KATIE CARR

THUNDERY AT TIMES

Loss, Hope and an Unfinished Kayaking Adventure



PRAISE FOR *THUNDERY AT TIMES*

Katie's pilgrimage through the Shipping Forecast isn't about heroic feats, but about the simple, stubborn magic of keeping going. It's a tender, human adventure that reveals what can unfold when you honour a promise and keep paddling forwards.

Alastair Humphreys, adventurer and author

A tender, courageous voyage through loss and love – a story that glows with humanity on every page. Katie Carr guides us through life's dark storms with astonishing grace.

Gavin Knight, author of *The Swordfish and the Star*

What a courageous, compelling and beautiful book from Katie. The honesty and openness with which she takes us on her artfully written journey through seas, grief and adventures will have you reflecting on your own life and loves. I felt it all.

Sarah Outen, adventurer and author

A deeply personal and thought-provoking journey through kayaking and life's challenges. Katie's honest, insightful voice, tracing her quest along stretches of the UK coastline, will inspire and resonate with many long after the final page.

Doug Cooper, sea kayaking coach and author

A sea-salted memoir, as steadying and compelling as the Shipping Forecast. Thundery at Times *charts the uncertainty of grief with a voice that is both tender and courageous.*

Zeb Soanes, broadcaster and author

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Thundery at Times *is a compelling tale of the strength of the human spirit and the unbreakable bond between siblings. Katie writes with enthralling determination, crushing vulnerability and immersive picture painting. She describes the concerns we all face – being a good parent, being a good sibling, being a good worker – with cutting accuracy. And she reminds us that hope, and the resilience to keep moving forwards, can shine in even our darkest moments.*

Si Willmore, journalist and broadcaster

A beautifully written and inspiring book. This is an emotional adventure which invited me on sea kayaking journeys like no others. Katie writes with candour about loss, eventual understanding and connection. It was a privilege to share her odyssey through her wonderful prose.

Nick Ray, expedition sea kayaker and author

THUNDERY AT TIMES

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To those for whom resilience is endurance,
may you find music in the thunder.

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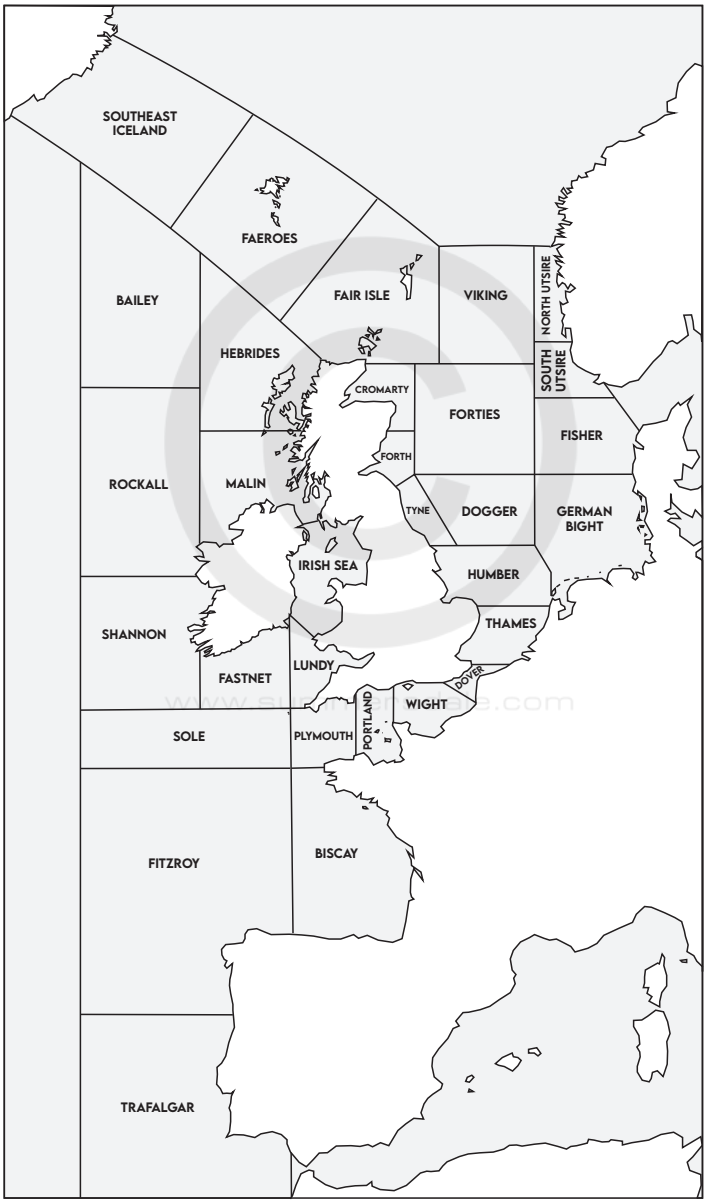
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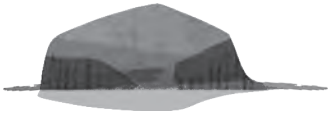




