

## 27

**THE PASSION AND DEATH OF  
LARRY TOWNSEND  
“PERHAPS YOU CAN SAVE HIS LIFE  
AS YOU SAVED HIS REPUTATION”**

On July 13, Jeanne sent me an email mourning the death of her favorite fashion model Dorian Leigh who was the sister of my favorite fashion model/actress, Suzy Parker, who had died in 2003. Unknown to us, that same summer day, Larry was suddenly admitted to Cedars-Sinai Hospital Emergency where he was immediately sedated and intubated and never regained consciousness.

On July 14, a biopsy was done on his lungs. I remembered that in 2006, a couple of months before Fred died, Larry had a severe lung infection. He, who was never a smoker of anything, kept telling me, the way the worried obsess over symptoms, that after his return from the car show in Santa Barbara where the air was polluted with climate-fire smoke, he was so short of breath he could hardly walk through his house.

On July 18, Roger Earl and Terry Legrand called me saying Larry was not answering his phone, and they were worried. I wrote to Jeanne:

Guys on the gay grapevine have contacted me asking for verification and updates on the news that Larry is in the hospital and his condition is surmised to be caused by the stress of the lawsuit. None of this may be true. Have you heard anything? Mark and I have called both his numbers, but no answer.

Jeanne responded July 19:

As you know, he no longer speaks to me. And the list of contacts I had from his last hospitalization was tossed out some time ago. However, I do have a number for his friend Derrick. This [possible hospitalization] would be terribly inconvenient for me.

Earlier this morning, and at great personal cost, I dragged many pounds of his stuff [his books which she sold mail-order] to the front of the house so that I could drag it all to the porch tomorrow. I was going to notify him that it could be picked up when [her sharpened fingernails typed with Initial Capital Letters] he does his usual Sunday Gala Brunch with The New Fred.

Of course, this [hospitalization] might explain why I've had no response to my email asking for an email address for his Gestapo officer [his assistant who was to pick up the goods].

Please let me know what, if anything, you find out so that I can drag this shit away from my front door.

On the morning of July 20, the morning of the day Jeanne was to receive her Lifetime Achievement Award, she wrote she could find out nothing about Larry:

Any news about YFLT? It occurred to me that he'd been talking about having some varicose veins taken care of.

I responded twenty minutes later forwarding the sudden, awful, heart-breaking news I'd just received from Larry's family:

Dear Jeanne, News. Larry had asked Mark and me to drive down to Santa Barbara to go with him to a car show on the 4th of July. We couldn't because of our car crash, but he went as planned although he was having a problem with shortness of breath. His doctor thought it was stress. By the time he returned from Santa Barbara—remember all the smoke in the air from the 1000 fires—he was so short of breath he could hardly go from room to room. He had had a lung infection some years ago and the meds from that had caused a cataract. So he

went to or was taken to Cedars-Sinai where on July 14 a biopsy was done on his lung and there is as yet no word on that tissue sample. He has a tube down his throat and is heavily sedated and cannot speak because of the tube. The sedation is being lessened each day, and his sister who has been with him this last week will probably return to Northern California today. I'll let you know more as soon as I know more.

An hour later, I wrote:

Mark and I just tried to send Larry a bouquet, but the Cedars-Sinai floral shop, which has always been so helpful in the past, said he could not have flowers because he is in ICU.

On July 22, Jeanne wrote:

Jack, dear— When you called at 9 p.m. on Sunday, I could feel a killer headache coming on. All day yesterday I was in bed, in the dark, with my head packed in ice. That is, “in bed,” when I wasn't up falling down, throwing up, feeding the animals. Obviously, I am up now—still severe head pain, still severe neck pain, still dizzy—but no more falling down, throwing up. I guess that's progress.

When Gwen called on Sunday at 3 p.m., she passed on the news about YFLT.

I don't understand why he wanted you two to drive down to Santa Barbara. He goes to that car show with his barber and his barber's partner; they drive up in a classic car, which they enter in the show. I can't imagine his going to that alone. He doesn't even go to lunch or the movies by himself.

But if I could figure him out—well...

Cheers, Jeanne

On July 24, Boi Gwen wrote that my Lifetime Achievement profile of Jeanne had surprised Gwen's leather friends at Pantheon

who told her that “they were quite shocked at what Jeanne had accomplished.” Most were from a younger generation, she said, “who never knew who Jeanne was until they heard your bio on her.”

Then came the humbling of any and every one of us whoever thought we were something gay and grand at the French Quarter: “To be quite honest,” she added, “I’m not even sure they know who you are, or what you have done in our leather history past.”

This invisibility is the de-powering of identity that happens when mainstream queer history scholarship, like the loud gay silence in *Gay L.A.*, excludes leatherfolk from gay American history.

She concluded: “I put it out on the ‘Leather Titleholders List’ that Larry was in the hospital and asked everyone to keep him in their leather prayers.”

