



BROKEN PIECES OF A LOST LIFE

Andrew Smith lay undiscovered for two months before his body was found – and there was nothing in his home to identify him. He is one of thousands of people who die alone and unmourned in the UK every year. Ariel Leve uncovers his poignant story

On an overcast day in March, very little is headed in the direction of Griffin Close, a block of council flats in north London that is in every sense a dead end.

When Andrew Smith died, nobody noticed. His flat, No 171, was at the end of the row on the second floor. His body was discovered when a neighbour, someone he had never talked to, smelt something odd and phoned the police. Andrew Smith had been dead for two months.

The date of birth on his medical records is November 30, 1965. The official date of his death, which is based on when his body was found, is May 13, 2006. There were no details on record of next of kin, and nothing in his flat to identify family or friends.

I'd first heard about Andrew Smith at Hornsey Coroner's Court, north London, while beginning a story on unclaimed bodies in the UK. I was drawn to him because of his age and his name, because he had nobody; and he could have been me. Now I'm standing at his cobalt-blue front door wondering just who

Left: Andrew Smith, aged five. He died last year at the age of 40, alone and with no papers to identify him. Centre: the coroner's officer Michelle Jones, who helped piece together a narrative of Smith's life

was this overlooked man? And how was it that at the end of his life, not one person missed him or knew he was gone?

For some, the decision to disappear is gradual. It begins with an impulse, a desire to disconnect. It could mean turning the phone off and retreating under the duvet. For most people, it's a fleeting escape. Family and friends are what keep them tethered. But what happens to those who become untethered? Or let go on purpose? Days, months, even years can pass. They have slipped through the cracks. Despite the presence of CCTV cameras and telecoms technology, which make most of us feel we are constantly monitored, it has become easier for those who live alone to avoid human contact altogether.

Some people don't want to be reached or saved or found. Andrew Smith was one of them.

☆☆☆☆

On May 13, 2006, at 6.30pm, PC Andrew Pilkington arrived at 171 Griffin Close. As he walked closer, he could smell the body and noticed the number of flies around the flat. There was no answer to his knock on the door, and he forced an entry. On a mattress in what appeared to be a bedroom, in green trousers and white trainers, Andrew Smith lay dead.

According to PC Pilkington's statement, no valuables were found and the flat was a mess; the contents of the fridge mouldy. There were no signs of a break-in or a disturbance, and incontinence (diabetic medication) was found in the kitchen cupboard. PC Pilkington called the Brent coroner's officer Michelle Jones, who arranged for the undertakers to collect the body. The last line of the statement reads: "QH24N waited with the body for the undertakers to arrive and to be taken to Northwick Park Hospital."

On May 15, two days later, a postmortem on the decomposed body listed the cause of death as "unascertained". There was no reason to suspect unnatural causes. Andrew's body was so badly decomposed that there was no fluid left in his body and his features were unrecognisable.

An inquest was opened and a "Merlin" reference number assigned – a number given to those who are unidentified or have no traceable next of kin. Andrew's body stayed in the mortuary while police tried to gather more information and Jones contacted his GP to find out his medical history.

Mortuaries can keep bodies indefinitely, but there comes a point when the deceased must be laid to rest. Sometimes a relative doesn't want to claim the body for emotional or financial reasons. But often there are no traceable relatives, and the coroner waits until the police tell them they have exhausted all avenues of inquiry before releasing the body for burial.

Five months after Andrew Smith's body was found, on October 17, DC John Richmond, from Brent Missing Persons Unit, told Michelle Jones that the inquiries into Andrew Smith were over. There was no next of kin.

During that six-month investigation, what had the police done to trace Andrew's family?



Ariel Leve after the funeral of George Willington. She and a woman from the coroner's office were the only mourners

Sometimes a relative doesn't want to claim a body from a mortuary for emotional or financial reasons

Richmond was, understandably, irritated by my interest. With each question he became more impatient. "His flat had to be fumigated twice," he said, sounding agitated. "It was full of flies and maggots. It was filthy. Clothes unwashed, in a very poor area of London. It was a slum."

