

LEE HARVEY'S OLDEST

JUNE OSWALD

As America's obsession with her father goes on, a daughter tries to set the record straight.

By Steve Salerno

MORE THAN 30 YEARS AFTER the Kennedy assassination, Lee Harvey Oswald is a name that will not go away. One of the latest authors to wade into the conspiracy waters is Norman Mailer, whose book "Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery" will be published next month. The assassination has also been a constant in the life of June Oswald Porter, the 33-year-old daughter of Lee Harvey Oswald. In her early years, grocery shopping with her mother, Marina, and sister, Rachel, took place amid stares and finger-pointing; hushed conversations ignited around them like flash fires as they walked the supermarket aisles. Because Marina Oswald realized that she and her children could become the focus of attention at any time, she made sure June and Rachel were always neatly dressed — no matter how small the chore, and despite the fact that the family was often financially strapped. "She never knew when we'd run into someone, and she didn't want us to look like poor white trash," June says simply.

Upon entering public school, June took the surname of her stepfather, Kenneth Porter, who married Marina in 1965. But anonymity exacted a curious price of its own, as June faced myriad graceless references to her father, mother and family. Even an intended compliment could hold hidden barbs — as when a male co-worker remarked on June's resemblance to "a young Marina Oswald," then immediately apologized, saying he "didn't mean to insult her" by invoking the infamous name.

Nonetheless, during several interviews over the past

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year, she reports being content. And she recalls her childhood as a "pretty happy" time, thanks in large part to her stepfather. June is quieter about her own marriage, which ended in 1992. She remains protective of her privacy, distancing herself and her sons, ages 6 and 3, from the oddball clique of assassination cultists who have dogged the Oswald women — Marina, now 53, June, and Rachel, 31 — ever since the events of Nov. 22, 1963. (June has requested that her married name, which she still uses in business, not be printed.)

Despite privacy concerns, she's pushing for the release of all records pertaining to the assassination. "We have to get the Government to move before it's too late."

Q: What are your thoughts on Norman Mailer's new book?

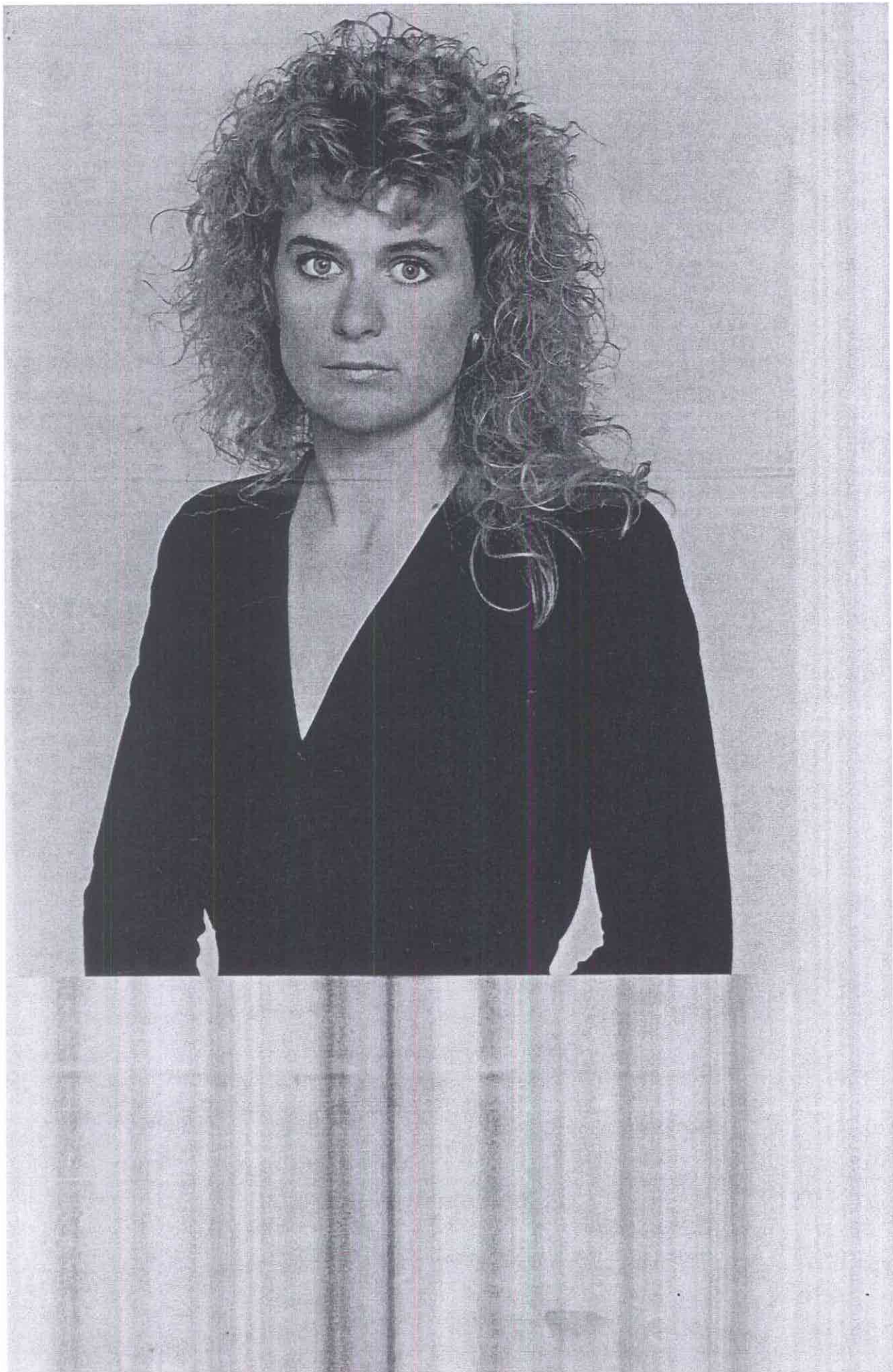
A: I don't have a comment on it as far as its conclusions because I haven't read them, but I did start the book. Mailer is such a great writer; I was just so enthralled. The first chapter opens with my family, and he goes way back to my great-grandmother in Russia. This is material I never would have known about insofar as my mother's side of the family, because my mother was illegitimate, you know. It's a little bit like opening a family album you didn't know existed before.

