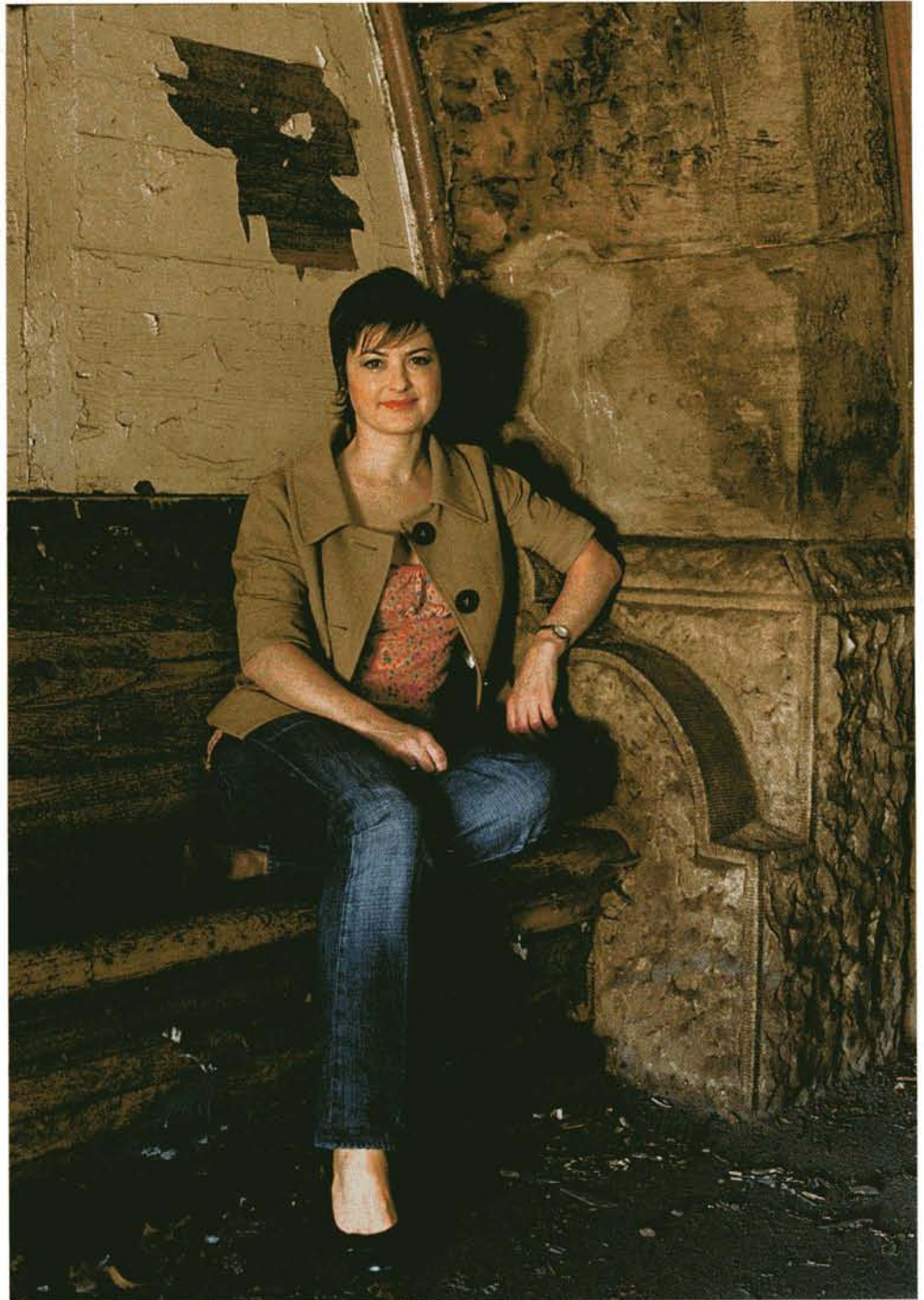


I had started getting to know John long before I ever met him in person. His name often came up in conversation whenever I was at my friends Paul and Anne's place for dinner. I knew that their friend of many years had been battling cancer, and that a few years earlier his wife had left him. When we eventually met, I was 32 years old, and little did I suspect that John and I would fall completely, irrevocably in love – that within three days of our first kiss he would present me with my own set of keys to his home, and that by the end of the week we would be living under the same roof.

Dwindling options

But as much as I tried to pretend otherwise, John was terminally ill. The original diagnosis was a rare tumour of the coccyx, the triangular bone at the base of the spinal column. By the time we met, more than three years after he was first diagnosed, the tumour had metastasised into secondary bone cancer. Having had two lots of neurosurgery, bouts of radiotherapy and now chemotherapy, John's treatment options were dwindling. At 44, he had entered the cul-de-sac of palliative care.

