

Chapter 26

A Mother's Story

Rose

Roland and Jake were early teenagers when they began using drugs. At first my husband Jeremy and I did not know. At that time, what you did was 'just say no' and my boys ... they made me think that they were too sensible to take drugs. They said people who take drugs are stupid. So I thought 'oh good, they are obviously not going to take drugs,' but all the while they were. I cannot remember when I first began to suspect.

When I absolutely and definitely knew something was going on was when Jake was 18. He was arrested for possession of cannabis. Years later he told me he felt ashamed and labelled as a 'druggie' because it was reported in our local newspaper – and that was the first I knew of the arrest. To open the local paper and there is my son having been arrested – I just felt humiliated and ashamed. I did not go out that morning. I could not go down the street because of the stigma.

It went on from there and they revealed to me they were using all kinds of things – mushrooms, amphetamines and cannabis. Their personalities began to change. They were devious and manipulative – not all of the time, but there was this other side. They were doing badly at school despite their early promise. Both were excluded and Jake was eventually expelled.

All this time, we thought it was teenage rebellion – and our boys had a bad case of it. We had no idea of the underlying reason. So, I went through years and years of a big knot of anxiety in my stomach, worrying all of the time, depending on how the boys were on any particular day. Some days I would feel hopeful as they would both be in good moods, then other days just hopeless and dejected.

The dreadful thing is the stigma because no matter how bad I was feeling there was nobody I could talk to. I did not dare reveal it to my friends and neighbours, to people at work and to my parents. So some days I would wake up – if I had managed to sleep – and I just wanted to burst into tears. But I would have to go

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into work and just pretend that everything was fine. It went on for several years and Jake got worse and worse, but he did eventually get on to an Access course. He managed to reduce his drug use and went to college as a mature student. We felt proud of him – he still was not off drugs completely but enough to function, go to lectures and write essays.

Roland was still living at home – on and off – he had a girlfriend and stayed at her flat. When he was home Roland always confided in me. I always knew when he wanted to talk as he would ask me to go for a walk with him. We went for a walk one day – he was 18, he told me he had started smoking heroin. I was out of my mind with worry. He told me not to worry, he said it was alright as long as you don't inject – but of course it wasn't long before he was injecting. He was living more and more with his girlfriend. They would come and see us but it was like they were grocery shopping at our house. I guess because all of his money was going on drugs.

His girlfriend was from America. She was six years older than him. She wanted to take a trip back to America, to go for three months and take Roland with her. It was big for him, he had never been abroad. We had never done foreign holidays. It was hugely exciting for him and it encouraged him to get the help to come off heroin, which he did. When he came back, it was amazing to see, he had filled out and looked really fit. He was talking about them maybe going back to America and him trying to get a work permit. She had relatives who might be able to employ him. We thought this was the best thing possible. So it was a time of great hopefulness, I thought they might get married.

It was a month or two after they got back when they split up. Roland immediately plunged into complete despair – so, of course, what do people who have used heroin want when they are at a time of despair – well heroin, it was the only thing that would comfort him. He went back on heroin. We had an awful time. He came back home to live. I remember on Christmas Day – my parents always came and I always tried to put on a nice Christmas but the two generations never seemed to gel, so I wanted to do everything to keep people happy. Roland disappeared into the kitchen after lunch. I went to find him and he was sitting at the kitchen table with his head in his hands and there were just sobs coming from him, his body was heaving. I just put my arms around him. That was how it was for months.

After six or seven months he seemed to come out of that sadness. He was still using heroin but had picked up with friends he had known from school. There was a girl who he was starting to get along with. He was looking much happier and he decided it was time to sort his life out, so he said he needed help and needed to get off the heroin. He had an idea he wanted to go back to college, he wanted to work with trees, a course on forestry. So he went to try and get treatment and was put on a waiting list for a methadone programme. He was doing his best, staying at home as much as he could. He asked us to look after him, to help him. The treatment service told him he needed to reduce his heroin use and they would keep testing him before he could get onto the programme. We discussed this and I said to him 'I think I need to take control, take control of you' so what we agreed was I would give him the money for the heroin – I would at least have some control.

