

The Early Days - Louise



LOUISE Peachey married husband Mark in December 2001, a year after Mark had been diagnosed with a brain tumour. During her brief marriage, Louise cared for her increasingly ill husband, and both were delighted with the news of her pregnancy in March 2003. Only days after her announcement, married for less than 18 months and pregnant for less than two, Louise was widowed at the age of 27.

Mark and I met when we worked together at Heathrow and started going out together in November 1997. He was 12 years older than me and divorced, although his ex-wife had remarried and was then pregnant – her son was born on Christmas Day 1997 and Mark and I were asked to be guardians, even though we'd only been together some five weeks by then.

We moved to a village near the airport in September 1999 with a view to making it our home, getting married and starting a family. I knew Mark would propose one day, but it was a question of when, and that day came on the third anniversary of our being together, 21 November 2000. It wasn't very romantic, though – we'd been out for a meal but it wasn't till he was making a cup of coffee that he finally proposed - in front of the kettle!

At the time, Mark was complaining of tiredness and recurring headaches, but he'd been doing a lot of overtime and his work was becoming gradually more computer based, so he just put it all down to that. It was winter, when it was a shock to leave the airport terminal's carefully controlled lighting and walk into very bright winter sunshine, so he thought perhaps the headaches could also be something to do with that. The first sign we had that it was something more was one day in December when he was at the gym and collapsed with what seemed to be a stroke or an epileptic fit. Someone with him managed to get my number and called to say he'd collapsed and an ambulance was en route. We were supposed to be going to a Christmas party that night and I didn't really think it would be serious, in fact I thought for someone to call an ambulance was a bit extreme. Mark dealt with ambulance calls all the time and I thought he'd be absolutely mortified someone had called for one for him. It didn't occur to me it would be something serious because he was so fit and healthy. He was a marathon runner, did martial arts, didn't drink, ate healthily, Weetabix was one of his favourite foods! But illness takes no account of those things, it just happens.

It appeared he'd suffered a brain haemorrhage, so instead of going to our Christmas party, we were whizzed off to Charing Cross Hospital in central London in rush hour traffic. We arrived to find the Salvation Army singing carols round a Christmas tree, it all seemed so bizarre and surreal in the midst of all this panic and worry about Mark's health. He'd once had a serious head injury, having bumped his head quite badly as a child, so it could have possibly been a weak spot all those years, but nobody, not even a top neurosurgeon, could tell if that was the case.

It seemed so unfair; we'd only just collected my engagement ring and I was in disbelief, I kept thinking 'this can't be happening, everything's going to be fine.' Mark's ex-wife Jan came to see him and she was brilliant, she was such a support when Mark became ill and she had also known Mark's parents for longer than I had, which was a help. Mark's mum and dad had been a bit unsure of our relationship and subsequent engagement because of our age gap. I called them at home in Birmingham the night Mark was taken into hospital, although they didn't come down for another four days, at which time Mark was still in intensive care at Charing Cross.

I stayed with Jan that night, I wasn't allowed to stay at the hospital, because it was touch and go. If he'd had another brain haemorrhage, they'd have had to operate, and anything from a stroke to sudden death could have been the result. It was all so up in the air, my whole life had changed in the space of just a few hours, it seemed. When I did eventually come home to sort out some clothes for myself, as I'd been borrowing Jan's, I found Mark's suit out on the bed ready to wear for the party we'd been intending to go to and a choice of three ties, ready for me to tell Mark which one looked best, and that was when it suddenly hit me that this was serious.

He came home after eight days. Initially, it was awful, I even had to feed him, but he got better as the drugs decreased the blood clot, but it was still a mystery why it had happened in the first place. We had a low key, quiet Christmas, far from the day we'd both imagined with the full festive works; Mark spent most of the day dozing on the sofa, due to the steroids and drugs he was taking in order to reduce the clot.

In mid-March, an anomaly appeared on the scan, close to his ear but too deep down to be operated on, and a needle biopsy revealed it was cancerous. Three months later, it had grown considerably and on 11 September 2001, we were told he'd need radiotherapy. That day was obviously a momentous one for the world for other reasons, and to us, coming out of the hospital taken aback by the news about radiotherapy, it was a surreal experience. Everything was silent, as everyone was stunned by what had happened in New York. People were all trying to get the first release of the Evening Standard to find out what was happening and we were trying to take in the news about Mark's treatment.

That evening, we went to see the organist to decide on the music for our wedding. We hadn't intended to get married until June 2002, but once Mark became ill, we decided not to wait. Mark couldn't drive any more and it seemed silly having his BMW sitting unused on the drive, so we sold it and it paid for our wedding. Planning the wedding didn't take too long – it kept us both occupied and Mark was very involved with it all. At times I think he'd have liked to disappear, go off and get married on a beach somewhere, but he knew I wanted my friends and family there, and we had so many friends who had been supportive, it was partly a celebration for them as well. I always had a vague hope that once we were married, once I had the wedding ring on my finger, this magic force field would come down and make all the illness go away, that something would say 'they've just got married, they deserve a bit of happiness, here's a miracle drug and it'll be all fine.'

