

THE DEAD FAMOUS

By
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The Dead Famous
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All events described within this book, even where they seem to be based on real events and people, are made up and not intended to represent anybody either living or dead. Where real names and events have been mentioned, accuracy concerning the events surrounding them has been sought to avoid offence.

Adult Reading Material

This book is the product of the encouragement and support of the following: The Moger family, various staff at the places I have worked over the past six years, the Helsinki Writers' group,

random friends and girlfriends who would probably prefer to remain nameless.

Dedication

To all those who do, did, and will put up with me; your patience is and always was appreciated.

THE DEAD FAMOUS

Chapter 1

“It’s Friday, it’s five to five and it’s Crackerjack!”

I suppose I knew, from the very first camera I held, that my calling in life had been found. Although my path to photographic success was sometimes blocked by idiots intent on my downfall, I managed to strive through with my sanity thankfully intact and my goals largely achieved. Which is more than I can say for the idiots.

Destiny deemed my future to be in journalism, specialising in the reported stories of actors and film-folk in general. Their world appeared to be solely of glamour and riches. Unlike those great people, however, I was not born into a rich family myself.

Our name of Montague was a moniker that had become associated with adventure and great landowners over the years due to the efforts of the more dramatic offshoots of the family. The Montagues had fought battles alongside Kings, ventured overseas to cross great lands in the name of trade and empire. Geoffrey Montague, my father, had descended twelve generations ago from Robert Montague. While the rest of his brothers were sturdy warrior types, Robert had been a weak and ineffectual addition to the family who had not entered the clergy as so many of the younger siblings did in those times. Not being deemed fit to join the exploits abroad with his brothers, he decided to put all of his inherited money into a type of seed drill which did nothing to move the agricultural development of England forwards and simply failed tremendously along with Robert’s heart just six months later, leaving behind an only son to continue his line.

Yes, the name brought with it none of the expected associations, and centuries passed so that we were as detached from the line as you can imagine, and it therefore meant little to me other than when signing cheques or knowing if letters had been delivered to the correct desk when working. The impression is given from the result of this unfortunate history that we were perhaps poor, which is not particularly the truth. My family lived comfortably enough and wanted for very little. Our home was a large terraced house in a leafy suburb of North London, our neighbours

house to one side had been burned out in a mystery fire and the owners had never been successfully traced so it stood and remained a sorry looking scorched husk, unsold and unloved. The house to the other side was owned by a local businessman who had made good with his life and moved to sunnier climes, apparently in such haste that he had quite forgotten to sell or even board up his property and so that also was left abandoned. Thankfully it never caught the eyes of opportunistic squatters and after a while even the postman stopped making deliveries there, so we appreciated the relative peace this lack of neighbours brought us.

I wanted for nothing as a child. My mother, Katherine, was doting and my father supportive. I can't say if being an only child affected the way that they treated me, nor if there would have been more or even less love had been more children in the family, as I had no way of comparing my situation I had no point of reference and therefore never missed any alternative life. You can't miss what you don't know.

Life passed me by uneventfully, there are no Tom Brown style stories from my time at school, there were no eccentric aunts constantly visiting us and there were no local children for me to go off on wild boyhood adventures with. I enjoyed playing with my Cowboys and Indian toys as I watched the television serials and, every month or so as a treat, my parents would take me to the local Odeon cinema to watch a film, a time I always looked forward to and later treasured. The films were always full of glamour and, when filmed in Technicolor, revealed the world they moved in all the more to me. It was as far from our north London home as you could get.

Nothing really happened until perhaps my seventh year when my Mother, who had enjoyed apparently good health until then, became suddenly ill and died, all within a matter of a few weeks.

A problem exists when you're young, it seems that there are so many things to learn around and about you of a physical nature, that you tend to have the more emotional or intangible parts of life just pass you by. It's possible to arrive at a workplace when in your adult life, and notice that a colleague is having what is often described as a bad day, or that your lover or partner is "under the weather", but this does not apply to children, they only know that they are being ignored and so are unintentionally selfish. So, even though I state that my Mother had died within a matter of weeks, what I should say is that within these few weeks I felt my life disrupted and my Mother was present in my life a lot less.

My Father would often be running around with bags packed for overnight hospital stays and our previously quiet household now became thrown into a comparative chaos. I did not know why, or how it had happened. There was no time for explanation and, in the days after her death, very few words came from my father who quietly dressed me and sent me off to school, or simply disappeared to cry behind closed doors while I tried my best to continue playing in the hallway outside.

As time passed by, I spent more and more time alone with the television and all the stars on it's warm, glowing screen as my babysitter while my father made all the necessary arrangements for the funeral.

A week went by and what I could only view as chaos once again entered our home. My Mother's family had been Irish Catholic and insisted on all the traditions of a funeral as they saw it. Our sitting room was turned into an exhibition area for my Mother and her coffin, the family milling around pretending to pay what they thought were respects as my father rushed from person to person filling glasses while they commented on our house although they had never, as far as I could recall, visited before.

At one point my father lifted me up to see my Mother lying in state, naturally quite still and

wearing clothes I hadn't seen her wear before. The thought occurred to me that they'd perhaps switched her with a doppelganger and that my Mother was elsewhere avoiding the raucous cacophony of this rabble. Oh, how I envied her.

The coffin itself was just like in the cowboy adventure serials I had been watching, with half the lid laid closed and the other half open to display her to the room, appearing to me just like the saloon bar doors I'd seen, it all seemed so bizarre.

