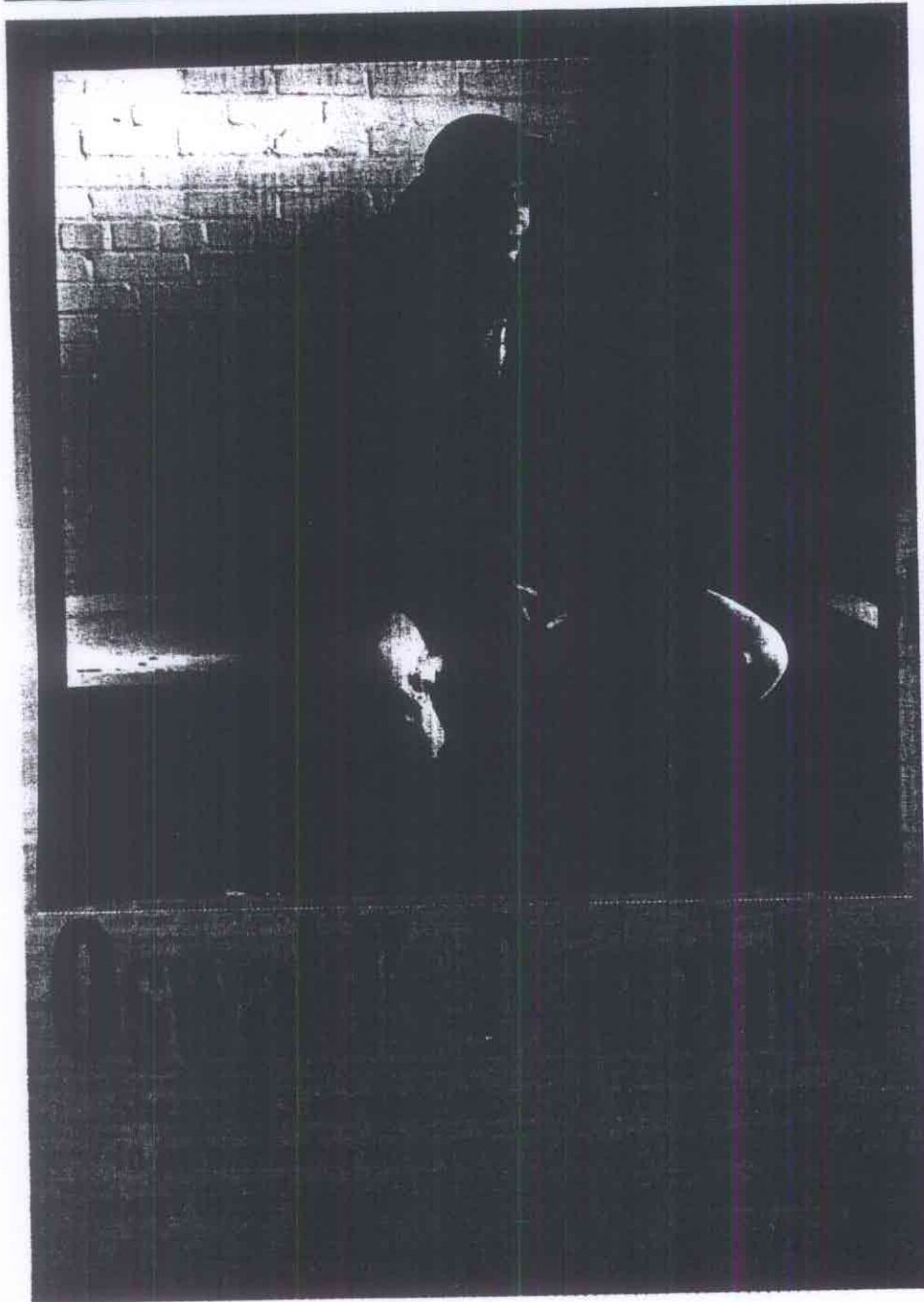


DALLAS

THE WEEKLY NEWSPAPER OF DALLAS ■ FEBRUARY 27, 1992

Observer



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Wiley ways

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Laura Miller



Rachel has lived all her life with the uncertainty of her father's role in the JFK assassination: "I just want to know...I want all the facts out."

