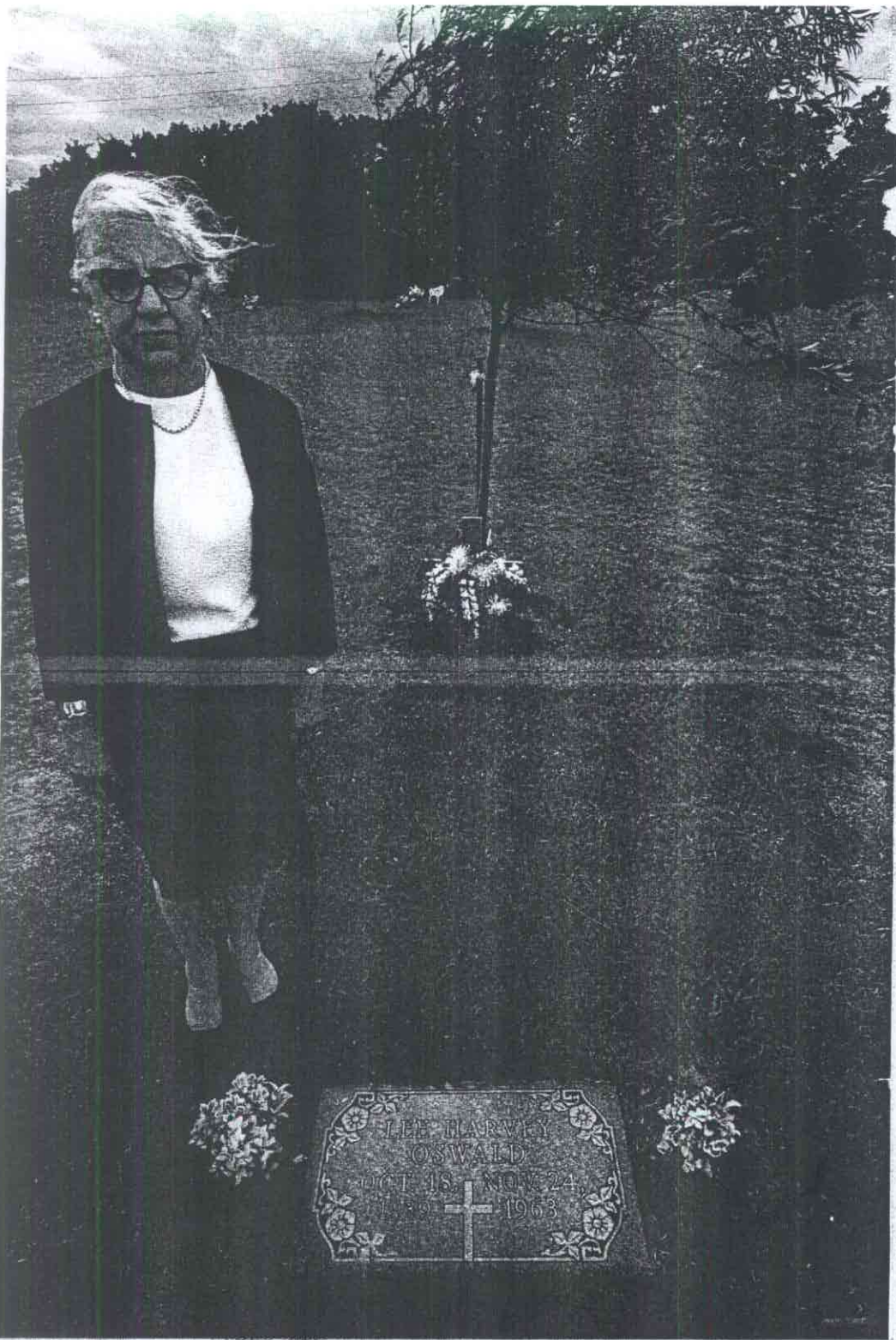


**THE
STRANGE
WORLD OF
MARGUERITE
OSWALD**

BY JEAN STAFFORD



In a tidy, unexceptional little house, on an unexceptional block of similar houses (they were seedy, but they were not squalid, and in some of their front yards roses grew) in Fort Worth, Mrs. Marguerite Oswald received me one steamy afternoon last May. Without inconsequential small talk, beyond asking me whether I found the air conditioning too cool or not cool enough (it was exactly right), she plunged straightaway into her memoirs—or, rather, into those parts of her memoirs having to do with the arrest and murder of her son Lee Harvey that catapulted her to international renown.

Her voice had a considerable histrionic range; in a minute's time she could shift her tone from resignation to irony, from sonorous patriotism to personal indignation; but at all times a central intelligence was at the controls regulating the pitch and the volume of mother, citizen, widow, public figure.

She declared at the beginning that she was "not a mother defending her son," but was "speaking for history," since history, she is persuaded, has been deformed by the press and the report of the Warren Commission's inquiry into President Kennedy's assassination, which is "all lies, lies, lies."

I had gone to Texas to see Mrs. Oswald because she is, as she herself said, "a mother in history." And I had hoped that I might be able to discover from this visit some of the accidents, loves, antipathies and idiosyncrasies that had influenced the character of Lee Oswald.

For all practical purposes, Marguerite Oswald was her son's only parent, since his father died before he was born, and her later marriage lasted too short a time to have much effect on him.

Mrs. Oswald, an inactive Lutheran, believes that "if ye seek, ye shall find," that at last "truth will prevail," and "to correct the false impressions" of her son and of herself under which most of the nation and most of the world labor, she is dedicating her life to her own investigation. From early morning until night, she is at work "researching the case," collating newspaper stories, studying the theories of conspiracy that have been propounded from Los Angeles to West Berlin, "reading between the lines" in the Warren Report, and she accepts any invitation anywhere to appear on platforms or on television screens, to pass on her observations and to interpret them. For several months after the assassination, she traveled widely throughout this country and through Canada. "My theme is the American way of life," she said, "and this was what I talked about."

"I want the truth known," she said to me, sitting erect on a sofa, her hands crossed at the wrists, palm upward. "I believe the American people are entitled to the truth, and I believe they want to know. Now, I will agree that immediately after the assassination and while President Johnson was taking the place of President Kennedy, let me say in all respect that this was not the time to bring these truths before the public. But after his time in office, most people think—I don't agree, but that's beside the point—that he is a very powerful President and the assassination itself has subsided. I think these truths should be leaked now, and if in the leaking they can prove to me that my son was the assassin of President Kennedy, I won't commit suicide or drop dead. I will accept the facts as a good, straight human being. But up until this day, they have not shown me any proof, and I have things in my possession to disprove many things they say. I understand all the testimony off the cuff in Washington and will be locked up for seventy-five years. Well, I've got news for you. It will not be for seventy-five years, because if today or tomorrow I am dead or

PHOTOGRAPH BY CARL FISCHER

killed, what I have in my possession will be known. And I in my lifetime have got to continue what I have been doing, using my emotional stability and speaking out whenever I can. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

Because there was no break between the proclamation of unwavering purpose and the hospitable question, and because both were delivered in the same tone and at the same pace, I did not immediately take it in. But in a moment I did and said I would. While she busied herself in the kitchen that abutted on the dinette at the end of the living room, she did not pause in her soliloquy: She asked herself questions and answered them in patient asides. "All the news mediums said he was such a failure in life. A failure in life?" Her voice conveyed stunned disbelief.

"He was twenty-four years old when he was murdered! The attorneys that are interviewing these witnesses make a hundred to a hundred and fifty dollars a day, and they never lived this type life. Lee Harvey Oswald a failure? I am smiling! I think it took courage for a young boy to go to Russia at twenty, for whatever reason he went. I find this a very intelligent boy, and I think he's coming out in history as a very fine person." She spoke in the accents and cadences of that part of New Orleans to which she was native, an accent that my late husband, A. J. Liebling, once described as "hard to distinguish from the accent of Hoboken, Jersey City, and Astoria, Long Island, where the Al Smith inflection, extinct in Manhattan, has taken refuge." Point is pertinent and person is poys-on.

Accustomed as she was to public speaking, Mrs. Oswald did not seem to be addressing me specifically but, rather, a large congregation; this was to be her manner with me on each of the three occasions I saw her. Taking advantage of my anonymity in this crowd and the fact that her back was turned, I looked around the room and tried to think what sort of occupant I would assign to it if I did not already know who she was.

The house itself was a white stucco bungalow, divided into two apartments, and as I had gone up the short path, I had noticed a "For Rent" sign at the approach to the other side. Each apartment consisted of a living room-dining room that then turned a corner and became a kitchen; off the living room there was a small bedroom and, off that, a bath. The two kitchen doors opened onto a common back porch, screened and looking out to a downward-sloping lawn and pleasant shade trees.

The space was limited; but Mrs. Oswald had arranged her furniture deftly, so that I did not feel nudged, and the furniture itself, while it was middle-aged and had been nondescript all its life (except for a Danish modern chair upholstered in carotid polyethylene), was solid and in good repair and comfortable. The armchair I sat in was hard enough and soft enough, and there was an adequate table to the right of it, on which stood an ashtray, a small vase of artificial violets and a copy of *The Wounded Land*, Hans Habe's highly emotional observations about the character of the American people after President Kennedy's assassination. The walls were that general color that can be called beige or ecru or bone or buff or oatmeal, and hanging on the longest, over a sofa thronged with multiform and multicolored cushions, was a print of Whistler's mother. The glass that protected it was spotless, and the brass identification plate was smartly burnished. I could not tell whether the picture was a recent acquisition or was daily treated with polish and a chamois skin; it was clearly cherished.

