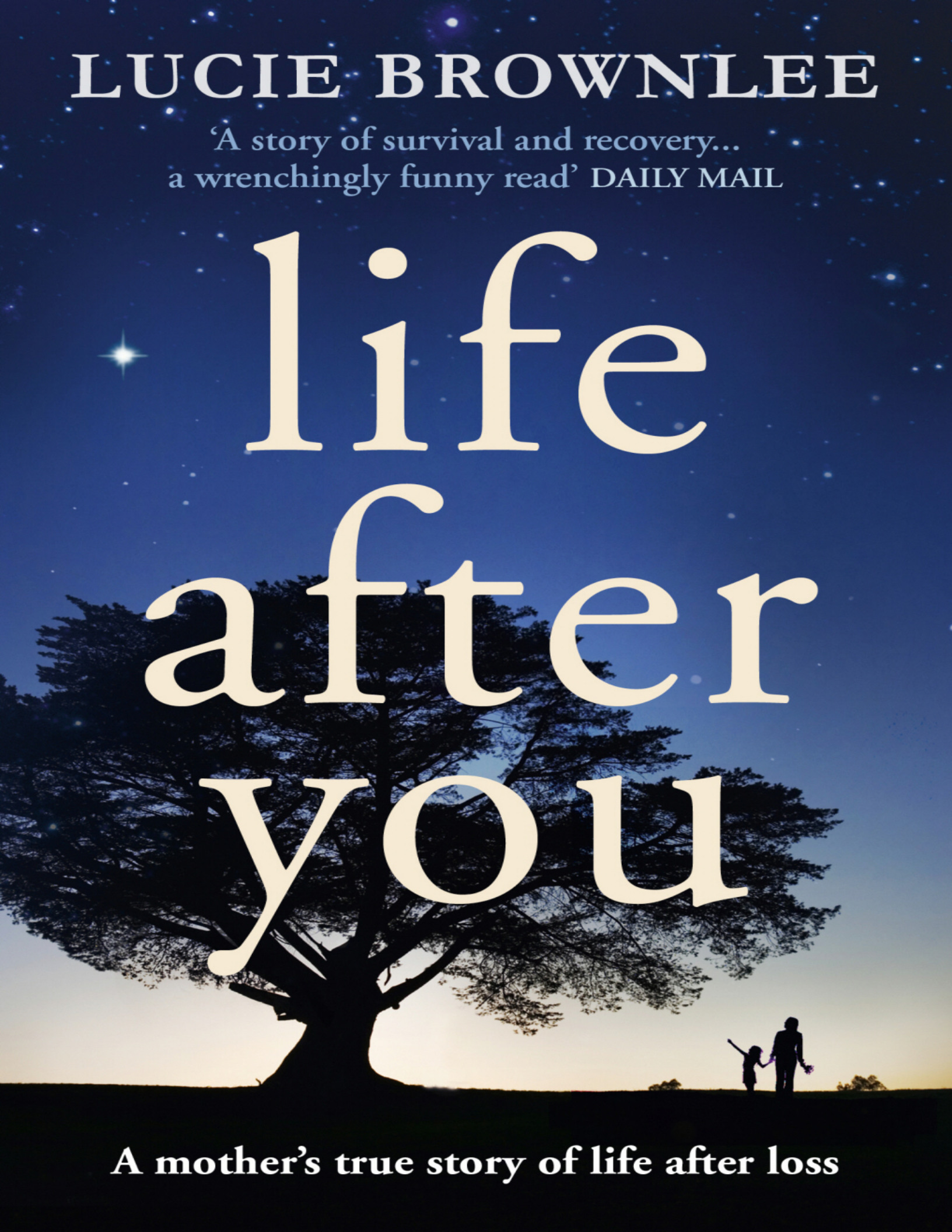


LUCIE BROWNLEE

'A story of survival and recovery...
a wrenchingly funny read' DAILY MAIL



life
after
you

A mother's true story of life after loss

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Title Page

Dedication

Prologue

STAGE ONE: Famous Last Words

STAGE TWO: Well-Placed Protection

STAGE THREE: The Shared Experience

STAGE FOUR: Just Keep Going

STAGE FIVE: A Final Resting Place?

