



Tragedy, Suicide and New York's "King of the Red Carpet"

by [Chris Gardner](#)

April 14, 2017, 6:45am PDT



ADVERTISEMENT

Six months after the death of media fixture Jeffrey Slonim, family and friends like Lena Dunham and Julianne Moore reveal their struggle to understand what went wrong: "For all of us, this was a complete shock."

The red carpet journalist arrived at Lincoln Center's Illumination Lawn just after 10:30 a.m. Oct. 13. But with rain in the forecast, the entrance to the lawn was chained off. He had been to Lincoln Center dozens of times covering premieres, the opera and the ballet. In fact, he had worked the red carpet across the street at Alice Tully Hall just six days earlier at a screening of Pedro Almodovar's *Julieta* as part of the New York Film Festival. There were more screenings scheduled that night, and media pals expected to see him on the carpet.

Instead, that morning the reporter threw his legs over the chained-off entrance to the lawn, which hangs over the 65th Street sidewalk between Amsterdam and Columbus avenues

— a bit more than two stories. It doesn't look high enough for what he came to do. He was pacing back and forth, talking to himself.

His presence caught the eyes of two Lincoln Center security guards, who approached and asked that he exit. Ignoring their pleas, he climbed the sleek metal railing that frames the lawn and stared down at the street. The sight of a man on the ledge caught bystanders off guard. Pedestrians on the sidewalk below, in front of the famed Juilliard School, stopped to look up. Police arrived within minutes, and onlookers joined the pleas of uniformed NYPD officers shouting, "Don't jump!"

"People weren't sure what was going to happen — if he really wanted to jump or was trying to get attention," recalls a staffer at Lincoln Ristorante, an upscale Italian eatery wedged right below the lawn. "This is New York; crazy things happen all the time."

Friars Club Under Fire: Inside a Showbiz Institution Divided by Financial and Sex Harassment Scandals

[Read More](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

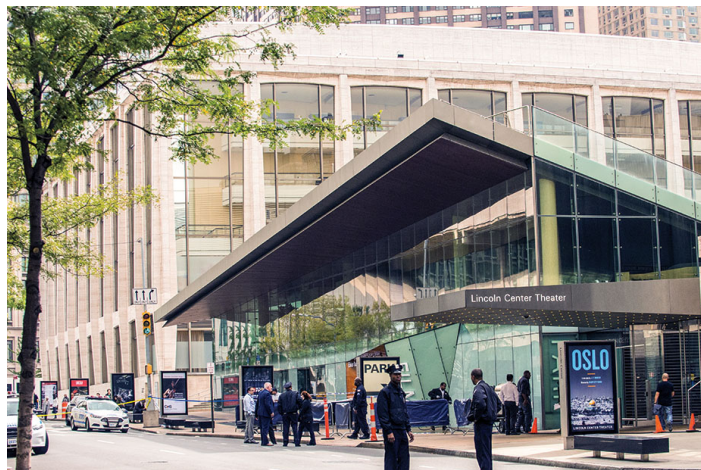
This was real. The man sat with his feet dangling over the edge. At Lincoln Ristorante, servers prepping lunch service could see his feet. About 10 customers were inside an adjacent restaurant, Indie. Police secured the area, closed the street and cut off access to both eateries. There were more pleas, and someone shouted, "Don't do it!"

At 10:54 a.m., he did it. The man planted his palms at the sides of his legs. "He just pushed himself off using his hands. And that was it," says a restaurant staffer, describing how one might propel himself off the edge of a swimming pool. "You could hear people gasping and screaming. I was watching, hoping he would get up. He didn't."

NYPD officers rushed to his side. Indie employees ushered patrons out the back. The man, still alive, was taken by ambulance to New York Presbyterian Weill Cornell Medical Center, where he died shortly thereafter.

The man's identity was not yet part of the tragic story. Outlets such as Gothamist, DNA Info and the *New York Post* shared

news of a Lincoln Center jumper without identifying him, as bystanders filled the online comments sections. "I saw the man jump, fall and hit the concrete," wrote one. "It was awful."



Marcus Santos/NY Daily News/Getty Images

Slonim jumped from Lincoln Center's Illumination Lawn, shown from the ground on 65th Street, with Lincoln Ristorante wedged beneath the sloping public space.

