

T

he fairy tale goes like this: they are high-school sweethearts from a small town, Metamora, Illinois, in the Midwest. He graduates from high school, becomes a US marine and is sent to Iraq. When he returns, they get engaged. He proposes before he leaves for his second tour. She is 18; he is 21. She can't wait for him to come home.

The tour is cut short. A suicide bomber blows up near his truck and he suffers horrific, life-changing injuries.

Two days later he is in San Antonio, Texas at the Brooke Army Medical Center. She leaves her home town for the first time to fly there with his mum so they can be by his side. She is there for him. His injuries are severe. He will have numerous operations and she will stand by him throughout. It will be a year and a half before they all go home. In the meantime, she will move in with his mother. The homecoming is a triumph. He is a hero and she is his heroine. Their commitment to each other is inspiring and rock solid. They get married. She is now 21 and he is 24. The wedding takes place on October 7, 2006 and that date is declared a state holiday. Renee and Tyler Ziegel Day. Their romance is covered by The Sunday Times Magazine. They plan to have a family. Love conquers all.

When I tell people that I am going to Illinois to do a follow-up story on Ty and Renee, they are curious. How are they doing?

A little over a year had passed. In January, they got divorced, I tell them. They react with shock and disbelief. What happened? There is more than curiosity in their voice, there is disappointment, too. As though it's personal. As though they had been promised a happy ending and they were ripped off. It turns out love doesn't conquer all. It's a myth.

☆☆☆☆☆

Metamora, Illinois is a two-hour drive from Chicago. The kind of small town people don't leave. Ty's mum, Becky, was working as a waitress at the Family Fountain, the local diner on the square, when in 1979 she met Ty's father, Jeff, who works in construction and raised two sons – Tyler and Zach.

The late-afternoon sunlight is fading. It is a frigid winter's day. Ty, now 25, is standing in his kitchen, eight miles outside Metamora, in ➤➤➤



TYLER AND R

**Their story touched millions: the brave young marine who fought f
When we met them last year, their marriage was blossoming. But**



ENEE: ONE YEAR ON

or his country and was left horribly disfigured. The high-school sweetheart who stood by his side. was the pressure to live happily ever after too much to bear? By Ariel Leve. Portraits: Nina Berman

the house he used to share with Renee before she moved out.

That was six months ago; they'd been married for less than a year. They are still good friends. In January, soon after signing the divorce papers, she was over for his Super Bowl party and they still socialise – even though Ty believes that she's in a new relationship now and living with “some guy”. He doesn't know much about it, he says.

There is no animosity when he speaks of her. There are still several framed photographs of the two of them laughing and being affectionate, taken before the accident. There are also wedding photos, and although it's clearly the home of a single 25-year-old male who isn't inclined to doing dishes, Renee's presence has not been extinguished.

The white fridge is covered with colourful snapshots. Friends, babies of friends, and several group shots of Ty with his platoon, before the attack. There is one in particular that stands out. It is striking – Ty on his own, relaxing in the desert between deployments. His boyish face is handsome and innocent, his body is strong, lean and rugged, his blond hair is cropped short and he is lying down on the sand, hands clasped behind his neck, smiling as he looks into the camera. Confident and self-assured.

There is no sentiment in his voice as he stares at what he used to look like and explains that Renee put that photo up because she liked it.

The face in that photo no longer exists. He was in a vehicle with six other marines, patrolling near al-Qaim, northwestern Iraq, when a suicide bomber drove into them.

His left arm is now a stump – having been amputated below the elbow. On his right hand his fingers were blown off – leaving only two remaining – and a big toe was grafted on in place of a thumb. He is blind in one eye and his ears were burnt off. Part of his skull is implanted in the fatty tissue in his torso, to keep it viable and moist for future use, and a plastic plate was fitted to cover where the bone on his skull used to be. He has shrapnel in his head and above his brow there is a hole in his skull. His injuries are so serious that even a recent sinus infection, which meant a trip to hospital, is a huge medical ordeal.

It doesn't upset him to look at photos of the past, although sometimes he feels nostalgic.

