

## *The Early Days – Caroline*



**CAROLINE Allan had been married to Ian for 11 years, they had one daughter and were expecting another baby. Just before Christmas 2001, Ian was attacked coming home from a Christmas party. Suffering from a fractured skull, he never regained consciousness and died six days later, aged just 34.**

I met Ian in 1988 when he was a student at Dundee University and I was working 20 miles away in Perth as a nurse. He was a cheeky Geordie who claimed he was a 23 year old mature student (I was 24 at the time). It took three months for him to own up to being only 20, but it didn't matter by then. He nervously confessed it to me one night and I could only laugh, but I did get a nice piece of jewellery out of it!

We were engaged exactly a year after first meeting and when Ian moved back to Newcastle after completing his MA, I followed him a few months later in early 1990 and we married in the August of that year.

Initially, life wasn't very easy. Ian was made redundant no fewer than three times and we were often pretty broke, but we had a cosy home, complete with cat, and despite the lack of cash, we were happy and life was good together. Ian found his niche in pharmaceutical sales, I was a staff nurse in a Newcastle hospital and our careers were finally becoming more settled, so we decided the time was right to try for a baby. Things never go to plan though and it took five years for me to know the happiness that pregnancy brings. I had fertility treatment eventually, and Ian supported me with love and humour through the years of tests, pills, injections and disappointments. During a break in treatment in the autumn of 1997, I discovered I was pregnant. Ian was over the moon and swanned around as if he was the first man on the planet to get his woman pregnant. My pregnancy went well and our daughter Katie was born in July 1998, weighing 9lbs 6oz. Ian held his newborn baby in his arms, but after 10 minutes was handing her back because his arms were tired, which I was very scornful of, of course. Ian told me later he'd gone home that night, poured himself a stiff whisky and stood in the garden looking out in the stillness of the night, thinking just how our lives had now changed.

The next few years of my life were the happiest I'd ever had; I was what Bridget Jones would call a 'smug married'. I was content and had a great sense of all being right in my life. I was promoted to Sister, and we moved house in 1999, it's just as well we did, as I discovered in October 2001 that I was pregnant again – naturally this time, no tests or treatments required. Ian was delighted, he was very excited at the prospect of being a father again, he'd proved himself very good in the role with Katie, and he decided to devote more time to us, sacrificing his beloved Sunday league football to spend more time with his family, a decision I find quite ironic now, given what happened later.

My birthday was on 21 December and we spent a quiet night in watching the Bridget Jones video Ian had bought me as a present. Ian hadn't seen the film before and he

thought it was really funny, he kept laughing out loud, particularly at the fight scene between two of the main characters, as it was such a staged scrap.

The next morning, we were woken up by a very excited three year Katie, who was delighted at the fact it had snowed heavily overnight and she was keen to be outside playing in it. Ian went out with her while I stayed in bed a little longer; I was working a late shift that day in an Intensive Care unit in one of the city's main hospitals, so I wanted a bit of a lie in. I remember watching Ian and Katie from the warmth of the kitchen while they built a snowman. Before I left for work, I took a photo of the finished snowman, kissed my husband and daughter goodbye and left to face the snowy roads. It was the last time I would ever see my husband happy and healthy.



That night, Ian had a night out with some of his Sunday league football friends. Katie was staying overnight with my sister while I finished my shift. I came home feeling very tired and nauseous, normal symptoms of early pregnancy, and I went to bed at 10.30 pm. By 11, I was asleep, having told myself not to worry about Ian, which is what I always did when he was out.

At 11.30 pm, 22 December 2001, my life changed forever with a phone call. A police officer was on the other end, telling me to get to the A & E department of Newcastle General, because my husband had been assaulted and had banged his head. I stumbled out of my warm bed, almost cursing Ian for dragging me out onto the snowy roads late at night a few days before Christmas, all for a bump on the head. I fully expected him to be sitting in the waiting room looking sheepish and feeling sorry for himself. Instead, when I told the receptionist who I had come to collect, she showed me into a small room where the police officer I'd spoken to earlier was waiting. He told me Ian had been punched by a man, someone Ian played football with. They knew the man responsible, although he wasn't in custody at that time. The officer didn't know what condition Ian was in, but when I found a nurse, she told me he was deeply unconscious and needed a brain scan. Just at that moment, a trolley was wheeled past me - lying on it was my husband with a tube in his throat and attached to a ventilator. Although this is standard equipment I work with every day in my job, I came very close to passing out when I saw it attached to my husband.