Mark started his six week course of radiotherapy on 18th September, so we had to go up to central London every day. My employers were brilliant, I went into the office early and finished round about three, came straight home, picked Mark up and went off to

hospital. We'd park in Sainsbury's and have our daily treat of a coffee in Starbucks there before Mark went into the Cromwell to be zapped. He finished the course on Halloween and he had a few weeks before our wedding to get strong again. His hair had fallen out after about the fourth week so he just shaved his head, or rather I did, from then on.

We got married on 1 December 2001, less than a year from the brain haemorrhage being diagnosed and just over a year since we got engaged. Everything seemed extremely Christmassy that year, I don't know whether it was because we were getting married and having a sort of Christmas type wedding, but everything festive seemed more heightened. We didn't really have a honeymoon, as we were a bit concerned about a long flight with the air pressure on Mark's brain, so we just went to Prague for a three day break. We had a quiet New Year at home, and then on 8 January 2002 we went back to find if the radiotherapy had worked. Unfortunately, it hadn't.

However, Mark felt really well, I think he was on a high because we'd just got married. The doctors agreed not to send him for chemo immediately, as he felt so well, but as soon as Mark felt more symptoms such as headaches, flashing lights, drowsiness, balance problems, slurring speech, he'd have to go straight back. Because we were now looking at chemotherapy, we agreed that Mark should bank some sperm, as having children naturally would be too much of a risk, considering all the poisons he'd have in his system and a low sperm count. Our first Valentine's Day as a married couple was about as romantic as the proposal, spent banking sperm at Hammersmith Hospital, right next to Wormwood Scrubs!

We managed to get away on holiday to Cuba in May, that was our honeymoon really, but on the flight back, Mark became ill and after being checked out when we got home, he started chemotherapy on the Golden Jubilee bank holiday. I thought he was going to die there and then, it was an awful experience. Mark had to take a tablet every day for five days and despite the anti-sickness tablets, neither of us was prepared for just how sick he was, retching until there was nothing left to come up. He was also delirious and it was frightening being on my own with him, it was also hard, because the weather was brilliant outside and we couldn't even go outside and enjoy it.

I did feel very alone at this stage. Mark's parents said they would come down, but I don't think they ever really understood the situation. It was natural for them to be upset seeing their only son go through this, I think they felt it was just too much for them, and they stayed away. They'd attended our wedding, then visited again in August and at Christmas; but even before Mark had become ill, they only saw each other two or three



times a year - his being ill didn't alter that. Mark spoke to his parents every day, but it was upsetting and frustrating for him, as they didn't really listen to what we were telling them. Instead, they would be searching the web in search of miracle cures, sending us reams of stuff in the post about which was the latest whacky cure for brain tumours. Mark's mum had once suffered from breast cancer, and she drew on her own experience, but to be honest, there was little comparison between her experience and Mark's.

When the chemotherapy started, it was another new routine and a new treatment to get used to, it seemed all our life was one hospital appointment after another and every time we went back it was another slap in the face, as we never seemed to get good news. During the few days of the new routine when Mark was at his strongest, we would go away together. A night in London, a few days in Norfolk, nothing exciting but it made a difference when Mark simply had the energy to do something, and it also meant we got away from our own four walls, away from the telephone and other people. Some friends didn't know whether to talk about it or not, some of our previously really close friends couldn't cope and gradually drifted away, but others, ones you wouldn't imagine relying on, like work colleagues, were the ones to rally round the most.

In November, we were hoping to go to Dubai, but Mark developed a cyst on top of the tumour, and his treatment was increased. It was about now that we started thinking about IVF. I had all the checks, blood and hormone tests etc and was fit and healthy to proceed. We had enough savings for one course of IVF and decided to go for it. We started the course of treatment in late February 2003; once a month we would go to the hospital, Mark to the chemo suite and me to the IVF clinic!

Around late 2002, Mark's eyesight failed completely as a result of the tumour spreading. By Valentine's Day 2003, he was completely blind. Shortly after that, he also became incontinent. The district nurses who were coming in every day were even talking about his only having six weeks to live, just when I'd started the IVF injections. Mark had always refused to give in and insisted he was going to get better, saying 'it's just a blip', but this time it wasn't. I think he was very worried about me looking after him and if the IVF succeeded, how would I cope with a baby as well as him?

I'd responded well to the drugs because of my young age and not having any fertility problems, and on 5 March, my eggs were collected. Two days later, they put the two strongest, most viable embryos back. Mark was there with me, he always came with me for my appointments.

