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THE
DEATH AND LIFE
OF

P E R R Y
E L L I S

BY
PATRICIA
MORRISROE



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IT WAS THE YEAR OF THE PALE FALL, AS PERRY ELLIS called his 1986 collection, and the showroom was packed with fashion writers and retailers. Many knew each other, and they all knew Ellis. They took their assigned seats and waited for the show to begin. Some fanned themselves with their programs. It was early May, and the showroom was warm.

At 11 A.M., the audience heard Gershwin's "Swonderful" as the first group of models came down the runway. The collection was a tongue-in-cheek salute to the well-dressed American snob. There were the "Junior League Cashmeres," the "Seven Sister Knits," and the "Princeton Camelhairs." Ellis wanted to combine "the shock of color with the familiarity of gray," and he spiced up classic charcoal with pastels. The audience loved it; many felt the clothes were Ellis's best in years.

An hour later, "Swonderful" came over the loudspeakers again, and the Perry Ellis bride walked down the runway for the finale. Afterward, all the models ran onstage, waving and clapping. Ellis came out, too. But he didn't race down the runway the way he usually did. He didn't flash his familiar grin. He walked onto the stage and was supported by his design assistants, Patricia Pastor and Jed Krascella. He looked frail and terribly ill; one side of his face was swollen. The audience was shocked. A few people started to cry. But after a few seconds, they all stood up and

applauded. When he heard the applause, Ellis, who could barely stand, tried to walk down the runway.

"There was a real surge of emotion," says designer Brian Bubb, "and Perry just wanted to move toward it, to grab it. We had to pull him back, because he couldn't make it. Finally, we had to tell him, 'Okay, Perry, okay. It's time to go.'"

Ellis went home, got some clothes, and was taken to New York Hospital. Two weeks later, he fell into a coma. Eight days after that, on May 30, the 46-year-old designer was dead.

The hospital listed the cause of death as viral encephalitis. But many people believe Ellis had AIDS, and given the evidence, it seems likely. Laughlin Barker, his business partner and lover, died in January of lung cancer. A friend says Barker had Kaposi's sarcoma, a form of cancer linked to the AIDS virus.

Though Seventh Avenue knew Ellis was ill, his death was still a surprise. "There are rumors about everybody," says designer Donna Karan. "The whole world thought Calvin Klein had AIDS. People told me he was dead. Today, he looks fantastic."

But Ellis hadn't been looking well for at least six months. He had lost about 30 pounds and had aged dramatically. "I couldn't look at him without crying," says one retailer. "But I was afraid to ask what was wrong."

When people did ask, they were told Ellis was grieving over Barker. Even today, the word "AIDS" isn't mentioned by anyone in the company. "You can pick up encephali-

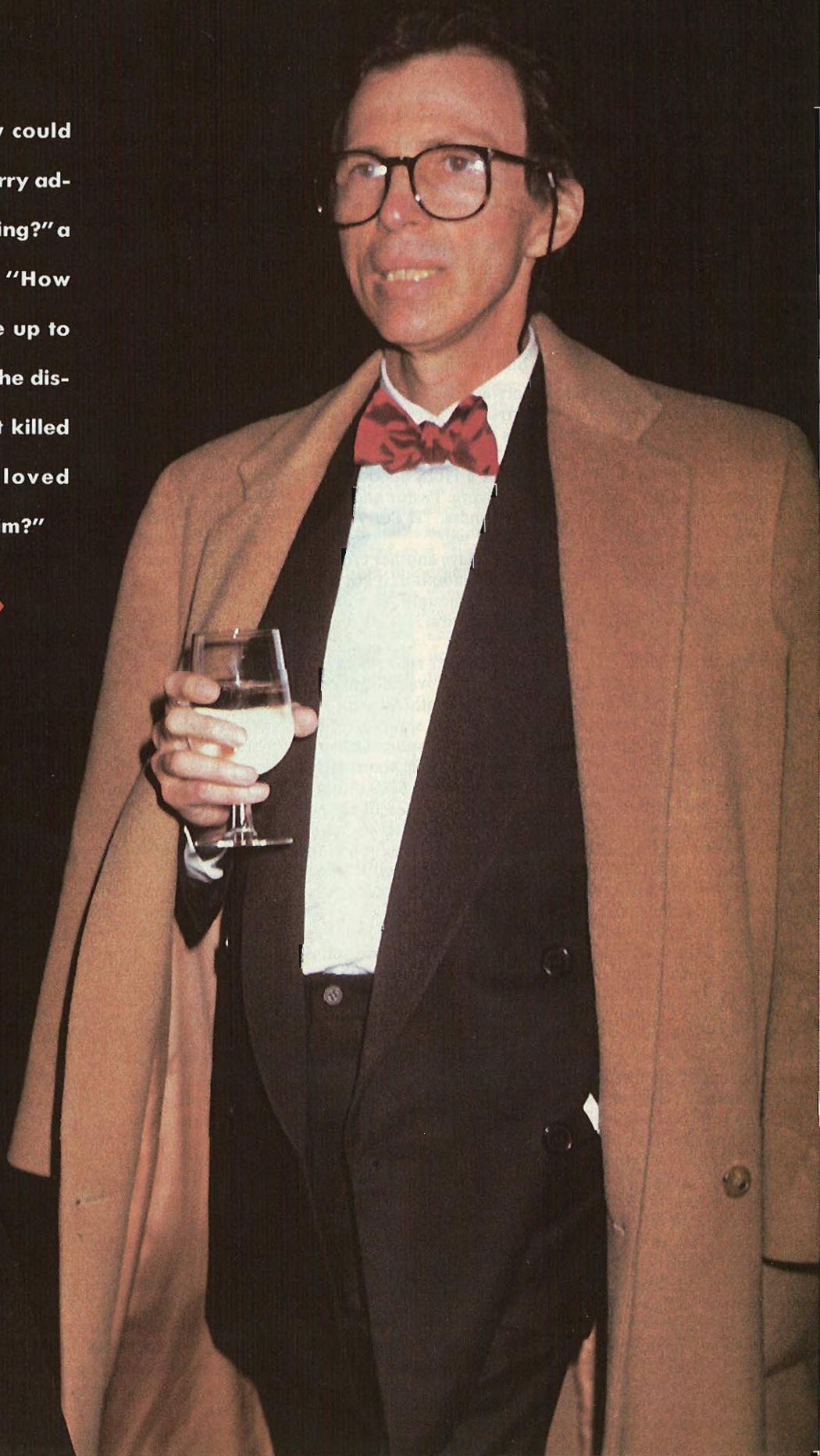


With his favorite model, Lise Ryall.

Perry had a real hypnotic effect on people," says an associate. "He could get you to do anything he wanted."

'How could
Perry ad-
mit he was dying?" a
friend says. "How
could he face up to
the fact that the dis-
ease that just killed
the man he loved
might affect him?"

*At the Council
of Fashion
Designer
awards, in
January 1986.*



"PERRY WAS THE PERFECT SOUTHERN GENTLEMAN," SAYS A FRIEND. "HE DIDN'T WANT A HOLLYWOOD DEATH."

tis from a flea bite in the Hamptons," says creative director Kitty Hawks. (Health officials say encephalitis, a virus that attacks the brain, is also associated with toxoplasmosis and cryptococcal meningitis, opportunistic infections seen in AIDS patients.)

Some fashion people are upset about the way the company handled the situation. "We're not living in the Middle Ages," says a fashion executive. "Consumers are not going to boycott a designer if they discover he had AIDS." Ellin Saltzman, a senior vice-president of Saks Fifth Avenue, agrees: "Most customers don't care. Look, they buy Nipon, and he was convicted of tax evasion."

But Ellis was a fanatic about his privacy; he wasn't the kind to issue a public statement about anything. "Perry was really the perfect southern gentleman," says a friend. "He was polite and dignified. Unlike Rock Hudson, he didn't lead a Hollywood life. And he certainly didn't want a Hollywood death."

Besides, Ellis didn't believe he was dying. Pastor and Krascella claim Ellis never discussed his illness. "If Perry didn't bring it up," says Krascella, "how could we?"

"Perry looked sick, and he acted sick," says another employee. "But he didn't admit it, so you couldn't admit it. It got to be very weird." Adds a third staffer, "Perry thought he was immortal. Disease just didn't fit into the picture."