Epilogue

Acknowledgements

Copyright

About the Book

How do you go on after the unthinkable happens?

Sudden death is rude. It just wanders in and takes your husband without any warning; it doesn't even have the decency to knock.

At the impossibly young age of thirty-seven, as they were making love one night, Lucie Brownlee's beloved husband Mark dropped dead. As Lucie tried to make sense of her new life without Him, she turned to writing to express her grief. *Life After You* is the stunning, irreverent and heartbreakingly honest result.

About the Author

Lucie is based in the north-east of England (Newcastle) and recently won Best Personal Blog at the Blog North Awards. Her short story 'T-shirt Weather' was shortlisted for the *Guardian's* 2010 short story prize, while 'Late Night Final' was shortlisted for the *GQ / Soho House* 'City Stories' competition. She has also written for *The Independent*.

LUCIE BROWNLEE

life after you

A mother's true story of life after loss



For Mark, wherever He is.

Prologue

Bad news travels through letterboxes and under doors like a noxious gas. By lunchtime on the day after my husband, Mark, dropped dead aged thirty-seven, there were at least three casseroles on the doorstep and a dozen sympathy cards on the mat. Representatives from both sides of the family who never met except for on 'occasions' had gathered in Mother's hot little living room.

My brother, Dan, had turned up first. At 8.30 in the morning, he screeched up to the house an hour after receiving the news, having driven sixty miles cross-country. He walked through the front door and held his arms out to me. It was a long time before he spoke.

Everyone was looking at each other, or me, or staring out of the window, and all the while I tried to justify to myself and to them why I wasn't crying. I tried to summon up the feelings I thought I was supposed to have. I repeated the mantra, Mark is dead, over and over again and waited for the moment when I would collapse, distraught, in a heap on the carpet. Nothing.

Meanwhile, our three-year-old daughter B played the bossa nova demo on her Bontempi keyboard to this new captive and catatonic audience, and guzzled the sweets they'd brought her. She asked once where her daddy was and I told her he was at work. She knew I was bullshitting but she had Haribo so she let it slide.

So while they nursed their coffee and their grief and listened to the bossa nova on a loop, I sat in the centre of the blast and calmly opened the Rioja.

STAGE ONE

Famous Last Words

DAY 1: SATURDAY 11 FEBRUARY 2012, 8.13 P.M.

I knew He was dead. His pupils were shot, and fixed on a point beyond me. He had no pulse. His face was pinkish-grey and doughy. But as the paramedics pounded up the stairs into the bedroom where He lay, I honestly believed they would bring my husband round. I had been doing CPR for twenty minutes on a dead man, but didn't allow myself to believe it was the end.

We'd been in the middle of making love - in my mother's bed. We were there for the weekend for the funeral of my grandma, who, in an unfortunate twist of fate and tragicomic timing, had died five days before Mark. We were making love in Mother's bed because we were trying to conceive (she was out at the time, I hasten to add).

Those who become embroiled in the complicated world of conception know that there is a 'moment' during the month in which all systems must absolutely go - you have a thirty-second window before the egg explodes and the sperm shrivels or something - so needless to say this wasn't going to be the Barry White of sessions. It was business. We'd lost a baby in September and this was a last-ditch attempt to have another. And besides, *Take Me Out* was starting in ten minutes so we had to be quick.

'You've still got your socks on,' He'd said, climbing on top of me.

Hardly the Humphrey Bogart of last words (*his* were reputedly: 'I should never have switched from Scotch to Martinis'). Seconds later, He crashed on to the pillow next to me, heavy as a felled oak. I slapped His face and told Him to wake up. He was breathing, heavy, laboured breaths into the pillow. I wondered if I should bother the emergency services with my call. Surely He would come round and I didn't want to cause a scene in the street outside. Our daughter, B, appeared in the doorway, woken up by the screaming - I must have been screaming but I don't remember - and she was crying and peering in. I told her the ultimate adult lie; that everything was all right.

The voice on the phone told me to roll Mark over and begin compressions on His chest. I manoeuvred Him, with difficulty, on to His back and started in time with the voice: 1... and... 2... and... 3... and... 4.

