



WITNESS STATEMENT OF MARY K PERSHALL

I, Mary K Pershall, say as follows:

- 1 I make this statement on the basis of my own knowledge, save where otherwise stated. Where I make statements based on information provided by others, I believe such information to be true.
- 2 This statement details my experiences with the mental health system in Victoria. My exposure to the mental health system in Victoria has arisen in relation to my daughter, Anna.
- 3 In this statement, I set out my experiences and opinions on how mental health services are provided in Victoria and some suggestions as to how the system might be improved to hopefully prevent tragic outcomes such as those which occurred in relation to Anna.

Our family and the early years

- 4 My husband John and I met at a Colonial Dance class when we were 29. We quickly began to share our lives, vibrant with careers, friends and travel. John introduced me to bushwalking, and though I appreciated the beauty of the Tasmanian wilderness, I could not develop his passion for lugging a backpack around for hours and sleeping in a tent.
- 5 John longed for children, but I wasn't sure I could be a good mother. He convinced me that I could be, so when we were 34 we welcomed our first daughter, Katie. Three years later Anna was born in a family birth centre, emerging to the joyous applause of her big sister.
- 6 Anna was a delightful baby, with white blonde hair and the loveliest of blue eyes. She continued to be a sunny toddler who met all her milestones early. When she began to speak in full sentences at the age of two, she enchanted us with her imagination. Anna loved to spend hours in our huge backyard, catching ants and 'butchy boys' and lizards. She would tell us long and complicated stories about these creatures. She was such an easy little child to parent, never begging for anything or complaining that she was hot or bored or hungry. She barely seemed to register pain, even if she fell over and hurt herself.
- 7 The pain for Anna began when she started school. I had noticed when she was in kinder that Anna did not make friends as Katie had at that age. In fact the other kids seemed to avoid her, not interested in her prattling on and on about her imagined

- biography of a spider she had found under some leaf litter. But at that stage Anna didn't care with the other kids thought. She could choose what she wanted to do at kinder, so she painted hundreds of pictures reflecting her rich inner world.
- 8 It was in preps that she began to be expected to fit in with other kids and to follow a structure imposed by the teacher. She hated school from day one. Our bubbly daughter, who had been so delighted by life, now woke up crying every morning, sobbing , 'Is it a school day?!'
- 9 Her teacher was concerned. She told me that Anna screeched like a crazed cat instead of using language and that she did not seem to comprehend instructions. The teacher suggested we get Anna's hearing tested.
- 10 Looking back, I believe that at this point John and I should have sought guidance about how to handle our deeply distressed little girl. I so regret not seeking an alternative educational setting for her. But at the time we had no idea how her life would turn out. We thought that things would get easier for her. We didn't know that school would continue to be a misery. Katie and I gave her endless suggestions on how to make friends, and we believed that eventually she would find a soul mate who would appreciate her quirky ways as much as we did. Meanwhile we tried to make her home life as enjoyable as possible, buying her hermit crabs and budgies and taking her to Movie World for the holidays ... We just wanted to see that smile we had adored since she first grinned back at us when she was 5 weeks old.
- 11 From the moment Katie and Anna were born, John and I were focused on ensuring that they had the support of a secure and loving family. We did not want our girls to experience the pain that I encountered growing up with my mother in Iowa.
- 12 My mother was never diagnosed, but I believe that she suffered from quite severe mental health issues. She was an extremely intelligent and capable farmwife, and could be very insightful and funny, but she suffered till the day she died from the abuse she received from her fundamentalist father, who not only beat her but condemned her soul to hell. Mother was determined never to hit me or my two sisters, but I can see now how she eased her own overwhelming pain by emotionally and verbally abusing us. Her terrifying tirades might last all day, then the next day she would tell me how much she loved me and how I had replaced her mother who died when I was a baby.
- 13 Never knowing how to keep my mother from getting angry caused me great anxiety from the time I was a young child well into my adult life. When I reached puberty, which my mother hated, I developed an eating disorder which haunts me to this day.
- 14 John was aware of the history with my mother and was completely involved as a husband and father in ensuring that both Katie and Anna always knew they were loved.