FOR A WHILE, THE PICTURE LOOKED PERFECT. ELLIS had won eight Coty Awards and was considered one of the brightest talents on Seventh Avenue. Ten years ago, he started out in the Vera showroom, designing a line of moderately priced sportswear under the Portfolio label. This year, the business is expected to generate a wholesale volume of nearly \$260 million. Besides women's sportswear, the company has 23 licensees, including a men's-wear division and Perry Ellis America, a line of casual-wear. There's also a line of sheets, towels, and blankets for Martex; suits and sport jackets for the Greif Companies; coats for Fairbrooke; stockings for Trimfit; furs for Alixandre; and fragrances for Parfums Stern.

From the start, Ellis was a hit with the press and retailers. His clothes were witty and fun. They were oversize and sometimes a bit clumsy, but they projected an easygoing charm. "Perry was the most sophisticated sportswear designer in America," says Geraldine Stutz, former president of Henri Bendel. "His clothes were instantly appealing."

Ellis was the same way. Both men and women found him magnetic; many admitted they were "secretly" in love with him. He wasn't classically handsome, but he had bright hazel eyes, a mouth often described as sensuous, and auburn hair streaked with gray. He wore it long for many years, sometimes pulling it back in a ponytail that accentuated his cheekbones. Ellis always said that fashion came "pretty far down" on his list of priorities. Nearly every day, he put on the same uniform: a blue oxford-cloth shirt, khakis, white cotton socks, and Top Siders. He never wore belts, because he didn't like them.

Ellis was quiet and shy; he spoke in a low, soft voice that made the listener lean toward him. "Perry had a real hypnotic effect on people," says Pastor. "He could get you to do anything he wanted."

"There was a beauty about him that was wild," says designer Abbijane Schiffrin. "From the first time I saw him, I was mesmerized." Stutz agrees: "He had it all. Grace, manners, style, intelligence. He was like an F. Scott Fitzgerald hero. One of those bright, shining people."

The image extended to every part of his life. Ellis had one of

the most beautiful showrooms on Seventh Avenue; it was always filled with rubrum lilies, Ellis's favorite flower. He spent three years and millions of dollars renovating a brownstone on West 70th Street. He imported bathroom fixtures from the Savoy in London and decorated the rooms with English antiques. He had two homes on Water Island, a remote strip of land off Fire Island, to which he would commute by seaplane during the summer. And he had recently bought a fourth home, in Los Angeles, where he spent several months each year. Every house was beautiful in an elegant, understated way. Ellis had a remarkable eye for detail. More important, he had the elusive gift of taste. "Everything," friends say, "was very Perry."

His friends tended to be "very Perry," too. He surrounded himself with a corps of talented, attractive people. He turned employees into loyal friends, and loyal friends into employees. That way, he could pretty much guarantee his privacy. Five years ago, he met Laughlin Barker, a lawyer born in Santa Fe, who was divorced and had a child. They lived together, and Ellis made him president of Perry Ellis International, the licensing division. Ellis and Barker appeared to be the perfect match; friends say they never saw two people so much in love.

Still, Ellis wasn't completely satisfied. He loved children and wanted one of his own. Two years ago, he had a daughter, Tyler, with Barbara Gallagher, an old friend who lived in Los Angeles. A former TV executive, Gallagher was about to turn 40, and she wanted a baby, too.

Now Ellis's extended family included Barker and his daughter; Gallagher and the baby; Ellis's mother in Virginia; plus old friend Robert McDonald, who had been Ellis's roommate and platonic friend for fifteen years. "For other people, this might have been a complicated arrangement," says one friend. "But Perry made it all work. He made the impossible work."

But soon after Gallagher and Ellis's baby was born, Barker began to get very sick. Over the next year, he was in and out of the hospital. Ellis took care of him, and spent less and less time at work. His collection wasn't as well received, and some industry people said the magic was gone. But Ellis insisted that everything would be fine. "In the end, it always turns out for the best," he said.

IT'S A WEEK AFTER ELLIS'S DEATH, AND HIS OFFICES AT 575 Seventh Avenue, near 41st Street, are quiet. The large showroom, which employees once jokingly called the mausoleum, looks empty and cheerless. A few of the rubrum lilies are turning brown.

Ellis wanted everything to be neat and uncluttered. He loved clean, shining surfaces. Inside, everything gleams—the taupe Formica doors, the white tables, the walls of English sycamore veneer. The only hints of imperfection are the clippings above the Xerox machine. Somebody has taped up a *Post* headline that reads, FASHION GIANT LOSES BATTLE WITH BRAIN DISEASE AT 46. It's next to a clipping on Hulk Hogan.

McDonald, who met the designer twenty years ago, now uses Ellis's office. McDonald introduced Ellis to Barbara Gallagher. Today, he is the trustee of Tyler Ellis's inheritance. He also happens to be the president of Perry Ellis International. When Barker died, Ellis asked McDonald to take over, and even though he is a film producer by trade, he plans to devote himself to running the company for at least two years. "I'm paying tribute to my best friend," he says.

McDonald, 40, is dressed just like his friend, in khakis, a blue oxford shirt, and Top Siders. Just like Ellis, he is softspoken and charming. Just like Barker, he's six feet two, blond, and blue-eyed. It's hard for McDonald to talk about Ellis. They

were very close friends, and he misses him a lot. He also wants to protect Ellis's privacy. "Perry had ample opportunity to discuss certain things while he was alive," McDonald says, "and he didn't. I have to respect that."

Krascella and Pastor are protective of Ellis, too. He treated them like privileged children, and they speak about him with a mixture of irreverence and awe. They make jokes about his perfectionism and poke fun at certain annoying habits. But they say he was the most amazing man they had ever met. Sometimes, Pastor says, she feels Ellis is peering over her shoulder, "like a guardian angel."

"We learned a lot from Perry," says Pastor, 32. "That's why I'm not afraid to carry on without him." Pastor, who is married to art dealer Barry Friedman, is eight months pregnant. "After the memorial service, Donna Karan came over to me and said, 'Believe me, I know what you're going through.'" (Karan was pregnant when Anne Klein, her mentor, died in 1974.)

Pastor is not at all what you'd expect from a Perry Ellis designer. She wears red lipstick (which Ellis disliked), a lot of black (Ellis loved neutral colors), and is never without her signature jewelry, particularly bangle bracelets (Ellis hated them). But Pastor, with her eclectic style, was the ideal design assistant for Ellis. "Perry gave Patricia class," says a former designer. "And she gave him a lot of pizzazz."

While Pastor comes across as determined and controlled, Krascella, who is 28, is loose and easygoing. He's got a sweet baby face and an outrageous sense of humor. Krascella and Ellis spent a lot of time laughing together. They came up with nicknames for everyone; for a while, Krascella was called

Sumo, because he'd wear his hair in a bun and stick two pencils in it. Many call Krascella a design genius. Says one employee, "He's so creative it's scary." Actually, Krascella would like to be an actor. Right now, he's studying drama at Oxford University. But he'll be back this month to start planning the Perry Ellis spring collection. Like McDonald, Krascella plans to devote all his time to the business. "This place is part of my life," he says. "I owe it to Perry."

Will Ellis's death have a big impact on the company? Most industry people say no. "Only in New York are people really caught up with designers," says Carolyn Gottfried, a public-relations consultant in the fashion field. "In other parts of the country, nobody cares. Besides, who remembers Christian Dior? In ten years, most customers won't even realize Perry Ellis was even a real person."

PERRY ELLIS WAS BORN IN PORTSMOUTH, VIRGINIA. It's the kind of place where people know their neighbors, and all the neighbors knew Perry Ellis. "People were really proud of him," says Cammy Sessa, a fashion writer for the *Virginian-Pilot* and *Ledger Star*. "He was a real hometown boy."

Ellis's father, who died in 1981, owned a successful fuel company; his mother, Winifred, who remarried, still lives in Portsmouth. "Whenever she came to New York," says Pastor, "she'd bring Perry his favorite butter beans." When Ellis was young, the family lived with his grandmother in what he once described as a "big, wonderful house." It was filled with old clothing belonging to his southern aunts, and Ellis loved to rummage through boxes of beautiful linens, hats, and gloves. "I've always loved clothing from my earliest memories," he told a reporter. "Some people remember books and places. I remember fabrics and colors."

Ellis was an only child. He spent a lot of time by himself, reading books and sneaking a look at his mother's copies of *Vogue*. In those days, Ellis said, "boys didn't do that sort of thing." Even then, Ellis had a special quality that drew people to him. "I remember speaking to a friend who knew Perry when he was fourteen," says Pastor. "He told me kids just gravitated to him."

