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# HOMICIDE AT ROUGH POINT

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THE UNTOLD STORY OF HOW DORIS DUKE  
THE RICHEST WOMAN IN AMERICA  
GOT AWAY WITH MURDER

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COVER UP, AND 1000 YEARS FOR REVENGE

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

# THE COVER-UP CONTINUES

Three months after Eddie's death, Sheila Graham included this in her syndicated column: "The Doris Duke-Eduardo Tirella auto tragedy had a counterpart at the beginning of the Bette Davis/Joan Crawford horror picture, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*"<sup>890</sup> Not having screened the 1962 Robert Aldrich picture since seeing it in high school, I found it and watched the opening. In it, Joan Crawford's character crushes her sister "Jane," played by Bette, against the wrought iron gates of their mansion which is identified in the film as "the old Valentino place," Falcon Lair, the very Beverly Hills estate where Eduardo Tirella had redesigned the kitchen for Doris Duke. That classic work of psycho-noir was in theaters *four years* before the homicide at Rough Point. I wondered, was it just another bit of irony in a story pregnant with it, or could the film have planted a seed in Dee Dee's mind?

The simplest explanation for all of this is that Duke's murder of Tirella began as a spur-of-the-moment act, fueled by anger and alcohol that simply veered out of control.



The crash scene in *What Ever Happened To Baby Jane* at the gates of what is identified in the film as “the old Valentino place.”

But one thing is clear: once Eduardo went up on the hood of that wagon and rolled off, even if she’d had a flickering moment of doubt that caused her to tap the brakes outside the gates, Doris then decided to *commit*, confident that her lawyers and damage control specialists would keep her out of prison.

The first week in April 2019, after never mentioning Eduardo in the nearly 20 years since the Rough Point museum had been open, <sup>891</sup> a new exhibit appeared at the end of the tour. A source close to The Restoration Foundation told me that it was planned as an attempt to “get ahead” of what I might report <sup>892</sup> after I’d reached out publicly to members of the Newport Facebook Group. <sup>893</sup> In a video announcing the exhibit, Rough Point’s curator said that, “a lot of locals . . . have heard a local myth, so we wanted to put all the facts out so that people would know exactly what happened and that it was just an unfortunate accident.” <sup>894</sup>

Apart from embracing Chief Radice’s explanation for the homicide, the exhibit contained multiple misstatements of fact enshrined on a wall at the Rough Point museum; including the false claim that, “After several days in court, Duke settled with the Tirella family” and Radice’s assertion that “Tirella and Doris were on their way to dinner that evening.”



Typically, the exhibits at the end of the guided tour of the museum rotate every season. But as of early November of 2020, two weeks before Rough Point was to close for the season, a visit to the estate by a friend of mine who lives in Newport, revealed that the NRF's exhibit (below) which embraces the false "accident" theory of the crash, remains intact.

## The Accident at the Rough Point Gate

On the evening of October 7, 1966, Doris's friend and interior designer, Eduardo Tirella, was struck and killed while opening the front gate at Rough Point. Doris was driving the car. While we can never know exactly what happened, it is undeniably a tragic event.

We do know that Tirella and Doris were on their way to dinner that evening. She was driving a rented car and unfamiliar with the transmission. Eyewitnesses said Doris was incoherent and clearly in shock following the incident.

Many rumors and half-truths surround this tragedy. Some say Tirella was Duke's lover and he had wronged her, so she killed him- except that Tirella had romantic relationships with men. Some locals claim Doris paid off the Newport Police chief (who retired six months later) and her \$25,000 donation to the Cliff Walk restoration was hush money for the accident.

Perhaps the most persistent tale is that Doris Duke founded the Newport Restoration Foundation as a way of apologizing to the city. While Doris Duke did found NRF two years after the accident, she had been in talks with other preservationists about possible historic preservation projects as early as 1965, based on correspondence in the Doris Duke Archives at Duke University.

In 1971, the Tirella family brought a civil suit against Doris Duke for damages and lost wages from Eduardo's death. After several days in court, Duke settled the case with the Tirella family.

### Death Called Accident For Heiress' Friend

NEWPORT, R. I., Dec. 18.—(UPI)—The death of Eduardo Tirella, who was killed while opening a gate to the Rough Point estate, was called an accident by police here today.



EDUARDO TIRELLA

Police Chief James J. Radice said the death of the 35-year-old was a tragedy.

HE STOPPED in to look at the gate and get out to open it, but the car was not in gear, he said. The car was in gear, he said, and he was driving through the gate when it was opened.

Radice said the investigation was continuing and he was waiting for a report from the medical examiner.