It's easy to understand that, for a detective who deals with bleak cases on a daily basis, Smith was one of many; just another body in a filthy flat.

LIVING ALONE

It seems the UK is becoming a nation of loners. In 2004 there were 7m people living alone in Britain – nearly four times as many as in 1961. By 2021, 37% of all households in Britain are expected to be

made up of people who live alone. But these figures reflect more than just an ageing population – today, more than 10% of people aged between 22 and 44 live by themselves, compared with 2% in 1973.

The problem, Richmond explained, was that there was no paperwork in the flat – no birth certificate, no passport. Smith's medical records indicated he had been adopted, but his name and date of birth were not listed in British adoption records. Also, the date of birth on his medical records did not match that in the General Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages, so the police couldn't retrieve a birth certificate. Everything in the flat had been destroyed. Richmond used the word squalor, a word heavy with the consequence of failure. There was no empathy in his voice, only disgust.

Was Andrew Smith his real name? Could the date of birth on the medical records have been incorrect? Who was Andrew Smith?

☆☆☆☆

Walm Lane is a 10-minute walk from Griffin Close. Nearly a year after Smith's death, it was surprisingly easy to locate the pharmacy where he took his prescriptions. For the past 12 years he had cycled there once a month to collect his insulin. March 3, 2006, two months before his body was discovered, was the last collection. The pharmacist said he was always dressed

21

neatly. He described him as "shy and pleasant – nothing mentally ill about him", and admitted that when he didn't see him for a while, he just assumed that Smith had moved away.

With little to go on, Andrew Smith's life unfolded through a single list. According to the medical records held by his GP, these were his concerns since childhood: mild scoliosis – curvature of the spine (1967); defective speech – treatment speech therapy (1969); lack of progress at school (1972); persistent blinking of eyes – eyes examined, no abnormality detected; air-gun pellet in right wrist (1981); road-traffic accident – lower back pain (1986).

Then the list skips to 1998 and notes insulin-dependent diabetes and then, oddly, the next date is 1967, wheezy chest. After that, 2006, with a patch of eczema on his left foot, and weight loss, 1998.

The paper trail of his life is littered with gaps, inconsistencies and typos. It is entirely possible that the birth date listed could be incorrect, that numbers could have been accidentally reversed.

A few doors down from his flat, at No 168, Andrew's neighbour, a postman, described Andrew as quiet, tall and thin. They lived near each other for 13 years but had only spoken to say hello when they passed each other coming and going on the stairs. In all the years he lived there, he said, he had seen no friends, ever. Andrew kept to himself.

For a few weeks I tried to get in touch with Victoria Akiwowo, the then estate officer for Griffin Close. Maybe she had information about Andrew – for instance, what happened to his mail? Whatever letters had piled up I assumed had been destroyed for health reasons along with the contents of the flat. But surely some letters arrived after his death? PC Pilkington's statement had noted: "There were a number of letters by the front door with the name Andrew Smith [sic]." I never did get hold of her, or find out.

