Marina Oswald Porter: Seven Years After Dallas

by Jessamyn West

A distinguished author visits
Lee Harvey Oswald's widow and tells what life
is like today for a remarkably
strong woman who is finding her way back
from shame and despair

Before I met Marina Oswald Porter she had warned me on the telephone, "You will be meeting a housewife."

"I know that," I told her. "I am not a writer who thinks that being in a house and keeping it makes a woman uninteresting."

She agreed with me. "There is story under every rooftree."

"Don't worry, then, Marina. That's the story I want to tell."

"You, maybe. But others will be disappointed. They will think when they see my name that they will hear new things about Lee Oswald. They want to believe in a mystery."

"There is no mystery?"

"I did not understand Lee's action. That is a mystery. But the Warren Commission told the truth. I knew before I went to New Orleans what the results of [District Attorney James] Garrison's trial would be. What can you say?" Marina asked. "I have three children? I help paint the roof? I have a garden?"

"Yes, I can say that." She protested no more. I had been warned.

Though I had no conscious preconceptions as to how she would look, Marina, the young Russian who had been married for two years to Lee Oswald, was the mother of three children and now the wife of Kenneth Porter, surprised me that first morning as she stood in the doorway of my Dallas hotel room. Yet there must have been some preconceptions—otherwise no surprise. The human face shows less of what it has experienced than how its owner has met those experiences. There was no tragedy in the face I looked into. There was intelligence, alertness, good humor.

"What do you think of my looks?" Marina asked me a few days later.

"I do not think you are a raving beauty," I told her, with some of the old-fashioned belief that young people should be reminded that handsome is as handsome does.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALEN MACWEENEY

She is, nevertheless, unusually pretty. She is five feet three but looks taller. Her chestnut hair, which I learned later that day was a wig, was short and casually curled. Her eyes were some mixture of violet and gray; her skin was very good. She wore a gray coatdress, miniskirted, and a topcoat that I thought was fur. She scoffed at this as I helped her out of it. "Fake fur, and made over from long to short—by me." She showed me how sleeves and shoulders had been altered, but I have no head for such mechanics and understood only that it took skill and a fashion sense.

Her hand was wet and cold as she put it in mine.

"My hands are wet because I'm scared."

"There is nothing to be scared of."

"People have said I was a monster."

"The people who did were monstrous."

"You don't think I am?"

"I wouldn't be here if I did."

"I am doing this for money. I don't need publicity. I'm not a movie star. I don't like publicity. It has done me nothing but harm."

"I am doing this for money. *And* publicity. Writers need to be published. That is publicity for them. So, you see, we are alike."

While we waited for lunch I said, "Astrologers would believe that you and I must be alike in many ways. You were born on July seventeenth and I on July eighteenth."

"Do you believe in astrology?"

I don't, but I can quote astrologers without believing. "The July-born," I told her, "are said to be domestic, home lovers who cling to the known and hate upheavals. The 'ordeal of change'—that is a phrase made for us Cancerians. But you have had many such ordeals."

"I didn't seek them."

"You married an American. You must have known that would bring changes."

"I didn't know when I married Lee that I would come to America."

"Did his being an American have anything to do with your marrying him?"

"Now I think so. Then perhaps I didn't."

"If Lee had been himself but a Russian, would you have married him?"

"Probably not." Then she flared. "But there are people who ask me if I loved Lee! That is disgusting. Do you marry and live with a man you do not love? Later he was sick. Some sicknesses you can't understand. But do you say, 'Because I can't understand the sickness, love is finished'? No, a good wife does not do that."

I had promised myself *and* Marina not to dwell on her past life—her life in Russia, her life with Oswald. The point of the interview was "What has this young woman made of her life? How does she live today?" But I found it impossible not to ask a question or two. And Marina, out of courtesy and out of her own understanding that what she had become was of significance chiefly against the background of her past life, answered, though often reluctantly.

Marina has very little accent. The words I could not understand were the result of the softness of her voice rather than of mispronunciation. She sometimes uses American idioms. "The hippies," she is afraid, "are just plumb lazy." This made me laugh—not the opinion, but the phrasing. She admires scientists, but their life would not be her "cup of tea."

We spoke again that first day on the nature of Cancerians. "I doubt that I would have had the courage to leave my home and my homeland," I told her.

"I did not have a real home. I was illegitimate and I was jealous of my mother's husband. Kenneth's mother is now more of a mother to me than I have ever known. I can put my head on her shoulder and cry. I can complain to her about Kenneth if I want to. She is a wonderful woman. She had nine children, and I shed tears to see the place where she had to bring up her children. Even if I am wrong, she will say to me, 'Though Kenneth is in the right in this, I will always take the woman's part.' "

"Weren't you sad to leave Russia? Frightened by so great a change ahead of you?"

"My husband was leaving. It was my place to go with him."

"Are you ever homesick?"

"Oh, *yes!* Homesick to walk down the streets of a great city and smell the Russian smells."

"If Lee had never gone to Russia, if he were alive today, do you think he'd be a protester, a bomb-thrower, a hippie?"

"About politics I cannot say. But a hippie, never. They are not clean; they are plumb lazy."

"And Lee wasn't dirty or lazy?"

"Never dirty; maybe lazy sometimes. His mind became sick. I do not know if it was politics."

