

Big Bitch



DIARY OF A HEROIN ADDICT - A Mother's Fight

Anne Rogers

BEN: DIARY OF A HEROIN ADDICT – A MOTHER'S FIGHT

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PROLOGUE

I sometimes delude myself into thinking that if I could have Ben back for just one day I'd get him clean. How stupid is that? He died six years ago at the age of 34 and for half of those years he was an addict. As for getting him clean, we spent 13 of those years trying to do just that.

Ben has gone. His death was a death of no consequence and many would say 'good riddance to bad rubbish'. Even his inquest was attended only by the deputy coroner, his clerk, myself and my youngest daughter, Sarah. However our small village church had been packed for his funeral.

So why do I want to write his story? What was there about him that warrants the telling of it? Ben had been on drugs since the age of 17, half of his life. What had made him get into drugs in the first place and above all, why couldn't he stop?

The remarkable thing about this story is the fact that Ben left behind a unique legacy of his drug addiction - almost 40 hours of film footage taken during the last four years of his life. In the few weeks leading up to his death, this was edited into a short documentary entitled "Sick and Tired of Feeling Sick and Tired" produced by Hanley Probation Services with the help of a young film maker, Darren Teale, from Junction 15 in Stoke-on-Trent. Two weeks after Ben died, Darren brought the film to show his Dad and me and affirmed Ben's wish to have it made public.

Watching the original film 'Sick and Tired' was incredibly harrowing and explicit and our first reaction was to bury it and never let it be seen by anyone, let alone our family and friends. However, after a lot of thought and

heart searching we agreed to release it to Darren to try to get it on television. Junction 15 sent it to Channel 4 who turned it down as they were in the process of making a documentary about the problem and couldn't take another on board.

That could have been it but I wouldn't let it lie. I became convinced that this film should be used to educate initially the police so that they might see the other side of drugs, namely the victims of addiction, and the effect drugs have on the families of addicts. I also thought the film could greatly benefit the prison authorities and drugs agencies who, through no fault of their own, see only a part of the problem, rarely the full picture. From my personal experience, I also felt that the general public were mainly ignorant to the many factors within drug addiction, choosing largely to focus upon the criminal aspect. I firmly believe that for whatever reason someone gets into drugs in the first place it very quickly becomes an illness. I also wanted families to be more open about having the problem within the family. Addiction needs to be outed by those most affected by it, the secrecy and shame surrounding it can only exacerbate the problem. Finally, I felt it should be shown and discussed in schools. That children are taught that drugs are not an option, that at best it will destroy their looks and play havoc with their mental health and at worst, like Ben, it will kill them.

Ben was an addict, drugs became his life and defined who he was. When he died his life's story should have ended with his funeral but in a way it was only the beginning and that's where I need to start, at the very beginning.

LIFE BEFORE DEATH

Chapter 1

Ben was born an addict. No truly, he was born sucking his thumb. He was an avid thumb sucker until one day at the age of 7 he came home from school and announced he'd given it up, just like that! I laughed (was that 'bad' parenting?) and said 'wait until bedtime'. I was sure that once asleep the thumb would subconsciously go into his mouth but he never put his thumb back in his mouth again, not even when he was sleeping. His strength of character emerged again in his early teens when he became a vegetarian probably because we lived just up the road from a farm where his best friend's dad, a farmer, reared and slaughtered his own cows. He kept that up, even though the smell of bacon drove him up the wall, until his mid twenties when he relapsed - a familiar phrase to addicts.

His dad and I had met whilst Mike was doing his national service stationed in my home city of Carlisle. We married in 1957 and after a short spell living in Ludlow in Shropshire where Mike originated from, we took the bold step and moved to London where our two eldest children, Stephanie and Sam, were born. We lived on the top floor of a very old block of flats in Railton Road, Brixton. Railton Road was in those days a hot bed of racial tension with the police marshalling the rioting on horseback. I went back to revisit it recently and barely recognised the road. The block of flats had been demolished and although it was 10.00 in the evening there were few people about and it all felt very calm and safe. Not a bit like it was in the late 1960's. My two eldest children were born whilst we were living in Brixton and I became very interested in getting them into a local playgroup. No such facility existed at that time so I

and one of my friends, set about trying to find premises. We eventually found an old disused school and contacted the Pre-School Playgroup Association who made the dream a reality. As well as the playgroup facilities there were also classes for mums to learn all kinds of parenting skills and I joined in as a volunteer playgroup leader. In 1964 Lambeth Council started up its first One O'Clock Club in Brockwell Park in Brixton. Again this was a play facility to enable children under 5 to get out of their high rise flats and enjoy outdoor activities in a safe environment. I was the first mother to be employed by them with pay and when we eventually left London my job went to one of my very best friends, Peggy, who only recently retired from the post nearly 40 years later so I know the facility still thrives.

