

The Early Days - Helen

AFTER four years together, Helen McKinnis and Ray Block were planning for the birth of their baby and for their wedding, both due to take place in 2003. The day after Valentine's Day, however, saw an end to all those plans when Ray died suddenly of a brain aneurysm. He was 39.

Ray and I had been together for *exactly* four years when he died, the 14th of February 2003 was our fourth anniversary. It was a wonderful four years, he was a brilliant guy, optimistic, funny - he was, although I hate to use the words, my soul mate, he was like the other half of me, and when he died I lost a part of me too.



We were planning to marry in September 2003. When I found out I was pregnant, we talked about marriage – it had become a more serious option because of the pregnancy, but I was slightly vain and didn't want wedding pictures of me with a big bump. The baby was due in the summer and so we decided to leave it till the autumn when I'd have got my figure back or as Ray put it, I would be 'back to normal' again! I had been married before and was a bit wary of remarrying, a classic case of once bitten, twice shy. I had been of the opinion that we didn't need to get married, that 'if it ain't broke don't fix it', we were plodding along happily as we were. Ray was a train driver, he was earning a good salary and it seemed as if everything was flowing nicely, particularly when I got pregnant and we planned our marriage for later that year. Obviously, not knowing what's round the corner, you can't plan for every eventuality, you think you have time to put things on hold till a later date, don't you?

Once Ray had qualified as a driver, and was secure in his job and our relationship, he was keen to have his own family. I have a daughter from my marriage, but Ray wanted a child of his own. We started talking about it in summer 2002, and I decided to stop taking the pill, have a few months of really looking after myself to get myself into shape for pregnancy and then we'd start thinking of having a baby after Christmas. I stopped taking the pill in September and literally, about a week after I stopped I got pregnant, it was that quick. We weren't surprised I was pregnant, just at the speed it had happened. I found out I was expecting a baby after about three weeks, normally you're about six or seven or more, and Ray was really, really excited. I knew he wanted a son, and we found out on February 5th that the baby was a boy. We'd gone for a scan and Ray asked what sex the baby was and they told us; after the hospital appointment, we went for a coffee and bought a book on names. We were scanning through the pages and I suggested Harry. Ray's surname was Block, and we had a laugh about the name Harry Block, Ray said he sounded like a second hand car dealer, 'Arry Block'. So we decided – the baby was Harry. Ray knew for just ten days he was having a son, and he was over the moon, talking about Scaletrix and football boots etc. I remember him saying to me on the day of the scan, 'I just want this over, I just want this baby born, I want to see him'. I was excited too; because my first marriage had failed, I felt this was a second chance to have

a lovely complete family with my daughter and Harry and Ray. I thought things were finally going to work for me, I was going to have a bit of luck and have the family I wanted.

But it doesn't work like that. Our 4th anniversary was on a Friday, the last day of a few days off Ray had taken. All day, I'd had a very weird feeling about the Saturday and I said so to Ray. He was having a bath on the Friday evening and I was feeling really anxious about the next day, I went into the bathroom and I said 'I'm really not happy about tomorrow, I've got a really bad feeling about it.' But, as I told him, I couldn't put my finger on it, I thought it was to do with my daughter, who was going to a party.

I'd never had anything like that feeling before. I went to bed just as normal that Friday night – Ray often went to bed after me and I lay there worrying while he went outside for a cigarette, but he seemed to take a very long time to come back in, so much so that I actually got out of bed and went down and asked if he was all right. He said he was, but I still felt really anxious, I had a sense of impending doom. I finally went to sleep and on the Saturday morning Ray was really, *really* jolly, he actually jumped out of bed that morning, saying 'I'm playing football today!' He was so happy and so hyper that it was almost too much, he was jumping and dancing around the bedroom to the radio and I remember thinking 'I just want to go back to sleep, I want a bit of peace and quiet!' Ray had such energy, he was a real extrovert. That day, he got ready and later on he went to football. For some weird reason, we never said or kissed goodbye, which we *always* did normally, I have no idea why we didn't then. Sometimes I've thought maybe it *wasn't* goodbye, maybe we'll see each other again, I don't know.

We were going out for dinner that night to celebrate our anniversary then rather than on Valentine's Day itself, which would have been really busy. That afternoon, I was having a bath and shampooing my hair when the phone rang. Normally, I'd let the answer phone take the call, but on this occasion I actually jumped out of the bath to answer it, because that feeling of anxiety had come over me again. It wasn't even Ray on the other end, it was my ex-husband Andy, who just wanted to let me know our daughter Beth had got to her party OK. We had a brief chat and he rang off. A few minutes later, about quarter to four, I got a call from Ray's football manager, saying Ray had fallen over. He didn't seem to know exactly what had happened, but he didn't sound particularly worried either, he just told me an ambulance had taken Ray to hospital and offered to arrange for someone to pick me up to take me there. I assumed Ray had broken an arm or leg – nothing *too* terrible - and said I'd make my own way to the hospital.