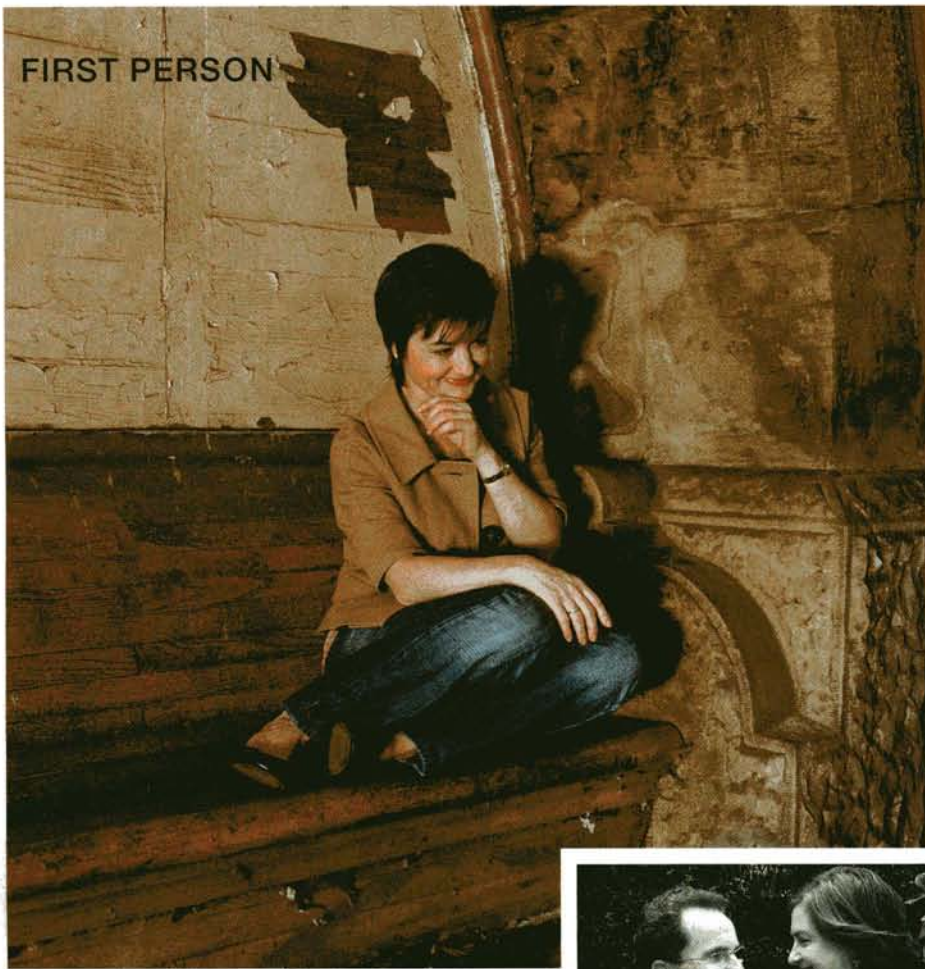
Although I knew all this, I felt that we were just beginning our life together – the notion of an ending simply did not compute. When we began our journey, the horizon seemed years away. As to how many years, neither of us knew. Five, perhaps? Maybe 10 if things went better than expected. But definitely not two. Eleven months after our wedding, I was a widow. ▷



*'I was widowed after a year
of marriage'*

When Virginia Lloyd's husband died, she was left to discover his life on her own

Photographs by Martha Camarillo



◁ After John's death, the sympathy cards flooded in. There were masses of them, using combinations of words deemed appropriate. Sad. Sorry. Love. Thinking. Brave. Know. Loss. Heart. Courage. The idea of preserving them in a scrapbook came out of nowhere. I bought four large scrapbooks, and planned the focus for each of the remaining three – one for the photographs of our wedding, one for our honeymoon and a scrapbook I called 'Young John'.

Preserving memories

The archaeology of our home revealed many items relating to John's boyhood and young adulthood. There were black and white photographs of him as a boy, of his parents as a young couple, and the council flat he grew up in. Discovering them was like uncovering Tutankhamen's tomb.

Although the process was sometimes therapeutic, gazing at photos

Right: John and Virginia on their wedding day



of a young, healthy John often rendered me inconsolable and I would stop my project for weeks at a time, leaving handfuls of photographs where they lay. But whether I looked at them or not, in my mind's eye John grinned at me from every one

'I sifted through a life with John I never knew'

of them. Hope and health yelled from every print. In Kentish Town riding his beloved motorbike; touring Rome with his best friend, camera slung from his neck; or abseiling from some bridge. He had travelled to all corners of Europe,

with friends and with his former wife. How I envied the physical freedom these photographs revealed. The sun shone brightly outside but I remained indoors, sifting through a life with John I never knew. The scrapbook became a place I created as somewhere for him to exist.

Moving on

Since completing the scrapbook I have leafed through it on occasion, but only for a few minutes at a time. While I'm glad it exists, and marvel at my ability to have put it together in the worst of my grief, the force of John's personality radiates from its pages like heat, and these days I try to avoid scalding myself.

The scrapbook speaks of John's presence as well as his absence, and in this way it reflects my own life since his death. His is a permanent absence that, like negative space, shapes my life. Sometimes it's difficult even for me to believe that the history of our private world occurred in the space of two years. And that we experienced in that time tremendous joy, which we found and lost so much sooner than we wanted or imagined.

My love for John and the fire of those brief years we spent together have forged a different version of me. I am alert to the possibilities of transient moments, as fleeting as the smile of a stranger. I can smile back, knowing that we are both human, alive, wanting connection to something greater than ourselves. ■

Virginia Lloyd is author of *'The Young Widow's Book Of Home Improvement'* (University of Queensland Press). Visit www.virginialloyd.com.