

T H E
FIFTIES

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T W E N T Y

Among those deeply moved by *A Streetcar Named Desire* was a college professor from Bloomington, Indiana. His name was Alfred Kinsey, and in 1950, when he first saw it on Broadway, he had already published the first of his two pioneering works, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, in fact popularly known as the Kinsey Report. Kinsey knew immediately that he and Williams were, in different ways, doing something very similar—they were tearing away the facade that Americans used to hide their sexual selves. As a result of his work, Kinsey was both fascinated and troubled by the vast difference between American sexual behavior the society wanted to believe existed and American sexual practices as they actually existed; in other words it was one thing to do it, but it was quite another thing to admit doing it. For example, at least 80 percent of successful businessmen, his interviews had shown, had

had extramarital affairs. "God," he noted. "What a gap between social front and reality!"

Therefore, his response to Williams's play was not merely emotional. He proposed that he and Williams get together, and the two began a steady correspondence. "As you may know we are making an extensive study of the erotic element in the arts," he wrote Williams. "This covers painting, music, writing, the stage, etc. One of the plays we have studied in some detail has been your *Streetcar*. We have been fortunate enough to obtain histories from a high proportion of the actors and two of the companies which have put on the play and it has made it possible to correlate their acting with their sexual backgrounds. There are a great many points in the play which we should like to discuss with the author to find out his original ideas and intentions. This is one of the reasons why we should get together." Eventually, Kinsey and Williams became good friends. Though he was in many ways the very embodiment of the Middle American square, Kinsey had no problem with Williams's homosexuality. He was immensely tolerant of all sexual variations, but he was prudish enough to keep the interviews that his staff did on homosexuality under a file that was known as the H-histories, and he could not bring himself to actually write the word *homosexual*.

Alfred Kinsey was no bohemian. He lived in the Midwest, had married the first woman he ever dated, and stayed married to her for his entire life. Almost surely, his close friends thought, he had had no extramarital affairs. Because he was an entomologist and loved to collect bugs, he and his bride went camping on their honeymoon. In his classes at the University of Indiana he always sported a bow tie and a crew cut. He drove the same old Buick for most of his lifetime and was immensely proud of the fact that he had more than 100,000 miles on it. On Sundays, he and his wife invited faculty and graduate-student friends to their home to listen to records of classical music. There, the Kinseys served such homey desserts as persimmon pudding. They took these evenings very seriously—Kinsey was immensely proud of his record collection. When the wife of one faculty member suggested that they play some boogie-woogie, the couple was never invited back.

His values were old-fashioned, and he did not like debt. His house was the only thing he had not paid hard cash for. He bought it with a small down payment and took on a mortgage of \$3,500. He boasted at the time of the publication of his landmark book, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, that he had never been paid more than \$5,000 from the University of Indiana; indeed, doing his income tax

at the very last minute one year, he could not remember what his salary was (this was before W-2 forms) and he had to wake the head of his department to find out. He was extremely careful about money and almost everything else. He once gave some wonderfully Victorian advice to Ralph Voris, a younger colleague who was about to get married: "Years ago my banker . . . gave me this advice about investments and savings. Diversify. Buy life insurance and annuities. Pay for your home. Have a thousand dollars in cash or instantly convertible securities on which you can draw for emergencies. After each and every one of these items has been achieved (in order), put the next few thousand in sound 3% investments (do not look for bigger returns; if buying stocks or bonds, put it all in investment trust shares which give the small investor the same diversification that the big investor enjoys). For you and Geraldine I should hesitate to advise any serious inroads on your savings until you are well along on the above program." He once told a colleague, Wardell Pomeroy, to drive back from New York at 35 MPH with some large models showing the reproductive process: "Anything faster than that is not safe for such a heavy load. You cannot stop in a hurry and you dare not bounce on roads that have been damaged by winter freezes." The mother superior, Pomeroy called him.