I dried my hair, I still had no real sense of urgency or panic. I got a taxi to the hospital, I was even joking with the taxi driver, saying that when I next saw Ray, he'd be sitting up in bed with his broken limb or bandaged head saying 'look what I've done.' When I arrived, a chap from the football club was there looking quite worried. He told me Ray was in with the doctors and I couldn't see him. It was then that I began to think it might be serious. He pointed out the ambulance driver who had brought him in, so I spoke to him about it and the first thing he said to me was 'how old is he?' I replied he was 39 and the paramedic said they'd thought he was only in his 20s because he was so fit. Then he told me he was unconscious, I couldn't see him and with that he walked away. No-one told me anything for a while. I was in the family room when a nurse came in to tell me he was still unconscious. I didn't know if he was breathing on his own, whether he

had a heart condition or what was wrong. She advised me to call his family even though I didn't know what to tell them. At this point I knew, I just *knew* that this was really bad and that Ray was dead or going to die. I called his parents, but all I could say was it was serious but couldn't tell them any more. Just as they and my parents arrived, the doctor told us Ray had a brain aneurysm and had a 5% chance of survival. I don't want to trivialise it, but it was like something out of Casualty, you see it so many times on TV or read about it in books, but this was happening now, to me. I just sat there staring into space, thinking 'he's dead', sitting there with my baby bump, thinking 'what the hell am I going to do?'

Ray was on a life support machine – I was allowed by his parents to see him first. He was on a ventilator and it was horrible, his eyes were open but his pupils had completely disappeared and he was looking right at me. I just looked at him and said 'you've gone'. And right then, I knew that I truly believed we all have a soul, because Ray was such a vibrant person, so full of life and now there was nothing there, it had gone, whatever it is that burns internally, it had gone.

Perhaps it was the shock, but I felt unusually calm, perhaps it was because I was pregnant and I had to contain all my emotions because of the baby. I felt that if I lost control and broke down, it would affect the baby, and apart from this nightmare going on around me, this child was all I could think about.

I couldn't stay in the hospital, I left Ray with his family. I was going back later, but I had to get out of there, it was as if something was telling me to go and I just couldn't bear to see Ray like that. He didn't like people being around him whenever he was ill, even when he just had a cold he wanted to be alone to put up with it and get through it. I felt that right then, as he lay in hospital, he would have hated everyone standing around him looking at him. So I left, I felt stifled, as though I couldn't breathe and I just had to get out.

I never went back to the house I'd shared with Ray from that day. I stayed with my ex-husband, who was brilliant during all of this. On the Sunday, the next day, I went back to the hospital. We'd been told to keep talking to Ray, and there was something inside me that just felt as though he was hanging on. I sat with him on my own and said to him, 'look, if you can't come back to me as the man you were, then you've got to go. You can't fight this and you wouldn't want to be just half the man you were, so I send you off with love and I give you permission to go, much as I love you and don't want you to go.' And with that, he deteriorated rapidly, as if he thought 'I really *can't* fight this, I've got to go.' I was sure he could hear me, because after that, everything started to go wrong, I could see the monitor and his heart rate was dropping. They performed a brain stem test and we were told he was brain dead and he had effectively died. At this stage, things were starting to have an effect on me and the baby. I was 23 weeks' pregnant, my blood pressure was rising and they took me up to the maternity unit for observation. I was worried and concerned, and felt I had a duty now to look after our baby, the baby Ray had wanted so much. After I'd been stabilised in the maternity ward, I went to say my final goodbye.

I couldn't give permission to turn the life support machine off because we weren't married; his father had to do it. He did, however, ask me about organ donation,

something Ray and I had never talked about it so I didn't know what his views on it were. I then left the hospital for the last time and got a phone call on the Monday morning from his sister to say they'd turned the machine off and he'd passed away peacefully. She also said she and his parents had seen his soul leave his body, his hand became very light all of a sudden and then went very heavy as his soul left him. Whether it's true or not, I don't know, but it's nice to think so, especially if it gives them comfort.

For me, Ray died on the Saturday, but officially it was the Monday, and as the funeral wasn't till the following Tuesday, there was over a week to get through. I don't remember much either about that time or about the funeral itself. Again, because we weren't married, it was down to Ray's parents to organise the funeral. I went to their house in Hampton Court, the vicar arrived and I might as well not have been there.

