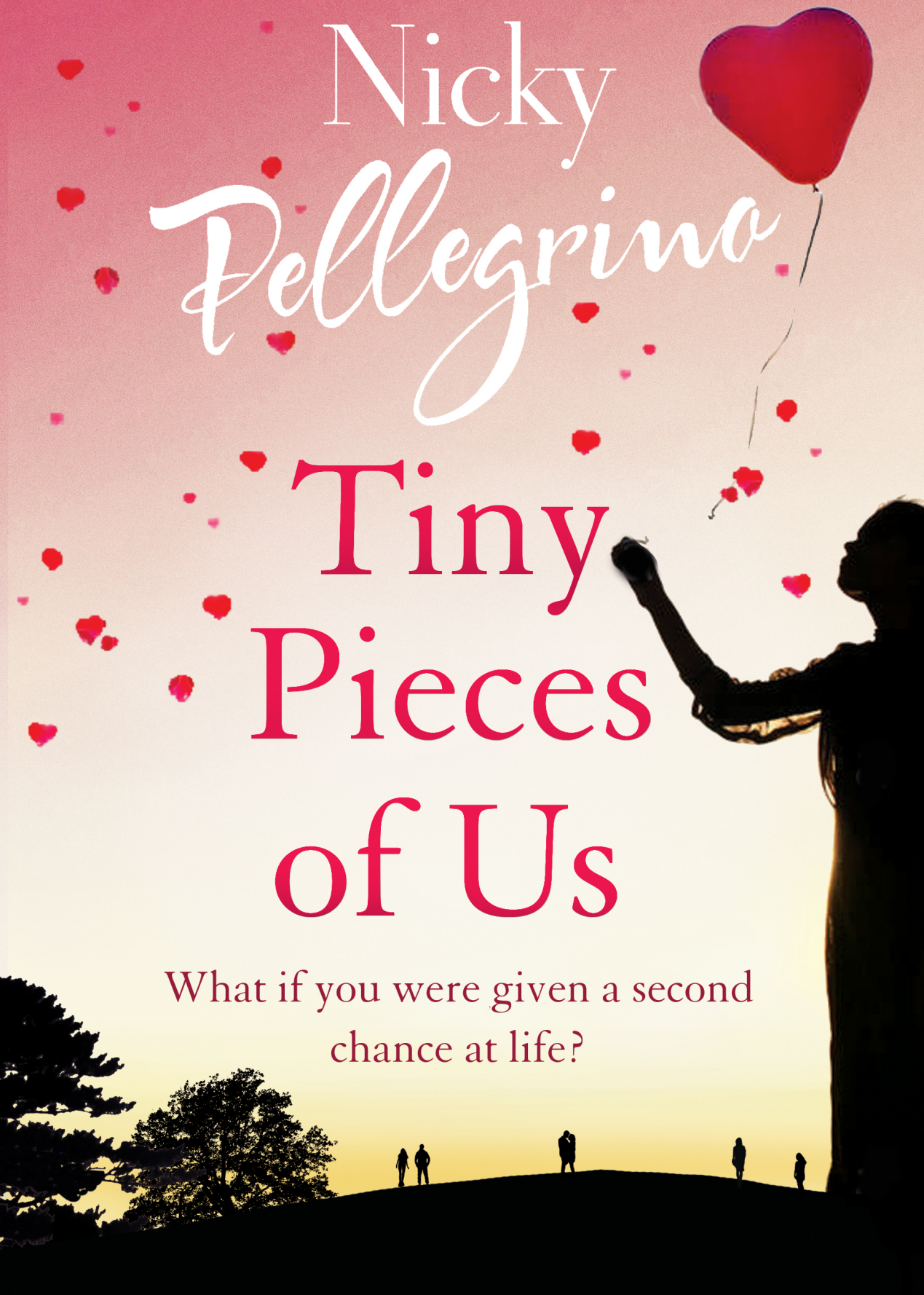


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Nicky Pellegrino was born in Liverpool but spent childhood holidays staying with her family in Italy. It is her memories of those summers that flavour her stories: the passions, the feuds but most of all the food. Nicky now lives in Auckland, New Zealand with her husband, two dogs and two horses.

Find out more at www.nickypellegrino.com

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Nicky Pellegrino

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For Stacy Gregg, with heartfelt thanks

How it begins ...

Jamie can't wait to get home. Normally after school he likes to hang out with his friends – kick a ball around, share a carton of fries, have a laugh – until the very last minute when he pedals as fast as he can to be back home in time for dinner.

Today a good thing happened and Jamie is excited about seeing the look on his mum's face when he tells her. She doesn't even know he applied for the scholarship. It seemed better not to mention it as there was so much competition and he assumed he didn't stand a chance. Jamie worked really hard on the application. He explained all the reasons he wanted to do the summer school in robotics, describing the dreams he had for his future. Some day he hoped to design super-cool bionic arms and legs, so cool that kids who weren't amputees would be sorry they couldn't have one. Jamie had filled a notebook with drawings of his ideas but there was so much he needed to learn and he couldn't wait to get started.

