Searching for Madame Nhu

by Katie Baker

Mrs. Ngo Dinh Nhu fires a .38 pistol. (Larry Burrows/Time Life Pictures via Getty)

Lyndon Johnson flirted with her. JFK hated her. Historians blamed her for South Vietnam's downfall. And decades later, a writer found her hiding out in Paris. A new book uncovers the final days of Saigon's infamous Dragon Lady.

Saigon, 1963: The city slinks toward a feverish violence. On the streets, monks set themselves alight to protest the government's anti-Buddhist bent. Dissenters plot in secret among the Army's ranks. In squalid prisons, students and political enemies rot in soiled tiger cages. And ensconced in Independence Palace, the insular ruling family prepares for martial law and inflates reports of their success against the Viet Cong. But the Americans backing the fragile South Vietnamese regime are growing disillusioned with President Ngo Dinh Diem and his pampered relatives and want the lot of them gone: the stubborn, inexperienced Diem, his ruthless younger brother, and particularly Diem's sister-in-law, the woman John F. Kennedy refers to as "that goddam bitch" – the vain, calculating first lady, otherwise known as the infamous Madame Nhu.

At the peak of her powers, with her bewitching beauty and relentless ambition, Madame Nhu inflamed the imagination and provoked the hatred of the West and the Vietnamese alike. *Time* and *Life* featured her on their covers and called her a "devious" enchantress; *The New York Times* crowned her "the most powerful" woman in Asia and compared her to the Borgias. She was described as "proud and vain," an "Ian Fleming character come to life," "as innocent as a cobra," an "Oriental Valkyrie." Jackie Kennedy thought she had a "queer thing for power," and the AP's fellow in Saigon, Malcolm Browne, knew her to be "the most dangerous enemy a man could have." Her penchant for tightly fitted sheaths and scarlet fingernails played into her image as a *grande coquette*, and her name became synonymous with feminine wickedness: Jackie used it as a slur for ladies she disliked, while Yoko Ono haters branded the Beatles interloper "Lennon's Madame Nhu."

But Madame Nhu's rise to notoriety and influence was short-lived. In the autumn of '63, a U.S.-backed coup deposed and disposed of her husband and brother-in-law, leaving her a hunted woman hiding out half a world away. After a few empty promises to sell her memoirs to Hollywood and make a comeback when the communists fell, Madame Nhu disappeared into obscurity – until an academic named Monique Demery tracked her down in the mid-2000s, begging her to tell her side of South Vietnam's sad story. Thus began a cat-and-mouse game that culminated in Demery's new book, *Finding the Dragon Lady: The Mystery of Vietnam's Madame Nhu*. It's a deeply intriguing, occasionally problematic work, one that struggles to find its way into the inner character of a narrator so unreliable, she makes Patrick Bateman look like a straight shooter – a woman still intoxicated by her faded glory and half mad from years as a recluse who comes across as ambivalently needy and terribly arrogant, conniving and pitiable, and shrewdly astute, often all at once.

Demery weaves the tale of her search for Madame Nhu in with biographical exposition about the first lady's life back in Indochine and Vietnam's turbulent modern history. Born more than a decade after Diem's ouster, Demery

never had the chance to witness the family's saga as it unfolded; instead, she relies on contemporary accounts by American journalists and eyewitnesses, CIA memos, presidential letters and transcripts, her own master's degree in Asian studies and two stints abroad in Vietnam, phone conversations with Madame Nhu, and, eventually, the first lady's garbled memoirs and a mysterious diary (more on those in a moment). The problem is, anything coming from the mouth or mind of Madame Nhu – even her old interviews with the Saigon press corps – tends to be deeply suspect, due to the first lady's penchant for self-aggrandizement, embellishment and cunning deception.
Even the earliest moments of Madame Nhu's life are shrouded in layers of mythmaking. Her birth, around the year 1924, was supposedly so auspicious that a Hanoi fortune-teller exclaimed, "Her star is unsurpassable!" and told her mother, an imperial princess, that the little girl's fate "defied imagination." The prediction made her parents jealous, or so the story goes, and they overlooked their middle child, née Le Xuan ("beautiful spring"), in favor of her older sister and younger brother. The girl grew up craving attention and approval; her siblings teased that she was a changeling, and she felt herself to be "an object of morbid [doubt] and family infighting." Still, Le Xuan's childhood could hardly be described as impoverished, at least not on a material level: her father, a lawyer in the colonial administration and distant relative to the emperor, admired all things Western, and his children attended a French school, spoke French at home, and partook in continental pleasures. The family employed a staff of two dozen servants to cook, clean, and drive them around town in a shiny Mercedes.