Oswald's legacy

The accused assassin's daughter harbors no illusions, offers no apologies for the dark shadow that looms over her life

SHE WAS FIVE YEARS OLD the first time she had to deal with it publicly. She was a little wiry kid, a tomboy, with a short, dark pixie haircut that her mom pinned up every morning with a big bow that never quite made it to school. "As soon as I got out the door, I'd pull the bow off," Rachel recalls mischievously, "and I wouldn't put it back on until I was coming home at the end of the day."

Rachel remembers being in school on that day when she was five—her arms spread wide, her hands gripping either side of a classroom doorway for leverage, her body hoisted in the air, her legs swinging back and forth, back-and-forth.

Another five-year-old brushed by. "I know what your daddy did," the child said, taunting, as children do.

"Well, yeah, he did do that," Rachel responded matter-of-factly, almost breezily, as though her daddy had just been accused of picking up the wrong fork at a formal dinner party.

But then, how could her reaction have been anything else?

How does one so young grasp the enormity, the horror, the grotesque implications of having a daddy accused of shooting and killing the president of the United States?

"Looking back on it now, I think if a grown-up had been around to hear that,

they would have just died," says Rachel, now 28 years old. "But as a little kid, it was nothing. And I'm sure for the little kid who asked it it was nothing."

It wouldn't stay nothing for long. As the daughter of Lee Harvey Oswald grew older, her understanding of what her father was accused of doing became painfully clear. And impossible to ignore.

For example: How do you ignore the inevitable question on the American history tests: "Who was in the sniper's perch in Dallas on November 22, 1963?" Each time that question appeared, and it always did, Rachel would stare down at her paper and read the words over and over again—all the

while sneaking looks at the kids around her to see if they knew that this question was about her.

"Even to this day, I feel this oppressive stare whenever anything comes on the news about it and I'm in a public place," Rachel says. "I think I have this mechanism where I will automatically look around at people, and they may not even be paying attention to me. It's just something I always look for."

School lectures, though, were worse than tests—particularly because textbooks and teachers have always clung tenaciously to the pat, safe, uncontroversial, seemingly incontrovertible 1963 version of events.

"The classes were all the same, with the same buzz words," she says. "The teachers all talked of Lee Harvey Oswald...the ominous figure...with the shady background...who crouched in the perch...who gunned down the president...who fled out the back, making his escape."

"I would just kind of sit and hear what they said, knowing I knew much more than what they knew," she continues. "Maybe if not from a historian's point of view, but from a different personal perspective."

Those feelings only intensified when she got out of high school. "The problems really came in college," she says, "because in college you get locked on a subject for days, or weeks sometimes, and it was hard to have them dissect this piece by piece and not say anything. I didn't want people to know who I was. But I always wanted to say, 'This is not as black-and-white as you make it seem.'"

She never did.

"As a rule of thumb, it's not worth making a stand in a class or in a group of people, because of the repercussions of it," she says. "There's too much embarrassment and shame. You just open a whole can of worms when you say, 'I'm Lee Harvey Oswald's daughter.'"

Until now, anyway. Until a certain Hollywood movie came out and changed the way we think about the Kennedy assassination. And convinced Rachel Oswald that maybe there were some people in this world who have the same nagging questions she does about what happened that day in Dallas.

Oliver Stone stood up at the Dallas premiere of his movie *JFK* two months ago and said he hoped that his film would result in the release of previously sealed files on the assassination.

He didn't say that he hoped to ease the burden of a young woman sitting in the audience before him, who once upon a time swung in schoolhouse doorways and deflected tasteless comments about a man she doesn't remember but will never forget.

Stone probably had no idea he could have that kind of impact.

Neither did Rachel Oswald.

RACHEL WAS 33 DAYS OLD when her father was accused of shooting the president. She was 35 days old when her father was murdered.

Today she sits on the couch in her small living room in a Texas college town, a living testimony to her father's dark looks and

▶ NEXT PAGE 5

DENNIS DARLING

DALLAS OBSERVER, FEBRUARY 27, 1992

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Laura Miller

◀PREVIOUS PAGE

angular features. She is tall, lithe, pert, and stylish, dressed in her hallmark vintage attire, which today includes a floppy, black velvet hat with a velvet rose on the brim.

She apologizes for being a bit frazzled from juggling work, nursing class, midterm exams, and ballet lessons. Her sister's birthday is coming up, she explains, picking up a pair of scissors to trim pictures of her sister's two sons for a locket she's giving June as a gift.

