

Media

NORA EPHRON

Twelve years on the assassination beat

Byline
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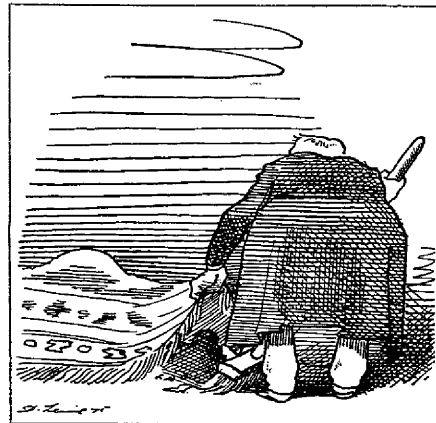
Hugh Aynesworth and Bob Dudney work in a little office just off the city room of *The Dallas Times Herald*, and things were running fairly normally there the day I dropped in to see them. A woman had just telephoned to say that she knew for a fact that Jack Ruby's brain had been controlled by a television station near the Dallas airport. The day before, a little man in high-topped sneakers had come by, whispered about some inside information he claimed to have, and finally confided that the Jews had killed President Kennedy.

Dudney, twenty-five, was in the eighth grade when John F. Kennedy was shot. He is new to the assassination beat, and he is still a little amazed by the people he meets on it. But Aynesworth, forty-four, has been covering the story on and off since November 22, 1963, and nothing fazes him anymore. "In 1963 only the most brazen kooks came out," he says, "but by the time Jim Garrison started in in 1966 and 1967, even the timid ones were getting into it. People want to be involved in this. I've heard five or six people confess that they were part of a conspiracy to kill Kennedy—only it turns out they were in jail, or in a loony bin in Atlanta, at the time. There were about five hundred people in Dealey Plaza that day. In twenty years, there'll be ten thousand."

The day of the assassination, Aynesworth was working as science and aviation editor of *The Dallas Morning News*, and he decided to walk over and have a look at the President's motorcade. He was standing catty-corner to the School Book Depository when he heard three shots. "I thought the first one was a motorcycle backfiring," he says, "but by the time I heard the second, I knew what it was. People started reacting in a very violent way. They threw their children down and started screaming. There was one big black woman who had been thrilled to death because she was wearing a pink dress the same color as Jackie Kennedy's. She threw up within five seconds of the shots."

After a while, Aynesworth saw a group of people running toward the Depository building. "On the fifth

floor we saw three black guys pointing up to the sixth-floor window. There were F.B.I. cars and a radio car. And then a funny thing happened. This shows what bad luck can do for you. There was a longtime police reporter for *The Dallas News* there named Jim Ewell. The F.B.I. was working up floor by floor in the Depository building, and here comes a call over the radio: 'This is a citizen, an officer's been shot.' It was on Tenth Street, three or four miles away. I said to Ewell, 'You stay here, I'll go after that one.' He stayed, and of course he saw no one. I ran off with two TV guys and a Channel Eight news car, and we go to the Tippit killing. Then a call came in that there was something going on at the Texas Theater. I got there,



and there was Jim Ewell, and I said, 'Jim, you take the upstairs and I'll take the downstairs.' Turned out Oswald was downstairs. I just got there in time. Oswald came up with his fist, which had a gun in it, and slugged McDonald, and the other cop jumped him from the back.

"Within a few minutes of that, I got a tip from someone at the police station about the two addresses in Oswald's wallet. We went tearing over to the Elsbeth address, where he wasn't living—I burst in on some wino and his girl shackled up together. Then we went to 1026 Beckley, where he actually lived. We were twenty minutes behind the F.B.I. There was that little old room, it couldn't have been more than eight by ten. The only thing they left in it was a banana peel.

"On Sunday morning, Jim Ewell had the assignment at the jail, but

he got a flat tire on the way. I went over just to see what was going on and saw Ruby kill Oswald. It was pure luck that I saw it and he missed it all. He feels snakebit, I'm sure."

Today Jim Ewell is still a police reporter in Dallas, and Hugh Aynesworth—well, Aynesworth is still a reporter, too, but he is also an odd sort of footnote to the assassination, the journalist who has spent more time on the story than any other. He is a walking compendium of names of F.B.I. agents, New Orleans informers, assistant district attorneys, bus drivers and cabbies. He was the first reporter to print Oswald's diary and he sat shivah with Jack Ruby's family.

Aynesworth became so emotionally involved in the Clay Shaw trial that one of his dreams influenced the outcome of the case. "Suddenly one night I awakened out of a nightmare," he told James Kirkwood, author of *American Grotesque*. He had dreamed that District Attorney James Garrison produced a surprise witness who came in "and sat down and captivated the jury, winning the case hands down." He was so shaken by the dream that he wrote a letter to Shaw's lawyer, urging him to hire a private detective to investigate one of Garrison's witnesses, a dapper man named Charles Spiesel who claimed he had heard Shaw discuss the possibility of assassinating Kennedy. The detective discovered that Spiesel had filed a sixteen-million-dollar lawsuit charging the New York police and a psychiatrist with hypnotizing him and preventing him from having normal sexual relations; the information was crucial in discrediting Spiesel's testimony.

