

**MOTHER OF A SUICIDE:  
FIGHTING FOR THE TRUTH**

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## **Dedications**



## FOREWORD

This is part of a letter I sent to a consultant endocrinologist a year or so after our son Chris died. It gives an idea of what he was like:

‘Christopher was kind, friendly, amused. He was capable, clear-sighted, he understood people. I used to rely on him for advice when I felt worked up, and when I needed computer help he’d always give it. My mother-in-law called him “a lovely boy” and he was, he’d willingly do odd jobs for her. He always worked hard and was good at his job. I used to love visiting him at his home in Skipton. He’d be waiting at the station for me, a tall, slim figure spreading his arms wide to hug me. I remember his soft, snorting laugh. What a good host he was, improvising a bed for me in his living-room, with the reading lamp placed at exactly the right angle. When I stayed there he used to play pop songs by artists such as Dido on the piano by ear – he was good at hearing and reproducing chords and he had large, well-shaped hands. We found a big Lego-type model of a machine in his house after he died, and I could imagine so clearly his hands making it, with strength and precision.’

I miss him so much. But I expect I’ll get over that eventually. What I can’t ever, ever get over, is the understanding I now have of his suffering and isolation,

and my realisation of what great strength he showed, when I was so wrongly believing him weak. I can't ever erase the image of him putting on that nasty helium mask and taping it in place, and turning on the canister and getting on with dying, with his door considerably left unlocked so that the police could get in to find him. And the thought of his heart beating more and more slowly and uncertainly, and then stopping, as he sat in his boxer shorts alone in the dark.

## 1 -BREAKING THE NEWS

On 26 August 2008 my doorbell rang. It was late afternoon, sunny and warm. I was feeling good because I'd tackled the garden and I'd enticed my feisty 84-year-old mother-in-law, Celia, out on a trip ('How about coming to the dump with me?'). She'd come, and we'd enjoyed it, and we'd had tea at her house afterwards. I smiled at the two policewomen. They didn't smile back.

'Are you Mrs Lane? Do you have a son called Christopher Lane?'

I stopped feeling good. I started asking questions, too fast. 'Has he had an accident? Is he in hospital? Was it his bike? He won't ever wear a helmet...'

A pause, and then I asked (it felt from nowhere), 'Is he alive?'

No answer, just a long slow look. They asked if they could come in. 'Can we sit down somewhere and we'll tell you what he's done?'

'What he's done' made me feel better – it made him sound as if he was still alive. We went into the lounge while they told me. Chris, our 31-year-old son, who lived 200 miles away in Skipton, had put on a mask and inhaled helium from a canister some time during the night, and left time-delayed emails for the police to come and find him. He'd also sent emails to Mark and Em, two friends from university, one to his boss at Skipton Building Society, and one to his counsellor. I hadn't even known he was being counselled. No email for us.

I thought wild thoughts that eat into me now when I

remember. ‘How silly of him, how melodramatic! He’s turned me into the mother of a suicide!’

One of the women asked if she could make me a cup of tea, so I showed her where the things were. I remember how neat and round her police hat looked, resting on the work surface. They told me, ‘He’s in Airedale Hospital’ and immediately I visualised him in a hospital bed, alive.

‘In hospital?’ I said.

One of them cleared her throat. ‘There’s a morgue attached,’ she said.

They were very tactful, and wanted to know if I had someone who could come and sit with me. My neighbour, Jill, I said. ‘We’ll do whatever you want, if you want us to stay, we’ll stay.’

I fetched Jill. I told her briefly what had happened. She sat in the living room while I went to my computer. I just needed something to blot everything out, and the game Minesweeper seemed the answer. One policewoman stood in the conservatory, discreetly making calls on her mobile. I’d hardly located three mines when the phone rang. It was my mother-in-law, asking about an arrangement we’d made that my husband would call in on her when he came home. He was almost due. Oh heavens! I had to tell him. I had to tell my mother-in-law. I had to drive to the station to pick him up in a few minutes. I said ‘I’ve had very bad news. I’ll come round.’

The policewomen seemed to think I wouldn’t be safe to drive. One of them drove behind me for the five minutes it took to reach my mother-in-law’s house. But I drove more carefully than usual, focusing absolutely because I didn’t want to think. I delivered the blow, and she sobbed aloud, but I couldn’t stay with her, so I asked the policewoman to look after her while I went on to the station.

That was the hardest thing, to see John in his suit coming down the hill towards me, catching sight of me, pleased to see me, thinking it was just another ordinary day. I ran to him. I couldn't help clinging to him, stroking him desperately, as I told him our son was dead. He stopped still and listened to it all. My face was buried in his suit so I couldn't see his expression. He said in a very level voice, 'You never know what's round the corner.'

We picked up my mother-in-law and the three of us went to our house, where I can hardly remember what we said. I was desperate to go to Skipton right away. I couldn't help feeling that if I got there fast enough I would be able to see something they'd missed, spot some mistake, somehow get him back. But the police said the morgue wouldn't be open until the next morning. John asked a lot of practical questions, wrote down reference numbers and telephone numbers and names. I thought about our daughters. Jenny was in France on holiday with her husband, Nick, but Ruth, our youngest, (I would soon have to start saying 'younger') was only an hour away, in London. I couldn't tell her on the phone, I'd have to go in person. I think I even set off without checking she was in (I had a key to her flat) because I didn't want her to suffer for an hour in suspense.

