

Commemorative Statement about the late Malgorzata Elzbieta Breczko-Nowak – 1977 to 2019

I first meet Gosia in late 2001. We remained friends until her death in 2019.

When I first met Gosia she was someone who was brimming with confidence and had a passion for life. She could walk in to a room and every head would turn. She was glamorous and passionate. Passionate about literature and old films. Her idol was Marylyn Monroe. She also loved to cook and took great pleasure in seeing people enjoy what she had created.

Behind this passion though, there always appeared a dark shadow, one that she would keep hidden and would fight tooth and nail to keep suppressed. Through our 18 year friendship I would at times attempt to discuss this with her, but it was completely taboo. There was very much a fight or flight reaction that could be set off by the smallest thing. This was especially noticeable when the subject of her childhood would come up.

After many years of friendship she finally opened up about the darkness that cast this shadow. She grew up in Poland in the grip of socialist rule, the country dominated by Russia and the Catholic Church. Her childhood was austere with the poverty that went with that time, but appeared happy enough. She was the child of a single mum. She never knew her genetic father.

When she was 15 her mother disappeared from her life and she went to live with other members of the family who were reluctant to take her in. Finally she moved in with her grandpa, a man she loved , she felt safe with him, she felt protected. I don't know much about him, but he was clearly a tough man. He survived as a political prisoner in Auschwitz and later lost a leg in a farming accident.

Gosia would recall stories of him taking her fishing and cooking their catch over a fire; she loved a simple life. Though she said he was "bossy", she clearly had a deep affection for the man. Sadly he passed away when she was 17 and she was on her own and again she felt let down by life. This is a theme that would reverberate through her life to the very end. A theme that in my opinion the MH teams she saw through the years failed to comprehend or examine.

Gosia and I had a friendship that lasted many years; we are both opinionated people and at times would disagree, but agreeably. We both loved food, so we would often share a meal together and a bottle of wine. But around 2008/2009 I noticed that we were not having one bottle of wine, it would be two, with her drinking most of it.

In 2010 she asked if you could stay with me for a few days, as her relationship had ended and she needed somewhere to stay while she got back on her feet. I agreed as I was due to be traveling for a couple of months and was happy to have someone look after my property. It was upon my return that her reliance on alcohol was evident, as was her deteriorating mental health. She had run out of money and had no where to go. She had no family, at least none she trusted. And it's amazing how quickly friends can vanish when they see you have mental health and addiction issues.

The next few months would be the start of the steepest learning curve of my life. I was immersed in the world of addiction and a mental health collapse. I would also be exposed to a health system that is as best not fit for purpose and at worst, abuses its power and is callous and cruel.

Over the following 6 years, Gosia lived in various locations and attempted to engage with various social services and charities. But due to the combination of anxiety, addiction and depression, she found herself made homeless on various occasions. Through this period I did my best to support her emotionally and financially. As well as keeping my home open for when she was made homeless.

From 2013 to 2016 she lived in Harlow. At this point I had moved to Chelmsford. Harlow had limited options for her to work, so she had been picking up jobs in Chelmsford. She would stay in my spare room Monday to Friday while she worked and for the first time in years, I saw a smile on her face again. I have a lovely memory of her cycling off to her days work and thinking to myself - "we have got there. Finally we are there". When she was made homeless for the final time in November 2016, I had no hesitation in suggesting she move in to my flat. It was big and spacious, she had her own room and freedom. I was just so glad to see her happy.

But things did not last. By mid-2017 the wheels had come off the wagon; they would never go back on again. In early 2018 she did a detox and rehab funded by a charity called Action on Addiction. HRH The Princess of Wales is a patron of the charity and while Gosia was in attendance, Katherine visited the centre. [personal/sensitive]

Addiction is a nasty and unforgiven disease. Society does little to recognise its devastating effects. The one thing I have learnt is; no one chooses to be an addict, it is not a life style that people think "yeah, that's a great way for me to live". It is a disease, yet it is very rarely treated as one. Not once did I hear a health care professional ask her "what are you blocking out with alcohol" – not once.

Gosia had 2 stints in the psychiatric ward at Colchester Hospital. First in December 2018 and for a second time at the end of May 2019 for 10 days. She was released on the 5th June and brought by ambulance to my property. I was not informed that she was being discharged to my care. I was not at any stage given a care plan. I was not given a diagnosis. And most worrying; I was not given a medication plan at any stage!

People had time and again failed her, they had mistreated her and walked away when she need help. The mental health "care coordinators" that she engaged with in both Brentwood and Chelmsford did nothing to create a bridge to her trust. Her greatest distrust was towards men, in fact she would often say "men are pigs". She trusted just two men; her grandpa and myself.

Gosia had an ingrained distrust of people; she had been failed by those that should have protected her time and again throughout her life. I believe the MH team in Chelmsford created heightened levels of anxiety in Gosia, by their action towards our friendship and I believe this was a major factor in her rapid mental health decline. [personal/sensitive]

At 2pm on 26th June 2019, Gosia had her final meeting with her care coordinator. She was accompanied in this meeting by a long-time friend. Her friend's name was Melanie Ferguson. Ms Ferguson was a registered nurse visiting from Australia. Ms Ferguson has set out in a letter that is in our counsel possession, the failings she witnessed first-hand, in that meeting. I hope that the inquiry has the time to view this.

It's impossible to know what Gosia was thinking. I can only recount the facts. She left that meeting at 3pm, sourced a large amount of alcohol and was dead within 17 hours.

How This Has Affected Me Personally

Throughout the 9 years I looked after Gosia, I always believed that I was coping. I have broad shoulders and I have a capacity to deal with stress and the rocks that life throws at you. However when she died, I realised that I had been gravely mistaken. I never sort help during these years: I should have. I thought I could deal with it all: I couldn't.

Our relationship was a complex one, but it was not until I started to write a eulogy for her funeral and I wished to convey what she meant to me, that I came to this conclusion. She had become the sister I never had, but in many ways also the child I never had. As her mental health deteriorated, she would often become childlike and watch cartoons for hours on end. It was as if she was retreating to a safe place. A place that existed before the world ripped out her innocence.

In the five years that have passed since her death, I have relived that moment time and time again. I've relived the 9 years of looking after her time and time again. I sort initial therapy for grief, which helped me through a period of real and visceral pain. However it was decided that my symptoms are more complex and I am receiving ongoing therapy for PTSD. PTSD for the trauma of finding her dead. But also the trauma of the 9 years of caring and battling an inflexible system.

9 years of seeking help from a broken system that seems more interested in protecting itself than helping those that it's set up to help and protect. 9 years of being told that I'm an enabler when all I'm doing is my best to help someone I care for. 9 years of watching someone lose their grip on life and not wanting to be here anymore. 9 years of watching someone being failed time after time by those that are responsible for her care. 9 years of feeling helpless when you come up against the power of the establishment and their desire to protect themselves.

At times I still get emotional over these events, but mainly I just feel numb.

In an attempt to heal some of the pain, last year I undertook a 16,500 mile motorcycle ride to the borders of Afghanistan and back to the UK, to raise money and awareness for MH charities. I raised around £10,000 across three charities. Money that I know will help others that are suffering the same as she did. The power of helping people, people you will never know or meet, is amazingly cathartic.

