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The Lost World of Kup

By Carol Felsenthal

In the days immediately following the death last November of Irv Kupcinet, the legendary *Chicago Sun-Times* gossip columnist, his family prepared for a huge funeral. After all, Kup had spent six decades passing on mostly complimentary scoops about the rich and powerful. Kup's heyday may have passed—the days when he would be summoned to Joan Crawford's bedroom, or throw a dinner for an all-star cast of comics in his apartment—but like its author, "Kup's Column" survived as the friendliest of icons.

Publicity agents plugging their clients, restaurateurs hoping to drum up business, fading celebrities looking for a bit of luster could almost always count on a helpful mention from Kup.

The service would be held at Temple Shalom, on North Lake Shore Drive, the same sanctuary where 1,500 people had turned out for the funeral of Kup's daughter, Karyn, after her tragic death in Hollywood in 1963. For this event, Kup's grandson, David Kupcinet, emerged as the family spokesman, and he warned people to arrive early because of the anticipated crowd.

He need not have bothered. Mayor Daley attended, and stayed for the whole service. But just one Hollywood star showed up—Hugh O'Brian, a.k.a. TV's Wyatt Earp, and he happened to be in town anyway. Hundreds of seats were empty. Maybe 600 people came.

Kup's funeral turned out to be a deflating finale to a remarkable life. Though "Kup's Column" had long since lost its spark—for at least two years before he died at 91, Stella Foster, his assistant, had written it—the column survived for the last decade and a half as an echo of another time and another city. That city came alive in the dark. It sparkled with glamour and intrigue and featured Hollywood stars, powerful politicians, mobsters who "owned the night," as one woman put it, and grateful press agents who sent crates of loot to accommodating reporters. Kup's Chicago existed largely in a handful of smoky venues with evocative names like the Chez Paree, the London House, the Black Orchid, and Club Alabam. And in those places Irv Kupcinet and his lively, foulmouthed wife, Essee, reigned as royalty. When they walked into a room, "the day is made . . . the evening's a success," recalls PR man Martin Janis.

Kup had tapped a friendly style and a talent for listening to move from a tough West Side childhood into a role as the city's premier gossip columnist. Although he spent his entire career at what became the number-two paper in town, he was the columnist with the most clout—"the column you wanted to be in," says the former publicist Pat Matsumoto. At his peak, Kup was a celebrity news machine—producing six columns a week, moderating a late-night TV talk show, delivering color commentary on radio for the Chicago Bears.

He went out almost every night, using Booth One at the Pump Room, in the Ambassador East Hotel, as his office and salon. In those days before nonstop cross-country flights, Ernest Byfield, the Pump Room's founder, would send limousines to Union Station to corral the stars stopping in Chicago en route to New York or Los Angeles. Byfield made certain that celebrities such as Elizabeth Taylor, Clark Gable, Humphrey Bogart, and Lauren Bacall would land at Booth One, where Kup and Essee awaited them. A strawberry blonde, dressed and groomed with theatrical flair, Essee once gave the young Marilyn Monroe a disapproving once-over and ushered her into the ladies' room to show her how to apply makeup.

After four or five hours of sleep, Kup would head back to the newspaper, where he worked the telephone, double-checking, following up leads, evaluating the items hand delivered by press agents. Getting Kup's ear became so valuable that, starting in the 1950s and continuing for decades, he had flacks working for free as his chauffeurs, pitching items as they drove. One, Frank Casey, a press agent for Warner Bros., would pick up Kup in the morning and deliver him to the Sun-Times. PR man Aaron Cushman was one of the people who staked a claim to the other direction.

As a youngster, Kup's son, Jerry, never knew whom he would find at dinner in their nine-room apartment, at 442 West Wellington Avenue. It might be Joan Crawford—Jerry remembers her "running up and down the hall with me on her shoulders"—or Bette Davis or Danny Thomas or Carol Channing or Sidney Poitier. Bandleader Stanley Paul recalls a dinner at the Kupcinefs' when "every comedian in the world was there—Jack E. Leonard, Jackie Vernon, Don Rickles, Martha Raye, Phyllis Diller, Milton Berle, Sammy Davis Jr., and Henny Youngman. They were giving jokes to each other. They all knew the punch lines."

But life wasn't entirely a floor show for the Kupcinefs. Their daughter, Karyn, died in her apartment off Hollywood's Sunset Strip in 1963, possibly murdered. In her short career as an actress, she claimed to have glimpsed vividly the superficiality of the show-business friendships that thrilled her parents. Although both Kup and Essee contemplated suicide in the aftermath of their daughter's death, they resumed their breakneck schedules, but neither ever recovered the sheer joy they had known in the life they led. Eventually, changes in the journalism business—including a sharper attention to ethics—turned Kup into a slightly embarrassing anachronism. And his Chicago changed, too—most of his old haunts closed, and the stars jetted over the city en route to either coast.

Still, Kup did not pass quietly. His death triggered the sort of media attention usually reserved for revered politicians. But it was a brief eruption of nostalgia. Kup's world—cruder, simpler, and certainly a lot more fun—had ended long before.

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After landing a job as a sportswriter for the Chicago Times in 1935, Irv Kupcinef switched to "columning"—any noun risked becoming a verb in Kup-speak—in 1943. The Times's managing editor and man about town, Russ Stewart, had recognized the qualities that the affable six-foot-one, 200-pound-plus former football player would bring to the assignment. (In 1948, The Chicago Sun and the Daily Times merged to become what eventually was named the Sun-Times, and Kup stuck with the tabloid until the end, refusing offers from the bigger, richer Tribune—loyalty being one of his many attractive qualities.)