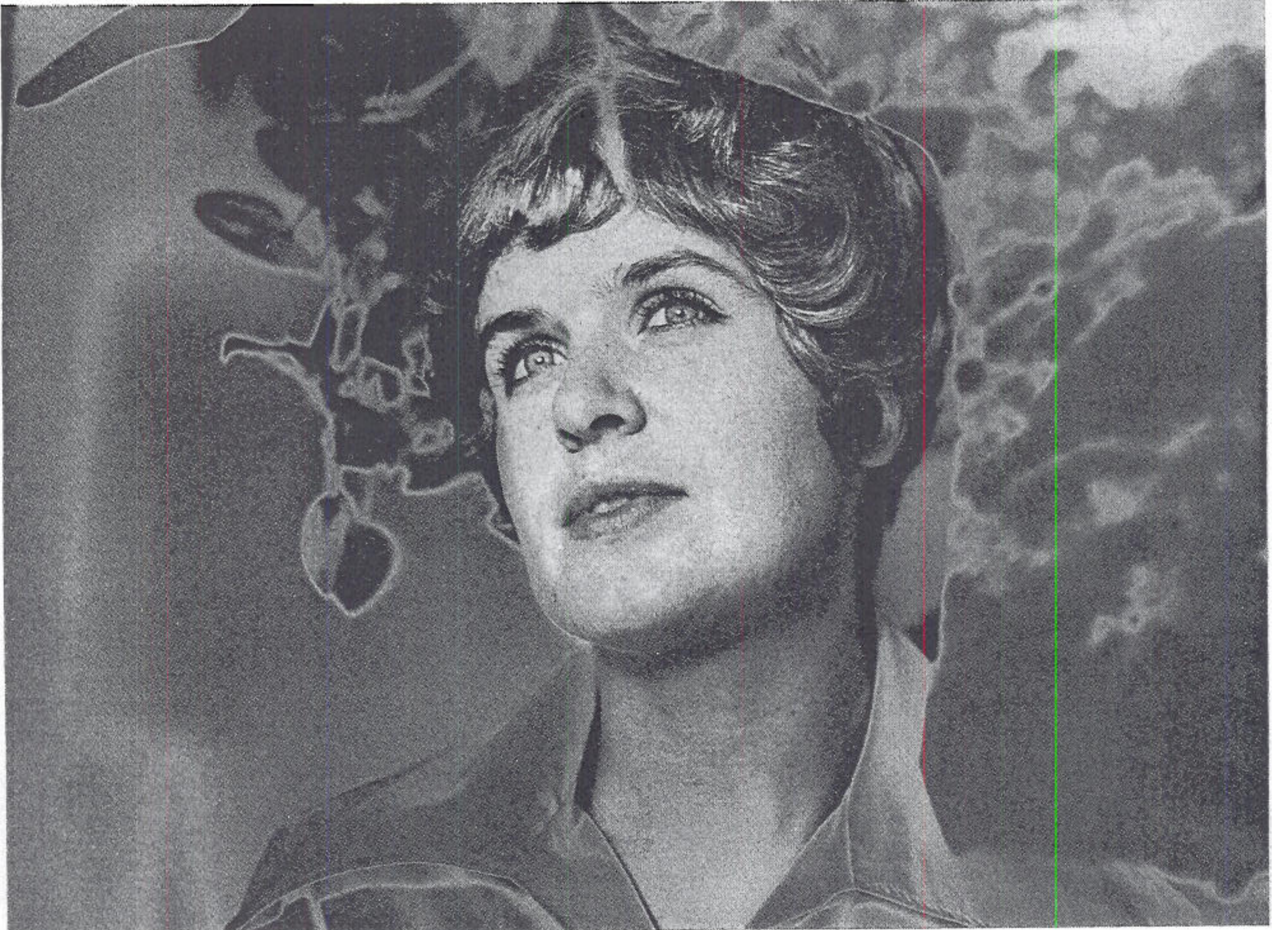
"When I talked with your landlady Ruth Paine several years ago, she told me that Lee took off his wedding ring on the night...or the morning... he left for Dallas...and put it in a teacup that you had brought from Russia."

"Yes, that is true."

"What happened to the ring?"

In a muffled, defiant tone: "I threw it away."

I wanted to ask but could not: "Do you wish you hadn't?" My feeling was that the revulsion she had felt at first for Lee Oswald because of his act had been tempered by time. She remembered the Lee Oswald of Russian days, the American boy thought handsome by Russian girls, who enjoyed speculative talk, as Marina does, and who would stand in front of shop windows looking at furs or jewels and playing with the idea, as young husbands do, of a time when he could buy them for his wife.



"How long had you known Lee before you married him?"

"Six weeks."

"That isn't long."

"I only knew Kenneth for two months."

I said nothing.

"If you know a man longer, you begin to see his faults and do not have the courage to marry."

"But you will see the faults after marriage, won't you?" I asked.

"Then you are *married*. You must help with the faults. You are vowed to put up with them."

"Perhaps the man will not want your help. What then?"

"Keep your mouth shut. You can only help where help is wanted. You can perhaps pronounce a word better than he can. You do not tell him how if he does not ask."

"So you are glad you married—" I substituted "quickly" for "hastily."

"I am glad I married Kenneth."

"Why?"

"First of all because of the children. I do not think I could marry a man who did not understand about having stepchildren."

Kenneth Porter at 32 has been married three times. He has a child by his second wife, who when he married her had a child of her own by a previous marriage. Now Marina and Kenneth have a son, Mark, aged three and a half.

"What happened to the Russian cup?" I asked Marina.

"I do not know. I lost it. It disappeared."

So Marina has lost two symbols—one of the man who had been *(Continued on page 129)*

MARINA OSWALD PORTER

Continued from page 59

her husband and the other of the country that was her birthplace.

It was past time to order lunch. Instead of sensibly calling down to see what was on the day's luncheon menus in the various dining rooms, we ordered from the room-service menu at hand. Before we ordered Marina asked, "Do you have to pay for this?"

"REDBOOK probably will be willing to treat us."

"Are you sure? Two dollars will be enough for me, if not."

I like such straightforwardness. Why live in the dark with another human being, fumbling toward a knowledge of feelings that can be learned in one short sentence? And suffering oftentimes because of a lack of that knowledge? But frankness about superficial matters often is used to hide secrecy about issues that are more important.

Marina was well aware of this. "You do not feel me to be covering up?" she asked once.

I felt that there were matters about which she wouldn't talk. This I do not call "covering up," but a kind of emotional modesty that is comfortable for persons newly met.

