

The Press: Report From the Other Side

By Michael Miner

Last May 26, just about noon, something terrible happened in my home. The first sign of it was dark smoke billowing from the chimney. A neighbor called the fire department and my office, fetching me home to the familiar urban spectacle of fire engines, police cars, and milling bystanders. Dozens of times as a journalist I have taken in this scene in a glance. Now a woman who lives two doors away nodded wanly, and as I ran up to my house a fireman appeared on the roof of the front porch. Immense in his black slicker, especially measured against what he carried, he was bringing down the ladder my ten-month-old daughter, Joanna, her eyes rolled up and her body covered with soot. "She's alive," he said, and the door of a red fire ambulance slammed shut behind her. "What about the woman who was in there?" I asked the nearest policeman. "She's dead," he said. "How?" I said. "We think she's been murdered."

The dead woman, Joanna's baby-sitter, was a family friend named Nina Gray, a calm, kind widow 47 years old who had helped us care for our children for almost three years. Her body was found beaten, choked, submerged in a running bathtub. The fire began two stories below in the basement bathroom, which it obliterated, and quickly filled the house with smoke. The fire remains bewildering, the cause of it a mystery; everyone's assumption, of course, was that the killer had

set it.

Contrary to popular suspicions about the luridness of the press, a violent episode of this kind in a city the size of Chicago is not necessarily headline news—not in the ghetto and not, automatically, out of it. Just two weeks ago, a 30-year-old woman was found dead in an apartment on Pine Grove near Addison, about two miles southeast of my house, in circumstances so similar—she had been strangled, and her body was in a tub—that police suspect a common-murderer. Yet this later killing did not make much of a news splash—I could find no mention at all of it in the *Tribune*. But Nina Gray and her family and Joanna and my wife and I were news for two days. Our story had more ingredients: a fire was involved, and a baby, and—not least important—I had been a reporter at the *Sun-Times* for eight years, and people in the business knew me.

So now I have observed the phenomenon of my profession going about its business from across the divide—from the unexpected perspective of the common man on whom some of the sky has fallen. Attention was paid—there was an almost palpable sense of the city turning its eyes this way—and despite anything I will now proceed to say, I am not ungrateful.

The first journalist I ran into that afternoon was a *Tribune* photographer hanging around the emergency room at Edgewater Hospital. He wanted permission to come upstairs and take pictures of tiny Joanna lying inside the hyperbaric chamber, which was driving oxygen into her. That was something I had no intention of letting him do, even while telling myself that I would of course cooperate with the press. Photos that splash horror and grief for decorative purposes on our front pages are newspapering at its most vulgar. Beyond that, I was superstitious; I did not mean to play with my daughter's fate. If the press was not allowed to photograph her dying, perhaps she wouldn't. This black camera



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dangling from a looming stranger's shoulders posed a paltry threat to Joanna but a threat to protect her against. When a pair of detectives took me downstairs to ask a few questions, the photographer found us there. "Beat it!" they yelled at him. "Get out of here!" He suggested a stereotype of journeyman press photographers: middle-aged, frumpy, edges worn away by abuse. He retreated through a glass door into a hallway, where I was aware of him squinting and twisting, persistent as a fly against a screen, determined to take whatever pictures of me he could past the bulky frames of the cops.

"There are a lot of reporters downstairs," a nurse said later.

"The police say they don't think you should talk to them." A lot turned out to be one camera crew. Paul Hogan of WMAQ asked me outside into the fading afternoon and we talked while the camera rolled. Hogan... Five... these were indices of the gravity the media were awarding this calamity. I was glad to see Hogan, although I scarcely knew him. Hogan is about my age; my guess was he had some idea of what children are, how they sit in parents' hearts. Hogan had me acknowledging that this awful act was not incomprehensible to me: I had covered its like often. Once he'd left I wished I'd gone on to say to Hogan, "So have you. You'll cover another one tomorrow." That was how I was handling

this—telling myself my life had caught up with my work. It was an attitude that kept some kind of order inside my head. Any reporter would be welcome to this bleak order—if he found it out himself. But no one did. My thoughts and feelings were in some describable condition and I nearly ached to share them, but "How do you feel?" would not bring them forth. The reporters would have to understand where to look. None of them, in their innocence, came near.

Back at the *Sun-Times*, I had wondered why strangers in their deepest anguish talked to me. The answer seemed to lie in a human need for dignity and meaning. When the absurd happened—and these calamities were absurd: one stranger was a father whose daughter went skydiving; her chute didn't open—meaning could be imposed by one's response. These moments of awful luck became tests, and dignity brought a kind of honor; one passed the test. Well, there may be some truth in this ornate surmise, but the explanation seems simpler now. Bad luck takes our lives out of our own hands. It makes us feel useless. Other than hovering at my daughter's bed, I had no function, and questions gave me a function. I could answer them. I welcomed questions from friends, doctors, cops—and reporters—because they elicited the one prowess left me.