His main competition, Nate Gross of the *Chicago American*, had grown lazy, collecting his items over the telephone, and for ten years Kup, aggressive and tenacious, had the run of the town. Then a new rivalry heated up when Herb Lyon, a former press agent, took over the *Tribune's* "Tower Ticker" column. Lyon saw Kup as "not a very good writer, not a particularly deep thinker," says Lyon's son, Jeff, deputy editor of the *Chicago Tribune Magazine*. But Lyon respected his rival's ability to "extract stories from people." Like Kup, Lyon went out almost every night, always accompanied by his wife, Lyle. Jeff Lyon says the two columnists had a friendly competition, but there was nothing friendly about the competition between their wives. Richard Christiansen, the former chief critic for the *Tribune*, says that Lyle and Essee were "very conscious of status." At the all-important Pump Room, the Kupcinets emerged on top. Booth One was always theirs.

In the mid-1960s, shortly after the Pump Room hired Stanley Paul to lead the nightclub's orchestra, Irv and Essee invited him to join them on their nightly rounds of Chicago hot spots. Paul was in his mid-20s; the Kupcinets were some 30 years older. The three started the evening with dinner at one of Kup's favorites, Fritzel's, on State Street—"the Midwest equivalent of New York's Toots Shor's," Kup declared—and then hit the Conrad Hilton, where the Kupcinets introduced Paul to Mayor Richard J. Daley and his wife, Eleanor ("Sis"). After that, the party decamped to the hotel's Boulevard Room for an ice-skating show, before moving to the Empire Room in the Palmer House to see Jimmy Durante, followed by a stop at Mister Kelly's on Rush Street to watch the comedian Totie Fields. At about 2:30 in the morning, the Kupcinets, with Paul in tow, landed at the Singapore, also on Rush, for Kup's adored barbecued spareribs. "'I'm falling asleep,'" Paul says he finally admitted to his hosts. "I said, 'I have to go.' They just looked at me, like, 'Why?'"

The *Sun-Times* columnist Steve Neal, in an interview shortly before his death last February, said he came to know Kup in 1987 and even then he was still the king of his world. Kup walking into any restaurant in town, Neal recalled, "was like the parting of the Red Sea."

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The son of Russian immigrants, Kup never lost sight of how far he had come. His father had walked into plenty of restaurants, but only to deliver baked goods. The family—Irv was the youngest of four children—lived in a small apartment at 16th and Kedzie over a grocery store. Bloody clashes among the Poles, the Irish, and the Jews were common, and Kup witnessed his first gunfight when he was 12. After graduating from Harrison High School in 1930, Kup went to Northwestern University on a football scholarship, but he soon got a better deal from the University of North Dakota. An all-star college quarterback, he was good enough to be drafted by the Philadelphia Eagles, but a shoulder injury ended his career before the first season was out.

Essee grew up with money on the Gold Coast. "You see pictures of her as a little girl," says her grandson, David Kupcinet. "She was like Paris Hilton. She was totally about being pretty, spoiled." Her father, Joseph Solomon, owned Solomon Cooper Drugs, then at Rush and Cedar, half drugstore and half liquor store. Friends say that he had made his money during Prohibition as a small-time rumrunner. Kup met Essee in 1935, when she was a student at Northwestern. Four years later, the Solomons hosted a white-tie wedding for 300 at the Belmont Hotel. Kup later joked that six people from his family were invited and 294 from Essee's.

Essee, who chained-smoked and ate only when necessary, had the legs of the dancer she longed to be—her father had nixed that—and the mouth of a stevedore. She never stopped fighting for her husband's position and, through it, her own. "She was always hollering that Kup isn't getting enough publicity on the trucks," recalls Louis Spear, formerly the circulation director of the *Sun-Times*.

She loved celebrities, but didn't care much for many of the press agents who promoted them to her husband. "If I'm standing there with Jack [Benny], who was a client," says Howard Mendelsohn, one of Kup's oldest friends, "she'd walk right by me, give Jack a big hug and kiss." Johnetta "Johnnie" Clark, who went to work for the Kupcinets as a cook in 1944 and stayed until she retired decades later, says, "Essee wasn't really close to anyone unless they were somebody."

Kup, on the other hand, was everybody's friend. "I don't recall Kup ever saying an unkind thing about a person," Steve Neal said. "He would just say nothing; it takes incredible strength and discipline to do that." When Kup saw prominent men out with women not their wives, he didn't write about it. When he talked to a doorman or a busboy, his demeanor was the same as if he were talking to Princess Grace. Johnnie Clark recalls her employer as such a lovely man that "I used to say that I wanted to be like him. I tried to be."

Karyn was born in 1941, and while Cookie, as they called her, was still in diapers, Essee began to groom her to be a star. "This is the child who was supposed to live out her dream," says Peggy Schatz, whose late husband, Jay, was an owner of the Chez Paree. Essee thought Cookie had the looks. When she was a little girl, Johnnie Clark recalls, "you'd walk down the street with her and people would stop and say, 'What a beautiful child!'"

A son, Jerry, born in 1944, seems to have been the forgotten child. "[Essee and Kup] were more involved with Cookie," says June Yamaguchi, a governess who cared for Jerry until he was 12. "Johnnie and June raised my dad," says Jerry's daughter, Kari. In his second memoir, *Kup: A Man, An Era, A City*, Kup writes with disarming honesty, "I was so busy columning . . . that I missed the birth of Jerry. I was at Toots Shor's in New York on Nov. 1, 1944."

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Kup was far from conventionally handsome. He had a large nose and wore an obvious hairpiece. His garish wardrobe—wide lapels, gaudy plaids—made him look like "he had lost an election bet," says Peggy Schatz. Yet she saw something "regal" about him. He was big but not flabby. He had football player shoulders and huge, powerful hands. He worked out regularly on an exercise bike. Steve Neal recalled Kup's "swaggering presence, incredible vitality."

