

A WOMAN

The bafflements of trying to interview Oriana Fallaci, author of “A Man,” peerless interrogator of famous politicians, and without question the world’s most divinely difficult journalist.

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By Jane Howard 1935-1996

When Oriana Fallaci cannot sleep, she doesn’t just lie there staring at the ceiling. Wherever she is, in her New York apartment, her farmhouse in Tuscany, or any hotel room, she gets up and gets busy. Often she makes necklaces, stringing together the beads she has collected, between appointments, in all parts of the world. “I’ve already had my Middle East period with the beads,” she says. “Now I am in my China period.”



As a jeweler, Fallaci is an amateur, but as a journalist, she is probably the most famous and fearsome interviewer alive. “A powerful personage,” she believes, “is a phenomenon to be analyzed coldly, surgically.” There are times, she says, when “it is wise to spit on those in power, just as it can be wise to buy a painting you cannot afford.” She has made it her business for quite a few of her 50 years to pin down those in power—persuading them that a date with her and her tape recorder is a date with history—to cajole them to tell her how they got where they are and what they plan to do about it.

Some of the most powerful people on earth—people addressed as “Majesty,” “Chancellor,” “Mr. President,” and “Beatitude”—have submitted to sessions with Fallaci. Her trips to the Middle East have been to interview Golda Meir, Yasir Arafat, King Hussein, the Shah of Iran, and in 1979 the Ayatollah Khomeini, in whose presence she flung off the chador she had been issued to show what she thought of his regime’s treatment of women. When she went to China last fall, it was for two interviews with Deng Xiaoping—“a nice, cute man; I have never found a statesman so cute, so sincere”—who later told her own nation’s president when he visited Peking that “you have a strong woman in Italy, you have the strong Fallaci.”

These exchanges, commissioned by the Italian magazine L’Europeo and syndicated nearly everywhere, tend to be scolding, scolding, and sometimes (see *Encounters* at

the end)) outrageous. After Fallaci got Henry Kissinger to compare himself with “the cowboy who leads the wagon train by riding ahead alone on his horse ... [who] acts by being in the right place at the right time,” Kissinger said publicly that agreeing to see her was the stupidest mistake he had ever made.

Interviewing Fallaci herself isn’t so easy. Even the preliminary arrangements are a small drama. At least 17 phone calls, or so it seemed, preceded my first visit to her apartment, 10 flights above Manhattan, a few months back. Ringing her doorbell, I felt awed, as a novice surgeon might if he were about to transplant the heart of Dr. Christiaan Barnard. Who was I, a big-boned, repressed Midwesterner with a humdrum personal history, to confront this tiny, glamorous Mediterranean volcano? She was the sort of personage whom spies followed, even (or perhaps especially) during her dramatic trysts with her late lover, Alekos—Alexandros Panagoulis, the allegedly assassinated Greek resistance fighter and hero of her new novel, *A Man*. Surely she would find me too Teutonic, too apolitical. And how would I find her? How long would I hold her in awe?

Not, as it turned out, for very long. As the hours passed—that afternoon, and over crab legs at the Oak Room of the Plaza Hotel a couple of weeks later—everything I had been hearing about Fallaci turned out to be true. She is intense, she is hilarious, she is exasperating, she is magnificent, and she is, as she wrote of Panagoulis in her collection called *Interview With History*, “a well of contradictions,” going so far at one point as to claim that “I am not a temperamental Italian.” No, and Leonid Brezhnev is not a Slav.

Fallaci declined to say, speaking of Brezhnev, whether or not an interview with him was in the offing, or one with Ronald Reagan. She answered such of my questions as she chose to hear, ignoring others but leading the talk into unexpected byways. Suddenly I was hearing about all the books in her parents’ library in Oriana’s adolescence—her family was poor, but money for books was always scrounged from somewhere. “I was like the girl who could choose any dancing partner she wished. I could dance with the French literature, the Italian, the English, the American, the Russian, but I gave the grand waltz to the Anglo-Saxon. I fell in love with its narrative. I have a romantic approach to life, like Emily Bronte. In America, romance means the top of the skyscraper, the violins and the candles, but real romance is a pattern of culture, a blossoming just when a culture is near to death. It can be very brutal.”

