

**JAMES L. SWANSON**

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *CHASING LINCOLN'S KILLER*

**“THE PRESIDENT  
HAS BEEN SHOT!”**

THE ASSASSINATION OF JOHN F. KENNEDY



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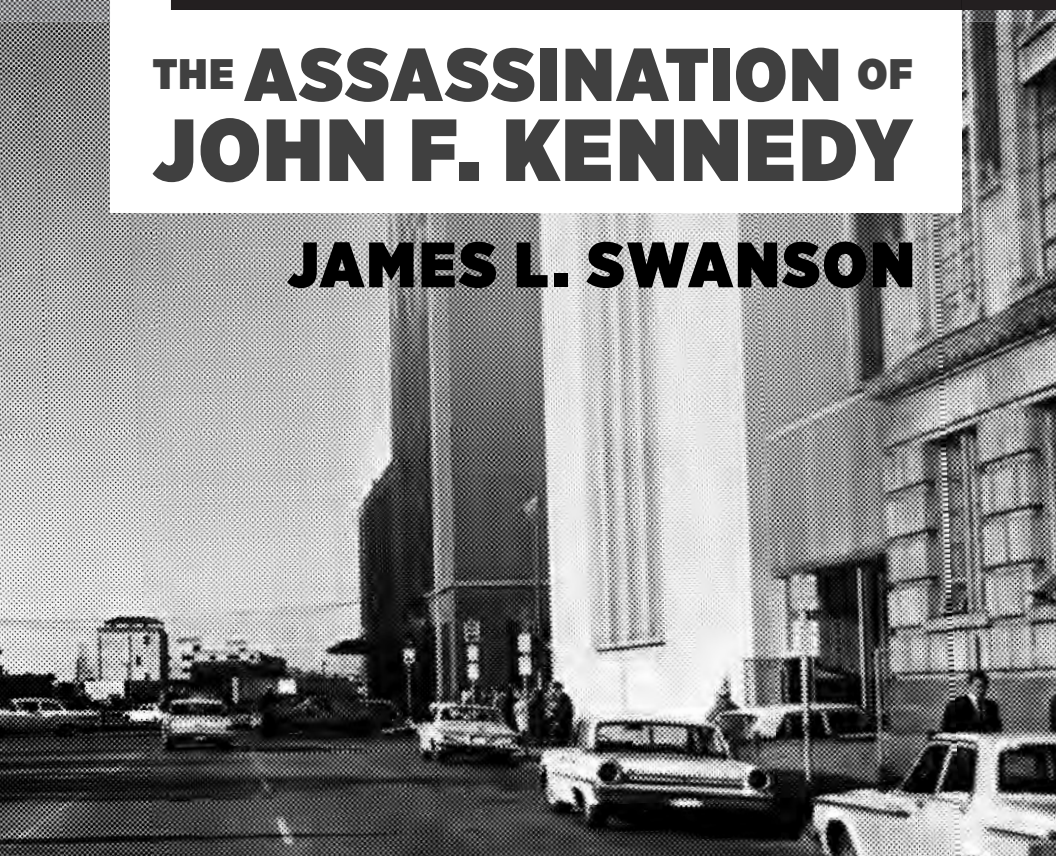


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THE ASSASSINATION OF  
JOHN F. KENNEDY