Section 1

NEW LOW FORTIES

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ADRIFT

January 2022

A red light burns through the bottom of steely grey storm clouds like oxygenated blood staining the sky. I gaze mindlessly out of the plane window. An appropriate sunrise for Toby's death day, I think to myself. It's 6 a.m. and I've been awake all night. I can't remember when I last slept properly. It's been a long, challenging Christmas holiday, not without its joy, but difficult. My little brother Toby is 40 and dying of liver cancer, his vibrant personality stolen away; with each breath, he's a little less Toby. We haven't known how long he has left until now. My Barcelona-based family and I spent most of the holiday with him in Cornwall, then made the difficult journey back home to get my young sons ready to return to school and nursery. I'd slept one night in my own bed when Toby called to say he wasn't doing well and had called 'The Pain Team'. I should have gone back then.

'Absolutely not!' he said to the idea. He wanted to make things easier for me. So I stayed in Barcelona with my partner Josep and the boys, clinging to a sense of normality.

I spoke to the hospice where they took him that afternoon. The kind Northern Irish nurse insisted I chat to Toby. In what would turn out to be our last-ever conversation he was confused and exhausted.

'They've. Just. Given. Me. Some. Morphine,' he said slowly. 'I'm okay though, it's nice here. They're. Looking. After me. I'm comfortable.'

'Don't worry, Toby,' I said with as much energy as I could muster, 'you just rest, and I'll make sure the hospice calls your friends. It's okay.' It clearly wasn't okay, but I was trying to convince myself. Hanging up, I didn't know what to do. I made dinner, read the kids stories and tucked them in, wishing I could do the same for Toby. Sitting in a dark corner of Llorenç and Max's room willing them to go to sleep, my phone flashed up an unrecognised UK number and I hid it under a dinosaur cushion. It did not bear good news. But at 8.30 p.m., when they'd fallen asleep, I called the hospice back. The Northern Irish nurse just said, 'It's time,' in that special bad-news tone, infused with gravity and calm.

I checked Josep could stay with the kids, dug my laptop out of the bag it had been in since before Christmas, booked the next flight out, rented a car, sorted out Covid tests and arranged to meet our Aunt Nicky at Heathrow for the drive down to Cornwall. My mum's sister Nicky had been a huge support to Toby and I knew she'd want to come. Wondering what else to do, instead of sleep I found the latest Shipping Forecast on BBC Sounds:

'And now the Shipping Forecast issued by the Met Office and Maritime and Coastal Agencies at 1700 on Sunday the ninth of January…'

I got as far as the gale warning and turned it off. The familiar cadence of the UK's maritime weather forecast, broadcast four times a day on BBC Radio 4, made me too emotional. Based on that

forecast, Toby had come up with the mad idea to sea kayak in all 31 areas that it covered. He started in 2018, the year after our brother, Marcus, died at 38. It gave Toby a purpose beyond his work as an architect, took him to obscure places and allowed him to spend large swathes of time cradled in nature. He called the project 'Moderate Becoming Good Later'. I supported him and followed his journey as much as I could, experiencing a combination of jealousy and joy at living vicariously through his adventures. Toby dedicated himself to the challenge for three years until he was thwarted by cancer. He still had 15 areas left to complete.

