

The Missing Kennedy: Rosemary Kennedy and the Secret Bonds of Four Women

By Elizabeth Koehler-Pentacoff

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Rosemary (Rosie) Kennedy was born in 1918, the first daughter of a wealthy Bostonian couple who later would become known as the patriarch and matriarch of America's most famous and celebrated family. Elizabeth Koehler was born in 1957, the first and only child of a struggling Wisconsin farm family.

What, besides their religion, did these two very different Catholic women have in common?

One person: Stella Koehler, a charismatic woman of the cloth who became Sister Paulus Koehler after taking her vows with the Sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis of Assisi.

Sister Paulus was Elizabeth's Wisconsin aunt. For thirty-five years indeed much of her adult life Sister Paulus was Rosie Kennedy's caregiver.

And a caregiver, tragically, had become necessary after Rosie, a slow learner prone to emotional outbursts, underwent one of America's first lobotomies an operation Joseph Kennedy was assured would normalize Rosie's life. It did not. Rosie's condition became decidedly worse.

After the procedure, Joe Kennedy sent Rosie to rural Wisconsin and Saint Coletta, a Catholic-run home for the mentally disabled. For the next two decades, she never saw her siblings, her parents, or any other relative, the doctors having issued stern instructions that even the occasional family visit would be emotionally disruptive to Rosie.

Following Joseph Kennedy's stroke in 1961, the Kennedy family, led by mother Rose and sister Eunice Kennedy Shriver, resumed face to face contact with Rosie.

It was also about then that a young Elizabeth Koehler began paying visits to Rosie.

In this insightful and poignant memoir, based in part on Sister Paulus' private notes and augmented by over one-hundred never-before-seen photos, Elizabeth Koehler-Pentacoff recalls the many happy and memorable times spent with the missing Kennedy.

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