- 15 As Anna progressed through primary school she would sometimes make a friend, for example when a new girl appeared in the class, but she could never sustain the relationship. She just couldn't seem to learn the give and take rules of friendship that most of us absorb by osmosis. Katie and I kept trying to teach her, telling her to smile and be interested in what the other person had to say and ask questions about them. But she was more likely to go on, in way too much detail, about the latest David Attenborough documentary she had seen.
- 16 The other kids thought she was weird and labelled her as a loner and a loser. She spent far too many recesses and lunchtimes alone.
- 17 I now believe, as does Anna, that she is on the autism spectrum. But even as an educator I did not encounter that term during her childhood. Of course I knew about kids with autism, but I thought they were nonverbal and couldn't express affection, while Anna always wanted to cuddle up in our laps and could talk the hind left leg off a donkey, as we used to say in Iowa. Plus she excelled academically.
- 18 I'm aware that autism is not a mental illness, but I believe the social isolation it contributed to was not good for her developing brain. I used to urge her to think of all the people who loved her: our church community, her cousins, her devoted godmother who provided a country sanctuary and horses to ride. I told her that with all those riches in her life, it didn't matter if she didn't have friends at school. But it did matter. Since then I've learned that the human brain has not evolved since we were hunter gatherers. When she was isolated in the playground, the inner core of her mind was in perpetual panic mode. Because how could it know that it was not on the open savannah, cut off from the group, in imminent danger of death from a much more powerful predator?

Early Signs

- 19 I can now see there were signs of mental illness sprinkled through Anna's childhood. I believe she experienced auditory and visual hallucinations from an early age. But at the time we thought they were childish fantasies and she would outgrow them. As Kirkegaard said, we must live life forward and can only understand it backwards. She was terrified of the ghosts that whispered in her ears. From a very young age she would sometimes run in from the garden, shaking with fear, saying, 'The eyes! The eyes are looking at me again!' When she was about 10 she complained of headaches so often that we took her to a local paediatrician, and after gentle questioning he diagnosed her with what he called 'good girl syndrome'. She was quiet in class and never caused the teacher any trouble, but she agreed with the doctor that she became anxious when other children were yelled at. It was around this time that Katie stop sharing a room with Anna and moved into our bungalow out the back. Alone in her room, Anna was so frightened of the ghost voices that she couldn't fall asleep. I had

suffered from intense fear of the dark when I was young, so I understood. I used to sit beside her bed every night until she went to sleep.

- 20 Early high school was especially hard for Anna, when the importance of fitting in is at an all-time high. In primary school, the worst days had been when girls would hand out their glittery birthday invitations, and there were none for Anna. Now, I watched giggling gaggles of gals walking home from Anna's high school, while Anna plodded up our hill alone. My heart broke for her so many times, it felt like scar tissue in my chest. But what could we do? We just kept giving her encouragement and advice, believing that as she matured life would get easier for her, and that her individuality would finally be prized rather than scorned.

Anorexia

- 21 We didn't worry straight away when, at 14, Anna began to restrict her food intake. She said she was eliminating fats in order not to get acne. She had always been thin, so the idea of anorexia didn't occur to me, as I thought this happened to plump girls with a poor body image. Gradually she eliminated more and more food groups, until all she was consuming was watermelon and diet cola. By this time her eating habits were causing a lot of anxiety within the family and eventually she agreed I could take her to see her paediatrician. He was alarmed by her low weight and she was admitted almost immediately to the children's hospital. We were shocked to be told she was in a very compromised state, and needed to be on a monitor at night in case her heart stopped. Within a few weeks Anna had gained enough weight to leave hospital, but was treated as an outpatient until age 18. She received excellent care during that time and I was so grateful for our public health system. Anna hated to be seen by a male doctor, so a young woman took over her physical care. We would all come to treasure this wonderful doctor, whom I still see regularly and who cares deeply about Anna and our family. For the purposes of this statement I have referred to this wonderful doctor as 'Dr D'. Anna saw Dr D once a week and also had counselling at the children's hospital with a social worker once a week.

Teenage Troubles

- 22 This is not to say that Anna's teen years were trouble-free. She had managed to make one friend, and she was desperately devoted to her, doing anything she could to keep this friend's interest from waning. Anna even gave her most of the money that she had earned from the trilogy of children's novels we wrote together. One afternoon when Anna felt this friend was giving too much attention to some boy who was walking down the street with them, she got so angry that she kicked in the plate glass window of an estate agent they happened to be passing. Another time the police called us to inform us Anna had been train surfing, again to impress this friend. After that incident, Anna's

counsellor told John and me that we really should set firm boundaries for our daughter. This was far from being the first or last time we would hear that phrase.