Madame Nhu's mother may have envied or even despised her second daughter, but the two shared certain similarities. Madame Chuong was also renowned for her stunning good looks – the French called her the "Pearl of Asia" – and for her sense of superiority: at her champagne-filled soirées, she forbade other guests from wearing yellow, the imperial color. She also had a keen sense of political trends – her Tuesday salons in Hanoi became famous for hosting the city's most illustrious Vietnamese and French patrons. In 1939, when the Vichy regime allowed Japan to set up shop in the colony, the Chuongs began cultivating influential relationships with Tokyo diplomats. Here, Madame Chuong's beauty came in quite handy; according to the French Sûreté, or secret police, she was as "famous throughout Indochina" for her "dogged ambition as for her *coucheries utilitaires* – sleeping around with people of influence from any and all nationalities," including the new bigwigs from Japan. Thanks to his wife's talents, Chuong *père* landed a plum job in Japan's puppet government. "In Annamite circles," the police added, using the derogatory term for native inhabitants, the "beautiful and very intriguing" Madame Chuong was "the one in charge; she directs her husband."

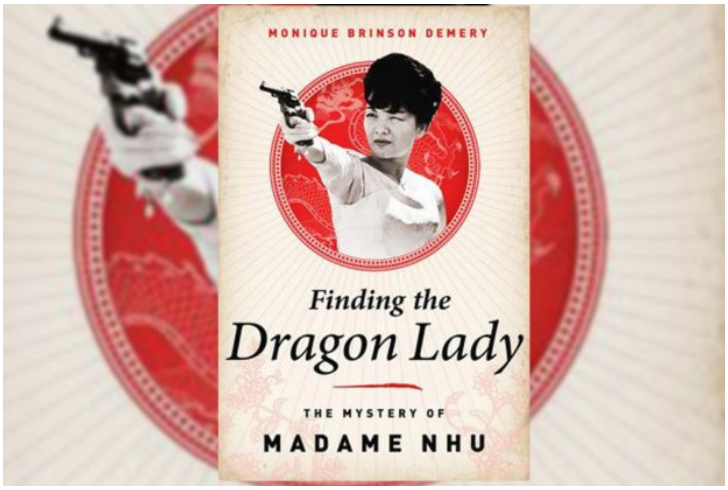
Another one of Madame Chuong's rumored lovers was a man by the name of Ngo Dinh Nhu. The 30-year-old came from a prominent Catholic family; his father had once held a position in the royal court, but stepped down in protest of colonial policies. He secretly trained his six sons in anti-French nationalist politics, including his third boy, Diem, and his fourth, Nhu. The studious Nhu had recently returned to Indochina from France, where he'd trained as a librarian and archivist. On one of his visits to the Chuong home, he met the 15-year-old Le Xuan in the garden; the two were quickly betrothed in a strategic alliance. "I never had a sweeping love," Madame Nhu told a reporter years later. "I read about such things in books, but I do not believe that they really exist." Nevertheless, the couple married in 1943 in front of the "tout Hanoi"; the 18-year-old bride, now a Catholic convert, wore a red silk robe embroidered with the xanthous royal trim.

After the wedding, the Nhus moved to the imperial capital of Hue, where they soon witnessed the devastating effects of Japan's stewardship of the countryside. In 1944 and 1945, due to crushing crop requisitions and dwindling natural resources, famine scorched the land, killing over 2 million people and driving the starving towards urban centers. In desperation, peasants ate grasses and leaves and stripped trees of bark, before succumbing to hunger along roads strewn with cadavers. Into this vast misery, the communists quietly stepped in to help people find food, give farmers seeds to replant, and gather recruits to their cause. When the Japanese surrendered to the Allies at the end of World War II, the French assumed they would be able to reoccupy their former colony – and found themselves facing a homegrown army intent upon national independence. In 1945, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, the communists began battling French troops and imprisoning and executing opponents as bourgeois traitors – including the eldest Ngo brother. They briefly captured Diem, promising him a role in the new government if he backed Ho Chi Minh (he refused); and they also came looking for Nhu, who hid himself while his bride bluffed to divert suspicion, even inviting soldiers into her home to wait for her husband. Nhu went on the lam, laying low in a Catholic town, where the Chuongs also happened to turn up in flight from the communists. (They'd tried, unsuccessfully, to bribe their way into the graces of the Viet Minh; the Catholics eventually smuggled the couple to safety in Saigon by disguising them as a monk and a peasant woman.) Meanwhile, Madame Nhu and her infant daughter were rounded up by communist foot soldiers and marched out of Hue with scores of other political prisoners.

