

The Jewish Giant *by* Stacy Abramson



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Author: Stacy Abramson

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Photographer Jenny Carchman was eight years old in 1979 when her mother first showed her Diane Arbus' collection of photos (diane arbus, 1971, Aperture). There were pages of "freaks" -- midgets, transvestites, dwarves, and hermaphrodites. She remembers her mother pausing in the middle of the book on a photo of a very large man, towering above an older couple. The caption read, "Jewish Giant at Home with His Parents in the Bronx, NY, 1970." Her mother told her that the giant in the photo was named Eddie Carmel. He was her cousin. Eddie had died two years after the photo was taken, a year after Jenny was born. This was the first she had heard of him.

As a child, Jenny couldn't get Eddie out of her mind. She had nightmares for weeks, and her fears were magnified by the silence surrounding her cousin. For years, whenever she'd try to talk about Eddie, her family refused to discuss him.

The Jewish Giant began with Jenny's search to uncover a story that has remained a secret for 25 years. Eddie was normal sized until he became a teenager, when he began to grow uncontrollably (he suffered from acromegaly, a then-incurable condition resulting from a tumor that had developed on his pituitary gland). According to The Guinness Book of World Records, Eddie grew to be 8'9". As an adult, the only work he could find involved exploiting his freakishness. He starred in B-grade monster movies (The Brain that Wouldn't Die), made two 45 records ("The Happy Giant" and "The Good Monster") and was billed in the Ringling Brothers Circus at Madison Square Garden as "The Tallest Man on Earth." Eddie died in 1972 at the age of 36 in Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx. His coffin was custom made.

The Jewish Giant is a story of suffering, of not fitting in, of the body betraying itself, and of the bizarre life-twists that can subsume a family. It's a story a regular person looking at the world from inside a not-so-regular body.



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