

## *The Early Days*

**RACHEL met Ian Green in December 1995. In October 1998, they married and settled in their home in Ealing in West London. On 1 December 2000, on a trip to New York, Rachel discovered she was pregnant. Exactly five months later, in the early morning of 1 May 2001, Ian collapsed and died; he was 42.**



When Ian proposed to me in a restaurant on my 35<sup>th</sup> birthday, I thought he was joking. He was so casual and laid back about it, I didn't believe he was serious. I was stunned when he pulled out a diamond ring and a waiter arrived with champagne. Three years later, I again thought he was winding me up when he sat up in bed at six one morning, then collapsed across me. It was only when I levered myself up and saw his face that I knew it was no joke. In fact, I'd just seen my husband die, although I didn't realise it at the time.

I dialled 999 and the woman at the other end stayed on the line with me till the paramedics arrived, after what seemed an eternity, I have no idea how long it took them to come. They wouldn't let me into the bedroom, it wasn't like the dramas you see on TV, they didn't reassure me or offer to put the kettle on, they told me it didn't look good and I had to stay out of the way. Ian was brought downstairs on a stretcher and moved into the ambulance. I wasn't allowed to go in with him and they didn't move off anywhere, I could hear them using a defibrillator on him. A second ambulance appeared at the top of the road and a woman driver escorted me into it. At the time, it didn't strike me as strange, but later I realised that the paramedics must have summoned a second ambulance because of my pregnancy. There's no way an ambulance would just have been passing near my home at 6.30am for no particular reason.

At the hospital, I sat in a waiting room, I don't know how long for, trying to be positive, imagining Ian would be sitting up in bed when I next saw him, embarrassed at the fuss being made and apologising for making me worry so much. In my heart of hearts though, I knew he wouldn't be, I just *knew* things weren't all right. I was on the phone to my father when the doctor came in and told me they hadn't been able to resuscitate Ian, he had died. My best friend Amanda arrived with her partner Nero, also a friend of mine and Ian's, and they just held me and cried with me. My legs gave way then and I crumpled to the floor, I just couldn't believe this was happening. I went to see Ian three times that morning, he just looked as if he was asleep, his skin was still warm and pink. His family were Catholic and the priest was called to say a final prayer over him. I remember thinking as he did so how Ian would have laughed at the incongruity of it – the priest had a high voice and a hare lip; he was intoning these serious prayers at a tragic time, but with a voice out of a comedy show.

Eventually, I said goodbye for the last time. Thinking of the baby for probably the first time that day, I pressed Ian's hand against my stomach to say a silent farewell to his child. I also removed his wedding ring from his hand; it was something which had meant a lot to him but which would now one day go to our baby.

Ian had been quite particular about his wedding band, he didn't ever play with it or twist it round his finger when he was thinking or was nervous like a lot of people do, he told me once he wanted it to stay exactly the way it had been when I'd first put it onto his finger the day we married, he didn't want it ever to move from there.

Before leaving the hospital, I had to go through all the formalities of form filling and trying to find out why Ian had died. All I could tell the doctors was that he had felt tired for a few weeks, ever since he'd had a cold over Easter, and he had had an irregular heartbeat and heart palpitations the evening before, but put it down to too much caffeine and a busy weekend two days before, including an early start on the Saturday to attend our first ante-natal class. Ian was very excited about our baby and although he hadn't been keen on attending ante-natal classes, he was glad he went, as it reassured him about being a father. He'd been worried he wouldn't cut the mustard as a dad, especially as he was 42, but meeting other fathers-to-be, even one his own age, gave him the confidence and reassurance I hadn't been able to, and he was much more buoyant about the whole idea after that class.

It now became clear that it hadn't been simply tiredness, and whatever it was, it had turned me in the space of a few minutes from a pregnant wife to a pregnant widow and a future single parent. My whole life, and that of my child, had been turned upside down. The coroner's report stated that Ian had had a heart defect and had died of hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. It's a genetic condition and results in sudden death, usually at a very young age; Ian was 'lucky' to have survived to 42. Because of its hereditary nature, our baby will have to be monitored until her twenties because there's a 50% chance she too has inherited it.

At home, my sister Vicki and Amanda took over. People had to be told, arrangements had to be made, and I wasn't capable of doing any of it. Much of what I did or said in the first few days is more hearsay than actual memory. I didn't eat, sleep or care. I probably didn't give in to the grief the way I would have done if I hadn't been pregnant, but then I'll never know. I felt later that my grief could only have been half-hearted as I had to consider the baby all the time, I couldn't throw myself at the mercy of several bottles of vodka and run away screaming and bash my head against a wall or just run away completely. I had to do the sensible thing and think of the baby, much as I didn't want to and much as everyone else *did* want me to. I know it was only logical of them to want me to focus on the baby, but I'd just lost my husband, there wasn't room for anything else in the first few days, I'd worry about the baby later, right now it was just me and the end of my world.

My GP said a few shots of whisky were about the only thing he could prescribe for me, but he asked me to go and see the midwife as soon as I could, to check all was well with the pregnancy. I just went along with it, not because I was worried about the baby. Other people could do that, in fact, if I could have swapped the baby to have my husband back, I'd have done it. I knew I could get pregnant, we could have another baby any time, but I couldn't have another Ian. For a few days, I resented the pregnancy, thinking irrationally that I'd been made to choose between two lives, that I couldn't have both my husband *and* child, I'd had to lose one of them in order to have the other. I would never be a wife and a mother, such an innocuous expression used every day about and by millions of women, and I wouldn't be one of them. I'd been a wife for a little while and

was now about to become a mother, never the both together. Everything was just so bloody *unfair*.

By around 8.30 am on 2 May, after a completely sleepless night, I had cleared out the vast majority of Ian's clothes and put them in bags ready for the charity shop, keeping only the ones he or I had particularly liked. It's something I now regret and think was short sighted of me, but I remember feeling the complete opposite at the time. By mid-morning that day, I'd also sorted out some of his personal possessions and put them away – his toothbrush, comb, mini disc player, the things he used every day. I just felt I had to do it now or I never would, despite people advising me to leave it till later. I didn't want to listen. All I wanted for a few days was to be left alone to think about me and Ian.

I felt we'd really just begun to know each other properly now we were in our new home and were starting a family. We'd been together for five years and married for two and a half. From the very start of our relationship, he made me feel the most special, beautiful and talented woman in the world, as if there was nothing I couldn't do if I set my mind to it, he encouraged me in anything I wanted to do. He discovered my ambitions and greatest wishes and set about making them all come true and with one exception (wing-walking) he did it. He was the archetypal bloke who never wanted to grow old. He joked he was born 10 years too late, that he'd have been in paradise as a young adult in the late Sixties – he described himself as 'an ageing hippy with short hair and a mortgage'. He was quirky, extremely intelligent and wanted to know everything about everything, he read Sartre and Nietzsche alongside music biographies, Ian Banks, Ian Fleming and Janet Evanovich. He was a spiritual type of man who did meditation and yoga, then fried his brains on computers every day at work in a bank in the City. His favourite times were the hours he spent in his recording studio either with his band or just on his own, him and his beloved music. We had a brilliant relationship, not perfect, as no relationship ever is, but it was near as damn it, based on not just love, but complete trust, great respect and a lot of fun and laughter. We rarely disagreed, had never had a major row and we were good friends as well as lovers, spouses and expectant parents.