Ty's younger brother, Zach, 22, is also a marine. He was in Iraq too, until March this year. He had been in the same unit as Ty, and Ty explains that Pete, the marine who pulled him out of the truck when he was aflame, had been Zach's squad leader. He is proud of his brother and doesn't draw parallels. He feels that his brother's decision to go over there should not have been influenced by what happened to him.

We go outside to the garage so he can show me his Harley-Davidson trike. It was a present built especially for him and it's impressive. Last summer they rode as a group – his mum, dad, and uncle Phil. They took a two-day trip.

Just then, he tilts his head over to the left and shakes a single tear out of his eye. “I didn't have a



The Sunday Times Magazine published the above story on Ty and Renee Ziegel last year. The couple who had just got married, became the subject of intense media attention around the world

tear duct that drained, so I had an operation where they put a glass one in, but it irritated me, so I pulled it out.” Whenever he fills up, as he does now, in the cold weather, he has to tilt his head over to dump out the salty fluid. He laughs mischievously. “I can use it to my advantage.”

It is the same laugh, the same voice, and most likely the same sense of devilish adolescent humour that distinguishes Ty as the same person he has always been. Over the next few days, one thing I will hear over and over is: “Ty is still Ty.” It's more than a glib line. People who knew him from before recognise that though the outside has been transformed, who he is remains unchanged.

Once we are back inside, he playfully instructs me to poke the side of his torso, near his waist, to feel where part of his skull is lodged. His laid-back personality defies his appearance. It's easy to forget the extent of his injuries.

His mother, Becky, has taken over the medical care – dressings still need to be changed – but Ty isn't keen to let her do domestic chores. He takes his laundry over to his parents' house once a

Ty, 25, shows off the tattoos on his right arm, which was badly damaged in the explosion. He has only two fingers and has had one of his big toes grafted on in place of his thumb

week and every so often he'll let her vacuum.

We move into the sitting room. Despite the cold weather, Ty is wearing baggy jeans, open-toed sandals and an oversized T-shirt. He has some new tattoos and one, which snakes up his entire forearm reads: “Yesterday was history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift.” There is another one that says: “You could hold my hand but you would pull me down.”

An average day is hard to pin down. There is stuff that he needs to do round the house – home improvements, going through dressers, putting stuff away. But he's not in any rush. “I wake up whenever.”

He owns a plot of land, 24 acres, and plans to build a house. It's out in the woods and will look like a log cabin. He has the floor plans already. Ty bought the land before he got married – they had planned to build a house on it together.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

When Ty went to Iraq the first time, Renee was still in high school. She cried when he left and their only communication was through “snail



mail” since the troops did not have an internet connection set up then. Once a week they were allowed a five-minute call, but Ty gave up his minutes – he didn’t like phoning home. “There was too much overstimulation. It wasn’t upsetting – just too much to think about.”

It is the same laugh and the same sense of devilish, adolescent humour that distinguishes Ty as the person he has always been

He returned home in the summer of 2003, and three weeks later, Renee’s father died in a quad-bike accident. She clung to Ty for support and had no way of knowing then the impact that losing her father would have, the emotional void it would create, or that it might lead her into a marriage she wasn’t really prepared for.

Sitting down on the sofa, Ty says he and Renee were never “touchy-feely”, even before the wedding. When he says this he conveys an aversion to tactile displays of affection. What he also seems to want to get across is that his tapered

emotional range is unrelated to his injuries.

But when it comes to his dog, it’s another matter.

These days Dobbs, a bouncy one-year-old boxer who he showers with unrestricted warmth and attention, has become his constant companion. When he jumps up on the sofa, Ty

strokes him lovingly as the dog licks his face.

“Nothing happened,” he says, turning his focus back to me. He is speaking about the breakdown of the marriage, explaining that it was not triggered by a single event.

“Nothing was ever really wrong. It just wasn’t right. Going into the marriage? I’d never been married before. I think we were okay. The wedding – it was so planned. There was this thing...” He breaks off and gets up to retrieve the framed certificate. It’s from the state of Illinois declaring his wedding a state holiday. “To call

something like that off...” He sits back down.