- 23 The counsellor said one of the boundaries should be a strict bedtime, even though Anna by this time was 16 years old. She often stayed up most of the night on our shared family computer, which bothered John a lot, so he was more than happy with the early bedtime idea. I wasn't so sure, and was surprised when Anna agreed to go into her room at 9:30. Around 11:00, I was feeling increasingly uneasy so even though she didn't like me checking up on her, I did. There in her bed was the cliché of a rolled-up blanket meant to imitate a sleeping person. Her window was wide open. She had vanished into the darkness she used to be so afraid of. And that was the first taste of the terror that would later become the background of our lives.

Anna's Best Years

- 24 It turned out that Anna had run off with her friend to live with the friend's dad on the other side of the city. We convinced her to return a few weeks later, in time to begin year 11.
- 25 Anna attended a senior secondary college for VCE, and there she found what we had so long hoped for: friends who cherished her for her intelligence and wit and her encyclopaedic knowledge of film stars. She earned a good ENTER score and we were thrilled when she was accepted to study psychology at Swinburne University. While at uni she met a wonderful young man. Andrew loved her for her intelligence, beauty and humour. He soothed her through her grumpy moods with patience and understanding. She was so proud of him, and around him she sparkled in a way that made my heart sing. They spent all their time together, either at our place or with his mother, who owned and ran a thriving business in the medical technology field. Heather welcomed Anna into their family as 'the daughter I never had.' She was amazingly generous, even shouting Andrew and Anna a holiday in England and Scotland. I was beyond grateful that something so good had finally happened for my unlucky girl.

Unravelling

- 26 It's only looking back that I realise Anna began to fray around the edges during her third year at uni. She started to say that people didn't like her there, that she had to get up too early for classes and it was all too much. John urged her on, telling her how valuable a degree would be, saying that if she would just finish it, he would never nag her to do anything again. She seemed to take this to heart, and graduated with a degree in psychology at the end of 2010.
- 27 During 2011 Anna and Andrew lived full time with his mother. John and I only saw her occasionally that year, as we now considered her an adult and we were busy with our

own lives. I was working on a book and tutoring children through the children's hospital, helping kids with chronic illnesses or acquired brain injuries transition back to school. John took long service leave and we spent a couple of months travelling in New South Wales and Queensland.

- 28 Now that she had her degree, everyone expected Anna to either get a job or do postgraduate study. She said she needed some time off to recover from the huge effort of uni, but month after month passed and she was still recovering. John reminded me not to nag her, though that is exactly what I wanted to do. She did eventually get a job in a call centre doing market research, but after a couple of months she began to lose interest and stopped getting shifts. Anna hated people asking her what she was going to do with her life or why she didn't have a driver's licence. (John and I and her godmother had given Anna hundreds of hours of instruction behind the wheel and also paid for professional lessons, but she just could not learn how to put together all the many tasks involved in driving, such as figuring out which lane to turn into at a complicated intersection.)
- 29 Andrew continued to love and support Anna. He was now working as an i.t. specialist in the city and bought a house in Chadstone. He and Anna moved in there at the beginning of 2012. As the months passed Anna still was not pursuing a career, and even Andrew was getting impatient with her. I didn't want to believe it, but I knew in my heart that their relationship was nearing an end. I no longer believe in the all-powerful God of my childhood, but I still tried bargaining with him or her: 'If you'll let Anna be happy and stay with Andrew, you can give me cancer.' The omniscient being didn't seem to be in the negotiating mood. Anna complained that Andrew didn't take her out anymore or shower her with compliments the way he used to. He didn't have the heart to kick her out, but Anna engineered her exit by taking up with a school friend of Andrew's who was besotted with her. I will call him Dan. She lived with Dan for a few months, but that situation didn't work out either.

The terrible years

- 30 Anna moved back in with us at the beginning of 2013. Because I only saw her occasionally when she was living out of home, I had no idea how much she had deteriorated. It was summer and I was shocked as she spent entire days sitting under the pine tree in our big backyard, smoking bong after bong. Apparently, she had taken up drinking heavily during her lonely days in Andrew's house. Dan had advised her that weed would suit her better than alcohol. Unfortunately the 'weed' that she could buy legally was 'synthetic marijuana', which is not marijuana but manufactured chemical cannabinoids sprayed onto herbs.

