

1985 The Cruise – A Sulphasalazine induced psychosis

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I thought an exciting holiday would be a reward for Karen's hard work at university. Jeff was keen to go on another cruise in 1985 as our first cruise together, in 1984 had suited him down to the ground. This time we would take Karen, Paul and Daniel.

Paul had left school and was about to embark on his career as a magician at the age of 17. He had won the 1984 Home Counties Junior Magic Competition performing a stylish silent magic act to music, with Karen as his assistant. Her efforts to support Paul were out of love for her brother, she had no ambition for a career in entertainment for herself. The pair were also awarded second place in the prestigious Young Magician of the Year competition 1985 in London. They performed in shows at the Garrick and Theatre Royal Stratford East and were all set to do the Home Counties Gala performance in 1985.

As we packed and prepared for our holiday, there was noisy chattering and running up and down stairs, until we piled cases in and on top of the VW caravette and drove off towards Southampton, Jeff an outwardly calm and kindly man was impatient to leave and was quietly irritated by my last minute checks to make sure there was no food left to decay in our absence or unlocked windows. However we finally departed.

I looked back up the hill to see our house in Roebuck Lane, Buckhurst Hill fading into the distance and feeling how lucky we were to have a nice home and be able to afford to go away on a Mediterranean Cruise.

We had started married life with nothing. Jeff had just graduated, his wonderful father was a cabinet maker. My mother was divorced and I had to start work at the age of 15.

We were thankfully secure, working all hours but able to enjoy holidays. Thanks to Jeff's dedication as a teacher, then Senior Lecturer in Urban Land Economics, followed by his new career running the property management business I had founded, in my early 20's.

Now with the support of our eldest son, Mark assisting his father in the business, I was able to study in order to follow my dream to become an actress. I had even founded a new theatre company.

I was happy as we travelled toward Southampton, with that warm feeling when with ones children. Knowing where they are gives a sense of security hard to describe. Just as when they are all in bed at the end of a day. After waiting for their return from an evening out, hearing their footsteps, the noise of a key in the door. A sigh of relief when they are all in bed.

We had taken our dogs to the boarding kennels, comforted by the fact they would not be pining as they had each other for company, sweet natured Shetland Collie, Zebbie and cute, feisty Yorkshire Terrier, Poochie.

It was August 1985, as at last we set off for our cruise with joyful anticipation. It was great to feel school work, university studies and our business concerns could be put aside for a while.

Karen had just completed her first year at Goldsmiths and as well as end of term exams for the joint History/English degree, The exams and rehearsals with Paul had taken their toll on her energy. Jeff

and I thought the holiday would do her the world of good. This would probably be the last family holiday together, with 3 of our 4 children. Mark was left in charge of the Forest Bureau Property Management business and we had supportive staff, so we could forget our everyday concerns and really relax. Little did we suspect the trauma that awaited us.

Karen had been tired in the preceding months. A conscientious student, the joint history and English degree was new for Goldsmiths and the reading list was formidable. Karen developed a stomach problem, I had taken her to a gastroenterologist who prescribed a sulphonamide drug for what he concluded, with no detailed investigation, to be Crohn's disease. This was later found to be a misdiagnosis.

Karen was concerned at being told she may have to take prescription drugs for life. The drug in question Sulphasalazine had been helpful for her Dad's condition of Ulcerative Colitis, so we confidently reassured her that as Dad was helped by the drug, she would be too. In retrospect the dose of 3 grams prescribed was far too high for a 7 stone girl. We had no information about the drug, as prior to 1997 no information about a prescribed medication was made available for the patient.

An early sign that Karen was unable to tolerate this drug was when she started having nightmares. I heard Karen sobbing. I ran up the stairs to the attic to find Karen coming out of her room shaking and crying on two occasions. The dreams of terrifying creatures which appeared to be in her room, had shaken her. The hallucinogenic nightmares was recorded in doctor's letters as an adverse effect of sulphasalazine, I later discovered at the British Library Medical Department. Sadly too late to help Karen. However the prescriber denied this to be a side effect and insisted Karen kept taking the drug at the dose he had recommended.

Even without the evidence of any written information, I suspected this was an adverse reaction to sulphasalazine. I was so concerned Karen was not tolerating the medication, I made an appointment to see the gastroenterologist with Karen.

He was adamant she should continue saying it was not an adverse effect. He knew we were going on holiday and his words "Keep taking sulphasalazine – "don't rock the boat", still ring in my ears. He also failed to warn of the need to keep well hydrated due to possible serious adverse effects known to cause blood and physical disorders.

