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AFTER ELECTRA

by April De Angelis

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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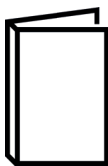
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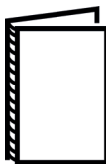


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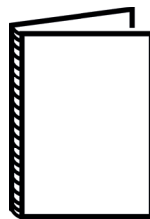
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



April De Angelis is an acclaimed writer whose extensive theatre work includes *My Brilliant Friend*, a two-part dramatisation of Elena Ferrante's epic family saga (Rose Theatre Kingston, 2017); *After Electra* (Theatre Royal Plymouth and Tricycle Theatre, 2015); *Rune* (New Vic Theatre Stoke, 2015); *Gastronauts* (Royal Court Upstairs, 2013); *Jumpy* (Royal Court, 2011, and Duke of York's Theatre, 2012, Melbourne and Sydney, 2015); an adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* (Birmingham Rep, 2008); *A Laughing Matter* (Out of Joint at National Theatre, 2001); *A Warwickshire Testimony* (RSC, 1999); *The Positive Hour* (Out of Joint at Hampstead Theatre, 1997); *Playhouse Creatures* (revived at Chichester Festival Theatre, 2013); and *The Life and Times of Fanny Hill* (revived at the Bristol Old Vic, 2015).

April has also written the libretto for *Flight* by Jonathan Dove, for Glyndebourne Opera; *The Silent Twins* libretto, which was set to music by Errollyn Wallen, Almeida Theatre, 2007; and *The Day After* at the ENO, 2017.

April's work for radio includes an adaptation of *Life in The Tomb* for BBC Radio 3 in 2014, a serialisation of *Peyton Place*, *Visitants* for BBC Radio 4, and *The Outlander* for Radio 5, which won the Writers' Guild Award in 1992.

TV work includes a BFI / Channel 4 commission, *Aristophanes*.

Photo credit: Johan Persson

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I was asked by Theatre Royal Plymouth to write a play for an older actress – because parts for older women tend to be thin on the ground and/or represent them as less than interesting, powerful characters. Too often older women are portrayed as sexless, absent-minded, eccentric – I wanted to write an older woman character who had passionately engaged in life as an artist, a friend and a lover; a character who was at the centre of her world and was daring and transgressive. I also wanted her to have a complex relationship with motherhood. That was how the character of Virgie came about. When I started to research artists, I came across the story of the painter Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1652). I wondered if she might be Virgie's inspiration as an artist. Gentileschi was raped as a teenager and later, in revenge, painted her famous work of Judith slaying Holofernes – using the image of her rapist for the General Holofernes. Virgie was responding to the anger and freedom in Gentileschi's work. Virgie's daughter, Haydn, feels she has paid a price for her mother's freedom. The play asks questions about the potential conflicts between motherhood and the freedom needed to be an artist.

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After Electra was first presented by Theatre Royal Plymouth Productions at The Drum, Theatre Royal Plymouth on 12 March 2015.

Scene One

Two women, VIRGIE (eighty-four years old) and her daughter, HAYDN (fifty-eight years old), stand in the room, HAYDN is smoking.

VIRGIE Would you like the photos?

HAYDN Not particularly.

VIRGIE I'll burn them.

HAYDN That's a bit extreme.

VIRGIE There's nothing sadder than seeing old photos in second-hand shops, gone irreversibly astray. I'm not subjecting Aunt Hilda and Uncle Bill to that. Having them smiling out at nothing.

HAYDN So you're going to immolate them.

VIRGIE Better than having them sniffed at by strangers. Picked up and thrown down carelessly.

Hilda was always so particular about what she wore.

HAYDN You might feel differently in a few months, want their company.

VIRGIE There's something spiritual in consigning them to the flames.

I saved everything; my feminist postcard collection; it begins when you sink in his arms, it ends with your arms in his sink. Interested?

HAYDN Naturally. I really do have room in my life for all sorts of pointless junk.

VIRGIE I'll burn that too then.

This is turning out to be marvellously straightforward. What did I think I was saving all this stuff for? Dragging it round for years and years.

How about a dining room table and four chairs?

HAYDN Stop engaging in termination behaviour. It's tasteless.

VIRGIE Do you want the car?

HAYDN For god's sake, you're not dying, are you?

VIRGIE No.

HAYDN Good. Can we get things on a more normal footing. You talk about things that don't interest me and I pretend to listen.

Then I can pop back onto the M25 feeling I've done my duty.