Our lunch, perhaps the worst I have ever tasted since a few concoctions cooked by myself at the age of nine, was served at a small table in the hotel room. The next day Marina called me to ask, "Shall I bring our lunch in a paper bag? I can barbecue some meat that will be very good."

I refused. I was the hostess and should provide the food. "We'll be more careful this time. We'll read *all* the menus. There must be something good to eat in this hotel."

We ended up ordering bacon and eggs.

Marina, with a husband and three children, is of necessity concerned with food. She cooks three meals a day. "Marina," her husband told me, "is a remarkable cook."

The dinner I ate in her home was delicious. Marina served beef Stroganoff, delicately flavored and tender, flaky rice, glazed carrots, broccoli, a compote of pears.

Because the dinner was good I supposed that Marina liked to cook.

"I hate to cook."

"I can't believe it."

"Yes. I love to eat but I hate to cook. I never measure except for precooked rice, things like that. But if I cook beans or regular rice, I don't measure that. I have a feeling for measurement. I can tell how the food will taste without tasting it. But I do not like the smell of cooking; I don't like dirty dishes. I like nothing about it. I never like my cooking. I always find something wrong."

"You are the same with your cooking as you are with men. After a while you find faults."

"*Now* I know that there is something wrong with everybody. When I was young I thought that I could find somebody who was just perfect. Yes, I did."

Marina and Kenneth live in Richardson, a suburban community 16 miles or so outside Dallas. When I arrived at their home it was almost dusk, but there was still enough light for me to see clearly the child who ran to greet me.

She made my heart stop: beautiful child, a girl of eight, lilting voice, welcoming words. "We've been waiting for you," she said. She had a face I had seen before—the face of her father, ardent, eager, but untouched by what we read or imagine we can read in the face of the father. All open. Smiling, loving. The eyes of the father were, Marina said, blue and "clear, clear as cold, cold water." The eyes of his child were blue and clear but warm, warm as sunshine. We walked to the house hand in hand.

This first child, Russian-born, was named June.

"She looks like Lee, doesn't she?"

"Yes. My coloring but Lee's features. Rachel [the second child, now six] has Lee's coloring, but June has his face."

June, in the second grade, is studying the presidents of the United States. "Once when they were studying President Kennedy, June said to the children, 'My first daddy killed him.' She said it just as a fact, you know. Something she knew and should perhaps tell."

"How did she know it?"

"I told her. I thought someone else will tell her if I didn't, and that would hurt her more. So I went to the principal of the school and asked him what was the right age, and he said, 'Mrs. Porter, I am sorry, but I honestly don't know. It all depends on the child. What is too early for one child would be too late for another.'

"I prepare myself for years to say what I must, but I could not. To explain that it was not their father Ken, who was living, but another father . . . who did it. I thought better now, little by little, than all at once. I thought, If she gets upset, if some children say something ugly, it's just natural. If your daddy is alcoholic, you should be above that. It's not your fault; you're not responsible; there's nothing wrong with you. So I tell Junie about her father."

"I think that was extremely——"

"It was the hardest thing for me to do. The first week Junie went to school, I talk to her about it. I *have* to open my mouth, because I am afraid if somebody tells her before me, she will be hurt more. Oh, it was the hardest thing. We cried a little. Then she asked some questions, and I answered, so that she won't have the wrong feelings."

"You were very wise with your child."

"Not wise. It was just a fact I had to face."

So in the warm spring dusk I walked into the house with the child with the antique-gold hair and the warm eyes, the child who had cried when she heard about her "first daddy" having killed the President but who, like her mother, "faced the facts" and said, "My first daddy killed him."

I knew her better later. But the first evening I felt at once that Lee Oswald's tragedy was greater for himself and for his country than we have understood. The young man who fathered this child and who had had the discrimination to choose Marina Nikolaevna Prusakova from among the Russian girls who admired him had latent qualities that somewhere along the line should have been salvaged.

The Porter house, when Marina asked me inside, welcomed me. But because it is almost impossible for me to converse and do anything else simultaneously, my awareness of the Porter home, other than that it said, "Welcome," was blotted out as soon as I began to meet the Porters themselves.

Junie's sister Rachel is dark-haired and self-contained. "The girls are very different," Marina told me later. "Junie, she talks and talks. 'Boy, you sure take after your mama,' people say. Kenneth thinks I talk too much. Then *I* complain about Junie. You have to beg her to shut up for a while.

"Rachel is very quiet. She only talks when she needs something or really has something to say. Mark talks with me and with Kenneth. And with everybody else. He can talk to himself."

Mark, a very blond, chunky boy not yet four, was curled up on the sofa in the sitting room. This room adjoined the open kitchen and contained a piano in addition to a television set.

I said to Kenneth, "Your son looks Russian, doesn't he?"

"No, he looks like my other son. And my other son is not Russian."

Later I told Marina this.

"Kenneth doesn't like to think that Mark's . . ." Marina did not finish her sentence.

"But you're Russian."

"I'm not ashamed of it. But Kenneth wants me to be American. And his son. The other day Junie said, 'Oh, Mama doesn't know anything. She's Russian.' We know some things even in Russia. But I understand. I am American now. I can't even speak Russian any more."

This astounded me.

"Why should I? Where are the people I would speak to?"

Kenneth Porter is a dark, handsome and self-possessed young man of few words. We share one characteristic. "Kenneth can't do two things," Marina said "—talk and do something else. If he is walking, he doesn't like to be talking. This walking and talking in Russia is a kind of custom. All the couples, forty, fifty, sixty years old, sometimes it is hard for them to walk, but after supper they go into the streets, walking. They go to a show, perhaps, or have a drink somewhere. Or perhaps just a juice or an ice cream. It seems to me that they can have a more spiritual life like that. You know?"

"I know. But if they had our autos and TVs, would they take these walks after supper?"

"I don't know. We're preoccupied with how to make money. It's not our fault. Men and woman have to plan. They have to be worried about the future.

