

## In Living Memory

*By Jamie Leedham*

Isn't it funny how life is filled with those petty, little annoyances that seem to permeate through any event? The pebbles in your shoe as you're walking down a crowded street. Queuing for hours, only to be told "position closed". Taxi drivers insisting they know the way and then getting lost at the first corner. Well my life seemed to be pretty much full of them. How many people have had to suffer the snails-pace drive through the inner-city with their face plastered in polka dot tissue paper? Perhaps these little inconveniences could be forgiven if only the backdrop of my life was any less of a disappointment. I wished it was still the sixties, at least then it would be marginally socially acceptable if I were to blot reality out, daily, with a cocktail of potent narcotics. No, life is never that simple, even though I have been unemployed for God knows how long, people somehow manage to consume my time with various projects and events which I 'simply must attend', despite the fact that I am not at all socially disposed. Life is very much like one of those adventure playgrounds we all used to play on as children, and even then I used to get stuck on the climbing frame.

Despite my best efforts I was going to be late, and it's always these bloody traffic lights' fault. "Green. Green. Stay green...Red! Ahh!" I knew it. Always the same, and they seem to take about twenty minutes to change.

God, I am looking old. Ten years ago I wouldn't recognise myself if faced with this rear view mirror visage. I had a full head of thick, wavy, jet-black hair, not a worry line in sight and I'm pretty sure I would have bought new glasses instead of trying to repair this old pair, albeit artfully, with a strip of black wire tape across the bridge. Still it doesn't look that bad...does it?

Honk! Honk! "Move it, you nutcase!"

"Yeah, wakey wakey!"

Van drivers, the cancer of the highway-code. I made sure to turn my head left slightly, as they overtook me, so they didn't see those ridiculous patches of tissue paper stuck to my face. I thought I had got away with it until I heard some broken cockney accent shout, 'Bit old for acne, mate!' Thank God I had reached my turn-off and could escape. I envy the turtle. They can just recede into their own private little world and not worry about being disturbed by Jehovah's witnesses or being woken up at 2:00am by their neighbours having their way with each other. Good Lord, I sound like my father and I'm not even forty yet.

Luckily the church wasn't hard to find, so I wasn't as late as I had feared. This last week had been tormenting enough without having to face the indignation of my mother, who could sandblast the hull of a ship with her tongue. I parked up and slowly peeled away the strips of tissue paper. In most cases the bleeding had stopped and even where there was still a little blood, the small blobs of Vaseline I had put on before I left the flat would eventually clot the wounds. I smoothed my hair and rushed into the church. The slow droning voice of the clergyman was audible from the hall; I crept into the service room and slid into one of the back pews without being noticed. The church had a dark, dank appearance, even on a brilliant day like this, which is some achievement. In fact, all the sun did was make the atmosphere even more enclosed. I listened intently to the clergyman.

"Do this now, my son, and deliver thyself, when thou art come into the hand of thy friend; go, humble thyself, and make sure thy friend."

But it didn't take long before I lost all interest. The church reflected exactly what I thought of religion; oppressive, dark, out-dated, uncomfortable and impersonal. If there really was a God I really couldn't understand how this maudlin edifice was meant to please him. The very little decoration there was in the room was at the front, where gaudy crosses and candles and dull tapestries lay.

The smell of dust and rising damp clung to the air. Particles of dust were even visible, dancing in the spears of light that lanced from the windows. Their ballet was intoxicating. I watched them while whimsically picturing my evening, sat in my favourite armchair with a glass of cabernet sauvignon and a collection of Russian short stories.

At the very front of the church there hung a large wooden carving of Jesus nailed to the cross, with particular detail paid to each nail wound, the crown of thorns and the gash in his side. Red paint poured from his twisted frame and was even matted in his splintered hair.

