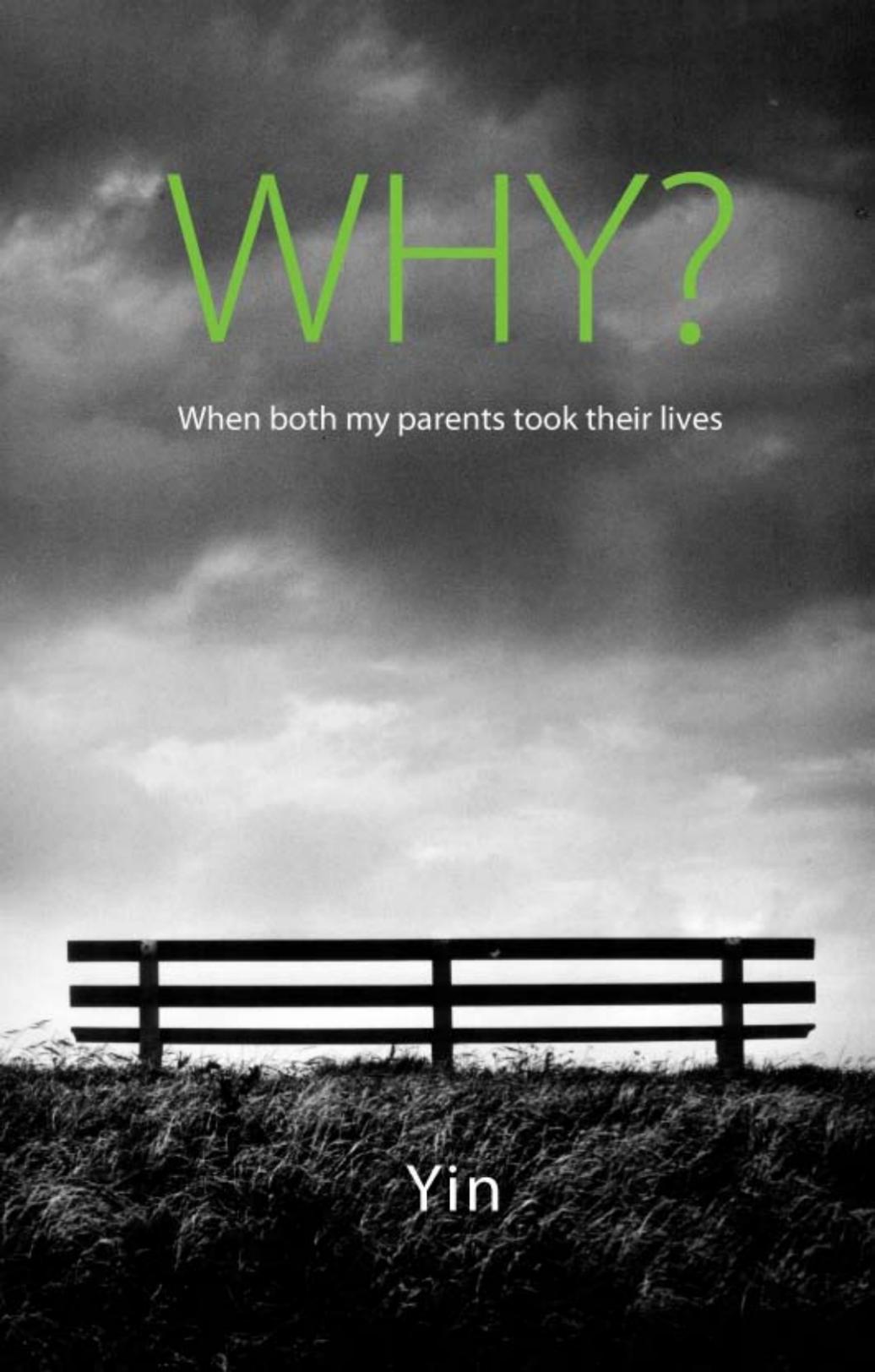


WHY?

When both my parents took their lives

A black and white photograph of a wooden fence on a grassy hill under a cloudy sky. The fence is in the foreground, and the sky is filled with dramatic, dark clouds. The overall mood is somber and reflective.