Arriving in Southampton amidst the sight and sound of gangplanks and cargo being moved, we saw the gleaming, impressive hulk of the P & O liner, Canberra. We paused on the gangplank for a family picture to be taken by the ship's photographer, who would later record fun events for all of us 'SNAP' as photo records were taken. Smiling and looking like the perfect happy family, only to eventually find the world we felt secure in, was falling apart at the seams.



We explored the decks, finding our way around Canberra, joining in various activities, games, swimming, variety nights, dancing lessons and enjoying the food and entertainment.

We went ashore in Cannes and tension between me and Jeff over our lack of French currency for drinks upset Karen. We ended up walking along the promenade into the heat of the Mediterranean resort, with no money to buy a drink. The resulting dehydration may have had a bearing on what followed.

I began to worry about Karen's changed mood and her heightened sensitivity to aspects of family relationships that she would previously have ignored. There had been signs such as the flower she balanced on the handle of my cabin, a sign of love. The flower had fallen and I failed to notice this which upset her.

I went to the ship's doctor to ask if he thought sulphasalazine, could have effected her mood. He did not even look in a drug manual for information. The doctor just said "you will have to bring her to see me" I explained " in her present mood, which I can only describe is like a tightly wound up spring ready to snap, there was no way I can persuade her to see you".

The fancy dress Gala evening, brings back a feeling of deep unease. Karen dressed as a Hawaiian dancer, in a costume we had brought back as a gift from our trip to Hawaii where we had celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary in 1983

Karen was in high spirits, I look back and realise why her 'high' spirited outgoing behaviour was a danger signal that I would not have known how to deal with even if I had understood it. Karen had painted a flower on her cheek and looked very pretty, with her eyes sparkling she was in a witty, lively mood. At dinner she seemed over concerned about Daniel and was defending him over a food issue I have forgotten the detail of.



Karen and Paul left the table to go to the dance. She was excited and slightly edgy, I thought. I was not too concerned as I put it down to the excitement of the cruise Gala night. I felt reassured as she was with her brother.

I hoped they had both had a fun evening. I awoke the next morning to find the ship berthed in the port at Palma.

Paul came to our cabin looking concerned and asked me to go and see Karen, in her cabin. I found Karen sobbing under the covers of her bed. I asked what was wrong. Karen told me to go away and would not tell me anything. I left reluctantly to find Jeff and suggested he could go with Paul and Daniel ashore while I waited to see if I could console Karen and find out what had happened to upset her so much.

I was shocked at the state Karen was in and unable to imagine what could have happened to make her so upset. I felt helpless when she still refused to speak to me. I walked around the ship and returned to her cabin several times. Eventually I pushed open the door to ask if she would like to come ashore with me. Karen, physically pushed the door shut against me and shouted “ if I want to go ashore, I will go with my friends”

I felt as if I was in a daze, I walked around the decks and on return found Karen had left the cabin, I went inside and checked her cupboard. Seeing her bag and passport were there and knowing how organised Karen usually was, I felt confident she was still on board and thought she had probably gone to the cabin of one of the girls she had met on board.

With no knowledge of names of her new friends, there was no way to check who Karen was with or where she was. I could see rows of closed cabin doors with no way of knowing who is inside or which cabin Karen might be in. It did not occur to me that Karen would not be on board.

I did not reunite with my family until just before departure. I stood with Jeff and Daniel on deck as we sailed out of Palma, watching the port lights fade into the distance. It all looked so peaceful.

We eventually went to the dining room for dinner. We expected Karen to meet us in the dining room. No sign of Karen. We asked for a tannoy message over the ship's loud speaker system, to call for her. Still no response and no Karen.

Paul went to seek out any of the young people they had met during the holiday. He was eventually informed by someone who heard the announcement, he had seen Karen sitting in the café on the quay by the ship, just before we sailed away. Paul was sobbing when he came to tell us and we were just as distraught, I rushed to tell the Captain.

“Please can you find someone in Palma to see if Karen is still in the café on the dock, or nearby”

I imagined Karen scared and alone, frightened and wandering towards the town through the naval yard as we were sailing further and further from her reach.

We had a gruelling time trying to persuade the Captain and officers there was a serious problem, while impressing the need for urgency and the importance of sending someone to find Karen.

I begged for a helicopter to take me away from the prison on water, as the Canberra liner then felt to me. To be trapped for two days in the ocean, before the next port of call in Lisbon, made me feel so helpless. This was a nightmare and I knew Karen must be ill and therefore unable to fend for herself.

The Officers' reaction was for the First officer and captain to try to play down the seriousness of a daughter left behind in port. The intransigence, in particular of one of the officers on the ship was difficult to deal with. He made dismissive comments to play down the seriousness of a young girl missing. He stated Karen may have run off with someone she met ashore.

“ She probably met a boy” “ people often miss sailings”.

We tried to impress on them, “she must be ill as our daughter would not have gone ashore without her passport and bag, that is just out of character - she must be ill”.