As she talks, she occasionally jumps up from the couch to retrieve some piece of memorabilia she has collected over the years—like her uncle's 1967 book, which is stowed away, unread, in her bedroom, where an ironing board is propped up and a straw hat hangs on one wall. In a living room bookcase, crammed with textbooks and novels, she retrieves a July 1964 copy of *Life* magazine with her parents' picture on the cover—a gift from the JFK Assassination Center in Dallas.

Asked to see baby pictures of her and June, she dashes into her bedroom to retrieve the only one she has—a yellowed newspaper clipping of two smiling toddlers, which she found in some publication and now keeps framed on her dresser.

This is all she has—a tattered, twisted, yellowing early road map of her life.

How, then, is it that Rachel Oswald is so normal, so seemingly untouched by history? She was the head cheerleader in high school. She has a college degree in natural science from the University of Texas. She is currently finishing an associate's degree in nursing at a small community college—and as she did in undergrad school, she is working as a waitress to pay for it.

She lives, for the most part, anonymously. It was a condition of this story that her place of residence, her college, and the restaurant where she works not be identified.

People don't recognize her walking down the street. Her co-workers at the restaurant know who she is, but that only becomes a problem if one of them gets overly excited about, say, the hubbub surrounding the *JFK* movie and talks about it so much or so loudly that the restaurant patrons catch on. Once, when a man Rachel had been waiting on for two hours left without so much as a quarter tip, Rachel asked him if her service had been lacking, only to get the icy reply, "You know, I've heard a lot about you." She didn't pursue it.

Overall, life hums along without paparazzi or poison-pen mail. She did, however, go through a period when streams of Iranian men wrote her from overseas, offering to marry her because they'd heard she was a social outcast; Shabbir Ezzi—she'll never forget the name—is one who wrote particularly ardent letters.

Rachel's life is tranquil and quite good, she believes, thanks only to her parents—her mother and stepfather. "She's such a wonderful person," Rachel says of her mother. "She must have been raised by

someone good." Her stepfather—a carpenter who has been a part of the family since Rachel was one year old—is salt-of-the-earth, she says, a solid family man who has spent the last three decades playing protector to his second family. Rachel calls him Dad and considers him to be so.

She has been especially close to him since Oswald's 1982 exhumation, performed at the request of a British conspiracy buff who insisted that Oswald was not dead but living in Russia and that his double, a Soviet spy, was in his grave.

At the time, Rachel was a painfully shy teenager who was a bit rebellious and distant at home and harbored fantasies that Lee, as she often refers to her real father, was indeed alive and traveling in Russia and would someday come and take her away with him. When Oswald's body was found in his grave, she was desperately disappointed and hid in her bedroom, crying.

"My dad came into my room and crouched down by my bed and said, 'I love you, and I want to be your daddy,'" Rachel recalls fondly. "I already knew he loved me, but he'd never said it. It really made us close."

The best thing her stepdad ever did was take her and her mother and sister away from Dallas.

"When I was still in grade school, my dad moved us from

the city to the country to keep us from reporters," says Rachel. "I was bored to death. We had cows and horses and a swimming pool and barns. At the time I hated it. But it was the best thing that could have happened to us."

Out in the country, Rachel says, the only thing kids were interested in was football, not history. "None of my friends or peers were interested in what happened to my family," she laughs, adding, "which might say something about our school system."

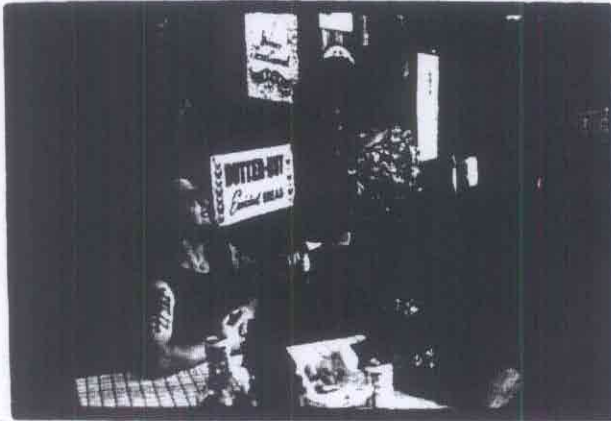
There was one person in high school, though, who couldn't get past the fact that she was Lee Harvey Oswald's daughter—her boyfriend and first true love. "He was embarrassed to be with me because of that," Rachel says, a little embarrassed herself to repeat it. "It was a horrible relationship. After the *JFK* movie came out, though, he called my mom and apologized profusely for doing that to me. He asked her for my number, but she wouldn't give it to him. She won't let him talk to me."

