



MYSTERIOUSDEATHS.COM Elizabeth Rutherford-Johnson

The funerals started as a joke. Maybe the joke was in bad taste or maybe it was only Julian and me who found it funny. Whatever.

Julian came up with his big idea three years ago. He and I were sitting in a pub getting drunk; I had just come from an audition that had not gone well. To be strictly accurate it had gone belly and tits up right from the off. I fluffed a line and lost my place, the accompanist couldn't or wouldn't read the score and then right at the end the director asked: 'so how old are you exactly, ah, Anna?'

Julian was sitting across from me, comfortably taking up most of the space in the alcove. Julian is a big man, and by big I mean fat. We met at LAMDA more years ago than I like to say. He had something about him even then: he could bring energy to a stage just by being on it. Every good play should have a Julian. He is the puppeteer, the trickster, the alchemist — the fat man who makes things go with a bang.

He is also my best friend and so was good enough to listen to me spit invectives at ageist directors for ten minutes, before sharing his plan.

‘I am considering,’ he said grandly, ‘going into trade.’

I spluttered on my gin and tonic.

‘No really!’ he said, his soft lips pouting, ‘I want to make money, Anna — lots of money. I’m bored of being poor all the time — aren’t you? It was alright when we were younger, but now it’s beginning to get tedious.’

‘How are you going to get rich, Julian — just by wishing it? I hear a lot of people have had the same idea.’

‘I’m glad that you asked me,’ he said, smiling evilly.

Julian’s theory was that in order to make money one must tap into mankind’s baser instincts, so to that end we went through the canon.

Sloth, greed and gluttony were early fallers, on the grounds that the market was already saturated. Envy was an also ran after Julian pointed out that there was an entire industry devoted to provoking said sin, based on the small lives and larger vulgarities of so-called slebs.

Wrath led to a round’s worth of speculation — but despite some outré suggestions we failed to come up with anything more profitable than paint-balling or professional mercenary: both of which we felt to be beyond our scope.

‘So that leaves us with pride and vanity,’ Julian mused. ‘I’ve always had a soft spot for pride. And I find that my innate intellectual arrogance is very poorly catered for in today’s society.’

‘Dunno what there is to be proud about,’ I said, a wash of self pity

sloshing with the gin, ‘You know, if I died tomorrow, well, that’d be it, wouldn’t it? What would they say at my funeral — what will I have achieved? Zilch. Zip. Nada. God, I hope I die interestingly — at least that’ll give people something to talk about.’

‘That’s the spirit,’ Julian said. ‘Something spectacular — possibly involving a circus animal.’

‘And a missing inheritance,’ I said, more cheerfully.

‘And a secret lover.’

‘A man with piercing black eyes who leaves a single rose on the grave.’

‘And who carries himself with a military bearing — is that a gun beneath his coat? He should probably have a beard.’

‘And a Russian accent.’

‘And be accompanied by a beautiful woman with tragic eyes.’

And that was when it happened. Julian looked at me across the table, his eyes wide: ‘That’s it!’

Of course I didn’t have the foggiest what he was going on about.

‘Don’t you see?’ He flapped his hands in excitement. ‘Vanity! The most dependable human emotion of all. Who doesn’t worry about the legacy they’re leaving behind, especially if they don’t feel it’s enough? We’d call it Mysterious Deaths: for people who fear ending their lives prosaically. We will guarantee a legacy of intrigue and ensure that they’re remembered. It’s never too late to be extraordinary.’

It should have ended there. It would have ended there but Julian is not one to let go of an idea easily. This was made clear to me a month later when I answered an emergency summons to find myself in a borrowed office in Holborn with a dying man.

Julian and I watched as Joseph Stevens painfully sucked up a

breath, which exploded into a series of small coughs nearly lifting his body out of the chair. There was a pause, then another agonizing indrawn breath. We waited, but this one stayed down. He accepted a glass of water with a nod of gratitude and, gently tilting it, allowed the liquid to touch his lips.

‘Is there anything we can do to make you more comfortable, Mr Stevens?’ Julian asked.

The old man waved away the offer. His fingers curled painfully with arthritis. ‘Nothing... you can do... thank you. Get down to... business.’

‘Of course,’ Julian said. ‘Perhaps you could tell us which of our services you would be interested in purchasing.’

‘I’m dying... not long now... months the doctors say. I want to have everything ready... for my wife and the kids. I want them to have something to be proud of, something real to remember me by. And it’s not as if it’s a lie — I just want to make it... more true for them.’

‘Well that is exactly the service we at Mysterious Deaths strive to provide. Perhaps you could share with us the particulars of your request?’

‘The Lancaster Memorial Prize, from the Royal Bryophyte Society.’ His watery eyes gleamed. ‘For mosses you see. I’ve spent the best part of my life on mosses — a hobby, no money in it. But I’ve discovered two new species and come up with a whole new classification system. That’s an achievement that is. I should have got it last year... they say I’ve been overlooked.’

‘And you would like us to ensure that this prize is awarded... posthumously?’

