

Jackie, Nina, and Me

by Anika Pavel

“Travel is the university of life”, my mother said with regularity. I thought about her words as I looked out the window into the night, one that started no differently than any other. The moon cast a pale light on the unattractive buildings built quickly by the communist government in the years following World War II. Speed, not beauty, was of essence as the nation rose from the ashes.

As a young teenager, every Friday at 8:00 pm, I listened to the one radio program that broadcast music and poetry the young people in communist Czechoslovakia wanted to hear. I listened to *Ave Maria* sung by Charles Aznavour, followed by a poem beautifully written by a fellow teenager. It spoke of love and of hope found in a sliver of a blue sky by two young people trapped in darkness—and in that moment it fostered in me a palpable need to write.

My mind was still processing the words of that poem when the radio program was interrupted by a somber announcement:

“The American president, John F. Kennedy, has been assassinated in Dallas, Texas.” It was 8:45 PM.

A single bare light bulb hung from the ceiling of our small family room. It cast a somber glow over the white, freshly ironed tablecloth covering the table where I sat. Above the wooden radio hung a black-and-white photograph of President Kennedy, his wife Jackie, Soviet Premier Khrushchev, and his wife Nina Petrovna. I had cut it out from *ZENA* (“WOMAN”) magazine and pinned it there after reading an article about the



Jackie Kennedy, Nikita Khrushchev, Austrian President Adolf Schaerf, Nina Khrushchev, John F. Kennedy

two women—though it was mostly about Nina Petrovna. Jackie was described as “a beautiful woman” and it was implied that, as such, she had no substance. The photograph was taken at a summit held in Vienna more than two years earlier. I stared at the picture in shocked disbelief.



That image has remained in my mind. The visual contrast between the two women is marked. Jackie is tall, slim, young, and elegant. She exudes beauty and femininity. In contrast, Nina Petrovna looks matronly, an older woman who has seen hardship, death and injustice. It was easy to ascribe one word to each woman: to Jackie, beautiful; to Nina Petrovna, babushka.

Looking at the photograph on that November night, I wondered how the two women felt right then, at that tragic moment immediately after the assassination. I imagined Jackie grieving and frightened. But what about Nina Petrovna? Did she close her eyes at least briefly and let the world go dark for a moment so that her heart could go to Jackie?

I knew from the *ZENA* article that Nina Petrovna was born in Ukraine, attended a private boarding school for girls and received a first-class education. The school normally did not accept the children of peasants, but Nina was able to study at Maryanski Girl’s School—writing in her notebook, “I chanced to be there because of the special circumstances of war.” She studied political economy in Moscow and later taught it at the State University in Kiev, among other places.

After the war, Stalin maintained tight surveillance; everyone was potentially an enemy or a victim. An estimated one million individuals perished without a trace as “enemies of the people.” Nina had learned to observe people carefully and to evaluate a room full of strangers while maintaining a calm friendly demeanor.

For different reasons, Jackie Kennedy also learned early to keep her thoughts and feelings to herself. She was known for her ability to keep her composure, a trait in evidence throughout the heartbreaks that she endured, even before she lost her husband. Khrushchev was impressed with Jackie. In his memoirs, he writes that he

found her energetic and pleasant, quick of tongue and a resourceful conversationalist. "Don't mix it up with her," he warned. "She'll cut you down to size."

So Nina was no babushka and Jackie was no simple starlet, but the press judged both women chiefly on their appearances. During Khrushchev's visit to the US the two women developed a strong relationship, communicating with ease because Nina Petrovna spoke English.

Americans who lived through the Cuban missile crisis, I am told, still shudder at the memory. The feeling was no different on the other side of the Iron Curtain. I remember 1962 vividly, how we were marched out of our classroom to the streets where, it seemed, our whole town was waving Soviet flags. We were told to celebrate the greatness of Nikita Khrushchev, who had averted a nuclear war with the United States by exercising statesmanship and restraint. He won a guarantee from the US, we were told, not to attack Cuba, and, in exchange, he removed the nuclear warheads from that island because they were no longer needed.

When I came home from school that day, I saw my father, who was a tailor, chuckling over a pair of pants he was ironing. "Kennedy whipped his butt and Khrushchev had to go home with his tail between his legs."

My father, despite coming from a very poor family, built a successful business through hard work and employed six other tailors in his shop. When the communists came to power after the war, they confiscated his business and labeled him a parasite of society. Naturally, he hated the communist regime. He often quoted, "When it rains in Moscow, we have to carry an umbrella." But I did not especially care what the truth was. I was glad that the immediate danger had passed. In the days leading up to the resolution of the crisis, my heart had pounded in fear every time I heard the sound of an airplane.

"It is insane that two men, sitting on opposite sides of the world, should be able to decide to bring an end to civilization," President Kennedy said soon after. Khrushchev put it in a way that was even more chilling: "In nuclear war, the survivors will envy the dead."

President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev reached an agreement on the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, with Kennedy signing the treaty on October 7, 1963.

In her last letter from the White House following her husband's death, Jackie Kennedy wrote to premier Khrushchev: "The danger which troubled my husband was that war might start not so much by the big men as by the little ones. While big men know the need for self-control and restraint; little men are sometimes moved more by fear and pride..." Jackie concluded with the words: "I hear that Mrs. Khrushcheva had tears in her eyes when she left the US Embassy in Moscow after signing the book of mourning. Please thank her for that."

The relationship between President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev was the start of a dialogue. But the damage caused by an assassination in Dallas along with the removal of Khrushchev by Soviet hardliners in 1964 meant that we in Czechoslovakia had to wait until 1968 for the warmth of the Prague Spring.

