

My son, borderline personality (BPD)

borderline personality disorder

The experience of a mother,

Marina Foret Jimeno,

who faced the trouble of her son with a little known syndrome

By GWENOLE BLOUIN BREHERET

*Riky would have felt useful and understood,
If he had worked as a volunteer,
assisting people with more problems and fewer opportunities than he had.*

*Dedicated to you
and to all who listened to you
and could not understand you.*

Mom

NOTE FOR THE THIRD EDITION

This is a third edition of the story of a life as there are many. It was written only to help understanding, protecting and researching solutions to the troubles that arise from borderline Personality Disorder – BPD.

I remember when Riky lay by my side gently so as not to disturb. His hand moist with anguish took mine and he kissed it to express a feeling I already knew:

- What sense is there to my life, mother?... Why can't I enjoy what I have and what I am?... Why do I cause you pain if I don't want to?... What would become of me without you?

He leant his forehead on my shoulder and he kept quiet, his eyes shut, aware that he was being observed. His frowns were grave; I could hear him breathe close to me. I could not help thinking that some day I would stop seeing him at all or I would have to keep looking at him the way he did 'empty, dead and alive'.

What was in store for him? What would happen? How? When? And why?...

I have tried to make a sense out of his life, of his suffering and ours, of our lonely struggle and the helplessness we feel as we cannot find resources, understanding or hope.

His suffering came to an end four years ago and I wanted to look for what I could not find for Riki: the right place, the learning or rehabilitation centre that would fit his disorder with the worthy and humane treatment he needed, a place where they would understand his crises, neuroses and psychoses and the entire complexity of his behaviours, his sensitivity and loneliness.

I wondered why nobody understood Riki, they rejected him, they insulted him and humiliated him.

I looked for this, not caring about gossip: I had nothing to lose now that Riki was gone.

Doctors, societies, foundations, radio programmes would give me some orientation but they led nowhere and the advice and hope they provided would come to nothing. I was always sure that I was not alone. I would meet other families who did not either know the consequences of BORDERLINE PERSONALITY DISORDER and they would ask themselves the same questions and look for answers.

I started to write for my friends. I wanted them to understand why Riki's life had been so complex and to let it be known that he had really tried to live like the others although he could not. Time after time, they asked me for copies and they read it politely. They were grateful or sympathetic for my involvement and it seemed they believed that writing was for me some desperate way to keep his memory alive. This was not my intention. I wrote for hours, summing up and always trying to make it simple so as not to be boring and to achieve a sincere and simple text.

Once the book was published just one year ago, most believed that my involvement had reached its end. It was only the beginning.

Bureaucracy does not understand suffering. Slow, complicated though necessary, it takes up a long time that seems to last forever for whoever needs urgent help such as exhausted and helpless families at a loss what to do to help their child diagnosed with this disorder.

We have launched a society formed by families, volunteers and health specialists. We know what the needs are and we work to meet them. Every call for help loaded with the same anguish and doubts tells us how necessary it is to provide quickly the same answers that many people expect and need.

Our thanks to all who believe in our project and who bring their support and time in spite of the terrible hardship they are going through and to the co-operators who have joined us.

Any achievement and effort towards this cause is also ours because they aim at a better future for borderline personalities and at the hope in a society committed to the alleviation of this suffering, through the investigation of its causes.

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Chairwoman

Marina Foret Jimeno

PROLOGUE

There is probably no psychiatric diagnosis as complex as that of borderline patients. This conclusion is frequently reached after partial diagnoses – such as school failure, hyperactivity, depression, drug abuse, bulimia, anorexia, phobias... - that were but varied faces of such a complicated polyhedron as borderline personality. As it is a complex matter even for the health specialist, it is more so for the family and obviously for the patients themselves.

There is no explanation for the sudden changes of mood, impulsiveness, immediacy about everything and low tolerance of frustration.

The patients become strangers to themselves and they lose their own marks and identity. The suffering is great and the escape ways are many and varied.

I have read Marina Foret's book. It is the extremely sincere account of a mother who suffered the problem. I have read it with emotion and rage. Emotion for what it has reminded me of and rage for how little we did or we can do because if we are quite honest, we must admit that we all fail to fully understand it.

Dr. Francisco Sabanés Magriña

INTRODUCTION: the strength of a mother

Marina, you've asked me to write some words about your book and they are addressed to the reader.

The book you hold in your hands is different to biographies or psychology books you may have read.

This book was not written by a health specialist or a scientist. However, I feel that no other reflects the mind and personality disorder as well as this one.

This book was written from the position of a mother engaged in a daily fight against the inability to do anything for her son and who could not communicate with whom she loved most because of a different personality barrier. Marina reflects in her writing all what a mother is prepared to do for her son. She is a symbol of strength. She never gives up.

Her observation spirit, delicacy and motherly love make her able to get into the mystery of her son's mind. She explains in a descriptive fashion his feelings and behaviours, his entire personality characterised by the mystery of a mind unable to acknowledge its own self. It is investigated by the scientists and they give endless lists of names, depending on how the conduct manifests itself.

We stand besides the great mystery of human life and we all should get into it on our toes and more even so when somebody's life has lost all its sense, because they are denied their capacity for self-achievement by some mental disorder and they neither know who they are nor what they want.

Thank you Marina for being so strong. I know that your book will help the psychologists better to understand people like Riky. It will help many relatives of such people to fully accept their different though sacred lives. We have a duty to escort them and bring some light in their path, a path that they have lost.

Montserrat Baró

FOREWORD

This is my testimony.

The following is only a very brief but deep account of a life.

I could write many pages if I went on to tell many stories that happened with my son. This is not my intention.

I only wish to expose the problems that a family may have to face when one of its members suffers a little known disorder. I do not know how many people are affected and may share an experience similar to mine.

My son – Ricardo, known as Riky to our friends – died three years ago in a crash. He was 26.

I remember our efforts to try and understand him. The last 13 years of his life were a continued and painful lack of understanding from both sides, in spite of the huge efforts we all did. We also had to look for the ways to keep some personal and family balance for all these years.

We realised through my son how hard it is to live with a borderline relative. The lack of information and support was absolute. The brutal rejection of the unknown world of mental disease, the quick judgements and criticisms, the troubles to find support... the influence of hatred or affection that can either see them through or destroy them further.

We learnt so much that we had to practise and not the theory. But we felt so lonely; we did not know if there were other people in situations similar to ours with whom we might share our confused feelings. We did not have solutions and nobody could give us any. We feared the future... Only our huge affection made us strong enough to carry on beyond reason.

The visits to the doctor's took about one hour or two a week. Then my son had to live for the rest of hours and days in a society that did not understand him.

It takes a lot of therapy, medicine and... luck to keep somebody safe from marginality.

I am not looking for justifications, let alone guilt. A borderline is such for some reason that we did not know. They collapse in front of a responsibility; a breeze is like a hurricane for them. Anybody not affected by this syndrome would have no trouble working out the problems that upset them so much and they would even find it ridiculous that they should make a fuss out of so insignificant matters. They do not realise that it is too much for them.

They always have to fight off so many fears... They are aware of their own disorder. Although they may have a rather high IQ, it is very hard for them to meet the daily scopes that the others can achieve easily. Only to live with others day to day is a challenge for them. Their need to feel fully accepted leads them to the exact opposite. Then a silent and hidden pain grows up inside of them. This pain makes life complicated for everybody around them and sometimes it even leads the family to cast them out. These families do not know how to find a solution or they cannot.

It is not easy. Like many mothers, I've asked myself many questions, so many that even now that he is no longer by my side, I keep asking them to myself. This is what I want to expose in this book.

And I do in the hope that perhaps somebody will read these lines and feel somehow understood and find out the way to make their life easier and happier.

Perhaps there are many misunderstood borderlines and not all of them are diagnosed. Not all books give the solution. It may seem that any pathology can fit, because some traits of the affected person can be found in all of them.

This is why you try and live day to day, without making so many plans for the future, because you do not know what will happen tomorrow. These sick people break all the rules.

I used to feel sometimes I was immersed in a senseless world, fighting against the unexpected and asking a thousand questions to myself: what will happen when those who try to protect him are not around? Why does he misunderstand things? What are the mechanisms behind his constant changes of mood? And why is he not able to change his behaviour, clever as he is?

This book was written with the heart and it tries to revive memories of a painful past. We may regret not to have been able to do more but if we consider our limits and environment we can rest assured that we did all we could. We try to fill the void left by our son, who like all borderline people, lived between the confines of sanity and madness, in a no man's land where they need a helping hand.

Only if we are aware of their inability to understand, appreciate and react will we be able to forgive them...

1/. A SPECIAL BOY'S CHILDHOOD

I will always remember his eyes that looked carefully, a bit scared and sometimes lost. It seemed he expected somebody to make out of them what he could not say.

He would listen very carefully to everything you told him but it was as if he did not understand anything.

He was obedient to the point of submission, delivered and enduring. Mysterious and closed, he was like a fragile present.

He was an invisible presence, he never caused trouble and he would follow you wherever you went like a shadow. Then he would stay where you had left him without complaining or asking for help.

It seemed he expected you to organise his every moves, to make decisions for him, to choose the course of his life, his games, readings, job, food and clothes. And when you had decided for him, he would accept anything.