His mum is going to be really pleased. She is always telling him he can do anything he sets his mind to. He is sure she would have found the money to pay for the summer school if he had asked. But Jamie didn't want that. Not that they are poor exactly but his mum spends very little on herself, saving to buy things for him instead – the mountain bike for his last birthday, the trip to London to visit the science museum, his new iPhone. It seems important that he shouldn't always be asking for more. He is sixteen now and wants her to know that she doesn't have to worry about him

all the time. So when he heard about the scholarship he put in an application and hoped for the best. He didn't believe it when the computer science teacher told him he had been chosen. Like, he really didn't believe it. But it is official; he has a letter now to prove it. It is tucked inside the school bag he wears slung around his shoulders as he cycles home along Cowley Road in a hurry to show it to his mother.

It has been raining and the tarmac is glossy but Jamie has all the proper safety gear; a helmet, a high-vis vest and really good lights for his bike. His mum insisted on it. She seems to worry more than other mothers do, probably because there's only the two of them. Jamie used to wish his dad hadn't walked out when he was a kid, and that he had a brother or sister maybe, but now he kind of likes the way things are. His friends seem to have endless whinges about their families. Little sisters are annoying, big brothers are bullies and parents are always spoiling things. Jamie gets on with his mum mostly. In the evenings they watch television together and on weekends she always has time to drive him wherever he wants to go. She isn't one of those mothers who is always getting upset, going on and on about things, or even worse, shouting. Jamie can't remember the last time they argued.

He wonders what she has planned for their dinner. Maybe when she hears his good news she will decide to take him out for a celebration instead. Just McDonald's; it is his favourite place, and always where he asks to go when she wants to treat him.

Jamie pumps the pedals of his bike, flying along the busy road towards home. It isn't a particularly long ride and it is pretty flat. On the weekend he might get his mum to drive him out to a mountain biking trail so he can have a proper blast. He wants to get fitter and stronger, perhaps even do some races. He loves the feeling of his heart and muscles working to power the bike forwards, faster and faster. It

would be great to have a go at a few jumps too; he has heard there are some in the Shotover Woods. Maybe she will drive him there then they can go to Pizza Express afterwards because his mum really likes the American Hot with the spicy pepperoni and jalapeño peppers.

She is going to be so proud of him; Jamie can't wait. He plans to give her the envelope and not tell her what is inside. She will probably think it is another boring school letter; details of new gear he needs or a parent/teacher appointment. She will tell him to leave it on the kitchen bench for her to look at later and wonder why he is so insistent that she read it right away. He imagines her surprise when she sees that her son has won a scholarship; out of all the kids who applied he was the one who was chosen. This is his lucky day, thinks Jamie.

The road is slick and wet, and a car is making a clumsy right turn through the heavy traffic. Jamie realises the driver hasn't noticed him and he brakes hard but too late. His last thought is that this is going to hurt, then the impact, then nothing. He doesn't see the shocked bystanders, one of them crying softly as she kneels down and takes his hand, waiting for the ambulance somebody has called. The lights, the sirens, the paramedics checking vital signs, the race to the hospital, Jamie isn't aware of any of it. His heart is still beating but his life has ended.

Later on his mother will find the letter tucked carefully into the school bag that has been returned to her. It will be a long time before she opens it though. Not until well after the days and nights in hospital when the miracle everyone is praying for never happens. Not until after the hardest decision of all, the one that still wakes her up in the middle of the night filling her with an awful mix of regret and panic.

Jamie is breathing with the help of a ventilator when she says goodbye to him. They tell her not to feel rushed, she can stay as long as she likes. But no time will ever be enough,

how could it be? She sits very close as Jamie breathes in and out. She can't quite let go of the last of her hope, but he is gone, this is what they keep saying. Her boy with all his energy and brightness and life. It seems impossible; it is too huge a thing and she can't take it in. She doesn't want to.

For years the school bag stays on the desk in his room. She dusts around it from time to time, but touches nothing, assuming she knows exactly what is inside. The iPhone Jamie was so proud of, the notebook he was always scribbling in, his dented old laptop, schoolbooks, a few pens, coins. The bag sits there until its fabric starts to fade slightly from the sunlight that pours through the window. She isn't sure what makes her pick it up one day, sit down on his bed and empty out its contents.

These are all the familiar things that Jamie touched everyday. She leafs through a notebook full of complicated diagrams, glances at the dark screen of his phone, opens the laptop and rests her fingers on the worn keys. Finding a slim envelope deep in one of the bag's pockets, she tears into it and starts to read.

Grace hadn't thought it was possible to feel any worse than she already did. But now she reads the letter and sees it all; the life Jamie should have had, the future he was cheated out of, everything that has been lost, all those beautiful dreams.

Her son is gone and she is broken. Mostly what she wants is to be gone now too. Grace longs to curl into herself, disappear, be nothing at all; it would be such a relief.

The only thing that has ever made her feel slightly better is knowing that out there somewhere Jamie's heart is still beating, that his death meant other people had a future. She thinks about the ones that have tiny pieces of him inside them, about the stranger who sees the world through his eyes, and most of all, the one who was gifted his brave heart. She wonders about them, what their dreams were and if they

are making the most of their chance to live them. At times it makes her angry – they got so much, Jamie lost everything – but often it helps just a little. Right now it seems to make no difference at all.

Grace wants all of this to be over.

