

Marina & Lee & Michael & Me

By Elliot Fremont-Smith

One of the really weird moments of my life came shortly after the assassination of President Kennedy, when the first bits of knowledge about Lee Harvey Oswald were broadcast. It turned out that Marina Oswald had been living with Ruth Paine, that in fact the Paines were among the Oswalds' few close friends. Ruth Paine and her husband were separated, but he often visited; not long before the assassination he had taken Lee to a local ACLU meeting. The husband's name was Michael.

I remember turning to Leda, my TV companion during that incredible weekend, and squeaking, "My God! Michael Paine! It can't be." But of course it was.

Michael Paine was (is) a distant cousin. We grew up together in Cambridge, Mass., went to the same progressive school, and, for a brief time when both of us were about 10, were "best friends." I remember him warmly, if vaguely. He was tall and gangly, very bright, sweet natured. His family had considerable wealth (Forbes-Lyman China-trade money), but he didn't act like a rich kid. I think our common interest was cars, a passionate affliction with me—I could tell every make and year, European too, from the grilles alone. (Michael, I now know, went on to become an inventor of sorts; in 1963 he was a helicopter designer, and dreamed of making an airplane everyone could afford.) We may also have shared a budding interest in politics; our families were politically verbal, with sympathies that wavered between New Deal liberalism and the pacifist left.

Whatever. As boys will, we grew apart, went separate ways, lost track of each other. Until the assassination. I was astonished to learn that Michael knew Oswald. The incongruity is still startling—Oswald kept his gun in the Unitarian-pacifist Paines' garage—but it also speaks a cultural insularity of which I, a journalist of literary and social phenomena, am only sporadically aware: It seemed almost equally astonishing that someone from my Cam-

bridge days should be living in Texas. Small world and all that; I was, most surprisingly, a friend in history.

All of which flooded to mind as I read Priscilla Johnson McMillan's *MARINA AND LEE* (Harper & Row, \$15), which opens with an explanation of how she got involved in this 13-year project. *Marina and Lee* is an immensely detailed account and analysis of the short, mostly unhappy life of Lee Harvey Oswald, done with Marina's exclusive cooperation (it is an analysis of her life too, their life together). The book has been kept pretty much under wraps until now; publication date is October 26, but copies are already on sale in New York. A promo-press conference with Marina—her first—is scheduled for the day this issue of *The Voice* goes on the stands. She will, no doubt, uphold the central assumption and thesis of *Marina and Lee*: that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting entirely alone, and with premeditation, shot and killed John F. Kennedy.

On November 22, 1963, Priscilla McMillan experienced the same weird sensation that I did. But in spades: McMillan, a Russian scholar and newspaper journalist, had worked as a researcher in Kennedy's senatorial offices, and had later become friends with him in New York when he underwent two spine operations to correct

symptoms of Addison's disease. But this wasn't all. She was in Cambridge, in Harvard Square, when news of the murder in Dallas came through. By chance she met a friend in front of a florist shop.

"Do they know who it is?" she asked. "Have they caught anybody yet?"

"Yes. His name is Lee Harvey Oswald."

"My God," she said. "I know that boy."

McMillan had often gone to Russia. In the early 1950s she worked in Moscow as a translator for *The New York Times* until her "succession of visas" ran out. From 1958 to 1960 she was in Russia again, as a correspondent for the North American Newspaper Alliance and *The Progressive* magazine. "And it was in 1959," she writes, "that I interviewed a young American who was defecting to the USSR. His name was Lee Harvey Oswald."

"We met in my hotel room, and I wrote a feature story about him. I thought he was very, very young and touching in his eagerness to stay in Russia, but afterward I did not think a great deal about him. Except for one thing. Oswald said that he was a Marxist and was defecting because of his beliefs. In Moscow we thought we had seen everything, but we had never seen anyone like this."