Kinsey did not smoke and he rarely drank. Relatively late in his career he decided to try smoking, since it might make him more like the men he was interviewing and help put them at their ease. Try as he might, he never quite got it right and his assistants finally suggested that the prop was hurting rather than helping him. When he drank it was much the same. After his death, Wardell Pomeroy wrote, "To see him bringing in a tray of sweet liqueurs before dinner was a wry and happy reminder that Alfred Charles Kinsey, the genius, the world figure, was a simple and unsophisticated man in the true sense of that word."

As a boy he was seriously religious and he walked to church with his family every Sunday, though as he grew older he distanced himself from organized religion and a belief in God. Nonetheless, his children were made to go regularly to Sunday School. Still, the scientist in him was always present. Once his son Bruce pointed to a flower and told his father that God had made it. "Now, Bruce," Kinsey said. "Where did that flower really come from?" "From a seed," Bruce Kinsey admitted. Kinsey was driven by curiosity, not prejudice. He rejected those who came to him with preconceptions. To one young man who applied for a job as a researcher, he said, "Well, you have just said that premarital intercourse might lead to

later difficulties in marriage, that extramarital relations would break up a marriage, that homosexuality is abnormal, and intercourse with animals is ludicrous. Apparently you have all the answers. Why do you want to do research?"

His greatest passion was his work. He approached it with an intensity that was rooted in the Calvinist zeal of his forefathers. As a young man he had gone on vacation with friends but complained later that the time might have been better spent working, and in fact he generally worked every day of the year except Christmas Day. He had always been, his biographer Pomeroy shrewdly noted, a *collector*. As a boy he collected stamps, but it was the only collection he ever made that was not designed to be useful. Sickly as a child from rheumatic fever, he had not been able to play among his peers; instead, he became a student of nature. He wrote his first book in his teens, a small monograph entitled, "What Do Birds Do When It Rains?" By the time he was in college at Bowdoin, he had come to love collecting plants and animals; the Bowdoin College yearbook notes that "on entering his room one never knows whether Mr. Kinsey or a large able-bodied snake is going to greet him."

As a graduate student at Harvard, he won a fellowship that allowed him to travel around the country. He later wrote a high school teacher of the pleasure of that fellowship: "In all, counting the summertime that I spent at either end of the trip, I got fifteen solid months out-of-doors! Think of that—for a life! I am more and more satisfied that no other occupation in the world could give me the pleasure that this job of bug-hunting is giving. I shall never cease to thank you for leading me into it!" From the start he had proven to be a first-rate scholar, and he never failed to see the beauty in plants and in animals. Earle March, a San Francisco gynecologist, once spoke of his rare ability to "look through the ugliness to something lovely beyond. I often," Marsh added, "thought about him as an athlete of the spirit."

He seemed by this time to be the least likely candidate to become one of the most controversial figures of his generation. During the early forties he published *Edible Wild Plants of North America*, which was voted the most important book of the year by the trustees of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society. He was a highly respected professor of zoology in a good department at Indiana University. Esteemed by his colleagues for his world-class collection of gall wasps, he was also popular with his students, a kind and humane teacher who was always generous with his time.

Then, in 1938, a group of his students came to him and asked

questions about marriage. He was touched by their innocence. At first he refrained from answering, fearing he knew too little. He went out and read everything he could on the subject and was appalled by the inadequate available material—both in quantity and quality. Some of the students petitioned the university to start a course on sexuality and marriage. From the start it was Kinsey's course. He was one of eight faculty members who taught it and he gave three of the basic lectures. The course was a huge success. It soon became his obsession. Clara Kinsey was known on occasion to tell friends, "I hardly see him at night anymore since he took up sex." What was probably true, some of his colleagues thought, was that he was already a little restless with the study of insects and was looking for a larger challenge—a new area in which to start collecting.

