



THIN WIRE

A MOTHER'S JOURNEY THROUGH
HER DAUGHTER'S HEROIN ADDICTION

CHRISTINE LEWRY

Thin Wire

A mother's journey through her daughter's heroin addiction

by

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A memoir

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Nobody ever becomes an addict to ruin his or her life. Addiction always begins with a desire to be *better*. Stronger. Smarter. Suaver. Richer. Braver. *More*. The promise is always of less pain and greater fulfilment, and the promise is always a lie.

– Dennis O’Neil

This is a true story. However, the names of some people and places have been changed or omitted to protect the identities of individuals. Amber’s sections of the book are based on her story as told to the author, her mother.

Introduction

Christine

It is the experiences you have in life that make you who you are, not the things that are given to you. This is true for me and for you too. Every single event in my life was something I needed experience in order to be who I am now. But it was the difficult circumstances that changed me the most, things that are usually viewed as bad luck. During these difficult times I found the strength to carry on – to move forward and make something good come out of a bad situation. From this I have gained great satisfaction and even spiritual growth.

When my son was three and my youngest daughter four, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. The operation to remove part of my breast and twelve lymph nodes left me frail and weak. In the beginning, I struggled to find the courage to believe in a positive outcome. After surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy, the small things that used to irritate or worry me all seemed rather trivial. To consider your own death changes you. Every day I was free from symptoms was a joy, a blessing. I came to view my struggle as a gift that made me stronger, more conscious and ultimately more alive.

Two years later, when I found out that my eldest daughter, Amber, then twenty-two, was a heroin addict, I had to dig deep inside for the strength to understand and cope. But the voice in my head that told me she would change was impossible to ignore. At times, when my battle to save my daughter from her addiction became desperate, I stopped and reminded myself how much worse it could be. I could be dying of cancer instead of being in remission.

The events of my past changed the way I viewed my situation, and Amber's – they affected every decision I had to make. The growth of my spiritual awareness defined me in a way that would not have been possible before I had cancer.

When Amber first decided to quit heroin, I resolved to help her, and we set off on the road together. We took things one step at a time, and we didn't step off the road until we reached our destination. Whatever that destination turned out to be, it was ours, and it was right for us – as I ultimately had to accept.

Along the road Amber lied to me – so I loved her; she stole from me – so I loved her; she tricked me – so I loved her; she let me down – so I loved her. She tried many times to stop using heroin and often she thought she had succeeded, only to be knocked back by a relapse. Other people saw this as failure, but it wasn't. It was just a result, the outcome of events.

We made a lot of mistakes, wasted time and money, but it was all part of the process, part of life's journey. Sometimes events happen that take us on a path we never expected to travel, and we are not always equipped for the journey. I know I wasn't. But I wouldn't change a thing about my past: it brought me to this moment and led me to where I am today.

Our story is not your story. Each person struggling with drug addiction is different. Maybe there is something about our story that rings true with you, that resonates with what you are going through and that makes it a little easier. I hope this book can inspire one person on the road to recovery, or one parent struggling to understand their son or daughter's addiction. But the door to change opens only one way: from the inside. However much you want a deeply loved person to change their behaviour, only they can do it. You can't do it for them, no matter how much you want to or how hard you try.

Throughout my life, the universe has sent me lots of help in the form of people willing to assist and inspire me, or maybe more importantly to just believe in me. The universe will do the same for you. Your fight to quit your addiction if you believe it, believe in yourself and forgive yourself for the mistakes you have made in the past. For the past can never be changed, but the future – your future is there for the taking.

Part One

The Back Story

Christine

When did I first notice there was something different about my daughter, Amber? As a parent, you are supposed to immediately bond with your child, and the two of you are meant to have an understanding of each other, an exclusive connection. My reality fell far short of that, for no obvious reason. I found myself repeatedly asking, why does she do things I don't understand? Behave differently from the way I taught her?

Pitching up to my first parents' evening at the small Catholic school Amber attended, I pulled back the low wooden chair in front of her teacher's desk and sat down. The teacher had a kind face and a head of brown curls, a crucifix hung at the neck of her blouse. I waited for her to tell me about my daughter's progress, but my eagerness turned to disappointment when she sighed and shook her head. 'Oh, you're Amber's mother'. Her detailed account of Amber's naughty behaviour and rebellious nature made my cheeks flush. She just didn't have that inbuilt urge most children have to be good, and struggled to understand and repent when told off. It was a pattern that would be repeated over the following years. Why did I always feel it was my fault? Maybe it was.

My parents separated when I was twelve. After the divorce, my father stayed in the pub while my mother enjoyed her freedom. There was no-one to stop me from doing whatever I pleased. So I lived for the weekend, clothes and make-up, smoking and drinking, older boyfriends in fast cars. I was headstrong and independent, making my own life. Until my series of mistakes led me to get pregnant at twenty and be alone with my baby at twenty-one.

I felt trapped, like my life was over. I had lost my sparkle. Sitting on the front step watching my baby play with her toys, I tried to identify the sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. Why was I so unhappy? Why were the days so easy yet so difficult? The clouds built up and the weather changed. Spots of rain appeared on my forearm.

I yearned for a better life than this stay-at-home loneliness. I wanted things: carpet on the floor, presents for my child at Christmas. The rebel inside me – the one who had made me who I was, had made all those mistakes for me – now turned itself into drive and ambition.

So I enrolled at night school and then went on to college to study accountancy. I landed a good job, bought my own house and tried to provide Amber with the best after-school childcare. There were times when I had to leave her with people, childminders she didn't like. She would pull at my skin and cry and complain. I would just say 'I have to go to work'. But, while I was busy working full-time trying to make a success out of my life, Amber grew up pushing things to the edge.