Ian had a highly developed and wicked sense of humour and seemed universally popular, I suppose most people would say that about their dear departed, but it was true. He had a huge range of friends from a wide variety of backgrounds and different areas of his life – from his schooldays right up to his latest job; as an only child, his friends were very important to him. The cards and letters I got after his death mainly said the same four things – one, how awful and shocking it was, two, his sense of humour would be sorely missed, three, he'd been a loyal friend or colleague who found the good in everyone, and four, that he was happier at the time of his death than they'd ever known him, which was heartbreaking and comforting to me at the same time. He was happier than ever and had so much to look forward to and he'd been taken away from it all. He'd made it his job to make me happy, and the day before he died, I couldn't have been happier, I had a wonderful marriage, a new and exciting job, a lovely home we'd just done up, I was pregnant, and then he died and it all meant nothing.

During the first week after his death, I let everyone else take over. My father, as a vicar, sorted out the funeral and anything official or financial; my chef brother-in-law did all the meals; my mother looked after all the visitors and the house, and my sister, who was also pregnant, did everything else. I made the most basic of decisions, but I simply didn't care what choices I made. Some things, though, I had to do myself. I had to register Ian's death, for example, and was virtually incoherent in the registrar's office, my dad had to do the talking. On the way out, a woman coming towards me stood slightly to one side to let me pass in the narrow corridor. I didn't even realise she'd done it until I heard her mutter sarcastically 'thank you would have been nice', which is the sort of thing I might have thought myself if the boot had been on the other foot. On this occasion though, I felt like running after her and telling her 'I am in floods of tears because I've just had to register my husband's death and look at my stomach – I'm sorry if manners aren't uppermost in my mind', but of course I didn't.

In the days leading up to the funeral, I did other things a young woman should never have to do – sit in an undertaker's and choose a coffin, as if I were choosing bedroom furniture or something; order a wreath of flowers; provide clothes for my husband's corpse – I even gave underwear and shoes, I had no idea whether dead bodies wear underwear or not. The worst thing I had to do was to go out and buy a black skirt to accommodate my bump so I could wear it to my own husband's funeral; that was something I will never, ever forget. The sadness of it all made me feel physically sick.

The funeral itself took place three days after Ian died. It wasn't a full church affair, as Ian hadn't been particularly religious and I, possibly selfishly, didn't feel I could go through a full funeral service. We had never discussed funeral arrangements, I didn't even know if he would have preferred burial or cremation, it was Nero who told me Ian had mentioned it only a few weeks before. Ian had been telling him about a film he'd seen about being buried alive and said he hated the thought of being buried when he died, it wasn't for him. If it hadn't been for that throwaway comment, I'd never have known Ian's views on it. As it was, I had a real problem handling his cremation, I couldn't come to terms with the fact that there was nothing left of him and that I had knowingly sent his body to be burned, I couldn't get my head round it at all, it was on my mind constantly for days and days after the funeral, that there really was nothing left of my husband.

Although we hadn't been able to get the news of Ian's death to everyone we knew, the crematorium was full, well over 100 people were there, some of whom I didn't even know. So many friends were in tears, and their glances fell on my stomach as if they couldn't quite look me in the eyes, unable to believe what had happened. The house was full of people afterwards and I managed to handle it for about three hours and then had to ask people to leave, I couldn't cope with it any longer. I was worn out in body and spirit.

It was after the funeral that I knew I had to face facts, face the future and face the reality that I was pregnant. Although he'd never see his baby apart from once on a scan monitor, at least Ian had known what sex the baby was, courtesy of a mistake at the hospital – they told us the sex when we'd asked them not to, but after he died, I was very glad he had known. He had been delighted he was having a daughter, we chose a name and he talked to her via my bump, he even sent me e-mails asking after his 'two favourite girls', and he was looking forward to showing her his world and doing all sorts of things with her I would never even have thought of.

Over the next few weeks, I had to deal with not just the emotional side of being suddenly widowed, but also the practical issues. Ian had run his own business and now it all had to be tied up and his financial matters settled. I had seemingly endless meetings with his accountant, his financial adviser, a solicitor, the building society and his bank. I really didn't understand the vast majority of what I was doing. As with most young men, Ian hadn't drawn up a will, it was on our 'to do one day' list. As a result, everything had to go to probate and I couldn't access any of his money until it was released by the courts. I also had no idea what accounts and savings Ian had had, it wasn't an area of his life I knew anything about. It was only thanks to a good solicitor, Ian's former colleagues and his orderly filing that I found out where he had pensions and savings accounts and how to go about closing them. I became a director of a company I had no idea about managing and I'd have found it amusing in other circumstances. What did my dad and I know about high finance and running a company? Yet here we were, directors of a business, signing documents and cheques all over the place like Monopoly money. I was grateful Ian had been meticulous about his accounting and his filing, and equally glad he hated the thought of being in debt, so there were no outstanding bills to pay. Delving into financial issues so quickly and in so much depth did, however, mean I became overly concerned that I was going to die suddenly too. I became fanatical in ensuring that all my own financial affairs were in order, I sorted out my will, appointed guardians for my daughter in the event of my own death, I even made a complete list of every bank and savings account, direct debit arrangement etc, complete with contact names and account numbers, and put it in the bank so nobody would have to cope with this awful financial situation if I died myself. I told my family where to find this list and they were uncomfortable about the whole idea, but I couldn't rid myself of the idea that I might die too.



I went back to work after a month of compassionate leave. I was told I didn't need to, as I was only a couple of weeks away from starting my maternity leave by then, but it became important to me to face everyone at work. When I returned after maternity leave, I wanted people to regard me as 'Rachel, just back from maternity leave', not 'Rachel, whose husband died and she's been off ever since.' I had also come to hate the house, so it was vital for me to get back to a routine outside it. I just didn't want to be at home, I felt in some way it had betrayed me as the person who'd loved it most had died in it. Ironically, the only room I derived any comfort from was our bedroom, the other rooms seemed strange and alien, as though it wasn't my house at all. I know people found it odd I preferred my bedroom, it was where my husband had died after all, but it was comforting to me, his bathrobe was still on the door and his favourite clothes were still in the wardrobe. Having something familiar in a totally unfamiliar situation became a necessity to me.

Apart from my regular midwife appointments and one or two scans at the hospital, I didn't think overmuch about the baby. I knew she was OK because she was kicking, and I continued to read my pregnancy books because it was the only reading material I could concentrate on. Even then, I would skip over the bits where it recommended you got your partner to rub your back or massage your swollen ankles, or pointed out there'd come a time when you'd be wearing your husband's shirts over your bump. I was simply

concerned with the development of the baby and that was it. Sharing the pregnancy, having massages and getting backrubs were immaterial.

However, once I went on maternity leave, I started to focus much more on the baby. The complete shock of Ian's death was beginning to wear off and although I still cried for hours at a time and couldn't talk about him much without dissolving into tears, I was very gradually getting used to the idea he wasn't coming back, it was just me and the baby. I also knew Ian wouldn't have wanted me to fall apart, I could imagine him saying 'come on, Rach, you can do it, you can get through this, that baby's relying on you.' Like I said before, one of Ian's main aims in life was to see me happy and he would have been devastated and horrified by the knowledge that he was the reason I was the most unhappy I had ever been in my life. So I began to concentrate on doing the best for our daughter that I could, so Ian would be proud of me, and in time, of her.

