

No one believed me!

The day started just like any other. Alan, my husband, a Police officer had already left for work on the 6am to 2pm shift.

I rushed around doing all the usual things, getting breakfast for our two children, Andrew who was ten and Sharon who was eight years old. Mornings were always a bit hectic in our house. It was the usual things like, "Mum I need money for the school trip" or with Sharon, it was "Where's my P.E. gear?" or "I can't find my homework; my shoes hurt!"

Andrew was the tidier one and normally knew where his things were. He just didn't like school because he was bullied by a certain group. It was usually a job to get him on his way.

I was working as a domestic at that time, in a house for retired naval seamen, and I was supposed to be there at nine o'clock in the mornings. It was habitual for me to rush out of the house, run down the seemingly never ending road, to catch the bus and hoping that I would not miss it. The sigh of relief when I reached the end of the road and turned the corner, to see the same people waiting at the bus stop, filled my heaving body with triumph. Once more I had won the battle with time, but there was to be an even greater battle to conquer.

Finally, the bus reached my destination. I hurriedly alighted and started to walk rather briskly past the shops, trying hard not to look in the windows. To my confusion, I couldn't control the way I was walking. My feet would not go where I wanted then to, but as I did not want to be late for work. I took very little notice, just kept giggling to myself. It seemed hilarious then.

This strange way of walking (as if I had one too many glasses of wine) continued. I was bumping into things and getting tired very easily. The rest of my life went on much

the same for a while. Then I started to get these aching pains in the back of my neck, like tension headaches. I would spend a lot of time just massaging my neck, and taking headache tablets, but they didn't do me any good. The tiredness got very much worse. It was a sort of tiredness very hard to explain; not like the normal tiredness you had after doing some very hard physical work.

I would put the children to bed around eight o'clock (we had a set routine except on special occasions). Every night I would read a story to them, but as I started to feel more and more exhausted, I would say to myself, "Please God, don't let them want a story tonight." After I had them settled down, I would crawl into bed myself. Alan would come home to find me fast asleep. It was no picnic for him either.

When I lay on my left side, the room would spin and I would feel sick. Soon I began to vomit when I first got up in the mornings. My first thought was "Oh! God, I must be pregnant, s it!"**

When I went to my then G.P. he just gave me some tranquilisers and said there was nothing wrong with me. So I carried on, but the problem got worse. After another week, I went back to my G.P. He just gave me some more tablets and said it was all in my mind and that there was nothing wrong with me.

One morning I went into work feeling very ill. I must have looked like death warmed up because, when the Matron (they were called that in those days) saw me she told me to go to the rest room for a while. She was very concerned at the time. The rest of the staff came in for their coffee break, and I remember one in particular (Anne) getting out the medical books to look up my symptoms. We were trying to find out what was wrong with me. We came to brain tumour, read what it said and I slammed the book shut and said it couldn't possibly be that and forget about it.

My G.P. has also given me some Stemitil tablets. The Matron asked me what he had given me and when I told her, she was shocked. She told me that many of the old sailors were taking them and could not understand why I had been prescribed them.

That was the worst day yet. I was sick at work. I was taken home and went to bed for a while to rest, before the children came home from school. I went to get up later in the afternoon to meet the children from school. I could not stand upright. I went to the bathroom. The room spun around. I had to literally to crawl on my hands and knees back to bed. It was a nightmare. A neighbour brought the children home even though they were all right coming home on their own. In those days, it was much safer for them to be with an adult.

Alan called the G.P. out, but he just gave me some more pills and said he didn't know what was wrong, probably a virus. Things did not improve, in fact they got worse. I was going to the doctors practically every morning. He still maintained it was all in my mind, and told me to pull myself together. He even told Alan there was nothing wrong with me.

Meanwhile, I had to give up my job. I was doing very little at home. I felt so ill and exhausted. My marriage started to feel the strain of it all. Alan believed the G.P. and thought I should snap out of whatever it was.

In the end, mainly because he was fed up with me pestering him I suspect, the G.P. sent me to see the ears, nose and throat (E.N.T.) specialist at All Saints Hospital in Chatham.

