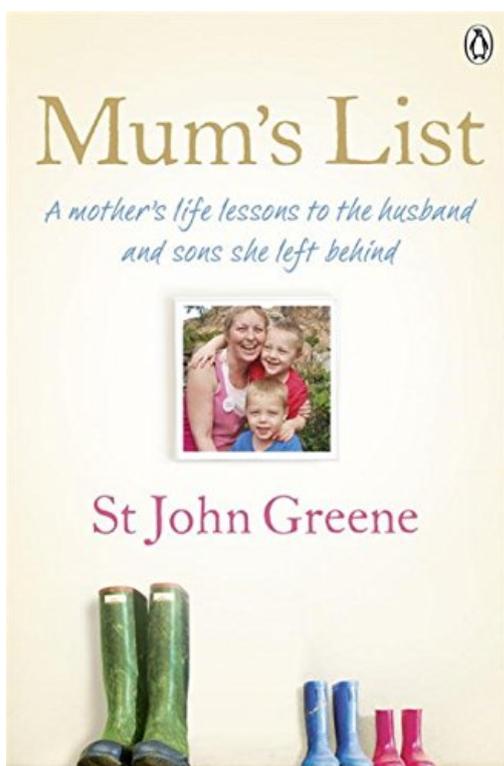


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Mum's List

*A mother's life lessons to the husband
and sons she left behind*



St John Greene



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About the Author

St John Greene grew up in the West Country, where he met his teenage sweetheart, Kate. A qualified medic and lifeguard, St John, known to his friends as Singe, founded Training Saints, which specializes in teaching outdoor activities and helping people gain qualifications and careers in the maritime industry. Since Kate's death Singe has devoted his life to raising their two young sons, Reef and Finn. He spends all of his free time teaching them the things he loved to do with Kate: sailing, scuba diving, jet skiing and power boating near their home in Somerset. Mum's List is his first book, and is the basis for the film of the same name.

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Prologue

“What d’you want to drink?” my brother asked.

He was standing at the bar, smiling, clearly pleased to see me. I instinctively looked over my left shoulder, turning to Kate.

“What d’you fancy?” I asked her.

It was noisy in the nightclub, and lights were flashing all around us. I could see Kate’s outline against the backdrop of disco lights and dry ice. She looked beautiful in the half-light, but then again Kate always looked beautiful. Her pale-blue eyes twinkled back at me, and I felt her squeeze my hand. A split second later I felt a squeeze around my heart, and I knew.

Kate wasn’t actually there beside me. It was just a shadow of her, a hazy illusion of what I desperately wanted to see. I was so used to having Kate at my side that my mind had played tricks on me.

I felt my face flush as I turned back to my brother, who was staring at me, open-mouthed.

“Oh my God, Singe, are you all right?” Matt asked nervously.

It was his girlfriend’s eighteenth-birthday party, and he’d been delighted I’d accepted the invitation so soon after Kate’s death. It was my first big night out with members of my family since losing her, and I wanted it to go well for everybody’s sake.

“Don’t worry, I’m fine,” I said, meaning it.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Don’t worry, I’m not going mad! Some habits die hard, that’s all. Let’s have a drink.”

Matt gave me a relieved smile, and I beamed back at him. It was good to see Kate again, I thought, though I didn’t say it out loud. She had died less than a month earlier, and seeing her was a little reminder of just how fresh my grief was and how much I missed her.

As I worked my way around the party, doing my best to put other people at ease who didn’t quite know what to say to me, I felt comforted by the fact that Kate was still so close to me. She was dead, but it didn’t mean she had stopped being a part of my life. How could she? She was my life, even though I now had to carry on without her.

I stood on my own for a while, watching the teenagers on the dance floor. They were so full of fun, just as Kate and I were at that age, and in fact for most of our lives together. The buzz in the air and the youngsters’ laughter made me remember our early dates. I pictured Kate in her teens, dancing in skin-tight jeans, without a care in the world. She looked older than she was and never had any trouble getting into the nightclubs, even at sixteen. She always strutted up to the doormen, giving a confident giggle and a wiggle that never failed to impress, and it was often me who was challenged about my age instead of her, despite the fact that I was five years older. Kate always looked stunning, and through the blinking lights and lasers I couldn’t see anyone but her on the dance floor. Her eyes were locked on mine, and I felt like I was the only other person in the room.

After we’d been clubbing, Kate and I would often take a midnight picnic up to Priddy in the Mendip Hills. I could see her aged seventeen, sitting on blankets under the stars, looking for satellites and listening to the choirs of frogs and insects. It was Kate’s favorite place in all the world. There was no light pollution, and the stars burned so bright it felt like we were inside a massive planetarium, just the two of us. I breathed in the smell of Kate’s perfume mingling with the sweet scent of damp grass, and we talked and melted away together for hours and hours.

The memory warmed my heart. Kate and I were soul mates, and we stayed that way for more than twenty years. How lucky was I? Looking around at the teenagers at the party, with all their lives ahead of them, I felt so grateful I had met Kate when we were both so young, and that we had had the chance to spend so many happy years together. That was something cancer could never take away.

