The Tree That Crashes in the Forest: On companionship

By Michael Gordon, Ph.D.

I am 72 years old. I have a hearing aid in my right ear, a plastic valve near my left ventricle, and a slight paunch protruding from my middle. On the top of my head is a wispy thatch of reddish-silver hair that stubbornly persists despite the absence of much follicular company. At the bottom of my feet are enough corns to keep a podiatrist in business for years. I wear eyeglasses with more levels of magnification than most microscopes, and these impossibly tight support hose that try valiantly to restrain blood vessels from breaking through the top layers of my papery skin. As best I can tell, I require more maintenance than a 1985 Jaguar or, perhaps better yet, a 1964 VW microbus that's barely survived too many cross-country adventures.

And somehow, despite my sinking jowls and my rising blood pressure, my disappearing youthfulness and my reappearing need for oversight and support, my gnarled feet and my somewhat stooped back, despite all of the predictable infirmities that accrue with age, I find to my utter amazement and thorough confusion that I am a hot item in the geriatric version of the dating game. I kid you not.

Yes, I may clutch my bottle of Metamucil close to my chest every evening around 10 and, yes, I spend at least 5 minutes removing various appliances from my body and depositing them on my dresser before getting into bed and, yes, you'd never see me on the cover of People Magazine with the banner, "Sexiest Man Alive," but I, Arthur P. Staubmeier, am a much sought after target of female attention down here in

the Gulf Coast of Florida.

Now I'll admit to you right off that the women who are chasing my sagging body aren't your spring chickens in the barnyard of heterosexual coupling. We're not talking here about young women in the 30's or 40's or even 50's who, despite their cosmetic worries, are nonetheless relatively taut of skin and steady afoot. The women interested in me are around my age, generally widowed, and desperate to secure companionship. They've survived marriage, children, menopause, and the death of at least one husband only to find themselves alone, lonely, and on the hunt for another man.

Because that's what everyone fears most at my age, or perhaps at any age. It's not so much the dread of infirmity or impoverishment or sheer boredom. Nor is it the dimming of confidence in talents, physical or intellectual. What all but the most withdrawn of us fear most is living alone, with no one to share in whatever joys or sorrows we might find around the house or world. It's not being able to behold the intricacies of a Venetian church door knowing that someone standing aside is in just as much awe of the carving as you are, so you don't need to say anything because it's been shared. It's about sitting alone in an elegant restaurant before an artfully decorated plate of salmon and not being able to say aloud to someone who might care, "Geez, is that beautiful or what?" It's about being that tree in the forest that falls without anyone hearing it crash.

So it's pure, unadulterated loneliness that drives us to restart engines that had long been on blocks in the backyards of our lives. You can laugh if you want to but we elderly like to touch and be touched, we like to travel together and see everything we can before most of our time is spent filling out Medicare forms, we like to feel the thrill

of romance even if we're not quite the physical specimens we might have been, and we still love having sex.

And that's why women from every corner of my community have been stopping by in droves, some referred by friends, others tipped off by an overheard conversation. They come with casseroles, they sit next to me at Frank=s Deli at the plaza we have nearby here when I just want to be alone with my coffee and bagel, they block my entrance to the men's room at the concerts during intermission and tell me how they spent their day. Hell, one lady I barely know somehow just appeared after a tennis game and asked if I wanted to grab a coke at the clubhouse.

You've also got to understand that the demographics are weighted heavily in my favor. For every one guy with a blood pressure around here, there are at least five women looking for some variant of love. If the woman is at all choosy about a man's physical or economic status, of course, the odds stretch all the more. Somehow or another I've found myself a seller in a heavily seller's market.

I'm not used to this, to say the least. I feel like I'm the object of so much attention just because I'm ambulatory and relatively affluent, sort of like a beautiful young woman who can never believe that someone likes her for more than her supple curves and smooth skin. But, of course, part of me is flattered that anyone would want this old carcass of mine by her side. I supposed I'm living proof of the advantages in love being blind, or at least somewhat vision-impaired by glaucoma, cataracts, and desperation.

So I sit here in my study overlooking a bayou created not by God but by a fleet of lumbering tractors, and I just can't sort out how it came to be that I'm dealing with

issues I thought I left behind just about the time General George Marshall took up residence in Berlin. How did I go from being a doting husband and grandfather ready to gently sail into the proverbial sunset of life to a potential suitor and sexual partner? How in the world did I end up in a position where I'm wondering what I should wear on a date or what I should do if one of these ladies expects some sexual favors?

But I'm wondering more whether I'm about to make a fool of myself because, with all the attention I'm getting from the gray hairs around my community, I'm a little torn up over this gal named Marlene from over on the other coast. I'm a little sheepish about telling you what happened but I need to anyhow.