Eventually Nhu and his wife both managed to make their way to Saigon and reunite. From there, they headed to the resort village of Dalat, a colonial oasis of privilege designed to look like a cross between a Normandy village and an Alpine getaway (albeit one where tigers roamed the underbrush). Madame Nhu and her family installed themselves in a house on the Rue des Roses, not far from the residence of her cousin, the playboy emperor Bao Dai. He'd surrendered his power to the Japanese and the communists before theoretically rejoining the French mission; in reality, that meant hiding out in Dalat to enjoy the good life – tennis, bridge games, fishing trips, swimming excursions – while the battle raged far below. The cousins frivolously called the fighting – which claimed

between 250,000 and 500,000 communists and some 75,000 Frenchmen – *une guerre bizardouille*, that weird little war. They did not think it would determine their fates.

Ngo Dinh Nhu suspected otherwise. Under the guise of lounging about in Dalat, hunting big game, and growing rare orchids, he'd been working in secret to build a network of sympathizers for a new political party to oppose Ho Chi Minh. It would be helmed by his brother Diem, a former bureaucrat known for his integrity and idealism who was circulating abroad to drum up support for a non-communist state. By 1954, Diem had convinced the Americans – in the throes of the Red Scare and desperate to stop the Communist influence in Asia – to back his plan. When the U.S. arrived at the Geneva accords to negotiate an end to the Indochinese war, the Yanks put Diem's name forth as their pick for prime minister of a non-communist state south of the 17th parallel. Madame Nhu's cousin, the emperor Bao Dai, would be the nominal head of the new state (in reality, he planned to live in the south of France and stay out of politics altogether). Only later did Diem realize why the French – who hated his hard nationalist stance – had agreed to his appointment; Paris felt sure Diem was destined to fail at the impossible task of fixing South Vietnam and keeping Ho Chi Minh at bay.



When Diem arrived in Saigon as the new man in charge, he faced a bankrupt treasury, cities plagued by organized crime rackets, and a refugee crisis in the form of a million arrivals from the north, where farmers were fleeing communist purges. Meanwhile, Ho Chi Minh was encouraging comrades in the south to go underground and wage a guerrilla war. Diem, an ascetic man who had little taste for the dirty pragmatisms of political rule, needed his brass-knuckled brother by his side. So the Nhus moved into the presidential palace, into a private wing done up in rare silks and tiger skins, to help Diem crush Saigon's gangs, suppress French sympathizers and shore up his power. By 1957, thanks to his brother's help, Diem was being hailed as the "tough miracle man of Southeast Asia" by the foreign press, and Washington was pouring millions into South Vietnam's coffers.

Nhu might have gotten public credit as the street smarts behind the mild-mannered Diem's regime, but Madame Nhu would soon eclipse both Ngo brothers in ambition and cold-blooded mettle. When a political enemy and French stooge boasted that he would run Diem out of town and keep Madame Nhu around as his concubine, she snarled, "You are never going to overthrow this government because you don't have the guts. And if you do overthrow it, you will never have me because I will claw your throat out first." She then organized a rally calling the man and his French allies "saboteurs of national independence" – an act of provocation in an "already overheated political atmosphere" that got her exiled to Hong Kong for a few months at the Americans' insistence. "Instead of looking at it as punishment," Demery writes, "Madame Nhu began to view their sending her away as confirmation of her potential power. If she didn't matter, they would have let her stay home. Clearly she was too dangerous to ignore."