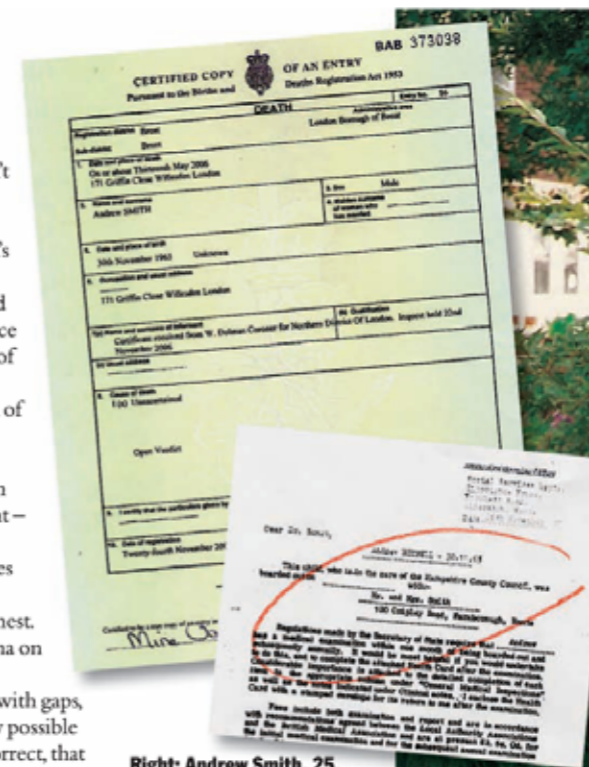
On the ground floor, a middle-aged woman opened her door. "He might know something," she said, and waved over a man in a green army jacket. He introduced himself as Joseph. "How well do you know Andrew Smith?" he asked cautiously, fearing I wasn't aware of his death. When Andrew died, Joseph said, he found it odd that the police hadn't knocked on doors or spoken to the neighbours.

It appears Andrew had slipped through the cracks in death, as he did in life. It was assumed that because he had nobody, he must be nobody.

☆☆☆☆

For a coroner's officer like Michelle Jones, death is part of everyday life. She is a good-natured woman, and when we meet at her office, she eats lunch from a paper plate at her desk while going through Andrew Smith's file.

"It is incredibly sad. Suddenly you're not here – and nobody's bothered. How can someone live a life where nobody is wondering? Nobody



Right: Andrew Smith, 25, after he had moved to London. Inset: a letter stating that, born Andrew Bethell, he was fostered by the Smith family in Farnborough, Hampshire. Top: his death certificate



'It is incredibly sad. Suddenly you're not here – and nobody's bothered. How can nobody be wondering?'

DYING ALONE

There are no national statistics for parish funerals. Under the Public Health Act, when a person with no means or family to arrange a funeral dies in the community, councils have a duty to pick up the bill. In recent inquiries, the Local Government Association could only get information from four borough councils, and The

Sunday Times Magazine contacted the local NHS trusts of these boroughs. All figures run per financial year, and often include numbers of foetal remains and stillborn babies – adults who died alone are grouped with lives that never began. Spreading these figures across the UK's 492 boroughs, we can estimate that thousands of deaths go unmourned by family or friends.

is concerned? He must be someone's child."

In October, after the investigation had been concluded, Jones referred Smith's case to the local authority responsible for contacting the funeral director, who would carry out a parish funeral and cremation, funded by the council.

No authority in the UK officially collates the national statistics regarding parish funerals, but in the year in which Andrew was buried, his funeral directors had dealt with 14 cases. We must assume that thousands die alone and unmourned every year. Sandra Moulder, the coroner's technical support officer, attends the funerals in Brent if nobody else is there. But sometimes she is just too busy to make it.

To get some idea of what Andrew's funeral would have been like, I accompany Moulder to Enfield Crematorium for the parish funeral of George Willington, a retired pipe-fitter who died of natural causes alone in his council flat. Born in 1934, he left behind pension cheques, a TV licence and £13 in coins. He had no next of kin. There is a plain white card with his name written in black ink on a stand outside the chapel doors. We are the only mourners.

Father Emerson is a charismatic man in his mid-seventies. He begins the service

23

with the 23rd psalm from the Book of Common Prayer. "The lord is my shepherd..." After 15 minutes, he commits the body to eternal rest. Afterwards, I walk out to their "flower terrace", where a bouquet of flowers with a purple bow lies on the ground near another card with George Willington's name. They were placed there by the funeral directors. Later his ashes will be scattered by a chapel attendant. There is an efficiency to this process that I find reassuring. It is a ritual that is comforting, serene, and a little bit heartbreaking. With nobody left behind to mourn, there is no suffering.

