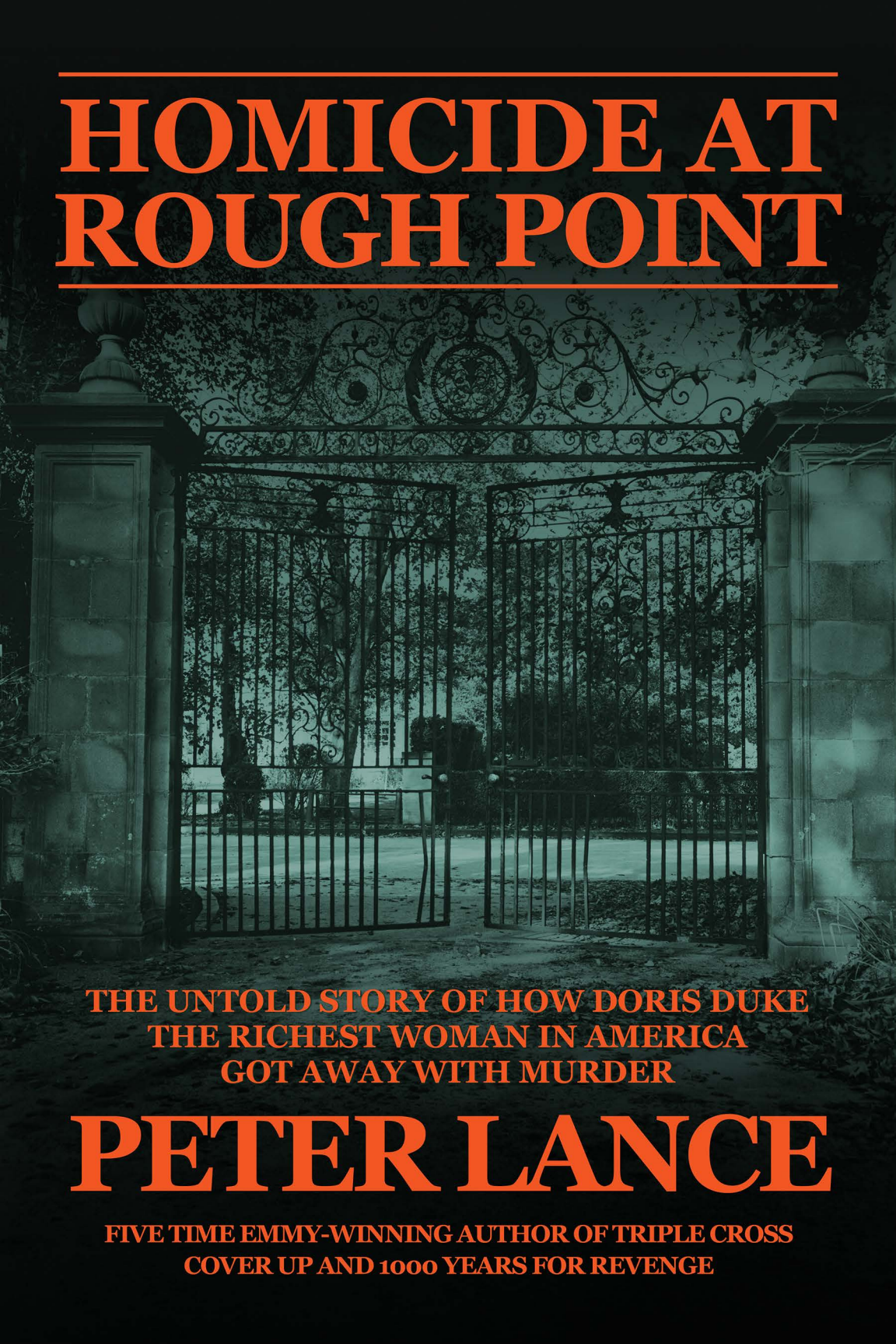

HOMICIDE AT ROUGH POINT



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

PETER LANCE

**FIVE TIME EMMY-WINNING AUTHOR OF TRIPLE CROSS
COVER UP AND 1000 YEARS FOR REVENGE**

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.

CHAPTER TWO

LITIGIOUS & VINDICTIVE

Rough Point was built in 1892 for Frederick William Vanderbilt, ⁶⁵ the grandson of “The Commodore” Cornelius, progenitor of the family responsible for six spectacular Newport estates. ⁶⁶ The gardens were designed by Frederick Law Olmsted who gave Manhattan Central Park. Yet when James Buchanan “Buck” Duke bought it in 1922 he found the red sandstone and granite estate so inadequate that he added a new ballroom. Back then, he considered its “Great Room” too small to accommodate the coming-out party he envisioned one day for his beloved 10 year-old daughter, Doris. ⁶⁷

After his death, when she was presented to Society at the age of 17, some 600 guests celebrated on the final evening of Tennis Week at The Newport Casino, site of the first U.S. Open ⁶⁸ On that night in 1930, two orchestras played at Rough Point as the tall blonde debutante sat next to her mother Nanaline. Five years earlier, her future had been cemented by a \$50,000,000 inheritance. ⁶⁹ But as she sat under colored lights on a specially-constructed cliffside marquee amid the top shelf of Newport Society, Doris couldn’t have imagined that 36 years later, outside the gates of that very same estate, she’d be willing to kill the handsome younger man she’d been so close to.

In 1993 when she died in Los Angeles, leaving a fortune of \$1.3 billion and generating years of lawsuits involving her butler, Bernard Lafferty, accused of hastening her death,⁷⁰ Doris Duke's 2,900-word obituary was sprawled across $\frac{3}{4}$'s of a page in *The New York Times*. But Eduardo Tirella, her trusted friend and advisor, earned only a single sentence of 34 words.⁷¹



Rough Point 52 years to the day after Eduardo Tirella's Death.
(Adam Fithers photo)

In her *L.A. Times* obit, which was more than twice that long, he got two sentences; the second of which reported that “an inquest cleared Duke;” though there never was one:

Interior designer Eduardo Tirella was helping refurbish Duke's home in 1966 when he jumped from the driver's seat of her car to open the gates of her Newport mansion -- and the vehicle slammed into him. Although an inquest cleared Duke, who was in the passenger's seat, she turned more reclusive.⁷²

“Doris Duke was bent on controlling the narrative of her mangled legacy,” said her one-time business manager, Patrick Mahn, the former NYU professor she put in charge of her finances in 1984. ⁷³ “Litigation was her favorite foreplay.” ⁷⁴

Starting at age 13 when she sued her own mother, ⁷⁵ Duke was involved in more than 40 lawsuits over the next seven decades. ⁷⁶ “She could be incredibly vindictive,” says Mahn, who co-authored *Daddy’s Duchess*, a scathing Duke biography. ⁷⁷ “After I left, she went bonkers and sicced the legal dogs on me.”

Her godson, Pony Duke, who co-wrote another bio entitled *Too Rich*, put it this way: “Doris gave no second chances. She collected people and then she threw them away.” ⁷⁸

Buck Duke, who made his first fortune with American Tobacco Company, creating the modern cigarette as we know it, ⁷⁹ warned his daughter on his deathbed to, “Trust no one,” ⁸⁰ and she’d been famously paranoid ever since. Dee Dee, as her few close friends called her, ⁸¹ was infamous for hiring ex-FBI agents to intimidate disgruntled friends and lovers who might be sources for reporters or biographers. ⁸² Columnists were harassed to print retractions. ⁸³ Ex-staffers were threatened and bullied. Thirty-nine months before Tirella’s death, she slashed the arm of her common-law husband Joe Castro in that jealous rage. ⁸⁴ Then, after Castro sued her for assault, he was effectively kidnapped in Hawaii by private investigators hired by her lawyers and induced to drop the suit. ⁸⁵

THE MISSING PHOTO

The only known photograph of Doris and Eduardo, published on page 6, is strangely unaccounted for in the archives of Getty Images, owner of the Bettmann Archives which had previously licensed the photo. ⁸⁶ The entire file of the Tirella wrongful death case is gone from R.I. Judicial Archives. ⁸⁷ The file on the police “investigation” was reported missing from the Newport Police Department in 1990. ⁸⁸ Even the negative of the photograph of the crashed 1966 Dodge Polara station wagon which made the front page of *The Newport Daily News* the next day, was selectively removed from archives at The Newport Historical Society. ⁸⁹

bragging that he could get away with murder sent me back home to the story I should have covered in the summer of '67, when life and my career got in the way.

