

NEVER MEETING MERYL STREEP

And other debacles turned to gold...

by

Julia Kogan

“Best you change your poncy views quick or you will never, never, never meet Meryl Streep.” –

Nicholas Martin

“Julia is a singer, not a writer.” – Dominic Bray, Solicitor

Foreword

I have never, never, ever met Meryl Streep. I expected to meet her some time ago, it's fair to say. In fact, *not* meeting her when I *didn't* came as “a bit of a shock”, as the British like to understate. What's more, in my personal and professional life (which were unhelpfully merged at the time), that very lack of meeting became a divorce declaration of sorts. Whether I *should* have met Meryl Streep, or whether I was *entitled* to meet her, is currently a heated subject of debate at London's Intellectual Property Enterprise Court, contrary to my wildest expectations. And I put it to my Learned Readers that no matter which way we slice it, my expectations do not lean towards the conservative end of the spectrum. I expect a few hard knocks now and again. Life has hardly been a romp through green and fertile pastures, as you are about to find out. Even after discounting some near death experiences by way of cancer, car crash, the odd hurricane and the adventures of political asylum, there has been a tad too much unnecessary excitement. Just a tad. And that was *before* I didn't meet Meryl Streep. But here is the crux of the matter - it is precisely our *un-meeting*, as it were, that has been the making of me. In fact,

there is nothing I wouldn't give to *not* have met Meryl Streep then, as I was fortunate enough not to do. And this has nothing to do with Meryl, whom I still hope to meet as much as ever. It is simply that my life's greatest joys have sprung up directly from my worst calamities. I have not only emerged through trouble, but largely from it. And what I took to be the end turned out to be my own beginning.

Calamity 1 – Rough Justice

The entire legal matter is in the hands of a wigless judge, who is clearly exasperated at the size of my evidence bundle, which he has not read. He makes this clear to us all, along with his finely honed preference to avoid doing so in the near and distant future. If he weren't the Judge in my Case, I wouldn't blame him for a minute. What lies under his Honourable Nose causing displeasure are a heavily redacted, but nevertheless protracted, Witness Statement and its accompanying Annex A, which explains some of the thought process behind the many drafts of the *Florence Foster Jenkins* film Script. The statement and annex are long, they are detailed, and they are accompanied by hundreds of documents supposedly proving my case. The Judge seeks simplicity. This is not it.

The Judge is abrupt and warns me about the need for brevity in my answers but still manages a smile after my brutal two and a half-hour cross-examination. In spite of plans to convey my sunniest self, I develop a tense and droning "court voice". Answering questions at cross-examination feels like trying to return rocket fire with a tennis racket. When the barrister says, "We'll get along much better if you just answer my questions, Ms Kogan," I apologise quickly

and lower my eyes. Harvey Weinstein is still front page news after days of new revelations. Unwanted hands up skirts (or worse), pocketing years of your girlfriend's work, pompous bullying. It's all water from the same spring. I'm trying to disrupt the flow but can't avoid drinking from the stream. I've been expressly warned never to argue with their barristers. It's a wind up. A more effective one than the barrister realises, if things go well.

My team are too far away from the witness box to see clearly. The half-dozen members of my ex's team and he himself are sitting all too close and seem less pleased with how things are going, except when I concede or waffle.

In the box, it is put to me that I am, and have been, much mistaken about my own person these past many years. Julia is not a writer, as the Claimant's solicitor Dominic Bray told *The Times*, merely a singer, and could only have been giving the actual writer emotional support and editorial advice...plus a few bits of singers' gibberish he could have picked up from anywhere. In fact, I am apparently not at all the woman I think myself to be, but rather, an entirely different creature - one who didn't suggest the idea or write any significant part of the *Florence Foster Jenkins* screenplay for lack of skill, talent, time, health and inclination. These deficiencies were apparently accompanied by my well-known proclivity to pathological lying in my spare time. And why not? We all have our hobbies.

In all fairness, it must be said that someone is certainly lying, and they are paid to put across the notion that it is not their client. My husband gets annoyed with me. "Occasionally," he argues, "an hour's rest could be had in exchange for a white lie about our arrival time, and it wouldn't matter one jot." True, it's ridiculous to blurt out the literal truth without thinking. It's

borderline OCD behaviour, but a racing panic grips me if something isn't factually correct. It's a hard habit to break.

I stand accused of inventing years of collaboration, despite the existence of hundreds of pages documenting our work on various projects. The barristers don't know me from Eve, and they don't care. This is not about getting to the bottom of things. Their job is to show I'm the person they need me to be for their client's benefit. Their career status depends on it, and their time is valuable. The Judge will decide it all based on his own arbitrary perceptions of "credibility". My ex is an experienced screenwriter, though this is a first film for both of us. My only screenwriting credit thus far is the one my ex refuses to credit me with, the product of our three year relationship in a nutshell.