She was generous in answering rhetorical questions she posed herself. “Do I take on people and forces more powerful than your President? Yes. Do I pay for it? Yes. Have I guts? Yes.” Is she modest? No, but she sure isn’t boring, either.” Being with her is like watching a one-woman game of charades, sometimes deadly serious ones. At one point, soon after we met, she bent down as she had in the Athens morgue, the first

time she beheld her murdered lover as a corpse. Later she fell to the floor of her living room, showing how, during the 1968 anti-Olympic riots in Mexico City, she had wriggled half a meter forward so that she could “take three bullets in the back, where I wanted them [wanted them!] instead of in the head.” And she told of the hunch that made her postpone a ride on a certain C-130 during one of her 12 visits to Vietnam. Lucky she did; that particular plane was never found.

“You Americans live on hope,” she told me as she had told an audience of students at Princeton University. (She pronounced it Prince-a-ton; for several hours after both my encounters with her, I had to suppress a pseudo-Fallaci accent.) “Hope,” she told them and now told me, “is your spinal cord. I live on tragedy. Tragedy is implicit in everything I say and write. My moral and political education was completed by the time I was 10 or 11, when I accompanied my father to small villages where he was fighting Nazi fascism. When they tortured my father, he never screamed, he laughed. Laughing he said was the same thing as crying. When a Nazi once told my mother to dress in the widow’s weeds, she said, ‘I will dress in black, and you tell your wife to dress in black, too, if you have a wife, and your mother, too, if you were born of a woman.’”

Fallaci herself wears slacks most of the time. The day we met she had on an evolved version of Levi’s with a blue work shirt, three rings, a necklace, open-toed espadrilles, and deep red polish visible on all 20 nails. Somebody very clever had cut her long,



straight hair. Smoking, which she said she never intends to quit, has browned the spaces between her teeth and deepened her voice to a baritone—an incongruous sound from one so small, who at times looks as girlish as a Botticelli portrait from a museum wall in Florence, where she grew up and which she often revisits.

Staying put is not her style. Soon after the scene in *A Man* in which Alekos Panagoulis meets Oriana, who hears from their interpreter that their

encounter was “not so much an interview as a mating of souls,” Alekos wonders where Oriana was all the years when he was “detonating the mines, when they were torturing me, when they tried me, sentenced me to death, shut me up in that tomb.” Oriana, “with remorse,” as she writes, replies, “Saigon, Hanoi, Phnom Penh, Mexico City, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Hong Kong, La Paz, Cochabamba, Amman, Dacca, Calcutta, Colombo, New York...”

She tries to spend half a year in Manhattan, a short walk from the elegant Fifth Avenue bookstore run by her Italian publisher, Rizzoli—“They pay me with an office, with someone to answer the phone, with a desk, rather than in money.” Her exact function there is clear to no one, including herself. “It is a very primitive arrangement; I am both master and guest. The others who work there call me ‘she’; they say ‘she’ put up the sign by the newsstand saying ‘magazines are to be bought, not read.’ If tomorrow it is necessary to sweep, I sweep. It’s pure anarchy, but I am a disciplined anarchist.” On another occasion she said that she, like Alekos, is a libertarian.

More than anything, she is a wanderer. “I cannot stay in any one place,” as she puts it. “I am very faithful in love for the person, though never with the signature.” She means that none of her liaisons, with Alekos and before, was officially a marriage, including the one alluded to in her previous novel, *Letter to a Child Never Born*. “I have always been monogamous; I don’t know the meaning of the word ‘adultery.’ But with places, it is different. I am a Florentine who belongs more to the mountainous places; generally I prefer the order and the coldness of the cities of the north.