I can tell you that I am very excited about the book in concept. I believe he's the first writer-researcher to get interviews with sources in the Russian Government and so this is an opportunity to shed new light on the subject from an area that has never been explored in any meaningful depth.

Q: To what extent have you followed the various conspiracy theories?

A: It's only in recent years that I've started to get

PHOTOGRAPH BY LAURA WILSON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



involved in all that, mostly as part of trying to get the records released.

There was a bill passed at the end of the Bush Administration that required all Government agencies to review their files for any information related to the assassination and to release it — unless they felt there were matters of national security or a couple of other issues. The law said that if they felt that way, then those documents needed to be turned over to the Assassination Records Review Board and those folks would review the records and either concur, release them in blacked-out state or release them entirely.

Q: Over the years, you've kept a pretty low profile. Why have you started to speak out?

A: Well, there was a lot of misinformation being released related to a book, "Case Closed," by Gerald Posner. And they got my mother on television in a live interview — she still doesn't have a good grasp of the language — and they were asking her specific questions about this book. She hadn't read it. I felt they manipulated her and made her look foolish.

I had already written a letter to President Clinton to try to make sure he would appoint this review board from the Bush legislation to review assassination records, and to release those records. I was really supportive. Since I hadn't gotten a response, I toyed with the idea that I might have to go public. When my mother came on and this interview went so badly, I decided I really wanted to rebut.

Q: I guess you must be encouraged that the review board was finally sworn in last year.

A: Yes, I'm also very excited about that. They first met last April in Washington. And there have been public hearings there and in Dallas and Boston.

Q: What is the status of your present-day identity? It sounds as if most people are not aware you're Lee Oswald's daughter.

A: Yes and no. Now, Mom does articles that she doesn't bother to tell me she's doing, and sometimes my name comes up. We always used my stepfather's name, Porter, growing up, even though we were never legally adopted. My secretary in my last job put two and two together.

based on one of those articles. She copied it and put it on all my staff's desks.

I didn't really want to be the center of gossip in this whole building. So I called my staff in, a group of 10 or so, and I said: "Yes, that is me in the article. Obviously, if I'd wanted to share that I would have told everyone a long time ago. I don't think it's relevant to anything we do here and I appreciate you keeping it to yourself."

My biggest concern was that people at the office had my home address and phone number and I didn't want it leaked to The National Enquirer. I have two small children, I'm divorced, I didn't want people to harass the kids.

Q: Give me an example of what you'd consider harassment.

A: When I was pregnant with my first, some lady got my phone number and called in the middle of the night. And she said, "June Oswald?" That catches you off guard when you just wake up. And I said, "Yes?" And she said: "I'm so-and-so, and I just

some quote-unquote assassination research. So I ended up supporting him. Anyway, the only person I knew up there was Priscilla Johnson McMillan, who wrote my mother's book. We stayed with her for the summer.

My boyfriend would sneak down to Priscilla's basement and read all her old files. He sold an article for an astronomical amount back then — I think it was \$25,000. The way I finally woke up was, one night he said, "I'm gonna sell an article to Penthouse or Playboy" — I forget which — "and it's about your mother. I'm convinced that your mother and Priscilla had a sexual relationship." So I said, O.K., this is it. Just get out.

