

## Rachel Green



Of all of us who contributed to the book, it's my life that has changed the least since it was published. Although I continue to move away from my bereavement and focus on other things, which is all part and parcel of the healing process, some aspects of life haven't changed much at all – I haven't moved house or had a complete career change, and I am not in a new marriage or relationship, which always seems (particularly to others) to be the biggest indication that life goes on and there are always new opportunities for happiness out there. I haven't changed in myself either, although some experiences since writing the

book have given my life an added dimension it didn't have before and have certainly been hugely rewarding. Appearing on TV and in the press, being the Chairman of WAY for two years, making presentations and speaking in public, working on my house and travelling – they are all things that a few years ago I would not have dreamed would happen. Clichéd though it sounds, life does go on.



With WAY friends in 2009



Good friends: with Cheryl in 2010

However, the main focus of my life, and therefore my update, is my daughter. I hope that what I have written below will give an insight as to how she has dealt with her situation so far in her young life and the different stages we have been through in dealing with her father's death. All the children in the book were very young when the book was written; now they are all at school, growing up fast, and dealing with their situation as they grow older and further away from it is sometimes challenging for us parents, as all the women have alluded to in their own updates. For any of you reading this who have children who are now heading towards the tweenies, or are just curious about how your currently very young child may deal with his or her bereaved status, some of my own experiences with Alexandra may have some resonance with those of you going through a similar situation.

Being an only child of a single parent means the relationship is pretty intense and very strong. I know Alex better than she knows herself. As the years have gone on, she's become a little companion and we have established our own in-jokes, pet names and traditions that any family would, just that ours is just the two of us.

There's no real right answers as to how to go about helping our children; as their mum, we know them best and know what they will respond to in terms of

information about their dads; mainly I've found that honesty, brevity, keeping it simple and saying the same thing every time rather than changing details, has worked so far. I have no idea how this will work in future, so I'm still on a learning curve too. I look to my friends who are a year or two ahead of me to find out what I might be in for, but I know that making Alexandra feel secure and loved by both her parents, however briefly one of those may have been in her life, is my main aim. She knows she can ask anything she likes, whenever she likes, and I will always answer her honestly.

Alex has always had questions about her father and I suppose she always will, just that the questions have become more complex and will probably become more sophisticated and detailed as the years go by. Alex has gone through phases of wanting to know all about her father and I used to dread the questions, especially the ones I had no answer to (i.e. 'will I get what daddy had?', 'will you die soon as well?') etc etc. I just got used to them in the end.



Alex's handling of her bereaved status still comes in fits and starts. I have found that when there have been major changes in Alex's life, it has triggered another phase of awareness of her father's death. Questions started when she was about two or three, she asked a lot about her father as she'd realised from her friends/peers at nursery that they all had daddies. I explained in very simple language what had happened, nothing that would frighten her but would give her enough information to satisfy her at that point in her life, something along the lines of 'Daddy had a poorly heart that just stopped one day'. It was all very confusing for her though – she was watching TV one day and an ad for Mcdonalds came on; she asked what it was and, as I am very anti fast food, said 'that sort of food is bad for you, it can give you a poorly heart if you eat too much of it'. At which point, she said, 'so did Daddy die because he ate too many chicken nuggets?' At the age of 4, having just started school and again, aware of all her friends having daddies (and unusually, they all did, there were no other single mothers in sight), her questions were on the macabre side. She wanted to know the exact details of what happened when he died; where it happened, what did I do when I realised, was I screaming, did it hurt him; not unnaturally, she didn't realise how difficult it was to have to go over it – 'yes, he died in this bed', 'no, I wasn't screaming, I had to call an ambulance', 'no, there was no blood', but this type of curiosity did ease with time.