The year before he started, I'd given up my previous life of international travel and somewhat envy-inducing social media posts to become a mum. It was not an easy transition. I had lived in Spain for 19 years. As a young law graduate, I had been buoyed by a stint at a leading London defamation firm and then in the European Commission in Brussels. So when I arrived in Madrid, I felt my future was as bright as the mid-March sun shining on the dusty greens of the Retiro Park I walked through every day to and from work. I watched from afar as my friends' jobs in fancy London law firms and investment banks faded from the joy of earning an impressive salary to the dirge of boring, meaningless work. Not that mine was much better. The salary was awful and well over half was consumed by my student loan repayments, but I loved Madrid, and later I came to love Barcelona too.

By the time I'd packed for my undefined number of days in the UK it was 1 a.m. and hardly seemed worth lying down – the taxi was booked for 4 a.m. and my alarm set for 3.45. I felt calm and focused; the adrenalin in my system gave me the total clarity of thought needed to make my plans but was not ideal for a quick nap. As I lay down, memories whirred through my mind. *My second*

brother will die today. I wanted to cry. I wanted to fix it. I couldn't do that either.

'Red sky in the morning, sailors' warning,' I almost say out loud on the plane a few hours later. I don't need to be able to read the weather to know a storm is brewing. For some reason my mind is cataloguing family history; it may sound masochistic, but it feels better to look backwards than forwards.

Over the years, I've become well-practised in dealing with crisis situations, and while my pragmatic approach has sometimes been mistaken for a lack of emotion, it has served me well. As a family we've sailed close to illness and death for as long as I can remember.

When Marcus was born, a year and ten months after me, he had several birth defects, a 'little thumb' and an arm that had to be broken and reset in a tiny cast, which many years later he kept on his bookshelf, where I'd occasionally pick it up and feel a shiver running down my spine. There were other invisible things wrong with him too, but they didn't seem to affect him much, until he was about seven.

Coldness, recurrent unstoppable nosebleeds and random bruising left even the doctors of the most prestigious medical institutions perplexed. There was talk of strange-sounding deadly conditions like Diamond-Blackfan anaemia, but finally he was diagnosed with Fanconi anaemia – which sounded a bit more friendly at least. I was ten, and pining after a Sony Walkman, so I don't remember being told my brother had a rare genetic disease, with a life expectancy at the time of 30 years at best. Perhaps I wasn't. We all knew Marcus was properly ill. Prescribed with the anabolic steroid oxymetholone and frequent visits to Great Ormond Street children's hospital in London, Marcus's condition seemed to stabilise. He went back to just being my brother, ready

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to play outside making cycle jumps in the garden. We were still worried about him though.

This isn't helping, I tell myself, banging my head against the plane as it starts its descent, *THINK ABOUT SOMETHING ELSE!* I can't. I'm struck by the thought that I am about to become the last person remaining in our family of five to remember our history, and none of it seems as clear as I thought.

In 1988, when I was 11 and my brothers nine and six, we became the type of family people quietly feel pity for while hoping nothing similar ever happens to them. Our mum Bron (whom, like our dad Mike, we'd always called by her first name) woke up not knowing who she was or who any of us were.

'What's wrong?' I stopped her as she passed my bedroom door that morning, after the doctor had left and she'd dressed to be taken to hospital.

'A part of me is missing,' she replied, wearing her pick-grey culottes and speaking to me for the last time as a normal mum. It was an accurate description of what had happened, but the part that was missing was her personality.

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The viral infection raged, and she was in a coma for weeks. At the time we kids knew none of this but there were indications that things were very bad. Through a crack in my bedroom door, I saw Mike crying in my Grandma Anne's arms saying, 'I think she's going to pop her clogs, Ma.'

It was the summer I was due to start secondary school, and by the end of August, Bron was still in hospital. Mike and I wandered around the shopping centre nearby, finding what I needed for school. On the list was my first bra. Mike had prepared. His secretary recommended a camisole top – 'What all the girls are wearing' she'd said. I was cross, I wanted a proper bra, a proper mum would have understood, but I

didn't have one of those anymore. After shopping, we walked to the hospital, the antiseptic smell marking a strange reality. I hadn't seen Bron for a month and a half.

'There will be lots of tubes, but don't be scared,' Mike told me. I prepared myself for the worst. 'And she won't know who you are,' he added.

At the time, this seemed like a small price to pay for her still being alive.

'Ready?' Mike said at the door to the ward. I took a big breath and tried to be as grown-up as I could as I walked in to see a new version of my mum lying on the bed, her hair messy, her face somehow different.

