“The Funniest One of All”

A progenitor of the National Lampoon and the movies Animal House and Caddyshack, Douglas C. Kenney was a Zen master of comedy. His mysterious death still perplexes those who laughed with him.
The Life

by CRAIG LAMBERT

He had a hell of a mouth on him, you had to say that. In a persona so contradictory and multifaceted that actor Chevy Chase described him as “a living paradox,” there was at least one item on which Doug Kenney’s friends could reach consensus: the guy had an amazing mouth. Doug could put his entire fist—which was huge—inside his mouth, and he often did so as a party trick. He also had “one of the world’s greatest smiles,” according to screenwriter Chris Miller. “With his rubber mouth, Doug made goofy faces all the time—the child in him was very strong.” Once, he even munched a wineglass in honor of a birthday celebrant he’d just met: “Doug smiled, toasted me, and took a bite out of the glass,” says Kathryn Walker, A.M. ’79, the actress who, as it turned out, became Kenney’s girlfriend from that point on. “I still don’t know how he did it.”

But the best thing that came from Kenney’s mouth was his fabulous wit. Doug was “one of the funniest people ever,” in the estimate of his close friend and collaborator Henry Beard ’67, and “a guy who said all the funniest things you ever heard,” according to motion picture executive Alan Greisman. “Doug was the funniest one of them all; he had an incisive brilliance,” says Walker. To New Yorker writer Ian Frazier ’73, Kenney was “extremely talented in about eighteen different ways”; to humorist George W.S. Trow ’65, he was “a tub toy under sedation.” Hollywood producer Michael Shamberg claims that “Doug had as much talent as anybody gets in this business, and what he gave, you are never going to get from anybody else.” Former National Lampoon editor Michael O’Don-
Perhaps the funniest Harvard man ever, Douglas C. Kenney ’68 was “a living paradox.” His humor was “iridescent, like rocks in the ocean;” halfway across the Pacific, his life ended on one last ambiguous note.

The Party

ghugh calls Kenney “a big jerk, in the most affectionate sense. He was a big American jerk, and very, very funny to be around. His humor was iridescent, like rocks in the ocean.”

t the extreme western tip of Martha’s Vineyard lies the town of Gay Head, a pastoral domain of low rolling hills whose landowners include Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and the Wampanoag Indian tribe. Only one road leads out to Gay Head, which is “the outermost point; it’s definitely off the beaten path,” says singer and local resident Kate Taylor. Just off that road, on a bluff near a natural spring, sits a house with a spectacular view of picturesqu Nashaquitsa and Menemsha ponds as well as the Atlantic Ocean. “That place was built for the view,” says Taylor’s husband, Charlie Witham. “You get inside the house and it goes, ‘Wham!’” Two decades ago, in this idyllic setting, Doug Kenney lived and patiently toiled on his novel, Teenage Commies From Outer Space.

The novel, acronymically known as TACOS, portrayed comic characters who were “the ultimate outsiders: not only teenagers, but Communists and aliens,” according to Kenney’s friend Lucy Fisher ’71, a motion picture executive with Warner Brothers. In contrast, Kenney himself was in some ways the ultimate insider. As a founder and first editor of the National Lampoon, the magazine that reinvented popular humor and spawned “Saturday Night Live,” he “was spearheading a youth-quake,” says O’Donoghue. As a screenwriter of the 1978 film Animal House, which outgrossed all previous film comedies, Kenney “ushered in a whole new era of comedy,” accord-
ing to film producer Laila Nabulsi. In Beard's words, "Doug was someone who was always going to be at the center of what was happening."

Yet insiders rarely make good comedy writers. The stance of the outsider—of the detached, alienated, or even hostile observer—is somehow central to comic perception, and Kenney could become an outsider in virtually any social setting. On the surface, he appeared to be "someone who wasn't weird—he was conventionally nice looking, from the middle of the country, someone who could have been all the 'normal' things that he was mocking," says former National Lampoon editor Sean Kelly. "Doug wasn't given outsider status. He had to achieve it." Beard says that "Doug would have liked to be a legitimate person. But in his heart there was a vein of illegitimacy that was so deep."

The conflicting drives that roiled inside Kenney fueled his peerless comic imagination. "He played ping-pong with himself," says O'Donoghue. "He'd say, 'I'm the greatest comedy writer alive...no, I meant the biggest asshole alive.'" Walker says that "Doug had an elliptical quality. All things and their opposites were going on in him at all times." Many of Kenney's remarks and gestures were double-edged. He owned, for example, a cheap, battered, and impressively ugly attaché case that was held together with duct tape. Kenney liked to hold it up near his face and wistfully announce, "My father gave this to me." Kelly says that "Doug was monstrously creative. And he was doing it from the inside, a guerrilla fighter. A lot came out of his negative capability; he could hold two contradictory ideas at the same time—is and is not."

According to novelist Emily Prager, Kenney's girlfriend in the mid-1970s, the key to his genius was that he both completely embraced and utterly rejected the mythology of American life. Again and again Kenney the comic writer would flawlessly recreate cultural tableaux: the Ozzie-and-Harriet family scene, the small-town senior prom, the Hemingwayesque father-son duck hunt. But the perfection of these Norman Rockwell settings depended on the suppression or exile of submerged, contrary trends. With lacerating humor, Kenney would bring these repressed elements rudely to the surface; he would invite a gang of Hell's Angels to crash the marshallow roast in the living room. Hilariously, he could transmute each American dream into its corresponding nightmare.