The scan was performed, but the results weren't encouraging. Ian had two skull fractures as well as swelling on the right side of his brain. Normally, if you bruise an arm or any other limb and it swells, it's not a problem, but with the brain, there's nowhere for the swelling to go, so it's very serious. Ian was admitted to Intensive Care, not in the same hospital as I worked in, but the two units work closely together and the staff work across

the two sites, so I knew a number of the medical team. I wanted someone I knew to talk to me, but all I wanted them to tell me was that Ian was going to get better.

The next five days are imprinted on my brain as the kind of nightmare you wake from in a cold sweat. I faced a roller coaster of emotions as my beloved husband's condition fluctuated from bad to worse. It was Christmas; people wanted to be with their families, and our family just wanted to be with Ian. I couldn't really believe it was Ian I was seeing lying there – he had all his Christmas presents at home waiting to be opened, he would never leave me, and anyway, I was pregnant, he *couldn't* leave me. I really did believe he would get better, and I refused to let myself think about what quality of life he would have if he *did* recover; I just knew he would overcome any problems.

At last I had good news when I was told he had had a good night on Boxing Day, and the pressure readings in his brain had stabilised. When I visited him on the afternoon of 27<sup>th</sup>, he had developed a temperature, but that's not uncommon in brain injuries, and he also seemed to be developing a chest infection from being on the ventilator. I left to go and look after Katie, who was bewildered by what was happening and was naturally wondering where her daddy was. My brother-in-law did a brilliant job looking after her for much of the time, but it was her daddy she wanted. Back at the hospital later that evening, Ian had his fifth scan in as many days and it seemed an age before anyone came to tell us what was happening. I waited with my brother-in-law and his wife, who'd come down from their home in Scotland the day after the attack, and they'd brought Ian's parents back with them, as they had been spending Christmas in Scotland that year. The doctor told us Ian's pupils had become fixed and dilated, which they hoped was as a result of the drugs he was on and not something more sinister. After he'd left, my sister-in-law, a former nurse herself, turned to me with tears in her eyes and said 'I don't know what to say to you.' She knew as well as I did what the news meant.

I phoned Ian's parents, but they preferred to stay at home rather than come to the hospital and his brother went to be with them. My sister-in-law and I just waited. I remember reading a magazine article or a leaflet in the waiting room, all about women who had been pregnant when their husbands or partners had died on 11 September, less than three months before, and now it seemed as if I was going to be one of them. I felt better looking at that article, like I wasn't the only woman in the world facing this nightmare.

Ian deteriorated throughout the night. I know everyone did everything they could, because they let me stay in the room with him while they did all the procedures they could, but I knew in my head if not in my heart, that it was futile. My early pregnancy nausea hit me with a vengeance and I began to vomit. The doctor asked my sister-in-law if it was the predicament Ian was in that was making me sick, and when she replied that it was partly that, but mainly because I was pregnant, he was horrified, his face was a picture apparently. I was advised to go and lie down in the waiting room, and I did as I was told, even though I just wanted them to stabilise Ian so I could go home. I had no sooner laid down than I was summoned back to the unit to be told Ian's heart had stopped and they were trying to resuscitate him. A doctor said 'I think we should stop now' and I replied 'yes, I think you're right.' It was 5am, 28 December; the whole festive period had been a nightmare, culminating in my husband's death three days after Christmas at the age of 34.

