

“Wow... Jen allows us right inside her heart. She shares exactly how it feels when an apparently happy, successful marriage abruptly ends... She writes so well there was no putting the book down until it was finished.”

– Jennifer Rees Larcombe

“I read this book in one sitting... It will be very strengthening and encouraging to so many in similar situations.”

– Celia Bowring, CARE

Missing Being Mrs

Missing Being Mrs

Surviving divorce
without losing
your friends, your faith,
or your mind

Jennifer Croly

MONARCH
BOOKS

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Jan Greenough.
Without her support and endless cups of weak Earl Grey
it would never have been written.

Chapter 1

Have They Really Gone?

The nightmare begins

I have trouble watching people walk out of doors. Just ordinary doors. Just leaving the room. I have real trouble watching people walk out of doors. Especially if I love them. I know exactly why. On 2nd September 1997 my husband and two daughters walked out of our back door. Nothing was ever the same again.

A strange reality

I lost my husband and two of my four children on the same day. They left in the morning as usual, the girls happily following their dad out of the door, and they didn't come back. At first I didn't believe it. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't conceive the reality of it in my head. Reality turned into a nightmare. That's a cliché because it's true.

I lost my husband and two children on the same day. I wanted to dial 999! I wanted to dial 911! Fire? Police? Ambulance? Coastguard? Call out the Marines? But there was no emergency service to deal with this emergency, and no one did anything about it. No one seemed to care. Worse, no one seemed to notice. It was as if it wasn't happening. There was no outcry, no newspaper headlines, no outpouring of national sympathy. My girls had been

taken from me and they treated it as *normal*. What sort of nightmare was this? Nightmare acting as reality. A nightmare where you try to speak but can't be heard. My girls had gone. They'd been taken and no one did anything about it.

I went to Social Services. They looked concerned, but powerless. I went to a solicitor, who showed me his filing cabinets. "It's very common," he said. "It happens every day." It was just a job to him. "BUT SOMEONE HAS TAKEN MY CHILDREN!" My heart was screaming but my voice was level. "You may see this every day, but it's the first time it has happened to me," I tried to explain. "These are not statistics; they are my daughters, and they have been taken away from me."

"There's no law against it," he said. "It's not worth bothering the police with. It would only cause the girls more distress."

Obviously he didn't understand. I searched for a more sympathetic ear. Two more solicitors said the same thing. One recommended a counsellor. She listened for an hour and then summed up the situation neatly: "It seems to me," she said, "that you want someone to say this can't happen, but in my experience I'm very much afraid that it can."

I lost my husband and two children on the same day. At a quarter to nine. Just before I went to work. I told my boss what had happened. He looked shocked, pitying, powerless. So did everyone. No one moved. No one did anything. A force field suddenly opened up around me. People walked by giving me a six-foot clearance. It was as if any closer would be dangerous. My boss was at a complete loss. Totally out of his depth. "Take some time off," he said, as a drowning man clutches at a piece of passing flotsam. "Take some time off if you want - you must have some practicalities to sort out." Life moved on again. It looked like a video playing to itself.

I lost my husband and two children on the same day and I couldn't take it in. "This can't be right," my mind reasoned. "Not my husband! Not my man! Not *my* man! GOD! You can do all things! Make it right again. Bring them back to me." I prayed. I pleaded. I couldn't believe it. Soon they'd all come walking in again. I'd hear the car on the gravel and their voices ringing as they jostled in at the door. Laden with packages, home from the shops, look at the money they'd made Daddy spend again! Twisting him round their little fingers. That's girls for you. Ten and twelve they were, a vulnerable age. They couldn't have gone. That only happens in nightmares.

I lost my husband and two of my children on the same day. "Well at least you still have the boys," someone said. I think that was meant to be comforting. My mind flipped to the memory of their young faces when they were told. So many emotions in one moment. The shock, the total disbelief, the grief. Trying to make sense of it all. They were sharing the same nightmare. Trying to be strong. Trying to be strong for *me*. But that was all the wrong way round! I should be strong for them. What sort of reality was this? Yes, I still had the boys. We were now a family of three, not six. I kept cooking too much food. There was suddenly too much space in the house. It was unnaturally quiet. Empty bedrooms. I shut the doors. Empty spaces at the table – we tried to ignore them. We carried on, attempting to be normal. Remind me, what *was* normal?

