That Most Beautiful Moment of a Woman's Life

By Michael Gordon, Ph.D.

No amount of personal effort or plain decency could keep me from staring at the killer. And I certainly knew better than to gape at the object of so much debate, outrage, and indignation. But you know how it is: those moments in the presence of the legendary are otherworldly for those of us unaccustomed to the thin air of celebrity. It's like you step on stage smack dab in the middle of the play when just moments before you were watching passively from the back row.

Who in the world would've thought that the woman perched only a few paces across the small room, someone I had heard about my whole life but had never met, was the instrument of a good man's destruction? I have to tell you that I consider myself both a good judge of character and a skilled cynic (the two qualities being not at all unrelated) and so I was shaken by the thorough absence of anything remotely sinister about her. Hell, she looked like everyone's purest image of a kindly old lady. Give her a wooden spoon, a bowl full of cookie dough, and a white-enameled oven and she'd fit snugly onto a Norman Rockwell canvas.

Her thin hair, dyed a pale brown for most of the past thirty-five years, glistened thanks to ample administrations of adorning sprays. The wrinkles on her face, although kind to her because they were neither many nor deep for a woman in her seventh decade, still trumpeted the advancement of senescence. All the other normal consequences of tiring muscles and a slowed metabolism stood in full view. What I saw here was an aging woman, not altogether decrepit, but still the unlikeliest of killers.

By now you must be wondering about the nature of her crime. Was it a crime of passion? In a manner of speaking. Did it end the life of a decent man? Yes, it did. Was she punished for her role in this poor soul's death? Only indirectly, hence some of the outrage. Were there other victims of

her murderous habits? Unfortunately, yes. Was she remorseful? You'll have to figure that one out for yourself. Should I stop taunting you and get to the story? Undoubtedly.

Let me begin by telling you about her first victim. Alfred was a simple man. Bald except for a ring of white hair, he never talked much, at least I don't remember him uttering more than a few words here and there. But then again I never actually met him, living as he did on the opposite coast during a time when such travel was well beyond my means. I only know what he looked like from the newspaper clipping of his brief obituary.

When I did have the occasion to visit, his housing was already subterranean, and the cause of his demise remarried. I do remember that he had been a musician with a symphony orchestra who spent many a year blowing his clarinet under the watchful eye of one conductor or another. I could be wrong about this, but I think he also augmented his income, likely of the meager sort, by serving as a music teacher in the small elementary school situated a few blocks from home. His home, that is, the one he shared with his wife, my Aunt Edith or, as she later became known within the family, Aunt Edith the Mankiller.

I've asked around and no one holds other than positive memories about the time Aunt Edith and Uncle Alfred spent together. The neighbor who lived to the right side of the gray clapboard house claimed never to have heard so much as a single voice raised in anged over her twenty years of occupancy. Same story from a friend who lives immediately across the street, and from a couple who joined Edith and Alfred on many a holiday junket.

But isn't that what you always hear after a particularly grisly homicide? Some dazed neighbor in a torn cotton shift says something to the newsperson about how the accused was a quiet and decent person who never caused a lick of trouble to any living soul? Next comes the attendant at

a local Seven Eleven who speaks with some pride about how he and the perpetrator often worked together for local charity events.

Now I need to tell you how I heard about uncle Alfred's trip to the Great Beyond. I happened to be home visiting my parents on a Saturday afternoon. As I can barely remember what I did yesterday, I can't truthfully fill in too many details of an event that occurred many years ago. But the highlights of that morning are well retained in my memory.

The phone rang on the kitchen wall just as we were eating lunch and my father answered. He only got out a quick "hello" before lapsing into a receptive silence. His face passed through the full range of negative emotions: shock, anger, sadness, and, finally, bewilderment. The conversation ended with his expressing his condolences and passing the phone to my mother.

