

My boy Mark Blanco's death was no accident

Three years after her son died at a party attended by Pete Doherty, his mother Sheila tells us she has damning new evidence

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and fatally injured, Doherty makes no attempt to check on him or call for help. "I daren't think about that too much," says Sheila. "If I did, I would never get through the day."

Ever since she found the lens from Mark's glasses in the gutter outside the block of flats the day after he fell - the area was not even briefly cordoned off as a possible crime scene - Sheila has been determined to discover the truth. Now, new evidence suggests her suspicion that Mark did not fall accidentally is well-founded.

A biomechanics expert has simulated and analysed Mark's fall, testing whether he could have sustained fatal head injuries by tumbling from the first floor and whether his injuries are consistent with an accidental fall. They are not. "Someone who was there that night knows what happened," says Sheila. "Sooner or later there will be a breach in the dam."

Why was Doherty not immediately interviewed by the police? Indeed, why did the police initially close the case at 4.19am, just hours after Mark fell, on the basis that there were "no suspicious circumstances"? Why, three weeks later, when Doherty's minder, evocatively nicknamed Johnny Headlock, admitted hitting Mark and pushing him over the railings - a confession he later retracted - did the police refer him for psychiatric care rather than arrest him?

Sheila's neat house in Guildford, Surrey, is full of reminders of her lively, eccentric son. On the packed bookshelves are a first edition of *Little Dorrit* and an early *Paradise Regained*, which he acquired while living in Paris and dealing in antiquarian books. On the table is Pooh, the bear he carried with him everywhere from childhood to the age of 24.

Sheila, who trained as a pianist at the Guildhall school of music in London and now teaches music and English, taught Mark and his sister Emma - now a professional violinist - to play the piano.

From the moment he could speak, Mark was always asking questions. "He was reading *The Hobbit* at five, *Dostoyevsky* at 10," says Sheila.

"He had the most phenomenal memory and he was always on to something new. It could be awfully irritating - one Christmas he was learning Swahili and refused to answer in anything else. He was tall and full of verve and enthusiasm. I imagine Doherty and his friends wouldn't 'get' him at all."

Mark won a scholarship to the Royal grammar school in Guildford. At Cambridge, where he studied philosophy, he was noted for his talent as a card magician. He was great friends with the comedians Jerry Sadowitz and Jimmy Carr. On leaving university he lived in Australia, France and Spain - birthplace of his father, Tony, from whom Sheila is divorced - and made a living from a mixture of book-dealing, acting and short-term jobs. His dream was to return to Cambridge and take a master's degree focusing on the life and work of Thomas de Quincey, the 19th-century author of *The Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*.

"It might have been his interest in de Quincey that drew him to Doherty," says his mother. "He would have wanted to know how that druggy world operated and been fascinated by its characters."

Sheila last saw Mark the week before he died when he visited Guildford to hear his sister give a recital. He was in good spirits, she says, joking with her about how disappointing it must be to have a grown-up son without a mortgage. He was living in a flat in the East End and rehearsing for the play at the George, in Whitechapel.

Unknown to Sheila, one of the pub's regulars was Paul Roundhill, Doherty's "literary agent", once described as "Doherty's best friend and soul mate, a modern-day Fagin who is known to locals as a small-time drug dealer and user". Just over a week before his play was to open, Mark heard that Doherty would be at Roundhill's flat. He thought that if he could get the singer to come to the first night it would generate some much-needed publicity.

CCTV footage shows that Mark arrived at the flats, after having dinner with some friends, at 12.12am. Three minutes later Doherty arrived. Inside the flat the atmosphere was ugly. Roundhill's friends, including the heavily built Headlock, took a dislike to Mark and started pushing him around.

They told him he couldn't sit on one of the chairs as it was wanted for a dog. When Mark tried to get Doherty's attention, pinning Doherty to the wall by putting his hands either side of him - Mark was 6ft 4in - they removed his hat and set fire to it. The singer reportedly felt that Mark was a nuisance and told his minders to "have a word" with him.

Roundhill then caught hold of Mark and tried to pull him to throw him out. He grabbed hold of Mark's lapels and tore his jacket. Mark put his hands on either side of the door frame and Roundhill hit him.

Everything happened quickly. Ten minutes after entering the flats, Mark was out on the street. Two minutes later, he was back.

That, in itself, is a mystery. Having been slapped around, why did Mark return? "He may have gone back for a poster he left there," says Sheila.

"He was not a chap to give up easily, but he would never have retaliated. Even as a child I can never remember him getting into a fight."

Nobody knows whether he even made it as far as the door of Roundhill's second-floor flat. Just 52 seconds later he fell from the balcony of the open stairwell on the first floor. "You can see on the CCTV, he came down as a dead weight, there was nothing moving, he did nothing to save himself," says his mother.

The implication is that he was unconscious before he fell. The biomechanics report tends to support that view. In simulating a fall from 3.5 metres onto concrete, Corrina Cory, a security expert with Arup, the engineering company, looked at whether it was possible to sustain fatal head injuries falling from that height and whether Mark might have jumped deliberately, not intending to harm himself.

She concluded that if Mark had jumped deliberately he would have probably landed feet first and injured his feet or legs, or if he fell accidentally he would have shattered his wrist or elbow. Instead, he had massive head injuries, a broken shoulder and five broken ribs. "The question remains as to why there are no protective injuries to the upper limbs," Cory concludes.

As Doherty prepares for a tour with Babyshambles, starting in Sheffield next month, Sheila awaits the conclusion of a second police investigation into Mark's death, but with no great hope of substantive progress. "It feels as if the police have been allergic to finding a crime here since the beginning," she says.

The police seem to have worked, initially at least, on the assumption that Mark either committed suicide or that he fell as he tried to jump from the balcony to a nearby lamppost. Both scenarios are regarded as absurd by family and friends.

When, three weeks after the incident, Doherty's minder confessed to punching and pushing Mark, he was referred to a psychiatric hospital (where his notes have since been lost). "Was that because what he had to say did not fit with what the police thought had happened?" asks Sheila. It was only during the second investigation that Doherty was interviewed. He apparently said he could not remember anything about the night Mark died.

According to Sheila, her biggest stroke of luck was meeting Michael Wolkind QC at one of Sadowitz's shows, at which he had put flyers in memory of his friend on every seat. Wolkind had seen the reports of Mark's death and was intrigued. He offered to act for Sheila without charge and cross-examined witnesses at the inquest. A neighbour of Roundhill's admitted to hearing people in the stairwell that night before a loud, shocking thud. The coroner gave an open verdict and ordered a fresh police investigation.

A second biomechanics investigation is under way that will try to determine whether Mark was unconscious before he fell. If it finds that he was, it may open the way for Sheila to pursue a private prosecution or to seek damages in the civil courts.

"Someone asked me the other day if I would ever give up and my instinctive response was 'never'," she says.