I hardly want to remember telling her, and how we cried together most of the night (not proper crying in my case, just a painful filling of the sinuses and never-ending nose-blowing, and a terrible headache), and how when I did go to bed I couldn't sleep, because all the thoughts and memories came crowding in. It was the first of many nights like this.



## 2 - THOUGHTS IN THE NIGHT

My first thought was ‘When did I speak to him last?’ I felt I’d lived through aeons, but I worked out that it had been only the previous evening – the night before he died, in fact. He must have rung me with all the nasty paraphernalia of suicide in his house, waiting (perhaps right in front of him) to be used.

It had seemed a normal conversation. He’d talked about the allotment he shared with Mark and Em, about my brother’s offer to find him a cheap car, how he’d been in the Dales the previous day, which was Bank Holiday Monday, walking on his own (why didn’t that ring alarm bells?). I told him how we’d taken my mother-in-law, Celia, to the seaside on her mobility scooter, which she couldn’t control very well, and how she’d created mayhem, scattering chairs in an open-air cafe. He laughed, I remembered. But then there was a little pause at the end, as if he didn’t want to end the conversation. Finally I said, ‘I suppose you want to watch that Al Pacino DVD darling’ (he’d mentioned it earlier), and we said goodbye. Why didn’t I let that pause extend? What would he have said if I hadn’t shut him up? But I put the receiver down, and sometime during that night, before 7 a.m. the next day, he did it.

I reached for my mobile and looked at his texts. There was one from Monday saying, ‘What are you up to today?’ and I’d answered that we were walking by the sea in Kent. So this was when he was on his solitary walk in the Dales, feeling desperate.

I'd asked him what he was up to too, and he texted 'Just getting on train back to Skipton after a walk near Keighley'. That was around noon. I looked at all the other ones for the past month.

July 30: Okay thanks Mum. I've left your key in the fridge in a bag with the carrots

August 2: Hi Mum. Can you text me Duniyul's street name before you go if you get this message. The address folder is in the study

(Later that day): Thanks Mum. Enjoy the play tonight!

August 3: Hi Mum, back in Skipton now. How was last night? Can you post me my mobile phone charger? I think I left it plugged in under your desk in the study

And then, only eight days ago on August 20: Greeting from Betws Y Coed! Today is the first day of our kayaking course. It's actually river kayaking, not sea kayaking. It's been very wet here so the rivers are all in full flow!

I could not believe there would be no more texts like this, that this ordinary inconsequential living stream had stopped, that I couldn't any longer select 'Chris Lane' on my phone and tap out a message to him. These everyday messages had suddenly become relics.

Among my first thoughts when I got the news (along with 'how melodramatic and silly!') was the idea that he hadn't loved us enough if he could do this to us. But now, in the dark, I wondered if I had loved him enough. I'd always known that I hadn't been a good mother when he was a baby. To confess now: although John was Chris's father, he and I didn't start to live together until Chris was nine months old, and during those early months – and afterwards too – I was stressed and insensitive. When he was a toddler I used to smack him. I remember that when he was three he drew a picture of me and him – I was a

giant, towering figure and he was a little tiny one in the corner, crying. My heart smote me then and I grew gentler, and life gradually became calmer as I made friends with other mothers in the area. But I'd always carried inside me the wish that I could live those years again, better. I sometimes thought of how hypnotists can implant false memories, and I wished Chris and I could go together and construct an alternative past, where everything was as it should have been.

Had my failings all those years ago made Chris kill himself? Naturally, I looked round for an excuse for my character defects in my own upbringing, and I wondered if I could lay the blame for my failures at the door of my elderly, rather strict parents who didn't communicate with their own widely spaced children (my sister was six years older than me, my brother four years younger), or teach them interpersonal skills. My sister – though she would dispute this – bullied me sometimes, but I hadn't been too hard done by really. It was more, I thought, like the way toxins in the sea can get concentrated by one creature eating another, until the last one in the chain ingests a lethal dose and dies. Perhaps my poor Chris was the end one, paying the price for the failure of generations.

But the next few days were going to bring me circling nearer and nearer to the true reason for his death.



### 3 - THE JOURNEY TO YORKSHIRE

The next day the weather changed abruptly, absolutely, from summer to winter. I have never known the outside world to mirror human emotions so well. Ruth and John and I drove up to Skipton through driving rain, desperate to get there, while simultaneously dreading getting there. I half wanted to spare our other daughter Jenny (let her not know, let her enjoy her holiday with Nick and be happy a little longer!), but I knew she would not forgive us if we kept the news from her. I called her in France and said ‘Is Nick with you? Can you get him? We’ve got bad news...’

They said they’d come back to England right away.