Helps Shrink Painful Swelling Of Hemorrhoidal Tissues Caused By Inflammation And Infection

Also Gives Prompt, Temporary Relief in Many Cases from Pain and Burning Itch in Such Tissues.

There's an exclusive medication which actually helps shrink painful swelling of hemorrhoidal tissues caused by inflammation. And in many cases it gives prompt relief for hours from rectal itching and pain in such tissues.

Tests by doctors on patients showed while it gently relieved such pain, actual reduction of these swollen tissues took place.

The medication used in the tests was *Preparation H*®. No prescription is needed for Preparation H. In ointment or suppository form.

SEND FOR REDBOOK'S GUIDE TO HOME SEWING 25¢

Even the woman with unlimited funds likes to sew. Sewing is an exciting pastime and a creative experience. It can be imaginative, insure a better fit, and it is an important way to increase your wardrobe while holding down your budget. All sewing takes is know-how. Redbook's Guide to Home Sewing is a fact-filled, 20-page booklet which covers such vital topics as what to look for when buying a sewing machine, how to measure, pin, mark and cut, how to choose fabric, how to buy and organize your sewing equipment, how to handle fabrics, and how to achieve a professional look. Plus handy chart indicating thread, needle and stitch selection according to type of fabric. Send 25¢ in cash. No stamps, please.

REDBOOK'S GUIDE TO HOME SEWING
Room 1117
230 Park Avenue
New York, N. Y. 10017

NAME______________________________

ADDRESS______________________________

CITY________________ STATE________ ZIP______

Not very many have time for a spiritual life."

"There are people here—you should find them—who are full of dreams and hopes, who want to lead spiritual lives," I said.

"I have told you this," Marina continued, "but perhaps you shouldn't say it. I should not judge all Americans by my own experience."

"Nine Americans out of ten would agree with you."

"I like to walk in the park with the children and my husband."

"You could do that in Russia and you can't do it here?"

"I guess I could. But Kenneth wouldn't go. When he wants to be outside, he wants to be outside for a purpose. He is a fisherman. You may not be familiar with a man like that."

"I am familiar. My husband is a hunter."

"Once Kenneth caught a very big bass, or something like that. He was telling his friend on the phone about it. I went into the shower, and when I came out he was still talking about that fish."

"Every hunter and fisherman is a frustrated story writer. They long to tell the story of how they shot it or caught it."

"Your husband too?"

"My husband too."

Kenneth struck me as a man who would have been more at home in an earlier America, a friend of Boone's or Kit Carson's, men who went outdoors for a purpose, who fished and hunted and came home filled with news of the kill. I have uncles like that on the Indian side of my family. They are men whose women want to see more of them than they do.

Kenneth's fishing, like my husband's hunting, may be beyond our complete understanding. But Marina accepts it as I do the hunting. And there is much that she does understand and value in her husband. At a time when other young men wanted to date her, and did fall in love with her, but were unwilling to risk public opinion by marrying the "widow of the assassin," Kenneth fell in love and, falling in love, had the courage to marry her. He is gentle with children, and because of his previous marriages "is not jealous of Lee."

Marina speaks sometimes of the differences between the two men.

"Kenneth doesn't play with the children every day. He doesn't like to be *called* to play with them. Oh, that doesn't mean that he doesn't love them or take responsibility. Then he is sure something! He is a good provider and in this way he shows his affection.

"Lee had a kind of humanness—you know what I mean? He could *watch* the children. I can look at Mark asleep in his little bed, beautiful, beautiful. And I could express myself in words and stay there watching for hours. Lee was the same way. But Lee wasn't thinking about the future of the children. He left them nothing, you know, to live off of. And he left them a bad name."

"You said that you liked a man with a sharp tongue, someone who was quick-witted and full of fun. Was Lee this way?"

"Yes and no. He was interesting. He talked a lot. We had an intellectual life and it was interesting to me. At least in Russia it was interesting. I guess we were both dreamy persons. Lee didn't like to walk, but in Russia he learned to walk a lot."

"Why did he want to leave Russia?" I asked her.

"The weather, I think, chiefly. He said he couldn't stand another winter."

The grownups had their dinner at a table set in the dining end of the kitchen; the children ate sitting on stools at the kitchen bar, which opened into the sitting room. The color television set, which had been the Christmas present for the entire family, played while we ate. I did not notice that the children watched the picture; and certainly Marina, Kenneth and I paid no attention to it. The unrelenting sound of the TV, unnoticed by Marina and Kenneth, reminded me that I was dining with a generation whose ears have been trained to tune out what they do not care to hear.

Kenneth, in order to give Marina and me time to talk alone, took the children for a ride after dinner. On a sofa facing the television set, which I could now see as well as hear, Tom Jones was singing and young women, screaming and crying, were offering him their handkerchiefs, hoping to be rewarded by a few drops of his supervirile Welsh sweat.

"Do you like Tom Jones?" I asked Marina.

"Yes, I like him. He is real; I think that he is healthy and earthy. But I could never scream like that for a man. I had an aunt who was very ladylike. It was her way that you should never look at a boy no matter how much you admire. Never let him know."

"Never?"

"No matter how much you like the boy, she said, never look at him. She had such gentle ways. She could not stand it when Russian woman had to dig roads. She would say, 'Boy, this is a disgrace.' In this way she does not like the Communists when the country become that way. And she had to do the job."

"Dig roads?"

"This was in the Stalin era. Her husband had been arrested. She preferred domestic life. But she had no education, even for a factory or a telephone company. To survive, she found a job opening the gate for big trucks in a factory yard. Even though she made money, it almost killed her—not the physical work but her companions, old ladies who were so masculine, who cursed and smoked. But when the men came in their trucks and it was her turn to open the gate, they never opened their mouths to my aunt. They respected her so much."

"She was a lady."

On the television screen Tom Jones wailed, smiled and shook.

"I could maybe be melting inside, but I could never scream like that for a man," Marina said.

"But with all the other girls screaming, how do you let him know?"

"When I was younger, I have my ways to get the guy."

