



# 'I WOKE UP FROM A COMA AND MY LEGS WERE GONE'

When Clare Forbes, 23, from Crawley, Surrey, went out clubbing with her friends, she had no idea it would be the last time she'd dance...

AS TOLD TO LIZ FROST

**A**s I came round from the longest sleep of my life, I reached down to scratch my ankle. Tubes and machines surrounded me, but I didn't register that I was in hospital. Then, with nauseating panic, I realised my legs weren't there. I was terrified.

'I'd been in a coma for six months, having collapsed at a friend's house with meningitis B and septicaemia. The night before I fell ill, in March 2001, I went to a nightclub, so I didn't think anything of feeling unwell the next day. But by 4pm, every part of my body was aching and the light hurt my eyes. Mum thought I had flu and told me to go to bed, but by 8pm, I'd collapsed. A few hours later, I was lying in intensive care in a coma with suspected meningitis.

## STAYING ALIVE

'I made it through the night, but then my kidneys started to fail and there was no dialysis machine at Crawley Hospital, so I was taken to St Thomas' hospital in Westminster. I was put on a life-support machine and my mum moved into a nurse's room at the hospital and gave up work to care for me. My boyfriend of about a year, Efe, visited daily for three months, but eventually doctors advised him to let me go, which he did. I don't blame him for it. In mid August, when I was still in a coma, the septicaemia spread to my legs. The doctors had to amputate them both from below the knee.

## FRIGHTENED AND UPSET

'Slowly, I began to regain consciousness, but doctors warned my family not to expect too much. By September 2001, when I was

transferred back to Crawley Hospital, I still couldn't eat, walk, talk or hold my neck up.

'I could, however, use a pen and paper to communicate, but my handwriting was like a three year old's. Then, two of the fingers on my right hand started to rot away because of the septicaemia. I was told they'd eventually fall off, but I begged the doctors to remove them quickly. They did, but it left me terrified. My body was falling to pieces.

'Each day, I became more and more aware. When I was lucid enough, Mum explained what had happened to me. At first, I couldn't stop crying and kept having phantom sensations, such as pain in my lower legs. My brain just couldn't accept it.

## TURNING THE CORNER

'By early October, I'd recovered enough to be transferred to a rehabilitation clinic. I had to learn to talk again and to walk in a whole new way, using my hips to swing my prosthetic legs. It was painful at first because the skin around my stumps was soft, but I soon got used to it.

'In mid December, I was finally allowed home. I lived and slept in the sitting room, and my family had a commode installed so that I didn't have to use the stairs. I felt such a burden – I needed help with

everything. Slowly, I gained independence, as I learned how to use my right hand again and master my prosthetic legs.

## FINDING A PURPOSE

'When my stepfather walked the Great Wall Of China in October 2004 to fundraise for The Douglas Bader Foundation, which supports people who are physically disabled, it inspired me. I decided to raise awareness of meningitis by running the Flora London Marathon in April 2005. But on the big day, my right hip seized up and I had to walk half the way in total agony. I arrived at the finish line triumphantly after 19 hours and ten minutes, having raised an amazing £20,000.

'Although I spent a week recovering in bed afterwards, I knew immediately that I wanted to do the New York City Marathon that November. In that race, I managed to reach the finish line after 12 hours. Since then, I've done a parachute jump and boat race to raise money. My goal is to raise £1 million.

'Daily life is still a struggle, but I can talk, wash, dress and feed myself now. I go out to clubs and pubs, and I've been on a few dates. I haven't met the right man yet, but I'm sure I will. I've got an incredible support network and every day I feel stronger.' [Z]

## MENINGITIS THE FACTS

- **Who's at risk?** Under fives and those aged between 15 and 24 are most at risk. The elderly and people with long-term illnesses are also susceptible.
- **What causes meningitis?** It's a bacterial or viral infection, which can be passed on through coughing, sneezing, kissing, infected blood or contaminated food or water. Occasionally, it can result from another infection, a head injury or brain surgery.
- **What are the symptoms?** They often include fever, vomiting, a severe headache, seizures and a stiff and painful neck. If septicaemia develops, tiny bright red spots may appear, which do not disappear when a glass is pressed against the skin.
- **Where can I find out more?** Contact the Meningitis Research Foundation on 0808 8003344 or visit [www.meningitis.org.uk](http://www.meningitis.org.uk).