16 November 2010

Tragic teen saves lives

But more donors are desperately needed.

By Daily Post reporter Mary Moore

All Jamie McGraw wanted for his sixteenth birthday was a new mountain bike. Tragically, only weeks after being thrilled to receive the dream gift, his young life was cut short after he was knocked off his bike by a motorist while pedalling home one wet, dark evening.

Thanks to a brave decision by his heartbroken mother Grace, the Oxford teen's death has meant the gift of life for five other people. His undamaged kidney, heart, liver, lungs and pancreas have all been donated to patients who were running out of time, and his corneas have saved someone's eyesight.

'Jamie had a heart of gold,' said Grace, 45. 'He was such a lovely boy. I still can't believe he's gone but I'm trying to find some comfort in the fact he has helped so many others.'

'There are thousands more sick people that are desperate for a transplant, and the need for organs is urgent and growing,' says Lynda Fyfe, coordinator of Harefield Hospital.

'Across the UK people are dying while they are waiting for an organ. Every day in my job I see the amazing difference a transplant can make. There are currently 165 sick children alone on the waiting lists and meanwhile healthy organs are going to waste. Signing up to become a donor really is giving the gift of life.'

Vivi

London, spring 2017

My heart is less than one per cent of my body, it weighs hardly anything; it is only a tiny piece of me yet it is the part that everyone finds most interesting, even me. Whenever I wake in the middle of the night, with one of those 3 a.m. spikes of anxiety, it is my heart I reach for first. Is it beating properly? Is one thud following another, slow and steady, or is it skittering a little, out of rhythm, is it about to fail me? I press my hand against my chest and feel each soft resting beat and it always takes a while before I am reassured enough to think of sleeping again. For now, everything is as it should be. For now, there is nothing I need to worry about.

I was born with a heart that couldn't be trusted to pump my blood properly. In and out of hospital, fainting at school, always exhausted; I was the child who couldn't go places or do things, the sick kid, the special one, the girl who was going to die young.

Growing up with a body that keeps letting you down isn't much fun. People feel sorry for you but they must resent you too. My sister put up with years of me getting the best of everything – all the attention, the biggest bedroom, the nicest presents – while the doctors bought me time. First drugs, then a pacemaker and finally they put in a mechanical pump to keep my failing heart going while I was on the waiting list for a transplant. No one expected to keep me for long; it was an unspoken thing but somehow I knew it. So for years I got everything I wanted, until at last I got someone else's heart.

I have tried not to think of him, the kid who died so I could live. I didn't want to imagine a screeching of brakes or the crash of a car accident, sirens, shocked bystanders, a still, bleeding body. I never wanted to know his name, or where he came from or how sad his family was. All of that was too much. Once I knew I had a future, it seemed better not to look back.

My mother called it a miracle; that was how we all thought of it. In the beginning everyone was focused on me recovering from the transplant surgery. There was a scare when my body started rejecting the new heart, so they had to fill me with steroids and that fixed things, although I still have to take drugs and be really careful. I was in hospital for ages and when I finally got home we had this big party with all the family and neighbours coming through and everyone telling me the same thing, 'You've got your whole life ahead of you now.'

Not a single person mentioned him, the boy whose heart I had taken. I suppose they thought it wasn't appropriate over cups of tea and chocolate cake in a room hung with bunting, not very nice to mention death when I was celebrating being alive.

The transplant nurse encouraged me to write a thank you letter to the donor's family; she even suggested what to put in it. Keep everything anonymous, mention how grateful you are, describe what it was like before and say how things have changed for the better, offer words of comfort such as, 'I hope this letter will help you through your loss, because you have helped to save my life.'

I wrote it fast and sealed the envelope, not really considering who would open it and read those words. I was nineteen when I sent that letter. Now seven years have passed and there is nothing wrong with my heart. It just isn't the one I was born with.

There are scars, of course, but the smaller ones on my

neck are fading and the dramatic long one down my chest I keep well covered most of the time. Hardly anyone at work knows, only Dan because we were sleeping together and I had to tell him.

Dan is my boss, an editor on the tabloid newspaper I've been working at for the past four years; the one who is always making me interview reality TV stars even though he knows I would rather be working on newsier, investigative pieces. I can't say no to him, not with the tricky state the print industry is in right now. Probably the only reason I still have a job is that I can turn my hand to pretty much anything – royal rumours, disgraced politicians, soap star weddings. If Dan asks then I write the story. One evening, following after-work drinks at the Prince of Wales pub, he asked for something more and I found myself saying yes to that too, then going back to his place.

Dan was fascinated by my scar, kept touching it with his fingers, putting his hand flat on my chest and feeling my heart beating. And he asked the question anyone else might have shied away from. 'Whose is it? Who did it belong to?'

'I don't know,' I told him, pushing his hand away and pulling the duvet up to my chin.

'Seriously?' He propped himself on one elbow and stared down at me. 'You've got no idea?'

'It's all confidential,' I explained. 'They don't tell you anything.'

For a while Dan and I had been having one of those secretive workplace flirtations. We would buy each other coffees and send messages back and forth; it was a way to break up the day, and Dan was a laugh, I liked him. And then there I was lying naked in his bed.