McMillan's urge to write a book came out of the extraordinary fact that she had been acquainted with both men. Also out of a sense of the bizarre (the two men were so different) and curiosity (what could have driven Oswald to kill someone he had never met?). And the practicalities dovetailed: McMillan was a professional writer and spoke Russian; Marina Oswald knew little English. So, with the assist of McMillan's publisher and Marina's lawyer, they got together. Thirteen years later comes this heavily annotated, 527-page exploration, explication, compilation, speculation.

"Detail is all," somebody once wrote about the assassi-

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MAKING BOOK

*Assassination thoughts:
The man who kept Oswald's
gun was a pal of mine
when we were kids. Small
world. Eerie, too.*



FROM "THE OSWALD FILE" FROM "MARINA AND LEE" FROM "MARINA AND LEE" FROM "THE OSWALD FILE"

Four faces of Lee Harvey Oswald—or is it only two? From left to right: (1) Oswald the Marine, about September 1959. (2) Oswald the defector at the Hotel Berlin in Moscow, October 1959, shortly before his attempted suicide. (3) Oswald (or imposter) the worker at the Radio Plant in Minsk, mid-January 1960. (4) Oswald (or imposter) the would-be assassin, probably in New Orleans, about September 1963 (unretouched version). Are these of the same man or not? Whichever, the photos, all from the National Archives, demonstrate tricks the camera can play. To wit:

One of the latest and most unsettling conspiracy theories posits a Soviet plot involving a double. According to Michael Eddowes's "The Oswald File" (Potter/Crowe, \$10), an agent named Alek was substituted for the real Oswald while the latter was in hospital following his suicide attempt. It was Alek, the "imposter Oswald," who subsequently recovered, moved to Minsk, married Marina, returned with her to the States, planned the assassination (with Soviet intelligence), enlisted Ruth Paine to help get him a job at the depository overlooking the intended motorcade route, shot the president, and, except for Officer Tippett's intervention, would have escaped after holing up in Jack Ruby's apartment. And it was Alek whom Ruby executed two days later.

Now, Eddowes is a respected English lawyer and investigator who specializes in uncovering "the esoteric art of [official] omission." Some years back he won a posthumous pardon for the convicted murderer in the famous Christie case, a factor in the subsequent abolition of capital punishment in Britain. But "the esoteric art" can cut several ways. Thus, to support his thesis, Eddowes records in his book every known discrepancy between the "two Oswalds," making much, for instance, of the two-inch difference in reported heights. At the same time, he notes discrepancies

and oddities that might jeopardize his thesis. These range from apparent vagaries of motive (the Russians preferred LBJ?) and targets (why Walker?) to such exacting problems as Ruby's timing—for Ruby got to Dallas police headquarters 20 minutes late for the scheduled transfer, and it appears to have been simply fate that the transfer was also delayed.

Eddowes makes much of the photographic funny business, but omits from his book the Minsk photo. This is important. In the "imposter Oswald" scenario, photos 1 and 2 are assumed to be of Oswald, and photos 3 and 4 have to be of the agent Alek. Yet to the naked eye, the best match-ups are 1 and 3, and 2 and 4, with the worst match-up of all being—if one were really hunting for discrepancies—the Minsk photo, 3.

That the camera can do very queer things should be no surprise: Moods, lighting, angles, and quirky chemistry can all produce mysterious distortions. (Intense scrutiny has been directed toward the famous backyard rifle shots and the absence of the cleft in Oswald's chin, but the cleft doesn't show in these photos either.) Nor is the naked eye the perfect sleuthing tool conspiracy theorists are wont to claim.

There is, by my lights, only one good reason to entertain a conspiracy theory: We know our government has lied on other matters and in certain details on this matter. It is not enough. It is not enough because, while the Oswald-askew-and-alone solution requires considerable acknowledgment of the role of coincidence, any alternative, supposedly tidier solution demands much more from Lady Luck. Credulity is the issue. Which may be one reason conspiracy theorists are themselves so given to "the esoteric art" of selective evidence and confined conjecture. The rest is politics—which "they" that did it do you prefer? The tune changes with the wind. —E.F.S.