Yin

WHY?



WHY?

When Both My Parents Took Their Lives

Yin



AN EPIGRAM BOOK

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This book is lovingly dedicated to the memory of:

My Dad and Mum. Though not with me in person anymore, they live on in my heart and in my memory.

The late Mary Mathew, Executive Director of the Samaritans of Singapore. Her warmth and gentleness as she listened gave me hope that I could survive the ordeal of my parents' suicides.

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Foreword

WHEN SOMEONE DEAR TO US DIES THROUGH SUICIDE, we are left with the agonising ordeal of having to survive the heart-rending loss. It traumatises us and leaves us with a profound struggle to make sense of the suicide and learn to live again.

“Suicide survivors” are those who have been left behind after a suicide and their loss and grief tend to be misunderstood and, sometimes, inappropriately responded to by people who seek to offer comfort and support. There are those who want to help but instead of helping, they could be adding salt to injury, amplifying the pain and grief of suicide survivors.

It is also a struggle for suicide survivors themselves to acknowledge, appreciate and adapt to life after the suicide. Many tend to cope in silence and solitude, left with a sense of bewilderment as to what had happened.

Perhaps what is needed is to give voice to those who are suicide survivors and hear their arduous journey towards healing. This is Yin’s attempt in offering us the opportunity to journey with her as she shares her story and that of others like her.

I count it a privilege to be associated with Samaritans of Singapore and be offered the opportunity of experiencing this journey through Yin’s account of her healing process. Her candid disclosure of her struggles is most engaging, inviting me and you into the inner world of her experience in healing from the trauma as a survivor

of her father’s suicide.

This first-hand narration of Yin promises not only to enlighten, but also serves as a balm for those working through their own loss and grief.

I am grateful for Yin’s contribution to SOS, and for the work of all others who offer a healing hand to those left behind in the aftermath of suicide.

May you journey with Yin and others like her by sharing this book with fellow sojourners who may be experiencing loss and grief.

Anthony Yeo
Chairman and Consultant,
Samaritans of Singapore
Consultant Therapist,
Counselling and Care Centre

Preface

MY DAD'S SUICIDE OVERWHELMED ME WITH SADNESS, grief, and regrets. I was on an emotional roller coaster and felt extremely lost. A friend suggested that I talk to a counsellor from the Samaritans of Singapore (SOS). After much resistance and hesitation, I called the SOS and soon found myself embarking on a journey that was painful and tiring, but necessary for my healing.

The idea of writing this book was mooted by Ophelia, my SOS counsellor. At first I was reluctant. It was different from the simpler process of keeping a journal, in which I just scribbled whatever came to my mind or my heart – whatever overwhelmed me. It had been difficult enough coping with the memories that kept replaying in my mind. Writing a book about my Dad's suicide meant summoning these painful memories and walking repeatedly through the whole nightmare. The thought of sitting down, recalling and recording the memories was frightening. The fear was apparent in my procrastination. I told myself that it was too painful to write about Dad's suicide, that I was not a writer, and that I was too ambitious to even consider writing a book. I had never undertaken a project of this magnitude. But a part of me realised that this was perhaps one way of making something useful out of the tsunami that had swept through my life, and that it would be of some comfort to other survivors who felt alone in their experience of suicide grief.

At first, I could not even bring myself to write the word 'suicide'. Each time I used that word, Dad's death rushed to the forefront and blocked out everything else. My grief engulfed me, and I could not focus on the writing process. I resorted to using the letter 's' as a substitute, until it became more bearable to see the word on the computer screen.

There were times when I thought of aborting this project altogether, because the writing took me to deep, sad places. But looking back, I am glad I persevered because the writing became increasingly therapeutic. It provided an additional outlet for my thoughts and feelings. I could take my time, write when I felt like it and stop when I needed a break. Sure, there were tears. But there were also good memories such as his fatherly gentleness when he took me out for special treats, just the two of us, father and child. Those were special times when I felt singled out and especially loved.

Writing this book also became a journey during which I explored undiscovered areas of my life. I must add that I am not proud of some of these discoveries, but I now know myself better and I have learnt to like myself more.

So this book is my gift to myself and other survivors.

