

Life is . precious

Four years after a speedboat accident in the Camel Estuary, in which her husband Nick and daughter Emily died, **Victoria Milligan** speaks to *Emma Inglis* about coping with what life throws at us, keeping busy, fundraising, and how unexpected positives arise from tragedy. Photos courtesy of Victoria Milligan.

It was the first May bank holiday in 2013, and Victoria Milligan was enjoying the perfect family day out in Cornwall with her husband Nick and their four children, Amber, then 12, Olivia, 10, Emily, 8, and Kit, 4. The morning had been spent swimming, jumping down sand dunes and rockpooling. After a lunch of fish and chips on their speedboat, they drove the boat up and down the Camel Estuary. Later, concerned that the tide was going out, Victoria – who was at the helm while her husband took a pee – suggested they return to harbour.

She started to move slowly towards the mooring, and Nick returned to her side. “Who wants to go around again?” he cried. As Victoria began to edge the boat back into the estuary, Nick reached for the wheel and throttle, but slipped. The boat went into a full turn, at full throttle. Neither Nick nor Victoria were wearing the kill cord. The family was flung into the water.

In the chaos, amid the shouts and the roar of the engine, Victoria grabbed Kit and began to swim away from the circling boat. As it came around, the hull struck her chest, and the propeller sliced her leg. Later she would see Kit’s little white trainer floating in the water. Amber was screaming that Daddy was dead. By now, three canoeists had rushed to the scene and were performing first aid. Soon after, watersports instructor Charlie Toogood jumped onto the boat from another speedboat and stopped the engine.

The family was taken in a RAF helicopter to Derriford hospital in Plymouth, where Victoria learnt that Emily had also died. That evening, her leg was amputated below the knee. Mercifully, Kit’s leg was saved. Amber and Olivia suffered minor injuries.

Four years on, with the anniversary of the accident looming, Victoria radiates hope and optimism. “I’m all

about positivity over tragedy,” she says. “I’ve been given a gift of knowing that life is precious, and even though the worst thing imaginable has happened to me, I’ve still got the gift of living on this earth. We have time that Emily and Nick don’t have and we owe it to them to make the most of our time. It’s not fair, what’s happened to us, but it’s not going to affect our entire lives. We are still going to have a good future.”

It has taken time for her grief to quieten. In the immediate aftermath of the accident, the pain was paralysing. “It seemed amazing that the clock was still ticking and life went on when my whole life had ended.” She devoured every book she could on grief: “cold, factual” books that did little to help. Then Victoria picked up a book written by a young woman who’d lost her brother in an accident. The author recounted how she’d also ‘lost’ her mother, who’d retreated into grief. In that moment, Victoria made an important decision: that her children would never lose their mother.

A network of friends and family, doctors, physios, and “a lovely, tight-knit community” in South London, where she lives, helped Victoria rebuild her world. “I was very conscious of not hiding away and becoming a hermit, so I made myself go out and see people. It makes me feel better being with other people.”

Julia Samuel, founder patron of Child Bereavement UK, is singled out for particular praise. She visited Victoria when she had been transferred from Derriford to St Mary’s Paddington, and continued to visit despite Victoria’s initial reluctance to see her. “Distilling my innermost thoughts to a stranger was quite an odd concept for me. All I wanted was for Nick and Emily to come back and she couldn’t make that happen, so I thought, why are you here? Luckily for me, she did keep on coming back.”



Amber and Olivia

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On the Camel Trail, Padstow



The family in the Cornwall Air Ambulance. A Night 4 Nick raised £250,000

Julia offered advice on how to prepare for the funeral, the memorial, and anniversaries. She counselled Victoria on how to answer questions from the children, even how to cope with going out in the evening. “She gave me brilliant advice like: if you’re not comfortable with the way a conversation is going, change it. Just say, I am having a break from talking about this tonight.”

There’s praise, too, for her prosthetist, Abdo Haidar, at the private London Prosthetic Centre. “I was very lucky in that my husband’s company, Sky, funded the treatment.

The NHS was fantastic and got me back on my feet, but obviously their budget is very limited – and I did want to get back to doing all the things I did before the accident. Unfortunately, you do need a different leg for everything you do.” Victoria has five legs now: an everyday leg, a waterproof leg, a blade, a high heel, and a ski leg.

Initially, she was embarrassed about running on her blade. “It is striking and people do stare. I’d sneak out early in the morning to run. But now I’m really proud of it. I think, how amazing that there is a bit of equipment

designed to replicate the spring and energy returns that my leg and foot would have given me.”

Part of her prescription for rebuilding her life was to get busy. As soon as she was physically able, she returned to her work as a fitness instructor and threw herself into fundraising. A ‘Night 4 Nick’ in February 2014 raised £250,000 for Cornwall Air Ambulance; the money was used to equip the fleet with night vision technology. In June 2014, a bike ride from Cornwall to London raised £500,000 for the RNLI and Child Bereavement UK. In November 2015, Victoria ran 10K and raised more money for charity.

While what has happened to her is devastating, Victoria sees positives. “I’ve discovered latent talents and attributes that I didn’t know I had: writing, live presenting, and a love of public speaking.” ‘Life is Precious’, a recent talk at TEDxTruro, has already been viewed nearly 25,000 times.

Each year has brought new challenges and horizons, which she is grateful for. She has a regular segment on ITV’s *Lorraine*, mentoring viewers who have been through challenging situations, and has been a judge on the show’s ‘Inspirational Woman of the Year’ for three years.

This year she is working on a book: it’s “a story about us as a family, and how we’ve survived” that will also give readers insight into how to support people going through grief. A website on which she shares what she has learnt is well-established, but she intends to do more work on her blog in 2017.

Her children remain the light of her life. “I’m constantly amazed by their adaptability.” The four of them are an extremely tight unit and very “open and honest” with each other. “Three and a half years on, they just crave some normality,” says Victoria. “Children don’t like to be sad.”

Kit needed multiple operations on his leg and wore a metal frame for nine months. In the Christmas holidays, he returned to hospital for more treatment, but Victoria concedes that it could have been so much worse. “It was such a miracle his leg was saved.”

The loss of Emily and Nick can still floor her and she doesn’t yet have the strength to open a box of letters and pictures that Emily’s school friends created in the aftermath of the accident. “I’ve not been brave enough to look at them yet, but at some point I will.”

The holiday home near Daymer Bay that the Milligans owned at the time of the accident was sold, but the family still has a property in North Cornwall. “A lot of people were amazed that we still wanted to visit, but we’ve been holidaying in Cornwall for years and I feel very accepted there. It feels like home. Who knows what’s right? All I can go on is my gut feeling, and walking on those beautiful beaches and cliff paths, and, of course, being close to Nicko and Emily, who are buried at St Enodoc church, feels like a very natural thing for us all.” **M**



Victoria running on her blade in London

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