

A Different Light **But A New Light**

**Re-establishing one's identity after Brain Injury
(a story of survival)**

**By
Ristead Lloyd**

I always had a lust for life and was always looking for new experiences. I loved learning about new cultures and seeing how other people lived. In order to travel I would work very hard for about eight and a half months, saving all my money for my next adventure. I worked as a long distance truck driver (more opportunity to travel!) and was proud of my ability to take care of my truck and of my personal appearance. Because I worked in the food industry it was important to make a good impression.

I also loved music. I went to nearly every concert in the country, Oxygen, Creamfields, Point Depot, the Red Box, (now Tripod). Because I worked so hard, I enjoyed my free time all the better.

This was my life. Then it all changed on 11th June 2005, a date that will be remembered by my family and me for the rest of our lives.

I was 28 years old and riding a motorbike through Koh Samui, an island off the west coast of Thailand. I was on my own and riding on a gravel track with no traffic and no people. I was riding on a gravel track because there are very few tarred roads on the island, apart from those in the central towns.

I have absolutely no memory of the bike accident at all. I now know what's happened because of what I've been told. The accident didn't make sense to me, because there was no traffic on the road and no people. However, there was a shooting range close by, although my injuries did not seem to be consistent with an accident caused by a stray bullet. I probably will never know exactly what happened. I can only tell what I have been told and what has been reported in the newspapers.

I had no helmet. I had no gear. The only thing I had on me when I came off the bike was a pair of shorts and a pair of flip-flops. I was young, I was carefree and it was how everyone was travelling in Thailand.

I was found, as the story is told, by a man who had got lost and came across a bike lying in the middle of the road. He stopped to pick up the bike but he didn't see me at all. He just saw the bike. So he thought, what's going on here? Then he saw my feet sticking out of a ditch. When he came over to me he noticed that the back of my head was opened; there was blood coming out of my nose; blood coming out of my ear; my collar-bone was coming out through my shoulder; my back was stripped to the bone,

where I had slid on the gravel. There were lacerations all over arms, fingers, feet, knees and back.

My head was in the drain and thankfully it was lucky that he found me when he did. If another hour or two had passed I would have drowned. The water was up to my nose. I was breathing in and out bits of water but because my lung was punctured I wasn't breathing properly so when I was breathing it in, it was coming back out. By the time he found me I was in a coma and he possibly thought I was dead.

The police took me from there to the hospital, because they don't have an ambulance service, as such, in Thailand. When I came into the hospital, the only way they could identify me was by a phone number found in my pocket. It was my parents' phone number. How it got there still bamboozles me to this day, as I was never one to carry phone numbers. I never wrote down telephone numbers or email addresses - I could always remember them. But for whatever reason, other than the fact that there were angels on my shoulders, the number of the house was in my pocket and that is how they got in contact with my parents to let them know what happened.

My father, woken up from his sleep, was asked if he had a son in Thailand. When he said that he did, he was told to come quickly to Thailand that his son had been in a very bad accident and had nearly died.

As anyone reading this story can imagine this phone call was most traumatic for my family. The whole family gathered and my brother and sisters were told what had happened, or as much as they knew, which was very little at that time. They just knew that I had a motorbike accident and that was the height of it.

My parents were able to find out, eventually, where I was and were given some further information. An English woman, Jane, who was working in the hospital, told them that I was on a life-support machine. She told them I already had brain surgery to remove fragments of bone, pebbles and dirt and any foreign bodies.

When they heard this news it wasn't just my parents, John and Monica, but my whole family, my brother, Gavin, my two sisters, Dervla and Siobhan, who wanted to come out to see me.

We come from a close-knit community in Boyle, where people help each other when they are in trouble. In this instance, our local GP, Dr Bernard Maguire and Senator Frankie Feehan made a particular effort to help my family make the journey to Thailand. Everybody else did as much as they could to help and we will always be grateful for the help from our community.

When my family travelled out to Thailand, they were full of fear and dread. I don't think it is possible to imagine what they were going through at this time.

My family found me was in an isolation unit. I had more tubes and wires coming out of me that could be described. They were coming out of my side (my right lung), my head. My head looked like a cabbage. I had lacerations and cuts all over my body, a broken collarbone on my right shoulder and plasters and bandages everywhere. They didn't recognise me and I think they were partly hoping that it wasn't me.

I was so changed that they had to identify me by my tattoos.