His parents and his sister in particular just took over. The vicar was asking questions about Ray, addressing them directly to me, because he knew that as Ray's partner, I knew him better than anyone, but I couldn't get a word in edgeways. Several times during the conversation, I felt I didn't even know the bloke Ray's family was talking about, some of the things they were saying made me want to shout 'no, no, no, that's not right, that's not Ray', but I couldn't intervene; as they were next of kin, I just had to let *them* talk. But I do feel I could have been included more.

We discussed the Order of Service and Ray's sister wanted to include a line at the bottom of it from the family to say 'Les, Evelyn and family thank everybody for their support.' I asked about including my name, but the reply was that that would make it too complicated. With just the one name? I remember thinking at the time 'I'm not Les, I'm not Evelyn and I'm not family, so who am I? Is it because we weren't married that I'm not important?' I realise it was only a trivial thing, but at the time it really hurt. I felt quite bullied; in some ways, I've felt a little bit bullied by the family ever since Ray died, but at that particular time, I felt it most keenly.

After I got back to Andy's that evening, I needed some air and went for a walk, I was beginning to feel I couldn't handle it any more. It was February, very dark, and I just walked and walked and walked. I found myself going back to the house Ray and I had shared; I'd moved out immediately after his death. Our stuff was still in there, it was still our house, it was just that neither of us was in it any more. A friend of mine was feeding Ray's tropical fish for me, and as I walked up the driveway I saw the light on in the lounge (which my friend had accidentally left on) and I had a feeling of such relief, I thought, my God, it's all been a complete mistake, he's actually in the house. Despite being five months' pregnant, I raced up the driveway and banged on the door, shouting 'Ray, let me in, let me in!' I ran right round the outside of the house, banging on all the windows, screaming 'Let me in, I know you're in there!' and then it hit me, the realisation that of course he wasn't in there, he was dead. I just sat on the step and fell apart, I simply could not believe he was dead at the age of 39, I couldn't believe he was never coming back. While I was sitting there on the step, distraught, my mobile rang. It was a friend of mine who immediately came to pick me up and took me back to her house, while I just sat and refused to believe all this was happening.

Three hundred people came to the funeral, but I don't remember a lot about it, I was in a complete daze. I do remember people giving me their condolences and a lot of people

not talking to me because they didn't know what to say. Being pregnant made me stand out and as I walked down the aisle in the crematorium, I felt every single eye on me, I felt like a car crash victim must feel, everyone staring and rubbernecking, all thinking 'you poor woman, I'm so glad it didn't happen to me.' I really didn't want to be there, and the only way I got through it was to imagine the whole thing was a movie and I was just an extra, it was so unreal. The whole service passed by and I took nothing in bar the last few minutes, when a song by Coldplay called The Scientist was played, it was a favourite of Ray's and I do remember hearing people crying at that point. There was a wake, but as soon as I could I got out of there. It didn't feel right, people were drinking too much and I remember seeing people laughing, while I was thinking 'no, you can't do this, it's Ray's funeral, not a bloody party, you can't be drinking and laughing, this is a young man who died, we shouldn't *be* here', so I left and went home to be with my daughter.

Once the funeral was over, I tried to focus on the practical side, finding somewhere to live, having to apply for benefits, as I had no money. Not being married is a real problem in my situation. I couldn't apply for the widow's £2000 payment, and I don't get a bereavement benefit or pension, despite the fact I have had Ray's child. Ray didn't leave a will, so everything had to go to probate, which was all down to his father, sorting it all out was an absolute nightmare. The worst thing to happen was about two days after the funeral, when I was told that when the baby was born, I wouldn't be able to register Ray's name as the father on the birth certificate. I thought it was a wind up until I made a couple of calls and found out it was true - if your partner dies while you're pregnant and you're not married, you can't register his name as the baby's father, because you could be seen to be making a claim on their estate, or could be trying to defraud someone, there are a number of reasons, but it absolutely devastated me, it was almost as big a blow as his death. It took 17 months to be finally told I could go to the Births & Deaths Registry and get a full birth certificate for Harry with Ray's name on as his father.

Ray worked for South West trains and they have a death in service payout, supposedly paid to any dependents, but because we weren't married, Ray's father was next of kin and took over the entire proceedings. His solicitor became involved and found a law which means that, as Ray's unborn child, Harry would get the money when he's 18. Apart from the fact we need the money now, this law went against everything both Ray and I believed in, we just didn't agree with children inheriting large amounts of money, particularly when they're just 18. Therefore, there is an awful lot of money sitting in a bank right now and I can't touch a penny of it, instead I am on income support and housing benefit and not much else money wise.