There was always an indefinable calm about him, a kind of silence with words. It was as if there was a wall around him through which nothing came out, good or bad. He never rebelled and there was no way to make out what was inside of him.

Sometimes I felt he was happy and scared at the same time. We observed him and we hoped he would change as he grew up. He looked so sensitive!

He pervaded peace and quiet. He preferred being alone than in turmoil. He could share, though he surely gave his attentive presence in return.

It was taking so much for him to grow up...

We started soon to see something: it seemed he was always scared of something. I steadily learnt about his emotions, I was almost able to guess what they were. I thought perhaps it was that he was scared of growing up and facing the challenges of the world.

He looked healthy.

I observed him constantly, never able to know him thoroughly. I only looked at his reactions and I kept my fears and premonitions to myself. I was scared by something and I could not tell what it was. I compared him to his brothers and sisters and I said to myself: 'they are all different. I know how they are, how to channel their inclinations and energies. Yet he doesn't seem to be going anywhere. What goes on?'

Riky was always easier to convince. However, he would show he was clever through signs that a mother can feel.

His hugs and kisses were hard, penetrating, long hugs and wet kisses that expressed so much without saying anything!

I began to realise that he was 'different' though I could not say what made him so. I could not say what, how or why. What I did see was that he looked sometimes so distant, though he was so close to me.

I was not worried then. I was still happy because I enjoyed the quietness of those who know nothing.

This is how I remember my son as a child: poetry and reality at the same time...

Clumsy and rough. Caring and sensitive. He would as well punch the walls, throw plates to the floor, act funny when he finished eating, break the bars of his cradle to try to escape, scribble the walls with a pencil or keep quiet and say nothing. 'Children will be children' I said to myself. Indeed I remember no tantrums beyond measure, no whims or angers that got out of hand.

He was so docile and so sweet that I would always see him as a very special child. It even seemed strange to me that he would never ask for anything, unlike his brothers

and any children. I even had to write the letter to the Wizard Kings¹ for him and he would not say a word. It seemed he did not mind: nothing really mattered for him. He always obeyed in a very docile way like a machine and he would never question an order.

I got scared by this strange 'perfection'. He gave so little trouble, so few problems!

¹ Note of translator: in some Western Mediterranean cultures it is the Wizard Kings who hold Santa Claus' role and bring presents to the children who write letters to them on Twelfth Night. Children write the list of their requests in a letter to them.

2/. THE SHIFT OF TEENAGE YEARS

He felt as if it was time for him to make up his mind about his own life. And then the world fell upon him slowly.

Suddenly – or time after time, I did not realise – the frames of his personality vanished completely. I had believed until then that his personality had been well channelled although I did not know where it went. It was as if he felt he was invisible in the world he lived in. A huge feeling of insecurity made him fall in a whirlpool into which he would be entrapped for the rest of his life and which he could never leave.

He was left without a personality and he became colourless or rather he would, like a chameleon shift to any colour, depending on whoever was by his side.

The advice we felt obliged to give would slip on him as if he had a suit of armour. He said nothing; he did not speak out... and he kept on looking at us with those void eyes that reflected fear. He did understand and he could not express what was going on with him. Then his anguish and self-criticism grew up day after day.

I remember very well the day when I noticed more neatly for the first time that there was something wrong, that there was something strange going on that we could not describe and put a name on it.

I found him curled up and scared on his bed. He was sweating and crying, begging for help without an explanation. He neither explained why or what he wanted. I felt confused and helpless. I did not know what to do and I slowly soothed him the best I could affectionately.

Then an apparent calm returned after this first manifestation and I believed it was an isolated incident. We never talked about this sudden surge of uncontrolled anguish. He was then 13.

After that day, I observed him even more. He was doing well at school, he got good marks, he was responsible, obedient and he liked sports. His teachers were happy with him and they never had a complaint about him.

However, there were some weird conducts to which we paid little attention. He never wanted his friends to come home. He never wanted celebrations or presents. It seemed he was still on the same course of shyness and isolation that we had noticed during his childhood. He was always sociable and loving, even helpful. What was growing up in him was an overrated docility. I was scared to see him so excessively easy to handle.

I observed silently another symptom and I expected it would mend overtime. I thought it was a matter of maturity. He was clever and very observing but he was confined in his own problems, as if he supposed that nobody could be interested in them. He would not share his feelings and worries. Distant and close at the same time, he always needed affection.

I observed his isolation, this shyness he made up himself, as he believed he was despised and hated by everybody.

I realised that he had too much trouble explaining a film or understanding a book. His preferred readings were still very childish - Tintin, Asterix, Mafalda – and they would always be... I would hear him laugh with the simplest comic strips. He often had self-esteem help books. He read them over and over again and followed their instructions in a military fashion. He was looking for so many answers...

He was really charming, able to gather a court of friends around him who laughed at his jokes. He began to feel the need of being loved and admired and the focus of attention wherever he went. This was meant to make up for the insecurity that frightened him so much. He needed to fight it off and show up that he was somebody through pointless antics or acts he believed heroic.

He made a habit of imitating people and playing the fool to bring attention on him. And then... when he got home, he would shut himself in his room and cry. He did not know how to get out of his own trap because he knew he had fallen into one.

When he was 15, he grew more rebellious and this seemed more normal to me than his overrated docility.

Any decision was a quandary. It was hard to know for sure how much there was of his decision and how much of our influence. It had been easy until then to bring him up when he had been so submissive.

I would have never imagined the chaos that was going to fall upon us. He was more and more distant and withdrawn into himself and we realised that he had more and more weird ways. This was confirmed by evermore-frequent incidents.

He had been until then the shadow of his teachers; he had been scared of getting out of the rules.

As things grew worse, he was expelled from school. The headmaster told us that perhaps it would be wise to move him to a smaller school where he could feel better attended and looked after, which was what he needed. He also told us that he had only seen one similar case in his many years of school teaching and he suggested we visited a psychiatrist. Then the never-ending quest for help started. We would visit the new school everyday.

It seemed he was looking for a path to follow and feel comfortable with. However, he would not listen to the advice we gave him. He did not understand and he did not know what he should do or what course he should give to his life.

It seemed that he wished he could live forever the present time like a frightened child who does not want to grow up and resign to be driven like a robot in a futureless life made of habits and rites.

I heard him once telling a joke and laughing aloud in the doorway only to break down in tears after he got in. What happened? I will never know. Perhaps somebody told him something he disliked. The reason for these swift changes of mood was perhaps the pain he felt because of his own weakness and failure. He felt so much shame to ask for help that I could not know what happened and the cause of his bitter crying.

He started behaving in such a way that he seemed not to know the sense of standards. He mistook and mixed up feelings and emotions, time and space, friendship and hatred, giving and taking, caution and danger, eating and refraining.

Everything turned more and more confused for him as if the barriers that control feelings did not exist for him, as if the world of standards and measures floated in his mind without a sense and a reason to be put into practise.

This life and conduct began to be shaped since his teenage years by this chaos and ups and downs of feelings and emotions and ignorance of the middle course notion.

Sometimes he was aware of this but he could not control himself. He felt unable and after an abnormal reaction, he would get scared, suffer and cry.

He stopped practising sport; he was afraid of competition because he sensed he would not be up to it. He fled from responsibilities more and more.

And he still kept quiet, he concealed to all of us that he felt ill at ease with himself. I could feel he was...

He grew up to look at himself as a failure. His playful tricks no longer made him his friends' focus of attention and he believed they did not like him anymore. Neither did he like himself because he was unable to know what he wanted.

He spent his weekly pay on useless things and he would always do. I battled with him in every possible way to teach him to save his money instead of throwing it away but it was useless.

During some months I decided I would let him have the strict minimum only. He did not learn; he went back to buying useless things. He would buy a shirt or a pullover he

did not need when he required a pair of trousers. I chose to leave him a small amount of money when he needed to buy something. He would leave a down payment and I would go to pay the rest and collect the garment.

He adored his father and he always admired his ways. This was why he tried to imitate him and practise his hobbies. He followed him at first with great delight. He felt helpless as he wished he were like him and he did not have a clue how to be himself. He began to love and hate him at the same time.

He looked for his identity in the others. He looked at himself on them as if on a mirror. He turned into a resentful boy. He was jealous of the others' successes and he became more and more hung up for not being perfect. He caught messages that the others were not aware of.

He felt empty and he did not know how to explain it or where to look for help. He was suffering for feeling different from the others in some aspects but his pride would not let him admit his inferiority and look for other ways. He was fighting to haul himself out of a bottomless hole he was falling into.

I was aware of what was going on and I tried to show him more affection but this was of little use. I had trouble understanding him and especially getting him to understand that I tried. He happened to do strange things. For example, if we went together in the street, he would walk yards behind me because he did not want his friends to see him with me. Yet he was old enough when he did that.

His room was like a sanctuary to him. One day he decided to give a personal touch and he forbade us to get in for three days. He put absurd things and moved others. And eventually he stripped every frame and poster in a fit of anger only to leave pins and shreds of posters on the bare walls. The only surviving items were his radio cassette, a TV set, an ashtray and his books. This decoration would remain this way until his last day, like a true reflection of his mood and personality.