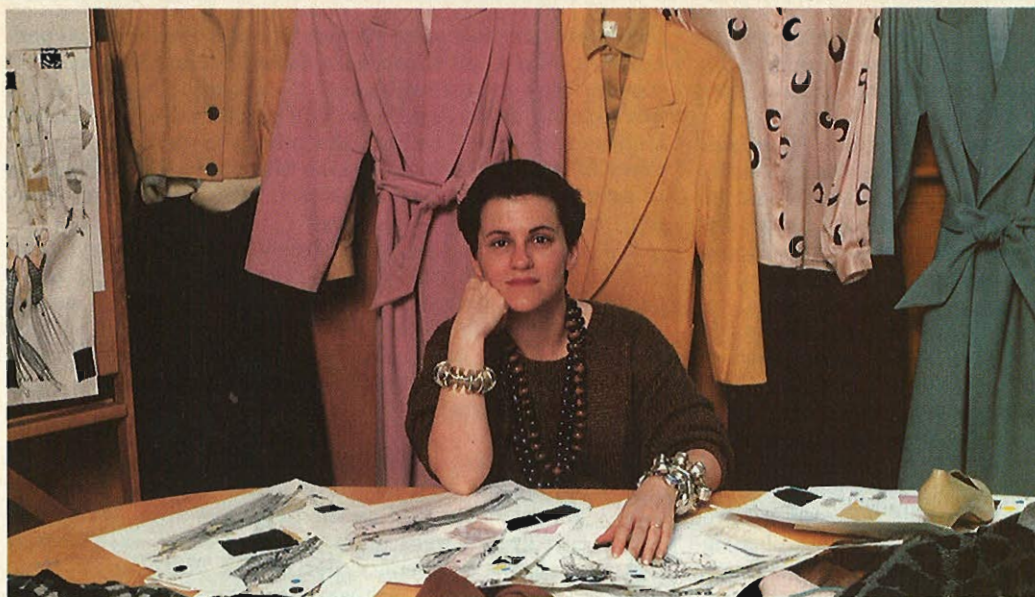
As a teenager, Ellis loved to buy presents for people, and he particularly enjoyed picking out clothes. "But I never knew one could make a living off of having taste," he said. Ellis majored in business at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, and later went to New York University, where he got a master's degree in retailing. In 1963, he returned to Virginia to become a sportswear buyer for Miller & Rhoads, a department store based in Richmond. He stocked the college department with preppy clothes designed by John Meyer of Norwich, a Connecticut company.

"We brought the Ivy League look to the masses," says Arlene Meyer, who designed the line with John, her late husband. And Ellis brought over a million dollars' worth of John Meyer to Miller & Rhoads each year. It became one of Meyer's largest accounts, and soon they were asking Ellis's advice on styles and "fabrications." "He'd come up to Norwich," says Meyer, "and we'd ask him questions like 'What kind of skirts do you think the girls want next year? What do you think will be the popular colors?'" In 1967, they offered Ellis a job as merchandiser, and he moved to New York. "After Perry became successful," Meyer says, "he told me, 'You know, I'm not doing anything different from what I always did.'" In 1974, John Meyer died of cancer,



His first show, in 1978, was a major success. "It was like he became a designer overnight," says a fashion editor.

With his models in *Women's Wear Daily*, in 1978.



‘We learned a lot from Perry,” says Patricia Pastor, one of his top designers. “That’s why I’m not afraid to carry on.”

Pastor in the Ellis offices.

and Ellis moved to the Vera Companies, where he got a job as a sportswear merchandiser. Vera was owned by Manhattan Industries, and its line was made up mostly of polyester double-knit pantsuits and Nyesta shirts. But Ellis tried to upgrade it by introducing cotton, flannel, and linen. Patricia Pastor, who was about to graduate from the Parsons School of Design, heard that Ellis needed an assistant.

“I pictured this short, balding garmento,” she says. “Instead, I found myself face-to-face with this great-looking guy wearing chinos and boat shoes. For the first six months, I didn’t speak to him without blushing.”

Immediately, Ellis brought Pastor into his life. They would often go out to dinner together and spend weekends on Fire Island. To Pastor, who was only 22, Ellis was the ultimate mentor. He knew about everything—clothes, food, antiques, art. Ellis was happy to share his knowledge. He realized Pastor was young and talented. He also realized she was the one with the design background.

A year after Ellis joined Vera, Manhattan Industries gave him \$5,000 to produce his own line, under the Portfolio label. It wasn’t much, but Ellis made the most of it. He designed 33 pieces and held a fashion show in the Vera showroom. “I knew Perry at John Meyer, and there was nothing to prepare me for that show,” says Sandy Horvitz, fashion director of *Made-moiselle*. “It was like he became a designer overnight.”

Ellis was featured on the front page of *Women’s Wear Daily* as one of five up-and-coming designers. (Among that original group, Ellis was the only one who became a superstar.) Gottfried, who wrote the article, recalls a conversation with John Fairchild, *WWD*’s publisher.

“He told me, ‘I want someone new and talented,’” Gottfried says, “so I introduced him to Perry. Afterward, I called Perry up and said, ‘I hope you’ve got a good lawyer, because you’re about to become very famous.’”

SUDDENLY, ELLIS WAS THE HOT name on Seventh Avenue. He began attracting such influential retailers as Kal Rutenstein, who was then president of Bonwit Teller. “I had never heard of Perry Ellis before,” says Rutenstein, who is now a senior vice-president of Bloom-

ingdale’s. “But I read the piece in *Women’s Wear*, and I went to visit him. He had this little booth in the Vera showroom, and I was totally overwhelmed.” By early 1977, Rutenstein was featuring Portfolio in the windows of Bonwit’s.

Why did Ellis become so popular so fast? “It takes an unusual amalgamation of talent, charm, and adoration from the press,” says Larry Leeds, chairman of Manhattan Industries. “Perry had it all.” He also had good timing. For years, fashion was dominated by French ready-to-wear; by the late seventies, however, such American sportswear designers as Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren were starting to build their empires. Ellis didn’t have their kind of financing, nor did he have as many customers. But people who wore his clothes really loved them. They became “very Perry,” too.

Ellis’s clothes looked best on young women just out of jeans who weren’t ready to dress for success. The designs were slightly conservative and slightly crazy. When a woman wore them, she looked a little schizoid, as if she wanted marriage, motherhood, and a job as a tightrope walker in the circus. In a way, Ellis had the same conflicts. He was raised in a traditional southern household, but he wasn’t leading a traditional life. He was extremely private, but he picked a public profession.

“His clothes were an expression of what he was,” says Schiffrin, “and what he wanted to be.”

When it came to clothes, Ellis wanted to be comfortable. For the fall of 1978, he introduced the “slouch look” and used natural, earthy colors and rough fabrics. He particularly liked linen and didn’t seem to mind that it turned into a wrinkled mess after ten minutes on the subway. In fact, he attached tags to the clothes telling customers that the wrinkles were part of the “natural beauty” of the fabric.

For the next year’s spring collection, Ellis gave the slouch look more sex appeal. He created miniskirts, and sweaters that stopped at the midriff. He paired a raspberry tank top with skin-tight treader pants, and even designed provocative “swim sweaters” that looked like turn-of-the-century bathing suits. For the finale of his spring fashion show, the bride skipped down the runway wearing a miniskirt and lace garters over rolled-down stockings.

Fashion critic Bernadine Morris of the



Ellis president Robert McDonald.

"SINCE PERRY DIDN'T HAVE A DESIGN BACKGROUND," SAYS PASTOR, "HE WORKED FROM A PURER POINT OF VIEW."

Times raved about the clothes. She loved Ellis's "spirited insouciance," his "collegiate madness."

"The Perry Ellis mystique is in full flower," she wrote. "It has been gaining ground for a little over a year . . . and now the master can do no wrong."

Now that Ellis was a fashion star, he didn't want to design under the Portfolio label; he asked Leeds to give him his own line. Manhattan and Perry Ellis were an odd team from the start. The parent company had built its business on manufacturing shirts—and they were not "very Perry." While Ellis was a fanatic about natural fabrics, and preferred to sleep on 100 percent linen sheets, Manhattan produced shirts with names like Candle Glow Satin, made of Dacron, and Silkhana, composed of 100 percent polyester.