Yin
September 2008

Chapter 1

Why, Dad?



WE MET IN A ROOM IN THE SAMARITANS OF SINGAPORE (SOS) office in Cantonment Close. Prying eyes were kept out by curtains. Some drinks and several boxes of tissues were on the table before us. We were there to share our painful stories. I had hoped that my presence would be a source of some comfort to the other survivors. I could empathise with my fellow survivors as they spoke of their pain, helplessness, emptiness and emotional upheaval because I had been there. As I listened to their stories, it became clear to me that the support of fellow survivors was very crucial in such a daunting and lonely a journey. But my being there also hurled me back to that fateful day when I became a survivor. The day of my Dad's suicide was the start of a lonely journey with an unknown destination.

Before that day

My Dad had not been well for almost two years before his death. He was in his late 80s, and with every weekly visit, I noticed a decline in his general health. He was in constant pain and discomfort in the weeks leading to his suicide. He was physically weak, emotionally and mentally fragile, and spiritually challenged. To my Dad, his prayers were not answered and he became increasingly discouraged and frustrated with his condition. He was fearful of the future.

The geriatrician's diagnosis was depression with an early onset of dementia. The visits to the doctors did little to ease his complaints about his ailments. Seeing his progressive deterioration to only a shadow of his former self saddened me beyond words. On the numerous occasions when we talked, Dad frequently expressed a deep desire for God to take him to

his heavenly home. He was tired of living.

Deep within my heart, I knew that he missed my Mum very much. He had been a widower for many years and had been lonely for a long time. He used to reminisce about Mum. Theirs was an arranged marriage. He had agreed to marry her without seeing her in person. She was several years his junior, pretty, and had completed High School in China. When Mum died, she was cremated; her ashes placed in a columbarium. Dad reserved a niche next to hers and he looked forward to taking his place there. If only God would take him. But God did not grant him what he most desired. Neither did God answer my prayer to ease Dad into eternity without suffering. I had thought it was merely a question of time before God heard us. What I did not know was that secretly, Dad had decided to hasten his transition from this world to the next, so that he could be with God, so that he could be with Mum.

Dad and I were very close and I could never imagine life without him, even though at the back of my mind, I knew that he was advanced in years and poor in health. When I lost my Mum at the age of seven, he became both father and mother to me. He cooked and saw me off to school. In my turbulent adolescent years, he was unwavering in his fatherly love. He was my confidante in my childhood years and I in turn was his confidante in the autumn of his life. When he passed away, not by sickness or by old age, but because he chose to take his own life, it shattered my world.

That day

The fateful day started out like an ordinary weekday with routine chores. After sending my children to school, I went to the wet market to buy fresh food for Dad's maid to cook for him. When I

arrived at his apartment, Dad was still lying in bed; lately he had been spending an inordinate amount of time in bed. Sleep eluded him night and day. He was extremely agitated. We spent some time talking and I tried to lift his spirits. But inside me, I felt helpless as ever, because I knew he was going through a very difficult time and there was little I could do to comfort him. Dad had always treasured his independence, but he had now reached a stage where he had to rely on others to help him perform even basic personal tasks. This affected his self-esteem. He became despondent.

Because of his insomnia, Dad could not get adequate rest. Paranoia set in. He was suspicious of the people around him, and he was unhappy with practically everything. I sensed that his life was devoid of meaning for him, that it had become increasingly unbearable to go on living. I had a difficult time adjusting to the change in his behaviour. Dad used to be logical, compassionate, kind, gentle, godly, prayerful, and much more. I grieved the loss of my Dad at this point of his life. Even though he was physically present, he was not the Dad that I knew. But I realised that was the time he most needed my care and understanding. So I had this quiet resolve in my heart to do my best for him by making his remaining days as bearable and comfortable as possible.

That day, like so many days before, I sat on Dad's bed. I spoke to him and tried to interest him in bits of daily news. I patted him to sleep. Our roles had reversed: I was like a parent to him and he the child. How I wish I could recapture the times when he was his old hearty self.