On another wall but oblique to my line of vision, there hung what seemed to be a copper

scroll; I wanted to get up to look at it, but I felt this would be presumptuous, particularly because it was over a writing desk with orderly piles of papers, to which my Paul Pry eye would be bound to stray. Near the television set (it confronted the sofa, and the vantage point from which it would be looked at was directly under Mrs. Whistler) there was a low tripod, on which stood a jardiniere planted with crotons, whose patterns were picked out in positive shades of purple and red and lemon yellow; the health of these leaves was so obviously robust that they testified to a green thumb and made a puzzling contrast to the fake flowers and fake grapes in other parts of the room. I had observed the same phenomenon in the small front yard, where heather, far from home and made of wax and wire, emerged from a plastic pot, toward which a few late tulips leaned their mortal, languid heads.

Mrs. Oswald, pouring hot water over instant coffee, was saying, "I can absolutely prove my son innocent. I can do it any time I want by going to Washington, D.C., with some pictures; but I won't do it that way. I want to do it this way, getting my story before the public, so young and old all over the world will know the truth. Why don't I go to Washington, D.C.?"

With this question, she turned to face me, arms akimbo. Embattled but still cool-headed, she answered it. "Because they've been so ugly, to me and my boy. I'll write a book, and the title of it will be 'One and One Make Two' or 'This and That.' Oh, I could write three books or five books! I could write books and books on what I know and what I have researched."

My own research, this cursory inspection of her living room, had yielded little but the observation that whoever lived here was a good housekeeper of modest means, and hoping to set her back in time, to the days before the concussion that had stunned the world. I asked her about her early life in New Orleans. But if she had any nostalgia for that most raffish and romantic of cities, she had suppressed it, and she brushed me aside as if there were no time for frivolous parentheses when the business at hand was history.

"Now, maybe Lee Harvey Oswald was the assassin," she pursued, stirring the coffee. "But does that make him a louse? No, no. Killing doesn't necessarily mean badness. You find killing in some very fine homes for one reason or another, and as we all know, President Kennedy was a dying man. So I say it is possible that my son was chosen to shoot him in a mercy killing, for the security of the country. And if this is true, it was a fine thing to do and my son was a hero."

I was caught off guard by these speculations stated as irrefutable facts, and I breathed deeply before I said, "I had not heard that President Kennedy was dying." Indeed, the conjecture was a new one to me; but later on, I learned that it is popular in certain quarters where the Warren Report is repudiated.

"Yes, yes," she went on with authority. My ignorance did not surprise her. On the contrary, she seemed accustomed to dealing with people who, either through laziness or want of opportunity, were not in possession of the most significant evidence. "It's been in many articles that President Kennedy was a dying President, that he had Atkinson's disease, which is a disease of the kidney, and we know that he had three operations on his back and that he would have been a lingering President. For security reasons, we could not have a lingering President, because of our conflicts with other nations." She turned to me, smiling broadly. "Do you take cream and sugar, sweetheart?"

Her affable face / continued on page 192

The strange world of Marguerite Oswald

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was round and lineless, and the skin that covered her small bones was delicate; her eyes were clear behind glasses in pale frames; and her clean white hair, only a little smudged with leftover gray, was pulled back straight into a plump and faultless bun. She wore a lime-green sheath that was appropriate to her short stature and her tubular, well-corseted construction. She would, I think, be called "modish." Her general appearance and her air were consistent with the several roles she has played in her fifty-eight years: insurance agent, saleslady, manageress of lingerie shops, practical nurse.

Terms of endearment came naturally to her lips, as they do to those of many Southern women; they are seductively ingratiating and coolly noncommittal.

Having delivered my creamed and sugared coffee, Mrs. Oswald re-established herself with her own cup on the sofa beneath her generic sister, Whistler's mother, and continued: "Now, it could have been that my son and the Secret Service were all involved in a mercy killing. I have thought about this seriously. We teach our boys to kill in war, and we don't think a thing about it; yet if these same boys kill someone on the street, they are lawfully put in jail or else electrocuted, which is right. So why wouldn't it be just a normal thing to have a mercy killing of the President?"

She uttered the words "mercy killing" as if this were as commonplace as reducing a fever with aspirin.

"If he was dying of an incurable disease, this would be for the security of our country. Now, when President Kennedy came to Fort Worth, Texas, for one night, there was an article in the paper that said the maid at the Hotel Texas had fixed his room for him and had to redo the bed because he had his own mattress. Even for one night. He must have been very bad off. And his rocking chair is still the way it was, with the towel in the back because he was in such pain."

Now there floated across my mind a foggy memory of hearing it rumored that the President had Addison's disease, which is not a disease of the kidneys, but a deficiency of the adrenal glands, and thanks to cortisone, it is no longer fatal. I asked Mrs. Oswald if she had meant this when she had spoken of "Atkinson's" disease.

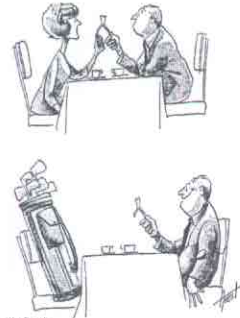
Once again, she found my interruption irrelevant and answered simply, "Whatever," and put me down, along with her coffee cup, which she returned to its saucer. "As I was saying, as we all know, Lee Harvey Oswald, after leaving the Texas Book Depository, got off the bus and got into a taxi. This was right by the Greyhound bus station. Isn't it a strong likelihood that he went into the bus station to make a telephone call to the people he was working with, to say the mercy killing had come off? Maybe he did, maybe he didn't. But if he was guilty, why didn't he get on a bus and get out of Dallas? This theory fits in with the other theory. So were they all subversive and in a plot? Or were they all humanitarian and in a plot? The same people, though."

I wondered if, in my musings on her plants and paraphernalia, when she was in the kitchen, I had missed

something, and rather tentatively I asked, "The same people? Which people were these?"

"They," said Mrs. Oswald, and shook hands with herself for emphasis. "When I say they, I'm going to quote Mrs. Kennedy when her husband was killed. She said, 'They have killed my Jack,' and I say they in the same text. They, who are they? Ah! I have my own theory, and I'm sure everybody else has. There was one or two others that I can't recall at this moment to say 'they.' I think Governor Connally said, 'They are going to assassinate us all.' It's always they."

My interviews with Mrs. Oswald took place in the third or fourth week of the troubles in the Dominican Republic, and just as, in reading the reports of those, I could not keep the dramatic personae on the proper sides



McColl's

(Or on top) of the proper fences, so now "they" swarmed about me like gnats, midges, fruit flies and sand fleas, impossible to differentiate. I could not find my way out of the cloud, and so I bent my head and drank some coffee and closed my eyes and tried to concentrate.

"If my son was an agent of the United States, this should be known. I wonder why Chief Justice Warren had tears in his eyes when President Johnson asked him to head up this commission. I wonder why." She meditated briefly. "Did Chief Justice Warren have to whitewash something the public don't know about? Did he know my son was innocent?"

Who used my son? This is the question I must find the answer to. Research and research, until I can bring the truth to light. My son was killed on cue, and this I can prove. The television cameras were ready and the TV directors gave the order. As I understand it, some important men in the networks got in trouble, lost their jobs and everything. But that's beside the point. What I want to know is, who used Lee Harvey Oswald?"

The question was rhetorical and was put to the unseen audience, but I answered it with another: "Do you have any idea?"

"I don't have an idea; I know," she said. "And of course when I find out who framed my son, then we can find out who killed Kennedy. I go a little different way than most of the books on who killed Kennedy. My theory is a little different, because I know who framed my son, and he knows I know who framed my son." Knowing that the question was useless, I put it to her anyway. I said, "Is he in Texas now?"

"I can divulge nothing on that score," she said brusquely, but

screwed up her eyes in an amiable grimace, to show that she forgave my intrusion into something that was none of my business.

I backed out of this dead end and returned to the avenue of the past I had tried to guide her down before; I asked what her son's hobbies had been as a child.

"He had a stamp collection," she said fondly, "and he loved to play Monopoly, which is a thinking game. So was stamps. He had a stamp collection. He loved to play chess; he was a very good chess player. And anything like that. So he was really a very busy little boy, and I don't see anything abnormal about any part of his life. He'd climb up on the roof to look at the stars, and I'd have to get the older boys to get him down, because he was interested in astronomy. I'm talking about a boy eight, nine, ten years old. And he loved, he just loved to read very deep books. He liked Darwin, Hemingway, Norman Vincent Peale. When he went to visit my sister, all she said she saw him read was comic books, and this is what she said to the Warren Commission. Well, that was true, and he did like comic books. Isn't that normal in a young boy?"

"He loved to read about animals. He knew all about animals. You know, they said he played hooky in New York, and he did, and then, of course, we had to go to the board several times, because he was always picked up in the Bronx Zoo. We only lived about two blocks from there, and this is where they would always find him, because he loved animals. Someone said, 'Well, at least it was educational.' I have to smile a little bit because boys play hooky. I don't say it's the right thing to do, and I don't say children should do it, but I certainly don't think it's abnormal. But they cautioned me and they cautioned me, and finally they brought us into court, and Lee was taken from me, and he was placed in a children's home. I think he was in the home five or six weeks, and that was Warwick—I think that was the name of it. In Brooklyn."

