



# “Chin Up, Head Down”

*A mother's journey of madness and grief*

Helena Tym

SSAFA **FORCES**  
*Help*

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**A Mother’s Journey of Madness and  
Grief**

**Helena Tym**



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# **Dedication**

For  
Rob, Zac, and Steely  
In Loving Memory of Cyrus  
Celer et Audax

# Acknowledgements

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# Chapter 1: Two Men

I watched the mosquito land and test my skin for the right place to push its hypodermic proboscis through the tough outer layer and so start the process of letting my blood. It flew off bloated. I was aware of the bite on my ankle but knew that it would never itch. I was numb: it didn't matter. Only hours before, my life had been shattered in an instant.

It was four o'clock on the first morning of my new life – a life I had not really planned for or wanted any part of. My feet were wet from crossing the grass to sit by the pond, where I looked blindly at the lilies. The warm air was heavy with the scent of the remnants of night, and filled with birds finding their voices in the dawn and the faint whine of the now distant mosquito. My new life. How do I begin to live it? I was more than happy with the old one.

Grief is physical. I had never known that – well, why should I? It had never been part of my life. It's like a gaping hole, deep and dark, filled with burning pains that reach up from your toes, strangling everything as they creep upwards to turn around and start back down again on their constant journey, never stopping or pausing to rest. Like the ebb and flow of the ocean – my ocean – awash with the flotsam and jetsam of pain and torment. I thought I might be sick, but that would have been a relief – so I wasn't. I was burning from the inside out, and even my tears dried as they fell on my cheeks.

Had I always known this day would come? No. I had just hoped against hope that it wouldn't. How could he be dead? This was not supposed to happen to my family. It was something that you heard on the news or read about in the paper – something that happened to other families – not mine. I had been as guilty as the rest, of flicking the channel or turning the page because it wasn't my family – it wasn't personal. It is now, and here I am in the middle of this sea of grief and pain, and it is real.



Parallel lines – like railway tracks that run all over the world; the world in my head running along lines that go nowhere, never stopping, never ending. Just parallel to Rob's, Zac's and Steely's, sometimes crossing, but never meeting completely. Perhaps that is what grief and pain really are; a line that runs its course through our lives, driving us forward but not showing us what is at the end – or if there is an end. There was a beginning though, that is a fact.

There were two of them. Men in suits, wearing ties. I knew. I was opening the window before going to bed – it was 10.20pm on Tuesday 2nd June, 2009. The night that my life, as I knew it, finished.

Looking out, I wondered who they were and what they were doing. It was during the local elections and for a split second I thought it might be candidates touting for business – but who would be coming up the drive at this time of night? I knew. They reached the door and Rob, grabbing his glasses, ran downstairs, opened it before they could knock. 'Mr Thatcher?' They held out their identity cards, but they didn't have to – I knew. 'Is there somewhere we can come in and we can all sit down?' I knew. 'Just tell me it's not the worst,' Rob pleaded. Surely he had been wounded and they needed to get us to the hospital? Yes, that must be it, but why would they ask us to sit? I knew. I stood there in my 'Winnie the Pooh' nightie as they uttered the words that would be any parent's worst nightmare.

I shouted up the stairs for Steely. He came down looking sheepish, thinking I was going to tell him off for not putting his plate in the dishwasher again. He looked at me and laughed as I put my hand to my mouth and whispered, 'He's been killed.' 'You're having a laugh,' he replied. Then he looked at my face and paled. Rob went to the garage to get Zac. 'Zac, mate, you need to come in, it's the worst possible thing.' Zac and Sharpie, his friend, came to the back door and saw the men. 'Cyrus was killed this morning,' Rob said.

Sharpie said, 'I'll go.' What else could he do? They asked us to sit. How do you sit when someone has just stabbed you in the heart? I refused. I was not going to sit while they gave us brief details about how our son Cyrus had been killed by an IED in Afghanistan



at 9.15 this morning. Which morning? Our morning or their morning? How many hours difference were there; were they in front or behind? Had he been dead all day and we'd not known?

I'll never forget that man's face. What a shitty job, telling people they've lost a son, thousands of miles from home, in a dusty land we'll never visit or even care about. What were the details, when would we know, when would we want to know? All sound was muffled. All I could see was my ruined family and feel a blind panic. Nothing will ever be the same again, oh God.

I think that's when I was first aware of the feeling of walking through glue. Sticky, smothering, exhausting, so little sound and light gets through. It is all diffused and the glue is slowly strangling us, bearing down, hateful – a weighted mist of glue and grief and pain. Oh, the pain.

