

How does a relationship survive seismic changes? From refugees forced apart by war to a young couple traumatised by horrific injuries, Deborah Linton meets five couples whose love endured

STAND BY ME

‘When he collapsed at the roadside, I thought he was dead’

Charlotte, 27, and Jak, 25, survived a serious car accident; both spent weeks in intensive care. They live in Lancashire and plan to marry this summer.

Charlotte Jak and I met in our early 20s, when he came to manage the bar I waitressed in. I fell for his looks, but he was caring and I could open up to him. In November 2018, after we’d been together for three years, I qualified as a teacher and he attended my graduation in Carlisle with my parents. We’d been driving back home for two hours, in poor weather. Ten minutes from home, an unlicensed lorry knocked us off the road.

I was conscious but couldn’t move. Jak climbed out of the car, desperate to get me out, but collapsed at the roadside. I watched his hand slide down the window and thought he was dead. My parents suffered irreversible brain injuries; Jak and I would have six life-saving surgeries between us.

My ribs went into my spleen, puncturing my lung and pancreas; my liver ruptured; I lost half my colon and a quarter of my small intestine, and would have to learn to walk again. Before consenting to surgery, the first question I asked was whether I could still have children. I was told I could; the worst thing would have been losing the future I pictured with Jak.

I spent five days in a coma and two weeks in intensive care. When I woke, Jak came to my bedside in a wheelchair. The seatbelt had cut repeatedly into his abdomen and he’d damaged his pelvis. The day I left intensive care, he went in, as bowel abscesses and sepsis set in. We had the same surgeon and were both left with colostomy bags. We spent more than 14 weeks in hospital. The week after we went home, on my birthday, he proposed. »



Photograph: Simon Bray

We've spent a lot of time apart, too unwell to care for each other. I suffer chronic pain, and our injuries mean we cannot comfortably share a bed. We have five weekly medical appointments and have both been diagnosed with depression; we even share a therapist. I worried whether he'd still fancy me, and we both struggle with body image problems. Jak's patience and understanding helps me through. It's a joint fight.

We moved in together last summer, and are due to get married in July. Neither of us can work - I'm a primary school teacher and he's a screen printer - which makes money tight, but I want to make our wedding magical. I'm determined to walk down the aisle unaided. Our medical team will be among our guests. We hope to have a baby one day, too, someone who will never compare us with how we were before.

Before the crash, Jak still had a young head on his shoulders. We both grew up quickly. Going through this means we could never be without each other. The strength we share is unbelievable.

Jak When I was offered a job at a bar in town, I wasn't planning on taking it. Then I saw Charlotte. We gravitated towards each other and I asked her out for a drink. We never stopped talking. After six months, I knew that she was the one.

I remember the crash, vividly. Charlotte was still and her eyes were closed. I felt instant terror, emptiness, until I saw her breathe again, then I collapsed. In my hospital bed, I was told that she was in intensive care, but I wasn't prepared for how frail she looked. It had been three weeks since I'd seen her. She was so traumatised she couldn't speak. When I was wheeled back to my ward, I asked her dad for her hand in marriage. Coming so close to losing her set in stone the knowledge that I couldn't feel that way again.

Our medical appointments became like dates. Despite being so poorly, Charlotte put my recovery and that of her parents, who are now disabled, before her own. She still cares for them. She has more bad days than I do. I think I provide her with a sense of normality. I can't easily go out and buy her flowers or chocolates, but I can support her emotionally.

I love her resilience, and see how amazing she will be when we have a child. For me, our wedding will mark the end of the bad times and the start of a new, exciting life.

'For three years, I believed she had been kidnapped and killed'

Abdula, 40, and Nada, 36, have survived the Sudanese civil war, years of separation, and a journey across Europe to seek asylum in the UK. They now live in Wales.

Abdula Nada and I are from Sudan, where we were engaged to be married when I was 11 and Nada was seven. Our region, Darfur, was destroyed by war and I fled to Libya, alone, as a teenager. It would be six years before my family learned I was safe, and before Nada agreed to join me there and marry.

We had seven happy years, and two children - a boy and a girl - together. I worked as a mechanic and Nada studied. I would go home every lunchtime to see her. She made me so happy; we felt safe.