I knew he would not be taking money out of my handbag, stealing things from the house – that had happened before. I felt at least I was taking charge.

We agreed on a set amount of money that I would give him to buy heroin. I would go with him – as near as he would allow to the place where he was going to get the heroin. He would give it straight to me, I would hide it and then dole it out to him at regular intervals. I knew it was against the law. I knew what I was doing was illegal, but I was more concerned about helping him.

After he had been waiting six weeks to get on to the methadone programme, one of his friends phoned and said their parents were away and he was having friends around. He wanted Roland to go. I was still at work. Roland told Jeremy he was going out and that he would be back later that night. I was giving him his heroin that night so I expected him to come back. But he did not appear. I was worrying, but in the end I thought 'I'll go to bed and put the heroin in his room for when he comes in'. I went to bed. At around 2 a.m. Jeremy woke me. The doorbell had gone so he went down to answer it. It was two police officers. My immediate thought was that Roland had got into a scrap. He was not the fighting sort but would step in on the side of someone being bullied. So I sat on the sofa and the policeman said to me a young man had been found dead.

I don't know why, but I thought it must have been one of the young men Roland was with. But it began to sink in that they were talking about Roland. But I couldn't believe it. I thought it had to be some mistake. I actually even thought it might have been Jake. My sons had different surnames – they were from different marriages – and the police gave me Roland's first name but then Jake's surname. The police said they would come back the next afternoon and take us to identify the body. We sat on the sofa crying. Jeremy phoned his sister and brother in law. They came over. We just sat crying until it got light. Then I had to phone my eldest son Jonathan. He had never been into drugs. He was a high flier at Cambridge University. I had to tell him, and then ask him to tell Jake's dad. I had to phone my parents, Jeremy's parents. It was awful having to tell people.

In the afternoon the police came for us to identify the body. I was still hoping it would be a stranger. But it wasn't, it was Roland. He was in the hospital morgue and I went to put my arms around him, leaning over him, and the policeman moved forward and said 'no, no, you cannot touch him'. I managed to kiss his forehead. It was so cold.

The policeman said to me that it had all come out that I had been giving Roland heroin so I would have to be questioned at the police station. So there I was, grieving for Roland and worrying at the same time about this forthcoming interview. I did not know if they would put me in jail for supply. Six months went by before they called me for the formal interview. So that was another anxiety gnawing at me for all that time. When the interview came, it was a lot of questioning. Then I was told it would not be taken any further.

I would not have been put through that if heroin use was regarded as a health issue and not a criminal one. Why put me through it? I was just trying to help my son. Why could he have not been helped? Why did he have to wait six weeks for a methadone programme? When his friends found him slumped in the bathroom, his lips turning blue, why did they not phone 999 [emergency services]? I am sure

the reason was they were afraid they would be implicated in drug use. Again, if it was not a criminal concern they would have had no reason to be afraid. As it was, by the time the ambulance got there he was dead.

We hear these days about Naloxone. If his friends were associating with a heroin user they should have had Naloxone available, they could have saved him themselves. But no, none of those things happened. It was so unnecessary, it did not need to happen.

They say for people who become addicts – that there is an underlying reason. With Roland, when he was born he had bilateral talipes, so as a baby he had plaster casts and special boots. After that I felt he did not look too bad, but his legs were thin and he never put on muscle. He had a real thing about it. He felt he was ugly. He would wear two pairs of trousers at the same time as he thought people would notice his legs were so thin. There were times he would only go out at night as he did not want people to see him.

I always wondered if heroin made him feel better about himself. When he was at school I wonder if he got into the trouble he did because he had to wear shorts for Physical Education. He asked, and I asked, if he could wear tracksuit trousers as he was so self-conscious but the school would not allow it. So he started bunking off school. So I do wonder if that was all part of the underlying reason.