B was by my side now, crying and asking me why Daddy wasn't waking up. I remember feeling conspicuously nude - except for the socks, of course - and considered where the nearest shroud of decency might be found when the paramedics arrived. (Towel... bathroom.)

His lips were turning blue. I opened one of His eyes and it stared through me. I felt His neck for a pulse. His skin was already beginning to get cold, vital signs shutting down one by one, like lights in an apartment block. A nerve in His left thumb twitched. I wouldn't believe He was dead.

But I would later learn it had been instant. There was nothing anyone could have done.

After the paramedics had arrived, I'd glimpsed Mark one final time. I needed to call Mother but the phone was where I'd left it after making the emergency call, discarded in panic on the set of drawers in the bedroom. I stepped in to get it and my eyes fell to where they'd moved Him on to the floor next to the bed. His arm was propped against the

radiator. They'd placed a mask over His face and all I could hear were the faint beeps of machinery.

My call to Mother went something like this; 'Mark's collapsed... the ambulance is here... they're upstairs with Him now... you need to come home...'

She was just around the corner babysitting at my sister Beth's house, and while I didn't really register her response, I knew that she would be arranging care for the kids and with us within minutes.

B and I sat at the kitchen table and waited. B looked at me over the rim of a cup of milk. 'I'm frightened of something,' she said.

'What are you frightened of?'

'I don't know.'

'No need to be frightened, love,' I told her. But a cold shard of terror had lodged in my guts. We listened to the beeps and creaks coming from the room above us; each one part of a last-ditch attempt to save her daddy.

When the paramedics came down the stairs after forty minutes, grim-faced and exhausted, and one of them uttered the words: 'Mark's died', you might forgive me for my response.

'Right,' I said. 'Right.'

I suddenly, inexplicably, felt frightened of the body upstairs. Did I want to see Him? No. I regret that response now. A chance for a last cuddle before He went truly cold.

'But whereabouts have you left Him?' I asked. 'Is He on the floor?'

'Yes. With the blanket over Him. I'll come up with you if you like...'

I shook my head. 'What will happen now?'

The paramedic prodded at his electronic notebook with a stumpy digit. 'The police will be here shortly. Then they'll come and take Mark.'

'Are you leaving now?' I asked, watching as the team filed past carrying their arsenal of life-saving equipment, now

redundant, back to the ambulance. 'Please, don't leave.'

'They are,' he said. 'But I'll stay until the police arrive.'

10.05 P.M.

'Was it your... husband?' asked the younger, more ample-
eared of the two policemen who were now sitting in
Mother's living room drinking tea.

'Yes...'

The other one, clearly an old hand at incidents of sudden
death, took notes and handed me a photocopied leaflet,
'Coping with Sudden Death'. 'Have you decided if you want
your husband cremated or buried?'

Mark hadn't been dead two hours, yet the policeman
seemed surprised that I hadn't considered the options for
His disposal.

'Tell me this is a dream,' I pleaded with Mother.

'I'm afraid it's not.'

The Old Hand pressed his fingertips together and
brought them up to his mouth. 'We have all night,' he said.
'Take your time.'

Policemen, up close, in your living room, have a kind of
other-worldliness about them. On the whole, they're taller
than you would imagine, and their uniforms are straight
out of the BBC costume department. Never having had a
proper encounter with one before, their presence seemed
to add to the theatrical quality of the evening.

'Cremated,' I suggested.

I didn't know what the significance of my answer was - I
still don't - but I was prepared to agree to anything to
avoid all night in the company of these two.

This seemed to have satisfied his line of questioning. For
him, the bureaucracy of death was complete. He sipped his
tea and reassured me that he wouldn't leave until the
undertakers got there. Small-talk doesn't come easily in

situations such as this ('Been busy tonight?' 'Is this your first sudden death?') so I stood by the window, willing the undertakers to arrive.