'Don't say anything, OK?' I pleaded, as his fingers strayed back beneath the duvet and traced the long ridge of scar tissue scoring my chest. 'There's no need for people to know.'

‘Sure,’ Dan said, too casually.

‘I’ve had all those years of being a sick kid, I just want to be normal now.’

‘Aren’t you curious to find out though? I’d have to know.’

‘You mean who my heart belonged to?’

‘Yeah, it must be possible to get more details. You could start by looking back through the news archives for accidents on dates that match up with your surgery. That would give you some clues.’

Dan was an expert at chasing people down and uncovering stories. It had been his job for years and, when I arrived on the scene as an intern, he devoted a lot of time to showing me how. But this wasn’t just another story, it was my life and I didn’t necessarily want to solve all its mysteries.

‘I could try and find out more about my donor but what good would it do?’ I asked. ‘There’s no point really.’

‘Maybe you’d feel a connection with the family, an emotional link. It might make a really good feature for the weekend paper.’

‘No,’ I said hesitantly, almost testing the word, because it wasn’t one I had used with him before. Then with more certainty, ‘No, I can’t.’

Dan must have assumed he would be able to talk me round. He mentioned it again several times when we were in bed together, or at the pub, or out for dinner and I always gave him the same answer. No way. I was not going to be clickbait for the *Daily Post* website. There would be no bittersweet video of my first meeting with the donor’s family, no moving first-person piece.

‘Think of all the good it would do. It might encourage readers to register as donors and help other sick kids,’ Dan pointed out.

It was the sort of line he had taught me to use when trying to coax a story from a reluctant interviewee, and I couldn’t believe he was trying it now.

‘I already wrote a big feature for organ donor awareness week,’ I reminded him.

‘Yeah, somebody does one exactly like that every year. Dull, isn’t it? Not likely to stir any feelings or touch a reader’s heart. Your own story could be really powerful.’

‘No,’ I repeated, shaking my head, because even though he was my boss I didn’t think he could make me do this. Briefly, his expression seemed to darken.

By then Dan and me were in a routine where I would spend a few nights a week sleeping over at his place, but still we weren’t officially ‘together’ and at work we were keeping things discreet. I hadn’t pushed for more because I didn’t think I wanted it. Guys like Dan are my unhealthy addiction – like cigarettes or alcohol are for other people: not good for me, a temporary pleasure I ought to give up at some point, just not quite yet.

‘OK Vivi.’ He treated me to a smile that widened into his most mischievous grin. ‘You can’t blame me for trying though.’

One of the things our newspaper is always doing in a bid to boost its readership is launching these big campaigns. In recent months there had been one to tackle loneliness and another to raise funds to pay for a dying woman’s dream wedding. Readers love that sort of thing and Dan was constantly on the hunt for another good cause to back.

It was him who came up with ‘Donate for Life’. Hearing about my transplant must have put the idea in his head and then me reminding him about that article I had written, filled with statistics about the numbers of people needing organs, had got him thinking. Thousands with faulty hearts, kidneys, lungs, livers ... some of them dying while they were waiting for new ones. Surely something could be done to help them.

‘I’ve had a brilliant idea,’ he announced. ‘This has to be our next big crusade.’

Newsrooms are quiet places these days. There is no pounding on typewriters or yelling down phones any more, just a lot of people jammed into a large room, all staring at their screens and not saying much. So when Dan spoke up everyone heard and half the office got in on the discussion, with even the editor-in-chief coming over and leaning on the edge of his desk as they brainstormed.

‘In lots of other countries all adults are potential donors unless they opt out,’ Dan explained, ‘but not in England. Here you have to be proactive and sign up to a donor register. Lots of people never get round to doing that. We need to push for a change in the law to bring us in line.’

‘Great, great, this could be huge,’ enthused the editor-in-chief. ‘Find me a good face for the campaign though. A cute-looking kid on the waiting list or someone young and attractive who would have died if they hadn’t got their transplant in time.’

‘Yeah, I’ll get onto it right away,’ promised Dan.

I was hunched behind my computer, trying to look busy. It was often me that was assigned articles like these. I had written the lead piece about the loneliness epidemic and followed the dream wedding story through to its inevitable unhappy ending. Mostly I liked working on those campaigns – it felt as if we were helping make a real difference – but I didn’t want to touch this one.

‘Vivi?’ Dan called.

Looking over the top of my computer screen, I shook my head. ‘Not me, sorry; I’ve got too much other stuff on.’

‘Park what you’re doing, this is more important.’

I couldn’t say no to him in front of everyone. Even if we hadn’t been sleeping together, which added a whole extra layer of complication, a journalist on the *Daily Post* didn’t refuse to chase up a story. There had been times I had put things on my list then quietly forgotten to get on with them, but that wasn’t going to work this time.

‘OK then, I’ll start hunting out a case study,’ I said, reluctantly.

‘Come on Vivi, forget boring case studies, write me a first-person piece, how a heart transplant changed your life. Knock it out this afternoon and we’ll get a quick shot of you, then we can have it up online tonight and in tomorrow’s paper.’

Everyone was looking my way curiously: the editor-in-chief, the other people at the desks around mine, a couple of sub-editors heading back from the kitchen with their cups of tea.