In 2010, during my investigation into the FBI's pursuit of al Qaeda, I'd worked with veteran NYPD Detective James Moss, of Brooklyn South Homicide. At that time, with the help of ex-FBI undercover operative Emad Salem, we cleared the 19-year-old unsolved murder of imam Mustafa Shalabi, who'd been shot and stabbed on Coney Island in 1991.⁹⁵

If *that* trail of evidence had been cold, getting the truth behind Tirella's death would be an even bigger challenge, given Doris Duke's efforts at hagiography. But when I started to kick over rocks, I was surprised at the number of current Newporters who still had passionate opinions on the homicide. Dozens of members of the dedicated Facebook group, "If You Grew Up In Newport, RI Share Some Memories," regularly posted comments like, "I never believed it was an accident" and "If you have enough money, you can kill someone."

Another wrote, "I don't think we will ever know the real story."⁹⁶

Taking that as a challenge, I began reaching out to people in that group who claimed to have personal knowledge of the incident. One identified the first cop on the scene who gave me a groundbreaking interview. I tracked down the first surviving civilian witness, then a young Navy nurse, who got there minutes after the crash and found Doris wandering back into Rough Point. I spoke at length with the investigator for the Registry of Motor Vehicles, now 87, who told me that he'd been prevented by the police from interviewing Miss Duke. I had a revealing conversation with a retired Newport Police detective who talked to Duke before she was locked away from that same State investigator in a private room at Newport Hospital.

I found a Newport Fire Captain who remembered visiting the scene as a 9-year-old. He was so taken by the prospect of re-examining the death, that he went up into the attic at Fire Headquarters and unearthed the original logbook from that fatal night, which helped me rewrite the timeline.

I even located the blacksmith hired to repair the two massive wrought-iron gates forced outward by the impact of the two-ton wagon.

Now 89, he told me that the damage to the seven-by-fifteen-foot gates was so severe that they were twisted and bent. Five of the gates' inch-thick iron baluster rungs were knocked out.

A crucial find turned out to be the stepson of the news photographer who arrived at the scene within minutes of the crash and took a series of heretofore unpublished photos that opened a new line of investigation. They show a Newport Police sergeant, who was the department's chief accident investigator at the time, working the scene shortly after the death. Ironically, 14 months later, I'd written a story in *The Daily News* about how he'd trained the Police Department's rookies.⁹⁷

That sergeant's take on the death was a shocking scenario in which Eduardo had gone up onto the hood of the station wagon after Duke hit the gas and roared forward from a dead stop 15 feet from the gates. Still alive at that point, he might well have looked her in the eyes as the Dodge Polara burst out onto Bellevue Avenue. But then, as the sergeant saw it, Doris hesitated for a millisecond, causing Tirella to roll off. At that point, the sergeant believed, she made a decision to *commit*, hitting the accelerator one more time and dragging him under the vehicle to his death. This previously undisclosed copy of Eduardo's Death Certificate contains important clues (we'll discuss later) that support the sergeant's "up on the hood" analysis.

COPY OF CERTIFICATE OF DEATH STATE OF RHODE ISLAND									
1. NAME OF DECEASED Eduardo			2. DATE OF DEATH October 7, 1966						
3. PLACE OF DEATH Newport			4. USUAL RESIDENCE (Where deceased lived. If Institution - Residence before admission) California						
5. CITY, TOWN, OR LOCATION Newport			6. CITY, TOWN, OR LOCATION Los Angeles						
7. MARITAL STATUS (If not in hospital, give street address) Bellevue Avenue			8. DATE OF BIRTH 8 June 1924						
9. SEX Male			10. RACE White						
11. SPECIAL OCCUPATION (On the kind of work done during most of working life, even if retired) Interpreter Translations			12. BIRTHPLACE (State or foreign country) New Jersey						
13. WAS DECEASED EVER IN U.S. ARMED FORCES? (If so, no. or number) U/64, date out of date of service			14. CITIES OF RESIDENCE (If any)						
15. CITIES OF RESIDENCE (If any)			16. CITIES OF RESIDENCE (If any)						
17. CAUSE OF DEATH (State only and extend per line for (a), (b), and (c)) PART I. DEATH WAS CAUSED BY: IMMEDIATE CAUSE (a) Fractures of skull, ribs (rt) side of chest; Fractured right humerus, hip and 6 and 7 dorsal vertebrae; Subarachnoid hemorrhage; Transection of dorsal cord. Rupture of rt. lung and bilateral hemothorax Multiple tears of spleen and liver. Multiple abrasions and contusions of body surface.			18. WAS DEATH CAUSED BY (a) (b) (c) (d) (e) (f) (g) (h) (i) (j) (k) (l) (m) (n) (o) (p) (q) (r) (s) (t) (u) (v) (w) (x) (y) (z) (aa) (ab) (ac) (ad) (ae) (af) (ag) (ah) (ai) (aj) (ak) (al) (am) (an) (ao) (ap) (aq) (ar) (as) (at) (au) (av) (aw) (ax) (ay) (az) (ba) (bb) (bc) (bd) (be) (bf) (bg) (bh) (bi) (bj) (bk) (bl) (bm) (bn) (bo) (bp) (bq) (br) (bs) (bt) (bu) (bv) (bw) (bx) (by) (bz) (ca) (cb) (cc) (cd) (ce) (cf) (cg) (ch) (ci) (cj) (ck) (cl) (cm) (cn) (co) (cp) (cq) (cr) (cs) (ct) (cu) (cv) (cw) (cx) (cy) (cz) (da) (db) (dc) (dd) (de) (df) (dg) (dh) (di) (dj) (dk) (dl) (dm) (dn) (do) (dp) (dq) (dr) (ds) (dt) (du) (dv) (dw) (dx) (dy) (dz) (ea) (eb) (ec) (ed) (ee) (ef) (eg) (eh) (ei) (ej) (ek) (el) (em) (en) (eo) (ep) (eq) (er) (es) (et) (eu) (ev) (ew) (ex) (ey) (ez) (fa) (fb) (fc) (fd) (fe) (ff) (fg) (fh) (fi) (fj) (fk) (fl) (fm) (fn) (fo) (fp) (fq) (fr) (fs) (ft) (fu) (fv) (fw) (fx) (fy) (fz) (ga) (gb) (gc) (gd) (ge) (gf) (gg) (gh) (gi) (gj) (gk) (gl) (gm) (gn) (go) (gp) (gq) (gr) (gs) (gt) (gu) (gv) (gw) (gx) (gy) (gz) (ha) (hb) (hc) (hd) (he) (hf) (hg) (hh) (hi) (hj) (hk) (hl) (hm) (hn) (ho) (hp) (hq) (hr) (hs) (ht) (hu) (hv) (hw) (hx) (hy) (hz) (ia) (ib) (ic) (id) (ie) (if) (ig) (ih) (ii) (ij) (ik) (il) (im) (in) (io) (ip) (iq) (ir) (is) (it) (iu) (iv) (iw) (ix) (iy) (iz) (ja) (jb) (jc) (jd) (je) (jf) (jg) (jh) (ji) (jj) (jk) (jl) (jm) (jn) (jo) (jp) (jq) (jr) (js) (jt) (ju) (jv) (jw) (jx) (jy) (jz) (ka) (kb) (kc) (kd) (ke) (kf) (kg) (kh) (ki) (kj) (kk) (kl) (km) (kn) (ko) (kp) (kq) (kr) (ks) (kt) (ku) (kv) (kw) (kx) (ky) (kz) (la) (lb) (lc) (ld) (le) (lf) (lg) (lh) (li) (lj) (lk) (ll) (lm) (ln) (lo) (lp) (lq) (lr) (ls) (lt) (lu) (lv) (lw) (lx) (ly) (lz) (ma) (mb) (mc) (md) (me) (mf) (mg) (mh) (mi) (mj) (mk) (ml) (mm) (mn) (mo) (mp) (mq) (mr) (ms) (mt) (mu) (mv) (mw) (mx) (my) (mz) (na) (nb) (nc) (nd) (ne) (nf) (ng) (nh) (ni) (nj) (nk) (nl) (nm) (nn) (no) (np) (nq) (nr) (ns) (nt) (nu) (nv) (nw) (nx) (ny) (nz) (oa) (ob) (oc) (od) (oe) (of) (og) (oh) (oi) (oj) (ok) (ol) (om) (on) (oo) (op) (oq) (or) (os) (ot) (ou) (ov) (ow) (ox) (oy) (oz) (pa) (pb) (pc) (pd) (pe) (pf) (pg) (ph) (pi) (pj) (pk) (pl) (pm) (pn) (po) (pp) (pq) (pr) (ps) (pt) (pu) (pv) (pw) (px) (py) (pz) (qa) (qb) (qc) (qd) (qe) (qf) (qg) (qh) (qi) (qj) (qk) (ql) (qm) (qn) (qo) (qp) (qq) (qr) (qs) (qt) (qu) (qv) (qw) (qx) (qy) (qz) (ra) (rb) (rc) (rd) (re) (rf) (rg) (rh) (ri) (rj) (rk) (rl) (rm) (rn) (ro) (rp) (rq) (rr) (rs) (rt) (ru) (rv) (rw) (rx) (ry) (rz) (sa) (sb) (sc) (sd) (se) (sf) (sg) (sh) (si) (sj) (sk) (sl) (sm) (sn) (so) (sp) (sq) (sr) (ss) (st) (su) (sv) (sw) (sx) (sy) (sz) (ta) (tb) (tc) (td) (te) (tf) (tg) (th) (ti) (tj) (tk) (tl) (tm) (tn) (to) (tp) (tq) (tr) (ts) (tt) (tu) (tv) (tw) (tx) (ty) (tz) (ua) (ub) (uc) (ud) (ue) (uf) (ug) (uh) (ui) (uj) (uk) (ul) (um) (un) (uo) (up) (uq) (ur) (us) (ut) (uu) (uv) (uw) (ux) (uy) (uz) (va) (vb) (vc) (vd) (ve) (vf) (vg) (vh) (vi) (vj) (vk) (vl) (vm) (vn) (vo) (vp) (vq) (vr) (vs) (vt) (vu) (vv) (vw) (vx) (vy) (vz) (wa) (wb) (wc) (wd) (we) (wf) (wg) (wh) (wi) (wj) (wk) (wl) (wm) (wn) (wo) (wp) (wq) (wr) (ws) (wt) (wu) (wv) (ww) (wx) (wy) (wz) (xa) (xb) (xc) (xd) (xe) (xf) (xg) (xh) (xi) (xj) (xk) (xl) (xm) (xn) (xo) (xp) (xq) (xr) (xs) (xt) (xu) (xv) (xw) (xx) (xy) (xz) (ya) (yb) (yc) (yd) (ye) (yf) (yg) (yh) (yi) (yj) (yk) (yl) (ym) (yn) (yo) (yp) (yq) (yr) (ys) (yt) (yu) (yv) (yw) (yx) (yz) (za) (zb) (zc) (zd) (ze) (zf) (zg) (zh) (zi) (zj) (zk) (zl) (zm) (zn) (zo) (zp) (zq) (zr) (zs) (zt) (zu) (zv) (zw) (zx) (zy) (zz)						
19. ACCIDENT STATUS <input type="checkbox"/> ACCIDENT <input type="checkbox"/> SUICIDE <input type="checkbox"/> HOMICIDE			20. DECEASED HOW DEATH OCCURRED (Under nature of injury in Part I or Part II of item 17) Decedent struck by auto while opening iron gates and then dragged under vehicle						
21. SIGN OF DEATH (If any, state only and extend per line for (a), (b), and (c)) 5:00			22. SIGN OF DEATH (If any, state only and extend per line for (a), (b), and (c)) 10-7-66						