The practical things were easier to overcome than the emotional ones, as they always are. Focusing on practical issues often defers the emotional ones, they serve a useful purpose so you can put off thinking about the things you know are going to hurt. I cleaned the house obsessively, wrote letters, did yoga classes and went swimming. I decorated the nursery, packed my hospital bag, tidied out the loft, finished painting the bathroom, made meals to go in the freezer for when I came out of hospital, made endless lists of useless things to do, I just did anything to try and wear me out physically so I didn't have time to sit and think and feel sorry for myself. I'd like to say it worked, but it didn't, I just fell into bed and then fell apart every night. I got little sleep and would be awake at around 6.05 am every day, counting the days since Ian had died, virtually to the minute. But during the day, I tried to get a grip and prepare for the practical side of having a baby.

One of the things I had to do was find a new birth partner. My mum offered, although I knew she wasn't too keen. My sister was happy to do it, but she lives some distance away and has her own family and wouldn't be able to be there from start to finish. Amanda was also an option, but she had a play to appear in. In the end, I felt it didn't matter who was with me, the one person who should have been there wasn't going to be, so I didn't really care who, if anyone, was with me. In the end, I had all three of them on standby, depending on who was free at the time.

I went on a shopping trip to Mothercare World with my mum, who'd been living with me virtually constantly since 1 May. A few weeks before, I'd been looking forward to buying all the baby stuff with Ian, oohing and aahing over tiny sleep suits and trying to fathom out how the hell a steriliser worked. Now, however, I had a very precise list and it was like Supermarket Sweep, mum and I grabbed a trolley, filled it with what was on the list, paid for it and came home. There was no cooing over adorable outfits, no throwing in the odd cuddly toy, no 'well, you never know if I might need it' dithering. It was pretty ruthless, but I didn't need the emotion, I just wanted to get the stuff I needed.

I relied quite a lot on my newly found friends in the local NCT group I'd joined, which I would recommend doing to any pregnant woman. They had been horrified when I turned up at the second meeting, clutching the back of a chair for support and announcing to all of them that my husband had died that week and I'd be coming on my own in future. My mum was with me and created a diversion for people by telling the class how things in pregnancy and childbirth had changed since she'd had me in the early sixties. Otherwise,

I think the teacher would have broken down and the others would have been stunned into embarrassed silence. During my maternity leave, I met the others in my group every week and gradually they got used to my situation and just accepted it. They occasionally mentioned Ian, but as they'd only met him once, he'd never really been part of their lives. Nobody was embarrassed at mentioning his name or talking about their own husbands, so it was a pretty natural and normal situation I was in with them. To some extent, it was a relief. At other times, I felt alone and bereft that they all had their husbands and I didn't, I was very envious at times.

Although the midwives at my local surgery were aware of my situation, the details had yet to filter through to the staff at the hospital, despite the assurances I was given that notes would be put on my file immediately. My dad rang the maternity unit to tell them himself. So, when I went for my next scan and was tearful because Ian had always been there before, I was a bit taken aback when the sonographer said bluntly, 'you've just seen your baby, you're supposed to be happy, what are you crying for?' When I told her, she immediately shot out of the room to find a midwife and I was escorted out of the scan room and into the consultant's office with no delay whatsoever. I'd never had treatment like it, but the fact I had to be in mourning to get it was pretty wretched. The consultant was brilliant, and I have nothing but praise for the maternity staff who took care of me. I was offered additional scans to reassure me all was well with the pregnancy. Once I'd decided I had to start thinking more about the baby than Ian for the immediate future, I'd worried that several days of not eating and all the stress of the last few weeks must have had some effect on her. The scans reassured me all was well. I can't honestly say I looked forward to having the baby, all the joy had gone out of the pregnancy and I just wanted to get it over with and try and get on with our lives.

Three weeks before she was due, I had Ian's ashes interred. I think there's something undignified about scattering them, and anyway, there's no way I could actually have brought myself to look on the physical remains of my husband when scattering them. I collected them from the undertaker's. I don't know what I was expecting, a small box perhaps, but it certainly wasn't this extremely heavy, big jar that looked like an old fashioned sweet jar, only burgundy opaque plastic. It looked as though it should have been filled with lemon sherbets or pineapple chunks or something, I even managed to smile at Amanda at how ludicrous it all seemed – again, it was something Ian may well have found funny himself, shoved in a sweet jar where rainbow drops should have been. I drove to Suffolk the next day with my parents and my in-laws, where my father performed a brief ceremony and buried the ashes in one of Ian's favourite places, an otter sanctuary. He'd loved otters and one year, I subscribed to one of those adoption schemes on his behalf and adopted an otter for him for his birthday. We went to the sanctuary a couple of times to see 'his' otter, and it is a beautiful, scenic and peaceful place. The owners allowed me to inter the ashes on an island in the lake, which I visit each year on his anniversary with our daughter. I bought a bench with a small plaque on it in Ian's memory, which the trust has placed right opposite the site of the interred ashes, and it's somewhere I'm sure Ian would have approved of far more than a cemetery. It would have appealed to his sense of something a little bit different, a little bit quirky – but it's also a very tranquil and reflective kind of place. For this purpose, it was perfect.

By now, I was drawing closer to my due date - I put my bag by the front door, gave a copy of my birth plan to my three potential partners and then I waited to go into labour.

I'd been given a cervical sweep two weeks before she was due (the doctors thought she was too small to endure a full term birth) and I'd been expecting to go into labour ever since. I finally did so in the early hours of 9 July 2001 and was quite calm and accepting about it all. I think because I'd been through the worst thing in my life, nothing else could be quite as bad. I had a very short labour – short but intense, as I progressed too quickly for any pain relief – and then, in the final stages, I just gave up. I hid a couple of contractions from the midwife, as they weren't that bad, and I just gave up trying, I'd had enough – as long as I didn't have to have a Caesarean, my labour could take as long as it liked, I didn't care. I didn't scream or shout, but I did a fair bit of wailing that I wanted Ian there. It wasn't meant to be like this – supported by my sister at one end and my mother at the other. Ian was supposed to be there mopping my brow, holding my hand, making me laugh and encouraging me. But he wasn't and it wasn't good enough for me. Eventually, a doctor came along and a few minutes later, via a ventouse suction cap and two agonising pushes, I was no longer pregnant, I was a mother.

I looked at my baby and felt absolutely nothing. I suppose I must have been glad she was here and safe, but if I felt anything at all it was relief she was OK and that I seemed to have survived the birth difficulties. I was given a ward, so I didn't have to and their partners. A bunch of balloons, champagne and to see. I marked my carton of orange juice and a of a blur, people came and baby – I had to keep remembering to say 'my' not 'our', 'I' not 'we', it does take some getting used to. My mum was allowed to sleep in my room on a put up bed, but neither of us got a wink of sleep that first night. I was exhausted and so sad Ian wasn't with us.



At some point during that first day, I did look at our daughter properly and she was beautiful and totally perfect. Ian and I had joked that she'd be small with red hair, big eyes and a lot of wrinkles, but she had a tiny amount of downy golden hair, she wasn't small at 7lbs 2oz (despite what the doctors had thought) and her skin was totally peachy, not a mark or a wrinkle anywhere. We'd got the eyes right though, they were enormous saucers, totally round even at a day old. She was a complete stranger and I was totally overwhelmed by the responsibility I had now taken on.

