



things i want my
daughters to know

a novel

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THE READING GROUP

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Dear All of You,

Despite my controlling streak, there aren't too many rules, so far as the funeral goes. Do it as soon as you can, won't you? Good to get it over with. Lisa knows about the music, if you can bear to go with what I've chosen. We've talked about the committal - you know I only want you lot there, and you know which coffin, and which fabulous outfit. I'd like this poem - which, by the way, I love. Thank God for insomnia and the internet - I'd never have found it otherwise, and you'd be stuck reading something yucky. It should be read by whoever thinks they can do it without crying, because that is my biggest rule. No crying, please. If you can manage it. Oh, and no black. Wear the brightest thing you can find in your wardrobe. Both are clichés, I know, but better the colourful one than the sombre. And try and make the sun shine (although I recognize that this last one might be outside of your control). I'm not saying anything mushy in this letter - strictly business - but I daresay there will be other letters. I have other things to say, she says ominously - if I last long enough to write them ... (don't you just love terminal illness humour?).

I'm sorry you all have to do this; I really am.

So, never ever-ending love, as always ...

Mum

*Do not stand at my grave and weep
I am not there, I do not sleep
I am a thousand winds that blow
I am the diamond light on snow
I am the sunlight on the ripened grain
I am the gently falling autumn rain*

*When you wake in the morning hush
I am the swift uplighting rush
Of quiet birds in circling flight
I am the soft starlight at night
Do not stand at my grave and cry
I am not there, I did not die.*

(Isn't that perfect for a funeral in a field?!)

Lisa

Lisa lay back gingerly in her deep aromatherapy bubble bath and looked at the 8" x 10" picture she had taken from the top of the piano downstairs and brought up there with her. She'd propped it behind the taps so that she could see it clearly from where she lay in the steamy water, and now she was trying not to splash it. It was a black-and-white shot of her mother, Barbara and it was taken on her sister Jennifer's wedding day, eight years earlier. Mum looked desperately glamorous, with her salon-fresh hair and artfully artless outfit. No mother-of-the-bride peach suit with matching hat for her. Lisa remembered the hat – three feet wide, floppy brimmed espresso coloured straw. No one sitting in the four pews behind her saw a thing of the ceremony. You couldn't see why, and she no longer remembered, but Mum was laughing her big, loud laugh. Her head was thrown back, the ungainly hat long abandoned, the auburn waves of her hair blown messily across her face by the summer breeze. Her large, expressive mouth was open and wide, so that you could see a filling on the top row of her teeth, and her hazel eyes had almost disappeared into the crinkles of her face. It was an especially great picture of her mother, although Barbara had always been photogenic. Lisa could almost hear it when she looked at the picture, deep and throaty, and so, so alive. It was Mum's raucous laugh she would miss the most – that, and the smell of Fracas.

She thought about the last big belly laugh they had

shared. It was the day Lisa had helped her mother plan her own funeral. She couldn't bear to do it with Mark, she had said. He would keep crying, and she so badly didn't want to cry. She was almost obsessed by not crying, towards the end. Hannah was too young, obviously. Amanda wasn't around. Off doing whatever Amanda was doing right now. And Jennifer . . . well, Jenny Wren wasn't exactly the person that sprang to mind for the task, she said, making a stupid grimacing face and rolling her eyes. No, she wasn't – Lisa could see that. Part of her was horrified, and part flattered, of course.

She hadn't expected it to be hilarious, but now that she thought about it, she didn't know why not. The two of them had done a great deal of laughing together, through all of Lisa's life. Mum had been quite well that week. She was thin, and a bit of a funny colour – a sort of translucent pale lavender – but she was still mobile, and almost energetic. She'd had all these brochures and computer printouts spread across the dining-room table. Coffins, hearses, wreaths . . . She always said life was a retail opportunity, but now, obviously, so was death. The last great party you got to go to, they said, if you planned it right. It was macabre and weird for about the first twenty minutes, and then they both just got silly, because that made it easier. Mum had even got prices for those horse-drawn affairs – but they decided that people weren't really ready for a purple crushed velvet, Kray-style East End send-off. She'd planned the clothes, though. She wanted to wear her Millennium Eve party dress, although it was a bit big for her right now. Which was a minor cause for celebration, and almost the justification for an open-coffin ceremony, since she'd eaten cabbage soup for a week and had one of those ridiculous

lymphatic wrap things in order to squeeze into it on December 31st, 1999, and it hadn't been near her since January 1st, 2000, when the wrap wore off and all the cellulite flooded back. Lisa remembered the dress – it was emerald green, lithe and silky, and her mum had looked amazing in it. The kind of good that almost makes adult daughters a little bit resentful. There'd been an underwear issue – she'd talked Mum into the first and last thong of her life, convincing her it was the only acceptable option under the dress bar going commando. Mum had rung, on New Year's Day, to say it was so uncomfortable she'd taken it off after about an hour and seen the New Year in knickerless – with a Magistrate and a headmaster at the table, if you please. More laughing.

'Isn't that a bit of a waste of a perfectly lovely Ben de Lisi? I was hoping I might have that,' she had joked. Actually joked. Jennifer would have been fulminating. 'Too bad,' said her mum, winking. 'There'll be a bit of money. Use it to buy one of your own.'

What really did them in was the music. Mum said she couldn't bear to have something miserable – no 'Abide With Me' ('no one can ever make the high notes – you can always hear the tear in their voice'); no 'Nearer My God to Thee' ('Too *Titanic*.') 'Lord of the Dance' was nixed because it reminded her of Michael Flatley, and who the hell wanted to think of that daft prancer as they were shuffling off their mortal coil? And 'He's Got the Whole World' was far too tambourine-y. She'd got a fondness for 'Jerusalem', which was more wedding than funeral, but who cared? And definitely, definitely 'Be Thou My Vision', although preferably the Van Morrison version, piped in, even if it sounded tinny in the high-ceilinged church. She had also surfed the net for a website

recommending popular non-religious music choices, however, and it was this list that finally had them shedding tears of mirth. Frank Sinatra's 'My Way': 'As if dying at 60 would ever be *my* way!' Gloria Gaynor's 'Never Can Say Goodbye': 'Well, I suppose it's more appropriate than "I Will Survive,"' she spat out through the chortles, 'but who the hell *are* these people, and why have I never been invited to one of their funerals?' Imagining the coffin being carried out to the saccharine strains of Doris Day's 'Que Sera Sera' made their ribs hurt, and the idea of quietly listening to Vera Lynn's 'We'll Meet Again' sounded like the funniest thing ever to the pair of them. When they'd regained their breath and dried their wet faces, they'd settled on Louis Armstrong's 'Wonderful World'. But the moment her mum nodded decisively and wrote it down on the A4 pad in her round, girlish handwriting, Lisa heard it playing in her head, imagined the scene and had to turn her face away so her mum didn't identify the fresh tears she refused to see.

Now that day – the day they had meticulously planned, but that, somehow, found her so very unprepared, was here. Van Morrison and Louis Armstrong were lined up in the portable CD player and the organist had his sheet music open at 'Jerusalem'. Just that now it wasn't funny any more. Lisa sank down into the hot water so that it splashed around her nostrils and squeezed her eyes shut. If only, if only, if only Andy was here.