On that same day, Sam Streit responded to my email telling him Larry was *in extremis*:

Dear Jack, I am so sorry to hear this, and really very surprised. Larry sent me a copy of his new book, with a note, just a couple of weeks ago and in the note he said he would call me soon. I had kept the note on my desk rather than in his file to remind myself that if he didn’t call reasonably soon I should give him a call. He and I had a number of phone conversations (he doesn’t like email very much, as you know) and I sent him, at his request, a copy of John Preston’s will so that he could have his attorney draw up a similar bequest intention. I don’t know that he did so.

By Friday, July 25, the international gay-community chatter reported incorrectly that Larry had suffered a heart attack. Deacon Maccubbin, circling through the rumors with his good sense of gallows humor, sent me the best news ever at 1:28 PM. Just hours before Larry collapsed with no time to start spreading the news, he had capitulated on the lawsuit; and while he was in ICU, his attorney had quietly followed his directive. Deacon wrote:

Larry Townsend dropped us and about a dozen other bookstores from his lawsuit, though there are still a number of stores named. In the meantime, Larry apparently had a stroke and is rumored to be in critical condition in the hospital. Meanwhile, [famous name deleted] stepped in [to] a public forum on the web, and allegedly made death threats against the distributor [publisher] who was the prime target of Larry's suit.

Somebody needs to start typing!

This would make a great soap opera!

Because Durk Dehner was such a passionate art professional who had jumped to Larry's defense in his lawsuit, I emailed him that same day to tell him the bad news of Larry's collapse.

Dear Durk. The next 72 to 96 hours are crucial. As Tuesday July 29 approaches, when a life-and-death decision must be made, please remember Larry and his family in your thoughts, prayers, and good energy.

Durk, who was in Europe defending Tom of Finland's copyrights, immediately responded:

Jack. it is Saturday here in The Netherlands and I feel so involved with this as it was the [Tom of Finland] Foundation that did the press release on the lawsuit against Moseley, and then I had to leave the country and its been one month and I haven't returned as of yet. Please give me the contact information for whoever is in charge of his medical so I can contact them. I am sure I can be of use in this situation, and I know what I can say to him even if he is sedated. I will come home as soon as possible. Please send me your phone number so I can reach you.... Durk

On July 26, I emailed:

Dear Jeanne, Larry continues to lie ventilated in ICU in an induced deep sleep, and he seems comfortable. A filter has been inserted in his leg to catch any blood clot

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before it travels up to the torso. This allows a reduction of the blood-thinning medicine he was being given. All his family will be present on Sunday for a Monday consultation with the doctors because Tuesday [under his living will] is the fourteenth day of his sedation, and that is a milestone in consideration of his present state and his further treatment. Honestly, it seems that he is leaving us.

Thankfully, one great thing he did this month was that, after that June 28 email I wrote to him which I copied to you, Larry did, in fact, drop his lawsuit against Lambda Rising bookstore and other small bookstores; he narrowed the focus to Nazca Plains. He actually was working his way into handling and focusing the stress and betrayal and chagrin he felt when the copyrights to his books were violated.

Larry has always been such a thunderous presence, moving like a storm-front blowing across the social and literary landscape, that it seems impossible that he now lies quiet.

Because he always stood up for himself, and because you sometimes accompanied him to the opera, and because he loves Puccini, you can understand that as his time comes I hope that his family puts headphones on him and plays “Nessun Dorma.”

“Nobody shall sleep!...Nobody shall sleep! / Even you, oh Prince, / In your cold room, watch the stars / ... [If] we must, alas, die. Vanish, oh Night! Set, stars! Set, stars! / At dawn, / I will win! I will win! I will win!”  
As ever, Jack and Mark

On Sunday, July 27, I wrote to a dozen leatherfolk on the email tree:

Our friend Larry Townsend remains in ICU where he has been since July 13. Contrary to internet rumors, he has not had a heart attack. Larry has pneumonia and is deeply sedated on a ventilator, and he has other

complications. I am in constant contact with his family. The next 72 hours are crucial. As Tuesday July 29 approaches, please remember Larry and his family in your thoughts, prayers, and good energy. July 29 will be two years and three weeks since Larry's longtime partner Fred died.

On July 28, I updated Jeanne:

Larry remains deeply sedated because of the breathing tube, and the good news is he's breathing more on his own, and his eyes are open. Tomorrow is the end of the two-week window on the respirator. I figured out a couple of days ago that Larry went into the hospital on July 13 exactly two years and five days after Fred died.

In as much as you mention my email that caused Larry to change his mind about suing the bookstores, Mark wanted me to mention that the email you sent to Larry (without meaning to, you said) in which you chastised his stormy behavior actually did a lot of good. Immediately after he received it, we noticed his attitude to us, and to the world, was suddenly sweeter and kinder. So, kiddo, ya done good. Love, J&M

Luckily, for once, he who listened to no one, listened—and saved his bruised leather soul. In the last week of his conscious life, he made that *mea culpa* decision because he realized the bookstores were not part of his alleged problem with the publisher. The lawsuit itself nevertheless exhibited something positive about his lifelong mission to protect gay writers and their copyrights that he began in earnest in San Francisco on June 15, 1970, at that first Gay Writers Conference at the SIR Center for the Society for Individual Rights. Of all the gay rights he championed, his passion was to alert LGBT creators not to be so masochistic that they sign over their copyrights to publishers in order to have their writing, drawings, and photographs make it into print.