But Ellis needed Manhattan's money, and Manhattan wanted Ellis's name. At the end of eight months of negotiations, Ellis got his own company, called Perry Ellis Sportswear, and an employment contract that was renewable every two years by Manhattan Industries. Unlike other designers who worked for large companies, Ellis did not get a percentage of sales.

ELLIS MOVED OUT OF THE VERA SHOWROOM INTO A vacant Art Deco bank on the corner of Seventh Avenue and 41st Street. He hired architect James Terrell, a friend, to renovate the space, and *Interiors Magazine* called the new showroom "one of the most impressive around." The showroom reflected Ellis's personality: It was beautiful and tasteful, but not always sensible. "The desks didn't have any pencil drawers," says Joanne Yellin, who was the national sales manager for women's wear. "And there was no room for a filing cabinet. Basically, it didn't look like anybody worked there."

At least, not anybody from the rag trade. But then, Ellis didn't look as if he belonged in the rag trade. He was a well-to-do southern Wasp who didn't need to create an old-money image. He didn't hang out at Studio 54, and he didn't lunch at Le Cirque. Brooke Shields didn't wear his underwear.

Ellis's showroom wasn't at 550 Seventh Avenue with those of Ralph Lauren, Oscar de la Renta, Bill Blass, and Donna Karan. He wanted to set himself apart, because he was shy and because, as one friend puts it, "Perry was a bit of a snob." Newspapers carried full-page ads showing Ellis on the dock of his home on Water Island, his long hair blowing in the wind. He looked pensive and brooding—a Seventh Avenue Hamlet who suddenly found himself contemplating such distasteful issues as whether to sell, or not to sell, designer jeans.

Ellis's female counterpart was model Lise Ryall, who appeared in nearly all his ads. With delicate features and honey-colored hair, she was the classic Wasp beauty. "Perry thought she had a Zelda Fitzgerald quality," says Pastor.

"Perry had this vision of his clothes being worn by someone like Lise," says Ruttenstein. "I told him, 'Stand outside Temple Emanuel on a Saturday and you'll see Perry Ellis with Bulgari jewelry and Gucci handbags.' Perry was very surprised."

Ellis's employees didn't feel as though they worked on Seventh Avenue, either. At first, there were only twelve; Ellis became their spiritual leader. They nicknamed him God and put his picture at the top of their Christmas tree. "I was totally in awe of him," says Judy Beste, who was hired as merchandising manager. "When I got the job, people screamed, 'I can't believe it! You're going to work for Perry Ellis!'"

"We were like a family," says Erwin Isman, the first president of Perry Ellis Sportswear. "There was so much spirit and

commitment. One year, part of the runway collapsed before a show, and we all got hammers and nails and put it back together. A lot of us were just starting out in our careers, and we were building something together."

Ellis worked well with Pastor and Krascella. With their design training, they could interpret Ellis's concepts and add a lot of their own ideas. Ellis couldn't sketch, although sometimes he'd draw what Pastor calls "paper-doll clothes." "They didn't look great," she says, "but they were always perfectly proportioned." Mostly, Ellis described what he wanted, and Krascella would sketch the clothes on a model they had nicknamed Dogface. "Since Perry didn't have a design background," Pastor says, "he worked from a purer point of view. He wasn't encumbered by rules."

Pastor says the slouch look was born when Ellis walked into work wearing a pair of pants that were too long. "He didn't have time to get them hemmed," she says. "I saw him looking at the pants for a while, and then he said, 'Don't you think it's interesting the way the material breaks at the knee?'"

Other times, Ellis would just throw out phrases. "Once, he



Perry Ellis surrounded himself with a corps of talented, attractive people.

Designer Brian Bubb in Ellis's studio.

"IT'S THE DETAILS THAT ARE IMPORTANT," ELLIS SAID— EVEN THE STAMPS FOR THE FASHION-SHOW INVITATIONS.

kept on saying, 'Hand-knits, hand-knits,'" Pastor says. Most sweaters were machine-made, and Ellis thought they looked artificial. So Pastor and Ellis enlisted the aid of Belle Meyers, who ran a knitting store on the Upper West Side. Meyers introduced Ellis to a special type of Colombian wool. "It had everything in it," Meyers says, "including burrs, dirt, sticks, and coral wiring." Ellis loved it. "We called it sheep-shit wool," says Pastor, "but Perry wanted everything to look as natural as possible."

ELLIS'S NATURAL STYLE WASN'T ACHIEVED WITHOUT maximum effort. "Perry was an unrelenting perfectionist," says Pastor. He was also known to drive employees to tears. "Perry would throw out an entire concept two weeks before a show," Isman says. "And when you told him he was insane, he'd look at you calmly and say, 'I just can't put it on the runway. I don't believe in it.'" Pastor and Krascella called him Lizzie Borden. They'd scream, "Perry, this is impossible!" But Ellis never shouted back. In fact, he never raised his voice. He'd just rock back and forth in his chair. "Nothing," he'd tell them, "is impossible."

For one spring collection, Ellis asked designer Patricia Underwood to create a hat with a "very flat" brim. She made 30 of them; Ellis didn't like 29 of them because they weren't quite "flat enough." Says Underwood, "For Perry, the microscopic adjustment made all the difference."

"Details," Ellis would say. "It's the details that are important." He applied that theory to everything, even to the stamps for the fashion-show invitations. Not for Ellis was your basic American flag flying over the Capitol. He always wanted something special. Two years ago, after much deliberation, Ellis finally decided on an orchid stamp. "Unfortunately, it was sold out," says Amanda Manogue, who works in the company's public-relations office. "Perry made me call every post office in the city. Finally, we located the stamps in Red Bank, New Jersey, and we sent somebody out there to buy 750 of them. We had to get twice as many as we needed because Perry only liked two out of the four orchids in the packet."

He was also very selective about his models. Unlike other designers, who mostly used runway models, Ellis always used the most popular magazine cover girls. He particularly liked blue-eyed blondes; he wanted them to have minimal makeup and natural, free-flowing hair. He also wanted them to wear the right undergarments, so he bought them new underwear for every show. "Even if you couldn't see the details," says Krascella, "they were still important."

But if Ellis was "demanding as hell," as Rutenstein puts it, he could also be gracious and thoughtful. Of course, he worked hard at that too. He loved to give flowers and always sent beautiful notes. "He'd make me call the florist," says his longtime assistant, Peggy Lee, "and ask, 'Exactly how long are the tulips? How many blooms on the orchid plant? Are they fresh?' I'd come back with my report, and Perry would say, 'Well, exactly how fresh?' " When it came to writing the notes, Ellis would labor over each word. "He'd do them over again and again," says Lee, "until they came out just right."

"He wanted everything to be the best it could be," says Krascella. When Ellis went to buy fabric, he'd ask his designers, "Can you live without it?" If anyone said no, he would buy it, even if it cost too much. Beste recalls, "Sometimes I'd say to him, 'Don't you think this is a little too expensive?' And Perry would say, 'It's not enough.' For him, if it was beautiful, it didn't matter what it cost. It was never enough."

"Whenever you'd go to his house," Krascella says, "the silver always looked just polished, the napkins were always freshly starched, and the beluga caviar was always from Petrosian." He wanted the best for his friends too. If you were part of his inner circle, he'd do anything for you. He gave Pastor and Krascella extravagant gifts, from antique ruby earrings to round-trip airline tickets to Europe. He always paid for their dinners, and encouraged them to bring their friends. "He was incredibly generous," Krascella says. "In eight years, I never had to ask for a raise."

To others, Ellis could be cool and aloof. "Perry didn't allow you to get too close," says a man who knew him for eight years. "If you did, he'd drop you." Ellis had a sarcastic sense of humor, and it was often aimed at people who didn't meet his standards. He was the kind who accepted sticks and burrs in sweaters, but hated anything that was unrefined in people. "If he didn't like the way you looked," says a former employee, "forget it."

Yet everybody wanted his approval. Manogue framed a note Ellis wrote to her; former public-relations director Karen Fortier says she can't get dressed without repeating "Would Perry like this outfit?," and public-relations assistant Susan Frances compares the designer to E.T. "He was like the perfect creature from another world," she says.