When I eventually came out of the coma I didn't know anyone. I didn't know who my parents were and I kept saying, 'Where's my friends?' I called my father Jim Morrison, from the Doors, and asked him to 'Sing me a song, sing me a song Jim!' I couldn't sleep, I couldn't walk, I couldn't eat. My whole body had gone into shut down mode.

I couldn't move. I couldn't speak properly, and at one stage I started speaking fluent Thai to two of the nurses who came in and tried to change my bandages. I have absolutely no idea to this day what I was saying to those two nurses – I can only begin to imagine! It might have been nothing but gibberish! My speech was not coherent enough to be understood.

My family were trying to keep me still because I was so agitated all the time, moving, shaking, wanting to go. At one stage I woke up in the middle of the night and I pulled out all the tubes from my side and all the tubes from the back of my neck, and pulled off the mask. I started screaming, 'I'm out of here! I've been in the war for too long and I want to go!' My family must have wondered whether this was going to be a regular thing and whether this state of confusion was going to stay with me.

I was in Thailand for a month. By the end of the month my family needed to make plans to get me home. This proved problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, they were worried about the effect of cabin pressure on my brain. I couldn't fly on a normal passenger airline. I had to travel Air France, First Class, with a team of doctors and nurses.

Secondly, they were worried that if I came out of sedation I'd be a problem on the flight, hence the reason the doctors and nurses were with me. From Koh Samui I had to get to Bangkok. From Bangkok I had to get to Charles de Gaulle in Paris and from Paris to Dublin.

The journey did not go without a hitch. In Paris, the airport authorities caused an unnecessary delay when they discovered that my family were (naturally enough) travelling on Emergency Passports.

I should point out that I had not taken out a travel insurance policy for this adventure. If I had insurance it would only have covered a certain percentage of my medical costs, because of the severity of the injuries. My local community came to the rescue and a bank account was set up for the 'Get Ristead home' fund. There were raffles, quizzes, competitions and door-to-door collections all held in Boyle and the surrounding villages and towns. I cannot begin to thank all of the people involved in fund-raising and all of those who contributed to the fund.

I went immediately from Dublin Airport to Beaumont Hospital. I was so bad and so confused. My normal sleep pattern was completely upset.

I don't really know what happened in the weeks I was in Beaumont Hospital. I have no memory of it. I think I was there for two to three weeks and then I was transferred to Sligo General Hospital.

I have some memories of Sligo but only of the last two or three weeks of my 3-month stay there. My memory was so shot that if they said to me, 'Son, it's your Mum and Dad, it's your Mum and Dad', I'd go 'Yeah, I know it's you, I know it's you'. Within two seconds of saying that I'd go, 'Who are you? Who are you? I don't know you. I don't know you. Get out! Get out of my room!' The confusion was plaguing me but when I look back on it in a rational way, I am thankful that I had no memory, because I couldn't remember what I was doing, and I couldn't remember how bad I was.

They had to retrain my mouth to swallow food. They were spoon-feeding me. They had to dress me, if I had the strength to get out of bed at this stage. I had lost my sense of taste. I was told that spooned jam onto a burger, even though my family said the jam was for dessert. I said, 'No, no, no, it's ok, ok, ok', repeating myself and I picked up the burger and put the whole burger, folded, into my mouth. And then I just turned around to my sister, looked at her and spat it all over her face and said, 'Aw, I don't like it with the jam! I don't like it with the jam! Can you give me another one?' This is not me. It is not the person I ever had been but it was how I behaved, due to my brain injury. Luckily, it is no longer me as I have slowly but surely started to come full circle in my healing process.

Although I don't remember any of the events around my early hospitalisation, I have been told many stories about what happened. However, I do remember 'Big John', who looked after me in Sligo and was always very patient and a most caring man. Another person in his position might not have been so understanding and not have understood the extremities of what a brain injury can cause. He was always there to bring me around in the wheelchair (because I was so thin and weak I had to use a wheelchair). I was in the wheelchair, I think, for about five weeks, maybe a bit more. 'Big John' used to wheel me everywhere, constantly. He was always trying to make me laugh. He was always saying 'Do you want to watch the football?' Although I had never watched a single GAA match in my previous life, I started to watch football with John. I was attentive and watched the match right through to the end. This was the first major sign of recovery. I should also point out that my family were present at all the major breakthroughs in my recovery. They were delighted with each little bit of recognition that I was still there – their son, their brother.

I remember the end of my stay in Sligo. This was my good stage. Robert, the Physiotherapist, worked on me and helped me to walk and regain my balance.

I started recognising my family because they were with me every day and they were coming in and out. My brother and sisters would take turns to visit me so that there was always one member of the family there with me. I needed constant care and supervision.

