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'I know Tom would not want to live. He had lost his life'

Mother who killed brain-damaged son with heroin injection told Old Bailey she was 'releasing' him

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Thomas Inglis, who was brain-damaged after falling from a moving ambulance.

Photograph: PA

As far as Frances Inglis is concerned, her son's life ended in the early hours of 7 July 2007 when he fell from a moving ambulance after a night out.

The head injuries Tom Inglis sustained when his skull hit the tarmac on Rush Green Road, in Romford, Essex, were so serious that she believed the then 21-year-old would never again lead a normal life.

So when she injected him with a lethal dose of heroin as he lay in a care home 16 months later, mute and in need of 24-hour care, she did not feel that she was murdering him.

She was "releasing" him, she told the Old Bailey. He had not uttered a word since the accident, nor communicated in any way beyond squeezing her hand, but Inglis felt certain that he was in constant pain and would have no wish to continue living like that.

"I know Tom – no way would he have wanted to live totally dependent," she said. "I can remember saying I felt I would rather he go to heaven than to hell on earth. I know Tom would not want to live. He had lost his life."

For Inglis, a mother of three from Dagenham, east London, the final straw came around six months after her son's accident, when she was told that the only way for him to be allowed to die legally would be to apply to the high court to withhold his food and water.

"I couldn't bear the thought of Tom dying of thirst or hunger," she said. "To me, that would be so cruel, so cruel. To die slowly like that would be horrible."

Instead, the 57-year-old decided to end his misery in the most painless way she could engineer. She decided to give him an overdose and set about sourcing a drug she believed could kill him quickly and peacefully.

She knew how to give injections because she was studying to be a nurse, but had no idea where to buy heroin. Desperate, she asked a neighbour for help.

The neighbour called police, and Inglis told officers who arrived that she was not thinking straight – but she was planning her next move.

"I asked myself what I would want," she told the court. "I would want someone to love me enough to help me die. That's why I thought heroin – a painless, peaceful death."

Not knowing any dealers, she started hanging around places where she knew drugs were sold – outside Barking station, outside the job centre and needle exchanges – until she managed to buy the two grams her internet research told her would be enough to kill.

She stole syringes from the hospital and then waited for a moment to inject her son. For two days, she arrived at the hospital with a handbag packed with heroin and needles, but she was never left alone with him.

But on 4 September 2007, she seized her chance when the ward was short-staffed. She described to the court how she tried to put her son "at peace".

"I held him, told him I loved him, told him everything was going to be fine, took the syringe, and I injected him in his thigh and his arm," she said.

"Then he went to sleep. He was at peace. I stayed with him. Then he died, he was at peace."

But hospital staff discovered Tom soon enough to bring him back to life. When Inglis returned to the hospital, she was distraught to find her plan had failed. It was as though the doctors "had put a knife in me", she told the jury, adding: "It was the cruellest thing anyone could do."

Tom's father and older brother, both called Alex, were immediately suspicious, and asked hospital staff to conduct toxicology reports to see whether there was a "anything unusual" in Tom's bloodstream. When heroin was detected, his mother was arrested on suspicion of murder.

As part of her bail conditions, Inglis was not allowed to visit Tom. But she was determined, she told the court, to try again, saying: "I wanted to make sure that this time he was left at peace and I wouldn't let any one resuscitate him again."

For 10 months while awaiting trial, she obeyed the court and stayed away from the Gardens nursing home in Sawbridgeworth, Hertfordshire, where her son was being treated.

But in September 2008, she told her family that her bail conditions had been relaxed and started visiting the Gardens, pretending to be one of her sisters or a family friend.

On November 21 2008, she signed in as Mrs Atkins and made her way to Tom's room. She barricaded them both inside by pushing the oxygen trolley in front of the door, and then injected him with heroin again.

This time, she sat with him for half an hour to make sure he was dead.

When nursing staff came on the scene, she refused to let them in. She told them she was HIV positive and threatened to spit on them if they came near.

When police searched her home the next day, they found detailed instructions for paying the bills and feeding the family dog, Max. She knew she would be arrested, she told the court, and wanted to leave her affairs in order.

Asked whether she was guilty of the charge on the indictment, she said: "I don't see it as killing or murder. The definition of murder is to take someone's life with malice in your heart.

"I did it with love in my heart, for Tom, so I don't see it as murder. I knew what I was doing was against the law. I don't know what name they would call it, but I knew that the law would say it was wrong.

"I believed it would have been Tom's choice to have been allowed to die rather than have the intervention to keep him alive."

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