The man on the ledge was Jeffrey Slonim, 56, a veteran of New York's events scene for three decades. The married father of two boys was a lively writer who changed the nature of red carpet journalism — a fixture at the Oscars and Golden Globes and adored by top publicists and stars like Julianne Moore, Sarah Jessica Parker, Gwyneth Paltrow and Lena Dunham. Editors loved him, too. He penned the "Private Eye" column in *Allure* for 25 years, an eternity in publishing.

Slonim embodied a certain nexus of New York, one that straddles media, Hollywood, society and money. His byline peppered publications that drive the conversation in the city, including the *Post*. Slonim even had the storybook New York life, courtesy of a house in East Hampton, a well-known artist brother, Hunt Slonem (he spells his last name differently) and invitations to just about every event that mattered, which he used to develop enviable relationships with the town's top names.

To many in media who were close to him, Slonim's death marked the end of an era for a certain type of New York figure and a certain type of old-school reporter (along with

the old-school media outlets that supported them). "Unless you're covering a big event and there's someone there who is major who will give you a quote, established journalists don't do red carpets anymore," says one top New York newspaper editor. "It's a world filled with 22-year-old freelancers. Seeing a 55-year-old man there ... he comes from a world that just doesn't exist anymore."

Two New Yorks: Where Malia Obama and Melania Trump Dine, Shop, Hang Out

[Read More](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

That's one reason why Slonim's death continues to be felt by the city's players six months later: His absence, and the tragic (and very public) circumstances of his death, represent something larger.

"For all of us, this was a complete shock," says Moore, a longtime friend (and former girlfriend), speaking for the first time since Slonim's death. "Everyone feels a great sense of loss, and we still have a lot of grief about it." Adds publicist Cindi Berger, as she chokes up and fights back tears: "There's not a red carpet that I walk now with a client when I don't notice the void. I can only hope that the young reporters who had the opportunity to be on a carpet with him were able to learn from his thoughtful questions."

Born in Kittery, Maine, Slonim was the youngest of four children after brother Hunt and sisters Dr. Anne Slonim Rafal, a psychotherapist, and Amy Slonim, a PhD-holding senior officer for Public Health Philanthropy. Their father was a nuclear engineer in the Navy, a job that kept the family on the move — Jeffrey lived in New Hampshire, Hawaii, Virginia and Washington while he was in grade school. Some itinerant kids have trouble fitting in, but Slonim had no trouble standing out.

He became the type of teenager everyone wants to be around — including future Oscar winners Moore and producer Bruce Cohen (*American Beauty*), his classmates at J.E.B. Stuart High School in Falls Church, Virginia, where the family settled. Slonim and Moore dated for a spell and attended a homecoming dance together. "He was popular and much cooler than me," she says with a laugh. "I was very nervous and not much of a conversationalist at that point, so it wasn't exactly a torrid romance. That's probably why he broke up with me."

She pauses. "Everybody thought Jeff was so handsome," adds Moore. "He had those doe eyes. I mean, he was just gorgeous."



Patrick McMullan/Getty Images

Flanked by Brooke Shields (left) and Fiona in 2008.

Smart, too. "He had a vision for himself," Anne explained of her brother, who applied to Ivy League schools and got accepted at Yale, where he rowed crew and served as an editor on the *Yale Literary Magazine*. "He wasn't a nerd. I always thought he would be a lawyer because he was argumentative and would test things from all angles." Slonim first tested his technical writing skills after graduating from Yale in 1982, accepting a job working for IBM in Boca Raton, Florida. He loved adventure (and became conversant in French, Italian, Spanish and Swedish after trips abroad) and found a way to make the corporate 9-to-5 game work for him. "The only way he survived was playing the piano in a hotel bar, and he said his fans often requested that he play 'New York, New York,' " recalls Anne.

Just 18 months later, he moved to New York, where a relative made an introduction for a job at the Andy Warhol-led *Interview*. He was hired in 1984 as the magazine's contributing editor and society editor. "He really enjoyed the art of writing and had this incredible memory and attention to detail," says Amy.

In 1990, he made the move to Conde Nast title *Allure*, one of the first hires of founding editor-in-chief Linda Wells, who later would say he was the hardest-working reporter in town and a visionary who redefined red carpet reporting. Slonim

became infamous for turning innocuous queries like, "What did you leave in the limo?" and "Who sees you naked?" into memorable moments for both celebrities and readers.