Jacinta McElligott, the Rehabilitation Consultant, come down from Dun Laoghaire to Sligo, to see was I a priority on the waiting list to get into the Rehabilitation Hospital. I remember Jacinta coming into the room, and asking questions. She could see the strain on the faces of my family, caused by the severity of my injuries. As a result of that visit I was swiftly moved to St. Pat's Ward in the Rehabilitation Hospital in Dun Laoghaire. St. Pat's Ward is specifically for Brain Injured Patients. It has a locked outer door, to keep patients safe, for fear that we might wander, get confused, get lost

or get disorientated. I had my own room at the start. As I progressed I was moved into the open section of the ward. I had a lot of occupational therapy and physiotherapy. Occupational Therapy involved very basic games such as Snap, Connect 4, all to try to invoke a thought process.

As part of my physiotherapy I walked almost constantly. I would walk from the back window to the front door and back again for up to three hours at a time. Later on I walked with a member of staff to walk around the hospital building and, eventually, walked around the building by myself.

Thankfully, I began to make serious progress here. I was reading maps, route finding, playing games – my mind was starting to come back a little bit. What they noticed about me was that on a regular basis I was calling for my parents because that's what I was used to in Sligo. I wouldn't say I was unhappy. I think the correct terminology for it is that I was frustrated. It was utter frustration. A person with a brain injury feels fine, doesn't see any limbs hanging off. You think when you can walk you're fine. You think when you remember something for two seconds you're fine. The problems are deep in your mind and you don't realise what the problems are. You just don't realise.

I did know I was ill. They had told me that I had a fall. They didn't give me any details of what it was, where it was. I just knew I had a fall. I kept saying, 'Did I fall off a ladder?' 'No son you had a fall. You hurt yourself.' They were saying to me, 'You hurt your shoulder and your back', because that's where the bandages were.

Physically I was getting better but I think deep down in myself I knew there were things wrong with me. Because of my perforated eardrum, I was very sensitive to sound. If a pin dropped ten feet away from me, I could hear it. My stomach was upset all the time. My eating habits were irregular. Sometimes I felt full very quickly and couldn't finish my food. At other times I could finish a full meal and look for more.

I missed my family and wanted to go home. I realise now that it must be very difficult working with people with Brain Injury as everybody is so differently affected.

When I eventually went home I still needed a lot of care and my parents, brother and sisters looked after me. I couldn't be left on my own for too long. I wasn't allowed to make tea in case I would burn myself. My coordination was poor: I would spill milk between the jug and the cup; I sometimes missed my mouth; I couldn't shower and had to sit in a bath instead, in case I slipped in the shower. My family were protective and looked after me because I was confused. At this stage I knew there was a lot wrong with me because I couldn't remember anything. I didn't question all that was being done for me. Part of my coming home was to see how I could cope in my home environment and in my own community.

My friends also had to cope with my brain injury. Each coped in his/her own way. Some did not recognise the person standing in front of them. Physically, I was very thin and gaunt. My hair was gone. My personality was very different. I was still very confused. I didn't really know who I was and what was going on. My friends

were very upset by this but some were better at coping with it than others. I liked seeing them. I recognised them and knew their names and I felt that this was a great achievement, considering I was remembering so little in other areas.

The support from my family has probably had a lot to do with my recovery. They didn't judge. They did everything to help. They pointed out simple things to me – for example how many spoons of sugar I liked in my tea. They also helped me with basic things like explaining how to chew properly, how to brush my teeth and how to get dressed on my own.

Now I do all these things effortlessly, thanks to the wonderful support from my family and my own ability to overcome obstacles.

The community also supported me. I still have all the relics, beads blessed by the Pope, water from the river Jordan, scapulars – all given by well-wishers, family and relatives.

My memory was starting to improve, but very slowly. I might start to read a story in the newspaper, leave the room and forget that I had ever read the paper on return. I started to pick out one or two points from a story in order to improve my short-term memory. I would then fold the newspaper and leave it on the kitchen table to remind me that I had read it and that I had a number of points to try and remember.

I was at home for three months and then I returned to the Rehabilitation Training Unit. I attended the RTU for six months, attending from Monday to Thursday. I returned home for the weekends. The things we did there were so basic that I laugh at it now, but I needed it then and I didn't realise how much it was helping me at the time. I was with other people who also had Brain Injury. Some were more frustrated than I because they didn't understand what was going on with them and because they had achieved so much in their life prior to the brain injury they could have found it frustrating to have to work on basic tasks and games, and repetitive actions. My family, however, supported all that I was doing in the RTU and pointed out that the staff there was trained in working with Brain Injury and working for my benefit. This made me feel better that I was getting so much help and direction.