The final sequence of Animal House, for example, begins with a college football homecoming parade, full of civic pride—a marching band, floats, dignitaries, and beauty queens. All appears to be in American apple-pie order. But then, multiplied incursions of a renegade college fraternity—the unruly brothers of Delta House—a wreak havoc and reduce the parade to an anarchic street riot, with screams, smoke, loot, and spectators fleecing in all directions. In the film Kenney plays a Delta House member who seizes the drum major's baton and leads the band into a dead-end alley.

Kenney's own life embodied the same tension. By American standards, he was a huge success. He won all the prizes that society held out to males of his generation. With the sale of his interest in the National Lampoon, he became a multimillionaire in his twenties, and added millions more later from his movie deals. Throughout his life Kenney enjoyed the love of extraordinary, beautiful women and the affection of scores of devoted friends. He inhabited a creative, hip, funny circle and numbered stars like Chevy Chase and John Belushi among his close friends. In Hollywood he achieved a large degree of recognition and power in a glamorous industry that vastly valued his creative work.

Yet Kenney distrusted the American dreams he had fulfilled. Walker says that "Doug had a vast amount of internal pressure to deal with. He was ambivalent about the possibility of his own happiness." In 1980, when he died at age 33 under mysterious circumstances in Hawaii, Kenney remained an enigma, a riddle, a walking set-up for a joke whose punch line always seemed to be on the tip of his own tongue.

Douglas Clark Kenney was named after two generals: Douglas MacArthur and Mark Clark, both of whom were much in the news around the time he was born on December 10, 1946. "He was unique from birth," says Kenney's sister, Vicky Humphrey. His father, Harry, had taught tennis as a young man but spent most of his career as a corporate personnel officer. "Doug and his father had a difficult relationship," says Alex Garcia-Mata '68, to whom Kenney was married from 1970 to 1972. "Doug might as well have been from another planet; they didn't know how they produced him." Lucy Fisher once commented on Kenney's distinctiveness by joking that "the stork must have brought him." Perhaps coincidentally, Kenney later gave the name of Stork to the character he played in Animal House.

The Kenneys lived in various parts of Ohio but spent Doug's formative years near Cleveland in Chagrin Falls, a "tidy, pin-near Ohio town with a gazebo in the middle and a waterfall for which it was named," says Humphrey. Kenney attended Catholic schools and graduated from Gilmour Academy, a Catholic boys' prep school, in 1964. At Gilmour, Kenney wrote humor in school publications and once was reprimanded for a parody of a high-profile faculty member.

"He had a rough childhood. He'd been an unusually talented and not especially popular student in high school," says Walker. "It was hard for him to find his crowd there; he was such a rare talent, and such a sensitive person. There was a lot of damage inflicted, and loneliness endured." In one of Kenney's letters he recalls, "I think that I was hit by at least 80 percent of my teachers." O'Donoghue says that "anybody who's good in comedy probably has rage behind it. I don't know what Doug's rage was, except maybe to get back at those S.O.B.'s from Chagrin Falls."

Later, at the National Lampoon, Kenney and colleague P.J. O'Rourke created an elaborately detailed parody of a 1964 high school yearbook. The yearbook of the "C. Estes Kefauver Memorial High School" of "Duxton, Ohio" includes Kenney's own yearbook photo—crewcut, intent, and slightly terrified—on an "In Memorium" [ sic] page dedicated to a deceased class-
mate and accompanied by an uneasily euphemistic text. A bit of graffiti—"what a dipshit!"—is scrawled on Kenney's picture.

In real life, the adolescent Kenney lived robustly on and imbued Kenney's adult humor with its characteristic slant. "He was a teenager at heart," says National Lampoon co-founder Rob Hoffman '69, M.B.A. '72. Kenney kept his Gilmour jacket with him throughout his life and during the writing of Animal House, "Doug was the resident expert on puberty," says Hollywood actor and director Harold Ramis, who collaborated with Kenney and Chris Miller on the film's screenplay.

During his teen years Kenney would sometimes visit his older brother Daniel, a student at Kent State University in Ohio. Kenney's sister recalls that the homecoming parade in Animal House was a virtual replica of those at Kent State. The sadder subtext was that Daniel suffered from a congenital kidney ailment; he eventually went on dialysis and died at age 29 in 1969.

"The soul of a reinvented human is three layers thick," writes Cynthia Heimel in her book If You Can't Live Without Me, Why Aren't You Dead Yet?

"There is a surface level of grooviness and fast-living joie de vivre. Just underneath there is a hard shell of psychic Teflon which inexorably seals off the innermost layer—that miserable, addled, pathetic person we were in high school, the person nobody is allowed to know about." Kenney lacked the Teflon. Not only did he fail to hide his pathetic adolescent self, he brandished it to the world—in the yearbook picture, in the nerdy Animal House character of Skorl that he played with delight. "Doug had the aspect of being a real pencil-necked geek—he almost cultivated that," says Miller. "It might have been an image of who he was afraid he was.

Kenney's freedom from Teflon opened him, however, to close bonds with people. "He was like Type O blood; Doug could get along with anyone," says Miller. "This was a very special person with way-more-than-usual amounts of soul, heart, and caring about people. He really listened; he could inhabit the stuff you were saying and you felt you were making connection." Hoffman says that "Doug was full of passion and emotion and he showed it," Greisman explains that "there are a lot of people in Hollywood who have a nice exterior that hides a very aggressive interior. Doug was the opposite: he was one of the few who worked hard at being aggressive because he was such a kind, sweet soul." Kelly adds, "I never heard anyone say they didn't like Doug Kenney. Especially women. Women really liked Doug."