The following day, my in-laws came to see their new and only grandchild. I'd always wanted us to have more than one child, so that Ian could experience, albeit by proxy, what having a sibling was like, and now my own daughter would be an only child too. During that visit, I could feel the tears bubbling up again and finally I just burst. I literally howled, God knows what the women in the main ward thought, but it was just like a huge release. I sobbed and sobbed while my father tried to comfort me, saying he knew his weren't the arms I wanted round me, but it was the best he could do, which made me cry even more. Grief makes you totally selfish, makes you think nobody's hurting the way you are, and it's probably true, they're not, but your parents in particular suffer terribly as well, knowing that nothing, absolutely nothing, can stop their child from hurting, they can't do a damn thing to make the pain go away and make it all right again. In that instant, I felt sorry for my dad as well as for myself, but was incoherent with tears

and just cried myself out. It was undoubtedly a mixture of grief, hormones and sheer exhaustion that had set me off, but I wanted to run away and hide from the baby, the hospital and all the crap that was now my life, but I couldn't, I was well and truly trapped. Even my own body had let me down, as I couldn't move easily and was still bleeding. When I came home from hospital, the house was once again filled with cards and letters, although much happier ones than a few weeks before. People's generosity was boundless, mainly because of what they perceived as my 'tragic' situation. People I'd never heard of before, friends of friends or relatives of colleagues had sent me gifts which they'd never have done in normal circumstances. It was very good of them and I appreciated it, but it did have a sadness about it as well, that I wouldn't have been the recipient of such generosity if Ian hadn't died. I think people were relieved in a sense that I had come through a death and a birth, and now it was a happier time, it was a sense of letting out their breath, 'thank God she's had the baby, now we can focus on that instead of Ian.' Perhaps that's a bit strong, but I'm sure that element was there and I can't in all honesty blame them, there was nothing else they could do to help and this was their very kind way of showing their concern and that they were thinking of me. Some of the cards weren't birth congratulation cards, as the writers couldn't bring themselves to send me one with sentimental congratulations on them, gushing poems about joyous arrivals and being over the moon etc. I had a bit of a dilemma of my own when it came to the birth announcement cards. I wanted people to know she'd arrived, as so many people were interested, but I could hardly say 'Ian and Rachel are proud to announce', it would have been a bit sick and not a little embarrassing for others to read, and I didn't want just my name on the card, as it would have been a sad reminder of what my situation was. Eventually, my sister designed a card and made no mention of either our names, just our daughter's, it was a simple card with baby illustrations on it and the message read 'Just to say Alexandra Lucy Siân Green arrived safely on 9 July', the time and her weight etc.

A few weeks before his death, Ian and I had decided on Alexandra as her first name, and Lucy had been Ian's preferred choice for a second name. An unexpected third name was my dad's suggestion, Siân being the female equivalent of the Celtic Ian, and as his grandmother had been Welsh, it was doubly appropriate. So, his daughter was finally here and named. And I felt terribly sorry for her that she'd never know the wonderful man her father was, and sorry for myself that I was the only one who was going to bring her up and she deserved better, Ian was far more laid back and tolerant than I am. She'd have had a much better, fun time with him around – fun dad and strict mum, now she only had the one who'd have to try and do both jobs.

Once we were home, reality kicked in and I had to start looking after our daughter. Feeding was quickly a problem, she simply wasn't getting any milk and I was getting distraught. I was in pain everywhere, and I was crying virtually constantly. One day, after yet another unsuccessful feeding attempt and a bit of a dispute with the midwife, I took to my bed and resorted to more sobbing and feeling hopelessly sorry for myself. I felt couldn't even be a decent mum, I was as much a failure at that as I had been as a wife. I couldn't save Ian's life, now it looked as if our daughter's was at stake as well as she wasn't getting enough food, I really was at my lowest ebb. My sister took one look at me, took herself off to the supermarket and returned with a carton of SMA Gold. The baby had the best feed in her four days on this earth, I had some sleep, and things improved. After that awful day, I did mixed feeding for the first 3 months. I would have

persevered with breastfeeding a lot longer if Ian had been alive. We'd even have had a bit of a giggle about it, as I wandered round with cabbage leaves in my bra to relieve the pain. With his encouragement and help, and me not grieving, I'm convinced I would have got to grips with it. Interestingly, one of my WAY friends who went through this herself said that she would have given up *sooner* if her husband had been there, because he would have encouraged her to look after herself and not put herself through it if it wasn't working and neither the baby nor she were benefiting from it. I'd never thought of it like that before, and it made me feel strange that two of us were sitting wondering what our respective dead husbands would have done in a certain situation.

Alexandra was sleeping through the night at five weeks, so I managed to get several hours at a stretch myself. I didn't actually mind the middle of the night feeds, it was summer and it started getting light at about 4.30am. I used to sit in a window chair to feed her, thinking of her father, as I always did when I had nothing else to occupy my mind, and some days I really *did* wet the baby's head by letting the tears fall as she fed. I seem to be giving the impression I cried constantly, and for the first couple of weeks after Ian died, I suppose I did. I remember feeling guilty the first day I hadn't cried until almost bedtime and this was only three weeks after. I felt terrible about it, as though I'd forgotten him already, but I hadn't taken into account the fact I'd been on a plane, flown abroad to stay with friends, had been talked to and kept busy since my arrival and it was only now, on my own in bed, that I had allowed my grief to come to the fore. I sometimes felt as if I'd never smile again, and my father recalled some months later that it had taken me a week to even smile at my own baby.

My mum stayed with me for the first month after Alexandra's birth and I spent a further month with my parents in Cheshire. It was only at the beginning of September that I settled into any routine and began to get on with it, when life became quite monotonous and I was like any other new mother, desperate for adult conversation and constantly worrying about my daughter's health and progress. After Alexandra had a bad cold at only 2 months, and I was frantic with worry, I realised just how much I loved her and it wasn't just relief and responsibility I felt for her now, it was a complete, deep, abiding love for my tiny daughter.

I would never get over what had happened on 1 May, and the first of every month was an ordeal, as it meant I was getting further and further away from Ian, but the indisputable fact was that I now had to focus more on what had happened on 9 July if I was ever going to make any headway and make any sense of what I'd been through. I had to concentrate on what is and what will be, rather than what had been, and start to focus on a new life rather than a death.



## *The First Year – Getting Through It*



During the first year, I relied on my daughter, my family, my friends, white wine and a sense of humour to get me through. I think anyone bereaved would agree that that first year is definitely the hardest, and having to cope with the demands of a new baby makes it doubly difficult. Some people said it would make things easier for me, having something to focus on, someone to live for and have a future for, but that just made the bad times even harder. I mentally gritted my teeth and got on with it as best I could, but I felt everyone was watching me to see how I'd cope. I took Alexandra to the health centre every week to be weighed and checked, so that the health visitors could see I was taking care of her OK, it was as if I had to prove to myself I could do a decent job as a mother, defiantly but silently telling them 'I might be widowed, but I can still look after my baby'.