That was five and a half weeks ago. So much has happened. Most of it in a blur, a dream – a glue-filled life of haunting memories.

They were so sad, those two men, with pain behind their eyes. They referred to their notes, unable to keep eye contact. How do you tell people such awful news and it not kill some small part of you? After they left – I don't know how long they stayed – the glue descended. I think we were given a name, someone who would come and see us, look after us, guide us.

That someone was WO II Ian Tindall of 7 Rifles, based at Brock Barracks here in Reading – our Visiting Officer. He has been our source of information throughout this awful journey, the bearer of both good and bad news, utterly reliable and compassionate, making this whole process as smooth and painless as he can. It must be hard to watch people grieve.

A new world opened up, one of which we had never really been a part. We were introduced to the ranks, what all the letters stood for, in what order everyone fitted together to make up a battalion. What a Warrant Officer II was, and why was he our Visiting Officer. Simply, a Warrant Officer holds a Warrant from the Queen. Class I is the Regimental Sergeant Major, one per battalion – Class II is one rank lower, and there can be up to ten per battalion. These Warrant

Officers have been promoted through the ranks rather than being a Commissioned Officer, who holds the Queen's Commission and usually come out of Sandhurst.

Visiting Officers are volunteered by the Regiment, and when Ian first arrived he came with a little black notebook containing our names and address, Cyrus's date and place of death. He took out his pen and waited. That little book was obviously going to fill over the months, it would become his method of ensuring no question went unanswered and all information was relayed.

This was a world that Cyrus was a part of and loved. I can see why now, five and a half weeks later. I always knew though. It was just him – a life he loved no more or less than he loved us, but a life to which he was suited – a life that made him a man. He had entered the realm of 'a band of brothers'; men who would lay down their lives for each other, and now he had done just that – he had laid down his life.

The Army said they would not release his name until we were ready. I will never be ready. We asked for twenty-four hours. There were so many people we needed to tell. That awful sound of the phone ringing, and when it's picked up the other end you have to say the words that have changed our life, and will now change theirs. 'Hello' is impossible; how do you go on to say, 'He was killed this morning'? It sticks in your throat, choking you. Sobbing, the words don't really come out, but they know, the people on the other end of the line. They know.

Glue. Or is it pain? So many phone calls to make, always starting with that impossible 'Hello', always ending with whispered words that shatter, and make others scream. We couldn't get hold of my mother or Rob's dad – where the hell were they? We needed to tell them before it was all over the news. Frustration was added now. It wasn't until the Thursday morning we eventually made contact, thirty-six hours after we had been told, just as the first news bulletins went out.

I haven't screamed, and I wonder why, when I told some people, they did. He didn't belong to them. He was ours. It is not their right

to scream and drop the phone. That right is ours, and we haven't screamed yet – so what makes them think they can? Their screams make it so much more difficult, because I have to tell them to calm down, tell them it's ok, tell them the scant details that I know. Why am I having to comfort them? I know why – because I've had to hurt them by telling them, but it doesn't make it any easier to have to pick up the phone and tell the next person. I wish they hadn't screamed. I could feel my patience snap. My patience, my heart, my soul.

In this world of mobile phones, the internet and text messages you know that within an hour the news will have spread. We've had to wake some people because it's getting close to midnight. Oh God, all those people whom we have to inject with pain. They have never known this pain, and neither have we. It is all so new, so crushing – so sad. Maybe the glue is really sadness. It has been so much harder to tell Cyrus's friends than it was to tell my own mother. I guess that is another story, even though it is interwoven with this one. I feel she has no right to grieve. You should only have the right to grieve for those you have known, but since this happened I have grieved for many other mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters. There have been so many since, so many more to come... so much glue and tears. So many families broken, marriages over, siblings split and so many more to follow, and so many that went before.

Grief is selfish. Only I really know how I feel. I can run that parallel line with Rob and the boys, but only they know how they grieve. Windows and seats on a train, each of us pointing in the same direction, just sitting in different places, seeing different scenes pass by. A friend of mine helped me to see it like that. She was so right. Different seats and different scenes – same journey, equal pain, equal sadness.