But how young were these reporters who appeared! Even if their city rooms contained some moms and pops, this spot news story hadn't called them out. Like myself ten years ago, and like dozens of reporters I have watched or known, life still exempted them from any serious understanding of the tragedies they chronicled; it hadn't made them old enough. The young man from the *Sun-Times* and the young woman from the *Tribune* asked essential, competent questions that I hardly felt. They bent over backward to be courtly. And then the *Sun-Times* man, dropping dimes into a pay phone on the wall of the waiting

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room, called his office and spoke to the night editor. "Five was here . . . the *Tribune's* here . . ." Silence for a query at the other end of the line, and then he furnished the name of the *Tribune* reporter. From my remove, these calibrations seemed wonderfully obvious to me. Who's there for the *Tribune*? he'd been asked—which meant, how are they treating it? should we be doing more? or less?

The *Tribune* woman did not ask very many questions. She withdrew without exactly disappearing. In fact, she was playing a favorite old trick of mine. She tucked herself into a corner, just a fly on the wall, and kept her ears open. Everyone said her story the next day was lovely. It was graced by

things I hadn't told her but had said on the phone to friends. Everyone also admired the picture in the *Tribune*. I looked pensive, burdened, head bowed and chin in hand. The photograph gave no hint of the indignities heaped on the head of the man who took it.

My colleagues at the *Reader* watched TV and read the papers and were annoyed. They agreed that the general approach taken by the media was "servant of well-known journalist slain." There was no picture of Nina Gray in the papers. Another watcher of TV who professed to be distressed by the coverage was WBBM's John Madigan. His critique caught up with me later. "On the ten o'clock TV news last night," Madigan began, in a voice whose shrill fretfulness is so easily imagined, "as police carried out the body of a murdered woman, a teen-aged girl ran up with her camera.

"Snapped several pictures. Changed position to get a better angle.

"My immediate reaction was one of revulsion. I presumed that the girl lived nearby. Perhaps even knew the murder victim. It seemed a little gross.

"But as the TV screen jumped to a new story I realized I was being too hard on the girl. Was she much different than the TV cameramen!"

Madigan's answer of course was no. And from this congenial premise he galloped to an abhorrent conclusion. "I'm a little weary," Madigan went on, "of seeing pools of blood in color on what we used to call cheap crime stories . . . Last night's TV shot of two policemen carrying a trussed-up body was so trite that it could have come from the files. A worthwhile picture would have been that of the ten-month-old baby who survived the fire set by the murderer to try and cover his crime. Or visual of the children of the victim . . ."

Yes, the three children of Nina Gray, who did not know for sure that their mother was dead until the television told them, would have been delighted to be seen weeping in each other's embrace for the edification of the evening TV audience. And Joanna gladly would have donated a few seconds of her brief, imperiled life for the sustenance of the cathode reality, whose appetite for simple, "touching" images is

insatiable. Madigan was right; those would have been better pictures. But I must tell him with a voice from beyond journalism that they would have been plundering and amoral; they would have trod upon our families' privacy.

I do not care about the shot of me—my need of privacy was totally invested in my daughter. She, and my dead friend's children, were stricken and defenseless. Is it that the tyrannizing media must willfully keep some private values foreign to their comprehension? The human need to be left alone seems to be one that journalism dare not grasp; it could not function if it understood that need too well. No doubt Madigan spoke shrewdly of "worthwhile" pictures as a journalist. He was only wrong as a human being.

The last reporter to check in the day of the killing was, surprisingly enough, from City News Bureau, which breaks most police-blotter stories. No profound breaches of human ethics here. "Hi," she said, meaning to get the interview off on the right foot. "How's your kid doing?" Here was someone who knew exactly how to handle

a delicate situation. Still—and this may have escaped her—she learned much less from me than I learned from her. At this late hour I still wasn't certain just what had gone on inside my home, and after a gesture to my lay delicacy—"Geez, I don't think you want to hear this"—she proceeded to fill me in.

There is no reason not to expect this young woman to go on to a triumphant career. If her public manner lacks a certain finesse, a certain intangible something that could almost be called sensitivity, the lack is in no way a serious obstacle. For the duties of a reporter do not include being nurturing or therapeutic. What I found out about the considerations reporters owe their subjects can be stated in a very few words. The reporters were not there for me. I was there for them.

Another day passed. Joanna improved and was transferred to Children's Hospital, and our story vanished from the public eye. As we all know, the human need to be left alone is a most ambiguous one. Barely, I noticed the press was no longer calling, and just barely, I felt ourselves adrift.