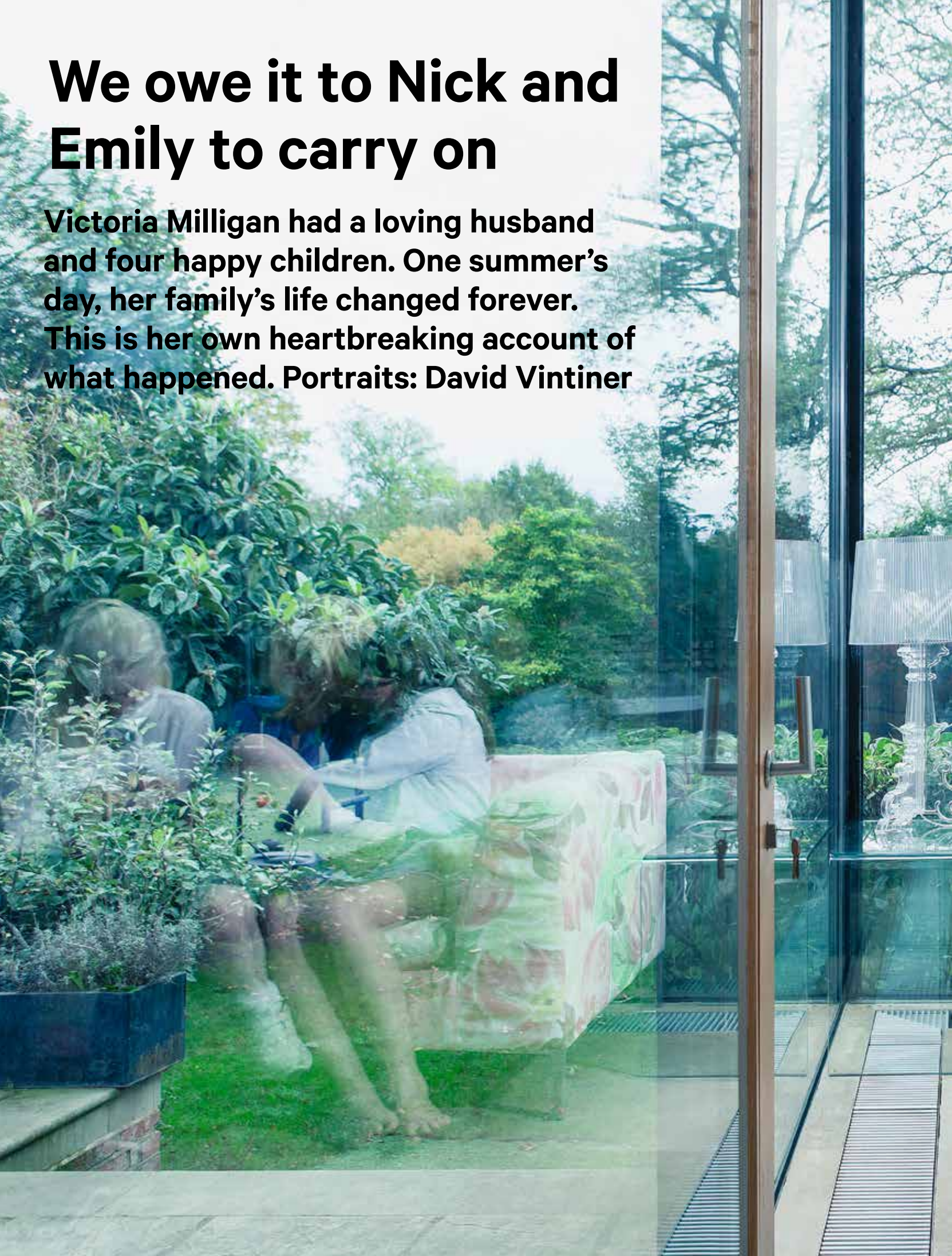


We owe it to Nick and Emily to carry on

Victoria Milligan had a loving husband and four happy children. One summer's day, her family's life changed forever. This is her own heartbreaking account of what happened. Portraits: David Vintiner





HOW I SURVIVED

How could a split second change my life? How can one wrong move take away everything that made me so happy? Did I do something awful to deserve this? These were just some of the questions I asked myself in the days, weeks and months after the tragic boat accident that took away my husband, daughter and lower left leg.