Amber's father lost contact with her when she was still a baby. Birthdays and Christmases came and went with never a card from him. I didn't care that she never saw her father, didn't want him interfering in our lives. He phoned once and took her out for the afternoon. Made promises to her of a present to be sent – I guess it got lost in the post.

I had boyfriends. My loneliness made me keep them around long after I knew I didn't want them. I thought there was something wrong with me, that I couldn't sustain a relationship, until at thirty-one I accepted that I might live my life alone – after all, I already had a child. But meeting Tony changed everything. He was good-looking with a strong, square jaw and the most exquisite hazel eyes, and I felt differently about him from the start. The first night we spent together, I stayed awake until the birds sang, content to listen to the sound of his steady breathing. I wanted him like I had never wanted

anything my whole life until then.

Although it didn't bother Tony that I had an eleven-year-old daughter, I packed Amber off to boarding school, 'to give her a better education,' I said. Her second-hand trunk, with the previous owner's name blazoned down the side, set her apart from her wealthy classmates. But, from Monday morning until Saturday lunchtime, I was free to enjoy my new love.

Amber's problems at school escalated. She wasn't doing any work, and when she came home at the weekends she was smoking and shoplifting. I found her so difficult that there was a part of me that didn't care. I cared what Tony thought, I cared what the people at work thought and I believed in those teachers at her school who said she was uncontrollable, devious and thick, but I never asked her why she was so naughty – I just accepted that she was. When the call came to say she had been expelled, I was embarrassed but not surprised. The bursary that I had worked hard to obtain had been lost. We talked, Amber promised to do better, and for a while she did.

Tony would tell Amber off for not helping me around the house or for leaving her stuff lying around, but he never tried to father her. We got married and moved to a larger house, hidden from the road in a quiet cul-de-sac. I waited for the arrival of our first child with such joy – joy I hadn't felt when pregnant with Amber. I knew that this time I was ready to become a mother. Tony slept lightly once our daughter, Lauren, was born, always the first to hear her cry in the night and comfort her. Our son, Sam, followed quickly, eighteen months later, as if he could see the precarious future that awaited us, a future that might make his arrival, if delayed, uncertain. My life was filled with nappy changing and bottles, and I was delighted by it: I had someone to share it all with.

Amber grew to be taller than me, pretty, with a pale complexion and brown hair that twinkled with copper in the sunlight. She always had a happy disposition. On the odd occasion she was sad it never lasted long: like a cork held under the water, as soon as you let it go it shoots to the top and bobs happily up and down. She started going out with boys – small, skinny things usually, as if she liked to rescue strays no-one else would have. She left school without taking any exams, and although she went to college she dropped out within a year. Amber had everything – looks, personality, advantage and opportunity – yet she had nothing: no backbone, integrity, ambition or purpose.

Somewhere along the way, my understanding of my daughter disappeared, and the distance between us grew.

Amber

What was it about me? Why was I different? Why was I angry? It's not that I'd lost something 'cause I never had it in the first place to lose, whatever it was. No, it's rather that whatever was missing from my life I didn't deserve to have. Oh, you wouldn't know to look at me, you can't see from the outside. Anyway, I didn't care. Really, I didn't.

Being the new girl was part of my school life. I was sick of hearing 'This is Amber, she's new she's going to sit here'. Everyone in class always stared at me – I had to push it all away, all the emotions it brought. It was horrid. I was interesting, for a short space of time, but a new school was never about a new beginning. It was more about hiding – hiding my vulnerabilities. Or did that make them more obvious? I constantly felt the anxiety of school life, that gut-sickening anxiety I carried around with me.

After I was expelled from boarding school, when I was thirteen, Mum sent me to the local school in Weydon, in Surrey. Sitting outside on my first day, the radio playing Bob Marley singing 'No Woman

No Cry' while I stared at the drizzling rain, I didn't want to get out of the car. I thought: if only time could stop and I could sit here forever. My feet made baby steps to the school gate, and when I glanced back Mum was watching me so I couldn't run off.

Most of the trouble I got into was mucking around trying to get the other kids to like me, because no-one did. I never understood why. I wasn't nasty or ugly. There was nothing wrong with me. But it was as if the other kids could always smell the weakness in me and, like the fat girl or the different girl, I was the one bullied and teased.

It was always me in the corner or on the naughty chair, me outside the headmaster's office. I spent hours of my life in the corridor – it became a familiar place for me. There was always an information board there somewhere, and with the pen from my blazer pocket I'd kneel up on a chair and colour in all the round bits from the writing – the o's, e's, a's, q's, p's, d's, b's and g's. It was quite fun to make sure I hadn't missed one and it stopped me from getting bored.

Then Weydon became the different school, the last school, the school I wanted to go to each day where I didn't care what the other kids said. All because I had found a true friend – what's more magical than that? I met her outside the headmaster's office and in the corridor – she was there as much as me. For the first time ever I felt safe; I knew I wasn't alone. I had someone who would always be there for me, and she never let me down, not once until the day she died. Her name was Leeanne.

Leeanne didn't think she was very feminine. I thought she was strikingly beautiful, but she never quite believed it. Even relaxed, she could be a bit hard-faced, so I started to make her laugh, my jokes usually directed at myself, laughing at my childish ways. We had a connection; our stories were different, but we both loved a father who was absent from our lives. My father left when I was eleven months old and I've only seen him once or twice since then. Her father had died in a car accident a year before. Although she didn't really say, I could tell Leeanne was devastated by his death. He had been a difficult man, a heavy drinker, but she desperately wanted his love and approval, now that love was forever unobtainable.