He began to shut himself at home and stay alone. He could be isolated for a long time, secluded in his room and go out suddenly and get carried away: he would act weirdly, telling all kinds of jokes, burst in laughter, do practical jokes and antics, always trying to bring attention on him and be the focus of interest. It was a way to conceal his fears and sadness, a deep sadness that he hid and got up to the fore when he was alone.

When he went to his room, he would lay curled up on his bed in foetal position for hours. He was unconsciously looking for this maternal protection that he otherwise rejected, a condition where there are no decisions to take, only let things happen.

He slowly stopped studying. He felt there was no point in anything and lost interest in everything.

He had some first short breakdowns, some anorexia and impulsive behaviours. He was unable to memorise simple things or to remember how to solve a problem he had worked out the day before.

One thing leading to another, he developed a motiveless aggressiveness and he did illogical things. He bought absurd things. We also noticed that he would sometimes speak endlessly; long talks that had a semblance of depth but an incoherent content.

We would tell him off often because his behaviour left much to be desired but he would never accept a punishment or a reproof. We did not know how to react and we stopped from telling him anything for fear of his reactions. When we told him he had done something wrong, he would blame the others and act in such a strange way that we dared to correct him less and less. This led to a growing and constant clash that dug a wider and wider gap between us.

It was or it seemed useless to try to talk sense to him. He would do the opposite of what we requested of him, as if he were a programmed robot that cannot act otherwise.

And when he wanted something, it had to be immediate.

Anguish, anxiety, paranoia, aggressiveness, depression: all this was happening again and again, at small or large scale and always between lapses of absolute normality.

It was like going round and round in a circle for no apparent reason.

It could not be said that his behaviour was good or bad: it was simply absurd.

We already visited psychologists and psychiatrists when he was 16 and we would do for the rest of his life.

And then he turned 20, in the mid of these never ending crises, many bitter moments, a few satisfactions and many headaches and a great suffering for him and for us.

Then for the first time I heard my son's diagnosis word: he had a borderline personality disorder.

3/. ASPECTS OR APPEARANCES OF NORMALITY

It is surprising that he was fully aware of the distinct phases he went through alternately, though he would not admit to it explicitly. One of these was absolute normality.

There were many times when he would reason or talk correctly, work, make plans for the future, as any teenager or young man do without any restriction.

Whoever got to know him during these phases could not believe or accept how abnormal he was at other times.

In such times, he would perfectly understand any theory about behaviours, accept the category of moral standards or material value and he would even be able to give advice. However, when the other phases came over, he would forget about them or be unable to apply them to himself.

He had no physical fault and no abnormal feature at all. He would then behave pleasantly, show sense of humour, he would be caring and joyful; in such phases of normality he could win over to him anybody he wanted. He was endowed with quality and strength for sports and he learnt things easily. He was very fond of music, he had quick reflexes and he was easy talking. He showed to be normal and clever in all respects. He knew how to make friends, even good friends. He was even able to conquer girls easily.

During these phases of normality, he was never aggressive at all; quite the opposite, he would be very peaceful and quiet. At first, you would come to believe he was fully getting over from this harassing trouble if you did not know well the problems of his disease and you would even forget about the anguish of not knowing how to understand or deal with him. At the first times, he went through such quiet phases, I did believe he was recovered to normality.

However, I soon realised that these 'phases of normality' were but another stage within the whole of abnormality. In such a phase, he passed his driving test at the first try. He had bought the book a few days before and assimilated it very quickly. This meant he was having a fine time.

Then I decided to take these phases that would come now and then as a respite. I knew that the terrible suffering of the other times would come back and I welcomed 'normality' as a door open to hope because nobody can live without hope. I knew it was a time when I should enjoy the healthy part of his personality that would show from time to time. And I did, as I recovered some strength.

4/. THE DISTINCT PHASES OF ABNORMALITY

I soon realised that I had to come to terms with other stages that made my son altogether different.

I will try to describe abnormality to the best of my ability, recalling what I could make out of him through my own experience and the doctors' diagnoses.

Depression and schizophrenia

Both diseases go along together. It seems that they close a circle of the anguishes that tormented him. They are the extreme opposites.

When he was depressed, he would stay for hours in the dark, with radio and TV sets switched on. Closed off in his room for hours and hours, he would lose track of time and not be able to tell apart night and day. He would only come out for food when he was hungry. He was unable to communicate in such moments and he would ignore advice and reprimands. He only wanted to be on his own and closed off.

Sometimes he would even lie curled up on his bed, sucking his fingers. He was absent, immersed in lethargy and nobody knew how long it would last. It was a total apathy, on the verge of autism. When he was so isolated, he would not have anybody disturb him nor would he disturb anybody himself. This was why he secluded himself. Without hope or expectations, he restricted himself to be an onlooker of life. These downfalls were sudden and the efforts to rise again were painful. He started unconsciously to yearn for death. He spent sleepless nights. Then he needed to talk: long talks to look for a sense to life, a fruitless effort to cope with so much despair.

As he saw that his inner world did not fit the society around him, he tried to make up another one, simpler, more sincere and more truthful.

He neither knew where his place was, he felt empty, sad and lonely. If he did anything at all, it was as if he acted in a slow film-motion style.

His silence and sadness were very expressive; at least they were for me. He sometimes expressed all his suffering with few words.

The very opposite phase could suddenly come in turn, without prior notice or gradual change: hyperactivity and euphoria. He suddenly felt up to anything, to study and plan many things, even to help others.

When violence took over him, the only piece of talk we could have with him was 'leave me alone'. I grew up to learn to keep myself apparently apart, always trying to make myself small and find excuses for being here because having me around upset him so much.

Sometimes he would even drop scum through his mouth; saliva that rage stopped him from swallowing. He turned the radio on to a deafening volume. 'I want to go! I can't take it anymore!' he repeated pacing his room to and fro and gesticulating in a threatening manner, red-faced, out of his senses. What had happened? We asked ourselves and we could find no answer. Indeed he had showered normally a moment before; nobody had said anything to him, there had been no remark or provocation of any kind.

I tried to stop him and I locked the doors because I did not want him to go out in such a state, for fear he would get some harm. Then he would insult me and use bad language. I let his anger burst out until he grew tired of crying and shouting and then he would sweat and feel shame and hug me. The poor boy suffered terribly because he did not want us any harm and he did not know where to go. 'What happens to me, mother?' he asked in anguish. I had no answer.

In such circumstances, he kicked or slammed the door of his room so hard that it broke several times.

One day I would not let him go to a motorcar rally and he reacted so violently that he came close to strangle me as he asked me for the car keys. This time I could not do other than yield to his strength. I knew it was wrong because he was a danger. I was very frightened when he went but I could not stop him. You can imagine how I felt when he left this way.

I observed these crises silently and my only comfort was to know that he was still at home.

Nobody could stop him: he was out of control like fireworks. He suddenly forgot about his sad thoughts and it seemed he was another boy. We would suffer when he was deep down in depression and he would exhaust us all when he was on the peak of euphoria. He spoke incessantly shifting from one topic to another.

If he practised sports, he would do excessive efforts. He would swim two hundred pool lengths and the coach had to force him to stop.

And one day, schizophrenia came up and this was new to me.

He lost touch with reality completely. He behaved disproportionately and he reacted very strangely. He was not himself; he was beyond reality. He fled from the red colour; he blamed wars upon himself and anxiety made his whole body sweat.

Confined in a clinic, he would spend hours under the shower to try to shake off the effects of the sedatives.

It came to the point that he did not want to see anybody. Sometimes he said he would kill whoever made his mother cry.

It took him one month to get over. We had to move him into a hospital. There was a new phase of heavy medication and much dialogue through which we tried to lead his mind back to reality.

His physical aspect would change a lot from the most absolute carelessness to the most obsessive cleanliness. He could as well shower and change clothes three times a day or spend three days in a row wearing the same clothes and without washing.

Paranoia

It was the time of pointless interpretations. He made up his own stories, he was obsessive and he had paranoiac jealousies. He would see offences and danger everywhere. He believed his own lies like a child who hides his face behind his hands and believes that the others cannot see him.

At such times, he could not see the reality close to him and he believed it was another. He would say he had not seen the very pullover he had on. He would say he was not smoking while he had to take the cigarette off his mouth to speak. Truth was a completely confused notion for him.

In such moments, he would tell things to the doctor in his own fashion while they were actually absolutely different. You had to live with him to be aware of that.

His behaviour was utterly disconcerting during these phases. He would leave the schoolhouse because he said he had to sunbathe. They closed the doors to him and he desperately looked for some way out. Sunbathing was then a matter of life and death to him. It was clearly an obsession.

One day a small pimple had appeared on his face and he locked himself in and he would not go out.

His whims and obsessions were terrible and we could not deny them to him. There was a time when he would fill the bath everyday at six o'clock in the morning or he was set on wearing a piece of clothing and he could not wait for the washing machine

to finish and he put it on wet. He wanted this one and no other although he had many more. There was no way to make him change his manias and rituals.

It happened that the whole family had to go through trouble because of his obsessions. We had to leave a place suddenly, just because he was convinced that everybody was watching him and talking about him.

It was the time of fears and persecution manias. He controlled every phone conversation, always suspecting they were talking about him.

Sometimes he did incredible things. For example, he went to another city without telling us, only because he had seen a car with a plate from that place. And obviously when he reached that city, there was nobody waiting for him, he did not know where to go and he had nothing to do there.

