

## Brother of Mine

*Jenny Evans'* brother died in a house fire when he was just 24. Will would have been 40 this week and she still misses him like a lost limb.

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*Jenny, her Mum Wendy and Will, France, 1982*

When you get bad news – really, life-changingly bad news – it's so shocking you go blind for a moment. It's like your head is filled with white noise. Your blood has fizzed like soda. The solid impact of the knowledge that you can't reach back through time and change things is so acute you can't actually believe it can be true. Is there nothing we can do?

My big brother Will would have been 40 today. When I found out he had died, aged 24, I had just ordered a bottle of champagne. I was lunchtime drinking with my boyfriend of the time for our anniversary. We were 23.

I got a voicemail from my mum telling me that my older half-sister, Deb, was coming up to London to pick me up and bring me home. That was so ... unprecedented. I told my boyfriend to hang on while I just called her back.

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My first thought was that our adored family dog, Teggy, had died, or a grandparent. Your healthy, happy brother's face doesn't flash through your mind, especially when you spoke to him the night before. He had been at Deb's. He was eating spaghetti hoops on toast. He was going out for a beer with an old friend. He was fine. He didn't feature.

"Hello?"

"Hi Mum, it's me."

"Oh god, it's Jen."

"What's happened?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm in Soho with Nick, it's our anniversary."

"Deb is coming to London to bring you home"

"I know. Why? What's happened? Is it Teggy?"

"I don't want to tell you."

"Tell me what's happened. Tell me what's happened. Tell me what's happened. Mum, tell me what's happened..."

And then my mum had to do to me what Deb had had to do to her that morning. Deb had held my mum's face in her hands and looked her in the eyes when she told her. My mum wanted the same for me. She didn't want to tell me on the phone. But I made her.

"There has been a fire at Broadway Road and Will has died."

Will had been housesitting for the night; Deb had gone away with her husband and little girl.

The ironic champagne cork popped and my head fizzed. I shook it. Then began repeating, "No, no, no" as I groped my way out of the restaurant, pinballing off furniture, leaving my very confused boyfriend behind.

He followed me. Out in the street I told him. Then I found a black cab that was out of service and told the driver too and begged him to take me home. And he did. And he didn't charge us.

When I got to my flat in South London, my sister was waiting outside. She shook her head. I said, "Not good enough," which in hindsight was a bit mean. I meant, "It's really nice to see you but the circumstances are so fucking ridiculously bad that I can't summon the words", but I couldn't manage that.

I don't remember the three-hour drive back to Abergavenny. I expect my now ex-boyfriend does, poor thing; it can't have been a barrel of laughs. I am forever thankful that he came with us and that he held me that night. It wasn't the cleanest of breakups, shortly afterwards, but that was so kind.

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*Deb, Will and Jenny in the mid-90s*

When your sibling dies the world tilts like a listing ship. You lose your Tweedledee: the finisher of your sentences; the other witness to all your family Christmases and holidays and illnesses; the person who can make you laugh until you're on the floor, or so savage you want to pull out all your hair – or theirs (when I was going through a God phase, Will poked his head round my door and said, "Jesus is shit," and I cried for hours).

When Will died the world seemed less colourful to me. Just... greyer. For ages. And I fully understood the expression 'it feels like you've have lost a limb'. I couldn't understand how I was meant to function without Will's gentle advice and guidance, without his moral compass, without his musical and comedic and cultural influence, without his long fingers, his awkward smile, his slightly too big ears, his cynicism to my

optimism, his perfectionism to my 'fuck it', his social awkwardness to my delight in others.

I had forever modelled myself on him, on not being him, on being different from him but the same. How could I live the rest of my life without my muse?

Will had always been more vulnerable than me, in many ways. It's weird because he was much brighter, honestly probably more intelligent than anyone else I have ever met; he was a far more talented artist, wordsmith, wit. But he was never very comfortable in his own skin. And that was made worse when he became a teenager, because his best friend turned on him and encouraged their group of friends to bully him.

I used to hear him crying himself to sleep in the next door bedroom because they hadn't invited him to a party, or had pushed him over in the corridor at school, or had lied to him about where they would all be eating lunch. He had never been anything but gentle and intelligent and kind and he didn't deserve it. It was so unjust. I used to listen to my Swatch watch ticking (hello the 80s) to try and drown out his tears – more out of respect for him as my big brother than because I didn't want to hear him.

To this day I can't abide a bully. For Will, and because I have met too many myself, I have focused my life (my work) on exposing them.

It took Will (his as-it-turned-out remaining) 10 years, to get over this bullying phase. His first fight back was an incarnation as the only goth in the village (... town).

Within a year this plump blonde cherub had been replaced with a spindly anorexic, with black shoulder-length hair, PVC trousers, massive boots, rings and earrings and eyeliner. Suddenly

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he got an older girlfriend, a younger following of 'alternative' kids from school, some kudos for the amount of weed he could smoke.

