

Amanda Daniels lives near Rachel in West London with her partner and two sons. She supported Rachel through her bereavement from the moment Rachel rang her at 7am on the day Ian died and was at the hospital alone.



Rachel has been my best friend for what seems like forever. We met in June 1989 when I started work at the BBC. She was the only one to talk to me out of a group of seemingly scary secretaries. She was welcoming, friendly and very funny and we clicked straight away. Rachel has all the qualities you would want in a best friend. She is like a sister to me and will never hold a grudge. I can tell her absolutely anything and she never judges. We can sit in complete silence one moment without it being awkward and we can laugh like drains the next. Over the last twenty years I have shared many life changing experiences with her; we shared a flat together, both got married, had children, changed careers, got divorced (in my case) and we were friends throughout. Then of course there was, and is, the loss of Ian.

Photo: clockwise L-R - Nero, me, Ian, Rachel's niece Louise, her sister Vicki and brother-in-law Joe – autumn 2000

The day Ian died is as crystal clear to me today as if it were yesterday. Thinking of it even now I get the same feeling of foreboding and disbelief. It's hard to know what to do when your best friend goes through something like this, because although it's not your loss, and you're not even 'family', I was grief stricken and it was without doubt one of the worst days of my life. You see, I had known Rachel with previous boyfriends, I'd been with her during the dating phase of her life and looking for Mr Right, as we all do. We had talked endlessly about relationships, marriage, children, future dreams, and when she found Ian everything seemed to click into place. We used to laugh about how 'unlucky' Rachel was...burglaries, house fires...you name it, if it was lurking around it would happen to Rachel. Ironically, just a week before Ian died, Rachel said how relieved she was her luck had changed. She had a baby on the way, she and Ian had moved into a new house, Ian's job was going well, and I was thrilled for her. My partner Nero and Ian had also hit it off, which was an added bonus.



Ian wasn't at all like Rachel's previous boyfriends. Her 'type', if you like, was a big, broad-shouldered type of guy - think footballer, fireman or farmer - so when I met Ian I was surprised. He was dressed like an art student with coloured striped trousers and a clashing paisley shirt. He was quite slight in build with a mischievous glint in his eye, massive intelligence and a wicked sense of humour. He clearly adored Rachel. He actually said to me once very early in their relationship, 'I love Rachel so much, she's absolutely fantastic'. I think it takes quite a man to say that to his girlfriend's best mate.

When Nero and I arrived at A&E on the morning Ian died, I fully expected to find him sitting up in bed, drinking tea and moaning about the NHS. What I found instead was my beautiful friend, heavily pregnant, sitting in a stark visitor's room, with a vase of plastic flowers on the table beside her (it's amazing what ridiculous things you remember at times like this) and her whole world was crumbling around her. It wasn't fair. I wanted to shake Ian awake and scream at him that he couldn't do that to her.

We were best friends before Ian died, but I shared things with Rachel that day that will bond us forever regardless. Rachel is the no nonsense, straight forward, practical, organised half of our friendship. I'm the dramatic, emotional, chaotic one. That's just how it is. Suddenly the tables were turned and that morning I had to take some kind of control. With Rachel's sister making her way from the other side of London and her mum heading down from the North, I had to make plans to get her back home. She immediately made a list of people for me to call. I found myself talking to people I didn't know or had met only briefly at Rachel and Ian's wedding two years before, and giving them the worst news possible. When I explained who I was, most people assumed the bad news was about the baby or Rachel's pregnancy, so the news about Ian came as even more of a shock.

Rachel was remarkable during the whole period following Ian's death. She coped admirably in the face of such heartbreak. Admittedly, it was difficult to get her to eat and she didn't want to talk or even think about the baby. She has a very supportive family and they rallied round - between us all it was a long time before Rachel spent a day on her own.

Alex's christening

My overriding feeling from that day to this is one of protection. Nero and I are both fiercely protective of her and of my god-daughter Alexandra. If anything, that feeling has become stronger as the years have passed.

If I were to give advice to any best friend of someone in this situation, I would say all you can do is **be** there. Whatever Rachel wanted to do, I would try my best to help. Often it was just talking, sometimes well into the early hours. Mainly about the future, but an awful lot about Ian. Were there any signs of a heart problem? Could I tell he



was ill? What could have been done differently? What would it mean genetically for Alex? I spent time with Rachel every single day for well over a year. I liked to go round and spend time with Alex, often bathing her and getting her ready for bed just to give Rachel some kind of support. As well as being a widow (a term she loathes) she was also a single parent, and grieving aside, that's an extremely hard job.