Berger, co-chairman and CEO of PMK•BNC, loved his manners. "He was a gentleman," she says. "Robert Redford does not do a lot of interviews because he's not thrilled with sound bites, but when I brought Bob over to Jeffrey, I always told him that this is a moment he would enjoy."

The hard work paid off. "He made a lot of money [at *Allure*]," recalls pal Bennett Marcus, a onetime *Vanity Fair* contributor. "We used to joke that he was the only one who had this great job, and Jeffrey would say, 'I made '80s money,' " referencing the glory days of the magazine business.

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar: How the 'Real Housewives' Reveal Race, Culture and Wealth Issues in L.A. and N.Y.

[Read More](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

Slonim's personal life fell into place, too. During the early 1990s, while on a vacation in Greece, he met Ireland-born Fiona, who also was on holiday with friends. She happened to be reading a copy of *The Warhol Diaries*, which contained a compliment about the young writer: "He has perfect teeth, a beautiful toothpaste smile."

The romance turned into a lasting marriage sealed in June 1995. (Fiona, a onetime nanny who now works as a school administrator in the city, declined to be interviewed.) "She was his life mate," says Amy.

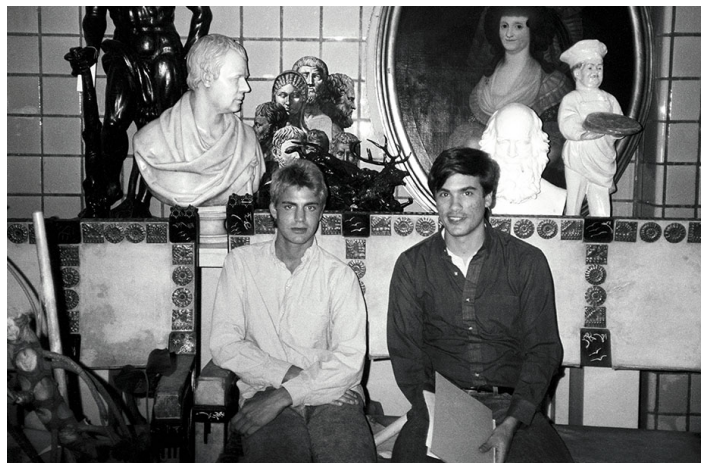
They built a life, shared an apartment on Lexington Avenue (across the street from Madonna), bought a house in East Hampton and had two adorable boys, Finbarr and Declan. "A very New York life" is how friend and veteran publicist R. Couri Hay describes what they had. Slonim loved thrifting and antiques, was obsessed with fixing up a Jeep Wagoneer, played a mean piano, and owned '80s artwork from legends like Keith Haring. He adored his sons and would get involved in class projects and assignments.

But health woes loomed. During the late '90s, Slonim was diagnosed with a rare blood cancer known as polycythemia vera, often called PV. "It took a long time to figure out what it was," recalls Anne. "He went through a depression [after the diagnosis] but minimized it as much as possible.

According to PV expert Ruben Mesa, deputy director of the Mayo Clinic Cancer Center, many patients deal with fatigue, insomnia, difficulties with physical intimacy, mood disorders and depression. "We see patients who live a normal life expectancy, but others can progress and pass away from the disease," notes Mesa. "It can go either way."

Slonim seemed to be managing pretty well, say friends and family, though many colleagues didn't know he had PV. "He worked through everything," says Hunt. Then, last summer, he stopped taking interferon — a drug used to treat PV that can trigger depression months after treatment — because it had apparently stopped working for him.

The timing wasn't great. Late in 2015, Wells was let go at *Allure*. A few weeks later, more than a dozen Wells loyalists got their walking papers, Slonim among them. "There's no question that Jeffrey was deeply affected when Linda Wells was fired at *Allure*," says Hay. Adds Amy, "That was pretty jarring — as it would be jarring for anyone who had devoted as much energy and time to something and then to have it change. Change is hard."



Patrick McMullan/Getty Images

Slonim (right) and Sam Bolton at the Andy Warhol Factory in 1986.

And, he loved his job. "He had a great eye for people on the way up. He was so well liked by everybody in that vicious world," recalls brother Hunt. "Cindy Adams once said to me, 'The difference between your brother and me is that he loves what he does and I don't.'"

ADVERTISEMENT



Scott Rudd/Patrick McMullan/Getty Images

Slonim with wife Fiona and their sons, Finbarr (left) and Declan, in 2006.