Back in 1966 I had no idea that this police sergeant had done an investigation of the case and effectively concluded that Doris had killed Eduardo Tirella with intent. When I finally I got the missing report I learned that those specific findings had been excised -- editing necessary at the time to justify Chief Radice's accident theory. But elsewhere in that document there is *prima facie* evidence of a cover-up at the highest level of The Newport Police Department.

One of the most important breakthroughs for me came when I located Donna Lohmeyer, Eduardo's niece, who had eight pages of trial transcript documenting how her father, a former Marine captain and engineer, had visited the crash site within hours after Eddie was declared DOA at Newport Hospital. He'd photographed what he described as parallel "gouges" an inch-and-a-half to two-inches deep, inside the gates. Those gouges were the width of tire tracks, suggesting that Miss Duke had gunned the station wagon's engine before it roared forward.

Donna also helped me find the undisclosed autopsy report from the County Assistant Medical Examiner, who signed on as Dee Dee's personal physician moments after pronouncing the death. He'd protected her within the walls of the hospital until her lawyers took over. When I learned that this official was Dr. Phillip C. McAllister, I was stunned, because he'd been *my own family doctor* growing up and I'd never had even a hint of his blatant conflict of interest.

In this case, the man legally charged with determining the cause of death had allowed himself to be paid to protect the killer. As we'll see later in this book, Dr. McAllister, a prominent member of the Newport medical community, would see his own personal life and career unravel in the years after he made the decision to protect Doris Duke.

A BARGAIN MADE IN BLOOD

All of this reporting, which I'll go into in depth, leads to the unambiguous conclusion that on the eve of his departure, after Eduardo Tirella had declared that he was leaving her for good, the heir to one of America's greatest fortunes, exploded in a jealous rage, turned a vehicle into a murder weapon and crossed into the perilous territory of intentional homicide.

That's what I found after a two year investigation involving interviews with dozens of surviving witnesses and the accumulation of more than 10,000 pages of documentary evidence which underscore not just Doris Duke's *motive* for the murder, but the lengths that she, her attorneys, private investigators and press flacks went to in covering it up.

Keep in mind as you read this that a jury of seven women and five men found her civilly *negligent* in the homicide, the same way a civil jury later found O.J. Simpson liable after he was acquitted of criminal charges. The difference was that Simpson still owes some \$70 million in damages⁹⁸ for the wrongful death of his ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend Ronald Goldman, but in this instance, after shamelessly denigrating the decedent, the total award Doris Duke was on the hook for was only \$75,000, plus interest.

Another eye-opening discovery for me was that the five lawyers for Tirella's family shaved 42% of that damage award off the top. One of them included J. Joseph Nugent, the retired Attorney General of Rhode Island, who had initially pledged to get to the bottom of the anemic police investigation but later acquiesced to it.⁹⁹ He then sat in court during trial and charged the Tirella family the equivalent (today) of \$11,549.¹⁰⁰

"In lieu of the proper damages," said his niece Donna, "all we have is Eddie's memory which I'm working to restore – to let people know the kind of man he was."

And what kind of woman was Doris Duke? One Newporter I found on that Facebook Group had a very pointed opinion. Denise Clement's late mother, Rosemarie, had been Chief Radice's secretary at the time of Tirella's death. In a lengthy interview in which she seemed happy to unburden herself after so many years, she told me this:

"Doris Duke *bought* the City of Newport and got away with murder. My mother read the full police report and knew that there was a cover-up, but there was nothing she could do. After she retired and we drove past those houses Doris had restored that helped Newport become a tourist destination, she'd say, 'It was blood money that paid for all this.'"¹⁰¹

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE NIGHT BEFORE THE REST OF HIS LIFE

In the cruel reality that is *life* one moment and *death* the next, forty-nine minutes after he'd stepped out of the Dodge wagon to open the gates at Rough Point, the man born Eduardo Giuseppe Tirella was now Autopsy Number A66-27⁴⁴³ pronounced dead on arrival at Newport Hospital.⁴⁴⁴ The newly uncovered Fire Department logbook indicates that the first alarm came in at 5:07 pm.

"Received a call for auto accident," the entry said. "Woman was hurt, and car went (out) of control. Man under car."⁴⁴⁵ At that time, because Newport's ambulance (Rescue #1) was tied up on a call across town, Middletown's rescue wagon was dispatched.



A photo of the crash scene shot by Ed Quigley. The man at extreme left is Brian Jones, Bureau Chief of *The Providence Journal*. The tow truck is from Pelham Garage where Rough Point caretaker Howard McFarlane rented the Dodge Polara station wagon.

Nine minutes later, Newport's truck, then free, responded.⁴⁴⁶

Deputy Fire Chief John Blythe told reporters that the 4,000-pound Dodge was so heavy that the power jacks on the rescue truck were unable to raise it so they could get to Tirella's body.⁴⁴⁷ A tow truck from Pelham Garage, the AVIS dealership where the wagon was rented, was then summoned.⁴⁴⁸

By 5:45 pm, the decedent's remains were loaded into a body bag and transported by Rescue #1. Doris was taken to the hospital in the Middletown wagon.⁴⁴⁹ The final entry in the NFD's logbook reads: "Emergency call to auto accident at the end of Bellevue Avenue for Eduardo Gusippe (sic) Tirella 42, D.O.A. Rescue #1 out 33 min."⁴⁵⁰

I was puzzled at first as to how the victim's name and age would have been known within minutes of the crash, particularly since Miss Duke, reportedly in shock and quickly incommunicado, would have been unlikely to offer those details.

Part of the answer came when I spoke to the daughter of the couple who owned Roselawn, the estate next door to the crash site. As it turned out, Tirella's body had been dragged under the vehicle with such force that after it hit the tree, his wallet was thrown onto Roselawn's property. It was found the next morning by the owner, Ella Chartier.

As reported in Chapter Twelve, it was Ella's husband, developer Louis Chartier, who would later tell Sheriff Harry Casey that Louise Vanderbilt had murdered her husband George in San Francisco. In 2018 while researching Eduardo's death, I reached out to Ella's daughter Janet who remembered how her mother had recovered the wallet.

