

Alex is dead . . .

Alex is dead. The words echoed down the telephone line, and my sister-in-law (husband's sister) was clearly distressed, despite the fact that she and Alex had been divorced for a good many years. My mind rushed back, back to the times we had spent together in our young married years. Alex was a character he could dance like a dream, light of foot and touch, yet firm enough to steer a dancing partner round a tricky dance floor, or even a golf course if the occasion arose.

In the golden years of early married life, we had enjoyed many fun times together such as couples in their 20's do. Alex was a Flight Engineer for one of the large passenger airliners and he had the looks, and the personality which, when linked to wearing a smart uniform, made too many women weak at the knees. He was also away from home for long stretches at a time, particularly when overseas crews were decentralized in Perth for example when he flew the Perth/Sydney/Perth legs of the flights to and from South Africa. All of this flashed through my mind as I drew myself back to the phone call, and caught the bit about Susan wanting me to accompany her and her now grown up children to Swaziland to identify Alex's body. Apparently he had not remarried and the children were now his closest relatives. They were in their early 20's and did not fancy doing this alone. "Yes, of course I will come," was my immediate reaction, never stopping to think about packing, flight bookings from Cape Town to Johannesburg, then a long car trip from Pretoria to Nelspruit, before going through the border and into Swaziland, and Manzini.

Shortly after my arrival in Pretoria, Susan received a phone call from someone called Saartjie saying she and Alex had been partners, had lived together for a while, although of late since having had a hip replacement he had been living in a caravan on someone's estate. She was, let us say, of the basic sort, who slurred down the phone line that whatever Alex had left was hers, and "they" would take matters into their own hands: the exact words being something like: "Hoor hier julle donners, as ek nie kry wat myne is nie, dan gaan daar groot moeilikheid kom ou suster, ek sê vir jou, groot moeilikheid." We shrugged our shoulders, "another crackpot for sure," and forgot all about Saartjie.

Susan had been advised by the mortuary in Manzini that identification of the deceased, by a family member was essential, then, and only then would permission be given for the body to pass through the border for transportation to Nelspruit. Why all this rigmarole? Why not bury Alex in Swaziland? Complications a-plenty.

- Alex was a Dutch Citizen, holding a Dutch Passport
- He had permanent residence in South Africa
- He was on a temporary residence visa in Swaziland.

Their thinking: either the Netherlands or South Africa had to do the necessary, but as he was not a Swazi citizen, and did not have a permanent residence permit to stay there.

The decisions lay somewhere between the family, the Netherlands and South Africa. Trust you Alex, I thought to myself, always the suave, debonair, ladies' man and at the end of the day all we ladies have to pick up the pieces. Well not pieces:

Red tape, red tape, miles and miles of red tape, necessitating calls to Manzini and the capable but implacable lady in charge there; calls to the funeral directors in Nelspruit, one of South Africa's leading companies the South African Funeral, Burial and Memorial Society. SAFUBUMS (what an unfortunate name I thought) as we struggled with sorting out suitable dates and times for the transportation of the remains to South Africa, to be followed by a memorial service in the Crematorium in Nelspruit.

"Let's move it people, let's get going," Susan urged and she, the two young people and I hit the road early on the appointed day, in order to reach the border post in Nelspruit before the rush of business people, taxis busses etc, descended on a two-manned post. Morris (the nephew) and Mandy (the niece) had said: "Aunty L, there are usually long queues as it takes time to go through the checkpoint, vehicle by vehicle, so we must leave early." Susan was somewhat subdued through all of this, but provided the standby travelling food most South Africans seem to enjoy: frikkadels, hard boiled eggs, cheese or ham sandwiches, crunchies (the kind made with oats, sugar and syrup) and a good flask of hot coffee. Joining the long snaking queue, anxiously looking at our watches, hoping we made it to the mortuary in Manzini, we absent-mindedly munched away, jaws working almost aimlessly, staring into space, saying nothing. God we looked like a bunch of cows in a meadow chewing the cud, or like one of those foolish looking baboons one sometimes sees, just sitting, staring, sitting.

Passport! Like a shot on a still night, jerked me out of my reverie, and getting out of the vehicle I walked towards the small window in an airless office, handed my document over, got it stamped and almost ran back to the car. We were late, we had to head through lunch-hour traffic in Manzini and find the mortuary.

Morris is a dab-hand at navigating, Mandy good at asking for directions, and we two "older ladies" sat in the back saying nothing, just following directions and instructions. Finally the mortuary. You have to be joking the ramp up to the building was almost perpendicular, so we left Morris to carefully drive and park the vehicle right outside the door. Meantime I had walked in to ask for Mrs.? Dr? "No actually it's Professor ..." was the swift answer. Begging your pardon Ma'am I thought as she took us through to her office.