I could feel that I was now beginning to make significant progress. I was finishing the tasks that I was given and gaining good scores. This helped to build up my confidence.

I felt that I was completely recovered. I had no marks, no medication. I was no longer disoriented and my reports were very good. I wanted to go back to my old life. I especially wanted to go back to work. I missed driving and being on the open road. I didn't know that I wouldn't be able to cope with working, even up to half of my previous ability. My parents advised me not to rush back to work. They were afraid that I wouldn't be able to deal with the pressures and stress of truck driving.

I didn't listen to them because I had convinced myself that I could do anything. I did return for a very short period to work and that is when it fully sunk in that the time was not right to return to my previous work.

It was not until 2007 that I began to become more independent. I started to cook for myself. I started to do my own shopping. I moved into my own apartment. I was beginning to get back my life.

As I couldn't go back to work I had to look at other options. I decided that I wanted to further my education and improve my skills. I started looking around to see what was available and what I could possibly achieve.

Thankfully, Imelda Walsh, who was from the Peter Bradley foundation, was able to direct me. I had joined the Peter Bradley Foundation BRI in 2006 when I was attending the RTU in Dublin. BRI sends out newsletters and information packs and information on seminars around the country. It is a good source of information for families who are in the early stages of dealing with someone with Brain Injury.

I went to a Counsellor after that to speak about why I felt I wasn't able to do the work, although I was back to work, why I wanted to further myself and what direction I wanted to take. There are a number of organisations which offer help to people with Brain Injury: Quest and Headway and New Road, Peter Bradley and BRI, were all the organisations helping me and advising me about what areas to go to get into education. There's so many different ways of getting in to adult education: there are FAS courses, schemes, National Learning Network, for instance.

The route I chose was National Learning Network. I was looking for something that would improve my ability to retain information, to assess situations, to develop my communication skills, book keeping, to learn to manage my life.

I've always been a fairly astute man with money. Before my accident I managed everything, knew what I needed and was careful with money. I felt in some sense that I might have lost that, that characteristic that was part of me. Therefore, I wanted to work on it, to overcome any obstacles that my Brain Injury might have created. For example, I needed to remember to pick up my money from the counter, to remember to take my groceries away with me when I went shopping, remembering, more importantly what to get when I went into the shop in the first place! I was determined to make things better myself.

I decided to do a course in Computer Applications and Office Skills. It is FETAC Level 5 and it's quite a demanding course in many ways. I had achieved an Equal Skills Certificate in Computers when I was up in the RTU and I thought that this would be a good area to continue to work in. I was worried that I would not be able to retain all the information that I'd learned up in Dublin. The truth was that I was not able to remember most of it. However, once I put that little bit of effort into it, it started to come back. It began to surprise me how well I was doing in it, making progress more quickly than I had expected. I still had to take my time with it – not to try to take on too much work in case I didn't have the ability to retain the information. But little by little, with the help I was getting, and the structure of the course, I was retaining the information at the pace it was set.

The fact that everything we do here – we file, we log, we date, we store, we keep on file some way or another, whether it's a floppy, whether it's just a record, a journal, helps me to see my progress and remember what I have done. So at any time, if I look back through my journals I can see exactly what I have done. But if I didn't

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have that bit of structure, keeping everything and dating everything, I would forget it – I would possibly forget it because I'm learning so much as the weeks go on.

This is my story. I know that Brain Injury affects everybody differently but I believe that the only way to overcome it is to believe in yourself. You need to take small steps at a time and not push yourself. You need to learn to pace yourself and take each day as it comes.

So, am I the same Ristead Lloyd that I was before my accident? I certainly look at things differently. I am much more appreciative of everything around me. I am glad to be alive. I have a new lust for life. I still love music, playing snooker, and so on. I am a little reluctant to travel, however! Ha Ha.

My final comment is that when times are tough; when you are frustrated, never stop believing in yourself. Those who knew you well before your accident will be worried, because they're looking at you in a different light. You are in a different light but believe in yourself, and enjoy whatever life offers you.



Me in my joyful travelling days in Morocco, North Africa.



Me not knowing who I am or even my parents and this was my good stage in Sligo.

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Me getting a little better but still very confused and unaware of what's happed.



This is me at my present a very happy man and also very aware of what I have been through, but knowing it can only get better for me.

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