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For Daria Miskevych

Read your own obituary notice; they say you live longer.

James Joyce, *Ulysses*

Chapter 1

Edwin: a eulogy from a dead man

Monday, 4 April 2022

There are some advantages to being the oldest sleuth in the country, thinks Edwin. For a start, you don't have to be at your desk early. His morning routine now includes yoga stretches and deep breathing. In for four, hold for four, out for four. Then he breathes through alternate nostrils and finishes with a deep sigh called 'the ocean's breath'. If he's really organised he will have put his porridge on first and will be able to sit down and eat it at perfect Goldilocks temperature. The porridge is made according to his late neighbour Peggy's specifications. It's not very nice but Edwin sees it as a tribute and perhaps a penance. Next is Wordle, an online word game once ubiquitous amongst members of 'book twitter' but now, as far as Edwin can tell, only played by the dogged few. But Edwin persists because he has got to preserve his winning streak in the face of understated, but deadly, competition from his friend Benedict. After completing the puzzle Edwin

walks to Benedict's Coffee Shack to share the results (especially if he has guessed the word in fewer than four tries) and read the papers, an activity he regards as essential for any well-informed private investigator.

Today, Edwin arrives at the Shack at twenty minutes past nine. The commuting crowd has gone and the mothers and babies have not yet arrived. It's a sunny spring day and the kiosk, with its rainbow bunting, looks cheerful and welcoming. Benedict is looking out for Edwin but, as he sees his friend approaching, withdraws inside, to make the coffee and probably to hide the fact that he was anxious. Benedict is a great worrier.

'Five,' says Edwin, when he gets to the counter. 'One of those infuriating words where there were too many options. I had "slack", "black" and "flack" before I got "clack".'

'I got lucky early on,' says Benedict, with the modest look which says he got there in three, or even two. 'Your usual?'

'Thank you, dear boy.'

While Benedict prepares the best flat white in Shoreham-by-Sea, Edwin sits at the blue picnic table and opens *The Times*. His favourite paper is the *Guardian*, although he has a guilty soft spot for the *Telegraph*'s book coverage, but *The Times* is best for his other not-so-secret obsession: the obituaries.

Today there's a bumper crop: three, including one deceased he knows (knew) personally. The first is a trade union leader who died at the age of eighty-four, which, given his own age, Edwin now considers untimely ripp'd; the second a pop star who sadly seemed determined to act out the clichés of that profession; and the third is a producer Edwin worked with in his BBC Radio 3 days.

Charlie (Chips) Walker

BBC producer famous for his bonhomie and long lunches.

Bonhomie is one word for it, thinks Edwin. Chips could be good company but, if you got on the wrong side of him, his sarcasm could make you wither inside. 'Are you trying to bore the listeners to tears?' he once enquired of Edwin, who had been so shocked that his own eyes had started to water.

Chips Walker, the veteran broadcaster and producer, was responsible for introducing a whole new audience to classical music with light-hearted TV shows such as Very Verdi *and* Mostly Mozart. *Chips, who died of prostate cancer aged 85, studied at the Royal Academy of Music before joining Radio 3 as a trainee. He went on to present the Sunday evening show before turning his hand to producing. With his second wife, Margot Emsworth, he set up the production company Counterpoint which was responsible for a series of shows based on well-known classical composers . . .*

Edwin, a quick reader, has skimmed through awards, illnesses and another wife before Benedict puts coffee and a brownie in front of him.

'Who's dead?' Benedict sits opposite him.

'Producer I once knew . . . bit of a monster, if truth be told . . . leaves a wife and five children. Five! He was always extravagant. Wonder what the *Guardian* has to say about him . . .'

It's more of the same, with perhaps a little less Verdi and more BBC. He skips to the end of the piece. Unlike the *Times* obituaries, which are unsigned, the *Guardian* credits the writer.

'This is interesting,' he says.

'What?' Benedict cranes his head to read upside down. Edwin turns the paper.

Charles 'Chips' Walker, broadcaster and producer, born 19 February 1937, died 3 April 2022.
Malcolm Collins died in 2021.

'Eighty-five,' says Benedict, doing the maths. 'That's no age,' he adds, seeing Edwin's face.

'No,' says Edwin. 'The obituary writer, Malcolm Collins, is also dead. He died last year.'