I was the same. I knew my own father had been violent, that he had hit Mum, but I still wanted his love. And I loved him. It didn't make any sense that I loved him – after all, I hardly knew him – but it was as if carrying fifty per cent of his DNA meant something, gave him that undeserved right to my love. It wasn't a wish or a want: it was just there. I knew I needed the love of both my parents, and I absolutely knew.

Leeanne was strong, physically and mentally, and, although I usually felt weak, with her I was self-assured and cocky. We told each other everything; we were united. We always had important matters to debate, or funny stories to recall. We became so in tune that we would say the same thing at the same time. We had several little mottos that we would say in unison, such as 'How boring is that?' but my favourite was 'You and me against the world'.

I started sleeping at Leeanne's house. We slept in the same bed – it was easier. 'Staying at mine' was what she would say most weekends. After a while she didn't need to ask, I was always there. I just stopped going home. Opening the double window in her bedroom, we would go twos on a fag, passing through the outside. Sitting either end of the windowsill in the dark, we talked about growing up, what sort of jobs we would get, what sort of cars we would drive and what sort of blokes we would marry.

We were always sneaking off to do something: taking Mum's Cinzano, making ourselves sick b

drinking the lot 'cause it was sweet and sugary, or getting a bit of dope and smoking it in the park. ~~left school without taking any exams, and although I went to college to study horticulture I dropped out within a year. I got a job at a nursery planting seedlings.~~

Then Leeanne and I met Jason and Paul. Jason was a lovable rogue, covered in freckles from head to toe and the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen on a man, like cracked shards of coloured glass vibrant blue. Paul was a 'bad boy'. He had a wild streak I found so attractive, white-blond hair and eyes like a huge expanse of clear sky on a summer's day. He didn't have a pretty face but he had a lovely physique. Jason always sat next to Leeanne and put his arm around her. I started going out with Paul. Although Paul had this bad boy mentality, when we were alone he wanted to be tender, emotional and soppy. I felt comfortable with him. I could be myself. He was so besotted with me that my physical insecurities just melted away – I never felt self-conscious. Paul pointed out things on my body I didn't know were there – freckles or a tiny birth mark in a private place. Mentally I always knew where Paul was. I never felt a void between us or distance from what he was thinking.

Since Mum had met Tony she hadn't had time for me. I was just there, living in the house, but not part of that intimate bond they shared. I started to stay at Paul's flat all the time. The flat was just an empty shell: no carpets or curtains and only a dirty brown sofa and a mattress on the floor in the bedroom. Once the morning sun came in through the bedroom window, I could never get back to sleep. I would lie with my face under the duvet until the alarm went off.

Paul made promises to me: that he would make the flat a home and that he wanted us to have a baby one day. Months went by but nothing changed. Although we both had full-time jobs and could afford to buy things for the flat, we just sat in our empty shell. We had a routine: Leeanne and Jason came round and the four of us got stoned on dope. We thought there was nothing more interesting to do.

Paul was soon taking things to a different level. He had to be wrecked all the time. Getting home late from work one evening, I found him out of his face on the sofa. I threw my bag on the chair and bent over to take a closer look. He had something on his lap, a piece of foil. I thought: he's smoked a the weed and then eaten all the KitKats. I elbowed him in the ribs. 'Wake up!'

He was surprised, like I'd caught him at something, but then he sank back, relaxed.

'What's that?' I pointed to the foil.

'Liquid dope,' he replied with a fat smile.

'Give over, there's no such thing.'

'Yeah there is, try it. If you like dope, you're gonna fuckin' love this.'

He did a line in front of me, heating underneath the foil with his lighter and then drawing up the smoke with a tube also made from foil. I was fascinated.

There was a knock at the door. I glanced through the frosted glass panel and saw that it was Leeanne. I took the door off the catch and sat back down without looking. Leeanne and I didn't need niceties.

'What you doing?' she asked.

'Paul's saying I should smoke a bit of this.' I held up the foil to show her.

She studied it for a moment. ‘Yeah, go on. I will if you will.’

‘I dunno,’ I said.

‘What is it, then?’ she glanced at Paul.

‘It’s liquid dope,’ he replied.

‘Is it fuck!’ Leeanne and I stared each other out. ‘Go on,’ she said. There always was a hard attitude between us, an energy. ‘Go on then,’ she said again.

I did it first. Leeanne straight after. Immediately we were both being sick out of the sitting room window. We couldn’t even make it to the bathroom. Being sick wasn’t the painful, frightening experience it usually was – with heroin in my blood, I couldn’t feel a thing. I can’t remember anything else about that evening. It just smeared into a blur.

That night I slept like a baby. When I woke the next morning I knew I was going to smoke heroin again. Everything that day was enjoyable: sitting on the bus, working all day – it all felt good. It was the best day of my life.

I nagged Paul to get me some more and when he finally did I made sure Leeanne was there. After that it was a regular thing. My natural state of feeling was so shitty and heavy, like carrying a huge weight, that sometimes I didn’t know how much longer I could hold up, but when I took drugs it was release, an escape. Cigarettes and alcohol felt like putting the weight down for a while, but heroin was like I had never had the weight in the first place – a miracle cure for misery. I was in control; I controlled what drugs I took, when I took them and how much I took. It seemed that I had found the key to my emotional freedom. It was such a powerful thing to play with, I couldn’t stop myself.

Addictions start slowly but they build up fast.

At first I didn’t need that much; a tenner’s worth would last three or four days, then I could go without for a few days before I needed it again. If I didn’t have much cash I would smoke it alone; if I had money I’d share my gear with Leeanne.