Kate’s diagnosis took the wind out of our sails, to say the least. It came literally weeks after our little boy Reef’s own recovery from an incredibly rare and aggressive form of cancer, and so it felt even more unbelievably cruel and unlucky. I remember how I scabbled around for positives. At least my feisty Kate would fight like a tigress, I thought. Reef had survived against far worse odds, so Kate would beat it too, no question. Reef’s cancer had left him with a slightly withered left leg, which upset his balance, but he had adapted remarkably well, and most people had no idea he had a disability. I knew Kate would show the same resilience, whatever cancer threw at her and took from her.

We’d always lived life to the max. We’d traveled the world and made the most of every day together. We had no regrets about the past, and that was a huge blessing. The most positive thing of all was that I knew for certain that, however ill Kate became, she would continue to squeeze the most out of every minute of every day.

As I begin to write this book, a year after losing her, I can tell you that Kate certainly didn’t let me, or the

boys, down. She did us all proud until her dying day, and beyond. Even when she was desperately ill in her final few months she took the boys on trips to Disney World and Lapland and insisted on taking them to see the Snow White pantomime in Bristol just days before she died, even though getting her there in a wheelchair with oxygen tanks proved to be more of a pantomime than the show itself!

She also produced Mom's List, which she added to right up until the end of her life. Kate wasn't trying to be immortal and she'd have been humbled by the huge media interest it attracted, which led to people asking me to write this book. The list was for us, not for her, and it was I who unwittingly prompted her to write it when I cuddled her in bed and asked: "What if you leave me?"

Kate was a devoted mother and loving wife, and she wanted to give me a helping hand to make sure I raised our boys as best I could without her. When I read the final list after she was gone, I felt less alone. Kate's spirit lived on, and I was so grateful to her for the massive effort she put into completing it on her deathbed. I still had a link to my fantastic wife and I took great comfort from that.

I think some people worried about the impact the list might have on my life. What if it made Kate's presence live on so powerfully my grief would never end? What if it tied me to the past so closely I could never move on?

For me, there was never any doubt in my mind. Kate's list was an incredible gift, no question. I felt sure it would guide me and reassure me and help me build a fantastic future for our boys.

I still have no idea how long it will take me to fulfill all of Kate's wishes, or even if I ever will. Some may take a lifetime. Only one thing is certain. I am taking every step as best as I possibly can, in memory of my wonderful wife, Kate.

Chapter 1

"Kiss boys two times after I have gone" /p

"We made it!" Kate giggled. That giggle. That blonde hair. Those cornflower-blue eyes. I looked at my beautiful wife and laughed. She had a knack for making me laugh. Even just hearing that cheeky giggle of hers set me off. That day, once I'd started laughing I just couldn't stop. I lay back in the wet sand and pulled Kate down with me, cracking up laughing. It reminded me of the day I proposed to her more than twenty years earlier. Then, I'd deliberately made her crash off her skis into a mound of powdery snow. I dived in on top of her and produced an engagement ring from my pocket. She giggled, and we kissed, just as we did now. Back then I laughed with relief that she wanted to be my wife, and with excitement at the prospect of spending my life with such an amazing woman. Now I laughed with relief and excitement again, but for different reasons.

I could feel worry seeping out of me, through my back and into the sand, and I felt a surge of joy and optimism about the future, something I hadn't felt in a long while. A wave washed over our feet, and Kate and I shrieked and huddled tighter together. As the water ebbed away I felt the terror and the darkness of the past three years wash into the sea and drift away from me. The sun beamed brilliantly, shining light and warmth back into our lives.

We lay back on the sand, holding hands. I thought about how life had changed in so many ways for Kate and me; but in so many other ways it hadn't. We had two children now, our precious little boys, Reef and Finn,

but at heart we still felt like two giddy teenagers, on the lookout for the next adventure. Now, I felt sure, nothing could hold us back.

Propping ourselves up on our elbows, we watched the boys chase each other along the beach. It was summer 2008, and Reef's fourth birthday was just weeks away. "We are very sorry, but Reef may not survive for more than a few days." I remembered the shocking chill those words brought when he was eighteen months old, and we were given the devastating news that Reef had cancer. It felt like a bucket of ice had been tipped onto my chest, freezing my heart and crushing my lungs. When I tried to come up for air, I was winded with yet more unbearable news. Doctors warned that if he did survive, our little boy would be disabled. "We are very sorry, but Reef may never walk again."

Thinking about it now was like remembering a script from a film or a story about somebody else's life. It was incredible to think that the child we'd held close and cried over each time he needed a blood transfusion or another dose of chemotherapy was this same, carefree little boy running along the beach. He was our miracle.

I smiled at Kate. I could tell from the look on her face she was thinking similar thoughts. I was surprised by how young she looked, relaxing on the water's edge beside me. The two lines I'd grown used to seeing carved deep between her eyebrows had melted into her soft skin. She looked like a girl again, like the carefree Kate I knew before our world was ruled by fear and worry and the aching, helpless sorrow you feel for a sick child.

