

Eulogy for Allan Robb

Nicky Campbell

It was a couple of winters back on a cold, dark Friday night around 6pm in Clapham. I'd been to see Allan and across the road from his flat I heard groaning and moaning from a body in the shadows on the pavement. "Help Me." A jogger had slipped and broken his ankle. I helped him over into Allan's flat - got him in - called an ambulance, sat him down on the sofa. Allan sat facing him with his cup of tea, eyes glinting.

AND THEN – Allan's opening gambit: "Me and Nicky have known each other for 43 years."

Allan didn't think to himself: "Poor man with broken ankle." He thought: "Brand new audience."

The poor man was then subjected to the Allan's Greatest Hits. Now that's what I call Allan.

The good news for the fallen jogger was that strangers came to his aid; the bad news was that he got an edition of "This is Somebody Else's Life."

Eventually the paramedics arrived – and of course he fell to the floor IN GRATITUDE and kissed their feet. Classic Allan. Defiant. Oblivious. Hilarious. Add to that loyal, loving, warm, kind, clever, acerbic, stubborn, relentless, embarrassing, life affirming – and funny. God, he was funny.

Allan was my brother – and it was love at first sight. We were instantly best friends from our very first day at our very first school – to the last day of his life. Through thick and thin. Good times and bad. We looked away from each other sometimes – but never for long. We had fights with each other; we literally risked life and limb for each other. We shared so much – through our lives at the Edinburgh Academy, Aberdeen University, North Sound Radio, flats, mad holidays together, the BBC – wherever we were – we were two peas in a pod.

Now – at last – at last, a chance to get a word in edgeways.

We had our own language. We had our own world.

And I am now the last living inhabitant of the "Allan and Nicky world." The joy. The craziness. The love and the laughs. So many laughs. And that world – so integral to my world – has gone. A part of me has died.

I can hear him now, though: "This isn't about you, Nicky."

Allan – you were the greatest best friend anyone could have.

Allan was wonderfully human – to say anything else would be to diminish his humanity. We loved him. At his best he was wonderful. At his worst he was – often – wonderful. He was Allan.

But we know he walked far too often far too close to the edge; far too close to the fire. That was Allan. Heard of Venus in Blue Jeans? He was Icarus in Chinos.

To me he was "El Presidente." To the last. When he was Union President one of the porters at Aberdeen University who smoked like an industrial chimney always greeted him in a voice of granite, gravel and nicotine. "El Presidente."

And El Presidente was a doubting Thomas. That is why he was such a brilliant journalist. He was always keen to emphasise: "My middle name's Thomas."

I loved his scepticism.

I loved his devil-may-care bloody mindedness. He'd march into the newsroom at the BBC with the Telegraph in hand as if he were planting a flag in enemy territory.

I loved his idiosyncrasies – that delicious intolerance. Back when we shared flats I loved the fact that he was physically incapable of being in a room if Paul Daniels was on the telly.

I loved the stories he loved: he cherished the surreal and absurd. Mr Woo, a trusted party apparatchik zealot from Communist China, lived in our six-room warren at Aberdeen University. Poor sod. He came past Allan's room at Hillhead Halls. It was 1979. He pointed to Allan's iconic photo of Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall which adorned the tiny wall and said: "Are these your parents?"

He loved that one. All his life. He told the story thousands of times. Each time just like the last. That was Allan. His face lit up every time.

He loved the story of when we were busted for having no TV licence in Rosemount Place. Aberdeen had just won the European Cup Winners Cup. The telly was draped in flags with a big red rosette pinned to the side. A shrine to Aberdeen FC who'd just beaten Real Madrid. The enforcers looked at it; they looked at us and we said: "We've never watched it. It's never been on." Then I relented: "To be absolutely honest we did catch the last ten minutes of the final." He loved that story.

He was literally my partner in crime. As students, he breached the peace and I disobeyed a lawful order at protesting his outrageous arrest. In the cells overnight. Our only experience of the criminal justice system – up until that point. I still wonder what the Aberdonian coppers made of his 3am cries: "I demand to see my attorney." And what they thought as we sang – in unison – from our different cells: "Please release me, let me go."

We shared the triumphs – like when he won the election to be President of the UMC at University. The slogans we devised: "Yes We can" and "A Time for Change" are nothing on "Robb's Your Uncle" and "Give Robb the Job" and he did a fantastic job. That was Allan.

When he went for the job at *Newsbeat* and I was waiting for him outside BH, he came out with a smile I'll never forget. He said: "They gave Robb the job." A great day. None of us will ever forget Allan's smile.

We were indestructible. We were the greatest thing since sliced bread. The coolest dudes around. The smartest cleverest boys in town. Didn't we know it. And wasn't it a terrible shock to find out it wasn't true.

When I joined 5live from Radio 1 he took me to one side like he was going to impart some terrible news. "Nick . . . you know we ARE really clever. Well, since I've been at 5live I've met people here more intelligent than us. AND I don't just mean Roger Mosey."

You never really get over that.

Recently, he took a bad turn in London. Eventually, I persuaded him into the ambulance. Once he had got used to the idea and we were on the move, out came the stories; it was a short journey through South London, but the paramedics were magnetised by his personality. In the hospital amidst the trauma, this four-hour old plate of mush arrived. Al looked up. "Excuse me – I ordered the lobster."

BUT such intimate and inextricably close friendship is a complex compact.

Being immensely proud of someone and rather jealous of the same thing in them is part of the deal. There were things about me that made him proud and jealous. He told me often – with that Allan directness. He could be very emotional.

But I never had the guts to tell him. I'll tell you now.

I loved and so envied his effortless ability to make people like him. To talk to people. Make friends. Keep friends. People warmed to him. People loved him. Sometimes against their better judgement.

So many people here loved him.

And that terrible joke he loved so much. "I've got a terrible memory. And I'll tell you something else. I've got a terrible memory."

He had an incredible memory.

That big brain of his needed to be occupied. So he did occupy himself.

When I was round at his flat a few weeks ago I asked him about the paddling pools. He had bought a job lot of paddling pools from Argus. A year or so ago it was a job lot of Sellotape dispenser so many of us got for Christmas – but now paddling pools. "Why, Allan?" I asked.

"Do you want one?"

Just before the funeral I went round to see if there was anything that had been left. Just wanted to go round. Somehow you think he'll be there. A group of Eastern Europeans were hard at it renovating the place: "A man from the BBC was here – it is VERY sad." they said.

I rooted about – nothing there of his any more; photos, clothes, books – all gone, except for one thing in the dark at the back of a cupboard underneath the stairs. It was a single paddling pool. I carried it all the way home – sobbing. Tina answered the door and I fell into her arms and we both cried. It's hard to explain; IT WAS a transcendent moment.

Like it was there for me. All I could hear was Al saying: "Do you want one?" Well, I got one. The last one.

Allan Robb had the X factor: exhausting – exasperating – exceptional – exuberant – exciting – extraordinary and exhilarating.

Jamie, my Godson. You know your Dad was exceptional.

Aren't many people in this world who had a dad like him. Ain't that the truth.

A cornerstone in my life has gone. A part of me has died. A lot of me has changed. My heart still grieves. But here is the news – this is the big headline this hour: we were all so very lucky to have known Allan Duncan Thomas Robb.

I love you Allan.