

A loved one missing

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A retired priest has known something like the anxiety of the McCann family. She talked to **Sarah Meyrick**

AS A MOTHER of four and grandmother of six, the Revd Sheila Auld can hardly bear to think about the suffering of the McCann family in Portugal. But there is another reason why the story cuts her to the quick: 23 years ago, Mrs Auld's husband, Len, went missing.

It took three years of fruitless searching before walkers happened across his body, on a remote hillside in Northumberland. Today, she is still none the wiser about exactly how he died.

"It was an open verdict, so I still don't know," she says. "Sometimes I think that he took an overdose, he was so upset. On the other hand, he didn't leave a note or give me any hint. Maybe he laid down to rest and died of hypothermia. Then, sometimes, I have this silly feeling that perhaps [the body] wasn't his. He was very clever; he could have arranged for it to look like him.

"It's silly to think like that, but you don't stop looking. I see someone who looks like him, and I'm off again. Then I have this awful fear: if he was still alive, he would be much older now and would I recognise him?"

Sheila and Len had been married for only 16 months. They had invested all their money into setting up a factory near Newcastle producing specialist tiles. Just before he disappeared, they were badly let down by a business associate, and the business went belly-up. "We were too trusting," she says now. "One of the big tile firms in the area promised us that if we could decorate plain tiles in the Italian style, they would buy them.

"We did all the research and learnt how to do it. By this stage we were very hard up and we'd run out of money for glazes, and we said we had to have a meeting. Then they said they didn't want the tiles, after all. Instead, they set up their own factory, and took two of the workers we had taught."

Mr Auld knew that this spelled disaster, and that they would lose not just the business, but the family home, too. He was understandably distressed. But what Mrs Auld didn't know — until the police told her — was that he had previously suffered from manic depression, and had once been hospitalised for two weeks. She knew he sometimes had terrible mood-swings, but not what that meant.

"I didn't know what to look for. I didn't know that when someone sits there not eating or speaking, that means they are depressed, or that when he was laughing and happy and buying us all presents that that could be the same thing. I've learnt a lot about mental illness since then, but, of course, too late. I still wonder if I could have done anything."

As it was, after that disastrous business meeting in February 1984, Mr Auld vanished, and the long, slow search began. Mrs Auld immediately reported him missing, called on friends and family to help, and even visited the Simonside hills where his body was eventually found. While their increasingly desperate efforts drew only blanks, she slowly rebuilt some kind of life for herself and her four teenage children from her first marriage.

“I was very lucky. I had good friends and a marvellous family, and they supported me all the time,” she says. With her husband’s encouragement, she had just begun studying for a BA in English and History. Her college tutors persuaded her to stay on, which proved a lifeline: it kept her occupied, while also allowing her time to keep searching. Through sheer determination, she graduated the summer after Mr Auld’s body was found.

A NOVEL based on the search for Len Auld, published in February by Biscuit Publishing, is in its third reprint. “When Len went missing, I realised lots of other things had gone missing in my life,” she says. *Cut Him Out in Little Stars* is the end result.

The story started as a novella when she was doing an MA in creative writing, and the published work is “99 per cent absolutely true” (she changed some details to protect the privacy of certain people).

Cut Him Out in Little Stars covers her childhood near Windsor, her early married life in Lebanon in the heady 1960s, their return to the UK, and their move to the North East in the 1970s — where her husband abandoned her to bring up their four young children alone. The story is interwoven with recollections of other losses: a doll she had treasured; her virginity; stillborn twins; her first husband, who left her for one of her closest friends; and finally Len.

As well as being perhaps a cathartic experience, the book has given her a chance to talk about him again, which, she says, she welcomes, because she doesn’t want him to be forgotten. The story the book doesn’t tell is of her journey since his death. To her surprise, she is now a (retired) Church of England priest. “I think I always had some kind of faith, but I never, ever, thought of becoming a priest,” she says.

After graduating, she took a job working with the Cedarwood Trust, a pastoral-care project based on the North Shields Meadow Well Estate, a housing estate of multiple deprivation. The post involved working with women and families, and in particular, through a writing group.

Ordination was the last thing on her mind when one day she and a friend were talking about the job vacancy that would arise when the current project leader, a URC minister, left. “Someone said, ‘Why don’t you apply?’ And I said, ‘No, I want to be with people, and anyway they always appoint someone ordained.’ My friend said, ‘What a wonderful idea — why don’t you?’ I just laughed.

“Then I told a dear friend who was a deacon at the time, and she didn’t laugh. By then, I was going to St Gabriel’s, [Heaton,] taking the children along. But I thought: ‘I’ve been married, divorced, and remarried — it’s never going to happen.’”

Her vicar and the PCC thought otherwise. “I got lifted into it. I’d never have thought of it myself, but once I started, I was carried along.” She attended the North East Ordination Course; and was ordained deacon in 1994, and priest the next year.

She presided at a communion service for the first time on the Meadow Well Estate, where she has lived out much of her ministry, while remaining an NSM in her home church, St Gabriel’s.

HER own life story has helped her connect to the people on Meadow Well. She struggled to bring up her children alone, on benefits, when her first husband left her with no means of support, and again after Mr Auld’s disappearance.

“The women used to ask about my life. I think my story offered some encouragement to people: that good can come out of dreadful problems. At least I was surrounded by strong people at church, and by my family, even though they were a long way away in the south. I was lucky that way, whereas people on Meadow Well are surrounded by people with all the same problems.

“But I’m a proud person, and I didn’t like to be asking for things. Even now, friends at church say, ‘We knew it was difficult, but we didn’t realise how hard.’” At one time, Mrs Auld was trying to get registered as a childminder, taking in lodgers, and “finding out that my son, Michael, had had to put plastic bags in his shoes to keep out the wet”. But people on Meadow Well are proud, too, she says.

Most of all, perhaps, she can identify with loss, she says. “I think I can feel empathetic towards anybody who has lost anybody. I know what that is like.”

Cut Him Out in Little Stars by Sheila Auld is published by Biscuit Publishing (£5.99; 978-1-903914-31-1).

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