Their reaction was as if this is a regular scenario. Hysterical parents just have to be subdued. I felt totally disempowered as I contemplated our helpless situation for the two days until we were due to dock in Lisbon.

We called our son Mark on the satellite phone. “ Take the first flight you can to get to Palma to find Karen”. Mark did not hesitate and immediately set out. He set off with trepidation into the unknown for a journey of great tribulation. His task persuading airlines fully booked by August holiday makers, to find him a seat took admirable determination.

That at least was some relief to know he could be there within a day. We had no idea of the difficulties he was to encounter trying to get on a flight and later, when he arrived in Palma.

I had an idea and called up Jeff's cousin, Daily Mail press photographer Monty Fresco. “ Monty please can you help us, Karen has gone missing in Palma. Is there a Mail reporter there? Can we get a photo of Karen to the island and circulate it as a missing person?” I knew Monty would have a picture of Karen as he attended our family events and always had his camera with him.

“ The Mail only send out reporters if there is a story, they don't stay around the world” Monty said. I was deeply disappointed.

My call to Monty caused more problems. We were summoned to the Captain's office.

“ Is this a publicity stunt” he demanded, “ I have just had a call from the Daily Mail”

We explained why this happened and had to work at convincing him, we were not part of a media publicity stunt. I was not finding it easy to be patient with their attitude and then I said “ please get a helicopter to take me ashore!”.

The captain eventually reacted to my pleading and took steps to contact P & O people in Palma.

The time was getting later and later and eventually the family retired to sleep. I just paced the decks. Here I was on SS Canberra which felt like a prison on the water. The decks were deserted as the time ticked by 2am, 3am, 4am. I paced and paced, looked out at the huge expanse of water, the skies full of tiny stars not seen when on land. An eternal distance between me and my lost young daughter.

The utter despair and helplessness of being on a ship, isolated in the ocean. The desperation of not knowing whether Karen was dead or alive . Instinctively knowing she was ill yet no one believing us. I prayed she would not fall into the dock, or be taken by someone in the naval yard that lay between the berth and the town. A long, long sleepless night pacing empty decks alone , in the loneliest place I have ever been.

In the morning the captain called us in to his office. "Karen was found sitting in the café, she is fine" I said "She can't be fine, please make sure she is taken to a place of safety, she must not be left alone"

My instinct was that her mental state was unbalanced and she was still in danger. Her appearance of confidence may not be seen as a sign all was not well.

Thankfully, the P & O representative, after taking Karen to obtain a temporary passport, took her to a clinic for safety. The picture taken for this new document shows a strange defiance which reflects her attitude at the time

Arrangements were made for me to fly out from Lisbon. The captain suggested Jeff and Paul should stay on board and this would be the best plan. He was trying to take control of the plans as he could see we were not able to think straight. At last we were the recipients of exceptional support from the P & O officers, we signed a paper and they took care of all bookings and arrangements for transport, covering costs to be repaid later.

All the best made plans were soon again in disarray. We had given Mark the direct line number as we did not have mobile phones in 1985, to enable him to call the ship when we were docked in Lisbon. We told the satellite officers where they would find us at any time. We were summoned by the head waiter in the dining room to the satellite office to speak to Mark. "Don't let mum come here or Karen says she will run away- she only wants Paul" Mark sounded desperately serious and very anxious.

We told the captain about the changed situation and the ticket purchased for me to fly to Palma from Lisbon was transferred to Paul. He set off with no qualms that to be with his sister, for him was the right move. Paul told us later how stressful it was explaining to the airline why he was flying with a ticket in my name. How they nearly refused to let him fly until his desperation won them over.

Mark had arrived in Palma and taken charge of his sister who appeared to be in a good mood so he did not think she needed to be in a clinic. Mark took her to an hotel and then out to the shops. Karen wanting to make a fuss of her brother ordered all the deserts on the menu in a cafe and told Mark "It is OK - P & O will pay". The same thing happened in a shop where Karen gathered up some cheap dress jewellery and was about to walk out without paying "P & O will pay" she told Mark.

Mark, was having to reason with Karen and now the penny dropped there was more of a problem than he had first acknowledged. He took Karen back to the hotel and in the bedroom, which had a balcony, where there was a dangerous incident.

Suddenly Karen felt convinced Paul was in danger. "He is being attacked" she cried and attempted to go on to the balcony. Terrified Karen was about to fall as she appeared to be hallucinating. "I can see Paul is in danger" she cried and ran towards the edge of the balcony thinking she could see Paul in the distance. Mark was scared she would fall over the balcony and grabbed her arm.

"Let go of me, you'r hurting me" Karen cried as she struggled free and ran out of the room, down the stairs with Mark following, into the lobby of the hotel. As she was heading towards the main doors, miraculously Paul had just arrived.