You know how these phone conversations are for the spectator. You realize something's terribly wrong but interrupting tends to delay the relay of information rather than expedite it so you sit there anxiously and bounce around the chair. And you think of all the people you know who could have died or were about to and you pray that it's not someone you really like or depend on or both. If you're especially self-centered or if you're just plain human and therefore can't stop the tumbling of stress-induced thoughts, you hope that whoever died doesn't live too far away because you've got plans and as upset as you might be and as much as you should be supportive, you'd hate to miss out on other opportunities.

My mother hung up and then both parents sat down. An agonizing few moments inched ahead and then my father spoke. "It seems Uncle Alfred died."

Honestly, I felt relieved because, while I knew he was nice and all, Uncle Alfred was by no means a major player in my family's life. But I did feel badly, although not overwrought, simply

because Uncle Alfred had a good reputation within a family that showed more talent for demonizing than for bestowing sainthood.

The next question was obvious: “How did he die?” As best I knew, Alfred had been a reasonably healthy fellow, so I was curious what did him in.

That’s when quiet abruptly seized control of our discussion. I could hear the wall clock, of pre-quartz vintage, ticking away. The sprinkler outside became the loudest sound source in the vicinity as the water arced high over the yard and, at the end of the cycle, splattered on the driveway’s edge. My parents just sat silently, seemingly lost in thought and sadness.

My father made the first attempt at a response to my question. He looked at his hands, then sadly at my mother, then back at his hands. I noticed now that his body began to quiver and I remember thinking to myself, “Dad’s gonna break down and cry and Dad never breaks down and cries. Even when his own father died his composure remained undented. So how is it possible that he’s this saddened by the death of a pleasant but distant relation?”

You know how it is when someone else gets emotional. This charge of electricity starts up your back as you realize that something painful and intense is about to break the surface of what had been calm and predictable. And as I was already entirely too sensitive to parental moods, my complete array of emotional early warning radar was fully deployed.

That’s why I was completely caught off guard when my father erupted into an almost uncontrollable fit of laughter. This was followed within milliseconds by my mother’s convulsions of hilarity that became so intense that she had to make a quick visit to the adjoining bathroom.

“Wait a minute,” I said, now thoroughly confused, “What could possibly be so funny about your uncle’s death?”

My father was the first to regain composure. He took a deep breath in hopes of steadying himself. Unsuccessful in his first attempt, he took another breath and tried again. “Aunt Edith told me that Alfred died ‘at that most beautiful moment of a woman’s life.’”

This added detail confused me all the more. I was of the opinion, one I can still hold, that “the most beautiful moment of a woman’s life” was other than a universal constant. I assumed that women had many beautiful moments and that the most beautiful could be a matter of personal preference or perception. I could see that the first kiss or the exchange of marital vows or the birth of a child could all be classified as the most beautiful moment in any one woman’s life. An especially sarcastic friend who’s heard this story added that, for his mother, it would have been when she got her first mink coat.

My puzzlement more obvious than usual, my father tried again. “Son, it seems Uncle Alfred died during a moment of intimacy with Aunt Edith.”

Even I, in my state of severe naïveté, figured that one out. Still young enough to believe that people your parents’ age long had sworn off sexual activity, the implication took a few seconds to settle, but then it burst forth with gusto.

“What you’re telling me here is that Uncle Alfred died during sex with Aunt Edith?” I asked.

“Yup. But that’s not all,” my father continued. “It seems” (he always began such pronouncements with “It seems”), “It seems Alfred died around 11 o’clock their time last night.”

I didn’t have a clue as to the relevance of that bit of information.

He continued. “Her call just now came an hour after the ambulance and medical examiner came to remove the body.”

What he was saying was that Aunt Edith had kept Uncle Alfred laying right beside her from the evening right through ‘til the dawn. As a matter of fact, she proudly, albeit sadly, told my

parents how bittersweet the night had been with Alfred in a such a peaceful state next to her.

The thought of remaining near a spouse who had recently died during the course of intercourse struck my parents as profoundly odd. They were of the opinion that a more appropriate plan would have been to call an ambulance, if for no other purpose than to remove the body and prepare it for burial. They judged her decision to take a more prolonged strategy as an indication of absolute bizarreness. To quote my father, "I guess Edith was always a float or two shy of a full parade."