- 31 John still hated me nagging Anna, but one day I managed to entice her to get out the computer to look for work. I checked on her a few hours later, only to find that she was not on LinkedIn, but watching funny cat videos. This was Anna's life that year: doing whatever she could to escape from reality. Dope, alcohol, sleep, PlayStation games, DVDs. To her credit she had taken herself to a psychiatrist while she was living with Andrew, but the downside was she now seemed to have an endless supply of Seroquel, an antipsychotic and powerful sedative. When she took that in combination with synthetic weed and alcohol, she would descend into a stupor so deep we couldn't wake her up.
- 32 I now understand that while Anna still had the structure of university, she could function well. But adult life was too much for her. It seems clear now that her mental health had always been fragile, and the daily use of synthetic cannabis sent her into a devastating downward spiral. The ghosts who whispered in her ear when she was a child reappeared, only this time they were snarling and howling. She said she couldn't bear to tell me the horrible things they said to her. She believed she was possessed and her room was inhabited by demons.
- 33 There was only one activity that seemed to bring Anna pleasure: getting dressed up and going out on the train. She still looked like a teenager and had no trouble striking up conversations with random men who paid her the compliments she craved and gave her drugs. Sometimes she would blithely head off to the train and be gone for days, not answering her phone or responding to Facebook messages. John and Katie and I would be frantic with worry. She had already told us on numerous occasions that she wanted to die, and with her behaviour she seemed bent on making it happen.
- 34 Towards the end of 2013, she met a man on the train who gave her ice. We begged her not to see this guy again, especially after she returned from his house in a desperate state, with cigarette burns on her arms. But she'd found she liked ice, and he told her he loved her so much he wanted to marry her, so she snuck off and went back to him ... only to call me one morning a few days later, sobbing that he had been holding her captive and she'd managed to get away and run to a neighbour's house. I told her to call a taxi, and paid the \$95 fare when she got home.
- 35 By this time we were trying to get help for Anna through the mental health system. We had no idea where to start, and it was certainly not simple to find out. We consulted Dr D and she referred Anna to Headspace, which Anna squeaked into qualifying for at the age of 24. We also tracked down some local services for drug and alcohol addiction.
- 36 One terrible night near Christmas, Anna was trying to leave the house to get back to her ice man while Katie and I begged her to stay. I called the police and asked if we were allowed to physically restrain our daughter but they said no, that would be assault.

Somehow my desperate tears got through to her that night and she agreed to go to rehab the next day. We were so naive we didn't know she needed detox first. We watched her every minute during that night to make sure she didn't escape, and took her to Dr D's clinic the next morning, where we stayed for hours as the doctors tried to find a place for her to be admitted. All they could accomplish was an appointment for an intake assessment to a detox facility in 10 days' time. It was afternoon by now and Anna was desperate for the drugs to which she was now hopelessly addicted. It had taken so much effort and strength to keep her in our grasp for 24 hours ... to think she would show up for an appointment in 10 days was ridiculous. When that appointment time rolled around, we had no idea where she was.

- 37 The next few months were a blur of pain as our beloved girl slipped further and further away from us. I stopped writing in order to spend hours every day looking for any help we might be able to access. I trawled the internet and called so many programs, always with hope in my heart that these might be the people who could save my daughter. She was granted a few hours of advice or therapy here or there, while she became increasingly suicidal and John and I became increasingly exhausted. By the beginning of 2014 any semblance of structure had vanished from her life. For a couple of days she would be comatose to the point of wetting her bed, then she would be awake for days. Sometimes she was so scared of demons in her room that she would insist on getting into bed with John and me. Our parish priest kindly came and blessed her room with holy water but that only relieved her terror for a little while. Looking after her caused the sleep deprivation we'd experienced when she was an infant, as John or I were often up at night talking her down from another suicide threat.
- 38 One of the terrible things we dreaded did happen to Anna around the middle of that year. In Brunswick, not far from where Jill Meagher died, Anna was taken into a dark alley and sexually assaulted. After that she was afraid to leave home. In a way that was easier for us because we knew where she was, but it meant we never had a break from her.
- 39 On one of the most awful days of my life, I went to the kitchen first thing in the morning to find Anna reading a book and drinking a beer. She had been up all night. John came in and suddenly his patience wore out. He grabbed the beer and said she couldn't have anything else to drink. She jumped up, grabbed our large cook's knife and thrust it towards her chest. John grabbed her hand before she was able to make contact and wrestled her to the floor. Anna was screaming that she wanted to die and John wouldn't let her go. He told me to do something. I rang a crisis team that we had been in touch with but was put on hold. I then rang Dr D and desperately asked her what I should do. She heard Anna screaming in the background and told me I would have to ring the police. 'But what if she lunges at them with the knife? They might shoot her!' Dr D

assured me that was not likely to happen so I rang the police. A man and woman came and they were absolutely wonderful. The woman sat with Anna and listened to her and later said to me, 'Anna needs to be in a hospital. I'm pretty sure that if we take her to an emergency department in the police car they will admit her. Then she'll be in the adult mental health system and will get some real help. With proper medication and good care, she can have a lot of good days.' I was so relieved. The police transported Anna to the emergency department of one of our major hospitals. There she spent the day, and that evening we met with a mental health nurse. She informed me that Anna would not be admitted and we should take her home. I was beyond devastated. I pleaded with her to see how sick Anna was and how ill equipped John and I were to deal with her. The nurse looked at me and asked, 'What good would a few days in the psych ward do?'