Then the insecurity of other phases would grow worse. Sometimes he would even ask for our opinion when he was not sure about his interpretation. However, he would forget immediately what we told him, even if he had listened to us.

One of his many obsessions was that he needed to be loved for what he was and not for what he had. Then he would wear clothes or put shoes on in a way that people would think he had nothing.

Several times he scattered all the clothes from his cupboard on his bed, only because he did not know what to wear.

Once in a hunting day, he shot without taking aim – because he would not kill the animal – and next, he got frightened and he crossed himself and he hid behind boughs so as not to make his deceit obvious, while his father watched him sadly. Yet, he would go hunting again a few days after and look happy, not remembering the other day's incident.

I saw him once praying, his arms stretched like Christ on the cross in a specific ritual and begging for luck today.

He was attracted by anything forbidden to him: his father's sweaters, his sister's handbag or his uncle's car.

He followed various rituals to draw attention to himself or to achieve a success that unwillingly, he denied to himself.

Bulimia and anorexia

He also went through these phases. Then he would eat huge quantities very anxiously. He would fill his plate as if it were for a dog. There was no way to tell him not to do this. And inevitably, he would continuously get gastritis. During these phases, he would eat with such greed that it was a scary thing to see. He would mix anything and take it with his hands. When we were going to cook a pizza, he could not wait and he ate it uncooked. Next his stomach would hurt a lot, he would get scared and then he would prescribe medicine to himself and eat again. At the same time, he took huge amounts of laxatives and stomach pills, a common occurrence in bulimia. This made him feel very bad and anxious; yet he did it again.

One day he ate eight hamburgers in front of his bewildered brothers and sisters. He did not understand why they laughed or they got angry with him. He simply said he was 'hungry'. Sometimes he would even leave nothing for them to eat without feeling guilty at all. He found it normal. He even lost sense of taste. Everything was the same for him, it was 'food' and nothing else mattered.

It was very difficult always to ask for comprehension from his brothers and sisters. One day they threw a plate at his face because they could not stand his eating mania. Another time we celebrated a birthday and I was cooking a cake in the kitchen. It did not occur to me to keep it away from him and when it was time to bring it to the table, there was nothing left but a small chunk just about enough to put the candles.

He would feel worse when his brothers and sisters got angry. He locked himself in his room and turned it into a pigsty. He ate untimely, he left food leftovers on the plates until they became swarmed with ants. You could find several fruit juice bottles on his bedside table, an overfilled ashtray on the radio set, etc. The bed sheets also looked like the mess there was inside. I got in on my tiptoes when he was away and I put his things right without making any reproof to him. There was so much indeed I could have reproved to him!

Yet there were times when he would not let anybody in. Then the stench would become unbearable. This physical neglect always went along with these crises and we always had to wait for them to finish to put right this lack of hygiene.

Then he would put on weight dramatically and he had to buy clothes several sizes above his normal one.

This was only a phase of his anxiety condition. Anorexia – the extreme opposite would come in turn suddenly. He would not eat, arguing that he was fat. We got very scared the first time it happened. He started to lose weight quickly. He drank water all the time and weigh himself all day long. In a fit of anger he took pullovers and cut them off at the waistline. He ripped off the trousers linings because he said they made him look fatter. His present obsession was that he believed he was fat and that he should lose weight at any cost. There was no way to make him change his mind.

However... one fine day, it was over, just the way it had begun. Without any explanation he decided he would eat normally. It was as if the data printed on his mind that told him that he was fat and he should stop eating had been erased just like that. We slowly taught ourselves not to ask him for explanations and not to tell him anything when we saw he had forgotten about it.

In view of these changes, we got used to wondering anxiously what tomorrow would bring.

We also learnt to be practical and his cupboard had to hold a range of clothes much smaller and much larger than his normal size...

Psychopathology and medical treatment

I looked for psychiatric care when he was a student at the first strange symptoms and memory troubles. Then we tried many sorts of medicines. As he was very clever he would escape our watch and stop taking them. Only when the crises made his life too miserable, he would go to the doctor and submit to his prescription docilely. Yet we had to watch over his medication because it was hard to keep up with his changing moods that made it necessary to switch from antidepressants to tranquillisers. We had to supervise everyday, note every change every week, survey his behaviours and report to the doctor for any emergency.

He had to take sleeping pills, tranquillisers, stomach pills and pills for paranoia, anxiety...

It was especially hard always to be on the lookout and he eventually found himself lost among us, only with what little help we could afford to pay for him... We were surrounded by misunderstanding and criticism. Blaming the parents is easy if you do not live close to a problem like this one. We wondered how we had coped with three children and why we failed with Riky.

I read books of psychiatry to learn about the theory of the distinct diagnoses. I had not yet assimilated one when I bought another. It seemed to me that I was in an endless nightmare.

I learnt overtime that sometimes a few hours a week are not enough to get a reliable diagnosis. This depended on the phase he was in or his ability to deceive the psychiatrist or psychologist, exposing the causes of his problems in his own peculiar

way and generally blaming the others for them. When those visits happened in a day of absolute normality, they would be put down to some family hysteria and this would prove that he should be properly confined in a place where they could survey his case without depending on an incorrect interpretation from the family who are not professionals and who suffer from problems other than the consequences of the boy's condition. The family feel guilty also for a situation where they have to control something that is beyond control and they do not know how to do it and how to endure it.

After a period of heavy medication and many changes, alcohol made things worse.

We had made a decision for a medicine incompatible with alcohol but we could not stop him from drinking and he had to stay in hospital for several hours in ethylic coma that had caused him a liver block. He told us jokingly only afterwards.

We were being caught in a web, torn apart between doctors, alcohol and a medicine treatment that he would not follow though he said he did. He was very good at deceiving us.

We changed the doctors several times over. It seemed to us that they gave us no solutions or we disagreed. Besides, the continued failures made it more and more difficult for the doctors to carry on with his case. Besides, there is a limit to anybody's patience and capacity for sympathy.

Although I knew they were not giving him an efficient treatment, I beseeched a doctor to attend him. I was not expecting him to heal the boy, only that he should take some time to listen to him, look after him only to have a professional contact if he ran away, which had already happened often.

The last words of a doctor were very hard for us: 'if he doesn't want, we can't do anything'.

Admissions in emergency hospital for small accidents, gastritis and lung affections became a frequent occurrence. He would turn up at the hospital like in his own home.

He came home one of those days with an asthmatic bronchitis and a very high fever. We called in an emergency doctor and he arrived a few minutes later. He ordered him to rest, he prescribed some pills and he said that he should go to hospital if he choked again. The physician had just left our home when Riky went out as if nothing. Then doctor let out a curse then. He could hardly believe what he saw. Experience had taught me by then to speak calmly and I explained to the doctor that he was borderline and as such, he was unpredictable.

When he reached the age of the draft, there was no way to get him to understand that he had to go. It just did not matter to him. It was only the very last day that I managed to get him to do the required steps to get himself cleared 'because I'm nuts', he said jokingly.

After several years living like this, I got used to writing every week about the moves of his disease. It was hard to admit mistakes, to be sure whether he pretended or not and not to feel guilty. I had learnt over time to have my body involved in many activities while my heart was always by his side.

Sense and feelings

His overblown sensitivity made him bolt quickly to stop the others hurting him. He intended to live without being ever rejected – a sheer impossibility. And thus, he would not accept a lack of affection, whether actual or imagined. The world he aspired to or he imagined was a kind of never-never land, permanently at odds with the one he lived in.

Indeed some did reject him so much that they would not say hello, a hard-hearted attitude from people who scorn the suffering of those around them. It is a fact that living with him was hard and only love made it possible to bear things like:

- Hearing the street door being opened and closed several times at night. He was going to buy cigarettes a couple of miles away from home. Coming in and going out all the time.
- Sitting in front of the TV set all through the afternoon, not knowing what he was watching. He was just there.
- Trying to look like his brother and putting on clothes two sizes below his own.
- Spending money like water and believing that the others cheated him and everybody earned a lot more.
- Diving at night without a lamp only to realise that once in the water, he could not see anything.
- Swimming in the open air and non-heated tennis club pool in the peak of winter at 10 p.m. and then coming home to ask for a cup of hot coffee because he was chilled. He would do the same rituals for several days at the same hour in front of the uncomprehending and astonished eyes of the people who attended him.
- Talking illogically for a long time about several topics at the same time without ever reaching a conclusion.
- Getting a call from a police station where he was kept with his bike, because he had jumped several red lights. He was just in a hurry to get to the gymnasium. Of course they believed it was a stolen bike.
- Going to the police in the middle of the night to report his rucksack stolen.
- Having a policeman surprised to see a well-dressed and well brought up boy sleeping on a bench at Atocha².

The reasons he would give for his antics were also outlandish. He did not go to his brother's wedding though he loved him very much. He told later it was because he felt scared at the last moment because he did know how to behave, what to wear, where to sign as a witness...

It was very hard for the whole family to carry on without him. When we came back home one day later, we found a long message in the answer phone machine. He was apologising incoherently. We learnt about his 'hangover' three days after: he had gone to find refuge at a friendly family's place. They understood his loneliness, soothed his tears and his hangover after he had searched in alcohol some relief for his fear and misery.