Coping with the rest of the pregnancy was just something else for me to get through. A midwife came to check me the day after Ray died and we were both fine now after the scare at the hospital. I didn't have any additional scans during the pregnancy, but the doctor phoned me from the surgery to say if I wanted any help, to call her. I did wonder what exactly she *could* do, except prescribe some sort of medication and I didn't want to take anything. Strangely enough, after Ray's death, I've seemed to catch everything going on a pretty regular basis, whether it be colds or flu, stomach bug, tonsillitis, I seem to have had something pretty much every 6-7 weeks since he died. I've never been so ill in my life and I think it's probably anxiety and stress.

Physically, the pregnancy went pretty smoothly in the last few months, there wasn't any danger to the baby, but I was on autopilot and just going through the motions. It hadn't been an easy pregnancy to begin with, I'd been very sick and constantly tired. Add to that my grief and loneliness and it was just something to be endured rather than a beautiful, enjoyable experience. One day you're going out as a couple, buying things, doing things together. The next, you're on your own and just don't know what to do. You know you have to carry on for the sake of the baby but what do you *do*?

I went to buy a pram and bought the one Ray had wanted, with no thought behind it, no trying it out, no concern about colour, style, how easy it would be to manoeuvre, just 'oh that's the pram Ray wanted, I'll have that', it was horrible actually. When I looked round Mothercare and saw happy couples together like I'd been a few weeks before, I wanted to go up to them and say 'you're so lucky to have each other, you're so lucky, let me tell you what's happened to me'. It wasn't that I wanted sympathy, but I was so angry that this had happened to me and I didn't know why. Why is it some couples who are unhappy together are allowed to remain together, even have a child, and I, who was so happy with Ray, wasn't allowed to be so?

I had to get on with things, as I had a daughter to look after and she was devastated by Ray's death. She was only five and I had to try and explain the concept of death to her at that very young age. Her father and I carried on as normally as we could. We didn't keep her off school, she went as normal, and the school was brilliant; the teachers counselled her through the early days, had her talk about 'Biggie', as she used to call Ray, and draw pictures of him. On one occasion shortly after Ray's death, I was waiting in the school playground for her. She'd been having a really bad time of it, struggling with her grief, but that day she came out of school laughing and I was relieved she'd had a good day at last. She ran up and put her arms up in the air to something, not looking at me, so I waved and said 'hellooo, I'm over here', but she became really angry with me, saying 'can't you see him? Can't you see Biggie?' The hairs on the back of my neck stood up and she said 'he's standing behind you.' I asked her if he was all right and replied 'yes, he's smiling, can't you see him?' She was so happy and it actually seemed to move her forward a little bit, she seemed more cheerful generally after that. I do believe she did see him, because children *can* see things adults can't.

She saw him just once more after that. She was coming back from a party, her head was full of her exciting afternoon and she was really happy. We turned a street corner and she said 'Ray's standing over there, mummy, he's standing in the road.' Like the first time she'd seen him, there hadn't been any reason for her to think of him or conjure him up in her mind at that particular moment, she was preoccupied with other things. Again, I said 'is he all right?' and she said 'yes, he's smiling, can't you see him, mummy?' She really couldn't understand why I couldn't see him and I told her how lucky and blessed she was that *she'd* been able to. Children are resilient and now she doesn't talk about him as much; being only eight, the memories are fading a little, but she remembers him and remembers things they did together.

At first, she was very clingy to both me and her dad, I think she felt that if Ray could go out and never come back, it could happen to anyone, so she became very clingy for a year or so. I think she knows too much for her age, she can talk about death quite a lot, and has a greater understanding of it than most eight year olds. I feel sorry for her in that respect,

because it's taken away some of her innocence, but I can't lie and never will lie to her, I've always been honest about how and why Ray died, but it's definitely taken away some of her innocence. It's done the same for me as well, though. Ray's death has taken away my naiveté about life; unless you lose somebody, we all have that naiveté to a certain extent. We all think we're going to be here for at least 70 years, that we're indestructible, even if we're ill, we've got modern medicine and machines that will save us and the truth is they don't. And when you experience loss at a young age, you lose any notions about your own immortality.

I read tons of books on bereavement shortly after Ray died, and dozens of books on the afterlife, I became obsessed with it, because I just didn't believe Ray could be dead, I didn't want to believe for one second that he was just dead and that was it, game over. For my own sanity, I had to hang onto the thought that he'd gone somewhere else, because the alternative was unthinkable – what, you just die and that's it? In which case, what the hell is it all about, why bother with life at all? There are days when I do think that when you die, you die and that's it, but there are other days when I think there *is* somewhere else and that's where Ray is, and he's fine and happy. Unlike in the beginning, I don't dwell on it much now. But in the early days, I read a lot of books; I know I had support from family and friends, but I had suffered this huge loss and I couldn't relate to anything for many months – the books helped.