Despite my efforts to soothe him and induce sleep, he was very restless. He told me that he had no appetite and was always feeling very tired. I fed him some essence of chicken, hoping that it would

strengthen him, at least for the day. As I had to attend to other errands, I told him that I had to go and that I would see him again another day. He seemed his usual self as he bade me goodbye. That was the last time I fed my dad, the last time I touched him, the last time I heard his voice, the last time I saw him alive. The image and memory of that last contact has never left me – we had said our last goodbye.

Several hours later, when I was on another errand, I received a phone call from my elder brother. He lived with Dad, so a call from him would usually be an update about Dad and his condition. Sometimes, he just needed to vent his frustrations and helplessness as a primary caregiver. So I was prepared to hear him out on my earpiece as I continued driving.

“Dad has jumped down,” he said. I could not believe what I was hearing.

“What do you mean he has jumped down?” The news hit me so hard I had to stop driving and pulled to the side of the road. My heart was racing and I was paralysed with fear. I remember screaming and crying into the phone and asking him question after question: “Why? How could this have happened? Where was the maid? Why didn't she stop him?”

The image that immediately flashed through my mind was that of Dad during his last moments just before he jumped. How did he drag himself to the window? He was physically very weak when I left him that morning. He barely had the energy to sit up in bed. How did he climb up the window ledge? He must have harnessed every remaining bit of his strength to manage that last physical task. In my mind I kept seeing him jump, again and again. I could not shake off that horrid image. Question after question raced through

my mind. Why did this happen? Why did he resort to suicide? Why didn't I see this coming? Why did he give up? Why didn't he tell me? Why did he have to die this way? Oh, how he must have suffered! I was certain that he would not have chosen this tragic way if he had not been terribly desperate and tormented. The thought of my dad struggling with such overwhelming emotional pain amplified the indescribable pain I felt.

From the car, I called my husband at his office; he rushed to my side and together, we drove to Dad's apartment. Wave after wave of intense feelings of guilt, regret and an utter sense of loss and hopelessness hit me as we made our way there. At the same time, I could not believe that this had actually happened.

When we arrived, I couldn't bring myself to see his body. How could it be that he was alive in the morning but was now gone forever? The fact was cold, cruel, and simply beyond my ability to comprehend emotionally, mentally, and physically. Part of me wanted to see him, to touch him, to be with him. But another part of me wanted to pull away. I did not want to confirm it; I could not bear to confront it. I desperately wanted to continue believing that he was still alive. I was also very afraid of what I might see. Would I still recognise him? Would his body be mangled and bloodied? Would I see bits of him everywhere?

I had contacted my close friend, Tina, who rushed over. Given my state of confusion and fear, I asked whether I should view Dad's body. She was against the idea. She was afraid that I might not be able to cope with what I might see. She asked me to consider whether it would be better for me to remember my Dad as he had been earlier, rather than what he might look like lying on the grass. Today, I'm glad I heeded her advice because I now retain the

image of Dad when he was alive, well and whole.

The police were there to conduct their investigation. They were in the apartment and were gathered around the window where Dad had jumped. A stool was next to the window and near the stool, my Dad's slipper; he had left one slipper behind as he clambered up the window ledge. I watched their deliberations from a distance. It was as if I was watching a movie and I was not really there. I was physically there and yet I felt as if I was far away and somehow uninvolved except for those instances when someone spoke to me directly. Even then, I felt as if my clone was answering for me.

The police, of course, had their job to do, but their presence was nevertheless an intrusion to a family in grief. They asked questions in a detached and professional way. Most of their questions were directed at the maid, who was the last person to have seen Dad alive. When the investigation was over, they left after giving us instructions on the procedure for claiming Dad's body from the mortuary the following day.

Every suicide is a police case. An autopsy usually has to be done to exclude foul play. The thought of his frail body being cut open was unthinkable. It did not help that I had heard horrid stories of how autopsies were conducted, and these thoughts assaulted my already battered emotions. Dad had always been a prim and proper person when he was alive and now, there would be strangers looking at his uncovered body, dissecting him. Would they treat his body with the respect he deserved? I felt extremely helpless about the autopsy; there was nothing I could do to protect him; I had no control over this. Irrational as it may seem, I thought of how cold he would be in the morgue with nothing on and no one to keep him warm. Dad, when he was alive, had not liked being in places

that were too cold for him. The morgue was a very cold place.