A few reporters have squeezed themselves into the cramped public seating area of Court 16. Watching them scribbling away doesn't fill me with anticipation of personal vindication. I'm somewhat beyond that. Last year, I flipped open *The Times* to page 2 to find this photo of myself in a demented rage.



photo by Denis Kelly

Contextual use of imagery must have been low on the editorial staff's list of priorities on that particular day. The article, titled *Opera movie has an encore in court*, puts my ex's Particulars of Claim straight into my mouth, placed between quotation marks and attributed to me. My formal complaint to the paper is met with an eventual retraction weeks later, in small print, online, where I doubt anyone ever saw it.

On the night this photo was taken in 2007, a couple of gents who'd had our Indianapolis Opera Magic Flute cast over for dinner the previous night met me backstage after the show. As one of them mumbled a few words of congratulations and looked at his shoes, the braver of the two examined me with a puzzled expression, as if he were only then seeing my true nature for the very first time. Taking an involuntary step away from me for safety's sake, he stammered, "Gawd..." and shook his head in disbelief mingled with outrage. "You were SUCH. A. BITCH!" Ah, yes, that I was! The Queen of the Night is not opera's most notorious villainess for nothing. That must have been the sort of reaction *The Times* was going for? Demented rage sells papers. He said/she said, not so much.

My Queen's Council sweats profusely under his black robe and Hanovarian, which has remained unchanged since Humphrey Ravenscroft patented a wig that didn't require dousing with scented potions in 1822. I'm not convinced. We could all use a good douse with something or other. It is hot and airless. To prove his status as Florence Foster Jenkins' husband, the real-life Bayfield St. Clair arrived in court with a pile of love letters spanning some three decades for the court to peruse. It must have been a great dramatic gesture, but I'd like to see him try it here! The evidence of our collaboration remains safely clipped into giant plastic folders which have been placed on a round metal shelf. I can only hope the judge will open the files. I am as in

control of the process as I was in control of Hurricane Irma several weeks prior...I'd better start "hunkering down".

Calamity 2 – Hurricanes, Shootings and Bombs, Oh My!

Admittedly, our departure from London to Tampa could have been better timed. It was still too early to know the exact trajectory of Hurricane Irma and so too early to cancel our eagerly-anticipated working holiday in the run up to my Florence Foster Jenkins trial. Within a day of our arrival, airline tickets out of Tampa, or anywhere else in Florida, became impossible to snare - seats sold out or became profanely overpriced.

In our first days, my husband Robin and I alternated between frantic stockpiling as warnings poured in and basics dwindled in the supermarkets, and what we came here for: white powder sand beaches leading to a nature preserve, a paradise if you can stand the lingering intense heat of early September in the Gulf of Mexico.

At the shops, heaving shelves of bottled water emptied while only bits of well-travelled posh fare from Iceland or Fiji were left, the last drops of liquid security. And then, there was none. Daily, we made the rounds and bought what was available as supermarkets attempted to keep up with demand from panicked hoarders. Rumours of where to find precious supplies spread by hurriedly-whispered word of mouth, but the consignments were usually gone by the time we reached the shops minutes later.

From the shore, we watched pods of dolphins glide along, fishing the coast, as sea birds bombarded the water like arrows before re-emerging with small fry in their beaks. We'd never seen the Gulf so alive. Maybe they too were stockpiling.

Just as we finished stuffing the fridge and cupboards to breaking point, a mandatory evacuation order was issued for all residences on the coast. The exodus began in spite of forecasts that fluctuated wildly from day to day - landfall could either be on the East coast or the West, go straight through the middle of the state of Florida, or turn out to sea, sweep through as a Category 5 or 4 or 3 or 2 or even Category 1 hurricane, or diminish to a tropical storm by the time it arrived in Tampa Bay. Waves could surge to mass destruction levels or a dribble, rain could flood or piddle. Power could be lost any minute or not at all. Phones may or may not work, with or without internet.

Being optimists, fools, or both, we continued to imagine the hurricane would change course at the last minute, as it had done on many other occasions. Tampa Bay had been quasi-miraculously spared for almost a century. Two days before the storm, a neighbor offered us shelter in a motel in Kissimmee. The next day, we turned on The Weather Channel and saw that Kissimmee was directly in the eyewall of Hurricane Irma's path. We laughed, relieved at our prescient rejection of the well-meaning but unfortunate invitation. The following day, Irma's trajectory swung back to Tampa Bay.