Paul’s drug-taking started to spiral into something more sinister than I had expected or could deal with. He was taking hard drugs first thing in the morning and hardly going to work, so I was paying for everything. I’d come home to find nasty people in the flat, people I’d never met and didn’t want there. They were so smashed I couldn’t even communicate with them, let alone throw them out. Whatever they were doing must have made them all sick because I’d find sick in the bath, sick in the sink and sick in the toilet. Even when I’d cleaned it up, I could still smell the rancid acid of sick everywhere.

Paul spent all our money on drugs I didn’t even want. ‘What am I supposed to eat, Paul?’ I asked him while I looked through the empty kitchen cupboards at the end of a long, hot day, but he was too stoned to understand. I rummaged about the flat for something to smoke and found an old piece of foil with dregs of heroin, just enough to take the edge off.

Waking up in my clothes, the room smelt of stale cigarette smoke. I felt weak. I heard the alarm go off and thought ‘fuck it’ and went back to sleep. When I arrived at work, my boss looked at his watch. ‘If you’re late one more time, Amber, I’ll have to let you go.’ By Friday he’d sacked me.

Before long Paul and I had no food, no shampoo or toilet roll, not even a fag. I couldn’t wash my

clothes and spots developed all over my face. The reality and despair of my situation were forgotten for a few seconds when I got lost in cartoons. So I took the duvet to the sofa and watched TV all day.

Until Leeanne came round. She had her own car and a job in an office earning a decent salary. As soon as she came inside, I pounced on her. 'Got any fags? Any money?'

'What's going on here?' she stared at my face. I was grey, under-weight and dirty.

'Lost my job,' I replied.

'Paul not at work?'

'He's out getting wrecked.'

She tucked her shiny brown hair behind her ear and looked around the cold, dirty room. 'Amber, do you love him?'

'Course I do.'

'No. Do you really love him? Are you prepared to live this way? Bring a baby into this?' She shook her head. 'You have to go home.'

Leeanne packed my things and drove me home. 'I'm gonna tell Paul in no uncertain terms where I got fucked up,' she said. Then she went back to the flat and waited for him.

Living back at Mum's was like checking into a five-star hotel after living rough. Without Paul there was no more gear and I didn't really think about it. I became ill with a fever – it made me sweat the whole time, my arms and legs ached and I felt sick.

Finally Mum said 'You can't go on like this, there must be something wrong with you,' and she took me to the doctors'.

The doctor said he thought it was a possible case of glandular fever and that I should rest. I stayed in bed for two weeks, and then I felt better and got another job.

Once I had my own money I couldn't resist doing gear again. I wasn't addicted, I just enjoyed it. It made me feel as if everything was going to turn out alright.

Christine

I felt the lump again, and then stared at the reflection in the bedroom mirror. ‘It’s probably nothing,’ said out loud. It wasn’t a hard lump but a knot of soft tissue under my right arm. Make-up done, jammed the mascara wand back in the tube, but the face in the mirror wasn’t me, it was someone else – someone shouting ‘Worry! Worry! Worry!’ inside my head. A wave of overwhelming doom made my knees buckle. I sank back to sit on the bed.

I rang the doctors’ surgery. ‘Is it an emergency?’ the receptionist asked.

I thought for a moment. Is it?

‘Well ... yes,’ I replied. She gave me an appointment for later that day. I wandered about the house, kept looking at the clock, didn’t get anything done.

The female doctor was dismissive while she examined me. ‘What makes this so important today?’

‘I’m really worried.’

‘Well don’t be,’ she said. ‘Do you shave under your arms?’

‘Yes,’ I said, struggling to do up my bra.

‘That’s your problem, then. It’s an ingrown hair that’s caused a small swelling. All women get them.’

I felt pretty insignificant and stupid walking out of the surgery.

Throughout the summer a nagging voice inside my head came and went but wouldn’t permanently go away. Each time I felt the lump again and remembered what the doctor said. I couldn’t really be sure that the lump was the cause of this sense of foreboding. I started having a recurring dream in which I was drowning. In the dream, I was looking up at the sunlight sparkling through the surface of the water while I struggled for air, choking, all the time sinking to the bottom.

That September Lauren started school and Sam, now three, was old enough for playschool. I had a bit more free time.

Amber was living back at home and had settled into a regular job. Growing up, she had always been chunky and solid, but now in her late teens, she’d lost weight and became withdrawn. Now and then I’d ask myself if she was taking hard drugs. But each time I thought that no, I would know if she was doing anything like that. I dismissed the questions, thinking that it was just the odd joint and maybe some ecstasy pills when she went to a rave or out clubbing. It wasn’t serious and she would tire of it naturally. As long as she came home a few nights a week, I accepted it.

By late November I had to listen to my instincts and go back to the doctor. I felt braver – what was the point in worrying? I had private medical insurance and would insist on a referral. This time I saw a different doctor. He was plump with a dark moustache, his face glistened with a light sweat. He smeared some of old-fashioned cologne. He pushed the lump and ran his fingers over it several times.

‘I don’t think it’s anything to worry about.’ He smiled. ‘But if you were my wife I’d want you to get it checked out properly. I’ll send you for a mammogram.’

Picking up a pen from his desk, he started writing. 'Give the hospital a ring and make an appointment,' he said, passing me a slip of paper.

Tony came with me for the mammogram. We sat in a comfortable pink waiting room and read the newspapers. He made a cappuccino from the machine. The nurse's hands were round and warm as she squeezed my breasts into the X-ray machine. 'Take a seat back in the waiting room and I'll show them to Dr Wainwright,' she said. I got dressed and returned to my newspaper – I didn't want to look at the frightened faces of the other patients.

A few minutes later the nurse poked her head around the door. 'All okay, Mrs Lewry. You can go now,' she said with a smile. 'Doctor says there's nothing there.'