My brothers gave me the task of choosing the clothes that Dad would wear for the last time; I was the youngest of the three siblings, the only girl, and the closest to Dad. I was reluctant and felt extremely sad to have to do it. It was surreal. He was alive this morning, and yet here I was, deciding what he should wear in his casket. How did it come to this? It was difficult to make sense of what was happening.

How do I handle the pain? How could I carry on living knowing that Dad's death by suicide would cast a shadow that would stay with me forever? How could I cope with life, knowing that I would never again be joyful? What would a meaningless existence be like? How could I live with the thought that Dad's suffering had driven him to suicide? There was a fleeting moment when I thought that the only way to escape my pain was to go the same way as Dad, take the plunge and escape the pain I knew I would have to face.

I went home that night feeling extremely tired; my whole being had been assaulted emotionally, mentally and spiritually. I tried to rest, but I drifted between wakeful restlessness and nightmarish sleep.

The following day

When I woke up the following morning, I felt numb and devoid of any feelings. I remember going to the hairdresser to have my hair washed as if nothing had happened. My conversations with the hairdresser were normal and no different from all the previous conversations I had with her. The hairdresser did not detect any trace of sadness and weariness. As on previous occasions, she asked

after my Dad's health and as on previous occasions, I replied that he was getting old and frail.

After getting my hair done, I even went grocery shopping. I walked up and down the aisles picking up the usual household items, all the while feeling strangely detached. I was going about my routine as if everything was fine and normal. I even made a phone call to a friend of mine to request that she keep Dad's death to herself and not inform my wider circle of friends because I wanted Dad to have a quiet funeral. I was calm and collected during the telephone conversation. It was as if someone else, not me, was saying all that was needed to be said. I wasn't really there.

Throughout the day, there were numerous calls from my siblings asking for my opinion regarding the funeral arrangements and obituary placements. In some unexplained way, I was able to take the calls with detached composure. I know now that the numbness was part of denial and it was the body's way of preserving my sanity. I remember moving between reality and surrealism and at the same time coping with many other intense feelings. It was exhausting as I vacillated between the real and surreal worlds, trying to make sense of all that was happening. I knew that Dad had died of suicide and yet, at that point, the full impact of his suicide did not hit me at the emotional level. While I could go about doing what I had to do, somewhere at the subconscious level I knew that a tragedy had happened, but I had difficulties coming to terms with it. So, when I was alone or with people who did not know Dad or his death, I was able to function almost normally.

However, reality hit home hard later that afternoon when I was told to be present to receive the casket. At that point, I could not deny the reality anymore. The image of Dad lying still and dead in

a casket shattered the other world in which he was still old, frail, but alive. Part of me had somehow been clinging on to the hope this was all a nightmare and that I would wake up and everything would be back to normal again. But to my great distress, it was not a nightmare and there was no more hope.

The family was instructed to be at the place where the wake was to be held. It was to be the first time that we would see Dad in the casket. I felt a heavy sense of dread. I was fearful and a large part of me did not want to be there. I love Dad dearly, and to have to see his lifeless form in the casket was simply too horrifying to contemplate. There was not only fear but confusion as well. I did not want to face the reality of the loss. When I finally saw him lying there, I burst into tears — tears of intense sorrow, regrets and remorse. There was a heavy pain in my chest. My husband hugged and held me tightly to stop me from going under. It was unbelievably difficult to come to terms with the thought that I would never be able to communicate with and care for Dad again. There was no escaping the fact that he would never be alive again; that I would never see or talk to him again. He was in the casket. He was dead.

In the process of making plans for the wake and funeral, my siblings and I were at a loss as to what we should tell our friends and relatives. We were afraid of being judged. How should we respond when asked? Would we be judged as being unfilial and uncaring to the extent that Dad had to resort to suicide because we, his children, did not do our best for him? I was fearful that many uninformed people would draw unfair conclusions. At that time, I did not want to and I did not have the energy to grapple with such questions. Collectively, we agreed to keep Dad's suicide private; we decided that there was no need to tell everyone about it.