Andrew Smith's funeral took place on Friday, December 8, 2006, seven months after his body was discovered, and was held at the West London Crematorium. The cost – paid for by the local council – was £475. His ashes were scattered in the Garden of Rest.

In Victorian and Edwardian Britain the death of a pauper carried a tremendous stigma. Today, we appear to be less judgmental about poverty, and yet we still keep an emotional distance from those who die alone. Perhaps because the choice to disconnect was theirs and so the burden of responsibility on the living is lifted; or because, at a time when an increasing number of us live alone, we fear this is what may become of us.

What happened to Andrew Smith to provoke his estrangement from the world? Was there something in his life that foretold his unhappy ending? A seminal moment? A traumatic event? Or perhaps it was a series of little rejections, fragments of disillusionment: an unremarkable life passing into an unremarkable death.

☆☆☆☆

And then, just as the story of Andrew Smith's life appeared to end with no insight into who he was, it was in fact beginning. In May 2007, Michelle Jones informed me of a breakthrough. Two months earlier, in March, I had contacted the primary-care trust in Brent and Harrow, looking for Andrew Smith's full medical records and patient notes (the GP's notes I'd seen had barely covered a page). I was told that if they existed, they would not be made available to me. Someone from the coroner's office must speak to a supervisor. Michelle Jones said she would help. Eight weeks passed. Now, here they were. A road map of Andrew Smith's medical history in doctors' scribbled shorthand.

It is a peculiar fact that details we never notice as we move through life can act as valuable clues once we die. An x-ray of your teeth, an address on a standard form – you never think these might explain who you are when you're gone.

Some facts: Andrew Smith was born Andrew Bethell. His recorded date of birth, November 30, 1965, was correct. He had been fostered, not adopted, through social services into the Smith family in Farnborough, Hampshire, till he was 16.

Jones put in a request to the Hampshire county council and also contacted children's services. If the fostering file could be retrieved, it would provide important details for locating next of kin. Without full names and dates of

birth, there was no way to make sure of the right Mr and Mrs Smith. A fax was sent to the county adoption services, for the attention of Donna Martin. It still wasn't clear if Andrew had been legally adopted after having been fostered. We waited for her reply. In June, Martin told Jones that two searches had been done and no file could be found. The conclusion was that it must have been destroyed. In a note, she wrote: "It's very frustrating. Seems such a simple task. Let me know if there's anything more I can do."

For the past eight years, Margaret Duncan has worked as a probate researcher, tracing relatives for the deceased. If someone in the UK dies without leaving a will, their estate becomes the property of the crown. Her company, Thames Probate, searches for the blood kin when an estate needs distributing. She also occasionally works with local authorities, which is how Jones came to hear of her and to ask her to look at Andrew Smith's case. Once she became involved, things began to move forward.

Using her death index (a CD containing special information), Duncan was able to provide

the address where the Smith family had lived with Andrew – Cripsey Road, confirmation of their names – Isabel and Stanley, dates of birth, and confirmation of their deaths.

Isabel Smith was known as Betty. She and her husband, Stanley, were older parents. They fostered Andrew when he was six months old. Isabel died in 1978 of cancer when Andrew was 13, and he continued to live alone with Stanley. And then there was the most trenchant detail of all: the Smiths had two biological children of their own before they fostered Andrew. He was not an only child. He had a brother and sister who might still be alive and, if so, presumably remained unaware of his death.

☆☆☆☆

It is a sunny Tuesday in July, and I'm standing in a residential road in Farnborough. In front of me is a semidetached house with white lace curtains. Mrs Camm has lived in this house since 1968, separated by only a wall and a fence from the Smith family, where Andrew grew up.

The Smiths were, she recalls, an average working-class family. Stanley worked for the

local council as a landscape gardener, keeping the parks clean and planting the roundabouts. Isabel was a busy housewife and very close to her fostered son. "Andrew had lovely red hair and freckles. And a little round face," she recalls.