Kenney did exude charisma and sex appeal. "He was very sexy, very charming, and very boyish," says Prager. "He had a helpless quality, a baby-me quality. Doug had beautiful long hair and was just a wonderful dancer. Of course, he was extremely funny, and there's nothing like humor to get to a girl's heart." In appearance, he looked like the ultimate Scott Fitzgerald character," says Fisher. "Doug enjoyed being 'the handsomest man in humor,'" adds Walker. "He was very fetching—the way he looked, the color of his skin. John Belushi was the same way; you just wanted to touch them."

When Kathryn Walker met the wineglass-eating Kenney at her birthday party in 1975 (a mutual friend, the late playwright Timothy Mayer '66, "gave" her Kenney as his birthday present), "it was instant, total attraction," she recalls. Kenney told her that he was "a very cold person with a lot of animal magnetism," and defined his home state of Ohio as "America in embryo." He also shared his idea for a self-help book, titled Get Behind Me and Stay There.

Father took me to dinner tonight and announced that he was quite unhappy to see the indecision on my part as to future plans. More to the point, he detects a leaning to the "purely creative" (i.e., artsy-craftsy-beatnik-pinko-faery) professions. I take it that this generic includes

Kenney with Kathryn Walker, an actress who is now married to singer James Taylor. Her cap bears the escutcheon of the fictional Bushwood Country Club, the setting for Kenney's last film, Caddyshack.

writing, theater, commercial art, journalism, criticism, toe-dancing, anti-government demonstrations, male prostitution, and non-corporation law. Specifically, he eyes an English major with the utmost suspicion and, perhaps justifiably, indicts me for unnecessary and financially disastrous frivolity. What am I to say? I am told that if I do not show immediate signs of "substantial thinking" and form definite career plans, my financial underwriter will find it necessary to cease
writing under. The alternative to a tactical retreat is a nice couple of years at some less elegant institution such as Cowbell State.

—from a letter by Kenney to Judith Bruce ’68, his college girlfriend.

At Harvard Kenney became “a preppy person, but he always felt like an outsider,” says Hoffman. Kenney joined the Spee Club and eventually became its president, though “he also wrote wonderful parodies of the final clubs. Doug was one of the most colorful figures on campus—extremely funny, brilliant, a dashing figure,” recalls fellow Lampoon member Mark Stumpf ’69. “At times he was elegant, wearing handmade suits, almost doing a parody of that lifestyle. And at the Lampoon he was precocious: as a sophomore he was already the star.”

Stumpf recalls that the two great talents in the Lampoon Castle of that era were Kenney and Beard: “Henry had a more cerebral style; Doug’s was more visceral and tended to focus on campus life and social settings. For example, Doug wrote a musical parody of West Side Story that pitted a preppy gang from Harvard against a townie gang.” Beard and Kenney contrasted sharply. “Henry wore a crewcut and horn-rimmed glasses, Brooks Brothers suits, white shirts and bow ties,” recalls Anil Khosla ’68, one of Kenney’s college roommates. “Doug was the complete opposite: blue jeans, motorcycle boots, no socks, sometimes no shirt, and very long, lanky hair.” Yet the two became good friends and well-matched collaborators: together they wrote a bestselling J.R.R. Tolkien parody called Bored of the Rings, published in 1969; that same year, they joined forces with Hoffman to start the National Lampoon magazine (see “Comic Sutra,” Harvard Magazine, July-August 1992, page 24).

Kenney’s preppy image eventually metamorphosed into the form of a late-1960s hippie. The namesake of two generals had himself disqualified from military service by an elaborate scheme to fake epilepsy; he staged several fits and got a prescription for Dilantin. “Doug, of course, never needed the drug,” Garcia-Mata recalls, “but the pills came in handy for my sister’s epileptic dog.”

After graduating from college in 1968, Kenney shared a Cambridge apartment with Beard; the two were graduate contributors to Lampoon parodies such as the highly successful Time spoof of 1969. That summer, a group of friends including Beard, Kenney, Garcia-Mata, Stumpf, Hoffman, and a few others moved into a run-down house on Kin- naird Street in Cambridgeport. They rented the first and third floors “and I feel sorry for whoever was on the second floor,” says Garcia-Mata. “We had a basket-and-pulley arrangement to send things up and down between the apartments. We were rowdy. There was a lot of dope smoking, lots of parties—it was a pretty wild summer. We went through a nudist phase; it was very hot and we decided not to wear clothes for a while.”

In September Beard and Kenney moved to a duplex apartment on East 83d Street in New York and began the arduous preparatory work for launching the National Lampoon, which would publish its first issue the following April. Kenney’s name was to top the masthead as editor, and he brought his enormous creative energy to the job. “The guy was high-wired, cooking at high speed,” says Prager. “He had a frenetic quality.” A perhaps overly modest Beard claims that “Doug bore the burden. The National Lampoon was his design—all the departments, ideas like Foto Funnies, everything. He was a Harold Ross- or Henry Luce-quality person.” Hoffman notes, however, that “Henry was there every day; he was more emotionally stable. Doug was tremendously creative. He had huge bursts of energy. But Doug could also be incredibly lethargic and lazy—phenomenally irresponsible about deadlines, for example.”