"Now," she said, after studiously studying her rather large wrist watch in annoyance, clearly our tardiness had annoyed her, "who is the next of kin who will be identifying Mr. . . um ... Alexander Sch ... Schi .. how do you say this name?"

"Schkietekatt," I said.

"Schitt a what? No one has been able to deal with this matter telephonically as no one can pronounce this surname let alone spell it."

"Well, it's quite easy, it's like 'shoot a cat' in English, only it's in Dutch. Schkietekatt."

"Extraordinary, where do they get these names?"

"Oh don't you know? It's quite simple you see. A few hundred years ago, as with many nations the Dutch people identified themselves by their occupations, and sons then became the son of"

"Yes all very well"

I was not about to be silenced by this very tight lipped academic so just continued as though I had not heard her frustration, "It was decided that everyone should have a proper surname, and this is where the Dutch sense of humour comes in, as not thinking these names would become permanent, many of them chose outlandish names. For example there is one called Hoenderdos, do you know what that one means?"

"As I said, time is of the essence, so Morris being the son, and as Mrs. um"

"Sch kiet e katt," Susan said slowly and deliberately, "it is not that difficult if you really try."

"Yes, well, as the deceased was divorced, would you, Morris, do this please?" I noticed Morris looking very unhappy about this, so once again in a firm, no-

nonsense voice I said, "If the others are in agreement, I, being the sister-in-law, and having known the deceased very well, will, with their permission, do this for them."

All nodded in agreement, and so I was ushered into a chilly room. There was a rather high gurney standing in the middle of the room, and obviously a body covered with a sheet.

"Now," said our gallant professor, "we are in the presence of the dead, so please hold my hand while we say a prayer." That caught me off-sides, totally blew my socks off. Numbly I held my hand out. Immediately it was taken in a very firm, tight grasp, and she said, "When you are ready."

"When I am ready? What kind of a prayer are you and the deceased wanting?"

"In our tradition we respect the dead, treat them with kindness, and revere them."

If only you had known Alex, I thought, charming, playboy, lover of all, irresponsible, the eternal Peter Pan in a James Bond suit.

More pressure on my hand, "when you are ready!!"

You want a prayer sister, you are going to get a prayer, it went something like this as I recall.

"Dear Lord, the two of us, plus the other three in the waiting room, are gathered here together today to identify the remains of your child Alexander, Wilhelm, Deiderik, Sybrand Schkietekatt, born in Holland, lived and worked in South Africa, died in Swaziland. (Well you never know if there was perhaps another Alexander, Wilhelm, Deiderik, Sybrand Schkietekatt somewhere, you just never knew, best to be clear on that one). We ask that you do as you have promised in Psalm 23 (recited the entire Psalm) and surround him with understanding and love (first Corinthians chapter 13 in its original form), and bring him to your everlasting light (The Nicene Creed, the Lord's Prayer). I could sense the Prof fidgeting next to me, so quietly added in conclusion: Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep and if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."

A sigh from next to me. "Is that it then?"

"Well ... yes, you want more?" me thinking, what other parts of the bible do I know well other than the Sermon on the Mount and the beatitudes.

I closed my eyes and began ... "Blessed are ..."

A clearing of her throat next to me, "Enough, enough, I think that's done now, let us get on with the identification." Mmm what happened to reverence and respect I wondered?

She gently slipped the sheet from Alex's face, and there he was, much older, with less hair, and very, very cold and blue. I would recognize him anywhere, and was suddenly overcome with a great sense of sadness for all that could have been, with him, Susan, and we, the family he had married in to. Bending over I lightly kissed his cheek, and yikes, my lips stuck to part of the cheekbone.

"Prof, prof, I'm stuck here!"

She rattled off something in her native language, and then said, "I did not know they had the refrigeration plant set that low. I shall have to get a swab to melt some of the crystals which you are sticking to." A swab? Crystals? Alex you swine, you have done it again, I can just hear you chuckling, "aha Louise, welcome to my little possie."

Lips unstuck, I bid Alex a fond farewell, "See you in Nelspruit tomorrow."

Relating all this to the other three had them speechless, followed by laughter which became quite hysterical as their imaginations took over, and they said, "Frozen to Alex? Frozen??", and then, "Geez Aunt talk about breaking the ice with dad!" Our hotel in Manzini was a solace and respite after the day's activities.