In 2008, the Libyan government ordered us back to Sudan, but the threat of genocide was very real. On New Year's Eve, I put my family on a lorry back to Nada's home across the border. I was smuggled by speedboat to Italy: I would seek a better life for us and send for them later. I did not see Nada again for 12 years.

We could speak very little in that time. I made it to the UK, but was deported to Europe twice, making my way back illegally on lorries and freight trains. I spent long stretches on the streets or in detention centres, and borrowed phones to call home. It hurt me that Nada needed money and I couldn't help her. I was lonely.

My lowest moment came at the Calais camps. I borrowed an officer's phone and Nada told me our young son was missing after a bombing. He has never been found. Our daughter was killed several years later. We endured the worst losses imaginable but could not grieve together, or hold each other. The pain is still too great for Nada to talk about it.

I continued fighting for a UK visa. In a detention centre, another call came that crushed me, from my brother. There had been more fighting and Nada's village had been wiped out: for the next three years, I believed she had been kidnapped and killed. At night, I would dream of her laughing with me in Libya, and wake up crying.

In mid-2014, a refugee arrived at the detention centre who said he knew her. They had been held by militia together in the mountains - but she had been freed. She was alive. It took me months to reach her family for confirmation. It was true; she had returned, traumatised and injured.

A human rights charity, Waging Peace, helped me gain my visa, and fundraisers put together the money needed to bring Nada to Britain. When we finally met at the airport, her face was just as I remembered. When I held her, my tears couldn't stop. Our years of struggling have left us both unwell. We carry physical and emotional scars, but we are husband and wife again.

Nada I loved Abdula straight away. We were young when we met, but I knew he would be a good husband. We were married during war and our celebration was small; my mother and sisters weren't there.

We didn't know if he would survive the crossing when he left for Europe. When he made it to Calais, I was so happy to know he was alive. When he told me he was sleeping in the street, that he wasn't well and had no food, I cried. My mother and brother wanted me to give up on him. He didn't have a visa, and they thought it was time I chose a new husband. They told me, "You can't keep waiting." But I would never divorce him; as long as he was alive, I knew I would see him again.

After I returned home from the mountains [where she was held hostage], recovering over many months, we spoke again. When my visa arrived, I was filled with excitement and trepidation. I had never flown, and didn't eat during the whole journey. I couldn't speak when I saw Abdula in the airport, but in his arms I felt safe again. Now I am nine months pregnant; life is still hard, but when we're together we are blessed. »

Abdula and Nada: 'As long as he was alive, I knew I would see him again'



‘I was in prison for 2,192 days; she wrote to me almost daily’
Laure, 58 and Jerry, 62, survived his jail sentence for causing death by dangerous driving. They live in Alabama, and now run a support network for the families of prisoners.

Laure Jerry and I met in 1995 and married four months later. I tell him all the time I would marry him again, but faster. We’d both been married twice before and dating was the last thing I was looking for. But he ticked all the boxes.

I had two daughters and he had one. We moved our family from Tennessee to Alabama, to raise them in the country. We were living the dream. But on 17 March 2003, it was shattered when Jerry caused a head-on car collision which killed a young mother. He had been driving drunk.

I felt rage, betrayal. When we met, we were both recovering alcoholics, so I had only known him sober. Now a life had been lost. I didn’t want him dead, but I wanted him to hurt real bad. We lived in a small town, and I grieved for that family. I felt embarrassment. I had to get to the forgiveness part quickly so I could get through each day.

Jerry spent 10 days in the ICU. He pleaded guilty to manslaughter and was sentenced to six years in prison and 19 on probation. I was scared - emotionally, practically, financially, spiritually. I wanted to stay married but didn’t know how. I didn’t know what you do when someone you love is in prison.

I wrote to him almost every night. I could afford one dollar-a-minute phone call a week and petrol for the 100-mile drive to visit every two weeks. I felt a lot of anger in those first years. I remember burying the cat, crying, saying, “This is a dad job.”

Laure and Jerry: ‘I felt a lot of anger in those first years’



JOHNATHAN KEEL/STY THE GUARDIAN

I tried to experience the girls’ graduations for both of us.