“But in your country, if you want to see me happy, push me to the south, even as far south as Washington, and especially to old-fashioned places like Char-les-ton and New Orleans, where the houses are so beautiful even in July when you could die from the heat. Only don’t push me to Atlanta. If I were a dictator, I would have my gulag in Alaska, and the first person to go there would be the architect of the airport in Atlanta and of the Omni Hotel, with those balconies into nothing—in such stupid, bad taste. You cannot do that to a city, to a people; it has no human dimension. It makes me bellicose.”

So does inactivity. “If I do nothing I get bored, I feel guilty. If you want to see me fade like a dry flower, just leave me in one place, even if it is in the best house, the best circumstances. I would like best to be cloned, to have three Orianas — one in New York, one in Tuscany, one traveling from continent to continent like a moth around a lamp. I was so jealous of the astronauts; I asked them, ‘Why you and not me? You are going upstairs with no eyes to look, no ears to listen, no tongue to tell. I would have gone upstairs with all my eyes, all my ears, all my tongues.’ If I could, I would step on the moon and plant a tree.” Confined for the moment to earth and houseplants, she claims to be “at my best, alert and content, when I am in an airport, going somewhere.”

Just so the somewhere isn’t Greece, where “I shall never step again as long as I live, no matter what. On the way to China, to interview Deng, I took a double sleeping pill so I would not even know when the plane stopped for 40 minutes in Athens. I have already lighted all possible candles to Alekos in my book; in Athens are only his bones.” In Florence, Fallaci has purchased 26 plots in a fashionable Protestant cemetery called Allori, where she herself will someday lie next to her other, and near a stone engraved “To Alekos Panagoulis, with the love of ever forever, Oriana.”

A Man begins with Alekos's funeral on May 5, 1976, to which mourners swarmed by the thousands from all over Greece. Promoting this book, which sold over one million copies in the original Italian and is doing well in 16 translations, Fallaci makes one think of Truman Capote's insistence on full novel status, in 1966, for his *In Cold Blood*, which also was based on undisguised real events. When anyone claims that Fallaci could have told her story more effectively than she has done, as some, to her fury, have dared to, she gets very Mediterranean. "How easy it would have been for me not to use real names," she says. "My creativity would have been flying as a seagull! But to use Alekos's real name, and so many others, was generous, dammit, it was an act of generosity and sacrifice and guts.

"But now I have rancor for this book. It has stolen me for too long from life, and become a psychosis. [She pronounces the "p".] I am afraid now of love in all its shapes. If I see that I am beginning to like any human being too much—not just a man, but a woman or child, anyone who might become a friend—I think, 'No, no, not



again.' I have built on my skin the calluses, very thick. I have come to associate the idea of love with the idea of death, which people do not understand. When you break your leg, people send you flowers and help you to walk again, but when you have a disease of the soul, they sometimes even make fun of you."

Several times, as we talk, her telephone rings; she appears to be making dates, planning dinners. She soon is to be off to Holland and later to lord knows where else before she returns to Manhattan. Still, there are odd hints now and then that this extraordinary creature might be, of all things, lonely. She speaks with spirit and deep fondness of her family and of its unofficial headquarters, the farmhouse—three connected houses, actually, made of stones and covered with ivy—that she bought outside Florence the first time she had extra royalty money. That house now, she says, is not as cheerful as it used to be. "The golden season of that house was when my mother and Alekos were alive, and my sisters [three younger ones, the youngest adopted, all journalists] were all around."

After Alekos died, "there was a particular week when I was in the house all alone with the dog. I was touring the house like a tourist, up and down the stairs to all 30 rooms, to the little swimming pool, to the tower like from the Middle Ages with the ogival

windows, and the silence of the house at night made me think of death, of mystery, of space, of time—I saw myself, with an ironical smile, as a really very romantic character, like out of Emily Bronte, and I thought, ‘This will be my oldness, a very lonely oldness.’

“I’m not even sure that I hope to reach oldness. I would rather die well young than die badly old, in an undignified way. I would like people to remember me coherently when there is no Oriana left to tell the story.”