I've been a widower for not quite three months now having been married for over 50 years to the sort of woman you'd want to be around for at least that long. But Joan died a death of the lingering kind after years of unstable health. I don't mind telling you that the last few years were an unremitting hell of doctor's appointment, of pill bottles piled high in a wicker basket, of seconds that ticked by with excruciating lassitude as we waited for the results of some medical test, of slow and wobbly steps toward an inevitable and pathetic decline, of heroic attempts at maintaining dignity in surroundings more conducive to humiliation, of standing around waiting for that other shoe to finally drop. And just like that she was gone and buried and mourned over and left to lie beneath the sandy soil on the other side of town. Just like that, as if a decades-long movie had stopped abruptly, never to be projected again.

I also have to say that I was a good husband, not only faithful but also tireless in trying to make things right for us, but mainly for her. Once we retired here so that we could best ride out whatever time was left us, I was there for her, first and foremost. I

made myself an expert in the various disorders that fed upon her. I used every bit of creativity I could muster to intersperse pleasure in the ever-narrowing spaces between the mountains of pain. I did what I could for her from morning to night.

And I know damn well that the reason I'm going on about how good I was to Joan is that I'm sitting here soaked to the bone with guilt for even thinking about another woman. Hell, my wife of over half a century hasn't been gone more than a dozen weeks and I've already put her aside, thinking seriously about starting with someone anew. Can't help but wonder if there's something shallow about me, something that makes it so easy for me to get off one horse and ride another. It feels like I'm being unfaithful and cheap and impossibly cruel.

Not that Joan expected me to spend the rest of my life padding around the house dusting off the dozens of picture frames that hold our memories. She told me so often to find someone else after she was gone that it got to be a kind of a joke between us. Upon finding out that Lester Fielding had died, she let me know that his wife, Sally, would make a fine mate for me because she cooked well and wasn't as crabby as most of the women we knew. It's a bit odd having one's ailing wife serve as a clearinghouse for future alliances, but that's the way she was. I suppose she was trying to give me the gift of a clean conscience, a kind of reward for my loyal service over the years. If so, I wish it were a present I could open more easily, without having to tug at the ribbon and struggle with the wrapper.

I guess like many in my situation, I couldn't stay around the house once the initial spate of visitors left after the funeral and the few weeks of friendly vigil that followed. On impulse I booked a tour to England and Ireland with one of those high-

end bus companies that just about wipe you, so attentive are they to your needs. I've always enjoyed the UK and figured this was as good a way as any at denying that my life course had just taken a sharp turn toward the unknown.

You know how the group dynamics settle out on these tours. Birds of a feather flocking as they do, the married couples gravitated toward one another while we unattached formed our own grouping. We were an odd collection of widows and widowers mostly, but not entirely because there was this woman I started to tell you about before, Marlene was her name. By the first evening I had found that I had spent more of the day chatting with her than paying attention to the sights of supposed interest. That day we talked mostly about our travels and plans for future voyages. She had been to my little part of Florida before so we compared notes on restaurants and galleries and such.

By that evening, despite all the interruptions for meals and sightseeing, we had grown quite friendly, taking the same seats on the bus and sharing all three meals. To show how friendly we had become, she took me by the hand after dinner and led me outside to a bench near the lantern of an antique pub. She told me that she had very much enjoyed our day together and hoped we would continue to pal around over the next few weeks. But she wanted me to know that, unlike the others in our gathering, she was married and was on this trip purely to recharge batteries that had been drained by taking care of her husband, Edward.

I still don't understand the details, but as best I can figure Edward, having suffered some kind of stroke, was left partially paralyzed and in need of constant care. He was wheelchair bound, catheterized, and only somewhat aware of what transpired

around him, floating in some either between the sharp details of ordinary life and the blurry images of an endless dream. Without going into specifics, Marlene made it clear to me that Edward was able to offer her love only in the memories he evoked of earlier and more robust times.

On good advice, Marlene traveled from home twice a year so that she might avoid the burnout so common to those responsible for long term care of a family member. She would leave Edward in the custody of his sister and head off for somewhere, anywhere where she didn't need to worry if the aide showed up on time or at all, if the visiting nurse remembered to check his bedsore and apply the proper antibiotic, if the pantry were stocked with enough of the apple juice he consumed in quantity through a flexible straw. She searched for trips that would distract her not only from the responsibilities of constant attentions, but from the crushing sadness of what Edward had become and what she had lost.

So in the cool air of the evening not far from the sweeping, green lawns of Hyde Park, Marlene looked me in the eye and explained that she wanted me to know about her situation right up front so that I wouldn't get the wrong idea. She said that she usually traveled with her friend, Helen, but that Helen had her own tale of woe and had to stay at home. With Helen around, Marlene didn't tend to get into too many conversations with others, especially the sort of unattached men who often signed up for these groups. But with Helen out of the picture, Marlene was on the loose for conversation, but not more.

It didn't bother me at all that my relationship with Marlene was strictly of the fellow traveler sort. It made it even easier to talk to her because I didn't have to worry

about the dangers of possible romance. I didn't need to obsess about all the things I'm obsessing about right at this minute.

