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Opening Extract from...

The Man Who Didn't Go to Newcastle

Written by Alison Clink

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THE LIST

Saturday 10th March 2008

I've spent a lot of time over the past couple of weeks preparing for this event. I've phoned people, sent emails, written letters, left voicemails, cleaned the house, bought fresh flowers, had my hair cut, even treated myself to a new skirt. But now today has come and there's nothing else to do to take my mind off what is really happening. My brother's ashes are to be laid to rest in our local village churchyard.

In films funerals always take place against a backdrop of drizzle, an obvious symbolic device. Weather reflects mood, mood is gloomy, weather gloomy too. Rain is like tears. Today it's raining.

During the two minute car journey to the church I tell my twin daughters, Emily and Fran, I'm afraid I might start to cry.

'You're allowed to,' Emily replies. Yes, I know, but for some reason I feel the need to prepare myself for the possibility.

When we arrive I see everyone I've invited standing on the gravel path leading to the Great Elm village church, all looking somehow odd, as if they're in the wrong place. Like when Mum and Dad turned up at school for parents' meetings. The right people in the wrong setting. A kind of dream where people you know well unexpectedly appear out of context.

Dan, the vicar, arrives late, and bizarrely seems to be changing his clothes in the back of his people carrier. He strides up the path, his surplice flapping in the wind, smiling his toothy grin – reassuringly eccentric.

He unexpectedly unlocks the church door and ushers us all in out of the rain. The service was to have been outside, but I'm glad Dan is prepared to amend the plans in order to spare us from a soaking for a few minutes' prayer before the burial takes

place. I love this church and Dan points out to his captive audience some of its unique features: the little doors at the ends of the pews, the ancient stained glass windows, the minstrels' gallery. He loves it too. I hope all the friends and relations are impressed.

Dan is clearly impressed by them. He obviously had no idea there would be so many of us for this interment of the ashes. He appears genuinely surprised by the number of people who've turned up. After all, this is a low-key service, not a true funeral as such. We did the funeral in Putney last September, seventeen days after Adrian died. This is a chance for everyone to get together in the place where my brother will stay, along the road from our house, in the graveyard of St Mary's Church in Great Elm.

Dan probably realises now why I took so long to come back to him with a day when everyone could be in the same place at the same time. I've been aware of his frustration at the number of phone calls I've made changing the date, and I sense an acknowledgement of the difficulty of the task I've undertaken. He asks where everyone is from and I reel off the list of places, feeling proud that people have come from so far. Norwich, London, Bristol, Devon, Taunton, Farnham, Basingstoke, Southend on Sea.

'And Great Elm,' my eldest son, Jack, jokes.

My brother wrote many instructions for his ending, most on odd bits of paper. I presumed he wanted his ashes scattered after the funeral in Putney Vale Cemetery. Only at the last minute did I come across a loose sheet saying 'Ashes to be buried at Great Elm Churchyard. Next to Mum.' I'm eternally grateful I discovered that piece of paper in time, yet I was also struck by its poignancy. Next to Mum. The instructions were so curt. So matter-of-fact. So decisively unemotional. So heartbreakingly sad. Only two-and-a-half years ago Adrian stood with me and

the other men in my family in this same graveyard, with the same vicar, probably clutching the same prayer book for the burial of our mother's ashes. But how different that day was. How hot, lit with the brilliant sunshine of mid-June, and too hot to stand in the shadeless churchyard for any longer than was necessary. Today we shiver and huddle together under umbrellas, again missing the shelter of trees. Also missing my younger son, Ed, who is in Thailand.

Standing to my left is our old friend, Martin Phillips, who collected Adrian's ashes from the funeral directors in Putney. Disappointingly, the urn he's been given is made of green plastic, more like a garden compost pot than the polished wood miniature coffin I'd irrationally imagined. Irrationally, since I knew we hadn't been offered, or indeed paid for, such a thing.

Martin appeals to me for guidance when his moment arrives. Should he open the pot and truly 'scatter' or should he just place it in the hole? I indicate somehow that he should put the whole thing in, as it seems the best option to avoid farce. What if he pours and a gust of wind gets in the way? What if he pours and a last clump of ash refuses to budge from the inside of the pot? The comic possibilities seem many.

'Just put it in,' I hear myself say. I'm slightly perturbed. I am so bluntly telling Martin what to do. One of my big brother's friends. I'm still the same child I was all those years ago.

My husband, Peter, takes our garden spade he brought with him and shovels the earth back into place. Adrian was important to him too and now he seems strong and the right person to make the final gesture of closure.

I've held myself together well till now. In the event, rather than dwell on the emotional aspect of what's going on, I've managed to focus my mind on the pedantic. Counting heads, has everyone found the churchyard? Are the girls warm enough? Why aren't the boots I'm wearing waterproof? As we all huddle so close, will the spokes of my umbrella poke someone in the

eye? Have we got enough beer, food, soft drinks at home? Did I remember to buy straws? Do we have twenty-five decent dinner plates?

I look around at the people standing with me and suddenly I see the list. The list Adrian made last summer – all the names of the people I should invite to his funeral written in his tiny handwriting. The list that I refused to read until I needed to. The list I watched him write as he sat skeletal in his baggy checked shirt, his chinos tied tightly with a belt to hold them up, and his Panama hat protecting his bald patch from the sun. A glass of white wine on the table by his writing pad and his Daily Mirror open on the racing page. The list that seemed so painful last August. So shocking. How could he care, how could he *bear* to work out who would come to mourn him?

Yet seven months later the instructions have been carried out. They're all here. Most have travelled long distances. Some of them couldn't make the funeral in September, but none of them has let him down today. I imagine his pleasure at seeing them all together. What might he have said? 'Oh, thanks, Ali.'

These are the ones who meant so much to him. The core people. The 'A' listers. The inner circle of friends he loved and thought about – even in the face of death. All present. Welsh Phil who went on a pub-crawl with him every Saturday night. Carol and Carole, Bryony, Phil Gullifer with his family, Den and Chris from Warwick, John Commerford, Mart and Lindsay, Mac and Minnie, all from our home town, even Clive Mason, who I'd never met before the funeral and had been Adrian's boss when he'd worked at British Telecom. All the names on his list have magically been brought to life. The list is finally and unbearably transformed into real people standing in a semi-circle with me now around the hole containing my dear brother's ashes.

In the end it's the memory of Adrian's list that makes me cry.