

**Cover Story** Alexander McQueen



# Stitch Queen

**...was Alexander McQueen's nickname for himself, but his self-deprecation hid a deep despair. Now his best friends reveal how the fabric of the designer's life unravelled. By David James Smith**

**S**haun describes the phone call that came on a Thursday in February, four months ago, as a moment he will never forget, and a moment he hopes never to repeat – even though, in a weird and not unconnected chain of events, it was a repeat of a moment from three years earlier.

It was a morning call, not more than a few minutes after his friend's body had been found by the housekeeper, Cesar Garcia, who was also McQueen's dog walker. Cesar first called the friend's PA, Kate Jones – "He's gone, he's gone for good" – and later called Shaun. It was

horrible. The housekeeper's wife had arrived. There was screaming, too much screaming, and Shaun could not understand what was being said. He gathered his friend was hurt. Is Lee all right? Shaun asked. Is he in an ambulance? Has he gone to hospital? He could not make sense of the answers and did not understand that his friend was already dead, found hanged in his own wardrobe.

A very, very sad time, as Shaun put it, with English understatement, some weeks later during our interview. As he said, it soon ceased to be a private matter and rapidly entered the public »»»→



domain. Within minutes, the news of Lee Alexander McQueen's shockingly unanticipated death, aged 40, had flown around the world.

McQueen was the leading British fashion designer of his generation, celebrated and admired for the exceptional talent that had transcended his ordinary, working-class origins in east London. Famous people who had barely known him lined up to give their tributes to the media. Cheryl Cole's heart went out to "Alexander's family and friends at this unbelievably sad and tragic time", while Victoria Beckham observed that the fashion industry had lost a true great. Lady Gaga dedicated a song to him at the Brits. Meanwhile, McQueen's real friends and closest colleagues in the fashion empire that had grown around him made little or no public comment — they were dumbstruck, left reeling. Their distress was unabated by the time of the posthumous McQueen presentation at Paris Fashion Week the following month, a muted event at a difficult moment for colleagues still struggling to comprehend his suicide.

Shaun Leane, the contemporary Hatton Garden jeweller, considered Lee McQueen his best friend. Three years earlier, in May 2007, there had been another phone call, another death call, while Shaun and McQueen were in Rome. Shaun had taken that call, too, and felt it was his duty to tell McQueen, even though it broke his heart. It must have broken McQueen's heart too, to hear that his kind, inspiring friend Issie Blow had killed herself at Hilles, her home in Gloucestershire.

**A**lexander McQueen never spoke publicly about the suicide of Isabella Blow. There were those in the fashion world who thought he had distanced himself from the woman who "discovered" him, and pointed the finger of blame at him after her death.

Shaun said there had been two rocks in McQueen's life — Issie and his mother. Philip Treacy, the hat-maker, who was close to Issie and McQueen, told me it was as if the designer had two mothers, Issie and his natural mother, Joyce. Issie and Joyce were friends. Posh Issie often took a cab out east to take tea with McQueen's mum. They often sat together in the front row at McQueen's fashion shows. His mum had made the sandwiches for one of his very first shows.

It is worth noting here that McQueen was known as Lee to his mum and most of his friends and colleagues. But to perverse, contrary Issie he was Alexander, which was his middle name. Treacy said she liked to call him that because he was so unlike an Alexander. According to Treacy, he did not look like the archetype of a fashion designer, whatever that look is supposed to be. Treacy said he was like a small boy, bouncing about with enthusiasm, quintessentially English, as befits one of the key figures at the heart of that lively cliché of the 1990s, "Cool Britannia".



Issie considered McQueen and Treacy her two great discoveries. She never stood still, not even in the grip of suicidal depression, taking her last tea with Joyce just two weeks before she died.

Within a year of Issie's suicide McQueen's mother would become ill too, with cancer, and begin the long decline that ended in her own death, nine days before her son hanged himself.

Suicide can be contagious, and needs to be written about with caution. It can be romanticised as splendid, a glorious oblivion, a merciful release, but in practice it is sordid and unpleasant and deeply, lastingly traumatic for those left behind.