As a little boy, Andrew would play with her daughter and some other children in the yard. He was shy, she said; not the sort to ask for a glass of lemonade, but happy if one was offered.

In 1977, Andrew started at Cove comprehensive school, the same year as Mrs Camm's daughter. She can't remember much of him after that. When Andrew's mother died a year later, his father stopped work to look after him. His sister, seven years older, and his brother, nine years older, had already moved out. After a year or so, Stanley Smith and Andrew moved to a smaller house. There is a Robert Smith who still lives down the road, and Mrs Camm believes this might be Andrew's brother. She offers to put a note through his letterbox, to see if it is him.

☆☆☆☆

Relationships are the infrastructure of our lives, but they require maintenance or they crumble. When Andrew Smith's brother was told what had happened to him, he was shocked but not surprised. They'd been out of touch for a while.

He agreed to speak on the phone. His voice was even, and he spoke of how his brother had become more and more isolated and had been on a downward spiral. Our conversation was brief, but he told me that he would inform his sister, a practice nurse with her own family. She was closer to Andrew and had seen him a few years ago. Robert, who works for a healthcare company, lives with his wife and his two →

25

daughters. "It all goes by so quickly," he says, before we hang up. "Marriage, career, children, paying the mortgage – you lose contact."

A few days later, in the late afternoon, I receive a phone call. A tentative voice says: "This is Andrew Smith's sister." It was an unusual phone call. Few of us expect to have to ask for the details of a sibling's death from a stranger.

She tells me she had been planning a trip to London with her family at Christmas this year and would have gone to the flat and found out then. So it was better to know. Several times she mentions that she can't understand why her letters were never returned. She sent cards to Andrew – Christmas and birthday cards – always with a note on the envelope that clearly stated they should be returned to her if not delivered. Nothing ever came back. In one card she had written: "Are you alive or dead?"

The following week, I visit Andrew's sister at her cosy seaside home. She does not want her name to be used. There are frog figurines in the loo and towels that match the cheerful paint on the wall. A fluffy tibetan terrier follows us into the kitchen as she makes a cup of tea.

The last time she saw Andrew alive was December 2004. It was close to Christmas, and she went to his flat at Griffin Close with her husband and two sons, who were 13 and 15. She had sent him a card letting him know they would be stopping by. She couldn't call because he didn't have a phone.

The flat was a mess. She noticed he was coughing a lot. He was very thin and looked poorly, and there was no radio, no television, and no books. What did he do all day? She didn't know. Nothing. He slept a lot. But there was a bicycle in his flat. And some days he would cycle to the West End and people-watch.

What was he thinking when he watched others live their lives? His sister was not one to ask him questions like this. She does not know what happened or why he chose to isolate himself. When she speaks about him, it is with a puzzled yet matter-of-fact tone. "He went to London to find his fortune," she says, shaking her head. "He was always a dreamer."

Only Andrew could have answered the question of whether or not he had a happy childhood, but others seem to think he had. Over the next few hours, sitting with his sister in her spotless sitting room, his life story is told. On her lap she has photographs to show me, and in nearly all of them he is smiling.

A red-headed little boy with huge brown eyes and a freckled nose. A teenager: broad shoulders, tanned, and wearing a coral necklace. There is one from 1998 in which he has a red bandanna on his head, and then there is one in which he is sitting in a brown leather chair. It is the same chair I am sitting in. As he ages, he begins to look thin. The photographs stop in 1998.

It will be dusk when we set off to the train station – her husband will drive – and she will explain why she does not want her identity to be known. She will tell me, "It's very sad how he



Andrew Smith in 1996. By this time, he was already disillusioned with life. His sister last saw him alive in 2004, at Christmas

went well. "A rewarding experience." He discovered he had another family and stayed in touch on and off. His birth mother is still alive, but made it clear, on hearing of Andrew's death from his sister, that she did not want to talk.