Whilst preparing for the wake and trying to make sense of all that had happened, a relative, who somehow knew about the suicide, called me on my mobile phone. Instead of comforting me, she started accusing me of not taking care of Dad. She blamed me for his suicide. I was stunned, bewildered and felt totally sick. The pain she had inflicted was more than I could bear. I felt like someone had dealt a blow to my heart and a deep wave of guilt and sorrow washed over me. Her response reinforced and confirmed the fear I had that survivors would be judged, whether overtly or covertly. It made me more resolved to keep the nature of Dad's death to myself.

The wake

At the wake, I stayed very close to Dad's casket. I wanted to spend whatever remaining time I had with him while he was still physically present. Seeing his lifeless form in the casket evoked intense and painful memories that were beyond words. There was such profound sorrow at a level that I had never ever experienced before.

Each night after the wake service, when friends had dispersed, I would return home feeling emotionally raw and physically drained. I was functioning like a zombie. I could not eat and I barely slept. The little food I ate was forced upon me by my family members. I lost weight but my health was the last thing on my mind.

Two days after Dad's death and after I had returned home from another wake service, the flood-gates opened. I cried non-stop for more than three hours, an unbearable heart-wrenching weeping that came from a sorrow deep inside me. My husband sat with me and held me. The memory of that night, when I mourned the death

of my Dad through suicide, still brings tears to my eyes. It was early morning before the tears dried up. There were no tears left and no sleep possible, just a persistent pounding headache.

Friends and relatives who turned up at the wake wanted to know how Dad had died. Their questions put me in a dilemma. Although the family had decided not to mention suicide, a part of me felt that it was not right to lie about his death; yet it was impossible to tell them the truth. So I remained silent whenever the question was asked because I could not make an appropriate response.

The final farewell

The funeral was especially poignant and painful. Dad's pastor comforted us by reminding us that death was not the end of life; he spoke of Dad being in heaven, a place far better than earth. No more sleepless nights for him, no more tears and no more fears. He had been freed from his pain and was no longer bound in his earthly body of weakness and sorrow. He was basking in the presence of God and one day we would meet again.

It was cold comfort; yet I needed to hear it. I needed the assurance that he was in a safe place and that I would one day see him again. It gave me something to hold on to, a place of calm in the rough days ahead. But it did nothing to assuage the sorrow I felt during the funeral service. Physical death was final and nothing could ever reverse that. The whole funeral service signaled the physical separation that would henceforth exist between Dad and myself.

I managed to maintain my composure throughout the service although my tears flowed unceasingly as I thought about Dad's life; how hard he had worked as a single parent to provide for the family.

I knew that I would miss him and the times we had together.

As the casket made its way to the crematorium, I recalled the many trips I had taken with Dad, in Singapore and abroad. I was saddened by the thought that this was his last journey on earth; that he had died alone, without the presence of his loved ones, without me there. I also knew that the journey ahead for me would be difficult and arduous. There was no other way.

Chapter 2

When Love Hurts



Dad's belongings

THERE SEEMED TO BE NO END TO THE CRUSHING reminders that Dad had died through suicide. One depressing reminder came a couple of days after the funeral when the family proceeded to Dad's apartment to sort out his belongings.

His room looked exactly as it had been when he was alive. Nothing in the room had changed except that he was no longer there, and would never be there again. I sat on his bed and held his pillow. I tried hard to summon the memories of my last days with him, to remember what it was like, what he had looked like. I did not want to forget, I was afraid of forgetting, and yet when the memories came flooding back I found them agonising.

Every item of his personal belongings was a brutal reminder that he was gone forever, that he would not be coming back any more. The cup that he had used for many years still bore the stains of his favourite drink. His clothes, which included his Sunday best for going to church, were neatly hung in his cupboard. As I cleared out his cupboard, it struck me that Dad had been a very tidy man. Every item of his clothing was neatly hung. I cried when I saw a sweater that I had bought for him years ago. It was his favourite because it had kept him warm especially in his later years.

He had spent a lot of time in this room when his health deteriorated, when he got weaker and weaker. This was a place where he spent his days and nights, and yet, it was not a peaceful place for him; it was not a place of rest because, tired as he was, sleep eluded him for days on end. This was where he had his meals when he became too weak to even walk the short distance to the dining room. This was where he did his toilet because he was simply too tired to make the trip to the bathroom. How then did he manage

to get to the window in the living room all by himself? How did he manage to climb onto the ledge?