JAMES L. SWANSON



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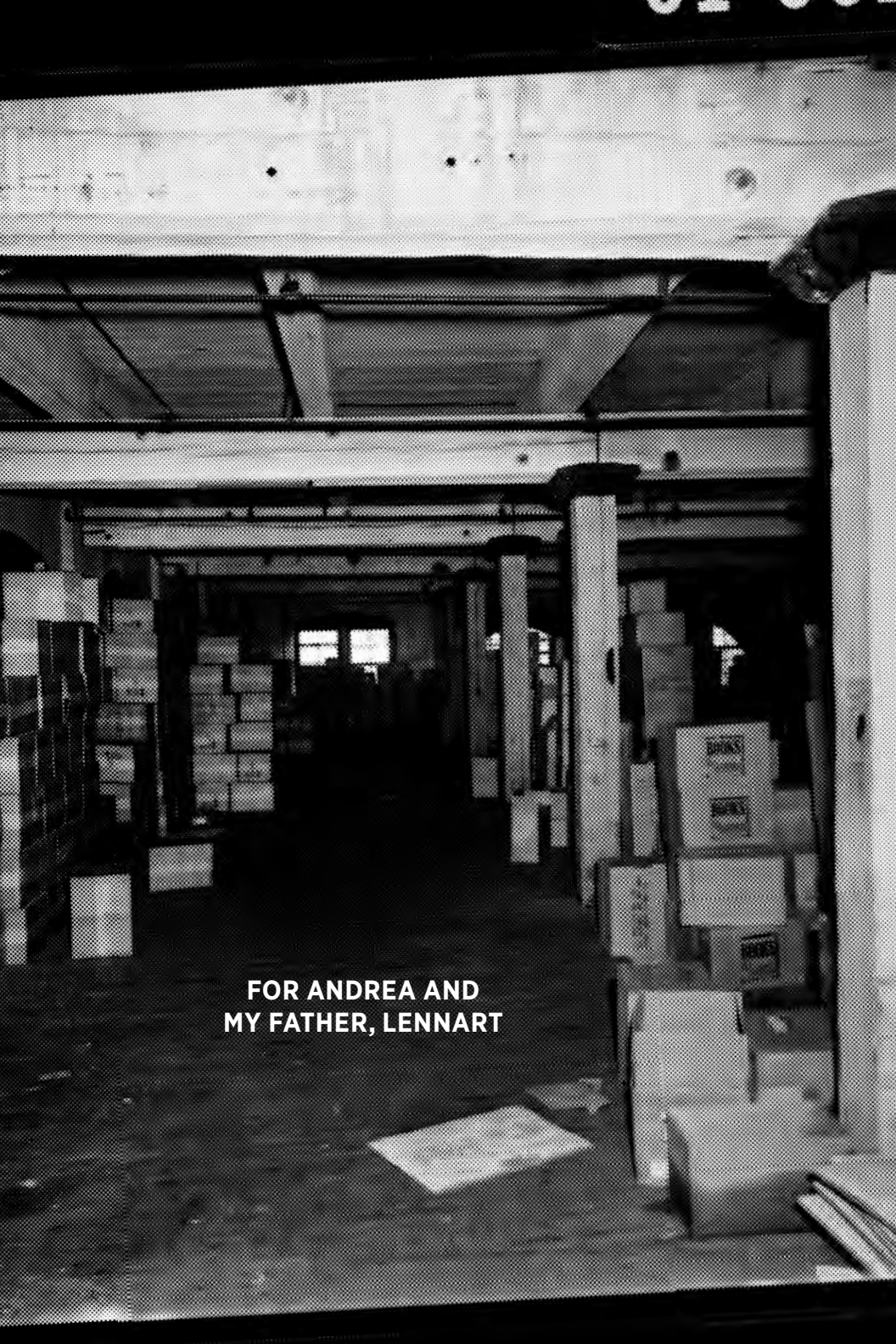
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**FOR ANDREA AND  
MY FATHER, LENNART**





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John and Jacqueline Kennedy playing with baby Caroline in front of their Georgetown house in 1960.



# BEGINNINGS

Historic Georgetown, in the northwest section of Washington, DC, is one of the most prestigious neighborhoods in the nation's capital. Founded as a commercial trading hub along the banks of the Potomac River before the American Revolution, Georgetown boasts the oldest home in Washington, along with many other eighteenth-century brick town houses.

Over the past two centuries, many distinguished Americans—congressmen, senators, judges, federal officials, military officers, authors, and one man who would become president—have called Georgetown home. In its long history, no public figure has been more connected to the neighborhood than John F. Kennedy, the thirty-fifth president of the United States.

He lived in several homes in Georgetown beginning in 1946, during the time when he gained national recognition as a U.S. congressman and senator, married Jacqueline Bouvier, and, in November 1960, was elected president. Between his election and his inauguration on January 20, 1961, the circa 1811 three-story Federal-era brick town house at 3307 N Street NW served as a nerve center. There John Kennedy planned and hired staff for his forthcoming administration, which he called “the New Frontier.”

For two and a half months, the lights burned late as the president-elect gathered his closest advisers around him.



The Kennedys leave their Georgetown home for preinaugural festivities on the snowy night of January 19, 1961.



Journalists camped outside the home to photograph or film Kennedy. They were there whenever he opened the front door, stood on the top step, and walked down to the public sidewalk a few feet in front of the house to announce the new appointment of a person to his administration.