‘Elaine would be made up. It would be a comfort to her... do you

see?’

‘Of course: and I’m delighted to say that a project such as this is well within our area of expertise.’

Mr Stevens nodded, the breath rattling in his throat.

‘How much?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘How much do you charge for something like this?’

For a moment, Julian corpsed. I can’t say whether it was the instinct to help a fellow performer stranded wordless on the stage but without consciously deciding to I was on my feet and talking fast.

‘Of course there are many factors to consider, the number of our operatives who will have to attend, the manufacturing costs of the award, plus of course we have a flat fee for all our services.’ I dried: think of a number, any number.

‘Seven thousand pounds.’ Damn. Too much, way too much, he’d laugh in our faces. ‘Plus VAT of course,’ I added, as if that made it better.

‘That’s a lot of money.’

‘We offer a unique service.’

‘I’ll have to think about it.’

‘Of course,’ Julian said, recovering, ‘we quite understand. Something as weighty as the legacy that you leave your loved ones cannot be rushed.’

Mr Stevens insisted on shaking us each by the hand. His hand felt strangely hot and light in mine. We stood and waited as he hobbled out of the room. Julian closed the door behind him.

‘Darling, you were wonderful!’

‘Oh. Dear. God.’

‘Honestly the way you just stepped in there...’

‘Yeah but seven grand. I thought he was going to keel over.’

‘People like things to be expensive. It’s how they know they’re worth having.’

We shared a moment of thoughtful silence.

‘He didn’t say no,’ Julian said. ‘He said he’d have to think about it.’

Another beat as we contemplated Mr Stevens paying us seven thousand pounds.

‘Where did you dig him up anyway?’ I asked.

‘Well after our little conversation I got to thinking...’

‘Julian, that conversation was a joke.’

‘Mr Stevens didn’t think so. I put together a little website — it’s actually very easy you know — and it got quite a few enquiries. Mr Stevens was the most promising. Seven grand, Anna, seven big ones. Think about it!’

And I was, I really was. I hadn’t landed a decent part in ages. The odd week’s temping ‘just to tide me over’ was turning into a full-time career. Starting over as an office junior at 37 was definitely not the plan.

‘Is it... legal?’

‘Absolutely. We offer a service to be delivered after the client is dead. We do nothing to hasten that death nor will we profit from it as we’ll ask for payment up front. Some people arrange their own funerals before they die — this is the same thing.’

‘I don’t know. We’d be lying to all those people.’

‘Would we?’ Julian’s eyes were large and soulful. ‘You heard him, Anna. He should have won this prize, but he’ll be dead before that

happens. All we'd be doing is making an old man very happy. Think of his family: his poor wife will have been widowed, she'll be devastated. And just as she's at her lowest ebb, her pitch of grief, we arrive. We tell her that not only was her husband a beloved spouse and father, he was a great man who had finally received the recognition he deserved. All we are doing is allowing this man, this wonderful, brave man, the chance to offer a last morsel of comfort to his poor wife.' His voice dripped sincerity. 'How can that possibly be wrong?'

Joseph Stevens died in June. And on a warm summer's day, Julian and I went to his funeral.

The wake was held at the function room of The Crown in Godalming. Mrs Stevens looked bent and worn out. Every now and then she blotted her eyes with a handkerchief. She was flanked by another woman her own age and a brisk, practical-looking blonde who was giving us curious glances.

'Julian, we've been rumbled,' I murmured, and took another slug of sherry.

Julian allowed his gaze to stray over my shoulder. 'Ah yes — showtime!'

I downed the last of the sherry and turned towards our advancing audience.

'Can I help you at all?' the blonde asked.

'My dear, I wonder if you could point me in the direction of Mrs Stevens.'

'And you are?'

'My name is Cornelius Swift and I am Professor Emeritus of the Royal Bryophyte Society. This is my colleague Angelica Foresight.'

'Pleased to meet you,' she said, visibly bewildered. 'Mum's over

there: is this to do with dad's mosses?'

That was my cue. 'Your late father was a greatly respected man at the Society. We have come to pay our respects, and also to convey a small token in recognition of his groundbreaking work in the study of bryophytes.' Delicately I tipped open the box containing the fake award.

'Oh,' she said, with a catch in her voice. 'We used to tease him about his mosses — thought they were just, well, you know, a hobby. This would have meant the world to him it really would — you have no idea. Come over here, you must tell mum.' She was crying now, tears sliding over her make-up as if this unexpected crumb of pride had tipped some balance inside her.

We were in business.

To begin with work was sporadic but lucrative. After we'd done a few funerals, well you couldn't say that word got around, but somehow someone always seemed to know someone who knew someone. And once we got on the hospice circuit, we knew we'd arrived.

Julian was right — vanity will get them every time.

Our clients wanted posthumous prizes — Mr Stevens set a real trend there. They wanted sympathetic strangers to tell their families what wonderful, brave, generous creatures they had been — that was usually Julian. They wanted mysterious women to turn up alone and leave without a word — me, wearing a short black Chanel dress and Christian Louboutin high heels.

