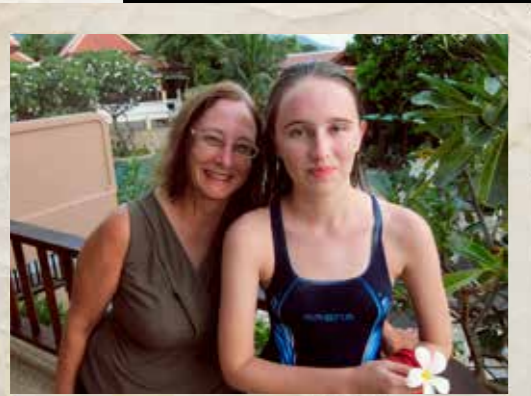




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The morning she lost her only child to suicide, Linda Collins woke up basking in the aftermath of a blissful dream. Her daughter, Victoria Skye Pringle McLeod, was spinning through the universe. The sky around the 17-year-old shone bright blue, like a kingfisher's wing. Her hair was long and golden, her clothes filled with light as she rose above the ground. She stretched out a hand to Linda, who tried to catch hold, but she rapidly soared too high and too far away.

"She was looking upward, smiling. She was so happy. That is what made me, in turn, euphoric. For her, that she felt that way," the bereft mother painfully recalls. "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 – her voice in my head. Disconcerting."

It was 6.45am on April 14, 2014. For Linda and her husband, Malcolm McLeod, nothing would ever be the same. Although they didn't yet know it, their world had been smashed from its foundations – just as their New Zealand home had been destroyed by the Christchurch earthquake three years before.

All it took was one small irreversible act earlier that day and their "wonderful, funny, glorious child" was gone. Seeing her body hours later, Linda came to a shattering realisation:

"The daughter I thought I knew was a complete stranger," she writes in her intimate account of grief

and recovery, *Loss Adjustment*. A loving and perceptive mother, Linda still had no prior warning, no inkling of the depth of Victoria's disturbance. But as a bereavement counsellor later told her, "You see what you want to see."

A journalist all her adult life, Linda had too many questions and pitifully few answers. Crushed, heartsick and searching for some reason to stay alive, she started examining the past for clues. Victoria had left no suicide note, so the 61-year-old author was forced to rely on other people's recollections to fill in missing pieces of the puzzle, her own memory fractured by shock and mourning.

The Monday her daughter died marked the start of a new school term and dreaded pre-HSC exam results were due. One explanation, perhaps? Like many other teenagers, Victoria struggled with social anxiety and was uncertain about her sexual identity. Could that be a motive?

Never one of the "cool kids", the tall, slim, quirky Year 12 student nonetheless had plenty of friends. She sang in the school choir, cherished her clunky Dr Martens boots, had an intense relationship with her hair straightener, loved horseriding and curled up for lazy cuddles with her pet cats, Mittens and Angelina, messaging on her ever-present mobile, silver bracelets jingling.

To her tolerant, supportive parents, everything seemed pretty typical. The evening before her suicide, Victoria dutifully laid out her uniform and retrieved a pair of neglected school socks from the grungy, teenage no-go →

The long goodbye

Linda Collins will never stop loving and grieving her daughter, Victoria, who took her own life six years ago. But in this intimate conversation with her friend, *The Weekly's* **Jenny Brown**, Linda explains that coming to understand Victoria's struggles and strengths has helped her find some peace of mind.

zone beneath her bed. There was a spirited tea-towel fight, drying up with her father after dinner. And then, with brutal suddenness, nothing was normal any more.

“How do you lose a daughter, and all your past as you understood it, and all your little hopes for the future? In terms of time, very easily, as it happens,” says Linda, whose acclaimed memoir will be released in Australia following World Mental Health Day, which is on October 10. “One minute you are a family sitting on a sofa eating spaghetti bolognese while watching a food program on TV. Next morning there are just two of you slumped there crying.”

At first Linda and photographer Malcolm, 65, a Kiwi couple who met in Sydney before moving to Singapore almost three decades ago, felt nothing but self-recrimination. How could they have been so blind to their daughter’s despair? Had the expatriate experience contributed to her sense of alienation? Was there some genetic link to the suicide of Linda’s grandfather, who took his own life after being diagnosed with a brain tumour?

“It was easiest just to blame ourselves for everything,” says Linda, a senior copy editor at respected English-language newspaper *The Straits Times*, “to loathe our ineptitude as parents, to hate our very selves.”

