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 rooftop."

"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 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.
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 topper jacket 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."

"They 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 protestor, 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."

"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

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from the room-service menu at hand. Be-
fore we ordered Marina asked, “Do you
tell how the food will taste without tast-
ing it: But I do not like the smell of
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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 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 some. 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?”

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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 far 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 singing and young women, screaming and wailing, smiled and shook.

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

“Does it have the feeling of happiness?”

“Yes, if 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 grow 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 monster has bought her.’ It wasn’t true. You can’t make yourself over in a day. I was only doing what I wanted to do before but didn’t have the money for it.”

“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.”

“Never?”

“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 disgusting.’ In this way she does not like the Communists when the country becomes 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. I think she worked nights because the money almost killed her—not the physical work but her companions, old ladies who were so moribund, 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.”

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

“If 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.”

“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.”

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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 the 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 two dollars a month to expect to see a rich, well-developed country, and I did. I knew 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 “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.”

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cries. I don't want the baby sitter to see the world, but when they get to be Jimie'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 is wrong, but I still continue to do my own way.

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

"Really?"

"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. Oh, I try to. If they cry too much and they take their naps; they have a doctor to take care of them. You know, in Russia they may lose a child, and they do think about children.

And if my children have a baby sitter, I pay them a little, so they can get away from me for a little while. Then I see somebody 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 also learn to dance and sing. They take their naps; they have a doctor to take care of them. You know, in Russia they may lose a child, and they do think about children.

I am so tired of the children being little, with their clothes and toys everywhere, that I have tried to make their room 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 in a box, the best 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, because they don't know what they have. People who lose are given something as a gift, to close their eyes and find something. I say, 'What did she find in him?' Or, 'What did he find in her?' But they have something beautiful in another person. It's a little too much power, for we 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."

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

"They didn't ask to be born. It is all my responsibility. Many mothers don't have an abortion. In Russia, since abortions have been legal, they have fewer, and fewer women will 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 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 it is not wrong, abortion. It's illegal now, of course.

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 to be happy."

"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 if Mama doesn't take care of me, I will be, even if 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?"

"You do what?"

"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 I commit a crime, not being happy and making others miserable because I am myself miserable. Do you understand?"

"Do you pray the same prayer every morning?"

"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 astronomers, I was excited. Now it doesn't fascinate me at all. So many things can be shown to me, 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."

"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 protest that America is no good, they should be sent to Canada. Everyone just stood in the streets. Not because they didn't like it. It was a wonderful feeling. We had radios, and when it was announced, everyone just stood in the streets. Not because it was from Russia. 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 was going to happen, would you have come?"

"I'd have stayed there!"

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

"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 cherished 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 white aluminum 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."

"And then 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 this, 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?"

"Okay," my husband answered. "I've asked this before, Marina, but I don't understand."

"I'll tell you what I've come to think of being alive and believing in joy is mysterious 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.

"Okay."

"Forget Joan of Arc. What's so great about Martina?"

"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 a baby incapable of speaking 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 is 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 bears her children; she loves her husband; she wants to learn."