We got into a fairly strict routine within a few weeks, not just for Alexandra's benefit, but for mine as well. It was important to me that I knew when she would be asleep so that I could plan to make phone calls, give into my grief and cry my eyes out for a few hours, as well as do all the practical chores around the house or see a friend for coffee. I would take her out for long walks in her pram and I had to have some sort of adult contact at least once every day, it was my daily reality check. The evenings, however, were mine. I locked the door around 6pm, stripped off the makeup and daytime clothes, put on a tracksuit or even my pyjamas, had something to eat and would then watch TV or attempt to read a book, speak to a couple of people on the phone and then go to bed. That was my evening for 2-3 years, more or less.

The first year naturally holds a certain amount of dreaded events – every main anniversary has to be got through, and it really *is* a case of getting through it. The first one for me was Ian's birthday in September, and that was the first day I laughed since he'd died. I remember the date because it wasn't just his birthday, I went to see Amanda performing in a comedy play, and I couldn't *not* laugh. I remember going to the loo in the interval and crying, feeling guilty because I'd been laughing when perhaps I shouldn't have been, but I also realised it was an appropriate time, and I know Ian would have been howling with laughter if he'd been with us. It might also have been a reaction to the fact that four days before, my friend Emma and I had sat with our two month old babies in our arms and been horrified by the scenes of the World Trade Centre's destruction, wondering just what sort of world we'd brought our children into, where lives could be

snatched away so quickly and cruelly. The company Ian was working for when he died was an American bank whose HQ was in the fated buildings. There's no knowing whether, if Ian hadn't died when he did, he'd have had a job, colleagues or even a company to work for after 11 September. I was always quite thankful he was spared that day.

The next anniversary, in October, was our wedding anniversary, quickly followed by Christmas, New Year and my own birthday, then the anniversary of his death. On the personal days, such as our birthdays and wedding anniversary, I drank champagne to his memory, much to the bemusement of some people. I wasn't celebrating his death, I was commemorating the fact it was what we'd always done together on those days. I felt very sad buying a half bottle of champagne, but if I'd had the full amount, I'd have been even more morose.

During the first few months of being widowed, I decided to build up a library of memories of Ian, ostensibly for Alexandra, but for me too. I began with photo albums. I had been given several albums and baby books when Alexandra was born, and people had gone to great lengths to find ones which didn't have 'Daddy's little girl' on one page or 'My daddy's first words when he saw me were ....' on another, and I've managed to make use of all the albums. One is what I call Alexandra's 'Firsts' Album, and it documents everything she's done for the first time – photos of her first finger food, shoving toast into a butter smeared mouth, or sitting in her floatie seat at the swimming pool for the first time, as well as including actual items like the first pair of socks she wore, coins from the year she was born, shells from the beach from her first holiday, that type of thing. Another album is a very plush, unusual one, which I've filled with particularly nice or special photos of me and Ian at different stages of our relationship. Another has pictures of Alexandra at the Otter Trust on Ian's anniversary each successive year.

At Christmas in 2001, I wrote to all Ian's oldest friends, the ones he'd been to school and university with, and asked them to write down their memories of him, their *real* memories, not just the good ones that they think bereaved women want to hear. I only knew Ian for five years, such a small part of his life; I'd known the late 30s version, the husband and father, the responsible working man, I'd never known the schoolboy, the student, the hippy type musician he was in his twenties, and I wanted people to tell not just Alexandra, but me as well, about the type of man he'd been before I knew him. And I didn't want just eulogies; he was a real person, he had faults, he made mistakes, and if they were appropriate and entertaining, I wanted to hear about them. It took a lot of effort for people to come back to me and give me their thoughts, and most of them didn't, which I was really saddened by, as I still won't ever really have the full picture. But I do have some wonderful letters and people have said marvellous things about him, but they've also been realistic and have talked about and painted a picture of the real man or boy they knew, not some improbably perfect person they've put on a pedestal simply because he's dead and they don't want to hurt my feelings. They've told the truth. They've mentioned hangovers, his sometimes peculiar dress sense (although in his defence, he was colour blind) and his lack of domestic skills, his dodgy cars and potholing escapades. I've put all the letters and anecdotes in an album with photos of Ian at the time the letters refer to, it's something for me and Alexandra to look and smile at in years to come.

We didn't have an official wedding video, we both disliked the idea, but my brother-in-law got a camcorder for the occasion and did a great job, imperfections and all, I'm so glad I've got it. It's a fabulous memory, a *real* memory, from my two year old bridesmaid tripping over her dress to what our guests were really saying at their tables during the meal. And I'm now glad we agreed to pay an extortionate price on holiday in Mexico to have a video of us swimming with dolphins, because I have a record of Ian moving, walking, talking, laughing – it's as if I have to prove to people, Alexandra included, that he really did exist, and this is what he sounded like and how he moved, or sat. One of my favourite videos is of him playing in one of his old bands from years before I knew him and I treasure that possibly more than the others because it shows me how he was before I knew him, and gives me an insight into how he was before I was ever a part of his life.

Apart from the photo albums, I've also kept the smallest, normally most insignificant things of Ian's – of course I've still got books, CDs, clothes etc, but I've also kept things like his tube pass, his toothbrush, comb, driving licence, a packet of chewing gum from his jacket pocket, aftershave. In fact, I went out and bought a new bottle of his aftershave, because when Alexandra is old enough to understand and wants to smell it, the open bottle will have gone off, so I bought her a new one for when she wants to know what her father smelled like. I used to spray his aftershave on the pillow to make it smell like him too, it felt comforting, reassuring and normal in my world where not much was. It was also the smallest things that got to me that both Ian and Alexandra will miss out on, not the major, distant future stuff like his being unable to walk her down the aisle or see her graduate, as she may never do either. Those things didn't bother me, but the fact that she'll never do such ordinary things as buy a Father's Day card or draw a picture of her daddy did get to me a lot. The fact she'll never even have something as insignificant and simple as having her photograph taken with her father broke my heart and still hurts.

For several weeks after Ian died, I woke at 6.05 every day, immediately thinking 'this time yesterday/last week/six weeks ago, Ian died.' After about 15 months, if I woke at that time, I didn't automatically think of Ian's death, it was more along the lines of 'I hope Alexandra doesn't wake up just yet.' The date of Ian's death being the first of the month was a hurdle to get over initially, simply because it was such an obvious change in day and month. Every month was another step further away from him. For some reason, Ian and I had had a few momentous occasions of our own on the first of the month and so that day seems particularly poignant to me even now. We set our wedding date on 1 March 1998, I discovered I was pregnant on 1 December 2000, I had an amniocentesis test on 1 February and a 20 week scan on 1 March 2001.

By far the worst time in the first year was the lead up to Ian's anniversary rather than the day itself. I kept comparing it to the previous year and thinking 'this time last year he was decorating the bathroom', or 'this time last year, we were having dinner and it was the last meal he ever had', it was relentless. The Sunday two weeks before his anniversary was terrible. The weather was appalling, I was stuck inside on my own and I just couldn't get a grip, from the minute I woke up till the minute I went to sleep. I was constantly thinking of Ian, talking to his photo, looking at his things. I had a terribly puffy face, red blotchy skin, I didn't eat or drink apart from coffee all day and I felt lousy. I will always remember how Alexandra seemed to pick up on it and rather than make a fuss or get frightened or start howling herself, she just sat in her playpen and stared at me,

or played with her toys – she was scarily impeccably behaved all day. She ate all her food and slept when she was supposed to, she was very content playing on her own and went to bed without any problem. It was only the next day that I realised she hadn't spoken a word all day. She hadn't babbled in her usual baby talk that nine month olds do, she hadn't grizzled or cried, and she hadn't smiled once. At the time, I didn't notice and couldn't have cared less even if I had. It was only afterwards that I realised it and immediately felt dreadful, but I was so caught up in my own feelings and my own grief that day that nothing else mattered. It has never happened again.

