

I'll never forget Whatsisname

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It was many years ago, when I was a mere articled clerk - oops, there I go, showing my age - they're called "trainee solicitors" now. I was just settling down to my sandwich lunch, watching the bedraggled shoppers down on Market Street from my pokey little room on a Tuesday in June. The weather was wet and miserable, as you'd expect in England.

The phone went. Could I see a client who had just come into the office without an appointment? It was important. And urgent. Muttering expletives under my breath, I put my sandwich back in its wrapper, wiped my fingers down the back of my shirt and opened the door.

In swept Whatsisname. I immediately recognised him as an actor currently playing a leading role at the local theatre. "Hello, my dear fellow," he boomed, so the whole office could hear him, and gleamed at me as though I were a long lost friend. He extended his hand in a majestic manner, and after a limp handshake he seated himself in the client's chair. He had a theatrical-looking moustache and wore a long, fawn cloak that got caught up in the arms of the chair and nearly tore apart when he sat down.

Straight away he melodramatically leaned forward over my desk and engaged me eyeball to eyeball.

"I have to go down to the hospital this afternoon - just a little operation, you understand - and I thought I'd pop in here on the way to do my will. Right, then. What do you want to know?"

He sat back in the chair, keeping a steady gaze on me. My jaw must have fallen open. In those days, anything less than a week for preparing someone's will was unthinkable.

"Is there something wrong?" said Whatsisname, looking at me with amusement. "I can assure you it's a perfectly straightforward matter. You'll be able to knock off what I need in no time at all." He smiled an infectious smile and I half expected him to jump on the desk and give me a little tap dance routine.

"Okay," I said at last, trying to sound enthusiastic and wondering if this was really happening. I had been geared up for a light, relaxing lunch, but now I had an uncomfortable feeling that I had seen the last of any relaxation for several hours.

"Er . . . Let's see. Have you made a will before?"

"Oh, yes," he said with a wave of his hand. "But that was a long time ago and things have changed a bit."

"I see. Well, tell me a little bit about yourself. Do you have a wife and children?"

"I do," he said, leaning forward again, more earnestly. "William and Hannah". I took their full names down.

"And your wife's name?"

"Well, we're not actually married." He gave me a wink.

"Okay," I said, drawing a deep breath. I wrote down her name, all the time feeling his eyes burning into me like a laser.

"And what property do you have in your estate, Mr Whatsisname?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing very much, really," he replied. "Of course, the wife's got most of it in her name, unfortunately."

"Your wife?" I said. "I thought you said you weren't actually married."

"Oh, no, no, no. I am actually still married to the silly cow. It's just that we haven't had a divorce yet. Bit of a dispute over property - oh, and child maintenance too - and it can't actually finalise until that's sorted out." He spoke in a lowered voice, but like an actor whispering on stage so the furthest theatre-goer at the back of the balcony can still hear. It was as if he were pretending to the audience that his wife was outside the door listening in.

"So you have children by that marriage."

"Yes - three. That's not a problem, is it?"

By now I was wishing I'd phoned in sick that morning. Down on my sheet of paper went the full names of the children.

"And then there's Daniel, as well," he said. "He's adopted."

Down went Daniel's full name as well. And, yes, they were all under eighteen.

Just then my phone rang. It was my boss, the omniscient John Willey, who owned and ran the law firm, between sitting on the district and county councils, around 150 committees, and generally being a big shot throughout the town and beyond.

"Have you squared him up yet?" he barked, in his usual abrupt manner.

"Er, yes, just sorting it out," I replied, not wanting to reveal the extent of my worries to Whatsisname. "I'll come in later and see you about it."

"Now, where were we?" I said. "Oh, yes. You have a wife and four children, including one adopted, and then there's your partner and William and Hannah." His eyes were still boring into me with an amused, slightly quizzical, look.

"Well, yes. There's just a little bit more you should know." He waved his arm to one side, as if it was a troublesome item he was trying to discard. "My first wife is suing me for child maintenance arrears and I need to know how I stand over that."

"First wife . . . ?" I repeated, in a kind of daze. "Do you mean you have more than one previous wife?"

"Oh, yes, my dear fellow . . . , " he interrupted himself with a loud, infectious laugh, which reverberated around the unadorned walls of my sparse room. "Wives aren't rationed, are they - as long as you have one at a time?" He laughed again, throwing his head back and shaking his shoulders. He crossed his legs and settled further into the client's chair. I laughed politely back, and glanced longingly through the window behind me at the umbrellas and raincoats on Market Street. That fire escape to Angel's Passage, dripping wet metal and all, seemed very inviting, right now.

"Okay," I said, after a pause. "You have a first wife, and how many children by her?"

"Just two."

"And then you have a second wife with four children, one adopted."

"Correct."

"And you live with your current partner," I said, checking the names with him, "and have two children with her."

"She has a couple of children as well - by her husband," he added, helpfully.

I groaned, inwardly. "Have you treated her children as your own?" (this is an important point in English law).