The scene that had greeted McQueen's housekeeper was far removed from the beauty of his runway shows. The chain on the front door to inhibit access (Garcia had got in through the utility room), the three dogs whining, the two bedrooms in darkness, a candle burning on the floor in the spare room. It was a mess, and Garcia had initially started cleaning. There was an empty pill packet by the main bed: zopiclone, the sleeping tablet

## IN THE SHOWER TRAY OF THE EN-SUITE SHOWER ROOM, GARCIA SAW MORE BLOOD AND A CHOPPING BOARD WITH A MEAT CLEAVER, A KITCHEN KNIFE AND A KNIFE SHARPENER

McQueen had been prescribed and had perhaps taken in overdose; a bloodstained dagger, more blood in the en-suite bathroom. There was a closed laptop on the bed, which the police later opened. It came up on a Yahoo! answers page that read, "Resolved Question: When someone slits their wrist how long does it take for them to die?"

In the shower tray of the second bedroom's en-suite shower room, Garcia saw more blood and a chopping board with a meat cleaver and a large kitchen knife and a knife sharpener. There was a dressing-gown cord hanging from the shower head, which had buckled, apparently under the weight of a body. McQueen had removed the clothes from the tall wardrobe in the spare bedroom before hanging himself from the rail

Flamboyant friends: McQueen and his 'rock' Isabella Blow in Vanity Fair in 1997. Left: Philip Treacy. Bottom: McQueen (left) with Shaun Leane



with his favourite brown leather belt. Both of his wrists had been cut, but only one of those wounds was deep. He had a "significant" quantity of cocaine in his body, along with the zopiclone and

a powerful anaesthetic/tranquilliser, midazolam.

He must have tried overdosing first, then cut his wrists, before finally hanging himself. There was an art catalogue on the bed from an exhibition, *The Descent of Man*, by the modern British artist Wolfe von Lenkiewicz. The police later realised that McQueen had scrawled a suicide note on the back of the book. The full contents of the note have not been disclosed, but it ended with a goodbye: "Please look after my dogs. Sorry, I love you, Lee. PS Bury me at the church."

At least with Isabella Blow everyone who knew her knew what she hoped one day to achieve and finally did, with swigs of weedkiller. But what of McQueen? Did Isabella intend him to follow her? I doubt it. Did the people around



him know that he felt that way too?

Some of his closest friends told me they had never heard him speak of depression or a wish to kill himself. But they also said that, like Iessie, he was very determined and single-minded. Stubborn, perhaps. Once he had made up his mind about something, he would not be deflected. The portrait of McQueen that emerged at his inquest last month was of a man prone to paranoia, who felt suspicious of friends who had

used him because of who he was. A guarded, secretive man, as his psychiatrist, Stephen Pereira, told the coroner, Dr Paul Knapman.

If he was not a wealthy recluse, he was certainly isolated from friends, enveloped by the immense wealth he had acquired. He was living in a luxury apartment in Green Street, in the heart of Mayfair, but had already bought a new house nearby (next to the Brazilian embassy), which, the inquest was told, he planned to demolish so that he could build anew on the site. His loyal housekeepers, the Garcias, did everything for him, not just walking his dogs and cleaning, but all his shopping and laundry.

The inquest heard that McQueen had suffered from insomnia, anxiety and depression as far back as 1997 (not long after he joined Givenchy) and that this had intensified in recent months. His GP, a Knightsbridge liposuction specialist, Dr Mike Comins, had referred him to Pereira in July 2009 after McQueen had twice taken overdoses, once of sleeping pills and once of painkillers. Pereira did not believe they were serious suicide attempts, but diagnosed a “mixed anxiety and depressive disorder” and began treating McQueen with an antidepressant — which he stopped taking after a week because of the side



effects, such as nausea — and with a further referral to a clinical psychologist. McQueen’s last weeks were a catalogue of ignored medical advice and missed appointments. McQueen’s family, his older sisters Jacqui and Janet, his aunt Anne and others were in court with a lawyer who seemed keen to draw out testimony of the intense pressures McQueen had felt in his work.

McQueen was caught in an endless cycle of shows — six a year, two each in menswear, womenswear and his own McQueen label, each of those in turn split up and spread out by so-called “pre-collections” designed to maximise profit. Profit, it has been said, was in short supply in recent years. At the time of his death it was widely reported that the business was showing liabilities in excess of £30m. The McQueen organisation denied these were debts in the conventional sense. They were merely Gucci’s way of financing McQueen, I was told.

He worked intensely, often close to deadline, sometimes making wholesale changes at the last minute. As Shaun Leane said, “You got on the train and it was a fast ride. It really was.” Pereira acknowledged those pressures but said they were a double-edged sword, as McQueen’s work was the one area of his life where he felt he had achieved something. The problem was the huge comedowns after his shows and the severe lows he suffered, feeling very isolated.