It's no coincidence that Ellis's nickname was God. For many of his younger employees, he created an environment that looked beautiful and seemed ordered. When it wasn't, he kept it to himself. "I remember when Perry's father was dying," says Beste. "Perry was in Japan to receive an award. He really wanted to go home, but he'd made the commitment. He never told anybody about his father. Instead, he stayed in his hotel room and came across as unfriendly. The press called him Petulant Perry. That hurt him, but he kept it all inside."

Ellis didn't talk much about his relationships, either. In the late seventies, he was involved with a man who lived in California. "Perry would fly back and forth to see him," says a fashion editor. "He was blond and very cute. Sometimes he'd model in Perry's shows. I don't know how serious it was."

AROUND 1981, ELLIS MET LAUGHLIN BARKER through a mutual friend, a journalist. The son of a wealthy Santa Fe developer, Barker had an eclectic background. He had spent four years in the Navy; he got a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Bologna, a degree in finance from the University of Colorado at Boulder, and a law degree from Georgetown University. After working as a law clerk in Denver, Barker moved to New York and got a job as a lawyer with Patterson, Belknap, Webb & Tyler. Bisexual, he was divorced and had a daughter, who lived with her mother in Massachusetts.

Barker, who was tall, had blond hair and perfect features; in his own way, he was as charming as Ellis. But they had very different personalities. Barker enjoyed cocktail parties and social conversations; he didn't mind being the center of attention. Ellis dressed in his understated preppy uniform, but Barker wore mostly suits and a signature bow tie. "He was a real bubbly, outgoing guy," says Bob Manogue, Amanda Manogue's brother. "He never seemed to be down about anything."

For a while, Bob Manogue worked as a messenger in the design room and ran a lot of errands for Ellis and Barker. "They were both picky about everything," he says. "I had to get their food at Balducci's, and the scallions and arugula had to

be perfect. But I didn't mind, because I just wanted to make them happy. They were really kind to me, and it was wonderful being around them. Once, I picked them up at the airport after they'd returned from Santa Fe. I glanced at them through the rearview mirror and they were just looking at one another, and their eyes were sparkling. It was really neat."

"I've rarely seen two people who loved each other that much," says Edward Jones, president of Calvin Klein Classifications, who had been president of Ellis's men's-wear and women's-sportswear lines. "They were incredible together. You'd see them after playing squash, with their hair still wet and their faces flushed. And you'd say, 'God, they just look so healthy.'"

Ellis wanted Barker to become president of Perry Ellis International, but Barker was hesitant. "Perry wanted me to convince Laughlin to take the job," says Beste. "We all went out to

Buoyed by the excellent press, the company geared up for a big 1982 fall season. "We'd been riding this wonderful crest," Yellin says, "and we were really flying high." Ten million dollars' worth of goods were sent to the stores—and the clothes bombed. "We reached too far," says Isman, who was president of the company at the time. "It was pretty bad. We lost a million, two."

But Ellis didn't appear to be shaken. "I remember someone once asked him if he wasn't afraid of making too many mini-skirts," says Krascella. "And Perry looked at her and said, 'I'm not a frightened designer.' And it was true. Perry wasn't scared of anything."

Fortier says that Ellis didn't even seem to be bothered by bad reviews. "Darling," he told her, "when they stop talking about you, then you're in trouble." By spring 1983, *Women's Wear* was still talking: "Perry Ellis's Wonderful World is a cartoon strip of larger-than-life shapes, sight-gag sweaters, vaudevillian accessories, and can-you-top-this proportions. With Ellis, the FIT simply flopped in a collection cut for teenagers and priced for grown-ups."

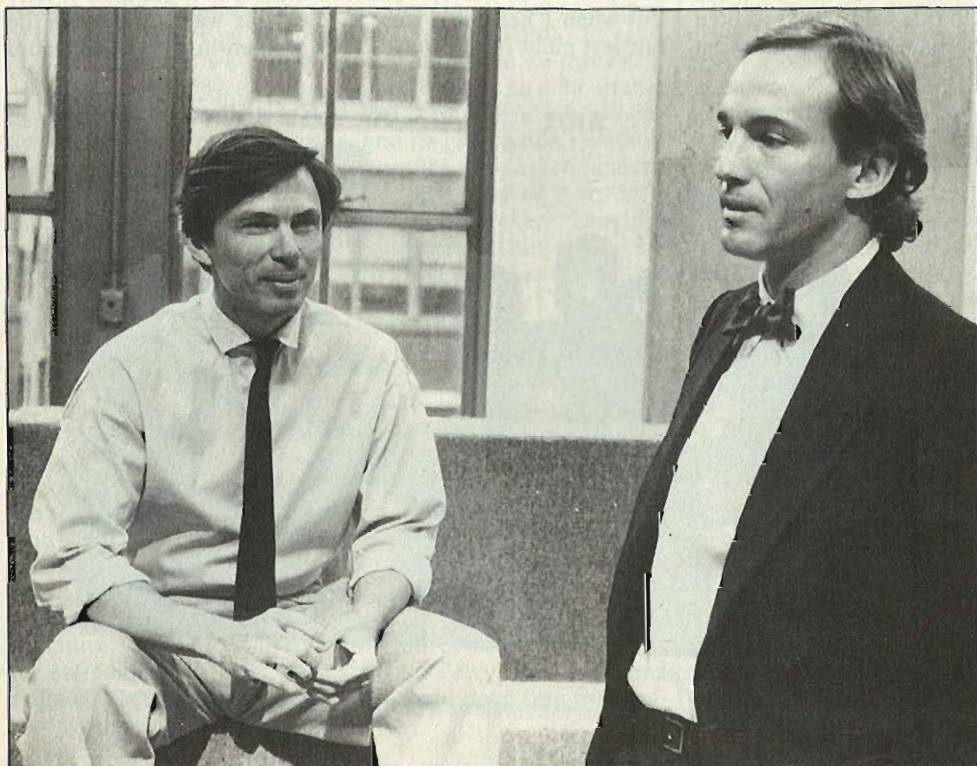
Jones blames the reaction against Ellis's work on the popularity of the European designers, who began attracting upscale customers. "Suddenly, everybody wanted a more sophisticated look," he says. "So the Americans tried to compete with the Europeans, and that was hard for Perry. He was stereotyped as a designer who was witty and fun. His clothes were for sophisticated hippies, not for ladies who wanted cocktail dresses."

"Everybody was getting real depressed," says Yellin. "It was like we were on top of the world, and now... nothing." The company had expanded fast, and the original twelve employees were joined by a hundred others. "To make matters worse, it wasn't like a family anymore," Yellin says. In the past, salespeople had worked closely with the designers, and there was little distinction between "creative" and "business." But the design team was eventually moved up to the third floor and worked behind closed doors.

People complained that Ellis, Pastor, and Krascella had formed a little clique that didn't take well to outsiders. Ellis stopped visiting the showroom, and people who once saw him all the time rarely caught a glimpse of him.

AROUND THIS TIME, ELLIS STARTED HAVING PROBLEMS with his health. He was sick for about six weeks with hepatitis, and spent several days at New York Hospital. "I was going to visit Perry and I ran into my doctor," says a former employee. He said to me, 'He's got some real trouble in hand.' I wasn't sure what he meant, but that comment just stuck in my head." Employees who worked closely with the designer were tested to see if they needed gamma globulin shots. "We were told not to tell anybody that Ellis had hepatitis," says Beste. "Perry wanted to keep it a secret."

He also was making plans to have a child. He'd been talking about it for at least eight years, and he didn't want to wait



Though they seemed opposites, Ellis and Laughlin Barker appeared to be the perfect match; friends

Ellis with Barker in the showroom, in 1982.

say they never saw two people more in love.

dinner, and Perry said, 'Okay, tell Laughlin how much we need him.' Ellis needed someone he could trust, and there was no one better than Barker.

By 1981, Ellis's business was doing better than ever. He launched a separate men's-wear line, and the women's sportswear was making a profit. (In 1978, the company lost money; in 1979, it broke even.) Until this point, Ellis's clothes had been sold in "contemporary" departments; now he was moving up with the major-league designers. At Bloomingdale's, he left the Young East Sider shop for a boutique next to Giorgio Armani. Though he repeatedly said he would never use "Establishment" fabrics, such as charmeuse, he introduced it into the line.

Still, he managed to maintain the Ellis signature. When his fall 1981 collection appeared, an enthusiastic Morris compared him to Chanel, and *Women's Wear Daily* called him the Archer, because of his sharp eye. "I am feeling terribly secure and loved these days," Ellis said.

much longer. "But Perry didn't want to have just any child," Schiffrin explains. "He wanted the perfect child. Someone who would grow up to be beautiful and blond."

