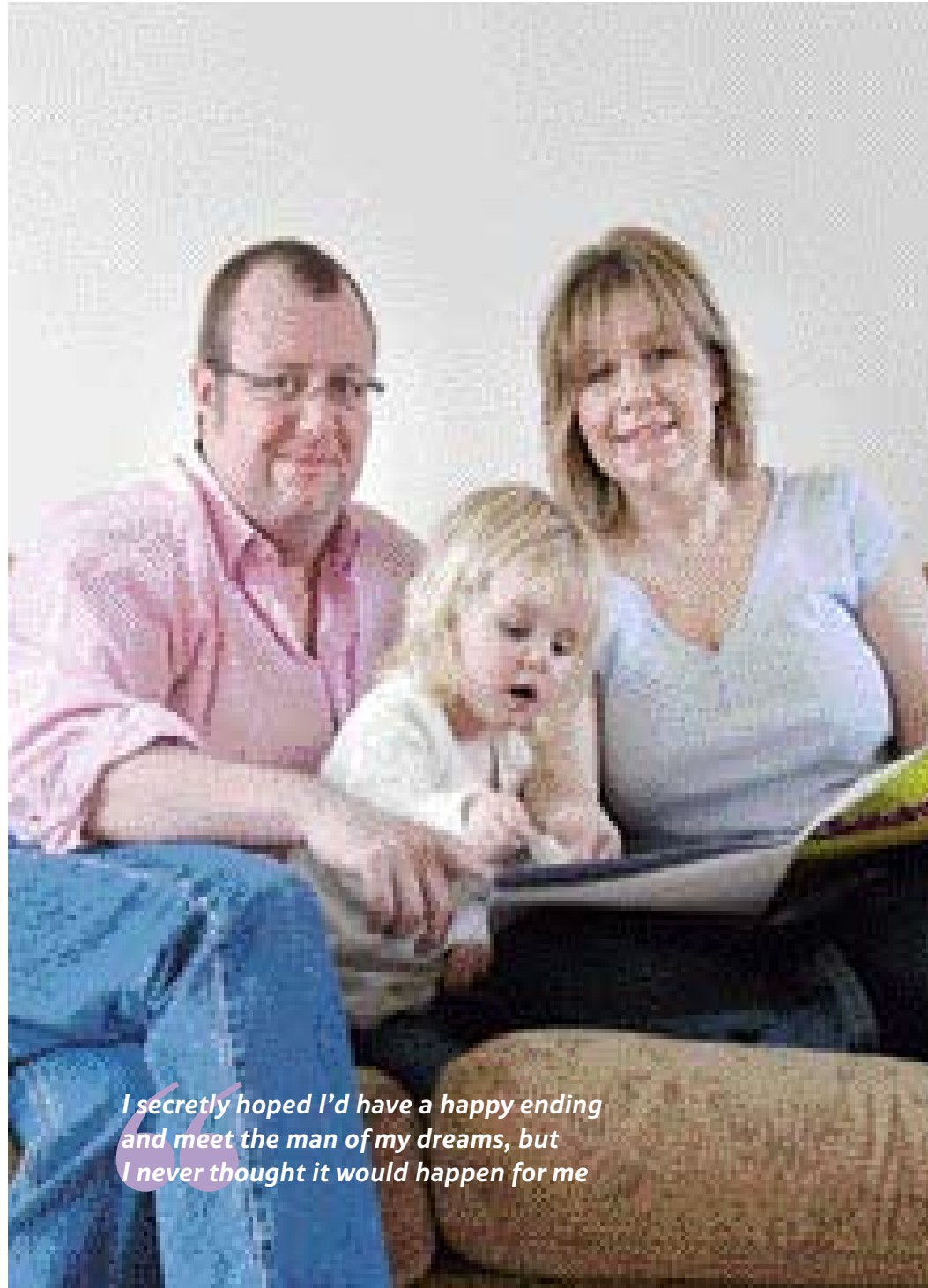


Things could only get better

A truly unforgettable year for many people, 1997 was the year of **Cool Britannia**, with Britpop bands such as **Oasis** and **Blur** at their height. **Tony Blair** came to power and the prospect of change swept the nation, along with the prime minister's pledge that, like the D-REAM song, things could only get better. And later that fateful year tragedy struck as the country mourned the death of **Diana, Princess of Wales**. As we look back over the past 10 years we speak to three women whose lives have changed beyond all their expectations