As my Father lifted me down to the floor again, an apparently drunk uncle interrupted the moment. We'd never had alcohol in the house as both my parents were teetotal, but our extended family always liked a drink (or so I'd heard) and so my Father had felt inclined to make them welcome by obtaining a stock of various liquors, beers and wines for the leering herd, something he now found himself beginning to regret.

The Uncle, with one hand on the coffin for support, drunkenly slurred a few poorly chosen words of pity and condolences into my Father's ear, but as he did so he lost his balance completely, falling to the floor and dragging the coffin with it. My Mother's corpse fell to the ground. Whatever had been blocking up her nose for appearance's sake suddenly popped out like champagne corks, followed by a slow glut of thick, black liquid, oozing onto our until recently very clean carpet.

My Mother had been a calm and graceful lady in life, and as people gathered her corpse back into the coffin, I knew that not only was this not my Mother, but also that respect or fear of death existed neither here in the house nor in the minds or eyes of the onlookers to this ghastly affair. As people may find understandable, the death of my Mother hit my father quite terribly and, although he had never been the most energetic of people in my eyes, he never seemed to recapture what little vibrancy his character had previously enjoyed after the events previously described. Life drifted into a monotony of making sure I was ready for school, fed when necessary, and then ready for bed at night. Weekends passed with little excitement, mainly concentrating around household chores or the necessities of everyday existence such as fetching groceries or cleaning certain stubborn stains out of carpets.

The death of his own mother not more than two years later strangely seemed to return him back to a more alert existence, with him apparently enjoying life that little more. Part of this newfound energy was directed towards myself and the few interests I had; noting my fascination with the television set, he obtained tickets for us to view a filming of the then well known BBC children's entertainment show Crackerjack.

The programme, presented at that time by one Eamonn Andrews (a friendly appearing gentleman, well suited as all television presenters were, and with an endearing Dublin accent) involved pitting a number of school children, fully uniformed, against each other in a series of increasingly inane challenges mixed alongside what were considered to be questions of general knowledge. At the end of the programme the lucky contestants had the chance to return back to school with a much-coveted Crackerjack pencil. I heard many years later that there was a minor black market among TV staff in the trade of these pencils and so, to stifle this market, the pencils were placed under strict lock and key, only to be given to those deemed worthy on the show itself and to absolutely nobody else, not even the presenter.

Yes, the whole show was, with hindsight, lowbrow, patronising and pointless. I never missed an episode and I really wanted that pencil.

Before we left for the broadcast, while busying myself with getting dressed when my father called me downstairs to see something he'd picked up that day. With a smile on his face that I'd not seen for a long time, he handed me a box. On opening it, I found inside a shiny new camera.

It had been a good amount of time since I'd received any sort of present, never mind one to this level. Absolutely overjoyed I pawed over it with eager hands as my father explained as best he could how it worked, although I was far too absorbed with the moment to take in his advice. I insisted on taking it to the BBC studios with us in my school satchel and once inside we were treated to what I thought was an amazing spectacle of entertainment. Not only could one experience the cheering audience, the cameras at work, the lights, experience the songs, but best of all, I could see the presenter Eamonn Andrews himself in the flesh. At last, the line I had perceived between myself and the reality of these people had gone. They weren't just flickering images on a muffled television, they were breathing and living, and it was all there for me. I knew it was something I had to somehow be part of and surround myself with, although I couldn't at that time possibly perceive how or under what circumstances that might occur, as later developing years would reveal to me.

Once filming had completed and we were politely yet forcefully asked to leave the studio, I overheard a family discussing the whereabouts of the stage exit and their plans to seemingly ambush Mr. Andrews for an autograph on his exiting the studio complex. I tugged at my father's jacket and begged for him to let me wait as well and, camera in hand, we found our way towards the stage door and waited patiently with one or two other families for it to open. After around an hour had passed and my father checking his watch with increasing impatience, he finally suggested to me that it was most likely that Mr. Andrews had either left via another exit or we had simply missed him, whatever had happened it didn't change the fact that we had to catch our bus home before the services stopped.

Downhearted and tired, I took my father's hand and walked with him to the bus stop. Presently, the bus arrived and we took our seats for the journey home. After only perhaps a minute or so of travelling, a very large car appeared to be blocking the road ahead. Its bonnet lay open with a chauffeur tinkering around the steaming engine within. As we stopped to let traffic on the other side of the road pass us by, who should jump on board our bus but Mr. Andrews himself, apparently frustrated at his broken down vehicle and, like us, desperate to get home.

I was fixated in awe at this now all too real character and begged my father to bother him for a photograph. With hindsight I suppose he was tired after performing the show but agreed to my request and even took interest in my camera. He came across as such a pleasant gentleman I quite forgot, and now chose to disregard, any negatively cautious warnings about never meeting one's heroes and now swore to meet as many as possible. I was sure that not only would they be as charming and gracious as Mr. Andrews now appeared to me but also that my hopes had been met and also exceeded.

He descended from the bus before us and I watched as he faded into the distance while the bus sped us home. I spent the rest of that journey gazing at my camera in satisfied bemusement with my father smiling contentedly at a job well done. Days after that eventful evening, I had been so desperate to see my photograph that I had busied myself in successfully filling the rest of the camera film with random shots of the house, the garden, some children playing outside my house in the street, anything to get it finished. My father had by now framed our tickets for Crackerjack and put them on display in the upstairs hall. Only a week later I had received back my new prints and the picture of Mr. Andrews now took pride of place framed upon my bedroom wall.

This was much better than any Crackerjack ticket or even a pencil. I was happy.