I really, really missed the familiarity of living with another person, warts and all, bad habits included. One of the things I found hardest immediately after Ian died was not having to brush up his toast crumbs on the kitchen counter every morning after he'd left for work. It really irritated me that he never did it himself, but I missed those toast crumbs dreadfully in the first few days after his death. I hated coming back to an empty house day in, day out, knowing that nothing had changed inside since I left it, it just emphasised the loneliness. When I met my NCT friends on a Monday afternoon, particularly on the dark, winter days, I would cry on my way home, desperate to get there before Alexandra fell asleep in her pram, but at the same time hating the thought of arriving home to a dark, empty house, in the knowledge that nobody would be coming through the door later either. But it wasn't just a person or a lifestyle I missed, not just a relationship, it was Ian himself and there was no getting away from the fact he was never coming back.

I went back to work in March 2002. Although I was dreading it, having been out of the work environment for so long and in such circumstances, going back to work was like a breath of fresh air. I was going into a relatively new job, so it was all a bit exciting and it felt great to be back in among adults and having conversations which didn't feature the words baby, nappy or calpol. I was lucky I had been able to arrange working hours to suit Alexandra's nursery ones, and I only did four days a week, tackling all my household stuff on my day 'off', which meant the weekends were free to do as I wished. I planned them rigorously – I ensured I did something on every single one. Even if it was just a trip to the Wacky Warehouse or a coffee in Ealing, I would rely on it to get me through two days. If people cancelled at the last minute I would panic, and would end up ringing people I wasn't even that friendly with or keen on, just so I didn't have to be on my own for the whole weekend. It took me over three years not to feel like that any more, to value my free time and to enjoy that spare time with my daughter.

Before going back to work, I had to sort out Ian's possessions. As he was a musician, I had to decide what to do with his thousands of CDs and records, recording equipment, computers etc. A lot of it went to friends, including his old band. I got such a shock seeing it on stage at Wembley Arena a year later, he'd always wanted to be on stage there, so at least his instruments got there, even if he didn't. The band knew I was in the audience that night and dedicated one of their old songs to him, which Ian used to play when he was with them. I was so touched by their thoughtfulness, it's often the smallest and most insignificant things that have had the biggest impact on my emotions. Of course, I cried for the whole of the song because of it and even the band was a little choked later when I went to thank them. They later dedicated their next album to him.

Music was Ian's overriding passion, listening to it, writing it, playing it. He had converted the top floor of the house into a recording studio, it was *his* room. The studio was what really sold the house to him when we were house hunting, a real place he could make loads of racket and set all his equipment out, and now here I was getting rid of it, I felt such a sense of betrayal, disloyalty and guilt. But I knew nothing about what made it work or what every computer/instrument did, I hadn't even heard of most of the bands he had on CD. Not many people had, he had a very eclectic and unusual taste in music as his friends would be the first to agree. I kept the CDs I knew meant a lot to him, and the ones I would listen to or pass on to Alexandra as prime examples of his musical taste. The rest, along with the equipment, went either to his friends or a specialist dealer. Nine months after his death, I turned the studio into a playroom-cum-office, but I still didn't go up there very often. It was still his room, and I felt it was the one room where Ian would, if such things happen, appear or make his presence known. And I was scared of it happening. I decorated the room and plastered it with children's stickers and put fairy lights everywhere, so it looked particularly effective at night, but I never saw it like that apart from when people wanted to see it, I was loathe to go up there after dark unless I absolutely had to. If I'm honest, I still am.

I've never had any indication of Ian's ghost or his presence, although there have been times when my mind has gone into overdrive and I've wondered. The bedroom door closing suddenly at midnight shortly after Alexandra's birth was obviously him and not the summer breeze through the open window, the shower turning itself on again a minute after it had been switched off was obviously him as well, ignoring the fact it has done it every day since and there is patently a small fault somewhere. One thing I don't have a rational explanation for is that when Alexandra was tiny, I would bathe her in her baby bath and lay her on the bed to change her - very often, I would notice her looking over my shoulder and smiling at something. Of course, when I turned round, there was nothing there, it was just a blank wall, so I did wonder if, as children are meant to be, she was sensitive to something I wasn't. I could just imagine Ian standing behind me pulling funny faces to make her laugh while she was being dressed, or pretending to pull my hair or tickle my ears or something to distract her. I did consider seeing a medium, but I never did. I think I would have been frightened if anything had happened, and disappointed if it hadn't, although I know a lot of people do do this after the death of a loved one and have found it comforting. If it had worked, I'd want to keep going back though, and that's no way to handle bereavement, it smacks of keeping them alive somehow when they're not.

I did some odd things as a result of being bereaved and my bizarre behaviour gave some friends cause for concern. It wasn't till I joined WAY and met Cheryl that I knew I wasn't losing the plot; I was reassured that I'm not the first to have done *any* of the things I'd been doing.

I've always been a writer and at this period of my life I wrote frantically, not just in my diary, but I wrote letters to Ian and to Alexandra before she was born, explaining what had happened. I sat down with my diary and worked out the date on which I would have been widowed longer than I'd been married for. My sister was horrified, she was unable to accept I'd done something quite so maudlin. But when I talked to other women in my situation, they were very blasé and said 'of course, been there, done that.' I even worked out when I'll have been widowed for longer than I even knew Ian, and it wasn't so far

away, we weren't together for very long in the grand scheme of things. I did other things such as wear some of his clothes – big jumpers, silk shirts, his bathrobe. I've even worn his aftershave instead of my own perfume once or twice. On one particularly bad night, I put on my wedding dress like some latter day Miss Haversham, crawled into a cupboard in the attic and went through every single thing I'd kept of Ian's – diaries, books, records, clothes, anything to feel closer to him. I was sick and had a terrible headache the rest of that night and the whole of the next day as a result. But none of anything I've done seemed mad or abnormal when I talked to others in my situation and that was a huge relief.

I knew even as I did these things that my actions would hurt and I'd get upset and I'd cry or become ill, but I couldn't stop myself, there was a compulsive element to it all, a strange link between the comfort and solace I knew it would bring and the inevitable pain that would accompany it. But, perversely, I had to put myself through the pain to get the comfort.

I read in a book that the most common place for bereaved people to cry is the car, and I can endorse that wholeheartedly. It seemed that the radio would set me off if a particular record was played, or if the radio was off, I would start thinking about Ian for some reason and that would be fatal, I'd be in tears within seconds. I found it reassuring other widowed people were in the same boat, as I'm sure a lot of people on the North Circular were surprised to see a woman howling her eyes out every few days for a year or two.