40 Well, for one thing, it might have given us a rest. Instead we had to take our sick daughter home and face one more horrible night of trying to keep her alive. The CAT team did come around the next day, but Anna was comatose and could not be aroused. This pattern of 'failed visits' continued until the CAT team gave up.

41 Not all our experiences with the mental health system were negative. In 2014 Anna was admitted to a 10-day detox program on two separate occasions and that was an unbelievable relief, to have her somewhere safe so John and I could get a few decent nights' sleep and enjoy each other's company. But even then there were heartbreaking moments, such as when a nurse at detox said to us that she believed Anna needed at least two years of rehabilitation. Where could we find that?

42 A few days after detox, Anna would be back to drinking and doing drugs. She deteriorated all through that year. By December of 2014 she was back on ice, which gave her the courage to leave the house. But she was so psychotic she thought that John and I were imposters who had done away with her real parents. She begged Katie to believe her, that John and I had been replaced by evil versions of ourselves. Anna had also started bringing men we did not know back to our house and reacted aggressively to us when we told we didn't like random ice freaks hanging around. We were actually becoming afraid in our own home. On one more truly horrifying night when we didn't know where Anna was, a stranger rang me on Anna's phone and reported that Anna had accused us of the most terrible crimes against her and they were going to the police to report us. Her accusations were so disgusting I don't want to put them into print. At last, we couldn't take any more. We did what I could never have imagined: we decided our daughter could no longer live in our home. This sent John, who had tried as hard as I had to save his little girl, into deep grief. His way of coping was to shut her off. It would be well over a year before he saw or even spoke to her again.

- 43 That was a Saturday night. On the following Monday afternoon, I received a call from another major hospital. 'Your daughter is in the emergency department and she's asking for you.' She was psychotic when I arrived to see her. Later I pieced together how she got to the hospital, after talking to the admitting nurse, Anna herself, and a nice young man at a servo in Footscray. She had gone into the service station and politely asked him to use the restroom. 'When she came out,' he told me, 'she was totally naked. She stood by the front entrance where customers would have to pass her.' Naturally he rang the police, and they took her to the e.r. Anna told me she had done this because she could not contact the police directly for help. 'The gangs were watching me, and they would have killed me.'
- 44 After this incident, Anna was at last admitted to a locked psych ward. She remained there for approximately a week, and because we made it clear she would not be returning to our home, the powers in charge organised a 'step down discharge.' She would spend some time in the involuntary psych ward there, then be sent to a residential mental health facility for a few weeks, followed by help to find housing. We were ecstatic. At last she was getting some real help.
- 45 But as soon as Anna was transferred to the involuntary psych ward, she called a man she knew and he picked her up to take her off to live with him. I begged her not to go but she said, 'You've kicked me out, Mum. You can't tell me what to do.'
- 46 I certainly wanted to tell the authorities at the psych ward what to do. 'Don't let her go! She is not capable of making a rational decision!' She was still desperately delusional, terrified of the gangs who'd made her stand naked in a servo just a few days before. She believed the hospital medical equipment contained hidden cameras to spy on her. She thought the man she had called, whom I will refer to as Jim, could protect her.
- 47 Why couldn't the authorities have taken a team approach and consulted people who actually knew this young woman? They could have talked to Dr D, who had spent hundreds of hours with Anna. They could have consulted John and Katie and me, who had loved and cared for her for 26 years. We could have told them that Jim was someone who had been sent to us by a carers' group I managed to unearth on the internet. The group offered us a few hours of respite, and Jim was the carer they sent. We had no problem with the way he conducted his professional duties, but when our allotted hours expired, he asked me if I would mind if he pursued a relationship with Anna. He was in his mid 50s and had children of Anna's age. I informed him that Anna was too sick to form a relationship with any man. He gave me a look with which I was to become all too familiar: 'You're being an over dramatic, protective mother.'
- 48 Only a few days after Anna going to live with Jim, he appeared at our house saying that he couldn't handle her. She was accusing him of having installed cameras all over his

house and she'd hidden a weapon that he needed for his security work. I was so numb with shock that I could barely react, but Katie was furious. She yelled at him, 'You took her out of the psych ward against our wishes. NOW YOU DEAL WITH HER!'