In some way, of course, Aynesworth is probably as addled about the assassination as some of the genuinely crazy people who come to see him. Unlike them, though—and unlike most of the buffs—he continues to believe that John F. Kennedy was killed by Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone. "I sort of feel like a damn fool," he says. "There's nobody on earth who'd rather prove a conspiracy than me. I'd love to write it—if there was any damn thing that made me believe it." It's an odd position: investigative reporters try to bring conspiracies to light; Aynesworth

has spent much of his time knocking them down.

"Let me tell you how the story about Oswald's being an F.B.I. informer got started," he said. "There was a note in Oswald's papers with the name James Hosty on it. Hosty was an F.B.I. agent, and in the beginning we thought Oswald was some kind of a spy or paid informer. I worked the F.B.I. stuff, and we'd run down everything you could imagine. I even got Hosty's phone records. I called the phone company and I just asked, 'How do you get phone records if you've moved?' I never actually said I was Hosty—she just assumed I was, and she sent them. Anyway, we couldn't put it together except for these interviews where Hosty had come to see Marina. And that's where Lonnie Hudkins came along.

"Lonnie Hudkins was on *The Houston Post*, and he'd been sent to Dallas to work on the story. He called me up all the time, he would bug me and give me all these tips that were nothing. I just didn't want him bugging me anymore. So one day he called up and said, 'You hear anything about this F.B.I. link with Oswald?' I'd just about had it. I said to him, 'You got his payroll number, don't you?' 'Yeah, yeah,' said Lonnie. I reached over on my desk, and there was a Telex number on a telegram, S 172 I think it was, and I told it to Lonnie. 'Yeah, yeah,' he said, 'that's it. That's the same one I've got.' Lonnie could see the moon coming out at high noon." The number eventually became part of the lore of the assassination.

Aynesworth stayed on *The News* until 1966, did some work for *Life*, and was on the staff of *Newsweek* from 1967 to 1974. The story would die down for a while and then crop up again. "Something was always coming up," he said. "*Look* magazine bought the Manchester book, so *Life* felt it had to have something to counteract it. They put an investigative team on it, and in 1966 they were digging around. They moved to New Orleans and worked with Garrison, did a lot of investigation for him. Jack Fincher, the San Francisco bureau chief, comes up with a little fag from New Orleans, a short-order cook who told him a story about Oswald and Ruby being seen in New Orleans as lovers, and then at the Y.M.C.A. in Dallas. He weaved a great tale. Fincher didn't know enough to know whether it was good, so they told him in New York to run it by Dallas and see what Hugh thinks.

"We got a motel room at the Executive Inn out by the airport, and we taped this story, and he really

had it down. There was no way I could break him. I was beginning to wonder myself. He was going on and on, he'd seen them swimming, hugging and kissing, and he said they'd even tried to entice him. Finally I looked at him and said, 'Wasn't that a terrible scar on Ruby's leg, that shark bite? Which leg was it on, anyway?' He said, 'It was the right leg.' He took a pause. 'No,' he said, 'it was the left leg. I remember now.' I said, 'You little son of a bitch, he didn't have a scar on his leg.' He started crying. I felt sorry for him—he'd been promised a good bit of money for his story."

Last year, after working a spell as a private investigator, Aynesworth joined *The Times Herald* and began working with Dudney. They make an interesting pair: Aynesworth is stocky and square, Dudney is lean and long-haired; Aynesworth is disorganized, Dudney is a compulsive file keeper; Aynesworth works the phone, Dudney writes. *The Times Herald*, under the by-line of its publisher Tom Johnson, broke the story last fall of the threatening letter Oswald wrote to the F.B.I. prior to the assassination; Aynesworth and Dudney did much of the legwork and wrote the backup stories. Their biggest story, both agree, was a non-story that took them weeks to put together. An F.B.I. clerk named William Walter, who was working in the New Orleans office in 1963, told them

that five days before the assassination he saw a Teletype saying there would be an assassination attempt in Dallas and that no one had done anything about it.

"When we first talked to him on the phone," Dudney said, "we were both extremely excited. The guy was very convincing."

"We interviewed him twenty-some times," said Aynesworth, "and we talked to everybody who ever knew him."

"We got red flags everywhere," said Dudney.

"We gave him a polygraph," said Aynesworth, "and he didn't pass it."

"We never could get the one bit of information that proved it or disproved it," said Dudney.

"When we were three weeks into it," Aynesworth said, "CBS got onto it. Dan Rather called and asked me what I thought. I said, 'I'm ninety percent sure he's lying, but I'm not sure.' They did some film with him, chartered a plane to get it out, and once again Dan and I were back and forth on the phone. I gave him the results of the polygraph—with Walter's permission. Finally, CBS went with it—but in a very positive manner. So we came back with a detailed, massive study. Knocking these stories down is no good—but you have to do it. There's a lack of willingness in this business to say that nothing is there. Especially after a few bucks have been spent."