

GOD ONLY KNOWS

At the end of *Touch of Evil*, Marlene Dietrich delivers the epitaph for Orson Welles; he's the oily, corrupt sheriff who's finally been gunned down. With her practiced, nearly professional world-weariness she murmurs, "What does it matter what you say about people?" Music up, and the film, shrugging off any moral lessons, is over.

I was thinking of that line as I stood with ten others on a windy day, in a small graveyard on Georges Road in North Brunswick. The ashes of my friend and collaborator Tim Korzun were being buried — more than a year after he'd died from Covid. The Thursday night before he died I'd sent him an email asking if he'd like a complimentary digital subscription to *The New York Times*. (They'd just given me two.) At 9:04 PM he wrote back: *Yes, please! Especially if it's free for the low low price of 19.99. I could use it, right now I have a mild flu. Not THAT flu, just flu flu. As opposed to floy floy. You have to catch em all like Pokémon.* This was pure Tim: playful, slightly too-hip-for-the-room. Three days later he died in his wife Sharon's arms, as she attempted to revive him with CPR.

A year later. Sharon, her daughter Jeanna, and nine guests stood next to folding chairs in the cemetery. The Korzun family plot is so near Georges Road that it was nearly impossible to hear anything over the BP oil trucks and the non-stop traffic heading towards the Phoenician Bakery and Arthur's Steakhouse.

Tim's musician friend Chris and I shared some history about collaborating with Tim in various recording studios. I met Tim in 1973; Chris met him a few years later. As we talked I watched Sharon huddle with the funeral director in front of the Korzun stone which is carved with the names of Tim's father, mother, and younger brother Andrew. I had attended all three funerals, as Tim had attended the funerals of my parents and my sister. But never could I have imagined I'd be burying Tim — his relentless sense of satire, the fire behind his oversized glasses, made him feel invulnerable. The wind blew the petals down from an enormous magnolia —they littered the ground in a circle of purple-white. Tim's daughter Jeanna, who attends Georgetown (remotely) wore a short skirt and sneakers. Above her white K95 mask, her eyes were made up with black liner to extend their edges. Her cheek sparkled with tiny green glitter. I said, "How's your mother holding up?"

"OK. She keeps busy with her teaching, her political activism."

"And you're a virtual junior this year?"

She nodded. "Next year a virtual senior."

We sat on the folding chairs as Sharon spoke—nearly inaudible with the traffic noise. Another BP oil truck pulled into the station across the street. *A real New Jersey funeral*, I thought; Tim would have taken delight in satirizing it. On a portable CD player, Sharon played a favorite choral piece of Tim's, and, again, it was nearly impossible to hear it.

Jeanna held her mother tightly during this piece of music. Then Sharon introduced “Tim’s favorite song” and played the Beach Boys’ “God Only Knows.” And, as a tribute to Tim’s vegan daughter, she played the Beach Boys’ “Vegetables,” a touch Tim would have also loved.

Tim’s ashes were held in a wooden box, smaller than a shoebox, and the funeral director placed the box into a cylindrical hole in the ground. We were invited to place a rose into the hole. This is when I had to turn away: that Tim could be reduced to the contents of a wooden jewelry box — sixty-seven years contained in a box the size of my hand. I wanted to cry out.

We were given the opportunity to shovel dirt on the box. The mourners were handed Lysol wipes to disinfect the shovel. I couldn’t put any dirt on Tim. It was too final. We were offered some outdoor refreshments on a picnic table. I couldn’t face this either.

But I returned two days later — by myself. I needed to stand there on my own, under that magnolia tree whose petals had now all fallen. I needed to talk to Tim. I said aloud: “You’ve been cheated. You had so much more left to do. *We* had so much more left to do together.”

On the way home, I pulled into the Phoenician Bakery where I remembered, years ago, buying warm, freshly-baked pita bread. Now it appeared to be nothing more than a convenience store. It was closing at 2 PM. I bought (for \$1.50) a bag of whole-wheat pitas. They already felt stale, but I bought them anyway, in some attempt to return to the ordinariness of life.

I remind myself: The young ginkgo in my backyard will bloom again. The cicadas will re-emerge. They’ll mate blindly. They’ll die. I remember Dietrich: *What does it matter what you say about people?* But I think: Maybe it *does* matter what you say. Especially when it’s all you’ve got left.