

## *The Early Days - Cheryl*

**THE first year of the new Millennium was meant to be one of joy for Cheryl and Glenn Craggs. When Cheryl became pregnant, after nine years of marriage, they were delighted at the prospect of becoming a family in March 2000. Just days after feeling their baby move for the first time, Glenn collapsed and died at the age of 41 from a brain haemorrhage. Cheryl was 35 and 17 weeks' pregnant.**



I was 22 when I met Glenn and we were inseparable from the start. He showered me with the kind of unconditional love which normally exists between a parent and child. My younger sister Erica and I had a privileged childhood financially and materially, but my parents divorced when I was young and my dad got custody which was unusual back then. My father remarried, but our new stepmother showed us little affection and we craved our father's attention even more than ever. We had all the latest toys and presents, but not the love we wanted so much. My father died of lung cancer when I was 21 and the gap his death left in my life explains why Glenn so quickly became my dearest friend, lover and father figure all rolled into one. We rarely argued and friends teased us about how close and sickeningly happy we were together. He always spoilt me; if we were watching TV and I said I fancied some chocolate, he'd think nothing of dashing to the shop to get me some. We'd call each other ten times a day at work and did silly things like buy each other matching dressing gowns and be blissfully happy just eating fish and chips outside on a cold Friday night after work.



They were precious moments. Glenn made me feel I was the most beautiful, intelligent and adorable woman on the planet and I never once doubted we'd spend the rest of our lives together. We married in August 1990. We knew we wanted to start a family together, but there was always another reason to put it on hold – moving house, renovating our new home, fulfilling our careers, going on another fabulous holiday. When we did start seriously trying, we realised there might be a problem. We had various tests and discovered I had a blocked fallopian tube and Glenn had a low sperm count. We needed IVF treatment, but we were very laid back about it. We'd been so happy all those years together that we weren't going to get obsessed about having a baby. We had each other and that was everything. The treatment was done privately at Liverpool Women's Hospital. Even though we knew the chance of becoming pregnant first time round was slim, I think it's about 15 per cent – we were optimistic. That month was a very special, close time. Two embryos were implanted and Glenn kept telling me 'I just know you're pregnant'. That was typical Glenn, always so positive and happy. Two weeks later, we returned to do a pregnancy test. It was positive. Only then, I think, did we both appreciate just how much we'd wanted a baby of our own.

When the pregnancy was confirmed, Glenn cried. We both did. We were crying and laughing and hugging each other. Even though I was only weeks pregnant, we wanted to tell the whole world. Glenn was so excited he rang all our friends and we drove over to his parents in Darlington that afternoon to tell them they were going to be grandparents. I remember going to pick some friends up from the airport shortly after we found out and the moment he spotted them in the Arrivals hall, Glenn was shouting over the crowd, 'I'm going to be a dad!'

Those first few weeks of pregnancy were such a happy time. We pored over pregnancy magazines and books and began to consider names. Glenn was excited and it was infectious - he carried a picture from the first scan in his wallet and showed it to anyone who was interested. He always found a reason to share our news with complete strangers. One friend bought us a baby book and wrote 'To Cheryl and Glenn, enjoy your baby'. It's the only baby present I've got that was addressed to both of us. At 16 weeks, I felt the first flutterings of movement and Glenn pressed his hand to my stomach to try to feel it too.

A few days later, on 4 October 1999, I saw my husband for the last time. We were both heading off on separate overnight business trips - me to Cheltenham, Glenn to Northampton. We had a cup of coffee before we both left and kissed each other goodbye as usual. Glenn was ever thoughtful even when we were apart. I'd been so hungry during my early pregnancy that I'd been getting up at 5.00 am and eating bowls of cereal. Before I went on my trip, Glenn had bought me miniature boxes of cereal, a bowl and a spoon so I could eat in my hotel room. He'd even rung the hotel to check there was a fridge for the milk.

