylor party probably would be cut in half because so many of the children that were coming to Janet's party wouldn't come all the way to Newport for one Friday evening.

The President was the one who encouraged her to go on and have it. Janet was unhappy; she lacked self-confidence at that time because she was a little bit overweight and self-conscious. I will always remember what he said to her one day on the terrace outside of the house they had in Hyannis Port that summer when we were having lunch there. I think it was the day that I went up to Boston with the President to see Patrick in the hospital where he had just been flown. Janet was sitting outside on the grass, and Jack said to her, "You know, Janet, you're really a very beautiful girl." Her face lit up and she said, "Oh, Mr. President, I don't know what you mean." Just the fact that he said this to her gave her such a lift that I think it gave her the courage to go on and have her party. I'm not sure that she didn't have some complexes about having three older sisters all of whom were good-looking and had exciting lives.

A day or two later when Patrick had died and she was again even more down, he said to her, "You know, Janet, some day soon you're going to be one of the prettiest people there are." He was always too kind to make comparisons. He never would have said, "You'll be prettier than Jackie or Lee or Nini [Lee Bouvier Radziwill; Nina Gore Auchincloss]." It was just a kind of thing.... He was very tactful; he never would compare.

BRADEN: Janet, I remember when you told me once before that when you were in Boston, even at the time he knew Patrick might die, that he was thinking more of Jackie than of himself.

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: Yes, I think he was. I remember his saying to me in the hospital in Boston that day, when Patrick was in the little incubator and then before we went down in the iron lung room, which they tried as a last resort to help his breathing, I remember his saying to me, well, I'm going to misquote him because I can't remember the words now, but I remember his saying, "Oh, nothing must happen to Patrick because I just can't bear to think of the effect it might have on Jackie." I could see the effect it might have on him, too.

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BRADEN: Well, then right after that then wasn't their anniversary, and he...

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: I remember, too, his saying to her at sometime—which I think I didn't hear him say but I think she told me—he said, "You

know, Jackie, we must not create an atmosphere of sadness in the White House because this would not be good for anyone—not for the country and not for the work we have to do.” This made a profound impression on her.

BRADEN: Oh, and she was wonderful.

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: She was wonderful and kept her chin up and went on because....

BRADEN: Was this the same summer that you told me he brought up the present for her anniversary, and he gave you the little silver cup? Was this a birthday party or an anniversary party?

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: No, it was their tenth wedding anniversary, which was September 12th, 1963, about a year ago now, so you see this was really only a month after Patrick's death. He came up, I think it must have been a Friday night, and it was not a party, because the only person not staying in the house was Sylvia Whitehouse Blake, who had been one of the bridesmaids at their wedding. Ben Bradlee [Benjamin C. Bradlee] and his wife [Antionette Pinchot Bradlee] had come up in the plane with Jack, so I think there must have been only ten of us for dinner: the President and Jackie, Hugh D. and myself, Janet and Jamie, that's six; Yusha [Hugh D. Auchincloss III] and Sylvia, eight; and the Bradlees, ten. But for some reason it was a happy sort of evening. I feel that they—well, ten years is a sort of a marker.

BRADEN: Oh, it is.

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: I felt that they were closer. They'd certainly been through as much as people can go through together in ten years: tragedy and joy and their children's births and deaths and then Jack's illnesses and Jackie's operation, Caesarean operations, and then the campaigning and occupying the highest office in the world. I can't think of two people who had packed more into ten years of marriage than they had. And I felt that all their strains and stresses, which any sensitive people have in a marriage, had eased to a point where they were terribly close to each other. I almost can't think of any married

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couple I've ever known that had greater understanding of each other, in spite of Jackie's introvertness, stiffness—I mean that it's difficult for her to show her feelings. I think one felt in those rare moments when one could be alone with them on a quiet evening when there weren't a million pressures pending—that they were very, very, very close to each other and understood each other wonderfully. He appreciated her gifts and she worshiped him and appreciated his humor and his kindness, and they really had fun together.

That night he brought up a whole lot of presents—really a wonderful collection—but he kept saying to her, “Now, you can only keep one; you have to choose.” Some of them

were pictures and some of them were antique Greek bracelets, and some of them were, oh, I guess they were Italian antique bracelets maybe and Greek ancient stone heads, an extraordinary collection.

BRADEN: Did she choose there at the party?

