



Returning from the brink of death after a freak accident, Carolyn Lim is fighting with every ounce of willpower to live a normal life again.

By **LONG LI YANN**

**“i went windsurfing  
and nearly lost  
my life when  
i was struck  
by lightning”**

**THREE YEARS AGO**, Carolyn Lim was in the prime of her life. The then 27-year-old was an English teacher at a private school and was starting on her Masters in Education at the National Institute of Education.

The energetic young woman was in excellent health, hitting the gym regularly, taking bellydancing lessons and windsurfing at least twice a week. And she was in love – she had been dating army regular William Ng, then 25, for a year.

Carolyn also had a wonderful relationship with her parents. “They doted on me as I’m an only child. I was very optimistic about my future,” she recalls.

Little did she know that the sport she enjoyed most – windsurfing – would almost kill her.

### THAT FATEFUL DAY

The accident happened on Sept 9, 2006. Carolyn was out at sea with other windsurfers when it started to rain, and the group headed back to shore.

“Suddenly, there was a loud crash; the other windsurfers looked around to find me face down, unconscious and floating in the water. One of them swam over and pulled me up into a passing safety boat, which was there to make sure everyone got back safely before the storm hit.”

“An ambulance was called and two doctors who happened to be at the nearby Sea Sports Club administered CPR when I was brought to shore. The Club also called William to inform him about the accident,” recalls Carolyn. She was rushed to Changi General Hospital (CGH).

Carolyn’s recollection is sketchy as the lightning strike wiped out her memories of that day, as well as events two weeks before the accident – which is typical. What she knows was pieced together based on eyewitness accounts.

Still, the miraculous twist of fate isn’t lost on her. Her neurosurgeon at CGH remarked that had any of the help – the safety boat, CPR, ambulance and quick journey to the hospital – arrived any slower, she would had died.

Most lightning victims die from cardiac or respiratory arrest, and are only kept alive by prompt and aggressive CPR, which was what Carolyn received. “Most lightning victims die. I survived due to the timely rescue and help; and I’m grateful for that,” she says with a smile.

### FIGHTING FOR HER LIFE

At the hospital, doctors found that the rash guard, her protective windsurfing attire, and her body, bore tiny burn marks at her right shoulder and



right calf – which is likely where the lightning entered and exited.

Carolyn had no other physical injuries although she was unconscious and deathly pale. Recounts William: “When I arrived at the hospital 30 minutes after receiving the call, she was in the emergency room. She didn’t look like she was in pain, but she seemed lifeless.

“She was wet, her hair was all tangled up and there was sand all over her. I realised that there was a real possibility of losing her.”

A spinal scan revealed blood clots and haemorrhaging, and doctors wanted to perform neurosurgery to remove the clots and stop the bleeding. Her brain was also swollen.

Initially, her dad, Lim Lam Hock, was reluctant to allow the surgery. “I wasn’t sure if that was the best move for Carolyn. She was already unconscious, what if she never woke up?” says the 60-year-old Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) practitioner.

But he consulted his colleagues and finally decided that surgery was the best course of action. The surgery took place two days after and Carolyn remained in a coma throughout.

Carolyn’s dad quit his job to take care of her, while her mum went on one month’s no-pay leave to be by her side. “We’d go to the ICU to talk to her because her neurosurgeon said the sound of familiar voices might help her regain consciousness quicker,” recalls Carolyn’s dad.

“The decision for me to quit my job was easy. My wife is a teacher and has to be responsible to her students. And as a TCM practitioner, I understood what the doctors were saying, and could help my daughter in her recovery,” he adds.

Four weeks after the accident, Carolyn finally regained conscious.

“When I first woke up, I couldn’t speak and would stare blankly at the ceiling. According to my doctors, I was at level two of the Glasgow coma scale, where my eyes were open but I wasn’t completely conscious and couldn’t communicate. It was another four weeks before I was totally conscious and aware of my surroundings,” explains Carolyn.

When her dad recounted the accident to her, Carolyn was initially bemused. “I kept thinking that I was dreaming and I’d wake up the next day,” she recalls.

**REALITY CHECK**

The truth hit Carolyn when she saw herself in the mirror for the first time, six weeks after the accident.

“They’d shaved my head for the neurosurgery. I loved my long hair. My first thought was, ‘This can’t be me’. I looked horrific,” says Carolyn, her voice trembling a little.

The lightning strike left the right side of her face drooping. Both her eardrums were perforated and while they have since grown back, her hearing is no longer as acute as before – like she finds it hard to hear softly spoken words. She’s also lost the

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motor skills in her right hand, so even simple tasks like holding a pen is a challenge.

Carolyn was discharged from CGH in November that year and transferred to Ang Mo Kio Hospital (AMKH) for a month-long intensive rehabilitation. At the time, she couldn’t even sit up in bed and her speech was impaired.

Every day, she would have three-and-a-half hours of therapy to learn to sit, stand up and walk all over again. It was physically tiring, she recalls, but the prospect of regaining control of her legs drove her on.

“Initially, I practised sitting up and getting into a wheelchair. It sounds easy, but after weeks of lying in bed, my body wasn’t used to the ‘up and down’ motion,” she says.

Her determination paid off. By the time she returned home in January 2007 – four months after the accident – she could stand up and even walk a few steps with another person’s support.