"After the assassination, all of this came out, and that Lee needed psychiatric treatment and so on and so forth, and that I refused, and that—well, this was a clue to the assassination. I would have to read you the Warren Commission Report on Lee's psychiatric treatment and tear it apart. I was never told my son needed psychiatric treatment, believe me. And this man, I forget his name, I stepped on his toes, and sometimes I wonder, did he hold it against me enough to harm my son? By the way, do you know that he is Mayor Wagner's right-handed man? How do you suppose he got from probation officer into an official capacity in New York State?"

This time, she really seemed to want an answer; but since I did not know who Mayor Wagner's "right-handed man" was, let alone what his credentials were, I had to disappoint her.

In view of the mass of detail she had at her command and the dextrous use she made of it to fit her argument, I felt, at times like this, like a flop on a debating team who had never reached the finals.

"I find these things very, very interesting," she said, "because as I'm researching Lee's life—and I'm not the only one—it looks as though this boy's life has been supervised. But if I stress this, they say, 'This woman is out of her mind. Let's

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put her in a mental institution.' Isn't it silly?"

She chuckled, sipped coffee, changed from her official to her chatty voice, and said, "Lee loved animals! With his first pay, he bought a bird and a cage, and I have a picture of it. He bought this bird with a cage that had a planter for ivy, and he took care of that bird, and he made the ivy grow. Now, you see there could be many nice things written about this boy. But oh, no, this boy is supposed to be the assassin of a President of the United States, so he has to be a louse. Sometimes I am very sad."

I started to express my sympathy, but I got no farther than an introductory murmur.

"When I think of all the things Lee did!" she went on. Her tranquility was ruffled, and her voice went up a note or two. "How can you call him a loner or an introvert or whatever they wanted to call him? Of course, after they arrested him, they had to find an environmental factor, and right away they said we moved around a lot. Well, all right, what if we did? This is the twentieth century and people move around. That's educational, isn't it? No matter where we were, we always had a decent home. I wouldn't put up with a piece of torn upholstery or something broken or anything like that—I'd go to the five-and-dime and get something and fix it up. You see how I live—nothing fancy, but a bright touch, a little decorator piece here and there."

She waved both hands, gesturing toward the shipshape and comely appointments of the room. "And I never neglected my children. They were well fed. Oh, yes, we didn't have steak, but we never even thought about steak—I didn't, I was always grateful to eat. And the children never really and truly complained. I know of one or two occasions when the boys said, 'Mother, why don't you have a platter of chops?' I was at such and such a house yesterday, and they served second, and I said, 'Well, now, honey, this is all Mother can do.' If, say, three days before payday, I had a dollar and a half to my name, I would cook up a big pot of soup or a big pot of beans and cornbread or a big pot of spaghetti and meatballs and make it last, but I happen to know some women in that position who would take that dollar and a half and go to the corner restaurant and come home with hamburgers and Coke, and there's your difference. I have always done what I thought was right, and I always did it in a true Christian way. And even though we were poor and I was a widow and I did have to support myself and three children, I always seemed to manage."

"I have often been complimented about how I look when I'm dressed up, about my little home and about the way the children act and so on and so forth. Now I'm patting myself

on the back as a mother only so that the people will understand. Why am I so concerned that the people will understand? It is natural, because I am a mother in history. I am in twenty-six volumes of the Warren Report, which is all over the world, so I just defend myself and defend my son Lee."

She altered the position of a green glass ashtray on the coffee table. Then, as if she had given the matter sober thought and this was her considered opinion, she said, "I would say that the Oswald family was actually an average American family."

To begin with, the record of Mrs. Oswald's matrimonial misfortunes shoots off at a forty-five degree angle from the norm. She was abandoned by her first husband, Edward John Pic, when her child by him, John Edward, was an infant; she was widowed by Robert Lee Oswald when her first son by him was a child and Lee Harvey was not yet born. Her third marriage, to a Mr. Eckdahl, was a hurricane, and while the lull before it was lengthy ("I made him wait a year") and the restoration period afterward was long, the storm that raised the roof under which

Lutheran orphanage when he was three. Sometimes they were at home with their mother, and when they were old enough, they got jobs to pay for their board and keep.

The family moved with dizzying frequency while they lived in New Orleans and later on when they lived in and around Fort Worth. Sometimes they rented apartments, and sometimes they owned houses; very often they lived in two-family houses; when she was unencumbered, Mrs. Oswald stayed in lodgings. In both cities, their addresses were in similar neighborhoods, and her sons John Edward Pic and Robert Lee Oswald, in their testimony before the Warren Commission, had trouble remembering the names of the streets where they had lived.

Mrs. Oswald emanated restlessness and energy, and she had handed down her wanderlust to her sons, all of whom joined the Marines as early as they could. At the same time, her nest-building instinct was steadfast; it was, however, the instinct of a migratory species that, insofar as possible, duplicated, in successive nests, twigs and leaves from the same sort of tree and swatches of the same kind of moss and lichen. Nothing in the room appeared to have more than the most ephemeral association of time or place; whenever, in the course of my interviews, I asked her where she had picked up a vase or a bowl or a tray, she said, "Oh, that's just a little decorator thing I thought would go with the other colors."

Her sons, under her guidance, were upright. "They didn't cuss—of course I don't say they didn't on the outside, but they didn't in front of me. We none of us used obscene language—oh, I might say 'damn,' you know, sometime, but none of the boys. And one little thing I did with 'em—but they never did know till later on in life—I never let them have a key to the front door. I remember Robert asking me, and I said, 'Oh, no, honey, it's better you wake me up, because if I ever heard the front door, I would think it was a burglar or something.' But this wasn't the idea. I wanted to be sure that no boy of mine would come into my home drunk. And I can truthfully say not one of my children ever entered my home stinking. They probably had a beer on the outside, for I'm not saying they're perfect. Now,

I have no objection to social drinking, and I've been to cocktail parties myself; but I don't drink, because alcohol doesn't agree with me at all, but if I wanted to I would."

"And another thing, I never let my boys have my car, because I thought they were too young to use it, and it was my livelihood, so I couldn't afford to let a teen-ager wreck it. I think this is a very nice thing to say, a woman raising children by herself, particularly boys. I'm going to give myself credit for this, and I think I deserve it."

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What the components were that made up Mrs. Oswald's image of "an average American family" I never learned. I asked, but the answer was apparently self-evident, and she ignored me. Since I do not know, either, how the sociologists and statisticians arrive at this denomination, it is quite possible that she and her brood fitted into it. But certain eccentricities of their circumstance had struck me when I had read the acres of newspaper following the assassination, and I doubted that the word "average" was precise or even approximate.

they dwelt together was brief. The household, therefore, was only sporadically manned by a man.

The Oswald economy was far from stable. Under the terms of the first divorce, Mr. Pic was required to contribute to the support of his son; and Mr. Oswald had insured his life for a nominal sum. But these were humble funds, and Mrs. Oswald, pressed and proud and energetic, went to work. The boys, in the absence of a full-time caretaker, were sent variously to schools and to church-sponsored children's homes. Lee Harvey joined his brothers in a

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The room was still cool, but the atmosphere was heavy, imbued with the secondhand mustiness of air-conditioning, and I was growing tired. Mrs. Oswald, however, was as fresh as she had been when she greeted me.

"You know, there was a violent campaign against me as well as my son in magazines, newspapers and written literature. Most all the papers pictured me in sort of a bad light, but really I'm not that way at all and never was. I should say I'm very outspoken, I'm aggressive, I'm no dope—let's face it, if you step on my toes, I'm going to fight back, and I don't apologize for that. This was my training along with Lee's father, who, as we all know, is now deceased. When my older boy first went to school, he came home one day crying that the children had taken his pennies away from him. Mr. Oswald took his little hand, as I recall, and started teaching him how to fight back, and I listened, and I thought it was a wonderful thing. As I remember him saying, 'If you ever start a fight, you're going to be whipped, but if they ever start a fight with you and you don't fight back, I'm going to whip you.' I continued that with Lee.

"Now, my boys were never tied to my apron strings. And Lee—Lee wanted to know all there was about life. Talking about going to Russia. He never did tell me why he went to Russia. I have my own opinion. He spoke Russian, he wrote Russian and he read Russian. Why? Because my boy was being trained as an agent, that's why. Another thing I found out in some book, where it said he was placed in another hut because he couldn't get along with someone. He was placed with a Cuban, and he was learning Spanish. I think he was spying on that Cuban. It is just so obvious. Now, how many Marines are going around reading Russian and getting Russian newspapers? One and one make two to me. That boy was being trained."

I asked her what she thought Lee would have done with his life if he had not been killed, and she answered immediately, as if she had answered the question many times before. "From what I know of my boy, and of course you have to understand that actually the last time I was very close to Lee was before he joined the service in nineteen fifty-six. After that, it was just through correspondence and on his leaves home from the Marines that I knew him. But every time he came home, he talked and talked and talked about the Marines and nothing else. I know when he came back from Japan, he said, 'Oh, what a wonderful experience, what a wonderful trip!' He said, 'Do you know it cost my government over two thousand dollars to send me there? I could never afford it on my own.' I think he was doing with his life what he wanted to do. And I'm going to say he was working for his country as an agent. I think that at age sixteen he became involved, that at age sixteen Lee Harvey Oswald was being trained as a government agent. And this brings up Russia and, of course, Marina."

