



Stories for the Train

Tales on the go

0:5:00

Crem de la Crem

Author: Alan Goodchild

It was a chilly day, but the flowers would need changing and I vowed to do it for a month before replacing them with the artificial variety. I polished the plaque and moved the adjacent blooms a little, so that my friend's would stand alone, resplendent, just as she did. As usual, it took me straight back there.

Colin Edward Simms was a friend of mine. The car park was overflowing with the previous mourners as I arrived, black tie still in my jacket pocket from the last one. I walked slowly towards the group, no rush.

'Alright Al?'

Oh, Christ it's Mac, builder, ex-Karate teacher and erstwhile football hooligan. 'Yeah not bad thanks mate, here we are again then?'

'Hope it's better than the last one.' He said treading the remaining quarter-inch of his roll-up into the immaculately cut grass.

'Yeah, me too.'

Mac's reference was to Pete's funeral. We stood together. One of Pete's older relations took exception to Mac's remark of; 'It's hardly worth some of this lot going home is it?' made rather too loudly to me during the session of quiet reflection. Offering him outside was equally ill-spirited of Mac and met with several shrivelling looks from the ladies. Even more unpalatable was his expose of Pete's extra-marital associations, after more than his fair

share of red wine at the wake. Something of an unwelcome surprise to Pete's wife of thirty years and vigorously denied by two of the accused attending. One woman, one man, as it happens, made things worse for poor June.

Luckily, Dave Warren beckoned Mac over and I beat a hasty retreat to visit my parent's vase in the lower grounds. I don't know why we all have memorials in the one place none of us ever want to go. Just then Roger walked up.

'Mac's here again then Al?' He said with a snigger. 'You chief carer?' He put his arm on my shoulder and we chortled back to the entrance to the Crem. By then the last group of mourners were laughing and joking their way to their cars, funny how it takes people. I looked around to see many old acquaintances, quite a few I didn't know and one that I'm really glad I met.

The car pulled up and we all bowed our heads in respect. Colin's fishing rod, that was lain across the white lilies on the lid, fell off as they pulled the coffin from the car, and one of the mourners trod on it as they backed away. It whipped around and almost tripped the bloke on the other side.

'Hold it!' Shouted Mac. Oh God, he bent down and picked it up, we all waited for some inappropriate remark or other, but none came. Mac held the rod over the coffin as a detail would their rifles, quite nice really, and our old mate Colin was duly carried through. The tall, elegant but slightly stooping old lady next to me tugged at my jacket:

'Take me in dear?' She had a kindly lined face with immaculately set grey hair under a floral head scarf and a long black coat that flared at the base. She carried a black glossy handbag and a cane.

'Yes sure. I'm Alan,' I said.

'Bit forward aren't you?' she said to my surprise.

'Your face is a picture dear,' she said, 'don't worry, you're far too old for me, I'm Ellen'. She took my arm and we followed friends and family slowly to the last vacant row of pews. I walked in first and she just stood there, still in the aisle, looking at me.

'Family, if you please', she said with a real air of superiority. I left the pew and she walked me further towards the front, which was already full. We stopped second pew back, her head tilted to one side and her eyebrows raised as she looked down the row.

'Ooh, sorry Gran,' said the young man sitting there and he beat a hasty retreat, pulling his bemused girlfriend with him. As we sat down, Ellen looked along the row and said to the other seated persons: 'we're old friends,' I nodded a sort of agreement as she squeezed my knee, then the vicar entered, we all stood. I helped her up.

Ellen lifted the order of service and set her mobile phone on the back of the pew in its place. She looked up at me.

'I-phone-X, she whispered, 'might as well be dead as out of the fashion.'

'Bigger screen too?' I said cheekily. She held two fingers up against her cheek towards me as the vicar took his place at the lectern.

'Welcome one and all,' he said, as Ellen's phone pinged the first of many loud alerts, no-one batted an eye-lid. She leant forward to look at the screen and gave me a nonchalant shake of the head.

'Trump, tosser.' Couldn't argue with her.

It was a nice service apart from the hymns, which nobody ever sings. Colin's brother read the eulogy, one of the best I've heard, and we all trolled off to the Naval club for the customary wake. Ellen asked for a lift, I said 'no, what do you take me for?'

'Pleasure,' she said, with some panache, which was overheard by a middle-aged lady taking a bunch of Colin's flowers home with her, she sniggered.

'Toy boy', said Ellen.

'Be gentle with him' said the lady, 'Hope you're insured?'

'Well If he dies, he dies' said Ellen. Oldie but Goldie I thought. She straightened proudly, as much as the arthritis would allow and we walked arm-in-arm together, chuckling towards the car.

'Got a fag?' she asked?

'No, it'll stunt your growth, and anyway, wasn't a fag in your day a very different thing?

'I asked if you had one, not if you were one.' Her reactions were lightning fast for an oldie, it seemed weird given the obvious frailty of her body.

'It'll also shorten your life,' I said, 'you might not reach your...'
Her stick hit my knees.

'If the next word you utter is in excess of my age, you'll be limping for the rest of yours.' She threatened with eyebrows raised over pink-edged glasses I last saw on Margaret Thatcher. Just as much resolve behind them too.

I unlocked the car and opened the door for her, ensuring coat, stick legs etc. were all safely inside before closing it, she smiled through the glass and looked past me back to the building. I got in and started the engine.

'Come to mine, won't you?' she said.

'Only if you marry me first.' I answered.

'I told you, you're too old for me. Anyway, I'll haunt you if you don't.' She continued: 'I don't get on with my family, never see them since Billy died, no house to leave, no money, no reason to visit Gran.'

‘What about your magnetic personality and natural charm?’ I returned.

‘I’m being serious.’ She said sadly.

‘So am I.’ I said. It made her day, and mine. We became good friends in the following months, but time ran fast.

The wind danced shadows of the branches eerily in the pale light of the afternoon. Looking down at her vase I couldn’t recall her funeral service at all, but as promised I was there. So was the lady who took the flowers, but not many more.

I paid for the latest vase, well, you might as well be dead as out of the fashion. I smiled as the inevitable tear dropped onto the plaque, but I walked back to the car chuckling, as I tapped her stick that I now needed, onto my knee.

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