By 1956, Madame Nhu's influence crystallized into a seat in the National Assembly, in elections that were reportedly rigged by the ruling family (she insisted that her nomination reflected the will of her admirers). Her parents made out well too – her father was appointed South Vietnam's ambassador to Washington, while her mother became the country's observer at the U.N. Once in office, Madame Nhu used her sway to push through laws that smacked of personal vendettas: under the banner of championing women's rights, she drafted Family Code legislation to ban concubines and outlaw divorce – a seemingly progressive step, until the rumor mill caught wind of the fact that Madame Nhu's sister, Le Chi, was embroiled in a torrid affair and desperately seeking a divorce of her own. When Le Chi heard of the new law, she slashed her wrists and ran madly around the palace in protest; Madame Nhu reportedly told Le Chi that her only regret was that her sister "didn't succeed at death." (Later, Le Chi's lover would claim that Madame Nhu had tried to get rid of him by paying someone to inject him with cholera.) She also imposed crushing Morality Laws that banned dancing, beauty contests, contraception, and underwired bras, despite the fact that she herself liked to wear a scandalously low-cut *ao dai* robe and high French stilettos.

Indeed, Madame Nhu seemed to like to play up her sexiness, while at the same time proclaiming her modesty. One contemporary described her as “so coquette,” an uncontrollable flirt who nevertheless castigated the Americans for “seduc[ing] Vietnamese women into decadent paths.” Another said she “look like a hot lady, talk too big.” She reportedly “reveled” in the attentions of politicians and military men on a trip with her husband to D.C. and sent teasing letters to Vice President Lyndon Johnson. When her bachelor brother-in-law – who relied upon her to act as official hostess and first lady – criticized her outfits for being too form-fitting (she was “moulded into her dress like a dagger in its sheath”), Madame Nhu replied, “It’s not your neck that sticks out, it’s mine. So shut up.” Whether or not she engaged in any actual affairs – a topic of hot speculation – she was seen as a temptress, a femme fatale, a “vixen of the first order.” She appeared to enjoy the rumors, or at least not mind them very much. “If any man is promoted and he is not too ugly, it is immediately said, ‘A protégé of Madame Nhu’s,’” she clucked in an interview with *Time* magazine.

Certainly, the stigma of her mother’s voracious appetites had clung, unfairly or not, to Madame Nhu. Like her mother, she was also accused of being, as Demery puts it, “the real man in the family.” Diem’s chief of staff told reporters that “she is dominant in the household”; a *Washington Post* correspondent noted that Diem “listened to her more than anybody in Vietnam.” She loved to live in a man’s world – relishing the ins and outs of political machinations (“her capacity for intrigue was boundless,” wrote one contemporary) and thriving on pomp and circumstance. The Pulitzer-winning *Times* reporter David Halberstam noted, “Madame Nhu had a real zest for the ceremonies of leadership. She was the only one of the family who walked the way a dictator should walk – with flair and obvious enjoyment, trailed by a line of attendants – turning slowly first to the right then to the left in acknowledging the crowd. It was always a virtuoso performance ... This was the way Mussolini must have done it.” To demonstrate her courage and the Ngo brothers’ weakness, she liked to tell the story about how, during a coup attempt in 1960, she convinced the “softhearted” Diem and her confused husband to stand strong against the traitors. “Up until then,” she told Halberstam a few years later, “they had not taken me that seriously. But then they began to notice me.” On another occasion, she cooed to *Newsday* reporter Marguerite Higgins, “Power is wonderful.”

Madame Nhu and her family liked power so much, they had a hard time sharing it. (“If we open the window, not only the sunlight, but many bad things fly in also,” Madame Nhu reasoned.) Though the country was supposed to have held free and fair elections to reunify with the north, Diem kept putting off the vote, since it was obvious that Ho Chi Minh would win in a landslide. Meanwhile, Nhu had organized a shadowy cadre of secret police who kept busy torturing and killing dissenters. Diem, already an insular man, resisted the American pressure to open up and diversify his government. Rumors of profiteering and money laundering fanned the flames of opposition, while communists continued to make gains over hearts and minds in the countryside. The regime even tried to intimidate the foreign press – Madame Nhu said she hoped Halberstam would incinerate himself and offered to “supply the fluid and the match,” and a *Newsweek* reporter got kicked out of the country for calling Madame Nhu “the most detested personality in South Vietnam.” But Nhu himself admitted that the couple was hated far and wide. “I am vilified so that others may be spared,” he said. Madame Nhu was less interested in playing the good martyr. She accused the Americans of fomenting a plot against her, slamming them as “foreign militarist[s]” and “Nazi-like cynical young men.” She called President Kennedy “intoxicated” (by which she meant poisoned by pro-communist opinion), while the U.S. military personnel in Vietnam were “little soldiers of fortune.”

