

The Third Death

by Phyllis Chesler



This is the third time in about two weeks that I've lost someone: Dr. Diana Russell (July 28th); Helen Freedman (August 12th); and now a younger brother, Jack, on August 14th. Jack will be buried today in Florida at a gravesite funeral which his children and his siblings, perhaps a cousin or two, an ex-wife or two, will attend from afar via zoom.

How, exactly, does one mourn a long estranged sibling, a man who has left only the proverbial scorched earth behind him? Severely battered wives, extremely abused children, death

threats, temper tantrums, the stalking of all those who tried to help his devastated families, Monster lawsuits against vulnerable relatives. He tried to have me killed, not once but twice—there is much, much more to say. But not now.

How does one mourn a man who has committed so many evil deeds? How can I speak ill of the dead? How can I keep silent? He has left his money to eleven charities—not a penny to his children, not even a Metro card. His only final mercy was telling his Executor that his family could, if they wish, now have the photo albums that he stole from them.

My stomach is roiled in knots and my heart is breaking. More than seventy years ago, I knew him as a shy and timid boy with shining ringlets who followed me around. He became a quiet, studious teenager, good in math, “nerdy.” When he turned eighteen, Jack bought a motorcycle, had an accident, and spent six weeks in a coma in Kings County Hospital.

He emerged a changed man, a demon, almost. Sexually inappropriate and promiscuous. Hitting on female relatives of all ages. Always in a rage. Deaf in one ear and increasingly paranoid. Incapable of empathy, able to keep physically hurting someone without letting up. A man who rages. Creates scenes in public. Nevertheless, to his credit, he finished college and became an engineer. He could never keep a job. Kept losing his temper and fighting with others.

He needed help. Perhaps there was none In 1962. What kept him going: Family women covering for him, enabling him, adoring him, fearing him, being held hostage by him. He became our mother’s Great Cause. He kept bleeding her dry, using her as his secretary, money launderer, and personal bank. When she refused to give him more and more money, he started stealing from her, threatening her too. There is much more to say about this. But not now.

Today is the day that a Jewish man is being buried more than a

week after he died—and I still do not know why his burial was delayed; today, a Jewish man is being buried and still, no one knows why he died; today is the day that a Jewish man is being buried without a single blood relative physically present; today is the day that a Jewish man is being buried but there is no shiva planned for him. Kaddish will be said for him by the Rabbi of the shul at the JCC where he worked out every single day and attended Shabbat services. He had smoothly befriended the Rabbi who had absolutely no idea whom his congregant and friend really was.

May he finally rest in peace and may God have mercy on his soul. May his family be consoled and his victims be restored to life.