



Dinah Jefferies's world was shattered in an instant when her 14-year-old son was killed in an accident. Here she describes what happened on that fateful day – and how she slowly healed her broken heart



BEFORE THE ACCIDENT we were a normal enough family. I had separated from my husband Jon a couple of years before. The split had been amicable and our two children saw their father as often as possible. We lived in a lovely spot in Devon and were happy; just five days earlier we had been celebrating my daughter's 11th birthday at an adventure park. Then came that sunny September Saturday in 1985, when my bright, generous boy Jamie lost his chance of a life.

I was at home when the local private school rang to tell me my son had had an accident and that I needed to get there quickly. It was just a few minutes away and he'd gone to meet friends who were boarders. With a pounding heart I leapt into the car: The first thing I saw was the blood – a great red arc across a pristine white wall that seemed to stretch for 20 yards. That and my beautiful blond boy lying on the tarmac. It seemed important not to go too close, and to allow the dark uniformed figures who squatted beside him to do their job.

Unnaturally calm, I walked away to wait in one of the school buildings. It was as if a switch had been flicked and my legs had taken control of my mind. I was terrified that if I looked I'd have my deepest fear confirmed. A few moments later, I came to my senses and ran back, but Jamie was already dead and an ambulance was taking him away. I'll never forget the moment: the terrible paralysis of knowing he was gone, and that I hadn't been holding him as he died.

He was just 14. He'd got on an older boy's motorbike for the first time; it had gone out of control and he'd smashed through a glass door, severing the carotid artery in his neck. I was persuaded not to follow the ambulance by the police. They told me there was no point going to the hospital as it was a Saturday and the mortuary was closed, and Jamie would therefore be in too much of a mess. I wished afterwards that I had insisted, though all I really wanted was for someone to tell me it wasn't true.

Only that morning I'd opened a letter telling me he'd won a scholarship to the school where the accident was yet to happen. He'd been a pupil there until a few months earlier; but I could no longer afford the fees. He was quietly doing his comprehensive school homework in bed as I read out the letter.

My daughter Laurel, ever practical, grinned at him. 'You don't have to do that homework any more, Jamie,' she said. He flung his school books to the floor; we all laughed and in the jubilant atmosphere, with the whole weekend ahead of us, he picked up his guitar to play one of his favourite John Lennon songs. Then he hugged me. 'This is the happiest day of my life,' he said.

I drove him to the school so that he could tell his friends. As he got out of the car and gave me his toothy grin, I said that I'd pick him up at about 4.30pm, without the faintest idea that it would be the last time I would see him alive. This tormented me for months as I relived that last image of my beloved son, scrutinising it for nonexistent clues that might hint at what lay ahead. I couldn't accept that all those years of love and caring could end like that, with no chance to say goodbye, no chance to tell him how much I loved him. Of course, if I had known, the parting would not have been so casual – just a turn of his head, a little wave and my talented, clever boy was gone.

I had the awful task of telling my daughter: When I sat her on my lap, she struggled to get away, shouting over and over: 'Ow! Ow! Ow! It hurts.' I think she actually felt the pain physically, just as I felt a tight band constricting my chest and stopping my breath. In the evening I tried to phone Jon to tell him, but couldn't get hold of him and in the end had to leave a message with a mutual friend in Suffolk who was going to be seeing him later. It was awful that he had to be told in that way, but this was before mobile phones and I had no choice.

That night my mother gave me a sleeping pill. When I woke up the next day, for a fraction of a second I was still me as I had been, but then the memory came crashing back. I was not me any more. I was this new woman who could barely stand. I had to be held because I was doubled up most of the time, unable to contain the pain. But there was a funeral to arrange, and, on the Monday, a ▶



Clockwise from far left: Jamie shortly before his 14th birthday, aged five, playing the drums at 12, and on holiday in Greece aged 13 with Dinah

RICHARD JEFFERIES/MATTHEW JOLLY

'I FELT ROBBED of our last moments together'

◀ visit to Torbay Hospital to view Jamie's body. Seeing your child laid out in a mortuary, his skin an unearthly shade of white, is like looking at an approximation of your real child. Jamie was so clearly not there that I felt somebody had smuggled in this waxen imposter.

For months I would see the chubby-cheeked baby he had been, the toddler falling over and grazing his knees, the kind, music-crazy, mop-haired teenager he became. And there it stopped. I could not see the man he would now never become. My home was still thick with the smell and feel of him, but he was no longer there.

