

*The Olivia Chapman
Phenomenon*

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Olivia Chapman was clumsy. It could be said that Olivia Chapman was an accident looking for somewhere to happen, and, in fact, it frequently was. Olivia Chapman left a trail of devastation wherever she went. She never meant to. It just happened.

She lived in a quaint little village, with kind people who understood the phenomenon that was Olivia Chapman. In her wake they would quietly pick up the pieces, mend what they could and shake their heads with good-natured tolerance. They knew Olivia Chapman never meant to wreck things. Somehow, she just did.

The villagers knew, from long hard experience, to keep Olivia away from the fragile drama sets carefully stowed in the back room of the hall. They knew never to allow her access to the kitchen, with its cupboards filled with crockery. And at the Easter Bonnet parade Olivia was always given the safe task of sitting at a table, writing down the details of the competitors. Even then, there had been one memorable year when she had managed to break the table, her chair, three pencils and a rather gaudy vase that someone had kindly provided for the prize giving. In truth, the demolition of the vase was greeted with silent thanks by most of those present, though the table, chair and pencils were sorely missed.

There was, however, one day when Olivia Chapman's clumsiness brought about a profound impact upon herself and her long suffering neighbours, in a way that could never have been foreseen.

That particular day, a Wednesday in the middle of June, began unremarkably. The local farmer woke everyone early as usual, roaring through the village on his tractor. The post mistress coiled her hair up into her usual bun, donned her uniform twin set and sensible skirt and opened the rear door of the shop for the delivery man. The head teacher arrived at the school and began the usual task of clearing last night's litter from the gate, and Olivia Chapman stood in her narrow hallway, checking herself in the mirror, wondering what she might have forgotten to lock, or switch off, or turn on, today. Just another normal day.

Eventually deciding that no amount of brain raking or fretting was going to uncover what she had forgotten, Olivia shrugged rather wearily, and walked out of the house and down the uneven Victorian tiled pathway to the front gate. Had she glanced over her shoulder as she walked off down to the village and the solicitor's office where she worked she would have seen that what she had forgotten was shutting the front door.

She did not glance over her shoulder, so she didn't see the bright red door, swinging gently in the breeze. But next door's cat did, and, knowing that a soft sofa lined with oversized cushions awaited him in the front room, sprinted in hastily before it slammed itself closed. As it happened, a spirited dispute with a mouse that happened to scamper past the cat later that morning led to a certain amount of destruction in the front room, proving Olivia's remarkable propensity towards disaster even in her absence.

None of this, of course, was yet known to Olivia as she walked purposefully along the lane, blissfully unaware that her drinks flask was leaking orange juice, through her shoulder bag, onto the pavement. A child hurrying to school, however, became all too aware of the leak when his feet skidded on the juice, shot up into the air and thrust him, bottom first, onto the hard tarmac. We should not allow ourselves too much sentiment over this incident though, as the child was a rather naughty boy, for whom an inability to sit down for two days could be seen, by some, as a form of divine retribution.

And so it was, as has already been indicated, an unremarkable start to the day. Mr Bromham, the only solicitor for thirteen miles, looked up as Olivia burst through the door and knocked the coat stand flying. He smiled gloomily and stepped around the desk to help her with her umbrella before she smashed the large picture window with it.

"Good morning, Olivia," he said, righting the coat stand. He winced at the sight of her juice soaked bag, then returned to his desk, shaking his head.

“Good morning Mr Bromham!” said Olivia breezily. “Don't forget you have a meeting with Sir Appleby from the hall at 9:30.”

The long suffering solicitor nodded his head and went back to his work. Olivia was, perhaps rather surprisingly, an extremely good secretary. True, he had to periodically replace entire telephone systems, carpets, and had learnt to keep a small stock of spare keyboards for emergencies. But she was efficient, charming and had an understanding of the legal profession that would have earned her a position as a paralegal were it not for that one less desirable facet of her personality. He often wished it were permissible to strap her to her chair for the duration of the working day in order to minimise damage.