'What about the lump?'

'Just a harmless cyst.'

Tony smiled and took my hand. Although I felt relieved, the feeling didn't go all the way down, just seemed to settle half way, in my stomach.

A week later, on a Thursday morning, when I was at home alone, the hospital rang. 'Mrs Lewry, there's nothing to be concerned about, but Dr Wainwright reviewed your mammogram before filing away your case notes and has seen something on your left side. We'd been looking for signs of cancer on the right side, your right breast, where you have the lump. Could you come back this morning? It's just routine; the doctor wants to enlarge the area on the left side.'

The hospital did another mammogram, enlarging the area where the doctor had seen the cluster of cells. 'Doctor wants to do an ultrasound,' the nurse with the warm hands said.

I lay on a narrow bed while Dr Wainwright squeezed cool gel on my chest and ran the ultrasound probe over it. The room was dark apart from the faint glow from her computer. Shadows fell on the walls like ghosts in the night.

'There,' she pointed to a haze of white on the screen. 'I'll do a biopsy, then we'll organise a taxi to take it to the lab.'

'What now?'

'It won't hurt.' She opened her drawer and selected a needle, felt again for the lump in my breast and drew out some tissue. 'You'll have the result tomorrow. I'll ring you. Will you be at home?'

Walking back to my car, an unintelligible buzzing started in my head. It seemed obvious to me that I had cancer. It felt weird to have found the cause of the bad feeling. Maybe there was some solace in that.

Tony stayed home with me until the hospital rang. 'Very sorry, Mrs Lewry, but you have breast cancer.' The words sounded so trivial and yet so profound and life changing. The rest of the day I tried to stay positive: it had been caught early, the lump was fairly small. Anyway, what could I do? Break down? Scream? I had to hold on tight to the belief that I was going to be alright.

The surgeon performing my operation was tall and distinguished. His skin was the colour of pale coffee, as if he spent his winters in the sun. 'I'll just remove the lump and the surrounding tissue. No need to have a full mastectomy or remove the lymph nodes, and after the operation you won't need any more treatment. You can go back to leading a normal life,' he said. 'Christmas Eve is the first

available date for the surgery, but we can wait until after Christmas if you'd rather.'

I couldn't wait.

The morning of my operation, Dr Wainwright and the surgeon gathered around my bed. 'We're going to do a larger operation than we originally planned,' Dr Wainwright said, looking down at the clipboard in her hands. 'We've decided to take the lymph nodes from under your left arm, in addition to the lumpectomy. The lymph nodes are used to diagnose whether the cancer has spread outside the lump.'

'You'll be in a bit more pain – this means we have to cut through the muscle,' the surgeon said. I signed the form, leaving it to them to do whatever they thought might save me.

Christmas was bleak. I had done enough shopping to make sure Lauren and Sam each got a stocking on Christmas morning. It must have seemed strange to them to open their presents without Mum being there. Amber had Christmas lunch with my mother, while Tony, Lauren and Sam spent the afternoon in hospital with me. The kids were fidgety and wouldn't settle, getting on and off my bed and running down the corridor. Tony kept calling them back.

On Boxing Day my surgeon came to see me. He smoothed out the starched sheet and sat on my bed. 'I've got the results of the biopsy. I'm afraid it's bad news,' he said as he laid a perfectly manicured hand on my shoulder. 'Of the twelve lymph nodes I removed, six have cancer. I'll arrange for you to see an oncologist. I expect he'll recommend chemotherapy.'

This wasn't the way it was supposed to turn out. 'You said the operation would be all the treatment I would need!'

'I know,' he said, 'I'm sorry.'

I turned over and stared at the wall, waiting for Tony to arrive. My life was slipping away, like grains of sand falling through my fingers. The thought that I had cancer spreading through my body was terrifying. What if I died leaving Lauren and Sam without a mother? They were so young that there would come a time when they wouldn't even remember me. I would be that photograph smiling back from the mantelpiece, a sad remnant of a woman who died long ago, never moved or put away since she left. 'What was my mummy like?' my children would ask their father.

The hospital discharged me with a drain hanging out of my chest. It filled a bottle strapped to a belt around my waist. I felt like I had aged twenty years overnight. I was weak and it hurt to walk around the house or do the simplest task. After a few days looking after me Tony had to go back to work.

'Amber been home?' Tony asked one evening.

I shuffled over to lower myself onto the sofa. 'Haven't seen her for days.'

'Doesn't she ever come home and help you? Sit with you?' He leant down to scoop up Sam before he could pull a decoration off the Christmas tree. I hadn't had the strength to put it away yet.

I shrugged my shoulders. 'She's always been the same, Tone. Sometimes I think she only cares about herself.'

I wondered why Amber didn't love me. Why didn't she care that I was ill and want to come and see me? I wasn't going to say anything to Tony – if he knew how upset I was he might judge her even more. I tensed my shoulder and moved my arm back and forth to stretch the stitches. When the pain

kicked in, I winced.

‘Why don’t you go and lay down,’ Tony said.

Upstairs in bed I let myself cry.

Tony held my hand while we waited in silence outside the oncologist’s office. A silver name plate on the door read ‘Dr Marshall’. His office was a calming shade of blue, and he was younger than expected: he had a boyish fringe, green eyes and a pale face. I tried to press him for reassurance about my prognosis, but he couldn’t give me any. He talked in percentages and statistics, about improvements in life expectancy of five or ten years, his voice set in a monotone devoid of hope or compassion. I expect it stopped him from getting emotionally involved with dying patients. What bloody good was five or ten years? I wanted to live, not wait it out. I wasn’t going to take on his fear or negativity.