"People pushed women at him all the time," says one close friend. "Sometimes he succumbed." In 1952 Joan Crawford asked Kup to join her at her home to watch the Oscars on television. She was up for a best actress award for *Sudden Fear* and did not want the cameras trained on her if she lost. Kup arrived to find the news crews camped on her lawn and Crawford in a gorgeous gown, her hair and makeup flawless. She didn't win, and the crews quickly departed. "God damn it, come in my bedroom," she barked at Kup, insisting in the most direct terms that he have sex with her. (The friend to whom Kup told this story says that Kup never revealed whether he had complied.)

Essee seemed proud that women were attracted to her husband—"Mae West really loved Irv," Essee used to tell friends—and she seemed willing, to a point, to accept Kup's girlfriends. She once confided to a friend that she had also strayed.

Essee raged, however, over what she suspected was an affair between Kup and a beautiful Chicago PR woman 20 years his junior, whose friendship he cherished to the end of his life. "That's where the bitch lives," Essee would hiss as she passed the woman's apartment. The supposed lover denies that she ever "slept with Kup." Not long before he died, Kup denied the affair, too, when his grandson, having heard the rumor so many times, asked if it were true.

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As Kup and Essee made their rounds, meeting friends and collecting items, he almost never paid their way—freeloading that would be barred by most major publications today. To the restaurateurs and club owners, however, a "Kup's Column" mention of a new chef, a new show, or a celebrity sighting was worth a lot more than the food and drinks that Kup and his party consumed. Peggy Schatz says that neither Herb Lyon nor Kup ever paid at the Chez Paree. If the nightclub "could get that one little inch [of newsprint] advantage," she says, "a \$50 check, that was a cheap price."

Kup certainly was not the only reporter accepting freebies in those days. Jeff Lyon recalls that his mother was strict about writing thank-you notes, mailing some 500 every holiday season to recognize the Scotch, bourbon, and fruitcakes sent to their apartment. "It's not fair," Lyon says, "to look at it through the lens of today."

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Over the years, Kup expanded his roster of sources to include the underworld. He ran into “the boys” at clubs on Rush Street or at places like the Chez Paree. Kup treated them in his usual manner—a “Hi, buddy,” a slap on the back, and an expectation that they, like anyone else, would be a source of tips. And they were. Audri Adams, who handled publicity for the Pump Room, says Kup got items from Tony Accardo, Sam Giancana, and Gus Alex, all major Mob figures.

When Bugsy Siegel was shot to death in the Beverly Hills mansion of his girlfriend, Virginia Hill, in 1947, a *True* magazine reporter named Mike Stern called Kup. Hill had been hiding out, and Stern had heard she was living on money funneled to her by a local Mob bookkeeper. Stern guessed correctly that Kup might know her. Kup arranged a dinner at the Blackstone Hotel, and the bookkeeper mentioned in passing that Hill was staying in a small town in Montana. Stern found her and got his scoop. Why didn’t the mobsters retaliate against Kup? Stern, now 93, says they liked him. And by then he was too powerful to harm.

And he was very close to Sidney Korshak, the Los Angeles–based Mob lawyer, a childhood friend from the West Side. Korshak, who died in 1996, was an incomparable source of news for Kup, not only about Mob matters but also about Hollywood (he represented studios and studio heads) and labor (ditto unions and union bosses). In 1958, when the *Sun-Times* moved from its old building on Wacker Drive to its later home on Wa-bash Avenue and the river, Louis Spear faced a refusal by paper handlers to unload a shipment of newsprint that had arrived by water. Spear contacted Korshak, and with one telephone call, Korshak sent the paper handlers to work.

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Though he wrote a gossip column, Kup thought of himself as a reporter first, and Dennis A. Britton, who became the editor of the *Sun-Times* in 1989, argues that Kup “had journalism skills as good as anyone I ever saw.” Kup had sources everywhere. In government, for instance, his weekly call list included the political heavyweights George Dunne, Neil Hartigan, Dan Rostenkowski, and Henry Hyde. (Kup was a Democrat—he loved Harry Truman and Hubert Humphrey most of all—but he had many friends besides Hyde in the GOP, including President Gerald Ford, a teammate on the 1935 college all-star football squad.) Britton says that Kup had “a corps of tipsters from federal judges to cops on the street. He called 30 to 40 people each week.”

And he got breaking news. He was the first to report President Harry Truman’s decision not to run in 1952—confided by the President himself. Around 1960, he broke the story that his friend Sammy Davis Jr. was about to present an engagement ring to Kim Novak. (The head of Novak’s movie studio decided marriage to a black man would decimate her at the box office, and he ordered Mafia thugs to warn off Davis. The romance ended.) When Britain’s Princess Margaret visited Chicago in 1979, Kup was the first to report her slur (“All Irish are pigs!”) in a conversation with the city’s most prominent Irishwoman, Mayor Jane Byrne.

In the 1990s, even as Kup was fading, he continued to break stories. In 1993, Steve Neal was with him at Comiskey Park when Kup excused himself to talk to a young woman, whom Neal did not recognize. Kup got the scoop that Michael Jordan was retiring (for the first time). The woman was Juanita Jordan.

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Being plugged in helped Kup move into television in its infancy. He started in the early 1950s with a WGN-TV variety show, followed by a late-night news and interview show on WBBM, which lasted until 1957, when Kup became the Chicago anchor for NBC's "America After Dark," a precursor of "The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson." In 1959 came "At Random" on WBBM, a talk show that started at midnight and continued until the host and the guests—some of whom wandered by after their nightclub acts—ran out of things to say, usually around three in the morning. "At Random" later became a more conventional, hourlong show on Channel 5, then 7, and, finally, 11. Guests over the years included Richard Nixon, Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, Milton Friedman, Martin Luther King Jr., Jimmy Hoffa, Judy Garland, and University of Chicago president Robert Maynard Hutchins. What made the show work was Kup himself, says Todd Whitman, his producer in later years: "[His ability to] put together people from different walks of life . . . I don't think anyone has done it like Kup. He sat back and let everybody else intermingle, didn't hog the spotlight—common guy sitting and observing."

