

CHAPTER ONE

MURDER AT THE GATES

On the last full day of his life -- October 6th, 1966 -- Eduardo Tirella flew into Newport, RI, the storied summer colony of The New York 400.⁷ Doris Duke, the wealthiest woman in America⁸ picked him up at the airport and they drove to Rough Point, her English-manor estate on Bellevue Avenue, known to Newporters as “Millionaire’s Row.”⁹ Tirella, whose close friends called him “Eddie,” was about to declare that he was leaving Doris¹⁰ after seven years as her constant companion,¹¹ artistic curator and designer at her estates in New Jersey, Bel Air, Honolulu, and Newport. It was now time to let his patron know, face to face, that he was severing his professional ties with her, for good.

The handsome Tirella, a war hero and Renaissance man with movie star looks, had just finished the set design for *Don’t Make Waves*, a new film starring Tony Curtis and his close friend Sharon Tate.¹² With his Hollywood career amping up, he was anxious to get back to the West Coast, so he’d asked Doris to rent a station wagon.¹³

His plan was to load up his paintings and effects and drive to his mother's house in New Jersey, where he'd drop them off and fly home.¹⁴ At 42 he was on the edge of an important new career. But nobody left Doris Duke without consequences. A notoriously jealous Scorpio, she was known for her violent temper.¹⁵ A few years back, in a drunken rage, she'd stabbed her common-law husband with a butcher knife when *he'd* angered her,¹⁶ and Eduardo, who was gay, had been warned by his partner and friends not to test her.¹⁷ He assured them that he could handle Doris and agreed to come back to Newport for one last curating job.

Still, by late the next afternoon, October 7th, servants at Rough Point remember them getting into a heated argument.¹⁸ Doris, then 53, had rented the Dodge Polara wagon from the local AVIS dealership and they were about to head out to pick up an artifact Eddie had deemed worthy.¹⁹

Moments later, as they exited the estate with Tirella behind the wheel, he got out to open the massive wrought iron gates. Suddenly, Duke slid into the driver's seat and seemed to snap.

She released the parking brake, shifted into drive and slammed down on the accelerator. The rear tires of the two-ton wagon spun, leaving gouges in the gravel driveway. From a dead stop the wagon roared forward, hit Tirella, burst through the gates and dragged him halfway across Bellevue before smashing through a fence and crashing into a tree.²⁰ As Doris sat stunned behind the wheel, Eduardo's body lay beneath.²¹ With massive injuries to his lungs, spinal cord and brain, death was instantaneous.²²

Ninety-six hours later, with no inquest – basing the brief probe of Tirella's homicide *entirely* on the word of Miss Duke – police chief Joseph A. Radice declared the death accidental.²³ Doris later signed a transcript of an interview prepared by the police²⁴ and the case was closed.²⁵ Seven months after that, Radice retired and later bought the first of two condominium units in Hollywood, Florida.²⁶ The Lieutenant Inspector who had first questioned her, leap-frogged over the Captain of Detectives to become chief.²⁷ Another cop at that interview was promoted to Sergeant.²⁸

Eight days after the homicide, following years of haranguing with Newport after she blocked off Cliff Walk,²⁹ the pedestrian path surrounding her estate, Doris donated \$25,000 to restore it.³⁰ It was the

equivalent of \$200,000 today.³¹ Next, she gave \$10,000 (\$80,000 in 2021 dollars) to Newport Hospital, where she'd been hidden away from authorities on the night of the crash while her lawyers traveled from New York to create a cover story.³² In the months that followed, she began to set up The Newport Restoration Foundation which eventually renovated 70 original colonial buildings.³³ Her sudden burst of philanthropy led one cynical Newporter to muse, "The death of one man was well worth the long-term benefit to this City."³⁴