"Look at Reef run!" Kate giggled. "He made it!" Even her voice sounded younger and freer. "We made it!" Her eyes were flashing the way they used to when we scuba dived on holiday. I always looked forward to the moment Kate pulled off her mask, because her face shone like a rainbow, as if she'd stolen the glittering scales and electric stripes from the tropical fish. That's how she looked that day, lapping up the sight of Reef and Finn playing chase.

"Singe, it's incredible. We're so lucky." I nodded and grinned. My old Kate was back. Lucky was not a word other people might use, but it was the word Kate chose that day, and it's one of the reasons I loved her so much. Other people might have felt bitter or badly done by, but not Kate. She embraced life and always tried to look on the bright side.

"Can't catch me, can't catch me!" I heard Finn tease. My eyes flicked from Reef to his little brother. For a two-year-old Finn was an awesome little runner, and he was giving Reef a run for his money. Everyone said Reef was the thoughtful one like Kate, which I had to admit was true, but Finn was my "mini-me," cheeky and sports-mad and boisterous. He was our miracle too. I remembered the moment I heard that Kate had gone into premature labor with him, and my chest tightened just as it had done when I answered the phone on the night of Finn's birth. The discovery of Reef's abdominal lump had sent Kate's stress levels through the roof. Her contractions began as we waited for the results of tests to tell us exactly what sort of lump Reef had. Kate was just seven months pregnant; it was way too early for her to give birth.

Watching Finn scamper about on the beach, I thanked God that the madness of those hospital days was over. Both boys had been in danger of losing their lives. One in a special care incubator, one with cancer in his pelvis. What were the odds? What was the point of thinking like that? It was insane. It was only a couple of years before, but it suddenly seemed a lifetime ago.

I exhaled deeply, blowing out the memory of fear and anguish into the sea air. The boys were whooping and skipping without a care in the world, and I marveled at them. Friends nicknamed us "The Incredibles." "You're such an amazing family," they told us, before and after our misfortune. In that moment, with Kate smiling by my side and our boys playing happily together, I felt it was true. We'd had our run of bad luck but

we'd come through it smiling triumphantly. My family was truly incredible.

I recalled that sunny day when we sat in the car overlooking the pebbled beach at Clevedon less than two years later. Now it was January 20, 2010, and instead of sunbeams, dark-gray barrels of cloud pointed down from the sky. The boys were buckled into their car seats, and I decided to get in the back and sit between them. As I stepped out of the car I shivered as the wind bit my face. I wished I could push back the clouds and pull out the sun. I patted my coat pocket to make sure the bubble gum was still there. It was something Kate and I had talked about. The boys had been nagging us for ages to try some gum, and we'd both decided this was a good time to give them a treat.

"Boys, I have something really, really important and really, really sad to tell you," I said, pulling them in close to my sides. I felt a little ear dig into my ribs on either side of my chest. My heart was thrashing around so wildly in there I was worried the sound of it might frighten the boys, and I took a long deep breath to try to steady the thud.

I'd picked the boys up from preschool and school and driven straight to our favorite spot near the beach at Clevedon, trying to keep things as normal as possible on the short journey. "How was your day?" I asked, immediately regretting the question. Whatever they said, it was going to get a lot worse. I don't know what they replied; it took all my energy just to drive the car safely and pretend to be like any other parent picking up their children on a cold Wednesday afternoon.

This morning I'd written "Oh my God, my darkest hour" in my diary. Now this hour felt even darker. Reef and Finn listened intently, waiting for me to tell them the important and sad news. They were dressed neatly in their uniforms, and my heart went out to them. They were such good boys, always eager to please, and I instinctively gave them a little smile and ruffled their fair hair. I think I'd done a good job so far of hiding my feelings and I wished I didn't have to tell them what had happened earlier that day. I wished I could be like other parents on the school run, chatting about friends or homework and telling the kids what they were having for tea. I didn't know what to say or how to say it, so I just squeezed the boys tight for a moment while I tried to control my breathing and hold back my tears.

"Say what you mean," I imagined Kate whispering gently to me. Her voice was soft and encouraging but it cut straight into my heart. I remembered her saying exactly the same words just a few weeks earlier, as she lay in bed writing her list. "I think it's really important to say what you mean, and I want the boys to learn that," she had explained, before writing instruction number four in her diary: "Please teach them to say what they mean." The school and hospital had reiterated this in their advice to me. I was not to beat about the bush or use vague language, as it might give the boys false hope or confuse them.

I cleared my throat and shifted position so that I could look at both their faces while I spoke. I had to tell them straight. "I'm sorry to have to tell you this, boys," I said, my voice cracking. Four soft blue eyes looked into mine. In that moment I saw Kate in the boys' eyes, and I could feel her watching me. I remembered her crying and saying she wished she could swap places with Reef when he was suffering, and I knew exactly what she meant. If I could have shouldered both boys' pain for them I would have, but it was impossible to shield them from this.