We reached Airedale Hospital. A nice, young policeman came to the desk to greet us and escorted us to a room where Chris lay covered by a shiny red cloth. How strange it was that I felt a little lift of the heart when I saw him, the pleasure of recognition, to see his dear face, his well-shaped, dark eyebrows looking much as usual above his large, closed eyes. I had been imagining something monstrous. But then reality took over. I felt his face, which was cool, and then his chest through the red cloth. His body was as hard as iron, frozen. I realised that the hospital must thaw out the faces of the dead, out of kindness to the relatives, but the mechanics of it repelled me. He had a little mark on his throat, which I later discovered happened when his boss, Avice, found him and ripped off the mask hoping to save him. But she was much too late, of course.

I am not a demonstrative person, but I gave a kind of

howl, deliberately, to see if it made me feel better, but it didn't. I stroked his eyebrows, because they at least didn't feel dead. Seeing him lying there reminded me so much of when he was seven years old, in intensive care after a terrible head injury falling from a tree. The same slightly open mouth with the top teeth showing, the same unresponsiveness. But there had been a happy ending that time.

Then it was time to go to his house.

It was in a terraced row ending in a high, blank wall where the canal ran. It stood out from all the other houses because the natural sandstone bricks were painted a thick cream. He hadn't been sure about this when he bought it, it wasn't a good effect, but in every other way he liked it. The front door opened straight on to the living room, from which you could either go upstairs or through another door into the kitchen. There was a little yard at the back where he had made a miniature polythene greenhouse to grow tomato plants, and beyond that an alley that ran between the backs of two terraces, which was usually festooned with washing lines from one side to the other.

The house had a dank feel. There was an armchair close to the front door. This, we learned, was where he had sat, his laptop running, with its dreadful emails bidding their time, a book called *Final Exit* nearby and a mask over his face with a tube leading to a helium canister. He had left the front door unlocked considerably, so that the police (to whom he'd sent the first email, timed for 7 a.m.) could get in to find him. But it hadn't happened as he planned, because the police didn't see his email until after Avice had got hers at around 10 a.m. and rushed round with a colleague, to find him blue and stiff in his boxer shorts.

Her email, which she forwarded to us later, said:

‘If you’re reading this then it means I was successful this time.

It was always a pleasure working for you, Avice. You are an excellent manager and a truly lovely person to have known.

I didn’t make it to the docs on Friday in the end. Medication might have masked the symptoms but it wouldn’t have been the real me, and it wouldn’t have addressed the cause. The counselling was therapeutic, but each time the warm afterglow feeling only lasted for half a day. Waking up the next morning I was always back where I was.

All the books and techniques seem to point to the need for change. But the ironic thing is neither do I want to, nor have I the capacity to change who I am. Perhaps it’s as much genetic as based on life experiences. Whenever I try to visualise a ‘future me’ all I see is an empty space.’

We didn’t linger near the armchair. We went up to his bedroom and started to pack his things. A copy of Dorothy Rowe’s book, *The Successful Self*, lay half read, by his bed. I flicked through it and saw he had been reading about how parents can wreck their children’s self-esteem. His bookcase was full of DVDs. I wanted to take them home with us and watch them all, so that I could understand every experience he’d had, everything he’d thought, but John and Ruth talked me out of it. I looked in the cupboard at his clothes, all his familiar T-shirts hanging there. They too seemed cold, unaired, needing a wash. Were we going to throw these out? Would we keep them for ever? I decided then and there that I was going to wear them and wear them and wear them until they wore

out completely, and then I would say goodbye gradually, throwing them away one by one.

## 4 - HIS WORKPLACE

We had arranged to visit Skipton Building Society to meet Chris's colleagues, and Avice. So after stowing his clothes and papers in our car to take home we drove there. I had never met Avice before, but could see immediately why Chris had liked her so much. Some people have an aura of unmistakable warmth and sympathy. She welcomed us in, showed us his desk, gave us an album which his colleagues had put together, full of photos and anecdotes about him. We could see he'd been loved. We could also see that he'd had fun at work. We stood, browsing other people's memories of our son – nearly everybody commented on his helpfulness and eccentric sense of humour.

He had a colleague called Graham who had an individual style of speech, which Chris had decided to record, with translations. Here is an example:

### Ordering a Drink

<b>Graham Speak</b>	<b>Translation</b>
Can I moisten your ship with a beverage	Would you like a drink?
The drink of champions	Tea with two sugars
If you could press the button that resulted in production of a chocomilk, I would be eternally grateful	Chocomilk please

One colleague, Mark, had written, ‘I have a distinct memory of one particular morning when Chris came in looking very tired. After a small inquisition he told everyone that the previous night he had driven 200 miles down to London to see a friend for just a couple of hours before driving back. I think this is a good example of the type of person Chris was, and the lengths he would go to for the people he cared about.’

Another, Rachel, recalled how the two of them would chat about Smurfs – ‘We spent at least a week discussing the female Smurf, where she came from and what she wore’ – and how Chris made a penguin out of Blu Tac to be a friend for their mascot, a small plastic duck.

Yet behind this jokey persona had been despair.

Avice had found out more than I had. She’d given him a job review, at the end of which she’d asked the routine question, ‘Have you any concerns or difficulties you’d like to mention?’ and something about his expression had made her say, ‘Is everything all right?’

