

LOSS

ADJUST

MENT



LINDA

COLLINS

“I wish this book didn’t have to be written. Most of us have experienced the tragedy of a loss, but few can write about it, or want to. Linda Collins takes this courageous step by doing the impossible—recounting her daughter’s suicide. But *Loss Adjustment* is not just about ‘a’ suicide. It is not just about the end of a life. It is about the prevention of death.

Suicide is not a bad word. What’s bad is our refusal as a society to talk openly and plainly about it. As adults, teachers, parents, colleagues, classmates we have a responsibility to those around us, especially those who are young, those still trying to make sense of the world they live in. I wish this book didn’t have to be written but it has, and it will save lives.”

—Haresh Sharma, Cultural Medallion Recipient and
Resident Playwright of *The Necessary Stage*

“In this book, Linda Collins shares a private pain that many of us will never have to endure. In this raw, honest reflection upon the loss of a beloved child, Collins takes us on an examination of human nature, family ties, and hidden struggles. A book that calls on us to bear witness to human struggles and not look away.”

—Kirsten Han, Editor-in-Chief of *New Naratif*
and Human Rights Press Awardee

“The details captured in the book are raw and impactful. As a parent myself, I can only imagine the pain and loss Linda must have gone through. Her experience is captured in a quiet, matter-of-fact, and yet loving way. It is a good reminder of the pain of people left behind. Death of a loved one is never an easy experience, this book reminds all of us that there is a lot more we can do to raise awareness on suicide, catch the signs, and provide a supportive ecosystem to prevent suicides from happening.”

—Louis Ng, Member of Parliament for Nee Soon GRC, Singapore

“My deep thanks to Linda for this selfless sharing of loss and grief. There is much to learn from this honest and poignant account of her daughter’s suicide. This book is a must-read for parents, teachers, mental healthcare workers, teens; indeed for all who care for and value human life.”

—Dr Radiah Salim, founder and president of Club HEAL

“A beautifully wrought and intensely self-aware account of the grief of a mother losing her child to the most heartbreaking of circumstances. For Ms Collins, an expat from New Zealand, the at-first odd seeming rituals of grief of her Singaporean colleagues and neighbours, who rally selflessly around her, become steely anchors that tide her and her husband through their inexplicable tragedy. A unique, elucidating account of how cultural newness in the face of harrowing pain, can be an unexpected balm and gentle soothe to an earth-shattering loss.”

—Zizi Majid, playwright-director

“In language so sharp in its sheer clarity, Linda Collins opens up an emotional investigation into her past. Or more specifically, her daughter’s, and why a talented young writer on the cusp of becoming would take her own life. Honest and heartrending, *Loss Adjustment* is as much a memoir of a family coming to terms with grief as a post-mortem of a troubled soul.”

—Felix Cheong, author and chief judge for Singapore Literature Prize (non-fiction) 2016

“Speaking about suicide has always been a taboo topic—in Singapore and around the world. *Loss Adjustment* provides us with raw truths of the living searching for answers that might have led their loved one to take his/her own life. It also shows us a glimpse of the harsh reality that the stigma of suicide carries, which further adds on the living’s pain and suffering. Through Linda Collins’s writing, and alongside her daughter’s journal entries, we are clued into the complexities of having an invisible illness and how it affects not just the person, but the people around them.”

—Cheryl Tan, Founder, The Breathe Movement Festival Director, Singapore Mental Health Film Festival

L O S S A D J U S T M E N T

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LOSS ADJUST MENT

LINDA
COLLINS



A NOTE TO THE READER

Part of Linda's journey of loss and questioning can be emotionally taxing. We recognise that each person's feelings and difficulties are different, and it will be best to observe your feelings as you read. If you find yourself feeling you're not in the right headspace, do put the book down and talk to someone about how you feel.

Together with Linda, we hope the book can encourage conversation and care about mental health instead of having people close off and deal with their emotions alone.

Victoria McLeod (December 27, 1996–April 14, 2014),
laptop journal, March 30, 2014:

I have had nothing bad happen to me except my own doing.
I have let this cowardice envelop me, and I can't shake it off.
I will commit the worst thing you can ever do to someone who
loves you: killing yourself. The scary thing is, I'm okay with that.