—UPI



**Tirella Crash Exhibit.** While containing multiple false statements, it covered a wall at the end of the Rough Point tour for the 2019 and 2020 seasons.

## THE DISAPPEARING GATES

By any measure, in the context of this story, the massive wrought iron gates that guard the entry to Rough Point are evidence of how Eduardo Tirella died. Until quite recently they remained as they had been in the fall of 1966.

This is a shot taken by John Quigley, stepson of *Daily News* photographer Ed Quigley, on March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2019. At that time they were fully intact.





March 15th, 2019 (John Quigley)

But months later in November of 2019 the gates were severely damaged by a catering truck attempting to enter the grounds. They were then removed from the pillars which had been cracked just above the bronze plaques with the estate's name and address: 680 Bellevue Avenue.



Rough Point in early 2020 after the gates were removed. The force of the collision with the truck cracked the pillars just above the brass plaques. (John Quigley)

Arguably, The Newport Restoration Foundation, had three months before the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis to repair them and one might have expected that they would, since May 1st, 2020 was set to mark the twentieth anniversary of the estate's opening to the public as a home museum.<sup>895</sup>

Yet in June, the pillars were reduced to less than half their size and across the once elaborate entrance to the estate the NRF had installed the kind of metal fence one might find dividing pastures at Duke Farms.



By June 2020, the gates were replaced by this small green fence.  
(Tom Perrotti photo)

As this book nears publication in December 2020, the old gates are still down and there is further evidence that The NRF seems bent on hiding those reminders of Tirella's death. As the photo below demonstrates, *the gates themselves* have been relegated to a corner of the estate where they lie covered by boards and a tarp.



The gates, photographed in early November, 2020.

## THE SILVER SWAN

Meanwhile, efforts to rehabilitate the image of Doris Duke continue. In January, 2020 Charles A. Burns, a tour guide at Rough Point who has been a guest speaker at Sotheby's Institute,<sup>896</sup> wrote a laudatory piece for *The New York Social Diary* entitled, "Guardian Spirit: Newport Legacy of Doris Duke," in which he admittedly sought to "dispel what are indeed misleading stereotypes" of the heiress.<sup>897</sup>

On April 7th, 2020, after a research, writing and editing process that took seven years,<sup>898</sup> *The Silver Swan*, author Sallie Bingham's long awaited Duke biography was published by Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, a division of Macmillan Publishers.<sup>899</sup> A member of the legendary Louisville family that published *The Courier Journal*,<sup>900</sup> Bingham devoted only 15 paragraphs in her 336 page book to the death of Eduardo Tirella, whom she repeatedly referred to as "Edward."

Virtually every sentence in her analysis of the crash contained a material misstatement of fact. Further, she cited David Rimmer, manager of Duke Farms, as a principal source for how the "accident," occurred, when, as reported here, he was pointedly excluded from Rough Point after he arrived in Newport late on the night of the homicide and returned to New Jersey the next day.

In researching *The Silver Swan*, Bingham never spoke directly to Rimmer, relying instead, on transcripts of interviews he gave in 2003 and 2004. Consider how her book, from a legendary publishing house, continues to distort the truth behind Tirella's death. Below are Bingham's verbatim paragraphs with my responses based on the research for this book:

**FROM THE SILVER SWAN:** "David explained that the car that had killed Edward was an Avis rental that Edward had arranged because the only car kept at Rough Point was 'an old clunker.' As always, Edward drove when he and Doris wanted to leave Rough Point for dinner in Newport. David explained that the rental car's engine tended to accelerate due to some unspecified problem with the automatic choke. David believed this was what had caused the accident."



**RESPONSE:** Rimmer told me that he was “speculating” when he thought that the rented Dodge Polara wagon contained an automatic choke. His reasoning was that if the vehicle was started in cold weather, the choke might have caused it to accelerate. “When I gave those interviews,” he said, “I wasn’t aware that it was 5:00 o’clock in the afternoon,” I assumed Eduardo and Doris had come out in the morning, so that was an opinion that proved to be wrong. Besides, I wasn’t even *in* Newport at the time of the crash.”

Bingham also relied on a news story quoting Chief Radice who falsely reported that they were on their way to dinner on the night of Tirella’s death, rather than heading out to pick up The Reliquary of St. Ursula, which she refers to elsewhere in the book as “the bust of an unknown queen, bought cheaply at a Newport junk shop.”