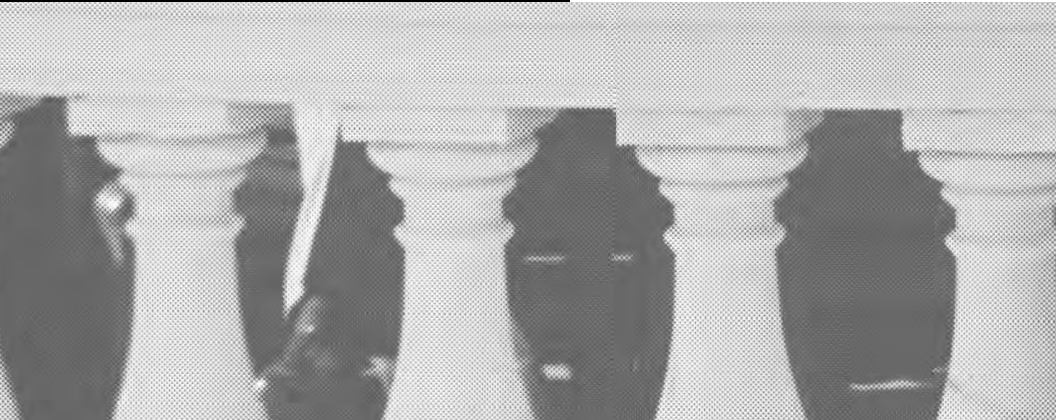
On January 19, the night before his inauguration, a heavy snowstorm paralyzed the nation's capital. The glow from the pair of clear glass and black metal lamps flanking John Kennedy's front door made the crystals layering the surface of the deep snow twinkle in the night. Undeterred by the weather, the Kennedys ventured out to attend long-planned pre-inauguration parties. Jacqueline Kennedy wore a shimmering white floor-length ball gown that mirrored the soft, thick snowy carpet that covered the capital. A photograph captured her as she walked through her front door and stepped into the night. Surrounded by darkness, she shone as bright as a glimmering star.

The next morning, John and Jacqueline Kennedy left their house for the last time and embarked on a journey that he would not complete, and from which he would never return.



# **PART ONE**

# **INTRODUCTION**





**TO JOHN F. KENNEDY**









**PART TWO**



# THE **ASSASSINATION**





# THURSDAY NOVEMBER 21, 1963

The day the Kennedys left the White House for Texas, a man waiting thirteen hundred miles away in Dallas was eager for the president to arrive. He was not an important politician who wanted to discuss business with President Kennedy. He was not a supporter who hoped to shake his hand or to obtain a ticket to the November 22nd Chamber of Commerce breakfast to be held for several hundred people in Fort Worth. He was not attending the lunch planned for more than two thousand people in Dallas. Nor was he a political opponent of John Kennedy's who planned to protest his policies with a homemade, hand-lettered cardboard sign. No, this man who awaited John Kennedy in Texas had something else in mind. He wanted to kill the president.

It was strange. Just two days earlier, when Lee Harvey Oswald awoke in Dallas, Texas, on the morning of Tuesday, November 19, 1963, he did not know that within the next three days he would decide to murder the president of the United States. If a fortune-teller had prophesied his future, the twenty-four-year-old married father of two children might not have believed it. Indeed, among Oswald's corrosive obsessions—and there were many of them—John F. Kennedy was not one. There is no evidence that Oswald hated the president. Much evidence suggests that he rarely thought about him at all. He had no

long-standing fixation with Kennedy. He had not made him the primary subject of his everyday conversations. He had not been stalking the president or, as far as can be told, fantasizing about killing him. Of Lee Harvey Oswald's many long-simmering resentments, frustrations, and grievances, the Kennedy presidency was not known to be one of them.

What lured Oswald to his sniper's perch on the afternoon of November 22, 1963, remains one of the most enduring mysteries in modern American history.

On the morning of Tuesday, November 19, the *Dallas Morning News* published the details of the route that President Kennedy's motorcade would follow when, in three days, the presidential jet, Air Force One, would take off from Fort Worth and land in Dallas. On the way to a political fund-raising lunch at the Trade Mart, the presidential limousine, a big, custom-built convertible Lincoln Continental, would travel from the airport — Love Field — through downtown Dallas, allowing thousands of citizens to assemble on the sidewalks and streets to see President Kennedy in person. In addition, many people working in office buildings along the route could open windows overlooking the street to enjoy a good, unobstructed view of the president. After driving through downtown Dallas, the limousine would turn right from Main Street onto Houston Street, proceed one block, then turn left on Elm Street. And, finally, as the crowds thinned in an area known as Dealey Plaza, it would pick up speed, vanish under an overpass, and follow the Stemmons Freeway for a short trip to the Trade Mart lunch. Anyone familiar with the streets of Dallas would know that when the president's car turned left onto Elm, it would pass

directly below a seven-story office building and warehouse known as the Texas School Book Depository.