The move to the country did foil the conspiracy buffs and the reporters. Except, of course, the most aggressive ones. "Channel 4 once followed our bus all the way to school to try and get a picture of me and June," Rachel recalls. "I was embarrassed. All the kids laughed and looked out the back window."

Overall, though, "we were sheltered," Rachel says. "We were protected. All of us kids—my sister and my brother, who's three years younger than I—have turned out real good. We have problems like everyone else, but not about the assassination," she adds. "We're fairly well adjusted where this is concerned."

'A lot of people mark time with this particular event, and if you're part of it, it's just really strange.'

Laura Miller



Where Rachel waits tables to pay for nursing school she has seen her face on tabloid TV.

RACHEL NEVER KNOWS how someone's going to react when they find out who she is. "A lot of people mark time with this particular event, and if you're part of it, it's just really strange," she says.

Some people barely give it a second thought. Others stand slack-jawed, expecting her to break into a one-woman oral history lecture on the subject. She inevitably disappoints them. "My mom always told us, 'If people ask you, don't lie,'" Rachel recalls. "Just say yes and go on to something else." Most of the people I've met have been kind and sympathetic.

Others, perhaps in an effort to make her comfortable, try to excuse her what happened.

"A lot of people have told me, 'You were only a month old at the time, what do you have to do with it?'" Rachel says. "I resent that. I was denied. I'll never know my dad, but I look like him. I walk like him. And everything I do bad is defined by him. All the negative things I do are attributed to him."

"So it's almost worse being so young," she adds. "Because I can't say I remember the good things."

It's not that she doesn't try. She has searched for the good things, by talking to her mother and gathering bits of information that people have brought to her family over the years. It hasn't been easy—virtually all of the family's possessions were confiscated by the authorities immediately after the assassination. Rachel has not one picture of her father, not one piece of clothing or jewelry. The only family pictures she has ever seen have been in books and magazines and on TV.

She marveled at the Dallas premiere of *JFK* when a baby photo of her father flashed on the screen—she had never seen it before. She is surprised to hear that a 43-page personal diary her father kept is in an archive at Texas Tech University in Lubbock.

"Can people just walk in and look at it?" she says with disbelief. "It just amazes me how much is out there."

Over time, amid all the negative stories she has heard about her father, she has found a few things that give her comfort.

Like the fact that her father liked ice cream. And that he may have wanted to be a writer. And that he believed that the South should be desegregated. He was "quiet and mannerful" in jail, according to a

police officer who played cards with him there.

And he also cared for his children, Rachel is sure. "I know he loved me," she says. "My mother said he would look into the crib and look at me, and he loved me."

The bad things, of course, overshadow the good—she has no illusions about that—but over time, she has found a place in her heart for this man that the whole country loves to hate.

"I've seen that footage of my dad's murder so many times—it's everywhere, even in Billy Joel's video," Rachel says. "For a long time, I could see it, and it didn't bother me. But when I saw *48 Hours* a few weeks ago, I cried. Because that's my flesh and blood. It's weird. I didn't feel like that until I was about 22 years old."

When she speaks of her father, she is not defensive. She is not bitter. She does not romanticize his memory in any way. She's just, well, sorrowful.

"The image I have of my father was that he was a loner," she says. "He didn't have much of a family life himself. He was searching for a place to fit in. After he and my mother got married, he was panicked when she didn't get pregnant within a month. He thought something was wrong. I think he had a real need to have a child, have a leftover legacy of his. He was just *thrilled* when my mother got pregnant with June."

"I feel kind of sorry for him," she adds. "He had such strange ideas for the times that he never really fit in anywhere. He skipped school a lot. Read a lot. Very bright. Disillusioned. Bored with school."

Somehow, in his effort to fit in, he became involved with some shady characters, his daughter concedes. He also got involved with the government, she believes. "There is so much evidence that points to the fact that he was a double agent for someone and was involved in more than just being a guy who decided to take this man out on a whim," she says. "There's a lot more than that."

"My father really loved this spy show on TV called 'I Lead Three Lives,'" she adds.