² Note of translator: a district in Madrid centre town.

5/. WORK

He wanted and he needed to feel useful, to earn his living and not to be a burden for anybody. He wanted a decent wage, insurance and his freedom.

The first obstacle – and it was also a challenge – was that he was insufficiently educated.

It seemed that the best option would be for him to work in the family business, but he immediately began to compare himself with the others and he felt he was being judged. Besides, his inconstancy at times, his self-demanding nature and the tension he imposed on himself propagated to the others and all this made relations at work difficult.

He started everything with much interest, but he became envious of the others. Paranoia came up again and he could not handle himself. He was self-demanding to a fault because he wanted to achieve a pathological perfection and he was afraid he might be reproved on anything. All this created a high tension around him, which was actually what he did not want to happen. He was picky about the most insignificant details and he took two cups of coffee in a row in order to do things better. Yet it achieved the opposite: his anxiety contaminated the others. Those who worked with him could not understand why he could not control himself without this permanent tension and it wore down their patience.

He dressed very formally and he attended the customers with scrupulous effort and attention. Sometimes he offered drinks to them needlessly just to show how friendly he was.

He dispatched papers and he gave errands. He was scared although it was a very simple job and he was overly able to perform it.

Although everybody praised his work, he thought he was being lied to and that they all plotted against him. He felt he was being controlled while he was the one who spied and mistrusted the others. Any remark or warning – no matter how insignificant – would hurt him excessively. He could never feel secure.

He worked at our workshop for one summer. He often broke pieces because he tightened the screws too much. It usually took him a long time to get his mess tidy. He left home early in the morning to bring sandwiches to the employees in order to win them over to him and show example. He was the last one to go home for the same reason. He stayed at work and did not have dinner out of his own decision just to show off his zeal. He eventually got uselessly exhausted.

He left the family business several times on the doctor's advice or for various reasons, most of them imaginary or caused by himself. He could not bear so much tension. He would get very upset if a customer would not buy a car from him in spite of all he had done to attend him.

We were a bit astounded when he tried again to go back to work so many times and we took him in. We did not know if this was a consented attitude or if he really was not up to this job and we had to be very patient.

He worked as a messenger but he could not stand it for more than one day.

Several friends offered simple jobs to help him out after these new failures. Unfortunately, he got tired of all of them. Besides, he had to go to the psychologist twice a week. Sometimes he could not go to work for many days for an odd depression.

The world of work is very hard. At school they had understood his problem and they accepted him as he was. This could not be the case at any serious job. They could not have him with his shortcomings.

Then he wanted to find a job in the street on his own account, but he could not find any. Most of the time, these were marginal jobs that stirred up no interest in him. He

felt very bad and even thought of prostitution as the only way to pull through... At least he threatened us with this idea.

He also felt humiliated as he saw that we wanted to help him and we always let him go back to the family business.

And when it looked like he was getting to get a job, people got scared when they learnt about his medical condition and they turned him down. Business managers had already too much to deal with and they would not have a much bigger problem on their hands. He was more and more aware that people got rid of him.

This was why he left home because he longed to be free and self-supporting; something he could not achieve through work. He did not want to cause more trouble to us.

We resorted to a detective agency to look for him and they found him after ten days.

They understood how he felt, they tried to cheer him up and they offered him a job.

He stayed there for one year and this was the longest period of apparent normality. It seemed he enjoyed some independence. We learnt afterwards that he inevitably got into all kinds of trouble. He would not ask for help from anybody and he bore on until he got on the verge of a crisis. He came to us, begging and crying, asking for help, care and affection. He could not take on anymore.

And so he tried many times to go back to the family business or to the university but every time he failed. Then he would say he needed to rest and he got back to isolation and his complexes.

6/. ALCOHOL AND DRUGS

The downfall...

As it happens sometimes when a life becomes out of control and unsolvable, my son stepped into the ruthless world of drugs and alcohol.

Drugs would destroy his brain slowly and drag him into defilement, lunacy and eventually, death.

He fell a victim to the merchants of death who shamelessly trade over misery, take advantage of weakness, vice and corruption to extortionate and ruin until exhaustion.

They destroy the best of this world: youth, future, family...

Nando died, ill and on his own.

Severo is still lost, he does not want any help; only money to keep on getting stoned.

He has lost touch with his family for several years.

Miti died.

Joel has gone crazy...

They and their families still suffer, fight and remember.

Although some win, suffering leaves a mark on them forever. It is so hard to forgive!

They are the real heroes. They fight for every minute of their lives, they fall and rise again and they make their lives a challenge to survive...

From this moment his life and ours became even harder.

We had no experience and at first, we did not realise what was going on.

I suspected something but I did not know where to start. Each time I tried to get into his world I could see that it became more and more closed and was more and more beyond my reach and what little hope I still had was dwindling to nothing.

The problems could grow huge from time to time. Alcohol and drugs were for him a way out of so many fears. It made his problems get so big that it was as if you could see them from a mile away. Only these stimulants could make him escape from his fears at least for a short while. Somebody – I do not know who – sold him out the big lie. He took advantage of his anxiety, his weakness and his disease.

He was never able to say no to anything or anybody and it was very easy to influence him. Thus he fell into the claws of those who make money in adding and keeping new captives in their deadly circle. They did what they wanted with my son and he could not defend himself because he had always acted on impulse.

Then it was impossible and useless to give him advice. He had entered into another world and he could not listen or if he did, he interpreted what you said in a different and distorted way.

His mind had been weak but it had been his own until then. From the point he sank into drugs, he was not himself anymore and he could not control his mind any longer.

It was a brutal downfall. I could observe he was getting more and more dropped out and that he was getting increasingly vulnerable. He hid while I stepped up a vigilance he would accept at times and most often evade.

From then on he could be even more unpredictable. He could come back home with other clothes on – most often shaggy – than those he had worn when he left. He looked like a clown when he was stoned or drunk, a puppet that made a fool of himself. He was aware of this but he could help it.

Sometimes it makes me sad to imagine that perhaps he dragged others into drugs like others had done with him before.

At first he smoked joints like many do... It is perhaps harmless for some people and some of them praise its consumption. However it is likely to trigger up a crisis or pathology on somebody prone to a mental disease or nervous crises. Those affected

by borderline personality disorder – whose pathology includes substance abuse – fall more readily into this underworld and it is logically harder for them to escape from it. Once he was out of his wits after a joint, a drink or several cups of coffee, he would add pills, acid, cocaine, vitamins on it... anything to stimulate himself or make him forget reality. The problem was not the drugs he took but why he took them: to ease his anxiety, overcome his fears and anguish, fill up his inner emptiness and search for a way to face any situation through drugs.

Pain and anguish ruled over our home: thefts, lies, violence, drunkenness, tears, nights away, ripped clothes, silent or anonymous calls, threats, debts, fights and remorse...

He robbed his brother's credit card. And there came to miss jewellery, cutlery, cups and money. Drugs turned him into a sad, desperate and lonely stranger.

He smoked in excess to calm down his anxiety and it destroyed his lungs. Tobacco was another 'legal' drug that poisoned him and made his dependence worse. Drugs had awakened his dormant disease and made him weaker.

Sometimes our protection instinct made us flee from him and cut him away from our lives in an attempt to defend ourselves from his lunacy. I suffered a lot when he was away but I also was afraid when he came back. We would get exhausted and we needed to defend our family life from the dependence he imposed on us. Yet my son was still the same weak, vulnerable and fearful boy as before.

He would not descend into delinquency as long as he could steal from us at home. He came himself to say regretfully and tearfully:

'I stole from you, Dad. Are you going to report me to the police?'

There were more and more such painful incidents and they did not even get smaller as we talked about them. Our home was turned upside down all the time. He took drugs compulsively. He did not need them nor did he usually take them.

He would spend his wage in only two days and he fell so down that he could throw away therapy efforts of several months in a few hours.

We had to fight against new symptoms again: pills, visits to doctors... We had to put his mind right again and find out the way to make him recover his balance. Sometimes we could achieve that but it was always a precarious victory.

When drugs came into his life, mine crumbled down. I was on the lookout day and night. Sometimes he looked fine when he left home and I wondered with scare: 'what will he look like when he comes back?'

He came with glassy, irritated and red-looking eyes. It was so deep a sorrow for us that you cannot know what it is like until you have lived it.

The problems continued. He was pursued by the debts and in the end we had to pay for them. Some would take advantage and claim for more than the stolen items were worth. And we let them deceive us. How could we argue?

We realised that everything – help, contacts, future, illusion, hope – was getting smaller and smaller. All the doors were being closed on us.

Powerlessness

I cannot think of another name for what you feel when a son of yours gets into the hell of drugs on top of this terrible disease that makes parents suffer so much.

Everything looked confuse. The few notions we had to deal with his conduct became tangled up.

I started to fight from square one again to save him, to build again the house of cards that his life had become. Everything seemed useless; there was always something wrong. I could no longer tell apart his personality troubles from those caused by his drug habit, which he always denied he had.

We began to suffer a veiled discrimination. Although I admitted everything my son did or failed to do, it would hurt me a lot when he was being judged ruthlessly. They said he was stupid, a thug, a dropout, a drunkard and a junkie. Nobody took the trouble to conceal their rejection anymore. I would hear everyday words such as: 'he doesn't value anything because he's got everything'; 'his parents have brought him badly'.

