

## Wills of the Rich and Vengeful

Like Leona Helmsley, the Dearly Departed Often Get the Last Word

By SUSAN DONALDSON JAMES

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You know you're in the doghouse when your wealthy father leaves this parting shot in his chatty will, "To my son, I leave the pleasure of earning a living, which he had not done in 35 years."

Or: "To my daughter, I leave \$1,000. She will need it. The only good piece of business her husband ever did was to marry her."

Stories abound of monied eccentrics who speak from the great beyond with their will.

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Just today, Queen of Mean Leona Helmsley cut off two of her grandchildren and left a \$12 million trust fund to her dog, Trouble, whose body when he goes to the kennel in the sky will lie beside her in a mausoleum.

The late wife of billionaire hotelier Harry Helmsley also left millions for her brother, Alvin Rosenthal, when she checked out. Rosenthal was responsible for caring for Helmsley's beloved white Maltese. The other two grandchildren were spared her final wrath and left \$5 million each providing they visit their father's grave at least once a year.

The dirt-hating Helmsley ordered that the mausoleum be "washed or steam-cleaned at least once a year," for which she left \$3 million.

Helmsley also remembered the "little people" in her life and threw her chauffeur a bone \$100,000.

Probate lawyers say the will is a person's last chance to seek revenge or reward the living even if that means a beloved pet.

### Wish List

At her death at 105 earlier this month, the philanthropic Brooke Astor left \$250,000 to the Animal Medical Center in New York City specifically for the veterinary care of the pets of poor and old people.

"Most states really try to honor whatever you put in your will," said Elizabeth Schwartz, a Florida lawyer who focuses on probate. "People see this as their final 'screw you' or 'I love you.'"

"I always tell people, 'Do what you want to do,'" she said.

According to the popular "People's Book of Lists," a Londoner willed his fortune to his sons "on the strict condition that they would not inherit the legacy if they became members of Parliament or undertook any form of public office, speculate on stock exchange, convert to any other religion or even marry outside the Jewish faith."

Consider these other quirky one-liners that have surfaced in the last will and testament:

"To my valet I leave the clothes he has been stealing from me regularly for the past 10 years. Also my fur coat that he wore last winter when I was in Palm Beach."

"To my chauffeur, I leave my cars. He almost ruined them and I want him to have the satisfaction of finishing the job."

"To my wife: She has been troubled with one old fool, she should not think of marrying a second."

Often, said Schwartz, the dying are hesitant to spell out their rancor in their wills, for fear there will be a dramatic reading and embarrass them.

## **A Dog's Life**

"You're going to be dead," she said, "so don't let the guilt drive you."

"There are a lot of misconceptions around wills that are created by television," said Schwartz. "What chills people to the bone is they think there will be a reading like the scene from 'Mommy Dearest': 'I give you nothing!'"

In fact, probating a will is pretty straightforward, she said. It's filed in court and beneficiaries are notified. Pets are named all the time.

In 2000, doggie millionaire Gunther IV, a German shepherd who was passed the fortune inherited by his father. Gunther III, bought a home in Florida, according to Slate.com.

The first Gunther was the sole inheritor of the estate of Countess Carlotta Liebenstein in 1992.

This was no sleeping crate the 8,432-square-foot waterfront mansion once belonged to Madonna. His press handlers said at the time the \$150 million price tag was burning a hole in his bank account.

The "moneyed mutt" also owns several homes in Italy and the Bahamas and put down a bid on Sylvester Stallone's mansion, according to the Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel.

An estimated 80 percent of Americans do not have wills, according to Schwartz. Wills are challenged only about 10 percent of the time and there is usually a "high burden of proof" if someone feels slighted, she said.

## **Willduggery**

The so-called Godfather of Soul James Brown's death prompted numerous children to come forward with claims. And icon Ray Charles had a "woman way cross town who was good to me" who looked for a piece of his wealth.

The estate of Anna Nicole Smith continues to challenge the relatives of her geriatric husband, J. Howard Marshall.

One Florida woman had an unusual "entrepreneurial spirit" when she was left money to care for a dowager's cats.

"This woman had previously taken care of an older person," said Schwartz. "The woman who died said she could stay in the house with all expenses paid to take care of the cats as long as they were alive."

"She was there for years and apparently proved to the state she was taking care of the cats," Schwartz said. "As each cat would die, she replaced them with new cats. It was genius."

Another client a "sweet old man" had a nurse who had forged a "codicil" or amendment to his will that made her the beneficiary of \$520,000. His estate was only worth \$700,000, so family members were suspicious.

"After his death we discovered the amendment and went through extensive litigation," she said.

Lawyers used the same handwriting experts as those in the contested Gore-Bush election to analyze the nurse's forged signature.

"The woman ended up losing," she said. "She was so greedy that if she had just tried for \$50,000, she probably would have gotten it."

Beware, too, the "chatty will," say probate attorneys.

"You always want to make the will as challenge-less as possible," said Schwartz. "If there is a situation where there's a sister you want to cut out of your will, don't say, 'I don't want to provide for her because she slept with my high school boyfriend.'"

"The sister can challenge that and say she was misinformed to the facts," she said.

Better to use an old-school line to stiff a relative: "I do not provide to her for reasons that are known to her."

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