Starting in 1953, Kup teamed with the veteran announcer Jack Brickhouse to provide color commentary on radio broadcasts of the Bears games. The job fit seamlessly with his column. One Sunday when Kup was new to the show, Brickhouse asked Kup if he needed help lining up guests for halftime. Kup said he thought he would be OK, and just before halftime Harry Truman, Bob Hope, and the middleweight boxing champ Carmen Basilio walked into the booth.

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While Kup and Essee were reveling in the glamour of Chicago's nightlife, their daughter, Karyn, was prepping for her own career in the limelight. Johnnie Clark, the family cook, says that the girl was "talked into being an actress" by her mother, who never got over her own stymied career as a dancer. Yet no one suggests that Karyn was a reluctant pupil. Before she could even read, the children's governess, June Yamaguchi, took her to acting lessons and then read the scripts to her, which Karyn would memorize and, Yamaguchi says, "perform for anybody."

Karen Kelley, a classmate of Karyn's at Francis Parker, recalls her as "sweet and and bubbly." Academics were not at the top of her list. "She was into shopping and parties" and her boyfriend. Kelley adds that Karyn wasn't serious about working at acting but was in love with the life, and, because of her father's position, confident she would get to the top. "Anybody in Hollywood of any consequence knew Kup," says Mendelsohn. "Some of his closest friends were heads of studios."

At 13, with help from a family friend, Karyn became Carol Lynley's understudy in a Chicago production of *Anniversary Waltz*. In high school, she appeared in productions at Francis Parker. "She was at ease on the stage," says Kelley, "but wasn't a great dramatic talent."

She was also strikingly insecure, and, compliments of her mother, obsessed with her weight. Karyn was five feet one, "not thin, big boobs, curvaceous," says Kelley. Already in high school, she had what Kelley calls a "weight problem," and soon, at Essee's urging, she started taking diet pills.

After graduating from Parker in 1958, Karyn attended Pine Manor Junior College, then in Wellesley, Massachusetts, but a year later, with plans to conquer Broadway, she moved to New York. She read for her first Broadway part but did not get it. Several years later, in a questionnaire for her PR agent, she described the miserable experience of trying to find work: "Through Dad's popularity, I was able to meet the top producers, agents and casting directors; through their respect for him they were terribly kind and understanding to me." But they saw her only as Kup's daughter and, she complained, could not recognize her talent. She lamented "the image I'd created of myself, out of many 'phony' compliments from well-meaning friends and business associates who were actually working for mentions in Kup's column—the feeling that I wasn't living up to the image expected of Kup's daughter and worst of all—the feeling that I was disappointing my parents!"

The pressure on Karyn to stay thin was crushing. Johnnie Clark recalls that when Karyn went to New York, “I guess she ate what she wanted, and when she came back she had gained weight, and her mother just went at her.” Her parents had said repeatedly that Karyn looked like a young Elizabeth Taylor. Karyn seemed to take that as a standard of beauty to which she should aspire. She analyzed endlessly how she looked to others, and she had so much plastic surgery—on her ears, chin, nose—that her natural beauty and expressiveness were lost.

In 1960, she left New York for Hollywood when Jerry Lewis, a close friend of Kup’s, offered her a bit part in *The Ladies’ Man*. Essee’s mother, Doree, accompanied Karyn to Hollywood, and they lived together in an apartment on Hollywood Boulevard. But after about nine months, Doree, disapproving of her granddaughter’s behavior, returned home and Karyn moved to another apartment. Kup asked Mark Goddard, a young actor, and his wife, Marcia, the daughter of a well-known Hollywood PR man, to look after Karyn. But by then she was abusing diet pills and other prescription drugs.

Karyn had some success professionally—episodes of TV’s “Perry Mason,” “Hawaiian Eye,” “The Donna Reed Show,” for example—but nothing she could count on. In 1962, she won excellent reviews for her last role on stage, as Annie Sullivan in *The Miracle Worker* at the Laguna Playhouse. But her insecurities grew. On the questionnaire she completed for her PR agent, she claimed to have gone to Wellesley College, to have taken acting classes at Harvard, to have scored 148 on an IQ test, and to weigh 106.

Late in 1962, she was arrested for shoplifting. The next month, she fell in love with a 26-year-old up-and-coming actor—he was then costarring on a TV series called “The Wide Country”—named Andrew Prine. The romance started strong, and then he pulled back. She wanted an exclusive relationship, marriage even; he wanted to have fun with the many young women who were his for the asking. “He just thought he was the greatest thing that ever happened,” says Kari Kupcinet-Kriser, Jerry’s daughter, who became obsessed with learning about the aunt she had never known. “One minute she thought he was going to marry her; the next minute he didn’t want to see her.” By July 1963, Karyn weighed 134 pounds, and her intake of diet pills also had increased.

She got pregnant, and with the help of the Goddards, had an abortion in Tijuana that July—a “butcher, newspaper on the floor, light bulb hanging,” recalls Mark Goddard, who paid for the abortion, “the worst thing I ever did in my life.” (Prine would not comment for this article.)