‘Chemotherapy for five months and then six weeks of radiotherapy,’ Dr Marshall said while flicking through my notes. ‘Cut your hair before we start,’ he looked up at me. ‘Makes it easier when it falls out, seems like less on the pillow if it’s short.’

I got my hair cut. I watched it fall on the pale, limed floorboards of the hairdresser’s salon. Laura bounded into our bedroom the next morning to climb into her usual place in bed next to me. Staring thoughtfully at my short hair and studying my face, she said, ‘Doesn’t look very nice Mummy, do you like it?’

As the appointment for my chemotherapy drew closer, I became increasingly afraid – probably the result of me watching TV programmes where cancer patients lay on the bathroom floor being sick. The chemo did make me feel sick. I tasted its bitterness in the delicate lining of my nose and at the back of my throat. It made me feel like every cell in my body had been poisoned and that I had the most dreadful hangover, yet I hadn’t even had a glass of wine.

Mentally I had to pace myself. Six times, once every three weeks. I could manage that. I counted them off. After the first time, I felt sick as soon as Tony parked the car outside the hospital. After the third time, my veins seized up and they couldn’t get a line in. But I settled into a pattern I could cope with. Tuesday was chemo day: Tony came with me to the hospital and when he brought me home I stayed in bed. Wednesday I made it downstairs to sit on the sofa. On the Friday after my chemo Tony took me to see a healer, and on the Monday I went back to work. Going to work made me feel normal – there I was someone other than a cancer patient. People asked about budgets, I had contracts to sign off, I had a role.

It was hard for me when all the hair on the top of my head fell out despite the torture of the chemotherapy caps. I always did care too much about my appearance.

‘Do you love me?’ I asked Tony whilst having the pinky-red chemotherapy dripped into my veins. The anti-sickness medication made me constipated for days and I became frail and weak. The more I became, the more I thought that if I died he might find a new wife; someone younger, thinner, better than me.

Sometimes at night I would wake with night terrors. I imagined I was a warrior, standing on a dark cliff in the pounding rain, a sword in my hand ready to face my foe. I looked around me to see who stood at my side. Tony was there, but not my eldest daughter.

When my treatment finished, I was cast adrift. All the time I had been having hospital

appointments, chemotherapy or radiotherapy I had been doing something positive to fight the disease. Now I floated about, waiting to see whether I would sink or swim.

One day, when I got home from work, there was a silver Mercedes two-seater sitting in the driveway. 'Life is for living,' Tony said, pulling me towards him for a kiss, 'and you need a treat.'

'I'll never fit the kids in that,' I laughed.

'We'll still keep the Jeep as a family car. This is just for you,' he said.

He opened the door for me to sink down inside the black leather interior. At the touch of a button the roof slid back and folded itself neatly into the boot. I loved it.

The reactions of my friends when I told them I had cancer had been mixed. Some who I knew only casually stood beside me in the school playground and asked how I was. Others had fear and pity in their eyes and avoided me. Perhaps they were afraid that if they spoke to me I might start to cry, and they wouldn't know what to say or how to comfort me.

I pushed myself to go to the gym. At first I wore a cap, but it made me hot so I stopped wearing it. I wore the cap to walk the children to school and to go shopping, but I couldn't sit in the office all day in a hat, so I got a wig. I thought it looked alright, but when I showed it to Amber on one of her rare visits home she laughed. I went upstairs and took it off.

At the yearly finance meeting in London I had to wear my wig. Most of the committee members pretended not to notice – it was business as usual – but during lunch the chairman singled me out. He was a rare man; he had a presence that emanated kindness.

'I had cancer some years ago,' he said. 'It changed me, made me a better person. I know it's hard for Christine, but you'll be glad one day you've been through this; it'll change you too.'

I smiled and I walked away. What good could ever come from thinking you might die?

Sitting on the train travelling out of London, I noticed the rain trickling down the window. The sky was grey and the darkness came on earlier than usual. Lights from shops and offices sped past.

I thought about what the chairman had said, and realised that he was right: cancer had changed me. The whole experience had made me stronger inside, as if I could cope with anything. All those coincidences, those lucky breaks – they must mean I would survive. The money and possessions I had, all the stuff, it meant nothing to me. The only thing that mattered was the people I loved: Tony and my children. I had a feeling that some destiny awaited me; that my life was mapped out in some way.

Amber

I switched off the engine and sat there for a moment in the driveway. Mum's car was not there. The garage door was open and Tony emerged from the back, wiping his hands on a cloth. 'Mum home?' I asked him cheerfully as I got out of the car.

'Haven't seen you for a while, Amber, where've you been?'

'Oh ... staying at Leeanne's.' I twisted the links on the white-gold bracelet Mum had bought me for my last birthday, turning it around on my wrist until the clasp was at the front. 'You couldn't lend me some money, could you? As she's out.'

'You know your mum's fighting for her life, don't you? Ever think about what she's going through?'

‘Maybe you could do something for her for a change? Help with your brother and sister?’ He nodded his head towards my car. ‘She bought you that car you drive around in.’

If Mum died of cancer I would be an orphan. All I could think about was how much I needed her, selfishly worrying about myself instead of her. Mum always coped with things easily – she went back to work when Lauren and Sam were still babies and I never saw her get flustered or cross. I thought that there must be something wrong with me – I was her daughter, yet I found even the easy things hard.

When I was a child, Mum took me to see *Lady and the Tramp*. Mum would have been Lady, feminine and fluffy, with impeccable manners, but underneath she was tough, like at the end of the film when Lady attacks the rat when it gets into the baby’s bedroom. That was Mum – hard as steel. You crossed her or threatened someone she loved. But was she strong enough to beat cancer?

