

‘A stroke changed life for both of us’

Marie Garvey, 60, from Glasgow, talks candidly about how her husband’s stroke pushed their marriage to its limits

‘When Paul stood up at our daughter Sally-Ann’s wedding last summer and talked with such pride about her, it was an emotional moment. Of

course, every wedding is a touching occasion, but hearing my husband speak so movingly was especially wonderful given that, just a few years earlier, he couldn’t even say my name, after suffering a stroke that robbed him of his language and tested our marriage to its limits.

It was one of those things we never thought would happen to us. After all, Paul was just 55, a healthy non-smoker, with no family history of stroke. We were on holiday in Ireland at the time, and Paul had told me he’d had a dreadful night’s sleep. He had been trying to teach me how to play golf and I remember joking, “You’re not getting out of it that easily!” I went to make a cup of tea and then found him slumped in the shower. Although he couldn’t lift his right arm, he kept telling me he was fine, so at first I didn’t think it was too serious. What I didn’t realise until later was that apart from “yes” and “no”, “fine” was one of the few words he could say.

By the time we got to hospital, the paralysis had gone and I assumed he was recovering – a few hours later,

he was sitting in bed laughing at the television and in high spirits. But it was when a nurse brought him some soup and he started to eat it with a fork, which bizarrely he referred to as a “bush”, that I started to worry. Why was this man, my rock and a successful finance director, giggling like a child and talking nonsense? The doctors didn’t seem terribly concerned. He was alive, he was eating. Yet, they didn’t know him like I did: a high-achiever, a deep thinker, a man who always selected precisely the right words for the right occasion.

A CAT scan confirmed a blood clot on the brain had caused a stroke. To say I was shocked was an understatement. Paul was young, fit and took care of himself. It didn’t make sense.

Two days later, he was discharged. It was frustrating

because physically he was fine, but when a speech therapist showed him some everyday items – a phone, a set of keys – and asked him to name them, he couldn’t. What upset me wasn’t just the lack of recognition, but Paul’s reaction. Normally, this would have annoyed him, but he seemed perfectly happy. The stroke had left him with this odd feeling of elation and had changed his personality. On that day in Ireland, it felt like the husband I had known for 33 years had disappeared.

Paul and I had first met at a rugby match in Lansdowne Road, Dublin. I was 21 and preparing to emigrate to Canada. He was 22 and a student. Straight away he told me I was the one, and that first summer he flew out to Canada. Within 15 months I was back. It’s fair to say I fell in love with his brain – he was smart and

witty, and we laughed a lot. I knew I’d found one of life’s good guys and we married four years later. From the beginning we were the very best of friends and, on reflection, I think that’s what has ultimately saved us.

Specialists told us he had aphasia, a side-effect of stroke that affects communication skills. The part of the brain that deals with speaking, reading and writing was damaged and, as he improved over the years, this would frustrate him – but in those early days, his brain was so scrambled he just accepted it. This was incredibly tough for me to handle, and I remember thinking: “I don’t know if I can do this.” I genuinely felt like I was going through a living bereavement. If Paul’s brain had died then, in many ways, so had he.

I’m clearly not a natural carer and being forced into the role made me question my love for him. He wasn’t the person I’d married and I’d cry all night thinking about what I’d lost. But, above all, I was angry. The stroke had robbed us of our life. I had everything I’d ever wanted: four great kids, and a wonderful lifestyle. Then, suddenly, the most important part of it – Paul – was taken away from me. If I’d had a bad marriage to a man who’d been unkind, I think I would have left – and on a few occasions, when

Paul speaking at daughter Sally-Ann’s wedding was an emotional occasion