I had X-Rays but nothing showed up. All this went on until May 1971. We were due to go on holiday. It was the first real holiday we had had since the children. We were booked to take the kids to Butlins at Minehead. It was also the time we bought our nice little Mini car. Freedom, at last we thought. The E.N.T. specialist told me to go back and see him after our holiday if I was no better.

Well, we went on holiday thinking that everything would be fine after it, but I must have had a premonition, because I remember saying to one of my neighbours, Christine, " I think something terrible is going to happen, because it's the very first time we have been on holiday, it's the first decent car we have ever been able to afford. (Policemen didn't get paid very well then) She laughed and said "Not to be silly!"

We returned from our holiday and being no better, I went to the E.N.T. specialist again. He admitted me to hospital again at Chatham. Further tests were carried out but nothing was found. I was then transferred to St. Barts hospital in Rochester. There, by chance, a doctor from the Neurosurgery department at the Brook Hospital was visiting another patient in the ward, when he stopped at the foot of my bed. He asked to examine me. "You are very ill my dear" he said in a matter of fact way. These are not normally the words you want to hear, but to me it was sheer relief. Stupidly, I just looked at him and said, "Am I?"

After all those months on no one believing me, and thinking I must be going insane, that was all I could manage to say to him. "Yes" he answered, "I am afraid you are going to have to go to another hospital". When I asked him which one, he said "The Brook Hospital in London, but don't worry, I will make all the arrangements".

The nurse took me back to my bed in the ward and then blind panic and sheer terror set in. You see, I knew from my husband's job as a police officer, that was where they dealt people with brain injuries and the like. I couldn't imagine anything worse than having something wrong with my brain. I sobbed my heart out wondering what would happen to my husband and children. Sharon, our daughter was eight and Andrew, our son was ten years old. They needed me. No one else would love them and care for them the way I did. I was certain I was going to die.

The very next morning, I was taken to the Brook hospital by car. It was a beautiful sunny morning in late spring. The birds were singing and the flowers were a mist of colour outside the hospital, the air was warm and welcoming, but my heart was sad. Black despair engulfed me.

Little did I know that this was only the start of many days and nights of utter despair. I call them my dark days. Had I known then what was to follow, I would have probably said, "No thank you Lord". That cross is much too heavy to carry.

My heart sank even lower when I first set eyes on the Brook hospital. It reminded me of a Victorian workhouse. It was red brick, huge and sprawling with many corridors and passageways, leading to seamless endless places.

The nurse who was assigned to me for the journey booked me in at the reception desk and then I was transferred to another nurse. A porter, with a wheelchair, took us in an antiquated lift up to Wills ward, where I was to undergo various tests. The tests were not very pleasant in those days. The angiogram, which consisted of dye being injected into the artery in the groin, which would be carried through the veins and around the brain. X-Rays could then be taken of the brain. After this sort of tests, you had to lie flat for about eighteen hours, supposedly to stop you feeling sick and having bad headaches. I didn't know one person, who was in the same ward, who did not have these dreadful side effects. I think we thought we were dying.

It was a lovely summer that year and here I was stuck in this awful place. There was a covered veranda at the end of the ward, and I was lucky enough to have my bed out on it, together with other young women I had made friend with. I can't remember their names now, but in spite of our problems, we had a lot of laughs together.

A few days later, I was transferred to Jefferson ward. This was the neurosurgical ward. I was told that I was to have an

operation the following week and that I could go home for the weekend.

Alan took me to Folkestone, to my mothers' where the children were, so that we could spend some time together. It seemed like 'The Last Supper.' My imagination played havoc with my heart. The children were pleased to see me, and we managed a trip to the park and the seaside.

I remember going to the Sunday morning service at the church where Alan and I were married, silently pleading with God, not to let me die. Was He listening to me and would he let me have my life back? It all seemed so very unreal.

The weekend went swiftly. I hugged the children close to me, thinking I might never see them again.

Alan drove me back to the hospital, which was to become part of our lives for many years to come. We didn't know this at this time. The journey back was very emotional. We were both in deep thought, hardly daring to say what we were thinking. Alan is a very positive thinking person, always looking on the bright side of life, whilst I am just the opposite. Actually, I like to be a bit of both, the optimistic and then the realistic. Well, life is like that after all. It can't be good and it can't be bad all the time. Somewhere along the line, it evens itself out.