Tirella's closest surviving niece sees it another way: "She killed him twice," said Donna Lohmeyer, 74, who's been searching for decades for the truth behind his death. "She destroyed his body and then she eviscerated his memory."³⁵ That came four and a half years later after Doris steadfastly refused to settle with Tirella's five sisters and three brothers who were willing to accept as little as \$200,000³⁶ at a time when she was making \$1 million a week in *interest* on her money.³⁷

Instead, she forced them to file a wrongful death civil suit which led to a 10-day trial in the summer of 1971³⁸ in the same Providence Superior Courthouse where the second trial of Duke's Bellevue Avenue neighbor, Claus von Bulow, had taken place.³⁹ In that action the Tirella family was asking for \$1.25 million.⁴⁰ After all, Eddie was at the top of his game professionally. He had more than two decades of earning capacity ahead of him and the year before his death he'd made more than \$43,000⁴¹ – the equivalent of \$355,000 today.⁴²

At that trial Doris testified that she "always asked Eduardo's advice before buying or planning anything for her estates."⁴³ Over the past decade he'd counseled her on the purchase of art worth tens of millions -- pieces they'd acquired together on more than 100 occasions.⁴⁴ He traveled with her to London, Paris and Italy to scout paintings, tapestries and rare furniture and he'd transformed Duke Gardens, a series of abandoned greenhouses on her New Jersey estate, into a spectacular series of themed botanical displays considered one of the most significant glass-house collections in America.⁴⁵ Eddie had his own living quarters in each of Doris's five estates⁴⁶ so she clearly wanted to keep him close.

"But even more," said Pola Zanay, a longtime friend, "She hated the idea of *him* leaving her."⁴⁷



Eduardo Tirella and Doris Duke. Mid 1960's

Doris Duke was actually found “negligent” in Tirella’s homicide,⁴⁸ but during the damage phase, her lawyer portrayed him as a spendthrift, ne’er-do-well and “financial fiasco.”⁴⁹ The shocking result: after legal fees and disbursements were deducted, each of his siblings was awarded a grand total of \$5,620.⁵⁰ “Considering what he had done for her and meant to her, it was shameful,” said Zanay who was also close to Eddie’s partner, sculptor Edmund Kara. “It was the worst kind of character assassination, considering the sort of nationally-known designer that he was.”⁵¹

As a gay man in the mid-Sixties Tirella had a diverse and complex resumé that ran deep. He’d been a performer at New Jersey nightclubs in the early 1940s, falling in with Frank Sinatra. His niece Donna told me that her mother “Remembered them coming home to eat Italian after some of Frank’s dates at the Meadowbrook, where the big bands played. But the war changed all that.”⁵²

In 1943, Eduardo enlisted in the Army and shipped off to Europe, earning a Bronze Star for his service at the Battle of the Bulge.⁵³ In the early Fifties he ran the millinery department at Saks in Beverly Hills⁵⁴ where he designed hats for gossip columnists Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons.⁵⁵

As he further developed his design skills, he transformed Peggy Lee's Los Angeles hilltop home, showcased on CBS's interview program *Person to Person* in 1960.⁵⁶ Ironically, in a piece published three weeks after his death, *Vogue* cited his design⁵⁷ for the "vast" new kitchen in Falcon Lair.⁵⁸

Eduardo's partner Edmund Kara was the most prominent natural wood sculptor of his day⁵⁹ and apart from Miss Lee, Tirella counted among his personal friends Richard Burton, David Niven, Alan Ladd, Kim Novak and James Coburn.⁶⁰ He'd recently created Elizabeth Taylor's beach house for the 1965 Vincent Minnelli-directed Hollywood production, *The Sandpiper*⁶¹ as well as sets for *Don't Make Waves*,⁶² in which Sharon Tate co-starred with Curtis and Claudia Cardinale.

Eddie played cameos in both films.⁶³

But after Doris Duke finished with him in court, he was relegated in the eyes of the jury to the status of celebrity sycophant.⁶⁴ By then, she had gone to great lengths to erase him from her own life as well as the public record.