For a while, I became extremely sensitive to the crass things people come out with in everyday conversation. It's not really their fault, they're just sayings we're all familiar with, but I wanted to shout 'think what you're saying, will you?' Expressions such as 'I nearly had heart failure', 'I nearly died', or 'I've lost the will to live', really got to me, especially as it's so obviously untrue. I was very angry and resentful in the first year or so about my situation, I was very sensitive about the slightest thing someone may have said to me, and I did feel sorry for myself. Other events happening around me didn't seem to affect me in the first few months at all, no matter how tragic or shocking or sad. I could always think of a reason why I was worse off than anyone else. Men who'd been married for 10 years and then lost their wife – yes, it was sad, but they'd at least known each other that long, I hadn't even got as far as my 3<sup>rd</sup> wedding anniversary. I knew it was illogical and I knew it was wrong of me, but I still felt bitter about what had happened to me, me, *me*.

There were two words I couldn't bring myself to say when referring to my own situation. For over two years, I couldn't describe myself as what I used to call the 'W word'. A widow. I could say someone else was, I had no problem with that, but I simply couldn't refer to *myself* as one. I also had a similar problem with the word 'dead'. I could say 'Ian died', but to say he was dead was beyond me, I felt a physical pang whenever I thought about it, so I just didn't say it. It seemed too final, too cold and heartless a word to describe my vital, real, husband. Even now, I very rarely say it, sometimes I do it to shock someone if I'm in a particularly vile mood and someone catches me on the hop. The first couple of times I ventured out in the evening with friends, I would find myself pressed up against by some oik at the bar who would leer at me, glance at my left hand, and say something like 'your husband's let you out tonight, has he?' or 'your husband's a lucky man' or something along those lines, and I would take some morbid, perverse

satisfaction in saying ‘not lucky, just dead’, or ‘my husband’s been dead for nine months, he wouldn’t begrudge me a beer’, and their jaws would drop. I suppose I didn’t fit the usual mould of a widow, but who the hell does?

The media’s perception of widows, particularly young ones, gives the impression of either a ‘tragic figure’ (a picture of a woman dressed in black and in tears clutching a small child and a red rose at a graveside usually comes into view about now) or ‘merry’ (envisage a picture of a brightly dressed woman out with a new, good looking man, gleefully studying her late husband’s bank accounts). I saw a trailer for a TV programme about a woman who joined a dating agency and told her suitors that she was a widow, so they’d feel sorry for her. I was livid when I saw it. How dared people think my situation was to be laughed at or made fun of? I think widowers probably have it even harder, men in films in their position are usually miraculously cured of their sadness within weeks (months at the most) of their wife’s death and are heading off into the sunset with a wonderful new woman who understands his situation completely and will also make a brilliant mother to his three semi-orphaned children, all of whom adore her and accept her completely from day one. Unless they’re teenagers, in which case she wins them over within a week or so after some traumatic, teenage angst crisis she solves impeccably. The people who make these films don’t even seem to begin to want to portray real life; at first, I wanted to yell at the screen ‘it’s not like that!’, but I knew it was only because I was in that situation, I thought I knew all the answers. I needed to learn to cut a little slack and not take everything so personally, but it was tough and I did become far more scathing, cutting and cynical about portrayals of widows in books or films, but I learned life really is too short to get hung up on such trivialities. I realise the film/TV people are really only exaggerating real life to some extent. I admit that people *do* feel sorry for you as a young widow. Seventy years ago, when young widows were more common, women who had children outside marriage would sometimes tell neighbours and even the children themselves that daddy had died, which was far more acceptable and would even gain them sympathy as a ‘poor widow’ rather than an unmarried mother.



One happy event in the year after Ian’s death was Alexandra’s christening on 2 February 2002. I hadn’t wanted a big celebration as I didn’t feel it appropriate, but it became clear that a lot of people wanted to share in something so positive and happy, as the last time we’d all been together, for Ian’s funeral, it had been the complete opposite. This was a completion of the circle, and there were dozens of people who joined me and Alexandra that day. It was good for me to see the same people smiling who had been so tearful and sad the last time we’d met a few months before. Alexandra looked beautiful in her christening gown (courtesy of one her godmothers and Harrods) and it was very much a family affair. My father did the christening itself, my brother-in-law did all the catering, and my sister was one of the godmothers.

Ian and I had chosen the godparents before he died, we just hadn’t planned to ask them until she was born. My sister and my best friend are fabulous godmothers, they were both essential to me and Alexandra in her first year of life, and continue to be so. Her godfathers were both close friends of Ian’s, and between them, they can fulfil many of the areas of her life I can’t – Chris is musical, imaginative and extremely creative. Mark is

completely the opposite, excelling in technology, science, hard facts and business – they both play with her in ways I can't – throwing her in the air, rough and tumble etc, that I just don't do but men do so naturally. All four godparents are fun, hands on and involved; they really are the best people I could hope to have for her in the absence of her own father.



The first year ended with a visit to the Otter Trust and the island where Ian's ashes lie. It was poignant rather than tragic, sad rather than heart rending, peaceful rather than funereal. At this stage, Alexandra was thriving in nursery and I was working, ensuring I was exhausted every night so I had no time to think. I was getting on with it. There was no sigh of relief I'd made it through the first year, no mental rubbing of my hands together and saying 'right, that's the first year over with, I'm fine now, let's move on', nothing changed. I'd moved away from the searing hurt and pain of losing my husband, but the shadows of it were still there. In that time, I was called 'strong', 'brave', 'tough', 'incredible', 'amazing', 'resilient', 'a survivor'. All I can say about that year is that I did my best when my life was at its worst – and that's all.

## *And Finally ..... Handling the Present*



Now, four years on, I'm doing my best. My daughter is thriving and is a happy, contented, secure and confident little girl. As for me, I'm content with most aspects of my life. That in itself is something I never thought I'd say. I've got used to my situation; I go to work, I look after my daughter, I run a home. I've got used to doing everything myself, whether I like it or not - driving, cleaning, cooking, juggling finances, making decisions about every aspect of our lives, and of course I get fed up of it, I'd love someone else to make the decisions and take control, but that's just tough. I still feel it's all bloody unfair, but I don't feel sorry for myself any more, I've just accepted it's my life now and I have to get on with it and not whinge.

There are some things that still have an effect on me – I can't look at speeding ambulances or at funeral corteges, I don't like seeing dads with their kids in the park at the weekend, I still get angry with authors and film producers who think putting a widow in their film/play adds to the glamour and is a ratings win, and even now, I never say 'see you tomorrow/next week', without qualifying it in some way with 'all being well' or 'hopefully'; Ian doubtless said 'see you tomorrow, guys' to his colleagues as he left the office on 30 April and it never happened. I get scared of being so definite about a date or time in case it doesn't happen.

But, after three and a half years, I turned a corner, I seemed to move on without realising it. I now feel ready to make decisions about my life I wouldn't have entertained a few months previously – and I would now be making them for the right reasons, not out of misplaced loyalty or sentimentality. I would move house now, for example, which I rejected out of hand for years. I can tolerate white lilies in the house again, although I won't buy them myself. I no longer wear my wedding and engagement rings on my left hand, as I don't feel married any more. For three years, I felt married to a dead man, now I don't feel married at all. Possibly one of the biggest steps I've made is to consider myself ready for another relationship, which I never imagined would be the case.



For a long time, this aspect of my widowhood seemed more of an issue for other people than it did for me. I was frequently asked if I had met anyone else, or if I felt ready to handle another relationship, but meeting someone else wasn't the most important thing in my life, it took over three years for me even to feel ready to contemplate meeting a new man, let alone it happening. I hate to think of me reaching 70 or 80 never having had another cuddle, kiss or physical contact with a man since the age of 38. I was happy being married, and I think it's testament to the confidence, security, happiness and love my marriage brought me that I'd like it to happen again.