Ellis had known Barbara Gallagher since the mid-seventies, and she seemed like the ideal candidate. She was a close friend of McDonald's and a member of Ellis's inner circle. She was blonde and very pretty; she was also intelligent and outgoing. "Actually, she had a lot of Laughlin's traits," says a friend. Gallagher had started out as a receptionist for *The Ed Sullivan Show* and later became an associate producer for the early *Saturday Night Live*. Eventually, she worked her way up to become a vice-president at NBC and then ABC. She quit to become a free-lance film producer and writer.

"I remember talking to her in the late seventies," McDonald says, "and Barbara said her only regret was that she had never had a child. A few years later, Perry, Barbara, and I all had dinner together, and Perry announced that he'd always wanted to have a child, too. He looked at Barbara and said, 'So what about it?'" The rumor among some employees was that the couple had decided on artificial insemination.

BY LATE 1983, BARKER had developed a bad case of shingles, a rash that is sometimes an early sign of AIDS. It was mostly on his chest, and Barker had to stay home because he couldn't wear a shirt. It led to other rashes that spread over his body and wouldn't go away. "At the time, we didn't think AIDS," says one employee. "I don't know what we thought."

With Barker ill, Ellis began spending more time away from the office. He had bought the brownstone on West 70th Street, and he and Barker were going to England to buy antiques. "Basically, Perry wasn't around," says one designer, "and it was really frustrating. At one point, I told him he wasn't minding the store, and Perry said, 'I know.'"

Except for the 1984 fall collection, in which Ellis created a brilliant series of designs based on the Cubist paintings of Sonia Delaunay, the clothes continued to get mediocre reviews. "It's inevitable in a designer's career," says Stutz. "Everybody goes through it. You just have to ride it out."

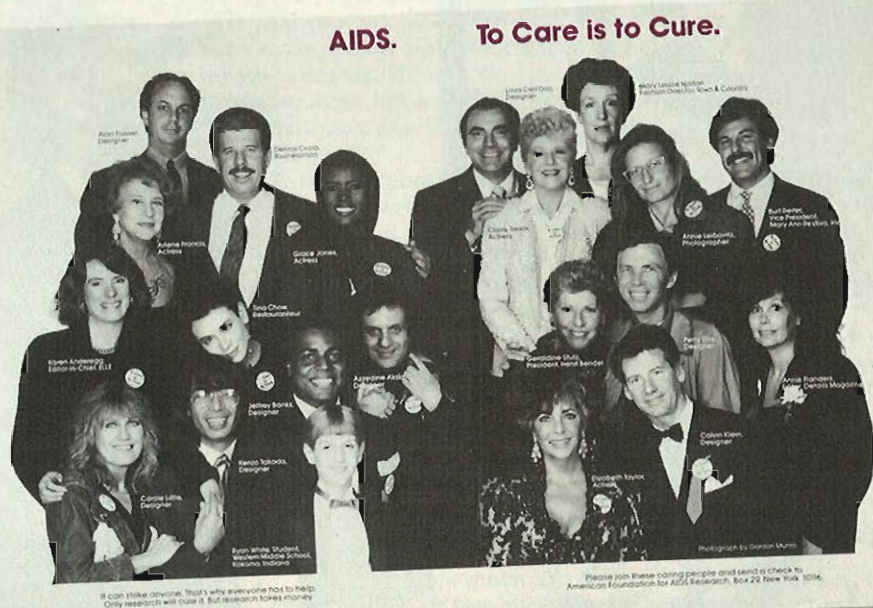
"I think the good designers have consistency," says a fashion editor. "Perry's stuff was erratic. Some of it was downright terrible. One year, it looked like he'd wandered into a used-clothing store on Sunset Boulevard and never got out. I'm not sure what happened, but suddenly there was no magic. No excitement."

It's hard to know why Ellis lost interest in the business. Some of it had to do with Barker's illness; they were spending a lot of time traveling together. And Ellis may have been feeling poorly himself. But to many employees, it seemed as though he didn't care anymore. They felt deserted, and some members of the old team began sending out their résumés. "It was very hard to get excited about the line when everybody was so depressed," says one saleswoman. "You'd be standing with a retailer, trying to be enthusiastic, and inside you were feeling like you were on the *Titanic*. And Perry didn't help matters. He

could have made an appearance. Sent us a note. Anything. But he didn't. It was like we were working for Howard Hughes."

"Perry had a lot of wonderful qualities," says a designer, "but he was very narcissistic. There was an incredible arrogance about him. He wanted everything, and he didn't worry about the consequences. It was really an extreme example of 'I can have it all.'"

IN NOVEMBER 1984, TYLER ALEXANDRA ELLIS WAS BORN in Los Angeles. Ellis, who was in the delivery room, called Tyler his miracle child. "Perry was ecstatic," says Fortier. "In three years, we'd never had a personal conversation, but suddenly Perry was so open and warm. 'I saw her being born,' he kept repeating. 'She's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.' Some people thought, How could Perry do this? I wondered myself, Is it good? Is it fair? But when I heard his voice, I knew she was going to be the luckiest child in the world." The women in the sewing room



Ellis had spent much of the past two weeks in bed, but he went to the benefit. "When I ran into Perry," says a friend, "I almost started to cry."

The American Foundation for AIDS Research ad, photographed on April 29.

made the baby a christening robe, and Ellis showed Tyler's pictures to everyone. He bought Gallagher a house in the Brentwood section of Los Angeles, and he flew out to see the baby whenever he could. "He was just so happy," Fortier says.

At about the same time, Barker's rashes were beginning to become more of a problem. He developed Kaposi's sarcoma, a fatal form of cancer that first leaves purplish marks on the skin and later invades the internal organs. His condition was kept a secret from everybody at the company. "Nobody heard from Laughlin for weeks," says Beste. "I thought to myself, There's something wrong here. I spoke to his personal assistant, and she said, 'I haven't heard from him in weeks, either.'"

Still, nobody even dared whisper the word "AIDS." "The implications were too awful to contemplate," says a friend of Ellis's.

To make matters worse, Ellis and Manhattan Industries were battling over everything. "The company was stuck in a 1950s-shirt mentality," says one executive. "They were primarily interested in the 'Fast Buck' Perry, and they didn't care

"PERRY REFUSED TO ADMIT LAUGHLIN BARKER WAS DYING. HE FIGURED HE COULD WILL HIM BACK TO LIFE."

about quality." Manhattan had been in financial trouble for a while, and it had accumulated \$50 million in long-term debt. (By 1985, the company would show a loss of \$17 million.) "It was like the last place you'd want to be connected with," the executive says.

"Manhattan and Perry had zero communication," he adds. "Larry Leeds desperately wanted to relate to Perry, but it was hopeless. Perry talked down to the people at Manhattan. He called them Seventh Avenue garments. After a while, it became a pissing contest. There were threats." (Leeds says none of this is so. "Perry never complained about quality," he says. "Our relationship was pretty good. There were no threats.")

By the end of 1984, the situation had become so difficult that Ed Jones resigned. He was the chief executive officer of both the women's and men's division, and he just couldn't work at the company any longer. In February 1985, Ellis asked Jones to come back, and made him managing director of Perry Ellis International. He would report directly to Barker. "Laughlin was very ill," Jones says, "but Perry still wanted him to be president. Perry was so positive in his attitude. He kept on telling me Laughlin was going to be better. Afterward, I thought to myself, Wouldn't it be better if they faced it?" After that meeting in February, Jones never got the chance to speak to Barker again.

During the year, Barker, who was undergoing chemotherapy, was in and out of the hospital. Near the end, Ellis set up a hospital bed at home and took care of Barker as best he could. Barker had a difficult time walking and needed a wheelchair. He showed up in May 1985 at a fashion show, and employees who saw him couldn't believe the change in his appearance. "I was totally unprepared," says one. "I thought to myself, My God! What's happening here?"

"Perry refused to admit Laughlin was dying," explains one executive. "He figured he could will him back to life. Perry was the eternal optimist." Says Stutz, "Once Perry had determined a specific course of action, nothing could deter him from following his vision."

WHEN HIS PERSONAL LIFE BEGAN TO GET more complicated in 1984, Ellis set his sights on the Council of Fashion Designers of America, an organization founded in 1962 to promote fashion as an art form. "Since then, it had been tucked away in a top drawer," says CFDA executive director Robert Raymond, "and nobody paid attention to it."