On July 28, Deacon Maccubbin responded kindly to the email sent him the day before, in which I asked:

Please do not think ill of Larry [for suing you]. He is a recent widower who has been in failing health the last year. In the end, he has listened to reason.

Deacon wrote:

Thank you so much for your report on Larry Townsend's health, as well as for the background on his change of heart regarding the lawsuit. I will be thinking positive thoughts of Larry today and hoping for his recovery.

Lambda Rising and the other glbt bookstores that were dropped from the suit are in your debt for the efforts you made on our behalf.

Is it okay with you if I share your report (either as you wrote it, or paraphrased) with the other bookstores affected? I'm sure they would want to know how this all came about.

I responded:

Hi, Deacon, Thanks. Yes, you have my permission to share my email with the bookstores. Everything about this ongoing lawsuit is of public concern to the entire LGBT community. Larry remains alive, and where there is life there is the cliché of hope...Having done what I could to address your request, and, considering that Larry now lies *in extremis*, I was able to act just in the nick of time.

It was fortunate that you queried me when you did twenty-three days before his collapse. It gave some time to maneuver through my honeymoon joys, and his stress and chagrin, and the disappointment he felt when his copyrights were violated.

If my personal efforts have helped save Lambda Rising and other bookstores from being sued, I am very happy that I was able to act in your defense.

During the days Larry lay unconscious in Intensive Care, Jeanne emailed twice asking for news. On July 27, she wrote:

Perhaps you can save his life as you saved his reputation?

On July 29, at 7:23 AM, eight hours before Larry passed, Durk Dehner returning from Amsterdam texted me praising Larry's crusading courage:

I got a hold of larry's family on their way to the hospital this morning to do the deed of pulling his life support. I asked them to give me an opportunity to speak with him for one last try...it aint over til it is and maybe they will call me back. it saddens me greatly for we need people like larry townsend who is the queer larry flynt in some regards as in ethics. [Larry Flynt (1942-2021) founded *Hustler* magazine in 1974, lived in the Hollywood Hills near Larry and Fred, and crusaded for freedom of the press.] he is one who is willing to be unliked by those of short-sightedness for he sees the importance of standing up to thugs who take advantage and abuse the naive vulnerable creative beings in our community. I do want him to be around for this fight with herbert moseley. durk

Larry died, unforgettably for me, on my deceased father's birthday, July 29. On July 31, I received an email from Nazca Plains publisher Herbert Moseley who himself was perhaps an innocent who happened to be in the wrong place when Larry began raging against death by threatening some kind of cosmic legal vengeance, as did Embry, against anyone he figured had done 'im wrong. Herbert wrote:

We have been following your very sensitive postings about the illness and passing of Larry Townsend. We join with the many others who thought Larry was one of the most gifted and prolific gay writers. It is regretful that the lawsuit was filed against so many bookstores and others who were trying to continue to proliferate Larry's messages...Perhaps because of his illness, Larry got involved with...an attorney who seems to be much more interested in collecting her own legal fees...Nazca Plains Corporation has never sought to hurt Larry, but

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that seems irrelevant to [his attorney. He then added the kicker.] I wonder whether you would be kind enough to provide a back channel for Nazca Plains to try and settle the matter with the family...

Moseley's plan would have flooded the market with a devalued dump of Larry's remaindered books. He wrote:

As an aside, our plan is to donate, on behalf of Larry's heirs, the thousands of authorized [*sic*] and contracted [*sic*] books in our warehouse to the Leather Museum [Leather Archives & Museum of Chicago] who could issue a tax receipt that the family could then use as a deduction against probate taxes... If you can believe [Larry's attorney], she claims to have learned of Larry's death for the first time from reading your column.

I washed my hands of the case. My concern had been for Larry himself, and then for the bookstores, in the misbegotten lawsuit in which everyone involved, including the attorney, was probably an innocent bystander caught up in his frustration about his lifelong exclusion from the gay mainstream.

I wasn't going to ask what makes people misbehave, or seem evil, as Joan Didion ruminated in her first line in *Play It as It Lays*: "What makes Iago evil? Some people ask. I never ask."

Maybe the fighting frenemies brunching at the French Quarter were all swept away by something weird in LA—something raw in the blistering Santa Ana desert winds that every autumn blow down from the eastern mountains, west across LA, and make locals go mental sitting isolated in their cars on the 405 threading bumper-to-bumper through the slow tangle of the smoky free-ways as the dry Santa Anas set the hills around LA on fire.

On August 20, 2008, a month after Larry passed, his family invited Mark and me to his home in Los Angeles to help begin to identify and sort his archive of writing, art, and photography which we did finally around the dining-room table of his niece's home in Berkeley. In 2012, Carole Queen, founder of the San Francisco Center for Sex & Culture blogged, "We are so grateful to have been gifted with [some of] Townsend's archives." Queen's

Center then exhibited its own version of his BDSM archives featuring “personal ephemera including toys, leathers, and original manuscripts.”