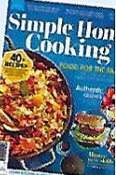


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## WELCOME!



Are you heading for burnout? It's a question worth taking time to think about. Women are often the caretakers in life – that's not to say that men don't do their

bit, but there's no denying that women often take on unreasonably demanding to-do lists that could feature caring for elderly parents, raising families, climbing career ladders – or all three – and more. Turn to p22 to discover the classic signs of burnout, plus six ways to feel better fast.

On p46, *Rooms with a View* might also help you feel more Zen. I can't stop staring at the Greek getaway – the blue sky, the clear sea, that pool... Throw in a souvlaki and some ouzo and it seems pretty perfect to me! Enjoy this week's magazine, and have a great week.

KIRA AGASS, EDITOR

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# A FINAL GOODBYE

## When Mina Blair's daughter passed away, she couldn't see a way forward

**S**itting at the bedside of my daughter Francesca, then 12, I tried my best to put on a brave face. It was November 2007 and she'd been hospitalised after collapsing a couple of nights earlier. For years, Francesca had suffered a multitude of severe illnesses, and I lived each day with the expectation that it was her last. But now, after doctors disclosed that her deteriorating lungs were unresponsive to treatment, I knew it was truly the end. Treatment was stopped, machines packed away and after consent from medics, I told Francesca we were going home. 'OK, but not for the last time, though?' she said, a slight infliction in her voice. 'No,' I replied softly, unable to tell my daughter it was to be the last trip she'd ever make.

Francesca's health problems began before she was born. At the end of my first trimester of pregnancy, in spring 1995, my toddler Karina had contracted chickenpox while at nursery, and just weeks later, I noticed the

tell-tale fluid-filled bumps on my own skin. I didn't know I hadn't had the disease before, but my doctor told me the virus couldn't cross the placenta and not to worry. Only, at seven months, my belly was much bigger than it had been with Karina and scans showed my baby was floating in a vast amount of amniotic fluid.

**'SHE CONTINUED TO DEFY THE ODDS'**

Francesca was born three weeks early, that October, via caesarean. What should have been a special moment, though, was shrouded in panic when her dad Malcolm and I realised just how poorly our baby girl was. Francesca had severe breathing difficulties, muscle wastage in her left leg and a club foot, plus complications with her bowels for which she would need surgery at just 10 days old. 'Is this because of the chickenpox?' I asked medics, pointing out the circular scars on her skin. But though it was a possibility, nobody could be sure. Then, as she grew, more issues began to manifest. At three months, we discovered our girl had vocal-cord paralysis, giving her a mute cry, and a faulty epiglottis meaning that the lid covering her windpipe let food and liquid fall into her lungs. It left her unable to feed properly, and by the time she was

six months old, she had a tracheostomy. In the face of such ill health, and with no clear prognosis, every time I took Francesca to the hospital I feared I'd lose her. But as the months turned to years, she continued to defy the odds and, despite her chronic pain, she grew into a beautiful, kind-hearted girl with an enviable zest for life. She loved spending time at the nature reserve near our house, identifying flowers and birdwatching. And when she wasn't relishing nature, she enjoyed playing Barbies with Karina, who had incredible patience, learning from a young age just how poorly her sister was.

### BUBBLY AND POPULAR

The constant hospital visits and general ill health meant that Francesca was mostly homeschooled, but she was only too keen to attend primary school as often as she could. There, her bubbly personality afforded her a group of loyal friends who she enjoyed spending time with at the weekends.



Francesca at just five weeks



Karina and Francesca on holiday in 2001



Francesca loved horse riding





**Smiling through:** Francesca had such a zest for life

We tried to ensure that Francesca lived the life of any other girl her age and, in spite of her health problems, she managed to live a full and happy one. But with the constant struggle of juggling her care and my corporate job in London, it all put a strain on my relationship with Malcolm and largely contributed to our split in 2005.

While it was tough on the girls, Malcolm and I remained friends for their sake and they had a home with us both.

For the next couple of years, Francesca was hospitalised countless times, mostly due to lung infections. She found herself in discomfort and, as her health deteriorated, I just knew the future looked bleak. It was a devastating reality to come to terms with, but I learnt to bury my emotions and fears.

Then, in 2007, I noticed that Francesca, then 12, had stopped growing - she seemed to stay the same height and weight while her peers continued to grow. She was experiencing more breathing difficulties,

and after collapsing in November that year while she was at home with me, doctors found vast amounts of fluid had built up on her already-weak lungs. She had suctioning treatment in a bid to remove it but, when it proved futile and fatal rates of CO2 were detected in her bloodstream as a result, I knew that this time really was the end.

Malcolm and I took her back home and had her favourite meal, pasta in tomato sauce. After, we got her ready for bed, gave



**Precious memories:** Mina with Francesca and Karina in 2006

her kisses and cuddles and watched as she dozed off. Then, in the early hours of the morning, with her family by her side and after years of pain, surgeries and treatments, Francesca passed away.

Although we took comfort in knowing she was now at peace, we were all distraught. We'd spent the last 12 years preparing for this day, but that didn't make it any easier.

We tried to carry on but I felt Francesca everywhere. Her pink bedroom remained untouched, her clothes hanging up and jewellery in the drawer where she'd left it.

I tried to hold it together as best I could. But masking my true emotions, both at home and at the office, was exhausting. I just felt utterly lost and numb without my daughter.

With support from the vicar who had organised Francesca's funeral, I was introduced to spiritual texts and teachings. Immersing myself into a whole new way of thinking, and a self-educational trip to Bali in April 2017 and Mexico in November 2019, over the next few years, I learnt different perspectives and outlooks on life while practising spiritual yoga to help me cope with the loss I'd suffered.

## POSITIVE OUTLOOK

I've undergone a spiritual awakening and had a profound realisation: that nothing is so bad that good can't come from it. Since Francesca's death, I've learnt much about my own resilience, that I can withstand what once seemed like an insurmountable amount of pain. Francesca may be gone physically, but she's alive in my memories of her.

Francesca would have been 25 now, and I often wonder what she would have become. Whether she would have pursued her love of drawing and become an artist, or followed in Karina's footsteps and become a teacher's assistant. But instead of dwelling on the 'what ifs', I instead try

to focus on the meaning of Francesca's short life, which I've found is to always live fully, with gratitude and joy.

✦ *Not For The Last Time* by Mina Blair (£8.99, MadChat Books) is available at [amazon.co.uk](http://amazon.co.uk)