That evening, I lay in bed and thought about Uncle Alfred's last moments on this earth, mainly those that included the very margins between his life and death. I imagined him reaching the pinnacle of ecstasy and suddenly finding himself floating upward into a post-coital haze of heavenly surroundings. He'd of course have a smile on his face and a strong urge to sleep away eternity.

I decided that very night on the following: Of all the ways to end one's earthly presence, dying in an effort to satisfy the wife had to be by far the most preferable. It surely beats death by floods, fires, occupational mishaps, highway accidents, drive-by shootings, cancer, or other diseases. Suicide does afford a level of personal control but requires a deep state of depression or at least hostility, neither of which condition is especially entertaining. And suicide can be rather messy when successful. If you judge one's demise for style, blood and bullets can lower the score.

Mind you, I understand that Alfred's death by sex had its drawbacks given that he missed out on the rest of a weekend and might not have actually reached the full measure of his ardor. For all I know, Alfred's up in the heaven's thinking, "Ten more seconds and I could've gone out with a bang." But I'm not sure there's a perfect way to die and this comes about as close to

perfection as I can figure.

Now middle-aged and often confronted with the inevitability of death, I have made it abundantly clear to my good wife that I wouldn't mind going the way Uncle Alfred went, essentially at the climax of my night. As a matter of fact, on those more than several occasions when I've aggravated her to the point where she screams, "I could kill you," I've shown the poor judgment to respond, "Would you mind trying to kill me the way Aunt Edith did in Uncle Alfred?" While this typically does not improve my marital situation at the moment, it certainly serves to remind her of my preferred cause of death.

Back to that fateful evening: I started thinking about the hours that followed Uncle Alfred's last gasp and began to doubt Edith's explanations about wanting final moments of togetherness before she would be left alone. That's sweet and all but it doesn't truly account for why a woman would lay with a corpse for what must have been seven or eight hours. Did she really want us to believe that lounging with a dead man for all those hours was justified by her love and devotion?

That's when this germ of cynicism began to bloom in my mind, eventually growing so large as to overtake any remnants of decency and good taste. As embarrassed as I am to admit it, I had this evil notion that Aunt Edith had other motivations. My hypothesis had to do with the natural process of rigor mortis, which certainly would have set in within the first few hours and affect all of his body parts, particularly one that might already have stood erect. Could Aunt Edith have figured that she might as well derive a few more hours of stiff pleasure before bidding Uncle Alfred a fond farewell?

The next day I mentioned these demented musings to my grandfather. He promptly hit me in mock horror and outrage. “How could my very own grandson find it so easy to locate the underbelly of such a tender scene?” I defended myself both physically and philosophically. “To the contrary, Grandpa. I see this scenario as evidence that love never dies . . . even when one of the partners does.” Again I got hit.

I’ll end with another bit of news about Aunt Edith’s curious life, and it couldn’t be truer. After several years of mourning, she met and married another fine gentleman, Arthur. They moved to an apartment and seemed to enjoy each other’s company. But were it not for improvements in critical care and the wonders of modern pacemakers, Arthur would have gone the exit route previously traveled by Uncle Alfred. Even Aunt Edith started to giggle when she informed the family last month that Arthur had spent four days in the hospital following a heart attack, which in turn followed another Friday night’s worth of overly-energetic marital activity. Yes, Edith is a serial man-killer, or nearly one.

And now I sit in her apartment, Arthur pale but by her side, as she makes polite conversation. She’s telling me about a trip both took to Switzerland last fall, but all I can do is hallucinate the scene of Aunt Edith in black boots and frilly lace negligee swinging from the two-bulb chandelier, about to finish off this latest victim. I look away to clear my head and maintain an air of social appropriateness, but it’s a struggle. I begin to lose and so I tell Aunt Edith it’s time for me to go. Arthur slowly lifts himself from the chair and shakes my hand. He’s smiling and seems content. But then again it was a Friday night, and he might just have been anticipating another blissful brush with death.