

Take a Break series

# Take a Break

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**MY HUSBAND KEPT ME IN THE COWSHED**



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### MY GIRL GLOWED WITH HEALTH Six months later she was gone



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After an operation, Vivvy's face was left looking permanently miserable. But she was determined she would be able to smile on her son's big day...

**M**assaging my temples, I tried in vain to soothe my throbbing head. Lately I'd been having intense migraines.

'My head's splitting,' I moaned to my husband David, 60.

'Oh no,' he sympathised. 'You must be working too hard.'

It was true. I worked as an aromatherapist and masseuse — perhaps that contributed to the headaches.

With two children, Toby, then 26, and Alice, 21, plus a home to run, I was bound to get a few headaches now and then.

Over the next few days I was hit by one attack after another.

That's it, I thought after a particularly nasty bout. I need to get this checked out.

I went to a cranial osteopath, then to a GP, who referred me to a specialist.

'All this bother for a couple of headaches,' I joked, yet inside I couldn't help worrying.

Two weeks after an MRI

scan, I got a message asking me to make an immediate appointment.

Nothing could have prepared me for what the specialist said.

'I'm afraid we've found a tumour on your brain,' he explained. 'We'll have to operate immediately.'

He said the tumour was a benign

growth called an acoustic neuroma. It had grown to the size of a plum and was pushing on my brain stem.

For a moment I froze. Then I began to sob. I wasn't sad for myself, but for my family. How would they cope if I wasn't there?

As for me, there were so many things I had yet to experience — seeing my children get married, having grandchildren...

It didn't seem fair that I might not get a chance. David came home to find me in a crumpled heap.

'Don't worry,' he said, pulling me

close. 'We'll get through this.'

A few days later I saw the Harley Street surgeon who would perform the operation.

'The tumour is large and it is surrounded by nerves. There may be risks in removing it,' he warned.

'Is it dangerous?' I asked.

'I'm afraid so,' he answered. 'You could be left paralysed or even die.'

Not wanting to worry Toby and Alice, I told them the operation wasn't serious. Despite my protests they looked it up on the Internet.

'Is there a chance we could lose you, Mum?' Alice asked, tears in her eyes.

I was filled with guilt. Although my children were grown up, they still needed their mum.

'I'm not going anywhere,' I said, hugging them both.

By the time I was wheeled into the operating theatre on 24 March 2001, I had come to terms with it.

'Whatever happens is meant to be,' I said to myself as I drifted off to sleep.

When I awoke 24 hours later, I was groggy and lethargic but alive.

'Happy Mother's Day,' said Alice, putting a card in my hand. 'Welcome back, Mum.'

I was very weak and lay in bed recovering. As I regained my senses, though, I felt an odd sensation in my mouth. It was drooping to one side.

'How do I look?' I asked.

'Your face is a little droopy' Alice admitted. 'But you're here and that's all that matters.'

For a week I was too scared to look in the mirror. Finally I went into a hospital bathroom and had a peek. The face of a stranger was staring back.

The entire right side of my face had dropped. My mouth looked stretched and my lip seemed too big on that side I'd never been vain, but now I felt like a monster.

'Tell me my face will get better,' I begged the surgeon.

He told me gently that I had facial palsy resulting from damage caused to the nerves.

'It may improve over the next few months, but I'm afraid you will probably



Right: how I looked after the first op  
Below: me with Alice



I'm not miserable...

**MY FACE WON'T SMILE**



On holiday in Portugal in 2005, I felt that I had to hide my face in photographs

never look the same as you used to,' he said.

I went home to be surrounded by the love of family and friends. The wounds behind my ear where the surgeons had operated slowly healed, but my mouth slumped to one side as though I'd been the victim of a stroke.

Weeks turned into months, but I couldn't accept that I'd always look this way. Sometimes people would tell me I was looking better. I knew they were just being kind.

I look hideous, I thought. How can David possibly love me now?