"What ways? Tell me."

"In Russia I had friends, boys I could be honest with. If you want to meet some guy, you ask them to introduce you in a polite way. You don't have to go beating about the bush."

Remembering that Marina had called this her first happy home, I said, "There is a good feeling here. I don't know what it is you have been able to do . . ."

"Does it have the feeling of happiness?"

"Yes."

"I tried to make it from a house into a home, our home. . . . Sometimes you can step inside a door and everything you see is perfect. Everything beautiful. But there is a chill in the air. Even though everyone is polite and nice. It makes you afraid. . . . Just for a moment you are afraid."

"Some houses are impersonal. But your home, with your own embroidery framed on the walls, with the paintings that speak of Russia, with the flowers you grew yourself in bowls, is personal."

"It is comfortable, though it may not be in style."

"If you could choose a profession now, what would you choose?"

"I would be an interior decorator. I know I am not good enough now. I would have to develop my taste. When the children are in school I will take courses. When I was given money . . . after Lee . . . you know . . . I bought some nice things. Then people said, 'The money has changed her.' It wasn't true. You can't make yourself over in a day. I was only doing what I had wanted to do before but didn't have the money for."

"You were quoted as saying that people were 'crazy to give you money.'"

"It wasn't really reported right. I don't think I ever used that word."

"What word would you use now?"

"Surprise . . . for me to get the money. But I never called any people crazy. Especially the Americans. I had so many thank-yous in my heart. How can I call them crazy?"

"What was their motive in sending this money to you, do you think?"

"Well, because I was a Russian and far from home. I think Americans are very goodhearted. I have much love for America. Russians and Americans are so much alike. I am sorry to say that, because many Americans will be hurt."

"I am not hurt."

"I mean that by comparing America with Soviet Russia there are people who will be hurt. Not everyone, even in Russia, is a Communist. There are many people even over there eager to raise their children without false words. All mothers in the world have very much in common. Most Russians and Americans are much alike. The French people are more nationalistic, more for themselves. America is made of people from all over the world. Russia is the same way. So many nationalities live there.

"I don't think Russians hate any foreigner. As far as the simple people go, the man who works in the street and goes to the movies, when he meets a tourist—oh, boy, he is always welcome. It's 'Come over to my house,' and they

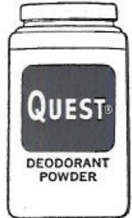
Ends women's "once-a-month" odor worry

Special deodorant destroys odor ...even on sanitary napkins!

To free you from needless worry about embarrassing intimate odor—even during "special days"—QUEST Deodorant Powder works *where you need more than an ordinary deodorant.*

(1) QUEST helps keep your body odor-free—even in the most intimate areas.

(2) QUEST destroys odor on sanitary napkins. Helps prevent odor *where odor lingers longest*—under bras, girdles, panty-hose.



Special deodorant for a woman's special needs

Itch Itch ITCH

CALAMATUM contains anti-itch ingredients plus **pain-killing benzocaine** to relieve pain fast. Cooling, soothing **CALAMATUM** relieves itching of minor skn irritations and rashes, prickly heat, insect bites, poison ivy & oak. Get non-greasy, non-staining **CALAMATUM** **—aerosol, lotion or ointment.**

EAR WAX?

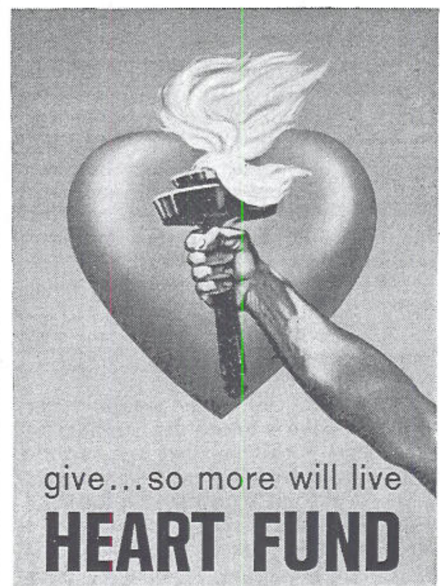
Don't use pointed objects that may puncture eardrums. **KERID** Drops help soften and loosen hard wax plugs. Put **KERID** Drops in, wash earwax out. Get **KERID.**

HOW TO HELP YOUR
SKIN PROBLEM

SAYMAN SALVE... wonderful aid for relief from itching, rashes, detergent hands, sunburn, dry skin, complexion blemishes and many minor skin problems. At all drug counters or send $1.00 for a full size jar and a beauty bonus of Sayman Lanolated Soap... **TRY IT TODAY!**

SAYMAN SALVE

SAYMAN, BOX 3457 E, SAVANNAH, GA. 31403



give away whatever they have; Russians are very generous. It gives me hope that most of the people in the world are good. I do believe that. You don't hear about the good people as much as bad."

"Were you disappointed by what you saw when you came to the United States? The Irish girls who came to live with us were very disappointed. They expected to find us all living in a Doris Day movie."

They didn't live in Russia or they wouldn't have been disappointed. I expected to see a rich, well-developed country, and I did. I know now that Lee and I were very poor. But I thought we were very fortunate. We had a one-bedroom apartment complete with bathtub and kitchen. In Russia many people wait for a year for this. Now I can see how miserable it was. I couldn't survive in it today.

"I did want beautiful things even before that. I couldn't afford them but I admired them. Then when the money was given me after Lee's death, it was too quick, too unexpected. I was too young. I hadn't *earned* that money. So I was foolish. Easy come, easy go. I didn't deserve that money. I never understood it. People said I was stupid."

"It was very hard for a person as young as you, almost a teen-ager . . ."

"It was not right for me to spend it all at once. And I'm still very foolish. It spoiled me very much then. It's hard for me to budget now."

"Do you try to budget?"

"I am always *going* to budget. I try to consider my husband and just how much money we have. I can go out and buy steak for two dollars and sixty-nine cents a pound. But I know I should look for meat at seventy-nine cents, eighty-nine cents and a dollar nineteen a pound."