He had long-term psychological issues and was confused where his private life was concerned. His mother’s death had been a link gone from his life, said Pereira, leaving him very little else to live for. He had hanged himself on the eve of his mother’s funeral.

The coroner said at the start of the medical evidence that he did not want to go into any great detail, and it seems likely that the carefully asked questions were designed to limit the information that was disclosed. The family had repeatedly stressed their desire for privacy.

No doubt McQueen was much more troubled than anyone realised by the death of his friend and mentor, Isabella Blow, as well as his mum. His two rocks. His two mothers. Perhaps, too, he carried other anxieties that he kept hidden. It was apparent, in the tributes that appeared after his death, that the real McQueen remained hidden behind a caricature version put forward by people who barely knew him.

Now, for the first time thanks to a series of exclusive interviews, The Sunday Times Magazine has been able to construct an intimate portrait of McQueen that reflects the real person, the dynamic and brilliant designer, the funny, vulnerable friend, the shy party-goer who loved to go out and “get messy”, the sometimes lonely figure at the apex of a multi-million-dollar empire, who worked with great intensity and sometimes fought with friends and colleagues and who could push people away in passing fits of pique. ➤➤➤

Right: McQueen's elaborate creations. Below: he designed the costume for Björk's 1997 album *Homogenic*

McQueen liked to refer to himself as a “stitch bitch”. Time and time again, I heard of his dazzling ability to fashion a dress straight out of his imagination. This was his core talent, the basis of his creative flair, and it never deserted him.

Philip Treacy had arrived at McQueen's studio for a meeting about his last show, at the beginning of this year, not long before his death. They had known each other for 20 years, drawn together by their love of Issie, even if, as Treacy put it, McQueen had seemed more like a love rival for Issie's attention — both men, of course, were gay and not rivals at all in that way, except perhaps for Issie's expansive affections.

As Treacy arrived, McQueen had a bale of cloth and a live model and was wrapping the fabric around her. Treacy had by now worked with the best designers in the world — Karl Lagerfeld, Gianni Versace, Valentino, Ralph Lauren — but he always considered McQueen to be exceptional, and here before him was the proof. He had never seen anything like it as McQueen worked with remarkable skill and speed, doing it all himself, not relying as others would on a team of cutters and technicians, pinning and shaping this incredible dress on the model. Treacy said, did you just do what I thought you were doing? (Treacy liked to mimic McQueen's gruff, guttural way of speaking.) McQueen said, dismissively, what? It did not invite further discussion.

He was, Treacy could see, engrossed in his next show — the show he would never finish and not live to see that spring in Paris. There was talk of a Marie Antoinette look and a white sailing ship of a hat, but that never came to pass. McQueen lived for the shows, said Treacy (missing the irony in that expression). They were like Broadway to him, he said, before changing his mind and saying, no, not Broadway, but they were everything.

Daphne Guinness, a close friend of McQueen's, was wearing an elegant grey dress when I saw her. A beautiful dress that hugged her figure close, with a short, shaped sleeve. Her Mayfair apartment was overflowing with art and clothes, but that grey dress was a bit of both — art and clothes. It had been made by McQueen after she had gone to him one day and said she wanted a very simple dress she could wear forever. Right before her eyes he had cut into a piece of fabric, making it all with no drawing or anything, just his innate, intuitive talent. He had cut a bra in two to get the arc of the sleeves. Daphne had loved it all so much she bought 15 of them, some in black. Soon after she was wearing a billowing black cloak by McQueen to his own funeral.



Shaun Leane and McQueen met when McQueen was a student at Central St Martins. At the beginning of the 1990s, they had much in common. They were both gay and loved their mums, of course, but they were London boys — their birthdays only a month apart in early 1969 — from similar ordinary backgrounds. Shaun recalled McQueen as shy, not always good in a crowd, but always ready to party, to go on the rampage, as Shaun would put it. He drank

“world of fashion”, especially cocaine, and McQueen did his share. Shaun remembered the terraced house in Tooting Bec that McQueen shared with Simon Ungless. The back room and garden were like McQueen's studio, and he'd be in the room on the sewing machine working away, noisily, then in the garden in a dust cloud of plaster of paris, the garden a scene of carnage, like the aftermath of Glastonbury, with red dye, silicone and the plaster as McQueen created something,

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Woodpecker Cider when they were young, which Shaun thought a bit embarrassing — the great fashion designer drank Woodpecker! — but favoured the more rarefied tippie Maker's Mark bourbon in later years, with Diet Coke. Sometimes he drank vodka. They took drugs, or used to. Shaun did not want to go into detail on that. Nobody did. Drugs were commonplace in the



far more than just a clothes-maker, a sculptor too.