Afterwards, there was no honeymoon. They began married life immediately, and since neither of them had to work, it meant that they could exist without a specific routine.

“It’s a different life. Whoever I marry doesn’t have to work – I get paid in VA [Veterans Affairs] benefits. We never have to worry about money.”

He seems resigned – that their break-up would have occurred no matter what, it just would have taken longer. “There were plenty of things I did wrong. Everyday life stuff. Stuff boys do and girls hate. We’re both in agreement – the lifestyle had its challenges.”

He talks about not having to work and how this contributed to the downfall. More so than anything else. After they separated they got along better than ever, he says. They would each go about their day and see each other out and about. “It’s not as strange as I thought it would be.” And his emotional state? “Oh, honey, my emotional state is off the charts anyway.”

There is a plethora of orange prescription ➤➤➤

Ty with his mother, Becky, who helps him with his medical care, including changing his dressings. Below: Ty before the accident



There are times when he feels lonely, but then he felt that way when he was married too. Towards the end he slept on the couch

bottles on the coffee table in front of us. Seven in all. “Take a look at what we’ve got,” Ty says, making a sweeping gesture over the pills. There is one is for pain, one is an antacid, there is a bottle of morphine for “the head thing”. I hold up a bottle. “What’s this?” I ask. “Those are the ‘don’t-kill-your-wife pills.’”

He says he’s been off them before and it wasn’t good. “Not to the point of eating a bullet or anything like that... they call it post-traumatic stress disorder.”

He will most likely stay on them for the rest of his life. But he emphasises he is not in a zombie-like state and still capable of feeling his feelings. “They are to get me out of the house. I don’t sit here drooling or anything.”

It’s hard to tell where the mood stabilisers end, and Ty’s naturally low-key nature begins. Returning to the subject of Renee seeing someone, his reaction doesn’t vary.

“I figured she’d find someone. I’m pretty chilled about most things.”

Jealous? Sad? “I don’t know. Probably a bit of both at first. But you know... I had a date last night!” This is exciting news. He downplays it and sounds sheepish. He went out with a friend – and her cousin and the cousin’s friend. They went to eat and then to a movie, where he dozed off.

Does he like her? “Yeah, she’s cool.” Attracted to her? “Uh, yeah.” When asked if he thinks the feeling is mutual, he pauses. “It’s hard to tell – am I getting the pity feedback or the real thing? Sometimes I worry. Like, I don’t know. But then it’s like, well, whatever. It’s like when you see that idiot who’s staring, and I give them their

minute to look. I don’t blame people for looking – you don’t see people like me very often. But when it becomes blatant... I’ve gone up to grown men and said, ‘What is it you want to ask me?’ and by the time we’re done talking, they end up buying me a beer.

“It’s no different with dating. I just hold the attitude that if you’re not grown-up enough to deal with it, then you’re wasting my time.”

Ty is not immune to the reality – it will be difficult for some women to see past how he looks. He empathises and says he can’t imagine how hard it is for them. But his attitude betrays a steady confidence, and whether it’s real or manufactured, he is intuitive enough to



realise that it’s what makes him attractive. “You can’t be like this and not be confident. If I looked the way I was and I wasn’t confident? What would I do?”

There are people who don’t dwell on the negative. Ty is one of them. But with dating, rejection can come swiftly – sometimes before there is even a chance for someone to prove they are worth getting to know. He knows this.

“I have to have good icebreakers.” He pauses. “Like, ‘hey you wanna see the hole in my head?’”

At times, he admits, he feels lonely, but then he felt that way when he was married too. Towards the end, he slept on the couch.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

Ty’s mother, Becky, is driving us into the darkness. We are headed into “the middle of nowhere”. It’s a 20-minute journey to where we’re going for dinner. There are no buildings, just farmland, and we can only see as far as the headlights in front of us. “You got the butt warmer on?” she asks. The leather seats in her truck heat up.