"She had a rose garden about ten feet from the edge of the grounds," she said. "It was next door to Quatrel, the estate where Doris had crashed through the fence. My mother noticed the wallet among the rose bushes on Saturday and gave it to the police."⁴⁵¹

The billfold held Eddie's driver's license, but since the cops didn't get it until the day *after* his death, I was still confused about how the first responders had learned his full name. That part of the mystery was solved when I interviewed retired Newport Police Department Detective William Watterson, who arrived at the crash scene just after Eduardo's body was removed from under the station wagon's rear axle.

"At that point it was a mangled mess," he said. "Doris had crashed through a fence across Bellevue made of cement posts and iron rails. But when I searched the body, I found his passport."⁴⁵²

As to why that piece of identification had been separated from Eduardo's wallet, his niece, Donna Lohmeyer, told me that when the Tirella family traveled, "they typically wore money belts around their waists that held passports and other travel documents."⁴⁵³

I found Eduardo's passport application amid dozens of files from The Doris Duke Papers, a collection of more than 81,600 pages at Duke University's Rubenstein Library, made public 25 years after her death.⁴⁵⁴ As a measure of just how close he was to Doris, Eddie had his U.S. passport sent to *her* offices at 30 Rockefeller Center in NY

M E M O R A N D U M

DATE October 11, 1966

TO MR. ROBERT M. AUGHEY
~~FROM~~ 100 ELIZABETH ST.
 SUBJECT Dover, New Jersey

Enclosed please find the passport of Edward Tirella and some papers inside said passport. These were the only personal effects that were at the hospital.

Joseph A. Radice
 Joseph A. Radice
 Chief of Police

addressed in care of Pete Cooley, her business manager. Given the trauma his body sustained, that passport was the only piece of I.D. on his remains when they were transported to Newport Hospital. And, as it turned out, other than his body, the passport and some papers inside it were the only personal effects sent back to his family in New Jersey via his brother-in-law Robert Aughey, Donna's father.

It was accompanied by a curt, typewritten memo over the stamped signature of Joseph A. Radice. Strangely, for an Italian-American, the chief had Anglicized Eduardo's name, calling him Edward.⁴⁵⁵

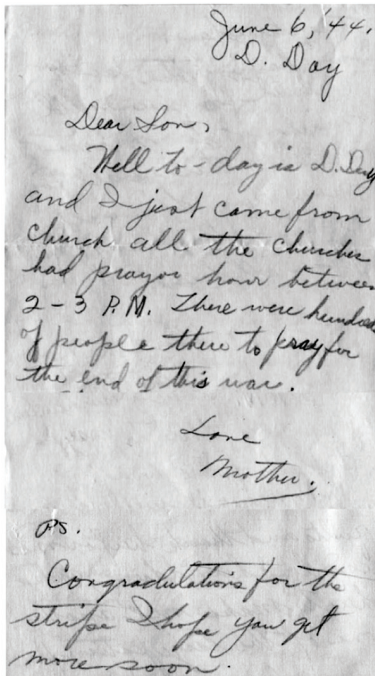
SINATRA AND THE WAR HERO

"Eddie's loss left a huge hole in our lives," Donna recalled. "Among his many talents, he played the piano and initially hoped to make it as a singer." After palming around with Frank Sinatra in the early 1940's, war broke out with the Japanese invasion of Pearl Harbor. On June 1st, 1943 "The Voice" from Hoboken signed with Columbia Records and chose to remain a civilian.⁴⁵⁶ But Eduardo felt compelled to enlist.

He entered the army three weeks later on June 25th and shipped off to Europe as a Rifleman in Company K of the 428th Infantry. Serving in both Northern France and The Rhineland, he carried, serviced and fired the Browning .30 caliber machine gun, seeing his heaviest action from mid-December 1944 to late January 1945 in the fierce counter offensive across the Ardennes Forest known as The Battle of The Bulge. It was the second-deadliest mass casualty action in U.S. history.⁴⁵⁷

His mother, Etilia Falgione Tirella, shown pictured with him after his return, sent him this letter on June 6th 1944, when Allied Forces invaded Normandy:

“Dear Son, Well, today is D-Day and I just came from church. All the churches had prayer hours between 2-3 p.m. There were hundreds of people there to pray for the end of the war. Love, Mother. P.S. Congratulation for the stripes. I hope you get more soon.”



The letter Eddie's mother sent him. Pictured with her after the War.

Hospitalized later in Europe for frostbite, and nearly losing the toes on each foot, Eddie spent months in the 1st Indorsement Hospital Center in Butner, NC when he returned stateside.⁴⁵⁸ Little did his mother know at the time, but eventually he would be awarded one of the nation's top combat awards, The Bronze Star Medal.

Honorably discharged in August 1945, he was so humble about his war service that his family wasn't aware that he'd won that honor until after his death when The Department of Defense delivered a grave marker with the designation BSM.

Donna, then a 20-year-old, found his dog tags which he'd hidden away. "Fixed to them," she said, "was a St. Christopher's Medal and a Miraculous Medal honoring Mary, to whom my grandmother prayed every night he was in uniform. Twenty-one years later, we had to face the reality of how quickly he'd been taken from us. And frankly, given what he'd told me about Doris and how possessive she was, it was something I had dreaded."⁴⁵⁹



Eddie's Dog Tags with Miraculous Medal. His grave marker and The Bronze Star.

In 1965, after toiling for Doris for years and routinely getting underpaid by Pete Cooley,⁴⁶⁰ Eddie had finally broken out. In the opening frames of the big-budget MGM Taylor and Burton production *The Sandpiper*, he'd earned a rare credit from producer Martin Ransohoff: "Coordinator of the Big Sur Scene." In fact, he'd designed the interior of the "beach shack" where Elizabeth's character, a Bohemian painter, lived. Eddie's partner Edmund Kara had sculpted the nude redwood bust of Liz that was a plot point in the film and he was also cited in the up-front credits. MGM even produced *A Statue for The Sandpiper*, a short film featuring Eduardo and Edmund which chronicled Kara's creation of the piece.

In the film, Liz's sculptor/love interest was played by Charles Bronson with whom Eddie appeared in a scene shot at Nepenthe.



At left, Eduardo next to Charles Bronson in *The Sandpiper*. At right Edmund Kara and Eduardo in the MGM short, *A Statue for The Sandpiper*.

"Between Big Sur and the house they shared on Stanley Hills Place in Laurel Canyon, Eduardo and Edmund had a full life," said Kara's longtime friend Glen Cheda.⁴⁶¹ "By 1966 they'd arrived at the cultural epicenter of the West coast art and music scene."

In the book, "*Canyon of Dreams*," L.A. music critic Kirk Silsbee described how "Tirella's renowned home parties were gatherings for creative people in L.A." including actors like Alan Ladd and Dennis Hopper, jazz greats Junior Mance and Cannonball Adderley, and songwriters like Johnny Mandell who composed "The Shadow of Your Smile" for the Taylor-Burton film. "Tirella was an accomplished vegetarian chef and he cooked fabulous meals," wrote Silsbee.⁴⁶²



Eduardo Tirella with Kim Novak and Sharon Tate.

"Eduardo and I shared the same birthday," said Pola Zanay, another artist.⁴⁶³ "He had a little Morgan sports car, and we'd drive up to Big Sur on Fridays. He and Edmund lived in a cabin in Mule Canyon near Nepenthe. Every weekend they'd throw musicales. Eduardo loved to sing, so he'd

have Bobby Short playing the piano. Little trios would come up. Kim Novak lived up there. She and I would be lying in a loft above the living area sipping champagne. It was a fabulous time.”

“But he was transitioning to studio work,” said Silsbee, “and that didn’t sit well with Doris Duke.” After Ransohoff hired Eddie to work on the new film *Don’t Make Waves* starring Sharon, with whom he’d grown very close, the tension with Doris escalated.

“Doris was panicked,” said Pony Duke, “when Eddie told her that he was *considering* the job he had actually *accepted*. Her entire life revolved around his ability to make things for her look beautiful. She pleaded with him not to leave her. He’d been a calming influence for her, but he was tiring of her mood swings and worried that his motion picture design career was suffering because (she was) monopolizing all of his time”⁴⁶⁴

Events came to a head in the late summer of ’66. “He was going back to Newport to tell her in person rather than on the phone or through a letter, that he was leaving her employ,” said Kara’s friend Glen Cheda. “He was happy at Big Sur and Edmund felt strongly that he shouldn’t go back. He felt fearful, because of his past knowledge of Doris. What she was capable of.”⁴⁶⁵

Pola Zanay agreed. “We all felt that way. Eduardo really wanted to extricate himself from her clutches. But at the time he needed major dental work that ran into the thousands of dollars and working for her was the only way he could get that kind of money. Everybody else in our circle of friends told him, ‘Don’t go back to her. You can get the money some other way.’”⁴⁶⁶

As a precaution, Eduardo agreed to consult with a clairvoyant named Dr. Jacques Honduras, nicknamed “the Psychic to the Stars.”