Chapter 2

- “13. Mr. Jeremy Cove - Actor
14. Miss Sylvia Moore - Actress.
15. Mr. Leonard Rivingley – Actor”*

A few weeks after the encounter, the novelty of the whole experience had still not faded from my mind and it bore away at my thoughts as if it would work its way right through to the very bottom of my skull. A symptom of this new found obsession was to question my father at every turn about the sort of people who made television programmes, films, radio shows, and so on. I wanted to know what sort of houses they lived in, whether they ate the same food as us, how they were plucked from normal life to be chosen for stardom to start with.

Eventually, perhaps out of frustration or boredom of my seemingly never ending torrent of questions, my father gave me a magazine that had been given away as a supplement in an old newspaper, “Thirty Famous Faces of Stage and Screen!”.

This supplement featured the thirty most famous performers and people working in the film and drama industries of the day with their photographs (not all of them flattering, I might add) and basic details such as their favourite food, music, pastimes, and a brief but informative list of their most recent or famous endeavours in the world of show-business.

Whereas most children of my age, I suppose, whiled away their hours under the sheets reading superhero comics or about the latest football stars and their cars, I was happily studying this glorious new window into the world of the glamorous. I decided that to meet each and every one of these marvellous people and take their photographs just as I had done with Mr. Andrews was to be my new hobby.

After only a day or two of reading, I could recite the most trivial of details regarding each person featured in the magazine word for word. I begged my father to question me on each and every element and, even when he was too tired or distracted to participate in this energetic display of knowledge, I would tell him random details anyway and be extremely offended if he didn't react to the information with the same interest as I had.

The pullout was eventually put to the side (although not out of view) but I would return to it whenever I'd had a bad day at school or had been bullied by the other children, which was often. I found myself marked out as being different because of the death of my mother and chose to read books and film magazines instead of joining the other boys playing football. This, apparently, meant that I was worth less than them and they took every possible opportunity to remind me so. The girls there were not any different; the boys would kick me over in the school corridors to which the girls would cackle with glee like a group of deranged chickens. I tried on a few occasions to convince my father to go to the school and do something about this treatment but he never seemed to have the time, something I would grow to resent him for. With the exception of one girl, who I will discuss later, the experience of having to deal with these people taught me to detest the so-called normal members of the public. As life went on, I found comfort with my own company and never missed conversation or interaction with others. On leaving school I successfully applied for University, my only friend came with me: the supplement was the first thing into the bottom of my kit bag along with my camera, now a little worse for wear. My father hadn't the money to help me attend drama school in my earlier years as I had hoped with a view to joining the world of those I so admired, but he explained and I too realised and understood that my studies would help open a door to the world of journalism. This would be a

steady and respectable career that also carried the prospect of meeting some well-known faces from time to time. I agreed with his logic and threw myself into my studies with gusto. During my studies I worked my way into the university's magazine as entertainments columnist, eventually rising to the heady heights of editor in chief. Three and a half thousand students would now hear my view on the world in glorious red and black smudged print.

Naturally, as people graduated from their courses the contributors to the magazine changed on an almost termly basis, meaning that each role had to be refilled including that of the entertainment's editor. Strangely enough, no people ever came forward that were good enough, in my eyes, for the role. They either didn't have the knowledge or the interest that I personally possessed and therefore expected of them, and so unfortunately it always fell to me to carry out any interviews with local actors, which also came with a few opportunities for photographs. After graduation I was fortunate enough to obtain a position at a small yet reputable newspaper in London as a deputy features editor and, with my first pay packet, I could finally afford to upgrade to a new semi-professional camera.

My daytime position would dictate my schedule but at night I could use my ever growing network of contacts in the film and television industries to gain entry to the vibrant party scene where I would, under the pretence of attending in an official capacity, take photographs of the many attending stars and well known faces to continue and expand my personal collection. I understood from the start that all pleasures should have their limits, and this should be no exception. I decided to keep my collection within a boundary that was tangible and completely set, it seemed that this "Thirty Famous Faces" was the most appropriate line in the sand and so it became my goal: to obtain every picture within it, and then stop.

It had started with Mr. Eamonn Andrews, but by the early years of my career my collection of photographs had grown at a satisfying rate. Even though only a small proportion of those pictures were actually part of my final goal, I found it pleasant enough to add these extra images to the fringe of my collection as I still appreciated their worth for what they were, even if they didn't contribute to the final tally.

One evening, while milling around one of the many celebrity parties I had the good fortune to attend, I caught a glimpse of a tall and robust blonde lady who I recognised immediately. Surrounded by fawning men was no other than Sylvia Moore, star of the silver screen herself and, more importantly, number fourteen in my "Thirty Famous Faces" book. A more golden opportunity one couldn't hope to find and I rushed forwards to introduce myself and request a photograph. Begrudgingly, Miss Moore posed with one hand on her hip and another causally by her side and awaited the familiar click-flash of the camera...but it did not arrive.

Panic flooded over me. Something was dreadfully wrong.

Trying again, the camera still would not co-operate and the realisation hit me, with sweat now dripping down my brow, that I had used the last of the film within and needed to change it immediately. Making my hurried apologies, I ran to the upstairs of the house in search of a bathroom but on opening it found, not a temporary dark room to change a film, but two lovers in apparently occupied and none too pleased for my intrusion.

Running out, I passed door after apparently useless door until my eyes set on a cupboard at the end of the hallway. Dashing into it and with the light of only the crack in the door to guide my activity, I changed the film, slammed the camera closed, and successfully tripped out of the cupboard and fell knee first to the floor.