We made a little pilgrimage first thing the next morning, to visit the caravan where Alex had spent his last days. There was a sense of melancholy, sadness clung to the very air we breathed. Mandy found her Dad's briefcase which is what she wanted in terms of documentation and information. A quick search found nothing further of great import. Morris took his dad's peaked cap. Outside the caravan door a magnificent bush of strelitzias was growing. Turning to Susan I said, "Lets pick some of these to take with us. They are so beautiful and will bring some joy into what is going to be a sad day." So we did, tall, colourful dignified strelitzias, about 10 of them. A reminder of Alex.

We then swiftly headed for the border post and our early appointment with SAFUBUMS in Nelspruit. The memorial service was planned for 11a.m., not that we expected many people, but this was for us, the family, more than for anyone else. Susan and I had been travelling in our denims, so we needed a pit-stop - we needed to change our travelling gear for something more appropriate. Long queue

at the garage restroom door, long wait to get in, then only ONE toilet. We decided to do this together. Not sure what the unseen spectators thought of comments like:

“Ow your elbow’s poking me the neck, oh no, it’s your knee, how did you get up on to the seat so quickly.”

“Quick I need to pee, move, move out of the way.”

“Where do you think I should move too, no space here to do anything.”

We left the little room, twisting our clothing into the right positions, and passing some very quizzical faces on the way.

The office of the South African Funeral, Burial and Memorial Society was a rather imposing single floor affair. We were ushered into a waiting room where heavy drapes clouded the windows, piped music filtered through the air-vents, breathing was slow and labored, and my demeanour became rather militant as a reaction to all of this advertised agony.

Finally, a Mr. Pistorius oozed his way around the corner and straightening his spectacles on his nose he held out a limp, damp hand, “Welkom almal, welkom. Ons gaan nou alles vir julle organiseer soos telefonies bespreek.” Clearly this person was not bilingual as he had assured us he was. As it happens the four of us are completely bilingual, so it mattered not if he spoke in Afrikaans, but he seemed to ignore this when it suited him.

Susan said, “Well could we go into your office please, to finalize matters?”

“Uh, oh yes, yes of courrrrse, step with me please.”

We arranged ourselves on two chairs and two bankies which had to be found in a hurry.

“First things first,” said Pistorius, who is paying for this, I must have the money first, before we can procedure.”

“Proceed,” I said. “Yes, procedure with the procedure.”

“I will do that,” from Mandy, “how much is the total cost.”

“Yes, well I can give you the first price now, but there will be added on costs when the body arrives here.”

“What?” four voices in unison.

"Well, it's a bit of a problem you see. Our hearse, after leaving the border post was in a hurry, no I mean the driver was in a hurry to get back home. He did not see a motorcyclist on the road in front of him ... no that man on the bike, he is good, he is quite fine no injuries to speak of, dank Vader, ons sou sommer so diep in die dinges gewees het as hy beseer was ... but our hearse, well in avoiding the bike he swerved, yes swerved, right off the road, hit a tree, and the back door flew open, the coffin rolled out, and ... well they are looking for the coffin now, and we have to rent a bakkie to finish the trip."

Stunned silence.

"Bakkie? Bakkie? And what on earth do you mean they are looking for the coffin now?" from me.

"Well I haven't heard from the driver, and the last report was that it was very dark when this incident happened, and the coffin must have rolled down a hill, and now they (he called some others on their way to work to help him) are looking for the coffin. Ek hoop die lyk is nog daar binnekant, mens weet nooit nie."

"Wat se jy van die lyk?" Oops he looked sheepish clearly having forgotten that we understood and spoke both languages. "Well, let us just be brave and wait a few minutes, but in the meantime dametjie, here is the invoice for the basic fee."

She look questioningly at Susan and me. Susan raised her eyebrows as if to say "What do you think?" I thought a moment and then said, "Yes Mandy, pay the basic fee now, get a receipt and a full invoice which obviously includes the transporting of the remains safely to Nelspruit. That was the initial request, and quote."

Obsequiously Pistorius got out his receipt book, checked Mandy's cheque carefully, then handed her the detailed invoice together with the receipt. "Dis nogal duur veral noudat julle ook die doodskis sowel as die lyk verloor het, maar toemaar ons sal wag."

"Oh," I added "if there is any damage to the body, which being frozen could easily happen,

I will be taking this matter further, and I will want to inspect the remains when they arrive."

"Ja, well, you have to identify the deceased for our records." Here we go again I thought, and I could not help adding, "Do you think I will be able to, considering this

shocking service, his fall from the hearse, his exploding out of the coffin like a thunder cracker and landing god only knows where? For your sake Mr. Pistorius, I do hope there is no serious damage.”