VIRGIE Visiting me must have been dreadful.

HAYDN Not really, I fantasise about the nice glass of cold Chardonnay waiting for me at home.

The bottle chilling in the fridge; gorgeous icy bloom on the green glass.

VIRGIE What's that, a breast substitute?

HAYDN Well I do qualify. By the way – happy birthday.

VIRGIE Thank you.

HAYDN *hands her a parcel.* **VIRGIE** *doesn't open it.*

Look, I don't think there's an easy way to tell you this so I'll just give it to you on the chin.

I'm going to kill myself.

Pause.

HAYDN Well, that really takes the fucking biscuit.

VIRGIE Yes, sorry.

HAYDN What's brought this on?

VIRGIE Nothing. I've enjoyed my life. I've had a good innings. I've done everything I wanted to and I'd like to go now before things get any worse. I wasn't looking forward to the decrepit bit. My eyes aren't getting any better. My hands – can't hold a brush. I don't want to go ga-ga. It's my decision. It's perfectly rational. What I suggest is you accept it and we can get on with having our final day together. The weather's fabulous. Couldn't ask for better in September.

HAYDN For god's sake, Mother.

VIRGIE I want you to stay for the evening. Should be able to let you go by midnight.

The traffic will be better then, – I've invited a few close friends – those I've got left, and I'd like you to help me out – I need to prepare a lot of salads—

HAYDN Will you listen to yourself.

VIRGIE holds up her hand.

VIRGIE I actually managed to cut myself the other day, a knife slipped – “my thumb instead of an onion”! What a coincidence... So that's slowed me down considerably—

HAYDN If you're asking me to preside over some ghoulish scene of self-murder you are absolutely mistaken, I won't do it.

VIRGIE I'm asking you as a last request and if you say no, Haydn, I'll never speak to you again till the day I die. It may be a short silence but it will be profound, I guarantee.

HAYDN If I stay I shall be doing everything in my power to prevent you.

VIRGIE I didn't expect killing myself would be so demanding.

HAYDN You've only just scratched the surface.

VIRGIE I'm not doing this thoughtlessly. I googled it. “The intentional, sudden and violent nature of the loved one's death often makes those left behind feel abandoned, helpless and rejected”. That's what I'm trying to avoid.

HAYDN How are you going to do it? Dying's messy. Pills get puked up.

Jump in front of a train, you traumatise the driver.

Guns – do you really want other people wiping up your brains?

Knives hurt.

VIRGIE I thought about that. Look.

They look. The sea stretches before them.

I suddenly realised it was out there all the time.

HAYDN *looks at her mother looking at the sea.*

You won't need to bury me. I'm going to be eaten by fish.

I've eaten a lot of fish in my lifetime. I'd like to return the favour.

HAYDN That's preposterous.

VIRGIE I'm not asking you to do anything. I'm just letting you know.

Perhaps you'd like to walk out there with me. Leave me, don't look back.

It only takes a minute to drown. And living here I've often wondered, you know, what it would be like.

HAYDN You're depressed. Have you seen your Doctor Roberts?

VIRGIE He's got cancer.

HAYDN They'll have a locum. You need help.

VIRGIE I got old, Haydn. Get over it.

HAYDN starts to breathe shallowly. She is having a panic attack.

Have you swallowed a cigarette butt?

HAYDN finds it hard to breathe, she begins to stumble about.

You're not dying, are you? Trust you to steal my fire.

HAYDN manages to find a paper bag and begins breathing into it. She begins to calm down.

I've managed to live through a whole eighty-four years without seeing a panic attack and now on my last day ever! Well, I wouldn't have missed it. Most people would have cried. But you have an attack. What's that called?

HAYDN Conversion hysteria.

HAYDN slowly gets to grips with her breathing. VIRGIE watches her but does not help.

VIRGIE I didn't open my present!

How exciting.

She opens it. A book.

That's lovely. T'ai chi for beginners.

I don't think I'll be able to get through it by the morning. I intend to be intensively socialising. Perhaps you could take it back with you?

Pause.

Whatever.

I'm going to use the last of the lettuce from the garden. It's sublime.

Isn't nature wonderful? It's such a pity we're destroying it. How do you account for that? People are cunts?

Shall we start the salads?

HAYDN makes no move to help.

You were always so traditional. Let this be the day you make a departure from the predictable. You might discover a whole new you! I'm your mother and I love you. Trust me.