Not since the founding of Mad (a magazine that Kenney loved) in the 1950s had the cultural landscape seen an upstart like the National Lampoon. Around its offices, there was “the kind of revolutionary clan we saw in Paris in the 1920s, a dropping of constraints, particularly the domestic oppression of the 1950s,” says Walker. “There was a rebellious, arrogant, defiant impulse—a sense of being stronger and smarter than the thing
they were resisting. It was a very elitist group; you had to be smart and funny in a particular way. Doug was one of those people who had an intelligence, insight, and talent that connected with the culture at a particular moment. And the culture was transformed."

For Kenney, subversive resistance took one form in “Mrs. Agnew’s Diary,” his National Lampoon column purportedly authored by Mrs. Spiro Agnew. The diary’s chatty tone sounded utterly authentic, and it portrayed the inhabitants of the Nixon White House in a light that was venomously unflattering. Kenney mined similar territory in a “Guide to Dating Do’s and Don’ts,” allegedly authored by Nancy Reagan. His feature pieces upended a host of cultural and countercultural icons: Che Guevara, Norman Rockwell, The Wall Street Journal, California life, Our Bodies, Our Selves, Our Lady of Fatima.

In 1970 Kenney married Garcia-Mata in the garden of her parents’ house in Connecticut; it was a traditional wedding with tents and 150 guests. Untraditionally, just minutes before the ceremony, Kenney’s best man, Peter Ivers ’68, and Hoffman took Kenney out behind a neighbor’s garage, shared a joint, and tried to talk him out of it. Although Garcia-Mata enjoyed some of Kenney’s humor, many of his friends felt that the two were operating on different frequencies. “She didn’t get him at all,” says O’Donoghue.

Back in New York, Kenney and Beard logged yeoman hours at the National Lampoon. “He was at work twenty hours a day and I was left out altogether,” says Garcia-Mata. “It was not a good way to start a marriage.” But the NatLamp found both a voice and an audience; as editor, Kenney’s instincts begat both creative and commercial success. “He pitched into an extremely accessible strike zone,” says O’Donoghue. “Doug would sometimes tell writers to ‘put in a little schmuck bait’—things like a kitten playing with a ball of yarn. People see that and go, ‘Awww!’ It pulls the schmucks in.”

George Trow notes that “the rest of us were fascinated by Doug’s instantaneous connection with other Americans. That’s a very different thing from developing a connection with the audience; Doug had it the first time out.” Bruce remembers that “even while leading a very hedonistic life Doug could still produce; he’d sit down at the typewriter at 3 A.M. He did many of the celebrated National Lampoon pieces out of whole cloth—one draft. There was music in his head.”

His marriage, however, was in a state of breakdown. Before marrying Garcia-Mata, Kenney had been involved with a female staff member at the National Lampoon, and after the marriage, with Kenney virtually living at the magazine, putting in seven-day weeks of fourteen-hour days, the affair continued. “He was troubled with guilt about the relationship,” says Garcia-Mata. Beard notes that “if Doug had a failing, it was that he was not great at telling the truth to people,” but eventually Kenney did confess the affair to his wife. “That precipitated his disappearance,” Garcia-Mata recalls. “That was pretty much the end. I was devastated and had no idea if he was coming back. He left me without a penny.”

Kenney vanished on the Fourth of July, 1971. “He stepped onto a 747 with nothing but the clothes he was wearing and a Lampoon credit card,” says Humphrey. “Nobody heard from him for ten days.” At the time Fisher and Ivers were living together in Los Angeles, and Kenney headed west toward his college friends. “Doug couldn’t take it anymore,” Fisher says. “He didn’t like his job or his life. He spent the next couple of months with Peter and me. Doug didn’t want anyone to know where he was. After the first week I told him that he had to let people know he was OK; I went to Schwab’s [drugstore] and bought five or six postcards for him to send.” One card went to National Lampoon publisher Matty Simmons. It read, “Next time, try a Yaleic.”

Kenney eventually returned to New York, where the magazine had regrouped under Beard’s leadership. But by the fall of 1972 Kenney was off again, this time to Martha’s Vineyard to work on Teenage Comin’ Up From Outer Space. “Doug had this retro idea that real writers write books,” says O’Donoghue. “But he froze up and it was just terrible. There was one good line, spoken in an alien language that sounded like a gunshot in a bell factory.” On the Vineyard, Kenney camped in a tent on land owned by singer James Taylor in the West Tisbury woods, where a few hippies lived in teepees. Later he moved to the house in Gay Head. At one point a NatLamp editor was dispatched to the Vineyard to check on Doug; the two wound up

![image]

Above: He couldn’t manage his foot, but his fist fit nicely. Kenney clowning with Chris Miller on the set of Animal House, written by Kenney, Miller, and Harold Ramis.

Kenney had a small part in the movie. At left, in the film’s final sequence, Stork, with the neutralized bandmaster’s baton in hand, leads the band into a blind alley.
taking LSD and frolicking in the clay pits of the Gay Head cliffs.

In 1973 Kenney returned to New York and began an extraordinary period of creativity at the National Lampoon, which was thriving. He helped write and produce the “National Lampoon Radio Hour,” a weekly comedy show broadcast nationally on radio. The 1964 High School Yearbook parody, a bittersweet time capsule of American adolescence, appeared in 1974 and sold a thunderous three million copies; Harper’s magazine called it “a literary masterpiece. The best work of collective writing since the King James Bible.” National Lampoon produced a hit off-Broadway revue, Lemmings, that satirized the 1969 Woodstock concert and brought prominence to such comic actors as Chevy Chase and John Belushi. The players on the “Radio Hour” and Lemmings formed the nucleus of the original cast of NBC’s groundbreaking sketch-comedy show, “Saturday Night Live,” which premiered in 1975.

