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dinner, picnics on the beach and cocktails.

It was while celebrating my 37th birthday that Holly first complained of backache. A few weeks later, in December 2007, she was diagnosed. Everyone rallied round. I would sit with Holly in a dark room when the sun felt too harsh after chemotherapy, bring meals when she was in hospital, and do as much as I could for Lucia and Cerys.

By then I'd set up my own business, which meant that I could occasionally pick the girls up from school. We'd sit on the sofa and I'd make up stories to keep them amused until Carlos came home from work.

Carlos and I got to know each other better too, becoming real friends. Watching Holly suffer and feeling helpless was tough for both of us. As she grew steadily worse, we knew the day would come, but that didn't make it any easier when she finally died.

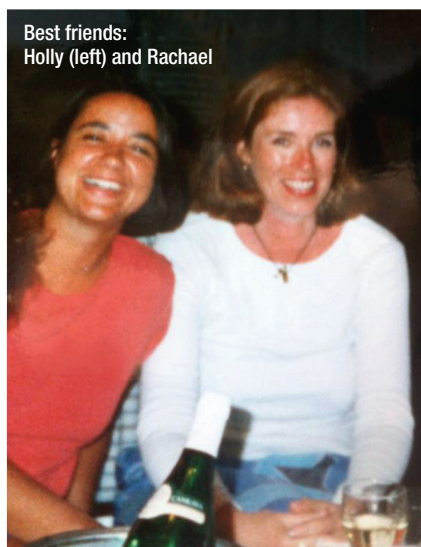
The next year was a blur of throwing myself into work, and seeing the girls and Carlos as much as possible. Just before the anniversary of Holly's death, Carlos declared that he was buying a VW camper van and taking the family travelling around France for six weeks. When he suggested I join them halfway through, I said yes immediately.

By the time I met them, Carlos couldn't wait for adult company, someone to have a drink with once the girls were in bed. It was lovely to see them looking healthy and tanned, although their hair was practically in dreadlocks. Lucia cried when I tried to get her to shower. 'They should shower, shouldn't they?' Carlos asked, unsure and not wanting to upset her.

He was doing the best job he could, finding his way as a father to two girls without Holly. It was just one of the many signs that highlighted how we were still struggling with grief, despite us all thinking we were doing okay. But those two weeks were also a time of laughter and celebrating Holly's life. It did us all so much good that we carried on the tradition every year until last Summer.

By then Carlos had met a wonderful woman, Lucy, with two daughters of her own, and they'd gone to France for two weeks. Although Carlos had invited me the week after, I felt that the Summer should be about them creating new memories.

It was hard, but I'd always known the time would, and should, come for Carlos to meet someone new and that life would move on. But it made me realise how much I also relied on that special time with Lucia.



Best friends:
Holly (left) and Rachael

'When you lose someone you love, you don't get over it. You grow around it, as a coin pushed into a freshly cut tree becomes part of the trunk as it regrows'

So I asked if I could take her to Barcelona for her 11th birthday in the October half term.

Lucia was beside herself with excitement, being the first among her friends to go away alone. Since Holly had loved travel adventures, I decided to book an Airbnb apartment, rather than a hotel. We arrived late, and as the owners showed us around, I thought how proud Holly would be to see Lucia so confident on her first trip.

The next morning we caught the tourist hop on and off bus, getting off at the beach for breakfast, before spending the day wandering the local neighbourhoods, tasting as much food as we could. 'Try this,' I said, giving Lucia a *panellet*, a traditional sweet of almonds, sugar and egg rolled in pinenuts from the bakers.

Food had been a huge part of Holly's life, and our friendship. We'd spent our meagre salaries visiting expensive eateries way beyond our means. On holiday we were the same, always looking for something new. Now, I was sharing the experience with Lucia. I knew it would have been important to Holly, who'd written her favourite recipes in a book for her daughters.

At times Lucia seemed so grown up. It was only when we went up the vast La

Sagrada Família cathedral, where she confessed to being afraid of lifts, that I was reminded that she's still a little girl, and doesn't have a mum to reassure her when she's scared. I hugged her. 'It's okay, and once you've done it, it won't seem so scary any more.' She was white as a ghost, but her reaction at the top made it all worthwhile. 'Wow,' she said, her eyes shining as she stared out over the rooftops of the city.

I've never thought of myself as Lucia and Cerys' mother, nor would I. I've tried to take on a role more as a cool aunt. And I'd promised Holly, on the day before she died, that she would always be part of her daughters' lives, whether that be in the form of sharing memories, or my simply being there to provide a constant in their life and a connection with her.

And with no children of my own, it is rewarding and a privilege to be part of Lucia and Cerys' lives, seeing them blossom and create their own identities, although Holly still shines so strongly through them.

Just like her mum, Cerys can make an entire room erupt into laughter with her jokes, while Lucia's wisdom pulls me up short. 'I keep thinking that I should write that story we used to make up when you were little,' I said on the flight home.

'You should. Write it,' Lucia said, urging me to take a chance, exactly as Holly would have done had she been the one sitting there.

It's almost five years since Holly died. It seems years ago, and also just like yesterday. When you lose someone you love, you never get over it. You simply grow around it, as a coin pushed into a freshly cut tree becomes part of the trunk as it regrows. I still miss her advice and her warmth. But she has left on this earth two beautiful children, and a husband who has grown into an incredible father. All of them are a testament to her and reflect her personality, while also moving on and developing.

I remember Holly's last birthday in September 2009, sitting on Hove seafront on a beautiful, hot day, the sea as smooth as glass. The sun was warm on our skin, the water sparkled.

'I wish I didn't have cancer, but it makes you appreciate everything so much more,' Holly said. And she was right.

I wish Holly was still here, but she made us realise that life is wonderful. Everything seemed more colourful and full of adventure when she was around, and I try to keep living my life that way and sharing that legacy with her daughters. □

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF RACHAEL WOOLSTON