His first year home, we argued all the time. I’d put my hand on his shoulder and he’d push it away; he was still in survival mode.

We’re grandparents now and enjoy our family immensely. We run a support network for prisoner families, called Extended Family. I started it six months into his sentence.

Jerry will still say, “You stayed with me all those years,” but I don’t think of it that way. I’m not going to make him do the dishes for the rest of our lives. We spent six years without each other; we don’t want to spend another minute apart.

Jerry On our first date, I took Laure and her daughters to see Cinderella at the theatre. When I got home, I wrote “She’s the one” on the back of the programme.

We had a good life. I had a small engineering business, work grew busy, and we moved cities. But I was in a mess. I got into narcotics but hid it from my family. The night of the accident, I had stopped at a liquor store. I was in a blackout. Moments later, a young woman was dead and I was airlifted to hospital. I was shocked, remorseful, disheartened.

My wife has a big and kind heart. I tried to protect her from the police investigation and the likelihood of prison. I didn’t want our girls walking around with the stigma of a dad who had killed someone.

In Alabama, incarceration is uncontested grounds for divorce, but there was never a question of Laure leaving me. On an early prison visit, I told her I wouldn’t blame her if she wanted to leave. She looked at me and said, “I’d be more miserable than I am now.” I’ll never forget it.

I was in prison for 2,192 days and she wrote to me almost daily. There were guys that got nothing. I felt blessed and honoured. She would arrive every two weeks and I would put on a smile. But I pitied myself; I felt useless, unable to provide for my family.

When I came home, I was harsher than before. Meanwhile, this woman I loved had blossomed. I had to adjust. There’s a not a day that I don’t pay for my disastrous decision in some way, shape or form. We worked through the mess I made together, and we’re closer because of it.

‘It was a form of gaslighting. He led a double life’
Keith, 59, and Claire, 57, survived his gambling addiction. They live in Sussex.

Keith Claire and I had known each other in the 80s, and reconnected online 20 years later. Claire was living abroad, and I was on my way to broke. She’d make short trips to the UK, and we’d laugh through days out and long lunches. She was intelligent, full of life; a better person than I was.

I first entered a casino at 16. By 18, I’d borrowed, conned and stolen from everyone I knew. I was an addict. Through adulthood, I’d made and lost small fortunes and entire businesses. I’d play Monopoly for real money, or sit in a room of the club I owned, drinking brandy, snorting as much cocaine as I could.

I wasn’t a constant drug user or gambler. When Claire visited, I’d try to keep it together; but then I’d get desperate and make excuses to go to London for “work”. When she moved to the UK with her three kids in 2009, I’d disappear into a room of the home we shared for days, in a heady state of gambling, drugs and porn, too embarrassed to re-emerge. I had intermittent spells in Gambling Anonymous, but I found it hard to ask for help.

Claire paid for the house and put food on the table. I never stole from her, but I’m still surprised she didn’t walk out. By 2014, I’d had a heart attack and was nursing my mother, who had cancer. I would drive her to the hospital every day, off my tits, bring her home, make her food, then shut myself in another room and gamble online.

I couldn’t see myself in the mirror any more. I wanted to die. On 28 June 2014, I logged on to a website for people seeking affairs and used it for porn. That decision would almost end us: when Claire discovered the website in her search history, she sent me a Dear John letter. The next day, she drove me to residential rehab. The only rule I broke there was asking her to spend one night. I had to save the relationship.

I’ve been clean for six years now; Claire is part of the reason why. People talk about languages of love. For me those are quality time, acts of service. Boy, were there acts of kindness and service from Claire. Without her, I could well be dead.

Claire I was 18, and a poor student, when I first met Keith. He seemed glamorous, exciting, funny, intelligent. He was also a known gambler, but when we reconnected years later, that appeared to be in his past. Yet, with hindsight, nothing about the start of our relationship makes sense.

When I visited, he’d urgently have work or disappear into a room for days at a time. I’d spend hours on edge, struggling to trust him, but he would rationalise his behaviour, omitting huge details, claiming he’d simply drunk too much. It was a form of gaslighting. He led a double life.

The first time I confronted him, I’d found an empty drugs packet, but he lied his way out of it. I became scared to ask, although we both knew he needed help. When his mother was unwell, he had the perfect alibi. He was an addict but he was responsible - and he took exquisite care of her. I was fearful but I had to get on with life.