“Fallaci was 16 when she persuaded a newspaper in Florence to hire her and teach her to type, so that she could help pay for her studies at, of all places, medical school. She didn’t last there for long. “It was difficult, learning all the bones—ah, that cursed bone the sphenoid, it is made like a papillon, a butterfly, with so many holes and channels! I was so desperate, trying to memorize it for anatomy class, that I stole it, and my mother screamed, ‘Now you bring home the bones of the dead!’ Some of the bones were nice—the femur and the iliac belt were simple—but I could not stand the anatomy, the cutting of dead people, the smell.”

Why had so romantic a girl studied medicine in the first place? “Not to become the surgeon or the dentist, but to try to penetrate the mystery, the brain, to rationalize my own and all mankind’s impotency to say why we do what we do. When I am very angry, which is often, or very pleased, which is rarely, I am always present to myself—*presenta a mestessa*, in the Italian. This means that even if I am stabbing you—don’t worry, I won’t—part of me is watching, as from a window.”

Dreams figure often in Fallaci’s prose and her conversation. She owes her nearly skinny shape, she claims, to “dreams in which I run and skate and fight, and burn up the energies people outside on the street have to burn up by jogging.” But she also has claimed—her talk abounds with little contradictions—that she has not had a single dream since the death of Alekos, when, according to *A Man*, two cars driven by junta goons crashed into his and ran him off the road. As a result, understandably, Fallaci loathes automobiles, but she doesn’t hate limousines. She likes limousines just fine, especially after a trying session with, say, a photographer.

The aria *La Donna e Mobile* might have been a hymn to Fallaci. “There are so many kinds of intelligence,” as she says. “Henry Kissinger has a mind like a computer. My own mind is very different. Once I took the same test of intelligence that is given to the astronauts, who are expected to score 175 or 180, and my score came out to be 35, the intelligence of a monkey! The reason was that when they showed me a piece of plain white paper and asked ‘What is this?’ I answered ‘A field of snow,’ which was not the answer they wanted.”

Her's is a mind of intuitions, of instincts. It is a very bright mind, as one quickly finds on reading her interviews and especially her introductions to them in her book *Interview With History*. It is also the mind of a romantic who insists that politicians behave like honest men, even while she savors their failures to do so. Fallaci, though, is the first to smile at what she herself calls her "childish approach to politics." She attributes it to her carpenter father, who told her when she was 13 that politics is the highest form of human activity. Although she has made a brilliant career of rediscovering the opposite, she has apparently become even more addicted to politics in the process.

"If you want to see me all lighted up," she says, "just show me a little piece of politics, any politics. I have been asked to run for office myself, and I would be good at it, but I would not like slowly, slowly always having to make the compromises." Indeed she wouldn't; Fallaci in office would probably be less effective than Fallaci at large, storming around and persuading the omnipotent to see her. "Journalism," as she has written, "is an extraordinary and terrible privilege," and nobody practices it more devotedly than she.

Outside her apartment, New York City has grown dark. Fallaci refills tiny, delicate crystal glasses with cherry brandy. "In the good things," she says, "I am old-fashioned. When I curse, I curse more than a porter of the Marseilles harbor. I try to live aesthetically as well as morally, which means politically. The two shores, aesthetics and morals, are connected by the bridge that I am trying to cross in a way that is decent, rational, imaginative, and elegant."

"That," I observe, "is a big order."



"If I am not all these things all the time," says Fallaci, "then it is still the dream that matters. Forgive me if I don't achieve these dreams, because they were my target. If I have lost the road, then at least I was walking in that direction."

END

Encounters With Fallaci

HENRY KISSINGER
Washington, 1972

Dr. Kissinger, how do you explain the incredible movie-star status you enjoy, how do you explain the fact that you're almost more famous and popular than a President? Have you a theory on this matter?

Yes, but I won't tell you. Because it doesn't match most people's theories. . . . I'm sure that you have a theory about the reasons for my popularity.