I was glad she had broached the subject of her daughter-in-law, since I had been shy of doing so myself, knowing that there was bad blood between the two women.

"Let's have some more coffee before I go into that," she said, and once again she went into the kitchen,

where, with her back to me as she went about the business of the coffee, she prepared Marina for anatomization. "To me, Marina is not a true person," she said. "And this is hard to explain. I have to ask myself who Marina Oswald really is. I'd like to see her marriage certificate sometime, and I'd like to know more about her. Oh, when Marina went to Washington, Washington fell in love with Marina Oswald, and Chief Justice Warren was her grandfather, and everything was red-carpet treatment; but when I went to Washington—'Don't listen to her!' Momma hadn't seen Lee in a year, and she doesn't know anything, blah, blah, blah.' Everything was against me. Now, I don't say that Marina is necessarily guilty of anything; but

suspense about Marina's origins was resolved.

As I rose to go, I asked if she would object to my bringing a tape recorder the following day; she said that, on the contrary, she would welcome the arrangement—if, that is, I brought two machines, since she wanted one tape to preserve "for history." She had made many recordings, she told me, for "mass mediums" and for her own purposes; she knew that she spoke at the rate of a hundred and eighty words a minute. An operator would not be necessary; she knew "how to work 'em all."

I started toward the bedroom to fetch my raincoat, and my eye drifted willy-nilly toward the scroll over the desk. I did not look at it directly



"He's very s-m-a-r-t!"

one thing I will say, she has lied continuously. Maybe she's not guilty of anything, but why is it necessary to lie?

"When it first happened, Marina did not identify the rifle. She said, 'Yes, Lee had a rifle,' but when they showed it to her, she said she couldn't say whether that was his. Now, this is understandable. If your husband had a rifle, and particularly if he had it, as they say he had it, wrapped up in a blanket and never using it, how would the wife be able to identify it? Yet a few weeks later, when she had taken oath and had been brainwashed by the Secret Service, she identified the rifle as Lee's. And at first she said, 'Lee good man, Lee no shoot anybody.' And then she changed her testimony. Marina seems French to me."

"French!"
"Yes, sweetheart, that's what I said. Marina Oswald seems French to me." She came back with our coffee, and as she put mine down beside me, she said, "But that will have to be continued in our next. You'll have to drink up, honey. Your driver's here."

I had not heard a car, and shrubbery obscured the window that looked onto the street; but when I peered through the interstices of it, I saw that she was indeed right, and I began to respect the sixth sense she had several times mentioned she had. I respected, also, her dramatic sense of timing and wondered how I would live through the hours until my

but, instead, at a painting on wood of a baroque orange-and-chestnut newel-post (a detail from backstairs at Blenheim Castle?), which she dismissed: "A little decorator thing. I thought it would go with the chair. But now this, this is important, this is what you should see," and she took the scroll down from its hook. "I was going to show you this," she said. "Here, the man can wait a minute—I guess he's getting paid, isn't he? You get out your notebook, honey, and copy it down, and be sure you get the words right."

The legend, cut into copper, read:

"MY SON—

"LEE HARVEY OSWALD EVEN AFTER HIS DEATH HAS DONE MORE FOR HIS COUNTRY THAN ANY OTHER LIVING HUMAN BEING

"MARGUERITE C. OSWALD"
As I was writing down this private, syntactically abstruse manifesto, Mrs. Oswald brought my things and smiled disarmingly. "Of course, I'm not a writer like you," she said. "But I like how that sounds. That's what I said at the year period, when I went to the grave. Newspaper reporters came by the galore and asked if I had anything to say, and I said this. And every word of it is true. I'm proud of my son, and why not? My son is an unsung hero!"

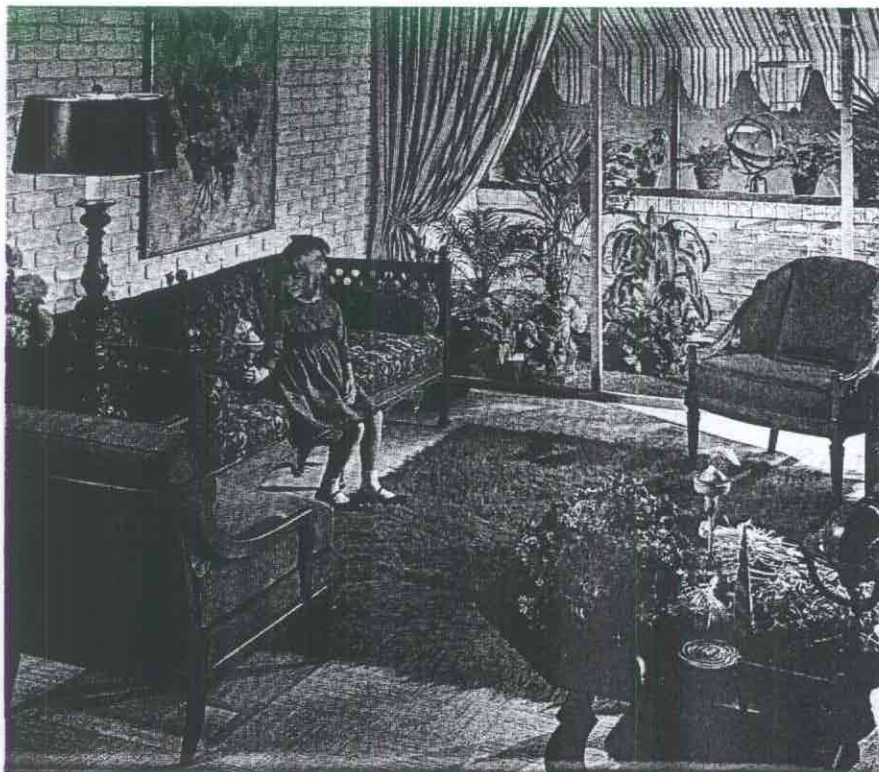
I thanked her for giving me so much of her time, and I thanked her for the coffee. Her handclasp was firm and straightforward, and her eyes shone with enthusiasm and

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Party Favors

Fun's popping
and Mom's relaxed!
Her DREXEL
furniture is protected by
"SCOTCHGARD" Repeller.

This little girl's mother has learned how to be the most carefree guest at the party. Formula: "SCOTCHGARD" Brand Stain Repeller! Keeps spills from spoiling the furniture. Spills— even oily ones— just blot or wipe away. And if a stain gets forced in— Mom spot-cleans it, generally without leaving a ring!



See this Drexel furniture, available on request with "SCOTCHGARD" Repeller, at the following furniture and department stores: Atlanta, Rich's • Baltimore, Hochschild, Kahn • Boston, Paine Furniture Co. • Chicago, John M. Smyth Company • Cincinnati, Leuger's—3 Stores • Cleveland, The May Company, All 6 Stores • Dallas, Anderson's Studio • Dayton, Town & Country Furniture Shops • Denver, Davis & Shaw • Des Moines, Younkers Store for Homes & Branches • Ft. Worth, Ellison's The Furniture Showplace • Houston, Sunland Furniture Co. • Indianapolis, Graham's of Gien-dale Inc. • Jacksonville, MAY Cohens • Kansas City, Kansas, Duff & Repp and Branches • Los Angeles, Barker Bros. and Branches • Louisville, Bensinger's & Branches • Memphis, Goldsmith's and Branches • Miami, Burdine's and Branches • Milwaukee, Kunzelmann-Esser • New Orleans, Hurwitz-Mintz • New York, Macy's • Northern California, Breuner's • Pittsburgh, Kaufmann's; Today's Home • Portland, Oregon, Director's Furn. Co. & Branch • Railway, N. J., Koon Furniture Showplace and Branches • Richmond, Bernard Siegel Furniture Co. • Salt Lake City, ZCMI • San Francisco, Breuner's • Seattle, The Bon Marche • Toledo, Lesalle's • Washington, D. C., Woodward & Lothrop—All Branches; Mazor Masterpieces, Inc.

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satisfaction and optimism. "We're going to win in the end."

I was not sure whether the "we" was editorial or whether I had now been initiated into a coterie whose adversaries were "they."

Having taken Mrs. Oswald at her word, I refused the offer of a lesson when the man delivered the tape recorders to my hotel. This was unwise; despite her assurance that she could "work 'em all," Mrs. Oswald could not work these, and I had never clapped eyes on a tape recorder before in my life. After a quarter of an hour of bungling experimentation, plugging and unplugging, punching buttons and shifting levers, reversing bobbins, profitlessly studying the instructions, we were both exasperated. Sitting on the floor, with our hair awry, amid furniture that we had dislodged in our futile fiddling, we were exasperated with the contraptions and with each other, and Mrs. Oswald said, with some asperity, that these were inferior machines, that I should not have cut corners when matters of such importance were at stake but, having chosen to do so, I should have learned how to operate the miserable things.

She went into the bedroom to telephone the shop to ask for help, and while she was gone, luck visited me in a dazzling revelation and piloted

my fingers in a virtuoso performance, unique in my experience, so that when she returned with the disheartening news that, since it was Saturday, the shop was closed, I was delighted to point to the smoothly revolving wheels.