Mike said something like, 'This is our daughter Katie.'

To which Bron replied, 'Yes, I saw you this morning.'

'No, me and Mike went shopping this morning,' I told her in my big-girl voice, trying to ignore the monitors, smell of wee and the fact that my mum didn't know who I was.

'You saw some photos of Katie this morning,' Mike said, signalling the photo album we'd put together to help her remember who she was.

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When Bron came out of hospital two months later, I thought she must be cured (that's what hospitals do), but she was still gone, no emotions, no love. She never recovered. We don't allow ourselves to grieve for those who are still physically here, to do so would be unkind: so we suffer.

Soon the Fanconi anaemia diagnosis included Toby but not me. I'd always thought that it came after Bron was ill, but thinking about it now, I realise it can't have done. The summer we lost our mum, we were all doing summer camp activities, so we must have all been okay. How cruel it seems that our dad would have thought

he was out of the woods with the boys, before being plunged into an even greater tragedy.

I hope Toby doesn't suffer anymore, I catch myself thinking. If there is a silver lining to this being his death day, the only one I can think of is an end to all of this. An end to decline, to his world shrinking down from the far reaches of the Shipping Forecast to the chair in his front room. Now I'm crying. The curve of the plane holds me. Passengers are of two types: business people unlucky enough to have a 9 a.m. meeting in a country they didn't wake up in, and travellers connecting through Heathrow on their way to distant lands. None of them seem to be bothered by my whimpering as we land. *SORT YOURSELF OUT*, I tell myself, I'm not even halfway to Cornwall yet.

I wonder if I'll make it before he leaves, as if Toby's about to launch to finish kayaking the Shipping Forecast and I might miss his departure. *Well, you missed all the others*, my unkind internal voice tells me.

Our dad Mike died suddenly and alone of a heart attack in mid-October 2010. Marcus called to tell me as I was getting dressed for a business meeting in Germany. I'd last seen my dad a month earlier when, late for a train to London, I'd run off without saying goodbye.

Marcus died in 2017. Josep and I had taken newborn Llorenç to London where Marcus was in St Joseph's Hospice and not in good shape. After delaying our return to Barcelona once, Marcus told us to go home. Through tears, I hugged him and thanked him for being an amazing brother, my words falling into an abyss. Six days later he died. I'd recorded a final WhatsApp voice note for him, which his husband Andy and Toby said they played before he stopped breathing. I'm still thinking about this as I navigate the

airport like a well-played platform game, and level up as I'm given the rental car keys. It's just gone 9 a.m.



'Happy New Year,' my Aunt Nicky and I greet each other, even though we know it won't be. Nicky is practical and kind, and her preferred attire of outdoor wear gives the impression she is ready for anything, but I'm sure she's not ready to lose Toby. We take it in turns to drive through the desaturated wintery landscape for the first two hours, before deciding we should stop for breakfast, even if it means we'll arrive later.

'Oh no!' we groan, seeing the Leigh Delamere Services sign as we turn off. The last time I had to come to the UK in an emergency was when Toby was picked up with meningitis at this very service station just over four years ago. There's little to discuss as we devour our soft Costa bacon sarnies and coffee in the characterless café, and we are soon back on the road. An hour and 20 minutes later, I'm driving in the outside lane of the M5 speeding towards Taunton and we get the call.

'He's gone,' says Toby's friend Rachael, her voice barely audible. Tears cloud my vision, and I swerve into the left lane, slowing down as they roll down my face. I want to stop but I can't. We sit staring out of the window crying and willing an exit to appear, adrift on the motorway.



Five days later, I'm standing on the South West Coast Path near Rinsey, my week in Cornwall nearly over. Despite my many visits,

this is my first time walking the clifftops. The cold stings my face. I've been cajoled into coming by Nicky and three friends of Toby's who are down from London. I know that letting the wind blow away some of the immense sadness I'm feeling is a good idea, but I'm in 'Sort Shit Out' mode, overwhelmed by a house full of stuff and God knows what else to deal with. I often find doing easier than being.

We stand in silence on the cliffs, together alone, like a nineties band on an album cover. The grey-turquoise sea seems calm until I notice the waves throwing themselves against the rocks, the lacework of the breakers on the empty beaches further around inelegant and messy. The sky, unable to decide on an identity today, is flicking through different looks: light, dark, cloudy, dramatic… while the sombre cliffs, dotted with the remains of Cornwall's tin mines, stand with a firmness against the sea that I can no longer grasp.