- 49 For the next few weeks, neither Jim or Anna would speak to me. I only knew that she was alive and living at his place because sometimes she would answer the phone if a friend of mine rang her. Once she made a chilling call to her godmother, asking, 'Did you know that my dad is dead?'
- 50 Then one Saturday night in the middle of winter, my phone rang and it was another of our major hospitals, telling me that Anna was in their emergency department and wanted to speak to me. 'Mum, I miss you! Will you come and see me?' Of course I would.
- 51 The nurse in charge told me that Anna was being admitted to a secure psych ward in another hospital and was being taken there by ambulance. If I met her there, I could stay with her for a while. I was so excited driving to that hospital, knowing I could hug my girl again, and hoping this meant she had another chance for help. But when I got there, I was bluntly told by security staff to go away, as it was the middle of the night and obviously not visiting hours. I angrily informed them that I'd been told by another hospital to come and see my daughter. But they were not letting me in. Suddenly, I was not excited anymore. I was cold and tired, grieving in the darkness of a hospital car park for the blue-eyed baby I'd lost.
- 52 Flash forward a few days and I was entering the secure psych ward through the front door, during the designated visiting hours. I'd already been in a few other times by then. A kind nurse I'd come to know a little was just leaving work. She stopped and said, 'I believe your daughter needs to be in here for a long time, and I'm going to do everything in my power to make that happen.'
- 53 When I saw Anna, she was distressed. She didn't want to leave that place. She wanted to be kept there, contained, because she knew she couldn't control herself. But she told me the person in charge of making that decision had spoken harshly to her, saying the psych ward was not there to provide accommodation to people just because they wanted it and she had two choices, either go back to Jim or be sent to a boarding house.
- 54 I was distraught. The person who had said this to Anna was not on shift, so I pleaded my case with the person in charge. 'If you care so much about her,' this person asked, 'why don't you take her home with you?'
- 55 I probably would have taken her home, if the decision had been entirely mine. I'd always had trouble setting boundaries with Anna. But John was stronger than me. He

told me more than once that if Anna entered our house again, he was leaving. John loved her as dearly as I did and I knew in my heart that he was right. Our home was no longer the right place for our daughter.

56 It was Jim who came and took her home, but a few weeks later he rang to say he'd had to kick her out. She'd been violent with him, using the moves she had learned in the kickboxing classes she'd attended as a teenager.

Johnnie's House

57 Anna wasn't on the streets. She'd hooked up with another man, whom she met at a rehab course she attended briefly. This guy took her to the northern suburbs where an older gentleman had rented a large, rambling house. He sublet the bedrooms. That's how Anna came to live with the big Macedonian man I came to know as Johnnie, and his gang of jolly mates.

58 I was shocked the first time I visited Anna in that house. It was squalid, crawling with fleas and bed bugs. But the centre of that home was the kitchen, and there I was greeted warmly by Johnnie and his friends. 'Anna mumma! You sit! Have drink!' That's what they did all day: drink sweet white wine from a cask on the table and watch SBS. They appeared to understand whatever language was being broadcast at the moment, and conversed with great animation in a variety of tongues. Anna had landed in a happy little community, and for the most part she loved it. She took to speaking broken English herself. The various guys were jauntily touched by her referring to them as her brothers and cousins, and I watched Johnnie beam as she planted a kiss on his balding head and called him Daddy.

59 But there was another part of Anna who could not stand the filth, clutter and smell of that house. Every time I took her shopping she would buy myriad cleaning products, and periodically she would demand that the guys follow her instructions to clean. When they were not inclined to comply, she became enraged, sometimes to the point of violence. I'm not sure how many times the guys called the police to stop her attacking them, but I know it was at least twice and I think it was more times. I got to know one of the guys who lived there pretty well and liked him a lot. He later told me, 'Anna attacked me once and I had to call the police. When they got here I told them, this girl doesn't need to be arrested. She's sick. She needs to be in a hospital.'

60 If only there had been some sort of database, to show Anna's escalating pattern of violence. If only someone in authority had noticed this and then consulted her family. We could have told them there had always been a powerfully angry force inside that fragile-looking girl, the force that gave her the strength to kick in a thick plate glass window when she was an anorexic teenager.