"Well, now! If we just keep at a thing, we'll get it to go in the end, isn't that the truth?" she said. "Oh, I can tell we'll work well together! Right here it's proved that we're a mechanical genius."

She picked up her microphone and spoke into it clearly. Because she never groped for a word and because her undertones and overtones and rhythms altered at such cleverly strategic times, I, the only visible member of her audience, was persuaded, even when I heard the imaginary grumblings from the back of the house that her logic was wobbly and her deductions were questionable.

"Now about Marina being a true or untrue person," she began, stating the text for the day. "Marina, as I have said, seems French to me. I have researched everything about Marina over and over. And, for example, when she went to New Orleans, she said she didn't want to live in an apartment with high ceilings. Now, where does she know about the high ceilings? A girl from Russia? There may be a simple answer for this and all the other things, but I don't have it, and I want it. And she complained about

the cockroaches, which is all right, but a foreign girl knows how to clean up these things. And of course she knew French, too.

"By the way, there's one letter in the Warren Commission Report from Russia from Lee that said he married this girl and she spoke a little French. Well, the letters had to be retyped, because they didn't photograph well, and they omitted the word 'French.' If you use a magnifying glass and look at Lee's letter, you will see that Marina speaks French. Now I ask myself: Was this deliberate or was this just an error? But when you find so many errors and so much coincidence, then you begin to wonder if something's being whitewashed, if there isn't something more to it than meets the eye.

And Marina knew English. Marina and I conversed. If they say that Marina didn't know English, that's baloney. She could understand perfectly well; but when she went out anywhere, she didn't open her mouth, and she made out she didn't speak or understand English. This is what I mean she's not a true person."

"But why do you think she is French?" I pursued, unsatisfied with the proposition that an aversion to high ceilings and cockroaches was Gallic.

"I wish I could go into this, I

truly do, but it's just like 'How do I love you?' It is just something that doesn't make sense, you know, and you know it. I sensed this almost when I first met her, that she didn't look Russian. She doesn't look Russian at all."

I recalled that when I had seen the first photographs of Marina, I had been reminded of the flawed beauty of girls in Soviet films; no face had ever looked to me more Russian.

"She looks French," Mrs. Oswald went on. "Now, the only thing I'm sure of is that I had nothing to do with the assassination. I'm not sure about anybody else. And because I am looking for the truth, everyone is under suspicion in a way. You see, I don't know who's who. I know that I had nothing to do with it, but everybody else I have to evaluate, and Marina doesn't ring true. Of course, I never heard anybody else say she was French. But I have my reasons for saying this, which will be very delicate. She doesn't ring true, to begin with, in respect to motherhood. Even if she thinks in her mind that Lee was guilty, the thing to do was protect him for her children's sake and for her sake. No, I'm not speaking about lying, because I don't believe in lying. But if she had met him outside of Russia, she would never have married him, because of the type he was and so on and so forth. That's just

downing him more and more not to protect him, and yet she's the mother of his children. This is not true of womanhood or motherhood. Even if he was a louse, she would defend him to a certain extent. She never goes out to the cemetery. She did at the very beginning, and everything was fine, and then when she was taken over, she started changing.

"And whether it was for the security of the country, whether this was her role, whether she's being threatened—which is a possibility—whatever reason, it's not a nice reason, and this is why she's not a true person. First she says, 'Lee good man, Lee no shoot anybody,' and everything was in Lee's favor, and then all of a sudden they get abhold of her, and they put her on television, and she says she thinks in her mind that her husband is guilty, and from then on, her husband's a louse. These are the things that just don't jive.

All the witnesses told how immediately, when they had a house of their own, Marina started to complain about my son and talked about her sexual life and denounced him and so on and so forth and left him to go and live with those Russian people that had made friends with her. Now, why? I ask, why? A Russian girl just arrived in the United States, right away she started

leaving Lee. This is in black and white. I'm not imagining these things, and thank God there are other people taking this up. I say thank God because there are some people who think I have hallucinations—I know it's been said in the Warren Report. Some attorney said point-blank, 'Do you think your sister—' this was said to my sister—'do you think that your sister has hallucinations?' Why is this? Because I notice the inaccuracies and coincidences and things that don't jive? I know some who wouldn't hesitate to try and make a mental case out of me, and believe me, if anybody's in their right mind, it's Mrs. Marguerite Oswald.

"No matter what Marina does, it's news; but locally I can show reporters something in black and white, and they won't give me coverage. This is the difference. This is where the human element comes in. And this is where I have been persecuted and have suffered just like my son. Oh, I can hear the 'ah's' when they read this—here is Mrs. Oswald feeling sorry for herself. No, no, I'm not feeling sorry for myself, but I know for a fact that I have been persecuted. What's wrong with Mrs. Oswald? Why does she think she's being persecuted? Is she mentally unbalanced? I have been asked that question publicly. No, no. Without persecution, there wouldn't be a persecution complex. This is

what Freud said himself. Shut off your tape, dearheart."

I did as I was told, anticipating a confidence she did not want recorded; but all she said was, "Don't you think it's too hot for coffee today? Let me make you a glass of iced tea. I've got some nice Indian iced tea with kind of a spicy flavor."

Today she was wearing a blue denim jumper and a perky red-and-white-striped blouse, and she was shod in sneakers. She looked as carefree and fun-loving as the wife of the man in the ads who has retired to Florida at the age of fifty, thanks to taking the advice of his farsighted insurance broker.

I felt that she should have been telling me more about the iced tea; but even as she emptied ice trays clamorously and rattled spoons, she rode her temper: "Maybe you saw where Marina was offered ten thousand dollars for the guns? The gun that killed Kennedy and the telescope sight that went with it and the gun that killed Tippett?"

I said that I had. I had been dumfounded, as a matter of fact, that the weapons had not been acquired by the FBI or the Smithsonian Institution; but I had been reminded that they belonged to the dead man's estate and were now Marina's to dispose of as she wished. The story I had read said that "a private collector" was negotiating

for them, and at the time I wondered what manner of man he was.

"Well, now let me tell you about Marguerite Oswald being a mental case. When I read that, I said to myself, 'Now, those guns are worth a great deal more than ten thousand dollars, and Marina should get more money for my grandchildren.' I am thinking about the welfare of my grandchildren. So I called up the Fort Worth 'Star Telegram' and told them what I thought. I said, 'Those guns are priceless, but if they're going to be sold, let's see some justice done to the children of Lee Harvey Oswald.' And just last week, there was an item in the Fort Worth 'Star Telegram' that said a Frenchman had offered twenty thousand. So I do my bit, but nobody knows. And it's a shame. I'm not unhappy. You can see I'm not, can't you? But I'm a mother in history, I'm all over the world. There's two Presidents in my life, and my son's the one accused. You know, here is Mrs. Kennedy, a very wealthy woman, Mrs. Tippett, a very wealthy woman, and Marina is very wealthy, and here I'm wondering where my next meal is coming from. It's almost unbelievable, and sometimes it's almost like a spiritual."

She brought me a dewy glass of tea with a spray of fresh mint. It was delicious and mysterious.

"Here we are, we four women in

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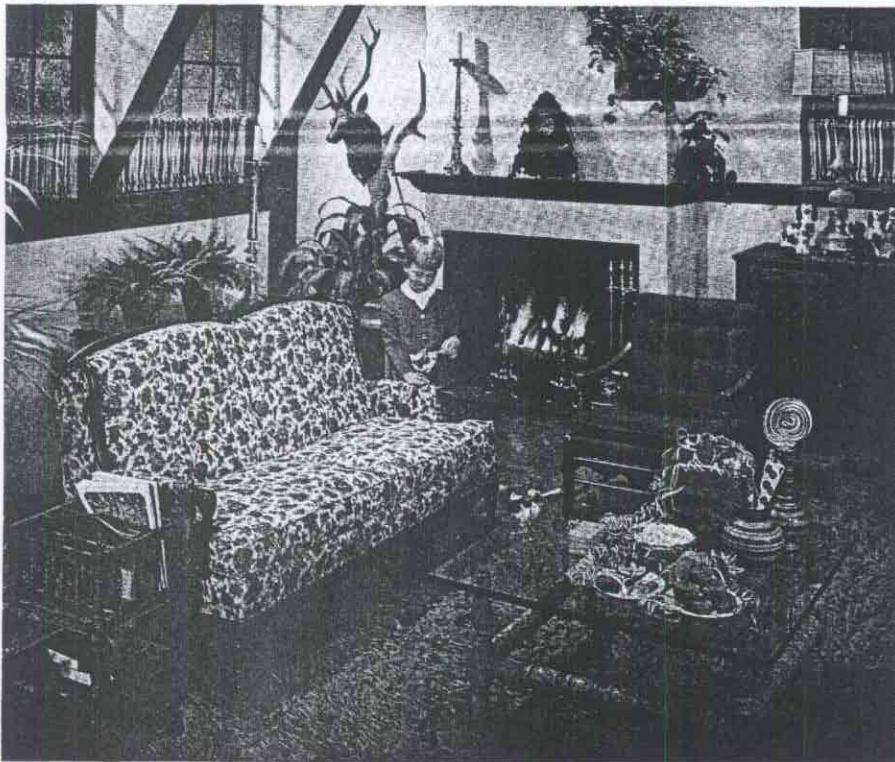
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Party Favors

Fun's popping and Mom's relaxed! Her BROYHILL Premier furniture is protected by "SCOTCHGARD" Repeller.