He’d confessed to her that he was depressed. She’d done everything she could – arranged for him to see a counsellor through the company, lent him books, talked to him. She seemed almost to be apologising to me for not saving him, but I said ‘You did more than me. When he came to visit us last month I left him and went off to have lunch with a friend!’

Avice arranged for us to talk to the counsellor, who was open and generous in her efforts to comfort us. She told us Chris had been worried about his sexual identity, hoping we would see this as something that wasn’t our fault. He had said he didn’t feel ‘like a proper man’, and felt that the gap between how he presented himself to others and how he felt inside had become enormous. She said he’d spoken of John and me with great affection. I

could see how she would have given Chris a ‘warm afterglow’ because she did it to us, too. For a moment we felt uplifted and cheerful – but as Chris had found, the descent to reality was harsh.

Avice told us that Skipton Building Society was anxious to give us the use of a flat they used for business clients, but we had arranged to spend the night with my sister Caroline. We said we’d stay in the company flat when we returned for the funeral.

Arranging the funeral was what we did next. As we waited in the undertaker’s parlour, John referred to a walk he’d done with Chris recently around Skipton, and his voice broke, for the first time in living memory. Ruth said ‘Don’t you cry Daddy, too, I don’t know what we’ll do!’

The priest at the church was kind, like everyone else. We fixed the service for a week away. When we reached my sister’s we were exhausted, glad to eat the meal she’d cooked and to go straight to bed afterwards. I couldn’t sleep, and read more of the album by the bedside lamp.



## 5 -ANOTHER NIGHT

There were entries by Graham, whose speaking style Chris had documented so carefully. One was:

‘The monkey wrench

When Chris cycled home from work, he would enter the back yard of his house and after depositing his bike would go inside through the back door. One day, the handle to the back door broke off. As Chris lived in a mid-terraced house this resulted in a fair walk to get around to the front door. For several weeks, to avoid having to walk *that* far, Chris carried a rather large monkey wrench to work and back each day. When he got home he could enter through the back door by using the wrench on the remaining stubby bit of the handle. Some may have bought a new handle for the door as soon as they could, Chris used the old wartime saying ‘make do and mend’.

The other described how ‘the always resourceful Chris’ had borrowed an enormous suction-cup handle from work, designed for moving heavy metal floor panels, and cycled home with it, to use it to move a small resistant strip of laminate flooring.

This side of Chris went with the way he had obviously put off repairing his central heating, and been content to live in a cold, mouldy house. It went with the way he had moved his piano from the house he used to rent, to his new one. He had trundled it on a little trolley by himself

down a steep hill and along at least half a mile of streets, and broken a bone in his foot in the process. Why couldn't he have hired a removal van?

I suspected him of liking his 'zany' image and acting up to it. But I hadn't wanted him to be zany, I wanted him to be a person who mended his back door and his central heating and hired removal vans and – to get to the heart of the matter – went out and found himself a girlfriend, instead of hankering uselessly after Kate who had left him five years ago.

Tossing in bed I thought about that time, when Kate left. They had been living for three months in the house that they'd bought together in Leighton Buzzard, and I had thought everything was fine. But he rang up one day to say, very nonchalantly and as if it was unimportant, that she'd gone. I rushed over to see him but he didn't seem able to tell me much. They'd gone on holiday with her sister and boyfriend, and he'd felt the sister didn't like him much and was putting Kate off him. And then, after they got back, Kate had said, 'This isn't working, is it?' and she'd gone back to her parents. They had been an item for four years, ever since they'd met at the university conservation group.

She hadn't given any reason.

John and I had made the two-hour journey to his house for several weekends after that, going on walks with him, giving him support. He'd found himself two lodgers to help with the mortgage, one of whom he suspected of criminality. He used to tell us funny stories about them, and then one left. He carried on doing freelance IT work locally, and we thought he seemed to be coping OK.

Then, a year later, while John and I were on holiday in Portugal, he disappeared. I'd been anxious as he hadn't answered my phone calls from Portugal but then, when

I'd rung our house expecting to get Ruth, Chris had answered, and I had just thought, 'Oh good, he's OK' and rushed off to dinner at the hotel, without thinking it strange that he should be there, though on reflection it was.

We returned to England a week later to find his mobile answered with the message 'this mobile is switched off, please call again later'. There had been no response to any of his emails, and the answerphone for his landline was unable to take any more messages because the inbox was full. I felt ill with worry. We drove to his house and found his car gone. To our surprise, a policeman intercepted us as we approached his front door, and insisted on doing a swift search of every room before we went into the house. I didn't realise until afterwards that he thought Chris's body might be hanging from a ceiling somewhere, and that something must have led up to the police presence there.

Later, partly from Chris's computer, which John took home, partly from the police, and partly from Chris himself when, thank God, he returned, we learned a complicated story. Perhaps I should start with his computer. We quickly found that he had slid helplessly into debt, not able to find enough freelance work (perhaps too depressed to try) and not getting enough rent from his lodgers. That was the most easily understandable of the revelations. There was another. In 'My Pictures' there were two images of himself, one in his normal clothes and one, in an identical pose, wearing women's clothes, a wig, and makeup.

Apparently there are places that will do this for you. We learned from Chris later that he'd belonged to an internet cross-dressing forum under the name of Kayla, and that he'd had a semi-official role there as gatekeeper.