That day, we spoke on the phone several times, which was quite normal for us. We arranged to speak between 10 and 10.30 pm that night but a work drama cropped up and when I called him at 10.35, there was no answer. When I went to bed, there was a message on my mobile telling me to sleep well and he'd give me my usual wake up call at 7.30 am the next morning. I woke at 8.00 am, there had been no wake up call and, although I was a bit surprised, I was running late for some silly team building exercise and so I just left it.

I called his mobile during a break at 10.30 but there was no reply. I left a message saying 'I'm worried, call me' and couldn't help but begin to get a little anxious as it was the longest we'd ever gone without speaking.

When I went back into the conference room, a senior member of staff came to find me. We were joined outside the room by a woman from personnel and they took me into a side room. I remember saying 'oh gosh, this looks a bit serious'. I thought they were going to sack me. Instead, they told me Glenn was dead. Nobody knew how or why at that time. He'd died the night before in his hotel room of a suspected heart attack, but no one had been able to locate me until my office reopened in the morning. I remember screaming for Glenn, sobbing his name over and over again and begging someone to tell me it was a mistake. It didn't make sense, how could he have died without me sensing it, the loss of the most precious thing in my life? How could I have been laughing and joking that morning with my colleagues when my husband was dead? I was carrying his

baby, would that disappear too? If it could be true Glenn was gone, then what else was real in this world?

It was my worst nightmare – the sort of thing that happens in films, not to real people. I went into total shock. I just couldn't believe what was happening. On autopilot, I had to go back to my room, pack, then be driven to Northampton Hospital to identify Glenn. Seeing him lying there, looking so young and fit, made it all seem unbelievable, made the reality of his death much harder to accept and saying goodbye to him was gruesome. Afterwards, I had to go to the police station to pick up his personal belongings. When I was handed his watch, I started sobbing all over again. Later still, we had to go to the hotel where he died, collect his car keys from behind reception and load his suitcase. It was the most surreal, painful day, minutes of which will forever be blanked from my mind because they were just too painful to hold onto. The shock and grief came in waves. One minute I was numb with pain and the next I was racked with it. I was shaking all over and irrational thoughts filled my head. I kept thinking that if I could have given up my unborn baby to have Glenn back with me, I would have done it gladly. But I couldn't.

An autopsy revealed that Glenn had died of a ruptured artery in his brain. His death had been painless and instant as he had prepared to go to bed in his hotel room. He'd been found a few minutes later by a colleague.

That night, I was back in the home we'd shared in Bramhall and which Glenn had painstakingly renovated for us, being comforted by my younger sister and looking through the Yellow Pages for the number of an undertaker. The doctor had come out to check the baby's heartbeat and to prescribe me a low dose valium, but it didn't come close to easing the pain. I remember thinking 'forget about the baby, what am I going to do without Glenn?' My sister sat with me for hours while I wept in utter despair.

I didn't sleep a wink that first night, and that first week without Glenn was absolutely awful. I had to register his death, plan the funeral, even choose the hymns. I kept thinking I should be choosing a cot for our baby, not a coffin for my husband. Worst of all, I had to go shopping for appropriate clothes for my husband's funeral. I wandered round a shopping centre for hours thinking over and over again, 'my husband's died'. Eventually I walked into a local boutique and blurted out 'I need something to wear for my husband's funeral and I'm pregnant'. They couldn't have been kinder. They sat me down, gave me a drink, sorted a suitable outfit and arranged for it to be altered to accommodate my growing bump.

Glenn was buried a week after his death, his funeral was held in the chapel where we'd been married. It was so packed, people had to stand. I was determined to stay calm and dignified, but it all seemed so unreal. I remember looking down from our bedroom window and watching the funeral cars reverse into the drive. In his coffin, I placed the scan picture he had cherished, with photos of us together. It was a wretched day.