It occurred to me that perhaps I should make some phone calls. But should I wait until morning to launch the grenade, or was it best to do it now, in this cold excess of time between death and undertaker? I asked the Old Hand for his advice. After all, he was the bearer of 'Coping with Sudden Death', which must surely have had a sub-section devoted to 'Telling Family and Friends (about the) Sudden Death'. He brought his fingers to mouth again and paused. Then he said, 'It's entirely up to you.'

I called my dad. He lived half an hour away in North Yorkshire with his wife, Karen.

'He's at the pub I'm afraid - anything I can help with?' Karen asked. I glanced at the hour: 10.30 p.m. Dad's habits hadn't changed in forty years. Two pints of Theakston's and he'd be home.

'It's just... well, there's really no easy way to say this... Mark has died, Karen.' Saying those three words for the first time, I felt like an actor rehearsing a script. They seemed fraudulent, somehow, with no basis in reality.

Karen and Mark were good pals; they enjoyed talking over Sunday morning coffee while the rest of us slumbered upstairs on the weekends we spent at Dad's. Mark had recently been exchanging letters with Karen's dad relating to the war; Mark loved his stories about flying Thunderbolts over Burma, and Karen's dad loved regaling Him with them.

Karen had heard the three words, yet clearly they had no basis in her reality either. She replied with: 'Your dad's only just left the house. I'll call the pub. He'll be with you in half an hour.'

I made one more call. To Mark's sister. Perhaps I should have granted her one last sleep before her life changed for

ever, but I figured she'd want to know. 'I can't believe it...' she uttered. 'I just can't believe it.'

I left her with the gruesome task of informing her parents, who were living 11,000 miles away in Australia. I can only imagine the phone call and their subsequent desperation to find a flight back to the UK, where each air mile would only bring them closer to the grievous reality that they had lost their son.

Mother offered to call my sister Beth, who was just about to settle into the second half of a performance by Cirque du Soleil at the Royal Albert Hall. It was rare that she and her husband Will were spared a weekend away together, and this frozen one in February was it. The details of the call and its aftermath were described to me only later, when she and I lay in each other's arms on the bed.

She'd stepped out into the foyer to be told the news, whereupon her legs had given way under her. Despite desperate attempts to get home, she had no choice but to wait until the first train out of King's Cross the following morning. She and Will had drunk whisky in the hotel bar until it permitted them to sleep. They arrived home just before noon the following day, as shell-shocked and disbelieving as the rest of us.

Two men finally came to Mother's door. The first man, a raven-like figure, stood in the puddled gloom of the streetlight, and announced:

'We've come to take Mark.'

Even now I can hear his voice uttering those words.

I don't have any concept of how long it took them to package Him up, manoeuvre Him round the bend in the staircase and out the front door. It could have been five minutes; it could have been half an hour. I had the TV on in the lounge, volume turned up full, with the door shut. All I remember was the silence once they'd gone.

I slept fitfully that night, in the sheets in which He'd died. Then I woke, and He wasn't there.

FOUR YEARS EARLIER: SUNDAY 17 AUGUST 2008

By 9 p.m., I knew there was something amiss. I'd been trying to contact my husband by phone for the last hour, but each time it had rung off. He would have started the hour-long journey to the centre of Cheltenham by now, ready to start His 10 p.m. shift at GCHQ. Three hundred miles away in Mother's kitchen in Newcastle, I waited. There would be an explanation for this. He was never late for a shift. At 10.05, I called the office.

'Has Mark arrived into work?'

'No, He hasn't actually. We were just starting to get a bit worried... who am I talking to?'

'This is His wife...' My throat closed up around the word 'wife'.

'Listen, give me a number where you are and I'll make a few calls.'

Panic had cleared my mind. I couldn't remember Mother's number. 'Who are you going to call?'

'I'll just make a few calls. Don't worry. Are you calling from the number that I can call you back on?'

'Yes.'

I paced the carpet in cold dread. Ten minutes later, a consultant from Cheltenham General Hospital rang. They had Mark in. He'd just managed to call an ambulance before collapsing in the flat around four hours earlier. He was stable and coherent, but they were as yet unable to ascertain what the problem was. There seemed to be an issue with the blood flow in His right leg. If it persisted, and they couldn't find a reason why, they may have to amputate the leg.