So she talked about her daughter, Julianna, whose successes in the business world were matched only by the extent of her failures outside the office. I boasted about my daughters and their children, all of whom had come to the funeral just a few short months before. We went on and on about our past careers, our health problems, the friends we've made through the years. We talked while we walked together through the dark wooden stacks of Trinity College where even the golden light hitting the venerable rows of leather-bound books looked rich and mellowed by their centuries-long vigil. We strolled along the narrow streets of St. Andrews and wondered why the golfers in the group looked like misty-eyed pilgrims after a long trek to Mecca. We gazed upon the grey-stoned grandeur of Glenneagles and commented in a chummy unison how we might just have fallen into a stuffy BBC miniseries on public TV. We sat next to each other on each of the meandering bus rides and reveled in the special intimacy that comes from being cocooned for long hours with nothing else to do but share personal stories you never even told your best buddies back home.

I didn't take long for the two of us to become fast friends. And, mind you, we were just friends although I will tell you that several times I'd look over at her and admire the deep green of her eyes or the line of her still-attractive figure or how charming she looked huddled in a wool sweater during a cold English morning. I'll even be blunter with you and tell you that a few times I had to bundle my jacket over my lap just to cover an embarrassing but, at my age most welcome, swelling you know where. And I'd think about her at night back in my single bed where I still would roll

over to put my arm around another, only to be taunted by the emptiness.

At the end of the trip, we parted company on the friendliest of terms having truly appreciated the companionship we provided one another. Marlene was apprehensive about returning home because she had gotten a call from her sister-in-law that Edward seemed to be coming down with something, a cold maybe or worse. I was sad to see her leave because I thought she was so comfortable and smart and encouraging. Maybe that's what I liked about her so much. She seemed so to appreciate me, that I opened doors, called a friend on his birthday, knew about art and history, had some talent in cooking and carpentry. She definitely thought I was a good guy and made her opinion on that matter clear.

Understand that I had a wonderful relationship with Joan but, after 50 years of marriage and under the weight of infirmity, she didn't seem quite so focused on my virtues as on my shortcomings. The worse she felt the less patient she became with me, but then she'd feel guilty given how much she knew I was sacrificing, and this would make her even more depressed and, unfortunately, irritable with me. To now have someone unabashedly sing my praises was refreshing, almost intoxicating.

So Marlene goes home, I stay on in London for another week, and I'm thinking about her often and wishing I had someone to join me on my various excursions through museums, parks, and castles. And on the Wednesday before I returned home I call her because I know it's her birthday and I want to hear her voice. We chat about how nice a time we had together and how it would be nice to join forces again. Maybe after five minutes or so we hang up and I head for the bedroom feeling gloomy to the nth degree.

I've been back home now for three days. Just last night I opened my e-mail and

there's a message from Marlene. If I didn't know the sender, I would have sworn it was written by a love-struck teenager whose ardor had erupted and lost control. I won't go into the details because it's embarrassing to me but she came right out and said that she had fallen in love with me, that she had never met someone who so attracted her, that my birthday call was so thoughtful that it set off feelings in her she had never before experienced, that she wouldn't be able to eat, sleep, or ever be happy if she couldn't be with me. Then came the justifications: that she deserved happiness after years of being a custodian to someone she once loved but was no longer, that she was getting older and didn't want to lose what time she might have left to be with someone who could share a life with her, that she ached to be held and kissed and loved in ways that had long eluded her. If tear-stains could be transmitted digitally, I'm sure the message would have been saturated from the drippings of her emotions.

The message ended by telling me she wanted to meet me early next week so we could be together as more than friends. She said that she hoped I'd meet her, not at my house because she knew that would be even more awkward, but at a hotel on the beach by the art museum. She signed off by expressing her love for me and by letting me know I was in her every thought.

So now what the hell do I do? I'm obviously sweet on this woman but old-fashioned enough not to feel especially good about engaging in adultery, even given her marital circumstance. Because her devotion to Edward is such that she'd never leave him, I could end up being something like a mistress if I met her at the Bayou Sheraton. I'm no saint but I could never do anything that would seriously hurt someone else. And could you imagine being paralyzed and finding out that your wife was

spending time with another man? It makes me shudder just thinking about how awful that would be.

But as much as all my instincts tell me that this whole deal is too complicated and fraught with danger, Marlene really is a hell of a woman. She's funny and cultured and, by septuagenarian standards, a looker. Now I know you might say that I'm just still grieving and perhaps vulnerable to jumping in with someone new just because I wanted to avoid sadness and solitude. And these pop psychologists would have a field day with me, assuming that my attraction to a married woman was somehow less threatening or perhaps more invigorating which is all fine and dandy, but I've still got Marlene's message burning a hole in my e-mail folder and I don't have a clue how to respond.

I suppose I've proven one thing: that you're never too old to make an ass of yourself. That's at least what my kids will say if I ever get up the nerve to tell them this story. Maybe it would be hard for them to understand that, at my age, it doesn't take much of being alone to feel terribly lonely. And when you feel that you're bumping up against the endpoints of your life, every day seems entirely too precious to waste. Jesus, can you believe that an old man like me is caught up in what sounds could be a plot line for some liver-spotted version of a soap opera? Unbelievable. Unbelievable.