

## PICTURE

# PERFECT

WHEN THE PHOTOGRAPHER CORINNE DAY MET THE FILM-MAKER MARK SZASZY, A DRAMATIC AND PASSIONATE LOVE STORY BEGAN TO UNFOLD. BUT AT THE HEIGHT OF THEIR SUCCESS, CORINNE WAS DIAGNOSED WITH BRAIN CANCER. LAST MONTH, SHE FINALLY DIED. MARK TELLS **CLOVER STROUD** OF THEIR EMOTIONAL JOURNEY



**W**hen the photographer Corinne Day passed away at the end of the summer, she had rarely spoken about her illness. However, her dramatic first collapse from a brain tumour in 1996 had been extensively photographed, because she insisted on it. On her instruction, Corinne's husband, Mark Szasz, photographed her in hospital as she went for treatment: unflinching records of Corinne, moments after diagnosis, looking crumpled and afraid on the way to surgery.

Corinne was given eight years to live; she outlasted this diagnosis by six years. She carried on working until 2008, when she struggled to hold a camera or walk unaided, but Mark was there for her every step of the way. "Mark and Corinne. Corinne and Mark," Susie Babchick, her agent, says. "They were a unit. It was always the two of them together. They were tender; you'd see them at parties, their faces together, arms around one another. You got a buzz off them; they were exciting to be around, with their interest in people and hunger for knowing more and seeing more and doing more."

It's a vivid September morning, with clouds gusting across a crystal-blue sky, as I arrive at their cottage in Buckinghamshire, less than a week after the funeral. With cropped dark hair and generous features, Mark is a big bear of a man, but he is articulate and funny, entirely focused on her bravery and spirit, on their love. He makes me a cup of tea. "This one?" he asks in his thick Kiwi accent, pulling out a box of green tea. "Or jasmine? Corinne liked that best." We take our mugs out to the garden, which faces some woods. Occasionally, during our conversation, he walks across the grass, as though he's looking for her. He frequently refers to her in the present tense, motioning to the sofa she lay on and the walk she enjoyed around the garden.

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month together. He taught her how to use a camera, then she was offered work in Tokyo. "She gave me an ultimatum: either you stay at film school, or we go on a journey together. Creatively, I wanted to do the film, but I couldn't let her go again. So I chose love and adventure."

They gallivanted around the world together, spending a month in a grass hut in Thailand, where Corinne, happier now to be behind the camera, turned him into her first subject. The images are beautiful: Mark, brimming with laughter, running through the surf, or swinging a child in his arms. "She knew what she was doing, right from the start," he says. "It was the happiest time of our lives."

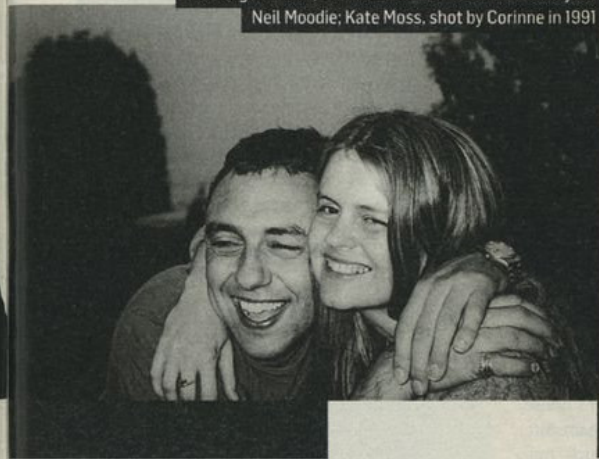
The love story of Mark and Corinne is an exceptional one on many levels, not only for its devotion and longevity, especially in the face of the hideous tragedy of a brain tumour, but also because they shared an aesthetic and creative drive that informed both their careers. It was, their friends have told me repeatedly, an exceptional and epic love. They met in 1985, in Tokyo, where they were both working as models. "We wandered up the road, walking and talking, and coincided at the same apartment. It was magical. She said she believed everyone should have a mission, a passion. It was an instant connection. A connection like that is rare, but sometimes it happens. It happened to us that day."

They spent a month together, falling in love, but their work took them in different directions; she was offered a big modelling campaign in LA, and he returned to Melbourne to film school. "I wrote to her all the time," he says. "She was always on my mind." Two years later, she visited him, "and we fell in love all over again", he says, grinning. They spent another



**PRAISE THE DAY**

From left Mark and Corinne, young and in love; a self-portrait from 2005; this shot of a couple in a field shows Corinne didn't only shoot grungy pictures and had a lighter side; Corinne with her friend the hairstylist Neil Moodie; Kate Moss, shot by Corinne in 1991



By the late 1980s, they had moved to London, stuffing their Soho flat with bags of second-hand and home-made clothes that Corinne then styled for shoots. She would photograph unknown teenagers she had spotted in McDonald's — she discovered the models Rosemary Ferguson and George Clements. Corinne's work appeared in *The Face* and *i-D*, while Mark was shooting videos for *Everything but the Girl* and *Oasis*. Together they were at the hub of a highly creative, hedonistic scene, the definition of originality and excess in the style-hungry era of the early 1990s.