HAYDN You're perversely threatening suicide in my presence, I don't think that qualifies for adequate loving care.

VIRGIE You're fifty-eight how long was it supposed to go on – this mother thing? Surely there comes a time when my life is my own to dispose of how I please?

HAYDN Why couldn't you have just got it over with quietly then, instead of indulging in this display of theatrics?

VIRGIE Well, I prefer you being angry with me to all that Victorian panting into a bag.

HAYDN I haven't had an attack like that for years.

VIRGIE I suppose it's all my fault.

HAYDN Frankly, yes.

VIRGIE If you feel so badly about it perhaps you better go.

HAYDN I can't go, Mother, because I'll feel guilty for the rest of my life – what would have happened if I'd stayed – I could have prevented you, etc. etc. I'm trapped unless I can think of a way out. Ooh maybe I'll kill myself. Except I'm not a coward.

VIRGIE I'm not a coward, Haydn. I'm quite scared of water.

Pause.

HAYDN I know what this is about. You're frightened of getting sick and being on your own. I would have visited.

VIRGIE You know nothing.

HAYDN You've got everything to live for.

VIRGIE What have I got to live for? You don't like me, never have really. You've tolerated me and I've loved you, of course, because being a mother is like being a madwoman, you're visited by a kind of insane, boundless love for your children that has no known precedent.

HAYDN Is that why you left me with Bill and Hilda?

VIRGIE Summer in the countryside – wonderful.

HAYDN You abandoned me there.

VIRGIE I visited—

HAYDN —for two years.

VIRGIE Was it as long as that? Farm house Christmases, lovely.

HAYDN I cried myself to sleep.

VIRGIE I expressed my love in trying to change the world,
painting, that was my way, that was for you.

HAYDN Thank you very much. I was a child, I didn't appreciate
it.

VIRGIE It seemed selfish to you but I was surviving, spiritually.
I used to meet a lot of dead women at the shops.

HAYDN How did that happen?

VIRGIE Housewives. A lot of them zoned out on tranqs and
sherry. They only appeared living if you weren't looking
closely. I was an artist. I noticed. This is a trip down memory
lane.

HAYDN I'm not blaming you, you did the best you were capable
of, but kids need mindless secure routine.

VIRGIE Don't remind me. The tedium. Not your fault. You
were children, you couldn't help making the same endless
demands. Oh look, here are the first guests.

This is what the Romans did – have a feast and fall on their
swords. It's civilised.

HAYDN I'm just warning you, I will be doing all in my power
to disrupt.

VIRGIE You think you mind now, Hadyn, but I assure you,
really you'll be pleased. You've never liked me and you can
inherit the cottage. And there are a few paintings. You'll
have to forgive me and help out. It'll be cathartic.

*Enter a couple, TOM, sixty-nine, still handsome, and
SONIA.*

TOM Virgie!

They embrace.

SONIA Virgie, love.

VIRGIE Hello, Tom, hello, Sonia.

TOM Happy birthday to you but it is impossible, birthdays are wasted, you are immortal, ageless—

VIRGIE You're flattering me. You remember Haydn – my daughter.

TOM My god.

SONIA My god.

TOM Little Haydn. This is good, isn't it?

Wonderful. The light. For your painting.

SONIA Yes, it's very pretty.

VIRGIE Delightful, isn't it?

TOM You haven't changed, Virgie.

SONIA Tom's declaiming. He's been at the RSC.

VIRGIE Good for Tom.

HAYDN Virgie's got a surprise.

TOM God I hate surprises.

HAYDN You've come to the right place then.

SONIA Look at us – we've got your presents in the car, a crate of champagne.

You're not eighty-four everyday.

VIRGIE I shan't be drinking.

TOM I've heard that before.

VIRGIE I don't want to die drunk.

SONIA We're not suggesting you drink the whole crate alone and at once.

TOM Although it would be a laugh – we could help. Virgie’s always been very good value with a few beers down her.

VIRGIE Yes but I want to be stone-cold sober when I commit suicide. I don’t want anything going wrong. I don’t want to be doing it all over again on Monday morning.

Pause.

TOM I suggest we crack a bottle open now.

SONIA Tom – don’t you think we should react to what Virgie just said?

TOM I didn’t understand a word of what she just said, it didn’t make sense.

SONIA How do you survive as a bloody actor? Too busy thinking about what you’re going to say next, never listening. Well, she said – perhaps you could help me out here, Haydn, she said – is that what she said?