Kenney moved downtown to an apartment on Bank Street in Greenwich Village. The home atmosphere was casual; two years after moving in he had not fully unpacked, and once when Miller fetched an orange from the refrigerator, Kenney cleared his throat and cautioned, “Uh...you might have to carbon-date that.” Stumpf recalls that “everybody had keys to Doug’s apartment. You could always stop by. Belushi slept on the couch when he moved to New York. Something was always happening there. We’d go to ‘Saturday Night Live’ and then to the cast parties afterward.” Nabulsi says, “We felt we could meet anyone we wanted; they all would come to the show [‘Saturday Night Live’].”

The crowd at the Lampoon was brilliant, competitive, acerbic—a group of very sharp, intelligent, emotionally retarded guys,” in Miller’s words. O’Donohue notes that “there was a lot of verbal showing off. Doug was very good at it; he could give and take with the best. Especially if you tortured him, he’d come back with something mean. He had a stuffed bear and once he whipped out a knife and killed his bear on the floor.” Frazier remembers Kenney as “extremely funny and extremely ruthless. Doug could be tough and he would say anything. A friend of his with a hatchback began going out with Doug’s girlfriend once. I remember Doug saying, ‘I’d like to sever his spinal cord once and for all.’”

Yet Kenney was also “gentlemanly, holding doors for people, bowing, very courtly and charming,” says Ramis. “His manners came from a different age.” John Belushi’s widow, Judy Belushi Pisano, worked as a designer and graphic artist at the National Lampoon in the 1970s. She recalls her introduction to Kenney: “I was coming up to the copy editor’s desk and there was this guy with long hair and ripped jeans hanging off the top of the door like a monkey. Someone said, ‘Judy, have you met Doug Kenney?’ He took my hand and kissed it.” At other times Kenney enjoyed doing pratfalls, says Miller: “He would come into a room with his hand outstretched to meet someone he had never met before and go sprawling.”

By 1974 the National Lampoon’s circulation had surpassed 800,000 and the magazine was turning a pre-tax profit of $3 million per year. In accordance with their business agreement, the three founders—Beard, Kenney, and Hoffman—sold their interests to Simmons for $7.5 million in 1975. Kenney’s share was $3 million. He was 28 years old.

“Doug always had beer tastes and a champagne pocket-book,” says O’Donohue. “He never knew what to do with his money.” Nabulsi says that Kenney “was the first millionaire I ever knew. He didn’t change; he didn’t get new clothes or a new apartment. In a way I think he was embarrassed by the money because nobody else had any.” In general Kenney seemed oblivious to his wealth. “I remember seeing a check for $100,000 with a footprint on it in the back seat of our car,” says Walker, and several of Kenney’s friends tell stories of watching uncashed checks for $40,000 or $80,000 tumble out of books where they had languished as bookmarks. (Kelly wryly speculates that “I tend to think Doug put those checks in the books...”)

Kenney did buy a red Porsche—and immediately picked up four traffic tickets. But “Doug liked his dinosaur collection more than his sports car,” says O’Donohue. He bought his parents a large house in Connecticut, a couple of cars, and a condominium in Florida. A soft touch who readily lent large sums to his friends, Kenney was stunned when John and Judy Belushi actually repaid a $1,000 loan. “Doug said, ‘Wow, you’re the first ones who ever paid me back,’” she recalls. “He attracted so many people to him because of his extreme generosity—generosity of spirit as well as with material things,” says Stumpf. And Kenney’s outflow extended well beyond family and friends; Ramis recalls times “when we would have to go back and retrieve outlandish tips Doug had given—like $100 to a parking valet.”

On one hand Kenney was immensely ambitious: “He would have liked to head the world, to be king, to be Jesus,” says Prager. “To be as famous as possible with all the great literary credits.” (Kenney could be grandiose and amusing even in slumber; Prager recalls him talking in his sleep, murmuring the phrase, “International Lampoon...”) Yet “his real interests were his creative projects and hanging out with people,” says Miller.

Kenney also had a grander purview. “To me the National Lampoon was an end. To Doug, it was a means,” says Beard. “The magazine, almost inevitably, became the larval stage of a butterfly. Doug was really a genius; he saw so far beyond what we were doing—he always saw the butterfly, I never did. Everybody except me thought that the idea of doing television and movies was fabulous. Doug was the only guy who understood whatever was going on all the time.” Trow adds that “Doug was always looking for the next level. He was passing through this stuff.”

Walker asserts that “Doug had this Zen component to him—he being able to see the essential shape of things or people. He was very intuitive; he had the kind of vision that tended to see the thing whole.” Kenney would walk into a Greenwich Village restaurant and dub it, “The Enchanted Ski Lodge,” or
spin out warped film concepts like Beach Party Massacre. He might offhandedly comment on fundamentalists: “There’s one reborn every minute,” or philosophize about failed suicide attempts: “You have to learn to roll with the bullets.” In addition, Bruce notes that he had an essential satirist’s gift: “Doug could identify a cliché before it was recognized as a cliché.”

Kenney’s perfect pitch also came from a sensibility that combined “the intelligence of an adult and the irreverence and perspective of a child,” says former Harvard Lampoon president Walker Lewis ’67. “He had a mind that could go in any direction, which is just what you want in writing comedy,” says O’Donoghue. “Comedy makes astonishing leaps. Very few can do that. Many people can develop a premise, but Doug could really surprise you. It’s the rarest gift.” Beard explains that “Doug could break through the side door; he could make two plus two equal, not four, but 22.”