Ellis had never been a big fan of the Coty Awards; he believed the prizes were given on the basis of politics and not merit. Most of the major designers didn't even bother to show up, and two years ago, the awards were discontinued. Ellis was named CFDA president in 1984, and he focused much of his energy on revitalizing the organization. He wanted to make it more prestigious than the Cotys, and he set about creating an annual awards dinner at the Public Library's Astor Hall.

Suddenly, Ellis was on the phone with Calvin Klein, Oscar de la Renta, Mary McFadden, and Donna Karan. He asked them to get involved with the CFDA, to support "their industry." In October 1984, Ellis and Raymond met for four hours each day to plan the January awards dinner. "As you can imagine," says Raymond, "no detail went untouched." Ellis tasted appetizers and desserts at Glorious Food, paced back and forth in the Temple of Dendur before finally selecting Astor Hall. He created a new awards system with no categories, and gave prizes to anybody who had made a significant contribution to

fashion. That included Diana Vreeland for her book *DV*, Bruce Weber for his photography, and Astor Place Barbershop for its punk haircuts.

Every major designer showed up for the awards dinner in January, and Ellis acted as master of ceremonies. "He was charming, cute, and witty," says *Mademoiselle's* Horvitz. "The whole evening was pure magic." Donna Karan agrees. "It was incredible," she says. "Everything was so perfect, so very much like Perry."

If the spirit had disappeared from Ellis's collection, at least it was back at the CFDA. Industry people who once criticized Ellis for being distant were now lauding him. "He became a much warmer human being," says one retailer. "There was an added depth, a certain mystical quality in his eyes."

By midsummer 1985, Ellis was already planning the next CFDA dinner. "One day Perry called me," says Raymond, "and he was all excited. 'I just found this wonderful book on Katharine Hepburn,' he said. 'She's been such an inspiration to so many designers. I'd like to give her the CFDA's Lifetime Achievement Award.'"

Raymond said, "You want to give Katharine Hepburn an award? Good luck."

Ellis went ahead anyway. He sent Hepburn flowers and a letter. She refused. He wrote her another letter. She started to soften. Ellis politely badgered Hepburn until, a few weeks later, Raymond was in her Turtle Bay townhouse looking through boxes of her private photos to illustrate the CFDA program.

Later, Calvin Klein interviewed Hepburn for the CFDA booklet. "Perry was really excited about getting Calvin and Hepburn together," says Raymond. "He felt like he was really giving Calvin a special gift."

By September, it was clear that Barker was dying. But Ellis persisted in telling people he was fine. They bought a classic Bentley on a trip to England, and they discussed other vacations they were planning together. He did, however, ask McDonald to move into the townhouse to help him take care of Barker. McDonald, who had left his job at NBC, was working part-time at the company, mostly filling in for Barker as president of Perry Ellis International. McDonald says he never thought it was going to turn into a permanent position. "And I never expected anything to happen to Perry," he says.

But people noticed there was something wrong at the October fashion show. When Ellis came down the runway with model Elle McPherson, he looked different. Instead of his blue oxford shirt, he was wearing a red sweater; he appeared much thinner, and large glasses framed his pale face. "I was shocked when I saw him," says a fashion editor. "I remember saying to someone, 'Perry is really looking his age.' And the person said, 'It's not age. It's AIDS.'" Karen Fortier, who was public-relations director at the time, had to field a lot of difficult questions. She claims she didn't know Ellis was sick, and she told people he was under stress. "Sure, he looked pale," she says, "and he'd lost a lot of weight. But I figured if someone I loved was seriously ill, I wouldn't look great, either."

IN DECEMBER, ELLIS WENT TO A PARTY FOR THE COSTUME Institute at the Metropolitan Museum. He fell against Bill Blass and Pat Buckley in the receiving line. "Pat tried to make light of it," says Blass. "She said, 'Don't worry about it. I've fainted in reception lines before. The only problem was nobody missed me.'" Bernadine Morris reported the incident in the *Times*, and the rumors began to circulate about Ellis's health.

Barker spent most of December at New York Hospital. Be-

ELLIS SAID HE LOOKED BAD BECAUSE HE'D GONE THROUGH "DIFFICULT TIMES." "MY DOCTOR SAYS I'M HEALTHY."

tween trips to visit him, Ellis made sure everybody got Christmas presents. Every year, he gave employees art books and wrote carefully worded notes. In 1985, Judy Beste got a copy of *Couture*. "I opened up the book, and inside Perry had simply inscribed L. AND I BOTH LOVE YOU," she says. "I put down the book, and I cried. It was then I knew Perry was going to die."

On January 2, Barker died of lung cancer at home. A small memorial service was held at the Public Library. Ellis didn't show up. "We held a chair for him," says Jones. "We said to ourselves, 'Perry's here.'"

Ten days after Barker's death, Jones resigned from the company. He was planning on moving to Texas. "Things were just getting too difficult," he says. He went over to Ellis's townhouse to tell the designer in person. "It was a very emotional meeting," says Jones. "We sat in front of the fireplace and cried together. I told him why I wanted to leave, and about my frustrations in working with Manhattan Industries. Perry said he understood."

"At the end of the meeting," Jones says, "I told him, 'I just want to grab you and hug you.' Perry opened his arms. It was like hugging a skeleton."

Still, the nature of Ellis's illness was kept secret. "It was like this cloud that hung over our heads," says one former employee. Ellin Saltzman of Saks remembers running into Larry Leeds on an airplane sometime in January. "He said to me, 'Do you think Perry is sick?' I said to myself, 'Come on, who are you kidding?'"

"How could Perry admit he was dying?" a friend says. "How could he face up to the fact that the disease that just killed the man he loved might also affect him, and maybe even his child? How could a person go on without uttering a long, sustained howl? He couldn't admit to anyone he was dying, because it was just too terrible."

THE CFDA AWARDS DINNER WAS SCHEDULED FOR JANUARY 19, with Ellis as master of ceremonies. Nobody believed he could make it. Even if he could, nobody wanted him to do it. Ellis was much too weak. Besides, he was still devastated by Barker's death. Raymond arranged for a master of ceremonies to fill in for Ellis, but the designer wouldn't hear of it. "Perry said to me, 'I'm not sick,'" Raymond recalls. "It's just that I'm suffering from a broken heart."

"Perry was meticulous about his appearance," Raymond says. "If he had known how he really looked, he never would have done it. But Perry thought he looked fine, so we all went along with it."

Hepburn, who was scheduled to accept her award later in the evening, showed up 90 minutes early and asked to go on first. Ellis tried to talk her out of it. "He had absolutely no effect," says Jones. "She wanted her award, and then she wanted to leave." Ellis, who was shaky to begin with, got very upset. By the time he walked out onto the stage, he fumbled with his microphone and seemed a bit lost. "My name is Perry Ellis," he said. "I'm president of the Council of Fashion Designers, and I'm delighted to be here tonight." He paused for a second, and then seemed to choke up. "I can't tell you how much it means," he added.

Next, Calvin Klein came out to present the award to Hepburn. "This," he announced, "is the evening of the invalids." There was an awkward silence, and then a few laughs. He went on to apologize for stumbling on the way to the podium, explaining he'd had a "bad fall on the ski slopes." The rest of the evening was equally uncomfortable. At times, Ellis ap-

peared disoriented, and McDonald, who was standing in the wings, had to help him on and off. People who attended the \$750-a-plate dinner say it was one of the most painful evenings of their lives.

Afterward, friends say, Ellis was deeply distressed that people had seen him in that condition. "He called me the next day very upset," says Raymond. "He told me, 'I've ruined everything. I'm so sorry.'" According to one friend, Ellis was disoriented the day after the CFDA. "He wasn't making any sense," the friend says. "He was scrambled and incoherent. He kept on repeating, 'I can't believe I did what I did.'"

On January 27, Ellis made out an eight-page will. He left a personal estate of well over \$1 million to three beneficiaries: his mother, his daughter, and McDonald. McDonald was named executor, and the trustee of Tyler Ellis's inheritance.

In February and March, Ellis seemed to get better. He and McDonald spent two weeks in Los Angeles with Gallagher and the baby. Ellis gained twelve pounds and got a deep suntan. By the time he returned to New York, he appeared much healthier. "See," he told Leeds, "I don't have AIDS." On April 9, an article titled "Perry Looks Ahead" appeared in *Women's Wear Daily*. In it, Ellis said that his former weakened appearance had been due to "difficult times." "My doctor says I'm healthy," Ellis said. "I feel great."