TOM We just want to clarify what you meant Virgie when you said...what you said.

HAYDN My mother is going into the sea and she’s not coming back.

TOM Are you swimming to France?

SONIA She’s eighty-four.

HAYDN She’s not planning to get that far.

TOM You mean you are...swimming...and swimming and not returning—

VIRGIE Yes. I don’t think swimming is the right word. I’ll be sitting at the confluence of tides. I just want to say goodbye properly. You mustn’t think of death in a grim way, it’s just a change from one form of existence to another.

TOM From warm, passionate, sensate life.

SONIA Surely you’re not describing yourself.

TOM To a lump of dead meat.

SONIA That's more like it.

TOM Christ, Sonia, is it going to be like this, we've only just arrived.

SONIA Virgie, could you confirm that you are going to—

VIRGIE Yes.

SONIA Oh god.

TOM What nonsense.

A pause.

What a bloody awful thing to do.

HAYDN Yes.

VIRGIE I want today to be a celebration—

TOM Oh my god my god my god my god my god.

VIRGIE —with the people that mean something to me.

Would you like a drink? A gin and tonic, some wine?

TOM My god.

VIRGIE Or a soft drink or a cup of tea, you have been travelling.

TOM It's not possible, I can't believe it, this is terrible news, I'm coming with you.

VIRGIE No no no.

TOM Yes.

VIRGIE Don't be silly, this is my exit.

SONIA Yes, don't be a cunt, Tom.

TOM A light will go out.

VIRGIE I know what I'm doing.

TOM What about Haydn?

VIRGIE What about her?

TOM You're her mother.

VIRGIE I am also a person in my own right.

Well, now we've got that out of the way, perhaps we can start.

SHIRLEY *enters.*

SHIRLEY Hello, hello everyone, it's me! I come to shower you with gifts.

She kisses everyone.

When does the fun start?

VIRGIE Shirley is my sister.

SHIRLEY Don't forget taller and younger.

VIRGIE Tom and Sonia are old friends. Tom lived with me years back.

SHIRLEY Lovely to meet you.

TOM We're all feeling a little put out, Shirley, because Virgie's decided she's going to kill herself.

SHIRLEY I don't think so.

VIRGIE Yes, I've got the order of events.

TOM That's a bit morbid.

VIRGIE Death is morbid. Tom?

TOM *takes it.*

TOM We have free time till drinks before dinner. There is a range of available snacks including a vegan alternative.

An optional stroll on the beach.

Dinner at seven thirty.

Followed by an address by each one of us to Virgie or, if we prefer, an entertainment of some sort.

Virgie addresses us.

Then we have the lighting of “the bonfire”.

Then we go home and Virgie tops herself. She’s underlined it, look. She’s gone mad.

SONIA Do you really think we’re going to sit by and let you do it, Virgie?

VIRGIE You’re my oldest friends, I expect you to respect my wishes.

SHIRLEY Someone get me a sherry, for Christ’s sake.

VIRGIE Dry or medium?

SHIRLEY I don’t fucking care at this juncture. Who can tell the difference after two glasses?

VIRGIE You’re not supposed to have more than two glasses, it’s an aperitif.

SHIRLEY Are these people living in the real world? Now, I want you to stop all this nonsense and let everyone breathe a sigh of relief and then we can all have a jolly time.

I must say, everyone’s looking shit.

VIRGIE We’re old.

SHIRLEY Sixty is the new thirty.

VIRGIE How exhausting. Go away, Tom and Sonia, go for a walk while I do the family thing.

SONIA Talk some sense into her.

TOM You should have told us what you were up to, Virgie, we’re not wearing the right clothes. This light jacket.

SONIA He doesn’t feel dressed for the part.

SHIRLEY Leave it to me.

TOM and SONIA *exit.*

They’re hard work. Well, I came. Husband said to me these things have to be done, these big occasions have to be marked.

VIRGIE How is James?

SHIRLEY Excellent. Retirement bores the arse off him.

VIRGIE And how's life as a lord?

SHIRLEY Well, it's what I was born for but I don't think we should get on to that side of things, do you?

VIRGIE I'm not afraid.

SHIRLEY Of the hurly-burly, no neither am I. Virgie, I've been looking forward to today – to be embraced in the bosom of my family and its banal everyday life, and you have to go and pull a stunt like this. Cancel it, will you?

VIRGIE Not everything happens at your convenience.

SHIRLEY Does usually. The perk of being an honourable.