When I went out in the weeks after Ray's death, I felt as though everything was in slow motion, I was so detached from everything and everyone that I felt I could never reconnect with the world again. And that frightened me, because I wondered if I had been so dependent on that person for my own happiness, that that had been all I had been living for. And now he'd gone and here I was, having to survive on my own, look after a child and an unborn baby and I found it very difficult to cope with.

At the time of Ray's death, I was 23 weeks' pregnant, there was one week to go before the cut-off point for a termination. One day during that week, I phoned my friend and told her I couldn't go ahead with the pregnancy, this was meant to be *our* baby, mine and Ray's, not just mine. Looking back, it was a flippant remark in a panic stricken moment, but I really thought I couldn't continue with the pregnancy. My friend listened to everything I said, told me she would support me whatever decision I made, but begged me to think about the fact that the baby would be something of Ray, he would give me a lot of comfort, he could in truth be my saviour. And I *did* think about it and realised that if I aborted this baby, Ray would be devastated, because he had wanted it so much. But it wasn't as if making that decision really solved anything or made the situation any easier.

Once I'd made up my mind and the time for a termination had passed, I panicked constantly at the thought of being left alone with a baby, of being on my own with two children and of living without him. I found it so difficult just waking up every morning without him, because he was such a rock to me, he wasn't just my lover, he was my best friend; I turned to him for everything and I wanted to talk to him *now* about all these things I was going through because of his death. I wanted to ask him, 'how do I get a house, how do I get this money, what do I tell Beth, how will I cope with a baby without you?' and he just wasn't there any more. On many occasions I just wanted to die myself, I didn't want to be here any more, I just wanted to be with him.

When the time came for me to give birth, the hospital was very good. They agreed to my request for a Caesarean given the circumstances, as I knew I couldn't face going through a normal birth. I asked Ray's mum to be my birthing partner, I thought perhaps because she'd lost her son, it would be a positive thing for her to see her grandson being born. She was actually a good person to have with me, she was very grounded and rational, and I think it was a sort of relief to her to see her grandson born safely after the trauma of losing her son. The birth itself was fine, not too painful and not too long, but it wasn't as if I didn't know what to expect. I knew the date of delivery, I went in in the morning and the baby was born without any fuss shortly afterwards. Everyone, myself included, was very calm. Although the whole event was tinged with sadness, we all tried to put it to the back of our minds, the focus was on Harry being born and by the time came to give birth, that's all I could think about, I had to try and remain as calm as possible for myself and the baby. I bonded with him instantly. I hadn't had the trauma and exhaustion of a normal delivery and he looked like his dad. When the hormones kicked in as he lay in my arms, it all came rushing back to me, my loss and Harry's loss, what Ray was never going to see, what Harry was never going to see, so he was so incredibly precious and important to me right from the start.

The staff were great while I was in hospital, I was in a small room off the main ward so I didn't have to see new dads coming in. I went home after two days, my parents came and stayed with me and the children in the house I'd found about six weeks after Ray died.

It was only when I got home that it really hit me that I was on my own with this baby. There were an awful lot of tears, often when I was feeding Harry, as it was a peaceful time, a time for thinking, but it was always restrained. I really believe you put your grief on hold when you're pregnant. You've got a baby to consider so you can't do the normal things you might do in grief like get out of your head on drink or drugs, scream, shout or whatever, you have to look after your unborn child. Then, when the baby's born, you again have to put it on hold, because you've got to care for the baby *and* look after yourself, you've got to eat properly, sleep as much as you can and try and rest in order to be able to cope with a new baby and you never really get a chance to smash something to bits, to scream and shout and say I really *hate* what's happened to me. But it's all still bubbling inside you, you can't ignore it for ever and just keep going, and about fifteen months after Harry's birth, it all started to surface - real anger about my situation, bitterness, self pity - and always the same question - why me? So many questions and not a single answer.

Helen's First Year Getting Through It



Like anyone bereaved, there are things to get through in the first year that are hard, but for me, the first anniversaries weren't the hardest because I didn't quite take them in, I found the 2nd anniversaries much more difficult to get through. I think in some ways, the shock of a partner's sudden death protects you, because you can't believe that they've died. For the first six, seven months or even longer, you still think they're going to walk in through the door. You *know* they're not, but you can tell yourself and almost believe that they are. I could never quite take it in that Ray was dead. My house is close to the railway Ray used to drive along. Sometimes, late at night when things got really, really bad and my grief had a strong grip, and I heard the late night train, I used to imagine Ray was driving it and that was the only way I got through it - I used to think 'oh yes, he's on the late shift, he'll be home soon.' On the first anniversaries, I used to look at his shift rota and work out what shift he'd be doing, and if he was due to be at work, I'd feel better about him not being around on his birthday or Beth's birthday for example because even if he'd been alive, he'd have been at work anyway. I suppose I used to get through all the worst times by imagining he was still alive.