Since mid-October, Lee Harvey Oswald had held a job there as a low-level order filler who moved cardboard boxes of school textbooks around the building. But on the morning of November 19, Oswald probably failed to read that day's newspaper, and he did not learn that in three days John F. Kennedy would drive right past the place he worked. Too cheap to buy a daily paper, Oswald was in the habit of reading stale, day-old newspapers left behind in the lunchroom by coworkers at the Book Depository. Thus, it is likely that it was not until the morning of Wednesday, November 20, two days before President Kennedy was scheduled to arrive in Dallas, that Oswald would have learned for the first time that the president of the United States would drive past the Book Depository.

Oswald must have realized the implications of what he had just read: someone with the mind to do it could open a window on one of the upper stories of the Book Depository, wait for the president's motorcade to drive by, and shoot Kennedy as he passed. The distance between an open window on, say, the fifth, sixth, or seventh floors and Elm Street was too great to fire a pistol at a stationary target below, let alone at a moving car. A pistol's short barrel could not guarantee sufficient accuracy at that range. No, Oswald would have known from his military training, to hit someone from such a distance, he would have to use a rifle.

It had never been attempted before: no American president had ever been assassinated by a rifle. Three of them — Abraham

Lincoln, James Garfield, and William McKinley—had all been murdered at close range—less than two feet—by lone gunmen firing pistols in 1865, 1881, and 1901. And sometimes pistols were not enough. In 1912, former President Theodore Roosevelt had been shot in the chest with a revolver during his campaign for reelection as a third-party candidate, but he survived the wound.

On February 15, 1933, an assassin in Miami, Florida, fired a pistol at a convertible car occupied by president-elect Franklin Roosevelt. The gunman missed his target but wounded the mayor of Chicago, Anton Cermak, who was standing next to Roosevelt's car. Cermak died the next month. And on November 1, 1950, two Puerto Rican nationalists who wanted complete independence from the United States tried to assassinate President Harry Truman by fighting their way with pistols into Blair House, the government guesthouse where he was living during White House renovations. The terrorists shot three policemen, wounding one fatally. One of the assassins was killed, and the other was captured. The gunmen never got into the president's residence.

Four years later, on March 1, 1954, while Congress was in session, a gang of four other Puerto Rican nationalists sitting in the visitor's gallery of the House of Representatives opened fire with semiautomatic pistols, wounding, but not killing, five congressmen. To this day, bullet holes from the attack scar the furniture in the House chamber. No, a pistol was not a foolproof weapon for an assassination.

What brought John Kennedy and Lee Harvey Oswald



together was a staggering coincidence. It is likely that Oswald would never have thought of killing Kennedy at all if the publicized motorcade route had not taken JFK to the doorstep of Oswald's place of employment. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity—the president was coming to him! Oswald thought about it. He possessed the necessary skill and equipment. He had learned to shoot in the U.S. Marine Corps, and he owned a rifle. He could do it. Yes, he could. But would he? And why?

Oswald had always wanted to star in a historic moment. He was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, in October 1939, the youngest of three brothers. But a dark cloud formed over him even before he entered the world. His father died two months before he was born, and during his unsettled childhood, his odd and unstable mother changed husbands, houses, jobs, and cities frequently—often turning over the care of her boys to orphanages or relatives. When Lee was growing up, he lived, among other places, in New Orleans, Fort Worth, Manhattan and the Bronx in New York City, and then New Orleans and Fort Worth again. Young Lee had disciplinary problems at school, made few friends, threatened family members with knives, rebelled against any kind of authority, and missed so much school that he was tracked down by truant officers and ordered to appear at court hearings.

Oswald exhibited an interest in the Soviet Union and the teachings of Socialism, Marxism, and Communism. These were strange pursuits for an American teenage boy during the middle of the Cold War, an era in which the United States and the Soviet



Lee Harvey Oswald at age fifteen, while a high school student.

Union were locked in an intense ideological battle, and being a Communist in America could trigger a government investigation.

In September 1956, Oswald dropped out of high school altogether. And in October, after he turned seventeen, he enlisted in the United States Marine Corps. He served at bases in America and Japan, where he was court-martialed twice: once for assaulting a superior, and once for accidentally shooting himself in the arm with a Deringer pistol—the same type of single-shot weapon that John Wilkes Booth used to murder Abraham Lincoln.