We didn't tell many people we were doing IVF for two reasons, one because as soon as you mention you're trying for a baby, you're always being asked if it's happened yet, has it been a success, are you pregnant yet? It was just extra stress and pressure we didn't need. Secondly, people may have been condemnatory, saying 'what on earth are they doing that for in their circumstances?', but I can only say that it was precisely because of our circumstances that Mark and I had put more thought into starting a family than most people do. When we found out about Mark having to have radiotherapy on 9/11, I remember saying to him that so many women had sent their husbands off to work that day and said 'don't forget to buy a pint of milk on your way home' or whatever, but they never came back. At least we *knew* what was likely to happen. I don't know if it's better to know somebody who's ill is going to die or not. I didn't have the shock of a sudden death to cope with, but it was no less traumatic for all that. I think that even though we sort of knew, part of us never accepted it would really happen, or at least not for five years. We'd been told the radiotherapy would buy Mark five years and that was what we both firmly believed, and who knows? During those five years a cure could be found and he could just get better, so I think on that basis, no, I don't think it's better to know someone is going to die, because it kills hope too.

On 17th March I had a positive pregnancy test – with IVF, hormone levels can be high one day and then drop again, resulting in a false result, but my levels were so high, they just told me to come back on 3 April for my six week pregnancy test, just to check the embryos were where they should be, that it wasn't ectopic and also to see if both eggs had taken. That was St Patrick's Day 2003 and Mark was thrilled to bits. He couldn't see, but I remember snuggling up in bed that night and he said 'this is going to be fun, you know, you'll be changing and getting bigger and I'm sure there are two babies in there.' I just said 'oh no, one's enough!', but I was so pleased, as we'd always agreed we could only do just the one course of IVF - if it was meant to be, it would work. If it wasn't, then at least we knew we'd tried and we'd just potter on. At the bottom of it all was really the fact that doing IVF was stressful, having chemo was stressful, Mark's eyesight failing was stressful, could we really put ourselves through all this again if the first attempt failed? The way things were then, I don't think we could.

We told our parents on 18th March that I was pregnant and they were all thrilled to bits. Straightaway, Mark's mum wanted to get the knitting needles out and they all seemed very supportive. My mum and dad knew I'd always wanted a baby and my mum had known about the IVF, so it was a relief to be able to say it had worked and I was pregnant.

By Mother's Day of all days, 29th March, Mark was slipping in and out of consciousness, and the district nurses were coming in morning and night. I'd always put him to bed and I'd always wash him, dress and shave him myself before they came to check for bedsores and administer his drugs. Mark's parents kept ringing up telling me 'it's not that bad, it's not all doom and gloom.' When they did eventually come down, the reality of the situation hit them and they couldn't face it for long – asking his dad to help me move Mark to and from the toilet reduced his father to tears and it was all too much for everyone having them there. It was different with my parents - my dad was brilliant once I was pregnant, he came to all my appointments with me and was a huge support. My mum's got MS, so physically she was restricted with how she could help, but emotionally she was a great support and comfort through all of this.

On the Sunday night, I called an ambulance because Mark was so bad, and I was told it was just a matter of hours before Mark would die. Some Mother's Day, Mark couldn't even say 'Happy Mother's Day', although I know it wasn't the same because I wasn't exactly a mum, I was only five weeks' pregnant, but it was still a poignant day for us.

The doctor told me the tumour had grown so much it was wrapped around the bottom of the brain stem, and that Mark would go into respiratory arrest. He was then incubated and couldn't ever speak again. We never really got to say goodbye to each other; you always think that, in the case of long term illness, you get the chance to say a final goodbye, but we didn't. I didn't expect him not to be able to speak, and by not saying goodbye, we weren't bowing to the inevitable, there was always a tiny hope that it wouldn't be goodbye and something would happen to prolong his life yet again.

This time, I felt as if Mark was finally saying, 'this isn't for me, I've always been well and healthy and I can't handle this and much as I love Louise and want to stay with her, I've got to go.' We went home for him to die there rather than hospital, but we'd only been there a matter of hours when Mark deteriorated, he had an epileptic fit and it was

too distressing to cope with, so he was ordered back to hospital - pretty much in the same ambulance that had taken us home, we'd been there such a short time.

We were put in a side room to A&E at Wexham Park, told it was a matter of hours, and we just sat. But Mark hung on. His best friend came, as did his parents. I'd rung them at four in the morning but they didn't actually get here till four that afternoon and couldn't face being with him for long, they spent a lot of the time outside, coming in at intervals to squeeze his hand. They stayed overnight at Jan's house while she stayed with me all through the night, until Mark died at 8.30am on 1 April. At the very end, Mark opened his eyes, they had been closed all the time I'd been holding his hand, he seemed to take one last breath and look at me with his beautiful eyes and I really feel that was his only way to say goodbye. He was 39 and I was 27.