Ramis recalls how Kenney once visited him at home, picked up a book at random, and began reading aloud, then started to improvise a comic takeoff on the text that perfectly mirrored the book’s prose style. “He finally stumbled, but it was a long time before he did,” says Ramis. “Doug said he could do it with any book. He had such a wide knowledge of styles.”

Kenney had a chance to exercise many of these gifts through the vehicle of Animal House, the film comedy set in 1962 about an outlaw college fraternity that disrupts a generally conformist campus. The foundation of Animal House was laid by National Lampoon writer Chris Miller, a former advertising copywriter who had completed three chapters of a novel called Animal House before abandoning the project. Miller converted the chapters into stories such as “The Night of the Seven Fires” and “Pinto’s First Lay” that appeared in the magazine in 1974 and 1975. The former story portrayed the actual fraternity initiation that Miller experienced at Dartmouth in 1961. “It was almost documentary reality, fiction verité,” says Miller. “Doug was charmed by it. He used to say, ‘Man, this would make a great movie—what are you going to do with it?’”

In the spring of 1976 a screenwriting triumvirate of Kenney, Miller, and Ramis began to work up a film treatment. Their talents harmonized well. Ramis had written sketch comedy as a member of Chicago’s Second City theater company, Kenney had created comic strips for the National Lampoon, and Miller had done sixty-second television ads.

“As a collaboration it was ecstatic, the greatest I’ve ever had,” says Miller. “I was working with two other guys who were smart, hip, real, and funny. We were still long-haired, dope-smoking guys who were into liking each other rather than competing.” Ramis (who had attended Washington University) recalls that “we started by debriefing each other on our American college experiences—every colorful character, everything strange, funny, sad, monstrous, all the apocrypha. That didn’t feel like writing at all, but we had a lot of material. We started dovetailing together.” They produced a very detailed 110-page treatment, divided that up into thirds, and each went off individually to write scenes and dialogue, then exchanged the results. “When I read Doug’s third I was laughing out loud, it was so funny and so polished,” says Ramis. “He could get laughs even in his scene descriptions.” Kenney believed in “a kind of adult Disney style,” says Ramis. “He knew that we were writing the most successful comedy ever. Everyone who read the screenplay howled at it.”

One of those who read the script was Sean Kelly, who says that it was “unspeakably outrageous. The original script was like a Céline novel; it was out there. It was funnier, blacker, weirder than the film. There was this outrageous vomiting contest. And after the final homecoming parade, the Delta brothers are chased back to their frat house; they take refuge inside and bar the doors. The cops and ROTC types lay siege to the frat house. At one stage Bluto [played by Belushi] frolics on the roof, acting like the hunchback of Notre Dame. Niedermeyer, the ROTC leader, suggests moving in on the house by using the huge papier-mâché bust of JFK on a parade float as a shield. Bluto hurls a beer keg at the float and it goes through JFK’s forehead. In the course of shaping it into a double film, [director John] Landis shaved all the hair off it. Before Animal House could become the most outrageous movie ever made, it had to be cleaned up.”

The film’s distributor, Universal Pictures, considered that “this is a weird movie, it probably won’t do anything, but it’s so cheap, with a $3 million budget, what can we lose?” according to Miller. But when the movie was first screened for a public audience at the American Booksellers Association convention, the audience rocked with laughter, and it became “clear that it would be an enormous success,” says Fisher. Indeed it was; Animal House’s box-office receipts eclipsed those of all previous film comedies; to date it has grossed more than $140 million.

Doug was a hot property,” says Prager. “He had both high standards and mass appeal. He was box-office without being bland. Today you have Seinfeld—somebody who is sweet and offends no one. But Doug was a black humorist who was a gold mine.” Prager feels that Kenney’s “high standards were shaped by Harvard; he knew what was good and what wasn’t. And he had that weird Harvard thing, a combination of supreme arrogance and dissatisfaction, never being satisfied with what he was doing. Doug felt that his friends from Harvard were his real friends; actors, showbiz people, and so forth weren’t real friends.”

Yet the monster success of Animal House propelled Kenney to the center of Hollywood. The film’s tremendous revenues sparked a surge of interest in comedies within the motion picture studios. Kenney’s agent Jon Patak put him together with producers Michael Shamberg and Alan Greisman, who had worked together on the film Heartbeat. The trio formed a production company to develop film properties, some of which Kenney might direct or produce, and made a deal with 20th Century Fox, where Lucy Fisher was an executive. Kenney’s cynical humor shone through in his sketch of a logo for their company, Three Wheel Productions: a gold-chain-encumbered vulgarian leaning against a Jaguar above a corporate motto: “See You in Court.”

Kenney bought a house near the top of Outpost Drive, a narrow canyon road that winds up into the Hollywood hills. “He had a party every night,” says film producer Wally Nicita. “You’d go out to dinner and then drop by Doug’s. It was definitely the best conversation in town.” Ramis confesses that “I couldn’t have survived Doug’s nightlife. It was a debilitating round of parties.”

Even more debilitating was the cocaine, an expensive drug that was both fashionable and prevalent in Hollywood during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Kenney could afford lots of it. “The worst thing that ever happened to him was cocaine,” says Prager. “And he knew it, too. He was far too conscious of who he was; when you’re as intelligent and perceptive as
Doug, you can’t do anything without knowing that you’re doing it. It’s almost a curse.” Shamberg says, “Doug had a drug problem, but he was functional. It was fashionable then; mentors were doing drugs, too. Everybody quit and Doug would have quit, too; he would have grown out of it. It’s not related to his death or his talent.”

