

Lady Murderesses

Julia Reed on a place where chivalry isn't dead but some husbands are



ALL MY LIFE I've heard the story of Howard Dyer's Abraham Lincoln. Dyer, the flamboyant, one-armed lawyer from my hometown of Greenville, Mississippi, was one of the state's most famous defense attorneys. The Lincoln was the black Continental he bought with his fee from keeping Erma Abraham out of jail after she blew a hole in the top of her husband's head with a .38 revolver. The car was also a symbol of a simple truth. A woman in the Deep South could, generally, kill her husband and walk away.

"I don't know why people say we're chauvinistic down here," my father has said more than once. "Look at how nice we are to women. A woman can kill her husband in the state of Mississippi and get away with it."

Mrs. Abraham killed her husband in 1966 in Leland, Mississippi, a town of about five thousand people ten miles west of Greenville, and the same place where Ruth Dickens, the wife of a respected cotton broker and planter and a scion of Delta gentry, had hacked up her mama with some hedge clippers eighteen years earlier. Mrs. Dickens actually served some time—matricide is a little touchier than husband-killing—but the governor commuted her sentence after a little more than six years, and she came back to her place in the First Baptist Church, running the nursery and teaching Sunday school.

Mrs. Dickens was still serving her sentence in the state penitentiary when her two daughters were presented to society at the Delta Debutante Ball in

Greenville. But she was able to attend the debutante ball thanks to two ten-day "holiday suspensions" granted by the governor before he simply let her go home for good.

She died six years ago in her Leland home, at the age of eighty-nine, from heart failure, and more than forty years after her release from prison. Her obituary in the *Delta Democrat Times* mentioned her "pioneer Delta heritage," her graduation from Hollins College, her marriage, her extensive church involvement, and her membership in the Leland Garden Club. It did not mention her mother's murder or her time in the penitentiary.

There has always been a double standard for capital cases, and not just in the South. Of the twenty thousand people lawfully executed in this coun-

try since Colonial times, fewer than four hundred of them have been women. In 1996 when the governor of Illinois commuted Guin Garcia's death sentence, he went out of his way to say it wasn't because she was a woman, but of course it was. When born-again pole-axe murderess Karla Faye Tucker was executed in Texas, many people who basically oppose the death penalty found themselves arguing that Tucker should be executed so that women would have the same rights as men.

But, the fact is, we in the South will do almost anything to keep intact the romanticized ideal of pristine Southern womanhood. The desire to hold onto that myth is much stronger than the desire for truth or justice—ideals never held in much esteem down here in the first place. And to let go of this ideal would be to admit that the Civil War happened, and that things are different now, which no one really wants to do.

We are also used to living with contradictions, chief among them the mixture of politeness and violence, of extreme piety and the desire to do whatever the hell we want to do when we want to do it. It is entirely possible for a woman to come home from church, put on a housecoat, and then blow out her husband's brains while he sleeps; *there just has to be a reason*.

Howard Dyer came up with a whole set of reasons for Erma Abraham. The first thing he did was put a gold crucifix around Erma's neck and get what seemed like everybody in town, including her employers at the cotton brokerage firm, where she had been a longtime secretary, to come in and testify to her devout Episcopalian ways and her reputation for "truth and veracity." The second thing Howard Dyer did was turn Will Abraham into a monster. Mr. Abraham was a well-

liked former mail carrier, the founding coach of the successful Leland High football team, who, according to the Greenville paper, the *Delta Democrat Times*, was "an ardent fisherman and fond of growing flowers." The only time I ever saw him was in a picture taken after he was dead, shown to me by Howard Dyer III, who assisted his father in the case. Abraham was lying on the couch in his den in front of the television, his pipe and tobacco pouch on the table next to him. One eye behind his metal-framed glasses was open, and one was closed, there was a hole at the top of his forehead, and two rivers of coagulated blood flowed from his nose. "Look what else," Howard III told me, directing me to the top button of his trousers that was unfastened at the waist, just as his father had pointed out to the jury thirty years before.