At 19, he changed his name from Bethell to Smith. After 1985 he drops off the electoral register. He worked at various jobs through the years – as a delivery driver and a builder – and took a winter let in Cornwall. He had a girlfriend. In 1987 he spent the summer in Portugal working as a barman. But then he moved to London and everything changed.

A week after our first phone call, I call Robert back to talk more about his brother. He is watching Rocky II. He pauses to lower the volume. He speaks slowly and there is sadness in his voice. "London really changed things for Andrew. He went there because he thought he could do better. He did a number of courses, ways to improve himself – computer courses; but they never materialised into a job. He wanted the quick jump from rags to riches."

Andrew grew melancholic and disenchanted. By 1993 he was living rough under London Bridge, and his family lost contact for a few years. Then, in 1998, he rang his sister from hospital saying he'd been diagnosed with type-1 diabetes.

"He wanted to be a London boy. He liked the bright lights," his brother says. And in an absurd

Andrew's sister sent cards, and nothing was ever returned. In one she wrote: 'Are you alive or dead?'

died," and that she is embarrassed. She tells me that Andrew's birth mother, Evelyn, was unmarried when she became pregnant and was not able to raise him by herself. She didn't want to put him up for adoption because she thought, or maybe hoped, that one day she might be able to take him back.

He was a good-natured child who looked on the bright side. He would climb trees and had friends. "He had a winning charm," his sister said. "And it carried over into his adulthood."

As a child, Andrew always knew that he had another mum and that she wanted him. In 1978, Isabel Smith developed bowel cancer and died six months later. There had been talk of adopting Andrew so he would not be taken away, but he was a teenager, and they were told it was not likely, so the adoption never took place.

When I asked his sister how Andrew had changed after the death of his foster mother, she said she didn't feel he had. He did not become withdrawn, and she does not believe this is what triggered his desire to disconnect.

Andrew left school at 16. He wasn't sure what he wanted to do but had ideas of a better life, somehow. He always had schemes. "There was one about biorhythms," his sister recalled.

At 18, he tracked down his birth mother and surprised her. Both his sister and brother say it

moment, as he speaks, I can hear the theme music from Rocky swell in the background.

☆☆☆☆

Was Andrew hopeful that things would work out? Did he have goals? Or had depression set in that went undiagnosed and untreated? Nobody can answer these questions. During his final years, he woke up every morning with nowhere to go and nothing to do. There was nobody who needed him. Imagine the blandness of his days.

Andrew's siblings spoke of the way he lived – the isolation in particular – being his choice. They felt a level of helplessness and futility that he wasn't willing to accept their support, or that of his birth mother, who seems to have offered to take him in. They are left to wonder: could they have done more? Could they have tried harder?

There was anger, too. Wondering why they had not found out sooner that he was deceased. He muddled along, they said. He drifted away. And after a while, despair turns to acceptance and apathy sets in. Which, in the end, is what everyone in this story had in common.

Andrew Smith must have wondered who would grieve for him or feel the loss. And to live your life knowing that if you didn't exist, nobody would notice, must be so lonely; it's being a ghost long before you have gone ■

Additional reporting by Amy Turner

27

WE ARE WATCHING YOU...

It ought to be hard to disappear from view. The UK has 4.2m CCTV cameras – approximately one camera for every 14 people. If you live in London, you are captured on CCTV an average of 300 times a day. Without our being aware, our everyday activities leave a trail.

According to the Information Commissioner's Office, mobile phones, bank, internet and credit-card transactions, car satellite-navigation systems, electronic travel passes such as Oyster cards, store loyalty cards and medical records can all be used to

trace someone's whereabouts. The charity Missing People estimates that 210,000 people in the UK are reported missing every year. Two-thirds of these are under 18, and the majority are found or return home safely within 14 days. Missing People is currently working on 150 unidentified cases – most of which concern corpses or body parts. Only a few are categorised as 'alive unidentified'. If nobody steps forward to identify them, they will remain indefinitely at a mortuary or will be cremated, or buried in an unmarked grave.