Should I have felt ashamed because my son was ill? Should have I hidden him away? It seemed to me that nobody listened and even less understood. Nobody knew what his disorder was, nor had they even heard of it. It looked as if I had made up some story to account for his behaviour. Everything had gone too far.

I had cried out all my tears and I was left without the strength to talk to him or convince him of anything. I had reached a state of apathy and I acted by sheer inertia, like a robot. So much suffering had made me tougher, as if a cloud of pain had made me impervious in front of the terrible reality.

I addressed myself to God and I begged Him again and again to make me strong and help me carry on with the fight to save my son. These were short prayers but they summed up my exhaustion, my powerlessness and my confusion.

There were things I heard in the neighbourhood that hurt me terribly for him and all of us like: 'you can't have everything'.

I felt that if I lost my son, I would be left without anything.

7/. THERAPY IN A DRUG ADDICTION CENTRE, BARCELONA '92

We were not sure at all whether we should take him to a drug addiction centre. Properly speaking he was not a drug addict. He would take drugs from time to time, as another stage of his disease among the many there were. He took drugs when something was too hard for him, when he went through a crisis of his disorder or when some bad acquaintance used him easily and took drugs at his expense account.

If we sent him to such a centre, he would be surrounded by drug addicts. What influence would this bear on his disorder? How would he react? We knew he was able to dodge all the rules.

At last we made up our mind for the centre we believed to be the strictest. When we took the decision, we were aware of the risks and the hopes that went along with it.

After three days he wanted to go and they sent him home with just enough money to buy a bus ticket from that town to Barcelona. They told him it was up to him whether he should carry on fighting or give up. He called me and I said I would not have him at home and he had to go back to the centre that very night.

Then he spent several months there, cut off from us and from any contact with the outside world. We were only allowed one phone call a week and an odd letter to keep in touch all over this time.

They planned and ruled over his time. Sometimes it seemed he was happy.

He learnt how to share, to let off his anxiety, to understand his own feelings and others', to overcome his shame and fears, to make himself reliable, to value things and to express himself...

Although he went through very hard times, he did his best all day long during work time and group therapy sessions. There he was protected, among friends and he felt he was understood and cared for. He also tried to learn from others' failures.

At that centre he had to go through various stages and accept consequences.

He gradually wondered why it was so hard for him to move to the next stage and he suffered more for the consequences than others. He even came to ask himself: 'what am I doing here if I'm not hooked to drugs?'

He was safe at that place and there was a therapist watching over him all day long. Work itself was designed to make living together easy and it taught them all the time the important things of life such as recovering the lost humane standards and resisting temptations.

As I observed the education ways of this centre, I often wondered why these standards are no longer instilled into children today. It is elementary for them to be strong-minded enough to say no to drugs and whatever may come in their way.

Discipline at the centre helped them although sometimes it demanded large sacrifices from them.

Though they were in Barcelona at the time of the '92 Olympic Games, they would not let them out or watch TV... They were isolated while this great event passed by so close to them. They had to do constant self-control exercises and tests about their capacity to resist temptations and to master their impulses. They were not even allowed aspirin to ease the pain.

Some were expelled because they fell again and they were not able to reach the final phase. This was what Riky feared: he was not sure he would reach the end of the therapy programme and mostly whether he would manage in the world of anxiety that awaited him outside.

I have kept a very emotive and meaningful letter from his days at the drug addiction centre.

June 6th 1992

First of all I'll be as little original as always. I want you to know that I realise everyday that I love you all very much and besides I've always looked up to you, although at times I've let myself go because of my lack of personality... This lack of personality and of conscience of myself and of life is what I am learning to overcome here. All what I am learning is like a new experience, that of a family who – I hope – wishes to get back somebody who is going to give up his life if he has to.

I've got some news. Yes, yes a thousand yes. I am now at medium stage. I was in my first long group session two days ago: 24 hours' non-stop therapy, exercises to dominate shame and fear, to confront and make us realise where we fail and what we should trust and how to use techniques to bring out the pains of our life that we want to change.

It was the hardest thing I've done in my life. But there's a reward for the hard things and I believe this is the way things are. I realise that I feel a lot freer than I did when I last saw you. They say it's not like an aspirin pill that cures it all but it helps you to go out, trust yourself and be stronger than ever...

Mom

You were always on my side when the chips were down; there are no words to say how much you've helped me. If you write to me, I'd like to hear about your back, your cheese sandwiches [censored] or your moments of loneliness and quiet of which there are few and I wish I could share them with you – of your strolls outside, your family, your mother and your brothers and sisters... of your happy and sad moments. You know you're an Iron Lady for me and I wish I could merge with you for the rest of my life. This is the naked truth. I LOVE YOU.

Dad

Ghost – Lule, Tati or Cuca – can as well explain to you. I know that my hobbies and joys have helped me to pull through and I owe it to you. The affection I've had from you at all times is because you're sensitive, caring though cold and calculating and you've had to work hard to become what you are. Now that you're reading this letter, there's nothing I'd like more than being close to you and look at you as you read, with or without glasses.

SOMETHING IS NEVER GOING TO CHANGE: I LOVE YOU ALL.

Riky

He was there for eighteen months. He had escaped several times, sometimes only for a few hours or a few days. He was scared and he took to drink coffee. It was forbidden to take any stimulant at the centre. After he escaped again several times, he was expelled from the centre.

We were supposed to be tough with him and not to let him in our home because he had not completed the therapy. This was one of the hardest challenges for us. It was terribly hard for me to make myself strong and close the door to him, although I knew it was for his sake. We had signed and committed ourselves to follow some rules dictated by the professionals in whose hands we had placed his dependency therapy. Now he could not understand why he should be expelled for having a cup of coffee. It was a harsh punishment for what many people do everyday. He could not get the message.

They told us he had to reach the bottom until he would come back to the centre on his own will. Yet I wondered 'where is 'bottom' for him? Where is the limit for him? How

does he think?' and I did when sometimes he would call at three o' clock in the morning and say 'I'm cold, I'm tired and I'm hungry'.

He fell again lower in his personal destruction. He could not listen to reason. He was unable to change.

He was scared and he eventually resorted to prostitution in order to eat and have a place to sleep. And that's how come we found him, practising this trade in a luxury flat or at the rambla³ in a cheap boarding house, in an underworld of marginal prostitution... They made him take drugs for him to bear so much effort and humiliation. He was sure however that he would not steal or hurt anybody. He was so scared of going to jail... And he decided to do 'this' instead of going back to the centre or sleeping out in the street.

We knew that he was not sensible and that what we believed to be 'teachings' were useless, so we looked for him, we brought him home again and we accepted his failure. Another failure of his.

³ Note of translator: the most famous street in Barcelona downtown.

8/. THE LAST PHASE

Running away from everything...

He could not forgive himself for his last failure and he did not believe that the others could forgive him. He acted with fear, as if he always had to ask to be forgiven.

It got to a point that he needed to tell his life to anybody who would listen to him. He even warned them of what he was able to do.

Then he realised that any medicine or therapy was doomed to failure with him. This pushed him into a deep hole from which he would not or he could not escape. He was tired of fighting...

The hole got deeper and deeper and his mental and personal chaos grew worse. He believed that he solved something by getting away from everything, but whatever he escaped from, he could not escape from himself.

He ran away again and we did not know where he was. We looked for him desperately. We had to make a report with the medical affidavits that confirmed his mental disorder.

Meanwhile we considered any kind of marginal world where he might have stranded on. We went around hospitals with his picture to rule out suicide or an accident. We would startle each time the phone rang or when they knocked at our door. Nobody can live like this; it was hell on earth. Only God can make you strong enough to endure so much anguish and accept His will.

We continuously asked ourselves: 'what can we do?'. And the only answer was: 'wait'.

At last they found him after a police and private detective search and they brought him home.

When they went to fetch him, he was broken into pieces. He spent the two hours' journey home crying in his father's arms, shivering with hunger, exhaustion, shame and remorse.

He was so much disrupted that he only wanted to thank us for loving him in spite of all. How could we not love him?

He hugged me very hard when he arrived home. We did not say any word; they would have been meaningless. We only cried.

9/. SELF-DEPENDENCE

We eventually had to make a decision: he had to leave home. We rented a small flat for him and we took our home keys from him.

This decision was made at the time when he worked at the detective agency after his failure at the drug addiction centre and a ten days' run.

We all needed some peace. We wanted no more frights, anonymous calls, thefts and so on.

When we moved his belongings to the flat, it turned into a shambles, a small chaotic world of his own. I felt an immense pain that I had to disguise for everybody's sake. I controlled it from a distance. There were too few hours a day to do this. It was very hard to give him the freedom he wanted and to get the one we needed to recover.

We made up our minds after many attempts though we were sure through our experience that he was unable to keep things tidy with any constancy.

When he started to go badly again, he would not mind about the most basic things and the flat turned into an awful mess. He would lose his keys, leave the door open and forget to take down the rubbish. Sometimes he would leave the laundry in the washing machine for several days; he left the taps turned on; he used the cleaning liquids any old how. He controlled neither his phone bills nor anything at all. I tried to be on the lookout and make up for his forgetfulness and shortcomings, without noticing him too much. He emptied the cupboards and left it all scattered on the ground. He would mix clean with dirty, cigarette butts, wet clothes, food, etc...