What if Johnny spills that rich confection? Couldn't matter less! Mother's love seat and chair are protected against spills — even oily ones — by "SCOTCHGARD" Brand Stain Repeller. You just blot spills away, and if a stain should be forced into the weave — don't worry. It will spot-clean, generally without leaving a ring.

Scotchgard
STAIN REPELLER



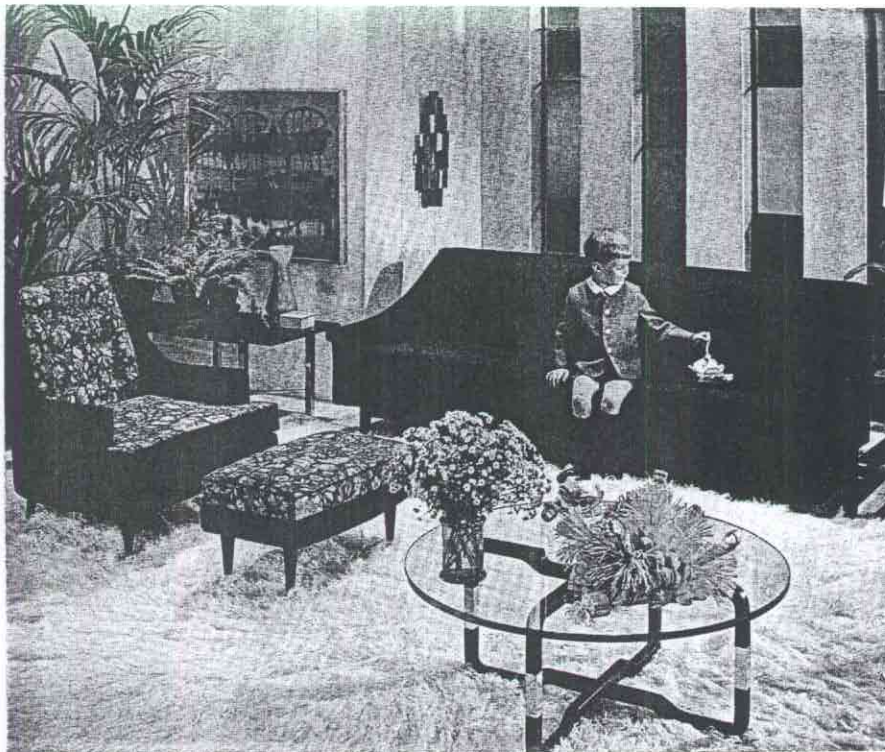
All Broyhill furniture has "SCOTCHGARD" Repeller stain protection. See Broyhill Premier's "Old Homestead" Collection now at the following furniture and department stores: Akron, Maddox's Fabulous Furniture • Atlanta, Haverly's Furniture Company • Baltimore, Hochschild, Kohn; M. Shavitz and Sons & Branches • Cincinnati, Shillito's; Friedman Furniture Co. • Cleveland, Watkins Furniture & Branches • Columbus, Ohio, F & R Lazarus & Co. and Branch; Glick's and Branches • Dallas, Titche Goettinger & Branches • Dayton, Town & Country Furniture Shops • Denver, The Denver Dry Goods Co. • Ft. Worth, Finger's of Ft. Worth • Houston, Suniland Furniture Co. • Indianapolis, The Wm. H. Block Co. & Branches • Jacksonville, Jones Brothers Furniture Company • Kansas City, Kansas, Duff & Ropp and Branches • Los Angeles, The Broadway—Southern California & Branches • Memphis, Donald Furniture Co. • Miami, Jordan Marsh, Florida • Milwaukee, Kunzelmann-Easer • New Orleans, Kirschman's • New York, Macy's • Northern California, Brauner's • Oklahoma City, John A. Brown Co.; James A. Cullimore & Co. • Philadelphia, Gimbels Philadelphia And Suburbs Pittsburgh, Hahn Furniture Co. • Rahway, N. J., Koos Furniture Showplace and Branches • Richmond, Bernard Siegel Furniture Co. • Salt Lake City, ZCMI & Branches; South East Furniture • San Francisco, Macy's California; Brauner's • Seattle, The Bon Marche • Washington, D. C., The Hecht Co.—All 7 Stores.

Party Favors

Fun's popping
and Mom's relaxed!
Her **INTERNATIONAL
FURNITURE***
is protected by
"SCOTCHGARD" Repeller.

Mom and "SCOTCHGARD"
Repeller have kids' parties licked!
Because even the most disastrous
spill blots right off the
upholstery. And if a stain is forced
into the weave, no matter!
"SCOTCHGARD" Brand Stain
Repeller lets it spot-clean—
generally without leaving a ring.

Scotchgard
STAIN REPELLER
*DIVISION OF SCHWABE CORP.



See International Furniture's sofa, high-backed chair and ottoman, available in fabrics protected by "SCOTCHGARD" Repeller, at the following furniture and department stores: Akron, Maddox's Fabulous Furniture • Atlanta, Haverty's Furniture Company • Baltimore, Hochschild, Kohn • Chicago, Elegant Interiors, Inc.; Empire Furniture & Rug Co. • Columbus, Ohio, White's Fine Furniture • Dayton, May Furniture Co. • Des Moines, Younger's Store for Homes & Branches • Detroit, Crowley Milner • Ft. Worth, Finger's of Ft. Worth • Houston, Suniland Furniture Co. • Los Angeles, The Broadway—Southern California & Branches • Milwaukee, Bachman's; Hacks Distributors, Inc. • Nashville, Harveys • New York, Macy's • Norwood, Ohio, Futurama Furniture Co. • Oklahoma City, John A. Brown Co. • Pittsburgh, May Stern & Co. • San Francisco, Macy's California • Seattle, The Bon Marche • St. Louis, Lammert's • Toledo, Lasalle's • Washington, D.C., The Hecht Co.—All 7 Stores.

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history, and yet I am the mother; but has anyone come forward to reimburse me for my emotional stability? No, no, and I have given of myself, I have given of my time and my voice, and I have twenty-three hundred dollars to my name. I'm not complaining. I have my health. I eat well, I sleep well, I'm not brooding—but isn't it strange? Now, I made a television interview with Belli, in Los Angeles, and we were so good they wouldn't stop the cameras but wanted us to go on for an hour instead of the half hour. And do you know what I got for that? A hundred dollars. Yet Richard Burton was on the same program the next night, and he got five thousand dollars. And what do you think he did with it? He gave it to charity. He isn't an American, yet he gave it to charity, and here is Mrs. Oswald talking and talking about the American way of life, and where's the rent money coming from?

"You understand I don't care about money. Money is only good to its use, but I need money to carry on the campaign against the campaign against me, and as a mother, I think I deserve it. I got fired from my job as practical nurse because of the assassination, and it broke my heart. I didn't make only five dollars a week, but I was glad to work for that, because I was doing it for humanity. The very day of the

assassination, I was nursing, and I heard it on the radio, that my son, Lee Harvey Oswald, had been taken into custody. I came right home and called the Fort Worth 'Star Telegram' and asked them to send over a press car to take me to Dallas.

You can push the button on again now. We can drink our tea and talk at the same time. Is there anything you want to ask me?"

"Yes, there is," I said. "When did you last see Lee?"

"I saw Lee in the jailhouse after the assassination, and he was all bruised up, with black eyes and all, and I said, 'Honey, did they beat you?' And he said, 'It isn't anything, Mother. I just got in a scuffle.' Now, this is normal; he wouldn't tell his mother if he had been mistreated by the police."

"But before the assassination? How long had it been?"

"I hadn't seen Lee since October, the end of October, nineteen sixty-two. Just about a year, that would make it. I used to do live-ins, and sometimes I'd be two hundred miles away; but the truth of the matter is, Lee and Marina left Fort Worth and didn't even tell me where they were. I called Robert, and he said Lee had a box number on him, and I told Robert to make sure he took care of his brother and so on. I was not in a position financially to help, working the way I was. And

another thing, I was a little miffed. I accepted it; but they left without telling me they were leaving. I was there that afternoon, and they left the next morning, and there's more to it than that, but never mind. And I thought, well, when they get good and ready, they'll come and see me. I hadn't seen John Edward for years before, or Robert either, and I felt, well, I'm their mother, and when they get ready, it's their place to come and see me. I don't worry about them any more.

"And this was the attitude I took with Lee and Marina. They lived with me for a month, and then they moved out. I'm a working person, I have to pay my own rent, make my own living, and I don't have the money or the time to run back and forth. And they didn't have a car to come over here. You understand? And, too, I wouldn't have a place to put them up if they came to visit me. Maybe if I had a three-bedroom house. Maybe then they'd take the bus and come over for the weekend, but I was never in that position. I am entirely alone. I do not have even my children to discuss things with. For instance, Lee was left-handed, and right away I realized whoever shot the gun, it would make a difference, so I called Robert, and he wouldn't answer these important questions."

She talked until the tapes were finally used up and the ashtray

beside me was full of cigarette stubs. We stood up, and both of us stretched, like women who had done a hard day's work. The room was cluttered with exhibits, and the furniture was still out of place, where we had moved it to accommodate the recorders.

I offered to help Mrs. Oswald tidy up, but she said, "No, no. I don't have another thing to do. I was hoping I could give you a bite of supper, but I suppose you can't stay."

"No, I can't," I said. "I'm sorry."