'What will you do about Toby's book?' Toby's friend Al asks me, as a beautiful white light breaks through the clouds, rays creating a silver patch on the sea in the distance. A gateway to heaven.

'I don't know,' I respond wistfully as if she had asked about his car, his house or his bank accounts. It all feels too much, but a seed is planted.

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Back in Toby's cottage, where his absence shouts in the silence, I find his notebooks. 'MBGL Biscay, FitzRoy, Trafalgar' says the cover of a particularly battered cream one. I flick through it, and the smell of Toby wafts through the air.

'Feeling of a whale presence', Toby had written, 'shimmery water, definitely feels like place you'd see one. Smell fish, skittering in groups, something under water? Sea birds flying overhead. Convinced it's there. Silhouette of headland in distance. Which day? check pictures…'

Then later:

'Tiny crabs purple and orange tap dancing upside down on the surface of the water, sending ripples from their claws.'

Skimming the notebooks, packed with observations and details, I can see how much he wanted to share his story. I try putting them aside, but a thought stays in my mind: *What if I could write it for him?* I end up with the five notebooks squashed into my grey hand luggage holdall on their way to Barcelona. I'll be back in two weeks for the funeral.



'Mummy, why didn't you say goodbye?' Llorenç asks, overfilling his bowl with Rice Krispies while looking at me earnestly across the table.

'Well, you were already asleep when I found out I needed to leave,' I say, knowing that this is the easier of the things I have to explain to him today. 'I'm sorry.'

'That's okay, Mummy… don't do it again!'

Llorenç doesn't yet know that his 'Uncle Wawa' has died; I wanted to be the one to tell him. I cleared my schedule for Monday morning in case he was upset and couldn't go to school. In the nearly four years that their lives had overlapped, Toby and Llorenç had become close. We'd all spoken to him about death, Toby suggesting at one point that he would become a star. I take a deep breath.

'So you remember Uncle Wawa wasn't very well?' I start.

'Wawa Wawa,' interjects my two-and-a-half-year-old Max unhelpfully. Josep whisks him off to do his teeth.

'Well,' I continue, knowing I need to say this clearly, without crying, 'he died last week.' Llorenç looks down at his cereal and takes another spoonful.

'Mummy, how did Uncle Wawa get into the sky?' he asks.

'Um, I think he probably kayaked,' I reply, knowing I'm further propagating a myth we don't believe in. 'Sky' and 'heaven' are the same word in Spanish.

'What happened to his house?' Llorenç asks reasonably.

'Well, it's still there, it's just that we have to look after it now.'

'So are my Coco Pops okay?' he asks, referring to the cereal that Toby kept on the shelf for him.

'Yes, they're still there,' I say with a smile, giving him a cuddle and wishing that I was capable of equating the importance of death and Coco Pops. Children are often so much better than adults at accepting new realities.



Alone at my desk for the first time in five weeks, I look up at the cloud lampshades Toby helped me to choose and burst into tears. I've quickly become used to this spontaneous combustion of emotions triggered by the smallest reminder of how things have changed, grateful to the waves of sadness that momentarily knock me over. *Keep going*, I say to myself, my internal voice slightly kinder than usual.

I'm in what we call 'Mummy's space', or more often 'the space'. I signed the rental agreement for the 30m^2 street-level space in December 2019, when I thought – after six months' maternity leave with Max and three years floundering since having Llorenç – that 2020 would be the year to get my career and business back on track. I'd imagined holding group coaching sessions and leadership communication workshops around the custom-made wooden tables I'd commissioned to complement the bare brick wall. Once

Covid lockdown ended, it became an expensive way for me to have some personal space, do some painting, create a podcast, offer coaching and teach the occasional online class. I will never regret visiting Toby during the months of his decline, but it wasn't good for business.

Despite my chronic underemployment, the 11 days between breaking the news to Llorenç and going back to Cornwall for Toby's funeral look busy. I am halfway through teaching an online master's course on Design Thinking four nights a week, I have ten Executive MBAs to coach individually, eight hours of class with them and a full-day creativity workshop to run. This is exactly what I need. There is also the funeral to put together, speakers and speeches to organise, an order of service to coordinate.