‘I do work full time, you know. I’ve been busy, that’s all,’ I said.

Tony moved his hand round to the back pocket of his jeans and took out a thin wad of notes. Peeling off a ten-pound note from the top with his thumb and forefinger, he flicked it at me. It fluttered slightly in the cool air and then dropped, as if by magic, at my feet.

‘Best you go then,’ he said coldly, and walked back into the garage.

I bent down and picked up the note. I needed the money to score. The gear couldn’t take it away from me, the fear that Mum might die – but it helped me forget for a while. Throughout my childhood I had felt alone. I had wanted Mum to stay at home with me but she had wanted to be at work. Then, when she met Tony and had Lauren, I became the outsider. And, even now, I wasn’t there at home being part of it. But I clung to that pain for protection. Being unwanted sat easier with me; I could cope with it. The thought of her dying was unbearable. So I told myself: they don’t want me anyway, I’m just the mistake. Anything but face the reality of what might happen.

I had this nightmare where I was on the edge of a cliff, holding on to Mum with one hand and Lauren and Sam with the other. I knew I couldn’t hold both. I had to save her, but when I looked into her face she screamed ‘Don’t you dare!’ It was so selfish of me to want her for myself, yet what she wanted was for me to save them, to take care of them. So I let her go, only to wake with an overwhelming feeling of guilt.

Leeanne had a brother, Stephen. Steve and I had similar characters – we both laughed at the same things. He was stocky and muscular, really fit with a cheeky smile. He had a golden glow – something about him just sparkled. For me, he lit up the room when he entered.

It wasn’t easy to score gear. Leeanne and I had spent weeks driving around trying to infiltrate the community, the secret society that was drug addiction. Searching in parks for people we recognised. ‘Here, mate, can you get us any gear?’

We’d done a lot of hanging around, waiting for blokes who’d said they’d be back in ten minutes.

In desperation, we had gone to find Stephen. Stephen’s story was Leeanne’s story. He’d scored for us the first time but then wouldn’t – didn’t want his younger sister and her mate tagging along. But sooner or later he’d given in, and the spider’s web of contacts had appeared.

Stephen had a baby with his girlfriend, Michelle, so the council had given them a flat. The flat was massive, but they had nothing in it. If they had a kettle they didn’t have any mugs. In the sitting room

there was a dirty sofa and chairs that didn't match. A cheap shelving cabinet against the wall was empty except for a Teddy bear, holding a heart that said 'Be Mine.' There was no washing machine, only a fridge that was always empty.

The baby sat in the buggy all day; it never cried.

Michelle liked to gossip – she was always talking about people – but Stephen and I liked to tease each other and be childish. 'Is that a spot on your face Amber? Or you growing a second head?' he joked while I was sitting on their sofa waiting to score. I touched my face to feel how big this spot was when a dealer came round to sort them out some gear. His name was Dave Jenkins. He was tall but really thin, very cocky, a bit of a geezer. He hesitated when he noticed me, then gawped for a moment. 'You look healthy for a drug addict,' he said.

I cocked my head to one side. 'That's because I'm not a drug addict.'

He smiled. 'Can I take you out to dinner?'

'No,' I crossed my legs and folded my arms. 'You can't afford to take me out to dinner.'

'Why don't I give you my number? Then you can give us a bell when you change your mind.'

'Okay,' I said, thinking he might be useful to score from if I needed to. He wrote his number on my fag packet and winked as he handed it back to me.

I thought about Dave once or twice, remembering his saucy smile, so I rang him, scored some gear from him. He pursued me right from the start. He always took care of me and let me have it on tick if I didn't have any money.

'Don't worry about it, princess,' he'd say. 'You can pay me next time.'

It was easier to score off him for Leeanne and Jason. Then the three of us would smoke our gear together. Dave always told me where to meet him – an alleyway or a street corner. One night, he beckoned me from my car, I got out and when I was close he reached out and drew me towards him for a cuddle. It was the first time we had had any physical contact; he felt very protective, almost paternal. He gave me the three bags I'd ordered and I gave him the cash.

'Call me,' he touched the side of my face, 'if ever you need anything.'

Sliding back into the driver's seat, I put the bags in the tray behind the gear lever, out in the open where the three of us could see them. I had to pay attention to the road, but Leeanne and Jason didn't take their eyes off the bags. Things were always tense before we had a smoke. When we parked up and I turned around to look in the tray, there were only two bags. Maybe Leeanne or Jason had taken one, maybe I dropped one. We argued about it for a bit then decided to mix the two into one and share between us. We were done in an hour and I dropped them off at home.

It wasn't enough: I needed a bag to myself. I phoned Dave, told him what had happened and made out I was more distressed than I actually was. He told me to come back, made me park somewhere different. He opened the passenger door and leaned inside the car. 'Look Amber, your friends have probably taken it, that's what addicts are like.' He got in the front seat and pressed a bag of gear in my hand. We smoked it together.

After that I began to do my gear with him more often.

We were smoking heroin together one winter's evening when he said, 'You're gorgeous, you are. Do you wanna go to the cinema with me?'

'What, on a proper date?'

'Yes, an official date.'

Dave arrived for our date with fifty quid's worth of crack on him, so we smoked it in the car park before we saw the film. He let me choose what I wanted to watch, and I chose Charlie's Angels.

After the film, Dave invited me back to his place. It was a rickety caravan in someone's garden. As I walked from one end to the other, it swayed from side to side and the floor bounced beneath my feet. Dave got out three bags of heroin and we shared them. This time he cooked it up on a spoon and injected it into a vein. I smoked my share and was pretty wrecked. 'Don't think I can drive,' I said.