Karen ran straight into Paul's arms "Mark is hurting me, keep him away from me". Mark, now rejected by Karen, telephoned us to explain what happened. We realised not only did we need to get medical help to bring Karen back to England. We could not leave our sons alone to deal with this crisis.

We had to organise for an air ambulance to take Karen back to the hospital where she had been treated by the gastroenterologist. This had to be paid for in advance and we did not have credit cards. People on board Canberra offered to help us and at least two people generously offered us use of their credit cards. With the help of Mark's good friend who worked for an airline at the time, the arrangements were made for an air ambulance to collect Karen from the clinic in Palma. I cannot remember who eventually laid out the money to pay in advance.

Paul took Karen back to the Palma clinic for her safety. He stayed in the room with her and was awake all night watching her. At one point he thought she had been a long time in the bathroom and went in. He found her climbing up on the cistern to try to reach a high window which was partly open. "Look there is a light beckoning to me" Karen said, pointing at stars. Paul gently persuaded her to lie down in bed and struggled to stay awake all night to keep an eye on her.

On board Canberra, by now people were aware of our predicament. A couple from Essex holidaying with their 3 children offered to care for Daniel when they heard the plan for me and Jeff to both leave the ship at Lisbon. P&O had obtained train tickets for us, as all flights were fully booked.

At ten years of age, Daniel was a mature young man and pragmatic in this extraordinary situation "I can't be of any help, so I may as well stay here" he said.

Daniel had befriended the son of this couple. The family had become friends after one night down on the cabin level deck, we heard whimpering. I was with Daniel and we followed the sound. A little girl and her brother in a nearby cabin were seen to be in some trouble. The girl around 7 had trapped her finger and her brother, about Daniel's age, did not want to leave her to find the parents. I stayed with the girl while Daniel went with her brother Bradley to find their parents.

"We can take Daniel home to Brentwood and I can drive your car back as I arranged for a limo to collect us after the cruise" said the generous young man – "you just come and collect both when you have sorted out your daughter". Once we could see Daniel was happy with this arrangement, we accepted the kind offer gratefully.

Jeff and I departed leaving Daniel safely on board Canberra and began our journey from Lisbon to Palma. A long, long train journey across Europe.

I still remember vividly how the tiredness swept over me, as I rested against Jeff. I was saying "I am sure this must be onset of schizophrenia" "No it may not be that" Jeff was always the optimist! , I had seen in The Times, a mother's account of her university student son's sudden onset of the illness". What else could cause such a change in personality, I wondered.

I started reflecting on our lives and how lucky we had been up to this point . Karen was always a loving daughter who's warmth and tender caring for all her family was always demonstrated by hugs, kisses and remembering everyone's birthday. She was always reminding her brothers Mark,

Paul and Daniel to send cards and buy gifts for special occasions. Her presence in our family was like the sun shining constantly keeping us all warm.

I suddenly opened my eyes and said to Jeff “are we there?” . I had been asleep and unaware the train had broken down and the journey had taken more than 10 hours. We had missed our connection. Mark was waiting anxiously with an amazing taxi driver would no leave him. He stayed with Mark the whole time, sensing Mark’s despair and understanding the extreme serious situation we were facing. I so wish I had this kind man’s address in order to thank him.

When we finally arrived it was shortly before the air ambulance was due to arrive at the clinic. I was warned by Mark via contact with Paul, on no account must Karen know I was there. So Mark and I ended up in the situation of hiding behind a bush in the grounds of the clinic, while Jeff and Paul coaxed Karen to agree to be seen by the doctor and nurse from England. As we cowered in the car park next to her clinic. The first floor window to Karen’s room was open, we could hear her voice.

The doctor had decided the only way to bring Karen home to England, was if she was unconscious. A needle with sedative was jabbed into her thigh, causing her shocked scream to reverberate around the car park, we both shuddered and left for our flight back to London.

It is hard to describe what this was like for us – we hugged, feeling scared about the outcome for Karen, and comforted she had her beloved father and brother with her in the air ambulance.

On arrival in London I called the gastroenterologist and asked “Could the sulphasalazine have caused Karen’s breakdown” The doctor retorted “ Only if she got dehydrated”

At the hospital, Jeff and Paul were sitting either side of the bed in which Karen lay, still unconscious. The doctor walked towards them and without directly speaking to the two men, he turned on his heel, walked away and stated “ Nothing to do with me” !

Karen was transferred to a psychiatric unit where events became worse before they got better, due to further horrifying adverse drug reactions. Furthermore she was not taken off the sulphasalazine either.

That is another story!

How had we come to this? What had caused our world to turn upside down?

I now believe I could have prevented what was about to happen, if I had known what I know now