

CRIMES OF PASSION

What meaneth Nature by these diverse laws?

Passion and reason self-division cause.

-- Lord Brooke, 1609

Boston is not particularly famous for its crimes of passion. It has nothing in its annals to compare with the sensational shooting in June 1906 of architect Stanford White at New York's Madison Square Garden by the jealous husband of his actress girlfriend. That murder was witnessed by hundreds of people during a performance of "Mamzelle Champagne," causing something of a panic. A journalist at the scene wrote:

White's elbow slid from the table, the table crashed over, sending a glass clinking along with the heavier sound. The body then tumbled from the chair. On the stage one of the characters was singing a song entitled "I Could Love a Million Girls." The refrain seemed to freeze upon his lips. There was dead silence for a second, and then Thaw (the murderer) lifted his pistol over his head, the barrel hanging downward as if to show the audience that he was not going to harm any one else.

Then came the realization on the part of the audience that the

farce had ended with a tragedy. A woman jumped to her feet and screamed. Many persons followed her example, and there was wild excitement.

L. Lawrence, the manager of the show, jumped on a table and above the uproar commanded the show to go on. "Go on playing!" he shouted. "Bring on the chorus!"

That sort of thing could have never happened in Boston, which, in those days, was a citadel of morality compared to New York's Sodom and Gomorrah. The murderer, incidentally, was brought to trial but found not guilty because of insanity. That's what they generally say about people who commit crimes of passion: temporarily insane. Love can drive you crazy. Composers have been writing popular songs about that phenomenon for generations.

Technically, crimes of passion include all acts of violence committed against lovers, friends and relatives under great emotional stress. And they are rarely as glamorous as the Stanford White affair. In Boston, for some peculiar reason, which an enterprising sociologist with a government grant might try to uncover, crimes of passion tend to be non-glamorous. For example, not too long ago a man shot his wife over a cold supper. That actually happened in Boston. But the couple were Puerto Rican, which might explain it, but doesn't. Frankly, the detectives over at homicide are a little embarrassed by the lack of interesting crimes of passion in their files.

"You have to go to your bedroom suburbs for your eternal triangles," says Det. Sgt. Jack Spencer, a veteran of the force, trying to be helpful. "In Boston it's all trivial stuff: an argument over a couple of bucks, cheating at a card game."

The detective, however, did bring one interesting case to my attention: the ^{a couple of years ago} murder of combat-zone stripper Tanya Rienzi by her jealous boyfriend. He strangled her with her pink pajama top. The scenario was right out of Carmen Jones.

Tanya had worked her way up from street hooker to exotic dancer and was about to marry a nice, respectable businessman, when the emotionally dependent boyfriend she was trying to get rid of put an end to it all. He's now serving a life sentence at Walpole.

Actually, the only sensational crime of passion that Bostonians tend to recall is the Van Rie case of 1959, involving the alleged murder of a 23-year-old Chicago heiress named Lynn Kauffman whose body was dumped into Boston harbor off a Dutch freighter as it steamed toward New York. The fact that the body was found off Spectacle Island gave the Boston police jurisdiction in the case.

At first it was thought that the woman had committed suicide. But when the bruises on the body were examined more closely, police ruled it a homicide. They found a likely suspect in Willem Van Rie, the 31-year-old radio operator aboard the ship, and brought him back to Boston for arraignment ^{in his own} trial. The latter lasted fifteen days, during which Boston newspapers gave it daily headlines and detailed coverage, with lots of pictures of the handsome Dutchman's dimpled smile. Never had Bostonians a juicier, more torrid story for their daily fare.

It involved a shipboard romance during a 44-day voyage from Singapore to Boston, with characters right out of central casting. A sort of Peyton Place at sea. It seemed that the exotically beautiful young heiress, the daughter of a Chicago industrialist, had a predilection for getting involved with married men. At the age of 20 she became a research assistant for a professor of Far Eastern studies at a Midwestern university. She moved into the professor's apartment with his 39-year-old wife and their three children. She slept on the living room couch. The arrangement smacked of a very civilized ménage à trois.

In June 1959, the professor, his wife, children, and Lynn all sailed for

Singapore on a research trip. After completing their work in the Orient, the professor put Lynn, his wife and children on a Dutch freighter, the Utrecht, bound for New York via Suez, while he planned to catch up with them by air in New York. It was on this leg of the trip, while being a traveling companion to the professor's wife and children, that Lynn became romantically involved with the ship's radio operator, who was also married.

One can imagine the breathtaking backdrop of that romance, which started at Djibouti in East Africa in late August and became more intense as the ship made its way through the Mediterranean and across the Atlantic. Lynn must have wished that the voyage would last forever. On the stretch between Halifax and Boston there was a birthday party for the professor's wife, during which Lynn, in a slinky Chinese dress with provocative slits down the sides, seemed quite gay. She spent that night -- her last alive -- in the radio operator's bed.