The roads quickly became clogged with cars full of people who didn't know whether they were running to or away from safety. They obeyed droning announcements from officials who repeated information at odds with variable and uncertain weather models from around the world. Finally, as the evacuation orders spread to encompass 6.3 million Floridians and the hurricane

was hours away, the Governor of Florida relented and asked everyone to get off the roads. Gas stations had no more fuel. Nobody wanted to be stranded in a car during the most powerful hurricane to hit Florida in living memory. It was certainly an effective exodus deterrent for us.

By the time a hit became a near certainty, it was too late to leave Regatta Beach Club. Along with a small number of residents in a concrete apartment building dating from and emanating the aesthetic of the cold war, we decided to ride out the storm and defy the mandatory evacuation order - a level 2 misdemeanor offense. Will there be arrests, we potential future convicts wondered? We finally decided the cops had better things to do than chase us around the beach just then, but we made ourselves scarce when the police circulated around our neighbourhood. Nobody who stayed believed our building would collapse, including the resident policeman, whose car remained stubbornly parked out front throughout. The paranoia of the Cuban Missile Crisis era made for solid construction.

The day before Hurricane Irma made landfall in the Florida Keys, we stepped out onto a seemingly virgin beach. Everyone who was leaving had gone, and the few who remained must have had more practical things on their minds. We walked to Caledesi, a protected nature zone and bird sanctuary amid mangroves and palms. Once far enough away from houses not to risk being spotted from a window, we nervously slipped out of our bathing suits and wrapped them around our arms in case we needed them quickly. We made for the water and slipped into the warm silk of the fragrant sea, perfectly still, and swam. Beyond time and civilisation, we took in a moment the likes of which we may never experience again.

Our Garden of Eden was interrupted by a small figure rapidly moving towards us. Startled, we fumbled our way back into our clothes in the water, not wanting to upset a God-fearing

American. A pair of oddly low-slung black shorts on tiny legs and a shock of white hair came nearer. Robin was about to greet their wearer when the mystery of his shorts revealed itself - the old man had lowered them, placing his family jewels over the waistband. He was strutting around completely exposed front and back, a wild grin glued to his face. Hurricane Irma had brought us all to a state of anarchy.

We strolled back to the building to find that the solitary egret we met sitting on the pool railing on our way out had company. Together, the flock was taking over the pool area, filling the carefully filtered and chlorinated water with feathers and avian excreta. If we humans were to destroy ourselves as a species, the natural world would have a field day playing on our glorious, artificial landscape. We wouldn't be missed.

That night, we had our final meal before the storm on my parents' balcony. Bits of steamed Tanner crab dipped in melted butter mixed with strands of my flying hair, whipped up by rogue winds and beyond control.

As the hurricane made landfall in Florida on Sunday, television broadcasters raced to out-report each other from inside the storm. They stood strong against the lashing rain and wind lunging with knees bent, shouting into their microphones, demonstrating all they were warning us never to do. It didn't look safe. Nor sane.

Those outlaw residents of Regatta Beach Club who had not spent the morning getting sozzled gathered for an afternoon meeting in the club room. In a fit of anxiety, everyone brought their pets - dogs ran amok, a rabbit looked on, munching grass from the safety of its cage. There was no agenda as such, apart from the airing of grievances. Water was everyone's main preoccupation. Not so much the kind predicted to surge from the sea, but the sort that could be

switched off at the mains by zealous guardians of order in the building. The board of directors had been threatening for days to turn water off as a precaution, lest a pipe should burst and the insurance company refuse to pay the bill. The threat of self-inflicted harm from a board more averse to litigation than to causing the residents severe discomfort led to an uproar. We filled bathtubs, bottles, jars, pots, glasses, cups and anything else that could hold liquid to the top in anticipation of unflushable toilets and sponge baths. My mother, herself a director of the board, fought it out on our behalf from Ohio. Everyone had their own worried friends and relatives waiting for updates and fussing on social media. Hurricane Irma had spread its tentacles throughout the globe.

At the end of the meeting, we the brave and/or stupid looked around, hoping to be reassured by each other's confident faces, before scattering back to our flats to "hunker down" for the night, as everyone was calling it. The only decision to emerge from our gathering had been to put name tags on our doors - a resolution forgotten by the time we got upstairs. Our neighbour across the hall planned to sleep in the corridor with his wife. Another suggested hiding in an unused storage room, and ran off to find the key to its lock. Others were discussing wedging their doors open, fearing they wouldn't be able to open them if glass doors broke and the wind got in, which was in direct opposition to online advice urging us to close as many doors as possible to stop errant drafts. Many of us had put duct tape on our doors and windows before reading warnings to the contrary sent to me by my worried cousin in New York.

