

'Ghost boy' learns to live again after years of coma hell

David Sanderson

A man whose mystery illness left him in a virtual coma for years has spoken of how he found love, a home and job in England.

Martin Pistorius, who spent the best part of a decade fully conscious but locked inside his body, has revealed the desperation he felt during his lowest days. While "locked-in", the South African overheard his mother, Joan Pistorius, telling him: "I hope you die."

Speaking in a radio documentary for NPR, he said his mother could "see only a cruel parody of the once-healthy child she had loved so much".

Mrs Pistorius, who had attempted suicide in desperation at her son's condition, told the documentary: "I just wanted some sort of relief."

Mr Pistorius was 12 when the illness, which doctors believe is a degenerative neurological disorder, began to affect him. His muscles wasted and he became "completely unresponsive".

Two years later he began spending most of his time in a care centre as the "years passed with me lost in my dark, unseeing world".

Around the age of 16 however — in the early 1990s — he said he began to become aware of his surroundings and by the age of 19 his mind was "fully intact".

It was then a slow process before medical staff and his family realised that he was making a recovery. "Everyone was so used to me not being there that they didn't notice when I began to be present again," he said.

Mr Pistorius said that he had been desperate to escape the daily re-runs of *Barney*, the children's television programme about a purple dinosaur which staff at the care home placed him in

front of each day. In his memoir *Ghost Boy*, published in 2011, Mr Pistorius wrote of this period: "However much I tried to beg and plead, shout and scream, I couldn't make them notice me.

"My mind was trapped inside a useless body, my arms and legs weren't mine to control and my voice was mute. I couldn't make a sign or a sound to let anyone know I'd become aware again. I was invisible — the ghost boy."

It was when he was 25 that one of his therapists picked up that he was responding to questions with almost imperceptible smiles and nods. He was sent for further tests

"Happiness surged through me. I was Muhammad Ali, John McEnroe, Fred



No one knew that Martin Pistorius was awake

Trueman. Crowds roared their approval as I took a lap of honour," he said.

In subsequent years he learnt to use a computer to communicate, taught himself to read and write and trained as a web designer.

In 2008, he met Johanna, a friend of his sister who was a social worker living in Britain. The couple fell in love and one year later married in an Essex church.

Mr Pistorius, who uses a wheelchair and speaks through a voice synthesiser, said he was now living a happy, regular life in Harlow, adding in an interview with Channel 5's *The Wright Stuff*: "Yes, life has its challenges, but then again whose doesn't?"