He'd confided to the group that he intended to commit suicide. Having learnt that a type of metallic spray used for the symbols on the bonnets of cars was lethal, he had ordered some on the internet. One of his virtual friends – to whom I'm lastingly grateful because he gave us a few more years with Chris – was alarmed and contacted the police, who were somehow able to identify him and visit him at his house. Chris was so shocked by the intrusion that he instantly took flight, breaking into the family home through a back window and lying low. This was when I had spoken to him, ringing from Portugal. From there, if I've got this right, he went to the cross-dressing salon, then on, in drag, to Kate's parents' house, where she was holding a barbecue for the group of conservationist friends that they were both part of. His friends were discomfited and embarrassed and he didn't stay long. He then drove to Edinburgh, though I can't imagine why, armed with his metallic spray, intending to kill himself.

I wish I hadn't been so imbued with political correctness about sexual variation. I felt the internal blenching most parents would feel, but I believed that everyone was different, that I had to be reticent and respect Chris's choices and accept him as he was. I didn't realise that here, if I'd only followed it up, was a powerful clue that might just possibly have led me to the truth in time.

He was away for about a week after we returned from Portugal, during which we went through hell. Then he crept back into our house in the middle of the night, waking us up. I felt instant fury. 'Christopher! How could you put us through this?' He told me he'd tried to kill himself 'but it hadn't worked'. I could not understand anyone wanting to commit suicide, and couldn't believe that here, in my own family, where we were all 'normal',

was someone seriously entertaining such a thought. So I decided, completely ignoring what I knew of his character, that it was all about being in debt, he was trying to scare us, hoping we would be so glad to have him back that we'd pay up without demur.

And of course we did pay up, and we arranged for him to see a psychiatrist, who said he didn't need medication, just counselling, so he had that. I wanted so much to know what he said to the psychiatrist and the counsellor – was he telling them what a bad mother I'd been? But he wouldn't talk much. He lived with us for some months, after the crisis, and I urged him to get a job, because I thought it would make him feel better. He said once, 'I want to get to the bottom of it first,' (i.e. why he felt depressed), but I thought, quite wrongly, that introspection and inaction would get him nowhere. So he got a job with Bromley Council, visiting people after waste trucks had reversed into their garden walls, getting details and, where possible, soothing them. He was apparently brilliant at this and he did seem to get more cheerful.

After a while he decided to leave us and move up to Yorkshire to be near his friends Mark and Em. I really wanted him to stay, and tried to tempt him with promises that we'd turn the extension into an annexe for him, with his own front door, but he was set on going. I thought his plan, which was to move there first and then find a job, was deeply unwise, but I was wrong again, because he instantly got a low-paid IT job with Skipton Building Society and then impressed them so much with his skills that he was taken on permanently, eventually being co-opted in to Avice's team.

I'd thought he was all right. His phone calls always sounded cheerful. He seemed sociable and busy, going to

Jazz ‘n Jive dance classes, playing football, digging his allotment, running marathons. I buried the cross-dressing episode at the back of my mind, getting irritated when Celia mentioned it to me once. Yes, everything had seemed fine. But he did tell me at some stage – when? that year? – ‘I’m feeling a bit low.’

I kept tossing and turning in bed as I remembered. Why did I just say, ‘Ah darling, I’m sorry’, instead of asking him to tell me about it properly? Why didn’t I realise that he almost certainly meant, ‘I’m feeling suicidal, Mum.’? Why was I so blind?

He’d visited us so much this year, more than any other year since he’d moved to Yorkshire. My birthday, Mother’s Day, Jenny’s wedding, the holiday in Scotland when we all went to stay with John’s brother. I realised that all those times he’d been mutely pleading for help, hoping I’d notice and do something.

## 6 - GOING THROUGH HIS THINGS

We spent the next day taking Chris's possessions to the charity shop and his furniture to the dump, and, in John's case, repairing his central heating. We kept his bicycle to give to one of our nephews. It was a small house, so it didn't take us long to dismantle it. Looking round at it now, a bare shell, I felt desolate. He had been so pleased when he'd bought it, we'd helped him move in (except for the piano!), he'd laid a laminate floor in the kitchen (helped by the suction cup handle), he'd achieved everything with his own earnings, and I thought he would be happy there. What would happen to it now? We'd sell it, someone else would move in, his little greenhouse at the back would be dismantled. It would be as if he'd never been.

We made the long, wet drive back to London, loaded up with boxes that needed sorting through. At home I started on a box of letters between him and Kate. Both sides of the correspondence seemed to be there and I tried to jigsaw them together. I'd felt frustrated that the police had taken away his laptop (which we were not to be given for many weeks), and I wanted so much to understand what had been going on in his mind. Maybe it was voyeuristic of me, holding their letters in my hands, prying into their relationship, but it felt more like wandering round a bombsite, where personal possessions lay scattered, tattered, and privacy had been destroyed for ever.

The letter I lingered on, very neatly written in his small

handwriting, said:

Hi Kate

You might think that this is a strange time for me to be writing you a letter. And at 11.36 p.m. on a Monday night I'd have to agree with you.

