

Painful Secrets

The blue text is Frances' story.

The green text is Gloria's story

The black text is written by Frances' Dad

I was 14, the eldest of the family, but the baby at a new school. I remember coming out of school one day and not being able to find my mom. Finally one of my friend's moms came to me and told me that my mom had gone to the doctor and had asked her to take me home. My heart sank – my mom was never sick. She wouldn't just leave me to go home with some one else. I knew right then without having to be told what it was, that it was very serious and would change all our lives.

All afternoon I worried. Eventually my mom fetched me up. She looked exhausted and older for some reason. We spoke in the car, but she gave nothing away. All she would tell me is that it could lots of nasty things. She wasn't a person who worried anyone unnecessarily and my earlier founded fears grew.

Over the next few days things got stranger. My dad was away and people kept on showing up at our house to see my mom. The house was quiet and had an atmosphere like some one had just died. It was awful, they would sit in the lounge with my mom and talk in hushed voices, and then they would usually cry, hug each other, tell everyone how much they loved each other and leave. I now had that knot in my stomach. The one that makes you feel physically sick, where you can't eat or smile and a feeling of dread envelops you.

My dad arrived home. We were shooed out the house to friends for dinner – even more strange at that stage – going out with friends on a school night. It was a nice evening, but that all came crashing down around me when we got home. My dad had been crying. Men don't cry. My dad doesn't cry, or at least that's what I thought. My knot was back and it was now worse than ever. It was so bad that I didn't go to school the next day. My mom didn't go to work either, apparently she had to take it easy. She called me to her room and that's when she told me – she had Leukemia. I stood there and said 'oh'. That was all

I said before I left the room. I didn't know what else to say. I knew that my life had just been changed forever. Nothing could ever be the same again. I was no longer just a naïve, carefree teenager – I had been thrown a curve ball. One, with which I was not yet ready to deal.

The next few months were hell. Mom was so sick from her chemotherapy. She couldn't walk and she became so thin. She looked like a doll that had been battered and bruised. Everything was an effort for her. She could no longer cook or fetch us from school or even play with Jess. She would sleep. Often all day and then when dad got home he would go and sit with her so we didn't really see him either. We became more independent during this time, and just as everyone described me – I was the strong one. The one who needed no help from anyone, but was always willing to help everyone else and fuss over them. I took over the 'mothering' role in the family. I'm not quite sure when or how it happened I just know it did. If I was always busy and helping people I didn't have to think about how I felt. I could push it all away and hide it somewhere deep in my subconscious. I was super human and the more people said how strong I was and how I must look after everyone else the more my need to please them all grew. I didn't want to let anyone down. I could cope- all I had to do was think about them and not me. My brother needed support, so I gave it to him, my sister needed someone to play with, so I played with her and so the list goes on. The psychologist at school once asked me what I was doing for me. I thought about it and my answer was that I had no idea.

I first met Glynn and Alison Davies in January 2000. They came to tell me about their family and the issues which they were facing.

Alison (a medical doctor by profession and mother of three children) had recently been diagnosed with Chronic Myeloid Leukemia. She had been having chemotherapy, which had taken its toll on her physically. She looked frail, but I could see that she was determined to not allow Leukemia to take over her life.

The reason for their visit was their concern about maintaining family relationships, in the face of the illness which had interrupted their lives. Alison told me about her children. She told me about her eldest daughter Frances (14) whom she described as being very strong. Alison was not worried about her because Frances coped well.

Alison was more worried about Christopher (12) her son, who seemed to have become withdrawn and angry. Jessie (4) the youngest, was small and coped well, probably because she didn't really understand what was happening. Alison asked me to have a conversation with Christopher to try and understand why he had become so aggressive and impatient with his sisters.

Christopher and I met each other the following week It was a time of limbo-many questions especially 'How long before something happens?'

There was the possibility of a bone marrow transplant, but a donor had not yet been found, or the unspeakable..... and Christopher explained to me how he just wanted to be left alone in the peace and quiet of his room, but that his sisters were always coming in to disturb him.

Alison's conversations with me touched me because she was always so positive. A doctor herself, she knew much about the illness and how to deal with it. Although she never allowed herself to lose hope, she did acknowledge that death was a possibility, but not a probability because she and the medical world were doing all they could to conquer the leukemia. Alison made tapes for the children and gathered together symbols of other memories, which she felt, were important for her to leave for the children, but she never told them about this fearing that they would be too upset by this.

And then ... a donor was found and very quickly arrangements were made for the procedure. Ali was admitted to hospital. Christopher and I spoke about various possibilities and 'hope' was always a partner in our conversations. Time crept by. The marrow was not rejected. Ali was on the road to recovery.

Things became more stressful when mom went into hospital. Even though mom had been sick when she had been at home she was still at home and was there if you needed to talk or had a question about something. With her gone it seemed like all the positive energy from the house had vanished with her. She had been my inspiration. It didn't seem to matter to her how sick she got- she was positive. She was going to live. She never kidded herself though. She knew the reality of her illness and was determined that we were going to know it as well. There would not be any lying or false stories that this would be easy.

I remember coming home from school one day with mom when she was well enough to drive. She asked me if I was scared of dying. I didn't want to talk about it. If you talk about something it becomes real. I didn't want it to become real. I sat quietly in the car and cried. She told me that she was not scared of dying. She had no intention of dying anytime soon, but if it did happen she was not scared. I couldn't understand it. How could she not be terrified? How could she not be angry? How could she not be resentful that this was happening to her? I was terrified, angry and resentful and it wasn't even me who was sick. I think knowing that she had come to terms with her illness made it easier for us. She taught us that what was meant to happen would happen, but at the same time she never gave up hope.