“He had the reading done,” said Zanay and Jacques advised him absolutely *not* to go back to Newport. He sensed danger there.” But, in the end, Eduardo decided to make the trip. “He really felt that he could control Doris,” said Donna. “Eddie was a trusting soul. He always saw the good in people and he figured it would be this one last curating job and he’d be out. He even promised that I could come to work for him in L.A. when I graduated with my degree in art and design. That was the reason he went back... One last job.”

THE RELIQUARY OF ST. URSULA

Until now there have been multiple false accounts of where Eduardo and Doris were headed that Friday at 5:00 pm when his life ended. Chief Radice said, “She and Tirella were going out to dinner.”⁴⁶⁷ But Linda McFarlane, the caretaker’s daughter said, “No. My mom told me that they were going to meet somebody. A brief meeting, because the cooks were preparing a meal for when they came back.”⁴⁶⁸

Other reports claimed that they were going out see Virginia Warren, then the head of Newport’s Preservation Society, to discuss “the Newport Restoration project.”⁴⁶⁹ But Doris’s plan to restore colonial houses didn’t formally begin until two years later, and it’s clear from this investigation that her sudden turn toward philanthropy in Newport commenced *after* Tirella’s death.

Harle Tinney, who lived at Belcourt Castle across from Doris, supplied the answer.

As noted, Belcourt was designed for Oliver Hazard Perry Belmont, grandson of the Naval Hero. In 1966 it was the only mansion-museum in Newport that wasn’t under the control of The Preservation Society. The Tinney family had bought it a decade earlier.⁴⁷⁰

“One of our very best friends,” said Harle, “was John Perkins Brown. He was a famed preservationist and antique dealer with a shop on Franklin Street in Newport. John was close to both our family and Doris Duke. Sometime in the fall of 1965 he came to us and said, ‘I’ve acquired an extraordinary piece.

“He showed us a picture. The bust of a woman, 15th or 16th century. Carved Wood. Decorated in polychrome.

“It was a reliquary, one of a number of works of art created over the centuries to contain the bone of a saint -- in this case, St. Ursula -- whom history had it, was martyred in the third or fourth century A.D. along with 11,000 of her handmaidens -- all virgins.”⁴⁷¹

“John Brown offered to sell it to us for \$2,500 and we said, ‘We’d love to have it, but that’s a little too rich for our blood right now.’ So, he said, ‘Well if I don’t sell it to you, I’ll sell it to Doris.’”



The Reliquary of St. Ursula. Eduardo's last curating job for Doris Duke (Adam Fithers photo)

"Eventually she bought it," said Harle, "sometime in the fall of 1965. but it took nearly a year to restore. For that John reached out to Adé Bethune, renowned for her expertise in bringing religious artifacts back to life.

<p><u>CARVED WOOD RELIQUARY OF</u> <u>SAINT URSULA</u> 1450-1475</p>		221
<p>Descrip. : Gilt and polychrome, with bone relic. Date of 1450-1475 established by Ade de Bethune. Carving said to have been at one time in collection of Henry Marquand Esq. of New York. Includes base which has strap work design showing under varnish. Height 24 inches. Width 19 inches.</p> <p>Purchased : October 25, 1965</p> <p>Vendor : The Blue Cat Newport, R.I.</p> <p>Price : \$2,500.00</p> <p>Location : Newport, R.I. to <i>Stair</i> <i>Great Hall</i> <i>2/86</i></p>		

This card is from an inventory of art at Rough Point. It shows the purchase price, \$2,500, the seller (The Blue Cat) John Perkin's Brow's shop on Franklin Street and the fact that Ms. Bethune, who restored it, also dated it.

“But before she took possession,” Harle told me, “Doris wanted the finished piece appraised. She needed Eduardo’s blessing. That’s why she’d coaxed him back to Newport. They were literally on their way to John’s shop on Franklin Street, late that afternoon, to pick it up when she killed him.”⁴⁷²

“What makes this story a tragedy of Shakespearean dimensions,” says Pola Zanay, “is that Eduardo was literally killed on the night before the rest of his life.”



The Great Hall at Rough Point with photos of Doris Duke in the foreground and priceless works of art surrounding them. Many of the pieces in this room and throughout the home-museum were curated by Eduardo Tirella. (Adam Fithers photo).

CHAPTER THIRTY

RENAISSANCE MAN

The deeper I got into untangling the forensics of the homicide itself, the more interested I became in understanding the victim, Eduardo Tirella: who he was; what drove him; and why he'd continued working for Doris, given the trajectory of his career and his capabilities as a designer across multiple disciplines from fashion to feature film. I understood *why* he went to work for her in the first place. After all, she had an unlimited checkbook that allowed him to travel the world assembling priceless artworks and honing his skill set. But once he'd completed Duke Gardens in 1964, why did he *stay on*, particularly after his life in L.A. and Big Sur was becoming so full?

The first time I focused on his name was in the summer of 2018 after CNN had replayed Trump's 2016 press conference in which he'd made that boast about being able to "shoot somebody" in "the middle of Fifth Avenue." At the time, I Googled, "Doris Duke" + victim + "Newport, RI" but all of the newspaper coverage reflected the official "accident" line.

By then, I'd already spoken to several of the Newport cops who had worked the crash scene and they'd uniformly told me that they'd sus-

pected foul play. But back in 1966 the great newspapers and wire services of the world had accepted the conclusion of the Newport PD and after that there was little else on Eduardo for decades. Even his six-year-long design of the 11 interconnected Gardens of The World at Duke Farms was dismantled by 2008. ⁸⁰⁷

I spent weeks trying to locate any of his eight siblings who might still be alive, but all of them had died. That's when I found the obituary of his sister Anita which led me to his niece Donna. She greeted me warmly and said that virtually every day since Eduardo's death she'd prayed that the truth might come out.

It was through Donna Lohmeyer, over the last two years, that I came to appreciate the depth and breadth of the extraordinary man killed so violently and abruptly outside Rough Point.

UNDER THE WILDCAT

Eduardo Giuseppe Tirella was born on June 8th, 1924 in Dover, New Jersey, the 12th child of Severino (Sam) and Etilia Falgione Tirella, who had emigrated from Italy near Naples. ⁸⁰⁸ He was actually the second one of their children to be named Eduardo. They had lost another son at the age of 11 to pneumonia.

"In fact," Donna told me, "of the 12 kids, only 9 lived to maturity. But Eddie was closest to my mother, who was two years older. The other four sisters and three brothers were much older than the two of them. Since Eddie was the baby of the family, his mother shared a special bond with him and when he died, she passed away six weeks later -- many said of a broken heart." ⁸⁰⁹

Sam Tirella prospered over the years, owning several meat markets, but he died when Eddie was 13, "So our uncle Al took over the family business and in 1942 he bought the Wildcat Roller Coaster at Bertrand Island, a small family amusement park on Lake Hopatcong in Mt. Arlington, New Jersey. Eddie's mother, my grandmother Etilia, owned and operated the cotton candy stand across from the coaster. During summers, all of the kids and grandkids worked at the park and Eddie, who was an aspiring singer, spent hours at The Villa (then called the

June Rose Ballroom) where another young Italian singer named Dino Martini -- soon to be known as Dean Martin -- performed. My family had a bungalow under the coaster where we stayed. In fact, my playpen was on the front porch. The cars of the coaster passed within feet and I'd wave to them going by.

"At Dover High, Eddie was very popular. He became a cheerleader and was active in theater. As they got older, he and my mother would hang out at The Wigwam dance club where Glenn Miller and Count Basie played. Uncle Eddie always had stars in his eyes, in the best sense of that phrase. He became an accomplished piano player and singer in his own right and soon dreamed of Broadway and Hollywood; aspirations that he achieved to some degree, but his entry into those worlds came through his amazing design sense and that began with fashion -- notably hats."

Eddie started working in the millinery department of Saks Fifth Avenue in New York City, designing hats for stars like Mae West and Lena Horne. "We believe that's where he and Edmund Kara met," said Donna, "since Edmund designed dresses for Lena. Soon Eddie parlayed his friendship with Mae into a two year theatrical run of 'Diamond Lil' that started on Broadway. He not only sang in the show but de-



Eduardo after the War, when he was a young hat designer at Saks.

signed her costumes. Eventually he and Edmund moved to Los Angeles where they shared a house on Stanley Hills Place off Laurel Canyon. He wasn't concerned about being openly gay on the West Coast, but he was closeted with the family in New Jersey."