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: They were all strewn around on the table in the Deck Room and the end table. And Jack said, “Now, what do you think of this? Do you realize this is a fourth century B.C. something?” or “This is a sixteenth century gold pair of earrings,” or whatever they were. He kept saying to her “Now, don’t forget you can only keep one.” Which one she actually chose I’m not sure I know because Hugh D. and I, I think we went away ten days later, and there was all sorts of excitement. I don’t know which she did choose.

BRADEN: I think I remember she told me...

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: I think perhaps she kept two. I have a feeling that one of those pictures was kept.

BRADEN: I think she told us the other night a little bracelet. I’ve forgotten about it; we’ll have to ask her.

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: Yes. We will.

BRADEN: Janet, was that the night that he also gave you a little silver cup that had been given to him?

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: Yes.

BRADEN: Made a little presentation?

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MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: He did. When he landed that day at Quonset [Quonset Point Naval Air Station], he had been met by the Governor of Rhode Island, and I think one or two of the Rhode Island congressmen had flown up on the plane with him and Claiborne Pell, the Senator, and I don’t know who else. Of course all the admirals like Admiral Austin [Bernard L. Austin], who was president of the War College, were all there. Governor Chafee [John H. Chafee] had met him and I suppose because he knew it was his tenth wedding anniversary, had presented him with a little silver bowl. But he just handed it to him, and inside it was a card, “The Governor of Rhode Island,” with nothing written on it—not “Congratulations and many happy returns on this anniversary from John,” or, “John and Mary”—perhaps I should not mention names. The President was also very sensitive. He was really hurt by this gift being to him with no card, no engraving on it, nothing.

When he arrived at Hammersmith Farm—he landed in the helicopter in the field in front of the house; we all walked out to meet him. Then we walked back together, and as we walked in the front door, he handed me the silver bowl, and he said, “Mummy, here’s a present for you from the people of Rhode Island.” I said, “What do you mean?” “Well,” he said, “you take it. I don’t want it. Don’t think that was a funny thing for the Governor to do hand it to me this way?” He couldn’t get over it; he was really hurt. I’m sure that Governor Chafee didn’t want to hurt his feelings, but it was a...

BRADEN: Well, it didn’t show the thought the President always showed in his way.

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: No, it was a thoughtless way. You know, it’s just like sending someone flowers with a florist’s card.

BRADEN: I must say I agree. Janet, while I’ve been here I’ve noticed several things: one, the desk in Hugh D.’s study, where the President signed bills—is that right—did he sometimes use that desk?

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: Yes, he did because when he stayed here he worked in that room in the mornings. I think he signed a good many bills there, some of which are listed, from that first summer he was here. I think it must have been Jackie who thought of having that plaque made to put on that funny old desk which has always been in this house—it used to be downstairs in the Deck Room.

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BRADEN: And then the flag that’s in the downstairs hall now?

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: The flag is the flag that flew on our flagpole down by the shore under the American flag. While the President was staying here his flag always flew. I think it is one of the proudest possessions that this house has, his flag—which he gave to us after his first stay here as President. He had a plaque made to put underneath it. The inscription reads:

The President's Flag
Flown at
Hammersmith Farm, Newport, Rhode Island
Presented to
Hugh Dudley Auchincloss
by
John Fitzgerald Kennedy President of the United States of America
-1961-

Certainly it means a great deal to Hugh D. One foreign guest of ours wrote after he had stayed here how proud he was to have had his flag flown on that standard which had flown the flag of that hero whose spirit he felt so strongly in the rooms and gardens at Hammersmith Farm. I do feel his spirit here.

BRADEN: Oh, I think anyone who is here does.

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: One of the things that really does make me happy, is that Caroline and John are back here this summer, their first summer without their father, that they must feel it here. And I think all his times here were happy ones. I remember he had to leave suddenly several times—he never had more than a few days when he was here as President without a crisis in Alabama, and many other things were constantly happening. Nevertheless, I think his times here were really peaceful, really happy and really restful ones. When Caroline first arrived this summer, she looked in the guest book—I really would like to put, perhaps on this tape, a little excerpt from a letter that Jackie wrote, which I keep in that guest book. I haven't got it here now, but I can get it. When little Caroline opened the guest book, and she's rather proud of her ability to write now, and she wrote on five or six pages of it, "Caroline. I love it here." And she kept on writing it on other pages until the writing got to be her best writing. I'm sure it would make Jack happy and it makes Hugh D. and me happy to know that the children are happy here.