Their little eyes were scanning my face now like miniature flashlights, looking for clues through the fading light. They were only four and five years old, too young for this. I swallowed uncomfortably and felt my face redden as I tried and failed to hold back the tears.

“Mommy has died. She won’t be coming home from hospital again. She died this morning.” Hearing the words come out of my mouth made me gasp and break down. The boys clung to me, and the three of us cried in each other’s arms, spluttering out hot white breath into the cold winter air.

“Has Mommy gone to heaven?” Reef sniffed eventually.

“Yes,” I said.

“Is she on a cloud?” he gulped.

“Yes,” I said, before quickly adding: “You can imagine her to be on a cloud if you like.”

I’d been told not to say things like “Mommy has gone to sleep” because it might make the boys afraid to go to sleep in their beds at night, or they might imagine she could wake up one day. I didn’t want them to really believe Mommy was on a cloud, because she wasn’t, but I thought it might be all right for Reef to imagine her there, if that’s what he wanted.

Nobody spoke again for a while. We just sat and cuddled and cried until a loud engine noise overhead made us all turn around and look out the misty back window of the car. Through watery eyes we watched two aircraft fly diagonally across the heavy gray blanket of sky above us, leaving a perfect white cross in their wake.

“Look, Mommy just blew us a kiss,” Reef said, and we all carried on crying.

It was just the three of us now. I felt that very acutely as we huddled in our own white cloud together, sharing the same oxygen and pain. We sobbed solidly for at least half an hour, oblivious to the dark and cold descending on us. The salt from my tears stung my face, and the boys’ cheeks turned from their usual rosy pink to blotchy red. I could have cried for hours and days, but when the boys’ soft sobs and panting cries lessened a little, I sensed it was time to stop.

“Would you like some bubble gum?” I asked them. Their faces brightened a bit as they unwrapped the pink parcels of gum, but Finn still had tears coursing down his cheeks.

“Thank you, Daddy,” he said politely as he stuffed the gum into his mouth. “Why has Mommy died?” He sniffed loudly and looked straight into my eyes.

“Well, you know she has been very ill, don’t you? And when you saw her last night in hospital and she gave you a big cuddle she was very, very ill. She was so ill, she died.”

“I want to see her,” Finn said. “Can I see Mommy again?”

“I’m sorry, Finn, but you can’t see her anymore.”

He chewed his gum miserably, and I watched him helplessly, unable to think of a word I could add that would possibly make my answer any better.

“I like this,” Finn said after a minute or two. “It tastes nice, Daddy.”

Reef nodded. “Thank you for getting us the bubble gum,” he said, wiping the tears off his face with the sleeve of his coat.

“Can we have it again?”

“I think we should always have bubble gum on special occasions. Mommy thought that was a good idea too. Let’s go home now.”

Buckling myself back in the driver's seat I felt strangely calm. I’d successfully completed a task on my own, and a very major task at that. I felt Kate would have approved of how I handled the situation, and that she would have done exactly the same if she were in my shoes. It was comforting to think that.

As we pulled away from the empty beach I looked at the boys in the rearview mirror. Both were staring out of the windows with swollen eyes, chewing noisily on their gum and filling the car with the smell of sweet strawberry flavoring.

Those two innocent little passengers were now my sole responsibility. My stomach muscles contracted, and I tightened my grip on the steering wheel as I thought about the enormity of that responsibility. They had no mommy anymore; it was all down to me. I was suddenly a widower, and I was suddenly a single dad. Even hearing those words in my head shocked me and made my blood ebb and flow uncomfortably around my body.

Part of me wanted to run away and pretend none of this had happened, yet I also felt a powerful urge to do everything in my power to protect my boys and make Kate proud. I still wanted to be her Mr. Incredible; it was the very least I could do.

I drove slowly and carefully. I couldn’t take any chances now. I’d have to slow down on every journey. If something happened to me, who would look after the boys? Besides, there was no rush to get home. The house would be exactly as I had left it earlier. Nobody would be burning dinner in the oven like Kate used to. My lips curled into a weak, involuntary smile as I thought about Kate’s attempts at cooking. If you couldn’t put it in the microwave and wait for it to go “ping” it was beyond Kate. That’s what I always said to tease her.

Ruth, who was Kate’s best friend, helped her out when we got married, teaching her how to cook half a dozen simple dishes. Tagliatelle, lasagne, Mexican fajitas, curry and spaghetti Bolognese became her “specialties,” but Kate never really did master the art of cookery. Now Ruth had another role. “Ruth good for parenting advice,” Kate instructed, “as she has two boys same age gap—if conflict between grandparent views.” Remembering that little word “if” made me smile. Our parents are so different, and like most couples, we’d had our issues trying to keep both sides of the family happy. Now Kate’s parents, Christine and Martin, had a son-in-law but no daughter. Everything was messed up. I hadn’t even thought about that until now, and it made my head throb. It must have made Kate’s head throb too, but she was one step ahead of me, thinking up ways to make life easier for me after she was gone.