I actually drove home from the hospital, I was eerily calm. My sister had been looking after Katie for me that night and we'd been trying to keep things as normal as possible for her. She wanted to stay at home and play with her new toys. When my sister heard my car pull up on the drive, she breathed a sigh of relief because she assumed that, as I'd driven, everything must be OK. She came out of the living room and I simply said 'it's over, he's gone.' She was stunned and had to look to my sister-in-law for confirmation. I called Ian's parents and told them their son had died. I was still very calm, and everything seemed to go on autopilot. The three of us had a brandy and we waited until it was a reasonable hour to start phoning and informing people. My main stumbling block was how to tell Katie. She was three and a half, and knew no more than that her daddy was in hospital with a bump on his head. Now, I was telling her he'd gone to heaven. She just kept on looking at me with a little frown on her face and occasionally would lean in and hug me, then look at me quizzically again and hug me again. It took many attempts to get the details reinforced in her mind. I didn't tell her how he'd banged his head, I didn't want her to know about a world where people could do this to her daddy.

My sister in Inverness was called, as was my brother who went to break the news to my parents before setting out for Newcastle with my sister. Our neighbour here is a vicar, and my sister Pat went to tell him and asked him to inform the neighbours, as they all knew Ian was in hospital. My sister also called my GP, who came out that day to check me and the baby over. Despite the state I was in, my baby's heartbeat was strong. I was offered a mild sedative, but declined. I needed more than a sedative to get through this, it would just put off the inevitable rather than deal with it.

One of the strongest feelings I had in the immediate aftermath of Ian's death was anger. I called CID and informed one of the officers who'd seen me the night Ian was assaulted of my husband's death. I had been told at the time that the man who'd done this to Ian would probably only be charged with a minor assault. My anger at the situation was now kicking in and I wanted to find out whether Ian's death changed the charge of minor assault and was gratified to discover it would now be a murder investigation.

When you've gone through life without ever experiencing this type of thing, when you've been an ordinary person in an ordinary family doing ordinary things, as I had, a situation like this is completely surreal. Even though I lived through it, I look back on it with detachment, as if it wasn't actually me who went through it.

Later on that morning, my mum phoned from Scotland. My father was very frail and my mum was his main carer. Because of my dad's condition, they couldn't travel down to be with me, but they were obviously very concerned. I began to speak to my mum on the phone and the grief just poured out of me. I started to wail like I'd never done before and have never done since. It was the first time I'd cried since Ian had died and it was unstoppable.

The police visited me that day and introduced me to a family liaison officer, who would guide me and help me through the procedures and grief of the next few months while the police carried out their investigation. Either he or another officer spoke to me or visited me nearly every day for the next couple of weeks. Strange though it may seem, their visits and calls helped me a great deal over the first few days, it gave me something to focus on. They were sympathetic but practical, and they were also very honest and kept

me informed about everything. It was the liaison officer who took me to the Coroner's office and I was informed that, following the post mortem, my husband's brain was not inside his body and I was actually asked if I 'would like it reunited with his body for his funeral?' I was completely taken aback, but it is now a legal obligation for a Coroner to ask this, following the problems at Alder Hey a few years earlier of organs being removed and not reunited with the main body. What most people don't realise, however, is that because the brain can't just be slotted back inside the skull, it is placed back inside the body in the stomach. There are some things I don't thank my medical training for. Having said I did want his brain and body reunited, I was taken to the hospital mortuary, along with my brother and sisters, to see Ian for the last time. He was so cold. I wanted to hold him, but he wasn't Ian any more.

We spent a tearful New Year's Eve looking at the Christmas presents Ian had bought me, and the next day we all travelled north to see my worried parents. For some reason, during the time Ian was in hospital and in the first few days after he died, I couldn't bear anyone touching me or hugging me, despite it being the one thing people *did* want to do. I didn't want anyone apart from Katie getting too close to me, but when I got to my parents' house, I just wanted to sit snuggled up close to my dad. I came home on 2<sup>nd</sup> January and from then on, I was on my own.

Just two weeks after Ian died, my sister Pat called me one morning and I knew from her voice what she was going to say. Exactly two weeks after Ian, almost to the hour, my beloved father had died in his sleep. Before Ian died, I had been dreading this news – my dad had been ill and it wasn't totally unexpected – but when the day finally came and I got the call, all I felt was numb. I'm no expert, but I believe that although we have an enormous capacity to love, our ability to feel pain is limited, like a kind of defence mechanism that enables the human spirit to continue against a tide of misery.