Grief is lonely. It is selfish, lonely and all consuming. It attacks you when you least expect it. I admit that I have had whole hours when I've not thought about Cyrus. Should I feel guilty about that? A whole hour – or maybe it was just five minutes – but it felt like an hour. I've lost all sense of time. I am not even sure what the day is, and have no idea of the date. I find it hard to remember how long

it has been since those two men in suits crunched their way up our gravel drive to shatter our world. How many weeks since the funeral? I've no idea. Does that make me a bad person, a terrible uncaring mother? Should I remember these significant dates and days, or is this the way my brain is helping me to cope? I'm sure I would go mad – perhaps I am already there. My reality does not seem to match anyone else's. Glue has taken all sense away and replaced it with sadness. My reality is no longer there. I know in my heart that this will change slowly, but swimming against this sea of glue is so hard, I'm exhausted all the time. Everything is an effort.

Breathing. I am still breathing and I cannot stop it. I cannot stop my heart from beating, pushing me forward, making me go on. My heart is broken but it still keeps beating, my lungs inflate and deflate. I cannot prevent it. Is there a purpose? Do I still have a job to do? Yes. I have a family that needs me as much as I need them. I need to see their faces, hear their voices, share their lives – even though the glue makes them harder to see at times. They have dreams too, and I will still be there to help them fulfil them if I can.

He was a school refuser, my son the soldier. He hated the classroom, felt inadequate because his reading was slower than others – but he was bright and that frustrated him too. He didn't know what he was going to do with his life. 'What will I do Mum?' he used to ask. We would spend many an hour on the sofa cuddling and talking, me trying to soothe and placate my confused, angry and sometimes misunderstood son, so like his dad, he too a school refuser and equally difficult and angry at that age.

I have seen first hand, through hard work and determination, Rob's achievements – what many in his past would not have thought possible. He has a successful general building business, employing many over the years, that has given us, as a family, a full and happy life. The boys idolised him, so how could I encourage without comparing?

Moments when I would try to hold Cyrus's long, lean fingers still, stopping him from biting his nails or digging them into the palms of his hands; tracing the freckles across the bridge of his straight, slim nose; soothing his mood, whispering words of encouragement and



love, telling him there was a place in the world for him, and that he would be successful one day. I don't think he really believed me until he decided to join the Army.

There were other people along the way who helped him – the recruiting officer who saw the potential, teachers and assistants who knew he had it in him and helped him to believe in himself. Once he decided to join up, his own personal army arrived in different forms and helped him achieve what he had once thought impossible. We were so proud of him during those last few months at school. Who would have thought that he would have done so well? He certainly knew what he wanted and did everything in his power to get it. Thank you to those who shared that part of his journey. I will forever be indebted to you. You know who you are and I do not need to name you.

'Even those who do not go to university can achieve greatness and honours,' Rob said to my mother on the day of the funeral. She seems to think that you can only attain greatness through education, but we are all different, and some of us can achieve it in other ways. My children are those sorts of people. People who live their lives to the best of their ability, collecting friends and experiences along the way, not needing books or paper certificates to tell them that they are successful. My children are people who have hearts larger than life, and who touch others without even knowing they are doing it, changing their lives forever, for the better. My boys, my pride, my loves, my children, my men.

They have picked us up and carried us on this path, the Army. People coming and going, cards, letters, flowers. I do not want any of them. I want him back. The house smells of lilies and pain. Cards flutter to the floor every morning and we go through the ritual of reading them, amazed at how many there are. Some from people who we have not heard from for years, and some from people we do not know – people swimming in glue like us. We are not the first or the last. So many people, so many words, so much pain and sadness. All I want is him back. People mean well, but they cannot help – not yet. It is all still too raw and open, too selfish.

## Chapter 2: Repatriation

I will never forget Lyneham. That was not how he was supposed to come home. Not in a coffin on an enormous aircraft filled with silent men and death.

He was not alone; there were two other soldiers, Lance Corporal Nigel Moffat, the Light Dragoons, and Corporal Stephen Bolger of 1st Battalion, the Parachute Regiment. Two other families who were numb like us.

One of the questions those men in suits asked was whether we would like Cyrus to be flown home on Friday 5th June or the following Tuesday. Why would we want to wait? He needed to be home – we needed him home. I couldn't bear the thought of him lying dead, thousands of miles away. No we wanted him home as soon as possible.

Apparently the repatriation had to be within ten days. The delay is because an MOD-sponsored mortician has to fly to theatre (Afghanistan) to prepare the bodies; there are only five C-17's available to carry coffins, and theatre wished to organise a ramp/sunset ceremony. Families are scattered all over the world and I guess they need several dates for bringing them home, so that the families can get to RAF Lyneham, Wiltshire.

Ian collected us on Thursday and took us to the Hilton Hotel, Swindon, where we were to stay the night. The repatriation is a military ceremony that the families are invited to attend, and because of the formalities of the day they need to make sure all who wish to attend are in place the night before. A maximum of seven close family/friends are funded from the public purse. Just the four of us went to meet him ... watch him come home.