'I suppose that often happens,' says Benedict. 'They write obituaries long before people die. There must be hundreds for the Queen and I bet she's outlived countless journalists.'

'She'll live forever,' says Edwin. 'It's odd though, isn't it? We're reading a eulogy from a dead man.'

Benedict doesn't look as though he finds it that odd but his attention is diverted by the arrival of a stunning blonde in designer running gear. This, much to Edwin's – and even Benedict's – continual amazement, is Benedict's girlfriend, Natalka.

Natalka stops at the bench to kiss Benedict on the cheek and perform some rather theatrical stretches. Benedict hurries away to prepare her signature cappuccino with cinnamon. He'll draw a heart in the foam too, Edwin knows. Edwin's not exactly an expert on living with women – he's known he was gay since prep school – but there is such a thing as being too romantic. Still, Natalka doesn't seem to mind and she and Benedict have been together for over two years now. Their relationship has

even survived her mother moving in. Edwin thinks this has put a strain on the couple though. Not least because Benedict gets on so well with Valentyna.

It seems that it's Edwin who is the reason for Natalka routing her morning jog in their direction.

'News,' she says, bending one leg back in an uncomfortably jointless way. 'We've got a new case.'

Natalka and Edwin are partners in a detective agency. It was Natalka's idea. In fact, Edwin suspected Natalka of suggesting the enterprise to give him that dreaded thing – an *interest*. He imagined Natalka saying to Benedict, 'We must give Edwin an interest, something to keep his brain alive, it's not enough to do the crossword and that Wordle thing.' Benedict had been dubious. 'Finding Peggy's killer was heart-breaking. And dangerous,' he said, during one of the planning meetings at the Shack. 'Do you really want to go through that again?' 'We won't be dealing with murder,' said Natalka, though Edwin had thought he detected a note of disappointment in her voice. 'It'll probably be women wanting to catch their husbands cheating.'

The agency was first in Natalka's name. NK Investigates. And it really did give Edwin an interest. He loved trailing people, old enough to become invisible, taking surreptitious pictures on his mobile phone. He even liked lurking in cafes, eking out a flat white while erring husbands flirted only a few yards away with women they had clearly met online. Eventually Natalka suggested that he become a partner so Edwin invested some of his BBC pension and the K and F agency was formed, standing for Kolisnyk and Fitzgerald. Natalka had first suggested F and K but, written down, that looked too much like the F-word with

the middle asterisked out. It would have been even worse if they'd added C for Cole but Benedict still refused to join. 'I've got enough work running the Shack,' he said. But Edwin knew that, despite loving crime fiction, Benedict was squeamish about the real thing. Work at K and F all but disappeared during the pandemic but now they are picking up a few cases again Natalka runs the business side along with her care agency. She's a born entrepreneur, Edwin thinks.

'Another Jolene?' says Edwin. This is their rather unkind name for the deceived wives although, in the country and western song, Jolene is actually the scarlet woman who is threatening to steal the unnamed man.

'No,' says Natalka, pausing impressively before starting on the other leg. 'A murder.'

'Murder?' Benedict puts the coffee carefully on the table. Please notice the heart, Edwin begs Natalka silently.

'Nice heart, Benny,' says Natalka, taking a sip. 'Today I got a call from a woman who thinks her mother has been murdered. The mother is an author, Melody Chambers.'

'Famous?' Edwin reaches for the papers. 'Will she have an obit?'

'You and your obituaries. I wouldn't think she's in the papers. She's a romance writer. Love and all that. You know.'

'I think I vaguely remember,' says Edwin. 'It'll probably be in the *Guardian*. They like women more than *The Times* or the *Telegraph*. Yes, here it is.'

He shows the page to Natalka.

Melody Dolores Chambers, author. Born 17 May 1952, died 2 April 2022.

'Only seventy,' says Edwin. 'Not quite, in fact.'

'I expect she died of old age,' says Natalka. She's probably joking but it's hard to tell from her face sometimes.

'Author of *And There You Were*,' reads Edwin, 'which was made into a film starring Nicole Kidman. It says here she died of a heart attack. Look, obituary by Malcolm Collins. The dead man.'

'I've just been talking to her daughter, Minnie,' said Natalka. 'She read that article about us in *Sussex Life*. She wants us to investigate.'