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BRADEN: Yes, they are. You can just tell being with them that they are. Janet, while Jackie and the President were in the White House, I know that you did have some official duties occasionally when Jackie was away. You did go down, didn't you, and be in the receiving line with him? And then I know also from my own experience with you that you did a great deal to help the President on the National Cultural Center, which has now become the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and something I think he really cared about.

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: He did care about it. I know he felt strongly, he and Jackie together, the importance of the performing arts. I feel that it is a most appropriate memorial to him to have the National Cultural Center become the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, because I can't imagine a better monument to a man who was so tremendously alive. He lived every moment of his life to the full. And instead of having a monument in cold stone, to have things—music, drama, movies, every sort of play going on. To me it is exactly the sort of thing he would have wanted, and it is fitting.

BRADEN: Oh, I agree. He wouldn't have wanted it to be sad; he would have wanted it to go on and do...

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: Yes, I think he had no patience with just melancholy.

BRADEN: Did you ever talk to him about the Center?

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: I did. He used to ask me how it was going. It was you, you know, who got me into it. I'm afraid I've been a rather inefficient, fiddling sort of a worker, but I've spent a lot of time on it and it's been very rewarding.

BRADEN: I think you've raised the most money of any.

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: Not necessarily.

BRADEN: Did you do other things in the White House, Janet?

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: I never received with Jack, the President, that I can remember, though I must say that a frustrating thing that has happened to me in the last year is the tremendous loss of memory. Things keep coming back to me, but when I want them they're not there.

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BRADEN: You can't remember them.

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: I think this is sort of a numbness from...

BRADEN: I can understand that.

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: ...I suppose sadness and tiredness. Maybe it will come back some day. But I did do lots of things. Once Eugene Black [Eugene Robert Black] asked me to come down and receive all the women from the World Bank, when the conference was in Washington, at the reception in the White House because Jackie couldn't be there. I did receive them with Mrs. Black and Mrs. Johnson [Claudia Alta "Lady Bird" Johnson]. And then I went again and received the Garden Club of America women. And another time, I received the Colonial Dames and others. I don't think I ever received with Jack. He did come in at several of these affairs rather unexpectedly, and of course, this made the day for everybody.

BRADEN: Where were you on November 22nd? Were you in Washington?

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: I was in Washington. I was with Margaret Walker (Lady Margaret Walker, wife of John Walker, then Director of the National Gallery of Art) that morning. I was terribly tired and I had a lot of things piled up on my desk, I guess all National Cultural Center letters and phone calls, et cetera. Suddenly Margaret Walker called me up and said, "Let's go and play golf." I

said, "That's just what I'd like to do—go out and walk around." So we went out to Chevy Chase and played a few holes of golf. She left me home and I walked in the house and up to my room. The telephone rang. It was Nancy Tuckerman from the White House. She told me what had happened in Dallas.

BRADEN: You didn't go and meet Jackie that night? You waited and met her at the hospital.

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: We met her at Bethesda. [Interruption] Hugh D. and I met Jackie at the Bethesda hospital. We arrived before she did and I remember the crowds waiting, silently, outside the hospital. We went up in an elevator many floors to the set of rooms where she finally arrived. We stayed there for a good many hours. Before we left, I asked Jackie what I could do, and she asked me if I would spend the night at the White House. This touched me very much. I knew she didn't want to be alone. We did spend the night at the White House.

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BRADEN: Where were the children, Janet?

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: There had been a message, before I went to Bethesda, while I was still at home.... I think I had gone to the White House, to be with the children. I get mixed up. There was so much going back and forth and so many things to do. But a message had come from the plane asked that the children be brought to O Street and that they should stay there. I spoke to Miss Shaw [Maud Shaw] on the telephone and she said, "I will bring enough things so that they can stay as long as Mrs. Kennedy wants them there." They did come to O Street. I remember having the crib brought down from the attic for little John and I remember talking with Marie Steinmetz, our cook, about their supper. I don't quite know what time they arrived. The time seems mixed up. It was so dark, as it is November afternoons, but it was quite early when Jackie did get to Bethesda with the President's body.

I said to her when we were talking about the children, "You know they are at O Street now." And she said, "Oh, what are they doing there?" And I said, "Jackie, I had a message that you had sent from the plane that you wanted them to come there and to sleep there." She looked absolutely amazed and said, "But I never sent such a message." I said "You don't want them to be there then?" She said, "No, I think the best thing for them to do would be to stay in their own rooms with their own things so their lives can be as normal as possible." I agreed with her absolutely, so I quickly called up Miss Shaw and told her that Mrs. Kennedy did not want the children to spend the night away from home. Fortunately they hadn't gone to bed yet and they were taken right back to the White House. So they thought they had just simply come to have supper with their grandmother, which they had done before. And I never have known exactly who that message came from. I think it must have been somebody who thought that Jackie wouldn't want them at the White House and had taken it into their own hands and decided that this is what she would have wanted to happen. Whoever it was

was wrong. I think that Jackie's reaction was exactly right, as it certainly was through all of the ensuing days.