She laughed. "If you can't, you can't," she said, parodying a broad "a" that does not exist in my speech. "You go on back to Dallas, and you be fresh for tomorrow, because we've still got a lot to talk about, hear? Tomorrow!" She was struck with a sudden thought. "Now, tomorrow is Mother's Day, and I will go to Lee Harvey Oswald's grave, but I will be a mother alone, a mother in history alone on Mother's Day." She was resourceful; she found a cheerful solution to her dilemma. She said, "I know. I'll take you."

Infernal thunderclaps shocked me awake on Mother's Day, and the rain on my windows sounded like kettledrum sticks in the hands of a gang of demented juvenile delinquents. A dolorous gloaming hung in my room, and the rushing wetness outside was a palpable vapor

within. My impulse was to eliminate the day by taking a sleeping pill, but I felt inexorably committed to seeing Mrs. Oswald again and going with her to her son's grave. For a long time, I lay abed dawdling over a great pot of coffee and the Dallas News. Floundering through the dispatches from South Vietnam and the Dominican Republic, I had the dislocating feeling that I was not reading about the culmination of crises today that would be annulled by different crises tomorrow, but that I was trying to get into my head the complicated facts of a *fait accompli* for a history examination. The living, current and inexplicable chaos was the assassination of President Kennedy, which had taken place only hours—or even minutes—ago.

Probably the storm through which we drove to Fort Worth was not unique in my experience, but I do not recall any to equal its infuriated lightning and its dooming detonations and the niagaras that roared down on us from four directions, baffling the windshield wipers. By the time we got to Mrs. Oswald's street, though, the fulminations began to peter out and the downpour was replaced by a sniffling nastiness.

Somewhere in the neighborhood, a voice, much amplified, was blaring. I thought at first it was coming from the sound truck of a political candidate on a mobile stump or from one advertising an American Legion

carnival; but as I got out of the car, I realized that it was coming from Mrs. Oswald's house and that the voice belonged to her. I knocked, unheard, several times. The tulips, I saw, had been decapitated by the wind, and their stems were limp among the stiff spears of the inflexible beather.

What an injustice to a mother!" shouted Mrs. Oswald's disembodied voice. "If this was true, the facts couldn't hurt me so deeply, or I would say, 'Consider the source.' But this quote, along with many others, has gone all over the world, and I have been attacked publicly as a mother by television commentators. They said I was going from place to place speaking in behalf of my son. Was it because I wanted to vindicate myself as a mother? What an awful thing! I have taken this with all the composure I know how, but inwardly I have seethed."

The door was open, but the screen was locked. The tape recorders were on the floor, where we had left them yesterday, and I could see the discs revolving as they released a hundred and eighty words a minute. I knocked again more loudly and called out. In a moment, Mrs. Oswald appeared. I had interrupted her in the middle of her lunch, and she continued to chew through her welcoming smile as she unlatched the screen. She was behindhand,

she explained, because she thought I might be delayed by the storm—she herself thought nothing of these funny Texas storms and loved driving through them, but she didn't know how people from Massachusetts took to wild West weather.

I made out these observations largely by reading her lips, since her recorded voice drowned her out. She let me in and turned the volume down and invited me to join her in a snack. I thanked her and refused and asked if I might put my soaked umbrella in her bathroom.

The living room was even more disheveled than it had been when I left it. The coffee table was piled high with newspaper clippings and pamphlets and Xeroxed documents; the lids of the tape recorders lay on the floor, and their canvas covers were wadded up, as if someone had meant to throw them out but hadn't got around to it. Evidently, Mrs. Oswald had been preoccupied in my absence.

The bedroom, however, was as neat as if no one had ever slept or dressed in it, and in the ascetic, anti-septic bathroom, besides the towels imprinted with big, bright flowers, the only things I saw were a bottle of hand lotion called "To a Wild Rose" and an ornamental soap embossed with golden lilies. If Mrs. Oswald suffered from indigestion or conjunctivitis, she kept the medications hidden.

In the living room, the affirmative voice went on: "I understand that Mr. William Manchester was commissioned by the Kennedy family to rewrite the events of the three days and his book will be out on November 22, 1968. I would like to say now unless Mr. William Manchester discussed my life and my son's life personally with me, this book will also be inaccurate. Many of the readers are wondering, 'Well, why doesn't Mrs. Oswald put all of this into one book, so we can get some of the true story?' It is impossible, dear reader.

"To begin with, this book would have to be researched for about a year or so. And no one has come to my aid—no publisher with the money, or a writer to do this type work. So until that time and money is afforded me, I will do the best I can. I will admit it is not enough, but as a mother I am doing the best I can."

Mrs. Oswald was at her dining table, proceeding with her plentiful lunch. She got up and shut off the machines, and she said, "I'll start this over from the beginning for you. You see, when I got up this morning, I thought I'd just put something on the tape all on my own. We can erase it if you don't like it, but I really and truly think I have some good instances here for you.

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3M

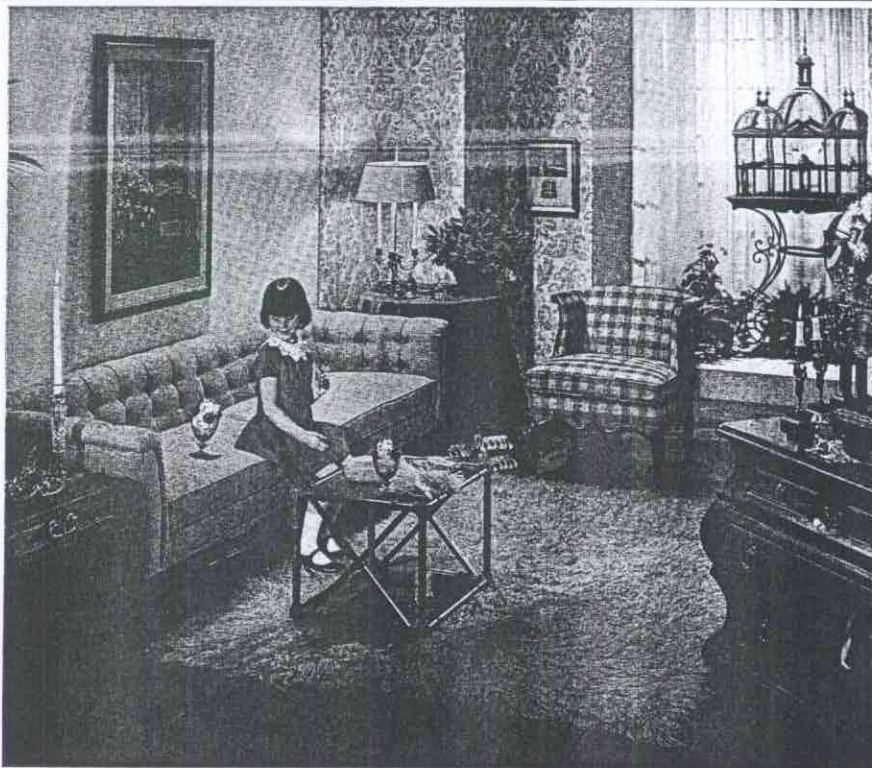
Party Favors

Fun's popping
and Mom's relaxed!
Her HERITAGE
furniture is protected by
"SCOTCHGARD" Repeller.

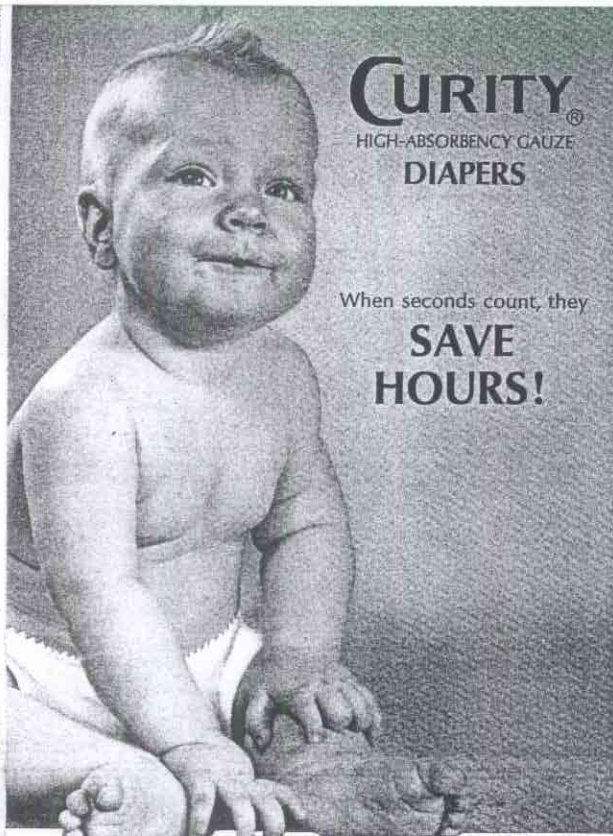
Ice cream and syrup,
fun and games — often end in spills
at children's parties. But
who cares? Mother has the "party-
insurance" of "SCOTCHGARD"
Repeller on her sofa and chair.

That means spills — even
oily ones — roll off or blot away.
And if a stain should be forced
into the weave, it will spot-clean
— generally without leaving a ring!

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I've got some real dynamite, some real exclusives."

I was not entirely pleased; I had brought no other tapes, and there were several questions I had wanted to ask her; but I managed an accepting smile and sat down prepared to listen.