Mike at that time worked in the exhibition industry but he wasn't happy living in London so he looked for and found a job in Fleetwood, Lancashire, and we moved there in 1965. It was in Blackpool that Sarah, my youngest daughter, and Ben was born although Ben nearly never was.

Ben was born in 1971 at a maternity hospital called Glenbrook in Blackpool. He was our fourth child but my fifth pregnancy. I had it all planned very early on in my married life. I would have four children, two close together, then a gap of five years and two more within 15 months. I am a very organised person and my plans ran to perfection except I got knocked down by a car when I was three months into my fourth pregnancy which resulted in me losing the baby. Not to be deterred I became pregnant with Ben two years later. I can't begin to describe the joy that Ben's birth brought to us as a family even though Sarah had just started school when I found out I was pregnant with Ben and Mike had recently left his secure job to become self employed.

There were nine years between Ben and Sam but Sam was delighted he had a brother and not another sister. The girls were ecstatic, in Ben they had a living, breathing doll to play with. No child was more wanted and if you can spoil a child with love and attention then yes, Ben was spoiled. We all adored him and Mike and I had the perfect family - two girls and two boys. Mike and the doctor made sure there would be no more, however. When I was still recovering from Ben's birth they conspired for Mike to have a vasectomy, I wasn't consulted. These were very early days for vasectomy operations. Mike had to pay to have his done and he pleaded with me not to tell any of our friends. Imagine his horror when he was being prepped that the nurse in attendance was one of our neighbours! He had a bad reaction to the operation resulting in a temporary limp which I had to tell friends was caused by him tripping up and falling down the stairs!!! Ben, whether I wanted it or not, was to be our last child.

Ben was a beautiful baby, as all babies are to their parents. He was 9lbs 1ozs at birth, nothing scrawny about him and, like I have intimated before, he was surrounded by five adoring fans. He spent the first three years of his life in Cleveleys living just a stone's throw from the sea. Ben had the perfect early start, I didn't work and his siblings were all at school which meant he had my undivided attention. His dad was now self employed and had his studio in Cleveleys so Ben saw an awful lot more of his dad than his brother and sisters had at the same age and, like his siblings before him, he went to playgroup.

Those were good days, really good days, especially in the summer. Days spent building sand castles on the beach and paddling in the sea. I was very aware of how fortunate my children were to be living where we were now living and when I heard an appeal on the radio put out by the Children's Country Holiday Fund I leapt into action. The Children's Country Holiday Fund was a London based

charity that existed to arrange holidays in rural areas for children living in deprived situations in the inner city. I knew I could offer a brilliant holiday for such a child and started out first of all by offering a holiday for a little girl about the same age as Steffi, who was then 7. When we went to meet Brenda she arrived off the train with two other children. The label pinned to her chest was parallel with my eyes - yes, she was very tall, 12 years old and cheeky with it. In fact she smoked like a trooper and taught Steffi her first swear word! Brenda stayed with us for two weeks and I had a job getting her back on the train at the end of the holiday.

The experience got me going though and for the next three years, over the six weeks school summer break, I organised holidays for many children to travel from London to the Fylde Coast for two weeks at a time, always having one and sometimes two kids staying with us. I stopped doing it when Ben arrived handing over the reins to my friend, Moire, who continued the good work for many years. Happy days, and happy days they were for all of us.

Chapter 2

When Ben was nearly four years old Mike was approached by Myotts, a pottery firm in Stoke-on-Trent that had been bought out by the American firm, Interpace. Mike must have met their design director through the big Gifts Trade Fair held every year at Earls Court in London but which spilled over into the Blackpool Winter Gardens. George, the American design director, wanted to return to the States and he was looking for someone to take over his position in the Potteries.

