

Love Kept Me Alive

What happened to CAROLYN LIM was bizarre. The results are permanent. But she was lucky in love. Her parents, and an exceptional man kept her afloat during her darkest moments, and helped her reclaim her life.

ONE SUNDAY IN 2006 when I was 27, my life was irrevocably changed by what is normally termed "an act of God". While windsurfing off the shores of East Coast Park, I was struck by lightning. To this day, I have no recollection of the accident that tore my life apart. What I do remember however, is the love that saw me through the biggest catastrophe of my life, the love that keeps me going, even now.

After the accident, I was sent to Changi General Hospital (CGH). More than three months later, I was allowed to go home. I had been in a coma, survived neurosurgery, undergone a transfer to another hospital and endured numerous rehabilitation therapy sessions. Aside from faint white marks (in the shape of lightning forks) on my right calf, I also bore a tracheotomy scar at the base of my throat and two depressions in my scalp (where bits of my skull had been removed).

My deepest scars, however, were emotional and psychological. I had lost the ability to walk independently and without supervision. Thus, I had to depend on a wheelchair to move around. My right eye was "skewed", I had double vision and my speech was slurred. I could no longer write, as I had lost all fine motor skills in my right hand.

I could also no longer do any water-sports, rollerblade, play the piano or even sing. I felt like a very, very diminished version of my former self. All the accomplishments I had achieved in my life suddenly seemed to have been nullified, wiped out, deleted...

The initial six months after my accident were unspeakably difficult. From a vibrant and cheerful young woman, I became quiet and reticent, a pale, washed-out wraith of



whom I had once been. I felt like a gigantic burden to everyone around me.

Not only did I require constant care, I was unable to contribute to my family or to the world in any way. Before the accident, I taught English to international students. My days were filled with anticipation, purpose and direction. After the accident, it appeared like I had lost everything that justified my existence. I felt utterly useless, a waste of oxygen. Continually, I questioned the fates for preserving my life, when everything else that seemed to matter had already been taken away. I actually wished that the lightning had done a more thorough job on that fateful day.

I sank into a deep and unrelenting depression. Once an ebullient soul, I wept almost every day. In my darker moments, I contemplated suicide. Not in the frivolous, what-if ways. But with determined equanimity and serious deliberation.

The one thing that held me back was love. Love from my parents, my boyfriend William, my friends, relatives, even people I knew just barely or not at all. Everyone. From my parents and William who kept vigil at my bedside, to the nurses who cried in joy upon seeing me wake from my coma, to the windsurfers who lifted my lifeless body from the water onto a "safety boat", to my dad's 'shifu' (truly one of the greatest TCM physicians ever) who nursed me out of my coma, to the numerous friends who visited me in hospital...I could go on and on. And that is exactly what describes the outpouring of love I was blessed with. It went on and on, a huge, tidal wave that swept me up in its tight, warm embrace and carried me to the realization of how many

people had strived to keep me alive and how many more cared.

Close friends visited with foods and gifts, going to different corners of Singapore to get things that stood even the slightest chance of putting a smile on my face. Friends located overseas sent long, supportive voice recordings. People I knew from the windsurfing club came, armed with flowers, soft toys and encouraging words. My relatives also took turns to drop by. I had my first birthday "party" in CGH, with a big birthday cake and friends crowding my bedside.

I had often read about "feeling humbled in the face of great love" but I had always thought it was the stuff of fantasies and fairy-tales. Until then. Humbled? I was on my knees. Never in my wildest dreams had I even thought that I would be worthy of love of such beauty and magnitude.

When I first awoke from my coma, I thought it was all a bad dream. As reality sank in, this love kept me from withdrawing into myself, away from the horror that had befallen me. When I first saw my own reflection in the mirror, I recoiled in revulsion. I had a buzz cut (my head had been shaven for the neurosurgery), crooked eyes and face. There was also a feeding tube dangling from my right nostril. It was this love that made me feel less repulsed by my own appearance.

Even after my discharge from hospital, I was surrounded by love. My dad had taken long-term no-pay leave from work since my accident. At the hospital, he had been with me almost 15 hours a day every day. My mum took on the challenge of supporting the family single-handedly and visited every day after work. When he wasn't working, William also spent every waking moment with me. After my discharge, the routine didn't change much. Just that now I was at home. My family was determined that I wouldn't be hurt again and my father stayed home, taking care of me every minute of the day. His "shifu" took superb care of me as well, monitoring my health and giving me regular acupressure massages. Friends came by with sunny smiles and curios they had found on their sojourns overseas.

Despite everything, it was very difficult to come to terms with, and accept my "new" self. However, in my more self-loathing moments, I would be reminded that everyone around me had seen the same person that I saw in the mirror and that if that did not stop them from loving me, then, I must still be worth loving. This love became a lifeline I clung onto desperately through my most despairing moments.

I became determined to "live up" to this love. Sure, there were parts of me that I was not proud of but there were other parts that I could polish and hone. Just because I had lost certain abilities did not mean I was a total liability. The people around me had not written me off and neither should I.