I had changed careers and was training as an actress at the time of Ian's death. Rachel's first outing the week after Alex was born was to come and see me in a play. I advised her against it as it was a harrowing tale but she wanted to support me. The next production 2 months later was a comedy and when she came to see it, Rachel laughed for the first time since Ian had died. I felt really glad about that and had a good cry afterwards. In fact, I cried an awful lot over that period. Not in front of Rachel of course. My tears were for my friend, because she was hurting and because I couldn't do anything about it, and also due to the sheer weight of the situation. The supportive role can sometimes be overwhelming.

Of course, with Rachel and me, even in the face of adversity it simply wasn't and isn't all doom and gloom. We cried a lot but we laughed too. Whatever your beliefs, I like to think of the humorous moments as Ian letting us know it would all be okay. For example, the

Catholic priest who turned up at A&E to say final prayers over Ian (Ian wasn't a practising Catholic, in fact quite the atheist) had a terrible speech impediment. It made the prayers sound like something out of Monty Python. Ian would have loved it. Another 'Ian Moment' came when we went to collect his ashes. The undertakers had placed them in what can only be described as a large, burgundy plastic sweet jar, and retrieved him from out of a small cupboard where they kept the gas meter. I like to think it was him having the last laugh as he always did.

After Ian's death, when Rachel began to focus once more on the baby, I was a potential birth partner along with her sister and mum, a case of whoever was available at the time. As it was, I got a call at around 5.30am on 9 July from Rachel, asking me to run her to the hospital, which of course I did, trying not to go too fast over the speed bumps. Although it wasn't a long journey, it wasn't a comfortable one, as I hadn't driven a manual car for some time and my gear changing was a bit on the rough side. My last comment (rather odd, I admit – must have been the relief of getting to the hospital in one piece) as Rachel got out of the car at the maternity wing was 'have a nice baby!' And she did.



My god-daughter was born later that morning and I had special permission from the hospital as a non-family member to go and see her. At the time, I didn't have much experience of babies but I was completely at ease with Alex from the start. I can't count the number of times I fed, changed and bathed her right from day one. As she grew older, I used to play with her and spend time with her while Rachel did other stuff such as putting the washer on, doing the ironing or preparing meals for the freezer. Sometimes she and Alex would come and spend the night at my house and I'd try and ensure Rachel had a work-free evening, even if it just meant a few glasses of wine, a meal cooked for her, a bath run and an early night. It wasn't difficult for me to do and it meant a lot to Rachel. Nero and I looked after Alex and she could relax. I know Rachel relied on us a lot in the early days (and when it comes to her continuing domestic disasters with her house, she still does!) and it was a sign of her trust in me that she didn't hesitate to ask if I would look after Alex if she needed to do something or be somewhere, despite my lack of experience in all things baby. She went to a wedding near Manchester when Alex was 18 months old, and I had her overnight for the first time. Not the most organised of people, it was quite a responsibility to manage the quite strict routine Rachel had for Alex at the time – feeding, bathing, sleeping, playing. It was quite tiring at the time, but we both actually had a really good time together.

Over the years, Alex and I have built a fairly special relationship – I think so anyway! When she was smaller, she would talk to me about her daddy in a way she didn't to Rachel. She was always a very articulate child and would ask me questions that I think Rachel found hard to believe she'd asked (such as, at the age of two, 'will daddy never come back and see me?') and telling me she wanted her daddy when I asked her what she'd like for Christmas. Rachel's mum found the same thing when she looked after Alex as well. Now, I can talk to her about things that are worrying her and she will respond to me in a way she doesn't with Rachel, as she knows her mum will either be more worried or angry, depending on what it is. When she was having problems with a girl at her school making life difficult for her, I chatted to her when Rachel wasn't in the room and found out what the real issue was,

talked to Rachel later and she managed to resolve it. Up till then, Alex hadn't wanted to tell her the problem as she felt it would worry her and she had enough to worry about. I suppose by being a couple of steps removed from the immediate situation, I was able to ask different questions of Alex and find out the real problem. By the same token, I have no qualms in taking Alex to task or reprimanding her if I need to, and she's very accepting of that. I'm just her Auntie Manda, end of story.

If you're in the same position I was in, just keep going. It won't be easy, even several years down the line, when you may feel you're being put upon – but if your friend didn't have to call you and could do it herself, she would. You may have to bite your tongue if you feel she's heading for disaster in all sorts of situations (with the baby, with decisions about the funeral or what to do with her husband's ashes, or future dating or going back to work), but if they're as single minded as Rachel, you can't make that call for her, and just have to try and be there if it does go wrong.

Your relationship with your friend will change, of course it will – nobody expects to ever support anyone in this position, and she really will find out who her real friends are as Rachel did, but it will bring you closer and if your friendship can cope with this, you really can cope with anything.

Amanda Daniels