His wheelchair, a contraption that he had great disdain for, now sat in a corner of his room, untouched. All attempts to put him in the wheelchair to facilitate his mobility were met with protest. The wheelchair had quickly become a symbol of his declining health and his loss of independence. It was a blow to his self-esteem, and on the rare occasions when he agreed to use it, he did so grudgingly. He preferred to remain immobile indoors than to be taken out in his wheelchair.

As I looked around the room, I saw Dad's old and trusty television set. There was a time when he had been well enough and interested enough to prop himself up on his bed to watch his favourite programmes. However as insomnia and paranoia set in, he lost interest in everything including his regular TV dramas. Like the wheelchair, the television became a redundant piece of furniture, and now another reminder that he was no longer around to use it.

My eyes rested on Dad's calendar. It was the old-fashioned tear-away calendar with a huge date on each page. Even in his last days, Dad was particular about keeping his calendar current. A page was faithfully torn away every day until the day he died. And that was the last date showing on the calendar. It was as if time had stopped the day he jumped.

Reluctantly I went through his personal belongings – the photographs, souvenirs and other knick-knacks that he had accumulated over the years. There were photographs of him when he was a young man. He had cut quite a dashing figure in his youth and I stared long and hard at the person in the photograph, a part of me

Acknowledgments

TO MY HUSBAND AND CHILDREN, FOR THE TIMES when I was physically present but emotionally absent, I want to express my thanks for your love, understanding and encouragement.

To Tina my dear friend, for walking with me right from the very beginning of my journey and even now, thank you. Without your friendship, patience and love, this journey might have taken me to a very different place.

To Ophelia Ooi my counsellor from SOS, your perseverance and patience never fail to amaze me. Thank you for believing in me, guiding me and giving me the confidence to complete the book and in the process helping me to believe that good can emerge from the pain of losing my parents to suicide.

To my fellow survivors, thank you for being my fellow sojourners in this journey. Your courage to live on and your desire to help other survivors inspire me.

To God, even though I cannot yet see your purpose in allowing these tragic events to happen, I am grateful for the moments when I experienced your peace in the midst of excruciating pain and turmoil.

About the author

WHEN SHE WAS ONLY 7, YIN'S MOTHER TOOK HER own life. Forty years later her father jumped to his death. This is the story of how she survived her parents' suicides. Yin, 47 was a physiotherapist before becoming a homemaker. She is married with 3 children, aged 20, 18 and 16.

About the publisher

EPIGRAM PUBLISHES EXQUISITELY DESIGNED BOOKS on a wide range of subjects including history, marketing, adventure, cooking, poetry, gardening, photography and children's stories. Its recent books include Lee Geok Boi's *The Syonan Years: Singapore Under Japanese Rule*, David Lim's *Against Giants: The Life and Climbs of a Disabled Mountaineer*, Thien's *A Gardener's Log* and the bestselling *Irene's Peranakan Recipes* and *Madam Choy's Cantonese Recipes*. It also published *Russel Wong: Photographs 1980-2005* which accompanied the first one-man photography exhibition at the Singapore Art Museum. Its most recent publication was Philip Lee's *Fridays with Philip*.

Epigram is also a design consultancy with extensive expertise in the area of publication design, corporate identities and environmental graphics. Its annual reports, catalogues and books have received over 200 design awards from around the world.

"Dad has jumped down," he said. I could not believe what I was hearing.

"What do you mean he has jumped down?"

The news hit me so hard I had to stop driving and pulled to the side of the road. My heart was racing and I was paralysed with fear. I remember screaming and crying into the phone and asking him question after question: "Why? How could this have happened? Where was the maid? Why didn't she stop him?"

– Extract from the book

"When someone dear to us dies through suicide, we are left with the agonising ordeal of having to survive the heart-rending loss. It traumatises us and leaves us with a profound struggle to make sense of the suicide and learn to live again.

"This first-hand narration promises not only to enlighten, but also serves as a balm for those working through their own loss and grief."

– From the foreword by Anthony Yeo

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