The pain in my leg was not going to be as much as the pain I'd feel if I failed to get the picture taken. I wrested myself up from the floor and scurried down the stairs to the main party room to

find Ms. Moore but, on scanning the guests there present, could see her nowhere at all. I tried all other rooms in desperation before heading outside in a panic just in time to see her stepping into a waiting taxicab and apparently giving her address to the driver. I ran to the car and banged on the window to let her know that I was ready, that she should return outside of the car if only for a moment but it was not enough. She assured me there would be another time and apologised as the car sped away into the night, leaving me with nothing but the feeling akin to that of being shot in the stomach.

On returning home, I slunk upstairs to my bedroom and sank into my mattress, defeated.

Chapter 3

A letter from the desk of J. Montague, Stanwick University.

Dearest Father,

I have found life at University to be more than satisfactory. I apologise for not having written to you for these past months since starting but hope that you will understand my days have been filled with activities both as part of my studies and extra-curricular.

I find my studies to be of the utmost importance which I trust you will additionally wish to hear as I would also like to thank you for the cheques you have continued to provide for my keep while here. You were quite correct stating on my leaving, that my studies would go by at a simpler pace if I had less to worry about.

The university has a wonderful selection of groups and unions, I have found myself a position on the team running the University magazine and already feel as if it could be a very real option for a career path to follow once I graduate, but let's see what time brings.

I'll be spending the Christmas holidays here in the halls as I can't possibly get away from my studies this semester. Perhaps I might be home for Easter.

Best wishes,
Your son.

Chapter 4

“The funeral will be held at St Mary, Star of the Sea church at around eleven a.m. Mourners are requested to make a charity donation in place of flowers...”

As my years at the newspaper passed by I rose to become the main features editor and settled into my role with ease. I should stop here to explain a little; I don't mean to give an impression that I was perhaps complacent or becoming jaded by the experience, on the contrary it became a pleasant time in which I could create articles on my favourite subjects of glitz and glamour while still getting out and about to photograph the dashing subjects of the pieces themselves. I was offered a number of photographers to work with and it seemed to me the most fascinating coincidence that they too failed to meet the standards of the job so it yet again fell upon me to complete all of the tasks at hand that were deemed necessary to complete the article submissions. It was such a burden that, I feel modest enough to say, I carried with humility and maybe even a little pride. These assignments would for the most part mediocre with little in the way of achieving what was slowly becoming my obsession, to have photographs of all thirty faces in the supplement.

As the years went by the news would bring reports of celebrities moving abroad and, therefore, out of the reach of someone like myself in such a lowly journalistic position. Also, perhaps representing a higher level of frustration for myself, people would be so inconsiderate as to die and move even further out of reach than those who had gone to foreign climes. To reach those in other countries I needed merely to apply for a passport, to gain entry to the afterlife seemed an altogether more complicated procedure and so I dismissed these Faces as "unobtainable" and marked their pages with a red circle that represented only disappointment.

To die is one thing, to die in situations that are not within your sphere of control is quite another. The people who had become red circles all had one thing in common: they had died prematurely, but it had been by their own hand. Of those five people that had so far passed on, one had died in a car crash caused by reckless driving, two by an overdose of prescribed medication, one had choked on his own vomit after winning an academy award and then celebrating it perhaps too much and the last, after complaining that her theatre dressing room was too cold, accidentally set fire to herself when her bathrobe became entangled into the electric fire.

I would usually take great pleasure from reading about people removing themselves from the gene pool so unselfishly, but as this represented a further deprecation of my final goal, I could think of it as them being selfish and extremely inconsiderate.

From time to time, however, requests would come through for me to cover for other journalists who were either ill or otherwise engaged to a level that they couldn't take a story and so, in the absence of work for myself, I would begrudgingly take on the task. It seemed wise for me to do this as we didn't have as many celebrity based stories coming into the paper to satisfactorily fill my column each week and I feared that it might jeopardise my position if I was seen to be somewhat less than busy.

Most of these assignments were of purely local interest but one day I had the good fortune to cover a particular funeral. At first thought the idea less than enamoured itself to me but the family of the deceased felt that the event should have some sort of press coverage. I was not one to argue with this and I frankly did not care one way or another until I saw the name: "Sylvia Moore: Actress, Model, Beloved Mother".

Funerals aren't, in general, events that most people run to, especially if it's their own, but I could not get there fast enough.

I had been informed that I should arrive at the church before the actual service took place. My plan (in line with the family's wishes) was to take some discreet respectable shots of the coffin and then to write an appropriate passage to accompany it in the paper. Nothing too complicated.

It seemed a bizarre request but Miss Moore had been an exhibitionist all her life and this seemed, in my mind, just a logical continuation of that.

The church itself remained peaceful with the priest to conduct the ceremony outside speaking calmly with the mourners. It seemed as if he might be out there long enough for me to take my photos and leave discreetly. I entered the church and, among the cold blandness of the Anglican surroundings, there she was, Miss Sylvia Moore. In a flash I recalled the night at the party, the famous face in the magazine that would never be circled. It would be an eternally sore point in my collection: the one unattained picture.

I paused, pondered, and realised: I could still get it.

While everyone milled around outside; I unscrewed one fastener on the side of the coffin and then stopped. Slowly beginning to sweat I opened the fastener completely, and then another and another until... the coffin was ready to open.

Lifting the lid, the prize was revealed, the one that got away. I found it difficult to hold both my camera and lift her body at the same time so I slid the coffin lid over and propped her up in the coffin so that she settled into a sitting position. Perfection. One photograph and that was another box ticked for one of my "Thirty Famous Faces".