Issie famously bought up McQueen's graduation show. I have seen figures of several thousand pounds quoted as the price she paid, and that is possible, but Treacy recalls Issie turning up with all the clothes in a bin liner and frequent trips to the cashpoint to raise an extra 50 quid towards the deal, which sounds more likely.

As McQueen assumed the centre and drew people to him, Shaun began collaborating with him on the notorious Highland Rape collection, shown in a tent at London Fashion Week in 1995. McQueen later claimed it as a comment on the Highland Clearances by the English, and said he intended it as an antidote to the tartan styling of the likes of Westwood. But the ripped clothes and restraining accessories hinted more at sexual violence and were the origins of the idea that McQueen was a misogynist, a charge that was said to have hurt him and which he and the women around him always denied.

Shaun was upset when he took his mum and his friend to the show — he had made some chains as accessories for the models: come and see my work! — and they could not get in. ➤➤➤

Bottom: McQueen had a 'dazzling ability to fashion straight out of his imagination'. Right: a sculpture at his LA shop

People had photocopied the invitations and filled the space to the brim. Shaun went home in a taxi, annoyed with McQueen, swearing never to work on or attend another of his shows, but of course he soon changed his mind. Gradually, McQueen created a team, gathered people around him he trusted. Someone called them The Family, which sounded a bit too much like Charles Manson for at least one of that “family”, Simon Costin. But still, like the others, Simon was inspired and loved working with McQueen for a while as his art director. As the sponsors grew, so did the budgets and the possibilities.

As with Shaun, Costin and McQueen were mates before they were colleagues, drinking in the same bars. McQueen might have been shy with outsiders, but with friends he was gregarious, with a filthy sense of humour. If Costin was out and they met, McQueen would not come up and say hello. Instead he would come up behind him and bite his buttocks.

They all enjoyed going out, getting messy. Simon too was reluctant to talk in detail about the drug-taking, but said: “Say no to drugs? That’s absolute rubbish. Every party you go to, it’s all over the place, mostly cocaine. You either dip into that or you don’t, but it’s there.”

In 1996 McQueen went to work for Givenchy in Paris. He had an apartment where members of The Family would gather to work and sometimes sleep. Katy England was McQueen’s stylist, Trino Verkade was close — her mother had helped finance his earliest shows. Sam Gainsbury, her husband, John Gosling, Simon Costin, they were all among those who played a part in McQueen’s rise. Costin sensed a change in the setup and in McQueen as the project grew in scale. One night they went to the Queen Club on the Champs-Élysées, a huge establishment where formerly they had often gone to roam around, but now they were in a roped-off VIP area and Costin thought, ooh, the dynamic’s shifted, you can’t go out now the way you used to. The change was fast, Costin thought, and he wondered how McQueen adjusted.

The plus side was the practical facilities of a genuine couture house: the cutting, the finishing were fantastic. On that level, McQueen was like a kid in a toy shop. (People often referred to him in boyish terms, but then he was still only 27.) The downside was the schedule: two ready-to-wear shows, two



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couture shows, his own shows. It was manic and the pressure, it seemed to Costin, was intense. He felt that McQueen lost some of his *joie de vivre*.

One night at dinner Costin said, I don’t envy you now, Lee, I really don’t. Costin didn’t think he could hack the press attention if he were in his shoes. McQueen laughed and brushed it off. Don’t talk bollocks, it’s great fun, it’s a hoot. Costin speculated that perhaps McQueen didn’t want to think too deeply about it in case it impacted on how he was working.

Curiously, Treacy said he found that McQueen was quite aggressive — “thuggy” — when he first knew him and that he became gentler, more the pussycat, as he progressed. He remembered how Issie had installed him for a while in her office and everyone used to worry he was going to rob their handbags. In Treacy’s view he softened and became sweet-natured as time went on, which he attributed to the fact that McQueen had “won”, he’d achieved it all: he’d got the label, the house, the acclaim, the money.

