

## High society hoaxes

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Anna Vadimovna Sorokina may not be a name that immediately rings a bell for most people. Anna Delvey on the other hand is a name that sends a shiver of anxiety along the very spine of the New York elite and has become synonymous with fraud around the globe. By the time of her trial in 2019, Anna's face was splashed across the front page of every New York daily and her exploits had taken their rightful place amongst conversation topics around the water cooler and an infinite number of coffee shops. Her story has proven engaging enough to already be under production by both HBO and Netflix simultaneously.

Anna Sorokin was born in a working-class suburb of Moscow in January 1991. Her father worked as a truck driver whilst her mother owned a small convenience store before deciding to become a full-time housewife. The family moved to Germany in 2007 with Anna graduating from high school in 2011. Anna spent short periods in London and Paris before finding her way to New York in 2013. Along the way, the name Sorokin changed to Delvey. This was a small change when one considers the upward trajectory of her father's career as rumours spread that he was an oil tycoon or maybe a diplomat amongst many other suitably wealthy other choices. A widely held belief was that he was a solar panel magnate, which is probably the closest to reality, as her father had taken up installing heaters as a job when arriving in Germany. Closest but still a quite considerable stretch. While his remarkable career may have been the subject of speculation, it was accepted that it was grandiose enough to endow his daughter with a trust fund of sixty million Euros. There is a single thread that runs through all such stories: once people begin focusing on the money other details seem to blur almost into trivia. In truth, New York never even met Anna Sorokin but all the right people seemed to be enchanted by a European heiress with big plans for the future.

Upon her arrival in New York, Anna Delvey was ready to take her place in the world. A European heiress with a taste for the high life but also a higher purpose. Delvey would use her time in New York to oversee the launch of an art foundation in her name which included the construction of unique and suitably lavish headquarters based on Park Avenue. She described the business venture as an altruistic means to use her wealth not only by assisting young artists but also inspiring the love of art in all who visited the landmark destination she would create. Through the liberal use of forged financial credentials, she secured a home base at the prestigious newly built 11 Howard hotel. As the hotel had recently opened and was aimed at high net worth individuals, the need for a valid credit card was overlooked and documents regarding a 60 million Euro trust fund made unlimited credit an obvious choice.

Soon after moving into her swanky new lodgings, Anna would act like she owned the place. The sight of her moving through the hotel in a bath robe was a regular occurrence, while the renowned chef at the hotel's restaurant would often cook a specific meal at her behest. Her behaviour was best exemplified by the relationship struck up with Neffatari (Neff) Davis who worked as the concierge at the time. She first noticed Anna when she looked up from the \$100 bill which had just been placed on her desk. She was surprised to see the tip was from a woman of comparable age simply asking for the names of good restaurants in the area. This would be the beginning of an ongoing and deepening relationship as the visits and the tips became more and more frequent. Neff soon realised that the eccentricities may have been less about wealth and more a sign of loneliness. A strong friendship developed between the two and tips were soon replaced with expensive lunches, gifts, and pamper sessions. When questions began to emerge regarding payment, Neff would allay concern by vouching for her friend, even citing their forays together as proof of her financial means. The "Benjamins" did not stop at the hotel's front desk, the tip was the same for all staff regardless of how small the task was. The hundred-dollar tip soon became emblematic not only of the assumed eccentricity but even more powerfully of a young woman who could afford to literally give her money away.

In an impressively short period of time Anna Delvey was a fully-fledged New York socialite. Her residence at 11 Howard was the perfect foundation, a highly revered hotel that even celebrities would consider to be perfect for a short indulgence but financially restrictive for anything more. She became a regular at the best restaurants in New York, she was at all the right parties and gradually meeting all the right people. The details of her wealth and her patronage of the arts would spread with each social event prompting one admirer to describe her as being like a Kardashian but with an actual purpose. It was at one such event that Delvey met Rachel Williams, who worked as a photo editor for Vanity Fair. Although the initial meeting seemed the norm in such circumstances Delvey made a concerted effort to befriend Williams. It was not long before the two would see each other on numerous occasions each week, Rachel was flattered by the effort Anna would make to spend time together and was struck by how generous her new friend was. There was no point reaching for a credit card as Anna insisted on paying without fail. When visa issues caused Anna to return to Germany the two stayed in regular contact throughout the six month period apart. The friends were reunited just as Rachel prepared to celebrate her thirtieth birthday. To truly mark the event, Anna proposed a sunny vacation in Marrakesh. They would be staying in one of the highest-rated resorts in the world which even included a personal butler. It was so extravagant, so expensive, and so like Anna to insist on paying for everything that it was impossible to resist. The nightmare that followed proved to be the hardest period of William's life and the end of an heiress.

It would be dishonest to claim that Anna Delvey was undone through a single action. She had been evicted by several hotels after failing to pay and sat firmly under a cloud of suspicion for a lengthy period before the trip to Marrakesh. After her apprehension, it was soon apparent the number of businesses and individuals involved was far greater than expected. Equally apparent was the singular pattern that united every occurrence of her fraudulent behaviour. Each testimony against her would deliver the same narrative regardless of the situation: an invitation by Delvey to a dinner, a shopping spree, a vacation, even a flight on a private jet. Each victim was assured that it was her treat right up until the bill arrived. Thereafter things always went a number of ways, worsening as the charade went on. Initially, it was often Anna's silly habit of packing her purse in her luggage or forgetting it. It didn't matter, she would assure the person or party, because she would pay them right back. As her guests tended to be both wealthy and members of the social elite, it is quite possible that many simply forgot the debt but it is almost certain that to pursue repayment was often deemed to be unsuited to their status and was insufficient to be a potential source of embarrassment. In nearly every incidence it was not considered an affront and certainly not a reason to question her authenticity. After all, aren't all millionaires a bit less conscious of money than most? Who else would be able to tip a hundred dollars to anyone they came across?

The trip to Marrakesh had simply been the same well-worn scam once again, only on this occasion there were very real consequences. Anna had apparently forgotten to mention to her bank that she was traveling to Marrakesh, thus rendering her credit cards useless. The dream birthday of Rachel Williams would ultimately leave her responsible for a bill of \$62 000, a figure that was higher than her annual salary. Despite being assured her credit card details were merely being taken for security purposes, she would return to a series of alarmed messages from her bank. When Williams sought legal action, she was informed that she had given her credit card details willingly and therefore had no recourse. Unlike so many others it was about more than just money for Rachel, she had been conned and betrayed by her closest friend. The pain and injustice she felt would compel her to respond to an online link that made mention of Anna Delvey, "I think this girl is a con artist" she typed. An hour later she received a call from a number simply identified as United States. Upon answering a voice replied, "We think you're right".

In 2017, Sorokin was arrested on six charges of grand larceny for allegedly committing acts of fraud against wealthy New York City business acquaintances and several hotels. While many potential victims refused to come forward, the Manhattan District Attorney's office estimates the thefts totalled approximately \$275 000. She was sentenced to four to eight years of imprisonment and was released earlier in 2021. She already has big plans for the money she will receive from both Netflix and HBO for the rights to her story. While Rachel Williams has no ability to recover the \$62 000 that Sorokin cost her, she has already published her version of events in "My Friend Anna" which was included in Time magazines "must read" books of 2019.