My husband's funeral was on a cold, bright Monday and my father's was on the Friday of the same week. Two journeys to two funerals, following two hearses, in four days. Ian's funeral was a bittersweet experience for me. The sheer number of people who attended was overwhelming, and Ian's brother gave a beautiful eulogy which had people laughing one minute and crying the next. Katie didn't attend the funeral, it would have been too bewildering and too upsetting, seeing her mummy and aunts and grandparents in tears. She has asked about it though, and I played her the music we had at the funeral, Clannad and Eric Clapton's 'Tears in Heaven'.

In those early days, my daughter was what got me out of bed on a morning. Within a couple of months, she seemed to realign the boundaries of her behaviour and pushed me to the limits of my patience and tolerance. One night as she sat in the bath, I came to a decision – once the baby was born, I'd kill myself. I wouldn't have harmed either my living child or the one growing inside me, but I felt my life was just pure misery. I actually felt better having made this decision, it was as if I now had something to look forward to. Whether or not I would have gone ahead if I hadn't been pregnant I don't know, but I had that luxury, I didn't have to do it now, I could do it in a few months.

Eleven weeks after Ian died, I returned to work. I knew I needed to get back before my maternity leave started, or I'd never go back. I was only there for six weeks, but it made a difference. Returning to intensive care nursing was easier than I'd imagined it would

be. I worried about seeing the people who'd cared for Ian, but I was going stir crazy at home and needed something else to think about. My colleagues were fantastic and gave me so much support. I was classed as supernumery, and therefore I was able to go home if things got too much for me, although I never did. A colleague who'd been on duty on the night Ian came in told me one of the doctors on call at the hospital who knew me had got a terrible shock when he'd gradually realised, bit by bit, what my situation was. Firstly, he'd known it was a fit young man who was dangerously ill, then he'd discovered it was the husband of someone he knew (and knew the man himself, we were all at a Christmas party together a few days before the assault) and finally, he found out I was pregnant.

People's reactions to my situation were naturally mostly ones of shock, sympathy and pity. I hated people telling me how sorry they were about what had happened. This usually made me cry, I preferred a simple 'how are you?', then I could decide how little or how much I would tell them. My usual response was 'not bad, thank you.' I received over 100 cards and letters, which I liked getting, despite the fact they invariably made me cry. I had cards from GP surgeries and hospital departments Ian used to visit through his work, one even referred to him as 'our' Ian. I even had one from some ladies who worked on the deli counter of a supermarket where Ian used to order sandwich platters for lunchtime meetings at the nearby hospital. I was really touched by their concern, and by the fact that Ian had touched so many lives and how highly they thought of him. He was a real charmer, a flirt with the ladies and he had the gift of the gab, so I shouldn't really have been surprised at how popular he'd been, but I was still surprised by how many different people he'd got to know.

I went for bereavement counselling in the early days and this helped a bit, although not much; I wanted to deal with the fact my husband had died, rather than *how* he'd died, which was what the counselling tended to focus on. My sister then came home one day with a leaflet for the WAY Foundation and, having read it, I realised I wasn't the only woman in the world to be widowed when young and pregnant. I can't stress how much being a part of WAY has helped me over the last three years, I can honestly say some of my best friends today are ones I've made through the organisation.

The six months after Ian's death were like a hiatus between my old life and my new one and became a bit of a waiting game. In May 2002, a month before my baby was due, I had a call from the police. The man who had assaulted Ian had changed his plea. Initially, he'd claimed self defence, but the evidence of over 80 witnesses proved overwhelmingly otherwise. He was due in court the following day and I was there as well, complete with large bump, for my very first visit to a courtroom. He couldn't look me in the eye, this man who pleaded guilty to the manslaughter of my husband, who was warned by the judge that the chances were high he'd get a custodial sentence. I know it wasn't very charitable of me (I didn't *feel* very charitable), but I said to my brother-in-law in full earshot of the man's family sitting behind me, 'I hope he rots.' Sentencing was set for 14th June, the day my baby was due, but the prosecuting barrister, a wonderful, intelligent and sympathetic man, had it changed to the 10<sup>th</sup>, a far more appropriate, bearable date.