LOSS

I

i. Time to wake up

I get up at 6.45am to prepare breakfast for my 17-year-old daughter, Victoria. All over this tropical yet urbanised island of Singapore, mothers are rising to get their children ready for school. For our family, it is the first day of the second term, of Victoria's final year at her school, an international one for expatriates. It is the day that exam results will be known.

The time, 6.45am, is when I always get up during term time, in order to get Victoria, our only child, breakfasted, dressed in her school uniform, teeth brushed, and then off downstairs to the 7.32am school bus. The evening before, she had laid out her school clothes on the dressing table in her bedroom to save time in the morning. I'd panicked that evening, as I couldn't find socks with the school logo on them. Vic was amused by my panic, and dug up two manky, dust-covered socks from under her bed, saying, "Mu-um. These'll do." My husband Malcolm hauled out shoe polish from the cupboard under the sink and buffed Vic's brown lace-up school shoes with a ton of spit and energy. It was how his late dad, Jack McLeod, taught him to do it. It seemed important for Malcolm to pass this bit of Jack on to his daughter.

Malcolm had explained to Vic, "One day we won't be around to do all this stuff, like polishing shoes. Here's what you need to do." She smirked and did the eye-roll. "Da-ad."

Later, doing the dishes the old-fashioned way—by hand—they had a tea-towel fight. Vic could flick a mean tea-towel. She giggled as she caught Mal a good one on his arm. But she'd been unusually pensive during the day. She had urged me to look at old photos of myself when I was young. I asked her, "Why would I want to look at those? I wasn't so happy then." And she said something about me being thin and pretty back then, which I took totally the wrong way as her saying I was fat and ugly now, and later I wondered, if only I had asked her why she had said that to me.

Still, this morning I had woken up euphoric in the aftermath of a long dream in which Victoria was spinning in the universe and saying, "I'm free, free! I'm free. And you're free!" The dream seemed to have gone on for a long time. Vic was above the ground, her hair was long and golden, her clothes light-coloured, and the sky around her was the bright blue of a kingfisher's wing. I was rising after her. She stretched out her hand to me. I was reaching for it, but already she was soaring away from me, looking upward, smiling. She was so happy. That is what made me, in turn, euphoric. For her, that she felt that way. I woke up, lying in the position that Victoria always slept in—on her back, with her arms crossed behind her head, facing the room. I always sleep on my side. I am generally semi-comatose and grumpy when I awake. To have woken in this position, with my daughter's voice in my head telling me she is free, is disconcerting.

Instead of getting up, I lie there, and recall the restless night I have spent. At one point I had woken to the TV still murmuring in the living room although it must have been about 2am. Malcolm, a night owl, was up watching tennis. I got up and burst into the living room. Malcolm and our cat Mittens, on the sofa beside him, both looked up indignantly. I said to him that it was school tomorrow, and it was already today, and that in a couple of hours I had to get up and get ready. He shrugged good-naturedly, and turned off the TV. Then I tiptoed into Vic's room and she seemed to be sleeping, though unusually she had pulled the covers over her head. I listened to her steady breathing and said the mantra for good luck that I always whispered to her last thing: "Good night, darling. Love you." Then I backed out quietly, shut the door which gave an irritating clunk on the last turn of the knob, and went to sleep.

At 6.45am I recall all this, and crack on with the morning. I get up, put the toast in the toaster, get the coffee ready, and think, "That's odd, Vic hasn't got up yet. It's nearly seven o'clock."

I go into her bedroom, calling, "Time to wake up now, Vic." The curtains are still drawn, but sunlight through the gaps lets me see that the covers are folded back. Vic isn't there. I feel that everything is wrong. I knock on the bathroom door; no reply. I open it, she isn't there. I think that maybe she is playing a silly trick, and is hiding in the cupboard under the sink. I look, full of hope, but she isn't there.