On 17 March 2007, William proposed. One of the first things I had said to him when I woke from the coma had been "Why are you still here?". And on that day, by the beach where I was brought ashore pale and lifeless six months ago, he pledged to be with me every day for the rest of our lives.

At that moment, I made my biggest decision ever since the accident. Before, I had felt "unworthy" of him because I thought of myself as "damaged" and was convinced that I would be a leg-shackling burden. On that day, as William slipped a gorgeous diamond

ring onto my finger, I resolved to become a veritable asset, a wife that will have any man bursting with pride, in spite of all the challenges I would face.

Love still keeps me going. Thanks to the tireless support from my family and the kind guidance of my professors, I am a few months away from completing the Master of Education course at the National Institute of Education. Spurred by the frustrations and difficulties I have faced since the accident, I am also working to establish a website (NotInvalid.com) to address the issues faced by the physically handicapped in Singapore. It is my fervent hope that this will raise public awareness of these needs and problems, as well as provide a resource for people who, like me, face a little more challenge in life.

I can't work outside of home but I strongly and earnestly believe I am not useless. I still have talents that can contribute to our society. I am now looking to work from home, either in the capacity of a writer or otherwise. I sorely need to establish a source of income so that William and I can start a family.

Ever since September 2006, love has made all sorts of wonders possible. The lightning strike was the absolute worst thing that could have happened to me, but in the aftermath, I have come to realize how truly blessed I am. Before this, I had not thought that love really could create miracles, but now, what can I say? I am living proof of it!



Carolyn is currently looking for assignments. She can be contacted at lim.caro@gmail.com

The most dramatic show of love must surely be the spontaneous liver donation involving our favorite celeb couple. But there are other stories, not famous but no less inspiring or heartwarming. Like William Ng's and Carolyn Lim's



Then: Carolyn and William on a cruise in August 2006 – a few weeks before the lightning strike

William
♥
Carolyn

Now and forever:
The couple says they seldom argue. "I never allow a tiff to last for more than three hours. There's always a closure before the end of the day," says hubby William.



AT ABOUT 1PM on the day Carolyn was struck by lightning, William Ng felt a tingling sensation on his right shoulder – the spot where Carolyn was hit.

"I was at work when I suddenly felt a muscle pull on my right shoulder, followed by pins and needles which lasted for about a minute," recalls the army regular.

Shortly after, William received a call from the Sea Sports Club in Changi. Carolyn had been "involved in an accident", he was told.

"As I rushed to Changi General Hospital (CGH), I kept hoping that this would all turn out to be a prank," says William, who was then 26. "And if it wasn't a joke, I prayed that Carolyn's injury would be very minor."

Carolyn's injury, William found out an hour later, was far from minor. The avid windsurfer was given CPR twice after being hauled out of the waters off East Coast Park. By then, Carolyn had slipped into a coma, regaining consciousness only two weeks later, after her neurosurgery.

"My first emotion was frustration," says William. "I



was trying to come to terms with the news while piecing everything together. No one could give me the full picture. No one saw the lightning. Even the doctors couldn't determine if Carolyn had indeed been struck."

Near or far, you are the one

The pair met through a mutual friend in 2004 but got together only after a year - just months before William left for a posting in Brunei.

They kept in touch by phone every night and 12 months later, William returned to Singapore for good, looking forward to spending more time with his girlfriend.

But less than two weeks after their reunion, tragedy struck.

"I never once thought of leaving her. Not even when Carolyn constantly pushed me away, calling me stupid for not finding another girlfriend. It's just not me to leave my loved ones when they are sick," says William, who moved in with Carolyn to care for her once she was discharged.

"Before this, I was very playful. I enjoyed clubbing and outdoor sports, and was generally carefree. But after the accident, I had to mature very fast."

In sickness and inarticulate

Carolyn, who can now talk slowly and move around with some aid, says: "William has been very sweet. When I couldn't speak, he bought flashcards to communicate with me. He'd flash out each letter patiently until I formed a sentence, which sometimes took half an hour."

Indeed, the incredibly patient William has never lost his temper - or showed sadness - in front of Carolyn.

"For me, the most difficult part was dealing with Carolyn's emotions. It was like a roller coaster ride because I didn't know just when she'd be depressed. She could be laughing with me one minute, and the next minute, she would burst into tears," he says.

Fortunately, things stabilized after William's proposal, helping to seal their relationship.

"All along, I was set on marrying Carolyn

even while she was in hospital. I wanted to take care of Carolyn as her husband - not just her boyfriend.

"Nothing has changed after our marriage. It was just to legalize our relationship. I still treat Carolyn like my girlfriend and buy her gifts regularly because sometimes, when you treat your loved one as your spouse, you tend to take each other for granted. And I never want that to happen."

Sweets for my Sweet: Because Carolyn likes these, William keeps her supplied with lollipops.

Ever after: William's secret to not having their relationship fall into a rut is to prolong the courtship and remain eternally boyfriend-and-girlfriend.