On the 10<sup>th</sup>, I once again sat in a courtroom and listened to the details of the night Ian was hurt – a childish grudge this man had against Ian for what seemed like a simple case of

envy of his life, his family, his happiness; a few pints of lager too many; a long wait in a cold taxi queue; a spark of anger that led to a punch coming from nowhere and had seemed to ‘knock Ian’s lights out’; the sickening crack of Ian’s head hitting the pavement. The man responsible for this was given 15 months in prison, that’s all. We were very disappointed by this lenient sentence, but were equally relieved it was all over. In those days, I was repeatedly told that with each hurdle, I could move on a little further. But I didn’t want to move on, I didn’t want to leave Ian behind. I remember seeing the man’s girlfriend crying when the sentence was announced, and thinking ‘what have you got to be upset for? You can still go and see him, he’ll be out in a few months, my husband’s never coming home to me, all because of something *he* did.’ I felt very bitter towards her.

A week later, on 17 June at 3.00 am, my waters broke. My sister came to take me to hospital, my mum was looking after Katie. Eighteen hours later, Megan Lianne was born. She was a perfect little 7lb 14oz girl. I hadn’t minded what sex the baby was, but in some ways it was a relief to have another girl. I knew how to look after girls! I’d been very newly pregnant when Ian died, so we hadn’t had much of a chance to discuss names, we’d only got as far as disagreeing over a boy’s name. I was free to call her what I wanted and went for Megan, simply because I liked it, and Lianne because it had her daddy’s name in the middle.

The staff in the delivery room were fantastic. I was moved onto the ward and for the most part, the staff there were good too. Having read other widows’ accounts, I now realise that many were offered single or side rooms to avoid being surrounded by celebrating parents. I wasn’t offered this and I didn’t think to make a fuss and ask. I didn’t mind it so much actually, but one incident sticks in my mind. New fathers were allowed into the maternity unit virtually all day every day, but other visitors are asked to keep within strict visiting hours. I can appreciate that, but when my mother-in-law tried to visit before the official visiting hour, she was only allowed in for a few minutes and even then I had to talk to her in the hallway. I thought that was somewhat cruel considering the circumstances. I was kept in a second night so that Megan could have a check from the paediatrician in the morning. Although I was desperate to get home, I was also glad it gave Katie a chance to visit me in hospital. I felt she may have had a warped view of hospitals as somewhere you go but don’t come out of, after what had happened to her father. When she had to go home after visiting me, she was inconsolable and didn’t want to leave me, she thought she’d lose me there too. I came home the next day, so she was reassured.

While I was in hospital, in fact this happened with both children, a great rush of love surged over me for the tiny person lying in my arms. I didn’t feel the guilt I thought I might after Megan was born, guilt from the time Ian had been in hospital, when I’d done what I think is probably natural and tried to barter my unborn baby for my husband’s life. If God had to have someone, let it be the baby I was carrying and not my living, breathing husband. I had only been 17 weeks pregnant, and desperate to save my husband’s life. But there was no exchange and now I had my new daughter.

Something else happened after she was born. Megan was lying on my knee, cooing and making funny faces. At that moment, I laughed and felt real happiness. I knew then that

I wanted to live, I wasn't going to commit suicide after all. I wanted to do my very best for my girls and I wanted to see them grow up. The next stage of my life had begun.



## *Caroline's First Year - Getting Through It*

My mother stayed with me for the first two weeks after I came home with Megan, then my 17 year old niece came for a week, followed again by my mum, so I did have a lot of support and company for the first crucial few weeks. It helped enormously having someone there. I remembered how much help Ian had been when Katie was tiny, helping her to settle at night and supporting me, and I was scared to be on my own. Knowing there was another adult there at night was reassuring, although I never needed to call on them. Having been through the same things with Katie, I was probably more confident when dealing with crises, particularly at night – when baby coughs and illnesses seem more serious than they are, but as I'd done that part before, it wasn't as bad as it would have been if Megan was my first child.