Two days after the funeral, I had to have an amniocentesis test, as my antenatal blood test had shown there was a potential risk our baby had Down's syndrome. Seeing our baby on the scanner without Glenn was awful. I was crying so much they couldn't put the needle in and had to wait until I'd calmed down a little. I kept thinking life couldn't be

this cruel, my husband is dead and now there's something wrong with my baby. The staff at Stockport's Stepping Hill hospital were wonderfully sympathetic, they booked me in during the lunchtime period when no other couples were around and fast tracked the results. Two days later, I knew my baby didn't have Down's. I also found out it was a girl, just what Glenn and I would have liked. We hadn't decided on names, but one sleepless night, it came to me. Alexandra Mae. Alexander was Glenn's middle name, so she'd have something of him, and May is my middle name. I knew immediately it was the sort of traditional name we'd have come up with together.

A few days after the test, my sister left to return to her own family and I had to start my life again alone. When I think back to those last five months of pregnancy, all I remember is being utterly desolate and miserable, a real black hole of despair. Every day was a struggle. I couldn't imagine how I was going to cope without Glenn. I know people tried to comfort me by reminding me I still had the baby, a part of Glenn still alive and growing inside me, but it gave me no solace. I didn't want the baby without Glenn, it was just a constant reminder of what I'd lost.

Even a few years later, I find it difficult to look at women who are pregnant, as I don't have good memories of being pregnant myself. The whole grieving process was made worse because I was pregnant. I couldn't tell which emotions were due to pregnancy and which were down to raw grief.

I felt no excitement about my developing baby. I bought all her clothes and nursery equipment on autopilot. I just walked into John Lewis and thought 'that'll do', then returned to the empty house that had once been my home. When I assembled her cot, I thought of how Glenn and I should have been doing it together. The baby books and magazines lay untouched on the coffee table, I stopped reading them, I hated all the references to comfortable lovemaking positions and asking your partner to rub your feet. When you're pregnant, everyone wants to know when it's due or has a comment to make about your bump. I wasn't proud and excited any more, I wanted to hide away. I had no one to share what should have been an exciting time. I busied myself getting the nursery ready, but it was all done on autopilot, my life with Glenn constantly playing on my mind. Once, in December, I stumbled out of Mothercare in tears because the song blaring out of the sound system was *Lonely This Christmas*. I spent Millennium Eve under the duvet wearing earplugs, desperately trying to block out the fireworks and sounds of people partying and celebrating the new century.

I went into labour on March 18 2000. I calmly collected my belongings, called my sister and headed for the hospital. Erica rushed to be with me and the wonderful midwife stayed for the whole twelve hour labour. I expected to be distraught, but I just felt emotionally numb. At times, the pain of childbirth forced me to focus on something other than the agony of my loss. At others, I felt close to Glenn, as the midwife and Erica encouraged me to remember and talk about the happiness Glenn and I shared in our thirteen years together. It was as if he were rejoicing with me in the birth of the child he'd so desperately wanted.



When Alexandra was placed in my arms, I loved her instantly. But it all felt so wrong. Glenn should have been there with us, I wanted to scream out for him. I had our precious daughter but I didn't have him and an overwhelming feeling of loss throbbed inside me as I gazed at this tiny new life. The hospital staff couldn't have been kinder. I was given a private room, so I didn't have the torture of seeing happy couples cooing at their new babies. That night, I felt completely flat. Glenn should have been calling everyone up to tell them our wonderful news, but instead, it was just me and the baby. I came out of hospital after two days and Erica stayed with me till Alexandra was six days old. Until then, I'd felt a strange mixture of euphoria at the birth of my child and sorrow for the circumstances into which she'd been born. But after Erica left, reality struck and I had to go it alone.