When Ty went to Iraq the first time, she was scared. It was before the war really started and they were being trained for chemical warfare.

“But I always felt he would be okay,” she says. “The second time he went, when I hugged him goodbye and he walked towards me and I looked at him, this little voice in the back of my head said, ‘He will never be the same, he will never be the same.’ It was in my gut. I just knew.”

She dismissed her intuition, but states firmly that she always knew. So much so that when the call came that he had been injured, her first reaction was, she says, relief. “I knew something bad would happen – I just didn’t know what.”

But she didn’t know the severity of it until she saw him for the first time in the hospital on Christmas Eve in Texas. She was there with >>>> 37

Ty and Dobbs, his one-year-old boxer, outside the home he used to share with Renee

Renee. Was she ever afraid Renee would change her mind about the engagement once she saw him? “No. There was no doubt in my mind that she loved him and would stick with him. But she was young.” When asked if she thought that their marriage would last, there is a long silence. She stares straight ahead at the road.

“Who ever really knows?” She sighs. “It wasn’t a surprise when they split up.”

After they made the decision, Ty went to her house and Renee went straight to her mother.

“I’m the mom of the boy,” Becky says. “You get way less information. He came and said they were going to take a break and they were keeping it friendly. That was it.”

She knew they’d been doing their own thing for a while. And that they had drifted apart. “I asked him, ‘Ty, are you all right?’” She laughs. “Ty is not a verbal, effusive person. He said, surprisingly enough, ‘It’s okay.’ So what does that tell you?”

Becky doesn’t worry about him meeting someone new. “He will,” she says definitively. But is she concerned someone might not see him for who he is? “If it’s somebody who’s going to fall in love with him – they’ll fall in love with him. Everybody loves Ty.”

She doesn’t believe Renee left because of Ty’s limitations, and without hesitation she addresses where she stands. “I will always love Renee, no matter what anyone says or thinks. I will always love her because she was there when he needed her most. When he needed to know it didn’t matter.”

We drive for a few moments in silence. “I’m sure he has concerns. You can’t think that face doesn’t look in the mirror and wonder if somebody would love you or not. But then, if you’re Ty, he probably wouldn’t be going for someone that would care about that anyway.”

Having her other son deployed to Iraq after what happened to Ty must have been difficult. Nobody wants their child to go to war. Zach came and talked to her before he volunteered, and she knew he’d go.

We pull into the driveway of the Duck Inn – a favourite with duck hunters. “Ty’s always been level-headed and easy-going,” she says, taking the keys out the ignition. “I raised two kids – Eeyore and Tigger. Ty’s Eeyore.”

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

Ty enlisted with his best friend, Buddy Robison, when they were in high school. They went through boot camp together, and were deployed to Iraq at the same time, for two tours, in different platoons of the same company.

Buddy was in Fallujah when he found out that Ty had been blown up. His captain told him Ty had minor burns and broken bones. He didn’t know the full details. “My heart dropped when I heard the name Tyler Ziegel.” Buddy is tall, good-looking and extremely shy.



‘He’s not afraid to go up to someone he doesn’t know and talk to them. He doesn’t hide. People look, but he walks straight ahead’

He speaks softly. We are sitting in the dining room in Becky’s house, a cheerful room that is filled with the bright morning sun. Buddy has driven over from Peoria, where he lives, a few miles away. “It took a few days to find out what really happened. I talked to my mom. She knew it was more than minor burns. It hit me that it was more than ‘no big deal’. But I didn’t know the full severity until I went to San Antonio and saw him for the first time, after I got home from Iraq. I can’t describe what it was like. But when I talked to him – besides the physical appearance – he was exactly the same.”

Buddy has known Renee as long as Ty. He knew they were having trouble because when Ty would go out, Renee wouldn’t be with him.

“We don’t talk about our feelings. It’s a guy thing. I found out they were getting divorced when he told me. He said he still loved her, but it was the best thing. I trust him.”

He admits that there was a little bit of anger, but then adds, “If Ty was okay with it, why shouldn’t I be okay with it? I feel for him. I’ve never been through a divorce.”