‘Put loads of emotion into it,’ Dan urged. ‘We need to hear how close you were to death and how thankful you are to the family of the donor. I want our readers smiling through their tears.’

He was talking fast, full of his own brilliance. He may have been good-looking with his shock of fair floppy hair and boyish smile, but right at that moment his charm was missing entirely.

‘This is your opportunity to raise awareness and save lives, Vivi,’ he was saying. ‘Give other sick people the second chance you’ve had.’

The trouble was there was no denying he was right. If a stranger hadn’t given me a healthy heart I wouldn’t have been sitting there at all; my own would have stopped beating years ago. Didn’t other people deserve the same gift of life? Shouldn’t I be helping them if I could?

‘This is a way for you to give something back,’ Dan pushed on, ‘to repay a debt. How can you say no to that?’

‘I suppose I can’t,’ I admitted.

‘Then why are you staring at me like that? Get on with it.’

And so I did. It came out more fluently than I expected, as if the words had always been there in my head ready to flood out onto the page and be a story. Afterwards, feeling slightly stunned, I put on some make-up, swapped my

black shirt for another woman's brighter top, and managed to smile down a photographer's lens. They even shot some video of me talking about changing the law and saving lives. And when it was all over I went to the Prince of Wales and ordered a large glass of wine.

'Should you be doing that?' wondered one of the senior reporters. 'Don't you have to take care of your health?'

'I don't have a moral obligation not to drink Chardonnay just because I've got someone else's heart,' I snapped.

'That's not what I meant at all,' she protested, but of course it was.

Dan must have expected me to go home with him that night. He was there at the pub, drinking pints of beer, and he looked surprised when I grabbed my bag and headed off alone. I went to my own place, a tiny rented room in a Victorian bay-fronted villa in Highbury. There was barely enough space for a large single bed and a clothes rack, but mostly I used it as a place to crash so I didn't particularly care.

That night I slept badly and woke with a headache. Normally I would never ring in sick. I've had enough days of resting in bed to last me a lifetime and would rather be at work. But with the thought of my face spread across the pages of the *Daily Post*, I texted Dan a feeble lie about having a stomach bug, rolled over and tried to go back to sleep. My phone kept ringing and I ignored it for a while but eventually needed to climb out of bed and open a window because the stuffiness of the room was making my headache even worse. I checked the calls I had missed: a couple from Dan, one from my parents, and several from my sister Imogen. Clearly she wasn't going to give up. The phone rang again and her picture flashed up.

'So, you're a celebrity now,' she said when I answered.

'It's only one article.'

'Vivi's Law – help our brave reporter Vivi Palmer save the lives of thousands.'

Grabbing my laptop, I checked the *Daily Post* website. There I was on the home page, forcing a smile and wearing clothes that didn't suit me. I could hardly bear to read the story. Dan had been late to the pub the evening before and now I saw why. He'd had a good go at rewriting it. In this new version I was a little battler, literally days from death and saying goodbye to the world when miraculously I was saved by the anonymous donor whose family I dreamed of thanking in person some day. My life was devoted to making Vivi's Law a reality and helping other sick kids have a future.

'I didn't write most of this,' I told Imogen. 'Shit, it's terrible.'

'Well, Mum and Dad love it; they couldn't be prouder, their little girl helping others.'

'That's good ... I guess.'

The *Daily Post* is the third most read online newspaper in the world, everybody looks at it. My dad has the app on his phone and checks for my stories now and then. I hated the thought of him reading this one.

'They forced me into being the face of the campaign,' I told Imogen. 'I'd much rather not have done it.'

'That's ridiculous. How could they force you?'

Imogen is married to a lawyer. Since having kids she hasn't gone back to work because they don't need the money.

'I can't afford to lose my job,' I pointed out. 'There's always talk of redundancies these days. And besides, the campaign might work; it may help save lives.'

'Mmm,' she sounded distracted. 'Farah, Darya, stop that now, you know the cat doesn't like it. No, she'll scratch you. What did I say? ... oh God, sorry, hope stardom goes well for you, talk soon.'

And my sister was gone.

*

I had spent the past few years talking other people into sharing their stories. Heartbreak, love, dreams; I had a talent for finding out the most interesting details and crafting them into a feature article or news piece, I prided myself on being good at it. Now I realised how exposed all those interviewees must have felt, and I felt a bit queasy.

A spike alert pinged on my phone to say my story was getting a high number of views. It was quickly followed by a message from Dan telling me to get in sharpish because *London Live* were sending a crew over to shoot an item about Vivi's Law for the evening news.

There was no avoiding this so I took a paracetamol, bought a can of Coca-Cola and a Snickers bar on the way to the tube station, and made my way to work more slowly than I should have.

Like I said, the newsroom is never noisy but an extra hush seemed to fall over the place as I walked in.

'Really great piece, amazing,' a couple of people murmured as I walked past their desks. 'I had no idea. You never said.'

There was a grin on Dan's face when he saw me. He seemed even more pleased with himself than usual, as he called me over to his desk.

'Hey Vivi, I've got some really amazing news for you. I reckon I've found him. Come and see this.'

'Found him?' I faltered.

'Yeah, here he is – look.' Dan swivelled his screen so I could see a picture of a smiling kid with a mop of dark hair and dancing brown eyes. 'Jamie McGraw, the boy who gave you his heart.'