FROM HATS TO CAFES TO HOUSES

By 1951 Eduardo Tirella had established himself as one of the pre-eminent millinery designers in Beverly Hills. He was cited in January of that year by *L.A. Times* gossip columnist Hedda Hopper for his design of a hat for actress Ann Sheridan, described as “the woman with the smartest head on her shoulders.” It happened at an Ambassador Hotel charity event attended by 850 women.⁸¹⁰

In October he was featured, along with Oleg Cassini, as one of “Saks’ famous designers” in “Inside S.F.A.,” a store magazine.⁸¹¹ That same month Eduardo’s design of an elaborate “Marie Antoinette-like headdress” for musical star Constance Moore, was featured in *Photoplay Magazine*.⁸¹²



The Marie Antionette head dress
for Constance Moore

While hat design was his “day job,” Eduardo never abandoned his dream of making it as a singer. By early 1953 he was billing himself as “Eddie Tirella.” In a review of a new show at L.A.’s Café Gala, a rival to the celebrated Coconut Grove, *Hollywood Reporter* critic Jac Wilson praised Eddie’s “romantic ballads and novelty songs” calling him “a high spot in the talent lineup.”⁸¹³

He was also part of a review at the legendary Cabaret Concert Theater in Silver Lake, a popular venue for a number of gay and straight performers, located at 4212 Sunset Boulevard in an old studio where D.W. Griffith had shot silent films.⁸¹⁴

By the late Fifties Eddie had moved from fashion to interior and landscape design. After a year at UCLA, he’d begun renovating houses. In 1958 *The L.A. Times* did a feature titled, “Rescued By Remodeling,” on his transformation of a simple frame bungalow into a showplace, “restyled with Oriental colors, textures and landscape with the flavor of the far east.”⁸¹⁵

Writing to Eddie's sister Anita that same month, Broadway producer Charlie Wood, who was about to mount a play with Tallulah Bankhead, visited the tiny house, which he described as "a Japanese dreamland." "Surely," he wrote, "Eddie has advanced his reputation as one of the up and coming designers in southern California."⁸¹⁶

Within months, Eduardo was introduced to Peggy Lee, who asked him to use those same skills to transform her modest ranch house in Beverly Hills into an Italian-themed garden hideaway. When the finished job was showcased on CBS's *Person To Person* in 1960, the legendary singer told host Charles Collingwood, "it was done by an Italian. Ed Tirella, a friend of mine."⁸¹⁷

Soon Eddie was designing custom furniture for the stars, including a four poster bed in a tent-like enclosure for James Coburn. Gossip columnist Louella Parsons, another hat client of Eddie's from the early 50's, devoted half a 1964 column to the \$5,000 bed which utilized 15 different fabrics imported from Venice. It was "a surprise," she wrote, "from Coburn's wife Beverly." The bed was waiting for the actor after his return from a two month shoot in Mexico for the film "Major Dundee" in which he co-starred with Charlton Heston.⁸¹⁸ In 2021 dollars that custom bed would have cost \$42,000.⁸¹⁹

"Eduardo Tirella and Edmund Kara each had exquisite taste," said film financier Steve Ransohoff, whose father Marty hired both of them that same year for his production of *The Sandpiper*, starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. It was Ransohoff who first discovered Sharon Tate and introduced her to Eddie and the circle of stars up at Big Sur who hung out at Nepenthe, the storied restaurant high above the coast. One of them was Kim Novak.



Kim Novak, Martin Ransohoff and Eduardo Tirella at Big Sur.

“My mother remembered just how kind Eduardo was to my twin brother Kurt and me back then,” Steve told me in an interview for this book. “We were about eight years-old and our Dad wanted to take us to one of his film premiers, but we didn’t have suits. When Eduardo heard that, he came over to the house in L.A. right away. He brought two suits from Saks where he’d worked, then measured us – making the chalk marks – and after the suits had been tailored, he brought them back just in time for us to make the premier.”⁸²⁰

Around that same time Eduardo became enamored with Kaffe Fassett, a handsome young painter who was the son of Nepenthe’s founders. When I tracked him down in London where he lives today, he shared a number of memories of Eddie as a designer and gregarious friend.

“During one of our first conversations,” said Kaffe, who’s now 83, “Eduardo told me that when he would decorate for people, the first thing he’d do would be to take them to the new house and sit them down. He’d make a bouquet of flowers and put it on a table, light candles and talk about the colors that the rooms could be. It all started with a bouquet of flowers. When I heard that, my mind just burst with imagination, thinking about how I would do a mural of nasturtium leaves. Eduardo always got my mind working. He was very inspiring to me as a young painter.”⁸²¹

As to Eddie’s skills at transforming modest spaces, Kaffe related a story from around 1964 when he was living in an old mess hall at Anderson Creek, south of Big Sur.

“It was in the same complex where writer Henry Miller had lived,” he said. “A series of old buildings that been used to house convicts working on the coast highway years before. I rented this huge space for \$25 a month, which was fabulous. It was on the coast with the sea beating below and lots of flowers everywhere. When Eduardo came to visit me there, he said, ‘You haven’t done anything with your outdoors. It’s just wild.’”

“I told him that I didn’t have time to build a garden. And he said, ‘Do you have the afternoon off?’ I said, ‘Yes,’ And he said, ‘Come on.’ So we went to the beach and loaded a truck up with driftwood and stones and he built me a garden *literally* that same day. It was extraordinary. What Eduardo did with that garden exemplified his energy and imagination and that was very exciting to me.”

FLOWERS AGAIN

Another story Kaffe told me underscored the infectious joie de vivre that Eddie inspired in other people; in this case, the woman who had founded Deetjen's Big Sur Inn, a kind of storybook wooden village of rooms constructed in the early 1930's by Helmuth Deetjen, a Norwegian immigrant and his wife Helen. They'd built much of it from material reclaimed from Monterey's Cannery Row.⁸²²

By the mid-Sixties Eduardo and Edmund had rented a two-story house in Mule Canyon from the Fassett family. Edmund lived there full time and carved works from redwood trees in a studio on the first floor.

Eddie commuted up from L.A. on weekends in his Morgan roadster.

"But before he and Edmund rented that place," said Kaffe, "Eduardo would stay at Deetjen's and he became fascinated by the old woman who built the Inn. At one point, in advanced age, she was holed up in her bedroom, seemingly very ill and near death. At least that's what she told everyone. So one day Eduardo said to me, 'Let's go down to the beach.' When we got there, he picked Sage and wild grasses and wildflowers and he assembled them into a beautiful bouquet. We drove to the Inn and knocked on Mrs. Deetjen's bedroom door to say hello. She was lying inside and moaning, saying, 'I don't want to die. I don't want to die...'. Suddenly Eduardo grabbed the bouquet from my hands and threw open her door. He bounded over to the edge of the bed and shoved the flowers in her face, exclaiming, 'You think that you're DYING? Well smell this! You're not dying, YOU'RE LIVING!' And the old woman came to, just like that!" Kaffe snapped his fingers.

"She just sat up and she started laughing... That was Eduardo Tirella, a force of positivity if there ever was one. He brought beauty to everyone who was fortunate enough to come into his life."

Pola Zanay, another artist back then, who would ride up to Bug Sur with Eddie on weekends, remembered that he was also a vegan chef, given to preparing elaborate feasts for his friends.

"Halloween was a major event at Nepenthe, where they had an annual Masked Ball," she told me. "The October before he died, Eduardo asked if I would help him decorate. He had purchased a huge pumpkin

and he had a gigantic pot that he could put the pumpkin into. He filled it up with vegetables and water and cooked it in this pot. He asked me to help him decorate a really, really long table in front of the cabin and we decorated it with flowers and fall leaves. It was beautiful.”⁸²³

Flowers were an essential element in another Eduardo story that Donna Lohmeyer told me. It happened in June of 1960, just before her 8th grade graduation. Eddie was back home in New Jersey and Donna, who had long blonde hair, was greatly anticipating her end-of-year dance.

