

After the Funeral, the Vultures Descended

Without a will, my family couldn't stop the greedy friends and relatives who ravaged my father's estate

BY VICTORIA FANN

DEATH AND MONEY DO strange things to people. Shakespeare wrote "He that dies pays all debts." In a perfect world, children are repaid for the neglects of the father, wives are compensated for any wrongful acts, friends are left tokens of appreciation, business partners are acknowledged for their services and charities are given gifts to make up for years of disregard. In a perfect world, one's death would leave one's affairs neatly wrapped and tied with a bow.

Death rarely provides such neat resolutions, however, especially when it is unexpected. I learned this harsh lesson at the tender young age of 21, when I became the coadministrator of my father's estate.

Less than two months before John Lennon was killed, my father, 43, died in a car accident. He was a successful jingle writer who had amassed what was in those days a small fortune in real-estate holdings and investments. He was in his prime, and gave little thought to the what-ifs in life. Like many of us, he lived for the moment, caught up in the forward movement of the day-to-day, ignoring anything that spoke of slowing down, or passing on.

The result for my family was an administrative nightmare, a Sisyphian mountain of paperwork, against which my 19-year-old sister and I had to push our bodies again and again and again.

I remember how deeply troubled that first lawyer was when he explained our situation. There was no will, and my mother, due to a decadelong separation agreement, was barred from direct involvement. He shook his head with furrowed brow as he studied us: two terribly naive, inexperienced women, overwhelmed by the loss of their father and about to embark on a dangerous

expedition. My sister and I would have to find our way through a maze of legal hieroglyphics, without knowing how long it would take or where we would end up.

There was a way out, the lawyer explained. We could appoint a bank. But, he



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FREE-FOR-ALL: We were stunned by the multitude of plots derived to exploit and cheat us, without regard for our loss

warned us, we'd have little say in the way things were handled. No, we decided. It had to be us.

"Where large sums of money are concerned, it is advisable to trust nobody." So said Agatha Christie. Wisdom I wish I had had, because it wasn't long after the funeral that the vultures descended. Not one or two, mind you, but en masse. They hovered, they swooped, they swarmed; they picked and pecked and devoured everything they could get their hands on. Business associates, friends, lovers and employees lined up with their hands out, crying poor. Everyone my father owed money to contacted us; those

who thought they could sue his estate for some reason did; those who thought they were entitled to occupy one of the dwellings stayed put; those who thought they should help themselves to his possessions grabbed whatever they could.

My family was in too much shock to even think of calling the police. It was akin to being characters in a Shakespearean drama, with all of us cast in the role of a royal family whose status as heirs automatically makes them enemies of the king's associates. We were stunned by the multitude of plots derived to exploit and cheat us, seduce and taunt us, without any regard for our loss. On any given day we were informed by one or another of the dozen lawyers and accountants who represented us that another lawsuit was pending, or another claim had been filed, or another person refused to move from one of my father's properties. It was truly a theater of the absurd.

In the end, my sisters (including the youngest, who was then 15) and I didn't really inherit that much. Once the scavengers departed and the IRS was finished, the estate had shrunk considerably. Afterward, the three of us simply drifted, unwilling to drop anchor until we could regain some semblance of meaning or direction. We had been burned twice—once by death, and once by other people's greed.

It's been 23 years since my father died. Ironically, what I learned about money cannot be bought. It was a lesson filled with pain and deep-cutting insight. In one year, I ventured into more corners of the money maze than most people visit in a lifetime. The pendulum has swung back now, and thankfully, I approach money with a less harsh and more balanced attitude. But I am still fascinated by the

power of money to heal and to hurt, to give and to take away, to charm and to deceive.

It gives one pause to consider the possibility of sudden death. Would we manage our affairs any differently? I think so. Look around you. What would happen if you died tomorrow? In addition to the obvious grief it would cause, what other reactions might there be? Fighting? Lawsuits? False claims? If there is even a possibility of the slightest mess or complication, do your family a favor and clean it up now. It is the greatest gift you can leave them. Trust me.

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