

Marion Bayliss

My long road to Japan

A journey through grief after a death at sea

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My husband, affectionately known as Curly, was killed when the MV Derbyshire on which he was Chief Officer sank off the coast of Japan in September 1980. There were 44 people on board; there were no survivors, no mayday call, no wreckage, only an empty lifeboat found some weeks later.

Curly joined the ship on 20 June 1980. He said he loved me, would see me in September and then we'd never part again, because he had handed in his notice. But on Sunday 16 September 1980 I had a message from the ship's owners. The ship was delayed and would not be in Japan the following day. It was not until the following morning that the radio told me that the ship was not delayed; it was missing. Friends came to help and support me. The Press waited around my house. Local churches held prayer meetings. Friends urged me not to give up hope. But I knew he would not come home and felt my first pangs of guilt for being unable to hope.

'Due to a further typhoon in the area. the search has been called off', said a voice on the telephone, from the shipowner's office. 'If the weather improves, a further search will be held but only to look for wreckage and not survivors'. 'So, I must presume death?' 'Yes', said the voice.

I wish someone could have told me for sure that Curly had died. It was now just a question of accepting that Curly would not be coming home again. We had no body, no funeral, no nothing. Curly had died, and with my three teenage children, I needed to start again. But how?

For three years I struggled. Then in 1983 I reached crisis point. I was scared. I wanted to talk. It was the only way; nothing else would do but talking. It overflowed. The relief to find someone to talk to – a stranger who knew nothing of me.

1983

Curly is dead. The pain, the hurt, the acceptance. Curly is dead and I am on my own. I feel terrible; so alone. I pace about, cannot settle. So many jobs should be done but I can't be bothered. I'm on my own and I hate it. I want to be positive and do something. How do you come to terms with it? I need someone to tell me what to do; to encourage me; tell me I can do it. But I can't be bothered; I'm on my own.

I want to scream at the top of my voice. CURLY. I feel terrible; I hurt. CURLY. He's not here; he's left me. Please come back; I can't manage on my own. The thought of my life stretching ahead of me, when there is nothing to look forward to, frightens me. No hope, not any more.

What happened? Was he in his room, on the deck? Was it slow, was it fast? Did he struggle, did he know? Did he call my name? Experts say it might have been quick, but was it? Experts say it was the weather, but was it? A typhoon they say – Typhoon Orchid they called it. A pretty name but I hate it; I hate orchids now. Three years yesterday since he died and he'll never be any older. I feel old and there are too many years left.

1992

It's a confusing time. So many things float around my brain, but are not yet ready to emerge. I think I know why water on television, rough seas, certain sounds trouble me, but I cannot put the feelings into words yet. The difficulty lies in not knowing how to start, especially with the water. I will overcome it in 1993, I hope.

1993

Perhaps I live too much in the past. Am I placing too much importance on my need to visit Japan? Will I ever come to terms with the fact that Curly drowned? I do accept that my inability to watch things like rough seas on television, is because of my inability to even consider the physical act of drowning. How long do you hold your breath? Is the water heavy on top of your head? Are you upside-down? Can you swim? For how long?

It isn't nice to think these thoughts; makes my head prickle, and my throat. It needs to be more personal and more precise. Where was Curly on the ship? Was he alone? Did he know anything about it? How long did it take for Curly to drown? Was it day or night? Was it dark or light? Was he able to hold his breath? Was the water in turmoil and was Curly tossed about? Did he bump his head?

I have never asked these questions before. Is there anyone who could answer them? Not precisely what happened to Curly, but in general. What do bodies look like when they have drowned? What would Curly's body look like? Did the fish eat him? Is his body trapped inside the ship? I always thought, but only vaguely, that he was free, in the sea. What is the next step? Must I sit in front of the television and watch rough water? Who can help me? Is there someone I could write to?

In my imagination, Curly, I see you on the ship, busy searching, watching, anxious. The weather is bad and visibility poor. A storm, the typhoon with mountainous waves, thundering noise and spray. All is quiet, there is relief and then it comes again. Noise, shuddering, shouting. It's busy and dark. 'Oh no! MARION!'

In my imagination I am swimming through the water and I can breathe. Curly is swimming through the water but he can't breathe. I ask him to come to me and hold my hands so I can save him. I want him to fight it, and not to give in. But he tells me that he is tired and can fight no more. His lungs are bursting and I must let him go. He is drowning and needs to drift away, to drown, to be at peace. He says it is easier now. 'Marion love, let me go'.

When death is sudden and tragic and unexpected, don't just sit there, you grieving people; rant and rave. Ask questions. Why did you leave me alone? Don't

EDITOR'S NOTE

It is hard to make real the fact of loss when no body has been recovered, no funeral has been held and even the circumstances of the death are uncertain.