**FROM THE SILVER SWAN:** “Immediately after the accident, there were stories in the press, and since the Tirella family continued to push for a settlement of \$1.1 million to compensate for the income they claimed Edward would have made during his lifetime, a court trial seemed inevitable. In fact, a jury was chosen to ascertain whether Doris had been guilty of negligence in Edward’s death, but before it could meet, the case was dismissed, the prosecutor declaring that the cause of death was an accident. After another year of legal struggles, the Tirellas agreed to accept \$200,000 as compensation, but the clouds of rumor around the incident never fully dissipated.”

**RESPONSE:** As documented in this book with files from Doris’s own papers at The Rubenstein Library, after the heiress repeatedly *refused* to settle with Tirella’s family for as little as \$200,000, they were forced to file a wrongful death action in December, 1967 in Rhode Island Superior Court. The case was delayed by Duke’s attorneys for years but finally came to trial during 10 days in June of 1971, covered nationally by the *AP* and *UPI*, during which Miss Duke was found *liable* for Eduardo’s death. The case was never “dismissed,” as Bingham reports. But during the damage phase, Duke’s attorney Aram Arabian, attacked Eduardo’s reputation so aggressively that the jury’s damage award was only \$75,000.

The Rubenstein files contain multiple letters discussing settlement requests from Tirella’s family starting at \$600,000 and going down to \$200,000 which were rejected by Duke’s attorneys. Those files which Bingham asserts she relied on, also contain multiple letters to

Duke's lawyer and business manager on the commencement of trial and the selection of the jury, which was not only empaneled, but heard evidence for 10 days. Further, Bingham confuses civil litigation with a criminal case. In this instance there was no "prosecutor," and the case was not "dismissed," though the Tirellas failed to overturn the paltry damage award on appeal.

**FROM THE SILVER SWAN:** "Since she walled herself off from the press, refusing interviews that would have given her a chance to explain what had happened, the easy animosity and fascination that often color our perceptions of rich women controlled the story of Edward's death."

**RESPONSE:** Bingham is correct that Doris "walled herself off from the press," but she fails to note that she did so after effectively compromising Dr. McAllister, the Medical Examiner who sequestered her in Newport Hospital on "the night of." As the newly found Registry of Motor Vehicles report reveals, even after she got home on Saturday investigators Perrotti and Massarone tried to interview her and were then thwarted by her lawyers.

The Registry report also notes that on Sunday, October 9<sup>th</sup>, it was Dr. McAllister who gave the final O.K. for Doris to be questioned. That happened in her bedroom with Wesley Fach and Pete Cooley, hanging on each one of the few words she uttered as Lt. Frank Walsh -- soon to become Radice's successor -- asked those four questions.

## THE MISSING RELIQUARY

When Adam Fithers photographed the interior of Rough Point on the 52nd anniversary of Tirella's death, the artifact that Eduardo and Doris were leaving the estate to appraise -- the Reliquary of St Ursula -- was where it had been for years, on a chest of drawers between two gold candlesticks, at the bottom of the grand staircase. In *The Silver Swan*, while wrongfully characterizing it as "the bust of an unknown queen" Sallie Bingham rightfully noted that Doris had put it there "in a place of honor."

The very presence of that Reliquary conflicts with the story perpetuated by the NRF in its 2019-2020 exhibit: that on the night Doris Duke killed Eduardo, they were, “on their way to dinner.”



The St. Ursula Reliquary on October 7th, 2018. (Adam Fithers photo)

In May of 2020, for reasons unknown, the Reliquary was removed by the NRF from where it had rested for years across from the foot of Rough Point’s main staircase. As of early November 2020 it was no longer on display.





The removal of the gates and that artifact from public view, suggest a continuing effort by The Newport Restoration Foundation to rewrite the Doris Duke narrative and sanitize the circumstances surrounding Tirella's death.

## THE POWER OF MONEY

Given the importance of the Reliquary to this story and the apparent sensitivity of the NRF to its presence at Rough Point, I asked nationally-recognized antiquities appraiser Dr. Elizabeth Stewart for her thoughts on the symbolic value of that artifact to the owners of great estates like Doris Duke.

"St. Ursula was one of the most popular international saints in Medieval Europe," she wrote in a brief monograph.<sup>901</sup> "According to legend she was a young Breton princess, the daughter of a Roman-British king in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. who had betrothed her to a pagan prince. As the legend has it, to delay her nuptials, she gathered 11,000 fellow virgins, trained them as soldiers, and set sail from the coast of France destined for Rome where she hoped to meet the Pope.