When he began his studies of human sexuality, one of his oldest friends, Edgar Anderson, by then the director of Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis, wrote him: "It was heartwarming to see you settling down into what I suppose will be your real life work. One would never have believed that all sides of you could have found a project big enough to need them all. I was amused to see how the Scotch Presbyterian reformer in you had finally got together with the scientific fanatic with his zeal for masses of neat data in orderly boxes and drawers. The monographer Kinsey, the naturalist Kinsey, and the camp counsellor Kinsey all rolling into one at last and going full steam ahead. Well, I am glad to have a seat for the performance. It's great to have it done, and great to know that you are doing it."

He began by taking sexual histories of his students. He conducted the interviews in his tiny office, locked the door, and sent his assistant elsewhere. The enrollment for the class grew every year, and first juniors and then freshmen and sophomores were allowed in. Soon four hundred students were signing up for it. But more and more his heart was in the research. By 1939 he wrote to a friend that the interviews were "a scientific gold mine." Soon he was taking the sexual histories of not only his students but traveling out of town on weekends, at first to Chicago and then to other communities in the Midwest, to find additional subjects. As the project took an increasing amount of his time, there was an inevitable conservative reaction against him in Indiana. Complaints began to come in, from parents and local ministers. One of his early critics, Professor Thurman Rice of the University of Indiana Medical School, was enraged because Kinsey had not, in the course of teaching, denounced premarital sex.

In 1940 Herman Wells, the president of Indiana University, who was largely sympathetic to Kinsey and his work, called in Kinsey

and, citing complaints from local ministers, told him that he would have to make a choice: He could either teach the course or take his histories, but he could not do both. Wells assumed, since he loved the course, that he would give up the case histories. Kinsey, sure that his critics feared the research more than the sex-education course, resigned from the course. Those who thought he would do otherwise, he noted, "do not know me." From then on, he devoted himself exclusively to his research.

The study of American sexual habits was a delicate business. Kinsey wanted a certain bland neutrality to his researchers. He did not want them to wear beards and mustaches, and he worried when one of them looked too young and therefore might not inspire the proper amount of confidence. Though he was a generous, abidingly tolerant man, he did not hire Jews or blacks or those with names that were not distinctly Anglo-Saxon. He was sensitive to the prejudices of the time and wanted his interviewers to cause no distractions among the subjects from whom they were eliciting such sensitive information.

During the forties, while much of the rest of the country was going off to war, Alfred Kinsey and a handful of assistants set off to interview as many men and women as they could on their sexual habits. At first they had limited resources: Kinsey used part of his own small salary to hire others. The war made things harder, and he worried whether he could get enough miles from the thinning treads of his tires ("I am well fixed for tires right now. I think I can get perhaps 30 or 40,000 out of what I have, but if retreads are not available then, my traveling after case histories will be at an end . . .").

In 1941 he got his first grant from a foundation, for \$1,600; in 1943 he received his first grant from the Medical Sciences Division of the Rockefeller Foundation, a gift of \$23,000; by 1947 that figure was \$40,000. The foundation thereby became the principal financial backer of his studies. By 1947 he was preparing to publish the first book of his results—a simple report on the human animal studied in one of its highest-priority biologic acts. His conclusions do not seem startling today: that healthy sex led to a healthy marriage; that there was more extramarital sex on the part of both men and women than they wanted to admit; that petting and premarital sex tended to produce better marriages; that masturbation did not cause mental problems as superstition held; that there was more homosexuality than people wanted to admit.

Herman Wells, the president of Indiana University, had made a

few minor requests of him: He asked Kinsey not to publish during the sixty-one days that the Indiana legislature was in session—or for that matter immediately before it convened—and he asked him to use a medical publisher, in order to minimize sensationalism. Kinsey chose W. B. Saunders, an old-line firm in Philadelphia. The original printing was slated for 10,000, but as prepublication interest grew, Saunders increased it to 25,000. The book cost \$6.50, which made it expensive for those days, had 804 pages, and weighed three pounds. Kinsey had received no advance against royalties from the publisher, and whatever money he made, he turned back to his own think tank, which by then was known as the Institute for Sex Research of Indiana University.