On the morning of May 5, 2013, I had everything I ever wanted. A husband I adored, four beautiful children, a gorgeous house in London and a holiday home in Cornwall. At the time I didn't see my life like this — it's only with hindsight that I realise how lucky I was. Before the accident I took it all for granted — that's what life is meant to be like, right? You go to school, maybe university, start work, meet a nice guy, get married, have children, they grow up and leave home and you spend the rest of your life together. I didn't for a minute think my life would take a very different path.

We had travelled to Cornwall for the bank holiday weekend and what a weekend it promised to be, the weather was glorious. We were all so excited, singing songs together on the drive down and everyone talking about what they wanted to do first — my daughters Amber, Olivia and Emily wanted to go surfing and my son, Kit, wanted to build sandcastles.

The day before the accident, Saturday, was perfect. We went for a walk on Daymer Bay with the dogs, hunting for crabs in rock pools. We took a swim in the sea and ate pasties for lunch on the beach. My husband and I organised some childcare in the afternoon and played golf at St Enodoc Golf Club. Nicko was a keen golfer — the course was way beyond my ability but that didn't matter; he was so happy that we were playing it together.

We had a gorgeous afternoon, me losing ball after ball, him striking every ball

effortlessly. We were on such a high as we walked off the 18th hole, he said: "You know this is just the start — we'll be playing this course together for years to come." That game of golf would be his last.

The next day, Sunday, was also stunning. Around midday we headed to the village of Rock to take out our boat. This was something we all loved to do — we'd had a powerboat down there for about three years and spent hours on it, taking the kids out on inflatables and waterskiing, fishing off the side, having picnics moored offshore and swimming to the beach. We had a wonderful trip to Padstow and we ate fish and chips on the boat. After, we drove up and down the Camel Estuary.

Suddenly it all started to go wrong. I knew the tide was going out and I was getting a bit concerned so I suggested going back to Rock. Nicko was driving, with the kill cord attached — it cuts the engine if it's pulled out; he was always so safety conscious.

He stopped the boat as we came into Rock, took off the kill cord and went to the back to get his sunglasses out of his jacket. He then returned and started messing around with the kids, tickling them and making them laugh. I stepped up to the controls so that our son didn't push the throttle up. I became a little impatient as I was increasingly worried about the low tide, so I clicked the boat into gear and very slowly started moving forward towards Rock — I didn't think about putting the kill cord on as I presumed Nicko would be coming back to take over as he never let me moor the boat. He did come back to the controls, but stood to my left as I was driving. For a moment we enjoyed the fresh air and the sound of the children laughing.

Then he said those fateful words: "Who wants to go round again?" All the kids shouted with glee: "Me, me!" So he told me to turn

right to head back out of the estuary. I didn't feel that I had enough space to turn and I said so. He reached across me and, at the same time as pulling the steering wheel down hard to the right, he pushed the throttle up to its maximum causing the boat to go into a steep turn and we all found ourselves flung into the water. I can only presume that he was helping me to make the turn and slipped.

The boat began racing away from us before starting a high speed tight turn to come back at us. I have never felt more helpless. My family was in extreme danger. There was nothing I could do. I heard Nicko shout above the roar of the engine to stay in the middle of the circling boat, but I was closest to the beach and my instinct told me to swim there. As the boat went past I grabbed my four-year-old son, Kit, who was near me. He was screaming: "No more cold water mummy, no more cold water!" I hadn't factored in how hard it is to swim in a life jacket, so we didn't move very far, but just far enough to save both our lives. When the boat came around a second time, we were just outside the circle, and I felt the hull hit my chest — but what I didn't feel was the propeller cutting my leg.

I remember three people in canoes arriving on the scene and they performed first aid while calling the emergency services. I later found out they had put themselves in extreme danger, coming between us and the out-of-control boat. Soon after, Charlie Toogood, a watersports instructor, bravely jumped into our boat from another speedboat and managed to stop the engine.

