

## Why I didn't go to my mother's funeral (or Dad's)

### Hannah Betts



This is the age of the no-fuss funeral: "direct cremations" in which the undertaker merely takes the body to be processed sans mourners, who then take possession of the ashes. No wreaths, no chaps in top hats, no gothic am dram whatsoever. David Bowie's relatives opted for this policy, and it is on the rise thanks to the number of atheists, people who can think of a better way of spending 9,000 quid, and those with an aversion to Victorian high camp. I'm all of the above. I didn't go to my father's funeral a year ago, nor my mother's two summers ago, and I have no intention of attending my own.

I am an extremely Protestant atheist — that is to say, I have a phobia of ceremonial exhibitionism and a distaste for the pomp considered obligatory at funerals as at weddings. At both, I fail to understand why participants feel compelled to enact so much fabricated tradition, as if naiffness were the only salve to the emotions. I'll go to a funeral to support a friend. Otherwise, my likelihood of turning up will be in inverse proportion to my grief: the more I love you, the less likely I will be prepared to manifest my misery.

My first opportunity to become a funeral refusenik came with my mother, marking the beginning of my improvising a way towards some personal death ritual. Pagan that I am, I craved bodily contact. As she lay there, an absent presence in her hospice bed, I laid my cheek against her still-warm skin, losing myself, animal-like, in her scent. I visited her body three times before her cremation, needing to see her face tighten about its features, to feel the skin of her hand pucker. Her dead face haunts me, but I had to see it to know that life was spent.



So many people told me that I would regret not attending my mother's funeral. I never have. Once I'd ascertained that my father felt no need for my presence, I could make my own wretchedness paramount. This was compounded by messages

## I've devised my own formula for mourning

from a genre I now recognise as the "funeral groupie" to the effect: "So looking forward to it. Can't wait to see you!" As if my mother's demise were the social event of the season. My desire to punch said individuals remains strong.

Instead, I saw off my siblings in the hearses, went back into the silent house and sought out my mother's jewel box — jewel being rather an optimistic term for an assembly of name tapes, milk teeth and Christmas cracker trophies. Slowly, I went through each lacerating relic, until the battered crown my sister sported on her sixth birthday felled me. My nephews and nieces came to join me, each claiming their heirloom, while they reminisced

about the minuscule white-bread sandwiches she would make for them when they were toddlers.

Good deaths are possible, but neither of my parents achieved them. My father died a year later, in equally traumatic circumstances. I'd always known I might not attend his funeral — too much love to make my torment a spectator sport. Instead, I cleared the bath where he had died a few hours earlier and laid myself in it. Next morning, we adult children sat round drinking tea, laughing and sobbing, a sort of impromptu, gay sitting shiva.

Once again, I craved a body — his body — despite the undertakers warning me I might not be able to face it. I held his hand, kissed his face, talked about how ridiculous he'd find my addressing a corpse. Finally, I placed my mother's nursing scarf under his head, a passage from Shakespeare in his palm and coins for Charon on his chest, in a pouch prepared by my brother.

Had the funeral not been imminent, I would not have been able to leave. While the others were at the service, I wrapped myself in his sweater, despite its being July. The children again came to join me for more sandwich talk and we discussed the different way these deaths hurt. "I loved my mother desperately," I told them, "but he was my person." "He was my person too," said Harry, while Bryn and Issy decided that she had been theirs.

Over these past two painful summers, I appear to have devised my own secular formula for mourning: tea, body, children and damn anyone whose sense of propriety demands otherwise. When my turn comes, I would like the transition from corpse to jam jar to being sprinkled in Claridge's Fumoir to be rapid and unmarked, everyone handling it in their own particular way. With tiny sandwiches for those that want them.

## Let's talk about S-Town

When did we become podcast addicts? Yes, it was October 2014, when *This American Life* began its cult 'cast *Serial*. Since then, audio rather than television has

yielded our watercooler moments, plot spoilers being the bane of the yet-to-catch-up.

*S-Town*, *This American Life*'s latest, was downloaded more than ten million times during its first four days. So culturally dominant is it that — if you haven't already got the bug — you're going to need conversational gambits to employ at dinner parties.

The place to start would be: "Where *Serial* reignited our collective true-crime obsession, so *S-Town* is a true crime with no crime in it. Instead," you might hazard, "it spirals into literature. We're accustomed to reality television; here is novelised reality."