"I wanted to be part of what they were doing, to impress them," remembers the stylist Karl Plewka, a close friend. "Corinne and I would sit up until 3am, obsessing about clothes, the precise way to pin a dress. On one shoot, we dyed and slashed a Calvin Klein slip; the PR went mad, but the images were extraordinary. Nobody could organise a shoot like Corinne. We worked on shoestring budgets, using home-made clothes photographed in grungy flats that cost nothing. She was a true original. That originality was at the heart of her and Mark's relationship, as they totally understood each other's work."

Because Corinne repeatedly challenged established definitions of conventional beauty, it is impossible to write about her without discussing Kate Moss — their careers were inextricably linked after Corinne shot Moss for the seminal *Third Summer of Love* cover for *The Face* in 1990. "Kate wouldn't have got where she has without Corinne," says Mark, whose relationship with the supermodel is uneasy. "Corinne went into Kate's agency, Storm, and asked Sarah Doukas if she could try out unknown girls. Sarah gave Corinne a pile of pictures, one of which was an out-of-focus Polaroid of Kate." The way Mark tells it, Moss seemed to be in the reject drawer until Corinne came along.

Corinne zoomed in on the teenager's gawky

appeal, using her to undermine fashion's prescriptive ideals of female beauty. According to Mark, Corinne stuck to her guns, defying the editors who wanted her to use other models, by repeatedly booking and promoting Moss. "Corinne is responsible for igniting Kate's brilliant career. Corinne passed her the ball, although, in Kate's defence, she took the ball and ran with it."

Didn't Moss set up a fund for Corinne at the end of her life? "Are you joking?" he replies, incredulously. "That was Carole White, Corinne's old modelling agent and a true friend. Kate signed a few photos that were auctioned, but that's it. Her behaviour towards Corinne towards the end was odd, to say the least." It has also been reported, wrongly, that Moss and Corinne shared a flat, when, in fact, Moss often stayed over with Mark and Corinne.

Promoting an unknown such as Moss was characteristic of Corinne's appetite for the underdog. Kate's wasn't the only fashion career she helped to launch — the celebrity hairdresser James Brown was another young boy hanging around their flat who Corinne often worked with, before he, too, found fame and made himself, in Mark's words, "unavailable".

Corinne's visionary work pushed the idea of dirty realism, making her a darling of the fashion industry, but then it suddenly turned on her in 1993, following the infamous *Vogue* shoot of Moss in knickers and vests, coined "heroin chic" by the press. Corinne was accused of promoting anorexia, paedophilia and drugs, because by then she had moved closer to the art world, swapping fashion for more extreme images of gritty squat life, with its surrounding drugs paraphernalia. When she had that first seizure in 1996, Mark knew, before she would admit to it, that this was the end of the hedonism. "The drugs had to stop, of course. Everyone was taking drugs, including Corinne," he says. "She conveyed youth culture powerfully in her work because she was plugged right into it. And although her immune system was weakened when she was living the rock'n'roll lifestyle, drugs didn't actually cause the seizure." >>>

## HER OWN WORDS

### CORINNE DAY GAVE HER LAST INTERVIEW TO STYLE IN FEBRUARY 2008. THESE ARE THE HIGHLIGHTS

● I was raised by my grandmother and grandfather because my parents divorced when I was five. I had a friendship with my mum, not a relationship. I was always close to my grandparents; I loved living with them. It wasn't the same as having parents, they are more accepting because they've lived a life, they're older. My grandmother was amazing. Her last job was delivering meat in a van in Ealing.

● My grandparents shared with me a lot of their wisdom and values.

When I left school at 16, my grandmother said I could become anything I want to be. She instilled confidence in me and opened my mind to life's possibilities.

● In life, I wish I'd known before that I could phone a friend or ask the audience. I wish I'd known life would be so short. I wish I'd known I should have spent more time with my grandmother.

● My best epiphany has been my husband. We've been together for 20 years. As a couple, you're going to influence each other, but it would take a good five years to go through all ours. He really isn't driven by money; he's driven by experiencing the good and simple things in life.

● My husband taught me how to use a camera. He taught me to see, and I started photographing him. We were both very, very young. Photographing your friends is a good way to start. You know your friends — you're not afraid to photograph them and it's more intimate. That familiarity gives you confidence, and it's easier because they trust you. You can become invisible.

● My job is about looking, seeing and appreciating. The times I really like my job are caught in moments such as seeing the reflection of waves on the window of a beach house.

● Art can be uncomfortable. Seeing something you've never seen before can make you uncomfortable. I like that because it's a new feeling.