We were met at the hotel by Major Mark Owen, the Quartermaster, also Officer Commanding Rear Operations in Ballykinler, Northern Ireland, where 2 Rifles is based; he would speak on behalf of the Rifles at Cyrus's funeral. We also met Captain



Richard Sellars, Regimental Administration Officer of 2 Rifles, who held the Regiment's purse strings and coordinated all the funeral arrangements.

They explained to us briefly what would happen the next day at Lyneham – that we would meet the coroner in the morning, who would talk us through their procedures. It was too much to take in and I felt exhausted.

That night, while we waited for Cyrus to come home, Steely ordered broccoli and stilton soup. Strange – he doesn't even like stilton. He just needed to order something and that was what he saw on the menu. I don't remember what I ordered; I only know it was taken away untouched.

We sat staring, unseeing, at our plates, while the plane of death rumbled high above the clouds, bringing our soldier son home. We were all so sad and heavy with the weight of the unknown. It was all Zac could do to talk, but he did – through clenched teeth, shoulders hunched, his face drawn and pale. I don't think he even looked up through his shaggy fair hair to make eye contact. It's not a matter of being rude or ignorant, because none of our children are; it's that everything seemed so impossible. Looking directly at someone might have made it true, and we all secretly so hoped it wasn't. We learnt to paint our masks on that night – a guise we still use, anything to make it seem normal. But nothing is normal – not any more.

The morning brought more officials the MOD-appointed undertaker (Kenyon Repatriation Ltd), and a representative from the Wiltshire Coroner's Office and Air Force personnel, as the ceremony takes place on an RAF base, and they needed to brief us on air issues and the RAF's involvement in the day.

We sat in a semi-circle, the other families in their own ones, and the coroner came to us individually and explained in a hushed voice what the procedure was going to be. He had been given the initial report from the medical staff in Camp Bastion, Afghanistan, which he had read. He didn't give us any details, only that they needed to do a DNA test; I guess as he was a blast victim they had to make

sure which bits were his. Surely not my baby, not in pieces, not needing to be identified by genes and chromosomes. What about his face? Could he not be identified by that? There was information, but no information. I didn't hear what I needed to know. Had it been instantaneous? Please tell me he didn't suffer, that he knew nothing of what had happened – but he couldn't say. No help to me, then. He then said that they would take him to the Radcliffe in Oxford for an autopsy and processing before he was passed on to the Berkshire Coroner and finally the funeral directors. 'Processing' – what the hell does that mean? This can't be happening, it's all too macabre and unreal. Can we see him? That seems to be the burning question, but he doesn't know because he hasn't seen the body, and he doesn't know what condition he is in. Condition? Oh God what does that mean? So many questions but none answered. Frustration takes over then – frustration at my inability to process the information. I don't want to be here – this can't be my life now. We are all numb, silent and numb, as there is nothing to say.

As we were driven through the gates at Lynham, everyone we passed saluted – how odd. They didn't know us, didn't know Cyrus – they just stood there silently, saluting as we drove on. It felt as if we were the honoured ones. I wasn't sure how to react to their sorrow and pride. It was so moving, then the enormity of it hit. There in front of us was the runway, huge, empty, and waiting. He would be landing there soon. How do I bear this? Hands clenched and mouth dry.

We appeared to be the last to arrive. The other two shattered families were sitting quietly, waiting. Waiting for instructions; none of us knew what to do; waiting for pain, waiting – just waiting.

Handshakes with uniforms – so many medals, so many ranks, so many sad and sorry eyes. Lieutenant General Nick Parker, CBE, Colonel Commandant, The Rifles, was the Chief of the General Staff's representative, and as such was also the main VIP who took the parade (he was awarded the Knight Commander of the Order of Bath in the Birthday Honours a few weeks after the repatriation and became Lieutenant General Sir Nick Parker, KCB, CBE). He

apologised for the formality of the procedures but explained that it is just 'what the Army do – all this pomp and ceremony'. 'Cyrus would have appreciated it,' I said. He loved that part – all the uniforms, the total package of being a unit of order and history – just as much as the soldiering. I'm not sure that it wasn't all completely lost on me.

They were so kind, those men – Lieutenant General Nick Parker, Major Mark Owen, Captain Richard Sellars – explaining about the order in which the coffins would come out of the plane. It isn't by rank of the fallen but regimental seniority, and so Cyrus as a Rifleman was to be last. It didn't dawn on me the implication of that, until we were on the tarmac. The padre moved silently, brushing against us with his words of sorrow and comfort. There are no words of comfort, not when nothing will ever comfort again.