- 61 Anna says that she herself was afraid of her violent outbursts during that time. She has told me often about how she presented to the nearest hospital and asked to be admitted to the secure psych ward. 'I told them I couldn't control myself. I said I was suicidal and homicidal and I needed to be admitted. They said they wouldn't give me a bed just because I wanted one.'
- 62 I have no way of knowing if Anna actually did go to a hospital and say what she's reported. But I certainly know that she believes it to be true, as she has repeated the story to me and Katie on numerous occasions.
- 63 I visited Anna often and on each of these occasions I also encountered Johnnie, both at the house where I originally met him and at the unit where he, Anna and one other resident moved later in 2015. I came to view him with great respect and affection. He was crippled with arthritis but did what he could to help Anna, especially after she dropped the little bombshell that she was pregnant and wanted to keep the baby.

Black Sunday

- 64 This is how our family refers to the day, the 22nd of November 2015, when our lives were sliced neatly into Before and After. That's when a policeman rang me to say that our daughter was in custody. For years, John and Katie and I had dreaded receiving The Call. But we always imagined the sombre voice of the policeman would inform us that it was her who had died. Instead this policeman told me as gently as he could that there had been an assault involving Anna, and the elderly gentleman she'd been living with had passed away. That's how we learned she'd killed Johnnie.
- 65 The policeman didn't elaborate, for which I was grateful. I wasn't ready to hear the details. There was a brief article in The Age stating that Johnnie had died from upper body wounds. But it wasn't until 15 months later, at Anna's sentencing hearing, that John and Katie and I heard, along with the media who were in court, what actually happened on that terrible night. That's how we learned that Anna had grabbed a boning knife from the kitchen bench and stabbed the man she called Daddy 22 times.

Anna's life in prison

- 66 On Black Sunday, so many feelings were clashing around in my head I thought my brain would implode. Here is just one of those feelings: intense anger. I wanted to line up all the authorities we had met from the mental health system and scream at them, 'Again and again you turned her away. You refused to contain her. You said she wasn't bad enough. Well, now she's murdered someone. Are you finally convinced that she's BAD ENOUGH?'

- 67 Another feeling I had on Black Sunday was one I was a bit ashamed of. But since I am appearing before the Royal Commission to tell the whole truth, I will admit that I felt relief. At last, Anna was in a secure facility. She would have a little room that she could keep as clean and tidy as she liked. She would have structure imposed on her days and, I assumed, appropriate medication administered. My gorgeous girl and the precious little life growing inside her would be safe. The tragedy is, it took the life of a good and innocent man to deliver her to safety.
- 68 At the time of her crime, Anna had been making a concerted effort to stay away from drugs and alcohol, because she so wanted to have a healthy baby. I think the removal of these substances which Anna unfortunately relied upon as part of her coping mechanism to deal with her illness exacerbated the situation to the point where she could commit such a horrible act.
- 69 That is not to say that Anna did not deserve the prison sentence that she received. I believe, as Justice Jane Dixon found when sentencing Anna, that she ultimately did know that what she was doing was wrong at that time despite being mentally compromised.
- 70 Anna is presently serving a 17 year sentence in the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre with a non-parole period of 13 years.
- 71 As it's turned out, prison life for Anna is better than I hoped. She is thriving there. With adult responsibilities removed, like paying rent and keeping up commitments to Centrelink, she can concentrate on learning about relationships. At her sentencing hearing, Justice Jane Dixon commented that it takes a hefty dose of antipsychotics to keep Anna stable. Her blood is tested regularly to make sure the levels are correct. She also is given antidepressants and lithium daily. So with this medication, regular sleep and good nutrition, Anna's mental health is better than it has been since she started school. A vital aspect of this is that she's part of a community. As she wrote to me in a card, 'it feels so good not to be lonely.'
- 72 Anna has had several jobs since she began her stint in prison three and a half years ago. Currently she's working in the laundry ...But she assures me there is no big steam press like there is in the 'Wentworth' TV show! She loves helping new girls settle in, some as young as 18. She calls them her crack babies, comforting them as they withdraw from drugs. She helps them with their English and writing letters for court. She hopes to continue this work in a professional capacity when she is released.
- 73 Her relationship with her family is great now. Katie and I and her godmother have been visiting her once or twice a week since she first was arrested. A few months after she got to prison she wrote a letter to John apologising for all the hurt she had caused him

and the accusations she had made. He has visited her once a week since then. There is one more important little visitor: her son, who is now a rambunctious three-year-old. He's a dab hand at passing through the scanner, having done it for the first time at 5 days old. And the officers never tire of reminding him, as he gives them a high five, that they have known him since then.