“I needed a trim,” she told me, “and a nice German neighbor of ours had a daughter who had just started beauty school. She began cutting my hair, first on one side, then the other and then she tried to even-out the first side and before I knew it, I looked like Friar Tuck.”⁸²⁴ But uncle Eddie rescued me. He went into our yard and picked sprigs of orange blossoms. He teased the top of my hair into half curls and tucked a white blossom into each one, turning a pumpkin into a princess in a matter of moments. All I lacked on my way to that dance were glass slippers. But that’s who he was. He got so much joy out of making the lives of people around him more beautiful. It was that quality that Doris coveted so much. She knew his Hollywood career was taking off and sensed he wanted to leave her. I had a sense of it too, at the time. After all, Doris Duke had dominated New Jersey for decades. My family didn’t realize it, but the two of them were on a collision course.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

TAYLOR, BURTON, NOVAK & TATE

On the October day in 1964 when *The Sandpiper* started shooting in Big Sur, producer Marty Ransohoff, then 37 and on a hot streak, put two other films into production.⁸²⁵ After co-founding Filmways, a company that had made a fortune on rural sitcoms in the early Sixties, he'd been responsible for a string of successful features beginning with the comedy *Boys Night Out*, starring James Garner and Kim Novak, who lived in Carmel Highlands and introduced him to Big Sur.⁸²⁶

In 1962 Marty bought land and built a house there. Before long he became friends, through Novak, with Edmund Kara and his partner Eduardo Tirella.⁸²⁷ A year later, on the set of one of his TV series, *Petticoat Junction*, the producer spotted a pretty 20-year-old actress named Sharon Tate whom he put under contract.⁸²⁸

She got her first feature acting role in *Eye of The Devil*, a Gothic horror film produced by Ransohoff starring David Niven. By then Marty had become so impressed by Eduardo's design skills that he hired him for the production. Eddie soon introduced Sharon to Edmund, and she made frequent trips up the coast where she stayed at Deetjen's and spent hours at the house in Mule Canyon, taking Polaroids of his work.



Eduardo with Sharon at Big Sur. Sharon with Edmund.

“We used to go up to Big Sur with my dad,” remembered Steve Ransohoff. “My brother Kurt and I would watch Edmund carve at the house up the street from Nepenthe. Sharon would come by and take us on hikes to the Elf Forest behind Deetjens. We’d go down to the beach with Edmund and Eduardo hunting for Abalone off the rocks. There was a driftwood beach we’d go to with Edmund where he’d get wood to carve. It was a kind of magical time, for us.”⁸²⁹

The filming of *Eye of The Devil* proved a challenge for Ransohoff who lost his first two directors and settled on a third, while having to replace Sam Peckinpah on *The Cincinnati Kid*, starring Steve McQueen, after the hard-fisted director of *The Wild Bunch*, insisted on a darker, more realistic tone for the poker-themed film.⁸³⁰



Eduardo, Niven and Sharon (in a wig) on the *Eye of The Devil* set.

“Big Sur became an oasis for Marty,” said Romney Steele, the granddaughter of Bill and Lolly Fassett, who opened Nepenthe in 1949. An accomplished chef in her own right, Romney authored, *My Nepenthe*, a compelling memoir in which she described how the site of the restaurant became the fixation of two other Hollywood icons, Orson Welles and his then wife Rita Hayworth:

Returning from San Francisco during a War Bond Drive they decided to head back to L.A. on the new scenic route, Highway One. Looking for a spot to picnic, they ventured up a meandering dirt road that took them to a cabin on a hill overlooking the south coast. Entranced by the view, they went looking for a realtor to sell them the cabin. As the story goes, they gathered up the money between them, put \$156 down to hold the purchase, measured the kitchen for a new stove and the windows for curtains, and then went on their way, never again to return. Within a year Welles and Hayworth divorced and later sold the cabin and property to my grandparents.⁸³¹

Martin Ransohoff was so taken with Big Sur that he decided to use it as the backdrop for his next major production. He wrote a 38 page outline for *The Sandpiper* over a weekend, later engaging Dalton Trumbo to write the script, sharing screenplay credit with Michael Wilson. The plot revolved around a Bohemian painter and single mother who lived in what was described as “a shack,” above the Coast. When her son is sent to an Episcopal school for troubled boys, she meets a buttoned down minister who quickly falls in love with her, only to face the moral dilemma of leaving his loyal wife and ending his religious career.

After offering the lead to Kim Novak who passed, Ransohoff flew to London where he presented the starring roles to Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. They had just made *The Yellow Rolls Royce*, following their scandalous tour de force on-screen and off in *Cleopatra*.

The principal target of the world’s paparazzi at the time, the couple signed-on after Ransohoff guaranteed a \$1 million payday for Taylor and half that for Burton, who for tax reasons, could only commit to shooting 29 days of the film in the U.S.⁸³² Then, after director William

Wyler got delayed, Ransohoff hired Oscar winner Vincent Minnelli and production commenced with Eva Marie Saint, another Academy Award winner, cast to play Burton's wife.



In an interview for her book in 2008, Ransohoff told Romney Steele that “Eduardo pushed me for the Nepenthe element in the film.” By then, Marty was so impressed with Tirella that he was quoted as saying, “Anything he touches can turn into something beautiful.”⁸³³ He hired him to design the interiors for Taylor’s “shack” and engaged Edmund Kara to carve the nude bust of Liz for in the film. They each received upfront credits and Eduardo

appeared in several scenes, including a folk dancing sequence shot on Nepenthe’s Terrace.



Eduardo, third from left, being filmed with a line of folk dancers for *The Sandpiper*.

Ransohoff then cast his protégé Sharon in a secondary role, but as he later confessed, when he brought her to the set, Taylor, jealous of Tate's beauty, chided him playfully, "How dare you bring that girl here while *mother* is on the stage."⁸³⁴

Playful or not, all of Tate's scenes ended up on the cutting room floor, though she attended the premier. By then, Ransohoff had advanced Sharon's career immensely by casting her in *The Fearless Vampire Killers*, a horror/black comedy, directed by the man who would become her future husband, Roman Polanski. Immediately following *The Sandpiper* she co-starred in *Don't Make Waves*, Ransohoff's take on the craze for Malibu surfer films. In that film Eduardo was billed as "technical advisor" and played another cameo.⁸³⁵ Over the next two years, his friendship with Sharon deepened as she spent more and more time up at Big Sur.

According to a biography of Elizabeth Taylor by Darwin Porter and Danforth Prince, which relied on interviews with her long time gay assistant Richard Hanley,⁸³⁶ Burton, who was said to be bisexual, became smitten with Eduardo. One weekend during production, after Eddie had booked a singing job in San Francisco, Porter and Prince wrote that Burton accompanied him there, while Liz was rumored to have stayed behind in Monterey to spend time with the novelist and screenwriter Peter Viertel. Then married to Deborah Kerr, Viertel's many screen credits included *The African Queen*. According to Hanley (per Porter and Prince) the Burton-Tirella San Francisco trip "caused some jealous tension between Burton and Minnelli," who was also reported to be bi-sexual⁸³⁷ and rumored to have "wanted Tirella for himself."⁸³⁸

Whether any of that was true, it was Eduardo's personal magnetism, along with his design skills that endeared him to so many people including Kaffe Fassett who worked on the dance sequences for *The Sandpiper*. At one point after shooting wrapped at Big Sur, the production moved to the Boulogne Studios in Paris where a reproduction of Nepenthe's terrace was built.

"When we worked together in Paris I stayed in a charming hotel with Eduardo," Kaffe told me in an interview for this book.⁸³⁹ "I had some wild adventures alongside him, going cruising. We were very close. Though there was nothing sexual between us, I loved and admired him, and

he was hugely supportive of my career as a painter. Eduardo was also a dreamer. He told me how, when he was young, he would drive by Doris Duke's property in New Jersey every few days and say to himself, 'One day I'm going to go into that place and see what it's all about. Now here I am creating The Gardens of The World with Doris Duke.'

Kaffe's perspective on Eduardo was crucial for me in researching this book because he was the only surviving friend and contemporary of him, I could find, who understood what it was like to be a gay man in the 1960's. More importantly, as he related to me and recounted in his book, *Dreaming In Color*, Kaffe spent a memorable weekend with Eddie and Doris at Rough Point:

At one point, Doris sent her private plane to fetch me and take me to meet them at her other family estate on the ocean in Newport, Rhode Island. It was a stormy night, but my flight got through. Eduardo and Doris were held up in New York and would come in the next day. When Doris and Eduardo finally arrived, the house came alive—dogs, music, conversation.

Doris allowed me free run of the house to paint anything I wanted, so I set up my easel in a corner of the enormous kitchen and did a study of brown and white dishes and fruit. She was very appalled by that. She said, "You have all the treasures of Europe and the Orient here and you're picking bowls of fruit on a marble table in the kitchen?"⁸⁴⁰

Kaffe told me that when Eduardo traveled with Doris collecting art treasures, he would call her "Mrs. Green" so that "If they went into an antique shop, nobody would know that she was the richest woman in the world."⁸⁴¹

"One thing that was sad to me," he said, was that Doris so wanted to be a jazz singer. That was her great longing, and of course, Eduardo was this incredible jazz man. He was always playing music and singing, and they'd go into clubs and sing, but when she sang, to me, it was in this wispy, sad little voice. So threadbare. She was so very big and tall and handsome; you'd think that she'd have a deep throaty voice like Marlene Dietrich. But her's was the voice of a child."

With respect to Big Sur, Kaffe said that Eduardo had “opened his eyes” to it. “One day he took me back into the canyon behind where he and Edmund lived. He looked at this tiny little waterfall, and the little ferns growing around it and he said, ‘This is complete beauty. You couldn’t create art any better than this.’ And I stood there rather naïve. I had grown up in this place. To me it was ordinary, but he made me see it as magic.”