In the morning, Friday, September 18, the ship docked in Boston for a short stopover before resuming its final leg to New York. Lynn became ill during the afternoon and stayed in her cabin. The ship left Boston at about 6 p.m., passing the Deer Island Light at 6:55 p.m. Lynn was last known to be on board at 7 p.m. when someone spoke to her through her locked stateroom door. A couple of hours later the ship's purser and the professor's wife went into Lynn's cabin to see what was wrong. They found the room empty, the bed cold, and the portholes wide open. At about ~~12~~ noon the next day, a construction worker found Lynn's body floating against the rocks off Spectacle Island. It was clad only in Bermuda shorts and slippers.

Did Lynn Kauffman commit suicide or was she beaten unconscious and thrown overboard? The evidence against Van Rie, whose devoted but plain wife sat in

the courtroom during the entire trial, was all circumstantial. It could have been suicide. Consider Lynn's predicament. She was about to terminate her intense shipboard romance and rejoin the professor. No small cause for despair and inner confusion. And there was the professor's wife, hardly looking forward to a resumption of the *ménage à trois* after having observed Lynn's behavior during the voyage. Who knows what was said between them on that last day? The professor's wife merely testified that she and Lynn had had discussions. "She was a member of the family," she said.

After due deliberation, the jury decided that the lovely, petite Lynn had indeed committed suicide and that the handsome wireless operator was not guilty. He had told the court: "I have committed a sin of adultery with Mrs. Kauffman and I know that is wrong, but my wife has forgiven me. I have gotten punishment for this sin. But I never kicked, not hit, not beat Mrs. Kauffman. I never attempted to do those things that they are trying to impress you. . . . As God is my witness I am telling you the truth that I am not guilty."

And they believed him. As far as the jury was concerned, the only crime of passion the poor chap had committed was that of adultery. Today, of course, adultery rarely makes headlines. It shows how far we've come from that age of innocence, when the only literature you couldn't ban from Boston was a trial transcript. And luckily it involved out-of-towners. Proper Bostonians simply did not commit crimes of passion.

Nevertheless, we do know that emotional violence knows no distinction of race, age, sex, social status or weaponry. For example, in West Germany in 1974, the 32-year-old Countess Diana Zu Eltz, whose family castle is pictured on a 500-Mark banknote, knifed her lover to death "out of rage, wounded pride, love

and revenge." Her lover was a Portuguese pizza parlor operator. And in San Francisco, in 1962, a Harvard-trained Hungarian doctor poured acid over the body of his 25-year-old showgirl bride because he believed her to be unfaithful. They had been married less than a month. It took her 33 days to die.

Such is the power of love and the intense rage it can cause when love is betrayed or denied. But there are many who ^{would like} ~~want~~ to kill their lovers or wives or husbands and never do. What is the difference between those who do and those who don't? Truman Capote once characterized the love affair of a lady friend by saying that her boyfriend didn't love her enough to kill her. Is murder really the ultimate test of love?

In many cases, the murder of the beloved will be followed by the suicide of the killer. This is standard practice where guilt feelings run high and the killer cannot conceive of committing murder unless it is a final, desperate, and symbolic act of total devotion. It is summed up in the phrase: "I can't live without you." But of course that's untrue. Just about everyone can survive the death of a loved one. We do it all the time. What the ^{suicidal} ~~desperate~~ lover really means is: "I don't want to live without you." But that idea in itself is not enough to drive one to murder. What really triggers the rage is the knowledge that the loved one is now giving his or her affections to someone else. So the next thought becomes: "If I can't have you, no one else will."

Contrary to popular belief, most crimes of passion are not acts of spontaneous violence committed during emotional outbursts. They are usually the explosive culminations of sober, deliberate planning, especially where the element of revenge is involved. There may even be a profound satisfaction, a sense of relief, in the planning itself as one imagines what the final result

will be: sweet revenge, an end to one's intolerable torment, and the final dramatic statement of one's serious commitment to love.

A classic case illustrating all of this took place on Cape Cod last May, when a 31-year-old husband burst into the apartment of his estranged wife while she and her lover were in bed, killed them both, and then took his own life. In one explosion of violence, he had made his statement: that life, under the conditions he had been forced to live, had become unbearable and unacceptable.