Diagnosis

- 74 We did not seek a diagnosis for Anna as her mental health deteriorated. We just dealt with the symptoms as they arose, as best we could. It was only after she went to prison that I asked Dr D, the professional who knew her best, what her diagnosis for Anna would be. She wrote it down on a slip of paper: *psychoaffective disorder with borderline traits*. She also agreed that Anna is most likely on the autism spectrum, and said she had suspected this for some time.
- 75 At Anna's sentencing hearing, it was accepted that she had a schizoid type illness and, if memory serves me correctly, a personality disorder.

Changes Needed in the Mental Health System

- 76 Despite people's best intentions and their expertise in their respective fields, I feel that there is a less than ideal level of information flow between entities such as the police force, hospitals, local GPs, other medical professionals, family of people with severe illnesses, social workers, and the like. In Anna's case, John and I could see a developing picture where she was getting worse and worse. It was not a straight line and some days were worse than others, however, there was definitely a trend that could have been picked up had a profile of her with my regular input been developed of Anna along the way.
- 77 Where someone is looking to care for a loved one like we were with Anna, it can be extremely difficult without some kind of integrated support framework which can respond and intervene early to assist in ensuring that the person who needs assistance is provided it in an effective and timely manner.
- 78 A vital issue is the dilemma of dual diagnosis, the divide between mental illness and addiction. When she was still living with us, John and I desperately wanted to get Anna into the 18-month residential rehabilitation program for people with addictions, run by a well-known organisation. Their goals of teaching life skills sounded ideal, so on numerous occasions we trooped over to their headquarters for information sessions. We dragged Anna in for interviews. I tried to teach her how to get there herself on public transport. But after I had called a dozen or so times to find out if she could at least be put on the waiting list, I was finally told that Anna's mental health issues were too complex and uncontrolled for them to handle.

- 79 This was deeply disappointing, but a decision made by a different organisation the next year was devastating. I was grateful to a tireless worker from the Personal Helpers and Mentors program (PHaMs), a government-funded initiative for people with mental illness, which I tracked down when Anna was still living with us. I'm sure 'Caroline', who stayed in touch with Anna after she could no longer live with us, put in many more hours than she was paid for. Apart from taking Anna shopping and out for coffee to relieve her loneliness, Caroline actually secured Anna a place at a residential mental health facility. The stay would only be for a few weeks, but Caroline and I, and Anna herself, had great hopes that it could be the start to a productive life.
- 80 So Anna showed up on time at this place on the first morning, which was a huge accomplishment for her. But then she panicked. What if they wouldn't let her have as much Seroquel as she felt she needed? Just in case, she stuffed the pills she had with her into her underpants. As the admitting nurse walked her to her room, the pills fell out.
- 81 Even though this was medication that Anna had been prescribed, she had lied about having it. She should have handed it over. She had breached the rules of the facility, and so she was sent away. It was catch-22: she could not go to an addiction rehabilitation program because she was too mentally ill, yet she was turned away from a mental health program because she abused drugs.
- 82 I believe that this ridiculous separation of addiction and mental health services is being slowly addressed. I certainly hope so.
- 83 In so many ways, we need a better system and the following paragraphs reflect views that I have previously expressed publicly on this subject (and which I still hold).
- 84 We need more places in secure psychiatric facilities, and people should to be able to stay there longer than just a few days. Patients as sick as Anna need enforced and supervised time to re-establish sleep patterns, absorb good nutrition and be stabilised with counselling and medication. Only then, when the howling demons in their heads have been reduced to a background murmur, can they be expected to begin to make rational decisions.
- 85 After they leave the psych ward, they should be offered long-term placement in a residential rehabilitation facility where they are given compassionate care by a team of experts who know how to help people with the dual diagnosis of mental illness and addiction.
- 86 After a couple of years learning and practising life skills, some of these people may be able to take on all the responsibilities of an independent life. Many others will need help with some aspects of being an adult. They might be able to hold down a job, for example, but still need help with budgeting, cleaning, cooking and keeping friends.

These people should be provided with supported housing and dedicated helpers like Caroline.

87 Of course, my plan would require a lot of money. But how many millions of dollars is it going to cost to keep Anna and others like her in prison or a forensic mental health hospital for decades? Who can put a price on the precious lives they've taken, or the families they have shattered?

sign here ▶ Mary K Pershall

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