Refusing to accept that Prine would never love her, Karyn began to spy on him and his new girlfriend. On July 30th, according to a 1998 article in *GQ* magazine by James Ellroy, she noted in her diary, “Andy with Anna. Me watched from hedge. Awful. Nightmares.” On October 29th: “Andy acting ugly. Complete indifference. Scene at his house. I’m hysterical.” On November 4th, after hiding in his attic: “Wish I were dead.” On November 20th: “I’m losing reality”; on November 25th: “Ate to oblivion.”

She had started to cut letters and words out of magazines, composing threatening and profane messages and mailing them to Prine and to herself. (Her fingerprints were later discovered under the tape, and the cut-up magazines were found in her apartment.)

Kup and Essee flew to Hollywood at least twice and tried to persuade Karyn to return to Chicago. They urged her to come home for Thanksgiving, but she refused. On November 30, 1963, the Saturday after the holiday, the Goddards stopped by her apartment, worried that they had not heard from her. Mark had a “funny feeling” that something was wrong. They found her nude on her back on the sofa. She had been dead for about three days, and Mark assumed that she had overdosed on pills. She was 22.

That day, the Kupcinetts were at an opening of a Sara Lee plant in Deerfield. Russ Stewart, the editor of the Sun-Times, reached Kup by telephone. The news had already broken on television; friends and family had gathered at the Kupcinetts’ apartment by the time they returned home. “Mrs. Kupcinet just passed out, in shock,” Johnnie Clark says. “Mr. Kupcinet went in a corner in the dining room and faced the wall and put his hand over his head and he cried like a baby.”

Accompanied by his lawyer and his brother Joe, a football coach at Taft High School, Kup flew to Los Angeles. His friend Sidney Korshak “took care of them,” Louis Spear says. Korshak identified the body.

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No one has ever been charged in Karyn's death, and though the coroner ruled it a death by strangulation, citing a broken hyoid bone in her throat, even that finding of murder is uncertain.

Ellroy believes that Karyn killed herself, either intentionally or by accident, with an overdose of pills. He speculates that she might have been following the advice in a book found near her body to dance in the nude like a "wood nymph, to free your inhibitions." Falling, she clipped her hyoid bone on the coffee table.

Los Angeles County sheriff's detectives found a note in the apartment: "I'm no good. I'm not really that pretty. My figure's fat and will never be the way my mother wants it. I won't let it be what she wants. . . . What happens to me—or my Andy? Why doesn't he want me?"

Members of the Kupcinet family angrily dispute the possibility of suicide. "If anyone ever suggested anything but murder, [Kup] would have murdered that person," says a former *Sun-Times* editor. Kari Kupcinet-Kriser, who came to know Ellroy well and admires him, thinks that he is wrong in this case: "He's the only one in 40 years who has ever [suggested it was a suicide], and every policeman will tell you that it's a murder."

According to Jerry Kupcinet, Chicago mobsters offered to send associates to Los Angeles to help expedite the investigation. Kup declined that offer—and an offer, Jerry adds, from Mayor Richard J. Daley to send some Chicago detectives to Los Angeles. "My dad was totally convinced that the [L.A.] sheriff's department could figure this out."

Kup also declined to hire a private investigator, again because he did not want to offend the sheriff's detectives. He grew bitterly to regret that decision, referring to it as "a colossal blunder." Instead, he called FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, "a person I had met on many occasions," Kup noted. "He wrote a warm letter, in which he urged the police to be aggressive in their investigation."

Early on, Essee believed that Andrew Prine had murdered Karyn, and she set out to ruin his career. He went from being a "hot property," says Marcia Goddard, to one who worked spottily during the 1960s. The *Sun-Times* celebrity columnist Bill Zwecker recalls a studio executive telling him, "I've heard for years [Prine] couldn't get a job at a car wash." (Today Prine lives in Sherman Oaks with his third wife, and, since Karyn's death, he has appeared in movies such as *Crypt of the Living Dead* and *Gettysburg* and on television in episodes of "The Fugitive" and "Murder, She Wrote.")

The other prime suspect was David Lange, then 27, the younger brother of the actress Hope Lange. At the time he was struggling to break into the movie business, and he would later work for the director Alan Pakula, who had married his sister in 1963. Shortly after the murder, Lange told a friend he did it, then said he was just kidding. "Oh, God, the police kept bringing that up," says Lange today. "Within a week or so of this murder, we were all so crazed with it that people would be going around saying, 'I'm the . . . Strangler.'"

Lange, who today lives in Connecticut, says Karyn "wasn't really a friend." He had seen her at a couple of parties with Prine. She helped Lange rent the apartment directly above hers. He had lived there just a couple of days, and they had talked about getting together. The next time he saw her, "she was getting carried out of the courtyard building in a body bag."

James Ellroy thinks the case will never be solved. Marcia Goddard, now remarried, says that ten years ago a detective came to her house to talk to her about it, but she hasn't heard anything since. Jerry Kupcinet, who lives in Los Angeles and directs the TV show "Judge Joe Brown," says simply, "The case is still open."

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"My mother lost the will to live after my sister died," says Jerry. "She was a mess." Within weeks of Karyn's death, Howard Mendelsohn met Kup at Fritzel's for lunch. Afterward, they parted to continue separately to their offices. When Mendelsohn turned to look back, he saw Kup in the middle of the Wabash Avenue Bridge, holding onto the railing and staring down at the water. "I know he was contemplating jumping," he says.

Kup had his work to give structure to his days. Within a week or two of the funeral, he was broadcasting Bears games. Essee had nothing. She was drinking too much Jack Daniel's, and she started taking pills. She flirted with converting to Catholicism for its belief in the afterlife, and she sent personal items of Karyn's to psychics, hoping that they could help identify the murderer and also communicate with the dead young woman. "Irv was very attentive to her," Stanley Paul recalls. "He was hurting, too, but he was just devoted to her."