Words by Maxine Clayman



I secretly hoped I'd have a happy ending and meet the man of my dreams, but I never thought it would happen for me

Vicky Barks, happy mum

1997 I was a real-life Bridget Jones
2007 I'm married with the family I longed for

'Ten years ago I was a jobbing actress, travelling round the country. It was like being Bridget Jones on the road – in a different city every week, with a big group of girls and lots of partying. We'd get together and drink lots of Chardonnay in our room and have Oasis blasting out from the stereo before hitting the town. Or we'd have a girlie get-together, watch *Ally McBeal* on TV, tuck into chocolate and takeaways, and discuss our love lives.

'It was all great fun, but I was getting older and realised that all the travelling would make it difficult to sustain a relationship. So with that in mind I decided to settle down and take a permanent job as a press officer.'

Seeking Mr Right

'I'd been a big fan of the Bridget Jones newspaper column and, like a lot of women my age, identified with her character. I secretly hoped I'd have a happy ending and meet the man of my dreams. But I never thought it would really happen for me.'

'Plus, I'd always been attracted to bad boys. Life was enjoyable but I felt that I hadn't actually achieved anything sensible.'

'I realised underneath that I had a deep-seated desire to meet someone I could connect with; I really wasn't looking for one-night stands any more. I would even lie in bed planning the frock, the honeymoon, the works, secretly hoping one day it would be me. But I'd lost all confidence that it would ever

happen. In fact, I had bored myself and my friends to death trying to find Mr Right.

'So I started to look for things to do, such as going swimming at my local pool, that didn't revolve around meeting men. And I know it's an awful cliché, but it was when I finally gave up searching that I found Duncan.'

Opposites attract

'I met him through work; he was a presenter at a local radio station. When I first heard his programme I thought he was opinionated and I built up this image of him as a grumpy old git.'

'But when we met in person there was an instant spark – he was the total opposite to everything I'd imagined. Duncan was kind and compassionate and best of all there was no game playing. We got together six weeks later at a friend's party and both of us knew this was it.'

'We were married three years later and I had Lily in 2004 when I was 38. I know what it's like to have people say that you'll meet someone soon. I've been there and I know it's not that easy. But without sounding like one of those "smug marrieds", you should never give up hope – I do believe there's a Mr or Miss Right out there for everyone.'

'I know how lucky I was to meet my Colin Firth and my life has changed beyond all recognition. To feel loved and secure and to be understood, having someone that I can share everything with, as well as my daughter Lily, is beyond my wildest dreams.'

1997

Tony Blair came to power; Patsy Kensit married Liam Gallagher of *Oasis*; and the country mourned Princess Diana



Jane McDonald, reality TV star

1997 I was filmed on board a cruise ship
2007 I've been catapulted to fame



launching called *The Galaxy*.

'Four days after I agreed to do it I got a call from the BBC telling me they were making a documentary and would I mind if they followed me doing my job because I was English.'

'I'd never seen a docu-soap as it was a new phenomena and I had no idea what to expect. And the crew spent ages filming everyone else on location and doing

'Never in a million years did I imagine how much my life would change as a result of being filmed on board ship. After working on cruise ships for eight years I'd actually decided to give it all up and had settled down in America with my husband. It was a good living but I was a realist, and you don't get many women in their thirties still doing the circuit.'

'But in a completely different twist of fate, after 10 months of domestic bliss I was asked to come back for six weeks to headline a show on a new ship that was

their job, whereas with me, I was on camera buying my knickers, missing my mum and falling in love. I was just being myself. And the rest as they say is history.'

Instant stardom

'I didn't get paid for being in *The Cruise* as it was a documentary, and when I told people I was going to be on telly they thought I was living in cloud-cuckoo-land.'