In our flat, we clung to the illusory connection to the outside world our television offered for as long as the power lasted, which was to be only a few more hours. Lights flickered once or twice, and we were swathed in darkness. Though increasingly hot and muggy without air

conditioning, cracking open a window was out of the question. The approaching hurricane was already creating a monumental ruckus on the 8th floor. Outside our windows, palm trees thrashed about, bending until they were almost horizontal. We attempted to go to sleep with the help of earplugs, but noise was superseded by the troubling sensation of protracted air turbulence like that in a bumpy plane, or the sensation of an ongoing earthquake. Our building was shaking and the bed was moving around. The sliding glass doors of our bedroom banged violently, and we worried they might give way, sending shards of glass flying at us. Genuinely frightened and low on bravado, we scurried into the smaller guest bedroom with less glass, clutching our flashlights. That made enough of a difference to fall asleep briefly, until two sets of alarms triggered by the power outage went off one after the other. Robin ran to dismantle them for sanity's sake, while I continued to clutch my pillow. Alarms had been going off for days adding additional stress to everyone's already frazzled nerves. Pinellas County accessed all mobile phones to send out half a dozen evacuation alerts daily accompanied by loud screeching noises we'd never known our mobiles to be capable of making.

By 6am, we were through the worst of it. We looked out at the aftermath as soon as any light appeared. For a moment, horrified, I saw the whole island completely submerged in a devastating tide. Then, as my eyes focused through the gray sheets of rain, I understood I had been looking at roofs of houses still intact.

In the morning, we walked down to the lobby where other residents were inspecting the damage. Some balconies were torn off and car windows shattered, but everyone agreed it had been a merciful hurricane, at least to us. We stepped out onto the beach; the sea was still boisterous. The sand was strewn with seaweed under a mountain of foam, which detached and

flew about like snow clusters. Hours before the storm, an anti-surge pulled the sea back to expose fields of conch shells that had never before been on dry land.

Prior to the power cut that continued to affect our whole area for days, when we were still happily tethered to our telly, a commercial came on that captured the spirit of our times. “In this dangerous world,” it said, “with its multiple threats from terrorism, illness, wars and natural disasters, it is crucial to protect your family.” We silently nodded our assent to the universal and inescapable anxieties of life. What wouldn’t we all give to be able to protect our families from harm? “That’s why we created our delicious range of pre-made long-life dinners, suitable for any occasion.” Apparently, to ensure your family’s wellbeing, you only need to add water. Would that it were so simple.

As we left the lobby, we ran into an older lady who had seemed especially nervous at the pre-hurricane meeting. I asked her how she was holding up. “That was underwhelming,” she replied, “The wind sideswiped my windows. I slept through the whole thing.”

After three days without electricity, the airport began flying planes in and out of Tampa. Though our own flight was cancelled, we booked another plane to Las Vegas in the nick of time. We were expected at an optical trade show, where Robin’s company exhibits annually. The hurricane adventure was almost enough to send us packing home. Robin was on the verge of booking our return flight back to London when I intervened. “We’ll be fine once we get there,” I tried to persuade him, “let’s complete the trip as planned.” Others from the Florida office were still stranded, and there was likely to be a staff shortage at the show.

From darkness penetrated only by candles, flashlights and police sirens, we arrived directly into the heart and soul of bling. Though not normally a destination of choice, we had rarely been

more relieved to arrive anywhere. The Tampa Bay sewage system was starting to back up due to the ongoing power outage, a radio announcer warned as we dropped off our rental car at the airport. That was definitely our cue to exit stage right.

The following morning, we woke up in fully air-conditioned comfort in a room high up overlooking the Strip. For the first night since we lost power, I had been able to breathe properly. The humidity of Florida and my asthma are not happy bedfellows, and the previous four nights had mostly been spent mulling over strategies the intrepid residents of this great state may have thought up to survive the heat prior to the advent of air conditioning. Now that we were back to artificially cooled civilisation, I yawned, stretched in bed and turned on the news.

The streets, our streets in Parsons Green, so familiar that watching them through a television screen created no sense of distance, were being filmed from every angle. Putney Bridge station, a three minute walk from our front door, was where the terrorist had gotten off the train. Parsons Green, the first stop on Robin's trajectory to his old spectacle factory in London's East End, was now the spot where the bomb exploded, mercifully only in part.

Days after we returned home, we watched in horror as footage of a lone gunman firing into a concert crowd in Las Vegas was broadcast around the world – the worst mass shooting in American history. Our stay in Vegas meant we weren't in Parsons Green, and vice versa.

Calamity, we outran you due to sheer dumb luck. Well, almost – one out of three isn't a bad average, and we got off with a light scare. We have dear friends who have made the decision to avoid large airports for fear of a terrorist attack. Unfortunately, they live in a flood zone.

Astronaut John Glenn, the first American to orbit the Earth – a risky business then and now, nearly “met Elvis” by slipping in his own bathtub. Elvis himself constipated to death. If it isn't

one thing, it's another. We'll take our chances and keep travelling, with all the cares in the world!