The first day I move between coaching sessions (the shining future of the 30-something-year-old Executive MBA student in the other Zoom box), planning Toby's funeral (minimising content overlap of the eulogies being prepared by friends and family), picking up Llorenç and Max (avoiding the mid-January chat with other parents about how my year has started) and teaching my online class ('How might we solve some of the world's biggest problems?'). For the most part, I hold it together. Afterwards, the soft click of the flat door as I open it is a testament to the burglar skills developed in my last four years as a mum – any noise or light now could shift my near future from sofa, beer, sandwich and Netflix to hours in the dark shushing the boys back to sleep. Stealth is critical but I'm successful. Too tired for Netflix or the beer, I eat quickly and climb into bed.

'So, I've just had a call from the school,' Josep tells me by phone the next day. 'Llorenç has tested positive for Covid, but he's fine.'

'Shit!' I reply, quickly doing the maths. 'If I catch it, I'll miss the funeral!' The UK still requires Covid tests to enter, and Spain enforces a ten-day household quarantine for all cases. Suddenly it all seems too much, too unfair. Hanging up, I pendulum between tears of self-pity and anger.

For fuck's sake, how strong do I need to be? I ask myself. It must have been when my mum was first ill that someone tried to placate me with the old adage 'What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger'. Over the years, I reframed this into the belief that everything bad that happened to me was shaping me into a stronger person, which at some point would come in useful. I've always found solace in post-apocalyptic fiction, perhaps this is why.

My wallowing can't last long, and I force myself into a short meditation before jumping on my next coaching call. I'm well practised at leaving my issues aside to focus on someone else's and the pause is cathartic. In a break between calls, I book the nearest, cheapest hotel and tell Josep of my plan, which involves him being in quarantine with the two boys while I try to stay Covid-free, work and prepare the funeral. In any other circumstances, this would be totally unfair. I feel an extra dosage of my ever-present parent's guilt but take the conscious decision to do everything I can to get to Toby's funeral. It's still possible we can all make it.

Masked up and wary, I hug Llorenç and Max goodbye again. Max, a little koala, still cuddles with his arms and legs; Llorenç, thus far unaffected by Covid, is full of questions with no easy answers. For all the challenges of parenting, I feel more stable with them; their routine and their needs mirror mine but are infinitely more important. They will be fine with their dad, but I'll miss them.

The hotel is simple and white, a blank canvas limbo between realities, ideal for thinking about what next. I set up a meeting with Toby's publisher. 'Please don't cancel the book,' I say to her, 'I'll write it.' She's kind, although I'm not sure she believes me, but I'm not sure I believe myself either. Right now I have to throw myself into writing my eulogy and a timeline of Toby's life. Photos and stories of him flood my email and social media. Some I read, some I leave, but all of them I appreciate. I imagine my skin like the thin crust that forms on moving lava, easily broken through with each explosion of sadness.

At the Business School, a colleague presenting before me in a leadership class talks of 'Worst regrets of the dying' and I find myself gritting my teeth and squeezing my hands to hold back my tears. Then later in the week for the creativity class, I take in a box of old things (wrapping paper, cards, cardboard tubes…) to be upcycled by students into installation art pieces. One student creation reads 'Leave a piece of you inside'; one wall is entirely blank except for a small gift tag I recognise, reading, 'Dear Katie, Happy Christmas, Love Uncle Wawa'. I calmly interrupt my visit to their creations to put myself back together in the bathroom.



Back in Cornwall the day of the funeral, I swerve into the car park of the Truro Penmount Crematorium in a grey 4x4 far bigger than I'm used to driving. As I weave through clusters of Toby's people gathered in the January gloom, I'm relieved to have made it. I've spent the last ten minutes lost, which was particularly annoying since every time we had passed the crematorium on the way back from Newquay airport, Toby would half joke, 'That's where I'll end up.'

The boys were cleared to travel, but Josep just tested positive on the UK's official Covid test minutes before we were due to leave Toby's cottage. He can't come to the funeral, and I could have done with the support. Frustrated, I cocooned myself in Toby's red Finisterre coat and drove off without my phone.