A rubbing of hands, and another phone call.

“I have moved the time of the service on to 2 p.m. now, to give us time to settle these matters,” said our undertaker from hell.

“Fine, please then ensure that the minister you have organized is available at 2 p.m. as well, and you do remember I requested an English minister.”

“Uh, minister? M-i-n-i-s-t-e-r? English? No you asked me to organize an English organist I know nothing about a minister.”

This was the last straw for me, “Now look here Mister Pistorius, I have run out of patience with you with SAFUBUMS and the entire bloody lot. What in hell difference does it make if the organist is Chinese, or German, he/she is playing the organ. But, the Minister who is doing the memorial service obviously has to be English. What do you not understand about this? Surely it is your function to organize a man of the cloth for a memorial service being held in your own crematorium when asked to?”

“Uh, it seems like my secretary gave me the wrong information, the organist she is ready but no minister.”

At this point there was a sharp knock on the door, a whispered exchange of words, “Mr. Schkietekatt is now with us in Nelspruit, and please to come and identify the remains.”

By mutual consent I was again asked to do this, so following Pistorius down the passage I was conducted into yet another cold, death-like room. When Alex was uncovered I could see that his face was somewhat misshapen, as compared with the previous day in Manzini, so I asked for the sheet to be rolled down to reveal arms and up to reveal legs. It was evident that Alex in his frozen state must have had a rollicking ride down the hill, but ... there was no way the family was to know of this.

“Mr. Pistorius, I identified this man yesterday in Manzini. I can assure you he did not look as he does today. And the fragments of his coffin in a plastic bag next to the gurney are proof of this. So, you will say NOTHING to the family. I will say NOTHING

to the family. They will be told that all is well. But ... you will provide another coffin, you will ensure that his cremation takes place as soon as possible, and you will not ask for one cent more, not one. If you do, then your superiors will hear of this, as will all the South African newspapers. You will also organise for a minister to be present at the sanctuary at 2 p.m. to conduct the service."

Mr. Pistorius managed most of these requirements, but sadly no minister could be found. Suddenly Morris, Mandy, Susan and I were going to have to do something to bid Alex farewell. Fingernail biting stuff, but ... we had come this far.

Arriving at the chapel, Strelitzias intact, we found a kind man sweeping the floors.

"May I have a vase for these flowers please? And do you know the correct format for a memorial service?"

I can give you a bucket for the flowers. If we put them on the floor, they are tall enough to be seen, but the bucket won't be so obvious, and I am a retired chaplain, would you like me to conduct this for you?"

Oh joy, oh relief, oh thank you God and all the saints.

The silence before the chaplain reappeared was shattered by the roaring of a motorcycle.

Standing in the doorway were a few people, leather studded jackets, crash helmets, tattoos everywhere, smoking, and looking at the largest of the men in a safari suit, I noticed a revolver stuck into the top of his sock.

In my view the 3 family members had had enough and then some. I marched up to them and enquired who they were. "Oh I am Saartjie, and this is my man. And I have come to bury Alex, and to claim what is mine, and you can't stop me."

Turning to the revolver-carrying slab of meat I said, "Are you aware that this is a house of God? And no firearms are allowed within these walls. So either you leave your revolver outside, and come in or you and your revolver leave."

I must have looked as though I meant business, reluctantly he whispered to Saartjie that she should be careful of these people, and not take any crap.

The chaplain conducted a lovely, impromptu standard kind of memorial service. I had written a eulogy for Alex which I presented, the last prayer was said, and it was all over.

Well not quite. It took three months, a few curt letters, and finally one to SAFUBUMS head office to learn that Alex had been cremated, but only 3 weeks later, and as requested his ashes were scattered by the kindly chaplain in their garden of remembrance.

Saartjie was another story, she sent lawyer's letters, demands, queries, threats and even a private eye to claim the "millions" she said Alex had, and that part of this was owed to her for a property deal. It took time, but all was finally dismissed, Saartjie being given the caravan Alex had stayed in, no one quite knowing to whom it belonged and a warning from her local magistrate to keep well away from anything to do with the Schkietekatts.

And Alex? Well every time I see strelitzias growing proud and tall, I see Alex in his flight engineer's uniform, I hear his deep chuckle, and I try to dismiss the image of his body in the Nelspruit undertakers cold room.

Julie Hattingh

Editor's note: This is a perfect example of truth being stranger than fiction. All the events in this story actually took place. Only the names of the people have been changed. The facts have been reproduced with the consent of the family.