The event I'd been dreading most was Christmas, which some people found strange because they assumed our anniversary would be more difficult to get through. But our anniversary was the day before he'd died and it seemed so linked up with his death that it probably won't be remarkable in itself any more. It will be a day forever more tinged with sadness, but because it was so close to his death, it seemed as if it had gone by anyway that first year. But Christmas was something Ray loved. We always went to his parents' on Christmas Eve, because his mum's German and they celebrate Christmas on the 24th. I took the children and throughout the whole day, Ray's name was not mentioned once. I sat there and thought we could at least toast absent friends, even though we'd all know who we meant, but nothing at all was mentioned. The atmosphere was a bit thick, you could tell Ray was conspicuous by his absence, and everyone was thinking but not saying 'Ray's not here'. I got through Christmas, but the bit between 27th December and New Year was absolutely horrendous, I went downhill so fast it was unbelievable. That was my lowest point ever, I even contemplated ending my own life then, I felt so alone. It's a lousy time of year anyway with its cold, dark days, it's a time of year that's meant to be about family and being with the one you love. I truly felt desperate. Ray had been a musician and had recorded tons and tons of music. During those few days, Beth was at her dad's so there was just me and Harry, who was only six months old. I just shut myself in the house with him and played Ray's music constantly. I wanted to bring him back for those few days, wanted to bring him back into my house; I just listened to his music and cried almost constantly. It was probably a reaction to no-

one having spoken about him over Christmas. However, I did get through it and only a few weeks later, I had to face the first anniversary of Ray's death. It was very depressing. I went to the football ground where Ray had died and laid flowers, which I knew at the time Ray wouldn't have wanted, but I didn't know what else to do and it was something I felt I *had* to do. After that, I thought things might move forward and get better, I thought that the first year was out of the way and I'd survived it, things would get better. But they didn't, and the second year was harder. When Ray's birthday came round last year, 31st May, he would have been 41, and it dawned on me that the last time he'd been alive for his birthday had been two years before. Two years already! People always say time's a healer, but I disagree, time just confirms the fact they're never coming back, confirms you're never going to see them again in this life.

As I said earlier, shock protects you from the worst of this situation, but by the second year of bereavement, the shock's worn off and so too has its protection, and then the realisation that they've gone really hits you. I found the second anniversaries very difficult and I spent most of his birthday if not in tears, then feeling extremely sad.

I have a lot of things to keep Ray's memory alive. As well as his music, I kept all Ray's football medals. I had them all on display for quite a long time, my lounge was almost a shrine to him for a while, there were photos everywhere, most of the possessions in the room were his, but in summer 2004, I decided to put some things away. I put the medals in a special box, took a few photos down and now I've only got the nicest pictures around. I've kept other things of his too, things which sound daft to other people, for example, a packet of tobacco. On the day he died, he had a fleece on with a packet of tobacco in his pocket, and I've still got it. It's all dried up of course, you could never smoke it, but I've kept it, not because it was what was in his pocket when he died, but because I can look at that tobacco and think of how it is still going, that it'll probably still be going after *I've* died. It's a reminder to me of how fragile we are, Ray's gone, but that tobacco's still here, it's hard to explain. I've still got his clothes, some of them still in the drawers. When times have been desperate and I've missed him, I've wrapped myself in them, put the arms round my shoulders like he would have done himself, although his smell's gone now unfortunately. I've still got a lot of his stuff around me actually, pictures and art that he liked, I haven't quite felt ready to tell myself I'm on my own now, that I can have the house just as I want it, a lot of it is still him. Naturally, I've got all his music, and I'll never ever part with that, whatever happens. I still can't let go of Ray, as much as I think that I should. There's a small part of me that has tried, but there's a whole, other, huge part of me that really misses him terribly and I can't let go.