They wanted people to notice them one last time. I can see the attraction. Just when everyone's written you off and thinks they know everything there was to know, Julian and I would arrive and leave questions in our path. We got them talking, made them wonder.

Someone once said that you're not dead as long as people still remember you. We made sure that our clients were remembered for that little bit longer.

People would come to the office and Julian and I would interview them together. We had a rule: nothing illegal, nothing pervy and nothing vicious — not too vicious anyway. Our clients were entrusting us with their dreams, we were their last request: it was quite a responsibility.

And it wasn't just about the vanity. Some of the people who walked through our door were breathtakingly selfless. They just wanted to leave everything in order. We were there to tidy up their loose ends for them, to say the last goodbyes that they weren't able to.

Our clients were all dying.

No, that's not quite right. Every one of us is dying, one day at a time. What made our clients special was that they knew it.

Of course, a lot of them were ill; they could measure their remaining span in doctors' prognoses. But there was another group, the ones who were perfectly fit and healthy but had, for whatever reason, been made to look death square in the eye.

Some people would say that's weird or horrible or morbid. Me, I think it's a privilege.

Of course, I see now that the online forms were a mistake.

Back then it seemed simple. 'Move with the times,' Julian said, 'streamline the process.' We'd had the website right from the off, so why not let people order online too? We could even offer a discount.

The online forms were popular, there's no denying that, but it lost us the personal element. We no longer met our clients, all we had to go on was a computer print-out.

‘So what do we know about Charlie Cooper?’ I asked, getting into the car.

Julian handed me a file, his attention on the traffic.

I scanned the form. Charlie Cooper, 69, bowel cancer — poor sod. ‘Some lovely young creature to mourn me,’ he had written. ‘Is that very wicked? I’ve had a past — I’ve lived. I just want some little reminder of that, some gorgeous young thing to lend a bit of glamour to the occasion. I live alone with my sister. Nettie thinks she knows all there is to know about me but I’ve lived. Remember that.’

The church in Lindfield was a stocky Victorian deal, surrounded by glossy, dark yews. The funeral had not started by the time we arrived; the coffin was waiting at the back of the church. Mourners gathered in huddles of sombre colour. Perfect.

‘Break a leg,’ Julian muttered as he went to the park the car.

I walked into the church, paused at the entrance, and then made my way down the aisle, heels clicking against the stone flags. You wanted glamour, Charlie, I thought. I could feel the eyes of other people following me. This one’s for you.

I reached the coffin and placed a single red rose — standard prop for mysterious mourner — on the polished oak of the coffin. Good for you, Charlie.

I put one hand on the wood and bowed my head.

‘Who do you think you are?’

I opened my eyes and looked up. Standing beside me was a woman in her sixties, her mouth creased into a bitter line.

Tricky. I didn’t know exactly who Charlie had intended me to be.

‘I’m an old friend,’ I murmured; that covers most things.

From the corner of my eye I saw Julian at the entrance to the

church, scenting trouble.

‘I was Charlie’s sister,’ she said, her dark eyes narrow with suspicion. ‘What sort of friend?’

‘Charlie and I were... close.’ I hazarded.

‘Close,’ she rolled the word around her mouth, ‘as in intimate?’

I nodded demurely.

‘You’re disgusting!’ she hissed.

This was getting out of control.

‘Madam, I think there has been some misunderstanding,’ Julian said, unctuous as you like.

‘You’ve got a damn nerve is all I can say,’ she said, her face twisted with anger. And then she walloped him one, right on the face.

Gasps; the organist broke off mid-pedal. Julian reeled, blood pouring from his nose. She squared up to me, gathering herself for another go. So I walloped her back.

I know, I know, undignified, unprofessional, but what do you expect? And how the bloody hell were we supposed to know that Charlie Cooper was a woman?

Of course we explained all this to the police. There were no charges, though I could tell that snippy DI was looking for something to throw at us. As it is I’d lay money it was him who gave the papers the nod.

‘No such thing as bad publicity,’ Julian said, but I knew that we were done for. The sister sold her story to the tabloids — called us jackals, opportunists, taking advantage of a dying woman.

And that was that; we’d crossed a line. Mysteriousdeaths.com was closed for business. We stopped taking on new clients, not that they were queuing up, and a lot of people who’d already paid up

started asking for their money back.

Maybe it was for the best. We both got a few good roles out of it, playing on the notoriety: older femme fatales for me, and lots of villains for Julian.

We do life motivation classes these days. It's quite a gimmick actually — live life before you die, that sort of thing. Julian says we're simply approaching things from the other side.

We're both pretty well off — we have what we wanted.

And yet.

Not everyone wanted their money back. We still have a list of people to whom we made a promise. So perhaps once or twice a year, Julian and I attend the funeral of a stranger.

Ashes to ashes.

We keep a low profile of course, no sense asking for trouble. But we go and, very discreetly, we carry out our client's wishes. In death, we help them be who they always wanted to be.

They are at peace.

And so — ministers to the dead, to vain dreams and to famous last words — are we.

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