After a rough first year, Essee rallied. She focused on work that would keep Karyn's memory alive and that would help high-school students find training and opportunities in the arts. Through the force of her personality, her contacts, and plugs in "Kup's Column," she raised the money to help found and support the private Chicago Academy for the Arts on West Chicago Avenue.

To those who didn't know, Kup seemed not much different from before. He continued to be loyal to the *Sun-Times*, turning down offers from the *Tribune*. On Hedda Hopper's death in 1966, the *Tribune's* publisher, Don Maxwell, gave Kup the chance to move to Los Angeles, to take over her *Tribune*-syndicated column, as well as her house and office. "I don't want to leave Chicago," Kup told Mendelsohn. "Everything I love in the world is right here." But the biggest reason was that Karyn had been murdered in Hollywood and, Kup wrote, both he and Essee thought the "memory was too fresh."

Remarkably, though, Kup didn't turn bitter. People noticed one subtle change: When he talked to old friends, he would never ask about their daughters.

But he was still capable of major acts of kindness. When Manny Skar, a Mob functionary and friend of Kup's, was gunned down in 1965 near the garage of 3800 North Lake Shore Drive, newsmen converged on the luxury apartment building, tormenting the victim's widow, Bea. In the next day's column, Kup wrote a flattering description of Bea and distanced her from her husband, who had been indicted on charges of income-tax evasion. A couple of weeks later, Kup insisted that she accompany him to Fritzel's. "A hush fell over the room as we walked in," Bea recalls. As they moved toward their table, he whispered in her ear, "Walk and smile." Waiting at the table was Kup's lawyer. Both men, Bea says, "talked to the government [from a telephone] at the booth on my behalf."

Kup and Essee wanted out of the Wellington Avenue apartment, with its memories of their daughter, and in the late 1960s they moved into The Carlyle, at 1040 North Lake Shore Drive, one of the first luxury condominiums to be built on the Drive. It was said that the developer, Kup's friend Al Robin, gave Kup a steep discount because he would lend an air of celebrity to a venture that was somewhat risky. Jerry Kupcinet calls that charge "ridiculous." The Kupcinetes were original owners, and, Jerry says, they got the same deal as anyone else—four bedrooms, four and a half baths (about 3,100 square feet, including a terrace) for about \$135,000. A recent search of Cook County records showed that no purchase price was recorded.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the ethics standards of journalists started to tighten, while Kup's casual style remained largely the same. In 1980, Mayor Jane Byrne publicly called Kup and his counterpart at the *Tribune*, Bob Wiedrich, "two of the greatest freeloaders in the city." A succession of *Sun-Times* editors grappled with the ethics nightmare that their popular columnist represented. Ralph Otwell, who was the editor from 1976 to 1984, tried gently to bring Kup up-to-date on changing standards. Among other things, he told Kup to curb the delivery to the *Sun-Times* of holiday "loot"—crates of gifts addressed to Kup that would sit on the loading dock for all to see. Kup "readily recognized that times had changed," Otwell says. "He had the common sense to recognize that the paper came first."

The embarrassments for the paper continued to erupt, however. In 1985, during the trial of Judge Richard LeFevour as part of Operation Greylord (an investigation of judicial corruption), a Cadillac dealer named Hanley Dawson Jr. testified that he had given free cars to Kup. Mike Royko, by then having left the *Sun-Times* for the *Tribune*, wrote that Dawson had given the Cadillacs "because he expected to receive favorable publicity in the column. Naturally, he wasn't disappointed."

By the 1980s, Kup was making about \$300,000 a year from the column, and more from his work on TV and radio. His bosses at the paper knew they were getting a bargain. Kup and the advice columnist Ann Landers (who jumped to the *Tribune* in 1987) consistently topped readership polls, even outranking Mike Royko when they were all writing for the *Sun-Times*, says Ralph Otwell. Men especially bought the paper to read Kup, and, even in the 1990s, when both his heart and zest gave out, he still made the paper plenty of money. As always, his column ran toward the back, drawing readers—and thus advertisers—well into the paper.

Still, by the mid-1980s, there were undoubtedly many who read Kup more out of habit than in expectation of learning much. A new generation was coming into the media, and Kup began to look dated and even comic, with his cliché-laden items carrying updates on such aged stars as Bob Hope (“Ol’ Ski Nose”) and featuring such press stoppers as who would “headline” this or that charity dinner and which local politician or grade-B actor was seen dining at which “eatery.”

In the WGN broadcast booth during Chicago Bears games, Kup sometimes dozed and had to be nudged awake before a commercial ended. “It was hilarious,” says his friend and *Sun-Times* colleague Ray Coffey. “[The announcers] couldn’t recognize the players.” PR man John Iltis recalls hearing about the time that Kup and Brickhouse were talking about a restaurant and they “missed a touchdown completely.” In 1976, the team’s general manager, Jim Finks, replaced both broadcasters.

* * *

By the late 1980s, Kup’s heart was failing. He claimed the illness as the reason he ended his weekly hourlong talk show, which appeared on Channel 11 and a handful of other public television stations. The record books would give him one of the longest-running TV talk shows in history, but the ratings books were not so kind, and the show’s days were probably numbered anyway.

Kup kept his chin up over the loss of his broadcast jobs, but when it appeared that the *Sun-Times* might be angling to put his successor in place before he had even retired, he told people that he had no intention of ever stepping aside, that he planned to be “terminal at my terminal.”

Robert Page, then running the *Sun-Times* and concerned both that Kup might not survive his heart condition and that the paper had to do something to attract younger readers, hired Michael Sneed from the *Tribune* as a second gossip columnist late in 1986. “I was hired to replace Kup,” Sneed says. Page and others thought Sneed brought a toughness to the job that Kup did not have. Kup didn’t learn Sneed was coming until after she had signed the contract.

