

# Butterfly Kisses

A Personal Journey of Living

Trish Schafer

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BY

Trish Schafer  
Queensland, Australia

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National Publications Manager: [trish@marleetraining.com](mailto:trish@marleetraining.com)

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# Preface

This is my journey. The journey of my family, extended family and friends as seen through my eyes. I felt the need to write this book as during this time I tried to find guidance in books, at meetings and by other means and found them all inadequate - I think I was looking for someone to show me the right way to handle my grief. I now know there is no right way or wrong way, there is just a path that you have to stumble along, learning as you go. This, I now know, is life.

My family before was a wonderful husband and five precious children and my family now is still a wonderful husband with five precious children. As you read of my journey you will come to understand why I can still say this. I need to thank my husband and children for their support through this process. I love you all very deeply and my life just would not be the same if you were not in it.

Our family is of mixed cultures; my husband is from Australia; his first wife was from New Zealand. They separated when his children were young and his two girls were raised in NZ. My two sons and my daughter are part

Indigenous from my previous relationships. I make note of this now so that the reader will have some understanding of some of the statements made in relation to the different cultures and beliefs of our family.

Thank you to our parents and grandparents for your support through this time of our life and for never giving up on us. You were our rocks and the voice of reason on many occasions. We hope that we have done you proud.

I also want to thank all our wonderful friends who have stuck with us through this journey. It has been very appreciated.



# The Start

I was staying with friends in Townsville when I received the phone call at 2:30 am. I remember this moment well as it was a very surreal moment in time. I had finished talking to my son on the phone at about 10:30 pm. We had been on the phone for a few hours chatting about all sorts of stuff. I remember in my dreams the phone kept ringing and ringing but I couldn't find it. Then I realised it was my actual phone. I got up as it stopped ringing, I pressed recall and then this voice was talking to me. I knew the voice but it sounded strange, all it kept saying was "Your Son is dead".

What an earth shattering piece of news - in the middle of the night or, at any time - this is. I remember being very calm; thinking they have got this wrong and this could not be so. To make matters worse, my son was so far away in Brisbane that I could not run down the road to prove the lie...

I was on autopilot, I put my clothes on and said: "I will ring you back". My friend had come to my door and was holding his chest. I think "Oh shit, he is having a heart attack!"

He had a history of this. I can see his lips moving but then he was gone.

During all this I could hear this strange sound. All I could think is “Would someone please knock the noise on the head”.

My friend came back to the door leaning over, shutting my mouth. The noise stops. It was me screaming. He scooped me up in his arms and carried me down the stairs. My friend, who cannot console me nor quieten me down, calls my father - whom I scream at - to find out if it was a lie.

I am on my phone - trying to get hold of my boy - when my father walks in and takes my phone. He just stands there, in this kitchen in Townsville. I watch him walk over to me and get down on his haunches. With trembling lips, he looks me in the eye and in a very broken voice states to me “I am so sorry but your boy is dead”. And then his tears.

I had never seen my father cry before with such heartache. It is now it that my Son’s death becomes real.

To witness a grown man who had always been the most stoic, hard person I had known sit there before me

– sobbing, as he watches his daughter, as she breaks into pieces. Knowing not how to put her back together was a very gut wrenching moment for me.

My Dad makes the calls and starts to notify my immediate family and although I know it to be true, I just don’t want to believe...

This is when my friend Denial comes to me. I love this emotion - it will only last for short intervals but it allows some fake normal to exist. It allows me to think at first that everyone got it wrong. The person they saw was not my son, that it was someone else. It allows me to have hope that things are not about to change forever.

Denial also allows me to think that I could remain who I was at that time. A free fun loving spirit whose smile shone all the way into her eyes. Where there was no grey hair and the presence of youth still existed in her features. Not the smile that is tainted at times with mixed emotions. Eyes that don't light all the way up anymore when smiling and feeling happy. Grey hairs that show the battle. Most importantly, the scar on the heart that never fully heals.

This is the first time I am meeting the woman that my dad is planning to marry.