Q: Tell me about growing up in the aftermath of the assassination. I know you were just a toddler, but do you have any recollections of turbulence in the household?

A: I don't have any real memories of those ages. I know some people can remember vividly like it was yesterday, but I don't do that —

started to explain who our father was — that it wasn't Kenneth — and who Lee was and what he had done. I just remember crying a lot because Mom was crying.

Q: How old were you then?

A: It would have been, like, first grade. And then, they tell a story about how after that I stood up in front of the whole class and said, "My father shot the President." Just out of the blue. But I don't remember that.

The next memory I actually have is in second grade. We were studying the Presidents. The Presidents were all around the walls in the rooms. And we got to President Kennedy and I was told to go across the hall during that one. So I sat across the hall in a time-out room.

Q: How did you feel about being singled out?

A: I remember what I did during that time-out was, I plotted how I could run for class president and win! So I never connected it as a big negative or anything.

Rachel felt differently. She has always felt really bogged down by it. She didn't feel like Kenneth was her dad. She wanted to know Lee; she wants Lee to be a saint. Well, I was satisfied with my dad, so I've never felt this big need to connect with Lee or do the daughter-father thing.

Q: One can't help but notice that you address him as "Lee."

A: I've always called him that. My father is Kenneth Porter, the man I grew up with, the man who was there for my mother and Rachel and me.

Q: And if someone were to show scientifically that Lee Oswald was or wasn't involved, that wouldn't make a difference to you?

A: It would make a difference in the sense of justice being served. If the truth can be found that shows Lee had nothing to do with the assassination, I would feel better in that there have been a lot of things said and done regarding my family that all proceeded from an erroneous perception of what he did or didn't do.

But you have to understand that, aside from what role he had in the assassination, there's the issue of what role he had in our family. I know that in my life, Lee wasn't a good man. He wasn't much of a husband, he wasn't much of a father.

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want you to know that I've written a song about you — and your child. And I'm gonna be in Dallas, and I want to sing it to you."

I said I appreciate it, but I really don't get involved in that. You try to be nice because you don't want to make somebody upset who's going to seek you out if they're kooky enough to do that stuff anyway.

There's always been this little group that's followed us — Mom, Rachel and me — and calls us and is fascinated by anything surrounding us. My first serious boyfriend — that's what he was fascinated about. He tracked me down. He said things when we were together like he really wanted to have children because "that would be the blood of Lee Harvey Oswald that was flowing through the kids."

So he moved to Boston and wanted me to join him. I move all the way up there, and his parents wouldn't even let us stay in his house because I was the daughter of Lee Harvey Oswald. They said it would depreciate the value of their home.

Then I find out he's been doing

even about yesterday.

I do remember that our phones were tapped. We always had this really bad connection, and when you'd pick up the phone you'd hear that other click. This was before wiretapping got more sophisticated. For all I know it's still tapped.

Mom was always overprotective of us. We didn't use the Oswald name, and it didn't come up a lot around the house except when reporters would call. It was always a big deal in November, when it was very stressful in the house. Mom would smoke all the time. Reporters came over and she would tell us, "Sshhh, go in the other room."

Q: When were you actually told about your father and the assassination?

A: Something had come up where Mom had old boxes of letters out. People sent us money following the assassination, because Mom was young with two small children and didn't speak the language.

Somehow those boxes came down and she was reading, and I guess she felt it was time to tell us. She sat us down, with my stepbrother, and

He beat my mother. There were times when we didn't have milk to drink. We lived in poor housing, or were taken in by others. So if I'm able to be detached or seem cold and unemotional about it, it's because I look at Lee in those terms.

Q: I assume you've seen the footage of Lee being shot by Jack Ruby. Are you able to maintain the same detachment when you see that?

A: The first time I saw it I was very upset, but it gets to the point where it almost becomes unreal, this movie you're watching that has very little to do with you as a person.

Mostly I feel bad that Lee was never able to tell his story. He tried to after the arrest but everybody discounted it. I would have liked for him to have his day in court.

Q: Where do you stand today as far as your perception of what really happened out there in Dealey Plaza?

A: I've never publicly said one way or the other for sure. There are a lot of assassination buffs who have analyzed all the technical data and the other available material and even they don't agree about what happened.

Q: But are you comfortable with the fact that Lee Oswald played at least some role?

A: I think there definitely is circumstantial evidence that could imply he had something to do with it because of the characters he was hanging out with in New Orleans. But you know, just because you're hanging out with a weird group — they could have set him up, and he could have had no idea what was going on that day.

Q: Did you ever take the so-called assassination tour?

A: Not until recently. I went on a car trip up to the house I had lived in with Lee, Lee's boarding house, another house Mom had lived in with Lee that's still standing, the path of the motorcade, where the bullets hit.