As for Jake, why he started, there were a few things there really. When I was three months pregnant with Jake his dad decided to leave me. It was awful. I thought that we were happy, that we would be together forever. It was all such a terrible shock. I went through this pregnancy feeling that the anguish was like having a serpent writhing inside of me. From the emotional point of view it was a dreadful pregnancy. I have heard that the emotions of a woman can affect the baby in the womb. I don't know. But later on he did say to me that he felt rejected by his father, he said that to me more than once. I always said to him 'it was me that was rejected, Jake, not you', but I always wondered if it was part of it.

Later on, there was a phase when we lived with my parents. The boys were very young. My dad was very strict, Victorian in his attitudes to children. If I had realised how strict my dad was going to be, I would have found somewhere else. I had been an only child, a good little girl who read books and did everything I was told.

All of a sudden we arrived with three bouncy boys who wanted to rush about and do physical things. My dad did not know how to handle that, other than being down on them like a ton of bricks. He made Jake feel pushed down and belittled, not valued for his creative qualities. I cannot blame my dad. He thought you had to be tough on boys to make them into good citizens. But I think it in particular stunted Jake's personality. I don't know if that had something to do with what happened later. Maybe I am just trying to find excuses.

When Roland died, Jake was completely devastated. They had been really close, although there were three and half years between them. Jake was absolutely distraught. Of course he, like Roland, turned back to drugs. As a result he dropped out of university. He came home to live and we had three more terrible years. The worst years. He got into a really bad way. Sometimes he was living with us, other times on a friend's sofa. He just kept coming and going. I did not know

what to do for the best. If he was not with us I would worry myself to death as I did not know what he was doing. If he was with us at least I could keep an eye on him, but worrying myself silly wondering what is he going to steal next. I used to have to carry my handbag, even when I was doing the housework, so he could not get hold of my purse. I knew if my bag was anywhere in the house and he had an opportunity to take money that he would. So yes, it was three more terrible years.

At times I thought he was going to die. There are organisations that help parents who have problems with their children taking drugs. I did go a couple of times. Their mantra is 'tough love' and the advice was you have to put him out. I managed to find a hostel that he could move to – away from home, away from where we lived and the people he associated with. He refused to go. We told him if he did not go he would probably break up our marriage. And that was another aspect of this, the tension between me and Jeremy about how we treated the boys: me blaming him, him blaming me for being too soft. We kept changing our ideas about how we should be treating them.

After finding out about the hostel, this terrible morning arrived when we told him he was going. He was yelling and shouting. We took his stuff forcibly from his room, made him come downstairs. We got him out onto the driveway. He was yelling and shouting at me, telling me I did not love him. That was one of the most awful days in my life. Apart from their deaths of course.

So he went off to the hostel. I told him he must not phone me until he had got himself sorted out. But somehow he found ways to call, and he would tell me how dreadful the hostel was, that there were people there who knew him, hanging around outside. But we did not relent.

After a few days, the doorbell rang. It was Jake. It was a day of torrential rain. He was standing there bedraggled, wet and looking ill. He said 'you have to let me come home'. I asked him how he got here and he had walked, sleeping under a hedge overnight. He looked so ill. He just kept coughing. We sent him to the doctors, he had bronchitis. Had he stayed out another night I don't think he would have lasted much longer. So I felt I had no choice but to let him home again. We went through more bad patches.

He decided of his own accord to go to a different hostel, but there were dealers living around there. More than once he told me he was going to kill himself as he could not get out of the spiral of the drugs. There was nothing we could say to help him. All we could do was listen and hope some magic thing could happen. You are just helpless.

One day he came to see me and said he had been to see the drugs team of his own accord. He said he wanted to try rehab again, this would have been his third attempt – this time completely from him. He arranged it all. He had to go to detox first of all, which we drove him down to. That was for six weeks and then he transferred to rehab where he stayed for six months. All of this time there was an amazing transformation of him. He was then meant to move into a half-way house where he would be kept an eye on but he would live independently, doing volunteering and getting back into society. Jake said to me he still did not feel ready, that he did not trust himself. So again, of his own accord he arranged a further nine months at a different rehab in Cornwall. We took him down.