But I'm starting to think that the occasional spell of madness is good for me. And also there are a few things I'd like to say which are, quite frankly, far too rude to mention in conversation.

And since there really is no other way to bring it up (if you'll excuse the expression) I'm just going to come straight out with it. I would like very much to write to you about my penis but before I do I would also like to tell you about my trip to Pembrokeshire in South Wales at the weekend. If you don't want to read about Wales, skip to page 4 for the juicy bits.

How had he known it would be page 4, I wondered? Then I realised he'd left a space and added the 4 afterwards. I skipped Wales and arrived at:

Right. Enough of this trivial chit-chat and down to the case in hand. We have been going out for near on 9 months now, and one thing I can't seem to quite get the hang of is sex. You've been very sweet and understanding about it all, but I can't help feeling that your patience, as well as the tendons in your right wrist, must be wearing a little thin.

For some reason my little man seems to need a lot of encouragement to do his job ... If there is anything you would like to try that we haven't already done ... If all you really want is for me to get a decent hard-on then we

can keep trying ...’

The letter ended, ‘I love you with all my heart. Chris x’ Poor, poor Chris, I thought. I couldn’t bear to think of him trying, and failing. It was a catastrophe that must have eaten him up from inside. And I’d never dreamed of it. Had they ever overcome those difficulties? If not, no wonder Kate had left. Amazing that she had stayed four years.

I told Ruth, who said, ‘Maybe it got better later.’ I pondered, then decided I needed to know, and rang Kate, who had already been told about Chris’s death.

She didn’t seem angry that I’d read their letters and answered honestly that things had never got better in all their time together. ‘I wanted him to see his GP but he wouldn’t, and what can you do? And I thought it might be my fault, that I wasn’t doing the right things. But I didn’t leave him because of that. It was his depression. When we were in a crowd with the group it wasn’t so bad, but when it was just him and me in our house I was always trying to lift him, and it got so that I couldn’t bear it.’

I put the phone down and went shouting crudely round the house, ‘I’ve asked Kate. He never *ever* got it up! He was impotent!’ I felt half mad with a piercing kind of pain. How must he have felt this year, when Jenny married Nick, when his best school friend Duniyul (whose street address he had texted me for recently) had announced that he and his wife were expecting their second child, and when Duniyul’s younger brother had just got married too? An explosion of fecundity going on all round him, and there he was, his girlfriend gone, no hope – or so he must have felt – of ever finding another one. He must have felt his life was pointless, that he had nothing to look forward to.

I thought about the anecdote in the album about his crazy trip down to London. I'd remembered, when I read it last night, that it was Duniyul he'd visited, and what had triggered it was the news that they were expecting their first child. I'd thought it was stupid, extreme behaviour at the time (he must have got so tired, driving 400 miles in a night and going in to work next day, he could have had an accident), but now I saw it in a different light. Duniyul had achieved what he, Chris, could never do. Powerful feeling had spurred him.

I seemed to be haunted by sea imagery at that time. Now I saw Chris as a seashell clamped tightly shut, impossible to open in life, but in death the halves hang loosely, open to the passing currents.

I rang my sister and told her what Kate had said. She said, 'I bet it was that bang on the head that did it. We ought to look it up.'

I agreed, but somehow couldn't summon the energy. I felt physically weak, I can understand what 'gutted' means, because I felt as if my stomach and intestines had all been scooped out. Terrible thoughts kept assailing me. When Chris had trundled his piano through the streets of Skipton and broken his foot, I'd found someone to stand in for my classes – I taught English as a second language for Croydon Council – and hurried up to Yorkshire to look after him, and we'd had a row in which he said I was like a cheese-grater, rasping him with everything I said. Then we'd made up and gone to a Chinese restaurant round the corner together, and he'd said he wasn't 'normal'. I'd stared at him in dismay, wondering what this meant. Was he saying he was homosexual? I said, 'Sweetheart, I love you whatever you are.' I wish so badly that I had instead said, 'What do you mean, Chris, not normal?'

Memories like this kept lurching at me, I couldn't cope with it. I spent time doing silly little things. I labelled all the things we'd brought back from his house – the Sellotape, the maps, cold remedies, some DVDs (I did bring some of those back), a bottle of TCP, a tin of cocoa – with his name, so that we would always know when we used them. I was obsessed with the idea of using everything up, so that in a way we were reabsorbing him. I thought of *Watership Down*, where I'd learnt that pregnant rabbits can reabsorb their foetuses in hard times. I'd brought back a set of his playing cards, and when I couldn't bear to think any more I played patience with them, pretending to myself that he was answering me through the cards. A display of red cards meant he was trying to cheer me up. If the game came out, he was telling me things would get better.

Jenny, Ruth and John made preparations for the funeral and kept asking me to find photos or to answer questions. I distinctly remember thinking, 'Why have they got to hurry him into the earth? Why can't they give him the benefit of the doubt?' I still felt doubt that he was dead. I still couldn't believe it.

John and I belong to a walking group and would typically walk around ten miles on a Saturday. We went as usual five days after his death, but I found I could hardly walk half that distance.