I was furious and hurting, and in the small hours I had to face the terrible, tearing pain and a feeling of violation. It wasn't guilt that I felt at not being able to hold him as he died; I felt robbed of our last few moments together. I wanted to make Jamie feel safe and loved, but because he had been taken away so quickly, I felt as if he and his death had been stolen from me.

I knew I had to cope for my daughter; but I can barely remember how I did it. Some days I hardly knew where I was, yet meals appeared, clothes got washed. My health suffered and, though I did my best, the devastation I felt must have affected her. Although she seemed to be handling it in her 11-year-old way, Laurel became more anxious and had to sleep with a light shining through her open bedroom door: With hindsight, the innocence of her childhood had been snatched away, and I think she must have felt frightened.

We were not just one family member down, we simply weren't the same people, and at times things got very intense. We didn't make a big deal of Jamie's birthday or his death day when it came round. We tried to make Christmas normal, though it was only three months after Jamie's death, and I think Laurel was happier when she stayed with her father: I went to counselling and read endless books on grief and death, searching for a way to assimilate what had happened.

By the time a year had passed, I seemed to be functioning. To look at me, people probably thought I was fine. I wore make-up, did my hair, but kept my feelings hidden. I felt that nobody should be allowed to see what was going on inside me, because nobody would understand. For a long time I didn't let anyone in. I took part in a Life, Death and Transition workshop run by the psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, who first recognised the 'five stages of grief'. This helped because it was the one place I was allowed to express how violently hurt and angry I really was. I appeared in a television documentary series about families who had lost children and that helped also. Four years later Laurel had counselling too, though none was suggested or offered at the time, nor for the other children who had watched Jamie die.

Instead of fighting the terrifying emotion, I learned how to feel it and let it be. I learned not to be afraid of extreme feelings. They came and they went; I managed to somehow keep my heart open to life, and I'm convinced this is why I never felt bitter: Eventually, as my tears filled with love for my boy,



Dinah with daughter Laurel and her two grandchildren. Below: with Jamie in 1983

instead of anguish and despair; they turned into healing tears, and it was as if a miracle began to happen. It is called acceptance.

Little by little I'd become more whole again. Thirteen years later, I remarried, and more recently two events properly drew me out in what now feels like a permanent way. The first was the birth of my first grandchild six years ago. Little, squashed, red thing that she was, she somehow redressed the balance. Here was a new life, a new person to love unconditionally. Of course nobody could ever replace Jamie, but she partly filled up the child-sized hole in my heart, so you see it wasn't just time that healed; it was love.

The second was the way the experience of losing my son inspired my writing. I could finally draw on what had happened in a positive way. When I looked back at old family photograph albums for research, I felt such sadness for the carefree person I had once been. But the realisation that there had been a 'me' before my son was born was poignant, and because I'd rediscovered a self who I'd forgotten, it reminded me that my entire life could not be defined by my son's death.

While, of course, I would far prefer him to be here, I don't regret anything about Jamie's life, and now not even his death. I feel the experience has given me greater compassion than I might otherwise have had, and by plumbing the depths I discovered my strengths, as well as having to face my weaknesses. I have no time for blame or resentment, and I know that everyone carries some sorrow. I especially value my relationship with Laurel. She was forced to grow up too fast, but she has come through and is a terrific person. I have a kind, loving husband in Richard, and although there has been a huge amount of pain in my life, there has also been a lot of love. Jamie was very affectionate and, even when he towered over me, he'd come up, give me a hug, then say, 'Hello, my beautiful little mother.'

So how is my heart now? Well, though scarred, it's fairly well mended. I can still be moved to tears when I think of Jamie's wide grin and sparkling green eyes, so full of life and curiosity, but grandchild number two, born three years ago, has glued me back together even more solidly. There is something about loving a child, who also loves you back, that is especially wonderful. I will always be a member of a club I didn't ask to join, but I often think of an old Chinese proverb I came across years ago: 'You can't prevent the birds of sorrow flying over your head, but you can prevent them making nests in your hair.'

While my lovely boy's death was a devastating blow to my body, heart and soul, I haven't allowed it to destroy me, and, because it so very nearly could have, I am proud of that. ■

■ *Dinah's debut novel 'The Separation' is published by Penguin, £7.99**



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