In this paper Marion Bayliss shares with us her own experience as she went through and successfully navigated this journey. Her article complements Tony Walters' paper on 'War Graves Pilgrimages' which appeared in *Bereavement Care* 1993; **12** (No 3): 26-29.

just sit there, you grieving people; scream and shout. Why did you choose that job? For in death there is honesty, so tell them what you are thinking. I'm sorry I didn't travel with you. Don't just sit there, you grieving people; remember the happy times, the fun and the love. Be glad. I'm glad we resolved all our difficulties; I'm glad we had that holiday; I'm glad we found a faith. Don't just sit there, you grieving people. Remember with gladness, with honesty and with love.

It would have been another trip for him. A journey towards light, not a port. A journey through tunnels, not through seas. A trip with no farewells, no suitcase to pack and no promises to keep; a trip without me, without even my knowledge, all over before I even knew it had begun. A journey without me. A journey I did not plan, did not want. But a journey that forced me to make my own journey.

Curly died and I can never be the same. Just when I dare to think this journey's over, something happens and I must alter course. I am not mad, just growing. As my life changes, new experiences bring new challenges. Something else to bring me pain. Sometimes I think I need a straight road to travel along. Instead I find so many corners, obstacles, wrong turnings and pain. But I cope; I always cope. I just wish I didn't have to cope with quite so many things. Curly died and he is at peace. And me? My peace is growing.

Curly died and I have so many questions. Why did he die so far from me? Why did the ship sink? Why was it designed that way? Why did they use that grade of steel? Was the ship built properly? Why was I left to look after everyone – the children, the family, the house? Why did he leave me on my own? These questions flow through my pen; writing letters that are often ignored. People deny responsibility. My anger helps to bring about changes. Ships must be safer, sailors must not die and families must not be bereaved. Lessons must be learned My anger is controlled and I am able to face the future. My journey through anger needs to visit Japan. I am ready to go.

1994 – May

They are going to search for the Derbyshire. That is good and I am pleased for it will help to improve shipping safety and arouse public awareness. They have arrived at the search area and I am pleased. The crew are sleeping and will start their search later. I pray God that the search will be successful. I have butterflies in my tummy and I feel sick.

They have found the ship. I am sobbing. I am weeping and confused. I am pleased but cannot show this or express it. My grief takes precedence. It overwhelms me. I am sad, so very sad. I am weeping. They have found images of the ship but I cannot see them. They have found the ship but I cannot see it. They are searching with the video but I am not there. They have pictures of the ship but I only see them on television. They are not blurred images as I had imagined, but clear, recognisable pictures. The anchor lies helpless, like me. It did nothing; it was impotent like me. I could not save them, or search for them. I was helpless, but I can go and say goodbye.

1994 – August

And so I am in Okinawa, Japan. I have just returned from flying a further three hundred miles to the tiny South Daito Island – the nearest land to the wreck.

In my dreams I had imagined a flat beach, but this was rocky with a steep path leading down to the sea. There were five rows of curving steps and I sat on the top one. I cried, shouted and talked to Curly. I told him I didn't like being on my own; I cried. I was angry, sad and lonely. I told him about the family; just whatever came into my head. Then I calmed down and sat watching the waves breaking over the rocks. After I'd finished talking I relaxed and just sat still. Suddenly a huge wave crashed onto the bottom step and frightened me. The sea seemed to be going wild. I felt it was trying to drag me in. There was a strong feeling of menace. I felt the sea was talking to me. 'You've had your turn', it said, 'now it's my turn'. Suddenly another huge wave crashed up three steps and I was not afraid. I had not moved after the first wave, only moved my bag further away. The sea seemed to be saying that I need not be afraid of it ever again. With waves crashing around me, I was very calm, unafraid and at peace. I wished someone would walk down to take my photograph.

I read some poems to Curly and then I quoted from the Song of Solomon 8; 7:

'Love no flood can quench,
no torrents drown.'

Not long after, four young lads came down and swam in a pool, created by rocks and filled by the sea. They looked so natural swimming there, they made the sea appear normal. They took my photograph.

It was all more perfect than I could possibly have imagined. I wanted the experience to change me and to be long lasting – for ever. I don't think I will ever be afraid of the sea again.

A strange feeling, knowing I was leaving Daito. I feel I had arrived as part Marion/part Curly. And possibly, the part Curly was the larger of the two. I feel I am leaving as a whole Marion. I want and need this feeling to be permanent and not transitory.

I am so happy and different. As the weekend progressed, I have felt lighter. I realise that I don't feel heavy any more and that a great weight has been lifted from me. I feel as though I have been carrying Curly on my back for 14 years. And now I don't feel guilty, that is the amazing thing. I just feel this incredible sense of freedom.

I was delighted to find a shop selling Okinawan T-shirts with these words:

'Wake up in the morning
Open the window
Feel the wind
look up at the sky
Listen to
the sound of waves
Oh! it's a fine day
Now begin the day'.

1995 – March

My story is not over yet. I am still at peace with myself and with Curly. I still help with the campaign to discover what happened to the Derbyshire and to improve the appalling safety record of these large ships. I feel that I have a more relaxed relationship with Curly now, which seems more healthy. I can never forget him, but now I am able to look forward. The future is hopeful and exciting. I can listen to the sound of waves without anxiety or terror. 'Oh! it's a fine day, now begin the day'. ■

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