Time carried on and slowly it almost became normal that mom was in hospital. We would phone and visit. I used to her letters and Jess used to draw pictures. The hospital was an awful place and I used to dread going there. It smelt horrible. Everyone was so quiet and everything seemed so morbid. Because the chemo had wiped out all mom's white blood cells she was imuno compromised and could not see anyone other than her immediate family. Even when we went we

had to wear masks and wash our hands with some special stuff that smelt really vile. Mom was more tired than ever. She couldn't eat because she had mouth ulcers everywhere, so she got even thinner. All she ever saw were the 4 white walls of her room. Jessie's birthday came and we filmed it to take it for mom to watch. It was a really fun party, but something was missing, something big, the most important person in our lives was not there to sing or take photos. It came to my birthday. 2 months after mom went into hospital. She was no better. The transplant had not been rejected, but it had also not been accepted. It was just sort of there. Taking up space in my mommy's body and causing her to be sick. Everyday she had to have platelets fed into her body through a thick tube. It was the most horrifying sight. She had a huge drip, but instead of being connected to her wrist it was connected to the main artery of her heart. To make it even worse platelets are not red like other blood is – they are bright yellow. Needless to say every time the nurse came in with a yellow bag I would leave the room in a big hurry.

I remember visiting another young man of 20 who was also struggling to conquer leukemia. His parents had asked me to go and chat with him to strengthen the voice of hope which they were all holding on to. He was in the ward next to Ali and I realised that he was having to fight so hard. His courage touched me. Not winning his battle, but Ali was. He was so ill and Ali was making progress. I was so delighted that this wonderful young mother was conquering leukemia, whilst inside I wept knowing that Mark next door was losing his battle.

25 October – the day of Jessie's Christmas concert at school and the most horrific day of my life. A school concert, so common sense says 'turn off your cell phone' doesn't it? Well apparently not in my dad's book of common sense, or so I thought. We had a huge fight about it. How could he be so inconsiderate? The kids had practiced so hard and now he was going to make a noise during their concert. It was

then that he told me. There was something wrong with mom. Well dah, she had Leukemia and had spent the last 2 months in hospital.

Then I looked at his face. No, it was more than that. The knot jumped up from his hiding spot to take up from where he had left off. Panic rose inside me. There couldn't be anything wrong with her. I had spoken to her. She was getting better. More bone marrow was being flown from Germany so that another transplant could be performed. How could something be wrong?

A friend of mom's came to video the concert and it felt to me that everyone else knew more than I did. I couldn't cry. I wasn't going to ruin Jessie's concert. I tried to concentrate, but I couldn't. We went home. Dad still wouldn't tell me more. He just said 'She's sick. I'm spending the night there, you're going to stay with friends.'

So off we went the three of us. Jess knew nothing and was perfectly happy to play with her two little friends. I can't remember whether Christopher knew, I just remember that I had to get away. I couldn't stay. I was suffocating and needed to escape to somewhere where I could think. My cousin fetched me up and I spent the night at her house.

The next morning was like any other school morning, a rush to get ready for school, but today was worse. I had to get ready and then get home in time for my lift. I got home. No lift. Only dad. He was crying again, "I think we have to say goodbye to her."

Sorry my hearing must have gone bad. What did you just say? Then it sank in.

"Noooo" I cried, dropped my shoes (which I hadn't had time to put on) and ran outside. This couldn't be happening. She was not going to die.

"Come we're going to see her" Dad's voice said.

I couldn't see her. I couldn't say goodbye.

I don't really remember much that happened after that. I remember going to school to see the school psychologist. I had spoken to Mrs. Corbett my teacher and she had sorted out an appointment for me. I sat with her in complete shock. Next it was off to the hospital with one

of mom's friends. The rest of the family were already there, but I hadn't wanted to go with them, it was too hard.

We arrived and I promptly ran to the bathroom to be sick. Mom was in a coma in intensive care. She had bled into her brain. I have never seen such a terrible sight as what I saw when I got into the room. It was a sight that still haunts me today.

The day of hurt

The hospital smelt even worse that day than normal. It smelt to her like death, like the end of a life. To her that's what it was, the end of her life as well as her mother's. After a year of being ill and hurting so much physically as well as emotionally she had died. After suffering 2 and a half months in hospital she had slipped apparently painlessly into a coma.

The girl had pretty much started living at the hospital. She knew every nurse in the unit and could tie a mask quicker than some of the doctors could. She had now developed a fear of hospitals and she worried that her little sister would never go willingly to a hospital. It was supposed to become better as the time passed and her mom was supposed to get better, but it didn't. Instead it got worse, the transplant that her mom had gone in for hadn't worked and she seemed to be getting depressed which wasn't really surprising seeing as she had been staring at the same 4 walls for the past 12 weeks and had only been allowed to see her immediate family. At least when she was at home she could see other friends and family and she didn't have to take 40 huge tablets every day, which made her really sick.

Her mother had been getting better, they were even thinking about letting her go home before the next lot of bone marrow arrived. The doctor said she would be fine, he had lied to them and now the girl could never trust him or any other doctor again. 2 days ago she hemorrhaged into her brain because of her lack of platelets. She hadn't even pressed her bell to call the nurse. She had just collapsed and now she just

lay there in I.C.U her eyes haunting her daughter. She just lay there like a statue, not moving at all. It was a sight that would stick out boldly in her mind forever. The tears just flowed like a river from her daughter's eyes. It should never have happened, she was a much better mother than any of her friend's mothers.

It would be the last day that she would be at the hospital for a long time. When she woke up from in the next room she was told that her mom had died. She wished then that she had died with her and that she wasn't left here all on her own to cope with growing up without a mom.

Family started to arrive from around the country and even from over seas. It was like a family gathering filled with hysteria. If anything funny was said we would laugh like it was the funniest thing that we had ever heard. It was a strange time. Like we were neither here nor there. We were just waiting for the inevitable to happen. We couldn't stop it. We couldn't change it. It was coming no matter how much we fought.

My mom was lying there with all these other people in the ward who looked more dead than alive. I crossed the ward to where the family was. There, looking like she was sleeping, was my mom.

A life special to me

*The silence overwhelms me
And I am unable to breathe.
The world is spinning around me.
Somewhere a doctor is paged and a machine beeps,
But it makes no impact on me,
Only the cold hand I am holding,
Unmoving in my hand, means anything to me,
It symbolises a life,
A life special to me.*

The person who gave me my life was lying like she was asleep. Only she wasn't. she was connected to a respirator and for the first time I saw her with no hair.

