



Jennifer O'Connor, who suffers from Spinal Muscular Atrophy, with her mum Yvonne and dad Denis in Bandon. Picture: Richard Mills

A family's heartache

THE week before Christmas in 2002, young parents Denis and Yvonne O'Connor were dealt a cruel double heartache.

The Bandon couple were told that their seven-month-old son, Cian, and their 18-month-old daughter, Jennifer, were both suffering from Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA). SMA is an inherited disease that causes weakness of muscles and prevents their natural development. Tragically, it can be fatal.

Yvonne explains: "At 16 months, Jennifer was moving and kicking like any other baby. She was even flying around the house in her walker.

"But then, shortly after Cian's birth, she just stopped suddenly. As her cousin on her Dad's side had died from SMA earlier that year, I felt it safer to have her checked out. My doctor also recommended having Cian tested at this time.

"I felt as if somebody

MARY MALONE meets a family who suffered the devastating blow of losing their only son — and are desperate not to lose their only daughter the same way

had ran me over when I received both results the week before Christmas.

"The doctors told me that Cian's condition was much worse than Jennifer's," she says, "and for this reason Cian seemed to get more treatment than his sister. He had severe chest and lung problems and suffered repeated infections."

She hands me a photo of Cian at seventeen months old. He was a beautiful little baby with a beaming smile and at that stage showed very few visible signs of how ill he really was.

"Cian never walked," Yvonne tells me, "and he couldn't sit up on his own, but he never complained."

Cian's fight for life ended on June 23 this

year, shortly after his fourth birthday, when he passed away in his mother's arms with all of his family around him.

Yvonne says that from January this year, he had spent a large amount of time in hospital and it became impossible to keep his lungs clear.

"So much so," she tells me, "that we were no longer allowed feed him orally."

Understandably, this was really difficult for a little boy who loved ice lollies. Heart-rendingly, and despite his tender years, Yvonne remembers how Cian used to promise his Nana that he wouldn't die if she gave him an ice lolly.

Cian also had a passion for trucks, not surprising considering his uncles and his grand-

father were all truckers.

On Cian's final journey from his home in Watergate to his resting place in St Patrick's Graveyard, his tiny white coffin was transported on the back of his uncle's truck.

Cian's death has left a gaping hole in the lives of all the O'Connor family, not least his sister, Jennifer, who had her fifth birthday only days before burying her little brother.

Jennifer's condition has deteriorated rapidly since her brother's death.

"She misses him terribly," Yvonne explains, "we are so lonely without him. But it's affecting her health and her doctors have indicated that she may only survive two more years."

But the O'Connor family aren't going to sit and wait for this to happen. Bernadette, Yvonne's sister, noticed an advertisement for an intensive physiotherapist named Senthil Periyasamy in Kilmallock, Co Limerick.

Senthil Periyasamy combines neuro-respiratory, food therapy, intensive physiotherapy and exercise and offers hope that Jennifer will one day walk and her life will be prolonged.

As there is a two-year waiting list for Senthil, Yvonne felt this may be too late for Jennifer, and has opted to see him privately. This treatment is very expensive and Bernadette has been fund-raising to meet the costs.

Jennifer's treatment is commencing in Kilmallock in January and will involve three hours of therapy a day, five days a week.

The O'Connor story is heartbreaking, but they are a family filled with hope for little Jennifer, the hope to see her remaining in their lives for as long as possible as they try and cope with the loss of her brother.

Donations can be made to Jennifer O'Connor's Junior Saver account, AIB, South Main Street, Bandon: Account Number 20392029. Sort Code 93-40-46.



ROBERT O'SHEA

IT'S that time of year again. When the likelihood of a newspaper article beginning with an "It's that time of year again" rises 30%.

It is also that time of year when annual office parties are held in the run-up to Christmas. No matter what the size the organisation, there is always an effort to bring co-workers together for one night of merriment.

Our own Christmas party was held on Saturday night. This, spookily enough, is being written a day before it took place but in advance I would like to apologise: to my boss for throwing up on his shoes/for my rendition of *Joe Hill* with altered lyrics/for quite openly cheating in the quiz/to Sally/Nora/Amy/James for trying to kiss them under the mistletoe/for the minor argument/court case that resulted when I found out the free drink was drying up. (Cross out where applicable).

Of course, in the above paragraph I am simply attempting to be humorous; I would never really do any of those things at my Christmas party.

That's because I follow a strict code of etiquette once I step in the door. There are certain rules of behaviour to follow at the office party if you want to have an office to go back to when the party is over.

That's why I have put some serious brainpower into compiling the following.

CHRISTMAS PARTY TIPS

● Do you have to go?

No, you don't have to go. And nobody probably wants to see you there anyway.

● What should you wear?

Men should wear anything that takes the focus off their immature and ruthless personalities.

For women, the more of you that there is, the more material there should be to cover it up.

● How long should I stay?

Stay long enough to speak and shake hands with as many people as possible, especially the key people, like your boss. If you leave over a full hour before the free drink has finished, people will be impressed and think that you have more popular people to socialise with.

The optimum time to leave is a good five minutes before you put a lampshade on your head and dance on a desk.

● Can I butt in to conversations?

Butt away! Stand close to people and pretend to cough. Say "Ahem!" loudly, but subtly. If this doesn't work and it's late enough, try nuzzling your chin on someone's shoulder.

Or do as Jack Handey advises: "If you want to be the popular one at party, here's a good thing to do: go up to some people who are talking and laughing and say: 'Well, technically that's illegal'. It might fit in with what somebody just said. And even if it doesn't, so what, I hate this stupid party."

● What to talk about?

The party is a great opportunity to become visible to your organisation's higher-ups and tell them your name. Be advised, bosses, supervisors and managers like to avoid the work topic, and it won't go down well with them to bring it up and will probably only draw attention to the lack of it you do.

If they are men and you are man, golf is the supreme topic. They will be members of expensive clubs that excludes riff-raff like you. So tell them you are a member of an out-of-town course. If they ask you what your handicap is, under no circumstances say "my clubs" and slap them on the back.

Even though you don't play golf, you can get by with some handy phrases. These include: "birdie", "fairway wood" and "it has really helped my back-swing".

● How much should I eat and drink?

Eat drink and be merry, for tomorrow we'll be tossing and turning in bed wondering if we really said that or not.

● Flirting?

There is "flirting", where you bat your eyelashes and make risqué remarks. There is "smirting", where outside in the smoking area your sexy-stanced cigarette holders coo each other with their bad breaths, and then there is "blurring", where you declare you undying allegiance to the person you fancy who you only ever meet at the photocopier.

Some say that office romances can never work. Yet thousands of marriages' first buds were planted in a suburban office. What is certain is that women wearing knee-length boots to the party are more up for it. As are the men wearing any type of footwear.