Stress piled upon anguish. Linda and Malcolm felt as though Victoria’s expensive private school cold-shouldered them, while they were simultaneously embroiled in a long-running, David and Goliath insurance claim over the wrecked Christchurch house they no longer even cared about. Malcolm buried himself in work as deputy photo editor of *The Straits Times*, and racked up a \$15,000 credit card debt on online spending sprees. Linda splurged on fashion impulse buys and, in a quest for meaning, ricocheted between religions, from the Catholicism of her childhood to evangelical Christianity. Seeking “a whiff of hope,” they applied to adopt

“It was easiest just to blame ourselves for everything.”

a child, looked into fostering and decided, after more than 25 years together, to get married.

Nine months after Victoria’s death, investigators finally returned her laptop, phone, shoes and clothes in a tattered cardboard box. The computer’s files, according to a wearily dismissive police inspector, contained nothing of any interest.

Yet for Linda, reading her daughter’s online journal made Victoria come alive again. It was like hearing her voice, in written form. Its many entries, written over the troubled teenager’s last four months, exposed a private world of dark thoughts, attempts at self-harm and purging, despair over her low exam results and a tendency to idealise pretty, popular peers. The poems, short stories, lists and jottings also revealed Victoria’s intelligent, almost clinical understanding of suicide and a “touching, heartfelt awareness” of her own destructive thought patterns. She was, according to Linda’s grief counsellor, “the most sane person writing about mental problems”.

On March 30, 2014, two weeks before her death, Victoria noted: “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.”

I first encountered Linda back in the 1980s, when we worked on one of Sydney’s old evening newspapers, *The Sun*. From Auckland’s blue-collar



western suburbs, she was, in her own words, “a naive young Kiwi fresh off the boat”, while I was a fairly recent arrival from the UK. Strangers in the big city, we bonded over a mutual love of words, theatre, loud accessories, current events, writer Katherine Mansfield and bright red lipstick. Innately shy, we hid our lack of confidence beneath an air of casual sophistication – or so we hoped – but had a tendency to clumsiness, especially after a few drinks. Luckily, a shared sense of the ridiculous helped us laugh at ourselves, while poking fun at the manic craziness of a male-dominated tabloid newsroom.

Our paths diverged when Linda set off for fresh adventures in London,

but we stayed in touch sporadically down the years. Viewing her Singapore life through the unreliable prism of social media, I sometimes felt jealous, not realising the reality was a cramped condominium and a constant battle to pay international school fees on local wages. From the outside, it just looked exotic.

Learning of Victoria’s death was heart-stopping, unbelievable, inexplicable. I could not imagine how my vulnerable, kind friend would be able to endure such tragedy. Incredibly, her daughter’s journal proved the “bittersweet” saving grace.

At first, reading descriptions of the depth of Victoria’s anguish was “a new devastation”, but it was also healing. Linda and Malcolm were able to see, in black and white, exactly how much their daughter loved them, how little she held them responsible for her difficulties. Like an absolution, it helped them find a way out of their cycle of self-blame.

“It was such a relief,” Linda smiles ruefully, aware that must sound absurd. “Nothing bad had happened to her, she wasn’t holding some deep, dark secret. It turned out she had a

really good understanding of her brain and the world we live in and her shortcomings within it – not to be able to do schoolwork very well, not to be able to fit in socially.”

Too late, Linda discovered the true extent of her daughter’s problems only once she volunteered to teach English at a local children’s home and compared her to other kids. Studying for a one-year diploma in learning disorders management reinforced the lesson. Victoria had been diagnosed with ADHD many

years before, but her mother now realised she may have been showing signs of autism and obsessive compulsive disorder as well.

On one hand, it was hard to understand how Victoria’s school had missed or ignored the pointers that something was very wrong.

Linda found solace in Victoria’s journal. Left: Victoria and Malcolm at New Zealand’s Earthquake Rocks. Below and bottom left: Victoria loved horseriding and fashion.

On the other, Linda could see how cleverly her daughter – like many girls with ADHD or autism – had managed to mask her functional predicament, watching other children and copying their behaviours as best she could.

Recent groundbreaking research in Sweden reveals this “camouflaging” is particularly common, and damaging, among women on the spectrum. When combined with ADHD, the risk of suicidal ideation or attempted suicide is 10 times higher than in the general female population. Horrifyingly, the statistics are even worse among those who take their own lives.

“Vic had these deep-seated issues of attention disorder, dreaminess, an inability to get organised to do stuff,” says Linda. “She never even learned to tie her shoelaces properly! And the isolation these things cause, because you misread social cues and other kids immediately sense this and either exclude you or make fun of you ... It must wear you down, knowing you will always face the life ahead being a misfit, when all you want to do is belong. And if you’re sensitive, it will eat away at you.”