Most of the time, he and Ty talk about music. And, like Becky, he isn’t worried about Ty moving on and falling in love again. “Someone will see through his skin and see his heart,” he says. And what of his own personal feelings about Renee? Buddy smiles. “That’s a hard question.” He takes his time before answering, choosing his words with care.

“I respect her a lot for sticking by Ty’s side. Moving to San Antonio... she helped him through the hardest time in his life.

“It’s not like I hate her. I think Renee has a good heart, too. I just think what happened to Ty might have been something too big. I don’t know if she doesn’t want to handle it any more.

Maybe she’s tired of it and wants to move on.” Since Ty doesn’t blame her or hold a grudge against her, Buddy feels it’s not his place to comment any more. We move on. He’s noticed that what has changed the most about his friend is that he is more outgoing than he used to be.

“Before he got blown up, we were both shy. We were exactly alike. Now he’s not afraid to go up to someone he doesn’t know and talk to them. He doesn’t hide. Obviously people look, but he walks straight ahead.”

There has only been one incident where there’s been trouble. A little over a year ago they were leaving a bar and a bunch of local college kids made fun of Ty. There was a fight.

“They made fun of him, called him a freak. You can’t just brush that off. Someone’s got the audacity to do that to someone who served his country, protecting them?” He looks at me, still pained by this, and shakes his head.

They have been close since they were six years old. He sees his best friend suffer, and he has suffered with him. “The most difficult part for me? Initially it was just seeing him. When I went to the hospital I walked right by him because I didn’t know it was him. Now? Nothing is difficult. When someone says Tyler Ziegel – I think of how he is now. We get along the way we always did. It will always be the case.

“Ty doesn’t come out and tell me everything that bothers him. He doesn’t want people to feel sorry for him. But you know that he’s got to be hurting every day.”

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

The Family Fountain is on the square, two minutes from Becky’s house. A few hours later, the four of us head over for lunch. The table in the centre of the room is occupied by half a dozen men in flannel shirts and baseball caps →

Ty with one of his guns. He has had to learn to function with only half of his left arm

caps, and Becky singles them out one by one: “He’s a farmer, he works for the phone company, he’s in garbage disposal, he’s in construction...” These men are men. Not a metrosexual in sight.

This is the diner where Becky used to work, and we chat for a while with the waitress about her tan. It’s Fake Bake. Ty and Buddy order burgers and the discussion turns to the war. They were not thinking of oil or money, nor were they fighting for President Bush. They were doing their job, dealing only with the task at hand – fighting for friends and family. They don’t question it. The big picture isn’t the issue.

A bearded man approaches to say hello. “Hey, Shakey,” Ty says, taking a bite of his burger. He doesn’t wear the prosthetic limb and manoeuvres slowly, using his stump in place of a hand to secure the bun.

Shakey’s real name is Dennis McCullough, and he’s known Ty all his life. They hang out, go drinking together and watch Nascar.

“Ty’s Ty,” he says, when asked for his thoughts. He confirms that Ty has always been laid-back and says that the only real change is that maybe now he drinks more. Everyone laughs when he says that.

Ty’s presence at the Family Fountain is a nonevent. People pay no more or less attention to him than they would any other local. He wouldn’t want it any other way.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

When Donna Kline first heard that Ty and Renee were separating, she was angry with both of them. Kline is Renee’s mother. She is wearing a bright orange Adidas sweatshirt and is seated behind her desk. We are in the back office at Kline’s Repair – an automobile repair service, and the room smells of motor oil and a patchouli scented candle that is lit and flickering. It is the end of the day, and Donna is getting ready to close the shop.

Her demeanour is prickly. She’s agreed to talk on Renee’s behalf, but it’s clear she doesn’t trust how her daughter will be portrayed. Nevertheless, she is willing to share her opinions.

“I wasn’t sure that they had put their whole heart into it,” she says.