"Oh, yes. " he beamed. "Of course, I have to travel around a bit - I'm an actor. But I go back home as often as I can."

I took all the details and looked at my sheet of paper. It was already overcrowded with names, addresses, descriptions, ages, and crossings out. And he wanted to be signing his will by tonight! This was turning into the mother of all nightmares.

"And what property do you have to dispose of?" I asked, suppressing a weary sigh and fearing the worst.

"Well, the house is owned by my partner and her ex," he replied. "All I have really is the trust fund. I just want to make sure neither of my ex-wives can get their hands on it."

Trust fund? Trust fund? At this, my eyes glazed over. I felt dizzy and sick. Why did he have to come and see me? Why not one of the several other law offices nearby? Why hadn't I gone out for lunch that day? Why had I taken up law in the first place?

"So this trust fund," I said slowly, leaning forward on my elbows and running my hand through my hair. "How many people benefit from it?"

"Oh, just myself and my two sisters - do you need their details?"

"No," I replied quickly. "I just need to know the current value of your share, the full name of the benefactor and the date it was set up."

"That was my grandfather. He set it up to benefit the three of us - my sisters and myself. Made his fortune in the Stock Market, y'know. Then had to give most of it away to escape the tax man!" He laughed again, and the little room seemed to return his laughter. I could hear my father's voice in my head saying, "Well, I'm glad someone's finding it funny."

He wanted to leave most of his interest in that trust fund to his current partner and benefit his children in varying shares. All except the youngest child, that is, whose paternity was in dispute.

I wrote frantically until I had what I considered was all the information I needed, scrawled out on several sheets of paper.

"All right, Mr Whatsisname," I said. "I understand there's some urgency here, and you want to have the will ready to sign shortly."

"Yes, that's right. Could you bring it down to the hospital when you've done it? I think they're operating on me this evening, so perhaps you could get it there by around six o'clock? Ward 16."

"Well, I'll do my best, Mr Whatsisname. But you have rather sprung this on me."

"I'm sure you will," he grinned. "So I'll see you later!" And with that he turned so his cloak flared out behind him, swung the door open and disappeared down the stairs.

The next few hours was a frenzy of looking up precedents, thinking hard and scribbling draft clauses.

My boss, John Willey, who had promised to help me out, had pulled his usual trick and disappeared to a committee meeting for most of the afternoon. I went into his junior partner's room, hoping for a head start from someone who always seemed to have the answers.

"Where there's a will there's a way," he quipped, and laughed. It wasn't like him to laugh, but everyone seemed to think this whole episode was one huge joke. Right then I couldn't see the funny side of it. Then he took one of his phone calls that showed all the potential of lasting an hour and a half. He was famous for that.

When he came back to the office John Willey berated me and I berated a secretary who typed out dozens of drafts before the engrossment (final copy) was anywhere near ready. Sheets of paper everywhere. No word processors in those days. Oh, no. We did things the hard way.

It was towards six o'clock in the evening when a wet and windswept figure made its way through the pouring rain to the hospital with Whatsisname's will, amounting to about five pages of closely typed A4.

Whatsisname, sitting up in his hospital bed, looked as cheerful as if he were about to receive an Oscar. He beamed at me and said, "Ah, there you are! Everything okay then? Beginning to think you'd forgotten all about me," He laughed and made the bed shake.

I had to smile, if only with nervousness, just hoping that it would soon be all over. I waited anxiously as he read the will through.

"Just one thing," he bellowed, not caring whether the rest of the ward heard all about his affairs or not. "My son John Carlton has a third name. I suppose it ought to be in as I have, er, you know - another little child somewhere and the mother's only gone and given him the same name, would you believe?"

"Really?" I said, trying to sound pleasantly amused. "Well, it's a small world, isn't it?" I was ready to believe anything could happen by this stage.

So I went through the splendidly typed document and wrote in my own fair hand the third name of the child in every place it appeared. Six places throughout the will, in all. And each little alteration had to be initialed by Whatsisname and the two witnesses (a nurse and me).

The thing looked like it had been walked over by an ink-stained spider. But at least it was done.

"Good luck with the op," I said, as I put the will back in my case and got up to go. "And don't forget to tear the old will up when you get out."

"Don't worry about me," he chuckled. "I'm not through yet. I'll be back on the stage before you've got your next legal aid pay cheque."

The nurse took my arm. "He's got quite a serious operation, you know," she said. "It's about fifty-fifty, so I'm glad he's got everything sorted out."

"Oh, yes," I said, smiling at her. "I think his affairs are in as good a shape as they'll ever be. If I haven't got it straight after all this effort I think I'll resign and take up acting. It seems to be an exciting life."

I sometimes wonder if that Will ever made it to the Probate Registry. What I do know is that Whatsisname made it through his operation and was back on stage soon. After that the next time I heard of him was over a year later when he was in another spot of bother. Caught on the roof of a dwelling house with some of the owner's property in his possession. Just a little misunderstanding with the law. Another act in the theatre of the absurd called life. Nothing to worry about.