Shortly after Sneed was hired, Kup collapsed in the lobby of The Carlyle. But he hardly let that deter him. “He had his heart surgery and went back to work six days later, chuckling about it the whole time,” says David Kupcinet.

Sneed had worried that she and Kup might come up with the same items. The deal that Sneed claims to have struck with Page was that under those circumstances, Kup “was to give up his item and I was to keep it. . . . One of the editors said to me, ‘Please don’t do this. I don’t want to hurt his feelings.’” Sneed says she agreed there was no need to codify the arrangement. The division of labor turned out not to be so difficult. “I was only interested in hard news,” Sneed says, no “pimp journalism,” referring to the press agents who lined up at Kup’s door.

For his part, Kup did not consider Sneed to be “in his league,” Dennis Britton says. It annoyed Kup that Sneed’s column ran near the front of the paper while he was in the back. Their relationship remained cool, although Sneed says that Kup was never “anything but a gentleman” to her. Essee was another story. “Essee hated me,” Sneed says.

By 1992, Kup’s portfolio was further diminished when Britton hired Bill Zwecker to cover celebrities and, again, to bring in those elusive younger readers. One editor says that Kup was “initially upset but came to respect Bill.”

In 1996, Kup suffered through the revocation of the best of his freebies—his annual deep-sea fishing trip aboard the 123-foot Blackhawk. That Kup saw nothing wrong with taking the gift from Arthur Wirtz, and then his son William Wirtz—major players in the real estate business here and the owners of the Chicago Blackhawks; the epitome of the bold-face names that Kup and his newspaper covered—is obvious because every year he reported on the escape to the Bahamas. “One of the great yachts of the world,” he wrote, and, in 1993, named the six members of the crew serving Kup and five friends and relatives. Dennis Britton told Kup that the gig was up, but allowed the columnist one last trip because he had already extended invitations, and it would have been a “huge embarrassment” to cancel it.

* * *

Kup grew hard of hearing as he got older, and he would sometimes pretend not to hear Essee, whose tart tongue did not sweeten with age. Essee “could be very mean when talking to Kup,” says Johnnie Clark, “but he never talked back to her.” At the 1986 ceremony to change the name of the Wabash Avenue bridge over the Chicago River to the Irv Kupcinet Bridge, Essee—surrounded by dignitaries including Mayor Harold Washington—remarked loudly as it rose, “That’s the first time I’ve seen Kup go up in 20 years.”

On a New Year’s Eve in Booth One, Kup with Essee and several prominent Chicagoans awaited a call from a network correspondent who would check in with “Mr. Chicago,” as Essee insisted he be called. When the call came, Essee had to nudge him awake. Kup fumbled the introduction of his table companions. “Well, you really fucked that up,” Essee said loudly—on the air.

By the late 1990s, Essee had begun to tell friends and family that she wanted to die. “I want to join Cookie. I’ve had it with this world,” she told her daughter-in-law, Sue Kupcinet. Suffering from emphysema, she still chain-smoked Pall Malls and did not care who objected. In 1998, Essee and Kup attended a fundraiser in Highland Park for Bill Clinton. “My grandfather was talking to the President,” says David Kupcinet. “She was sitting in a chair in the back of the room, and she lit up a cigarette. . . . The Secret Service guy came up and said, ‘Mrs. Kupcinet, I’m sorry, you can’t smoke inside,’ and she said, ‘I’ll put it out.’” She didn’t, though, and the scene was repeated several times, until the agent finally said, “The President has requested that you don’t smoke in the house.” Essee replied: “Fuck the President.” The agent was speechless, and she finished her cigarette.

In 2000, Jerry Kupcinet received a phone call in Los Angeles from Essee’s doctor. By the time Jerry arrived at the hospital in Chicago, she had rebounded. “There she was,” he recalls, “sitting on the side of the bed with oxygen streaming up through her nose, and she was smoking. ‘Let’s get the hell out of here,’” she said. They went to Gibson’s for dinner.

In April 2001, when Patrick Smith arrived as the “male assistant” for Kup, Smith found both Kup and Essee “suffering in the master bedroom.” Essee’s smoke was so thick that “you could hardly see the other side of the room,” Smith recalls. Kup, who had reluctantly given up cigars some years before, was often short of breath and required oxygen. Though the Kupcinet had a large staff, the apartment was filthy. Sue Kupcinet, visiting from Los Angeles, would later fire most of the help. She also discovered that, over the course of several years, Essee’s minks, jewelry, and silver serving pieces had disappeared.

Essee died in June 2001, at the age of 86. About 300 people, including then governor George Ryan, attended her funeral at Temple Sholom. Kup was in a wheelchair and on oxygen. Stanley Paul played “More.” Reporters wrote that he had played it for the Kupcinet marriage of 62 years, but, as Paul knew, it was Essee’s song to Karyn. Before closing the casket, the family put in—at Essee’s request—a pack of Pall Malls and a lighter. She was buried next to her daughter.

In his farewell column to Essee, published the day after the funeral, Kup wrote of “the pain, heartache, emptiness and pure devastation that I am feeling.”

Kup’s health continued to deteriorate. He had stenosis of the spine, among other ailments, and went from using a cane to a walker to a wheelchair. He had a pacemaker on one side of his chest and a defibrillator on the other. The pain in his legs was constant.

The column's frequency dropped from six times a week to three and then two. The columns had lost what little punch remained. "What do you got?" he would ask his old friend Henry Hyde. And mostly Hyde offered puffery about himself, even during Bill Clinton's impeachment hearings, when Hyde chaired the House Judiciary Committee.