I like Ruth a lot. She used to be married to my friend Chris, whom I met twenty-odd years ago when I was learning to scuba dive. Eventually Chris certified Kate when she took her scuba-diving qualifications too. Ruth is divorced from Chris now, and she lives a short walk away from our house. I call her my “pet Rottweiler,” as she’s one of those friends who speaks their mind and tells you when you’re being an idiot. I admire that, and I thought how clever it was of Kate to set Ruth up to give me parenting advice.

I flicked a glance over my left shoulder. “Don’t swallow the gum, boys,” I said. “Remember, that’s why we didn’t give it to you before. Please be careful. Promise me you’ll be careful.”

“OK, Daddy,” Reef said. “I can blow bubbles, look!”

With that he blew a broken bubble, making a loud raspberry sound that made Finn giggle. They were still chuckling as we pulled into the drive and piled through the front door.

I missed Kate's familiar cry of "Hello, boys!" as the front door opened. I missed not seeing her handbag strewn in the hall or her shoes kicked off at the bottom of the stairs, but to my relief and surprise the house didn't seem half as empty as I'd feared. The phone was ringing; our terrier, Coral, was barking; and before I'd even got my coat off someone was knocking on the door.

It was Paula, one of the moms from school. She was crying her eyes out, and my immediate reaction was to try to comfort her. "I'm sorry, Singe," she blurted out. "I just had to come round and I had to do something."

"It's OK, don't worry," I told her, giving her a hug. "I'm touched you came."

It felt good to be the one offering support instead of receiving it. It was a role I was a lot more comfortable with. She held out a huge cake tin. "I have to bake when I'm upset. Here's about two hundred and forty brownies. I'm so sorry!"

I laughed as she ran off down the path, apologizing, leaving me standing there with the overflowing tin.

Over the next few hours lots of other friends and neighbors arrived with bowls of curry, cottage pies and lasagne. Some popped in for a few minutes, others scuttled away and left wonderful goodies on the doorstep. I felt like a one-man disaster zone, like I'd become a mini-Haiti overnight, and I needed food drops and emergency rations to survive. Kate's parents came round and played with the boys for a bit while I listened to all the phone messages, answered the door and slipped off into the conservatory to allow myself a little cry in private.

Kate was everywhere, but she was nowhere. Some of her favorite clothes lay crumpled on top of the ironing basket, and I noticed one of her brightly colored life jackets had fallen off its peg by the back door. We had a garage full of life jackets and every piece of survival gear you could imagine. The irony of it had never struck me until that moment. Irony didn't even seem the right word; sheer rotten luck was more like it. Why had Kate not survived? She was fit and healthy. She never smoked and hardly drank, and she followed all the health advice going. The only thing she wasn't great with was eating vegetables, but she did her best with them. She didn't deserve to die. Why had this happened to Kate?

I could hear other people's wives and mothers coming and going, offering words of comfort. My wife, my soul mate, was gone. Our boys had lost their mommy, but other lives carried on. Other people cared and loved and shared. Other people breathed and talked and hugged, and other people walked out of my front door and went home to their children and their other halves.

At 7 p.m. I was alone, and it was time for the boys to have their bath. Kate and I always stuck to the same routine. One of us would run the bath, and Kate would get the boys washed and tucked up calmly in their pajamas and kiss them good night. Then it was my turn, and I'd read them a story and invariably wind them up again. I would tickle them and make them giggle, and Kate would come and stand at their bedroom door, hand on hip and shaking her head disapprovingly.

She secretly loved it, and she knew I knew it. She was full of fun, and nothing pleased her more than seeing her boys laugh. She was also a brilliant mom, though, and rules were rules and bedtime was bedtime. "Come on, you three naughty boys," she scolded, eyes glinting cheekily. "Time to settle down." She kissed the boys good night, and then I kissed the boys good night, usually giving them one last little tickle when Mommy wasn't looking.

Where did I start tonight? Now I had to be Mommy and Daddy, an impossible task. "Come on, boys, bath time," I called. I'd said the same thing a thousand times, but now it seemed new and different, like I'd said it for the very first time. The three of us went upstairs together like we had done so many times before, except

it wasn't the same. Nothing would ever be the same again now that Kate was gone.

My eyes were drawn to the door frame of the boys' bedroom. Their heights were notched up in pencil on the white frame where Kate used to stand, pretending to be cross. I remembered her balancing books on the boys' heads and telling them not to wriggle as she recorded their heights.

There wasn't a lot between them, despite the eighteen-month age gap. Reef's illness meant he wasn't as tall as he might have been, and he and Finn looked incredibly close in age. "Need to measure me on door frame—Mommy was 5ft 1in," Kate had carefully added to her list. That was a job the boys could help me with. That would be something good to do together.

I turned on the bath taps and noticed Kate's favorite milky bubble bath standing on the side of the tub, half empty. "Half full," Kate corrected me. I'd heard her say that so many times. She was a half-full sort of person. Kate's glass was never half empty, even when sickness sapped her life away.