'Is it life-threatening?' was all I could think of to ask.

'Not if we get the leg off in time,' the consultant said.

I stared at the muted television, unable to take in the words I had just heard. 'I'm coming down, now.'

‘Yes, do so. But please drive carefully.’

Mother, Beth and I gathered and held an eerily calm crisis meeting. I pushed the consultant’s words to the back of my mind and focused on the practicalities. Who would look after three-month-old B while I drove to Cheltenham? How would she be fed, given she was currently on the breast? Having no transport of my own, whose car would I drive down in?

I threw clothing items into a suitcase, whatever I could find on the floor. Mother would come with me. Beth would stay with B, using whatever milk I was able to express for the midnight feed, and one of the ‘just in case’ ready-mixed formula feeds for the next morning.

I hurried Mother out of the door and into her car. We drove as far as Darlington before my phone rang. It was Beth. The consultant had called again and asked that I call him urgently.

‘Change of plan,’ he told me. ‘We’re transferring Mark to Oxford. We’ve discovered it’s a problem with His aorta. An aortic dissection, in fact.’

‘Is it life-threatening?’ was all I could think to ask.

‘I can’t answer no to that,’ the consultant said. Those were the exact words he used.

Mother and I drove for five hours through the black August night, each of us unable to find a single word to say to the other. We stopped once at Woodall services for a toilet break. Coldplay’s ‘Fix You’ was piping through the sound system with ominous prescience as I paid for a bottle of water.

I expressed milk from my swollen breasts and threw it out of the car window on to the motorway. We arrived at 5 a.m. in the desolate car park of Oxford’s Radcliffe Hospital. I jumped out of the car while Mother went and parked. I ran down empty corridors, whose polished floors reflected the strip lighting overhead, and found the lift to the cardiac ward.

All I could see were His eyes, peering out from above the plastic oxygen mask that covered His face. Machines beeped through the thick gloom of the ward. He was waiting for me.

‘Love...’

His eyes smiled.

‘Are you all right?’ was the only thing I could think to ask.

‘I am now you’re here,’ he said, reaching for my hand.

He asked me to be waiting with a big bottle of water and a smile when He came out of surgery. I chivvied. He chivvied. But we both knew this was catastrophic.

‘Have you had any recent impact to the chest? Car accident? Spontaneous aortic dissection this extensive is most unusual in someone so young...’ The straight-talking Scottish surgeon, dragged from his bed in the middle of the night to operate in this most acute of emergencies, looked at Mark.

‘No...’

The surgeon glanced at his clipboard. ‘You’re thirty-three, aren’t you, Mark?’

Mark nodded through a tangle of wires and tubes.

The surgeon turned to his registrar, then back to my husband. ‘Thing is, Mark, we don’t at this point know why this has occurred. But whatever the reason, your aorta has ruptured and our immediate and urgent task is to fix it. We’re just assembling the team, then we’ll take you down to theatre.’

The lighting was dimmed in the ward, but the glare from an anglepoise lamp reflected in the surgeon’s glasses. Life had gone from baby shit and colic to the vocabulary of acute crisis in the space of six hours. My hand gripped the rail on the side of Mark’s bed. The registrar, a small, kind-faced man, placed his hand over it. ‘You look terrified. Don’t worry, Mark’s in the best place. Professor Chambers is one of the most respected heart surgeons in the country.’

‘What will you do to my husband, though?’ I pleaded.

‘We need to assess the extent of the damage first, but we’re aiming to patch up the aorta, and replace the aortic valve.’

I felt foolish having to ask at this late juncture, but I heard myself say; ‘The aorta being...?’

‘The main artery to the heart.’

‘And what was that about the valve?’

‘Mark will be fitted with a mechanical heart valve. It’ll mean He has to take pills for the rest of his life, but in someone so young we would always go for this option over a pig-skin valve. Those tend to be the option for older patients; requiring no medication but only lasting ten years or so. Mark can expect a normal lifespan and a mechanical valve will go on for ever. All things being equal.’

I turned to Professor Chambers, one of the most respected heart surgeons in the country, and asked: ‘Have you done this many times before?’