On that day I had lost him for ever, but my head expected him to walk in the door again, smiling, familiar, normal, like he had every day of my adult life. Soon I would wake up and everything would be normal again. Soon he would walk in and laugh and say what an idiot I'd been to worry. Soon he would come to his senses and return and say sorry and we'd kiss and make up. Like we'd always done. We'd always overcome any problem together.

Now, it seemed, there was no “together”. All our adult lives we’d been together. Now I was alone. I’d never been alone before. Now, everywhere I went I would go alone.

So, inexorably, the nightmare rolled on, daily played out in familiar settings. There was never any end to it. There was never any funeral. No public demonstration of mourning. No cards, no flowers, no gathering of sympathetic friends. There was no acknowledgement of our loss. No one to share past happy memories with. It was as if the past was wiped out. As if it had never existed. Twenty-two years suddenly gone. My whole adult life. My husband. Their father. Our family. Gone.

In those early days I once had a dream. It was an ordinary dream. I was walking beside him in easy familiarity and the children were all around, running backwards and forwards, shouting and complaining. A normal day out, in my dream. Reality returned to a recognised shape, feelings relaxed, happiness returned... then I woke, and the nightmare invaded with all its nightmare feelings. I woke up *into* the nightmare. “That’s not right!” my heart screamed, as the mangling pains twisted somewhere very deep and the tears forced their way out of my eyes. Reality shifted again. My mind couldn’t get round it. “This isn’t right! You’re supposed to wake up *out* of the nightmare, not into it!” The tears, temporarily staunches in dreamland, now welled up again and flowed freely in disappointment.

Reality was a dream.

The nightmare *is* reality.

I couldn’t believe it.

“God! Say it’s not true! Say it’s not happening!”

“GOD!” I cried.

“Nothing will ever be the same again,” he said, ever truthful.

“God! You can’t mean that!”

“I will never leave you,” he said.

I lost my husband and two children on the same day. And no one seemed to understand why I was crying. After all, people walk out of their marriages every day.

I was thrown into a strange and totally unexpected reality. In fact the whole meaning of what we call “reality” seemed to me to have changed. The impossible was suddenly my everyday experience. The unbearable was being daily borne. What sort of reality was this? How can I explain it?

Maybe you remember the day Princess Diana died, and the awful shock that accompanied that news. Wasn’t it unreal? Yet to me it almost seemed quite reassuringly normal. First my husband had left, then Princess Diana died; the next day the newsreader reported that little green men had landed from Mars and when I looked out of the window in the morning the sky had turned fluorescent orange. Well, all right, the last two didn’t happen, but I don’t think I would have been surprised if they had. I had lost all ability to gauge what reality *was* because so much of what I had believed to be true had turned into its own opposite.

One day I was married, the next I was single. One day I was the mother of a large family milling around at home. The next I faced a new reality: single parent to two boys and parent-at-a-distance to two girls. How do you parent your children when you only see them once a week? How do you parent at all when your inner self is disintegrating? How was I ever going to get used to a reality like that?

The world I walked through in the daytime looked false and unreal, yet in my dreams all was “normal”. Then I woke again to the reality of a nightmare. That was one of the most distressing experiences I had at the time. When you are in a dream, you think it is real. Then you wake up and find it’s not. You really have lost the people you love most, which has to be anyone’s worst nightmare.

The strangest reality of all was that the one who had been my closest friend was now acting as my worst enemy. The person I knew best in the world had turned into a stranger. The one I knew I could trust with my life I could no longer depend on at all. I really couldn't take this in. My husband was gone yet not dead, so I couldn't have a funeral, couldn't share the sad news with friends and family, and couldn't begin the process of grieving. Yet although alive he was lost to me. It was very difficult to know how to act or what to feel in this situation. It was all so bizarre. He looked like my man; he sounded like him and then he behaved totally contrarily to all I had ever known of him. Totally out of character. It was as if there was an alien in my husband's body! How could *that* be reality? That really was the sort of thing that only happens in horror movies or nightmares.