He wasn't alone. In a constantly consolidating industry, previously well-paid writers and editors have been forced to scramble in a competitive social media-obsessed media landscape where young (and affordable) talent is in higher demand. The red carpet isn't always kind to people as they age, on either side of the stanchion.

Still, Slonim wasn't ready to give up the red carpet, so he joined the freelance game full-on. He landed the "Scene & Heard" column in *Gotham*, wrote for sister publication *Hamptons* and did regular work for *People*, *Town & Country*, *Architectural Digest*, *New York Post* and *Daily News*. But he couldn't come close to matching what he had earned at *Allure*. For event coverage these days, typical fees range from \$100 to \$250 per night, and some outlets pay only if an item gets published. Notes Marcus, "When you have two kids to feed and a house in the Hamptons, it's certainly not that much money."

Such struggles are tougher for those with PV. That summer, people began to notice a change in Slonim's typically professional demeanor. He became scattered, especially during a regular gig for the *Post* in the fall. "So zonked after my first week filling in at Page Six, I got on a train to East Hampton tonight, and woke up in Montauk," he posted Sept. 3 on Facebook.



Patrick McMullan/Getty Images

Says Moore, with Slonim in 2007, of her longtime friend: "He believed in the glamour of the event but also the humanity."

Hunt noticed that his brother wasn't the same. "He was a little lost ... and getting quieter," he says. "I had offered him an office in my studio. He kept going, but where he was headed was not so clear sometimes."

Friends say he floated ideas for a late-career transition. He talked about moving to Los Angeles (where there is more red carpet work), and his sister Anne thought he might take a stab at writing a novel. Marcus says Slonim was pragmatic and considered more stable careers. "He once suggested that maybe it was time to 'get a regular job and work for a bank,'" he recalls.

He soldiered on, tweeting that he was proud of a Sept. 29 piece he wrote for *People* about how friends came to Rosie O'Donnell's defense following an attack by Donald Trump. "This was one of the most meaningful nights of reporting I've done," he boasted. A day later, he posted a Q&A that he had done for *Town & Country*, interviewing the granddaughter of Gerald and Sara Murphy, the inspirations behind F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*. "How many times to [sic] we

get to write about a dream subject like this in our careers," he beamed.



Patrick McMullan/Getty Images

With Donatella Versace in 2006 at a book party for Wells, his boss at the time.

Slonim kept fighting — against his disease and a career in flux. "It was a perfect storm," notes Anne.

The worst was still to come. Six days before he found himself on Illumination Lawn, Slonim called Anne to say he was having suicidal thoughts. As a mental health professional, she offered resources and help in getting appointments with local professionals, but her brother resisted. "He didn't want treatment for depression. That's not uncommon," she explains. "He was trying to put a brave face on it even though he was up and down."

On Friday night, he went to *Julieta*, then spent the weekend with Fiona in East Hampton. She later told *The New York Times* that the weekend was "a lovely time" and her husband said he felt better. Back in the city on Monday, he saw a doctor at New York-Presbyterian, and after revealing his dark thoughts, Slonim was held under observation until Tuesday. Suggestions were made that he go on antidepressants and see a therapist. They set an appointment for later that week. Still, he disliked being in the hospital. "He was locked up for observation, but he hated it and wanted to get out. He saw atrocious things [in there]," says Hunt. "He couldn't bear it,

even though he was in really, really bad shape. I was surprised they let him out."



Dimitrios Kambouris/Getty Images

A relaxed moment with Fergie at a black-tie amfAR gala in 2014.

On Wednesday, things were looking up. Slonim went for a jog with Fiona, his family confirms, and later posted a link on Facebook promoting what would be his last "Scene & Heard" for *Gotham*. He exchanged emails with a publicist who set up an interview with actor Tituss Burgess which was included in the column. "Hope you like," he wrote. He also made plans to update his résumé with help from Marcus and pal Alexander Ewing, who agreed to send back notes. Another friend, journalist Carson Griffith, had lunch in the books with Slonim the following week.

None of that happened.

In the six months since Slonim's death, a few family members have entered therapy, and others worry about how to keep the tragic news from his mother, Louise, who lives with dementia. Hunt has turned to his art, painting portraits of his brother as a way to cope. Also helping: work with a medium, who he says has connected him to Jeffrey. "We're very much in touch. I know he's doing really well on the other side."