You must then enthuse over its hero, John B McLemore, "the genius fool at the

heart, and on the edge of the Alabama community he despises", riff about the "nuanced incidental characters", and conclude with admiration for the way "the story pulses between the micro and the macro: the 'Shit-Town' of the title and an ever shittier America". All of which should ensure that you are never invited again.

# Me and my big

## After the rebel's death, his siblings swore a vow of silence. Now one has broken it. By Daniel Masoliver

It was 47 years before Juan Martin Guevara felt ready to make the 1,600-mile pilgrimage from his home in Buenos Aires to La Higuera in Bolivia, where in 1967 his brother Ernesto "Che" Guevara was surrounded, captured and killed by the Bolivian army. The youngest of the five Guevara siblings, Juan Martin had hoped to better understand his eldest brother's final days, but was unprepared for the scene that greeted him.

"This was a wild place, right up in the mountains, and yet what I found there was like a fair," he recalls. "It was full of tourist shops selling anything and everything to do with Che, from CDs and stamps to paintings. The atmosphere was somewhere between commercial and religious — two things Che passionately was not. It was totally inappropriate and against everything Che had fought for."

Juan Martin was in his teens when his brother, who was 15 years his senior, played a pivotal role in overthrowing the dictatorship of General Fulgencio Batista and establishing the communist Republic of Cuba. Over the years, he had grown used to seeing Che T-shirts worn by rebellious teens; Che flags waved by activists on the political left; Che tattoos inked on the bodies of everyone from Diego Maradona to Mike Tyson. Yet for all the prevalence of this iconic image, it wasn't until the experience in Bolivia that it dawned on him that his brother's ideals had been diluted and distorted for commercial purposes.

"He was totally against taking advantage of his position for personal gain. If he'd seen this place, he would have hated it. That's why I was so shocked," says Juan Martin, 72. As a result, he has decided to break the vow of silence about their brother's life that he and his two surviving siblings had made — a pact made partly out of respect, partly so that they couldn't be accused of profiting from the relationship. "Che's image is one of the most recognisable in the world," he says, "but it's also one of the most manipulated. I want to take this image and give it back its meaning."

Juan Martin has co-written a book, *Che, My Brother*, with the French journalist Armelle Vincent, but he admits that even within the pages of what is a lively, rich and personal — if highly politicised and hagiographic — portrait of one of the most famous figures in 20th century history, the lines between the myth and the true nature of the man get blurred. "You get this sense that all of us at home, growing up, were looking at this brother of ours believing he was this formidable person. That we somehow knew he was destined to become Che.

But it wasn't like that — I don't remember him as my exceptional brother, he was just my fun older brother. The one who would wind me up and play games with me."

Juan Martin is, however, often guilty of talking about Che with the same saintly reverence he abhors in others. He won't be drawn on his brother's flaws — or rather, he sees none. In his book, he will say only that Che's biggest fault was how he struggled to express just how fully he loved his family and friends. On the rumours that Che, who was married twice, was an inveterate womaniser, Juan Martin is circumspect. "He was a womaniser in as much as he loved women, but he didn't surround himself with women, or go out trying to seduce them." He does at least acknowledge his brother's magnetic appeal. "In the countryside in Argentina at that time, there were these so-called 'night lamps' which burned with a hot white light and would attract all the bugs that flew by. Well, they would often refer to Che as 'Night Lamp'."

This hero-worship is understandable — by the time Juan Martin was at school, Che was already embarking on various adventures around Latin America. "Ernesto was always travelling," says Juan Martin, who spent relatively few years living under the same roof as Che. "For that reason, I loved it when he was home."

It was at home that the foundations for Che's activism and idealism were fostered. "In my house, you didn't talk, you debated. No one was right until they'd proven it to be so," says Juan Martin. "I remember coming home