"He always watched it. He was really into the romanticized life of the agent. This may very well have been his dreaming coming into real life. He could have been—and I say this with a lot of hesitation, because I am not trying to excuse him—someone

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◀ PREVIOUS PAGE

who tried to make something of his life, and he was doing things under orders that he didn't realize were a part of the bigger picture."

Whatever it was he was involved in, it certainly made him unpleasant to live around—when he was around. Rachel's mother tells her stories about how he never had any money and never brought home any food for his children or provided any prenatal care for his wife. He beat Marina. He wouldn't allow her to learn English. Says Rachel, "I know he wasn't an angel."

If history had played out a different way, and Lee Harvey Oswald had never been implicated in the assassination and had lived to raise his daughters, Rachel believes her life would have been worse.

"Based on what I know about him, we probably would have been poor," she says. "I don't know if I would have been educated. My mom's life would have been totally different because he abused her."

In contrast, the Oswald women, all three of them, have never been poor or abused or deprived of an education. To the contrary, life since 1963 has been surprisingly good. Considering, "I think just as a result of this whole thing we women are all strong," Rachel says. "And I don't know if I would have been like that if this had not happened."

FOR A LONG TIME, Rachel believed what that her father was the assassin.

Period.
"Through my high school years, I believed he did it alone," she says. "And I was just trying to be a normal high school girl and didn't want to deal with that."

"Then in my college years at UT, I thought he did it but he was involved in a conspiracy," she adds. "That's the impression I got from the news and the media. My mother, all during that time, was saying that she thought Lee was innocent of the murder. I remember being doubtful about that."

"It's only in the last two years that I've come to start agreeing with her—I think there's a lot of evidence that he was one of a lot of people there, but that he may not have been responsible for the murder."

Rachel has never read a conspiracy book or looked at any documents or records about the assassination or followed the various theories that pop up on tabloid TV. "I don't like to read any of this stuff because you read one thing and it gets you all excited because this author has all this evidence, and your father comes out smelling like a rose," says Rachel. "And then you read this other book, by someone with just as many credentials, and it says just the opposite, and it puts you on an emotional roller coaster."

But two years ago, two men from the JFK Assassination Center in Dallas contacted Rachel and her mother and sister with a new piece of information they were parading before the press.

The now infamous Roscoe White story had come to them from a small-time private detective, who swore that his client—the son of a former, now-deceased Dallas policeman named Roscoe White—could prove that his father was involved in the assassination. Though the media pooh-poohed the story and the Assassination Center no longer talks about it much, the "reve-

lation" did serve one useful purpose: it introduced Rachel Oswald to the conspiracy world—specifically, great volumes of material housed at the Assassination Center.

"I never knew this stuff existed," Rachel says. "Then it really infuriated me and prompted me to be more involved, because I just couldn't believe the stuff existed."

Two things most impressed her: paraffin tests performed on her father's hands after he was arrested found traces of nitrate on his hands, which would perhaps indicate that he handled a handgun (though the conspiracy buffs point out that it could also mean he was handling paint that day or even urinating). But the results were negative on a paraffin test of his right cheek, raising doubts about whether he ever fired a rifle.

Furthermore, she says, there were no fingerprints or thumbprints found on Oswald's rifle immediately after the shooting. After examining the weapon, the Dallas police had given it to the FBI, who sent it to Washington, where no fingerprints were found. But after the rifle was returned to Dallas, the Dallas police, lo and behold, found a partial palm print of Oswald's underneath the gun barrel. Oswald was in the morgue at the time, and some speculate that the print was taken from his body.

None of this is concrete evidence, in Rachel's mind, that her father was innocent of any crime in Dallas that day. But it does raise disturbing questions that she would like answered.

To that end, she had done two interviews in her life before this one. She did the first in November 1990 with David Lifton, who wrote the highly acclaimed conspiracy book *Best Evidence*. Lifton had earned the Oswald family's trust with his painstaking research, and when he approached Rachel about helping him with an upcoming book on the life of her father, she agreed. She sat in front of a video camera for 45 minutes and answered nine questions. Lifton told her the videotape would only be used in tandem with his book.

That wasn't quite true.
This past November, to Rachel's extreme horror, she looked up at the television in the restaurant where she works and saw her face on the screen. Lifton had sold the videotape to the tabloid TV show "Hard Copy." Then, in January, she learned that he had sold her out again to a tabloid newspaper in Holland—this time, it was a number of photographs he had taken of her with the understanding that they would only be kept by him as a personal memento of their work together.