Her medical bills, including rehabilitation sessions, exceeded \$70,000. After government subsidies and Medisave deduction, her family had to dip into their savings to pay off the remaining \$15,000.

**BATTLING DEPRESSION**

When she got home, the enormity of her condition truly sank in and she fell into bouts of depression, which left her angry and resentful. “I felt like a shadow of who I used to be,” says Carolyn, who was frustrated that she couldn’t go out on her own and had to rely on her family. Her inability to speak clearly was also a source of unhappiness. There were times when Carolyn wished the lightning strike had killed her.

Carolyn’s depression was heartbreaking for her dad. “We couldn’t really do anything but be there for her and encourage her to treasure the life she had fought so hard for,” he says.

Her relationship with William also suffered – she kept pushing him away, and threw tantrums in the hopes he’d get angry and leave.

“When she was overwhelmed by pessimism, I had to keep her fighting spirit alive and cheer her up,” says William. “She felt that she was a burden to me, but I had to convince her otherwise as I never thought of her that way.”

**› the lightning factor**

The National Environment Agency says our hot and humid weather creates the perfect condition for lightning-producing storm clouds. We have one of the highest lightning occurrences in the world, and an average of 171 thunderstorm days a year. Last year, at least three people died from lightning strikes.

Victims of lightning strikes go into cardiac arrest while survivors have to deal with internal burns that can lead to haemorrhage and neurological injuries.

Here’s how to stay safe on stormy days:

DO...	DON’T...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take shelter in a house, car or large building</li> <li>• In open areas, seek shelter in a low-lying area, like a ravine</li> <li>• In open water, head for the shore</li> <li>• Get off your motorbike, bicycle or golf cart</li> <li>• Steer clear of wire or metal fences, pipes and rails</li> <li>• If you’re in a group, out in the open, stand apart from one another</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use the telephone, electrical appliances and electronic equipment</li> <li>• Stand under tall trees or next to a telephone pole</li> <li>• Stay out in the open or on high ground, such as hilltops</li> <li>• Hold onto metal objects like umbrellas, golf clubs or bicycles</li> <li>• Shower or bathe – plumbing and bathroom fixtures can conduct electricity</li> </ul>

*Tips from Singapore Civil Defence Force*

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The start of a new chapter in the couple's life



### TURNING THE CORNER

Fortunately, Carolyn's optimistic nature won out. Whenever she sank into depression, she'd talk herself out of it. "I questioned why I had to suffer and why life was so unfair. But I also saw it as being handed a situation in life: I could either cry about it or I could cope with it. I didn't want to waste time on negative thoughts," she explains.

To improve her speech, she would read aloud Antoine de Saint Exupery's *The Little Prince*. A fellow rehabilitation patient also advised her to chew gum on her right side to exercise her facial muscles. And rather than rely on a wheelchair, she tried to walk as much as possible using a walking stick.

The turning point came in March 2007: William proposed at the very site where she was pulled out of the water, and in the company of friends.

William says he never had any doubts Carolyn was The One. He had been planning the design of the engagement ring even before the accident. In fact, he says the accident gave him added impetus to propose.

"I felt helpless and lost when she was in a coma. I started bingeing on fast food and went back to cigarettes even though I had quit for a year; I put on 8kg because of that. Those little sins kept me from breaking down on numerous occasions," William admits, adding that he kicked those bad habits for good when Carolyn woke up.

"During the accident, I felt like an outsider as the hospital wouldn't allow a boyfriend in the ICU. I wanted to be responsible for Carolyn's well-being and being her husband would give me that privilege," William explains.

"Her physical disability doesn't mean she's a different person; she just needs more help getting around. I never questioned my decision to marry her. As far as I am concerned, the accident didn't change anything."

Adds Carolyn: "Seeing his sincerity and love made me realise that I should stop giving in to my insecurities and concentrate on being a good wife to him. Suddenly, I saw my future and saying 'yes' was my commitment to our future."

Their wedding was held on July 7, 2007, a date William chose as Carolyn liked the number 7.

### PERSEVERE FOR A FUTURE

Today, Carolyn gets around in a wheelchair; and she will complete her Masters in June. While she's keen to return to teaching, she knows the odds are stacked against her as she can't stand on her own for long. Her career choices, she says, are limited, but she hopes to write academic materials or become a copywriter.

Also in the pipeline is the launch of her website, [www.notinvalid.com](http://www.notinvalid.com), which deals with the issue of disability in Singapore. Her pet peeve is neglected and badly designed toilets for the handicapped.

"Some of these toilets are located within the ladies, which means William can't go in with me and help me up onto the seat. Then, there are those that are labelled 'handicapped toilets' but are not different from normal ones.

"I want to put up a list on my website with the locations of disabled-friendly public toilets. I will also review shopping malls and their facilities for the disabled," Carolyn enthuses.

Her neurosurgeon believes it's possible for Carolyn to recover the full function of her legs and right arm as she's still young. "It may take me 10 to 15 years, but as long as I've the determination and keep practising, I'll get there.

"This accident has made me a more tolerant and patient person. I now understand that things aren't always perfect and instant gratification is not always possible," she says.

Carolyn and William are also planning to start a family. While she acknowledges that it will be a challenge to raise a child in her physical condition, she believes there is nothing the couple can't handle.

In fact, they would love to have five children. "We love big families," Carolyn says laughing as she twiddles her wedding ring. "I think our children will grow up to be accepting and tolerant of those who are different from themselves." SH