Back on my very first day at the *Daily Post*, when I was still feeling overawed to have landed a job on a national newspaper, Dan gave me one important piece of advice – never, ever cry in the newsroom. Up till now I had managed it, although there had been a few private tearful moments in

toilet cubicles, but now, looking at the face of the dead boy on his computer screen, the tears came from nowhere. They rushed from my eyes, and Jamie with his tangle of curly black hair, big smile and ears that stuck out, almost blurred from view.

Dan stood and put an arm around my shoulder. 'Hey, it's OK,' he said. 'It's a big moment for you; this kid probably saved your life.'

'How did you find him?' I wanted to know, once I could trust myself to speak.

'The story was in our archives, so it was easy enough to find. He saved four other lives actually – one got his undamaged kidney, another got his liver, one his lungs, one his pancreas. And his corneas saved someone's eyesight. Imagine that, five people out there linked to you, almost like a family. Wouldn't it be great if ...'

'No.'

'Ah, come on, think of the campaign; there's the potential for some great pieces here.'

I didn't want to hear about the Vivi's Law campaign. I even stopped worrying about hanging on to my job. If it meant going home and living with my parents, giving up on journalism and training for some other career, I didn't care any more. My sister had been right after all. No one could force me to do anything.

'You're not meant to try and contact each other,' I told Dan. 'There are rules.'

'Right, and what are they going to do if you break those rules, take the heart off you?'

Someone had pushed a wad of tissues into my hand and I blotted my tear-soaked eyes, hating Dan, thinking I should turn round and walk away, but held there by the image now clearing on his screen, the boy who had died but whose heart was still beating.

'We need to keep up some momentum on this,' said Dan.

‘At least track down the mother, Grace McGraw. She might be pleased to know that you’re happy, healthy and successful. It may help bring her comfort.’

‘She wanted those things for her son, not me.’

‘This is an opportunity to do some good, to help other people,’ repeated Dan. ‘How can you say no?’

‘I wrote the first piece and that’s it.’ The words burst out of me. ‘Why don’t you do the TV interviews, the radio or whatever else? It’s your campaign.’

For a few moments people’s fingers stilled on their keyboards and a phone was left to ring as everyone waited to see how this would go.

‘I’ll find the woman myself then.’ Dan was flinty-faced. ‘It’s not likely to be too hard.’

Sympathetic glances were darted my way as I headed back to my own desk but no one spoke to me. Sitting there pretending to work, failing to concentrate because my stomach really was churning now, I couldn’t get that photograph out of my mind: Jamie McGraw. Who had he been? What had he liked doing? Where was life set to take him?

My desk was tucked away in a corner of the newsroom, which I always liked because no one could see my screen unless they came and stood right beside me. It meant a lot of time wasted on Facebook when I ought to have been writing. I logged onto it now and searched for Grace McGraw. Just as Dan had thought, it wasn’t too difficult to find her. In her Facebook profile shot there she was with her son, a pleasant-looking woman with a smile a lot like his. Obviously she didn’t know much about privacy settings. There were sad little posts about grief, more photographs of Jamie, even a short video clip that was difficult for me to watch. I really wanted to contact her but not for any story or campaign, only to say thank you and that he looked lovely, her son.

I shut down my computer, picked up my bag and left without bothering to look back. Dan would be furious but

I wasn't about to waste time worrying about it. Walking up to Kensington Gardens, I sat on a bench beside the Round Pond and watched the swans and geese for a while. It was sunny and the park was busy. Mums wheeled their toddlers past in buggies, people walked dogs, couples smooched. They were normal people and for them it was an ordinary sort of day. I felt envious of them all.

There was always a chance Dan might be wrong about Jamie but I didn't think so. The dates of his death and my new heart transplant matched and so did the few details I had been given. Besides seeing his cheeky, smiling face I just had a feeling. This boy was dead and I had his heart.

12 April 2017

Donate For Life: Support our campaign for Vivi's Law

Your chance to help make a difference.

By Daily Post senior editor Dan Parker

Today Vivi Palmer is one of our talented reporters but as a child every day was a struggle to survive because her heart was failing.

Vivi was 19 and running out of time, when the miracle of a heart transplant changed everything. We believe it was this boy, Jamie McGraw, who gave her the precious gift of life. After Jamie's tragic death in a road accident, his heartbroken mother agreed to donate his organs. He also helped four other people survive and his corneas saved someone's eyesight.

Forever grateful for her second chance, Vivi is now battling to help other sick people get that same opportunity. She needs your help to change the law and make sure no more healthy organs go to waste. Sign up to our life-saving campaign and hear more from Vivi about why it's so important at donateforlife.co.uk.

This is your chance to make a difference.

Vivi

I had spent all afternoon composing a message to Grace McGraw, deleting and rewriting it several times. This time I did picture the woman who would read my words. I imagined her surprised to hear from me but hopefully pleased to know her son was being remembered. Perhaps she had a husband she would show my message to, or Jamie might have had brothers and sisters. From her Facebook page I could tell she lived in Oxford but Grace had been sparing with other personal details.

Each day it was my job to sit in front of an empty screen and fill it with words. Even though this was only a few lines, getting them exactly right was the hardest thing. Several times I came close to pressing send, then changed my mind, ran my eyes over the message and tinkered with it again, altering a word here and there.