I held that thought in my head as I bathed the boys and got them into their pajamas, forcing myself to think positively. I would never get over losing Kate, but I was so lucky to have these two cracking little lads. They were a part of her and a part of us. I had so much to live for despite Kate's death.

"Can we sleep in your bed tonight?" Reef asked. "Of course you can," I said. They bounded into our bedroom and launched themselves on to the bed like a couple of little rockets. Kate had bought an absolutely massive king-size bed when she got ill. She had wanted to create a cozy nest when she was too weak to get up so the boys would have plenty of space to cuddle in with her. Sadly, she died in hospital before the bed was delivered, and now they had so much space it was ridiculous. They looked marooned in the middle of the huge cream leather frame, a cloud of fluffy white duvet surrounding them.

"Snuggle in now, boys," I said. "Time to settle down." They wriggled under the covers obediently, perhaps expecting a little tickle, but it wasn't the right time for that. I was using up all my energy just going through the motions of being normal and not breaking down in front of them. "Now be good, sleep tight," I said. I bent down to kiss them both good night. As I did so the scent of Kate's perfume on the pillows mingled with the soapy smell of the boys' heads. "Kiss boys two times after I have gone," Kate said, but I didn't need reminding. "Night-night, Reef," I said, kissing one cheek and then the other. One kiss from me, one from Kate. I did exactly the same with Finn, then I gave them both a massive cuddle, grateful I could bury my head between them so they couldn't see my tears.

I felt Kate's presence very powerfully. Her perfume was so evocative I could feel her wrapping herself around me, around all three of us, and I half expected her to whisper a "thank you" in my ear after she watched me kiss the boys as she had instructed.

I quietly closed the bedroom door and let out a stream of silent tears, pressing my hands over my mouth so the boys didn't hear me. As I did so I glanced in the open bathroom door and noticed the school uniforms still littering the floor, exactly where the boys had left them. That's how life was now. There was nobody to pick up where I'd left off, and certainly nobody to finish my sentences or read my mind like Kate used to.

I stooped to pick up the clothes and froze as I heard an unfamiliar noise. It sounded like footsteps coming up the stairs, but that was ridiculous because I was all alone in the house. I held my breath and strained my ears, frantically trying to remember if someone still had a key or if I'd forgotten a visitor. I didn't want to shout out and frighten the boys, but something wasn't right. Nobody had called my name, and there'd been no knock at the door. It wasn't Kate. The footsteps were too heavy to be Kate's or, rather, for me to imagine them being Kate's. I straightened my back, instinctively heading to the bedroom to guard the boys. As I stepped across the landing a sudden gush of water in the pipes around the bathroom replaced the sound of the

footsteps.

I dissolved in tears. It was just the central heating creaking. I sat on the edge of the bath and sobbed as silently as I could. I'd never noticed how noisy the house was before. When Kate was here I guess I always assumed she was making the noise, but now she wasn't. Even the bath was squeaking under my weight, making a grating "eee-aww" sound as my body shook with heavy, muted sobs.

When I eventually stopped crying I went downstairs, not quite sure what to do next and looking for jobs to do to keep me busy. There were more messages to listen to, the dog to feed and a sink full of teacups to wash. The fridge was full of all the food prepared by friends and relatives. I had no idea who had brought what, and whose crockery was whose. I'd have to sort that out.

Tomorrow was Thursday, and I was glad the boys could go to school as normal. I thought it was best to maintain their routine and I was glad of the distraction as I sorted out their school bags and made their packed lunches. Still, I couldn't wait for the day to end. At least if I was asleep I wouldn't be able to burst into tears.

The boys were fast asleep when I eventually crept into bed, but they both wriggled in close as my head hit the pillow. I didn't sleep well, nodding off and waking frequently with a foot in my ear or a head in my armpit. "Mommy loved Reef's cuddles at night." "Finn's cuddles were always very special." They were on Kate's list. It was almost impossible to believe she had written those words just weeks earlier, yet she would never cuddle the boys again.

It was so unfair. I could see Kate propped up with her diary, in this very spot where I lay. She was wearing a pretty white cotton nightshirt, which was typical Kate. When we first met I used to call her the "Timotei girl" because she wore a floaty white linen gypsy skirt and a white cotton sleeveless top, exactly like the girl in the shampoo advert. Except, of course, Kate's hair was much more beautiful than the model's, that's what I always said.

It had been pretty traumatic for Kate when she lost her hair. She had always been very proud of her blonde hair, and she cried when it came out in clumps on the pillow and blocked the drain when she showered. She never really complained, but I knew she was heartbroken. She was a very beautiful woman, and her hair had always been a big part of her beauty.

I remember being angry about her hair. Losing a breast was bad enough. Why did she have to go and lose her hair too? It was just so cruel, and I hated seeing her upset about it. She still looked bloody fantastic to me, even when she was bald as an egg. When we went to the rugby I told her that her head was perfectly shaped, like a rugby ball. "I'll take that as a compliment," she laughed. "You should, you look gorgeous," I replied, and I really meant it. Kate was always stunning.