Maybe she is in one of the other rooms. I run to them, she isn't there. Maybe she is out on the balcony? She isn't there. I go and wake Malcolm. I grab my phone and run downstairs. I start to run towards the hill leading to other apartment blocks. Something stops me. It is more than not wanting to go further from home. It is a feeling that I mustn't go there. I pull out my phone and text: "Please, Vic, where are you?" I run back to our apartment. As I run, I allow myself, fearfully, to wonder if Vic has headed off to the main road for some reason, to go to where there is a bridge over a canal. Why would she do that? Why do I think she might do that? In the apartment, Malcolm is pacing the rooms, bewildered. We hear the sound of a motorbike. We rush out, hoping for news. It is Mohan, the condominium's security guard. The burly man with a carefully tended moustache and a devotion to his job has known Vic since she was a little girl. This familiar, kindly man in his blue uniform and polished black shoes, is sobbing.

Mohan won't tell us what is wrong. He is shaking, burying his head in his hands, telling us only, "Come. You must come. Over the hill, over the hill." He has come to get us, to take us there. We don't want to go. We cling to what should be. The school bus will be here soon. We want it to be there. I want to call out, "Victoria, the bus is here," to see her emerge from her bedroom, hauling her green school backpack over her shoulders, bending like an old woman lugging all her

belongings on her back, then straightening to stand tall and beautiful; to see her in the shiny polished shoes, the laces done up haphazardly, to pat her on the back as she goes out the door, an habitual gesture for luck with a prayer to keep her safe, that I always do; and to see Mittens dash out and after her down the stairs, like she always does.

Tabby-coloured Mittens and black-coated Angelina have run out onto the balcony, confused and scared. Dread rakes my stomach like cats' claws. "You must come," Mohan says. We are shepherded downstairs to the carpark. We are silent, we are made mute. We go forth helplessly, to what we fear at some visceral level is our death, or at least the death of our current selves. We will go wherever we are led, for we are powerless. We find ourselves in a white SUV that Mohan has flagged down. He instructs the driver to go to the apartment block on the other side of the hill. The driver nods, realising it is an emergency. We travel along the road, past families in their homes getting ready for the day. We arrive at the other side of the hill and pull up near an apartment block facing tropical Angsana and Tembusu trees and pink and white bougainvillea. A crowd has gathered at the foot of this apartment building. They are Singaporeans of all ages and some young Filipino domestic helpers who are holding each other and crying. Police sit on motorbikes, or else stand about, making notes or speaking into phones. Yellow crime scene tape keeps the crowd back from the object of their attention.

Another country—the past

There were days of innocent happiness, of a belief in change creating a better future. I had forgotten that. But I recently came across a piece for a column I used to write in Singapore's *Sunday Times*, 'The Expat Files', dated February 15, 2009. Recalling when I was pregnant with Victoria, I wrote: "Memories include: the night before my elective Caesarean, gazing over the rooftops to the full moon above, hearing a toc-toc bird and the wind rustle the leaves of a chiku tree. I remember thinking with a mixture of fear and excitement, this is the last night of my old life."

ADJUSTMENT

I



Victoria McLeod
Photo by Malcolm McLeod

Notes and acknowledgements

This book is for Victoria, and to all those who suffer suicidal thoughts, or who feel alone or misunderstood, or marginalised by issues of identity, sexuality or learning disability. And for individuals railing against the corporate machine, whether it is the treating of children's education simply as a business, or multinational insurers failing to honour their policies in a timely manner after a natural disaster such as an earthquake.

The memoir is a mixture of journal-accessed record; concrete recollections; lyrical recall; interviews with those affected by my daughter's death or by the death by suicide of someone they knew; interviews with mental health experts; inspiration from fellow writers; and reading and study on mental health issues.

I have no formal training in mental health work apart from a diploma in learning disorders management and a certificate in basic counselling, obtained in Singapore. There is always a danger of framing recollection, or indeed, evidence, to fit a psychological theory. It is also important to note that Victoria's death—the traumatic nature of it, and also the sheer absence of her from my life—affected me at a visceral level, changing aspects of my personality and also of cognition, such as social awareness and memory. Apologies if I have omitted anyone in my acknowledgements, or neglected their own backstory.

Research for this project has been approved by the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee, approval reference number 24677.