But he reassured me: 'You are still just as beautiful to me as you always were.'

One day I mustered the courage to go outside. I'd been putting it off, scared that passers-by would be repulsed by my disfigurement. I was very self-conscious and hid my face behind my scarf. I dreaded the thought of passing a child on the street, worried I would frighten them.

Some people stared, most didn't. I still felt that I had to apologise for

my appearance whenever I met anyone new, though.

Months passed and I began to get used to my new face. I hadn't wanted to return to work, and instead threw myself into things I had always wanted to do, such as painting and sculpture. I was discovering new talents I'd never known I had.

By wearing bright colours or finding new ways to style my hair, I found I could feel better about myself.

I finally felt happy and content inside. It saddened me that this wasn't reflected on the outside, though.

My face constantly looked miserable, even though I wasn't grumpy at all. I was happy to have been given another chance at life. Yet whenever I thought of the future, I worried about things like smiling at my children's weddings or whether my grandchildren would be afraid of me.

As the years went by I tried every type of alternative remedy I could find — herbs, pills and diets — but my face remained exactly the same.

Six years passed and I'd almost



My family always helped me



Now I have learnt to smile naturally again

given up. Then I got a phone call from Toby.

'Mum, guess what!' he gushed. 'I've asked Anna to marry me!' Toby and Anna had been together since university and she was a lovely girl. I couldn't have been happier for them. But thinking about the wedding got me down. It was supposed to be one of the proudest days of my life, but the delight I was feeling wouldn't show on my face.

That's it, I thought with renewed determination. I won't go to that wedding unless I'm smiling.

I started looking into surgical options. Coincidentally, just a few days later my physiotherapist rang. A new surgeon called Charles Nduka at the Queen Victoria Hospital (QVH) in East Grinstead, West Sussex, was carrying out pioneering surgery on people with facial palsy like me.

Unwilling to get my hopes up, I booked an appointment to find out how the procedure worked. To my amazement Mr Nduka said I would be an ideal candidate.

'I will transfer the temporalis muscle that controls how you grit your teeth down to your top lip,' he explained.

Then he showed David and me some videos of patients who had already received the treatment. As I looked at the before and after shots, I was astonished. People whose faces had once drooped like mine now looked normal and they were smiling.

'I'll do it,' I said. In June 2007 I had the eight-hour operation. Afterwards I felt very groggy and my face was swollen and bruised, but I felt more

hopeful than I had done in years.

When I looked in the mirror, however, I was a little disappointed. Although there was a noticeable improvement to my mouth, it didn't look completely back to normal.

'You've got to practise smiling and slowly you will see a change,' Mr Nduka said.

I spent hours in front of the mirror, gritting my teeth to see the sides of my mouth curling slowly upwards.

'How do you like my new smile?' I asked David pulling my best grin.

'You look beautiful,' he said, then added: 'But then, you always have.'

On 22 September 2007 I beamed with joy as Toby and Anna were married. At last I felt I was smiling on the inside and the outside at the same time. I even managed to pose for pictures, something I had refused to do for six years.

My face isn't completely back to normal, but each day it is improving.

And now I have something more to smile about. Anna is expecting a baby in July — my first grandchild!

I can't wait — and I am determined to be the smiliest, happiest granny in the world.

**From Vivvy Butler, 55, of Fulbrook Lane, Elstead, Surrey**

● Patients with facial palsy from anywhere in the country can be referred by their GP to the Queen Victoria Hospital. For details call 01342 414000 or visit the website [www.qvh.nhs.uk](http://www.qvh.nhs.uk)

● Donations can be sent to the Queen Victoria Hospital NHS Foundation Trust Charitable Fund (Facial Palsy) at Holtze Road, East Grinstead, West Sussex RH19 3DZ.

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Above: Alice, David, Anna, Toby, me and Alice's boyfriend James. Right: I'm better by the day