VIRGIE Well, you're not one now, you're my sister.

SHIRLEY Yes, happy birthday.

She hands her an envelope.

VIRGIE What is it?

SHIRLEY It's a holiday in Venice.

VIRGIE I won't be going.

SHIRLEY Don't be silly, it's a Renaissance jewel – you want to see it before it goes underwater.

VIRGIE That thought would lessen the enjoyment for me. I don't want to see anything beautiful if there's a niggling feeling it might soon be thoughtlessly destroyed.

SHIRLEY I can assure you, drainage experts are working very hard to ensure that probably never occurs.

VIRGIE You don't know the first thing about drainage.

SHIRLEY I know, I always manage to pull something rhetorical out of the hat—

VIRGIE Well, it's very kind but I won't be in a fit state to travel. I'll be underwater myself before then.

SHIRLEY Oh come on, stop it, it's me, Shirley – stop posturing. I love you, Virgie, and we're sisters.

VIRGIE I'm a big enough person to be happy that you want to carry on for whatever reason – but I don't.

VIRGIE *hands her a sherry.*

SHIRLEY Don't think I can't see what you're doing, you've always been nasty and spiteful, and now you're belittling my life in this revolting way.

VIRGIE Sorry.

SHIRLEY You're not a bit sorry – you've got the upper hand for once and you're revelling in it – well, what a pathetic way to achieve power over another individual.

VIRGIE And you'd know nothing about that, of course.

SHIRLEY Is this some kind of political protest – because if it is, I'm not listening.

VIRGIE My god, why is everything about you?

SHIRLEY I know we haven't seen eye to eye over the years.

VIRGIE I don't want to look back over the past, it's dreary.

SHIRLEY That's all you've got now.

VIRGIE I've got today, that's all anybody's got.

SHIRLEY I want your word that you'll drop this.

VIRGIE No.

SHIRLEY Or we'll have to have you sectioned, (to HAYDN) won't we?

VIRGIE Is that a threat—

SHIRLEY Of course. It's always something with you, Virgie. Do you remember, Haydn, the naked protest?

HAYDN Yes.

SHIRLEY When they spelled the word peace on Foulness. Virgie was the exclamation mark. That was bloody embarrassing. I was entering the upper house and my seventy-nine-year-old sister was flashing her bush for demilitarization.

HAYDN That's her right, after all.

SHIRLEY But it's all part of the same thing. A deliberate attempt to unsettle. Like this – now.

VIRGIE Not only do we have to suffer the mess politicians create but we're imprisoned when we try to leave it.

SHIRLEY Don't blame the state of the world on politicians – we're the last people that can be held responsible – we don't have the power to change anything really.

VIRGIE One wonders why you bother getting up in the morning. I don't want to argue with you, Shirley, life's too short, especially mine.

SHIRLEY I refuse to let you passively aggressively blame me in some way.

VIRGIE You're just going to have to accept that you're just not important enough to take the blame for this. Sorry, you're insignificant.

SHIRLEY Promise. I'm totally insignificant.

VIRGIE Absolutely.

SHIRLEY Thank you.

Pause.

James and I have been very happy.

VIRGIE Good for you.

SHIRLEY I'm sorry you never had that.

VIRGIE I've had plenty of lovers, quite a few of them knew what they were doing and if they didn't I showed them the ropes. So don't be sorry on my account.

SHIRLEY No need to boast. I'm sure that wasn't easy on Haydn. Or Orin.

James and I often talk about what happened. It was a tragedy.

HAYDN It was a long time ago and I've had a lot of therapy.

SHIRLEY That's not cheap. Please tell me this is some ridiculous joke, Virgie.

VIRGIE No, cheers though. Raise a glass to me.

SHIRLEY No. Can't you see, Virgie, when you act in a selfish way there's always casualties. Look at Haydn.

HAYDN Thank you.

SHIRLEY Don't take this personally, dear, but you didn't fulfil your potential. I'd like to see you in red.

VIRGIE Oh leave her alone. Shirley, Haydn is Haydn she's all right.

HAYDN Am I? How would you know? You never ask.

VIRGIE The surprising thing is I thought seeing you all might make me change my mind, or at least waver a bit. But it's the opposite. I'm actually looking forward to going.

She exits.

TOM and SONIA *re-enter.*

SONIA Raised voices?

TOM It's really happening then?

SHIRLEY Apparently.

SONIA We can't let it happen.

SHIRLEY Of course not. We might be implicated.

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