Writing this, I've noticed dates and particular days seem to have played a big part in events in our life together, looking back. They have seemed to become very meaningful with major events happening on pertinent days – Valentine's Day, St Patrick's Day, April Fool's Day, it was as though we were living our life according to a 'days to remember' calendar, except what was happening in our lives was far more traumatic. We married on 1 December, he died on 1 April, exactly sixteen months later. On 1 August 2004, I had been widowed as long as I'd been married.

I had my six week scan two days after Mark's death and I discovered I was having twins - Mark had sensed it was twins anyway. We'd gone out shopping once, Mark was blind and in a wheelchair, so I was describing cuddly soft toys to him, toy lambs, and he insisted on buying two of them because he just knew I was carrying more than one baby. He once put his hand on my stomach and said 'this isn't how I wanted things to be', as if he knew what was to happen and how difficult it was going to be for me raising children alone and widowed.

I went through the motions of organising the funeral, but it was all done for me. Mark and I had talked about it and I basically just tried to mirror our marriage service. The same vicar did the funeral service and I had the same hymns and flowers (red roses) as I'd had when we were married. My best friend Emma and Mark's best friend Phil looked after all the arrangements. The vicar was also a marathon runner and used to go out running with Mark, and he and I had always got on well, so it was quite nice to have a familiar face doing the service, and he just took care of most of that.

The church is so close to the house that we followed the hearse round on foot, it was a spring day and so it seemed the right thing to do. Part of me is, not exactly glad, that's not the right word and people who've no idea how I feel think I'm callous, but I feel better that he died in April than any other time of year. All the flowers and bulbs were coming out and there were lambs bouncing around, the place was full of new life and I was pregnant. If he'd died in November or December, it would have been so miserable and dark and cold. But I had the summer ahead of me and could just get out. I couldn't be in the house, it was too hard for me to spend so much time in the house, because I'd nursed him so much here, and every time I heard a creak I expected him to walk through the door or shout up the stairs 'I've got the kettle on, d'you want a cup of tea?'. It was sometimes all too much. But I couldn't move away, because if I did, if I moved house and then later needed to be there, for comfort or memories or whatever, I wouldn't be

able to, I'd have sold it, it would have gone and I'd never be able to walk back in again. I'm not saying I *won't* move, in fact I think in time I probably will, but not right now. Apart from the obvious reasons, it's too much on a practical level – I'm still handling all the paperwork of probate, sorting out debts and mortgage and life insurance, there's no way I could be dealing with solicitors and vendors and estate agents etc.

After the funeral, I just had to get on with things. Physically, I was exhausted. I didn't suffer from morning sickness, but I was shattered. Looking after Mark had been draining, probably more than I realised at the time. Now I had nobody to care for, rush around after and take my mind off things, the tiredness kicked in. I hadn't slept much over the last few months because, as Mark and I had continued to sleep in the same bed (we couldn't face having a hospital bed put in the house, Mark didn't want to sleep alone and neither did I), I'd often have to be up changing the bed and stripping Mark if he was incontinent – pretty much preparing me for motherhood, really. But I didn't get much sleep even though I was tired, and my hormones were all over the place. I went up to Scotland for a while, where Jan and her family had relocated after Mark's death, having re-evaluating their own lives and happiness and making big decisions because of it.

I came back in May, in time for my twelve week scan and the day I had it was the day I started bleeding. It was then that I realised how much I wanted these babies, until then, I'd been wrapped up in Mark's illness and death, so it was now, when my future was again under threat and my babies were in possible danger, that I knew I really wanted to be their mother. Now I was spotting. It turned out that, in basic terms, I had grown too much very quickly (I was showing at only nine weeks), and a plug of tissue had become dislodged and led to some bleeding. But it was fine, I had to spend the weekend being treated like an old fashioned pregnant woman, with Jan and her mum looking after me, pillows underneath my legs and instructions not to move unless it was to go to the loo. There was no way I could do this throughout the whole pregnancy, I'd go stir crazy, mainly because it gave me time to think, reflect and remember.

Although I'd been a bit numbed by everything in the very early days when Mark died, and wasn't 100% focused on my pregnancy, I never dreamed of terminating them, as I know one option could have been to do just that. I know some people thought that was what I should do, but I couldn't let people tell me what to do any more, I had to do what I felt was right for me. Mark had always told me that I was his priority and now I accepted he was right, I *was* a priority, and the babies were a priority in our happiness, so I had to concentrate on them now. I still felt numb throughout much of the pregnancy, but had huge support from my mum and dad, and aunts and uncles. The midwives were brilliant, they all knew my circumstances and put it on my notes, although I was still asked if my husband was coming along to various appointments, which was upsetting.

I went back to work after four weeks, although I was dreading going back and virtually saying 'thanks for the time off for compassionate leave; by the way I'm 12 weeks' pregnant and I think you should know because obviously I'm showing and I'd like my maternity leave to start now, thank you!' I was concerned they would think I was taking liberties and would think ill of me, but I had nothing to worry about, my boss was brilliant as I settled back into work and tried to be normal, which is what I know Mark would have wanted.