When Keith decided on residential rehab, I knew that if I didn’t support him, there was no future. I didn’t want significant time apart, but when an addict is serious about making changes, you have to put your own needs aside.

The most soul-destroying moment came when I found the affairs website. I had been betrayed by gambling and drugs, but my belief in the purity of our love had kept me going. I wrote to him saying it was over. From rehab, Keith proved to me it was only curiosity (there was no activity on his account), and I was open enough to reconciliation to visit him.

Emotionally, we’re more independent now, although we share bank accounts and he supports us financially. I’ve grown, too. I used to tell friends that Keith felt like an addiction to me. I’d waited years for a stable home life together: eventually, he walked the most difficult path in order to truly change.

‘Friends saw us as the perfect couple, but it was a lie’
Maryam, 31, and Amir, 33, survived his affair. They live in California.

Maryam When Amir had an affair, I had a thousand reasons to leave but looked for the one to stay. Our relationship had started as an affair, too. We had been couple-friends in our previous marriages and used to hang out as a group of four. Then, in February 2017, Amir and his wife broke up and he came on a trip with my husband and me. One night, we were up late, talking, while my husband slept. Amir opened up about his marriage and I began to sense he had feelings for me. I had relationship problems, too, and we started an affair. I ended my marriage.

Over the next 18 months, friends came to see us as the perfect couple. They would comment on how loving our relationship was. But I couldn’t forgive myself for how we’d started, and his divorce was a mess. He spent nights with his ex. I broke up with him several times. Things looked great on the surface but we both carried unresolved pain.

By the end of 2019, I became suspicious of his relationship with a co-worker. She was too intimate at the Christmas party and he was jumpy when she called. Then I found a credit card charge to a cafe, clearly for two people.

It took me 10 days to get the full details from him. It had been going on for months and they’d slept together six times. I couldn’t breathe; I felt stupid. Everything that had gone before felt like a lie. I left him.

Amir telephoned non-stop and showed up at my parents’. I loved him deep down but anger overwhelmed me. He asked over and over for a chance to prove he could change. Eventually, I agreed to give him three months. We started individual and couples’ therapy and talked through every detail of our relationship. I couldn’t bear to sleep in the same room as him, but I could look at his face again. I agreed to more time.

I see the consistency and changes Amir has made, his commitment. When I discovered his affair, I was ready to give up on our relationship, but we have both grown. No one knows what the future holds and I have my fears. But, right now, I love the way he loves me.

PETER HILDRE/STY THE GUARDIAN



Keith and Claire: ‘We both knew he needed help’

Amir Maryam was the first time in my life I felt real love. But we were both married and I told myself it couldn’t happen.

As time passed, my ex-wife had an affair and my marriage died. Maryam had problems, too, and I made my feelings known. I admired her looks, the way she thinks. This wasn’t a game that I’d started; it was coming from the bottom of my heart.

I was born in the Middle East, in a war zone. As a child, I experienced sexual and physical abuse at the hands of my teacher, but told no one. The human psyche finds soothing mechanisms to alleviate pain. For me, that was sex.

I was in the most loving relationship with Maryam. The sex was amazing. We bought a house, enjoyed travelling. But the foundations were shaky and I unconsciously sought more.

When I got close to a co-worker, it turned into an affair, starting in May 2019 and lasting several months. It was pure sexual desire. This wasn’t someone I wanted to change the course of my life. We were opportunistic and, in those moments, I became blind to the consequences.

When Maryam found out, I tried to lie. I was naive about how much I was going to hurt her. She wanted nothing to do with me. She blocked my calls and texts, and told our family and friends all the details. Everyone who loved me looked at me as a monster. For the first time in my life, I started to wake up.

I made fixing myself and our relationship my only priority. I promised Maryam she would see a change, and started intense therapy, twice a week. I addressed my childhood trauma and sought support for sex addiction. I realised how much I was willing to do for Maryam.

At the beginning, it was simply about keeping Maryam; but it transformed into strengthening our bond. She has made sacrifices for me, been my guide and love. Every day, I’m more appreciative ■

Some names and identifying details have been changed