Though he continued to sign himself on letters “Alfred Kinsey, professor of zoology,” his days as a mere professor were behind him. His name was suddenly a household word; everyone knew of him as the sex doctor. There was a famous Peter Arno cartoon in *The New Yorker* showing a woman reading the report and asking her husband with a horrified expression, “Is there a Mrs. Kinsey?” Within ten days of the book’s release, the publisher had to order a sixth printing, making a phenomenal 185,000 copies in print. To the astonishment of everyone, particularly Kinsey, the book roared up the best-seller lists, a fact somewhat embarrassing to *The New York Times*, which at first neither accepted advertising for Kinsey’s book nor reviewed it. The early critical response was good. The first reviews saw his samples adequate, his scientific judgments modest, his tone serious. Polls taken of ordinary Americans showed that not only did they agree with his evidence, but they believed such studies were helpful.

Then his critics weighed in. They furiously disagreed with almost everything: his figures on premarital sex; his figures on extramarital sex; his figures on homosexuality; above all, his failure to condemn what he had found. Not only had he angered the traditional conservative bastions of social mores—the Protestant churches on the right and the Catholic Church—but to his surprise, he had enraged the most powerful voices in the liberal Protestant clergy as well. Henry Pitney Van Dusen, the head of Union Theological Seminary, and Reinhold Niebuhr attacked. Harry Emerson Fosdick, the head of Riverside Church and the brother of the head of the Rockefeller Foundation, complained that the advertising for the book was not sufficiently sedate. Harold Dodds, the president of Princeton, said, “Perhaps the undergraduate newspaper that likened the report to the work of small boys writing dirty words on fences touched a more profound scientific truth than is revealed in the

surfeit of rather trivial graphs with which the reports are loaded." By trying to study our sexual patterns, he was accused instead of trying to lower our moral standards.

Kinsey was at first stunned, then angered by the response, but he was never embittered. He was appalled by the failure of other scientists and doctors to come to his defense. He sensed in certain cases that the lack of support stemmed from professional jealousy. In time, as the attacks grew more strident, he did not hesitate, when talking with friends, to compare himself with such scientists as Galileo, who had been pilloried in the past for challenging the myths and the ignorance of their age. What surprised him most was the absence of scientific standards in most of the assaults. His critics were, he noted, merely "exposing their emotional (not their scientific) selves in their attacks."

Soon his friends began to worry about his reaction to criticism. It was as if even the mildest dissent in a review bothered him—someone either supported him completely or had become an enemy. But he held back from revealing his dismay in public. He treated most critics the way he treated one would-be heckler at a lecture at Berkeley. It was a marvelous moment: Several thousand people had turned out to hear him. As he reached the most delicate part of his lecture—that a person might need a sexual outlet as many as seven times a week—a long, low wolf-whistle came from someone in the audience. "And then there are some whose outlet is as low as that of the man who just whistled." The audience roared with laughter. It was his last interruption of the night.

The attacks wounded Kinsey, yet he refused to show it in public. Besides, there was a second book to finish. His biggest fear was that he might lose his key source of support, the Rockefeller Foundation. Unfortunately, Henry Pitney Van Dusen was not just the head of Union Theological, he was a member of the Rockefeller Foundation board. It seemed to Kinsey that a systematic attack was being aimed toward the Rockefeller people, designed to get them to cut off their support to him.

At first the Rockefeller Foundation stood firm. The criticism from Van Dusen, Fosdick, and the others had not damaged Kinsey's standing there. Alan Gregg, who was in effect Kinsey's man at the foundation, congratulated Kinsey for handling himself so well in the face of such venomous criticism. But soon Gregg's tone began to change, reflecting, Kinsey was sure, mounting pressures on the foundation. Gregg started suggesting that Kinsey show more statistical evidence in the next volume. Soon there were warnings from Gregg

that it might be harder than he had expected to sustain the funding. Perhaps the royalties from the book could pay for the research, Gregg suggested. To Kinsey that was a spurious argument. If the Rockefeller people wavered in their support or cut it back, Kinsey wrote Gregg, it would be the equivalent of a vote of no confidence in him. There was only a limited amount the royalties could do in terms of support. If anything, Kinsey wanted to expand the budget—there was always so much more to do.