"Does Kenneth give you an allowance to run the house on?"

"I can't figure out a budget, but I know where we stand. I shouldn't spend more than forty dollars a week on groceries. If I see a dress for forty dollars, I don't go and buy it, no matter how much I want it. But if I need a dress, I ask Kenneth; then I pay around fifteen dollars."

"But at the beginning of your marriage . . ."

"At the beginning I felt like Alice in Wonderland, really, like Cinderella. My head was spinning. I was so foolish. Kenneth once told me, 'Before you buy something, think, For this three dollars I spend, my husband must work one hour. Then if you want it that much, you can have it.' I think that if I work for money myself, I'll be wiser when I spend it."

"So you're not so tempted to spend now?"

"Oh, pretty things tempt me. Not clothes. Prints, paintings."

"Paintings?"

"Oh, yes. One of the reasons I like to go to movies is to see the paintings by very unknown painters that are hung in the foyer. I remember one I wanted very much. It was just a picture of a forest. I mostly like nature. I tell you what, if I didn't see some work that Picasso did in his regular paintings, I wouldn't think that he was a great artist at all. Put a picture of a woman with three breasts this way and that way and another way and you still have no woman."

"She was a *lot* of woman, you might say."

Marina laughs, but holds to her opinion. "That's right, but I'm still old-fashioned. I like the pretty views and the still lifes."

"This picture you were tempted to buy . . ."

"It was a painting of a forest. You can't even see the tops of trees. Very old pine trees of a special kind they make boats from. It is very dark in this forest, and nothing but closeness. And this one sunbeam going through it, very little, but you can feel it without seeing it."

"Were you ever in a forest like this in Russia?"

"Oh, yes. And when you look at it, you can feel it. The old leaves . . . and the smell. You can't see the sun because it's too dark, just this little teeny beam going through it. I think this painting is very good, and nobody noticed it."

"I like the framed embroidered pieces you have. Did you do them?"

"Oh, yes. But don't call them creative work. They are not *me*. All girls in Russia are taught to embroider."

"I was taught to sew in school, but I don't sew. I think you have a deep creative vein. Did you ever paint?"

"That was my favorite subject at school—drawing," Marina answered.

"But you told me you were a pharmacist. How did you ever become one?"

"I wanted to be."

"But now you would prefer to be an interior decorator?"

"No, it is not what I prefer. It is the second choice after pharmacist. If I could go to college again, I would be a pharmacist again. But I am scared to make the attempt. I am not sure of myself because my English is not good enough."

"But you would really *prefer* to be a pharmacist. Why?"

"I don't know. It's a field I already know something about. I love the smell of medicine. When I go into a drugstore and smell the medicines, my heart is aching. Isn't that strange?"

"And I was convinced that you truly wanted to be an interior decorator."

"I truly do. Because I cannot be a pharmacist here."

"How long did you work at the pharmacy?"

"Two years."

"You were a child pharmacist."

"They all are over there. Children. Seventeen, eighteen. I hate drugs to take, but the preparation of them is very interesting. It is a clean job, like being a nurse. You wear a uniform. I think Lee liked me in a uniform. I don't know why. I think because it would be a very respectable profession to be a pharmacist there. Lee had very pretty girls but they were working girls, girls in factories. He could brag about me."

"You didn't meet him in the pharmacy, did you?"

"No, but he came there to see me work."

Marina is a night owl. No night owl and, alas, no lark either, I returned to my hotel soon after Kenneth came home. Before he drove me back to Dallas I admired the tree house he had built for his children and said farewell to the children's puppy, a large, semi-German shepherd called Softy.

Junie, before she went to bed, had written me a note and autographed a picture of herself for me. The note said, "Dear Miss West, We liked having you come to visit us. We lóve you. Good night. Junie."

The note touched me very much. Because of my talk with Marina, with the handicap of my one-track mind I hadn't been able to pay much attention to the children. But the face of the child June, I look at it again and again. . . . So beautiful in its eager lovingness! Such faces alone—and I suppose that there are millions its equal in this world, black and brown and yellow—should convince us that the child flowers out of a mixture of peoples and rises above the misdeeds and crimes of its forebears, and if not misdirected by us, may be able to live without hate.

Marina came to my hotel the next day. Neither she nor I had wanted to use a tape recorder for our talks. We thought that with it in the room we would feel as if we were speaking to an audience rather than having a conversation. But there were many things Marina said that I wanted to record in her own words. The gist of what she said—yes, that I could get. But her phrasing was her own, and that I could not duplicate. So a hotel porter found me a recorder and it spun on as we talked. Neither of us paid it any attention.

Marina, who had been dressed in slacks and a blouse the night before and worn her hair in a ponytail, was wearing once again her wig and city costume. She had left the two younger children with a baby sitter, and she had the qualms most mothers feel when they do this. She both wanted to be free of the children's constant care and wondered if

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

If you wish to comment upon something in this issue of REDBOOK or upon something pertaining to children or family life in general, we would be glad to hear from you. Please address your letter (which should not be more than 200 words) to Letters to the Editor, REDBOOK Magazine, 230 Park Avenue, New York, New York 10017. A selection of recent letters appears in this issue on page 172.

she was a proper mother because she wanted to be free.

"I love babies, but when they get to be Junie's age and they want this and they want that and cry, 'Mama, Mama,' sometimes I don't take the time to answer their questions. And I really should try. I can see what I'm doing that is wrong, but I still continue to do my own way."

"You would be happier if you had more time to yourself?"

"For the husband's good and the children's good, I believe the woman needs to get away from the children some. She will appreciate the children more. That way I think the Russian woman is a better mother."

"Really better?"

"They're not tied up with the children so much. They're so happy to see the child and they are sorry to have been away for so long—then they give for the few hours all their love and affection for the child. After twenty-four hours you're irritable, not just physically. I'm not complaining. I don't work and I worry when my children are with someone else."