## He loved women, but he didn't go out trying to seduce them

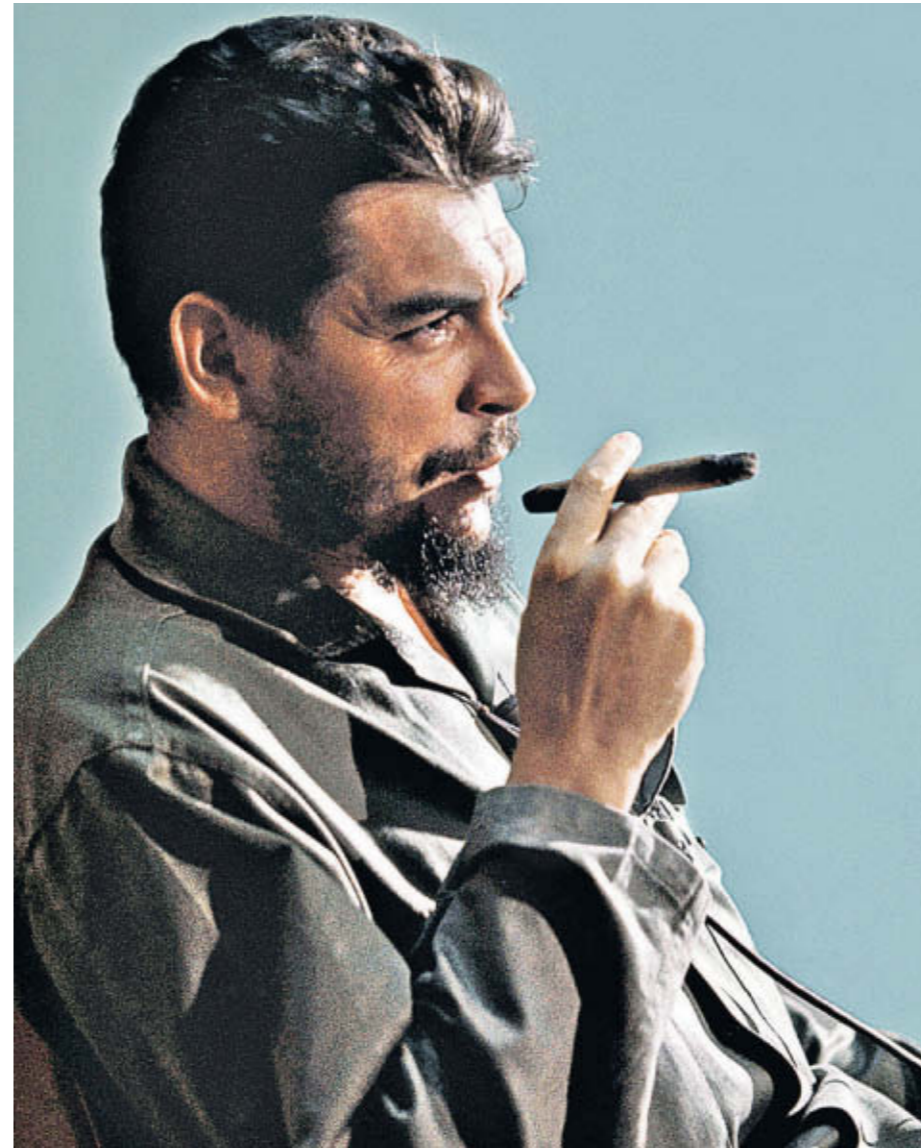
from school and telling my siblings what I'd learnt, only for them to tell me my teacher was wrong. Suddenly I'd have to defend what my teacher had said against Ernesto and the others. It was our way of relating with one another."

They were a close-knit family, partly because they were estranged from the wider Guevara and (on the maternal side) de la Serna clans. Both sides of the family were well off and well connected, with wealth going back generations and holding some of the most important roles in Argentine society. While Che and the Castro brothers were falling foul of the Mexican authorities in the months leading up to the Cuban revolution, Che's parents would receive news of their son from a cousin, who was the Argentine ambassador in Cuba.

Yet the immediate Guevara-de la Serna family didn't benefit from this familial privilege. "We weren't a proletarian family; neither of my parents were labourers. But neither did we have the aspirations of the middle classes," Juan Martin says. "We didn't want a better house, or a better car — we didn't even own a car! Ours was a studious family; for us, wealth

# brother — Che Guevara

ELLIOTT ERWITT/MAGNUM PHOTOS; M LUCESOLE & S ZUCCHERU/GETTY IMAGES LATAM



Juan Martin Guevara and, left, his brother Che in 1964

was knowledge." And of all the siblings, young Ernesto, he says, was the most studious, always with a book in his hand. His progress through medical school was delayed only by his regular months-long excursions.

It was only during his six-year absence, which would culminate in armed revolution, that the family realised that Ernesto would not be coming home soon — and perhaps never. "When they arrested him in Mexico [in the summer of 1956], we realised this wasn't just another adventure," says Juan Martin.