As soon as I the camera had clicked, somewhere a door opened and voices started building. With no time to make things good, I let the body slump down and ran towards a vestry door, leaving the coffin lid to then slip to the floor with a bang behind me.

As I ran through the vestry and then out into the rear of the church I could hear the screams, cries, and the troubled voices of the people left behind me, but it didn't matter. None of it mattered at all because I now had my photograph, after all this time, and now that I knew that it really was possible to complete my list my life took on a new meaning with actual and real importance, dealing with things that I could touch and were precious, not like the petty things that these people in the church were now bothering themselves with. They would never know such happiness or pride in their lives, their lives were nothing without these feelings so were as good as the dead anyway, whereas my life felt entirely reborn and the future seemed just wonderful.

On my returning home, I rushed straight to the bathroom where my darkroom was set up and began the development process. As I moved the paper from tray to tray, the picture began to take form in all its glory. I would have gladly taken a deep inhalation of breath in awe at the sight were it not for the danger of increasing my already failing breath. The years of exposure to the various chemicals had caused no end of problems to my breathing, I would be fine over a short leisurely sprint (out of a church or some such building, for example...) but anything more than a few hundred yards and I would start to wheeze and lose energy. It was a most frustrating side effect of my hobby, but one I was willing to tolerate as the prizes most certainly outweighed any so-called negativities.

After leaving the pictures to drip dry, I took a cup of tea and a moment to relax, pen in hand, and check through the thirty Famous Faces supplement. I happily took an eraser and scrubbed out the penciled crosses that had so painfully marked my failures: opportunities lost because of death or a simple refusal on the subject's part to participate in the photograph. Now, at last, I could start again and finish this once and for all.

It's a remarkable benefit of this information age that almost all details of a person can be found with the greatest of ease. I remember my father telling me at one time, that his parents had rarely seen their brothers or sisters as they had (as many did in those days) moved abroad to what were then the colonies of the British Empire. One or two of them corresponded through letters and,

eventually, aerogrammes, but this soon ended. Whether this was because of the loss of novelty or due to a sheer lack of news to tell, who can say, but stop they did.

When family news did emerge and it became necessary to contact these people, it was rare that they either responded in a timely manner or even that they were still at the same address.

Tracking them down through the various diplomatic or administrative centres proved to be a complete nightmare and eventually contact was lost, and our connection with those family members along with it.

In these advanced times it has been made so much easier by the introduction of the internet and, although it is still in its infancy, it has made my life as a journalist simpler. More importantly, it has also made it easier to find out the most intricate details of the lives of even the most random stranger. Whether people were dead or alive, at home or abroad, as long as they'd left a small trail in their wake, they could be tracked down. I now used this wonderful trail to rejuvenate my hobby.

The moment I had a free evening from work assignments, I began to draw up a plan of action that might best achieve my goal as quickly as possible but with the minimum of error. I understood that certain aspects of my new photograph collecting method might not be understood and therefore perhaps deemed a little unsavoury to some. It was vital that I should minimise contact with the public at large and cover my tracks as well as possible.

In order to know the best approach to each case, I had to know where all of these people now were, irrelevant of whether they were living or not. I already knew the addresses of some of them, but of course they were still alive so I diverted my attention to the stars in the sky or, to be more precise, in the ground. Of the thirty names in the list, I had already attained photographs of twelve. This left eighteen more of which nine were still living and a further nine had passed on. I calculated that it would take up to a year or more to find the graves of these deceased persons and, purely as part of my work as a journalist, I might achieve a further two or three photographs from the living over the course of that year. This would leave only six or seven more. The time ahead would also give me a chance to concoct a notion on how to achieve those final photographs as well, and put a close to the project. It was all becoming very exciting, but there remained a minor consideration: how was I to open the caskets to get my photographs?

As I would be operating alone, the amount of digging that I would have to carry out appeared to be the most daunting task. This, it seemed, needed research.

On consulting various local authority websites and checking the regulations of England and Wales concerning the burial of the dead, I discovered a number of details that I previously, through my ignorance of these matters, had no idea of. Firstly, the popular colloquialism of being "six feet under" turned out to in fact be a falsehood. The only regulations concerning the depth of a grave specified that the uppermost part of the coffin should be no more than thirty inches from the surface of the plot, there was no regulation concerning how deep it had to be in total.

Secondly, it appeared that some graveyards and cemeteries were incredibly busy. I would assume this was either because they are in such glorious locations or (transversely) because the area had become so ghastly that people were rushing to their deaths just to alleviate themselves of their miserable lives, filling the land with corpses at a fantastic rate. Whichever the case might generally be, it still results in the necessity of re-using the graves from time to time and this is why some graves are deeper than others, the idea being that there should be enough space between the first coffin and the next inhabitant. The surface above would be to place another layer of dirt and a further coffin if the need should arise. This would still leave the optimal thirty inches between the coffin and the ground.

The debunking of various urban beliefs concerning this area helped my plans immensely for I had feared that I had a great deal of digging ahead of me. It was, however, still perhaps more digging than one man could possibly achieve in one evening without being noticed by some bothersome passer-by. There would be noise, I would need light, it was looking more and more complicated.

I wondered how others had dealt with this conundrum in the past. For two weeks I wrangled with the problem and, just as I was nearing the limits of my frustration, the idea came to me in the most bizarrely opportune way. After work one evening, I had settled down to watch a documentary about the late silent film star Charlie Chaplin.