The Silence

*Still,
Silent,
Comatose,
Dead to the world,
Living only in her head,
She lies there unresponsive,
Connected to us by pipes and tubes,
In and out she breathes-
Yet she looks dead
No longer in existence,
Just a doll of what once was...*

I knew she had no hair but she had always taken pride in what she looked like and worn a wig or a turban. At home she had a wig that was known to everyone as 'Pricilla' after Pricilla Queen of the Desert. Now she was lying there with no hair and that wasn't even the worst part of it. Her eyes were half-open and half-closed. As if the nurses weren't quite sure what to do with them. Close them I cried as soon as I saw her. It was inhumane as far as I was concerned. Not only that, it was really scaring me. (Apparently they were like that because the nurses had to clean her eyes every half an hour or some rubbish like that).

The Haunting

*As she sat there those eyes that used to see right through her,
Just seemed empty,
They seemed to have given up.
It was like looking at a doll, those eyes weren't real.
It just be true that those eyes
That looked just like hers were gone.
Even though her body was still there
Her mind and soul were absolutely gone; they had left that body
And were now floating somewhere in the room watching them.*

*She knew that it didn't matter where those eyes went though,
They would always watch her forever.*

Time had no meaning to me. I spent the day at her bed just watching her, willing her to wake up and ask what all the fuss was about. But I knew that that would never happen. It was like I could already feel that her soul and spirit had left her body and all that now remained was the container that had housed my mom while she had been on earth.

I was returning from an early morning meeting, when I received a call asking me to phone Glynn. He told me 'It looks as though it's all over.' Ali was losing the battle.

Christopher wanted to come and see me straight away. His aunt brought him to me directly from the hospital and we sat, talked, cried, prayed and hugged each other for a while. Then he said he wanted to go home.

The next day Christopher and Jessie came to see me. We spoke about what was happening to mom, what she would look like with all the life support equipment around her and how she wouldn't be able to talk to them, but if they wanted to, they could talk to her.

Chris chose to make her a card and Jessie drew a picture. Armed with these messages, the children went to say 'goodbye' to Ali. Ali died on the 29th of October.

I felt like I had just been hit in the stomach, but so hard that it had winded me and left me gasping for breath. This could not be happening to me. Slowly people trickled in as others trickled out. I fought and cried and made an absolute scene. These were the doctor's, the professionals, and the people who save lives for a living. They could let some axe killer die for all I cared but they couldn't let my mom die. She was too young, she was too special, and she still

had too many things to do with her life, but mostly because she was my mom. I wanted her. I needed her.

The Dream

*She just sat there crying,
It had to be a dream; it just couldn't be true.
She had to be coming back.
They all kept telling her that she wasn't,
But she told herself that they were all lying.
She just couldn't believe it,
How could it happen to her?
It was all a bad dream.
She knew if it was a dream she had to wake up.
She knew she had a mother and that she was coming back
She had to didn't she?*

On the night of the 29th of October my mom died. She died 'in her sleep'. My dad was there with her while the rest of us waited anxiously at home knowing that it would only be a matter of time before she died because a decision had been taken to switch off the respirator.

My Mommy

*I want my mommy back,
I want to wake up from this awful dream
I want to see her smile,
And hear her laugh.
I want to know she's really there.
I'm tired of this haze that surrounds her
Stopping me from seeing her face,
Suffocating me in its denseness,
So the words 'I love you' are trapped.*

The funeral service was very moving and it was there that I first saw Frances.

Frances a young teenager struck me as being a beautiful, strong, very organised young girl. Just as Ali had described her. Her friends Kiara and Andy were with her, but Frances did not need emotional support from anyone. She was taking care of the others. Jessie hung onto Leah (the housekeeper) and her bottle for comfort. Christopher and his friend Matthew sat together.

As darkness arrives

*The day ends,
Silence, darkness.
Fear of the unknown, the end.
From the outside houses are lit,
But what about from the inside,
Are the people lit or are they dark like the night sky?
As emptiness engulfs the dark streets
It engulfs empty people.
Black holes as big as the sky control them,
Unfortunately no stars shine through for them.
No one seems to notice; maybe nobody cares.
What about those dark people with hearts of stone?
The ones that no one seems to be able to hurt or comfort,
They withdraw into their own worlds, further and further from reality.
Then all of a sudden they're completely gone,
Left their bodies for something better that only they have found.
But, they never let down their wall of protection, ever!
We all belong to one of these groups.
You are either lit, empty or dark.
I'm sure on the outside you're all lit,
But what about on the inside?*

This was how I felt scared, alone and above all a gut wrenching sadness just overtook me. I was unable to think, unable to eat, yet still at the funeral I was the strong one. The one giving support and being there for everyone else. I have an amazing friend named Kiara

she came with me and has just been an absolute rock for me through all my troubles. She knew what I needed and when. I love her for this.

The funeral was a beautiful service. The church was packed. It made me feel so special to know that so many people had cared so much about my mom and just showed me yet again what an incredible person my mom was. This made me feel grateful that even though it was only a short time at least I had such an amazing mother.

After the service it started to rain. But not just a little bit, or small drops. It was coming down in buckets. When we arrived home we saw the most stunning rainbow that I have ever seen. It wasn't just a single rainbow either, it was a double one. It was like a sign to me that my mom was in heaven and that she was fine. Later that day my aunt, who comes from India told me that in India they believe that if there is a rainbow on the day of your funeral it means that the Gods are pleased with who has arrived in heaven. The story really touched me and now every time I see a rainbow I think of that story and remember my mom.

Grey clouds

*Grey clouds suit Grey moods,
The sun doesn't shine when you're down.
Rain falls from the sky,
Like tears from my eyes,
But my tears are not greeted by the earth
Seasons don't change,
It stays winter all year round,
Darkness and cold
Are my new best friends.*

Christmas time came and went. Glynn and I had frequent conversations and daily email contact as we watched the progress of the aftermath of Ali's tragic and sad death. The family spent Christmas away and a special bowl of pink roses was arranged to adorn the table in order to keep the memory of Ali alive. Grief was part of the family's life, but they were moving on.