But that was not how Costin saw it. His last show with McQueen was called Untitled. It was said that he had changed the name from Golden Showers in case he upset his sponsor, Amex. In fact, according to Costin, Amex objected and insisted on removing the title. The theme, however, remained Golden Showers, which Costin helped to realise with models setting out on

a runway while being sprayed with water bathed in golden light.

As McQueen fought to keep all the plates spinning, he could get depressed and moody. He would be snappy and bad-tempered, and even though it was water off a duck’s back to those around him, the tension began to take its toll.

As the backstage tensions grew, Costin stopped enjoying the shows. He wrote McQueen a letter saying he was stepping back. It used to be fun, he wrote. He heard later that McQueen read the letter out to his team in the studio and there was a cooling between them that lasted for some years, until McQueen appeared with a friend at Costin’s Christmas party three years ago with an olive branch in his hand — literally. They had a good chat and it was a hoot having him there.

Costin was struck by how much he had changed, as if he had reinvented himself. Costin recalled how McQueen — who had a tendency to put on weight — had always been insecure about his appearance, feeling that he was too big or the

wrong shape or something. Now he joked about the liposuction he’d had around his middle and said the puncture marks had left him with three navels. Philip Treacy thought the liposuction had been a mistake, making McQueen look as if he had been Jack-the-Ripper.

Costin always believed he would have been sacked anyway by McQueen if he had not jumped ship first. Perhaps that was why McQueen was upset with him, because he had not waited around to be fired. Costin believed that others were fired or pushed away by McQueen — even Shaun, for a while — as he fought to stay ahead.

He sometimes seemed lonely, was not always good at choosing partners and could be drawn to inappropriate people. Costin remembered meeting one who was a barman. They were all devastatingly handsome but often short-lived. One longer relationship involved someone who did not want to talk for the article, but who, I was told, had McQueen’s name tattooed around his biceps and then later inked out. He had a few good ones, said Shaun. There was a brief civil partnership with George Forsyth, a film-maker.

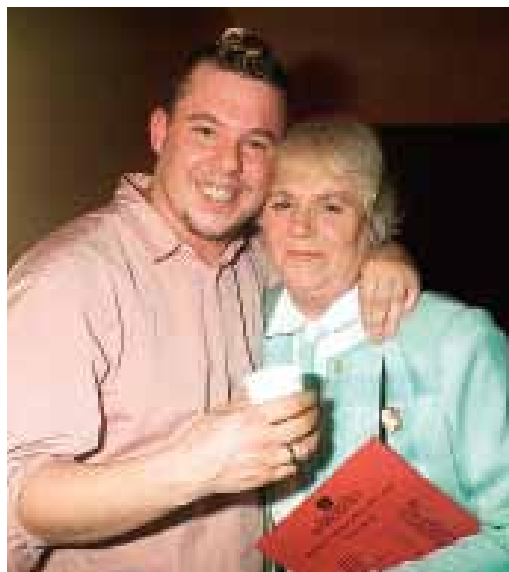
Shaun said that McQueen was not always sure how to deal with personal situations, perhaps involving boyfriends, just as he did not always like being out in company. He might call Shaun late at night for advice or support. Shaun speculated that maybe McQueen had been lonely as a youngster, perhaps a bit of an outsider as a gay kid, sitting in his room sketching dresses. Costin, too, saw McQueen as an outsider. By definition, as a gay man he was on the outside, and had a particular vision >>>>



that could be troubled and disturbing, described by Costin as “transgressive”, meaning a desire to provoke or shock by the use of dark imagery.

By way of illustration Costin referred to the Mat Collishaw print on McQueen’s wall at home, which was originally a pathology-textbook image of a bullet wound in a human head. The angle of the photograph made it a surreal, disconcerting image — like an anus or a vagina surrounded by hair. Not the kind of thing many people would want to look at several times daily. Costin did not see McQueen’s dark imagery as destructive or even morbid, although it does seem possible he had about him a kind of morbidity. Shaun said that McQueen found it hard to be around Issie’s suicidal depression, especially when she was so vocal about her torment.

He continued to soar, professionally. At the turn of the millennium, Gucci bought a majority stake



Left: McQueen with the mother he adored, Joyce. Below: Kate Moss and Annabelle Neilson at his funeral

He texted friends about his mother’s death. Treacy texted back how he always thought of McQueen’s mum in the front row of his shows and how proud she was of her son. McQueen thanked Treacy by reply, “That means a lot to me,” he said.