The deep crimson ran down his features, making a horrific contrast with his wide, white, terrifying eyes. I hated that statue. I dislike a lot of things, but I seldom have such a powerful feeling as hate. My thoughts were interrupted when, for the first time since I had entered the building; my eyes encountered a large, rectangular, black wooden box, stood on a cage with six casters at the bottom. An overwhelming sense of guilt swept over me. I turned my attention to the pastor and once again attempted to listen. So for the next ten minutes I stood when we were called on to stand and sang when we were called on to sing. Well, rather than singing, a feeble, monotone groan escaped our lungs. There were no distinguishing words in any of the hymns, just an idle yet persistent noise, like the droning of worker bees.

"You may be seated." This was accompanied by the sound of fifty or so pairs of buttocks creaking on the hard uncomfortable oak seats. I could even feel the uncomfortable grain through my trousers. As everyone took their seats I noticed that one woman, close to the back like me, wasn't fidgeting. She had never even stood up. Immediately my hatred fled from the statue and focussed itself onto this woman. She was an ugly, haggard old woman, even from the back. Her brittle grey hair was bunched up into a ball at the back of her head, where a small purple hat lay crucified by an armoury of hatpins.

"Alice was a kind-hearted woman, beloved by all. She never faltered when aid was needed and never hesitated where there was good to be done. She was also a strong woman, both physically and mentally, and managed to overcome many trials in her life. She was able to bring up three wonderful children, to all of whom I offer my deepest sympathies..." Once again I tuned out. These words exposed me as a fraud. I hadn't seen Aunt Alice since I was a toddler; I knew nothing about her, yet my mother had pressed me to attend the funeral. I was no better than that purple crone. Even though I didn't know the deceased, the pastor's words fell to my feet like the pennies to a beggar. Individually they were worthless, yet collectively there was some hope that I may ascertain some idea about the woman I should be grieving for. But it was useless, he never knew her. I even started to hate the pastor for it. Then I noticed something odd, throughout the ceremony that strange woman's eyes had not lifted from that glossy black box.

The rest of the ceremony was conducted as woodenly as expected. I imagined that anything the pastor said came from a book with the name of the deceased blanked out so that whoever lay in that dull box, they would be receive the same brittle words, bleached of all meaning.

Then, my hopes for a something sincere were simultaneously satisfied and shattered.

"Maureen, Alice's youngest sister, will now say a few words." My mother promptly stood up and took the pastor's place, most likely enjoying her new position of priestess.

"When our Carol called me last week and told me that Alice 'ad collapsed, I couldn't believe her. We all know what Alice was like, I always expected to find her climbing Everest at eighty-three! She'd had an 'ard life, but somehow I don't think she would have had it any other way. She went lookin' everyday for new challenges so at least now she can be at peace..."

Still, the mysterious woman did not look up from that black box. My mother could only dole out more solemn words beneath that gaudy display of crosses and tapestries. I knew that she felt little grief for the death of my aunt. They never spoke. I was almost tempted to openly applaud my mother performance. It was then that I decided that I must speak with this woman and discover her relationship to my aunt, and perhaps find some tiny speck of value in this shammed ceremony, some memory of Alice that lived on. After my mother had used enough synonyms for the word 'sad' to be considered grief stricken, she gave up the podium and the pastor prepared to conclude the ceremony.

Everyone stood as the pallbearers took their places beside the coffin. A thin melody played. I could feel spit rising in my mouth.

The music added yet more drama to this already overly dramatic image.

I felt like the only inexperienced actor in this tawdry soap opera.

Everyone drooped their heads as the coffin was carried by, but my curiosity overcame me and I couldn't tear my eyes from that withered old lady. She was not as ugly as I had originally thought; instead she was actually rather amiable looking. She had that soft, almost simple, look which is not uncommon to elderly women, or any women for that matter. I imagined she worked in a sweet shop and spent her evenings surrounded by a dozen or more cats. Still, those dull gentle eyes had not yet left the coffin, but as the coffin came close to me our eyes locked. She started. In that single electric moment my head swam with confusion and my face darted towards the floor. I stared at those ancient floorboards for quite some time till I felt that the redness in my cheeks had subdued. In groups of two the congregation filed out after the coffin, I tried to manoeuvre myself so that I stood next to the lady who fascinated me, but my mother intervened.

"So you decided to show up then," she said through gritted teeth.

