

PROLOGUE

You will preserve all my Letters and I will secure yours – and thus in the course of time we shall each of us have a good Bundle – which, hereafter, when things have strangely altered and god knows what happened, we may read over together and look with pleasure on times past.

Letter from John Keats to his sister, Fanny, September 10th 1817

I began writing this book in May 2004. Since then, through periods of motivation and progress as well as times of dormancy and doubt, it has expanded and evolved into what it is today. However, not a word would have been written were it not for an unplanned moment that happened six months earlier at a time when I was lacking direction, fed up with myself and drinking too much. As was so often the case, I awoke that morning with a hangover, feeling gloomy and restless. Sitting at the kitchen table slumped over a mug of tea, I knew that unless I made myself do something, it wouldn't be long before I slipped into despondency and opened a bottle of wine. I went through a mental list of suggestions, rejecting one after the other, until, quite unexpectedly, I said to myself: you could find the letters from Chris. I sat up straight; my hand went to my mouth. Through my fingers I whispered, *I could find the letters from Chris*. All at once it seemed a matter of urgency. I fetched the stepladder, carried it upstairs and climbed into the loft. I found what I was looking for – some boxes that had been transported and preserved, unopened, through three house moves, clearly marked 'Letters'. I brought them downstairs and placed them on the kitchen table. The lids lifted easily as the sticky tape that had sealed them was now browned and brittle. Inside was an astonishing number of letters of varying shapes, sizes, and colours. I removed a handful, momentarily surprised to see my old addresses printed on the envelopes. As I began to identify the senders and sort the letters into piles, I couldn't resist reading some of them. The youthful vocabulary of the day made me smile, as did the price of the postage stamps. Before long, I was immersed, swept back to my teenage years. Faces and places, intimacies and friendships coalesced as in a clearly remembered dream. I was infused with warmth and amusement along with the melancholy of time lived and gone.

Then I found one of Chris's letters. It was as unnerving as a sudden scream, the shock of seeing his handwriting. The world seemed to fall away. I felt immobilised, as though I had stumbled upon a secret I was not meant to discover. My heart raced. His handwriting! I couldn't believe the impact it had – to see again the words he had written. As I held the letter, I was aware that his hands had also held it, had once lifted it to his mouth to lick the flap. I visualised him going to find a stamp from our mother's office, leaving the house, crossing the road and posting this very letter in the pillar-box on the corner of Cleveland Road. I laid it in the middle of the table, deciding not to read it until I had found them all. My earlier reverie had

gone. I renewed my search with purpose, prepared for the next jolt. By the evening, every kitchen surface was covered and the boxes were empty. In front of me lay five letters from Chris. I assembled them in chronological order, breathed deeply, and eased the first one out of its envelope. His untidy writing pierced me with sadness and pleasure; memories tumbled into my mind; I heard his animated voice, felt his sparkly-eyed smile and pictured his expressive gestures. Overcome by a strange joy, I read every word, spilling tears of long-lived, never-finished grief. Chris, my only brother, died just six weeks after his seventeenth birthday.

The next day my twin sister, Izzy, phoned me. She said, “Do you know what I did yesterday? I’ve not been able to face it before, but I dug out all the letters Chris wrote to me when I was at university and read them for the first time since he died.” We had reached the same point on the same day. It had taken both of us more than twenty-eight years to read his letters again.

My children have often asked me what Chris was like. He is indelibly stored in my memory, he appears in my dreams, yet whenever I have tried to describe the multifaceted, inspirational person he was, my words have fallen far short of the sum of him, have failed to illuminate the influence and impression he had on everyone who knew him. It has always bothered me that he is but a shadow to the people who came into my life after his death. I knew I would have to write about him if I wanted to bring his life out of obscurity, but this was a daunting prospect. Although I had kept diaries, composed a few essays and written as a form of therapy, to write a book seemed impossible. I had tried many times to begin and failed just as often to get beyond the first page. If ever I did manage to write something that seemed to have some potential, it was soon torn up or deleted; harsh self-criticism made sure of that. I was further hindered by a notion that I could only write with alcohol flowing through my veins, believing that it lubricated my mind, freed the imagination and opened the windows of creativity. There is some truth in this, yet ultimately, alcohol dims the senses, confuses the thoughts and burns out all attempts at prolonged endeavour. Lacking discipline, incentive, and staying power, I was unable to enter that place of solitary confinement that writing really is.

Then various elements conspired to force my hand. A relationship came to an unhappy end; I was again struggling to deal with loss, negativity and depression. As usual I took up the pen and the bottle, but through the alcoholic haze I became aware that the words spilling onto the paper were more meaningful for me than the relationship had been and that my own neglect of my creativity was the main source of my loneliness.