How do you deal with such a strange and distressing reality? It is hard for other people to realise what a shock it is. It is hard for them to believe that you really didn't see it coming. I didn't see it coming. Like many others before me, and many doubtless to come, I honestly thought that it would never happen to me. I was young when I married at 20, but not thoughtless. I was a committed Christian marrying a committed Christian and I believed that marriage was for life. Both sets of my grandparents had been married until death robbed them of their partner. My parents have been married for over 50 years. With such a family history I knew that marriage for life was a real possibility. There would always be problems, but I believed that there was no problem that we couldn't solve together. There was certainly no problem *God* couldn't solve, if we asked him. I believed God had put us together. The vows I took, I took in church and meant seriously. So did he. We faced all the ups and downs that life inevitably brings along together, and our relationship was strengthened. After 22 years of marriage, and four

lovely children, I was very secure in the knowledge that our friendship and love would last throughout this life and beyond. I never once considered that he would leave. It just didn't seem a possibility. I would have staked my life on it.

What I didn't realise is that, although it takes two to make a marriage, it only takes one to break it. When it came to it there was no discussing of problems, no involvement of professional help, and no prayerful appeal to God. If one partner decides unilaterally to walk away from the marriage, there is nothing the other can do about it. The pain of that decision and its consequent effects on children, grandparents, friends and family is sudden and inevitable. It simply has to be endured.

I had no idea that emotional pain could be so intense, just so utterly painful. It is hard to explain. I think that because the wounds are invisible people think they are not there. In the first shock of loss, psychologists, I have since learnt, talk of "denial". Denial seems such a negative word, like a refusal to accept the facts, almost as if one *wanted* to live in a fantasy, but really it is a very helpful trick of the mind. Shock and denial are useful friends; they offer some psychological protection. The brute facts are far too painful to accept all at once and denial is a way of easing the pain. When a partner leaves, the loss is so great it is totally unbearable, but maybe it becomes bearable if you think of it as being only temporary. "He'll be back by Christmas." "She'll soon realise she can't live on her own." "He'll come to his senses eventually." "She'll realise it's all been a big mistake..." To look at any other alternative would just be too much to bear to begin with.

Friends at this stage also don't want to believe that it is true either, and they bolster you with stories of people who were separated for six months, a year, two years, ten years, until it all ended happily ever after. And of course there always is that possibility that your partner *will*

come back, so for six months, a year, two years, or however long it takes, you hang on, hoping for reconciliation. Christian friends pray and quote “What God has joined together, let no man put asunder” and remind you that nothing is impossible for God. Convinced that God wants you together, they pray like they have never prayed before and alert their intercessory groups and leave your name on monastery prayer lists. Meanwhile I simply stood in shock and tried to get used to the idea of what had happened to me. I appreciated the people who stood with me. Literally hundreds of people prayed for the restoration of my marriage. I am so grateful to them for their support, love and prayers. So why didn’t God answer their prayers? Why didn’t God, of all people, DO something?

God never promised me he would bring my husband back. He promised to take care of me, and that he has done. He told me not to fear and he promised to strengthen me. He promised he would never leave me. Those promises he has kept.

I will never leave you nor forsake you

It’s funny – people are kind and want to encourage you to hope for the best, but I found God to be much more of a realist. The day after my husband told me he was leaving, my daily readings said, “Take your share of suffering like a good soldier of Christ” (2 Timothy 2:3, Living Bible). There’s nothing like not mincing your words!

A couple of days later the reading was 1 Peter 4:1-2: “So since Christ suffered in the flesh for you, arm yourself with the same thought and purpose (patiently to suffer rather than fail to please God). For whoever has suffered in the flesh is done with sin [has stopped pleasing themselves and the world and pleases God]”, Amplified Bible.

Suddenly, when all else that had seemed real looked

like a stage set, like a picture of reality, the truth of what I was reading in the Bible seemed to fit with the strange new reality I was experiencing. This hurt! And God knew it! This really, really hurt and there was nothing I could do about it. This really was reality. It is not a popular subject, but the Bible consistently teaches that we will suffer. Here in the comfortable West we always seem surprised by this (although brothers and sisters in other countries know suffering as a daily reality).

A couple of days later my attention was drawn to “Stop being afraid of what you are about to suffer. Hold fast the faith even when facing death and I will give you a crown of life – an unending glorious future” (Revelation 2:10, Living Bible), and then, “These troubles and suffering of ours are, after all, quite small and won’t last very long. Yet this short time of distress will result in God’s richest blessing upon us for ever and ever!” (2 Corinthians 4:17, Living Bible).

Now, before we go any further, let’s get one thing straight. I am absolutely sure that God has no wish to see people suffer. Nor does he bring suffering our way in order to teach us things or make us turn to him. That’s a lie! God binds himself to us with love, not with pain. He himself would rather take the hurt than see us suffer, as the cross clearly demonstrates. The origin of suffering is with mankind or with the church’s enemy, Satan. We suffer as the consequence of our own actions or the actions of other people. The only one to delight in our suffering is the enemy, who is the father of lies, and who comes to kill and steal and destroy. God hates such things.

