

Pagan Kennedy

from *The Dangerous Joy of Dr. Sex*, a short, eccentric biography of the man who authored *The Joy of Sex*

One day in 1934, he sequestered himself in his family's greenhouse in London to perform an experiment. Alex Comfort – then 14 years old – had decided to invent his own fireworks. He ground together sugar, sulfur and saltpeter, an operation so dangerous that most chemists pour water over the ingredients to prevent a blast. Alex neglected to take that precaution. The container exploded. The roof of the greenhouse blew out. A red-tinted vapor hovered in the air before him. Four fingers on his left hand had vanished, leaving a lump of meat with one thumb hanging off it. He felt no pain. Indeed, he found it thrilling to be blown apart.

Or, at least, that's how he told the story later. Alex Comfort loved explosions, even the one that mutilated him. He never would admit any regret at the loss of his four fingers. As a middle-aged physician, he bragged that his stump could be more useful than a conventional hand, particularly when it came to performing certain medical procedures— exploring a woman's birth canal, for instance.

One thing was clear after the accident: Alex should avoid laboratories, at least until he was older. So he set his sights on literary greatness instead. When he was 16, his father took him on a tramp steamer to Buenos Aires and then Senegal; Alex scribbled notes along the way. In 1938, his final year of high school, he published a little gem of travel book, titled *The Silver River*, billed as the “diary of a schoolboy.”

The Glove.

When Alex arrived at Cambridge University, the other students stood in awe of him—a published author! He regarded himself as brilliant but ugly. A reed-thin boy in a

Pagan Kennedy

tweed jacket, he kept his eyes caged behind glittering round glasses and wore a glove on one hand. “I didn’t like to ask him why,” said Robert Greacen, who befriended Alex during his university years. One day, when they shared a train car together, Alex removed the glove, and Greacen noticed the stump, but still didn’t dare mention it.

The truth was, Greacen had fallen under the spell of Alex Comfort. “Even though we were the same age, he seemed like a man ten or twelve years old than me in ideas, reading and opinion.” Greacen decided that Alex was the cleverest person he’d ever met.

Indeed. At age 22, Alex began sparring with George Orwell in the pages of *Tribune*; in rhyming verse, they debated whether Britain should have entered World War II. Alex sneered at the concept of a “good war” and denounced the group-think of the British. He was, already, an anarchist.

(Later in the biography; Comfort has met and married Ruth Harris.)

Ruth regarded herself as the long-suffering wife of a great man. She tried not to complain, though the pure force of his intellect wore her out. He followed her into rooms ranting about whatever subject obsessed him at the moment—ballroom dancing, electricity, cell growth, dulcimers, cooking, pacifism, anarchism, utopia. “Holding a conversation with Dr. Comfort is rather like racing after an express train that has already puffed out of the station,” a journalist wrote later.

For his part, Alex tried to tamp down the impulses that upset his wife, and it cost him dearly. “I suffered from a severe form of migraine and it produced an intensive depression,” he said later, of that period. In order to rein himself in, he resorted to following a well-established British trope: he became an introverted polymath, pottering

Pagan Kennedy

from one enthusiasm to the next. His son Nick, born in 1946, remembers his father building a television from spare parts and glue-soaked Weetabix.

And he wrote with blazing speed—poetry, novels, science papers, sociology. By 1950, he'd published a dozen books. A medical doctor and biologist, he became a leading authority on snails, that creature that symbolizes the slow and cautious and flabby. It seemed that the younger Alex – the boy who blew things up – had been squashed forever and replaced by a morose intellectual.

“He seemed like a workaholic— only we didn't have that word back then. He was puritanical,” said Greacen, who added that the only way to spend time with Alex was to find him in his lab or else tag along to anti-war meetings. The two belonged to a coalition of writers denouncing Cold War hostilities. After their meetings, the writers adjourned to a pub, to huff on pipes and jaw about books. But Comfort refused to join them. Instead of socializing, “he would jump in his car and go home,” according to Greacen. “He thought I was lazy. Once he said to me, ‘Look Bob, you shouldn't hang around in pubs with people. You'll get no work done.’ When I spent two or three hours with him, I'd go away absolutely tired—my head would be filled with all he said about literature and politics. I used to wonder when he slept.”

Then, in the late 1950s, Comfort developed a new obsession, one as dangerous, in its way, as the gunpowder had been. He couldn't stop wondering about Jane, Ruth's best friend from university days, now a frequent dinner guest at their house. His wife was the kind of woman who shrunk into middle age. Jane, on the other hand, blossomed at 40. At ease in her big-boned and athletic body, she made only a token effort to keep her lipstick

Pagan Kennedy

on straight. To hell with propriety! Her curls blew out everywhere, like springs popping from the active gears of her mind. She was as full of ideas as Alex. Instead of marrying, she'd devoted herself to books, and now she worked as a librarian at the London School of Economics. She spent all day around professors; she understood men like him. He had to have her.

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