"Can you do more than one thing at a time?" she asked. "I mean, can you listen and read and so on and so forth all at once? I can—I can cook and look at television and clean house and this and that—busy, busy, busy. Some one of the reporters called me 'The Unsinkable Mrs. Oswald.' Because if you can, I want you to look at these scrapbooks and some other things. I'll just go on and finish up my lunch."

In point of fact, I cannot easily assign my attention to two different matters simultaneously; but I found that most of the clippings in the albums were not news to me, and although I dutifully turned the pages and appeared to read, I was listening to her Mother's Day Epistle.

It began serenely: "Upon waking up this morning and it being Mother's Day, I've decided that in defense of myself and my son Lee Harvey Oswald I would put a little something on the tape. I sincerely hope that you will find it newsworthy and print it. Here again, I know you want just a casual interview, and you want to keep away from the Warren Commission Report; but because it is involved in my personal life and that of my son, I will have to go back to it from time to time."

"Now, they talked about me working as an insurance lady. Here, on page 378 of the Warren Commission Report, they say, 'She would sometimes take Lee with her, apparently leaving him alone in the car while she transacted her business. Once she worked during the school year; Lee had to leave the empty house in the morning and return to it for lunch and again at night. His mother having trained him to do that rather than play with other children.' What an injustice to a mother! Anybody who ever sold insurance, and there are many, many insurance men that are going to read this and listen to me and know, a person like I was selling insurance and didn't want to make a killing, we could go out in one hour's time and collect thirty dollars. And so I was home most of the time with my boy Lee. I was usually home with him unless I had a definite appointment. I always tried to make my appointments later on, when both the men and the women were at home, because I found in the beginning, when I started to sell and I talked to the women, I was asked to come back to discuss it with the husband. Well, then I would be immediately rejected at the door, and the simple reason for that was that the wife had discussed what I said with the husband, and of course she didn't know as much about it as I did and she didn't present a good case. So I would have definite appointments instead, and usually, out of the four or five calls, I would sell something."

My mind wandered drowsily; the "exclusives" hinted at were never disclosed; the dynamite did not go off.

"I didn't date," I heard her say. "My son John said before the Commission, 'She didn't have any friends.' Of course I didn't have any friends, because I was a mother, a working mother. When I came home, I had to take care of the house and the groceries and make sure that my

children had clean clothes, so what time did I have for friends? I think that this is in my favor that I didn't run around with men and drink and deprive my children. No, it is true, John Edward, I didn't have any friends. I devoted my life to you boys!"

Throughout the recitative, the performer herself sat rapt, her elbows among her lunch dishes. Her house temporarily was a mess, but she was not. She was wearing a trim green linen suit with a smart white blouse. I had the feeling that, except when she was in bed, she was always dressed ready to receive anyone who wished to have the scales removed from his eyes.

"You know, if you research the life of Jesus Christ," the voice continued, "you find that you never hear anything more about the mother of Jesus, Mary, after He was crucified on the Cross. And really nobody has worried about my welfare. Now, when I say that I get letters, I mean

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they are from the public, and they are the only things that keep me going. I'm talking about my children, my sister, no one, when my son was murdered, no immediate member of the family, no immediate friend came to me and gave me consolation. They didn't want to be involved, you see. You say, 'Your nieces and nephews couldn't send a telegram or a note? Your own sons and their wives?' But I'm going to be honest with you—not a soul."

The tape ended abruptly; the coda was a mechanical squawk.

"How's that?" said Mrs. Oswald, poised, self-congratulatory. "Oh, how I wish there was more time! I have stories and coincidences by the galore, and if we just had the time, we could write them up and become millionairesses."

As she talked, she unplugged the recorders and removed the tapes; but replacing the covers flummoxed her, and she giggled joyfully. "Let's get our mechanical genius to work," she said, and flung up her hands in coquettish dismay. "Hurry on, now; I want you to see the grave by daylight!"

I restored the covers and put the canvas overcoats on the machines while Mrs. Oswald went to get my umbrella and her purse.

She locked the bedroom door after her, and she double-locked the outer door. "Of course, I don't keep the really valuable things in the house. I keep them stored, insured, but there's plenty that interested parties could steal, and I can't run the risk."

Her Buick Skylark was blue and new, and she drove it expertly, with enjoyment. My driver's black limousine was lubberly behind us. The

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rain had altogether stopped, and the flat fields steamed on either side of us.

"I have enough material for at least five books," said Mrs. Oswald. "We could run it for two or three years, every month, as a serial in a national magazine, and then as a sort of a soap opera on radio or even on TV. Couldn't you take the summer off and come down and rent the other part of the house, so we could write it all up? I mean, I would give of my time and my voice, and we could split the proceeds."

For some time I had been aware that a cat was lurking near me, waiting to get my tongue. He had it now, and all I could do was stammer like a schoolchild, "I don't know."

"I know a discount house where you could get a hot plate cheap, and you could use my icebox." The practical planner was working hand in glove with the dreamer. "There's that back porch, so we could wander back and forth, very informal and relaxed, and we could set up all my exhibits on what-you-call-'ems-sawhorses is what I mean. And buy a couple of tape recorders. I think we'd work out fine as a team."

"Yes," I said.
But now we had reached the gates of the cemetery, and she changed her tack. In the voice of a tourist guide, she said, "Like everything else in life, this is divided up into classes. There is the section for the rich people, and some very fine people are buried there, and there is the one for the poor people, and then there is the one for the middle class. Lee Harvey is buried in the middle-class section, as it should be according to his station in life."

The graveyard was deserted; we met no other car and saw no mourners as we spiraled up between granite shafts and marble angels, and Mrs. Oswald plaintively remarked on this: "If it had been a sunny day, you'd have seen the cars lined up clear to the gate, people coming to see where my son is buried." Then, in a moment, round a bend, we did see a car ahead of us at the top of a slight rise. "Now there!" she said. "There's somebody, after all, even though it isn't such a nice day, and they're coming to see Lee."

We came to a stop directly behind the car, which, azure where it was not besmirched by mud or scabbed with rust, could not have been less than twenty years old; it was long and broad and tall, and its rear window was a high, narrow oval; it looked as if when it had been new and probably black, it had been used as a getaway car. Its occupants were slopping through the mud across the road as we opened our doors. They were five boys in their late teens, all rangy and long-armed and all wearing dirty dungarees, dirty T-shirts, dirty sneakers and dirty, uncombed hair.

"They're heading straight for Lee," whispered Mrs. Oswald. "Now, it's that age I want to reach with my books. The young people. I want to write it all in a way they will understand and know the truth of history."

She moved purposefully forward, bowing to either side, and halted at a grave at the edge of the road. The boys stepped back, and she beamed on them beneficently. They quickly fanned out among other graves higher up the slope, but I was conscious of their eyes on us.

The small stone that marks Lee Harvey Oswald's grave bears only his name and the dates of his birth

and his death. Surrounding it today were half-drowned yellow pansies. Beside it, resting against a wire bracket, was a pale-green cross made of styrofoam, the arms of which were wreathed with artificial freesias. A young weeping-willow tree grew at the head of the grave, its vulnerable leaves touched quietly by the light, damp breeze. Plastic philodendron, as glossy as a grass snake, wound up its trunk.

Mrs. Oswald plucked a weed from among the pansies, bent the pliable freesias into a more becoming embrace around the cross, brushed off her hands and gave me one of them to shake.

"It turned out to be a right nice Mother's Day, after all," she said. "But on some Mother's Day, I think it would be wonderful for the United States to come out and say my son was an agent. It would be wonderful if they would come out in behalf of his family and his mother and say he died in the service of his country."

"Is that what you meant in your statement on the little scroll?" I asked.

"No comment," said Mrs. Oswald. "I do not comment on my statement." She was curtly official, but immediately she was again cordial, perhaps thinking of me as her future collaborator. "Now, you think about coming down here for the summer. I'll be glad to cooperate with you. It would be a big, big deal."

As soon as she drove off, the five sightseers converged upon the grave, and my driver, as he opened the door for me, said, "I don't like the looks them. They had a guard on the grave up until a while back. I guess they figure nobody cares about it no more. I reckon it must be kinda hard for her to come out here and all."

I assured him that I thought, under the circumstances, she was bearing up quite well.

We were silent for several miles, and then he said, "The day it happened, I was hauling some folks from Love Airport. Prettiest day you ever did see, and all of a sudden we heard it on the radio that the President was dead. I took this party to their hotel, and then I went out in the country and set by myself. I never reported back to work till next morning."

That day, as I entered Dallas along the same road where the President's motorcade had been hideously halted and as I passed by the Book Depository whence the bullets had been fired, I observed a peculiar condition of mind that I had recognized each time I had made the trip to and from Fort Worth: that is, that the physical site did not accentuate my recollected woe; indeed, I was instead returned to my own apartment in New York, where, quite by accident, I had turned on the radio and had heard the first inconclusive bulletin. At other times in my life, I have stood on memorable ground and have apprehended directly experience that heretofore had been once removed because I had only read about it: Once when I drove inland from the Normandy beaches, I knew for the first time with immediacy what the invasion had been, and the deaths, along those pretty roads, of my friends and kinsmen became more than abstractions.

But Kennedy died everywhere throughout the world, not more in Dallas than in Paris or in Calcutta or in my apartment in New York City.

THE END