He would not accept a maid's help. He shouted them away when he turned crazy. Then they were afraid of him and they would not go back...

I could not look after him without him noticing and this made him angrier. He complained that we helped him and we did not let him be free and self-relying. Yet when we let him loose and fend for himself, he panicked, he was unable to handle himself and he asked for help. Sometimes he called to thank me for all I did for him, just after getting very angry because my presence there upset him very much.

I had to endure him and get used to this complex game of contradictions, anger and gratefulness.

When he was fine, he was able to keep his flat tidy and he managed everything; he washed, hung and ironed his clothes and he could cook.

What we had to fear was the distinct phases of abnormality. They did not let him be self-dependent and live on his own or they made living with him impossible. What solution was there for so much anguish?

He was not alone and he did not end in the street. We did not come to lose him like many parents who do not know what has become of their children.

We were lucky. I do not know how long it would have lasted.

10/. THE BIKE

It was one of his big obsessions. He lived to have one and it made him happy and it tuned him into another boy. When he rode a bike, he felt more secure; this was his goal in his life.

He gave up drinking, he took the medicine, he obeyed and put money away so that he could afford one.

We knew it was dangerous. Whatever decision we had to take, we were never sure whether it would work or if it was the best for him. And then we took the risk upon ourselves knowing that it could be a mistake because of his crises. It is easy to talk when things have passed and when you do not have to face a reality that hits you everyday...

Indeed we were aware of the risks that went along letting him have a bike in such circumstances. It was like living in permanent tension. He told me one day: 'Mom, it's been fantastic, my ear touched the ground'. Another day when bike races ended in Montjuïc, he joined the circuit and rode, happy to feel unique in front of a crowd who clapped their hands at him.

He decided one night to go to Barcelona from the town where he was, although his lights were out of work. A friend told him he should not go because it was a terribly dangerous thing to do, but he ignored the advice and left as if nothing. When one day, we saw his bed sheets were stained with blood, I was frightened and I asked him what had happened. He had fallen one day before and he had not thought it was serious and then he could hardly walk. He grew angry because I forced him to have a shot of anti-tetanus.

Most of the time, he would forget about petrol and he was left stranded miles away from home. The Guardia Civil got used to seeing him walk by through the grove with his helmet under his arm. The reason was always the same: he had run out of petrol.

When he was obsessed with the bike, all he did was run from one place to another aimlessly. He wore out the wheels in two days.

They often stole pieces from his bike but he knew very well where to find some. He knew all the garages that bought stolen pieces. Then he managed to build it back with little money.

This motorbike that made him so happy and made us doubt so much brought up many problems and it was the cause for his death at age 26.

'I want you to be happy. You deserve it' he told us that day. We did not know then that there would be the last words he would ever tell us.

A few hours later, he was killed by the rain, his bike and his fate.

11/. THE END

He had just spent a week in a medical centre for detoxification, relax and monitoring. We thought it would be better for him to rest and while he rested, so would we. It was hard to convince him and after four days, he left without telling us, without his medicine. He dropped by in a bar to have a couple of pints.

'Your guardian angel must be exhausted' I often told him.

Some people told me that I should leave him but I could not follow such advice. 'How could I ever leave him if he's part of me?'. And I tried to muster strength and make up excuses to carry on keeping us afloat.

He made up his mind to spend a time on his own at Calella, a small town by the sea where we had a house.

I remember I had some forefeeling of something during his last days. These were days of balanced dialogues, dreams and projects for the future that sounded sincere and credible. He told us he wanted to look for a job in an NGO where they could understand his conduct. It did not matter to him if they paid no wage to him. He wanted to be useful to others, 'people who have more problems than I have'.

It was a slow farewell that left us a bittersweet taste. We left everything else and we went with him. We enjoyed being with him; he was quiet and there were more good moments than bad ones. Sometimes we could not sleep at night, not knowing what would happen the day after. During those nights, he told us things of the past and he often said there were things he 'would rather not tell, they're far too heavy'.

He would go at any time of day or night to the home of some friends of his or of ours, like he had frequently done before. He did not realise he could mean trouble. They took him in as if he were a lost child who needs to be cared for. They listened to him and they treated him kindly because he was likeable.

Towns are quieter and he felt better there. When we sat in a typical tavern, we spoke with a lady who had taken the trouble to listen to him. Though she had spoken few times with him, she remembered vividly his frank smile and the sincerity of a good and defenceless boy.

We shared several quiet weekends with his father; others were sad and tense.

He had supper with us on New Year's Eve. He turned up at the restaurant in a very outlandish way. He almost ate with his hands. Then he took three packages of twelve grapes⁴ and he put them in his pocket and he rushed out to go home. We were very sad as we followed his car and did not dare to speak. It was already hard and meaningless to have the grapes at midnight. This is how we came into the New Year, without wishes, celebration or party. We were not in a mood for that.

This was the last night we spent with him in that house. The next day we moved in another in the town centre. There we would not feel the loneliness there was at the grove and that we felt unbearable. He would not go with us. 'You'll be better off without me' he said, 'I don't want to bother you, you deserve being quiet and happy'.

On the Wizard Kings' Eve⁵, a quiet and cold afternoon, he went like a child to watch their Majesties' Procession at the harbour. It was one of these moments that would bring us hope for a little time

⁴ Note of translator: Families have supper together at New Year's Eve and eat twelve grapes at the rhythm of the twelve midnight bell tolls.

⁵ Note of translator: in some western Mediterranean cultures the Wizard Kings have a much greater relevance than elsewhere. They parade in great pageantry in the streets and bring gifts to children.

We left the Wizard Kings' cake aside for when his brothers and sisters would come and after lunch he took the bike to Barcelona. He said he wanted to see a friend. He waved us good-bye with his helmet on and his sack on his back. I still remember his sincere smile and his words: 'Bye Mom'.

We had talked about his future that day and he told us he would not come back and live in Barcelona. He felt better in Calella.

I felt a strange peace that afternoon. It was as if I stood in the eye of a hurricane without being struck by it. 'It's all too quiet, I've got a forefeeling of something' I told my children.

They rang us at two o'clock to tell us about the accident. They had taken him to Hospital de Mar. I knew he was gone but I felt his presence very close to me and I talked to him interiorly: 'show me how to live without you'.

They could not do anything because the shock had been too hard. Rain, some slippery paint, a bend, an uneven ground and the skirting of a garden. He lay on the grass a few yards away from his destroyed bike. He did not hurt anybody and he did mean to take his own life.

His eyes survive in somebody else because he donated them.

I laid down a wreath of red roses a few months later where his body had left its print on the wet grass. I joined him in the loneliness of death.

I felt he was with me on the day before we buried him. I also felt the need to write the words I spoke before the mass in front of everybody and God. I promised to him that his suffering would not be forgotten. This book stands as a proof of that.

12/. LEARNING TO LIVE WITH HIM

... was a contradiction in terms.

How could I tell how my son was and how my son was and how hard we tried to understand him?

I will only try to lay on the paper some memories that, once put together, may help the reader to learn about borderline personality disorder.

The first symptoms manifest themselves in the early teens and they fully develop into adult age.

Caught in a circle of varying pathologies, he was affected by each of them without having one in particular. He was not strong enough to break down this circle and to be aware of the qualities that he actually had.

The crises turned up unexpectedly with or without a motive and they went away just the same way they appeared. It made us live in permanent tension and it had him out of control. He was scared of whatever rule or authority imposed on him. They were the pole opposite to him.

Permanent changes of mood: he could switch from serenity to tension without a prior notice. Sometimes depressed and sometimes euphoric, several miscellaneous diagnoses were produced about him.

There was something in his mind that often would not let him tell reason from emotions.

Besides living with him was a permanent contradiction because you could never know if he lied or if he told the truth. He never learnt from experience. He would always commit the same mistakes. He could shift from one extreme to the other without a medium term. He achieved some balance and normality a few times, especially in his last days.

We would see him very often with empty eyes like people who can hear but do not listen and pay no attention to anything around them.

He interpreted the scale of values in his own way depending on circumstances. He wanted immediately whatever pleasure he wished to have. It was as if he were addicted to everything... His anxiety reached his peak when he got something and he left it with great indifference.

He was unable to control or to handle himself. He could spend compulsively all his money on foolish useless things and then he could not afford what he actually needed. He would make disproportionate gifts without a motive.

He could never control his instincts and he was always on the move. He used a key ring as a lollypop; he liked biting something all the time.

We and those who loved him knew that everything could happen with him and there was never an explanation. He was always a big-hearted grownup child who sometimes hurt the others though always unwillingly.

It could seem to those who did not know him that his life was frivolous and shallow. However, it was painfully deep.

He lived without projects and without a future.

Anguish made his hands sweat.

He could show a terrible lack of self-control sometimes. He could rent nine videos for an afternoon, cross the street just to say something, tell a joke to somebody he did not know. He would stuff his suitcase with four distinct shoes, two hunting-jackets and a toothbrush as only luggage or endure physical pain impassibly...

He worked harder than anybody and he did everything in a rush and disorderly... He would give up every project because he could not keep up with such a pace.