On this programme they explained that, after his death, Mr. Chaplin had been laid to rest in Corsier-Sur-Vevey Cemetery in Switzerland. Only a matter of weeks later, two Eastern European motor mechanics living in Switzerland had exhumed his body and spirited it away to their hiding place from where they contacted the Chaplin family and disgustingly attempted to extort six hundred thousand dollars from them. After a five-week police investigation the authorities finally caught up with the criminals and retrieved Mr. Chaplin's body from a nearby cornfield where they had buried it for later possible exhumation.

The whole affair had made the danger of a copycat crime an all too realistic possibility and, to discourage further attempts of disturbing his grave, Mr. Chaplin was reburied but this time with his grave covered by a substantial slab of concrete.

This was when it hit me: if the graves were covered somehow, I could carry out my work underneath those coverings undisturbed. I would make a lightweight set of panels from chipboard or some such material and camouflage on side of it to fit in with the surrounding grass and earth. I would start digging as per normal from above and then, when it had become deep enough, from underneath this paneling. I would be able to dig down to the coffin over the course of a few days, returning as and when I could, and leave the camouflaged panels on top of the grave to hide any sign of excavation work. Of course it would mean that most of my digging would have to be done on my hands and knees with a trowel but any dirtied clothes would be a minor inconvenience compared to what I would achieve from the whole experience. My heart was electrified with the adrenalin of what thrills were to come; all I needed to figure out now was how to dispose of the soil from the grave.

On my return to work the next day I struggled to concentrate on the routine of my daily work and knew that my behaviour and any thrills related to my external endeavours would have to be stifled with a certain amount of emotional detachment. The operations ahead must be kept secret at all cost in case of misunderstandings either from my colleagues or indeed anyone else who might stumble upon my work. I relaxed and mentally distanced myself from the world, sure that no one would appreciate what I was doing and, to be honest, I didn't care to share it with anyone either.

Chapter 5

- “9. Miss Elizabeth Rivers - Actress*
10. Mr. Reginald Bates - Comedian/Poet
11. Mr. Terence Ditton – Actor”

Although the publication that employed me started out with a reasonable but local distribution, it grew at a respectable rate during my employ. I was happy to be involved with a newspaper that had such a growing reach into the world. A life bereft of purpose is one that is wasted and undeserved. I, at least, was making a difference.

The early years in the office had been of relative calm but there existed also a camaraderie that you often only find with smaller businesses. Everyone knew each other's names, whether they drank tea or coffee and if they took sugar and, if so, how many. This of course did not last and as the friendliness of the early years was to prove vital in it's growing popularity, so too did it quickly die as it morphed into yet another daily newspaper, no different in this respect from any other in the newsagent's stack.

I know most of the staff almost mourned this transformation, but I for one welcomed it. It was a constant annoyance to have people chattering and laughing while I tried to work, and the slamming of my room door didn't give them the hint that perhaps they should be working also. Thankfully, as time passed by, the less professional of the employees either moved on or were fired and so I had the bliss of a busy yet miserable office. If people are miserable, they still find time to mope, get on with their work, hand in assignments but chatting is not the occupation of the miserable and so this newfound peace meant that I didn't need to continue slamming my room door very much.

The editor, like myself, had a policy of keeping a distance from his staff. He mostly chose to communicate any decisions through his secretary or via internal notes and memos. I considered this to be perfectly fine as any form of monitoring, as I saw it, was an unwelcome intrusion on my work. The less contact with him or indeed anybody else in a position of power the better. With each growth in the paper's sales figures, so my exposure to a higher and higher level of celebrity also grew. Agents and promoters were well aware of the power of the press to make or break a new film or burgeoning acting career and so it was perceived vital to keep us well informed along with the right and appropriate level of access to interview opportunities come film premiere time.

The passing of time also meant that I eventually knew nobody in the paper from the early days. Please don't mistake this as some form of caring, I just prefer a certain uniformity to my life, no matter how drab the rhythm. I considered my colleagues to be efficient unemotional drones. They knew how to work, to scribble hackneyed articles with clichéd similes and do the job they were told to. I expected any new staff to also fit this description.

This is why I did not feel when I was inevitably assigned an assistant that she was as much an intrusion as I might otherwise have expected her to be. Her name was Louise.

Louise had studied journalism and media studies at university and had, like myself, had been involved in the student magazine albeit on the sports pages. This was enough to twist the arm of her father's best friend, our esteemed editor, to give her a break within weeks of her graduating and so she was placed under my watchful eye to write accompanying minor articles for my section of the paper.

I have never wished to be any more sociable than my life necessitates me to be. Communication with my fellow man tends to be a tiresome drain on my life force. I have found myself attending parties with the sole intent of attaining my photographs and then leaving, only to be trapped by a bore of a sous-chef in the kitchen that usually mistakes my thin-lipped condescending smiles and constant yawns as some sort of green light to continue yapping at me. Each word eschewed is like a pin to the bubble that might be each of my brain cells being burst over and over until I

actually feel stupider by the end of the conversation, if you can refer to it as such.

I thanked the stars that Louise did not appear to be like this. From day one I tried my level best to be cold and dismissive of her but it only seemed to motivate her into trying harder. She would leave me to my work as I might have requested, if I had needed to, and only spoke when she felt it necessary. We barely exchanged a word for the first two months and I could swear that it must have been a further two until we actually exchanged any enquiry into how each other's weekends might have been. It's not that I particularly cared about her weekend, I just felt it the right thing to do as she worked underneath me and provided me with excellent tea whenever I might have needed it. She was motivated towards her work, but was also incredibly spineless outside of this and so I could ensure she took responsibility for some of my more menial tasks while I found time to concentrate on the more important issue of the thirty photographs.