Q: How did you feel about that?

A: It was — unusual. I didn't break down and cry or anything. It was just kind of eerie.

Q: I'm sure there must have been a lot of unusual incidents as you were growing up.

A: I remember Rachel's seventh-grade dance. So this little boy she was going with, his parents were going to come get her and they were going to go to the dance.

Well, we're all waiting, and a car pulls up in the driveway, and Mom rushes out to greet these parents, and they happen to be a man and a woman, and they've got a camera, and she says: "Oh, you're gonna take pictures! Great!" And she's just welcoming them with open arms. And they say: "Oh, we can take pictures? Oh great!"

Another car pulls up — and that's the parents and the little boy. The first car was The National Enquirer. But it was so funny because Mom talked to them for — I mean, nobody noticed that the date wasn't there!

During college, Rachel supported herself at the Texas Chili Parlor in Austin. It's right across from the Capitol, and she was a waitress. Well, there's a travel guide she found out

usually end up telling people that I'm seeing very often. And I'll tell you why: It could come up at any minute.

Q: Did you see the "Seinfeld" episode in which they're at the ball park, and they get spat upon, and —

A: The "second spitter," right. It was hilarious.

Q: If someone was to ask you today who your father is, what would you say? Whom do you really think of as dad?

A: Kenneth. Now, the word father does mean Lee to me. But dad is Dad. And you know, it's not Lee's fault he got killed by Jack Ruby. I don't blame him for not being here for me. I do blame him for having beat my

like. Are they going to take after some ancestor we don't even know? There's a lot of genetic things you can't even control that are inborn in your kids.

Q: How are things between you and your mom these days?

A: The last two years have been very stressful, because she started doing things that she hasn't let us know about, then all of a sudden I hear about it or see it on TV. Like she did a movie and it involved me and Rachel, and she didn't tell us first. I think her physical health and mental health have been damaged in recent years over all of the pressures put on her.

Q: After all this time?

A: Part of it was the big anniversary, the 30th. There were a lot of things leading up to that that they wanted Mom to do, and Mom in recent years has gotten more and more involved, I guess because she's getting older and trying to rectify some of the things she may have done unintentionally — like stating publicly that Lee did it. I've never seen her act like that, like she needed to become more of a crusader, and it's taking its toll.

Q: On your relationship with her as well?

A: It has put certain strains on it. Mom accused me one day of being ashamed of who I was. I don't think that's true. It's not a matter of being ashamed, it's a matter of wanting to be judged as June Oswald and not "the daughter of Lee Harvey Oswald."

Q: Do you and Rachel argue much about this?

A: Yes. Just in recent years; but yes. We are very close — except when these kinds of things come up.

See, this is the difference. We visited the set of "J.F.K." when it was going on, and somebody said, "Your father was a hero." Well, that's what Rachel wants to believe. Rachel loved listening to that. She got all caught up, because she wants so badly to have this identification with her father.

That didn't set well with me. If they could prove somehow that he was innocent, he'd still not be a hero, he'd be a martyr. I have to remind Rachel that this is the man who beat our mother, who didn't provide for his children. I tell her, "Rachel, for all we know, we could have been living in the streets." Because that's mostly what I think of when I think of Lee.

As for what his exact role in the assassination was — well, he'll have to be judged for that before God. ■



Marina and June Oswald, 22 months, at Lee Harvey's funeral on Nov. 25, 1963.

about that actually listed the Texas Chili Parlor and said the daughter of Lee Harvey Oswald worked there. So she became sort of a tourist attraction.

Q: Your childhood doesn't sound like it was easy.

A: Mom kept us together. She was pretty strong. I don't know if I could've done it and kept my sanity: two small children, don't speak the language, dirt poor, everybody in the country pointing their finger at you — hating you in some cases. I'm a strong woman, but I don't know if I could've kept myself together. But she did. She kept herself together for us.

Q: Was any of this an issue in your marriage?

A: No. My husband couldn't have cared less. But I still have problems in that area, because I date a lot. I always feel torn by whether I'm required to tell somebody about my history. I

mother, and not being a good father — or a good provider. Because some people have called me and said, "I knew your father and he really loved you." I have to admit that when I heard that he used to play with me all the time, that was a nice feeling. I try to hold that in the back of my head.

Q: Do you worry about telling your children as they grow up?

A: I do. I started worrying about, first of all, do I have a responsibility to tell them? What do I tell them? And I realize that I'm kind of cold about it, so how do I tell them? Do I need to be more compassionate about it? I want to make sure they understand why I'm so matter-of-fact about it. But see, I'm matter-of-fact about a lot in my life.

The other thing is, you just worry genealogically. Lee was illegitimate, and so was my mother. I've wondered what my kids are going to turn out