We talked it over in great depth. Steffi and Sam were at tricky stages in their development, namely teenagers. Steffi was settled into Fleetwood Grammar School and was adamant that she was not leaving! I almost agreed with her when Mike and I took a trip to Stoke-on-Trent so that we could see what our future habitat would be like. The Steel Works were still up and running and the potteries, of which there were many, were still flourishing, the result of which was a pall of smoke that hung heavy over the five towns. We parked our car outside what was then Lewis' department store and I actually cried at what my eyes were taking in. We were considering leaving the seaside to come to this dark, depressing, Lowry landscape. Mind you I remember being equally depressed at the thought of moving to Blackpool from London. When I was 14 years old I had gone to Blackpool on a Bank holiday day trip with my mum joining the throng on the Golden Mile. We decided to turn round and walk the other way but it was nigh on impossible such was the crush of people. "I'm never going to Blackpool again as long as I live" I vowed to my mum and then ended up living six miles from it and loving it!

So what changed my mind the Potteries people. I had moved around quite a bit in my married life, from Carlisle to Craven Arms, to Ludlow, to London and then Cleveleys, but I had never encountered such open, friendly and cheerful people. The decision was made, Mike would accept the offer and move to Stoke ahead of us. I would stay with the house until it was sold.

The company found Mike a bungalow that they rented for him in Kidsgrove and there he was for best part of a year leaving me to try to sell the house which had been in a bad state of repair when we bought it and still needed lots doing to it at the point of sale. When we first moved to Cleveleys it was to a semi detached chalet bungalow and we lived there for nine years before we moved to a large pre war detached house just five minutes walk from the sea front. It was going to be our dream home and "I am never going to move again" said I as I closed the door behind us on removal day. Famous last words, we were there for eighteen months only. We had done some work on the house and garden before Mike left for Stoke-on-Trent but by no means was the work completed and of course when Mike came home at weekends there was little time, or energy, to build on that.

Mike missed his family and, of course, they missed him tremendously so he started coming home midweek on Wednesday evenings, arriving late and leaving early the next morning. Weekends started to get fractious and at one point Mike said he would pack the job in and come back home. For me though there was no turning back. Mike had secured a very good job that he was enjoying doing and we had to consider the future. If he left Myotts what was there to come back to in Cleveleys? Although he was never without work it wasn't profitable and centred mainly around the entertainment business that was Blackpool.

Shortly after this upset, with me putting my foot down and insisting we carry on as we were, we got a buyer. Well

we did have a buyer until the survey showed that underneath the floorboards the property was afloat with water. Funnily enough the survey we had to have done when we bought the property had not revealed anything of this nature. All was not lost though because further investigation revealed that the water was tidal - it came and went! The sale went ahead and we were able to look for a property and we had to do this quickly.

We looked at several houses in and around Burslem in Stoke-on-Trent where Myotts were situated but nothing proved right. Then a chap that Mike was working with told him about a cottage he knew of that was for sale in the village of Alton, some 14 miles from work. When we saw it we knew it was for us although to be honest it was right at the top of our budget, £15,000. Our house in Cleveleys had sold for £13,750 and we never made a penny profit on it. If you have seen Ben's DVD you will know why we fell in love with the cottage, it was picture perfect.

We moved to Alton in April 1975 with four children, two of whom were adamant they hated it and would move back to Cleveleys as soon as they were 16 years old - this was before Childline - and our two Siamese cats, Winston and Dougal, who were much less trouble.

If you asked me for my advice on what to do if your situation involved a teenager taking drugs, I wouldn't be able to advise you. I would say there is no right or wrong way to deal with it - I don't know whether it's better to keep the lines of communication open or to cast them adrift to sort themselves out. I would only say 'go with your gut reaction' but as regards moving house with children I would say 'never move a teenager from out of their environment, they won't take kindly to it'. However Steffi and Sam's move into their new habitat is another story, I'm here to tell you about Ben and Ben took to the move like a duck to water. Mind you he was only three years old and at three home is where Mum and Dad are.

I very quickly got Ben into playschool and he loved it. He had some great playmates and these became his closest friends throughout primary school until he was 9 years old. They played at each other's houses, joined cubs together, celebrated birthday's - all the normal things that small children do when they interact and this continued until he reached nine then suddenly all his friends moved up to middle school leaving Ben behind because Ben's 9th birthday fell after the summer holiday school break. Ben never seemed to catch up with the 'big' boys.

My friend gave me a few photos of the group a little while ago that she had come across whilst clearing out some drawers and they did seem to verify what I have just written. Ben seems to be standing a little apart, or sitting withdrawn from the rest of the group. Looking at them was painful for me, not just because of Ben's perceived isolation but also because all the boys have successful, happy lives - why not Ben... and why Ben? I know that some of the boys also dabbled in drugs when they were young but it didn't become the consuming problem that it became for Ben. Ben used to say he had an addictive personality and that possibly was a factor but it doesn't mean that if your personality doesn't include addiction you won't become addicted. If that makes sense!