The final straw – at least, as far as Washington was concerned – over Madame Nhu’s brazenness came during the summer of 1963. The regime, which heavily favored the Catholic Church, had clamped down on Buddhist displays of religious ceremony, and monks had started self-immolating in protest. In a supremely Marie Antoinette–like moment, Madame Nhu sniffed that the suicides were “barbecues” and offered to bring the mustard to the next one. “Let them burn! And we shall clap our hands,” she declared. She even sneered that the monks were being unpatriotic by setting themselves on fire with foreign petrol. The regime’s attitude set off mass protests, and Diem declared martial law. Though Washington warned the Ngos to keep the streets peaceful, Nhu secretly encouraged his militias to dress up like Army men and mow down the Buddhists in their temples. The resulting bloodbath left Madame Nhu “in a state of euphoria, chattering like a schoolgirl after a prom.” It was, she said, “the happiest day of my life.” It was also the beginning of the end for the Ngo family’s rule.

Under pressure from an irate Kennedy administration – “that bitch stuck her nose in and boiled up the whole situation down there,” JFK would later tell his advisers – Diem arranged for Madame Nhu to go on an extended tour of Europe. She decided to add the United States onto her itinerary, despite semiofficial dissuasion. Her parents, ever the political opportunists, had sensed Washington’s changing winds and were publicly speaking out about their “power-hungry propagandist” of a daughter. (In private, Madame Chuong told the CIA that she’d urged Vietnamese expats to run her “monster” of a child “over with a car” – or, lacking that, to throw eggs and tomatoes at her.) It’s possible that a different personality would have arrived on U.S. shores with a more humble sort of charm offensive; for her part, Madame Nhu waltzed off the plane in a mink stole and hot pink lipstick, giggling about her “feminine spirit of contradiction – maybe if [the Americans] had invited, had insisted that I come, I would not!” Congressmen called her “too big for her britches,” while the press called her “too beautiful to ignore.” She pressed her case on college campuses, palled around with the Republican Clare Booth Luce, the wife of the conservative

Time-Life publisher Henry ("I wouldn't be surprised if they were lesbians," Jackie Kennedy complained to a biographer), and accused JFK insiders of being "not red yet, but pink." Madame Nhu was hardly obeying her orders to lay low and keep quiet.

Back at home, the Diem administration's troubles had reached the point of no return. The Americans secretly signed off on the idea of a coup, leaving Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge in charge of the details. The ensuing web of plots and counterplots leading up to the army's takeover of power has been well documented and parsed; it ended with Diem and Nhu lying murdered and mangled in the back of an armored vehicle, the first in a series of tumultuous coups that would draw America into an escalating involvement in the Vietnam conflict. Some scholars have speculated that had Diem stayed in place, the Vietnam War might never have happened; then again, maybe the family would have been murdered anyway by their ever-growing pool of enemies. In any case, on October 31, 1963, the only member of the regime left standing was its most noisy and audacious one, cocooned an ocean away in the Beverly Wilshire hotel, where she'd received panicked news reports of the ghastly events unfolding at home. At first, Madame Nhu refused to believe her husband and brother-in-law were dead; she railed against the Judases in D.C. for their complicity and declared, "Whoever has the Americans as allies does not need any enemies." For all her posturing, though, Madame Nhu must have known she was in deep trouble and that her days of glory as the Dragon Lady of Saigon were drawing to a desperate close.

The rest of Madame Nhu's story peters out not with a bang but a whimper. Deeply in debt, she skipped town with half of her hotel bill unpaid to hide out in Paris. But when the new South Vietnamese government asked the French to extradite her back to Saigon to face justice, she flew instead to Rome, where her four children had been spirited by a sympathetic ally. Tragedy soon followed; her oldest daughter died in a car crash in 1967, while her parents met a grim end in 1986 – smothered to death in their D.C. duplex by their son, who had been stranded in Vietnam after the coup and who emerged from years of imprisonment with a broken body and a deeply damaged mind. Meanwhile, the ever-loquacious Madame Nhu stubbornly went silent, shutting herself away in a run-down villa on the outskirts of Rome and refusing to talk to reporters after her parents' murder. For all anyone knew, she was still skulking about Italy, but no one had really seen her for years.