Sticking two fingers up to his bullies, he developed a sneer that could wilt gardens. But at home he cut his arms, he drank too much, he loathed himself. And eventually he took this pain and self-harm to the nth degree by injecting heroin.

Hell hath no fury like a little sister trying to stop this happening. I used to argue: "You think you're the only person in the history of the world who can dabble in heroin and not get addicted?" To which he would reply, "I'm not going to make a career of it, Onejen" (his nickname for me – an offshoot of our drunkenly misreading the opera *Onegin* in TV subtitles and it reminding us that Mum had a bottle of gin we could drink ... A story for another time).

This was the era of *Trainspotting*. Will had read that Will Self and William Burroughs both took heroin and were 'fine'. And he had a big poster of Sid Vicious on his wall. This was where he was determined to go.

Needless to say, it didn't end well. He got addicted. He ended up living in a hostel and selling the *Big Issue*. He was humiliated again. I was absolutely fucking furious.

But Deb made sure that he always had a key to Broadway Road. If he was ever really in trouble, if he ever needed somewhere to hide, if he ever needed his big sister, he knew – we knew – that he always had that. A place he was safe ...



Will, the week before he died

And then he did what we feared he never would – he got himself well. He spent time at a Buddhist retreat going cold turkey alone. He went to rehab. When he came out of the other side of heroin addiction it was like he'd shed a skin. There was a new Will in town, one who sunbathed, did weights, didn't smoke, cut his hair. He was self-assured in a way I had never known him. Massively back on form.

He went to university, realised he was far cleverer than everyone else on his course and came home after the first year saying he wanted to apply somewhere better.

He also wanted to build some bridges with me, so we agreed that he would come and live with me and my boyfriend for the summer, work in a bar - he died four days before he was due to arrive.

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They don't know what started the fire that killed Will. Deb had been having her bathroom extended, beneath the room that he died in, so it could have been that a joist disturbed some old wiring, or some new wiring. The house insurers tried to sue the builder's insurers. They investigated. They couldn't decide. There is verifiably no reason why.

These are the things we do know: Will went for one beer with his friend, he came home, he read some of Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights* and then he went to bed. At some time in the early hours of the morning, the wiring in the floor beneath his bed started emitting a noxious gas, carbon monoxide.

Will breathed it in and died within minutes in his sleep, so he never had any idea of what happened next, thank god, because an explosion blew a hole in the floor at the end of his bed and then a fire began to rage; a fire so fierce that the firefighters couldn't get in to the building, because their thermo-imaging equipment kept melting.

At the inquest they told us that the fire didn't burn Will – it kind of raged around him. He was lying on his side. He had some 'skin slippage', which means he melted a bit, I think. The heat had been so intense that his stomach had burst and remnants of his last meal had been found in his chest cavity. I thought, "spaghetti hoops on toast".

They advised us not to see him after he had died, because those kinds of fires leave you covered in black soot and crap that they can't remove. The funeral director, 'Ted the Dead', the man who just 10 years earlier had cremated our lovely dad, said he didn't think we should look, but he added, "He did have eyes," and I have wondered about that ever since. I think we should have looked.

When they read out a description of Will at the inquest – large feet, nipple bars, an Alien tattoo – my Mum sat on her hands. When they asked her if she had any questions she whispered, "Can't speak." I think that might have been the worst day.

Will's funeral overflowed with young people, looking so smart in black and white and sunglasses. We buried him in a beautiful graveyard just outside Abergavenny, with an incredible view of the mountains we had loved to walk and camp on – so many funny hours sat around campfires with our friends and beer and weed and guitars.