Shaun had gone round to be with McQueen as soon as he heard. They had always talked about their mums and must have many times discussed Joyce’s illness. McQueen had told Shaun he was prepared for her death, but Shaun subsequently realised that confronting the reality of his mother’s death would have been very different.

Shaun was glad later that they had enjoyed one last night out together three or four weeks before McQueen’s death. McQueen had phoned him, what are you doing tomorrow night? Seeing you, I hope, Shaun had said, are we going out? You and me on our own, like the old days, McQueen had said. An old-school night, they had agreed it would be, back round the old haunts, two naughty boys — aged 40 — on the rampage in Comptons and all along Old Compton Street, having a laugh, winding people up, moving on.

They had a great time that night and continued talking on the phone. Shaun had no concerns about McQueen at any point, not even after his mother died. Shaun feels that McQueen didn’t want to worry him. It is a measure of how secretive McQueen really was that Shaun and others in his closest circle knew nothing of his long-standing battle with depression and anxiety.

She was my rock, he had said of his mother. Shaun knew that Issie was his rock too. Both of them gone. Now McQueen gone. A gaping hole in that world of fashion, and a lasting wound in the lives of those who knew and loved him.

Meanwhile, in a measure perhaps of the pressures that McQueen himself had been facing, the Gucci Group, who owned the controlling share in his company, moved quickly to announce the brand would continue. The group did not immediately announce a replacement for McQueen as chief designer, but many assumed it would be his colleague Sarah Burton, who was now left to oversee the completion of the autumn/winter collection for Paris Fashion Week.

I was told the McQueen organisation agonised over whether to go ahead with the show before finally deciding on a low-key, standing presentation with no catwalk. I saw the “looks” myself in Paris, on mannequins in the white-walled McQueen showroom in the back streets of the city. They were breathtakingly beautiful, not really outfits at all in many ways, but each one a little work of art. Only clothes, maybe, but richly detailed in magnificent fabrics. And sad, too. Like a lament for a lost soul ■

## MCQUEEN ASKED IF HE COULD HAVE A LOCK OF ISSIE'S HAIR. IT WOULD HAVE TO BE CUT FROM HER CORPSE AND TREACY THOUGHT HE HAD BETTER ASK HER SISTERS FIRST

in his own label and wooed him away from Givenchy. Issie, meanwhile, began to feel old and outmoded and perhaps a bit neglected by her friend and protégé. Treacy agrees that Issie felt let down by McQueen, but that was her, he says. She always used to complain she could never get a hat out of Treacy, and she was always trying to get dresses out of McQueen. She felt he owed her. But that was nothing really to do with the source of Issie’s unhappiness and determination to end her life. Issie’s husband, Detmar, asked Treacy to choose a dress for her cremation and Treacy called McQueen and asked him to do it instead, so the two of them went to her apartment in Eaton Square and McQueen chose a pale-green Chinese dress — one of his own of course. Later he called Treacy and asked if he could have a lock of Issie’s hair. Treacy did not mind, but it would have to be cut from her corpse and he thought he had better ask her sisters first — just the sort of dilemma that would have appealed to Issie, and probably to McQueen too. The sisters agreed. Treacy then asked McQueen to join him at the funeral home to pay his last respects to her before the casket was closed. McQueen said he had never seen a dead body before, but Treacy had no doubt Issie would have wanted him there.

to feel guilty about. McQueen soon told Treacy that he had consulted a number of psychics in an attempt to contact Issie. He was very serious about it and had spoken to Treacy on a couple of occasions in the past about such matters.

There was no doubt in Treacy’s mind that McQueen was far more affected by Issie’s death than he let on. He eventually persuaded McQueen to meet a screenwriter who was going to write a film about Issie. Treacy was keen to ensure that McQueen took his rightful place in her story.

Like Shaun Leane, Treacy had never known McQueen to suffer from depression, but he had heard talk about it afterwards from others. Nobody I spoke to regarded McQueen as an obvious candidate for suicide, if there is such a thing. There was a consensus that the death of his mother, Joyce, must have played a key part in the emotional upheaval he seems to have felt.



While these intimate scenes of grief were being played out, there was a degree of crackle in the fashion world and the media about McQueen’s supposed neglect of Issie — though in fact he had supported her financially and emotionally as best he could — and the suggestion was floated that he might in some way be partly responsible for her depression. Treacy was aware of this and hoped McQueen did not feel any guilt, as he had nothing