She, too, believes that they should have slowed down before they got married. “But there wasn’t time. It was so crazy. If they had both stepped back a minute, I’m not sure that the marriage would have happened. They didn’t take the time to step back.” She speculates that after those two years in Texas, they just wanted to get back to normal. They thought the wedding would be that. But nobody considered past the wedding.

“Renee has no regrets,” Donna states. “They had issues and mutually decided to separate. Sure, I was shocked. I was hurt.”

There was, she concedes, a lot of pressure on their marriage – all the health issues they went through, being in Texas. “If he hadn’t been blown



injured and people would blame her.”

Donna explains that even after the wedding they weren’t left alone. “I wish they’d had more time, without the media scrutiny.

“Renee feels that it’s done. Enough’s enough. She wants to move on. I believe if her dad hadn’t been killed, things would have been different. They jumped in too quick – and jumped out too quick. I know Renee loves Ty. Is she in love with him the way you need to love a husband for the next 50 years? Apparently not. But I don’t think he is either. I think they both would have stayed in it, if one of them hadn’t initiated a talk about where things were going.”

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

The fairy tale, as we know it, was not meant to be. They were too young to be married. Too young to process the possibility that what led them into a lifelong commitment was a

‘Renee doesn’t feel guilty for leaving Tyler, because she doesn’t

see Ty the way other people see Ty. She sees him the way he was’

up and things hadn’t happened the way they did... I don’t know. I can’t answer that.”

She has a hard time understanding how – after everything that they had been through – this is the way it ended up.

“Am I happy that they’re divorced? No. I’m not a big believer in divorce. They were both hurt. Renee did not get married thinking she would be divorced a year later. It’s not exactly what she wanted either.”

When I ask if Renee was worried about what people might think of her – if she felt guilty – Donna cuts me off. “Okay, let’s go off the record here, because I’m starting to get upset.”

Suddenly she seems very uncomfortable. “You might want to turn that off,” she says. With the tape recorder turned off she expresses concern about the way the article is going. I reassure her that I’m not looking to blame Renee and only want to know what she was feeling. She allows me to turn it back on.

“Renee doesn’t feel guilty for leaving Tyler, because she doesn’t see Ty the way other people see Ty. She sees him the way he was four years ago, not the way he is today.”

Ryan Rohman, 21, is Renee’s best friend. After Donna, he was the first person to know about the separation. “As soon as it happened she came straight to me. She called and said she wanted to talk.

“Ty likes to have his fun and Renee likes to have her fun. Renee was born and raised a hick – she’ll tell you that. Ty, he’s into bands and stuff like that. She’ll come up here and we’ll party and listen to country music, and he’ll go listen to rock music. That’s just how they are.”

Renee, he says, was scared. She didn’t want to be 22 years old and divorced. “She told me she was afraid people were going to think bad of her for leaving Ty. But she wasn’t leaving Ty – it was a mutual decision. She was worried that she would get a bad reputation because Ty is

desire for certainty in an uncertain world.

There is no mystery, no implosion, no tragic conclusion. There were factors that added up. Factors that at the time they could not have foreseen. That a marriage would not offset the consequences of Ty’s injuries. That it would not compensate for the loss and the grief felt by a young woman losing her father.

Everyone suspected it was too soon – that maybe it wasn’t right. But nobody spoke out. Others, strangers, projected onto them what they needed to believe.

They were larger than life. When we heard their story, we put ourselves in their shoes, imagining what we would do in the same situation. Renee personified the courage and strength we hoped we would have. But she was 18 years old. And neither are prone to introspection. They weren’t people who asked why. Between the two of them they had so much life experience, but the emotional narrative of their lives never caught up.

What made us think it would? Why did we have such high hopes for them in the first place? Nobody really ever knew Ty and Renee. Not even Ty and Renee.

But this is not the end. They emerged from the marriage with warmth and affection for each other – not anger and recrimination.

She was there when he needed her most, she showed up and stood by him. That is more than many people will ever have in a marriage. It is something they will always share ■

For more features by Ariel Leve from The Sunday Times Magazine, go to



‘I’ve never had a problem expressing anger, providing it’s about something specific’

www.timesonline.co.uk/arielleve