I had been trying to decide upon where and when my first subterranean photograph should be taken and of whom. The best idea, it seemed, was to start locally and then move on once my confidence grew. Only a few months before, a gentleman born and bred in London by the name of Reginald Bates had passed on.

For those of you who may be ignorant of such things, Reginald was a comedian and, when the mood took him, a respected poet. Adored by millions as a funnyman and admired by many for his eloquent verse, he had the honour of being laid to rest in the crypt of a cathedral. This spot was accompanied, in a small corner of the building above, by a plaque listing his life's endeavours. A clean, polite and kindly comedian, this reputation of course helped with his entrance to the crypt as families the country over warmed to his homely charms. Being overly blue in your work life is unlikely to get you a cathedral based resting place unless you're a bishop or of some similar standing, in which case I assume it is par for the course.

Despite Reginald's friendly demeanour when in the public eye, not everything is quite so clear cut as at first might seem. Reginald had many friends in the showbiz world, but he was a renowned recluse and did not spend his earnings wildly or extravagantly. After his death this became known and made him a target for unscrupulous miscreants.

Many years before this, a fellow comedian by the name of Benny Hill passed away in similar circumstances but was buried in a simple but respectable grave in a simple but respectable cemetery.

Rumours abounded of how his last days had been spent and word spread, false or otherwise, that Mr. Hill had died surrounded not only by heaps of jewellery but also millions of pounds in cash. Through a misunderstanding of modern burial practices, laws, or whatever drove the fantasies, word spread that he had also been buried with all these riches inside his coffin. Unless the cash was buried in the form of a cheque, this would have made the coffin immensely heavy and most likely impractical to organise burying but these considerations did not deter the imaginations of the greedy.

Not long after the funeral had taken place, some people took it upon themselves to investigate these rumours first hand by digging away at the coffin in the dead of night. The cemetery keeper found himself greeted the next morning with the sight of an excavated grave, an open coffin, and the body of Mr. Hill slumped across the grass still wet with morning dew. If there had been any riches within the coffin, they were long gone by now. He was promptly reburied and security was stepped up around the cemetery for fear of a repeat excavation.

Mr. Bates' family were going to take no such risks of this happening to him and so they negotiated with the cathedral for him to have this special final resting place in the crypt to which the clergy readily agreed as the family were assured that the folk who worked at the cathedral

had also been great fans of Mr. Bates' work. They stated in a quite oily fashion that they would gladly inter him in the crypt along with accepting a small donation to the church's coffers. It seemed a small price to pay for piece of mind.

The planning of this task started out simply enough, but this then grew in complication as the plan formed in my head. The cathedral, like most, was thankfully ill protected and security had barely changed since mediaeval times, consisting as it did of nothing more than the simplest of locks on the doors and windows.

I presumed that every investigative journalist would more than likely have access to a basic lock-picking kit and the desk drawer of Barry "the binman" Kingsley at the office was to prove my assumptions correct.

His name came from what he saw as exposing the rubbish of society in his weekly column although, irony not being his strong point, he failed to see what trash he was himself. He reeked of stale cigarettes and the stench of sweat that can only be achieved from concentrated years of poor personal hygiene attendance. His face was red with the stressed veins that alcohol abuse obliges. In conversation his chauvinistic blurts never went much further than describing his most recent sexual encounter in a urine soaked alleyway (I guessed these experiences of his to have been with another human being but I never liked to presume). I made it one of my daily goals to avoid him at all costs.

Barry was forever losing things so I knew he wouldn't start seriously looking for his lock picking kit for another few days. The rest of the things I needed that I did not already have had to be obtained from various hardware stores. A small yet sturdy fishing stool to stand upon to reach places just out of my reach, a torch to guide my way, a rope to lower and raise myself through windows and, lastly, a crowbar to pries open any monumental slabs or stone markers in front of the coffin placing.

The preplanning included the checking of the cathedral's time schedule for the next few days, studying the architectural plans that were so readily available on the internet, a few time and motion studies, and I was ready to go.

My heart was beating like a broken clock, I chose to translate that as meaning I was doing the right thing.

The Cathedral itself wasn't a great distance from my house, but the weight of the necessary items I'd had to take with me were making the journey just that little bit more arduous. My greatest concern was how to protect my camera. Although it lay in a protective bag on one side of my body, the heavy kit swinging to and fro threatened to knock into it and the slightest touch might have resulted in a cracked lens or even just a jamming of the camera's mechanism, either of which would end my evening there and then as I carried no spare.

I had left the house at two a.m. precisely, aiming to reach my destination at two-thirty a.m. I reasoned that this time would ensure the quietness of the surrounding streets, but also it seemed the optimum time to be in the Cathedral itself as anyone living in neighbouring houses would surely by now be asleep and no religious activity or it's associated preparations would be due to start for at least another three hours or so.

I had visited the place earlier that day before it shut its doors for the night. I had chosen the one day of the week when no service or celebration was planned, as a result there were few people around to see me sneak into the vestry and quickly unscrew the arm of a window lock. From the outside I jammed a paperclip into the gap between the window and the frame to ensure it would hold fast in case of any disturbances caused by doors opening or other changes in air pressure but would be enough for me to lever it open later on. A casual glance would give the appearance of

the window being closed like any other. This was a temporary solution, but all that was required at the time. Finally, I slid a small stool over from a desk to beneath the window to aid my descent into the room when entering from the outside, and, having done all this, I quickly made my leave.