Dear Grace, I hope you don't mind me contacting you. I saw a photograph of your son Jamie and I'm convinced it is his heart that is keeping me alive. Seeing his face has made me think about him so much. He looks like such a gorgeous boy. I'm very sorry you lost him and extremely grateful you agreed to donate. All the other recipients must feel the same way. You saved our lives and I wish I could do something as huge and meaningful for you, but it seems I can only say thank you again even if it's not enough. Please know, I will always be thinking of Jamie and you – Vivi Palmer.

It took hours for me to get that far. I started out typing on my phone while sitting on a bench in Kensington Gardens. After a while I moved to a nearby café where I sipped tea and frowned out at a view of the Italian fountains. Finally, I went home, lay on my bed, switched to my laptop, and tried again. Nothing I said seemed to be enough. Disheartened, I considered deleting the whole thing.

Taking a break, I went to the fridge, looking for something I could call supper. There wasn't much to be found, which is par for the course, unless my mother has recently sent a healthy food parcel, so I opened a can of chilli beans and microwaved a potato.

Sitting down to eat, I flipped open my laptop again to check the *Daily Post* headlines and make sure I hadn't missed anything big. That was when I found it, Dan's follow up story for the Vivi's Law campaign. I wasn't surprised to see he had gone ahead and written one without checking in with me first; if anything, I had expected that. It was the photograph at the head of the page that shocked me – Jamie with his curly hair and happy smile, the same shot that had been used on the original piece Dan had shown me that morning. He had even gone ahead and used his name. I couldn't believe it.

I was too agitated to sit still, never mind eat, but pacing back and forth across the short stretch of worn carpet in my bedsit wasn't especially calming. I was furious at Dan and almost as cross with myself for not predicting he would do this. All he cared about were headlines and the number of views on a story. I knew that and it had always kind of bothered me, but now I was the headline, and Jamie was the story, I felt hot and angry.

All that time spent crafting a warm and friendly message to Grace, trying to get the tone exactly right, and there was no point in sending it now. Instead I would have to find some way to apologise.

My head was starting to ache again. Scraping my dinner

into the bin, I dropped the dirty plate into the sink, lay down on my bed, and wondered if there were any words I could come up with to fix this. I fell asleep still thinking about it.

In the morning I tried telling myself it had been a short news piece and there was every chance Jamie's mother hadn't seen it. She might be a *Guardian* reader who wouldn't dream of looking at the *Daily Post* website. And even if someone had drawn her attention to the story, perhaps she supported the campaign for Vivi's Law, maybe she wouldn't mind too much. By the time I got to work, I had almost convinced myself that naming Jamie hadn't been such a big deal after all. I wanted to believe it. The last thing I needed was a showdown with Dan about it in front of everyone, so I decided to stay quiet for the time being.

Dan too was playing it cool. He didn't mention his Vivi's Law piece or the fact I had stormed out of the office the previous day. Instead he assigned me a couple more stories – an internet romance gone wrong and a guide to having a better night's sleep – and left me to get on with them. It was run-of-the-mill stuff and not especially taxing. Still it was a struggle to concentrate on anything. I had always loved seeing my name in print, attached to the pieces I wrote, and I liked the idea of people reading my words. But I had never spared much thought for the impact those words might have; now it was all I could think of.

By mid-afternoon, I wasn't getting very far. The pace of work is fast at the *Daily Post* and I couldn't afford to slack off for long but, if I coasted through a few more hours without anyone noticing, hopefully I could go home and then be back on form in the morning.

The phone on my desk rang and I picked it up with the usual, 'Hello, Vivi speaking'. All I could hear at the other end was the sound of someone breathing. Assuming it was a nuisance call, I hung up. It happened twice more and the

second time a woman's voice said a faint 'hello' then I heard a click as she disconnected.

By then it was getting late. Dan had left for the pub and I was giving it a few last minutes before I escaped too, when my phone rang again. This time I picked it up and didn't say anything at all.

'Hello?' It was the same voice as before. 'Is that Vivi Palmer?'

'It is,' I said, levelly.

'Your trashy newspaper used my son's picture without my permission.'

'What?' My hand tightened around the phone as I realised who I was talking to. 'Is this Grace McGraw?'

'I want to make an official complaint.' Her voice was shrill. 'Surely you're not allowed to do that. It isn't ethical.'

'I'm so sorry,' I began, but she wasn't interested in an apology.

'And now this Dan Parker keeps sending me messages,' she continued, angrily. 'He wants to interview me, make me join the campaign you're running. Well I'm not interested. There's no way I want to be a part of anything like that. I'm a very private person.'

'I'm so sorry,' I repeated, doing my best to sound calming when my own voice was shaky. 'I'll tell him that, and hopefully he'll stop chasing you.'

'I don't even support Vivi's Law. Actually, I think it's a bad idea. It's not all about the people crying out for organs, you know. What about us, the ones who have lost somebody we love.'

'I sent you a letter, after the transplant,' I told her, when she gave me a chance to speak.

'Yes, I got that letter. You hoped the fact I had saved your life was helping me through my loss. Just so you know, it wasn't.'