When Oswald was stationed in Taiwan, he suffered a nervous breakdown and had to be transferred to Japan for medical reasons. Throughout his three years in the Marine Corps, Oswald was a malcontent and constant complainer who loved to argue with his superiors to show that he was smarter than they were. He also made no secret of his interest in Communist societies. He received no better than average performance ratings, but the Marine Corps managed to teach him to do one thing well—shoot a rifle with skill and reasonable accuracy.

In September 1959, under false pretenses, he requested a dependency discharge to care for his mother. Oswald was granted his discharge. Then, in October 1959, in a series of bizarre events, he traveled to the Soviet Union, showed up in Moscow, and tried to commit suicide when his visa (the document permitting him to visit the Soviet Union) expired and he was ordered to leave the country. He then went to the United States embassy in an attempt to renounce his American citizenship. Soviet officials, though suspicious that he might be mentally unstable, allowed Oswald to remain in the country, and

assigned him a job at a radio factory. In April 1961, he married a nineteen-year-old Russian woman named Marina Prusakova. After a few years, Oswald grew dissatisfied with life in Russia, and he wanted to return to the United States. He was no longer the exotic foreigner and center of attention that he had been when he had first defected. He, Marina, and their infant

Lee Harvey Oswald with his wife, Marina, and their first daughter, June.





daughter left the Soviet Union in June 1962 and traveled to Fort Worth, Texas, where his mother and brother lived.

On January 28, 1963, Oswald purchased a .38 caliber Smith & Wesson revolver by mail order. On March 12, 1963, he mail-ordered a surplus World War II Italian rifle, a 6.5 mm, bolt-action Mannlicher-Carcano mounted with a telescopic sight. He paid for both items using a false name. On March 25, the two weapons arrived at his post office box, which he had also obtained under a false name. Later, he had his wife take photographs of him in the backyard holding his new rifle and wearing the pistol on his belt. On April 1, Oswald, who could never hold a job for long, was fired from his most recent one. April 6 was his last day at work, and on April 10 he crossed the line from malcontent to madman. That night, Oswald attempted to assassinate former U.S. Army General Edwin Walker.

Walker led the local chapter of the John Birch Society, an energetic and vocal anti-Communist private organization named after an American who had been killed by Chinese Communists. Walker was also an outspoken opponent of school desegregation and President Kennedy. Oswald had stalked Walker and, just a few weeks earlier, had spied on and photographed his house. On the night of April 10, Oswald went to Walker's home. Through a window, Oswald could see the general in a well-lit room. He was the perfect target. Oswald aimed his rifle at Walker's head and fired. But he missed. Too afraid to fire another shot, he concealed his rifle in the vicinity and ran off into the dark. He didn't want to get caught with the weapon in his possession on his way home. Shortly after that, Oswald came back and retrieved his rifle from its hiding place. The attack on General



Lee Harvey Oswald poses with his rifle and pistol.

Walker was a turning point for Oswald: it was the first time he had ever tried to kill a man.

Soon after that, Oswald decided to leave Texas and moved to New Orleans. In late May, he wrote to an obscure organization called the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC). It was a group that lobbied for fair treatment of the island nation after its revolutionary dictator, Fidel Castro, had installed a Communist government there. By June, he was distributing FPCC handbills on the streets of New Orleans. In July, he was fired from yet another job, and the U.S. Navy (which had jurisdiction over the Marine Corps) affirmed its decision to change his discharge from the Marine Corps to undesirable after it learned that he had tried to defect to the Soviet Union. In letters to Secretary of the Navy John Connally, Oswald had argued, without success, that the service should reinstate the honorable discharge he had been given when he left the marines, before he moved to Russia.

In August 1963, Oswald was arrested after a street brawl with Cuban anti-Communists who objected to his distribution of pro-Castro literature. The incident attracted the notice of the press, and on August 17 and August 21, Lee Harvey Oswald participated in two New Orleans radio shows to discuss Cuba, Communism, and Marxism. The host of the program surprised him by exposing his defection to Russia, so Oswald was compelled to also discuss his life there. Nonetheless, he enjoyed his notoriety and the public attention he had received.

By the fall, Lee's wife, Marina, was fed up with life in New Orleans and with her husband. Lee had become short-tempered and violent, and on several occasions he had hit or beaten her.



Oswald distributes “Hands off Cuba” flyers in New Orleans in the summer of 1963, when he was a member of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee.

He had also confessed to her the Walker assassination attempt, which had terrified her.