I couldn't bear to go to mother and baby groups. I had nothing in common with the other women. I felt like a freak, and wanted to stamp my feet and scream 'I didn't choose to be like this!' I was exhausted too, as I'd walk for miles, pushing Alexandra's buggy, just for something to do. Everywhere I looked there seemed to be couples holding hands, pregnant women looking happy with themselves and life, proud fathers holding newborn babies in slings. I hated them. They'd all smile at me with my tiny baby in her pram and I'd feel angry at them for looking so smug. I even fantasised about marching up to them and telling them that I had buried my husband when I was 17 weeks' pregnant. I'd breastfeed Alexandra and weep as I looked down at her face – I loved her with all my heart and the fact I couldn't be happy, even for her, only added to my torment. I was trying to come to terms with the loss of my first love while at the same time adjusting to being mother to my second, it seemed an impossible task. I didn't feel as if I could ever function fully in the world again.



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

The first year was horrendous and there seemed to be no end to the miserable anniversaries. It started with my first Christmas as a widow, and that dreadful Millennium Eve only two months after Glenn's death. Then came the first birthdays and wedding anniversary without him. Finally, I came full circle to the anniversary of his death, so closely followed by my first Christmas as a mother.

If I'm totally frank, looking after Alexandra alone often felt like a never ending chore. I got her into a pretty good routine when she was still only weeks old and she slept through the night after a few weeks, but there was no one there to share all her milestones with – her first tooth, learning to crawl, who loved her as much as I did, no one for me to say 'come and look' when she was sleeping. In fact, it wasn't until she was 18 months old that I really started to enjoy her.



Other people's happiness stabbed at my heart and I hated everyone else for getting on with their lives while I still mourned. Early on, people told me time was all that could heal me and I wanted to spit in their faces. I didn't want to hear that I might ever feel even a tiny bit better, because that would mean I was letting go of Glenn and my grief was all I had left of him. But no matter how many times I went to bed hoping I wouldn't wake up in the morning, I always did, and slowly – very slowly – I began to feel a bit better. I began to make a life for me and our precious child, and gradually the house became a home again.

I realised I couldn't allow our beautiful girl to grow up deprived of joy, and I knew she must never get used to the sight of her mother crying, which is why every evening for months, I would lock the door, put my pyjamas on, put my daughter to bed and *then* let the tears come. During the day, we played in the park, made new friends and tried to find fun wherever we could. I became increasingly glad to be alive. I also changed career direction, left my office job and worked from home doing aromatherapy and holistic treatments. During the week, Alexandra went to nursery and it was good for her to have friends and interests outside the house. Weekends were very hard for a couple of years, having to find things to do to keep both of us occupied for two long days.

I found lone parenting as exhausting as it was rewarding, and I hated having to make all the decisions about Alexandra's well being.

In the first year, before and after Alexandra was born, I wrote my feelings down in the form of letters to Glenn. I call it my morbid book. I've also written a book for Alexandra about my and Glenn's life together – how we met, our jokes, things we did together. When she's older and can read it, she'll know just how much her mother and father loved



each other. I've also made a collection of Glenn's personal things for her to look at – his clothes, photos, driving licence. I asked all his work colleagues and friends to write their memories of Glenn in a beautiful leather bound book, memories which include his practical jokes and his thoughtfulness, things I might not think to tell her. I spent hours putting together a memory box to share with Alexandra, to help try and explain where her daddy is and make sure she knows what a special man he was. I missed Glenn every waking moment and my heart ached to have him here with us. But he couldn't be, so it was down to me to give her the kind of normal childhood she would have had if her dad had been around.

I don't believe that time heals, but I do think you become more accepting of your situation. The first was very painful - I survived a year came round and we willow in the garden engraved with the why I loved him, I can and it was me.' By the anniversary, I was becoming more and more distant, he was becoming my past. That was painful too, but it no longer felt raw.



anniversary of Glenn's death was acknowledging the fact I'd without him. Some friends planted a Japanese maple and a and I placed a simple slate words, 'if I am pressed to say only reply because it was he time I reached the third aware of how Glen was