A bicycle ride could turn into an endless journey to nowhere. He could never plan time, energy, water, food, etc. It was an effort that made him come home at 10 o' clock exhausted and depressed because he knew that the others do not do such things.

Sometimes he would turn aggressive without reason and that made him a real heartless psychopath who offended with cruelty and he would even show no emotion at all when somebody died. Nevertheless he was extremely sensitive and at times, he could not hold back tears in front of the tenderness of cartoons.

Sometimes he smiled and said he wanted to cry but he could not.

He would take twenty cups of coffee to make twenty decisions.

He was unable to make himself responsible for anything: identity papers, fines... He could do a pointless journey. He was like a child who is not aware of dangers. He would jump into the sea from a boat without turning off the engine. He could not sky; yet he climbed to the highest track. He could not brake or turn and he was a real danger but he felt it was funny.

As far as health was concerned, he could fear and yet ignore a serious disease like smoking while he had an asthma attack or taking contradicting medicine or alcohol.

He was able to deceive anybody very astutely as well as others could manipulate him at their will. He could never see malevolence in anybody.

He was inconstant and he lacked willpower, yet he had a titanic strength inside to carry on fighting and escape from marginality where he had been caught and isolated many times.

He was always like a scared child and he always needed somebody to slow him down and to control him: his parents, brothers and sisters, a psychologist, a doctor, a friend...

He wanted to run away from everything but he could never escape from his worst enemy, namely himself. He had everything and he never knew what to do with it.

When he was 24, his life was going downhill, his crises were deeper and deeper and his remorse was too heavy a burden to bear.

He only longed and looked for some peace.

... and yet we lived with him and we loved him

I poked an eye into the world of lunacy, marginality and drugs through my son.

I met the huge social emptiness derived from the cult to intelligence, perfection, beauty, success, money, being the first, the best...

As I lived close to lunacy I could realise through the pain it causes how much hypocrisy there is in our society. We are supposed to hide away our faults, sorrow and pain and pretend we cannot see those who suffer by our side. We look away as much as we can because we do not want to see anything and we want to get on with our lives.

How much loneliness is caused and how many lives are crushed by so much pride and vanity!

Imperfection does not look nice.

This selfish society of ours hurt the weak. They are sensitive people who suffer because they need to hide their insecurity, conceal their mistakes, their lack of intelligence and their imperfection in order to succeed in front of the others. They cannot... and they know they will not be accepted as they are and their insecurity and suffering grow worse.

I have often seen society in this light: insensitive and amoral. People turn away from their own conscience and they put things around them not to show their own emptiness. They get out of their way to boast about everything, even their children. Your children must be perfect and you have to flaunt them about and this is why you

do not talk about their failures or their diseases. The truth does not look nice, even less when it is a scary one. We are not interested in the mystery of human mind...

I met people who loved my son though they hardly knew him. Others lived close to him during all his life and they could not love him.

There is a lesson we have to learn from all this: we should stand by everybody and try to understand the weakest and not to cast them away. Let us share their pain and we will achieve a better world alongside with them.

I want my son to have the place he deserved. He fell down deep because he could not face criticisms, ignorance and his disease. He was a great boy but he suffered terribly. He had a disorder that made living with him and relations with the others difficult. I hope this suffering will not have been in vain.

In spite of all the pain I have been through, he especially taught me how to deal with suffering and to be proud of him.

I would like to bring a stone as a mother to help putting our efforts and knowledge together and help the sick and their families.

There are so much misunderstood suffering and limited intelligence, so many unknown disorders and so many people ignored who feel abandoned among us!

There are some parents who will not admit the trouble and they cannot give the appropriate treatment to their children and they force them to a way of life they cannot follow.

There are on the other hand the ill that accept they have this disorder and they get a regular medical attention but they keep on dissimulating always and they conceal an anguish that is not well considered.

Perhaps many cases do not have a solution. The disorder is chronic and we must find a way to protect their future, make the society aware, spread information and know the limitations and defend them from themselves.

This disorder is not admitted as mitigation in law. They are judged as if they were aware of their acts.

There is a lack of information, communication, integration, suggestions... temporary help centres and support to families.

To dedicate yourself to such a son is so mentally absorbing that it leaves no time and no energy. Only those who have lived it in their flesh can understand what I am talking about.

'If I had known more about his disorder, I would have been able to help him more' his brother told me after reading these lines.

When I was paralysed by exhaustion I wished somebody would give me some hope and show me some way to help my son.

Perhaps this way does exist. I could not find it or I did not know where to look for it. I write with the hope that there is one.

IN GUISE OF EPILOGUE

At the burial mass

We beseech You Lord

- That Riky find the peace he could not have in this world;
- That we accept Your will when times get hard and make our faith stronger;
- That we should have sympathy and not ignore our brothers and sisters' suffering;
- That we help and listen to the others and not come to meet You with empty hands;
- That we know how to face reality and nourish sincere feelings to keep us as one;
- That humane values lead our lives;
- That Riky act for us and watch over us until we meet again forever.

We beseech You Lord.

'Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven', Luke 6:37.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted' Matthew 5:1 and 4.

At the burial in Calella

Riky was a special boy. He wanted to please everybody and he looked for affection desperately. He felt he was different. He thought nobody loved him. Now he knows that everybody around him cared for him.

He lived in a world of his own because of the disease. He neither had standards nor a sense to his life and there were plenty of contradictions in him. He suffered and others suffered because of him.

He searched for easy and fictitious enjoyment but it increased his loneliness. He rode his bike without a destination, looking for a little happiness.

He lived in Calella for his last days and there he found a simple and quiet life and some peace.

He wanted to live here and so we have brought him here so that he can rest in peace forever.

It was God's will that his life should be so short and so hard.

By his side we learnt to know what suffering, loneliness and marginality are and we saw how society casts out those who are not perfect. We witnessed his fight to find out a sense to a life he did not understand and where he felt he was lost.

God has given peace to him. Now he will start living at last.

Thank you for loving him and for your prayers.

Letter to la Farola⁶, issue n° 31, 1996

Dear friends,

I've just lost a 26 year-old son. He had a fine social, family and body condition but he suffered borderline personality disorder and it made him feel empty and different. He did not know how to live his life; his reasoning was inadequate and he could not put his standards right. He simply fought to achieve being somebody, love himself and get the others to love him.

⁶ Note of translator: a magazine sold by homeless street vendors.

His troubles and other circumstances led him to live out in the street several times. He slept on benches, in stations, he ate at charity institutions and he did not know how to make a living.

That happened six years ago. There was no Farola then.

I can see him today in every vendor. I know there are a story and a problem in each of them. Perhaps my son would have sold la Farola too.

A letter to heaven

Riky, I would like to apologise now that you can understand me.

I think of you and your loneliness when I walk along the streets.

You felt even more despised.

They told us we should throw you out to the street. It was part of the therapy.

They used you when you stayed at a cheap boarding house and you tried to earn a living.

You were close to suicide when we found you. You would not even think at all.

There was a chance we might never see you again... and some still said we were too easy on you.

You left home with your clothes on your back, no money and this distress in your eyes that seemed to ask for an explanation.

These eyes will remain fixed in my heart for the rest of my life.

Mom

Extract from a letter from Riky to his father

June 6th 1992

... I would like to know you more and more and help you like you did with me and fight with you and get support from you. I hope that if you write to me, you'll tell me what you do and about the boat, when you'll put it afloat and man it as you know so well.

But the most important thing is how my dear wonderful father is, after the tides and storms of life that left him sad, caring, cheerful and worried at the same time.

YOUR LOVING SON WHO WILL WALK IN YOUR SHADOW FOR ALL HIS LIFE...

P.s.:

There is nothing more beautiful and rewarding in life than having somebody who stands and fight for happiness when the chips are down.

I wish and I hope that you may share my happiness.

Your loving son

INDEX

NOTE FOR THE THIRD EDITION.....	2
PROLOGUE.....	4
INTRODUCTION: the strength of a mother.....	5
FOREWORD.....	6
1/. A SPECIAL BOY'S CHILDHOOD.....	8
2/. THE SHIFT OF TEENAGE YEARS.....	10
3/. ASPECTS OR APPEARANCES OF NORMALITY.....	14
4/. THE DISTINCT PHASES OF ABNORMALITY.....	15
Depression and schizophrenia.....	15
Paranoia.....	16
Bulimia and anorexia.....	17
Psychopathology and medical treatment.....	18
Sense and feelings.....	19
5/. WORK.....	21
6/. ALCOHOL AND DRUGS.....	23
The downfall... ..	23
Powerlessness.....	24
7/. THERAPY IN A DRUG ADDICTION CENTRE, BARCELONA '92.....	26
8/. THE LAST PHASE.....	29
Running away from everything... ..	29
9/. SELF-DEPENDENCE.....	30
10/. THE BIKE.....	31

11/. THE END.....	32
12/. LEARNING TO LIVE WITH HIM.....	34
... was a contradiction in terms.....	34
... and yet we lived with him and we loved him.....	35
IN GUISE OF EPILOGUE.....	37
At the burial mass.....	37
At the burial in Calella.....	37
Letter to la Farola, issue nº 31, 1996.....	37
A letter to heaven.....	38
Extract from a letter from Riky to his father.....	38