"Yes," I replied, trying not to be sarcastic, "I am sorry for being late, I didn't miss much. Your words were very moving."

"Yes, the pastor thought so," she grinned. "You look ridiculous, did you over sleep? And for God's sake what is that on the side of your face!" I reached up and found a small square of tissue paper by my left ear. I must have missed it in that tiny mirror. "For God's sake when are you going to get your act straight! No wonder she left you."

My mother is rarely content with stabbing you where it hurts, she will twist the knife so the wound never has a hope of closing.

"Who is that woman in purple ahead of us?" I asked, still winded from her blow.

"Oh, I don't know, one of your Aunt's friends from the home I suppose. What do you care?"

"Just curious." I said as we approached the hole in the ground. The coffin was lowered into it, but even this simple thing couldn't be done without some flamboyant ceremony.

"Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust." This seemed to be the cue for everyone to lose interest and our small congregation slowly spilt out over the graveyard. My mother had gone off with the pastor and I was left alone. The woman had gone. A surge of panic gripped my chest and I took off in the hope of finding her. I feared that in that awkward moment in the church I had caused her pain or worry and that she had taken the first opportunity to escape any further engagement.

Luckily I saw her hat disappear behind a hedge near the exit. I pursued. Rushing through the gate, I found myself walking just a few feet behind the woman I had become obsessed with over the last half-hour, and was suddenly faced with an insurmountable problem. How was I to approach her? Once again chance played in my favour.

She stopped off at a small café. I waited a few minutes before entering and then ordered myself a latté.

"Excuse me, do you mind if I join you?" I pleasantly enquired.

"Err... no, no, not at all." She appeared confused, and deservedly so. "Didn't I see you at the funeral?"

"Yes," I scratched my head; this was more embarrassing than I had bargained for, "I'm afraid I was a little late."

"Humph, you didn't miss much."

"Oh?"

"A bunch of people who didn't even know Alice talking like they knew the very secrets to her heart!"

"Yes, I have to agree. If that's a funeral then I hope they flush my corpse down the toilet."

"You knew Alice well?" At the sound of this my face flushed, the waitress bought me my coffee as I hung my head in shame. We both remained silent for what felt like forever; even the conversations around us seemed to have stopped. "You didn't know her?"

"I..." for the first time in my life I was lost for words, and didn't even reproach myself for thinking in clichés.

"It's okay, I think I understand." She nodded "I'm glad one of us did," I choked on my own words, "this whole thing seems absurd. I mean, I was entirely blasé about this whole thing, about pretty much anything as a matter of fact. I have absolutely no memory of the woman, but I wish I had known her because-"

"Nobody else did?"

"E-exactly!"

"It made my blood boil to see that rancid woman deal out platitudes as if she were sincere. At least it's the pastor's job to patronise."

"Yes, erm, I apologise for my mother"

"You're mother? Oh, so you're Ian?" This caught me off guard, of course I realised the absurdity of grieving for a person I never even knew, but I had never even contemplated if she knew me. Through all those years when I hadn't spared her even a single thought.

"Y-yes, I am. Did she talk about me?"

"She only mentioned a dispute your mother and her had, cutting her off from the rest of the family. She regretted not seeing her nephew grow up. She'd be glad to see you didn't turn out like that poisonous woman. I'm Elsa by the way"

"Glad to make your acquaintance, Elsa. Can you tell me about Alice?"

"Of course. She was a stubborn person. I never once heard that in her eulogy, but it was her most defining feature. I met her at the home about three years ago, she still had all her marbles, unlike most of them, and she didn't smell of PoliGrip and cat pee. She always wanted to go to Spain, yet never had the money..."

If she wanted to see a bunch of football hooligan's vomit in the street I would have suggested the far more affordable destination of Manchester. Yet her naivety touched me. I listened intently to this woman's words, and gobbled them up like someone starved for sustenance. Each new word added a new image to my mind. We both feasted on her memories. Her face brightened at the recollection of their times together and I too felt a sense of elation as the ball of her memories unravelled. It was true, Alice was no longer a person, but she was no longer a figure of guilt either like that revolting statue. Instead she was a memory, almost forgotten and never known.