Chambers was unfazed by the blundering nature of the question. ‘Yes. But it’s always more difficult in the acute scenario. Let’s go, Mark.’

Mark looked up at me and smiled. ‘It’s like that Al Green song, pet. “How To Mend A Broken Heart”. See you soon. And don’t forget that bottle of water.’ They wheeled Him into the operating theatre, and I saw a single tear crawl down His cheek.

We left the hospital together three months later. ‘I’m granite, me, man,’ Mark said. He’d been sliced in half, His lung had been drained, He’d suffered a mild stroke during surgery. Yet here we were, racing along the B-road between Oxford and Cheltenham, the fingers of a brittle autumn sun splaying through the trees on to the road before us. He was three stone lighter, gaunt, shell-shocked, yet He had made it. We had made it. ‘We win,’ we said – our catchphrase against the world.

He took short, tentative steps into the flat. Each stair left Him breathless. He took His first bath when He got home, the livid wound bisecting His sternum. He was smaller. Depleted. He had been violated in the most savage way imaginable. Surgical fingers had sawn open His ribcage and tampered with His heart. But He never complained, not once. Life was different now, dictated by pills and blood pressure and Warfarin, yet it was there to be lived. He'd been given a second chance and He was going to take it with both hands.

A year later, I wrote the following letter to Chambers:

10th August 2009

Dear Professor Chambers,

I am compelled to write a few words to you as we approach the first anniversary of the 'cardiac event' suffered by my husband, Mark.

Mark was brought into the Radcliffe from Cheltenham on 18 August 2008 with an emergency 'Type A' aortic dissection. By some miracle, he found himself in your care and that of your wonderful colleagues. Despite the odds, you saved his life. Although his troubles were not over - further surgery and a stroke - your intervention on that fateful morning has meant that I still have a husband and our tiny daughter B (just three months old at the time of the incident) will grow up to know her dad.

Mark is making a great recovery - he is an unrelentingly positive soul, which helps enormously. As you can imagine, each milestone is an emotional one. One year on, with the immediate crisis over, we find ourselves in the whirlwind of trying to come to terms with what happened. However, we are totally and utterly indebted to you and the team at the

Radcliffe, and each day we are thankful that Mark was lucky enough to have been attended by you.

We intend to make a financial donation to the unit, but I wanted to write to you personally to express my gratitude.

On behalf of Mark, B and our entire family and friends - thank you.

Sincerely

Lucie Brownlee

It took me two years to begin to feel comfortable with our new life, for the anxiety to subside and for the sense of doom to lift. The surgeons and the doctors had spent twenty-four months reassuring us.

‘What about, you know, exertion...’ I asked Chambers during Mark’s first review. ‘Can we still have sex?’

‘As long as you’re not swinging from the chandeliers...’ Chambers told us.

‘And what about the future...?’

Chambers turned to Mark. ‘Listen, you get dealt a hand. You can’t do anything about it. You’ve been lucky, though, you’re still here, and despite what you suffered, you can expect a normal lifespan. Now go and enjoy your lives.’

DAY 2: SUNDAY 12 FEBRUARY 2012, 6.30 A.M.

I rolled over and instead of Mark there was Mother, lying awake next to me. We’d tried to sleep downstairs, on the sofa-bed (‘the rack’ as it had come to be known), but we couldn’t settle. In the end we had climbed into the bed He’d died in, pulled up the duvet and fallen into a troubled slumber.

‘Where are Mark’s things?’ I asked. ‘His clothes, His backpack? His glasses from beside the bed?’

‘I moved them,’ Mother replied.

We stared at each other over the undulations of our pillows. 'Moved them where?'

'They're in the wardrobe.'

'Why the hell...?' I threw the duvet back and opened the wardrobe door.

'I didn't want you to have to face them, lovey...' She sat up and watched as I burrowed in the bottom of the wardrobe.

I dragged His suitcase out and opened the zip. His brown Dr Martens boots were crushed up inside with all the other offending items: His mobile phone, His belt, His wash bag, His pill box. Those now defunct remnants of a life, hastily packed away. And finally, His glasses. He'd taken them off seconds before we began making love, and I lifted them out of the case and looked at them. I thought I could discern a fingerprint on one of the lenses. I looked through them in an attempt to see the world as He did.

