
Phoenix from the flames

Susan Phoenix has lived the extremes of joy and despair. After losing her husband in the 1994 Chinook helicopter crash, she found the strength to gather her life from the ashes and rise again

By Alana Doogan

As the sun's rays flow through the lobby of The Shelbourne Hotel, Susan Phoenix needs no introduction. The hotel is bustling with the weekend influx of tourists, but she stands serene and radiant at the opposite side of the room. Instantly we spot each other. A petite lady, she beams a huge smile across the crowded room. It's contagious and we both laugh as we introduce ourselves. "Now let's sit down and have a chat," she says linking my arm after we have shaken hands.

Sitting opposite this woman, who never stops laughing, it is difficult to believe how much she has suffered. In a succession of mere months, the British-born psychologist had lost both her parents and her husband, Ian, her 'soul mate' of 28 years. A Tyrone man employed by the RUC, Ian was killed in a horrific helicopter accident in 1994. Soon after, Susan spiralled into a deep depression that she thought might never lift. When both her parents died within the following six months, she found herself alone on her farm in Belfast – totally disconnected from the outside world. But for the woman who says she was 'born at the age of 40', a deep-rooted sense of self-belief and spirituality would guide her along her journey to recovery.

It is clear that she still misses her husband as she smiles sadly, recollecting their life together. She was just 18 when they met and had been training to be a military nurse. It was the swinging sixties and she was having the time of her life. "I trained with the British Army because I thought that would help me to travel, not knowing that I was going to meet this big, Irish paratrooper in the first year, and that it would change my life forever. All the student nurses had been told not to go near the paratroopers, so we all went off to find ourselves one!" she laughs. "Ian was what I would call a typical Irishman, even though he was a Protestant from the North. He had

twinkly, blue eyes, was very charismatic, tall and slim and good fun. But he was a bit of a tough guy on the outside – people that didn't really know him didn't realise just what a softie he was inside."

The couple embarked on a whirlwind romance and parted reluctantly when Susan went to complete her final six months of training in Germany. But this was only the beginning of their love story. "In Germany I found out I was having Ian's baby. Luckily, I think, because I might not have come back to marry him. We spent a lot of time saying 'no, no, we're not really into marrying'. But of course we were madly in love from the first day and we were until the last day, 28 years later. So we got married. I was only 19 and a half. I was 20 when my daughter was born." Susan pauses, as if digesting this information for the first time, and then adds, "If you had told me that that was going to happen I would have thought, 'Oh my God!' And my parents were shocked because I was the dedicated career girl. But it was one of those times when fate takes over, thank God, and it was all wonderful."

Soon after the wedding the young couple moved to Malta where Ian had been posted with the army. When baby Nicola arrived, the little family made their home on the island. "It was idyllic. Our little baby learning to walk on the sun-drenched island of Malta – it was beautiful! We had a really nice time. Then we came home and Ian joined the RUC."

Shortly after the young family moved back to Northern Ireland, Susan and Ian had another baby – a little boy they called Niven. Living what they called 'the good life' after the popular sitcom, Susan and Ian soon settled into their little farm, near Belfast. It was here that Susan encountered a deaf neighbour, who led her back to education. "She taught me sign language and told me about the problems for deaf people in Northern Ireland. I went back to do a Youth and Community degree, to work with young deaf people – or so I thought. That soon changed

into psychology because that subject worked best with my nursing background and my interests in science and human behaviour. I was about 31 when I went back at first."

Susan began working with deaf people and later for the National Association for the Deaf. "We offered basic adult education for the Deaf, as well as drama, and we provided children's therapy for the families. Nobody got paid in those days – we just did it," she shrugs nonchalantly.

It was in the midst of all of this excitement and productivity that Susan's world came crashing down. On June 2nd, 1994, Susan dropped her husband to the airport to catch a flight to an anti-terrorism conference. She was unaware that her life was about to change forever. "I was listening to the radio on my way to see my daughter in Belfast." She pauses, gravely. "On the way home I heard it on the radio. BBC Radio Ulster said a military Chinook had gone down on the Mull of Kintyre and they didn't think there were any survivors. And I remember... I knew then. I just knew. It took several years before I could pass the part of the road where I heard that news again. I remembered the feelings of that realisation for a long, long time."