He was always in 'trouble' at primary school, well it was either that or the headmaster fancied me because the head was nearly always waiting for me when I went to pick Ben up after school. They were always trivial little boy naughtiness but the most serious was that he and another 7 year old had been caught trying to light a cigarette in the boy's toilet. "He could have burnt the school down" was the headmaster's lament. Ben got a smack when I got him home - you could smack your child in those days.

Ben's account ~

My father came home first and, although I shouldn't say this as mum would not want to hear, it was my father I'd tell the problem to first every time. Dad listened before blowing his top, if he blew his top at all. One thing for certain with dad there would always be a forgiveness and an "I love you Benj". As I started to tell dad the phone started ringing and in walked mum. It didn't take long for my teacher to break the news to mum and then the fireworks began! My mum made me smoke one of my dad's cigarettes in front of her and, of course, I had to do the pretend coughing and say how nasty and smelly it tasted. They weren't to know I was already smoking and liking it. My dad, however, wouldn't accept my apology that night which was a measure of the amount of trouble I was in. He just said "you've really let me down today Ben". He took it on himself that it was his fault - I smoked because he did. It wasn't. I was grounded for weeks, grovelling to try and get liberated. I was essentially a 'good boy', if I was told I had to stay in then I wouldn't escape and cause ructions and mountains of worry. I had a lot of love and respect and still do for my parents during childhood and teens, even if my own self worth, which is low, stopped me showing my feelings for them in return. As a family we've never been ashamed to show and speak 'love' to one another and I thank them for that. At least I'll always know love.

Other occasions at primary school are faint in my memory. I remember always being pretty much the class live wire, all through schooling in fact. I certainly had a smart answer for everything which on many occasions made me unpopular with the authoritarian figures. Only as I got older and more mellow did I learn more about how people should be

played or what was expected of me. I had a good education and because of my personality was never short of friends. People want to be around people that 'buzz' but once that buzz goes they move on.

Chapter 3

Ben's reputation seemed to follow him from primary to middle, from middle to senior school. It was as if they had him sussed before ever he set foot in the school. I remember him crying once, and he was in high school at the time, because he was convinced he had improved that year but we had returned from the school open evening with a bad result. "It doesn't matter what I do, it's never good enough" he cried. Steffi, who has spent all her working life with children with learning difficulties, believes that if Ben was going through the school system now he would probably have been diagnosed with attention deficit disorder, or perhaps hyperactive, but when Ben was young he was just labelled disruptive and naughty.

Sarah's recollections :

My early memories of Ben are patchy as I was not yet 5 years old when he was born. I had been the youngest and was very happy in that role but I remember feeling only great joy that we had a new member in our family and very proud of my little brother. My parents always seemed to have enough time and energy for all four of us individually and it is a huge testimony to them that growing up as an adult I never felt jealous of Ben or angry that he was taking so much from them.

My last memory of Ben is total sadness. I went to the detox unit on the afternoon of his death to be with Mum and Dad, and we were allowed to spend some time with him. I think we were all in shock, not because his addictions had finally killed him but

because he was in a hospital bed and we couldn't comprehend how, less than 24 hours after his admittance, he was dead. I remember Mum and I commenting on how beautiful he looked; somehow his good looks had returned, he looked very peaceful and he was smiling.

My life as Ben's sister is divided very firmly into three parts. His early life was very much like any other family's. He was very lively, so full of life and lots of fun. He was possibly more of a handful than the rest of us - there was a big age gap between him and Steffi and it was sometimes as if he was trying to be older than he was. Like all of us though, he was loved for who he was and I'm so grateful for that time.

As a teenager, he became very aware of his good lucks and charm. I used to gel and blow dry his hair for him before school, spending more time on his appearance than on my own! It was at this time that Ben had a few incidents where he got drunk which horrified Mum and Dad as he was so young. I just thought it was another example of Ben trying to act older than he was and didn't worry too much.

The second part was learning to live with the problem. I don't remember Mum and Dad ever telling me that Ben was on drugs but I remember vividly the day that I knew. Ben had gone to college in Leicester and at that time I was working in a travel agency. He came into the shop one afternoon and stood shaking in the corner. It took minutes for me to realise that it was him, he looked gaunt and ill and he'd dyed his hair blond - I just did not recognise him. From that afternoon until the day that he died I was never to have peace of mind about Ben again.