Christopher and Jessie both came to see me and we chatted about how life had changed for them. Christopher had started high school and was settling in very well. Jessie had had her first day at "big" school and was very proud to be wearing her new uniform. Lift schemes had been arranged for the family. All strategies were in place and seemed to be working. Frances did not want to come and see me. She was fine, coping well and had nothing to talk to me about she said. I respected her need for private grief. (A big mistake, perhaps I should have kept more open contact with Frances).

I couldn't cope. I didn't want to go to school. I was constantly tired. I didn't sleep at night. I was always in a bad mood and I was more depressed than I knew was possible. All in all I was sick of life and tired of fighting to survive. I didn't know what I was fighting for and on bad days I still wonder.

Black Balloon

*Black balloon,
Swallow me whole.
Take me away from all that I feel.
No more anger,
No more pain,
Just an empty nothingness
Becomes what used to be me.*

I couldn't show what was going on inside me, that was going against everything that I had worked so hard for. The secretiveness and the aloneness. I didn't need anybody, or so I thought. And then even when I rarely saw that I did need other people I was so scared and embarrassed to let them see past my mask.

The mask

*Behind a painted mask I hide
Showing no one who I am.*

*Keeping people far away,
With the act of who I am.
Wishing I could tear away
The painful, stuck on mask.
Not knowing what to say or do
To try and be just fine.*

*My mask fits me well.
It won't come off.
I tug and tug, yet it's still there,
Smiling at those around me,
It's scared to leave my face.
Where will it go?
What will it do?
What will I look like under my mask?
Will anyone like me?
For what is really inside?
Or is this just another dream?*

I didn't know how to let anyone one help me. All I knew was that if I shut everybody out, they couldn't hurt me. Great plan in theory huh? Pity it didn't work so well.

The wall

*The walls grew around her,
Higher and higher they went.
Everywhere she went, there was a new one up.
'keep them out, don't let them near.'
Things repeated over and over in one's head.
'the higher they are,
the less they can hurt you.'
So says the vicious voice inside my head.*

I started hurting myself. Just a bit at first. Just to make it bleed. I couldn't express what I was feeling verbally, but now I had found a way that worked just as well as that for me. I began to mutilate myself. It's not a nice word is it? It makes you think of someone who has been cut to pieces, well that in the truest sense of the word was what I was doing. Inflicting pain on myself. Hurting myself where no

one could see. To justify it to myself I was '*expressing myself without hurting anyone else.*' I actually thought that I was helping myself. It gives you a kind of release to see blood coming from your arm and feel the prick of the blade. It reminds you that you do actually feel things and tricks you into believing that you are releasing all the painful feelings that are eating you up inside.

My friend

*It sits there enticingly,
Like my best friend,
Willing me to pick it up,
Begging to be used.
A friend of mine for a moment,
Then despised till the next round,
Agony turns to bliss,
Pain to relief,
All with the glide of a blade.
Desperation is forgotten,
Anger fed with fuel.
For a few seconds all is forgotten
With the first sight of my blood.*

I would probably still be cutting today if I hadn't been so stupid and never cleaned my cuts. One became infected. I flipped out. There was no way that I could tell my dad. I would have rather died. I was still under the impression that I was fine and could stop at any time that suited me. A very teary phone call to Mrs Corbett followed and after she swore that she wouldn't tell my dad, I felt a bit better. This was just a bump in the road, nothing that I couldn't get myself out of. Well clearly I was wrong. It didn't get better. But I still couldn't tell my dad. This was mine, and I wasn't going to share it with anyone, not even him.

A decision was reached. I was going to see my doctor. Maybe she would have some brilliant idea, which would help me, but in the process leave my dad out of the whole equation. 'Nope' she told me. 'There is no way you can do this on your own.' 'Great' I thought. This was just what I needed to do; upset the family, which was finally getting back to functioning normally.

I begged, I cried, I pretty much stood on my head, but she was adamant that my dad would know. Finally, a decision was made; she would tell him. This idea seemed slightly better for me, although I still was terrified. She called him. He was at work, busy in a meeting. He was supposed to stay the night, so I was safe for one more night. Then the phone rang. It was him,

‘Do you know why Dr Woolf left a message for me to call her back urgently?’

‘No’ I lied wondering whether he could hear my voice quivering.

‘OK, I love you, see you tomorrow.’

I was safe. He wouldn’t know till the next day. Just to be on the safer side I told my brother that if Dad called again Christopher must just say that I was in the bath. He agreed with a puzzled look on his face.

No sooner had we agreed this than the phone rang again. My stomach dropped out the bottom of me, and fell somewhere onto the floor. I reassured myself that he had just phoned and would not be phoning again. Sadly, I was wrong.

My brother did as I had asked, but my plan didn’t work. I was ordered to ‘get out the bath’ I broke down into tears. I couldn’t do it. It was too hard.

‘Hello?’

‘Frances why didn’t you tell me?’

All of a sudden I was angry. It had nothing to do with him and I didn’t want to talk about it. He was coming home from his conference. My stomach was now probably somewhere in the middle of the earth. He couldn’t do this. Why was he coming home? I didn’t want to see him. I didn’t want to hear him say that he was sorry again. I just wanted to be by myself. I didn’t want to talk about it. I didn’t want to try to explain to him why his little girl had felt that she was forced to hurt herself. It had nothing to do with him and I didn’t want him to feel responsible for what I had been doing; I was a big girl.

The next day I went to see a shrink. Can you imagine, a head doctor, a doctor for mad people, for people with problems. I was fine. I didn’t need to see a shrink. I was just fine how I was. Hurting myself when I felt the need and getting on with life ‘normally’ the rest of the time. I was angry.

Red angryness

*Red angry arms,
Wounds crying for help
In silence they are screaming:
'look what she's doing,
see how she's hurt?'
but I am a master of disguise,
I can be who I'm not.
I need no one but myself
And my faithful blades.*

People were now deciding what was best for me. I wasn't allowed to close my door at home and dad watched me 24 hours a day. I was asked a question, which had never even crossed my mind before, "Do you think you need to be hospitalised?"