Still, Miller was shocked in June of 1980 when Kenney showed up late for a story meeting at 3:00 a.m. after not having slept the night before. “His attention span had gotten very, very short. Doug was pacing back and forth and couldn’t keep his mind on anything we were talking about. His advice on the script had been, ‘Go with your worst instincts.’ Doug was called outside and returned with some freshly purchased cocaine. He laid out a rail of coke from his elbow to his thumb and did it all in one snort. And nobody was even batting an eye at this. I thought, Holy Christ, this guy has gone over the top. His brain has to be like some mirror that got broken into a thousand glittering shards; each one is very bright, but they’re not connected anymore.”

Miller reflects that there was “a sense you got with Doug—and also with Belushi—that they were running. Doug was running fast to keep ahead of something that was half an inch behind him and breathing down his neck. The cocaine picked up that quality even more.” Long before Kenney got into cocaine, Prager felt that “although Doug was a writer and very bright, he tended to multiple personalities. He could drop into black moods, terrible depressions; then he’d wake up and be a smiling little angel. When we broke up, he told me not to worry, he had a fast car and he was going to die young. The simple things that make other people happy did not make Doug happy. It was difficult for him to be comfortable inside his own skin. He used to ask, ‘Am I having a good time? Am I happy now?’”

“He was incredibly sensitive to everything going on in a room. It unnerved him. He couldn’t handle it,” Prager continues. “On some level I don’t think Doug expected that he could ever relax enough to have a normal life. One of the aims of anybody who makes that much fun of the normal is that he desperately wants to appear normal.”

Ramis recalls that Kenney embodied a “combination of tremendous arrogance and confidence with the lowest of low self-esteem, abject humility,” and O’Donoghue describes Kenney’s personality as “shyness intermingled with arrogance, a funny combination. Very elusive, but it wasn’t a romantic-elusive quality; it was a neurotic elusive quality.” Judith Bruce recalls Kenney doing self-destructive things, like trying to hurl himself out of moving cars. Late in his life, Kenney told Sean Kelly that his big kick was to drive along Mulholland Drive—the twisting roadway that winds between precipices across the top of the Hollywood hills—at night with his headlights turned off.

“He was a reckless driver,” says Chevy Chase, who became close to Kenney during the making of Kenney’s last film, Caddyshack, in which Chase starred as Ty Webb. (“The persona that Doug wanted to project was the character that Chevy Chase played in Caddyshack—a Zen WASP,” says Kelly.) At that time Chase owned a turbocharged gray Porsche and Kenney still had his red Porsche convertible. “One time late at night on Sunset Boulevard we got into a little race, and Doug moved out into the oncoming-traffic lane,” says Chase. “He stayed out there longer than I would have. I slowed up.”

Kelly’s theory is that “Doug died of Caddyshack,” and Fisher says that “Caddyshack propelled Doug’s alienation into a new phase. He was getting into a Hollywood thing that he didn’t like that much. He wasn’t the bad-boy artist; now he was the person in charge. Everybody took drugs the whole time they were making the movie.”

Caddyshack was filmed in 1979, much of it at Rolling Hills Golf and Tennis Club in Davie, Florida, outside Ft. Lauderdale. “It was just a party; I haven’t seen the likes of it since,” says Chase. “We lived in a motel on the golf course and I can remember being in golf carts in the middle of the night, racing across the greens. Still, we worked hard, we had six- or seven-o’clock calls in the morning. People didn’t sleep a lot.”

Kenney produced Caddyshack and wrote the script with Ramis and Brian Doyle Murray. Both Kenney and Doyle Murray had been golf caddies as teenagers. The latter’s brother, Bill Murray, who played a greenskeeper in the movie, had once assumed the same role in real life. Orion Pictures approved the script, conditional on hiring a star, who materialized when Kenney successfully prevailed on Chase. Doyle Murray was cast as the caddy-master, and Rodney Dangerfield, Bill Murray, Ted Knight, and Michael O’Keefe rounded out the cast. “We had a great time making that movie, with that many funny people in one place,” says Ramis, who directed the film. “I looked forward to shooting every day.”

Caddyshack, though uneven, includes several hilarious, memorable performances, especially those by Dangerfield and Bill Murray, and has become a comedy classic of sorts. Thousands of Caddyshack aficionados and “pro athletes of all kinds have memorized Bill’s speech from that movie,” says Ramis, referring to a soliloquy that Murray delivers in the voice of a golf sportscaster. It also proved a commercial success, one that is still earning money, but Kenney did not live to see the film find its full audience. “Doug wanted it to be another Animal House, to follow one smashing success with another smashing success,” says Ramis. “But the film was flawed and not destined to reach Animal House’s huge audience. It was a more refined setting, and it doesn’t push all the same buttons.” Fisher says that “Doug was very upset. His standards were so high; everything he had ever done had broken new ground and been the best.”

Kenney behaved badly around the time of Caddyshack’s release in the summer of 1980. At a press conference at Dangerfield’s in New York, he showed up drunk and denounced the audience of journalists. “Let’s go dry out,” Chase suggested, and Kenney agreed to join him for a few weeks of rest and recuperation. First they went to Vic Braden’s tennis camp in California, then on to Hawaii. Eventually Chase returned to the mainland, and late in August Walker flew to Hawaii to join...
Kenney. After enjoying ten days together, she returned to Los Angeles. Furniture was about to be delivered to their house on Outpost Drive; they were moving in together for real.