Kup came to rely more on Stella Foster, who had been his assistant since 1969. Changes in the column were obvious. Foster, who is African American, "has brought the column into the African American community," says Britton, who adds that she has never been given "proper respect from various managements, including my own. Can you imagine Kup in the hip-hop community?"

For the last two years of his life, Kup had little to do with the column. Patrick Smith would wheel him into the office once a week or so. Steve Neal would take him to lunch, and they would talk about "old times and old people," says Ray Coffey. In the office, Kup would sit across the desk from Foster, and they would make it seem as if he were in charge. David Kupcinet says that tipsters "still called Kup. He always until the end wanted to be a part of it."

In the last months of Kup's life, there was what Kari Kupcinet-Kriser calls "a little bit of weirdness between Stella and my dad and brother." David, now 25, had moved to Chicago from Los Angeles, with plans to become a writer and standup comic. Foster saw herself as Kup's successor and feared that she would be shoved aside so his grandson could take over.

With memories that include "hanging out" with his grandfather and stars such as Bill Cosby, Sammy Davis Jr., Frank Sinatra, and Bob Hope, David Kupcinet did not have an average childhood, and, not surprisingly, he does not have average aspirations. Michael Cooke, the editor in chief of the *Sun-Times*, says that David's father, Jerry, pushed hard to maneuver his son into what had become, by default, Stella Foster's job. "I had nothing to do with any of that," Jerry insists. John Cruickshank, the publisher of the *Sun-Times*, also says that Jerry lobbied on his son's behalf and wanted David to take over "to keep the column in the family."

About a week after Kup's death, Fox TV newsman Walter Jacobson reported that a battle was brewing between Stella and David, and he suggested that the paper "could avoid the possibility of a hassle with the Reverend Jesse Jackson and Willie Barrow of Operation PUSH" by giving the column to Foster. Jackson calls Jacobson's speculation "violently unfair, ridiculous," and insists that he never issued anything resembling a threat to Cruickshank or Cooke.

Cruickshank claims that two years before Kup's death, he and Cooke took Foster to lunch and "urged her to think in terms of what kind of column she wanted." Cruickshank recalls that she was "terrified by the idea," but eventually she grew accustomed to the challenge. Today, her twice weekly report is called, appropriately, "Stella's Column." David Kupcinet has continued to write a weekly column for Red Streak, the *Sun-Times* youth edition.

Stella Foster is apparently still feeling slightly bruised. In the months since her column made its debut, she has taken a couple of swipes at the family, recently in plugging the first annual Irv and Essee Kupcinet Leaders Award Luncheon in May. She reported that Bill Zwecker would be the emcee and that Kari and David would be cochairs. "And no, I was not asked to be involved in this wonderful tribute," she wrote.

"Stella owes her career to Kup," says Jerry Kupcinet. "She shouldn't be disgruntled." Cooke seems to leave the door open to David's writing a nightlife column, calling him "very smart, well spoken," but "not ready for the *Sun-Times* yet."

While his grandson and his longtime assistant were jockeying for position, Kup did not let his feelings on the succession be known, perhaps because he did not have any. He was simply too tired, too dispirited, too out of it. "Kup didn't care after he died who took over the column," says Britton.

* * *

Kup represents the rare person who really was a hero to his valet. Patrick Smith says that his boss was “brilliant to the end,” though Kup grew frustrated and angry that he couldn’t do anything for himself. Still, whatever Smith did for him, Kup would say, “Very good, Patrick, perfect.” Friends say that Smith gave Kup two extra years of life, opening the blinds to let the sun in, bathing and shaving the old columnist, dressing him in his Pucci suits and coordinated ties and shirts. Kup would plead with him, “Pat, don’t ever leave me.”

For years, Kup had enjoyed a Saturday lunch with old friends, most recently at the Drake hotel. At the lunch on November 8th, “he was extremely tired,” recalls his friend Audri Adams. “He ate some, but he was quiet, and two ladies from Indiana wanted their pictures taken with him. Usually he would immediately rise to the occasion and be alert, but he wasn’t.” Kup told Smith he was tired and wanted to go home. Once there, Kup asked Smith to call Adams. “He had to make sure that she got home OK,” Smith says.

Early the next morning, when Kup was having trouble breathing, his night caregiver took him to the emergency room at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. His friends figured he would rally as he had so many times before. But he died the following day, Monday, November 10th, surrounded by his family.

Kup left almost everything, including his condominium, to his son. (In April, the *Tribune* reported that a buyer was under contract for the apartment, which had been listed for \$1.8 million.) Kup also made three \$50,000 bequests—to his grandchildren, Kari and David, and to his daughter-in-law, Sue. Friends say that Kup was never motivated by the accumulation of wealth. “As long as he could have the lifestyle he wanted,” says Marshall Field V, the one-time owner of the *Sun-Times*, “money was secondary. He had that big cigar in his mouth and was always upfront shaking hands— ‘Hi, Angie,’ to Angie Dickinson, or ‘Hi, Groucho’—and he just loved it.”

* * *

Richard Christiansen recalls Essee once saying that “both she and Kup were perfectly aware, if he should stop writing the column, they would lose half their contacts and friends.” So the sparse turnout at the funeral might not have come as much of a surprise to the veteran newsman. Still, it is startling to note the finality with which Kup and his world were left behind. On the day of the funeral, the Publicity Club of Chicago has a luncheon scheduled. One PR person called the club to ask if the gathering would be delayed because of Kup’s funeral, and she was told that she had been the only person to ask. The luncheon would be held as scheduled.

At the funeral, Stanley Paul played “Chicago.” In mid-song he inserted Essee’s “More.” Kup was buried in a Pucci suit, a navy-blue pinstripe selected by Patrick Smith, who says the tailor insisted that he made clothes only for “living legends.” Kup undoubtedly would have enjoyed the incongruity of the remark.

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