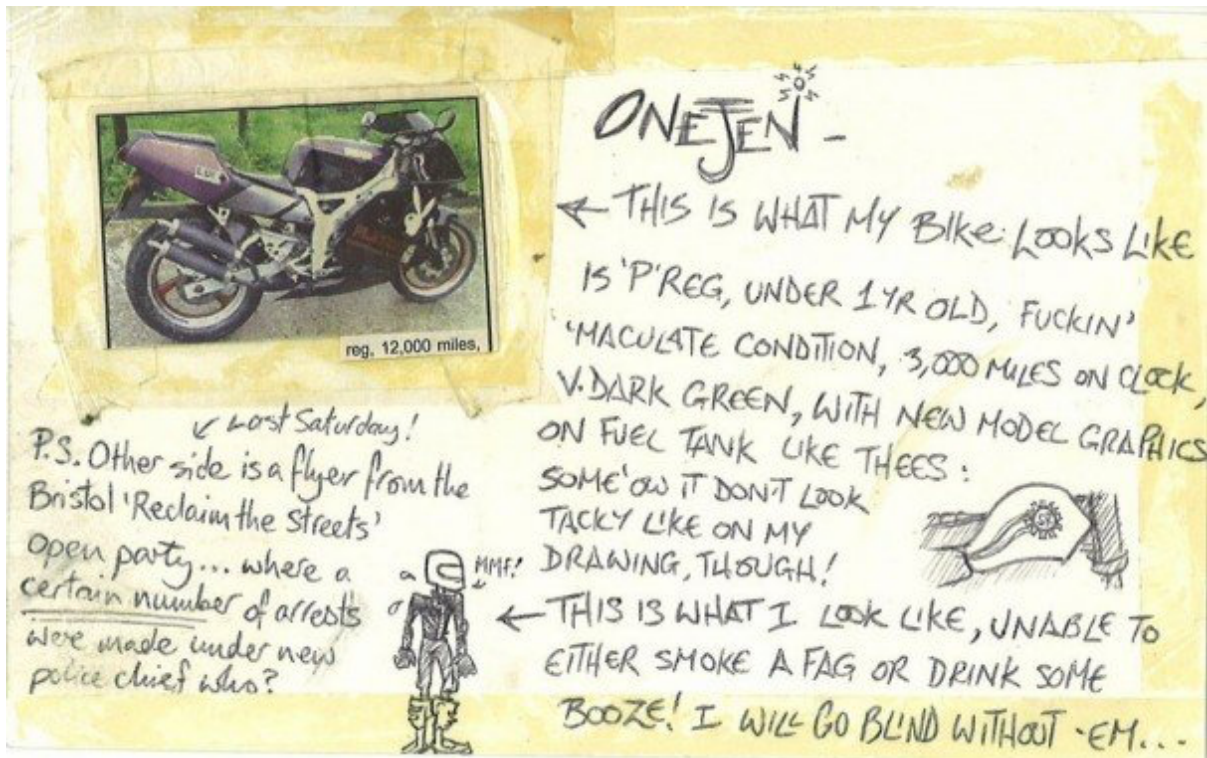
I had organised for the *Blackadder* theme to be playing on a loop as people came in; Will and I loved *Blackadder II* when we were little. I wanted these people who loved Will, who were so bone-wearyingly sad that day, to also have a little laugh. He had known pain but he was always very funny.

It was my idea to bury him. They'd cremated our dad and I'd struggled with that. But you can't win because when you bury someone you are plagued with thoughts about what stage of

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decomposition they are at, for weeks. We bought a few plots either side of Will, because I wanted him to stand out; I didn't want him to be in line with others.

Rather than a coffin we got him a biodegradable silk pod in bright red with an Aztec sun on it. It was the first of its kind in the UK. That felt right. And Teggy our dog did also die that summer, so we organised that she go in the pod with Will. It felt easier putting them in to the ground and walking away knowing they were together.



A postcard from Will

It's 15 years since Will died now and I still remember everything about him: his smell, the way he moved and laughed and wrote and drew and sneered and sideways smiled. What is incredible is that when someone is formed in the same house as you, in the same way, somehow even though they are gone they are not. Will is a part of me and now I try and live for two; there's pretty much nothing I won't try to do in my life, because I know how short life can be. I feel it to my very core. So I also know how much fun we must all squeeze out of it if we can.

When I got married I was determined to get my dress from Country Brides in Abergavenny, the shop from which, when it was new, Will and I had nicked the 'o' and the 'r' on our way home from the pub. Yes, I was covered in more diamante than I would necessarily have chosen, and I had a tiara, but it was the one dress that fitted me in the shop and I had to be the Cuntly Bride.

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It's so cruel that we don't get to see what Will would have accomplished, because he was just about to fly. I can't believe my husband didn't get to hang out with him. When I try to explain what he was like to people who never met him, I get them to imagine someone who was a bit Noel Fielding, a bit Peter Cook, a bit Charlie Brooker. I think he might have written books.

It was Pablo Neruda, I think, who came up with the best description of grief that I have ever found, 'There is no space wider than that of grief. There is no universe like that which bleeds.' If you are grieving you must make sure that you eat well and sleep well if you can and surround yourself with only the best people, because it knocks your confidence, which is something I didn't expect. But if you think about it, that makes perfect sense - not only have you lost someone who you love unconditionally, but you've lost someone who was going to love you forever too. There is a new, less safe and certain, world order.



*Will and Jenny, West Wales, 1984*

I have felt real, gut-wrenching despair in my grief for my brother. I have felt that living is pointless. I have felt like I wanted to die. At the beginning I felt like I wanted to kill my mum and then myself, so that we didn't have to go through it. Her pain is visceral and palpable at times, even now. But she and I and Deb have muddled through together – keeping going for each other, keeping him alive by loving him so much, loving each other, living with the fact that in the end none of us could save him, even though we all tried so hard.

So here's to Will on his 40th birthday. The very definition of a gentle man. How I wish you could make me laugh again. How you are missed.

Love, Onejen (aka Basher, aka The Squirt)

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