Various names of people and institutions have been altered, omitted or truncated for privacy reasons or discretion. Of the students who were Victoria's friends, Hannah and Sophie consented to have their first names used; Ellie Carson consented to her full name being used. The rest either selected or I chose nom des plumes for them.

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Writers and lyricists guiding or informing me (in random order): JK Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. 2000, Bloomsbury; Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*. 1996, HarperCollins; Marianne Boruch, *The Little Death of the Self*. 2017, University of Michigan Press; Margaret Atwood, *The Door*. 2007, Virago Press. Emily Dickinson (ed. James Reeves), *Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson*. 1959, Heinemann Educational; Anne Sexton, 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs', *Transformations*, 2001, First Mariner; Marion Coutts, *The Iceberg*. 2014, Atlantic Books; Decca Aitkenhead, *All at sea*. 2017, First Anchor Books; Nick Flynn, *The Reenactments*. 2013, WW Norton; JRR Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (50th anniversary one-volume edition). 2004, HarperCollins; Steve Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*.

2016, HarperCollins; Jesse Bering, *The Belief Instinct*. 2011, WW Norton; Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, 1995, Ebury Press; Lee Kuan Yew, *Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going*. 2011, Straits Press; Kate Mayberry, 'Third Culture Kids: Citizens of everywhere and nowhere', *BBC*, 18 November 2016; songwriter Stephen Schwartz's 'For Good' from the musical *Wicked*; Chris Martin of Coldplay, 'Fix You', *X&Y*, 2005. St Louis de Montfort, *The Secret of Mary*. 1998, Montfort Publications; Lesley Morrison, *The healing wisdom of birds*. 2011, Llewellyn Publications; Charles Olson, 'The Kingfishers', *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson*. 1987, University of California Press; James Brown, 'Capitalism Explained', *Kaupapa: New Zealand poets, world issues*. 2007, Te Whanga-nui-a-Tara Development Resource Centre; WB Keats' 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death', *The Wild Swans at Coole*. 2001, Penguin; Janet Frame, *Owls Do Cry*. 2016, Counterpoint; Enid Blyton's *The Faraway Tree Collection*. 2002, Dean; James K. Baxter, 'High Country Weather' from *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, 1960.

Where to go for help

If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, here are some hotlines and organisations in Singapore that provide support and assistance. It is okay to need help, please reach out.

Suicide Prevention and Crisis Helplines

SOS (Samaritans of Singapore)	1800-221-4444	Daily	24 hours
Emergency Helpline (Institute of Mental Health)	6389-2222	Daily	24 hours

Mental Health Helplines

Singapore Association of Mental Health	1800-283-7019	Monday–Friday	9.00am to 1.00pm 2.00pm to 6.00pm
Eating Disorders Helpline, SGH	+65 6321 4377 eatingdisorders@sgh.com.sg	Monday–Friday	9.00am to 1.00pm 2.00pm to 6.00pm
Child Bereavement Support Group (Singapore)	cbss.sg		
Club HEAL (caters to the needs of Muslims though all are welcome)	6899 3463 info@clubheal.org.sg	Monday–Friday	9:00am to 5:00pm

SOS E-mail Befriending Service	pat@sos.org.sg		
Over the Rainbow Mental Health Initiative	contact@over therainbow.sg		

Counselling Helplines

Youth Line	6336 3434	Monday– Friday	8.30am to 6.00pm
Touch Line	1800-377-2252	Daily	10.00am to 10.00pm
Tinkle Friend (For primary school students)	1800-2744- 4788	Monday– Friday	9.30am to 11.30am 2.30pm to 5.00pm
Metoyou Cyber Counselling	6445 0100	Monday– Friday	2.00pm to 6.00pm
eCounselling Centre (eC2) (Fei Yue Project 180)	https://www. fycc.org/ contact-us/	Monday– Friday	9.30am to 6.00pm

Or you may try visiting one of the Family Service Centres. Services are generally free and they may be able to provide counselling assistance.

A comprehensive Mental Health Services Resource Directory by National Council of Social Service:
<https://www.ncss.gov.sg/NCSS/media/NCSS-Documents-and-Forms/NCSS%20Internal%20Documents/Directory-on-Mental-Health-Services.pdf>

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