Did I what?!? I was terrified of hospitals and had absolutely no intention of going to one for any reason other than having a baby or being on my deathbed. I was taken home with strict instructions as to what I was allowed to do and what I wasn't. I tried really hard, but I just couldn't stop. I needed to hurt myself. I needed to feel whatever it was that I felt every time I cut. I could now cut without even really noticing what I was doing. I could just sit and make myself bleed, using anything, even a paper clip. Dad got desperate. I was tired of fighting all the demons that had taken over my body. Eventually I gave up and admitted defeat, well some of the time anyway. I wanted to be looked after. I wanted someone to care for me. I got it. I was admitted to Sandton Clinic.

April arrived and I was away on a family weekend break away when I received a phone call from Glynn. He asked if I would be prepared to see Frances who had been admitted to hospital, having cut herself badly. I explained that I was away, but would see her as soon as I returned the following day. Not long after the phone call I did not feel comfortable, I decided to pack up and return. I went straight to the hospital.

Frances (who I remember as being a stunningly beautiful young lady) had a very puffy, red eyed face. Her arms were bandaged and she was heavily sedated. Frances had been cutting herself for a month. I introduced myself and chatted for a few minutes then told her I would be back the next day.

I don't really remember much. The butterflies were really having fun in my stomach then. It felt like if I opened my mouth they would fly out and everyone would see just how scared I really was. I was drugged. If you have ever been leglessly drunk you will know that you have no control over your body. I couldn't talk properly. I slept for about 23 hours of the day and when I was awake I saw double. This posed a huge problem when we tried to watch the cricket the one day. There were about 50 players on the field and about 4 balls. Talk about confusing. Then to top off my confusedness I couldn't walk straight. It is possible that on a few occasions I was concussed.

This so far doesn't sound so bad, but let me tell you that it was this bad and worse. I could cry until I didn't think I had any tears left and then half an hour later I would cry again. My brain felt fuzzy and I couldn't think properly. Even though my arms were bandaged from my wrists to my shoulders I still managed to cut. I am the sort of person who cannot do anything in half measures, it must either be done to its full capacity or not at all, that was what I was doing. I couldn't stop. I was addicted. I used to go down to the coffee shop and tell them that they had forgotten to give me a knife with my food. They would then give me one because they were none the wiser and I would then go and sit in the bathroom and cut myself. I still needed that feeling of absolute release. Sadly, the only thing I got it from at that stage was my cutting. To make it worse I was extremely agitated. I could not sit still and this made my urge to hurt myself greater. All I knew was that I was tired of living. I was tired of being told how I should be and what I should do. I was tired of living up to other people's expectations. I was burning my body and mind out. They had nothing more to offer anyone. I decided one day that it was all just too much and I got up onto the windowsill to jump out the window. Luckily a nurse came in so I quickly got down, otherwise who knows I might not have been here today to tell my story.

The silent cry

*The silent cry,
The scream for help.
I'm being devoured whole
By my own invisible demon.
Desperation creeps up,
Depression holds my hand,
Guiding me down the wrong road,
One of self-destruction, hatred and hurt.*

When I visited Frances that day, she told me that she had nearly jumped out of the window, but that the nurse had walked in in time. She said that she felt they were not really looking after her, they were just giving her drugs. And she hated that more than anything else, cause the drugs were not going to make her better. Many people visited Frances. In fact whenever I called in to see her there was somebody with her. I knew from the past that the family had a wonderful network of support from family neighbours and friends, when Ali had been ill. My first thought then was to try and reestablish this support network and take care of Frances at home. I spoke to the psychiatrist who had admitted Frances and once I had explained how I had been working with the family for some time now, she agreed to discharge Frances from the hospital into my care.

I contacted Glynn and asked his opinion on this idea. Immediately he agreed, and set up a meeting at his home of all possible caregivers. I went over and explained the situation to all the people who were gathered in the lounge. They asked questions about what they should do and how they should react. We talked and made plans. Then we fetched Frances from the hospital. She was delighted and prepared to do all that was required of her, "As long as she could get out of that place". All went well for the first few days and everyone took turns in being with or nearby Frances, to care for her and support her. She still had to take some medication. We all felt a huge responsibility, and I knew that I had put my head on the line to request for Frances to be discharged. I could not make a mistake. This had to go right.

I was released from hospital two weeks after I had been admitted with strict instructions to never be alone and to take all my medication. This all seemed bearable to me. It started off OK, then I just couldn't stand being around people all the time. When you're depressed, you want to be alone and I was not allowed a second by myself. To make

it worse I had to see Gloria, my brother's psychologist, who I had taken a huge disliking to. She had this really awful habit of asking the hardest questions that always made you think and often really hurt you inside. But it was like she could see what I was thinking.

All therapists make mistakes. I made another huge mistake. In conversation one day I asked Frances how she can keep her mom's voice alive. She broke down and screamed at me. "Mom's voice is alive... I hear her voice all the time through her friends... it's so painful. They all tell me that I must get stronger so I can look after the family..."

At once, I knew I had asked the wrong question and yet in a strange way the right question. Now I realise how the voice which informed her to be strong so that she could take care of the family, was the voice that caused all the pain. It was not Ali's voice, but what Frances thought was Ali's voice being spoken by Ali's friends.

Light my lamp.

*Somebody switch my light on,
Come into my life and help me light my lamp,
Blow out my cobwebs,
And leave me not ugly.
Help me to shine like the stars
And reach even further than them.
Give me the strength I need,
To fight even when it's a losing battle.
Somebody switch my light on,
Maybe then my tears will be seen,
Maybe then I could smile.
Maybe, but maybe not...*

Frances hated herself and her mom's oncologist. Frances felt that in order to conquer the hate she had for the doctor she

needed to tell him how angry she was, but she also wanted to ask him some questions. I called his office and he agreed to come and have a conversation with us.

I think that was the most tiring conversation that I have ever had. I couldn't tell him what I wanted to say. It hurt too much to even open my mouth and I wasn't going to let him see me cry. He was my enemy and he would not see me down. I wanted to know why he had lied to me and said that mom would be fine even after she had gone into a coma and wasn't his patient anymore. To me he had failed us. She had put her absolute trust in him and he let her die.