The morning came when I was to have my operation. It was the first of many. Apparently, this was only an exploratory one, although I did not know this at the time.

The surgeon told my husband Alan, that a tumour the size of a golf ball had been found, but it was in one of the worst places it could be. It was on the brain stem. Tissue was taken to send to the laboratory for analysis, unknown to me.

I began to feel better because some of the pressure had been removed. I wondered why I was still in hospital and I finally asked the surgeon, Mr. Newcombe, when I could go

home. He sat on my bed and explained that I had to have another operation. The news filled me with utter despair and I was frightened. Alan was called from work, to come up to try to calm me down. He was the only person I trusted and who had any influence over me.

He must have been sick with fear and worry. The surgeon had told him, that due to where the tumour was, I could end up paralysed all over, and that if I did not have the operation, I would have about three months to live.

It must have been a dreadful decision for him to make. I was not told of this on the morning of the operation.

Alan came and stayed with me until they wheeled me on the trolley into the clanging old iron lift. I can see it now. Heavy doors clanging shut. Little did I know then, that it would be the last time I would smile at Alan without looking hideous.

Nine hours later, I was back in the ward. Mr. Newcombe was overjoyed that I could move my arms and legs. It meant that I was not completely paralysed. Alan had been at the hospital all day. It was early evening when they had brought me back. He too was very relieved that I could move my limbs. I think it was the next day that the horror of what happened to me became clear. In removing the tumour or most if it, my motor nerves in my face had been damaged.

My face was pulled over to one side; I was deaf in my left ear and had no tear ducts in my left eye, which meant that it had to be stitched up, to stop it getting infected. I did not know any of this then because I was still very ill.

It was touch and go if I would survive. I had to be fed through a tube because swallowing was impossible. The love and care I received from the nurses helped me pull through. One in particular, Sarah, used to sit with me and I remember as a very pretty coloured girl from some other country. She was always singing 'Life is a circle.' I have often wondered what happened to her.

The days went into weeks. Days of pain, injections to stop the pain, in which I drifted into a deep sleep away from the hell of it all. Alan would visit every day. He never missed a visit, sometimes it was twice in one day. His heart must have ached when he saw me, face contorted, tubes coming from every orifice. It makes me want to weep for him, but he never gave up on me, never let his sorrow show. I was the lucky one then, for I did not know how I looked.

Gradually, I got stronger, but swallowing was still a problem.

As I got fitter, I began to hate having to be fed with that dreaded tube.

Finally, one morning, I was well enough to have a bath. A nurse, who was not normally on the ward, took me to the bathroom. In that bathroom was a full-length mirror. The nurse did not know that I had not been told how I looked.

As I looked into that mirror, I saw this monster staring back at me. I looked again in horror and I said to the nurse, "That's not me, is it?" "Yes" she said. I remember screaming and yelling. I was hysterical. I never did get a bath that day. The sister on the ward had to get Alan once more. I was inconsolable.

The sister said that I could have plastic surgery, and I suppose she thought that would make everything alright.

I yelled at her "Why didn't they let me die?" How could they have let me live, smiling at everyone. If only I had known.

I vowed there and then, that I would never smile again, and if I didn't talk, no one would know.

Now I understood why my little boy had fainted when he saw me for the first time. It had been explained to my children how terrible I would look, but when you actually see it for the first time, the shock must be horrific.

I must stress here, that the plan was for Alan and Mr. Newcombe, to sit with me and gently explain what had happened to me, when they thought I was well enough to be told. Sadly, this plan went wrong, because of an extra busy time on the ward and staff shortage, hence the different nurse. I never saw her again after that morning. It must have been a shock to her as well.

The damage was done. I didn't care if I lived or died. I would have preferred to die at that time, but was not allowed the easy way out.

The weeks turned into months. Soon it was August and then came our wedding anniversary. Thirteen years. A bouquet of thirteen red roses came from Alan. I had red roses in my wedding bouquet. I remember how I felt when we stood taking our marriage vows. When the curate said the words 'in sickness and in health', I shivered, and had a most peculiar sensation (even though it was a very hot day). I soon forgot all about it, but on that August morning, as I lay in my hospital bed, it all came flooding back. Even now, it is still with me. It must have been a premonition.