The trouble, Kinsey learned, was the new head of the Rockefeller Foundation, Dean Rusk. Rusk had come over after serving as assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs. Cautious to a fault, wary of the power of conservatives in Congress, he was not anxious to take serious political risks on behalf of something that must have seemed as peripheral to him as Kinsey's sex research. B. Carroll Reece, a conservative Republican from Tennessee, was threatening to investigate the Rockefeller Foundation and one of the reasons was the Kinsey report. Kinsey sensed that Rusk was quietly distancing himself from the institute.

The second book, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, was published in the fall of 1953. Kinsey was well aware that it was even more explosive than the first—he was, after all, discussing wives, mothers, and daughters. As a precaution, Kinsey invited journalists to come to Bloomington for several days to have the data explained and interpreted. Ed Murrow asked Kinsey to come on his television program *Person to Person*. Kinsey turned him down, noting in a letter to Edgar R. Murrow that it was the policy of the institute not to appear on radio, television, or in the movies.

Like the first book, it was a sensation. The first printing was 25,000 copies. Within ten days the publishers were in their sixth printing, for a total of 185,000. It would eventually sell some 250,000 copies. Again, the initial reception was essentially positive: Some of the magazine reporting was thoughtful. Then the firestorm began again: "It is impossible to estimate the damage this book will do to the already deteriorating morals of America," Billy Graham pronounced. The worst thing about the report, Van Dusen said, was not Kinsey's facts, if they were indeed trustworthy, but that they revealed "a prevailing degradation in American morality approximating the worst decadence of the Roman Empire. The most disturbing thing is the absence of a spontaneous ethical revulsion from the premises of the study and the inability on the part of the readers to put their fingers on the falsity of its premises. For the presuppositions of the Kinsey Report are strictly animalistic . . ." Again Kinsey was dis-

heartened: "I am still uncertain what the basic reason for the bitter attack on us may be. The attack is evidently much more intense with this publication of the *Female*. Their arguments become absurd when they attempt to find specific flaws in the book and basically I think they are attacking on general principles."

The new book was the final straw for the Rockefeller Foundation. In November 1953, Kinsey's supporters there made passionate presentations on his behalf. His work, they argued, was among the most important the foundation was sponsoring. They put in a request for \$80,000. An unsympathetic Rusk rejected it. It was a shattering moment. Kinsey wrote a note to Rusk pleading with him to come out to Bloomington and see what they were doing and telling of how well things looked for the future. Later, in another letter to Rusk, he noted, "To have fifteen years of accumulated data in this area fail to reach publication would constitute an indictment of the Institute, its sponsors, and all others who have contributed time and material resources to the work." Rusk was unmoved by his pleas. Instead, the Rockefeller Foundation made a grant of \$520,000 to Union Theological Seminary. Kinsey was devastated. "Damn that Rusk!" he would say from time to time.

Kinsey merely redoubled his efforts. If he had been a workaholic before, now there was a manic quality to his work. His friends began to worry about his health. His friend Edgar Anderson warned him that the institute needed him for another decade, not just another year or two. Anderson pleaded with him to see a doctor and work out what he called "a rational way of living under the circumstances." He suffered from insomnia, began to take sleeping pills, and started showing up groggy at work in the morning. The problems with his heart grew more serious. On several occasions he was hospitalized, and by the middle of 1956 he was forced to stay home and rest. In the summer of 1956 he conducted interviews number 7,984 and 7,985. "It is a shame," he noted, "that there comes a time that you have to work up data and publish it instead of continuing gathering. Frankly, I very much enjoy the gathering." He was ever the scientist, delighted by discovery. On August 25, 1956, he died, at the age of sixty-two.