When Randolph O'Connor graduated from Norton High School in 1964, the yearbook wrote that he was "outspoken, a neat dresser, and very outgoing." He was a member of student council and the theatre arts club and played junior varsity basketball. After graduation he joined the army and went off to Vietnam. When he got back to Norton around 1969 he met Ruth Anderson, an attractive brunette who was studying at nearby Wheaton College. They dated, fell in love, and married. Ruth, who had majored in languages, got a job teaching French at the Norton Middle School, and Randy took courses at B.U. and Bentley under the G. I. Bill. Around 1975 Randy got a job as a salesman at a Chevrolet dealership in Hyannis. He and Ruth bought a house on the Cape at Marston Mills and she took a teaching job at the middle school in West Yarmouth. Things seemed to be going smoothly for the couple until Ruth met Randy's boss, Jim Kissam.

Kissam was tall, lean, athletic, and handsome. He was a real charmer. He had gone to a prestigious prep school, graduated from the University of Michigan, and served as a captain in the U. S. Marine Corps. He had a wife and three daughters and a large beautiful house in Wellesley Hills. He had gotten into General Motors through his father, an executive with the company,

and had advanced quickly in the business. In 1976 he bought the Chevrolet dealership in Hyannis. Randy O'Connor was one of his salesman. Imagine the relationship: Kissam, nine years older than Randy, a Marine Corps captain, the boss; Randy, an army enlisted man, employee. Jim Kissam had everything. A business of his own, a family, kids, an expensive home, a winning personality. Randy was just a salesman, with a pretty wife but no kids.

When two married people begin having an affair, life becomes enormously risky. And sometimes the danger adds spice to the romance. Obviously Kissam thought that his enlisted man employee was no one to be afraid of. And Ruth might have felt that she had given Randy enough of her life and now wanted something more exciting. To her Kissam was tremendously attractive and successful, twelve years her senior, a leader not a follower. She'd leave Randy for him any day. But would Kissam divorce his wife for her, or was she merely one of his conquests, an ego trip? He was building a house on the Cape for his wife and daughters. There'd be little opportunity for him to sleep out nights once his family moved down.

But for Randy it was the end of everything. He and Ruth sold their house, and she took an apartment of her own in Osterville. He was left with nothing but a job he loathed. It was more than he could take. They were separated, but not yet divorced. Yet, here was his wife, jumping in^{to} bed with his boss. All of this fed the fires of his inner rage and frustration. At this point he might have thought of committing suicide. But then the thought of those two enjoying their adultery at his expense must have jarred his sense of justice. If he killed himself without killing them, then he would simply confirm their evaluation of him: that he was worth nothing, that his feelings were beyond their consideration.

Once the decision is made that life is no longer worth living, then it is easy to plan its end. The end becomes a much-sought-after goal. The end that Randy chose was calculated to have the greatest impact he could make: to kill them at the height of their pleasure, in the act of their betrayal. In that way, their families would know beyond a shadow of a doubt why he did it, and they would understand.

Ruth moved into her new apartment on Sunday, in a quaint remodeled eighteenth century house, with weathered shingles and white shutters. On Tuesday evening, May 16, 1978, Kissam arrived to spend the night there. Randy waited until the lights were out and they had gone to bed. Then, armed with his .357 magnum six-shot revolver, he went inside.

He found them in bed as expected. He fired four or five times at Kissam at close range, killing him. Ruth, terrified, ran into the bathroom. Randy pursued her, firing several shots. She slumped to the floor. He then reloaded the revolver, fired one or two more bullets into her nude body, then turned the gun on himself. He killed himself with one shot to the head.

When the police arrived, they found Kissam's nude dead body sprawled on the bed; Ruth, dead in the bathroom; Randy, fully clothed, lying dead beside her. It was like the last scene in Hamlet: a stage strewn with corpses.

It was a sad ending to three lives. You couldn't tell from Randy's yearbook picture that his life would end this way. But that's what crimes of passion are like, and all men, ^{are} by nature, ~~are~~ quite capable of such violence, given the proper circumstances.

But not all such actions lead to the kind of irrevocable tragedy as did Randy's. Some crimes of passion, believe it or not, may even have happy endings.

There's a story from New York that's worth telling. Back in the late 1950's a successful criminal lawyer from Scarsdale by the name of Burton Pugash fell in love with a young lady named Linda Riss. He intended to marry her. But when she found out that he was already married and would have to get a divorce, she broke off. This angered Pugash who told her that if he couldn't have her "no one else will, and when I get finished with you, no one else will want you."

He hired two men to splash lye in Linda's face. They carried out the job, blinding Linda completely in one eye and partially in the other. The police arrested Pugash and the two thugs. All three were tried, found guilty and sent to jail. After serving thirteen years, Pugash was released on parole, at which time he proposed to Linda twice on television. To his surprise, she answered yes. She was willing to forgive. So the two were finally married in November 1974, proving, once more, that love conquers all. Or, at least, almost all.