The difficult part was to come, there was no way that I and my kit could get through the window all in one go. The easiest solution seemed to be to first lower my camera bag into the room with a rope and a slipknot and then to use this same rope for my kit bag. After climbing through the now open window and listening out for sounds of possible movement, I pulled the bag in after me and gently let the window rest to a close.

Time was the key factor to consider; my plans for the exhumation of graves in cemeteries allowed for a certain amount of dalliance but this was different and called for an almost military-like operation. I didn't need to be there longer than necessary. This being the case, I had memorised the outlay of the cathedral and I now made my way towards the crypt.

As I was just getting used to the quiet of the building the silence was somewhat rudely disturbed by the distant shuffling of feet. The glow of what appeared to be some sort of night-light approached glowing closer and brighter as the noise of the shuffling increased until an old man appeared at the other end of the cathedral, apparently oblivious to my presence. Evidently this octogenarian had taken to going on late night strolls through the church to alleviate his insomnia, it was a disruption I hadn't planned for. Quickly, I darted under a nearby pew, dragging my gear as quietly as possible behind me.

I've never been able to hold my breath for a particularly noticeable length of time and as a youth I was always wary of putting my head underwater, but now seemed as good a time to start practicing as any. I realised that the slightest noise or his noticing of anything the slightest bit out of place could completely blow my cover and end my task before it had begun. I froze as he dragged his feet past me, smoking a pathetic cigarette and mumbling as he passed. Suddenly, just as I thought he might go straight past me. He stopped. Had he heard me? Perhaps he could see my feet? Before I could gather my thoughts to know what evasive steps I might have to take, the man took an asthmatically feeble drag from his cigarette and threw its burning roach to the ground, landing right in front of my face. A footstep from him to extinguish it, and he went on his way, shuffling and mumbling back down the aisle and out of the cathedral proper towards the residential wings.

I waited until he would definitely not hear my movements and pulled myself from under the pew and continued towards the crypt.

Opening the door was tough, but not overly difficult. The antiquated lock was simple in design so that, once the catch spring inside had been depressed, I found it to be just a matter of inserting one more pick to turn the lock before the door slowly creaked open.

Reginald's resting place was at a thankfully accessible spot just at shoulder height with the plaque "guarding" the coffin sealed with a thin line of mortar. This came away easily with a few well-placed pries of the crowbar.

As I cleared the coffin space of debris, I saw nothing but dust in the beams of the torchlight. I had planned for darkness but this was pushing its limits. I held the torch in my mouth and reached inside the space with both hands for the coffin but found... nothing? I grabbed empty space once more and by now I was beginning to sweat, coldly, with panic. Even further still I reached into the darkness and, bringing my hands together, grasped onto something solid but far too small and completely the wrong shape for a coffin. As I retrieved the mystery object my confusion changed from wonder, to realisation, to the purest of unfathomable anger. I felt my

face tighten with silent rage as I held in my hand Reginald Bates' cremation urn. As I stated earlier, his family had wanted to take no chances after the exhumation of Benny Hill and it appeared they had cremated their dear relative, therefore ensuring his eternal rest. I felt so angry that what little light there was seeping into the crypt turned red by the fury in my eyes. I replaced all as I had found it, made a rudimentary effort of cleaning up behind me and returned home to a fitful night's sleep. It should all have been so much easier than this but, as I previously said, not everything is quite so clear cut as at first might seem.

Chapter 6

- “6. Mr. Michael Haywood – Actor*
- 7. Miss Evelyn Maroe - Actress*
- 8. Mrs. Joyce Carruthers – Actress”*

The first operation had been a failure, but no failure is complete unless lessons are ignored. I needed to retrace the whole evening's events in my mind and mentally deconstruct each moment. After some deliberation only two items stood out as having been perhaps preventable or, in the very least, better planned for: the wandering geriatric and the non-existence of an actual coffin. More research was needed and maybe even some sort of monitoring or scouting of each site would have to be carried out to ensure that not only would I be undisturbed in my work but also that no one would discover my activities and report them to whatever authority they thought relevant.

I returned to work, discretely placed Barry's lock picking kit back in his desk, and dwelled on the issue at hand while I half-heartedly reviewed a new romance based film. These reviews were always simple enough to write and I actually preferred to write them rather than any other when in a hurry as it didn't actually require me to watch the film itself. I adore films, but romantic films tend to fall into two specific descriptions of plot as follows:

- 1) Boy meets girl, girl annoys boy, girl hates boy, boy and girl argue, boy and girl share challenging experience that reveals previously hidden emotions, boy and girl kiss, end credits.
- 2) Boy meets girl, boy and girl love each other, boy or girl gets sick or challenged in way that renders the other helpless, boy or girl loses boy or girl, boy or girl triumphs through personal strength and adversity, end credits.

To know which of these two types of film I was reviewing, one only had to look at the film poster. If the boy and girl were either looking at each other like “you're annoying me” or they have their backs to each other while looking at the camera: it's the first type. If the poster features both parties laughing “genuinely” while looking downwards or avoiding looking straight in the camera, it's the second type.

Louise was busy at her desk completing snap descriptions on some films that were due to be released that week. Having proved her worth by completing coherent and well-rounded articles in recent months, she was soon to be moved to slightly different duties. Our Entertainment columns were expanding, and now looked to include celebrity gossip and ill-founded Hollywood rumour. This area of writing embodied something that I wished to avoid as I have never

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