

Dear Luise

A story of power and powerlessness in Danish psychiatry

Dorrit Cato Christensen

Foreword

This book is about my beloved daughter Luise, who died tragically in 2005 from overmedication while being treated in the Danish mental health system. Her untimely death received wide media coverage, which prompted other people to come forward with similar stories.

In recent years I have been active in the public debate on this subject, in associations formed by families and friends of victims, and as a member of Copenhagen City Council's discussion group on psychiatric issues. Through these interactions I have learned of many other tragic fates, evidence that Luise's sorrowful history is far from unique.

For years I have systematically written everything down, so I can provide exact dates and content from meetings and conversations, though there are several medical chart entries referenced here that I first became aware of after Luise's death.

My goal is to draw attention to the many patients diagnosed as schizophrenic who, like Luise, drag themselves through life in the 'neuroleptic straitjacket' of heavy medication. This condition can produce irreversible side-effects and, at worst, lead to death. Such patients are a mere shadow group that appears in statistics under the category of 'chronic schizophrenics'. These sufferers are often left to their own devices and are paid little mind by either case workers or politicians. We need to take a serious look at the treatment they receive.

I am not against treatment with psychoactive drugs, I am simply trying to raise awareness of how destructive psychiatric treatment becomes when it is inadequate, neglects timely care standards, and when the patient is viewed as a mere diagnostic case rather than a person with resources.

It was hard for me to witness what I saw as the wrong treatment for Luise and still not be heard by the people responsible. So in desperation I started to write. The following lines are the introduction

to the book I started to write to Luise in 2002:

Dear Luise. Once that strong antipsychotic medicine wears off, I hope we can sit and talk about what I've written down and that you might add your important comments on how you've experienced the many years you've spent in the mental health system...

At that point I had no idea how bad things would get, and that Luise would never read a word of what I had started to write. I still want to disseminate what I originally wrote. But since the most important element – Luise's own words – is missing, I have had to change much of the original formulation.

I shall do my utmost to faithfully reflect Luise's feelings and thoughts in what was planned as a sort of conversation between Luise and me but which has now become a document about Luise written by me. Luise herself never got the chance to contribute.

This is a highly personal, painful story about my darling daughter with the beautiful mind, but the reports I include on the Danish treatment system apply to a very large group of mentally ill patients who are subject to the same inhuman treatment as Luise. For them, disempowerment, overmedication, and coercion – especially hidden – are a big part of everyday life.

This is about a treatment system that doesn't see the mentally ill as human beings but as diagnoses. It is about all the families and friends who wage a sad and hopeless struggle to get a decent quality of life for a loved one.

Luise often asked me: 'Mom, can't you tell the world how we're being treated?'

Luise's story is a personal portrayal, but I have chosen to cast it in a wider context.

Writing this book has been a somber task, as I cannot fully express my feelings of impotence and grief. Words turn to stone when I try to describe what she and others like her have been subjected to. You have to feel it in your own body.

But Luise's story is significant, even though it is heartbreaking. If I don't tell the story, it would be as though it never happened.

It *did* happen, and these untimely, unnatural deaths will continue as long as politicians and ordinary people turn a blind eye.

I hope this book promotes reflection on this human rights issue.

A big thank you to all who have supported me with advice and encouragement through this difficult

process.

Apart from friends and acquaintances, the characters in this book have been given different names.

Dorrit Cato Christensen