Enter Monique Demery. The author claims she'd been fascinated with Madame Nhu as a child, and she wanted to set out to tell Madame Nhu's side of the story – to make the fearsome villainess into a "sympathetic" character and give her a chance to tell her "version of the truth." Off of a hunch and an old address unearthed in a presidential library (and perhaps off of a tip from a 2003 *Times* story, which noted that Madame Nhu was thought to be living back in Paris), Demery tracked down the first lady's apartment building and left a letter for her with the valet. Months later, Demery's phone finally rang and a gravelly voice on the other end of the line declared itself to be Madame Nhu. She worried that Demery was a CIA informant, or, worse, a *Times* reporter; she flattered her by insinuating that Demery was "an angel" come to help her "finish the memoirs and then everything will be revealed."

Hook, line, sinker, and Demery is on board. She agrees to let Madame Nhu control all the terms of their contact. She tries to soften the old woman up by confessing that she's pregnant – telling Madame Nhu about the baby before she tells most of her friends – and sends her pictures of the newborn. (Like her, she thinks, Madame Nhu was "obviously a caring mother.") When Madame Nhu tells Demery to fly to Paris for a face-to-face meeting, she packs up her baby and boards a flight; when the first lady fails to show, Demery forgives her. She feels "flattered" Madame Nhu is "sharing confidences" with her – "the feeling was simply thrilling, like the early stage of a romance. She led me on and I followed" – and she is "eager for her acceptance." She imagines that Madame Nhu is like Scarlett O'Hara – beautiful, strong-willed, misunderstood – and when the first lady sends her pages of rambling "memoirs" written in half code with biblical references and indecipherable footnotes, Demery feels "like a character in a Vietnamese fable who finds an enchanted treasure." She wants to sympathize with Madame Nhu – the first lady's woeful stories about being a neglected wife who just wanted a quiet life in the countryside "tugged at my heart strings," Demery admits – to "understand her," to save her. When Demery dares to ask a question off-script, Madame Nhu punishes her by disappearing into stony silence until Demery is "ready to apologize for my outburst." Some might call this push-pull power dynamic manipulative or abusive; Demery prefers to characterize it as "a friendship."

To her credit, Demery is transparent about their exchanges, and admits she "should have known better" than to totally trust Madame Nhu. "At the beginning, I had been a little star-struck," she says. Still, she's clearly rooting for the old gal, and as such can be something of a Madame Nhu apologist in places. She also has a tendency to repeat certain stories that seem to fall somewhere in the hazy realm between fact and fable. Perhaps Demery is only using these incidents to demonstrate Madame Nhu's fondness for padding her own legend. (She's the one who saved the South Vietnamese government from collapse! Famous people had to bow down when they met her! She faced down a barrage of bullets with a baby in tow! President Kennedy's own motorcade had to stop to let her pass!) Yet Demery doesn't always make it clear which stories check out with sources beyond the vivid shades of Madame Nhu's own imagination – leaving the reader in the same frustrating position that she surely found herself in when trying to sort through the shards of Madame Nhu's fascinating life and fractured personality.

Which brings us to the matter of the diary. This document did not come from Madame Nhu, or from the presidential libraries, or from her children. It showed up in the possession of a 30-something half-Vietnamese vet from Queens who found Demery via the Internet. He tells Demery he's got Madame Nhu's diary, but either won't say where it came from, or he did say and Demery's not telling. She's sure it belongs to Madame Nhu, as the spindly, spiderweb writing is exactly the same as the first lady's distinctive hand. Trouble is, the document surfaces in 2012 – a year after Madame Nhu has passed away in Rome. The other problem is that the diary chronicles a span of years punctuated by a cataclysmic disaster in which the presidential palace, and Madame Nhu's sleeping quarters, were directly bombed by rebels. The resulting fire scorched all of her possessions – incinerating even her prized tiger pelts – and yet somehow, this paper-and-glue diary survived, and found its way, years later, into the hands of some post-coup palace looter who covertly preserved it for posterity.

Maybe it really is Madame Nhu's diary. Maybe the first lady really did walk across that bridge, baby at her breast, with Communist bullets whizzing by her head; maybe it wasn't just a scene lifted out of her favorite Vietnamese myth. Maybe she did really desire to live the life of a quiet housewife who spent her days writing children's books, as she once told Demery. Maybe she was a virtuous Madonna with a heart of gold. Maybe she did all the brave, brazen, bold things she said she did. Either way, it's one hell of a story.