So why was God drawing my attention to these verses at this time? Wasn’t it a bit harsh? Well, God treats us all as individuals, knowing each of us so well. It might not be appropriate for all, and I certainly wouldn’t offer these verses as comfort to someone in a similar situation! However I can say that in a crazy sort of way I appreciated

it and drew comfort from these verses. For a start, it ACKNOWLEDGED my pain. Emotional pain is invisible and most people just don't see it. I felt like I had just been in a road crash and broken every bone in my body, but instead of rushing me off to intensive care people seemed to think that if they left me alone for a bit I'd be up and running around again in a week or two. You simply can't see emotional damage, so people often don't recognise that it is there. God did. That in itself was helpful.

In all these references to suffering, too, there was hope. There was the hope that somehow, in some way, some good could come out of it. Impossible thought! What good could possibly come out of such gross pain, such awful devastation? Yet we know that God can work his strange alchemy in all situations. (Romans 8:28, NIV: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.") It's at the heart of our faith. It's there for all to see in the cross. Out of extremes of pain and rejection came salvation, wholeness and healing for so many. The Man of Sorrows became the glorious Son of Man, to whom all authority in heaven and earth was given. The Victim became the Victor. He himself was amply rewarded, comforted, and restored to his former glories, with more added, if that is possible. God doesn't engineer the situation in order to produce these things, but, given that the suffering was already there as my new daily reality, it was a comfort to think that somehow there might possibly be some meaning in it. What had I got to lose? It seemed to me that I might as well get whatever good I could out of it! So I clung to these verses.

God doesn't promise to protect us from pain and suffering but he does promise never to leave us alone in it. "The Lord is close to those whose hearts are breaking" (Psalm 34:18, Living Bible). Sometimes we feel his presence, sometimes we don't. When we have lost someone we love – worse, when the one we love most in the world

has left – this is not easy to believe. But God is faithful. He is also extremely patient. He knows what it is like to be abandoned. So he doesn't mind telling us again and again in as many different ways as he can that he will not abandon us. He told me that through people, through sermons, through Scripture, through words in a book like this, through music on the radio or heard in a shop. Time and time and time again he told me "I will not fail you or forsake you." It's written all over the Bible. One of the places is Deuteronomy 31:8, but it occurs in many others as well. In that first year I think I must have had every one of them drawn to my attention. I especially like the rendering of Hebrews 13:5 in the Amplified Version, because of its emphasis. It goes: "He [God] Himself has said, 'I will not in any way fail you nor give you up nor leave you without support. [I will] not, [I will] not, [I will] not in any degree leave you helpless nor forsake nor let you down (relax My hold on you)! [Assuredly not!]'"

In the darkness of one night these words went through my head and so I wrote them down:

*When all else is gone,
I am here.
Faithful and strong,
I am here.
In the deep darkness of night,
I'm with you,
though just out of sight.
Safe in the eye of the storm,
My love keeps you safe, keeps you warm.
My strength drives away every fear.
Your God, your Refuge, is here.*

We ourselves cannot choose what happens to us; we cannot always avoid suffering, but we *can* choose how we respond to it. Suddenly I could identify with the prophet

Habakkuk (Chapter 3:16–19, Amplified Bible): “I will wait quietly for the day of trouble and distress. Though the fig tree does not blossom, and there is no fruit on the vines, though the product of the olive fails and the fields yield no food, though the flock is cut off from the fold and there are no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the victorious God of my salvation!”

More often I could say with the psalmist, “O God, listen to me! Hear my prayer! For wherever I am, though far away at the ends of the earth, I will cry to you for help. When my heart is faint and overwhelmed, lead me to the mighty, towering rock of safety” (Psalm 61, Living Bible). Actually the truth is that most often I *couldn't* say that with the psalmist; it was far too long a prayer for me to muster! Often prayer was beyond me; I couldn't even frame the thoughts. At those times I prayed a sort of *précis* of those verses. This became my exclusive prayer for months and months. It was the only one that worked in this new, strange and confusing reality. In the middle of the nightmare it was a prayer that God NEVER once failed to answer. It was so useful I offer it to you. It went simply like this:

“Help!”

