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STARTER STORY • ENGLISH • C2

Advance Notice

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In the newsroom at the Chronicle, three floors below the reporters who chased the news that was actually happening, Julian Pryce kept a locked drawer of the dead who were not dead yet. This was the unglamorous permanent secret of the profession he had practiced for nineteen years: that half the obituaries printed on the morning someone died had, in fact, been written months or years earlier, in the subject's own kitchen, over tea that went cold while Julian asked the only question that mattered and pretended it was several smaller ones. He had never, in nineteen years, attended a single funeral of a person he had interviewed. He told himself this was professional distance. He had never examined the claim closely enough to notice it was a lie he had been telling only himself.

He was assigned Edith Calloway in the autumn the Chronicle launched a small, quietly radical series called *Life Before Death*, obituaries commissioned in advance not for the famous but for the merely remarkable: a retired lock keeper, a woman who had translated the Bible into a language with nine speakers left, and Edith, eighty-four years old, who had run the same corner shop on Aldergate Row for fifty-one years and had, three weeks earlier, been given six months by a consultant who did not enjoy giving numbers he could not stand behind.

Session One, his notes read, dated the ninth of October, conducted at the kitchen table above the shop. "I opened in nineteen seventy-one," she told him, "the year after Harold and I married, with money his mother didn't want us to have and gave us anyway." She poured tea neither of them drank. "Write that down properly. People always get the year wrong when they write about shops."

Julian wrote a competent, warm eleven hundred words that week, the sort of obituary that runs beneath a small photograph and makes strangers on a bus feel, for four minutes, that they have met someone worth having known. He filed it in the drawer, expecting, as the prognosis suggested, to retrieve it again by spring.

In November, Edith rang the newsdesk and asked for “one more session, there’s a detail I got wrong.” The detail, when he arrived, turned out to be the year of her marriage, now nineteen sixty-nine rather than nineteen seventy, Harold’s mother’s money now a loan rather than a gift. She delivered the correction with the same flat certainty she had delivered the original. Julian, who had built a career on believing that memory under pressure produces its most honest version, wrote it down and told himself it changed nothing structural.

By the following autumn there had been thirteen sessions, and Edith Calloway, six months into a six month prognosis that refused to expire, had become a subject of gentle, uneasy amusement in the newsroom, the woman who wouldn’t finish. Julian no longer minded the drive out to Aldergate Row. He minded, if he was honest, the days between visits.

It was leafing back through his notebook to check a date, sometime that winter, that he found the wrongness he could not immediately name. Two entries were both labelled Session Thirteen, in the same hand, in two different inks, four months apart. He had no memory of the second sitting. He read both entries twice, decided the explanation was simple fatigue and a duplicated page, and did not mention it to anyone, including himself, again for some time.

In the eighteenth session, without preamble, Edith told him that Harold had never existed, not as she had described him. There had been a man, briefly, a delivery driver named Colin she had known for four months in nineteen sixty-eight, and everything since, the marriage, the mother’s money, fifty-one years of a name spoken fondly across a shop counter, had been a story she built the year the loneliness got to be too much to sit inside honestly. “I told it so many times it stopped being a lie,” she said. “That’s not confession, love. That’s just what a life is, if you keep it long enough.”

Julian did not write that down for the file. He wrote it, instead, in a separate notebook he had begun keeping without deciding to, the one where he had also, over the years, drafted his mother’s obituary seventeen times, in seventeen slightly different versions of a woman he had never once managed to bury on paper, because he had never managed to attend the funeral either, four years running late for a train that would in fact have arrived early.

The editor, a practical woman named Frances who had run Life Before Death since its first uneasy pitch meeting, began asking, gently at first and then less so, when the Calloway piece would be ready to run. “She’s alive, Frances,” Julian said, as though this were an argument rather than merely a fact. “They’re all alive, until the morning they’re not,” Frances said. “That’s not usually a reason to keep filing.”

Edith seemed, in the sessions that followed, to sense the pressure gathering somewhere beyond her kitchen, and to enjoy it in a manner Julian found difficult to forgive and impossible to resent. She introduced, across the twenty-second and twenty-third sessions, a sister who had never been mentioned, then unmentioned her two sessions later, then mentioned a different sister with a different name and the same childhood argument transplanted whole. “You can’t publish a woman who won’t sit still,” she told him once, with what he was fairly sure was delight.

In the thirtieth session, in the spring of the third year, she asked him directly why he had never once, in nineteen years, gone to a funeral. He gave her the answer he gave himself, about professional distance, the necessary discipline of the trade. Edith looked at him the way she looked at a customer who had handed her a coin from the wrong decade. “That’s not distance, love,” she said. “That’s a woman you haven’t buried yet, sitting behind your eyes while you drink my tea.”

He did not deny it. He found, to his own surprise, that he told her about his mother in more or less complete sentences, the first time he had managed the story in that shape to anyone, including the version of himself that filed obituaries for a living and had never filed his own mother’s. Edith listened the way she had spent fifty-one years listening across a counter, without needing to be the one who spoke next.

The forty-first session was the last, though neither of them knew it at the time, which was, Julian thought afterward, the only honest thing about any of the sessions that had come before it. She told him a version of the shop’s opening that matched, almost exactly, Session One, as though thirty-two revisions later she had circled back to something true, or simply to the story she liked best. She did not correct it again.

Edith Calloway died in June, aged eighty-seven, a year and nine months past a prognosis of six, in the room above a shop she had, by her own final count, opened either in nineteen sixty-nine, nineteen seventy, or nineteen seventy-one, married to a man who had either existed for fifty-one years or four months, survived by a sister who may have been one woman or two or none. The Chronicle's file listed the cause of death plainly, the one fact in the entire record that nobody, including Edith, had ever once tried to revise.

Among her things, the solicitor found an envelope addressed to Julian in handwriting steadier than her last few sessions had been. Inside was a single page, headed, in her own hand, Session Forty-Two, though there had been no forty-second sitting either of them had lived to conduct. "Don't tidy me up," it read. "I gave you thirty-two different women over three years and every one of them was true while I was telling it. Print all of them, or don't print me at all. An obituary that agrees with itself is an obituary about someone who never really tried living."

Frances, reading the draft Julian eventually submitted, a collage of contradictory sessions run in full with the discrepancies left standing rather than resolved, said only that it would confuse readers expecting the usual eleven hundred words of quiet reconciliation. Julian said that Edith had specifically asked for the confusion. Frances, who had buried her own arguments with the dead a long time before Julian had learned to, ran it as written, on the front of the Saturday supplement, under a photograph of a shop counter with nobody standing behind it.

It ran to unusual and unexpected acclaim, readers writing in not to correct the discrepancies but to say that Edith Calloway, whoever precisely she had been, sounded like the only obituary subject they had ever fully believed.

That Saturday, for the first time in nineteen years, Julian went to a funeral, not Edith's, which had already been held quietly among neighbours who had never doubted a word she told them, but his mother's, four years delayed, conducted by Julian alone in a churchyard with a stone he had ordered the week before and a eulogy he read from the seventeenth draft, the one that had never once agreed with the other sixteen and that he now understood was, for exactly that reason, the only one worth reading aloud.

Back at his desk on Monday, a new folder arrived from Frances, a name he didn't recognize and a diagnosis he had read a hundred times before. Julian opened a fresh file, typed the subject's name, the date, and, where the template asked for an estimated date of death, left the field blank, on principle, for the first time in nineteen years, and went to put the kettle on before he asked the only question that mattered.

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