'She thinks her mother was murdered?' says Edwin. 'Does she have a suspect in mind?'

'Minnie says that she and her sister Harmony thinks Melody's second husband killed her.'

'Melody and Harmony,' says Edwin. 'Oh dear.'

'You'll have to be brave,' says Natalka. 'Minnie is short for Minim.'

Minim Barnes (née Chambers) lives in a large house on the outskirts of Brighton.

'Mummy loved music,' she tells them in her vast, uncomfortable kitchen, 'Daddy too. That's how they met. Singing in a choir.' She dabs her eyes with a Sussex seabirds tea towel.

'Alan's tone deaf, of course,' says Harmony who is perched on a stool at the catafalque Edwin believes is called a kitchen island. He's sitting on a high stool too and wonders if he'll ever be able to get off. Natalka, who had leapt up on hers, now says, 'Edwin knows a lot about music. He used to be on BBC Radio 3.'

'Really?' Both Harmony and Minnie turn to Edwin with new interest. They are not very alike, the sisters. Harmony is tall with

dark hair pulled back into a severe ponytail. Minnie is smaller with blonde hair in what Edwin (showing his age) would call a pixie cut. Harmony is forty-five and Minnie forty-two.

'I presented a show for a few years,' says Edwin modestly. *Forgotten Classics*. Six o'clock on Sunday evenings. The ironing slot, they called it. Edwin still irons his shirts though Natalka tells him that people don't bother these days. 'We buy things that don't need ironing, or we just wear them with the creases.' He's a forgotten classic himself now.

'I'm sure Mummy and Daddy listened to it,' said Harmony. 'Alan listens to Planet Rock.' She shudders. Well, that settles it, thinks Edwin. Alan definitely did it.

'Daddy loved opera,' says Minnie. 'Especially Wagner.'

'I'm an Italian opera man myself,' says Edwin. 'Verdi and Puccini in particular.'

He always suspects Wagnerians, though there were plenty of them at the BBC.

'Alan likes heavy metal,' says Minnie. 'Tells you everything.'

The sisters' case is that Alan Franklin, Melody Chambers' second husband, killed his wife by replacing her blood pressure tablets with poison of some kind. 'He's a pharmacist,' they said in chorus, as if this explained everything. Edwin, who has a very good relationship with Dervish, who runs a chemist shop on the seafront thinks that a lot more evidence is needed. Other signs of guilt include being fifteen years younger than his wife, having long hair and encouraging her to write a new will.

'It's not about the money,' says Minnie, putting two cups of professional-looking coffee in front of Edwin and Natalka. Benedict

himself couldn't have produced better foam. Edwin takes a sip, worrying a little about caffeine overload. He usually restricts himself to one flat white a day.

'We're both comfortably off,' Minnie continues, 'with families of our own.' Edwin believes this. Minnie's house is a solid Victorian end-of-terrace near leafy Preston Park and evidence of Minnie's family is everywhere: a row of wellington boots in the hallway, football kit on the washing line outside, a 'Mum's Planner' stuck on the fridge, a palimpsest of scribbled handwriting. A small dog who could have had 'family pet' written on its fur, watches them from what looks like a day bed.

'We don't need the money,' repeats Minnie. 'But Mummy always said she'd leave the house to us. It was *our* house. *Our* family home.' Despite the pixie cut and the designer leisurewear, Minnie suddenly sounds like a teenager.

'And now it goes to Alan?' asks Natalka.

'According to the new will, everything goes to Alan,' says Harmony. 'The house, the car, the boat. Even Frodo, Mummy's dog, belongs to him now.'

'I understand this must be very distressing for you,' says Natalka. Her accent often makes this sort of remark sound sarcastic but she manages to strike the right tone here. Both sisters lower their eyes as if to emphasise their distress. 'But do you have any evidence that Alan wanted to kill your mum?'

'Mum' is a nice touch, thinks Edwin, though he noted that both sisters used the posher, and more old-fashioned, 'Mummy'. It's what he had called his own maternal parent, although their relationship hadn't been the easiest.

'Oh, we've got evidence,' says Minnie. In a dramatic move, she produces a notebook from a concealed drawer in the catafalque. 'She wrote about it. I found this in her desk.'