I sat on the step outside Gloria's office after he had gone and just cried. It actually physically hurt. I felt like there was a hole in my heart and nothing would take it away. All I wanted from the doctor was just for him to say that he recognized that what he did was wrong and he would never lie to a patient's family again. Instead he told me that he had never said she would not die, and yet my entire family had heard him.

I still question whether this was a wise thing to do. It seemed right at the time. Frances was so wanting to talk to him, and he seemed so willing to answer all her questions. Yet, when they faced each other, Frances could not ask what she wanted to ask, nor scream at him and tell him how angry she was.....It was as though she had lost her voice, The pain was too much for her.

I refused point blank the next day to go and see Gloria. I was having a really bad day and I just didn't have the energy to go and listen to all her hard questions and then try to give her answers. Plus, she always seemed to be able to tell when I was wearing my mask. I could tell other people that I was alright and they would believe me, Gloria knew that I wasn't.

Someone shoved me in the car and off we went to Gloria. I was furious. How could people not respect my feelings? I just exploded when I got there. I didn't want to be there and they had no right to drag me there. I was not a baby. I screamed and shouted and cried

and told Gloria how I couldn't keep on living anymore. The fight had just become too much for me and I was now giving up. After our meeting with the doctor all my reserves that I had been running on for so long were empty. It was like a cord in me snapped. For the first time I was actually honest about how I felt.

This didn't get me very far, because once I had started I couldn't stop.

Frances did not stop cutting and was admitted back to hospital because I and the support network felt that the responsibility was too tricky and too difficult for us to deal with. It was a difficult decision for me to make, but I realised that this monster was too big for us to handle on our own. I was further troubled by the knowledge that if Frances was admitted to a psychiatric unit, I would no longer be allowed to have contact with her as a psychologist, but I made a decision to keep visiting her as a friend.

Decisions were finally made, I was not getting better. I needed to be somewhere where they specialised in psychiatric problems. No way! I was not crazy, I would not go to a mad house. What would everyone at school say when they found out? That thought was just too awful to even think about. No arguments! I had no choice. I was taken home to pack a bag. The next day we were off to Tara. I was terrified. I had no idea what to expect, but I just knew that I didn't want to be locked up.

We had arrived at the gate and I was staring at what looked like a 10 foot wall, search lights surrounding the property and guards at the gate. (I would later learn just how useless the guards really were.) It took about half an hour to get all the paper work done and then we were off to find ward 1. The adolescents and eating disorders. I cried when my dad said that he was going. I couldn't stay here. It looked more like a jail than a place that was going to help me with my problems. He left though leaving me a letter, which still makes me cry every time I read it.

Darling Frances,

What do I say, can I comfort you, can I take away your fears, wipe away your tears?

I don't think so- not in the way you seem to need someone with super human gifts and abilities. All that I can do is assure you, if you are not already convinced, that you were from day one the most precious gift given to mom and I. For 15 years you and we have been on a great expedition; many times into the unknown- BUT always learning, always growing. That's what we are doing now. We have been given this extraordinary opportunity to experience life; to be faces with seemingly insurmountable problems which I know with your strength, tenacity and resilience, not only will you exceed our and your own expectations, but all of us as the family, immediate and extended will be enriched and so much stronger that anything life in future thrown up our way will really be nothing at all. This period that you spend in Tara when measured against the cycle of life will really amount to nothing but a 'blip'. BUT in terms of experience and enrichment will be gigantic and encyclopedic.

You must grasp this opportunity to experience a different side of life, a side not all of us are privileged to experience. You must develop the discipline for yourself so that your innate creativity can be harnessed and reflected in describing your experiences, emotions, expectations and frustrations. I am convinced that not only will this give you the necessary comfort to continue but more importantly it will provide the foundation from which you can propel yourself into a really bright and exciting future.

I know it, and I guess you know it as well that there is a very large extended family all sending out positive vibes for you. We know that you will rise to the occasion and successfully get round what might be viewed as so as insurmountable obstacle, BUT, for you with your strong will tempered by compassion, intellect

matched by pragmatism and warmth balanced by individualism will not only complete this race, but do so in style. It is this battle which is so important, not whether you win or lose, BUT the manner in which you conduct yourself. And that you have always as a daughter, a young lady, done exceptionally well. I know that the next few days and possibly weeks will be difficult and will try all of us- however I am equally convinced that standing together bound by the love we share for each other that not only will you get around the current obstacles, but that we will all emerge stronger and wiser.

In closing thank you for the opportunity to be on this journey. My hope is that as we move forward we will be rewarded by true sharing and growing from this experience.

*With all my love and affection
Dad.*

As you can imagine this letter just about destroyed me. I felt so guilty, to me I had let everyone down and I was now going to make it up to them. I wanted to do it at home though. I knew I could do it, but I wasn't allowed. I was to stay put until the doctors said I could leave.

The first week was terrible. I just cried and begged everyone to take me home. I was different from the other girls in my room and didn't really get along with them. I felt like I had no one. To me it was crazy. I didn't need to be here. I now saw that I had problems, but the people in here were all quite mad and I wasn't. My second week was better. I finally started to calm down and realised that the sooner the nurses thought I was getting better the sooner I would be home. So I didn't cry in front of them anymore, I started to talk to other patients and I smiled. They all noticed the difference and after just 3 weeks in Tara I was sent home. I was by no means cured. That would take a long time and a lot of hard work, but I was getting better.

I was home. I don't think that I have ever been so happy to sleep in my own bed. I had about 2 weeks left of school before holidays when we would be going down to Cape Town where my sister and I were going to be bridesmaids for my cousin. It was really exciting. We were getting our dresses made and having everything else done. The only down side of this entire thing was that Gloria and the "support team" was back on the scene again and I had to sign a contract to say that I would not cut myself. It read:

Contract between Frances and her support group.

We, the support group will try to help you by doing these things you have asked us to do.

