

Behind the Story

EYES WIDE OPEN by Andrew Gross

EYES WIDE OPEN is a different kind of tale for me, and one that has been inside me for a long time. The story is not taken from the “headlines.” but from the private headlines, two real-life occurrences from my own past: the sad suicide of my twenty-one-year-old nephew last year; and a chance meeting in my youth with an iconic and infamous cult killer who’s very name has become synonymous with chilling, wanton murder.

My nephew Alex was a troubled, confused kid who suffered from bipolarity and bouts of schizophrenia, as did his dad, my old brother. Michael was a moody, unpredictable child of the Sixties who bounced around the country, living on the street and in grungy communes—anywhere he could find drugs and play his music, trying to live out his rock-star fantasies. More than once he was tossed in jail for possession or vagrancy, or sadly, found himself in the mental wing of various hospitals. By the late Sixties he had managed to find his way to Southern California, trying to attract people in his songs, and ended up at a commune under the sway of a charismatic but insidious figure who was trying to make it as a musician and record producer himself. That commune was the famous Spahn Ranch outside of L.A., and the person leading Michael was, of course, was Charles Manson.

I met Manson when Mike brought him to our father’s sprawling house on the top of Benedict Canyon, overlooking the valley. Mike and my dad had about the most tempestuous relationship a father and son could have, and every interaction I can remember usually ended with shouts of accusation, profanity, even punches thrown. I was only twelve that day, and visiting on vacation from New York. No one knew who the dark-eyed, long haired, caftan-wearing hippie who came in with Michael was, along with a garrulous, over-zealous producer-type who may well have been Terry Melcher. Within minutes they were rejected and humiliated by my dad and one of his friends and left in a hail of shouts and accusations, my brother screaming about betrayal and spitting out threats of revenge—the mortifying scene described in detail in EYES WIDE OPEN. A year later, Sharon Tate and four others were brutally murdered, and my father, who never backed away from a good story, claimed the murder group had gotten lost in the LA hills and ended up in Coldwater Canyon, not Benedict Canyon, on a mission of revenge aimed at him!

Michael, in truth, was long gone by then, having left the ranch shortly after that fateful visit, and was in Boulder at the time of the murders.

I didn’t find Manson particularly foreboding or threatening, just strangely subdued and even polite, admonishing Michael to respect one’s father, even as he ushered my agitated brother from the house—and even thanking us for our time as he left. In recollection, that almost sounds chilling. Of course, no one knew at that time who he was or what he would become; he was just another long-haired drifter-type Michael had connected with. But I never forgot the look, and all these years later, his aura, the blood-tingling energy that came from him, magnified by his later deeds, still resonates in my mind: and those

smiling, slate-colored eyes. I never had to think hard to draw the creepy image up again, writing the book.

In the end, Mike remained in California though his music career never blossomed; found a wife in AA; settled in a central coast town, lived out a secluded, quiet life as a ward of the state. He even had a son, and though the boy seemed spectacularly gifted in many ways, and was even a basketball whiz as a teen who attracted college scouts, he inherited much of what led to the failure of my brother's life—the bouts of anger, shifting moods, deep depression and delusions of grandeur. After a bitter fight with his parents that drew the police to their home—one of many such arguments, as if repeating the past— Alex was taken away in restraints, thrown in a hospital in San Luis Obispo, medically subdued, and examined. But because he was over twenty-one, and, amazingly, deemed to be no danger to himself or others, he was released into the care of an unrestrictive halfway house in Morro Bay—completely unsuitable for his state of mind. On the second day there, Alex said he was going out for a walk and never returned, and the next morning, was found on the jagged rocks at the bottom of Morro Bay Rock, a breathtaking mound of granite in the harbor there, ruled a suicide.

It was a poignant end to a troubled, abbreviated life, to many sad lives, as his father and mother's "life" ended that day as well. We all wish we could have done more, but ultimately, if one's destiny is, in fact, his character, well, Alex was doomed. EYES WIDE OPEN is my testament to him, and I hope, bestows him with a bit of grace and honor in his deluded state, mixing in the themes of sons who clash with their fathers; mental illness; the LA music scene in the Sixties; a bit of lore from the garment business, and ultimately, a ruthless, jailed cult killer, whose evil runs as free now, and as chilling, as it did back then.

(Read about it on andrewgrossbooks.com, and be sure follow me on Facebook (Andrew Gross author) and twitter (The__ Andrew Gross.)