

A woman with long, wavy blonde hair is sitting in a large, light-colored wicker chair. She is wearing a light blue or mint green top and matching pants. She is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. Her right arm is raised, resting on the top of the chair's backrest. The background is dark and out of focus.

HOW I ESCAPED CHARLES MANSON'S KILLING MADNESS

BY AVA ROOSEVELT

Ava Roosevelt

“Did you hear Charles Manson was being released on parole?” A text from Robin Jay, *South Florida Opulence* Editor in Chief, reached me on vacation in Spain. How is this possible? The world is coming to an end, I thought horrified. Fortunately the Manson story turned out to be a hoax, but the memory of the events of August 8-9, 1969, deeply imbedded in my heart, became as real as if the day was yesterday.

“Come for dinner with us tonight,” Sharon Tate suggested when she called me on the afternoon of Tuesday, August 8. “Jay, Gibby and Wojtek are going to join me at El Cayote at 7:30.”

“Sorry, Sharon. I can’t. Have to meet a German producer for dinner, AND tomorrow is my big screen test for the Alberto VO5 commercial,” I sighed.

“Come after dinner, we should be back by 10:30, or so.”

“I’ll try.”

“Do that darling, I love you.”

Sharon’s phone call reached me at the home of my then-agent Valerie Cragin, founder of Flair Modeling Agency with whom I lived at the time, teaching her daughter, Deborah Joy, French and pursuing my career, which began at Christian Dior in Paris.

My life in LA as an aspiring actress and model was thriving, thanks to Valerie who, to this day, at 88 years of age, is a great believer in ‘giving a chance’ to those who are willing to take the brutal rejections synonymous with the beauty industry. I was rejected a lot, but worked just as much. As soon as I saved enough money, I rewarded myself with my first and most extravagant acquisition in years, the purchase of a secondhand 1955 Rolls-Royce Silver Dawn!

I was forewarned, but wouldn’t listen: How could such a beautiful automobile not function properly? I was soon to find out. It was either the brakes, or the windshield wipers; windows would or would not close depending on the weather; often the ignition wouldn’t start at all. The love-hate with my impulsive folly started early on, but I loved the ‘smell and the feel’ of the real leather and the luxury the car represented... I rushed through the dinner with the producer and headed in the direction of Sharon’s house to meet my friends. I wondered, would John Phillips be there, as well? I had a mad crush on the founder of The Mamas and The Papas in those days, and on a spur of a moment, I decided to stop by his house – which seemed quiet when I arrived. And just as I was to turn uphill towards 10050 Cielo Drive, my gas gauge flickered and stopped at empty. This couldn’t be happening, something’s wrong again! I glanced at my watch. It was almost midnight. What if the gauge is right for once and I run out of fuel miles away from a gas station? *I have to work tomorrow. There will be another party I decided and turned around.* Every August 9, for the last 45 years, I stop to thank God, my strict Catholic upbringing, my punctuality-obsessed father, and Rolls-Royce, as I wouldn’t be alive today if it wasn’t for them. Just in those moments, a few miles away, four of my dearest friends weren’t as fortunate.

Sharon Tate



MANSON'S REVENGE

10050 Cielo Drive was a former residence of Terry Melcher's, a man whom Charles Manson despised for not keeping his promise



Charles Manson

to record Manson's songs. The house evoked hatred and represented rejection that Manson would not stand for. As fate would have it, the compound became a residence of Sharon and Roman Polanski.

On Aug. 8, Manson dispatched Susan Atkins, Charles 'Tex' Watson, Linda Kasabian and Patricia Krenwinkel to "that house where Melcher used to live" with directives "to totally destroy everyone in it, as gruesomely as you can."

I made it to the gas station. My Silver Dawn took \$2.50 in fuel. I went home and kicked myself for not going to Sharon's party. Next morning, August 9, 1969, I departed at 5:45 a.m. for my makeup call at Universal Studios. I nailed the screen test, got the job and was leaving when I spotted Valerie in her car, waving me down.

"They are all dead," she shouted.

"What did you say? Who's dead?"

"Sharon, Gibby, Wojtek and Jay."

"Dear God! What happened?"

"No one knows."

Did they overdose? Drug deal gone wrong crossed my mind as I sat in the car which saved my life, holding Valerie's hand, both weeping. Recreational drugs were common those days, but Roman hated drugs and Sharon was pregnant. I couldn't imagine it. But how about the others? Who else was there? The next few hours were a blur. The headlines screamed bloody murder. Sharon Tate, wife of Roman Polanski, Abigail Folger, Jay Sebring Wojciech, 'Wojtek' Frykowski and Steven Parent were all confirmed dead, brutally stabbed at Polanski's residence. To millions, those were the names of the victims; I had lost four close friends.



10050 Cielo Drive, 1969. Sharon Tate and Roman Polanski's home.

PANIC AND PANDEMONIUM

Los Angeles became gripped by fear compounded by the gruesome homicide of Rosemary and Leno La Bianca the next night. "Pigs," "War," and "Helter Skelter" was written in victims' blood on walls in both locations, but police took a while to connect the dots. The heinous killings provoked LAPD and the FBI to investigate and interrogate all close to the victims, including me. Paranoia abounded like wildfire. Everybody was under suspicion. I sought refuge in Malibu at the beach house of my close friends, Michael Sarne, a British actor and director, and his wife Tanya. Roman arrived the next day and stayed with us. He was barely functioning. I have never seen a human being as besotted by grief as Roman was that day.