Guerrilla warfare was hardly conducive to open channels of communication, so what little word the family had of Che came from newspapers. Juan Martin remembers at least four occasions when they were confronted with the (erroneous) news of Che's death. This period of intermittent mourning and continuous distress took an enormous toll on the family.

By late 1959, after the Cuban revolution, Che had gained international notoriety and was being heralded as a hero in his adoptive Cuba. As a surprise for his comrade, Fidel Castro flew Che's entire family to Havana. "When we landed there, that's when the penny dropped that Ernesto had become Che," says Juan Martin. "It was as if he was someone

else. He was someone else. People looked at him with awe and spoke to him with respect. He was a commander." Gone was the bookish boy they remembered, with his mismatched shoes and ill-fitting shirt hanging out the back of his trousers, and in his place was a man in a crisply ironed military uniform.

On his return from Havana, Juan Martin became involved in various leftwing groups and not much later Che left his job as Castro's minister of industry, once again taking up arms, first in Congo, later in Bolivia. It was a dangerous time to be a Guevara. During a state visit to Argentina, Castro had dropped in on the family home. The next day, the walls of the house were sprayed with bullets. On a separate occasion, a bomb was discovered on their stairwell — a teenage Juan Martin raced down the stairs and cut the wick on the fuse.

Juan Martin maintains that the dangers his family faced were not down to their name, but their increasing levels of activism. His own imprisonment came years after Che's death, when in 1975 he was held as a political prisoner for almost nine years for his membership of the socialist PRT party. His book describes the squalid conditions in jail, but he says he was one of the lucky ones.

Others were rounded up and shot or flown out over the Atlantic and dropped like rubbish into the ocean.

"In our family, faced with this sort of repression, there was no other way but activism," says Juan Martin. "I went to prison. My brother Roberto, who was a lawyer, defended me, and subsequently had to exile himself to Cuba for his own safety. My sister Celia exiled herself to Europe, where she became a human rights campaigner, drawing attention to the abuses occurring in Argentina. Of course our family was influenced by Che, but more than that we were influenced by the environment in which we were brought up."

When Juan Martin left prison he settled in Buenos Aires, where he has kept a relatively low profile. For Che's five children, growing up in Cuba, it was a different matter. "It was very difficult for them. Much more difficult being the child of Che than the brother of Che," says Juan Martin. "Their father was a symbol, and they bore its weight on their shoulders. They were held to different standards than their peers." Four of the five now grown-up children survive. All are involved in one form or another in preserving the memory of the father they hardly knew.

Juan Martin has taken on the role of publicising his brother's political ideology, of trying to breathe new life into the worn-out image of Che. So that people might not see him as a poster boy for a tame brand of bedroom rebellion and instead explore the 3,000-odd pages of political theorising that he published during his lifetime. "I'd like Ernesto to be remembered not just for being handsome or brave, but as someone who marked out paths." Juan Martin pauses to think. "People often say I must have lived my life in the shadow of Che, but they're wrong. I lived in his light." **Che, My Brother by Juan Martin Guevara, £20, is published by Polity**

## The lowdown

### Antonio's scented candles

Big news for fans of Antonio Banderas! He has a new candle range out.

Sounds like it must be hard times for the movie business. Is he doing a Gwyneth Paltrow and launching a lifestyle brand?

He could well be. But this is a little different because these mandles...

Sorry, what?

Mandles. Man candles.

Right.

Anyway, these mandles are the result of Banderas taking up a short course in menswear at Central St Martins two years ago. He's a proper designer. He's got cachet. Plus, he's already got a line of wallets and sunglasses and phone cases.

What's so special about these mandles anyway?

Amusingly, they're being advertised as "Antonio Banderas scented candles".

Does that mean they... smell of Antonio Banderas? Phwoar. That wouldn't be too bad. He probably smells wonderful — like musk and sweat. Essence of man.

Calm down, it's not quite that literal. When talking about his new merchandise he has stated obliquely that "the creation of your own personality is very important" and added that the scent has been "inspired by his passion for the Mediterranean".

I think we've all got a passion for the Mediterranean now, haven't we?

The candles cost £19 a pop, so I suppose you could pick up a few.

Perfect for a sensual night in. Scented candle, glass of wine, silk sheets, blindfold...

Until it turns out the blindfold is the mask from Zorro, of course.

You just have to ruin everything, don't you?

Helen Nianias