Lifton's tactics only further eroded any respect or trust Rachel had toward the press, which has been preying on her family all her life. "They always come in November, and by December 1, it's over," Rachel says, "and my mom's left feeling that she's been holed out again...They go on with their lives, and we're left behind to deal with it."

To make matters worse, what little does appear about the family in print or on TV is apt to be wrong, twisted, sensationalized, or slanted. That, Rachel says, is the way it is with reporters, who will do or say anything to fling their way into her mother's confidence. They drop friends' names; they promise flattering, sympathetic stories; they allude to new, convincing evidence that will help clear the Oswald name.



Oswald with Kevin Costner, star of Oliver Stone's *JFK*

"You want to believe in something so strongly that you put all your eggs in a basket, but for most of these people this is just a business," Rachel says. "They will tell you one thing, and when it's written, it's a completely different thing."

Sometimes it's worse than that.

In 1982, when Rachel was in high school, the *National Enquirer* slapped her and June's yearbook pictures on its cover with a headline to the effect of "The Horrible, Tragic Lives of Lee Harvey Oswald's Daughters."

In classic *Enquirer* style, no one from the newspaper ever interviewed the daughters. Or Marina. Instead, the tabloid dug up an obscure friend of Lee Harvey Oswald's mother, Marguerite, who the girls never spoke to and never visited. "She was a nut," says Rachel, "and was never kind to us."

The result, of course, was a story so inaccurate, so sensational, and so hurtful (the girls were social misfits; the girls' dogs were poisoned by the neighbors; the girls were shunned at the prom) that the girls sued. The case was resolved to the girls' satisfaction in a sealed, out-of-court settlement.

Those experiences aside, Rachel finds herself today torn between maintaining her privacy and using her small but still-considerable influence to persuade the government to open the assassination files—a possibility that she never dreamed existed until Oliver Stone made his movie.

"I have a newspaper clipping on my refrigerator from a year ago," she says, "that mentions that Oliver Stone was doing this film. I thought he would do it and be done with it. I never imagined that he would talk with legislators and testify before House committees to open the files. I thought he would just drop the ball. I'm really impressed that he's going to see this through. It has motivated me."

Hence a visit to the state capitol in January, where she watched the Texas House pass a resolution urging the U.S. Congress to open the files. "I was shocked when I went up to the capitol," Rachel says, truly marveling at the memory of it. "I am not political. I have never been political. But there I was, rooting for that resolution to pass. It was important to me."

Hence an interview by satellite hookup with a Dutch TV show, which saw Lifton's tabloid photos and wanted Rachel to help promote the European premiere of *JFK*.

They paid Rachel to do the show, just as

Lifton paid her for making the videotape. "Quite frankly, I've never done an interview where I wasn't paid something," says Rachel. "I needed the money for nursing school."

Both June and Rachel have had to pay their own way through college. To that end, Rachel is thankful to the people of Dallas, whose generous contributions of money to her mother in the immediate aftermath of the assassination helped pay for Rachel's first two years at UT. (It also helped Marina buy a little house in 1964.)

Now, though, Rachel lives month to month on a waitress' part-time salary. Often strapped for cash, she describes how she wanted to look "normal" (as opposed to vintage) for the Dutch TV show but didn't have the money to buy clothes for the interview. In the end, she ran out, bought a \$169 "Chanel-looking" suit, did the interview, and returned the suit to the store, price tags intact.

For this interview, which lasted four hours, Rachel received no money. She says she is interested only in telling her story, in the hope that people would see how important it is for her and her family to know, once and for all, everything that the government has stored away in file cabinets and storage boxes on the assassination and her father's part in it.

There may be nothing in the files to vindicate her father. But that's not the point anymore.

"If they open these files, and it comes out that he's guilty, that's fine with me," says Rachel. "I can live with that. I just want to know. I just don't want my kids—whenever I have kids—to have to go through what June and I went through. I want all the facts out."

The best reason of all to open the files now gets up off the couch and goes into the kitchen to make a big pot of black coffee. She has a nursing exam to study for, and this is one of the only nights of the week that she doesn't have to work.

"The best thing I can do with my life is be a good person who puts good back into the community," she says, pulling down a tin of butter cookies from a cabinet shelf. "When I become a nurse, I'll do good things—I'll put back into the community."

"I have a sense of wanting to do right...and it's not just me. It's being Lee Harvey Oswald's daughter." ■



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