"That suggestion was made to Howard by a former deputy sheriff," said John Webb, who prosecuted the case. "He said, if you can get about three or four rednecks on that jury, that [undone button] will work to your advantage." Howard Dyer was not big on subtlety. Mrs. Abraham told a packed—and completely stunned—courtroom that her husband had become impotent, and, afraid that he would lose her if he could not satisfy her in some other way, had begun forcing her into "unnatural" sex acts, particularly oral sex. When a technical word for oral sex was printed in the newspaper, it was, according to then-editor Hodding Carter III, for the first time. It was almost certainly the first time that most of the members of the all-male jury had heard it said aloud. (Their eyes, according to the paper, "were fixed upon the floor.")

But there were more shocking reve-

lations. "Mrs. Abraham Is Victim of Brain Injury, Amnesia, Psychiatrist Tells Court," was the headline. Just in case anyone wanted to make an issue out of the fact that Mrs. Abraham had originally claimed that an intruder had shot her husband or that she had wrapped the gun in foil and hidden it in the deep freeze—and her husband's wallet in the cedar chest—a Jackson psychiatrist named Willard Waldron arrived at the Washington County courthouse in a Rolls-Royce to say that the defendant suffered from "acute brain syndrome" rendering her incapable of remembering certain events such as the murder.

ON JUNE 20, 1966, one day after closing arguments were completed, and the day before fifty-eight years of the widely ignored Prohibition officially came to an end in the state of Mississippi, the jury found Mrs. Abraham not guilty by reason of insanity. The judge explained to Mrs. Abraham that she would be held at Whitfield, the state mental hospital, until her condition was improved "so that you can resume your place in society."

She resumed that place just sixty days later, but in her absence it was discovered that the "rigid moral and spiritual beliefs" ascribed to her by the good Dr. Waldron did not include an aversion to stealing. Her former employers, who had paid for her bail and defense, including Dr. Waldron's fee, discovered that Mrs. Abraham had been embezzling tens of thousands of dollars from them for years. When they asked Mr. Webb, the county attorney, to take action, he reminded them that, "If she was crazy when she killed her husband, she must have been crazy when she took the money."

It was hardly a surprise that a jury

would accept without question that a woman could go crazy in the face of "unnatural" sex acts, since Southerners tend to accept that people can go crazy without much prompting at all. Women are deemed especially susceptible, especially for legal purposes. Dr. Benella Oltremari, a pathologist from Greenville, found out her husband, Marty Albinder, was cheating on her with his secretary and shot him five times in the chest and stomach with both a .38 and a .44 Magnum. He was taken to the Delta Medical Center, but so was she. "I viewed her as seriously upset and badly in need of medical attention immediately after the incident," said Oltremari's lawyer, former state senator H. L. "Sonny" Meredith. The hospital said she was "in shock" and kept her in a private room with guards at the door. By the time the police were allowed to question her, Albinder, who now refers to himself as "Bullets," had miraculously pulled through and pronounced the whole thing "a tragic accident."

Men have been known to snap as well, most often just before women snap and kill them. Mrs. Abraham testified that on the night she shot her husband he had appeared at the kitchen door with a terrible look on his face. "I've never seen such a look," she said. "He looked like he was crazy."

Two years later, when Peggy Bush shot her husband, a prominent lawyer, in their Jackson home, it was after a dinner party and during, the newspaper made a point of noting, the telecast of the Miss America Pageant. Millard Bush went to the bedroom of the couple's fourteen-year-old daughter, Pamela, yelled at her about the size of her bills at the country club, told her he didn't like the way she looked or what she wore, and said he was going to kill her. "I don't know what made

him completely snap, which is what he did, completely snap," Peggy Bush told the jury (the first in the state to include a woman). She added that he cursed her using words she could bring herself to repeat only by using the initials "g. d." and "s. o. b."

She also insisted that she thought she was shooting her husband with a "pop gun" (it was actually a .22). She was found not guilty after the jury deliberated for three minutes, still a record in the state.

A WOMAN, in all her selfless maternal benevolence, taking the fall for someone close to her, is also a familiar theme in these cases. A famous murder in Nashville, Tennessee, involved my aunt Jane's best friend, Jean Wilson, who ran her husband through with a samurai sword. Although she was charged with the crime (and of course acquitted) the rumor to this day in the salons of Belle Meade, the wealthy Nashville enclave where the Wilsons lived, is that she was covering up for another member of the family. There was no way to tell. Before Jean Wilson called the police, she called my aunt Jane, who came over and cleaned up and put the blood-soaked curtains in the trunk of her car. They had not, they explained, wanted the place to look such a mess if so many people were going to be trooping in and out. When the police did get there, Jean Wilson told them that she and her husband had just been horsing around on the bed with the sword, which had been hanging on the wall. The Wilson death, like so many more, became a tragic accident.