I packed everything back up and pushed the case back into the dark corner of Mother's wardrobe. I turned to look at Mother.

'You didn't get rid of the Guinness, did you?'

'What?'

'The four-pack of Guinness He'd just bought that were sitting on the bench. You didn't throw them out, did you?'

Mother shook her head. 'They're at the back of the shelf in the porch. I just didn't want...'

I pulled on a dressing gown and walked out of the bedroom.

I peered in at B who was yet to awaken into her first day without her daddy. I was relieved she still slept, for I had no energy to deal with her. Downstairs, I boiled the kettle, then went into the lounge and forgot about it. I felt hungry, but the thought of food made me retch.

I looked out of the window at the trees, skeletal against a white February sky. I had been told my husband was dead,

but it felt impossible to me that the world could keep turning without Him in it.

It was almost 7 a.m. He hadn't yet been dead twelve hours and already there was a burning in my heart. How on earth was I going to face a lifetime without Him?

It occurred to me that I ought to let people know. I sat on the settee and contemplated how best to do it. In the post-postmodern age, how do you tell friends that one of their friends has died? By text, of course. But how to put it?

Morning all! Just to let you know, Mark passed away yesterday. Happy Sunday!

After numerous attempts at rephrasing, I ended up sending words to this effect. Minus the salutations. There was no way of dressing up the facts. Their friend had died less than twelve hours earlier and the bringer of this news was in a stupor. People tried to call. My closest friends Kim, Beccy, Nicole and Anna were all desperate to get through. But I let the phone ring. I don't remember listening to the messages that began building up. Maybe I never did. I did make one call - to Mark's best friend John - and asked him to relay the news to the other lads. Tag-team bad news. On reflection it was a crass way to announce it to the people Mark loved. But sudden death is crass. What else could I do?

'Where's Daddy?'

I crawled into the bed next to my daughter and drew her close. Her head was tilted up at mine, framed with a froth of ginger curls. Her eyes were His. A deep, creamy brown.

'At work.'

She considered this for some time. 'At Cheltenham?'

Beat. 'Yes.'

Great sobs convulsed through me and I squeezed her tiny, sparrow-like shoulders with my arms.

'Are you crying?'

'Yes.'

We lay for a moment in silence. I looked at the area of carpet where He had last stood. He was the bearer of bed-time milk. He had handed it over and kissed her goodnight. It was the last time He would ever see His daughter, and the last time she would ever see Him.

Finally I said: 'Do you want some breakfast?'

'Yes, please.'

On the way downstairs, we passed the entrance to my mother's bedroom. B stopped, her hand wrapped around mine, and looked in.

'You tried to wake Daddy in there,' she said. 'You said "and 1... and 2... and 3... and 4".'

'I did.'

'Who came?'

'Doctors.'

'But they couldn't wake Daddy?'

'No.'

She accepted this. Now she wanted Shreddies.

Bereavement professionals call it 'puddle-jumping'. Children hop in and out of grief as if they were splashing in puddles on a rainy day. This was unsettling for me at first. I didn't understand how a complex, potentially upsetting line of questioning could be followed by something as mundane as a request for a biscuit. She never cried for Him. But then she was three years old. She didn't understand 'forever'.

DAY 3: MONDAY 13 FEBRUARY 2012

People came and went. Family members had arrived from Canada for the funeral of my grandmother which was taking place in two days' time. I watched them walk uneasily up the path to my mother's front door. I hadn't seen my Canadian cousin for six years, but I couldn't face her. They came into the house and I went upstairs and lay on the bed in Mother's room, in the same position I'd been

in when Mark died on me. I glanced around the room, wondering what the last thing was Mark had seen before His eyes closed for ever. The leather headboard, perhaps? The alarm clock on the cane side table? Or had His last image been of me, lying there in my socks?