One of the more difficult times in coping with Alex's situation was when I first published the book. I did a lot of press interviews, and was taken aback by the papers repeatedly publishing one particular comment I'd made in the book and making it a headline in their feature. They took one phrase from the section when Alex was born and misquoted it. My daughter, who was learning to read at the time, wasted no time in taking me to task when she saw headlines like 'When my daughter was born, I didn't love her', 'I didn't love my baby'. What I'd actually said was that when she was born, they put her in my arms and I literally felt nothing, I was numb. I had been expecting this rush of love and didn't get it. I never imagined I would be explaining myself to my 4 year old who had read this and asked 'didn't you love me, Mummy? Do you love me now?'

Another time she became very aware of her situation was a year after she started school, when she was finding it hard to articulate her feelings; she couldn't quite find the words she was looking for and sometimes this resulted in bad behaviour at home

to the extent that at one point I dreaded spending time with her as she seemed to hate me. I finally narrowed the problem down to a situation at school. A girl in her class was deliberately excluding Alex from games/conversations, on the pretext of not having a daddy. On a daily basis, Alex was being told, 'you can't play this game, only girls who have dads can' and Alex would spend every lunchtime on the friendship bench, left alone by other children who were under the influence of this one particular girl – perhaps unconsciously she connected her father's death with me and so took her frustrations out on me.

When I talked to her about it, Alex confided she also felt left out emotionally as well as physically, and this problem had two parts to it. The first was that she didn't feel she could take part in conversations about her dad, simply because she didn't know much about him. When her friends were saying 'my dad got a new car at the weekend' or 'my daddy supports Fulham football club' or 'my dad does this, says that', Alex couldn't join in, even with things from the past (i.e. 'my daddy used to support Liverpool' or 'my dad had a blue car') because she didn't *know* that sort of banal, everyday stuff, as the details Ian's friends and my family and I had given Alex were far more about him as a person than what colour car he had. But it was really important to Alex and I felt I'd let her down. The second part of the problem was that she didn't know anything about him when he was her age, she couldn't equate the man in the photos with being a child like her and possibly having the same interests or habits. I only met him in his mid 30s and knew him for 5 years, so I didn't know a lot myself.

I was then on a mission to get as much information about him as I could from people who knew him either as a child or a teenager or a young adult. Since then, we've all put together a lot of information for Alex, she has photos and letters from friends of his, anecdotes and even a couple of his old toys that his parents dug out, which she is immensely protective and proud of. She is also, thankfully, more secure and settled in herself that she does know him better. She has her 'daddy's' box, where she keeps all the special things about Ian, and in order to cope with the situation at school, her teacher gave Alex an entire circle time session, where she talked about having no daddy, showing her treasured possessions in her special box, even showing my book! It not only helped her overcome the issue with confidence, but had an effect on the other children who of course were totally unaware of how she'd been feeling. One of her classmates even wrote her a little note to say how sorry she was about her daddy. Alex no longer feels awkward talking about her father - some of her peers haven't actually believed her when she has told them he died. Even now, new friends meeting me for the first time will ask me if it's true and what happened, and they are only content when they've seen proof he existed in the shape of photos or DVDs or something. They seem quite fascinated by it, but perhaps that's more to do with their never before having seen a photo of someone who is now dead.

One of the effects of the above was that, far from not mentioning her father, Alex went through a phase of telling just about everyone she met about Ian, which was a bit unnerving for me. I didn't want to stop her from talking or asking about him, but sometimes her audience just wasn't appropriate. For example, I took her to see *The Sound of Music* in the West End about 3 Christmases ago, and the woman in the row in front of me offered to keep an eye on her during the interval while she ate her ice cream and I nipped to the loo; by the time I got back the woman had had the full story and was offering me her condolences. About 2 hours later, I was in a shop in Covent Garden and the assistant said to Alex, 'aren't you lucky having a big day in town with your mum?' and her answer was 'I'm not that lucky, my dad died'. I have to warn you, this telling everyone new she met went on for a long time, and even now, it's a fair bet that when she meets new people or is in a new situation and I'm

not there (playschemes, Brownies, new babysitters), she is likely to tell them within minutes about Ian. She has eased up, though, she was at a sleepover with a new friend just recently and the subject didn't come up till dinner, when the girl's father asked Alex what her dad did for a living, and then the story came out. But at least she'd waited a few hours on this occasion!