Did I sense a wind of a change in the fall of 1967 or was I just lucky? At that time in Czechoslovakia, it was unheard of to travel abroad, let alone to a capitalist country. People in my town thought I was crazy when I applied for an exit visa to travel to England.

But it was thanks to the most important woman in my life, my mother, that I took the plunge westward. She never missed an occasion to give me a book about some far-away country. Ignorance, she insisted, breeds fear.

I knew in my heart that when the opportunity to travel came, I had to take it. Only when the Soviet tanks rolled into Prague's Wenceslas Square on August 21, 1968 and crushed the Prague Spring did I realize how important it had been for me not to waste it.

In November of 1967, the image and the strength of those two vastly different women I admired, Jackie Kennedy and Nina Petrovna, carried my spirits high even before I boarded the plane that would take me to the big open world. Armed with a small Slovak-English dictionary, a parting gift from my brother Pavel, I was ready for the challenge.



When I landed in London, my lofty teenager's dreams awoke to the reality that although I had taken lessons in English, I did not understand spoken English. I squeezed my dictionary for comfort and visited the restroom. Right there in front of the door marked "LOO", my youthful optimism was seriously tested. In England then, to use a bathroom one had to drop a penny in a slot to open the door. But I had no money. I had a job lined up as an au pair but, at that moment, in foreign country and unable to communicate, across a cold war from anyone I knew, I could not "spend a penny."

My first night at the house where I was to work was a mixture of excitement and apprehension. I curled up in my bed and waited for fatigue to overpower the adrenaline.

Next day, with the help of my dictionary, I started to learn. Fast. No lifelines, only the one I was looking at in the mirror. In time, people's conversations no longer sounded like gibberish. Words became clearer and eventually I was able to converse with ease.

Time and fate led me to a job at a solicitor's office located opposite the Marlborough Court, in Great Marlborough Street. From my perch in the office I watched Paul McCartney entering that very court to marry Linda Eastman. London in the early 1970s was a mixture of burned brassieres, protests against the Vietnam War and psychedelic music. I was eighteen years old and wanted to be part of it. I shed my bra, listened to the Beatles, and for a while I put Jackie and Nina on the back burner.

Still, I looked for guidance in my past. Back when Valentina Tereshkova became the first woman in space, I was taught that all women in communist countries were emancipated. But by my senior year in high school I also learned the narrowness of the Communist conception of an emancipated woman. Not unlike my daughter and her classmates many years later in America, girls in my class were focused on prom, hairstyles, dresses, and shoes. Make up was not available, but to our delight we discovered that one of the crayons we used in an art class could double as a make-up pencil. One day, I volunteered to be the guinea pig and let another girl, the best artist in the class, put liner on my eyelids during a break between lessons. My literature teacher

walked into the room; she had always liked my work and said I was a talented writer. She took one look at me and told me to stand up. “You look stupid. Go and wash your face,” she said.

With time and perseverance, I mastered the English Language well enough to venture into the world that surrounded me. Ten girls were selected by the London’s *Daily Mail* newspaper in a competition to discover international models. I was lucky to be one of them. But even after I saw my face looking back at me from magazines, I could not, as much as I wanted to, ignore the voice of my teacher. Had I betrayed all that I was taught?



By the time I exchanged Big Ben for the Statue of Liberty, I returned to my first love, writing—a place outwardly anonymous yet in which I would bare my soul. I wondered: Who was behind the face in the magazines? That thought would bring me once again to Jackie Kennedy and Nina Petrovna. Because of the marked difference in their physical appearances, the photographs seen all over the world failed to reveal the closeness of their inner lives and similarity of their inner strength. The irony of people underestimating Jackie because of her beauty and Nina because of her lack of it made me realize that the way others perceived me did not change who I was behind my photographs in those magazines. There I found my mother who had the audacity to believe that an eighteen-year-old girl could successfully navigate a world she knew only from books. I found a determined young girl who grew up in a hurry yet who remained a dreamer destined to write. I found a poem penned long ago by an unknown teenager that always provided me with hope in the darkness.

Today my hair appears to match Jackie’s perfectly, but under the coloring, it is as much salt and pepper as Nina Petrovna’s in that aged photograph pinned above the wooden radio. Now I have a large television on which I see the events unfolding in Ukraine. Images of destruction and cruelty bombard us as lifeless ash replaces the once beautiful cities. As I mourn with the rest of the world, I tremble at the memory of Khrushchev’s words following the Cuban missile crisis.

Nina Petrovna, who was from Ukraine, materializes in my mind, and I also think of Jackie, who worried about the little men moved by fear and pride—and I feel trapped in darkness. But then I look closer and I see the grit, the grace, the dignity of the women long gone. Presently I see a little boy traveling alone from Ukraine the length of Slovakia to meet up with his brother, who is a student in Bratislava. I focus on this story from my homeland. With nothing more than his brother’s cellphone number written on his wrist, I see his bravery, and I see beauty in the actions of kindness he encounters on his journey. As the boy is interviewed, a little piece of blue sky is visible behind him, and I am transported back to my family’s communist era apartment and a poem that once again inspires hope in me.



Anika Pavel was born in Czechoslovakia. She became a refugee when the Soviet Union invaded her homeland. She now lives in New York City. Her essays have been published in *bioStories*, *Tint Journal*, *Nixes Mate Review*, *Ariel Chart*, *Cleaver Magazine*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *Scarlet Leaf Magazine* and others. The essay “Power of The Violin” has been selected by the *Potato Soup Journal* for their anthology. Her essay “Finley’s Gift” has been selected by *Living Spring Publishers* for their annual book of short stories. Her essay “Encounter with the Future” was nominated for the Pushcart Prize.