Shortly after Harry was born, I had counselling. I reached a point where I found everything very difficult; people around me couldn't help me by talking any more and others just didn't help at all with their insensitivity. I felt I needed to talk a bereavement counsellor and I got a brilliant one who helped me a great deal, because she'd been widowed and had been to some extent where I was. One day, she said to me, 'OK, we've spent weeks talking about Ray the terrific person, Ray the great man, let's talk about the Ray who really annoyed you, let's talk about his bad points.' I was horrified, I told her I couldn't do it, but her response was to tell me that Ray had been a person, a real living man, and that I had to talk about the things that got to me about him, so I did and felt so guilty afterwards. I hated myself for it and I hated the counsellor too, thinking 'you cow, how dare you do that to me?', but I gradually realised she was right to have made me do

it, because I *was* putting him on a pedestal and turning him into Saint Ray, and there *had* been things that had annoyed me about him. But at the same time, they were also the things I loved about him, they made him the man I loved more than any other in the world and now they were what made me miss him more than anything else in the world too. But at least I'd got to the stage where I could think of his faults and his annoying habits - I was finally beginning to grieve for the whole person and not just this paragon of virtue I'd built up in my head. Like it or not, I was beginning to move ever so gradually forward.

Finally for Helen Handling the Present

Harry is a little boy now and has Ray's personality, he's very active, on the go all time and doesn't sit down for a second. He also laughs very easily like Ray did. He was a very funny, entertaining man and if he walked into a room, he'd light it up and have people in stitches within minutes, because he had a brilliant sense of humour, which I can see in Harry already. We can laugh together, young as he is; he can do something and I laugh at him and he laughs back at me and I think



'that's totally your dad.' Sometimes Harry looks at me in a way that makes me gasp out loud, because it's so much like his father. Sometimes, to keep his memory alive, so I can remember for Harry, I put on tapes of Ray so I can remember his voice. I forget what he sounds like; sometimes I can forget what he *looks* like and that makes me panic, I find myself a bit breathless and desperate to remember – asking myself over and over, what did he look like, what did he look like, what did he sound like? Then I put on a tape and can hear him again and put on a video and see him again. Watching a video of him is very hard, because I see all those little mannerisms I'd forgotten about and the video brings me up with a shock *because* I'd forgotten them. That's something else I dislike about time; agreed, it means you eventually learn to live with your grief, it becomes a part of you, but what I hate about time is that it makes you forget the things that made you love him, those little things he used to do that made you giggle or smile or even made you think 'ah, I really love you', all I really get sometimes is a flash of an image of how it used to be.

Because Ray and I were together for such a short time, I do worry that when Harry gets to my age, gets to thirty, I'll be in my sixties and I won't remember a lot about his father – it really worries me that one day when I'm sixty something and Harry's thirty, I'll say to him 'your dad's been dead 30 years today' or something similar, and Harry will ask me something about his father at his age and I will have to say 'I don't know, I don't know what dad did then.' Like Rachel, I have been getting friends to write things down about him, who knew him long before I did, because there were so many years when I *didn't* know him, and as much as he told me about his past, obviously I wasn't there so I can't relate to a lot of it.

Despite the fact I've had two pregnancies, my second one has completely overshadowed the memory of my first and when I see pregnant women now, my reaction is one of horror and terrible memories rather than anything else. I had postnatal depression when I had my daughter Beth, but funnily enough, I didn't have it with Harry, I just felt deeply unhappy as a result of the loss Harry and I had suffered. I clung to Harry a lot, literally and metaphorically, and I still do. I still have him in bed with me every night. He has his own bed and people tell me he should be in it, but I just can't do it. I cannot let go of him. I've made a rod for my own back because I've got a very clingy baby as a result, but I still can't let go. I've got a fear of losing my children now because of what happened to Ray. Because it was so unexpected and so sudden, I know that anything can

happen in a split second and so I fear anything happening to the children, it's similar to what Beth had in the early days, a fear of losing someone else who means to the world to me, but because I'm an adult, it's much harder to deal with, the fear doesn't go away as quickly as it does with a child. I cling to both my children, particularly to Harry because he is Ray's son. I'm so glad I had him, I adore him and wouldn't be without him. Someone said to me recently 'if you were given a choice to have Ray back or keep Harry, what would you do?' It would be a difficult choice, but now I would keep Harry, because Ray had nearly forty years of life and this is Harry's time. I feel blessed I've been given something of Ray, I could have been left with nothing, but I've got a big legacy.

Of course I feel sorry for Harry, because he's lost what would have been an incredible influence on his life. Ray would have given Harry so much, but I can't dwell on that - if I did, I would drive myself insane. I used to watch Harry and it was only natural I'd say things like 'you've got a similar sense of humour to your dad, if he were here now, he would have done this or said that, etc, etc.' But I've tried to stop myself doing that, it's not worth it, Harry's never going to see him.