On Labor Day weekend Walker called Greisman, concerned that she had not heard from Kenney, who had gone on to the Hawaiian island of Kauai. Police in Kauai were notified; they entered Kenney’s hotel room and found his belongings, then came upon his rented Jeep parked near a lookout above the Hanapepe River. Fisher and Ivers were staying at Tim Mayer’s house on Martha’s Vineyard when they got the news. “You had a bad feeling, but Doug had been missing before,” she says. In the days that followed, Kenney’s friends gathered at the house on Outpost for a vigil of sorts. “At that point it was incredibly surreal. There were zillions of people at his house having that same party,” says Fisher. “But he wasn’t at it.”

The police in Kauai eventually found Kenney’s body at the bottom of a slope not far from his car. There were no known witnesses to Kenney’s death, whose date was fixed at August 29, 1980.

Kenney was buried in a beautiful cemetery overlooking a duck pond in Newtown, Connecticut (where he had bought a house for his parents), after a requiem mass at a Catholic Church. Bill Murray arrived from Bali on the morning of the funeral and strolled into the lobby of his motel wearing a wetsuit and fins. Mayer and Chase gave eulogies; “Chevy was crying and cracking jokes at the same time,” says Hoffman. Several National Lampoon editors involved in longstanding feuds exchanged their first words in years. Ivers, perhaps the most distraught of all, pulled out his harmonica and spontaneously played “Sitting on Top of the World” and “Beautiful Dreamer” at the gravesite.

Several of Kenney’s friends felt that his funeral was the model for the opening scene of the 1983 film The Big Chill and that actor William Hurt’s character was based on Kenney. The film’s writer-director, Lawrence Kasdan, and its producer, Shamborg, had been Kenney’s neighbors on the Fox lot. Hurt’s strong resemblance to Kenney reinforces the parallel. However, Shamborg claims that the opening funeral sequence was invented by Kasdan, and that the story “had nothing to do with Doug.”

When he died Kenney had several projects in the works; he hoped, for example, to film the book Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. There was a draft of a script called Little Gentlemen, about preppies, which evolved into Young Bucks, a project that Hoffman, Beard, and comedy writer Andy Borowitz ’81 developed with Fisher at Warner Brothers. It was ultimately abandoned. Had Kenney lived, he might well have become a writer-director. “The sky would have been the limit,” says Greisman. “He’d have done incisive, hysterical exposures of American culture.” Beard speculates that “Doug would have directed comedy movies and gone in a direction of his own as personal and complete as Woody Allen. What if Woody Allen had been run over by a truck and killed before he made Bananas? Doug was of that caliber.” Prager says that “by now Doug would have been really, really powerful in Hollywood. The course of comedy was changed by his death.”

There are other legacies. Chase still has an African gray parrot named “Doug.” Kenney still enters Ramis’s dreams. “He always looks good, always has that Zen-like calm, that knowing half-smile,” says Ramis. “And I always ask, ‘Doug, where have you been?’ He never says.”

Another mystery to which only Kenney knows the answer is the question of how he fell to his death in Kauai. “Doug didn’t kill himself,” Shamborg famously declares. “He was clumsy sometimes. Doug went through drugs and money; most came through it, he didn’t. Excess is not the same as suicide. If I had to guess, I’d say he was stoned and he slipped.” Greisman, who visited the spot in Kauai where Kenney perished, says that “the idea of suicide is absurd. You would never in a million years think of committing suicide there—there was nothing to jump off from. There was this shrub-covered hill you’d look at and think you’d walk down the slope. The coroner told me they had a death every year from people who were walking there and slipped. The soil was very loose.” O’Donoghue adds laconically, “Most writers would leave a note.”

Some speculate that foul play may have been involved in Kenney’s demise, although there is no real evidence of such. “Doug was into carrying lots of cash around and flashing money at people. He could have picked the wrong people in a bar,” says Ramis. Chase notes that “there were a lot of bad characters who ran boats out of Maui—expatriate Americans into shady things. Doug would go anywhere with anybody.” Walker mentions her feeling that “the police in Kauai were covering something up. Kauai was having a lot of racial problems; there was some violence involving Samoans. One young woman was knocked off a cliff and paralyzed. A lot of people died in strange ways. My feeling is that Doug was a victim of that.”

Greisman had originally identified Kenney’s body for the Kauai police by asking, over the phone, if the eyeglasses they had found with him had an earpiece that folded outward. But when he and others went to fetch the body, they were astounded to discover that the police had overlooked Kenney’s wallet, with full identification, in his pocket. Greisman says, “I still can’t come up with a rational explanation for Doug’s death. The truth is that he could walk into my office tomorrow afternoon and it wouldn’t surprise me a bit.”

Chase, who also visited the site of Kenney’s fatal fall, says that “the only odd thing was that his shoes were at the top of the cliff. I can imagine Doug taking his shoes off on a beautiful sunset evening to walk in the grass, then having the footing go out from under him.” Fisher says that “Doug went to a dangerous place. He led a charmed life and never operated out of fear or worry. He was the type who, if he did have a moment on the way down, would have enjoyed the view.”

Stumpf, an attorney, was executor of Kenney’s estate. “To the extent that Doug’s death could be investigated, it was. I have more data on that event than anybody; I have access to investigative materials from a variety of sources,” he says. “There is no evidence to support any conclusion other than accident.” Judy Belushi Pisano has her own image of Kenney’s final moments. “Someone told me there was a sign up there that said Do Not Go Beyond This Point,” she says. “Doug would have said, ‘Do they mean over here?’”

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