● I've always enjoyed fashion. I like the way it changes. But I don't confuse fashion with the real world — living and spending time with my family.

● I believe the best feminine wile is not to be wily, because you will only attract the wily, often not the best type to attract.

● The best advice I have for dealing with love is just to appreciate it.

▶▶ Corinne, defiant and energetic as ever, ignored her bleak prognosis, checking out of hospital at Christmas to go to a New Year's Eve party. She worked harder than ever, while Mark gradually gave up his career to support hers. "Something happened to me after the diagnosis," he says reticently. "I didn't take it as well as Corinne, the horror of it. I'm not as tough as her. Corinne was one tough cookie, brought up by her nan, who gave her that older generation's quality of stoicism."

He focused on her diet, optimistic they could beat the disease with the right nutrition. He is a devotee of the Budwig diet, advocating a daily mixture of cottage cheese and flaxseed oil for fighting cancer, and also adamant that anyone dealing with the disease should read *Cancer-Free* by Bill Henderson. "We didn't talk about her dying," he says, staring into the trees. "We were waiting to cure her and beat this cancer. Then she wanted to tell people about the research we had done into alternative treatments."

Corinne worked relentlessly until two years ago, by which time she was physically struggling to support herself. Mark was always at her side, accompanying her on shoots; one of her final assignments was an Hermès shoot in Kerala, where he carried her between boats. In the final year of her life, she couldn't talk properly, so he would often finish sentences for her, interpreting her words when she struggled to pronounce them, because he understood her as nobody else could. "Mark's a visual poet as much as Corinne, but he put his career aside to support her," Susie Babchick says. "He made it fun, too, cooking things that might make her better. He looked after her beautifully. He's a complete hero."

Dealing with brain damage in someone you love, and watching that person diminish and change, is frightening and painful. Corinne's closest friends, including Babchick, Plewka and the hairstylist Neil Moodie, are full of praise for the way Mark looked after her. When I tell him this, he looks confused for a moment, shaking his head. "No, I'm not amazing. Corinne is amazing. I'm just an ordinary bloke who did what I thought was normal," he says. "But hell, it was sad, seeing her get pushed into a corner by the tumour. Corinne was so good! Right to the end, she was still there. Even in the last few weeks, I'd see her early in the morning, and she'd look at me and smile lovingly and supportively. I'd kiss her and cuddle her. Corinne was the hero, not me."

They married, on a sunny day, at Chelsea register office, on September 15, 2007, pulling a couple of people off the street to act as witnesses. Afterwards, they went to Regent's Park and lay beneath the spreading branches of a tree, which they called their honeymoon tree. Two years ago, they left London, and went first to her father's house, and then to their cottage in Buckinghamshire. "She said she had spent too much time working, and she needed to concentrate on getting better," he says.

By then, she was gravely ill, and friends and colleagues, from whom she had retreated as the tumour took hold, raised funds for treatment. White organised the Save the Day charity, raising almost £100,000 for treatment in Germany and Arizona. Mark nursed her daily and didn't leave her side. "She was my best friend, my love, my soul mate. I would never have deserted her, however tough it became. She was always loyal and supportive to me, so I tried to be the same for her."

In the final few months of her life, when she stopped talking, Mark would sit with her, reading to her, holding her hand. "It was always apparent they were very much in love, even at the end. They were inseparable. I've never seen a relationship like that," Moodie remembers. "They were a formidable duo. The strength of their love was humbling."

Corinne died at home. Her funeral was in the garden. Mark organised a traditional New Zealand open casket, so friends could say goodbye. He wove flowers through the basket coffin, which was rounded, "because I didn't want her going in the hard cold lines of a box," he says quietly. "I dressed her in her favourite Rick Owens leather jacket, her jeans, a 1960s scarf, white T-shirt and black Converse. She looked beautiful and completely herself." At the funeral, he did a Maori dance for her, called a haka, the highest form of respect that can be shown to a person who has truly earned it. He urged her friends to remember her strength and dignity, and to draw courage from her life.

The morning sun has gone, and in the three hours we've been talking, it has started to get colder. I get ready to go, walking out to the drive where there is a London taxi that Mark bought for Corinne when she was restricted to a wheelchair. "She was so excited when we started making money back in the 1990s and could take taxis," he says. "I didn't want her to have an ugly disability vehicle, so I bought her the taxi." He tells me about his plans to carry out her final wishes: an exhibition of her work and to make a feature film about her life. "She had big plans for me," he jokes. The big bear of a man smiles, but he looks small and alone.

Fashion needs iconoclasts such as Corinne, and her absence is a loss to the industry and anyone who reads magazines or cares about visual images. But to the people who loved her and knew her best, her family and friends, and to Mark above anyone else, her death is just unbearably sad. ●



Mark and Corinne on their wedding day in 2007

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