We were watching the England v. France match at Twickenham, and England won. Kate was ecstatic, jumping up and down like she did as a teenager when she watched me play rugby for a local team. It was a great boost seeing her like that in the midst of her chemotherapy.

"We have just got to take the boys to see the rugby," she said excitedly.

"We'll take them to see Ireland versus England in Dublin," I suggested.

"Brilliant idea!" she said, clapping her hands.

Now losing a head of hair seemed minuscule in comparison to the enormous loss of Kate. There was nothing

left of Kate, or at least nothing physical. She had ice-blue eyes. They shone out of her face, giving her a beautiful glow. As for her figure . . . well, don't get me started. The first time I saw Kate she was wearing bleached jeans that looked like they'd been sprayed on. She looked incredible then and she still looked incredible twenty-five years later. I know she would have carried on looking incredible for another twenty-five years and more, had she been lucky enough to grow old.

Instead, Kate lost everything. First her breast, then her hair. Now her eyes had stopped shining, and her gorgeous body was gone. I'd never be able to make love to my beautiful Kate again. I wouldn't even be able to take the boys to the rugby with her. Instead, that was another item on the list. "Take the boys to see an international rugby match." At least that could be arranged, I'd see to that.

The alarm clock rang out at 7:30 a.m. the next morning, jolting me into a half-awake panic. My body seemed to know before I did that this wasn't a normal day, and I immediately tensed and my heart raced as my mind caught up. I looked at the boys curled up like two little dormice beside me. They were lying on Kate's side of the bed. Kate was dead, I remembered. I felt like someone had just given me the news and it was sinking in all over again. The boys started fidgeting and stirring. Their mom was dead. That was all I could think about. My wife was dead and their mom was dead, and here we all were, about to get up for school and start the next day of the rest of our lives without her.

Another alarm sounded, this time on my mobile phone. It startled me because I didn't remember setting another alarm, and I instantly worried I'd already made a mistake and missed something important, something Kate had booked in or wanted me to do. The words "Reef's medicine" flashed on the phone screen. I smiled and let some tears leak from my eyes, remembering how Kate had asked me for my mobile phone when she lay in her hospital bed toward the end. She had diligently set the alarm so I would never forget to give Reef his daily medication.

Reef sat up in bed and caught me wiping tears from my face. "Oh, for goodness' sake stop cryyyy-ing, Dad!" he said, his little face twisted with frustration. He must have thought I'd cried all night, and maybe he was right. Finn sat up now, looking forlorn. Reef put his arm around his shoulder and said firmly, "Come on, we'll be all right." The boys' eyes met, and they gave each other a knowing look and a half-smile, a couple of brothers hatching a plot. "'Course you'll be all right, boys," I said, pulling on a cheerful smile. It was only half fake, because their bravery gave me the will and strength to face the day.

"OK, boys, take turns in the shower, please," I said, turfing them out of the bed. We had a routine in place on school days, and I was determined to stick to it, as I figured it would help me cope. I needed the boys to pull their weight now and do things for themselves a bit more, and it wasn't going to help any of us if I started mollycoddling them or rewriting the rules.

While the boys showered, I laid out their school uniforms and made the bed; then, while I showered, they got dressed as usual, with Reef helping Finn into his black trousers and green sweatshirt. The pair of them went downstairs to feed Coral and the guinea pigs, and I got the boys' breakfasts ready and gave Reef his medicine.

Everything went according to plan. "Teeth, please, boys," I said, and they scampered back up the stairs just like they always did after breakfast, jostling for pole position. "It's my turn first," Finn said. "Just a minute," Reef replied as they reached the landing. "How about you brush your hair while I do my teeth . . ."

I shuffled around the kitchen, clearing up the breakfast dishes. As the boys disappeared behind the bathroom

door, it fell silent downstairs.

The dog was statue-like in the conservatory, watching some birds forage for crumbs in the frozen yard. I could hear myself breathing as I stood and watched her in silence. Kate's breathing had been so labored toward the end. When we lay together adding to her list, she was fighting for every breath, dependent on the ugly oxygen tank she was attached to. I despised it and welcomed it. I didn't want Kate to need it. In the past the only times I'd seen Kate breathless were in happy times, when she laughed so hard she had tears rolling down her cheeks, when we made passionate love or when her heart was racing with exhilaration as she pulled off her mask after a dive.

In the end the oxygen tanks weren't enough, and Kate had to go into hospital. I thought she'd get better in hospital. I thought her lungs would have a rest and she'd catch her breath after the exertion of Lapland and Christmas. It didn't happen like that. Instead, Kate got worse. "Singe, I want to write a last letter to the boys," she said. It was January 19, 2010.

Doctors had told me just weeks before, on our return from Lapland, that they hoped Kate had eighteen months to live. I clung on to that hope every single day, even when I saw it fading away before my eyes. Eighteen months would take her through to Reef's seventh birthday, and Finn would be five and a half. Kate herself would turn forty in March 2011. Surely she could make it to her fortieth, at the very least?