The former headmistress of the Madeira School, Jean Harris, tried the "tragic accident" defense with less success when in 1980 she shot her lover, the Scarsdale Diet doctor, Herman

Tarnower, saying that she had gone to his house to kill herself, but that when Tarnower had tried to get the gun away from her it killed him instead. The problem, the ballistics experts testified, was that the shots were fired from about seven feet away while the man was lying in bed. She served fifteen years of her sentence before being granted parole. Harris should have had Sonny Meredith as her lawyer. When I told Meredith I had never had an accident with as many guns as Dr. Oltremari used on Marty, he looked at me with a totally straight face and said, "It wasn't but two."

Jean Harris' biggest problem was that her trial was in White Plains, New York. Also, instead of a crucifix she wore a mink coat and made too much of her innocence and integrity instead of the fact that she had been sorely mistreated by a two-timer who had gotten her hooked on diet pills. Do you think, I asked my father, Jean Harris would have gotten off if she had been in Mississippi?

"Oh hell, yes," he said. "That cat sounded like a very bad guy." ♦



Julia Reed is a contributing editor of Vogue. This piece was adapted with permission from the Oxford American, which is published by John Grisham in Oxford, Mississippi.

Move Over, Dr. Spock

Marguerite Kelly has sold more than 800,000 copies of *The Mother's Almanac*. Her children have turned out well, too.

Meghan Cox Gurdon gets some tips

"American children have been ignored, denied, idolized, pampered, and despaired of, but seldom enjoyed."

—Marguerite Kelly

IT'S A SUNNY winter afternoon when I knock on the battered front door of Marguerite and Tom Kelly's rambling, three-story house on Capitol Hill, just a few blocks behind the Supreme Court. The alabaster splendor of official Washington has given way to faded gentility; a few blocks further on the neighborhood gets rough.

I've been told that Marguerite Kelly's is one of Washington's great untold stories, but my interest is closer to home: She also happens to be the country's foremost exponent of sensible child-rearing. With two squabbling children of my own, I'm hoping her maternal wisdom will rub off.

The door opens, and there is Marguerite, exuding motherly comfort. She's a small, rounded person with twinkly, intelligent eyes and a soft, humorous voice. That voice—firm, reasonable, forgiving—also informs her writing. In her syndicated newspaper column, "Family Almanac," and in the



Marguerite and Tom Kelly with their brood: baby Nell, Meg, Katy, and Michael

800,000 copies of her book, *The Mother's Almanac*, thus far sold, Kelly advocates an approach to family life that is adventurous, generous-hearted, and refreshingly old-fashioned. Not only is her advice sound, it is, as advertisers boast, "proven to be effective."

Marguerite's skills as a mother—a job she calls "the most creative I have ever done"—have produced four accomplished children. Columnist Michael Kelly, whose weekly contribu-

tions to the *Washington Post's* op-ed page make waves all the way to the White House, edits the highly respected *National Journal*. The eldest, Katy, is an illustrator and writer for *USA Today*; daughter Meg writes novels; and Nell, the youngest, is a film-editor-turned-teacher. Not only have the Kelly children distinguished themselves professionally, but they're also all happily married and producing grandchildren at a rapid rate.

We go inside, and Marguerite pours coffee. It's the sort of house where the floorboards creak, silver gleams amidst a profusion of dark furniture, and the light filters in giving off a Faulknerian feel. "Marguerite came from broken-down Southern gentry, who all lived in these big houses," says Tom Kelly of his wife's Louisiana childhood. "So it looked like home."

Marguerite smiles and offers dried apricots from a dainty glass dish. "To me, it's been my idea of safety—a house big enough for relatives to come and stay if they needed to, where people could get married or hold reunions," she says. "Growing up, we had a lot of silver around, and old furniture, and it didn't matter how dent-