It was hard when I was pregnant to see dads with their kids, even a family social occasion I went to was difficult for me, seeing my cousins with their kids, and I did wonder then whether I should have carried on with the IVF? I wouldn't change it for the world now though, there are lots of children out there who don't have dads for whatever reason. It's unfortunate and sad that my girls are among them, and I do feel sad for them that they've been deprived of their dad and they were conceived despite knowing Mark might not survive to see them grow up, but I just have to try to be a better mum for them to compensate. Part of me now wonders why I was so stubborn not wanting children outside marriage. If I'd had them earlier, at least Mark would have been there, at least I'd have had a photo of him with them.

Louise at 28 weeks



I went to a few ante-natal classes and joined the NCT, I took my cousin with me to the classes rather than go on my own, particularly as the first one was on what would have been Mark's 40th birthday on 4th September. Then I was in hospital for the next few classes, but I still think they were worth doing, and they did prepare me for being on the ward, prepared me for having husbands and new dads around. I was put in the ante-natal ward, but the patients were a mixture of all sorts of maternity patients, because they were doing up the ward, so there were women who were being induced and women with possible pre-eclampsia and women having elective Caesareans and of course all of them had husbands or boyfriends to support them, bringing them clean clothes and stuff to eat and drink; I had my mum and dad.

The hospital couldn't offer me a side room, so I had to see new dads coming in all the time with balloons for their new baby boy or girl, flowers etc. I just felt numb and wanted Mark. I'd been to every hospital appointment with him, I'd taken him to virtually every single one, and I knew Mark would have been there for me too and it really hurt that he wasn't.

I'd known one of the babies was a girl, but had been content not to know the sex of the other one. I was pleased about having a girl, because Mark had always wanted a daughter called Lydia, so I knew I definitely had Mark's Lydia. The other baby kept playing up a bit and I thought 'this has got to be a boy', and thought it would be nice to have one of each, but deep down I wanted two little girls, and after a midwife let it slip one day, I knew that was what I was having. I think out of the combinations of twins I could have had, two boys would have been my least favourite option, because Mark wasn't there to do boy things with them. At least with two girls, I know, or at least have a better understanding of what they're going to go through.

One thing I didn't do was go shopping for baby things, not till late in my pregnancy anyway. Buying the stuff on my own and not with Mark, decorating the room on my own and not with Mark, it wasn't exciting any more, it was just a case of getting on with it instead of enjoying it. Also, it was awful going into Mothercare and seeing mums and dads looking at baby items, holding hands and stroking bumps, whereas I was thinking 'for God's sake, just stop doing that!', but it wasn't their fault that they were happy and

together with someone. Deep down, I knew that Mark and I would have been doing the same.

I was due to start my maternity leave on 28th September, but on the 9th, I was back in hospital with high blood pressure and possible pre-eclampsia. I think the pressure and stress had finally got to me and perhaps that was why Amelia had become poorly inside me. They performed a Doppler scan and found I had an endystolic flow problem and the umbilical cord was twisted round her neck, so the blood supply wasn't getting to her properly. I had more scans and checks and stayed in for three weeks. The problem seemed to right itself, but it was still all quite frightening, because by this time the twins were almost here, I'd taken the steroids to bring on their lungs and I didn't want anything to go wrong now. I was going to have to have a Caesarean section, because Lydia was breech and Amelia was transverse, so there was no way I could give birth naturally. I was upset about this, because I wanted it to do it normally, not because I wanted to experience it particularly, but because there was no-one to look after me after the birth and after a Caesarean I wouldn't be able to drive, that was a big thing. Yes, I could do the shopping on-line, but I would never be able to get out of the house and would be cooped up with two babies. I was totally dismayed I wouldn't be able to drive for so long. The babies were born early, as it turned out. I was scheduled for a C-section on 3rd November (at 37 weeks), but I went into labour two weeks before that. Our longed for babies were on their way.

Louise's First Year - Getting Through It



For the first six days after the girls arrived, I was on autopilot – it was a case of feeding a baby, changing a baby, making sure there were clean clothes for us all. My mum stayed the first two nights and my friend Emma helped out, as did my aunt, and the midwife was very good too, in fact, she still pops in to see us now. The twins were only a few weeks old when I had to contend with the first Christmas – their first ever and the first without Mark. I was in a daze, with two

eight week old girls weighing only 6.5lbs each, I just spent most of the day breastfeeding. My parents came across, we went for a walk round Virginia Water and had Christmas dinner, then went to my aunt's for the night. It was the first night I'd stayed away from home with the girls and it was nice to have help through the night, someone else could give the babies a bottle of expressed milk.

I try to do something positive on the various anniversaries. I spent the first New Year with Mark's best friend and his wife in Sussex, he and Mark always used to ring each other at midnight when the bells were chiming and I just felt it was what Mark would have wanted me to do, and doing what Mark would have wanted me to was very important. On the anniversary of his death, I bought some new fish for his fish tank and put flowers on the grave, which I do quite regularly anyway.