Then, sometime during that first week after his death and before the funeral, an email came from my sister. It said, 'You would have found this, but maybe not till after the funeral, which would be too late to do tests for multiple anterior pituitary hormone deficiencies, which according to this 2007 paper are almost inevitable after traumatic brain injuries.'

It was a life-changing moment.



## 7 - THE RESEARCH

I sat staring at my computer screen for a long time before I could make myself read on. Her email continued, 'To me it explains everything about poor Chris's problems except how he soldiered on so bravely for so long and stayed so kind and patient with everyone.'

I scrutinised the research she'd sent, heart beating wildly, hardly able to think straight enough to extract the facts from the dense medical language.

The hypothalamus and pituitary are essential for childhood and adolescent development and are vulnerable to injury and dysfunction following brain trauma ... Well recognised in adults, data regarding hypothalamic-pituitary function in brain-injured children and adolescents are scant. It is necessary for physicians as well as patients and family members to know that onset of hypothalamic-pituitary deficits can occur even after several years following brain injury ... The key presenting symptoms are growth failure, delayed or arrested puberty, secondary amenorrhea, or reduced libido. Delay in the diagnosis was extreme in many cases...

What on earth did all that mean? I had to read it several times before I understood that it was saying that head injury often damaged both the pituitary and its 'control' (the part of the brain known as the hypothalamus). This damage could interfere with growth and puberty, make a girl's periods stop, and rob people of their sex drive. And all this could start to happen years after the injury. Everything seemed to fit with Chris's

story.

I took in another sentence: ‘It was notable that in six patients, multiple deficiencies were documented after relatively mild head injury without loss of consciousness.’

Chris’s head injury when he was seven hadn’t been mild, it had been very severe. He’d fallen from a tree and fractured his skull ‘like an eggshell’ according to the consultant. We’d thought he was going to die. After a week-long coma he had come round and slowly climbed back to normality, though his face remained half paralysed for months. I even remembered a nurse telling me as we left hospital, ‘His pituitary may be damaged’ – abruptly, as if she were flashing a personal warning. But my school biology lessons hadn’t given me the full picture. I thought the pituitary just controlled growth, and though I didn’t forget what she’d said and waited anxiously to see if he would grow, my worries subsided when he did (though I now know that growth and growth hormone deficiency aren’t incompatible). I hadn’t known at all about the sexual side.

Our first reaction was to approach the pathologist, but this led nowhere. All he did was to go and look at Chris’s body and report that there were ‘no clinical signs of hypopituitarism’. In other words, his penis looked a normal size and he had body hair. He did have body hair, but his facial hair had always been rather scanty, and his chest hair had an odd lopsided look. I felt the pathologist could have done more, but I was told later that pathologists do not get paid much ‘per death’ and can be perfunctory.

I expect we could have insisted on a proper autopsy, in the process of which his pituitary gland might have been physically examined. I didn’t think of this. The funeral arrangements were in full swing, with letters and cards

flooding in every day, and I felt it had turned into an unstoppable machine. And if we did find pituitary damage, what would it achieve? We wouldn't have sued. It wouldn't bring him back. I decided to let it go, though there have been times since then when I wish we hadn't.

The general effect of my sister's electrifying information was to lift, slightly, my feeling that I was wholly responsible for Chris's death. Now I saw it as a double whammy. Misery from the impotence coming at him from one side, and the insecurity created by my early mothering failures coming at him from the other. He hadn't had a chance. My sister's words about his courage, and how he had soldiered on being patient and kind with everyone resonated with me. Poor Christopher, poor Christopher! I wanted to comfort him, to tell him that I understood now, to say sorry for every time I had ever been impatient or thought him weak, that I could see now that he hadn't been weak but very, very strong. But no message from me would ever reach him now.

When he'd had his brain injury nearly 25 years before, what had sustained me then was a simple mantra: 'Let everything that can be good, be good.' What it meant to me was that though you could do nothing about the big bad thing that was going on, you could do little things. If the room you were in was untidy, you could tidy it, and that was then one thing that you had made better than it was. If your socks were dirty from being worn six days running while you were sitting in intensive care, you could wash them, and that was another good thing. Or if you were tempted to snap at someone because you were tired and miserable, keeping it in was better than not keeping it in. It is a way of feeling you have some power left.

Now my sister's information had given me something

to do. If Chris had been affected by hypopituitarism and not been diagnosed, it was likely that he wasn't the only one. Maybe there were other people like him and I could save them by spreading the information.

I can't pretend that I felt any great desire to help anyone at that stage, but it fitted the mantra, so I decided, even in those early days before the funeral, that I would channel some of my wild, useless emotion into this.

## 8 - THE FUNERAL

The rain fell and fell. The priest at the service for Chris said it was the angels weeping. He was a nice man.

What I mostly remember from that day is how many people came. The church was bursting. I remember my mother-in-law wailing loudly at some point. And I remember Duniyul's eulogy, which took me back to the days when Chris was four years old. The full version is in the Appendix.

Afterwards, at the reception, I remember hearing Dido singing, 'I will go down with this ship, there will be no white flag above my door, I'm in love, and always will be,' over and over again, until it was like a torture, while the sequence of photos projected on the wall repeated endlessly – Chris as a baby crying in a rucksack; Chris as a little boy playing on the beach; Chris as a young man sitting on the ground, his arms loosely propped on his knees with unconscious grace. I just wanted to get away and hide in the dark somewhere.