BRADEN: Well, who did finally tell the children? Were you the one who did?

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: I asked Jackie that night. I think before we left Bethesda to go back to see our children, Janet and Jamie, who were arriving from college and school and who were, I was afraid, in a very emotional state. I

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asked Jackie whether she wanted me or Miss Shaw or anyone to tell the children about their father's death. She thought for a minute and then she said, "I think Miss Shaw should do exactly what she feels she should do. She will have to judge how much the children have seen or heard or whether they are wondering. She will just have to use her own judgment." Again I think this was the right reaction.

I told Miss Shaw this. I went back to the White House from Bethesda before I went home to see our children. She was in her room and I told her that Mrs. Kennedy had said that she should use her own judgment. I told her that I was going to sleep at the White House with Mr. Auchincloss, and that Jackie had told me that she wanted us to sleep in the President's room.

Miss Shaw—I found out very late that night, I suppose it must have been very late, that she had told Caroline before she went to bed. John, of course, wouldn't understand at all what death meant, and Caroline not very much more, but Miss Shaw told me that she had told her. I don't remember her words, but she had said that her father had gone to Heaven and talked a little bit with her and that Caroline had cried a good deal. Miss Shaw very wisely said, "You know, when children are Caroline's age they do sleep at night, and it's better for them to get a sadness and a shock before they go to sleep at night so that it won't hit them very hard when they wake up in the morning." I think this was wise.

I know that the next morning, shortly after 7 o'clock, Caroline came in to the President's room, where Hugh and I had rested, I think perhaps only for an hour. I don't think we laid down until six in the morning. She came in a little after seven and she had her big giraffe with her, which I think her father had given her. She knew we were there; Miss Shaw had certainly told her. She walked over to the bed after she had pushed the giraffe ahead of her which was sort of to ease her entrance, and John came in pulling some toy. She came over to the bed and pointed to the picture of her father, which covered the front page of the newspaper and said, "Who is that?" I said, "Oh, Caroline, you know that's your daddy." And she said to me, "He's dead, isn't he? A man shot him, didn't he?" And her little face was so extraordinary. It's hard for Caroline to—she's a very, very affectionate little girl and she's a very thoughtful child. And I think that the behavior of both the children through the next days was a remarkable tribute to the way the President and Jackie had brought them up.

BRADEN: Oh, I think so, too. And the way Jackie was. Were you with

Jackie during the next days, Janet?

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MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: Yes, I was there.

BRADEN: The decisions, as I understand it, during those days were really all hers, how the funeral was to be....

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: Yes, they were all hers. And there were so many thousands of things to be done and to be decided and lists to be made. No, I had nothing to do with any decisions.

BRADEN: And the children seemed to go through this in a completely—I mean, their lives were kept as normal as possible.

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: Yes, they certainly were.

BRADEN: Even the way they were dressed. There were no clothes bought, were there, just for this?

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: No, and I think that it was so wise not to put them into dark clothes and hats. They behaved as well as children could possibly behave and perfectly naturally, the way I think people should behave and not always do.

BRADEN: Exactly as the President would have wanted them to. Now, before we end this tape, do you remember any—I know we talked last night to Hugh D. and there were several things he mentioned that you may have forgotten.

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: I remember—well, I don't know whether this is the moment to go into them. There were so many little things. I do remember my son James, who was sixteen years old then and who had come down from school. I remember him at the Mass in the East Room the next morning which was for the family and close friends. I remember Jamie taking communion, and he's not a Catholic; he had been confirmed in the Episcopal Church just that spring. But I'll always remember the faces of the children at that Mass that day and the complete bereavement that everybody felt.

BRADEN: He had been a true friend of the children as well as somebody that they admired.

[-34-]

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: I think that they thought of Jack as their great friend. I can't think of anybody in the world who could have left so many people with such a complete sense of bereavement, I mean young people all over the world, as well as the young people that knew him. Someday I hope that Janet will tell you the advice he gave her before she went to college and that Jamie will tell you some of the things that he talked about with him.

BRADEN: What did he tell Janet?

