

CASE STUDY BY A FAMILY

Christmas Eve 2013

Tom's death hit us like a bolt of lightning. Without warning we were plunged into icy water that we couldn't comprehend or fight. Every person experiences every death in a different way and even when surrounded by mourners bereavement is a very lonely place indeed. Hannah, Izzy & I lost the same person, but our memories of him were all utterly different.

When Hannah was 3 and Izzy just 1 year old Tom's abusive alcoholism had driven us to shelter into a Women's Refuge. In the seven years since then he had refused to have any contact with us. Hannah and Izzy (now 10 and 8) had grown up with an absent father, which strangely enough seemed to make him loom larger than life in their imaginations. He was their own personal hero, rock star, darling. And nightmare.

Hannah couldn't take it in: 'It was overwhelming and so out of my reach that I didn't believe it'. Izzy also found it shocking 'but since I didn't even know what he looked like I couldn't cry and I didn't know what to do'. When the news sank in Hannah started crying every night. Izzy, however, couldn't cry: 'I worried that I wasn't taking it seriously – I should have been crying because it's death and it's sad. But I just couldn't cry'.

Hannah worried that her crying was wrong. 'I stopped because I think it made it hard for Mummy and I wanted to look after her. I didn't want to look as if I was trying to get attention. I felt that I was being unfair and not letting Izzy cry because I was doing all the crying – I thought she was being strong and I should give her chance to cry.'

It felt as if we had been swept away by a strong river; the grief swirled and roared around us as we helplessly tried to stay afloat and to hold on to one another.

Seeking help

I struggled to find anybody who could help so sent out pleas for help to every bereavement charity I could find. Most of them responded with kind emails and suggestions; none offered what I needed, which was a human being who would talk to me. A friend suggested I try the local charity Balloons. The therapist I spoke to was lovely; she listened carefully and then offered her considered opinion that the three of us would benefit most from family therapy. Great. Except Balloons don't offer family therapy. Hello square one, I thought, dispiritedly.

Thankfully, the Balloons therapist didn't stop there. They had a reciprocal agreement, she said, with a charity called Children & Families in Grief. She would refer us to them. For the first time since we had fallen into that violent river, I could see a branch to cling on to.

First contact

Izzy, Hannah & I raced home from school for the first visit. We had been waiting for so long for this – every outburst of tears had been comforted with the thought of it. The CFG therapists had a lot to live up to.

Thankfully, they didn't let us down. We warmed to them immediately – they made us feel as if they really wanted to know us. Hannah admits: 'at first I was really shy, but then after about 2 minutes we became friends. They listened whilst I explained how I felt and were interested to know all about me'.

Three visits

We soon came to understand that our culture does not allow death to be part of life. Talking about death is not encouraged and we all found that we needed to constantly reassure those around us that we were 'fine'. Visits from the therapists felt like a chance to rest; to stop pretending that our minds were not full of death and to talk honestly about the darkness.

Izzy felt isolated from her friends at school. 'It felt lonely when they just ignored me and acted like I was invisible. They didn't know what to say and I was different and sad and had different feelings so they didn't know how I would react. I didn't feel so lonely once the therapists explained that they didn't know what to say.'

A school activity required Hannah & Izzy to write down the people they felt they could talk to. Despite having only met their therapists a few times, they were right at the top of each child's list. Over the course of three visits, we felt that we had really found some friends who understood that our lives were now full of death. And that this was OK.

Weekend workshop

Eventually the weekend workshop arrived – we had longed for it, yet dreaded it. We were afraid.

It turned out that everybody in the room was afraid and this gave us all a peculiar kinship. As we were encouraged to talk we found ourselves instinctively protecting and helping each other. The raw grief made us transparent, open. We cried. We laughed too. With the help of hedgehog puppets the children shared their feelings and this encouraged the adults.

Izzy felt at home. 'The weekend helped me to realize that there are more people who have grief than I actually thought. I really enjoyed throwing clay at the wall – I could let out a lot of anger'.

Hannah realized that 'lots of other people had death in their life. It wasn't just me. Other people knew how it feels. The dragon story showed me that it was OK to be angry and sad and to cry.'

Every grief is different. We had worried that ours would be too weird, that we wouldn't fit in. Hannah explains: 'Me and daddy were different because we didn't live with each other. There were some tricky parts in the weekend like when we talked about memories because I didn't have any.' Izzy felt the same. 'I found that none of the feelings on the list went with my reactions so I told my therapist and she suggested I add some new feelings. She went and got a pen so I could add a new one – confused.' Nothing fazed the therapists – they could make any reaction to grief OK. They gave us the gift of normality.

Onwards and upwards

Something shifted for each of us at that weekend workshop. By the end we had stopped crying and somehow felt able to face the world again. We had been given a chance to indulge our grief; to pay it attention and it became quieter. The work that Hannah did with the CFG therapists helped her doctor to diagnose her with depression. She was troubled to find that their visits would cease after the weekend, but they have promised to reply if she emails them. They are not going to disappear from our lives, even though their time is required for new families. All three of us agree that we want every grieving family to have the opportunity that was given to us by CFG – to be supported so that they can swim against the river that threatens to sweep away normal life.

I never thought I'd say this, but we are looking forward to our first CFG 'social' enormously!