And in the end we did get away, making our way to the flat that Skipton Building Society had offered for us to use. It was high, and from the window I could see how Skipton was laid out, and the Yorkshire Dales beyond. On ground level I had often been puzzled about how the river and canal and railway and roads were interwoven, but now the riddle was clear – rather as Christopher's death and our subsequent discoveries had given us a bird's-eye view of his own sad geography. I thought about him and his sister Jenny, both little, round-headed babies born at

the same time of day, weighing much the same, both blond-haired and smiley, and I thought how happy Jenny was, newly married, adored by Nick, brilliant at her job, whereas Christopher ... There's a poem by William Blake which goes, 'Some are born to sweet delight, Some are born to endless night.'

Thinking about Christopher's endless night made me want to be alone and huddle into myself, but John wanted to make love, and this was probably the first time I felt the difference in the way men and women face tragedy. To me, it was as if John was triumphantly flaunting something he could do and Christopher couldn't, and it felt like a profound breach of taste. To him – I didn't feel like asking him – maybe he wanted comfort for himself and thought it would comfort me too. Anyway, I applied the principle of doing what would make things better rather than worse, and I didn't reject him.

Afterwards we talked. John said, 'I just want to get on with life and forget this as soon as I can.' And I said, 'I feel the exact opposite. I want to go over it and over it and understand it as much as I can.' And somehow, we agreed to accept our different strategies and support each other. Much later I read Lee Woodruff's autobiographical *In an Instant* where she says, after describing a miscarriage and hysterectomy, 'Men and women grieve differently. I needed to chew it over and roll it around, and Bob wanted to bury it like a bone.' This just about sums it up.

## 9 - GRIEF

What I felt as August gave way to September and the weather remained wet and autumnal, as though summer had ended on that far distant sunny day when I was happy and got on with the gardening, will be familiar to anyone who has suffered a sudden, close bereavement. I couldn't sleep, or when I did I would wake up, heart lurching, staring into the darkness, with the impossible thought, 'Christopher's dead!' propelling me from the bed with terrible force. I did Sudoku puzzles with mechanical concentration until I couldn't think any more and then I switched off the light and twisted and turned.

I was frustrated by my inability to cry. I felt that if I could only let out a great flood of tears it would ease my heart, but I couldn't. Somehow over the years my tear-glands, from being exceptionally copious in my teens, had withered, and now the sharpest grief only produced the merest drop. I conceived the bizarre idea of collecting what tears I could shed for him in a little plastic tube with a cap, letting them mount up into a quantity I could see. So I woke in the night and cried into the tube, seeing the level rise barely perceptibly.

Then I collected coins that had been dropped in the road and put them in Christopher's money box, a miniature telephone box I had given him long ago, which we found stuffed with 2p pieces in his house. I got strangely fixated on this. I remember seeing several coins in a workmen's pit fenced off by posts on the pavement – several 2p pieces, a 5p even! – and creeping down early

next morning before anyone was up, so that I could climb over the barrier and get them without embarrassment. Actually a passing man did see me, and I had to give a nonchalant shrug and smile like Kristen Wiig caught astride a security gate in *Bridesmaids*. Then I went home to post these grimy, defaced coins through the telephone box slot like all the others, whispering, 'For you, my darling.'

Tragedy is a magnet that draws out other people's secrets. Juliet, a friend from our walking group, a slight, blonde girl with a sunny, childlike smile, told me how her only daughter was murdered by her boyfriend. 'When it happened I told the whole world about it, I couldn't stop talking, but then that wore off and I hardly mention it now. But sometimes when people talk about their children I feel like saying, 'I have been a mum.'

To have your only child die, and die in that way, is a benchmark of horror. I used to think about people in Beirut who went shopping and came back to find their home destroyed and their whole family killed. Before Christopher died I would read these things in the papers and be hardly touched. It was too dreadful to imagine, so I didn't try. But now I had a way in.

And I thought of Victorian families, where there were often a dozen children and you'd lose one or two as a matter of course. Maybe those families had a more real understanding of life than we have, we who are cosseted and protected by modern medicine so that premature death strikes us as an outrage.

Another friend, whose son died of leukaemia when he was only twelve, told me how she'd read that the faulty gene could be triggered by trauma, and how she thought her son's had been, which made her feel as if his death had been her fault. She was telling me this to assuage my

feelings of guilt. When he was a little boy she had come home from shopping, put her car in the garage letting him sit on her lap to ‘drive’ as he liked to do. When she lifted him out of the car he ran back into the house and tripped over the step knocking his teeth out. ‘The times I’ve relived those moments, over and over again, wishing and wishing I hadn’t bothered to put my car away.’

Thinking about other people gave me perspective, but I still felt as if I could hardly function. I felt like I was struggling hopelessly to steer a small ship over a vast, heaving sea. It seemed a matter of survival to brace up and do something practical, which meant campaigning, though I thought of it simply as writing emails, and didn’t give it that name at that stage.