Fixated on the idea of suicide, seeing no other way out, Victoria specifically wrote that she didn’t want anyone else to go through the same torture. She wanted her words to be shared, hoping they might help.

Linda had never dreamed of writing a book. Yet, on a month-long retreat, she was told to ask herself where her

talents lay and listen to her inner voice. She laughs: “I’d always thought my talent was paying the bills, editing newspaper stories, nothing creative at all. I suspect there are a lot of women like me, too busy to have any bleeding inner voice! There’s your job, housework, get your kid to do her assignments, →



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Real life

"It was like I was a conduit. I wasn't writing it for myself."



Above: The proud parents with their beautiful 15-year-old daughter at a school function in Singapore. Left: Linda had no inkling of Victoria's deep despair.

catch the school bus, make sure everyone is fed – and I'm someone who's not very good at organising stuff, you know. But I started to wonder: What if I did have an inner voice and I stopped to listen to it?

"That's when some deep intuition came to me in the form of Victoria's voice, or what I imagined to be Victoria's voice, or a projection of my longing to hear Victoria's voice, which said, 'Mum, Google creative writing, New Zealand'."

So she did, and up popped details of an MA in Creative Writing offered by the International Institute of Modern Letters at (aptly named) Victoria University in Wellington. Asked to provide a 5000-word sample of her work overnight, Linda sat down and the description of her daughter's noisy, crowded, three-day, open-coffin Singaporean wake poured out of her.

"It was like I was a conduit," she marvels. "I wasn't really writing it myself." The following day she was awarded a place on the course, and *Loss Adjustment* was the eventual result. "To be honest, I never expected it to be published. It just seemed to

happen of its own accord. Despite me, the book wanted to find its way in the world."

In Singapore, where attempting suicide remained a crime until January this year, Linda's emotional chronicle created a sensation. Its unflinchingly honest examination of mental health issues, social inequality, sexual identity and spiritual struggle has just earned a rare honorary mention at the Singapore Book Awards, also striking a chord with parents facing similar heartbreaks, who turn up in droves at her book signings and mental health forums.

"There are a lot of us out there, silent grievers for lost children," she says. "We operate as ghosts among the living. All these people want to tell me their dark secret, their story, which can be quite overwhelming. Luckily, I found a very good psychologist who told me that all I had to do was to bear witness and listen. So that's what I did and what I continue to do if I am at an event. Somehow *Loss Adjustment* has really helped to open up the conversation about suicide, which is a taboo topic in Asian society."

Victoria's poignant, lucid journals were also examined by developmental psychologist Jesse Bering for his book *A Very Human Ending: How Suicide Haunts Our Species*, which has been the subject of articles in both *The Guardian* and *The New Yorker*.

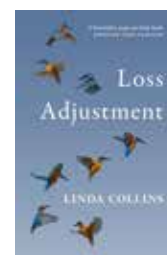
Her generous, desperate warning resonates beyond the grave. It's a posthumous gift that keeps on giving. Not least to Linda, who has just won an International Excellence scholarship to study for a Poetry MA at Britain's University of East Anglia.

Victoria's ashes lie peacefully shaded by aged pine trees in Oamaru Cemetery, NZ, just a stroll from her beloved paternal grandmother, Sheila McLeod. Her parents, who go to visit when they can, have purchased grave plots either side. Sometimes, Linda sees Malcolm kiss their daughter's headstone and mutter, "Stupid girl".

The McLeods' rebuilt Christchurch house has been sold, the contested insurance claim finally settled. Life goes on, sadder and perhaps wiser, without Victoria Skye Pringle McLeod.

"Part of me died, and my child did die, and my reason for living is gone, torn away at her own hand," says Linda, who sees *Loss Adjustment* as a means of honouring Victoria's memory. "Grief can't be cured although it can be diverted for a while. It is not an illness. Grief is an extension of love, and if you loved your child, you can't stop loving them and therefore you can't stop grieving.

"But writing is a good distraction. Looking at a sentence and trying to improve it, I feel that Victoria is by my side. It's satisfying and gives me some kind of purpose." **AWW**



Loss Adjustment by Linda Collins, Awa Press, is available from October 20.

If this article has raised concerns, you can reach Lifeline on 13 11 14, Kids' Helpline on 1800 55 1800, Headspace on 1800 650 890, or Beyond Blue at beyondblue.org.au