He left a little while later for his meeting, giving his office one last affectionate look as he walked through the door. The problem with employing Olivia Chapman was that you never quite knew how much office you would return to.

Olivia, for her part, was far too busy to dwell upon such matters. She had lived with her maladroitness all her life and had grown used to chipped mugs, wobbly heels and jammed drawers. She just worked around any little problems that arose, which was why, thirty minutes later, she was at the window, attempting to re-hang the vertical blinds she had inadvertently pulled down whilst taking a folder from the filing cabinet.

In a display of misplaced optimism, she elected to use her chair as a step ladder in order to reach the lintel. The chair, being a standard office typist's chair, was the kind that swivelled. As she stretched upwards, the chair turned slowly, until her feet were pointing away from the rest of her body at an angle of approximately 84°.

She wrestled the tiny plastic hooks back into the track, grunting as she fought to bring the chair back under control at the same time. The chair, possibly in a fit of pique at being so cruelly used, spun back through 180°, so that her feet were now facing the other way entirely.

This had the effect of completely unbalancing her and, though she clawed valiantly at the wall, the broken blind, and the window, gravity was not to be denied and, with a crash that shook the whole building, she landed on her back, on the floor beside the now teetering coat stand. Luckily the coat stand decided it had endured more than enough excitement already this morning and slowly settled back down on all four feet. The chair sped off in the opposite direction, crashing into the wall and leaving an impressive dent in the plaster. And Olivia, well, let us say, Olivia was crumpled.

She had made sufficient amounts of noise to alert half the street, and soon the solicitor's office was brimming with well meaning people, all with their own ideas about how to help her. But for the timely return of the solicitor, Olivia may well have been splinted to a table top and ferried to the nearest hospital on the back of a tractor.

“Thank you, everybody!” called Mr Bromham authoritatively. “I think perhaps I can manage with just Mrs Hewitt's help,” he insisted, sweeping them towards the door.

They allowed themselves to be herded out, albeit reluctantly, then stood at the window, staring in at the poor unfortunate secretary, sprawled on the floor of the office. Mr Bromham rolled up his sleeves and checked her over quickly, before calling for an ambulance.

Mrs Hewitt discretely arranged Olivia's skirt to cover her dignity, such as she had left, then sat beside her, patting her hand distractedly. Mr Bromham looked down at them and sighed. “Has she come round at all, Mrs Hewitt?” The old lady shook her head sadly. “She must have taken quite a knock to the head. Still, the ambulance will be here shortly. I'm sure she'll be fine,” he said, as much to convince himself as anyone else.

The ambulance did, eventually, arrive, though the technician had been following his satnav and had taken a wrong turn, ending up on the road to the reservoir. It was a common error that was usually treated with gentle eye rolling and a collaborative effort in pulling out the vehicles that got stuck in the muddy reservoir car park. On this occasion, however, it was generally agreed that it

would have been far better if the technician in question had learnt to read a map.

When the paramedic finally reached the scene, Olivia had regained a degree of consciousness, and was staring rather fixedly at the damp-stained ceiling tiles of the solicitor's office. She gasped as the paramedic's face drifted into view, then sighed and went back to sleep. This was not the reaction the rather handsome paramedic was used to, but he rallied magnificently and quickly went to work, assessing her injuries.

Olivia came to again as she was being wheeled into the ambulance. It was intolerably bright but the paramedic kept on at her to open her eyes. She tried to explain that it was too bright, but her tongue seemed to have divorced itself from her brain. She heard the doors slam closed and the engine started, then the vehicle surged away with a warning blip of its siren.

The motion was unpleasant, so Olivia decided to go back to sleep, hoping that it might all be over when she woke, but within a few seconds the ambulance gave a fearsome jolt, and before she knew what was happening, the trolley she was strapped to was rolling towards the doors. She didn't scream, but she did share a powerful moment with the paramedic, staring into his horrified eyes as the doors gave way and she sailed out of the still accelerating ambulance.