Some things helped me more than others in those first months. I had counselling which really helped, it was brilliant for me, it was organised for me at the hospice for cancer sufferers. I was terrified I would suffer from postnatal depression because of what had gone on in my pregnancy, and I would have done anything to avoid it, so I went for counselling. It was informal, just someone who sat with me and listened and prompted me. I went once a week from June to September 2003. After the girls were born, my counsellor visited me at home, which was a great help. I was very angry that Mark had died, not just angry about the situation, but angry *with* him as well. That anger has gone now, because I know we couldn't have carried on the way we had been, and at least when Mark died, he died loving me and we spent precious days together before he died, and he knew about the pregnancy, knew I was going to have his children. Although the way he died wasn't pleasant, it could have been a lot worse, and that's the way I've come to look at it. He could have been like an Alzheimer patient and that would have been awful.

I also relied a lot on my friend Emma, she lost her dad when he was 47 just a few weeks before I started going out with Mark so she knows what it's like to lose someone you love. I get on really well with her mum too, as we're both widowed and both understand what the other's going through. Emma's mum told me about WAY and I went to some meetings when I was pregnant but haven't had the time since, although one of the main

co-ordinators has twins himself so there are people who understand how my life is now. I'm reluctant to keep regarding myself as a widow – I know I am, but I try not to dwell on the fact and try and see myself as just a mum of two. It was awful when I had to register Mark's death and I was asked 'are you the widow?', I didn't feel one at the age of 27, married for only 16 months, I just didn't feel (and still don't) that I quite fit the description.

Some people have great religious faith to keep them going in hard times. I do go to church, and I'd like to go more often, I just haven't got the guts to go on my own and I'm unsure how to find a decent one now that the vicar from here has left. I'd like to go to a spiritualist church if someone could recommend one to me. I'd probably take Emma with me, I'm not brave enough to go on my own! My faith all but disappeared when Mark died, but it's now coming back, I go to the local church now mainly because his grave's there, and because we have friends there who knew Mark, but I find it difficult sitting in a pew looking at the steps where I married him, and every time I look at the altar, all I can see is his coffin with him inside it.

The girls were christened anniversary, the vicar was wanted him to christen the birth, marriage and death, as ceremonies for my family. I



there towards Mark's first leaving to go to another parish, I twins and complete the circle of he had performed all three felt it was a positive thing to do.

Imagining that he was here somewhere was my way of dealing with things too, it helped. Even now, when a light bulb flickers for example, I can believe it's Mark, because a light bulb was flickering in the kitchen constantly just after he died.

I didn't go back to work after having the girls, as the cost of childcare for two of them outweighed my earnings, but I managed, thanks to a private pension from Mark's company. The mortgage finally got sorted, although it took a while. Even though Mark had a will and was married, his estate had to go to probate to validate it. I never expected to have to go to county court and make a sworn statement and deal with stuff like inheritance tax. I thought it would be a lot easier with his having a will, but it doesn't seem to make any difference. It was the last thing I needed with everything else going at the same time, just something else to worry about. You don't realise till it happens that there's more to the practical things than you think.

The babies, however, were my priority from the moment Mark died, whether I recognised it then or not. None of what had happened was their fault, I think I blamed myself partly because it was me who'd put myself in this situation, it wasn't as if I'd just got pregnant,



I'd gone out and injected myself, had tests etc, and having gone through all that, I had to think of them to survive. We'd thought Mark and I had four or five years or more and I felt cheated that the doctors had got it so wrong.

Some people think I was foolish to have gone ahead and become pregnant, others simply think I was very brave, but I don't feel particularly brave to

have done it in those circumstances. One of my closest friends doesn't speak to me any more because she thought I was very reckless and immature to do IVF. She didn't even tell me how she felt, she was repeating her views to other people and it eventually got back to me. I thought her actions were in very bad taste and she's never really got back in touch since. That's fine by me. I've moved on in a different way to the one she thought was right for me. It would have been nice if she'd been involved and supportive, but if she can't, then I'm better off without her. Our decision to go ahead with IVF was mine and Mark's alone. At the time, I had a few reservations about it, but Mark didn't. He flashed his winning smile and won me round, after which time IVF was something we both wanted and it was *us* in that situation, nobody else, so it was *our* decision and I feel very strongly that it was the right one. Nobody else has the right to pass judgement on that. I think there's a thin line between being brave and being crazy and sometimes I wonder if really I *am* crazy? I'm glad I had the two of them, despite it being very hard work, because now I have a family, I don't have an only child, I'm glad they've always got each other. I also still have the unused embryos in a freezer at Hammersmith Hospital for the next four years, but whether they get used or not, I don't know – the two I have are enough to keep me busy.