More distressingly, our mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. She had been losing her short-term memory for some years, but it had become obvious that her increasingly strange behaviour was far more than occasional forgetfulness. She fought it every step of the way, relying valiantly upon the remnants of her exceptional organisational ability to disguise the fact that her life was slipping out of control. Izzy and I guessed it was Alzheimer’s long before we managed to persuade her to see a consultant. By the time tests had eliminated all other possibilities, the words

'Alzheimer's Disease' were as meaningless to her as thousands of others she no longer understood. Her decline was awful to witness: as tangles and plaques destroyed her brain cells, she was stripped of her independence, intellect, grace and dignity. She was almost unable to function in the present, yet she still retained clear memories of the past; memories that became fixed so vividly in her mind that she needed to tell them, always as if for the first time, over and over again. Rather than closing my ears to the repetitions of her identically phrased stories, I decided to write them down, question her further and nudge her to remember more. I am glad I did, for it was the last chance that she or I had to access her memory. My mother's infirmity brought into direct focus the incalculable value of health and the brevity and randomness of life. If I meant to do anything with mine, I must start right now.

I decided to stop pouring poison down my throat, wantonly destroying my brain cells, and made the same decision the next day and the next. In a similar way, I decided to write. I progressed past the first page and wrote another and then another, until the words began to grow into something of substance. What a revelation to learn that I did not need alcohol to write: how reassuring to find inspiration in plentiful supply with just the application of dedication and constructive work. There were no more excuses: I had the motivation; I was sober; I would try to write a book about Chris and this time I would not give up.

Of course I could not write about him in isolation. The book would also be about Izzy and myself – 'the girls', as Chris used to call us. Remembering the life we shared with him would be an undertaking for both of us. As I started on the canvas of our childhood, I realised that I needed to colour in some background about Mum, Dad and Granny, the three adults with whom we lived. Their experiences of life before we were born had established their attitudes, influenced their beliefs, and were brought to bear upon our upbringing. Their history is also ours. I have presented my research of their lives and our ancestry in three separate biographical sections: *Granny's Story*, *Dad's Story* and *Mum's Story*.

Granny's and Mum's Scottish roots were fairly accessible. I contacted the relatives I knew, none of whom I had spoken to for many years, and began to ask questions. They lent me photographs and recounted tales from the past. With the additional help of Internet access to genealogical websites, my voyage back through the generations and along the lines of siblings and cousins began. As I discovered the many babies and children who had died, the illnesses that had cut adult lives short, the young men killed in wars, the hardship and poverty, even abuse, depravity, crime and intrigue, I had to become an investigator, detective, historian, psychologist and interpreter in order to assemble data, follow leads, track people down, and understand who they were, what they were like and how they survived. I found no dukes or duchesses, knights or dames – our forebears were ordinary folk, most of them living hand-to-mouth in cramped, basic dwellings and labouring in the factories, shipyards, mills, mines and iron foundries. The exploration was, and still is, fascinating, but the material that has accumulated is far too extensive for this book. Consequently, apart from a few stories that almost pleaded to be told, I have given only brief sketches to set the scene for Granny's early life. *Mum's Story* follows

on from there and is depicted mainly through the diary she kept during the 1940s.

When it came to writing about my father's history, I barely knew where to begin. He died in 1999. I knew none of his relatives. His mother died before we were born and he had cut himself off from her side of the family. Fortunately, I knew his mother's name. Persistent searches connected me with a second cousin I didn't know I had. With his help and encouragement, I contacted and met other family members, which has been both heart-warming and curative. What has emerged, though, is a labyrinth of mysteries, leading to a dead-end with a Machiavellian great-grandfather, whose identity has been artfully concealed through three generations. As far as Dad's father is concerned, I haven't investigated deeply. We knew him, as we paid weekly visits to Grandad throughout our childhood. Although I found out where he was born, now know the names of his siblings and parents, and have stretched his family tree to previous generations, the picture I have drawn of him is derived from my own recollections and Dad's memoirs.

As I began to write about Chris, a wealth of material came to light. Finding those letters from him was only the beginning. The doors to the past had been opened and people from long ago reappeared. A friend with whom I hadn't had any contact for thirty years wrote to me just as I was writing about his friendship with Chris; somebody who had been occupying my thoughts emailed me after a twenty-five-year silence; I bumped into old acquaintances in unlikely places; names I hadn't heard in ages cropped up in conversation; almost forgotten events, scenarios and images resurfaced. The more absorbed I became in the process of remembering, the more of the past I reclaimed. I contacted as many people who had known Chris as I could; some I hadn't spoken to since he died, others I had never spoken to before. They were incredibly generous in giving me their time, sharing their memories and answering my questions. I am indebted to those who loaned me significant correspondence and photographs and to others who allowed me to use letters that they themselves penned more than thirty-five years ago.

The most invaluable help I have received has been from my sister. Apart from permitting me to use her diaries and letters, she has been my soundboard – answered, discussed and considered every question I have asked, contributed her own thoughts and recollections, read every draft and supported me throughout not just the writing of this book, but also every moment of my life. Our memories serve us in differing ways. Izzy has an astonishing memory for dates, places, chronology, names and faces – she can look at a photo of our infant class and name every child. I tend to remember atmosphere, conversations, gestures, expressions, texture, colour and smell. I see the past in cameos, the scenes replaying with the lucidity of a movie, but above all, I remember vividly how I felt.

I intended this book to be about Chris. It is, in as far as I have included as much detail about his life as I have been able to gather, but at the same time it has expanded to include the lives of others, whilst also becoming much more autobiographical than I had anticipated. Nevertheless, Chris has a connection with all I have written. He has been my inspiration, and in that sense he is present on every page.