If you're ever worried about your ability to give a speech at a funeral, I'd recommend you try singing an a cappella song first. Toby had left notes about his funeral in his phone, and his friends and I followed them faithfully, while also adding our own flavours. One such note suggested that his friend Rachael and I might sing 'Crossing the Bar' by Alfred Lord Tennyson. We'd quickly decided we'd do anything for Toby and set about rehearsing on Zoom (once we were able to listen to the song without crying, that is). The audience is spilling out of the small non-denominational chapel, expectant faces looking at us behind masks as we approach the microphone. A breath and look of complicity between us and we start. The harmony is in a minor key like ointment on a wound.

A little later, I'm up to read my eulogy, in the form of a letter to the boys. I'd done the same at Marcus's funeral, four and a half years earlier. It hasn't got any easier. I step back up to the wooden lectern and look out at my face-masked audience and read:

Dear Llorenç and Max,

I'm writing to tell you about your Uncle Toby (or Wawa, as you called him). I had hoped I wouldn't have to write another letter like this.

Toby was an explorer – you will have heard about how he learned to kayak and went off on adventures around Europe, sleeping on empty beaches and photographing the stars. But he also adventured into the unknown in life. Handed a half-drawn map

and recommended to stay where he was and be careful, he chose to discover the world, ignoring the spectre of illness that followed him, and sketch in the new, exciting lands he found.

Even before he started kayaking, Toby had this attitude. He applied it to his approach to architecture, to friendships, to teaching, to cycling, to art and to any tiny spark of an opportunity that landed at his (slightly weird) feet. Instead of asking 'why?' Toby mostly asked 'why not?'

Whenever I had a crazy idea that I really wanted to do, I'd speak to Toby. I don't know if I'd kidded myself into thinking he would talk me out of it, but he never would. I would provide the same service to him. Classic Toby–Katie behaviour could be observed this New Year's Day when Toby tentatively suggested he might get out in the kayak. Any rational analysis would have said that this was a terrible idea. He hadn't managed to walk as far as the quay for weeks, was showing signs of end of life and had a fair chance of going out and never coming back. So, there was no question of him not doing it!

Toby loved visiting new places and challenging himself. First it was cycle routes in Europe or bagging national parks in the US, then it was Shipping Forecast areas. But he wasn't a tourist. It wasn't just the natural beauty that enchanted him, or the fact he had an avid Instagram following, it was the joy of connection with others. He loved to capture stories of lighthouse keepers, fishermen, other kayakers, and anyone who shared his love of the sea (and anyone who didn't). He used the stories to connect. Toby had a magical way of keeping friendships alive, and thanks to that, he had a magical collection of friends.

For me Toby will always be my ally and I hope he saw me as his. We tried to look out for each other. Whether that was making his twice-weekly platelet transfusions into a game nearly 30 years ago, long coaching conversations on changes he wanted to make, painting on Zoom, giving constructive criticism on my new web design, crossing

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the US together, encouraging me that I was doing okay as a mum, or us just sitting on his sofa wishing that all the bad stuff would go away.

For a long time, we didn't talk much about emotional things. Experience on our boat Hullaballoo as kids had taught us both that it was best to look out at the horizon to cure any seasickness. But long before our conversations were opened by the sledgehammer of terminal cancer this autumn, we did occasionally mention our appreciation for each other. For Christmas 2012, Toby gave me a Tracey Emin poster (designed for the Paralympics) – the same one which he had near his door in Flushing and on his wall in London. It simply states 'You inspire me with your determination. And I love you.'; I always understood that we had said that to each other.

Against all the odds Toby was an optimist. Not one of those annoying ones that tell you it might never happen, because in most cases it did bloody happen. Toby's optimism was like taking a stand against what life threw at him, always questioning, does it have to be like that? How might I get a different outcome? Our Christmas with Toby, his online purchases days before he died, as well as his messages, showed he still had plans, hope and so much more to give.

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And that might all sound quite serious and heavy, but Toby wasn't like that. The Toby we all knew was the guy in the middle of the party, enjoying the moment, the one encouraging others to join in, to have some fun and to not take life so seriously.

So, Llorenç and Max, if I had to give you some advice from Uncle Wawa, I think it would be along the lines of 'have fun, explore everything, make lots of real friends, and don't let anyone else tell you what is and isn't possible'.

Lots of love,
Katie