A sharp pain skewered my guts. I hadn't eaten much for three days, and my innards were protesting. They didn't want dry toast hastily stuffed into them at 3 a.m., yet food had become an ordeal - the sight of it, the preparation of it, its demands to be chewed and swallowed. I had largely managed to avoid the stuff during the day, but hunger had taken to waking me up in the night when I was sufficiently woozy to ingest food without thinking. I rolled into a tight ball and dry-retched into the pillow. When it had passed, I stayed in the ball and wept until my eyeballs ached.

My oldest friend Kim arrived, unbidden, from Preston.

'You don't have to speak to me,' she said. 'And don't worry, I'm not staying long. I just needed to be here.'

I'd known Kim since high school. She was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen and I instantly wanted to be her best friend for ever. At the time she had layered hair like Debra Winger and the longest legs imaginable. We went through break-ups, make-ups. We lost touch then found each other again. And here we were, twenty-five years later, sitting on Mother's bed not knowing what to say to each other.

The constant stream of visitors was a distraction for B, but I worried about when I should tell her the truth. Mark couldn't be in Cheltenham indefinitely. There would come a time when the visits stopped and His absence would be noted.

I asked Kim to contact another friend, Suzie, who worked for a children's bereavement charity called Winston's Wish. I couldn't face phone calls, but Kim could ask Suzie for some advice on how to deal with my daughter on my behalf.

The advice came back, scrawled on the back of an envelope. We sat on Mother's bed, away from the hoopla downstairs, and we wept as Kim explained what I needed to do. I was to tell B that her daddy had died. I should use direct terminology, no euphemisms, and explain, in simple terms, what it meant. That the doctors had tried to save Daddy, but they had not been able to. Daddy had a problem with His heart and it had stopped. She would never see Daddy again. There were to be no more lies.

I brought B upstairs and the two of us sat on the bed where she had last seen Daddy, lying flat on His back with His eyes open and His arm splayed over the side of the mattress.

'Do you remember what happened here?' I asked, softly.

'You tried to wake Daddy up,' she said. She played with a loose flap of leather on the sole of her shoe.

'I did. But I couldn't wake Him. The doctors couldn't wake Him. Daddy died. Do you understand what that means?'

She looked at me. 'Why did Daddy die?'

'Daddy was very poorly. The doctors tried to save Him, but they couldn't.'

She was distracted, perhaps by the voices of the newly landed visitors, or maybe she just didn't want to hear.

'When somebody dies, it means we won't see them again,' I went on.

She said nothing for a short while, then she said: 'My shoe has broked.'

She'd jumped out of the puddle and I wasn't going to force her back in.

DAY 4: TUESDAY 14 FEBRUARY 2012

Dennis from the funeral director's arrived. The salesman of death. He was a mouse-ish little fella with gingivitis and a

terrible bedside manner. He offered no condolences and didn't look me in the eye as he unloaded casket and coffin catalogues on to the table.

'This one is very popular,' he said, flicking through the coffin selection. 'At the end of the day, it's only going to end up being burned so you may as well go for the cheapest one.'

It was prudent economic advice from Dennis, but not what I wanted to hear at that moment in time. In fact, I didn't want to be thinking about coffins for my husband at all. It was Valentine's Day and I had anticipated that we would be holding hands somewhere, eating Cornettos and blowing kisses at each other in the wind.

I didn't know where the hell Mark was. He'd been whisked away in a body bag and I could only imagine Him to be filed in one of those drawers in a morgue somewhere with a name tag hanging from His toe.

Truth be told, Dennis couldn't wait to get out of there. It transpired that he'd already been in Mother's living room, in that very same chair, just a few days before, discussing my grandma's funeral requirements. He probably thought the place was cursed. He clearly wanted the choices to be made so he could be excused from the company of this blighted family and get to his next appointment. This was business - the tragedy that had ripped apart my life three days prior was not his concern.

And frankly, I didn't want condolences from Dennis. Not only was I sick to death of hearing condolences, but this whole thing was becoming more and more surreal as each day went on. I just wanted it to be over. I wanted Mark, like Bobby on *Dallas*, to come walking out of the shower and for it all to have been a dream. I believed He would, too.

I took Dennis's advice and went for the MDF, E-Z burn coffin. Selecting the casket proved more difficult. The vessel in which to burn the body of your beloved husband is