On September 23, 1963, Marina left New Orleans for Irving, Texas, a suburb of Dallas. She was expecting their second child next month, and her friend Ruth Paine had offered to take her in and care for her. Lee left New Orleans too, and four days later, on September 27, he showed up in Mexico City, where he visited the Cuban embassy and applied for permission to travel there. The Cubans gave him no special treatment and told him it would take months. Frustrated, he then went to the Russian embassy for help in getting to Cuba or returning to the Soviet Union. The Russians knew he was an odd duck and were in no hurry to allow him back into their country either. He was furious.

Oswald returned to the United States and on October 3 showed up in Dallas, where he visited Marina at Ruth Paine’s



house in Irving and spent the weekend of October 12–14 there. Paine worried that Oswald was having trouble getting a job, and she told some of her friends that he needed work. On the night of October 14, after Lee had returned to Dallas, Ruth told him over the phone that a girlfriend of hers said they were hiring at a place called the Texas School Book Depository. Oswald applied in person the next day. He was hired and started work on October 16. He and Marina agreed that he would live at a rooming house in Dallas during the week and visit Marina at Ruth Paine's house in Irving on the weekends. Ruth, who disliked Lee and hated the way he treated his wife, hoped that Marina would leave him. A neighbor of Ruth's, Buell Wesley Frazier, also worked at the Book Depository, and he offered to drive Oswald from Dallas to Irving on Fridays after work and back to the Book Depository on Monday mornings. Marina threw her husband a surprise birthday party that week, and he seemed touched. Then, on October 20, 1963, their new baby daughter was born. Perhaps Oswald's odd and unsettled life would finally calm down.

On October 23, Lee attended a right-wing political rally where General Walker spoke. Was this a warning sign that he was plotting another assassination attempt? Then the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) made a couple of visits to Marina Oswald. They told her they would like to speak to Lee. It was nothing serious, just a follow-up to chat with him since he returned home from Russia almost seventeen months ago. The visits angered Oswald—he believed that the FBI agents were harassing Marina. On November 12, he left an angry note at the

FBI headquarters in Dallas for agent James Hosty, telling him to leave his family alone.

Who *was* this strange man named Lee Harvey Oswald? In the fall of 1963, he was a lifelong loser, a high school dropout, a second-rate ex-U.S. Marine, and a malcontent with a chip on his shoulder. On November 19, Lee Oswald was a complaining, self-pitying, attention-seeking, temperamental, impoverished ideologue, and a man of slight build with an oversize ego. Despite his long record of incompetence at even menial jobs, he believed himself superior to others, and he despised authority. He had always dreamed of big things, but he'd failed at everything he had ever attempted. He was still a young man—he had just turned twenty-four—but was living a dead-end life of unskilled, low-paying jobs and humiliation by superiors, with an inability to provide for his family. He was insignificant. He wanted to stand out. Oswald had delusions of grandeur, and he dreamed of accomplishing great things. But in reality, he was the feckless father of two young children whom he could barely afford to feed and clothe. He was the bad husband of a wife he insulted and abused. He could not control events. He could not even control his own life. His marriage had failed, his prospects for a better life were failing, and his life as a whole was a failure.

He claimed he was a Marxist and pretended to be an intellectual, but he persuaded no one of his intelligence or wit. All he could muster were humorless slogans and theories he had memorized from books and political tracts. Was he a true believer and supporter of Communist principles and dictatorships? Or was this all a fraudulent pose he adopted in

adolescence to be different, to stand out from the crowd, to gain attention?

Sometime over the next three days, between the morning of November 19 and the afternoon of November 21, Lee Harvey Oswald would decide to assassinate President Kennedy. No one knows exactly when he made that decision. It could have been as early as the morning of Tuesday, November 19, but only if he broke his habit and read the morning paper the same day it came out. If he followed his usual custom, then he would not have read Tuesday's paper until the following day, the morning of November 20. Once Oswald read the day-old paper, perhaps he also consulted Wednesday's *Dallas Times Herald*, the afternoon paper, which confirmed the motorcade route. Then, on Thursday, November 21, to make sure that the public knew where to go to see the president, the morning paper published a map of the route that Kennedy's motorcade would follow.

A deviation from Oswald's normal behavior offers an intriguing clue. On the morning of November 21, he ate breakfast at the Dobbs House restaurant. He was not in the habit of buying breakfast, and he did not have the money to do it. Did breaking his routine by treating himself to a special breakfast signal that something was different and that he had decided by the morning of the twenty-first to assassinate the president? No one will ever know.