I don't feel I am the same person I would have been if Ian had lived, I think I was probably a nicer person than I am now – not so cynical, untrusting and pessimistic for a start. I know I would have done things slightly differently because I had someone else there to give me feedback, encouragement, help, support. And because of that, I think Alexandra will also be a different person to the one she'd have been if Ian had lived, and that gets to me. Is she going to suffer because of what happened to her father before she was born, because it's affected me so much and thereby has affected the way I bring her up and treat her? I'll never know the little girl she would have been if Ian had lived, but then, he will never know his little girl, full stop. There's no point beating myself up about it, I realise that, but it's hard sometimes to watch her and realise she'd be having a much better time if her daddy were here. I'm under no illusions, I know if he'd lived we'd still have had sleepless nights, tantrums, arguments about childcare, we would have made mistakes and not been perfect parents, but I think I'd have been a better mum – more relaxed and not so anxious and panicky, more confident and more ready to laugh at things I now tend to take so seriously. I'm optimistic that that will change in future.

Alexandra continues to grow up like her father, from the set, determined look on her face when she doesn't want to give in, through the flashing eyes when she's annoyed with me, to her current talents in music and maths, definitely not something she's got from me! She talks about her father in a matter of fact and sometimes brutal manner, just blithely throwing into a conversation comments like 'my daddy's in the sky with Basil (my parents' now deceased dog), daddy looks after him.' She has started asking questions about him and I vowed from the beginning to answer as honestly as I possibly can. What's the point in doing otherwise? One day, she asked if daddy had died in bed and I said yes, and when she asked how, I tried to make it as simple as possible and said he'd had a poorly heart, that one day it had stopped and he had fallen over in bed and landed on top of me. She eyed me with suspicion and then said 'mummy, you didn't squash him, did you?' I had no option but to laugh and I suspect Ian would have as well. She very openly tells people she has no daddy, that he's in the sky – she tells complete strangers, who probably think her father's a pilot or something. Then she goes for the jugular and qualifies it by saying 'yes, he's in the sky with angels, he's in heaven'. People are then completely taken aback and don't know what to say. I have to make this as normal for her as possible and explain it all to her in different and increasingly detailed ways as she gets older, but it's difficult just now to explain death to a small child. She believes Ian died of a broken heart, because I told her his heart was poorly and she's taken that to mean it broke. The concept of explaining what a broken heart actually means is too complicated for me to explain and her to understand just at the moment. Very occasionally, she will use her father's death against me, if she's being told off for example, she will turn round and say 'I want my daddy'. Whether this is to get back at

me and upset me, as she knows I cry about it sometimes, or whether she wants him there to fight her corner for her against horrid, strict mummy, she's still too young to tell me.

Some of the similarities between her and Ian bring me up short on occasion. She was once playing with a toy keyboard at a friend's house, sitting in front of the keys and plonking away, and she suddenly adjusted the microphone. I got such a jolt seeing her do it, even though it was such a small, innocuous thing to do, but I'd seen Ian do it hundreds of times on stage with his band and now his daughter was doing exactly the same thing and slightly frowning in concentration the way he used to, that it really threw me. As she gets older, I imagine that type of thing will happen more and more, it's the small things that are somehow much more noticeable than the major stuff, but it's often amusing rather than heart rending. I do feel as if I have been grieving for my daughter's father as well as for my husband, I feel for the fact they're both missing out on each other.

I'm looking forward to her growing up and doing girlie things together, I hope we'll be mates as well as mother and daughter – spend girlie nights together watching sappy videos, putting face packs on, ordering pizza and doing our nails, that type of thing, but I don't want to be her best friend and cling onto her when she's older, hoping she'll stay home with me rather than go out, I want our relationship to be constructive and strong rather than destructive simply because it's just her and me. Like any daughter, she makes me laugh, she makes me cry, she drives me to distraction and I never know whether I handle certain situations the right way, but she knows I love her, I tell her several times a day, just like Ian used to tell me. It makes a big difference to be told rather than just knowing it.

The two of us have been on holiday together – the first time was a complete disaster, abroad and alone together, and a year later with friends to France, which was one of the best holidays I've ever had, so situations and circumstances do improve.

Things do get easier as time goes by and as she gets older, it's just a case of adapting to the situation and also trying new things to make her (and my) life more interesting and enjoyable again. I have tried to keep Ian's memory alive in ways other than the blindingly obvious - photos, CDs etc. Ian was a chess champion and I bought some stone chess pieces as garden ornaments. I also bought Alexandra a cot set with a John Lennon design on, Lennon was one of Ian's favourite musicians, who had drawn some images to accompany 'Imagine' years ago and these had been printed, along with some of the words to the song, on cot bedding. I must have been one of their first customers. Alexandra has also been the recipient of several otter toys since she was born, another strong, but not entirely obvious, link to her father.

I wish I could say the first year anniversary is a magic date and everything gets better and brighter after that, but it doesn't. There have been tough times in the last couple of years and I couldn't have got through them without my parents, sister and friends. I had two particularly bad periods – the first was fifteen months after Ian died, when I broke down at work and had to be sent home. I had been constantly thinking of Ian, and couldn't mention his name or think of him without crying. Even anything remotely connected to him would set me off, and this insecurity fed off itself and escalated until I finally blew. I had been having building work done on the house at the time, had had to fend off

unwanted attention from one of the builders, and was coping with a year old baby. The practical problems were resolved within a day or two thanks to a friend's intervention with the builders, and the rest followed on and I was back on an even keel again. The next time was almost two years later, when again other circumstances (redundancy, Alexandra's ill health, Christmas) conspired against me, and I began to suffer from anxiety and mild depression. I had counselling, which wasn't effective in the least, I took six months off any form of work after I was made redundant, spent time with family, friends and my daughter, and I haven't looked back. I find I can look to the future now rather than constantly looking back at the past and finding my present wanting. I concentrate now on what is, not what might be. And life is certainly too short not to take the opportunities that come your way, which is what I'm trying to do now - so what if something's expensive, so what if I have to take an extra week off work, so what if I meet with disapproval from friends or family – it's a harsh lesson I've learned that I have to make the absolute most of my own life and I fully intend to do that now.

Now, when I meet women like me, I try to give them confidence and positive expectations for their futures, that they *will* get through it, there *is* light at the end of the tunnel and their children will be well balanced, secure kids as much as they would have been if their father had been alive. Meeting them is something positive for me as well, because women further on than I am can give me the same sort of support I try and offer others. None of us can change anything, but it does help to know you're not on your own, and you're not going mad.

Writing this has been hard and sad but cathartic; being open and baring my soul hasn't been easy. It has been tough but helpful talking to other women and listening to so many different yet similar stories, thinking 'yes, I thought that' or 'I'll have to put that in my book', there is always something to add. I want other women to read this and feel that there's someone who has been through exactly the same thing as they have, or perhaps are going through now, because it *does* help to know you're not alone. It won't get rid of the pain, but if this helps just one woman cope with her grief a little better, it'll be a job well done.

Like everyone else included here, I have now got through the worst and am getting on with life; as with most dilemmas, you sink or swim, and although I still need my waterwings occasionally, I'm getting there.