I see her there on the couch watching us all. The noise is back. She leans over gently, closes my mouth and then embraces me. I need that right now. It removes the cold feeling that has washed over me off my skin. Sitting there holding me, this woman does all she could for me. At that very moment ... she gives me touch. When you are breaking - you just need that touch...

It was black and hopeless when the world changed. I saw nothing but black, it was comforting. I had to remember to breathe. That was the only important point, everything else had to wait. I vomited a few times whenever reality would hit. I felt very calm but, internally, I was hysterically screaming because that was the physical rip that was occurring. It hurt to the point you needed to scream and let it out. I detached - it was like watching myself on television. It is those memories that make me realise it was real.

...

We are moving; we are going to my boy's Nana's on his father's side. I think someone has told my husband. I then think, we have to tell the kids. I am now beside the taxi and have vomited all over the place. Dad is explaining to the cab driver what the go is, somehow I am in the cab and we start

to drive. I am sitting there watching everyone as they go about their daily stuff. Here I am, my life shattered, and wondering how bloody unfair this is. Denial is still playing with me. But Anger is rearing his head at me a little.

We have arrived at the house and there was Nana on the verandah crying. I got out of the cab and Dad tells me that he was going to get my daughter. We sit there together, Nana and me, crying, waiting. I see this car pull up. In the back, it looks like my son is sitting there. I just cry out "My Son is here!" before running to the car. The nieces and nephews are all looking at me as I run around the car trying to see him. I ask "Where is my Son?" and they are like "Aunty, he is in Brisbane." I think they realise something is wrong as I was hysterical that he wasn't in the car with them. "Aunty, what is wrong?" I can hear the panic in their voices but can't respond. I hear myself saying "They said he is dead but I think they are wrong".

I just watch as they jump out of the car and look at their Nana. Some start to cry and scream, others start to get angry. I look on, shattered at what this is doing. I am a rock that has dropped into the pond and has created a tidal wave of water; ring after ring. Nana comes and gets me and walks me back to the verandah. There I sit. Waiting for my boy to come home. Waiting for the families to arrive. Waiting for someone to tell me this was not real ...

By mid-afternoon, we had begun to get the full story of how my son had died and the fact that it was a suicide.

To be very blunt, my world was truly disintegrating even further. In addition to the loss of my son - which I still could not comprehend - I was now feeling guilty as well. For eight months my son had spoken to me about how he wanted to take his life. I would spend weekends waiting for the police to come to the front door and to tell me this had happened. Yet,

every Sunday arvo he came home and I would cry with him. Full of gratitude that he found the strength to come home to me and allow me to help him make it through the week. I had taken him to the mental health unit near to where I lived and asked him to please speak to someone. He wouldn't go in. He said, "I do Mum; I speak to you".

Oh, how I tried to keep him here with us; with me. Now, even to this day ... Guilt still has its wicked way with me.

I take the blame for my son's death on my shoulders. As his parent, I was the one who was around him the most. It is like a cold stone pit that follows me around and I have come to the conclusion that as a parent I will always have this.

The following day I found out the horrifying truth. My son had committed suicide by going under a car that had been driving by; this started another rollercoaster of emotions that then became blurred with all the others.

I tried to blame the driver but then felt sorry for the driver. I hated the driver but then I had compassion for the driver.

You so desperately want to blame someone that you just find it so hard to accept that your loved one has made the choice they felt was good for them but you know that it was not the path you ever wanted them to choose.

Once you have a loved one that makes a choice that you can't undo, you feel useless.



# *The Black Dog*

With my Son passing from this choice I also get to hear and see what the world thinks and it is sad. The most common statement I hear about my Son's actions are "How selfish was he". I look at how hard he tried to live a life that we had expected. He had so many people; parents, friends say "Do what makes you the happiest. Think about what you think will make you most happy".

So he tried to do what makes us regular folk happy and still that black dog followed, ever relentless. I feel like the black dog is howling at them, at times stealing snatches of their happiness at will. Reminding them, in those moments when it seems to get pushed a little too far away, that it is still there. I watched my son try with every bit of himself. He would fall so regularly but he would get back up and keep trying. He would talk and walk and keep on keeping on. Then a series of events which just seemed too hard to get back up from seemed to allow that howling creature have its wicked way. I tried, we all tried, to carry him but by then he didn't see it as us carrying him anymore, all he saw was being a burden.