By now, I had got to the stage where I didn't cry every day. Although I still felt great sadness and yearning, and still thought of Ian nearly every minute of every day and still talked to his picture, I had stopped crying each and every day. At times I got angry and shouted at his photos and felt he'd got the better end of the deal. I would like to believe in a life after death, but I'm not convinced. I felt that if there was some form of life after death, he'd be there in this nice, safe place without a care in the world where he could see us all the time, and if there wasn't, then he was out of all the misery and sadness I'd been left to cope with. Either way, it didn't seem fair.

In October, I found out that whilst the man who'd assaulted Ian would get an automatic release halfway through his sentence, he was also applying to be released on home detention curfew and would get out some time in November. I cannot describe the anger I felt on discovering this. After several phone calls to my liaison officer and statements written by my family, Ian's family and myself, this was thankfully denied.

We gradually moved forwards towards Christmas. December will always be a bad month for me, not just for the obvious reasons, but both my and Ian's birthdays are in December. On his birthday in 2002, the first year of his birthday without him, I took his parents to his grave. They don't go often, as they find it too upsetting. That day, we all wept as we laid flowers. We returned to the house afterwards, where Megan had us all laughing and smiling with her antics, a measure of the joy she has brought into our lives. The 21<sup>st</sup> December is not just my birthday, it's the anniversary of when we last shared a bed, and then we get to the awful anniversaries of his assault, his fight for life and his death. That first year, both our families got together, went to the cemetery and spent the day talking and supporting each other. It wasn't actually as bad as I'd been expecting, I think the thought of it was worse than the actual day. I am glad everyone got together for it though, I think it really helped. I felt I'd reached a milestone; I'd done it, I'd got through my first year without him.

## *Finally for Caroline ..... Handling the Present*

Today, three years on, little things like the smell of lilies and certain pieces of music can take me right back to the early days and I feel that sickening dread in the pit of my stomach. However, I now find that I can put things into a particular part of my mind, in a 'box' if you like. I can take it out from time to time and put it back when I feel myself start to get upset. Writing this was hard at times, because it forced me to go back over events in detail. I can now talk about Ian and the life we shared quite freely and without crying. Katie and I often talk about her daddy and she amazes me with some of the memories she still has. I know as she gets older her memory of her father will grow hazier, but with videos and photos, we try to keep them alive for her. Megan, of course, will never know her daddy. She knows it's daddy in the photos, but I don't know if she understands the concept of fathers. She is apparently very like him as a young child, confident, mischievous and at times downright defiant, a real handful and a real joy. Facially, she is like me, and Katie is the opposite, she looks like Ian but is more like me personality wise. It saddens me to think what Ian is missing out on, he would have loved her antics and I can imagine him sniggering into his hands whilst I get exasperated with her.

I have now learnt to live with my situation. I am no longer 'actively' unhappy, but nor am I truly happy as I once was, but I'm reasonably content. I have happy times when I'm with friends and family. I have a very busy and, at times, exhausting life. I am at work, which can be hard to organise, particularly with night shifts as par for the course, when I sometimes need to get my sister to have the girls several nights a week. What I do have, and know I am very lucky to have, is an excellent support network, providing me with childcare so I can go out to work. I even have a social life of sorts, probably similar to the social life any mother of young children gets!

There is still not a day goes by that Ian is not in my thoughts, but I have found that without conscious effort, I have moved on. However, I didn't, as I feared, leave him behind, I have taken him with me. Ian will always be a part of me, in my head and my heart. I would like to think I will meet someone in the future, but I know Ian will be with me even then. For me, Freud's definition of bereavement and loss, written in 1916, strikes a chord. He said 'we find a place for what we lose, although we know that after such a loss the acute stage of mourning will subside, we also know that we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute. No matter what may fill the gap, even if it is filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else.'

Having spoken to women who are or have been in unhappy marriages, they always seem to feel the same about future relationships – they don't want one. Having been in a happy marriage, I want that back some day. I think it is a compliment to the life I shared with Ian that I would like to find it again in the future.