It was then eerily quiet, no crying or screaming, just the sound of waves lapping around us. I didn't know what had happened to everyone else. I had Kit in my arms and just presumed that we were the only ones hurt. There was a lot of blood in the water and ➤➤➤



HAPPY FAMILY

The Milligans, clockwise from left: Victoria, Emily, Nick, Amber, Kit and Olivia, 2011

BRAVE FACE

Victoria at home in south London. She has learnt to walk again after losing her leg



my left leg was hanging off above the ankle. I was more worried about Kit's right foot as I could see his little white trainer floating on the water.

I remember my 12-year-old, Amber, in the water screaming: "Daddy's dead, Daddy's dead," her face covered in blood from her injured hand. It had been cut by the propeller, as had her left thigh. My 11-year-old daughter, Olivia, had received a bump to the head from the boat but wasn't too badly hurt.

I remember the most basic of all human instincts, survival, kicking in. Lying in the water, dipping into unconsciousness having lost a lot of blood, I was figuring out how I was going to look after the children on my own: I'd put the house on the market, buy a smaller one. It still surprises me how strong that practical survival instinct is.

Amber and I were taken to the beach on a leisure boat; Kit and Olivia were on an RNLI boat. Then we were all taken by RAF helicopter to Derriford Hospital in Plymouth. At the time I didn't know my darling Emily had been killed. My brain wouldn't let me go there so I told myself she must be in a different helicopter. Later a police officer came into my cubicle at the hospital and informed us all that she and Nicko had been killed in the accident. I think, if I'm honest, I knew that Nicko was dead as Amber had been screaming it in the water, but not my beautiful Emily — it couldn't possibly be real. I just remember feeling completely numb.

Soon after I was taken into theatre and I pleaded with the surgeon to save my leg as I was a single mum now with three kids to look after — but the propeller had severed all the main arteries and nerves and I had multiple breaks in the bones. One bit of good news was that Kit had one more artery and nerve attached than I did: they saved his leg.

Olivia's poem, written for Nick's memorial

To Daddy, reasons I love you

*You always used to make me laugh,
when you sang me funny songs in the bath,
we'd eat chocolate on the sofa just us two,
that's one of the many reasons I love you!*

*You gave me cuddles when I was down,
you always stopped me from wearing a
frown. I loved playing hide and seek with
you going boo! That's one of the reasons I
love you!*

*I begged you to take me on your bike to
school, all of my friends thought that we
were so cool. I'd complain about the
homework you'd make me do, but that's
another reason that I love you!*

*We were so alike you and I, I know
you'll be looking after Em in the sky, I will
remember you in everything I do, for all of
these reasons, I love you.*

I awoke next day to see my lower left leg had been amputated, and the knowledge that my husband and eight-year-old daughter were dead. My hospital room was full of friends and family crying and hugging me and I remember thinking: "Why are they all here?" I was in such a state of shock that it just didn't feel real. In a way, it still doesn't.

It is now 18 months since the accident. It's been a long road to recovery for Kit: he had 12 more operations and wore a cumbersome metal external fixator on his leg for nine months. It's now a joy to see him jump on the trampoline with his sisters, run around with his friends, and he has even been skiing. He is the bravest little boy I know.

The children and I are coming to terms with life without Nicko and Emily. We still feel like we're a family of six but with two missing. We talk about them every day and are starting to be able to laugh about silly things they did and enjoy happy memories together. Kit often talks about how he misses Daddy cuddling him on the sofa while watching a Grand Prix. I came down the other morning to see him transfixed by the Japanese Grand Prix. I asked what he was doing and he said: "Watching Daddy's racing." I'm sure he didn't have a clue what was going on, but it obviously made him feel close to Daddy. Olivia used to spend hours doing Sudokus with Daddy and she still does these, and Amber will sing and play the guitar as she did for him when he was alive.

As for little Em, a friend once said that she has been absorbed into the other three children, as Nicko and I made all of them, and it gives me great comfort to see some of her in one of their smiles or in a turn of phrase. We plan together what we should do for their birthdays, Christmas, and the anniversary of the accident. We're finding our way and having to create new memories, but we ➤➤➤



HOLIDAY IDYLL

Victoria and Nicko enjoying life on the ocean in the Caribbean



NOT FORGOTTEN

Nick and Emily, who both died after being struck by the family boat in the accident on May 5

will do it together as a team. We don't always get it right: last year we made their favourite cakes on their birthdays and bought Emily an ugly doll for her collection, but it just made it even more painful that they weren't there.