Eduardo Tirella in 1966, months before he died, still scouting art treasures in Europe for Doris Duke.

LEARNING OF HIS DEATH

There seemed to be something spiritual in the way that Kaffe learned Eduardo was gone.

“I had a very, very strange mystical thing happen,” he told me. “In 1966 I was walking down a street in London. I had a new boyfriend at the time, and I said to him, ‘You have to meet my friend Eduardo. He’s just the most amazing man.’ Literally just before that, one of the songs he’d sing came into my mind. ‘You’re Nearer Than My Head Is To My Pillow.’³ Just then, my boyfriend said he needed to pop into a shop and a few moments later he came out with a newspaper in his hand. He said, ‘There’s an article that says Tirella. Wasn’t that his name?’ And he opened the paper to a headline. He looked at me and said, ‘He’s just been killed.’ I couldn’t believe it, because Eduardo was one of the most alive people I’ve ever known.”

3 A song Judy Garland sang and recorded at her Carnegie Hall concert.

Four days after he died, Eduardo was laid to rest in the family plot at St. Mary's Cemetery in his hometown of Dover, New Jersey. The burial following a solemn high Requiem Mass at Sacred Heart Church was attended by hundreds of his friends and extended family. Taylor and Burton sent flowers. Martin Ransohoff and Kim Novak each sent chrysanthemums.⁸⁴²

For her thoughts on Eddie, I reached out to the legendary star of *Vertigo* and so many other memorable films. She sent me this reply:

"I loved him very much and miss his sweet voice in the songs he'd sing at parties and in the forest behind his house in Big Sur. So pure and filled with kindness and love for all creatures great and small. He did not deserve his ending!"⁸⁴³

Not long after the funeral, Peggy Lee sent this note to Anita, Eddie's sister:

"Words are never adequate, but somehow I felt I must try and tell you how much I share your love for Eddie. He will always live in our hearts. It would give you comfort if you could hear the beautiful things that are said about him almost every day by his friends to whom he has given so much. I have a particularly warm spot in my heart for you, because he had expressed his love for you so many times."⁸⁴⁴

As to the funeral itself, the headline in *The New York Daily News* under a page-wide photo of the gravesite read, "Doris Absent From Jersey Funeral Of Her Long-Time Friend, Eduardo."⁸⁴⁵

The heiress who was responsible for his death *did* send an arrangement of roses and the staff from Duke Farms drove up with flowers. But David Rimmer, the estate manager there, who'd been earlier barred from Rough Point by Duke's business manager Pete Cooley, told me that his offer to participate in the funeral was spurned.

"One of Eduardo's brothers had asked me to be a pall bearer and I was happy to do it because Eduardo and I had been so close, but when I asked Miss Duke she said, 'See Pete Cooley about it,' and when I called him repeatedly, he just hung up on me, so I didn't do it and I always felt bad about it. There was just no way Cooley wanted me involved."⁸⁴⁶

DORIS REPORTEDLY CONFESSES

As I reviewed the evidence of Sharon Tate's close friendship with Eduardo and the kind way that she'd treated Marty Ransohoff's eight-year-old sons, I was drawn back to the incident which began this book. It involved Sharon's sister Patti, then eleven, who had an abrupt encounter with Doris Duke's caretaker at Falcon Lair, months before Sharon was killed.

The nervous way that she'd entered the old Valentino estate to pick up Patti was indicative of Sharon's state of mind back then, two and a half years after Eddie's close circle of friends came to believe that Doris had killed him with intent.

Of course no one could say for sure what was in the billionaire's mind when she got behind the wheel of the Dodge Polara, but a month or so after my investigation of the death was published in *Vanity Fair*, I got an intriguing email. The subject matter read only "Doris Duke" and the message was cryptic. "If you care to give me a call... something of interest for you on Doris... I was (her) lover for five months – after the (man) she killed."

The email was written by Peter Byrne, an Irishman who had enlisted in the Royal Air Force during World War II and flown dozens of missions as a reconnaissance pilot. He later became a big game hunter and adventurer with multiple expeditions to the Himalayas. In 1967 he was running safaris to Africa and India.

When I contacted him in August of 2020, he was 90 years old, but seemed to have the energy and mental acuity of a 50 year old. He was happy to discuss his time in Hawaii with Doris Duke.

"I met her in June of 1967," he told me, "at a party in Honolulu, thrown by a friend of mine there named George Frelinghuysen."⁸⁴⁷

As reported in a piece from *The Honolulu Advertiser* on May 30th, 1967, Frelinghuysen was a "millionaire art collector... dubbed 'the host with the most,' who had arrived in Hawaii and moved into the presidential suite (plus an adjoining suite) at the Kahala Hilton Hotel." There he was expected to host a series of parties in the coming weeks.⁸⁴⁸

"Doris was there one night, and we met," Byrne told me. "I went home to her place at Diamond Head and stayed the night. I was hunting

in those days. I had my own Safari company in India and Nepal, and I worked for 7 months of each year. Then, moving into the Monsoon Season starting in May, I took 5 months off.”

Byrne said that for all that time he and Doris were virtually inseparable. “We lived in Los Angeles at Falcon Lair and in New Jersey and at her apartment in New York as well as Honolulu. But when it came to October, I wasn’t feeling good about being with her. She made me nervous. She was very vindictive. She was very powerful, and she could be very, very mean. So right about then at the end of October, I said, ‘I’ve got to go back to hunting. I’ve got bookings, and she said, ‘If you walk out that door you’re never coming back.’ And to myself, I said, ‘Great. Wonderful.’

“I left her at the end of October and saw her again a couple of times. Years later I was in New York and she called me. She had a nephew, Walker Inman. She wanted to get him out of her hair for a month and she said, ‘I hear that you’re going down to climb Kilimanjaro’ and I said, ‘Yes.’ She said, ‘Will you take him with you?’ And I did. He wasn’t a bad kid. Sadly, he later killed himself with an overdose of drugs. Anyway, (Doris and I) never lived together again.”

At that point in the conversation I asked him if she’d ever spoken about Eduardo Tirella. Without skipping a beat, Byrne said, “I know that she killed him, because she told me.”

All I could say was, “Wow.” After the deal she’d made with the Newport police, I hadn’t expected that Doris would make a confession, but the former RAF pilot was adamant.

“I’ll tell you her exact words, which are in my mind to this day,” he said. “We started talking about him and what happened with the car. As we talked, she was very cautious, but her exact words were, ‘He got what he deserved. *Nobody* two times me.’ Those were her exact words.”

I had to take that for what it was: the account of a man who had reached out to me “over the transom,” but his well-documented bonafides and his relationship to Frelinghuysen and Hawaii at the same time Doris Duke was there had checked out.

Based on what I'd learned from many of Eduardo's friends, I believed that Doris Duke had coveted his *professional* relationship with her as chief designer. But what if her jealousy went deeper? What if she had harbored *sexual* feelings for the handsome designer who was twelve years younger? And if so, who did she think he was "two-timing" her with? She not only knew he was close to Edmund Kara, but she'd hired the two of them⁸⁴⁹ to do the design work on The Self Realization Fellowship, a spiritual center she was funding high in the hills above Los Angeles.⁸⁵⁰

Then I thought of that weekend she'd spent at Rough Point with Eduardo and Kaffe Fassett. Though the two gay men were just friends, could Doris, whom Byrne called "a nymphomaniac," have suddenly become jealous because she *imagined* that there was actually something between *them* and she wanted Eduardo for herself?

In 2007, writing in *The L.A. Times*, Dr. David Buss, a Ph.D. and psychologist, concluded that "jealousy is possibly the most destructive emotion housed in the human brain. It's the leading cause of spousal murder worldwide (and) those who experience jealousy (themselves) suffer too. They feel anxious, depressed, angry, humiliated, out of control, sometimes suicidal."⁸⁵¹

Every one of those qualities seemed to describe Doris Duke.

She'd killed Eduardo literally minutes *after* he'd announced he was leaving, following seven years as her "constant companion." That happened within months of that violent incident at Falcon Lair, where she reportedly got her jaw broken by Joe Castro, whom she'd stabbed in a jealous rage three years before that. Castro had told his L.A. lawyer Edward Brown that he'd twice saved Doris from suicide. In the months before the Falcon Lair incident she'd been depressed about the death of her second husband, Porfirio Rubirosa. Doris was notorious for her heavy use of drugs and alcohol. Could all of that explain the central element in any murder case: *motive*? And if she *did* confess to Peter Byrne was it because she harbored some sense of guilt?

It all seemed in keeping with what I learned after I located the first police officer who'd arrived outside Rough Point moments after Doris Duke had crushed Eduardo Tirella to death.

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.

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