He was a different character. He started painting again. He had always had a piece of paper and pencil in front of him – from being a child right through to a teenager, he did amazing drawings. That came back, he started painting again and he was keeping fit – he had always been a good runner.

When his time finished he moved into a flat where he could get support at his own discretion. He started volunteer work. He was working in a children's nursery and he discovered to his astonishment he had a gift for working with children. The school wanted him to stay and they encouraged him to take his qualifications as a nursery nurse. He loved that. He had told the manager about his treatment and she supported him. But when he tried to get other nursery nurse jobs it was always such a performance because of his criminal record. It could go on for weeks, the process took so long so he lost his chance of interview. How does that help? Giving him a criminal record? What chance did he have to get his life back on track?

He started writing poetry. There seemed to be no end to what Jake could do. Along with his nursery nurse job he started to follow a counselling course. He decided that he wanted to become an art psychotherapist. That meant going to university in London. That was a big step as he had felt safe in Cornwall. He did not know if he could manage in London.

As a stepping stone he went to Cambridge to stay with his brother. From there he could commute. He said he wanted his brother Jonathan to keep an eye on him and he found AA meetings in Cambridge. Then he felt he could move to London and that was where he met his partner Cara. That is the nicest thing that has come from all of this – Cara, she is lovely. He moved in with her, they had a baby, my grandson.

Everything was going fine and then in 2013 he had a relapse. He nipped that in the bud quickly as Cara called a family meeting. We all went, my husband, Jake's brother. We sat round and talked to Jake and told him he had to go to AA meetings, we laid down the law. And he did, and he stopped.

A year later he relapsed again. Cara had to be away at the time, the baby was with her. Jake was found dead in his room. They had a lodger. The lodger had found Jake. There were terrible phone calls. To get a phone call from your son's partner and to hear that he is dead.

Anyone's Child has definitely helped me. It has helped me enormously. After we had brought Jake back I was grieving. I got an email from Danny Kushlick at Transform. When Jake was alive he had been doing so many jobs, studying, being a dad. One of the things he did was work as an editor for Open Democracy. He had asked me if I was prepared to write an article from a parent's point of view – a parent of an addict. Danny had read that article and contacted me and asked me if I would join an organisation that he was hoping to set up. At the time I said no, I did not want to get involved that much. But when Jake died, I suddenly thought of Danny. He got in touch with me and this time it felt right, that it was something I could be doing for Jake and Roland. I could not be helping them, my sons, but I could be helping other families. I agreed and went along to the inaugural meeting of the group.

It was wonderful to be with other families that don't judge you, you can tell them everything and they tell you everything. It is just such a huge support –

emotionally and also doing the campaigning. It has helped me be able to stand up in public. I had never ever spoken in public. I was terrified of speaking in public. When I went to the first meeting I said 'I don't know how much good I am going to be to this organisation as I will never be able to stand up in front of a hall full of people or be interviewed'. And they said that is fine. Just do what you think you can do. I went to one of the first events and Ann Marie Cockburn was speaking. I noticed she had her speech all written out I had thought the rules of public speaking were that you could only have notes on cards, not a sheet of paper. So I thought 'I can do that'.

The first time I did a radio interview I took a deep, deep breath, then I was on TV and then newspapers and magazines – so I have done all these things that I never dreamed I would be able to do. So to some extent it has made me blossom, but the most good is that we are spreading the message and more people are beginning to understand. I am also a member of the Green Party of England and Wales and I have been able to help to change party policy. I became a member of the working group on drug policy and we have managed to change policy and it was approved at conference – resoundingly accepted. I just feel really proud to have been part of that. Yes, they are a small party, but others follow.

One of the things I know I have done – I was speaking at a fringe event at the UK Liberal Party conference and a chap came up to me afterwards and said 'I came here convinced we need to crack down on people who use drugs. I have listened to you and completely changed my mind'. And I thought, well if I have at least convinced this one person.

But it is a quandary, I will be 75 next year and I think it will be nice to do all of the things I hoped to do when I retired from work, some gardening, baking. The usual things.