This year we went to St Paul's Cathedral for Emily's birthday and we all lit a candle for her. We sat down to look at our four candles in a row. Then Olivia stood up and moved her candle to the middle of the back row. I asked her why. "She always wanted to be the centre of attention," was her answer. This was so true and we all burst out laughing.

I think when something devastating happens you have two choices — you can be strong or hide away from the world. I've found out so much about myself and the human spirit. We underestimate how much we can cope with. The instinct to survive and the maternal instinct are incredibly powerful, and together they get me out of bed in the morning when I want to crawl back under the duvet and hide from the pain. Amber, Olivia, Kit and I are a tight little unit now with an incredible bond. I'm very open with my grief as they are with me. We support each other.

It is also for Nicko and Emily that we carry on. It could have been any of us killed that day and we are the survivors, we must live our lives for us and for them. I owe it to Nicko to look after our children and bring them up how we would have done together. I talk to him often for advice. I knew him for 16 years, so I feel I know how he'd answer my questions.

We met when we both worked in the media. He was part of the team that started Channel 5 and I met him at the launch party. We were very much in love, and very quickly went on to have our children. Watching him with his children was a joy to see; his family meant everything to him. Everyone who knew him would say how he was always

A legacy for Emily and Nick

The Royal National Lifeboat Institution rescued us, and Child Bereavement UK has helped us immeasurably, so I wanted to fundraise on their behalf. Earlier this year, friends and colleagues of Nicko took part in the three-day Milligan Bike Ride from Cornwall to London. The event culminated in Emily's Fun Day, where we transformed our local playing fields into a Cornish fairground. We raised £500,000, to be split between both charities. We also wanted to fundraise for Cornwall Air Ambulance (CAA), as their work is so important. Last February we held a one-off Night 4 Nick. His friends Simon Le Bon and Mark Owen played sets, and we raised £250,000. The new CAA helicopter has been named after Nick and Emily, and I love the thought of them flying around together saving lives.

pulling out photos of me or the kids. And the children adored him — they would all run to him when he came back from work, screaming: "Daddy's home, Daddy's home!"

I am grateful that, apart from the last few terrifying minutes of his life, he died a happy man. Yes, we should have had many more years with him, but the happiness of the years we spent together are worth more than a lifetime of mediocre ones. The same is true of Emily. They are both buried at St Enodoc church in Cornwall, looking out over the golf course he loved and Daymer Bay, where we spent so many happy days as a family. Engraved on their headstones is a quote from Seneca: "As is a tale, so is life: not how long it is, but how good it is, is what matters."

I would not be where I am today without the incredible support of my friends, family and Child Bereavement UK. Of course, some

things are always going to floor you, like when my 11-year-old asked me last week in a very matter-of-fact way: "Mummy, who is going to walk me down the aisle now?" or when I'm at the supermarket check-out and find I have put peanut butter in the trolley. It was Emily's favourite and she's the only one that ever ate it.

I used to get so wound up by small things — do these shoes go with this outfit, should the children be eating more vegetables, and should I do more reading with my youngest... Now they seem so ridiculous compared to the real worries I deal with — will Kit ever walk without a limp, how will we survive financially, the everyday angst of being a single mum, the recurring memory when I shut my eyes of the boat running us over, the pain of missing my husband and daughter, learning to live with a prosthetic leg. These put everything else into perspective.

Our lives are dictated by short-term plans of what is in the diary for next week or next month. Long-term plans for our future have very suddenly been taken away and I must make new ones. After the accident I thought Nicko was the lucky one, as he didn't have to feel any of the indescribable pain I was feeling. I hate to admit it, but I wished it had been me that had been killed. Now I know I am the lucky one as I get to see our children grow up. I know that I will never fully get over what has happened to me, but I also know that the only way my children and I will have a future is by working our way through the pain of grief. I can never change what happened to my family and our lives in those fateful split seconds on that beautiful day — but through that pain we can all honour Nick and Emily ■

To donate to Victoria's charities, visit milliganbikeride.com



JUMPING FOR JOY
From left: Amber, Olivia, Kit and Emily enjoy each other's company in their garden, 2011

VITTY ROBINSON