"If they were in school?"

"In Russia the children learn to go to kindergarten while Mama goes to work. Children learn, in a way, their obligations, and in a way they enjoy it. They have lots of toys, lots of friends, to play with; they learn to dance and sing. They take their naps; they have a doctor to take care of them. You know, in Russia they maybe neglect women, but they do think about children.

"And if my children have a baby sitter, I worry about them from the time I leave the house until I get home. In two hours I am already talking about them. For example, if we go to New Orleans, after one day I want to be back with the children. Then when I am with them for twenty-four hours I yell at them. And feel guilty afterward. I blame myself. They didn't ask to be born. It is all my responsibility.

I am so tired of the children being little, with their clothes and toys everywhere, that I have tried to make their rooms a boy's room and girls' room. Not a baby's room. I take their toys away. Oh, sometimes I feel I am robbing my children of childhood."

"By taking their toys away too early?"

"I don't take them away. I *throw* the old toys away. Because the less toys they see, the more they appreciate them. I tell Rachel, 'This is your last doll, so don't tear it up.' She can be careful then. She takes better care of this doll than the twelve she had before."

"I think that's a good thing."

"Even with the broken ones, they don't want me to throw them away. But I tell them, 'It's because you didn't take care of it,' and I throw away the broken ones. Or I try to. If they cry too much or beg too much, I give in to them. I'm not a good mother in this respect. I let the children get away with too many things. I am not strong enough. I left Markie this morning, but usually I take him with me because I'm so sorry when he cries. I don't want the baby sitter to see his tears or his heart getting broken. So . . . I take him everywhere I go, and it gets on my nerves."

"Kenneth told me last night that you didn't plan to have more children. Together you have the three. And he has another child."

"We have five between us."

"Five? Does he have two?"

"No, but he has a stepdaughter by his second wife. If he wouldn't take care of her, how can I expect him to take the responsibility for my two children? And I will never say no. It is a thing he has to do and I have to do with him. This is my responsibility to him."

"So there will be no more children. How do you take care of that?"

"The pill."

"It works for you and you feel all right?"

"It makes you feel miserable. My opinion is that when you take those things you take a chance. But you take a chance every time you drive down the highway. It doesn't mean you have to stop driving. You take the pill, and if it doesn't agree with you, you have a medical checkup. If it is dangerous to my health, my doctor would take me off it for a while. I like it because it's the safest and surest thing so far."

"How does it make you feel miserable?"

"Very moody, very depressed. But I should not take the chance to have another child. I am Rh negative. I could have a deformed child, and that would be criminal. I believe in abortion in such cases, myself."

"So do I."

"If a woman doesn't want a child, what kind of mother will she be? She will ruin its life. It's a crime to have a child if it's not wanted. And it is not wrong, abortion. It's illegal now, of course. If a Catholic woman wants to have children, that is her privilege. She doesn't have to have an abortion. In Russia, since abortions have been legalized they are fewer, and fewer women are killed. I wish that it was legal here. When it is done by a doctor it is safe and clean. If it is not legal, women will find a way.

"I hope it never happens to me, but if I have to . . . I just don't know," she continued. "I love children, but I think it is a crime not to be able to give them what they require—love and affection. Even with only three I rob them. . . ."

"If everyone has ten children, we're going to rob the whole country of air and space and——"

"This is a little too much power, for us to talk about the country? No matter who talks on television about overpopulation, everybody will say, 'Oh, you do it. I will do what I want to.' "

"It's a pity, but you're probably right."

"I consider myself very lucky and fortunate to have enough for my three."

"You are lucky in your temperament, in your nature."

"No, I think I'm not. I really should never complain. But I get moody and sorry for myself. Then I see somebody else, and compared with them I can see how fortunate I am. So many people still don't have enough to eat. Or they have diseases. There are people who can't walk. We ought to be happy just because we are alive. Happy because life was given us. Before I eat breakfast, before there is any talk, I walk around the yard. This makes me feel very good. I set my mood then."

"You do what?" I asked.

"I set my mood in the morning. Before I face a greasy skillet I like to take a walk. And when I see and hear the birds singing—even birds, as dumb as they are, they're happy to be alive. And here am I, a human being, healthy, with three children, and I can see the sun shine. I feel like I commit a crime, not being happy. I'm not religious . . . but then I say a prayer for seeing those things."

"Do you say the same prayer every morning? Aloud or just in your heart?"

"No, in my heart. I just say, 'Don't take it away from me.' Because it is too good to be true. Sometimes I just say a prayer to Him to make me wise. I know that's religion, and though I don't have any real religion at all and I don't go to church, I do believe in God. I ask Him to give me the wisdom to understand things, to appreciate the things He is doing for us. I ask not to be such an awful person with complaints, unhappy and making others miserable because I am myself miserable. Do you understand?"

"I understand."

"To help me not to be such a grouch, you know? I pray for that. There are so many things I can never thank Him enough for. I ask Him to help me make harmony with Kenneth. Husbands and wives need much help."

"I still think you have a lucky temperament. Things have happened to you that would make many people bitter."

"I have accepted them because you can't have everything beautiful. Everyone has his share of bad. There are people who have no money. Or the worst that can happen is when people lose their children. That's something I couldn't bear. A real punishment. But then, those who lose are given something as compensation."

"Compensation?"

"Everybody has something good in him. That is what I believe. Sometimes I see a very ugly person, a person who can never be pretty, but is married. And I say, 'What did she find in him?' Or, 'What did he find in her?' But they have a gift, to close their eyes and find something beautiful in another person. It's the biggest gift you can have."

"To see beneath the surface?"

"No—to have the gift of love. This is much better than being loved."

"To be able to love is best?"

There was a long silence following my question.

"Do you feel that you are lacking in this ability?" I asked.

"I think so. I think I am very selfish."

"But in the morning you go out loving the world?"

"Yes. And then I come in and yell at the kids: 'Will you please stop making this mess?' "

"Kids need to be yelled at once in a while. But you love the world—you love being alive."