- *Look after me*
- *Help me when I've got problems*
- *Care for me*
- *Take some responsibilities away from me for the time being*
- *Love me*
- *Listen to me*
- *Try to understand me*
- *Accept me the way I am*
- *Encourage me in the things I do*
- *Be with me*

We, the support team, expect in return:

You, Frances, are not allowed under any circumstances to:

- *Inflict pain upon yourself (emotionally and/or physically)*
- *Inflict pain upon any other living being*
- *Until you stop cutting yourself Verity (my aunt) will not make the bridesmaid dress, Verity will start the dress on 5 June.*
- *If you don't stop cutting yourself you may not attend the wedding.*
- *We would like you to please try and communicate with us as much as possible, so that we know what you are feeling*

We have entered into this contract as a statement of our love and care for each other.

This contract was like a threat to me. Stop it or you don't be a bridesmaid. I started trying harder than I had ever tried before. I didn't just want to get better for the wedding I wanted to get better because now that I was back at school I could see just how much I was missing out on with my friends. There are things that I have missed that I will never be able to replace. Being back at school was really difficult. No one except my closest friends knew where I had been and why. The rest just thought that I had been sick for a really long time. I didn't want to tell them. I was embarrassed, I felt like an outsider. I didn't fit in. Even with my friends I felt like I was the new kid at school. I had missed out on so much, the parties, the who's going out with who, the fights and even just the normal school gossip. I wasn't quite sure how to pick back up. I wasn't quite sure where I left off. All I knew for sure was that over the past 3 months I had become a new person and the old Frances that everyone knew was no longer in existence. I had this constant fear that people were staring at me, that they could see through my layers and layers of clothes that I wore. I became obsessive about it. I thought everyone was out to get me. They all had something against me, they knew where I'd been and what for. To them I was no longer normal.

The wedding came and went. It was an amazing day. I was so glad to be away from the same surrounding that I had been in. My dress was long sleeved so no one could even see my scars. I still cut though, not often, just sometimes when I felt that everything was getting too much for me to handle. All too soon it was time to come home. I couldn't, I just couldn't face the thought of coming home. It was like having to wake up from a nice dream and being thrown into a nightmare. I cried, I just wanted to stay there. Where I was safe. No one could hurt me because nobody knew me.

School started and I became even more paranoid about what people thought about me. I had no proof at all as to what they were thinking, but my mind was made up. I was cutting, but not a lot and when I was I didn't think they were that deep. I could see myself losing everything that I had worked for though and so after lots of tears and deliberation, Gloria, Dad and I decided that I would go back to Tara. This time it didn't seem so terrifying. Maybe it was because I had been there before, or maybe it was because the decision was partly mine this time and I wasn't just being told what to do. I went back and

it was bad. There is nothing nice about Tara. It was cold because it was the middle of winter and the paint on the walls was old and needed to be redone.

I was the only girl on my side of the ward. There were just guys, so I had a room to myself. It was scary at first. I didn't like having to sleep in this big room all by myself. I got used to it though. When I was readmitted I made some rules with myself. I would be friendly and try to get along with the nurses. The psychologist that I had seen the first time when I was in Tara had left so I had to have another one. I didn't really mind though because I didn't like her. She didn't understand me or my problems. This time I made some amazing friends. Some of them I am still very close to, others I don't speak to anymore, but they still have a special place in my heart. They made my time there bareable. We sort of just bonded together, a whole bunch of us and stuck together through thick and thin. We became like each other's psychologists, always there when you needed to talk and understanding more than the nurses did.

We got up to all kinds of rubbish. The one day a guy mooned out our front window at some poor little girl who had come to visit a friend. (I don't think she'll ever be the same again.) Then just for all the girls we had our very own stalker. Yah- you can imagine. It was not all that great. Then last, but by no means least, in our ever entertaining soapie about Tara, we had the man who thought he was Jesus. He was a very sweet guy. Just a little bit confused we gathered.

I visited Frances as often as I could, we talked and cried and shared some thoughts but I knew that I was on very shaky ground and had to keep boundaries. I remember one night being with her when her wonderful teacher from school was also there. The three of us had a chat about how frightened Frances was of the social reintegration into school. We chatted about what the kids at school thought and how much they knew. We decided that it would be a good idea if Frances did not buy into the tricks of secrecy, but rather to speak out and tell everyone. Secrecy had

tricked her before, and this time she now realised that Secrecy was not her friend.

This time I was doing things differently and to show just how differently I was going to face one of my greatest fears. I was going to tell everyone at school where I was. I was still attending school at Tara so I didn't actually have to see them when they heard. I wrote them this letter.

Hey everyone

I don't know what you all thought when you heard I am in Tara but I just wanted to tell you I'm not mad. Since my mom died I've become very depressed and always tried to hide how I'm feeling. It became such a problem that the only way I could feel better was to hurt myself. It started out as something I could control. It's like taking drugs every now and then, eventually you need them more and more. I started cutting up to 10 times a day just so that I could see my pain. It became such a habit that I didn't even always realise what I was doing. I was never planning on telling anyone and the only reason I told someone was because one of the deeper cuts became infected, even then I couldn't tell my dad. I was just so scared of what he would say. When he found out I was amazed at how wonderful he was to me. He didn't blame me for what I'd done and he told me he'd support me through everything. I was in Sandton Clinic for almost a month before the doctor realised that that drugging me so much just wasn't working and that I needed to be somewhere where they specialise in psychiatric problems. The thought of going to Tara terrified me. I was not mad and didn't want anyone to think I was. If I'd known that you'd all be as nice as you have been then maybe I would have had the courage to tell everyone last term and I wouldn't have needed to come back here. I just got more and more freaked out every day I had to come to school and was always terrified someone was going to find out where I'd been or what I'd done to myself. I'm really scared of coming back to school and I think this time I'm going to get properly better before I come back. I don't want to be treated any differently and don't want people to be nice to me just

because I've been through a hard time. I'd love to get letters from you guys. It's really boring here and I've got about a month to go before I'll be discharged.

Love Frances

I probably was discharged about a month after that although it's not for the reason that I would have liked it to be. I was kicked out. Can you believe it? It is actually possible to be kicked out of Tara, but not as my brother says for scuba diving in the toilet, but rather for cutting myself. It wasn't even a cut, it was a graze. I was upset at the time, but at the same time I was excited. I was going home and this time was going to be the last time. I was back, and better than ever.