Particularly early on in my bereavement, I felt people would think I'd gone mad if they knew some of the stuff I've done since Mark died. For example, I used to climb inside the wardrobe and sniff his clothes. I've kept everything, I haven't thrown a thing out yet. I've got his toothbrush in the holder, his slippers are under the bed, his coat's hanging up under the stairs. I've packed his clothes up into bags, they're not in my bedroom any more, but I've still kept it all. I still buy Mark's favourite foods sometimes – Weetabix for example, which luckily the girls eat.

Custard tarts were Mark's favourite treat and every time I pass a cream cake section, I want to go and buy some egg custard tarts for him. I talked to him often, I still do, and sometimes I've thought the girls see him, when they've suddenly gone quiet and started looking at the door and I wondered if Mark had walked in to comfort them and then went off again.

I've definitely changed as a person since being widowed. For a start, I became a lot stronger – Mark always said I was too sensitive and worried about what people thought of me. When I was pregnant, I had so many different men visiting – either friends of Mark's or friends' husbands doing jobs for me, then when I had the girls, it was easier for people to have the key to the house, as I couldn't always answer the door when because I was breastfeeding two babies, so Mark's friend and my male cousins would all have keys and I used to wonder what the neighbours were thinking – 'blimey, she's got a bit of an appetite – the merry widow!' That would have really worried me in the past but then I didn't care what they thought. Mark always said if they're going to think something, whether you tell them the truth or not, they're still going to carry on believing what they think is true regardless, so let them get on with it and now I do. Sometimes I think laughing is the only way to cope with things, you either laugh or you go mad. Once, when I was shaving Mark's head, because his hair had gone all stubbly because of the chemo, the doorbell rang. We both got to the door at the same time, and it was a woman collecting for charity. 'Cancer Research' she said 'I'm collecting for cancer research', so I pushed Mark forward and said 'there you are, take him.' Of course it sounds awful, the

poor woman didn't know where to look and Mark and I were in fits of laughter, simply because we *could* laugh about it.

Looking back, the worst time of all this was when I was pregnant, right up to the first Christmas. Some people say it gets easier after the first year, but I don't think it does, it just doesn't get any worse, that's all. I got into a routine so I'd know what I was doing with the girls and I just kept busy, and that still works for me now. There are days when I go stir crazy and I have to get out of the house, other people prefer to stay inside and shut out the world, but I just can't stay in the house with the two of them all day every day, I need to be out and about, even if it's just walking round a shopping centre. I need to keep busy and keep going and doing things, but I was like that anyway, even when Mark was ill. Now, I don't plan very much ahead for the future, but I need to have something to do each day, otherwise it can get too much and both the girls and I suffer. I can feel my patience starting to fade, so before they get too cranky, I pack them up in the car and go for a drive. It's not how Mark and I planned it, but in the first few months of parenthood in these circumstances, it was what worked for me and the girls.

Finally for Louise Handling the Present

When I think of Mark now it's with sadness, and lots of what ifs. How would things have been if he'd still been here? How much easier and how much more enjoyable would it have been to have experienced the children together, seen all their firsts, their first smile, their first crawl? If someone offered to barter with me, I would have done it, for example if only Mark could have lived to touch my stomach and feel the babies kicking, but then it would just go on – if only he could live to see me give birth, if only he could hold them, if only he'd lived long enough to see them crawl, to have a few photos together - if I carried on I'd have him here walking them down the aisle at their weddings and there would never be a right time for him to go. I have to try and believe that that was the way it was always planned, be it through fate or destiny, that was the way it was always meant to be.

People still ask me this question and I still don't know the answer - how would I have coped if I hadn't been pregnant? I don't think I have ever properly grieved, because I couldn't, not while I was carrying two children and at such an early stage of pregnancy. I'm aware my grief has always been on hold, but if I hadn't had the pregnancy to focus on, would I have stuck a hosepipe inside the car? If I'm honest, I can't say for sure I wouldn't have done something like that, awful as it sounds. At least I'd have been with Mark. I feel cheated of my happy marriage and complete family, but I don't know what I would have done without the babies to consider – the pregnancy was a security net.

I'm not really on my own any more now the girls are here, but I feel as though I am, they're too small to be of any companionship or comfort really. The worst part of being on my own is constantly wondering whether I'm doing the right thing. If Mark was here, would he be getting me to do things differently? I don't know, I just have to go with my gut feeling. All the way through my pregnancy and even now, when I buy things I think 'would Mark like it?', it's still as if I need his approval or his OK that everything's fine. It's lessening now, but I remember the first time I took the girls in the car and decided that Mark was there watching that I was driving carefully. I miss someone to do the blokey things around the house, someone to mow the lawn, wash the car, do the decorating, little things like that – maybe I'm too traditional, I would choose the plants for the garden, but Mark would dig the hole! Now, it's a bit of a joke between me and my friends that I will ring up and say 'I don't want you, I'm after your husband', and then ask him to come and put up a shelf or do some DIY or something.