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: She could do this better than I. I'm going to misquote him.

BRADEN: Well, just give me an idea of what he said.

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: He was here the day that Janet was going to college for the first time. We were driving her down to Sarah Lawrence College at Bronxville. She was very excited about it. She had wanted to go there so badly. It was the only place she wanted to go, and after terrifying suspense, she had been accepted. I can't quite remember how he said it, but it was very easy. He didn't sit down and consciously try to give her advice, but he said to her, "Well, Janet, don't make all your friends the first day." This is wrong, but the idea was to be a little bit quiet, wait awhile and see who the people are that you feel you want to be your friends. Don't rush forth, giving your all to everyone. Just wait a bit. It was better than that, but it was the best possible advice for anybody starting anything, and something that Janet needed very badly because she is a friendly puppy type who is apt to rush into a college of five or six hundred people and throw her arms around all of them at once.

BRADEN: Well, time must have been very important to the President and he realized that if you rushed in and met people that you were going to waste a lot before you found the people that you really wanted to spend a lot of time with.

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: Yes, and I think that you waste yourself when your life gets filled with all sorts of unimportant things that people demand of you and you find yourself telling them what they won't necessarily want to hear.

BRADEN: One thing I thought of, Janet, did you know the President or see very much of him when he was ill, when his back was first—the time when he was so seriously ill?

[-35-]

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: I remember going to see him several times in the hospital when he had the really big operation. I remember how always amusing and...

BRADEN: He never really complained once, and he must have been in pain much of the time.

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: Yes, you could see that he was by the look in his eyes. He still would always talk about—he wanted to know all the news about the world you were in and not tell you about his operation, which is unusual. And then I remember, too, going to see him again when he was in the New York hospital where the Special Surgery Hospital had moved and that was when—I think the scar, or the wound, hadn't healed properly. I believe that must have been a couple of years after the original operation. I don't remember how long he was there, but I do remember seeing him. I remember when he had the first operation, though what tremendous time and effort Jackie took to keep him entertained. Did she ever tell you about Grace Kelly?

BRADEN: No. What was that?

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: I don't know whether this should be on the tape. Anyway, Jackie used to go and spend every day at the hospital. One night she went to dinner with some friends—I can't remember who—and Grace Kelly was there, who, as you know, is very beautiful and she wasn't then, not married. Jackie used to always go back to the hospital late in the evening and spend an hour or so with Jack. Apparently, Grace Kelly had said to her “You know, I always wanted to meet Senator Kennedy.” And Jackie said, “Will you come back with me to the hospital and meet him now?” She did, and this always amused Jack very much later. I think one of Jack's, well not exactly complaints, perhaps regrets, was he did have very elderly nurses, terribly nice, but they weren't all beautiful. Jackie asked Grace Kelly if she would mind putting on a nurse's cap and uniform and going in and telling him that she was the new night nurse. She did, which I thought was very sporting of her. She put on a nurse's cap and uniform and walked in, and I don't know what Jack was doing, but he must have been rather electrified when she announced that she was the new night nurse. I think for a few minutes he didn't recognize her.

BRADEN: That's the best wife I've ever heard of.

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: I agree.

BRADEN: That is funny.

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MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: As you know, Jackie has a sometimes fairly distorted sense of humor, but nobody can be funnier.

BRADEN: Did she write any books then for him, or any pictures? Do you remember did she do anything like that?

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: She was constantly writing him little jingles and poems and bringing him little presents with appropriate rhymes accompanying them. I suppose she must have a collection of those things. And really, someday all the things she has written ought to be...

BRADEN: Oh, I think so too. You said the other night you do have some of the books.

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: I have some. I have some wonderful ones which I really would like to show you.

BRADEN: And I remember a picture you had in Merrywood—where is that picture now? It was up here at Hammersmith Farm—and all your children are wheeling baby carriages.

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: Oh, yes, all the nannies and the babies. Well, now there are ten grandchildren; then, I think, there were five.

BRADEN: Where is that picture now?

MRS. AUCHINCLOSS: Well, that is in the elevator in O Street. I'm ashamed to tell you that it was hanging in Jamie's bathroom; he had taken it there. Sandy Hamilton [Alexander Hamilton] came to spend the night, and the next thing I knew I got into the elevator and it was there. Sandy said he thought it was wasted on the bathroom wall.

BRADEN: I think he's right.

[END OF INTERVIEW #2]

Janet Lee Bouvier Auchincloss Oral History Transcript – JFK #2
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