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My journey from depression to peace

By Margaret Clayton

JUNE 2, 1994, was a day like any other for Ian and Susan. They had lunch at their home, potted in the garden in the sunshine.

Ian performed a spot of DIY using his latest toy — a brand new glass-cutter.

Susan popped out at regular intervals to remind him the job could wait as he had a helicopter to catch!

As they drove along the Co. Antrim roads to the military airport at Aldergrove, Ian remarked it was a pity Susan couldn't come with him.

At the airport they passed several Wessex helicopters.

"It's not those wee baby ones for us today. We're using a Chinook — you know the jungle stuff," he said.

Susan realised it was the flight he was looking forward to rather than the

When she dropped him off they kissed, but he didn't turn and wave — he never did.

"You just go forward — don't waste time looking back," was Ian's motto.

Susan had dinner with their daughter, Nicola, in Belfast that night. After a pleasant evening she got into the car to drive home and turned on BBC Radio Ulster.

Horror

In horror she listened as a newsreader announced that a military helicopter had crashed on the Mull of Kintyre in Scotland while carrying security forces personnel to a conference in Inverness. "First reports suggest that there are no survivors."

As her hands clung to the steering wheel, she heard herself screaming 'No! No!'

Somehow she got home and at 11 pm that night she got the news she had dreaded — that 28 men and one woman had died instantly as the Mull of Kintyre near a lighthouse known in Gaelic as Hill of Stone. A giant fireball had enveloped the heather as wreckage flew across the hillside.

Three days after the crash Susan visited the crash site with Nicola and her son Niven (21).

It was the beginning of a difficult journey.

Susan says, "There were times of helpless crying, periods of depression, anger at losing the man I loved. We'd been together for 28 years and our life together was good. We enjoyed living in Northern Ireland — even though there were inevitable dangers because of the Troubles.

"Our home was always bustling with friends and family. We enjoyed lovely

■ The mangled remains of the Chinook on the Mull of Kintyre hillside.



Chinook widow's struggle to recover from tragedy

meals and good wine. Our marriage was fun and we had plans for the future.

"I'd been working as a military nurse when we'd met in a NAAFI Club at Aldershot. Ian was tall and slim with twinkling Irish blue eyes. From the moment we met we were each other's best friend," she says simply.

"For a long time after his death it seemed I was living in a dark, lonely tunnel without even a faint glimmer of light at the end. One day as tears tripped down my face, Niven said to me, 'Oh mum you'll never be happy again, will you?'"

"I suppose I realised then that I needed to do what I could to take my pain away from my children."

During her marriage Susan had run workshops to help families come to terms with having a deaf child in the family.

She threw herself back into her work, but admits, "It's difficult to provide a supportive service when you really just want to shout 'So you think you've got problems? I'm in pain, too!'"

Sorrow

And the practical difficulties of even staying overnight on a hotel on her own, eating a meal on her own in the dining room and going to the cinema on her own, sometimes defeated her.

Amidst all her sorrow, Susan's parents died within six months of each other.

"It seemed that all we were doing was going to funerals. Life was just one big muddy swamp. Getting up in the morning was difficult. You ask yourself 'what for?' and you ask that question for a very long time."

Susan's GP suggested tranquillisers, but she resisted going down that route. In the coming months she had one throat infection after another and a cough that refused to shift.

"I was almost permanently sick," she says. "Physically, mentally and emotionally I was running on empty. The thing I hated most was when people said 'Time will help.' That made me want to scream."

Then a friend suggested alternative therapies.

IT'S NINE years since Susan Phoenix (left) was widowed. Her husband, Ian, a Detective Inspector with the RUC, was among 29 people who died when a Chinook helicopter carrying colleagues from the RUC, military intelligence and the secret services to a conference in Inverness crashed on the Mull of Kintyre. She was only 45. The couple had been married for 26 happy years. They both had busy lives and had plans for the future.

It has taken Susan a long time to rebuild her life and, at long last, look to the future.

Her healing has been helped with the writing of a book called *Out Of The Shadows*, about her journey back from overwhelming grief.

Last week she told Family Matters how she's found the strength to cope with her loss and to make a new life for herself.



"It was in that stone cottage that I licked my wounds and learned to love the rural French people and their culture. Someone suggested that I was running away from my life. But I could see that there was nothing to run from or to. It was my life now. Ireland had been my life with Ian. I no longer needed those roots, any more than I needed the roots of my childhood home.

"My children would come to me no matter where I chose to live. As long as I have contact with family and friends from time to time I can survive."

Susan organised an angel workshop (for people who believe their lives are governed by guardian angels) in her quiet little corner of France. She studied more about crystal therapy and how people's chakras (energy lines) can be balanced by placing crystals in appropriate places around the body.

"I know there are those who are sceptical about anything New Age," she says. "All I can tell you is what worked for me and the people who shared their healing energy with me."

Friends

Susan made friends in France but after seven happy years she decided it was time to move on.

"It had been a challenge to learn a new language and culture. I'd learned to be 'me' and not just half of 'us'. I bought a small house in Southern Spain close to a beach called 'Heaven' and I moved there last year," she says.

People visit her for aromatherapy treatments, foot massages and guided meditations.

"They come by word of mouth. Some are cancer patients or just people facing difficult times."

Now in her 50s Susan has found love again. He's an Italian Argentinian called Riccardo and he, too, practises alternative therapies.

"He has massaged both Sean Connery and his wife," she says.

This year Susan began writing the story of her journey from depression to peace.

"I've discovered that we all have the strength within ourselves to survive the worst that life can throw at you. It's just finding the trigger to release the energy to get you going again that counts."

● *Out Of The Shadows* (Hodder and Stoughton, £10.99. ISBN 0-340-83556-7).