Alexandra has always been a happy, secure and well balanced child. Everyone tells me my daughter looks like me, but sometimes when I look at her, I see Glenn. Not only does she have his smile, they are also alike in temperament. She has his cheeky sense of humour and his desire to please that I loved so much. Initially, when she was only a year or so old, these similarities were painful to see, but the fact that Alexandra and I have since shared many happy moments must prove that a human being can survive anything. There are times when Alexandra's expression reminds me so much of her father, especially when she's pensive or contemplative and doesn't realise I'm watching her. At nursery, when she was about two, she began to say 'daddy's at work', imitating the other children. By three, she would say 'my daddy's called Glenn, I like him. We can't see him. He died.' She was too young to really understand what it meant. By the time she was a toddler, I felt I owed it to her to let the old Cheryl out and enjoy life again. More than two years after Glenn's death, I finally felt at the end of a long dark tunnel and began to see light I never expected to see.

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

Since Glenn's death, people had hinted I'd find love again and I never believed them. My experience of loss was so painful and unbearable that my thoughts of entering into a new relationship were ones of fear – fear of loving and possibly losing someone again. I also felt I would never be able to have a relationship as good as the one I had with Glenn. I decided I was never even going to look for a new relationship and had reached a 2½-year stage in my grief where I was beginning to cope well by adjusting slowly to my situation. I was prepared to allow myself to be happy again, but that didn't mean I wanted another man in my life. Gradually, I began to socialise again – I hadn't gone out socially for over twenty months following Glenn's death. I



I had also been involved with setting up the local Manchester branch of WAY, and that's where I met Wyndham, a widower with a daughter the same age as Alexandra.

Initially, we were friends. He knew he wanted to enter into a relationship/marriage again eventually, as he didn't want to think 'this is it' after his short marriage ended when his wife died. We began our relationship tentatively at first, as we were both very vulnerable. I was surprised at how natural our being together felt, and we gradually started to spend more time together, including weekends. It was then, when we started seeing each other regularly, that I discovered what it was really like to have a family – what it would have been like if Glenn had lived. We did simple things like buying the girls' shoes together or going to the park. The first time we took our then two year olds to the park and held hands was a most surreal experience, as I had previously only taken Alexandra to the park as a single mum, looking with envy at all the other couples together with their children. We went on holiday to France and began to make joint decisions, and I loved it.

Being with Wyndham doesn't take away my love for Glenn. I talk about him and Wyndham talks about his wife. I never felt I had to run around taking down Glenn's photos when he stayed over. It was easier being with someone who has an understanding of your grief, and having lost someone yourself, you're more appreciative of what you've got afresh.

After being with Glenn my whole adult life, the thought of making love to someone else used to fill me with horror. But when it actually happened, it felt like the most natural thing in the world, as did saying to him 'I love you'. But then there were times when it still felt really strange – when we went for a weekend to the Lake District and I saw our clothes hanging together in the wardrobe, for example. Small, simple things like that.

For the first time in three years, I felt happy. On the anniversary of Glenn's birthday in 2003, I visited his grave and left flowers. But that evening I went to a wedding reception with my new partner. I really let my hair down and for a time I forgot I was a widow. The next morning, I felt very guilty and unnerved. Your feelings don't disappear



overnight when you meet someone else, you just find that new feelings of love surface when the right person comes along, and you are in the right place emotionally.



Wyndham and I moved in together in September 2003 after eighteen months as a couple. It was a natural progression, as we were so happy together and so sure of our relationship. Wyndham proposed to me a month later, and we were married on May 22<sup>nd</sup> 2004 with our four year old daughters as our bridesmaids.

We both remain members of WAY, and I still play an active role both locally and on the national committee. Both Wyndham and I and our children in particular continue to have issues relating to our respective losses. The local WAY branch still gives us a much-needed outlet for discussion of various topics and we have made some very special friends.

I've taken part in this writing project in order to give hope to other women in my situation, who are still in the depths of despair. When I was widowed, I really never wanted or dreamt of being in a relationship again. Now, however, I cannot believe the happiness I would have been missing out on if I had never allowed myself to love again. My life feels complete again. Wyndham and I both give each other time and space to discuss our previous partners, who will always remain a part of our lives. We have created a new and happy family and look forward to many happy years together.