"I do. I do. Perhaps too much."

"You want to learn."

"I am in love with life."

"That's a great thing."

"Everybody tries to change something. I'm not against progress at all. I think that if you have a creative mind, you try to improve your place of work, your home, your street. That's why I am against the moon."

"Against the moon?"

"I'm not 'against' it. I appreciate science. The first time I saw the astronauts, I was excited. Now it doesn't fascinate me at all. So many things can be done here, and they spend all this money on a dead land. If it's something good for humans, that's fine. For instance, if we could bring water to the desert. Make beautiful things here."

"Were you still in Russia when the Sputnik . . ."

"Yes, I was."

"Did it make you proud?"

"It was a wonderful feeling. We had radios, and when it was announced, everyone just stood in the streets. Not because it was done by Russians. I wasn't that patriotic. But I was happy that man achieve this. I didn't care who did it, Americans or Russians. But now I wish the purpose of this was a little different, more for good, less for the military. And I think too that there is too much democracy here."

"What do you mean by 'too much democracy'?"

"The people want too much. They want too much to be given. We have this freedom of speech, so we ask for everything. People do not appreciate what they have. The people who protest that America is no good, they should be sent for one year to Russia to work. Then they would be so glad to come back; they would love it. Everything in it. No country in the world is perfect, the way they expect America to be. Every country has its own faults and problems. Look at the best ones there are. You know the best country in the world? Here, the United States."

"I've asked this before, Marina, but if you had known when you left Russia what was going to happen, would you have come?"

"I'd have stayed there!"

"You wouldn't have come?"

"Even for all the goods that are here I wouldn't have come—and have that happen."

"If you could take your children to Russia with you now . . ."

"I don't want my children to do that thing. I tell you something. We have an obligation here. Kenneth and Mark, they were both born here. If they have to go and fight and be killed, why not? This is their homeland. They have an obligation."

It was six o'clock when we finished talking, another warm, spring dusk. This was the last of our interviews, and I felt we should mark it in some way. It is the rarest thing in the world for persons to open their hearts to one another, to make, as the philosopher Martin Buber says, "the effort to impart one's self as one is to another. To share one's being. . . ." Without this, says Buber, "there is no authentic human existence."

I felt that I had experienced a few days of authentic human existence and I was grateful to Marina. In happier times we might have repeated together some prayer for wayfarers who meet and part. As it was, I asked her if she would like a drink. She said yes. I called our orders down, and tired from so much talking, we dampened our throats with a whisky and soda.

It was just dark when she called Kenneth to pick her up. At the door she put her hand on my arm and said almost under her breath, "If you should ever have a chance to talk to the President . . ."

I shook my head. "It's very unlikely."

She paid no attention. "Tell him I am sorry . . . for the shame to the country."

These were not her last words to me. I went with her to where Kenneth was waiting in the family station wagon. Marina got in and Kenneth leaned over to give my hand a hearty, outdoorsman's shake.

He had put the car into gear when Marina rolled down the window. "You won't forget to ask your husband what he does for red spider in his garden?"

I not only asked him; I gave him the whole account of this article to read.

When he finished he said, "You write about Marina Porter as if she were Joan of Arc."

"What did Joan of Arc ever do that was so great?"

While he was thinking of an answer I—like Marina with Kenneth, probably—gave him one. "Joan of Arc was a reverse hippie. 'Make war, not love,' she said. What's so great about that?"

"Okay," my husband answered. "Forget Joan of Arc. What's so great about Marina?"

It seemed useless to try to tell him if what I had written didn't convey it. Born without a father, with a mother whose love she doubted, in a country turned upside down by revolution, she had had the courage to marry a stranger from a hated country. That husband soon became the most hated man in his own country—an assassin who killed a beloved President. The widow, scarcely more than a teenager, with two babies, unable to speak English and with a mother-in-law who (she has said in the past) made her feel "like a bug," didn't collapse. Her head may have, as she said, "spun"; the money she was given may have been spent wildly; she may have believed the men who admired her but who were less interested in the human being than in her money.

But she did not lose her head. She endured. She survived. She loves life. Her children are radiant. She prays in the morning for harmony.

On the second day of our talking she brought to my room a dozen daffodils she had grown.

"I hope you will not consider them a bribe," she said.

What has life—what have *we*—done to this girl whose nature it is to give, to make her feel that we will consider her gifts not friendship's offering but the calculated price she must pay to win our good will? And yet she takes the chance of that misconstruing and makes the gift.

And so I tell my husband, "She is great in her humanity and courage. Don't talk to me about Joan of Arc and her voices. Lee Oswald may also have heard voices. But Marina hears her children; the spring rain; Softy; her husband's story of the bass; her daughter's saying, 'Mama's a Russian'; the principal's saying, 'What's too early for one child is too late for another.' She hears Tom Jones.

"She hears me saying, 'The mystery of being alive and believing in joy is mystery enough,' and agrees. That's great enough for me."

My husband smiles, lifts his right hand. "I believe too," he says, and hands me my manuscript. THE END

Editors' Note: Jessamyn West's novels include *The Friendly Persuasion*, *A Matter of Time* (which was published in REDBOOK) and *Except for Thee and Me.*

MOVING? If you're moving soon, please let us know at least eight weeks before changing your address.

New Address

Name

Address

City **State** **Zip**

To subscribe or extend present subscription, check box and fill in name and address. We'll bill you later.

☐ 12 issues for $3.95
☐ 24 issues for $6.95
☐ New ☐ Renewal

Add $1 per year for Canadian orders.

(1) ATTACH PRESENT ADDRESS LABEL HERE, THEN FILL IN NEW ADDRESS ABOVE.

(2) IF NO ADDRESS LABEL AVAILABLE, WRITE IN OLD ADDRESS IN THIS BOX, THEN FILL IN NEW ADDRESS ABOVE.

Mail to: Redbook, Box 986, Dayton, Ohio 45401