Harry recognises his dad from pictures his grandparents and I have shown him. We'll keep Ray's memory alive and I want Harry to know his dad, even though he's not here, I want Harry to know everything he possibly can. I do find that Ray's parents are trying to make Harry a clone of his father, which could be a source of annoyance to him when he's older, he might have to tell them that he's not Ray, he's Harry, his own person. There's a slight danger of that happening, especially as Ray had a son rather than a daughter, there will always be comparisons made and similarities pointed out and he can't be his father's clone simply because of our loss.

I get angry now as well as sad, sometimes I feel angry towards Ray, when I'm having a bad day. Ray had a real knack for getting out of situations, he was a real blagger, he could sell sand to the Arabs. He was a cheeky chappie with the gift of the gab, and sometimes when I'm having one of those awful days, I get angry and think 'you even managed to blag your way out of this, didn't you? You got out of the responsibility of having this baby, you used the ultimate get out, and even then you died playing the game you loved - how many people could do that?!' It sounds harsh, but it's just one of those moments when you've been left holding the baby, literally in my case. And he's gone, it's all over for him and whether he's a pile of ashes in a cemetery in Guildford or whether he's in the afterlife somewhere, either way he's fine, it's the rest of us who are left picking up the pieces pretty much on a day to day basis, and life now sometimes seems to be one thing after another, whether that's an effect of someone dying I don't know, but there are times when life feels as if it's a continuous spiral of bad luck.

I've found in the last couple of years that I'm not the only one who's changed, other people around me have too - changed towards me, anyway. My close friends were all extremely supportive and cried with me seeing Harry for the first time, they felt Ray's loss again, because Harry did and does look very much like his dad. Lots of Ray's friends sent cards and some came to see me when Harry was born, but I don't see much of them now. Parents at my daughter's school altered their behaviour towards me completely. People who'd once talked to me didn't talk to me any more after finding out about Ray's death (obviously it went around the school like wildfire). One woman, a supposedly strong Christian who used to talk to me all the time at the school gates,

literally crossed the road to avoid talking to me after Ray died. I found I was no longer Helen, or even Beth and Harry's mum, I was Helen-that-woman-whose-boyfriend-died-when-she-was-pregnant. I had a new classification. Just recently, I saw a couple of people who were good friends of Ray and were at his funeral, although I haven't seen them since; I approached them and just said 'hello', and they almost ran out of the shop. All I wanted was for them to say 'hello, how are you?', they didn't have to use that particular tone of voice lots of people use when talking about sad things to bereaved people, all hushed and deep toned. All they had to say was 'hi, how are you, is this Harry, doesn't he look like his dad? Nice weather, got to go, bye' and that would have been it. But you're treated differently when you're young and bereaved, and in my situation, I think people see me as some sort of tragic figure.

These days, the children take up so much of my time that life has become easier in the sense I know I have to get on with it. I'm 34, I'm still quite young and I knew I couldn't spend the rest of my life in black and grieving, but nor could I plan anything any more. Every day was a new day to me and as soon as I hit the pillow and went to sleep at night, that was the end of another day, and as soon as I woke up, it was yet another day to be got through. I felt life was just day to day and I lived for my children, to give them some happiness. I don't want Harry to grow up with grief because of *my* grief, he's a new human leading his own life and is actually the lucky one, as he doesn't know any different, those of us who knew Ray are the ones with the grief, and I don't want Harry to suffer because of it. I want him to be a happy child and I don't want to influence him by what I'm feeling.

As for being happy again myself, for a long time I didn't think I could be. My children are growing up fast, and I know better than most that nothing lasts for ever and they will be off and away one day. I liked to think there would be happiness again in my life but I wasn't looking for it. Ray's death took away my naiveté about life and I knew there'd never be a completely happy ending. All I wanted in life was to have a balance, a bit of peace. None of us wants to be on our own forever and I did want to meet someone else eventually, despite the obvious comparisons with Ray and other difficulties I knew would lie ahead for any future partner and me, but I wanted to find someone else one day and share my life with someone again. And in 2005 I did meet someone. Neil and I were friends initially, then as the months went by, it became clear to me that I had been lucky again and had met a very special man. In September, we had a romantic (child-free!) break in New York, where Neil proposed to me in Grand Central Station. I accepted and we plan to marry in 2006 – hopefully by Niagara Falls, something completely different to start our new life together.



Forging a new relationship hasn't been easy. My emotions are still all over the place at times and I often fear I will lose Neil just as I lost Ray, but as I know only too well, I can't live like that, I have no control over events that may or may not happen in the future and I'm taking this second chance at happiness. We all deserve it – not just me and Neil, but Harry and Beth as well. I can look to the future with a degree of optimism and hopes of happiness and even just a few months ago, I never thought I would come anywhere close to that.