'There were only 12 episodes of the programme ever made, a bit like *Fawlty Towers*, so I was amazed by the impact it had on people. The show



1997 the year

- * Oasis and Blur ride the crest of Britpop
- * The Spice Girls and 'girl power' take the world by storm
- * Toddlers everywhere fall in love with the Teletubbies
- * Ally McBeal and her rising hemline hit the small screen
- * Sojourner, a tiny robot the size of a bread-bin, begins exploring Mars
- * Titanic, the highest grossing film of all time, is released in North America
- * Tamagotchis, small but demanding digital pets, become a global sensation
- * Scottish scientists announce the birth of Dolly the sheep, the world's first cloned mammal

had 13 million viewers every week and luckily the public latched on to my story and found it addictive.

'It only hit me what a success it was when I got back from America and found journalists camped on my doorstep. I felt like I was Cinderella. As soon as the series finished I got offered a record deal and the album went straight to number one. I'm actually in the *Guinness Book of Records* for being the first artist to go straight into the charts with a number one album without a prior release. It was an incredible feeling especially as, at the time, music producer Simon Cowell

It only hit me the show was a huge success when I got back from America and found journalists camped on my doorstep

said I was too old at 35 and that I'd never make it. But he was proved wrong.

'Now I write, produce and record all my own material – my next album will be my sixth. I also appear on television as a presenter on *Loose Women* and *The Wright Stuff* and I'm even bringing out my own range of cruise-wear clothes. In fact, I've just gone back to working on cruise ships, but this time around I'm taking out my

very own show, and it's a fantastic experience.

'I'm living the dream. I'm financially independent, which for any woman is such a powerful thing. I'm single again, I'm doing a job I love and I'm running my own company. But at the same time, I never take anything for granted. I know I'm a very lucky lady and that it's all due to *The Cruise* being filmed in 1997. I'm just so grateful that it all happened to me.'

Ruth Raynor, businesswoman

1997 I died but was brought back to life
2007 I'm successful and a grandma

'At the age of 40 I died three times before I was brought back to life by doctors. I'd always been healthy and happy and had never suffered from any illness before, but the day of the fifth of January 1997 was very nearly my last one.

'Through sheer luck I was in the doctor's surgery when the heart attack happened, I'd stopped off for a routine check-up. If I hadn't, I wouldn't be here now – normally I would have been driving the car on my way to work.'

Heart stopping

'I was taken to intensive care. On the way, my heart stopped again twice and my husband Freddie was told I wasn't going to survive. I remember waking up in the hospital, surrounded by beeping machines and, amazingly, against the odds, I pulled through.

'I was fitted with a defibrillator under my skin, and I suffered from short-term memory loss. I'd ask people questions and then five minutes later ask them the

same thing, which was awful. And it meant I wasn't able to go back to my job as a PA for a builder's merchants as I couldn't remember how to do things like shorthand.

'While I was ill Freddie gave up work to look after me and our three children so money was quite tight.'

Business start up

'After about six months Freddie was getting offered lots of cleaning odd jobs so we decided to start up a cleaning business. We had £20 to make up leaflets, so my mum dressed up as a maid and we took her picture and then photocopied it onto them, and posted them through peoples' letterboxes locally.

'We ran the business from our bedroom and the response we had was instant. I answered the phone and used Post-it notes and pads to remember things, which helped me regain my memory.

'Soon we had hired our first cleaning lady and before we knew it we had to move into

office premises and take on office staff because our business, Time For You, was growing so quickly.

'My life's changed so dramatically for the better in the past 10 years. I'd thought I'd always be a PA but now I'm the boss with a PA of my very own.'

New lease of life

'Being healthy meant that, for me, having a heart attack was like the odds of winning the lottery, but I feel as if I've scooped the jackpot anyway. It's made me think about what life is about. Before I'd get cross over silly stuff like the kids spilling food on the carpet, but now I realise things like that aren't important.

'What matters to me is my family. I've just become a grandma and on my 50th birthday it really hit home that I could so easily not have lived to see it. Having a near brush with death has made me appreciate how precious life is.

'It was a strange year and different people remember 1997 for different reasons. For me, though, it will always be the year my life began – again.'



Ruth and, inset, her mum dressed up as a maid to help get the cleaning business off the ground

Having a near brush with death has made me appreciate just how precious life is