Several things happened at once, and the narrative of events has become confused by the various perspectives of the witnesses, but it seems to run something like this; Olivia, now freed from the ambulance, was heading at speed down the road in the opposite direction, powerless to do anything to help herself.

The paramedic, stunned into inaction for several critical seconds, eventually regained the presence of mind to yell at his technician to stop the vehicle. Meanwhile, the unsuspecting farmer had turned his tractor into the road, only to see Olivia Chapman, strapped to a trolley, hurtling towards him in the unstoppable manner of a runaway train.

Reacting entirely upon instinct he had turned his tractor into a hard left, and crashed clean through the wall of the graveyard. Too shocked to remember to take his foot off the accelerator, the farmer and his tractor had then proceeded, with velocity, across the graveyard, coming to rest at a precipitous angle inside the forgotten underground tomb of a long dead nobleman.

Olivia, unaware of the farmer's woes, or the newly discovered tomb, sailed onwards, passing her house with its now closed door, and soaring onwards into the path of the number 53 bus. The bus driver slammed his brakes on, brought the vehicle to an immediate halt, and watched in bemused silence as the trolley collided with his bumper, rebounded, then collided again, repeating this several times until it at last came to rest. He and Olivia stared at each other in confusion from opposite sides of the large split windscreen of the bus.

In the ensuing melee, the passengers on the bus joined the villagers milling around in the road as the ambulance crew retrieved their passenger, this time securely bolting the doors. Then, once Olivia was safely on her way to the hospital, they all turned their attention to the farmer and his stricken vehicle.

Now, it so happened that riding the number 53 that particular Wednesday in June was an archeologist from the university. Had he not been riding the bus that day, and had Olivia not fallen from her chair, and, subsequently, the ambulance, and had the farmer not crashed his heavy tractor through the top stone of the forgotten nobleman's forgotten tomb, the artefacts inside would not have been discovered, or if they had, their significance would undoubtedly have been overlooked.

As it was, the archeologist, who had joined the other men in discussions about how to recover the farmer's tractor, happened to glance into the tomb, and had immediately, to the consternation of all around him, descended into raptures.

What lay bare, exposed for the first time in more than three hundred years, was a famous sword, believed by historians to have been destroyed during the civil war, and vital documents of antiquity, priceless to the academic world.

And so it was that Olivia found herself, with a bandaged head and a worrying sensation of

imminent nausea, surrounded by a delegation of excited villagers, who had visited the hospital in order to tell her the good news.

Thanks to the Olivia Chapman Phenomenon, the artefacts were retrieved, sold for an eye-popping sum at auction, and a considerable reward was paid to the village in gratitude for the “safe-keeping of the nation's heritage”. This money was, in turn, used to fund vital repairs to the graveyard, a new tractor for the unfortunate farmer on the understanding that he would no longer drive through the village too early, repairs to the church roof, a complete refit of the hall, and the funding of a nursery within the school.

Olivia's homecoming two weeks later was celebrated with a street party, a hog roast, dancing, laughter, and two large barrels of local cider, a good portion of which was consumed by an opportunistic stray dog who woke up the next morning with the mother of all hangovers. Olivia broke nothing that evening. In fact, as she settled back into life in the village it could honestly be said that she was now no more clumsy than anyone else.

And so ended the phenomenon of Olivia Chapman. I suppose in a certain type of story the end would come with a summer's day and the idyllic wedding of a solicitor and his secretary. This is not that type of story. This is the story of Olivia Chapman, whose various adventures and catastrophes had left too many mental scars on Mr Bromham for the poor man to ever be capable of regarding her romantically.

For those who wish to know, Mr Bromham never married, and continued working as a solicitor in the village for the next forty years. And Olivia? Olivia married the bus driver, who was made of sterner stuff than Mr Bromham, and had evidently been impressed by the resilience of the young woman who had survived falling from a chair, an ambulance and a head-on crash with the number 53 bus.