

Belly dancing saved me from my grief

► When Jae De Wylde's 15-year-old daughter Rowena died, she didn't think she'd ever laugh again — until a move to Dubai sparked an interest that helped her cope with her loss

‘As the cassette machine clicked off, I jumped up to hug my little girl Rowena. ‘You’re so clever,’ I told her. She’d written and recorded a story about a girl who wanted a pony. It was intelligent, loving and funny – just like her. My daughter grinned and pride rushed through me. Rowena, ten, and her little sister, Rebecca, eight, had been having a hard time recently. I’d split up from their dad Sam, and we were all trying to adjust.

I found a job as a language teacher, but the hours were frantic and I rarely had a second to myself. Inevitably, I put my own dreams on the back burner. Like Rowena, I’d always wanted to write novels. ‘You’d be brilliant, Mum,’ she’d say, reading my scribbles. But I needed to put the girls first and, besides, maybe Rowena would be the author in the family.

Rowena showed real promise, but I wasn’t sure that’s what she really wanted to do. She loved animals, especially her pet goldfish, Teeny, which she took everywhere – even to her father’s for the weekend. Unlike her adventurous little sister, Rowena was measured, thoughtful and anxious to please. She had a caring side that meant animals took to her immediately. So when I met and fell for Martin, the head of Art and Design at school, we promised the girls a dog.

I was scared they’d think I was trying to replace their dad, but I wanted them to like Martin. I needn’t have worried. ‘He’s nice, Mum,’ Rowena said.

We bought a house together in Rutland, UK, and got a Golden Retriever called Monty. Martin provided the stability the girls had been missing and when we married in 1996, our family felt complete.

Martin had a grown up-son from a previous marriage. Daniel, 27, lived in Houston, USA, and invited us out for New Year’s Eve in 1998, while



Rowena and Rebecca went to stay with their dad in Edinburgh, Scotland.

Before we left, we’d had a wonderful Christmas. I gave Rowena the video of her favourite film, *Titanic*, and a red sweater. As I packed, Rowena threw her arms around me. ‘I love you, Mum,’ she said. She was 15 now, and looked so grown-up. ‘Love you too,’ I whispered.

We had a great time in America, although I missed my girls. ‘I can’t wait to see them again,’ I told Martin.

Then at 4am on January 4, the phone rang. Stumbling in the darkness, I answered. It was Sam, my ex. ‘It’s Rowena,’ he said, sounding dazed. ‘You have to come home.’

Fear knotted in my stomach as I heard how Rowena had collapsed and been rushed to Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. ‘I don’t think she’s



society ●
real life

living ●

leisure ●

going to make it,' Sam said, his voice cracking. A phone call, ten minutes later, confirmed my worst fears. 'She died,' Sam said.

I went into shock, unable to believe we were rushing back to the airport. 'There must be some mistake,' I kept telling myself. But Sam and Rebecca were waiting for us, their faces grey, their eyes red and swollen and reality crashed in. My legs buckled. My daughter was dead and nothing made sense. Rowena had been leaning over the bath, changing the water in Teeny's goldfish tank, when she'd collapsed. Sam had tried to resuscitate her but she'd died on the way to hospital. 'I want to see her,' I said. Rowena was in the hospital's chapel of rest. She was wearing the red sweater I'd bought her. It sounds like a cliché but she looked like an angel, with her hair fanned around her face. I combed her parting straight, as she would have wanted. 'Why?' I said, breaking down.

Traumatic period

A post-mortem revealed that the cause of Rowena's death was most likely Long QT syndrome – a cardiac disorder in which sufferers' irregular heartbeats stop. It's genetic, although there is no history in either mine or Sam's immediate family, and it's undetectable unless there's a reason to investigate. We'd had no idea Rowena had it.

I was prescribed anti-depressants and sedatives and signed off work. I was tortured by nightmares. Rebecca was 13, and desperately missed her big sister. There was a huge, gaping hole in our lives where Rowena had been. 'She wouldn't want us to be unhappy,' I told Rebecca, but I didn't know how to smile any more.

I went back to teaching after three months, but in every child's face, I saw Rowena, and the pain became unbearable. Eventually, I left and spiralled into depression. Months, then years, passed, all the same: me, numb with grief. I went for bereavement counselling. 'You can let Rowena's death destroy you or pick yourself up and move on,' my therapist said.

It sounds simplistic, but it was a massive turning point. I realised that by making the most of what I had I would be honouring Rowena's memory. I wanted to work, but teaching, with the haunting sense of loss it prompted, was out of the question. It occurred to me that I could write.

So I applied for – and got – a job as a copywriter for a travel agency. It meant for a few hours a day, I lost myself in work. I did well, getting promoted, and even head-hunted to become the editor of a regional magazine.

But my body was still shattered by the trauma I'd been through and I developed Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy – a disorder of the sympathetic nervous system that caused terrible pain in my limbs. I spent two hours a day, five days a week, in an oxygen tank in hospital, to help repair damaged tissue. The year-long treatment helped. Not only that, the sheer solitude that the tank provided inspired an idea for a novel. It was to be based on a mother and daughter relationship, and deal with issues of belonging, love and loss.

Then, in 2007, Martin was offered a job as head of careers at Dubai British School.



Jae with daughters Rowena and Rebecca in 1997

It was the new beginning I'd been longing for, but I hesitated. Rebecca was studying fashion at Leicester DeMontfort University. 'Go!' she urged me. So we flew off, hoping for a fresh start. We were given an apartment in the Green Community and from day one, I loved it. Nobody knew what I'd been through. The sunshine lifted my spirits; I felt like me again.

I'd been numb for almost a decade, and hadn't known how to move because of my grief. But I drank in the history and culture of the Dubai Creek and even joined a belly dancing class at Cello Music and Ballet Centre.

New lease of life

I had thought belly dancing would be fun, and I might make some friends. I hadn't expected it to be such a wonderful release. For the first time since Rowena's death, I felt like smiling. 'I feel alive,' I realised, and booked up for the next class, and the one after that.

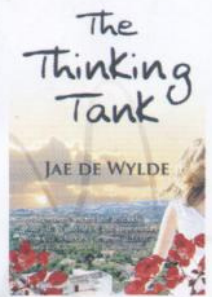
I found a natural talent I didn't know I had. Before long, I was even teaching my own classes. I loved helping others fulfil their potential. My grief receded, and I began to feel part of the world again, not some empty shell. I even started working on my novel.

The ideas that had come to me in the oxygen tank, and the grief that had once engulfed me, overflowed onto my computer screen. With every word I wrote, I felt Rowena urging me on. By the time Martin came home I'd be breathless with excitement.

In September 2009, Martin and I moved back to Britain. His contract had come to an end but he got a new job as the Middle East Regional Director of an international careers organisation, which meant we still spend three months a year in Dubai.

I carried on belly dancing and writing, and was offered a book deal. *The Thinking Tank* was published last October. When it went straight in at number 33 on the Independent Booksellers' Chart – just behind Jamie Oliver's latest book – I couldn't believe it.

I still have Rowena's recorded stories on cassette, kept in a bank safe for security. My love for her will never fade, but her loss drove me to fulfil my dreams. By loving life I'm honouring Rowena's memory. It is the least she deserves.



INSIDE INFO

The Thinking Tank, Jae De Wylde, (Dh56), published by Summertime, will be available at Magrudy's by the end of January