But the disease was only in remission, and soon after the article appeared, Ellis started losing weight again. He spent most of April at his townhouse, although he tried to come into the office for a few hours several days a week. He had lost so much weight that he was now wearing sweatpants with his Top Siders.

"He was driving everybody crazy again," says Pastor. "We said, 'Well, he's back to being his old bitchy self.'" This year, Ellis wanted duck stamps, but he only liked two out of the four ducks. And he couldn't decide on the proper background music for the show. Michael Purri, the music coordinator, suggested Gershwin's "Swonderful," but Ellis had another song in his head. Only he didn't know what it was.

"Kitty Hawks called up," Purri says, "and told me Perry thought the words were something about 'If you can read my mind.' I thought it was the Gordon Lightfoot song, but Kitty asked Perry, and he said no. Finally, I was talking to Kitty from a phone booth at the Port Authority, and she asked me if I'd found the song. I told her I didn't know what it was, and she said, 'Give me your number.'"

A few minutes later, the phone rang. Purri heard a voice humming into the receiver. "It was Perry," says Purri. "He was really weak, and I could barely hear his voice, but he kept on trying to hum the song. After he finished, he said, 'So what is it?' And I told him I still didn't know. He seemed disappointed. 'Well, I can hear it in my head,' he said."

DESPITE HIS WEAKENED CONDITION, ELLIS STILL wanted to be president of the CFDA for a third term. He called Raymond and asked him if they could change the bylaws so he could serve for another year. "Perry really felt he was going to live," Raymond says. "I'm not sure dying ever crossed his mind."

On April 29, the fashion industry put on a benefit for AIDS at the Jacob Javits Convention Center. Many designers refused to participate until Calvin Klein offered his support. Fortier, who did the publicity for the benefit, says she never dreamed Ellis would show up. "But Calvin called Perry and asked him to come," she says, "and he felt obligated. He'd gotten Calvin

McDONALD REMEMBERS ELLIS'S LAST WORDS. A VISITOR ADMIRERED THE FLOWERS. "NEVER ENOUGH," ELLIS SAID.

involved in the CFDA, and I guess he felt he owed it to him."

Ellis had spent much of the last two weeks in bed, but he went to the benefit with McDonald and Raymond. "When I ran into Perry," says a friend, "I almost started to cry." As part of the event, designers and celebrities posed for a group shot to show their support of the fight against AIDS. "Perry really wanted to be in that photograph," says Fortier. "And he was just so ill."

Several days later, Ellis was showing signs of encephalitis; the virus was now spreading quickly to his brain. One side of his face appeared paralyzed. Lee Adduci, who had worked for Ellis in the early days of his career, ran into him in the elevator at 575 Seventh Avenue. "At first, I didn't know it was Perry," she says, "and then I saw the boat shoes. I asked him about his baby, and suddenly his eyes sparkled just like the old days."

ELLIS WAS DETERMINED to make it through the May 8 fall show. He had often said there were only three things in life that were important: matters of the heart, health, and career. He had already lost Barker, and he was dying himself. But he still had his designs. He made sure Amanda Manogue had the right people sitting next to one another. The night before the show, he talked to Purri about the music. He still wasn't sure about "Swonderful." He wanted to use the song in his head, but he couldn't hear it clearly anymore.

Brian Bubb says they didn't think Ellis was going to attend the show. "We didn't know if it was a good idea," he says.

But at 8:45 A.M., they got word to clear the freight elevator. Ellis was coming up the back way to avoid the crowd. Pastor and Krascella immediately starting joking to lighten the atmosphere. They said, "Oh no! It's Lizzie Borden."

In the past, Ellis would make the final adjustments on the models and send them out. This time, he sat on a stool and watched the show through a two-way mirror. But even then, Ellis was preoccupied with details. "We only made a few men's hats," says Bubb. "But suddenly Ellis loved them, and he was sticking the hats on all the models as they went out."

At the end, the designers realized that nothing could stop Ellis from going out on the runway. Bubb and Krascella tried to support him, but Ellis moved ahead. Pastor and Krascella held him as he heard the applause and felt the warmth in the room; for the next few minutes, the Perry Ellis magic was back.

Only a few people knew Ellis was taken to the hospital. A friend says Ellis's mother didn't know just how seriously

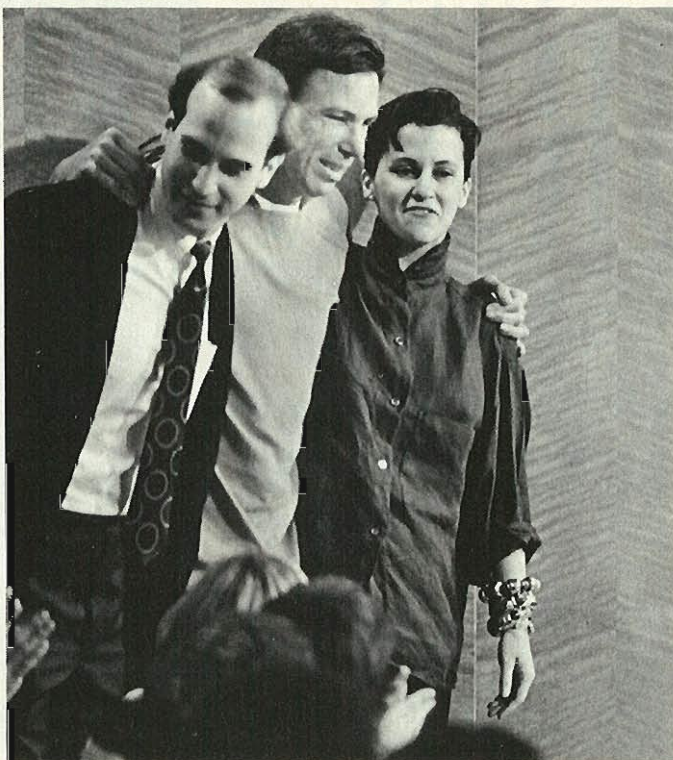
ill he had become until she came to the fashion show.

"We weren't prepared for it at all," says Amanda Manogue, who suddenly found herself deluged with calls from reporters. "Maybe we were just being naïve. Maybe we just couldn't face it. I don't know."

"After a while, we didn't want to take Robert McDonald's phone calls," she says. "We didn't want to hear the news. Finally, I heard someone say, 'It's Robert,' and my heart just stopped."

Fashion editors praised the collection; they said the designer

had let his clothes mature along with him. He was finally back on track. Friends read Ellis the reviews in his hospital room. "He could still hear," says Adduci, "and he understood. It made him very happy." Soon afterward, Ellis went into a coma. McDonald remembers his last words. A visitor came into Ellis's room and commented on all the beautiful flowers. "Never enough," Ellis said.



He heard the applause, and for a moment,

the Perry Ellis magic was back."

Krascella and Pastor with Ellis, at his last show.

ON JUNE 12, A MEMORIAL service was held for Ellis at the New York Ethical Culture Society. It was a rainy day; the sky was a Perry Ellis gray. Most of the major American designers were there, and they carefully staked out their territory. There was Calvin Klein on the left, Bill Blass in the middle, Donna Karan down front; Ralph Lauren, who arrived ten minutes late, took a seat to the left of center.

The Meliora Quartet played works by Beethoven, Mozart, and Britten, and ten speakers paid tribute to the designer. Leeds said that Ellis was "the possessor of an aloofness and

social savoir faire that made even the most sought after seek his company"; Stutz commented on "the beautiful order of his mind"; Pastor talked about his "relentless pursuit of perfection"; and Krascella reminisced about the happy days, when they called him Lizzie Borden and there was laughter in the design room.

At the end of an hour, Marvis Martin sang "Amazing Grace," and people began to file out of the room. There were no uncontrolled sobs and very few tears. Someone commented that it was almost as though no one had died. Someone else pointed out that Ellis probably would have wanted it that way. Outside the door, people pulled out their umbrellas and kissed their friends good-bye. Photographers snapped pictures of Paloma Picasso and Calvin Klein. A woman with an autograph book wondered if Brooke Shields was there. Finally, the major American designers, minus one, climbed into their limousines and headed back to Seventh Avenue in the rain.