I couldn't help Kate, or even watch her write her last letter to her boys. It was way too soon, and it was something I felt should be private between Kate and her sons. From the hospital, I called Lois, a lovely friend of ours who's an English teacher. "Can you help?" I asked. "Kate mentioned you, if you don't mind. I know you've talked about it. I just couldn't do it." I kissed Kate good night in her hospital bed, leaving her with Lois. "I'll see you in the morning. I love you. Acres and acres," I said.

"Thanks, Singe," Kate said gratefully, and I felt a flash of anger. Why did my wife have to be grateful for this? No mother should have to write a good-bye letter to her two little boys.

"Good luck," I said, kissing Kate again on the cheek. "Acres and acres," she said quietly.

Driving home, I was visited by images of patients I'd treated when I used to work as a paramedic. I'd saved dozens of lives. I saw the faces of young women who'd abused their bodies and poisoned themselves with drugs and alcohol. I could see them clearly under the blue flashing light, convulsing, vomiting and falling unconscious, then surviving against the odds, against their will in some cases. Life was so unfair.

I lay in bed that night feeling cold without Kate by my side, and I thought about her letters to the boys for what felt like hours. Reef and Finn were sleeping soundly, and I was grateful for all the help I was getting from family and friends that meant the boys' routine was unaltered when I needed to go to the hospital to see Kate.

What would she write to the boys? How would she cope with such a difficult job when she was already so frail? What was I thinking? This was Kate, my Kate. She was a powerhouse of a woman inside that tiny little body. She would do a magnificent job, I was sure. I was also sure she was just being cautious, and that there was no mad panic to write the letters so soon. She still had time.

I slept eventually, or rather my body collapsed into a series of short, confused naps. I had dreams filled with images of Kate smiling and laughing and then fighting for breath. I couldn't see in the dreams why she was fighting for breath. Was it the old Kate, refueling her body after an exhilarating dive or coming up for air after kissing me passionately, as she did so often? Or was she struggling to fill her broken lungs?

It was pitch-black in the room when the phone by my bed rang out. I looked at the luminous hands on the clock. It was nearly 4 a.m. on the morning of January 20, and I knew it was bad news before I heard the nurse speak.

“Kate’s taken a very bad turn for the worse.”

I had to see Kate before she went. This was it, there wasn’t a moment to spare. Throwing on clothes as I ran down the stairs two at a time, I lurched out of the house and banged on the door of the house next door. Jane, our kind neighbor, was amazing. “Kate’s dying,” I told her, and left her to do the rest, shouting instructions about staying with the boys and taking them to school in the morning.

It was a forty-minute drive to the hospital in Weston-super-Mare. Too long, too far. Missing Kate was unthinkable. I pressed my foot hard on the accelerator and tore up the roads. Fifteen frantic minutes later I slammed the car across four parking spaces in front of the hospital and headed to the nearest door. It was a fire exit, but I ripped it open and bolted down the corridor toward Kate’s ward. Two security guards shouted “Oi!” and started to give chase, but I didn’t look back.

Kate was in a private room and a nurse opened the door ready for me when she heard me thundering along the corridor. Clearly, every second counted. Thank God I wasn’t too late. There were five nurses surrounding Kate in the bed. I noticed she wasn’t attached to any drips or drains anymore. It was too late for that.

“We have made her comfortable with morphine,” one nurse explained. Kate’s eyes looked at me as I cuddled her small body. Her mom and dad were on their way, and I desperately wanted Kate to hang on until they arrived to say good-bye. She was taking very shallow breaths now, and the nurses were whispering about giving her more morphine. Christine and Martin arrived just as one last big dose went in.

“Sorry,” Kate said to me, and I grabbed her hand.

“Don’t be stupid! You have nothing to be sorry for,” I said. I cuddled her and held her left hand, the hand I’d placed her engagement ring on, and then, in later years, her matching wedding band and finally her eternity ring.

Her parents sat together, holding Kate’s right hand. We kept talking, offering reassurances, even when Kate’s breath stopped coming. I knew from my paramedic training that the brain is still active for a couple of minutes after breathing stops. A nurse had gently reminded me of this, and I kept talking to Kate. “You were the most wonderful wife and mother,” I told her. “I will do everything I can to carry out your wishes. I will tell the boys how much you loved them, and what a wonderful mom you were.”

“We’re ready!” Reef shouted. Coral started barking loudly, scattering the birds from the back garden, and Finn bounded into the kitchen and asked, “Is it swimming tonight, Daddy?” I was back in the moment, but it felt surreal, like I wasn’t quite there. Kate had died just the day before, and here we all were getting ready for school, carrying on with our lives. It felt somehow wrong, yet I knew it was exactly the right thing to do. Without a shadow of a doubt, I knew it was what Kate would want us to do, and so we put on our coats and shoes, and I drove the boys to school.

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