'Stay the night here, princess,' Dave said.

It was cold in the caravan. We cuddled up together in his bed. The feeling of heat from his body, the rhythm of his heart, the gentle whisper of his breath on my skin; all these things are accentuated by heroin. I pulled him close to me, but there was no sex.

From that night on, Dave and I were inseparable. After I finished work each day, I went to the caravan to smoke gear with him. Soon I was getting up early to go there in the morning and smoking gear before I went to work as well.

The more my habit grew, the less I cared, about myself or anything else – as if I were swimming in the sea and being pulled out by a gentle tide, it happened naturally. I didn't see a problem. I never had to spend any money on heroin. Never had to steal for it. It just came too easily.

The fresh scent of polish filled the air as I added another layer to the counter. I wiped it away when Stacey, the Saturday girl, told me about her antics the previous evening. We both giggled. 'Isn't that your Dave outside?' she asked.

I turned around to see her gazing past me through the large, glass shopfront. Dave was pacing about outside. His head was low, but it moved up and down when he walked, as if he was trying to see in and yet hide. Holding a fag to his mouth, he looked at me to catch my gaze, then quickly looked away.

Something was wrong; he couldn't stand still. 'I'm gonna take my break now, love,' I said to Stacey.

Once I was outside, Dave was at my side in a moment. 'Babe, got a problem, had to hide some gear and it's been dug up by something. I've lost it.' He raised himself up on his heels. 'It's gone.'

I wasn't quite sure how serious this was. 'What? All of it?'

'Can't score. Don't have any cash.'

'I've got a twenty note on me.'

He was flustered and distracted, glancing left then right down the road. 'Do you get paid monthly? His hands were trembling and he lit another fag as soon as the previous one was finished.

'Yeah.'

'How much?'

'Take home five hundred and fifty.'

He drew hard on his cigarette. 'I'm gonna need more.'

'I've got an overdraft limit of four hundred,' I offered.

'That'll do,' his face changed to a smile. 'I can get an ounce with that.'

I gave Dave my whole wage packet and drew out cash up to my overdraft limit to give him the money to get re-started. Then I waited at home while he drove to London to score. By ten o'clock my body was screaming for heroin – I was clucking and watching out of my bedroom window for his car. I rang his mobile but there was no answer. I rang again, still no answer.

When finally I recognised his car pull up the drive, I ran straight out, slamming the front door behind me and jumping into the front seat as soon as his car stopped. 'You alright? I've been worried you didn't answer your phone!'

He was shaking. He glanced up into the rear view mirror and then opened the front of his jacket. 'I'm more than alright. I've got the fuckin' gear!'

He had it close to his chest, snuggled up like it was a baby. He pulled it out with one hand and dropped it in my lap.

It was a huge, solid brick, yet it was feather light. It had been wrapped thousands of times in cling film so that it looked shiny-silver right through. I thought about how much a tiny bag cost, a piece so small you wrapped it in a Rizla. How much would this be worth when broken down into bags?

I felt the power radiating from it, warm, like it was radioactive.

Christine

I looked at my watch. Amber and Dave were an hour late and Sunday lunch was ready.

‘Where are they?’ Tony said as he opened the oven to a gush of vapour. ‘Potatoes are done, we can’t wait any longer.’

Lunch was on the table and smelled delicious, butter melting on the vegetables and steam rising from a jug of gravy. Everyone had started eating when Amber and Dave finally arrived – breezing in with all smiles and excuses. Somehow they were always late for family gatherings and could never stay very long. There was usually a compelling reason why they had to leave early. I wouldn’t let myself get upset today.

‘Would you like a glass of wine or a beer, Dave?’ I asked as he settled in at the table.

‘No thanks, I’m driving, but I’ll have a nice cup of tea.’

I sighed. ‘I’ll make one when lunch is finished.’

My own mother said ‘He’s such a nice boy – doesn’t drink and drive, does he?’ Then she peered down the table and smiled at him.

‘Do you still need to borrow some money from me this month, Amber?’ I asked.

Amber opened her mouth to speak, but Dave butted in: ‘Don’t worry Mum, I’ve sorted it.’

I blinked; I’m not his mother. Then he gave me this cheesy smile.

‘Oh okay, if you’re sure,’ I said.

When Amber first met Dave I thought he was a decent lad, a steady influence on her. Everyone liked him. But, as their relationship grew, I could see how dependent Amber was on him. Dave was friendly and cheerful around us, but I suspected he had a dark side. I wondered what she saw in him. Amber had this beautiful speaking voice, whereas Dave sounded common and talked in slang. I didn’t like myself for being disappointed in my daughter’s choice, but I couldn’t help it.

A few weeks later, waiting outside Dr Marshall’s office for my check-up, I flicked through the pages of a crumpled magazine. By now I knew how the appointment would go: he would ask me if I had any symptoms or pain, and then he’d examine me and I would leave. It was a ten-minute slot every three months during which I would speak about my fears – I was searching for symptoms all the time.

My knee had started to hurt after I did my step class each week, so I told Dr Marshall. He organised a blood test for me, to look for ‘markers,’ whatever they are. Then he decided I needed a bone scan. Both tests came back normal, so he said it was just me getting older. One day, I had a dreadful pain in my head while I was doing a complicated spreadsheet at work. Alone in my car at the end of the day, I couldn’t stop the tears welling up in my eyes. I cried, convinced I had a brain tumour and only months left to live. By the time I got home, I had imagined my own death and organised my funeral. I took some aspirin and went to bed. The next day the pain was gone.

Sometimes, when I was alone, I took off my bra and studied my body in the mirror, asking myself whether I was still attractive. My left breast was deformed, but not that badly. I asked Tony what he

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