"After docking in Germany, the legend says that she and her virgin army made it by land to Cologne where they were captured by Huns and martyred after they refused to give up their bodies or renounce their faith. Today the Church of St. Ursula is purported be on the site of their mass grave. The church's walls are filled with thousands of bones said to have been unearthed there. Because she was a pilgrim who died with her faith intact, Ursula soon became the most famous Saint in Europe, beloved by The Knights Templars at the time of the Crusades. So enduring was her fame, that Christopher Columbus himself claimed what were later called "The Virgin Islands" in her name and in 1610 Caravaggio immortalized her in his legendary painting, "Martirio di Sant'Orsola."<sup>902</sup>

According to Dr. Stewart, similar reliquaries, believed to contain the bones of saints, became revered among robber barons of the Gilded Age like J.P. Morgan.

"Today there's another St. Ursula Reliquary in The Metropolitan Museum," she wrote, "along with 23 related reliquary busts.

“The art form symbolized the power of money to buy a piece of The Divine. Since you’ve cited that reliquary in the context of Eduardo Tirella’s death, it’s not surprising that those whose job it is to preserve the Doris Duke legend, might be uncomfortable with its continuing display at Rough Point.”

## A REMINDER OF “THAT HORRIBLE NIGHT”

More than half a century after the murder— despite the ongoing efforts by Duke’s Restoration Foundation to rewrite history in her favor— I wondered how the death of her longtime friend, decorator and curator had affected the woman for whom a vast fortune seemed to buy so little happiness.

Donna Lohmeyer told me that for months after Eddie’s death, late at night, Doris would call her mother (his sister) and weep with her on the phone over his loss.<sup>903</sup> “Mom said that Doris told her she kept a picture of him in a silver frame next to her bed in every one of her estates.”

But if she did, such a photo was no longer visible in her bedroom at Rough Point on the 52<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of his death. And if she’d had any lingering remorse, it soon seemed to pass. Within weeks of Tirella’s funeral, Doris finally took possession of the St. Ursula reliquary. Eventually she put it on that chest of drawers in her main hall at the foot of the stairs where it stood until recently. Every night after that, when she went up to bed and every morning when she came down, that artifact was there to remind her of “that horrible night.” Still, Doris Duke was a woman with enough money and power to view the world entirely through her own distorted lens and like a classic narcissist she managed to turn even that last work of art, which she’d asked Eduardo to endorse, into her own image.

After she died and Rough Point became a “home museum,” existing today in perpetuity just as she’d left it, the old staff remembered how she’d referred to The Reliquary not as the image of Saint Ursula, but as *Saint Cecilia*, patron saint of music, whose feast day was November 22<sup>nd</sup>.<sup>904</sup>

That happened to be Doris Duke’s own birthday.

# Murdered “On the night before the rest of his life.”



**HOMICIDE AT ROUGH POINT** chronicles ex-ABC News correspondent and best-selling author Peter Lance's investigation into one of the least known, but infamous unsolved homicides in recent American history: the brutal death of gay interior designer and war hero Eduardo Tirella, outside the gates of Doris Duke's Newport, R.I. estate in October, 1966.

## PRAISE FOR PETER LANCE'S WORK:

**1000 YEARS FOR REVENGE:** “A brilliant investigative read. Peter Lance connects the dots and proves not only that the Twin Towers plot was in motion as early as 1994, but that our Justice Dept. knew enough to stop it and didn't.”

—Nicholas Pileggi, author of *Goodfellas* and *Casino*

**COVER UP:** “Without a doubt... had Mr. Lance been a special agent with the FBI working international terrorism cases in the 1990s, the al Qaeda terrorists who attacked America would either be in U.S. prisons or deceased.”

—Joseph F O'Brien's FBI special agent (ret.) and co-author of *Boss of Bosses*

**TRIPLE CROSS:** “A chilling account of a killer who slipped through the hands of a daft justice system. Triple Cross chronicles one of the most vicious spies of our time.”

—Thane Burnett, *The Toronto Sun*

**DEAL WITH THE DEVIL:** “A blistering account of a cunning and brutal Mafia capo who triggered some of New York's most violent gang wars, all while serving as an informant for the FBI. Packed with revelations. It offers the most penetrating look into the inner workings of the Mafia since The Valachi Papers.”

—Nicholas Gage: former organized crime correspondent for *The New York Times*

**PETER LANCE** authored four investigative books from HarperCollins published 2003-2013: *1000 Years For Revenge*, *Cover Up*, *Triple Cross* & *Deal With The Devil*. A former correspondent for ABC News, he covered 100's of stories worldwide for *20/20*, *Nightline* and *World News Tonight*. Winner of five News & Documentary Emmys, his first account of this story was published in the July/August issue of *Vanity Fair*. [peterlance.com](http://peterlance.com)