Then we were there standing in the rain, not moving, just looking for the plane that was carrying death.

The uniforms were there, standing in front of the marquees, saluting, both Army and Air Force, too many names and ranks to remember – too much glue anyway. They told us to look left towards the clock tower; that was where we would first catch sight of the plane. The sky was dark grey and we stood there, chairs touching the backs of our legs. 'We're going to stand for him and be proud,' Rob said, so together we did. The marquees fluttered in the breeze, it was cold and damp – typical June weather.

The aircraft was so long in coming; the uniforms still saluting. Eventually we could see three white lights in the distance and a bell started to toll, then the plane was flying past so slowly I thought it would drop there on the runway right in front of us. There was no air. Perhaps we were all holding our breath. Then he was home. The force of the feeling was physical. He was home – but not the way he was supposed to be.

Because of the geography of the airfield, it wasn't possible to watch the aircraft land, so after the flypast we were taken back into the terminal building to watch via CCTV screens. We then had to wait for the Air Force to clear the plane of any defence systems, and carry out safety checks, which took about an hour.

RAF catering staff provided food for us, but the smell made me feel so sick I asked if it could be taken away. What on earth made them think we'd be able to eat at a time like this? Lieutenant General Nick Parker came and sat with us. He was covered in medals and he had the largest hands I've ever seen. What a nice man – what a disgusting way to have to meet him. We talked in whispers – there were the other families too, looking as lost and confused as we were, talking to the other battalions' representatives.

The padre moved between the families and recited each regiment's collect – a short prayer. I wasn't aware of hearing the other ones, only the Rifles':

*O Almighty God, the sure stronghold of each succeeding age, guard us your servants of The Rifles, that we may uphold and be worthy of the great traditions of our former Regiments; and as we were chosen to be swift and bold, may we seek with courage your grace in every time of need, and so be patient and persevere in running the race that is set before us, as did your son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

It's the 'swift and bold' (often written in its Latin form *Celer et Audax*) that makes me choke. It describes Riflemen so well. 'Fearless' perhaps should be in there somewhere – I'm sure they do have fear, but take it all in their stride, going with the flow of their job and what it means to be a soldier.

Eventually they called us outside again. To stand so close to that plane was almost frightening. These aircraft are enormous and I felt small. The back was open and the first Bearer Party moved up the ramp and disappeared into the plane. It seemed an age before they were back in sight, bearing the first coffin. Twice we watched as each of the regiments' Bearer Parties moved on to and out of the plane: then it was Cyrus. Moving backwards, Serjeant Major Lee Jones directed them down towards the tarmac to the sound of *The Last Post*. There was no air – how can I breathe? How can this coffin



that's draped in a flag have someone so dear inside? How can he be dead?

They walked so slowly, so precisely, with such pride and sadness. Those men with their shiny boots and solemn faces, carefully carrying his coffin to the waiting hearse. There was no other noise that I remember – only the rain and the bugle sounding Reveille as the wheels of the hearse started to move off towards the Chapel of Rest. It was the first time we'd heard those bugles in context and my blood turned to ice, every hair on my body stood up, goose pimples ran across my skin and into my heart. Haunting is the only way I can describe it – clear notes played with such passion, projecting such pride, notes to call to arms, notes to say goodbye, notes I wish I'd never had to hear. It is their final farewell, and symbolises that the duty of the dead is over and they can rest in peace. It is impossible to control the lump in your throat and the tears that follow.

We met them – the Bearer Party – inside, away from the runway and the plane of death. What could we say? None of us knew where to look. No one could bear to look into our eyes, and I couldn't bear to look into theirs. How many more of these awful days will they have to go through? They volunteer to do this – amazing.

After a long embarrassing silence, T, one of the of bearer party, decided to recount a story of when he and Cyrus were in Kosovo as part of a Peace-Keeping Force, leading up to and during their national elections. They had been tasked with protecting monasteries and churches, and on this particular day a wedding was taking place. Apparently Cyrus – 'Thatch' – decided to make himself scarce. The next thing they knew, on the top steps of the church, right in the middle of the wedding party, was Thatch with his cheeky grin, posing for the family photos. T said he would miss him, as he was the morale of the platoon, the one who always had a smile, a giggle, and a kind word, the one who was always 'up for it' – the one who had so much more to give and live for.

While we waited for the coffins to be taken to the Chapel of Rest, I found I was beginning to feel light-headed, and they kindly brought back the plates of food I'd sent away earlier. We all had a