I suppose that at the root of everything there's your success. I mean, like a chess player, you've made two or three good moves. China, first of all. People like chess players who checkmate the king.

Yes, China has been a very important element in the mechanics of my success. And yet that's not the main point. . . . The main point arises from the fact that I've always acted alone. Americans like that immensely. Americans like the cowboy who leads the wagon train by riding ahead alone on his horse, the cowboy who rides all alone into the town, the village, with his horse and nothing else. Maybe even without a pistol, since he doesn't shoot. He acts, that's all, by being in the right place at the right time. In short, a Western.

I see. You see yourself as a kind of Henry Fonda, unarmed and ready to fight with his fists for honest ideals. Alone, courageous.

Not necessarily courageous. In fact, this cowboy doesn't have to be courageous. All he needs is to be alone, to show others that he rides into the town and does everything by himself. This amazing, romantic character suits me precisely because to be alone has always been part of my style.

ARCHBISHOP MAKARIOS, president of Cyprus and head of the Greek Orthodox Church in Cyprus
New York, 1974

Isn't it true you're very fond of women?
(Silence)

All right, let's change the subject. They also say you're not a sincere man, that a word of truth never comes out of your mouth. Do you think a head of state should be permitted to tell lies?

No, this is something I can't accept. I'm so incapable of telling lies, any lie, that when I can't tell the truth, I prefer to keep silent. Silence is always better than lies. . . .

Just what you did with me when I asked you about women.

What did I say?

Nothing.

The perfect answer.

I'm beginning to like you, Beatitude.

THE SHAH OF IRAN
Tehran, 1973

If there's one monarch who's always been talked about in relation to women, it's you. I'm beginning to suspect that women have counted for nothing in your life.

Here I'm really afraid you've made a correct observation. . . . Nobody can influence me, nobody. Still less a woman. Women are important in a man's life only if they're beautiful and charming and keep their femininity. . . . You're equal in the eyes of the law but not, excuse my saying so, in ability. . . . You've never produced a Michelangelo or a Bach. You've never even produced a great chef. . . . Tell me, how many women capable of governing have you met?

At least two, Majesty. Golda Meir and Indira Gandhi.

Who knows? All I can say is that women, when they govern, are much harsher than men. Much cruder. . . . You're schemers, you're evil. All of you.

. . . the price of oil will go up?

It certainly will. Oh, most certainly! You can carry back the bad news and add that it comes from someone who knows what he's talking about. I know everything there is to know about oil, everything. It's really my specialty. . . . You [Westerners] make us pay more for everything, scandalously more, and it's only fair that from now on you should pay more for oil. Let's say— 10 times more.

AYATOLLAH KHOMEINI
Qum, Iran, 1979

This *chador* that they made me put on . . . and which you insist all women must wear . . . making it hard to work and move about. . . . By the way, how do you swim in a *chador*?

This is none of your business. Our customs are none of your business. If you do not like Islamic dress you are not obliged to wear it. Because Islamic dress is for good and proper young women.

That's very kind of you, Imam. And since you said so, I'm going to take off this stupid, medieval rag right now. There. Done.

Why is it a sin to drink a glass of wine or beer when you are thirsty or when you're eating? And why is listening to music a sin? Our priests drink and sing—even the Pope. Does this mean the Pope is a sinner?

Drinking makes people lose their heads and impedes clear thinking. Even music dulls the mind, because it involves pleasure and ecstasy, similar to drugs. Your music, I mean. Usually your music has not exalted the spirit, it puts it to sleep. And it destroys our youth, who become poisoned by it, and then they no longer care about their country.

Even the music of Bach, Beethoven, Verdi?

I do not know those names.

ALEXANDROS PANAGOULIS
Athens, 1973

Alekos, what does it mean to be a man?

It means to have courage, to have dignity. It means to believe in humanity. It means to love without allowing love to become an anchor. It means to struggle. And to win. . . . And for you, what is a man?

I'd say that a man is what you are, Alekos.