At the time of the murders, no one had heard of Charles Manson before, but these bloody crimes eventually brought him the

infamy he sought. A self-proclaimed musician and career criminal with schizophrenia and paranoid disorder added to his DNA mix, Manson, father of five, spent half of his life in correctional facilities that became his home. As the head of the Manson family, which at times included as many as 18 females, according to his mother Kathleen Maddox, "he was pampered by all the women who surrounded him." Manson operated a quasi-hippie commune in the California desert where he dispatched his madness and by-proxy killings by use of sex, drugs and music. Using the Beatles' hit song "Helter Skelter" to brainwash his family, Manson ultimately became an emblem of his insanity, violence and macabre ways.

Jay Sebring, the 'hairdresser to the stars,' never stopped loving Sharon Tate, whom he dated prior to her marriage to Roman. He settled for friendship and was a permanent fixture in Sharon and Roman's



Roman Polanski (far left), sits next to Ava Roosevelt and friends on Malibu Colony Beach.



Jay Sebring

circle of friends, but I remember his profound sadness even when accompanied by the most beautiful women. Jay died trying to save Sharon's life. He was shot and then stabbed seven times. Ironically, the crime scene's picture depict them being bound together by a rope in the living room.

Roman, in London at the time of the crime, said, "My absence on the night of the murders is the greatest regret of my life. Sharon's death is the only watershed in my life that really matters. It changed my personality from a boundless, untroubled sea of expectations and optimism to one of ingrained pessimism...eternal dissatisfaction with life." I believe Roman's brief time with Sharon to be the best years of his life. They couldn't wait for the birth of their first child, whom Roman posthumously called Paul. Paul Richard Polanski is buried with Sharon in California.

Sharon Tate, the eldest daughter to U.S. Army Colonel Paul James Tate and his wife Doris, was an actress and sex symbol during the 1960s. She was blessed with beauty, poise and kindness. She became my great pal, an older-sister-I-never-had, my English teacher, and makeup/fashion advisor. She lent me dresses and never wanted them back. She was eight and a half months pregnant but still continued to teach me how to apply false lashes, comb my hair and always told me to believe in myself. She was stabbed 16 times pleading, in vain, to spare the life of her unborn child.

Abigail Folger, Gibby as we used to call her, was the great-granddaughter of J.A. Folger, the founder of Folgers Coffee. She was sweet, frugal and a reserved 25-year-old on her own rebellious path to cure social injustice. Her quest became personified by Wojtek Frykowski, a penniless



Abigail Folger

*Charles Manson
said his mother sold
him for a pitcher of
beer to a waitress
who wanted to have
children. A few days
later, his uncle found
the woman to get
his nephew back.*

Pole and Roman's pal from Poland whom she met in New York in 1967 with Jerzy Jurek Kosinski. The late author of *The Painted Bird*, *Steps* and *Being There* was well known for introducing his-fellow-countryman-in-need to the wealthy patrons he frequented in the Big Apple. During my marriage to David Manson Weir, II, Jurek who had been previously married to David's mother Mary Hayward Weir, became my stepfather-in-law.

Gibby and Wojtek fell in love and moved to LA in pursuit of Wojtek's screenplay-writing ambitions. Legend has it that Wojtek's family in Poland initially helped to finance the "Knife in the Water," Polanski's first feature-length film, which put him on the path to fame. I had known Wojtek in Warsaw. After spending a considerable time in their house, I knew Gibby was way over her head with Wojtek, whose reputation for controlling women was legendary. Gibby was stabbed 28 times, her beautiful face disfigured. Wojtek was struck in the head 13 times and stabbed 51 times. The coroner's discovery of recreational MDA in both Gibby's and Wojtek's blood didn't surprise me. But it managed to derail the investigation,

misleading the LAPD in believing that drugs were the cause of the crimes. It couldn't be farther from the truth.

On August 12, 1969, LAPD raided Spahn Ranch and arrested Manson and 25 Manson family members as 'suspects in a major auto theft ring.' The warrant was misdated and the group was released a few days later. It wasn't until mid-October of 1969 the LAPD caught a-long-awaited break. Susan Atkins, booked for the murder of Gary Hinman, was transferred to Sybil Brand Institute and begun bragging to bunkmates about her involvement with the Manson family massacres. The detailed account of the gruesome events was reported to the LAPD and their case was finally made. The lengthy trial began on June 15, 1970, and concluded on January 25, 1971. Guilty verdicts were returned against the four defendants on each of the 27 separate counts they were charged with. The death penalty was recommended. Their sentences were commuted to life when California abolished the death penalty in 1972. Additionally, Manson was found guilty of murdering Gary Hinman and Donald Shea and was given a life sentence, which he is presently serving at Corcoran State Prison in California. Susan Atkins is dead.

AND I AM ALIVE

In the past 45 years, I married four times, outlived two husbands and was able to care for my late parents. 10 years ago, I found love again. A few hiccups aside, I've lived, for the most part, a charmed life. I recycled my modeling career into Real Estate sales, became an international private investigator and an interior designer. I finally abandoned all hopes of commercial success when I became a writer six years ago. My first novel, *The Racing Heart* is yet to become a major motion picture; but I love what I do; and I couldn't be more grateful that once upon a time, my beloved Silver Dawn didn't let me down. ●



Visit www.southfloridaopulence.com and view Patricia Krenwinkel (participant in the Tate murders) who provides an emotional account of her life in prison.