One of the inescapable effects of Ian's death on Alex is the possibility that she may have inherited his condition. Every 3 years, she has a check up with a consultant from Great Ormond Street and will continue to do so until she is in her early 20s. If she shows no sign of it by then, the chances are she is clear and hasn't inherited it. I don't think about the alternative. The check ups aren't a big thing in themselves and they don't dominate either Alex's or my life apart from the day itself, when I do wonder if this will be the check up that finds something. Alex herself takes it all in her stride and regards it as a bit of an adventure and a few hours off school, although each time she goes, she has a little more understanding of *why* she has to go and has questions and concerns she raises with me.

All in all, her father's death is still a big thing for her, particularly as she never met him and he never saw her, and that is an issue in itself. All I can do is reassure her that her daddy loved her and it is a terrible thing that he never got to see her or cuddle her, but he used to talk to her in my tummy and he bought her a cuddly toy before he died and some children don't have thoughtful daddies like that who love them. It's very little compensation of course, but it does give her some reassurance. At the times he would have been very proud of her (good school reports, learning a musical instrument, being enrolled in Brownies, that type of achievement), I tell her so. What I don't do is the opposite and tell her when (after bad behaviour or misdemeanours) he would *not* be proud of her, as I think that is not just a cop out for me, but is destructive rather than *constructive*.

Alex does still need reassurance, she's not a clingy child but she is probably closer to me than a lot of children her age are to their mother. She still calls me Mummy and insists she always will, she doesn't like using 'Mum', she still sits on my knee, still needs copious cuddles, and when we're at home and she's in one particular room, she always needs to know where I am. She sometimes spends a few days away from home as I work full time, and she will stay with my sister or my parents for half term or for a few days in the summer, but needs contact with me at least a couple of times every day.



Having said that, she is also very independent and feisty – but I think she always has been. She has lots of friends, is keen to try out new things on her own, and has her own opinions on just about anything. Perhaps it's the red blonde hair, as she has a hot temper, so the teenage years will be rather challenging, but she really is a daughter her father would be immensely proud of – as am I. It's sometimes difficult to know where the line between being mates and mothers is drawn, we can be laughing uproariously at the dinner table about something and then ten minutes later I'll be in mother mode, complaining that she's not cleared the table or needs to switch off the TV and go and do her homework. It's important she doesn't see me as her best friend when she's older, sharing clothes and (God forbid) expecting me to go clubbing with her, that type of thing, that's not my role. By the same token, one of my faults is a tendency to tell her some things she doesn't really need to know, problems I should just get on with

fixing and not share with a 9 year old. When we had squirrels in the loft or when the kitchen roof was leaking water through the lights or the car had been damaged by vandals, she knew all about it. I suppose I talk to her about it because she's there and is the only person to tell when things happen. And she doesn't worry about anything I tell her, she just assumes I'll deal with it and get on with things. Which, like all widowed mums, I do.

She has declared in the last year or so that she doesn't want a new man in my life (I feel somewhat differently!) as she doesn't want a father, other than her own. I feel sad and a little concerned that she has no regular male role models in her life, I don't have brothers or cousins, and Ian was an only child, so there are few men/boys around. I don't want her to go to an all girl high school for that reason, I would like her to have male friends as she's growing up, so at least she has some contact with the opposite sex and won't emerge into adulthood thinking that men are something to be either feared or revered or impressed, that she can feel as comfortable with them as she does with her female friends. At the moment, that's the case with her friends at school, boys or girls, and long may it last.

In conclusion though, all the children in my book are, without question, secure, settled, loved and happy. Sure, they have their questions and their moments of wanting to know about Daddy, but it doesn't screw them up forever. There are probably years ahead of 'tough love' but we'll get there. As for the mums in the book, we're battle scarred and a little battle weary but it's a battle we have won. I wish you that same victory.