A lot of special people helped me through (this is so cliché) the dark period in my life. They didn't give up on me even after I had. They pushed me because they knew that I could succeed and with their help I have. I hurt so many people unintentionally last year and I want to apologise. I couldn't see past my own problems. You all stuck by me though, and never gave up.

I don't want to mention any names because if I forget someone they will be very upset with me, but I just want to say thank you to all of you. You mean the world to me. There is one person in particular who has always stayed in the background. She never interfered or told my dad anything that I didn't want him to know. She cares for me and always knows just when I need a hug or a chat. She was there when I needed her the most, willing to put other things aside for me. At the same time she managed to bully me with tough love. She knew all the right things to do. Thank you so much, you will always mean so much to me.

My saviour

*Someone sent you to save me
Someone must really have cared.
Somewhere, someone is thinking of
Me.
While my world was so black
And falling apart,*

*You were kind and caring.
You forced the sun
To sometimes blind me.
You forced me to pick myself up
And keep on running
Even when I had given up
You made sure I survived,
Just like someone made sure you found
Me.*

I was once asked what helped me get through everything. Truthfully, I have no idea. It was one of those awful questions!! I just didn't know how to answer. After some thought, I finally came up with a few answers.

I love to write. I will write about anything. The more painful the experience, the better my writing seems to be. I have a whole book that is filled with writing just since last year and just because I am better now I have no intention of stopping. I also love music and can sit for hours with no one around just listening to music. I took my CD player with me when I was in Tara and I think that it helped me so much. Music just has this kind of way of releasing all your tension and allowing you to relax. It's almost as though you can breathe to the beat of the music (provided it's not rave of course) and feel it going through your body calming the entire thing down.

When I first started cutting I had never heard of anyone else who suffered from the same problem. I had the huge worry of being as an outcast or someone who is mad. Then I read a magazine article that Gloria gave me about how self-mutilation is becoming an even bigger thing than eating disorders. This surprised me though because I have friends with eating disorders, but none that physically hurt themselves. Then after thinking about it some more I realised that if it were on the increase it doesn't mean that it has to be higher than eating disorders. It is still quite an unknown problem which to me still has a stigma attached to it. The article made me see that I am not so different to thousands of other girls.

I later saw a piece from Carte Blanche all about cutters. It was amazing, the one girl could have been me. The way she spoke about

it and the things that she wrote sounded exactly like what I had written.

Earlier this year I developed a terrible fear that I had Leukemia. I was too scared to tell anyone so I looked on the net and in my mom's old medical books to find everything I could about the disease. Eventually because I couldn't stop thinking about it I went and saw my doctor. We talked about it, but I still wasn't happy. I had a blood test done and just as the doctor had promised, it came back negative. Things always seem worse when you don't know exactly what you're dealing with. Don't worry yourself to death because chances are you don't even need to worry. Research what you want to know about. That knot that you get in your stomach doesn't just go away, you have to do something about it.

Lastly, do something everyday for you!

It is now over a year since I was in Tara and guess what..... I'm doing fine. I still have my days when I don't know what any of this is for, but the good days now outnumber the bad days. I know now that I have to keep fighting even when it is hard. My family made sacrifices for me and I am determined to show them that they didn't just waste their time and energy.

I have just finished my grade eleven year at school. It has got to be the most incredible year that I have ever had. I got up on stage in a ball gown for our fashion show and faced my fear of people seeing my arms. I have made lots of new friends and have restored the old ones that I damaged. I was elected onto our grade 11 fundraising committee. It was a wonderful experience for me and although I can't make up the time that I lost I had a chance to catch up on the bonding. I was also involved in other things that I usually wouldn't have been involved in. For the first time I got into the school pool again since last year and swam in nothing but my costume for our gala. I still have my fears, but I think that this year I have proved to myself that anything is possible.

I was awarded my colours for drama this year and when we had a ball at our school I had the guts to go stag along with some of my other friends. Last year I would never have even considered doing

these things. I have also completed my SANCA and Lifeline courses and can't wait till next year when I can start counseling. All I want to do is help people, which can be both a strength and a weakness. It is a strength because it means that I am very compassionate and care deeply about people. It is a weakness because sometimes I am so busy looking after other people that I forget to look after myself. It is a character trait that I now see in myself and am trying to use positively rather than negatively.

I have just got my report and although I did not do as well as I hoped to do I passed all my subjects and next year will be heading into my last year of school. I hope to have new experiences, meet new people, make new friends and learn from my mistakes.

Frances and I now meet to chat about life and the world and things,... and I have promised her that I will not ask her questions. She often has to remind me though that "You're asking those horrible questions again" and I quickly change gear. I love her for her courage, her wisdom and her incredible determination, her honesty and her openness. Frances is a strong, soft, sensitive girl who has taught me so much about life and death.

Once she has finished her schooling Frances hopes that she will be able to go into the world of medicine. And when I last spoke to him, so did Christopher. Jessie I guess hasn't thought that far yet, but every time I speak to her she tells me about all the fun she is having at school. This is an extract from one of the many emails that Glynn has written to me during the last two and a half years

Afternoon Gloria

I have to admit that Frances emerged from your rooms in good humour yesterday afternoon-it was truly nice to see and wonderful to be part of-thank you. Thinking back to this time last year, its chalk and cheese. And if I went back two years then, then at that time this kind of 'reality' wasn't even on the horizon let alone being considered. Sitting here two days short of the fateful day, the day that changed our lives forever, makes me realise not only just how far we have all traveled, but also how time telescopes and compresses as emotions and feelings play themselves out as we try to cope, understand and make sense of what has happened.

Today

*Today is the tomorrow
I worried about yesterday.
Help me not regret what has happened before,
Or fear what is yet to come.
What help will it be to fear?
I cannot change anything,
I cannot prevent change.
I can only prepare for the future,
And learn from my past.*

Today, five years later, Frances is in her second year of study, well on her way to becoming a psychologist. I salute her, the survivor, the victor, the heroine of this story.

Epilogue

This is a photograph of Frances. This photo was taken on the night of Frances' school leaving dance. She chose to wear this dress, which was the dress her mother wore as a going away outfit after her marriage to Frances' Dad. In this way Frances was able to feel the presence of her dear mother.