Susan says she always knew she would lose Ian. "We always knew – I had that inherent feeling that I was going to be a young widow. I don't know why. We talked about it and he used to say, 'Ah you'll be all right. If anything happens to me, you'll just travel,' which was very odd. We had these kinds of conversations but we always tried to promise each other – whoever went first would try to let the other know that we were okay."

Susan and Ian shared a strong belief in the supernatural. "Ian had seen ghosts in the bogs of Co. Tyrone as a child. I remember him telling me about this old guy in plus-fours that he saw when he was a young boy playing hide and seek. And I'd seen ghosts in my family bedroom in our little Victorian terraced house in Peterborough, so we both had that connection. We didn't talk about it a lot. We both believed in an afterlife, and certainly reincarnation. He thought he'd like to come back as a rabbit, but that was just being rude!" she laughs.

The news of the crash left Susan numb. "We didn't know what was happening, everyone was coming and going, and I just felt numb. I just felt totally bereft – that pain in your heart that's physical. You feel it isn't really true, it can't be." But that night she had an experience that offered some comfort to her devastation. "At four o'clock I wasn't sleeping and I suddenly felt fantastic. I felt this energy all around me. I was smiling and felt very happy. I thought, 'This can't be true, this can't be right – Ian's dead, why should I feel like this?'"

The next morning, to her surprise, Susan's daughter, Nicola, spoke of experiencing the same feelings the night before. But it was her son, Niven,

who believed it was Ian's spirit, and he said, "Dad knows I wouldn't wake up for just anybody." Susan says, "I talked about it for a long while and I can still see people's faces, looking at me thinking, 'Yeah right. She's cracked; that's what happens to widows'. And I thought that maybe I had cracked."

Soon afterwards, Susan wrote Ian's life story based on a series of diaries he had left her, a move which proved somewhat controversial. "Writing that book was great because it shook some boats. Afterwards I got many letters thanking me for writing the real story of a real family that was involved in the security forces during those times."

However, Susan had yet to experience the long-term effects of grief. Writing the book was both a comfort and a distraction from the pain. In her despair, she fled to France. "I went down a tube after that. Looking back, I was clinically depressed, but I wouldn't have admitted it then. I'd burst into tears at the drop of a hat. My two children and my friends were fantastic, but they can't help you. If you haven't got the one person you want in your life, nobody else can help. I felt sorry for my children because I felt I couldn't give them what they needed either."

Remarkably, she never experienced the anger that often comes with grief. "I felt like I was living outside of this bubble looking in at the rest of the world. I didn't care about anything. It's funny, I never felt anger. I was just very, very sad. I now realise there's no point in being angry because you have no one to be angry with. I never took it as a personal injury to me. People wanted to blame others – yes, it was a faulty Chinook, but there was no point in being angry about it – it had happened. If Ian got knocked down on the road, or died from some horrible disease, I'd lost him. Loss is loss." She adds, "We were 'us' and it took me a long time to stop being 'us' and to start being 'me.' You have to extricate yourself from that situation because as a couple you are like one person."

Susan never took any medication for her depression. Instead she sought alternative treatments and drew from her spiritual beliefs. "I had every physical illness under the sun – a lingering cough, a pain in the leg, a pain in the arm. They are all psychosomatic but they are real pains. Aromatherapy was the first thing that actually made me feel good. I knew I couldn't take medication because I had to feel the pain to know when it was gone."

Now based in Marbella, Susan recently met Ricardo, an Italian man from Argentina. Ricardo is a masseuse and treated Susan after an operation this year. "He would be a year older than Ian," she says. She took her time getting into another relationship because she says she needed to find happiness on her own again. On a trip to the Mull of Kintyre in March accompanied by Belfast clairvoyant Joanne Maguire, Susan says she managed to contact Ian's spirit. "That was the only time I ever heard his voice.