She sounded bitter and sad, and I understood why she

must be, but it made me feel guilty, like I had stolen her son's life from her, taken everything and left Grace with nothing at all. I took a deep breath, touched my hand to my chest, and searched my mind for the best words.

'I was so young,' I told her. 'I didn't know what to write, how to explain how I felt. But when I said sorry ... and when I said thank you ... those weren't just words. They came from my heart, from Jamie's heart.'

There was a moment of silence then Grace said in a softer, quieter voice. 'It's inside you beating right now, as we're talking.'

'Yes, it is.'

'A little piece of my little boy.'

'It's keeping me alive, every single day, it's given me seven years I wouldn't have had otherwise.'

'Have you done good things with those years, Vivi? Because Jamie would have, I'm sure of that.'

'I've tried,' I told her, although I couldn't come up with anything I had achieved that seemed impressive enough to share with her.

'Have you had any children?' Grace wanted to know.

'No, but I have two lovely nieces who I adore. Farah is four and Darya is almost three.'

'Are you married?'

'Still single ... just dating.'

'I suppose you're still young. You've got plenty of time ahead of you. Years and years.'

'Hopefully,' I said, because I struggle to think that way, having grown up knowing my life could be cut short at any moment.

Grace must have heard the doubt in my voice. 'More time though, enough to achieve whatever you want, to have all the things you've dreamed of.'

'More time,' I agreed. 'Thanks to you and Jamie.'

She breathed a soft sigh. 'I'm sorry if I was rude earlier. I

got such a shock when I saw that article with Jamie in it. It was the last thing I expected.'

'Grace, I'm the one who needs to say sorry. I had no idea my boss was going to use his name and picture, otherwise I'd have tried to stop him if I could.'

'Ah well, it's happened and no harm done, I suppose. And at least it was a nice photo, the one they used.'

Now she was calmer, Grace's voice was low-pitched and pleasant. I put the timbre of it together with the photographs I had seen of her on Facebook and tried to imagine what sort of woman the mother of my donor was.

'Jamie looks like such a lovely boy,' I told her.

'Oh, he was. They all used to say so, his teachers, the parents of his friends, everybody we met; they'd tell me how lucky I was to have such a great kid. And then my luck ran out, didn't it?'

'Oh Grace ...'

'What I'd like is to be close to him again.' Grace said it very softly. 'Close to his heart.'

I wasn't sure what she meant, not at first, then it dawned on me. 'You're saying that you want us to meet?'

'Yes ... I could come up to London any time that works for you.'

The thought was unnerving. 'When were you thinking?'

'The sooner the better; do you get a lunch break?'

'Most days.'

'Tomorrow then?' Grace sounded eager now. 'Or are you too busy? Would another day be more convenient?'

How could I be too busy to meet the woman who had saved my life? As if anything else I had planned to do with my time was more important than that.

'Tomorrow should be fine,' I agreed, apprehensively.

Where would we do this? It needed to be somewhere informal, not too intimate, an easy spot to come and go from, full of other people who wouldn't pay us any attention. My

mind went blank until suddenly it was obvious.

‘What about McDonald’s on Kensington High Street, say at 1 p.m.?’ I suggested

‘Yes, McDonald’s; good idea,’ she agreed. ‘I’m sure I’ll recognise you from your photo in the newspaper.’

‘Right, well, I’ll see you then,’ I told her, and my stomach churned at the thought of it.

Once it was arranged I started to feel better about our meeting, excited and curious too. I called my sister Imogen as I was walking back to the office and heard the usual soundtrack of her family in the background – a child yelling, Peppa Pig playing, the clinking as a dishwasher was emptied and plates were stacked.

‘I need to talk,’ I told her.

‘What? Sorry? Hold on a minute.’ On the other end of the line everything went quiet. ‘I’ve shut myself in the bathroom; it’s the only place I get any peace. Now what did you say?’

‘I’m meeting her, the mother of the kid who was my heart donor.’

‘Bloody hell.’

‘I know.’

I described what had happened and Imogen wasn’t distracted once, not even by the unmistakable sound of a small child screeching from somewhere beyond the closed door.

‘How do you feel about this? Is it going to be weird?’ she asked.

‘Yes, probably.’

‘Do you need me to come with you? I’ll find a babysitter.’

‘Thanks, but I think that might be weirder.’

‘Call me straight afterwards then, OK?’

‘Shouldn’t you go and see what’s going on out there?’ The screaming was definitely louder.

Imogen sighed. ‘Most likely it’s only someone hitting their sister over the head with Lego bricks ... but yeah, I’d better check. Hope it goes OK. I’ll be thinking of you.’

*

Back at work I had another distracted afternoon. Every time I thought about my donor's mother, adrenalin surged through my body and my heart seemed to beat faster. In my head I kept running through the questions I wanted to ask her, the things it would be appropriate for me to say. I don't remember ever being so nervous about meeting somebody.

That evening instead of going home I walked to Selfridges and spent too much money on a new outfit. It looked exactly the same as everything else I own – fitted black top, slim-leg trousers. I have variations of that outfit for summer, winter, daywear and evenings. But it would make me feel good to dress in something new and I wanted to give myself every chance to make the right impression.

Grace McGraw had to like the girl who had got her son's heart.