Obviously I'll be keeping Mark's memory alive for the girls. I've put together keepsake albums of all Mark's things and I have lots of photos. I still stay in touch with his best friend and with former colleagues at the airport. It's easy to fall into the trap of eulogising about someone who's died, and forgetting all the other things, the bad points, that made him the person he was and nobody else is prepared to talk about the real man really, so I will give the girls a full picture of their daddy. He was a really laid back, easy going, jovial type of person, but he still had a temper tantrum when you pushed him too far. But he also had a wonderful smile and a wicked laugh. He hated arguing, he refused to do it, I used to wish he would argue or shout back but he never did, he'd just storm out of the house, come back later all calm and relaxed and I'd still be seething! He was a George Michael fan, so we play his music a lot. Oh, lots of silly little things pop up all

the time and I'll think 'oh yes, that's definitely Mark', or 'daddy would have loved that'. I find it hard when I've been out with other women and children, because unlike them, I can never say 'let's go home to daddy', all the other women have husbands, they're all happy and I do find it difficult to listen to people complaining about their partner, they should be grateful they've got one, and I get impatient with other mums saying 'oh it's so hard, we're not getting any sleep' when I feel like saying 'oh for goodness sake, there are two of you and one baby, not the other way round!', but of course I don't say it. I'm lucky because I have friends who will stay over and help when the girls are unwell and aunts and uncles always help out. I'm not physically on my own, I'm just not with Mark any more.

The girls both take after Mark in different ways. Amelia is more like Mark in looks than personality, whereas Lydia is the opposite. Amelia is very lively and demanding, as if she's saying 'here I am, entertain me', and she'll swipe things off Lydia - you certainly know she's there. Lydia is more like Mark in personality, she's more settled, calm and quiet; even as a one year old, she'll pick up a book and look at it, or she'll put wooden blocks in and out of a box, she'll keep herself entertained. Mark was a great thinker, if you walked into a room and he was there, he'd be very quiet and would weigh everything up, he thought a lot about what he said before he said it, whereas I don't always think before I speak. I used to be shy, but I have lost a lot of my shyness in recent years, whether that's just maturity or a result of my situation, I don't know.

I still find some things hard - going round places with the girls and seeing families together, for example - luckily I'm holding onto a double pushchair, otherwise I'd be shoving my hands in my pockets or my eyes, as I remember walking round there hand in hand with Mark, talking about the future, daydreaming, swapping ideas about decorating a room or planning our next holiday; now I see other couples doing it and it makes me angry and bitter so I don't go there as much as I used to. Partly I go back to the same places Mark and I used to go so I can tell the girls about it and partly I do new things just for us now, so it's a new stage.

Other people are always keen to tell me what they think, and sometimes it's hurtful. Taking my wedding ring off is a case in point. Some people think I should take my wedding and engagement rings off - I did when I was pregnant because my fingers were swollen, but I wore Mark's wedding ring round my neck. I don't any more but, and this sounds silly, if I need to feel his love, his help or support, I will wear it. When the girls have their MMR shortly, I'll probably put his ring on just to feel that maybe things will be OK and work out fine if I've got it on. But I don't need to wear it every day like I used to, as if it were an emotional crutch or the nearest thing I had to him. But I can't be without my own rings - simply because it wasn't my choice to end my marriage.

These days, I look forward to a glass of wine at the end of the day and I'm doing something positive about my memories of Mark. I'm compiling photo albums of him and I'm now at the October before Mark died. I think when I put in that last photo of Mark at Kew Gardens, it will really hit me then, that that's it, I won't ever have another photo of him. At the moment, I've been putting off doing the albums because I've been busy every evening with the girls, but if I don't do it soon I never will and I'll never get to move on to do the girls' photos. I haven't got an album for them yet, just photos round the house.

I still take one day at a time while the children are this small. Even during the year Mark was on chemo, I always had something to look forward to, a few days away or a trip out, but at the moment I don't feel I have anything to look forward to other than put the washer on and make sure there's a hot meal on the table at the end of the day. I'd love to go away somewhere really nice and be pampered, but it's not going to happen just yet.

I would like to find a new partner one day, I'm young, and I'd love to be with someone, have someone to chat to, as I find the loneliness hardest to bear. If you're on your own you can have friends come to stay but there's nothing worse than cooking for yourself. I don't get the opportunity to go out much, although I have spent a night here once without the girls, they went to my mum's and I was here but instead of painting the town red or downing several bottles of wine, I caught up with housework. My cousin stayed with me that time, my family worried about me being in the house on my own. But now the girls are no longer tiny babies, I might try to get out a bit more, perhaps with my NCT friends. We've met up for coffee and spent the afternoon together, but we're arranging a night out soon.

I think happiness again will be part of my future, but it would just be a different type of happiness, and maybe I could love again, it's just going to be a different type of love and a very different type of person.