So he sat and thought and then he did what made him find his peace and happiness. He made that choice we all told him to make. He did it so quickly and decisively. It was just not what we were saying or wanting. It was not a choice we liked. It is a choice we just don't want to accept. It's a choice that makes us look at our own selves and question ourselves. Something none of us have time or want to do. The sad thing about that statement is I just wished that with all of my heart, my Son could have just found that courage, the same courage he used to leave us, for five more minutes to hang in there so we could have eased that pain. Quietened the howling dog long enough for him to hear us again.

Then you get us who are left behind and we ask why? But I believe if you trace your steps you really do see the why. For me, I looked at his life and what was going on in it and realised it was fear of the unknown. The fear of failure. The fear of not living up to our expectations. The fear became so crippling he was stuck within himself for alternatives. In a snap decision that will change lives dramatically he made his choice and so my journey began. I have never asked why except that once. I will say that it was a painful question as I have a cross that I must carry as I too participated in helping him make that choice through my words and actions.

In saying that though, I truly believe that I never did anything different to any other parent, said things any different to any other parent, loved different than any other parent. I now understand it was his perspective. He didn't love me less, he didn't want to hurt me, he didn't want to make my life a living hell; he just wanted to find a moment of peace. He was just weary with his battle. He just wanted peace; his black dog gone.

Please understand; I do get how others see it as selfish and how this has affected my partner and father who are angry

with him for making this choice. I also have a friend whose partner took their life under different circumstances and I see the anger and frustration as they are left with raising their child; the forced choice that changed their lives with no consultation. I too get angry with my son at times, especially when I get that unexpected heart wrenching moment in memory and the pain sears through me. I think it has to be a personal perception of those who are on the receiving end of this choice. I know that his siblings are angry that he did not give them a good bye or a chance to talk to him, and that my parents are angry as they have seen what he left behind in me, and themselves, and his siblings.

For me though, I have to stay with my perception, as my life is too short to be angry and it is what I can live with. I love my baby and don't need to walk around for the rest of my living days in constant anger over something I cannot change. I know that all suicides are different but they all carry a common denominator; and that is they make a choice without any discussion or seeming concern for us that are left behind. Hence I understand how people call it selfish. It is, but aren't we all guilty of this? They just took it to another level. Like Coldplay say "the hardest part was letting go not taking part you really broke my heart" I choose not to ask why, or lay the blame fully at my boy's feet.

I don't believe these people who say my Son was trying to attention seek; he was asking for help and sometimes, in that moment, no matter how much you are loving them, talking to them, hugging them, it just isn't enough to beat the black dog because as soon as it gets a few minutes alone with them, and I realise that's all it takes, it is more powerful than us and them.

People are embarrassed about having such a beast or know of someone with the beast and I notice it seems like secret service business when it comes to dealing with it. I know a

young couple who both suffer the black dog, but one more than the other. One of these young people came to me recently and said “Trish, things aren’t good. My partner is in a bad place and I just don’t know what to do”. I responded with “Get them on the phone I will talk to them”. The response was everything but to get them on the phone. I was stunned - you want help but yet I can’t talk to them? It was in their mind that they would be appearing to be betraying confidence and they didn’t want to break that trust. I couldn’t explain it quick or clear enough. This is the problem. There can be no secret service business here. We need to help and to help we need to expose the beast. The more who know about it the less the howling beast can be heard.

When I look back at the night my son took his life I see the secret service working overtime. There was distraction, self- medication, discussion on anything but the elephant in the room, no calls to police due to fear, no calls to me the parent to say ‘Hey, this is exactly what is happening’ and where did this secret service mission end up? I’m here writing a book, hoping to help or change just one life, a child in the ground, and a family riddled with this bloody beast.

If you take anything away from this, please, no more secret service. Let others know what is happening, be vigilant but be supportive and know that this journey could be a forever journey or it could be a few days, weeks, or months. Look at what you can do and be realistic so that way you can put other supports into place so there are no cracks for this howling beast to claw through to get its five minutes. Use available community services to get assistance in how to help or to encourage that person to seek help.