God is reality. If you've never known this, now's the time to try it out. Some might say you just need a crutch to lean on. Well, most people with broken legs do. And most people with broken hearts need a spiritual crutch. Look around, they've all got one. Some turn to drink, some turn to sex, some turn to working all hours of the day. Turning to God is simply less risky to your health and more effective than any of the above. Lean on him. He's big, he can take the strain, and he loves to help. I don't know why; it's just the way he is.

I had to cling to him; he was the only Reality I had.

Chapter 2

Will I Survive?

Will I survive the storm?

After the initial shock, the next reaction I felt was total emotional disintegration. I had never felt anything like it in my life before. My interior landscape shattered, blown into a thousand pieces. I could never understand how, in that state, I could still be walking around.

I felt so fragile. Like a shattered vase in that moment before it collapses, still holding its shape but crazed with cracks. So fragile. Don't touch me! Don't touch! I'll fall apart!

And then I do. Waves of emotion engulf me. Unbearable. Inexpressible. Grief that has you howling like a wounded animal. Despair that opens gulfs in your soul you never knew existed. Black chasms of emptiness beyond tears. Panic that has you running down the road. Literally. Running and running with no relief. This isn't an enemy you can run from.

Anger explodes ferociously when you least expect it. Murderous anger that clamours for expression, but has none. Minor sights, sounds and comments bring floods of tears and engulfing sadness. You can have six different overwhelming emotions a day. Or an hour. The storm plays loudly, howling in your ears, blowing you from one extreme to another. Life looks unreal. People look unreal. Why are they carrying on so normally? Are they really so

blind to this raging storm? Yes, because it's raging in your heart. Unseen and inescapable. Totally out of control.

I had no warning that my husband was going to leave. However, about a month before he left I was accompanying a group of schoolchildren on a trip, and coming back in the coach we travelled through a violent storm. Looking back, that storm became a metaphor for me for the emotional storm I was about to pass through.

The storm

I was sitting in the front seat of the coach, surveying the miles of motorway in front of me and wondering how long it would be before we were home. It had been a long day and I was looking forward to the meal I knew my husband would have ready. The coachload of kids that I'd taken out for the day were being somewhat pacified by the video that was on for their entertainment, but stuck in the very front seat I couldn't see it, and I was bored.

So I started praying. Hadn't I been complaining that I hadn't enough time to pray? I was worried by my husband: he'd been acting strangely recently, and obviously there was something going on in his head that he hadn't got round to telling me about yet. I started to pray for him, thankful that prayer can be a silent, in-your-head activity. I closed my eyes and in my mind I talked to the God who knows all our thoughts, telling him my concerns and knowing that he, at least, understood the situation. When I opened my eyes the motorway vista still stretched out in front of me, but over to the right, from the fields to the sky, was the most amazing black storm cloud. It was like something a child would draw, a black ball of swirling cotton wool with streaks of lightning flashing through it. "Thank goodness we've missed that!" I thought. It looked dark and very angry. Then the road began to bend gently round to the right, and slowly but

inexorably I realised that the road I was on was taking me directly towards the storm. We were going to have to travel through it.

It started with a gloriously sunny day turning into grey rain (not unusual for England, even in the summer), but the rain became more and more intense, falling in heavy lines that the windscreen wipers could barely deal with. Then the greyness turned the sunny afternoon into night and visibility became almost nil. I could hardly make out the car travelling a few yards in front of us. The coach was still hurtling on at what seemed to me to be a suicidal speed, but there was nothing I could do about it. The feeling of helplessness was intense. I glanced at the driver, who *seemed* to know what he was doing. The rest of the party were too engrossed in the video to worry about what the weather was doing outside. Then the lightning started. Huge forks flashed down to earth to the right and left, illuminating the crowded motorway with its cars battling through the driving rain. I started to get really frightened. Would we get hit by lightning? What would happen if one of those cars skidded on the wet road and caused a pile up? Wouldn't it be safer to get off the motorway and let such a storm pass? Couldn't the driver ease up just a little on that accelerator? I looked at him again, with more concern this time. I *hoped* he knew what he was doing. It was the worst storm I had ever experienced, and we were hurtling on through it as if it were not there! Disaster seemed inevitable.

The crash never came. Eventually we travelled through the worst of the storm, past the sheet lightning and immediate threat of danger into more grey rain. The colour had gone from the world; all was shadow. The darker slate-greys of trees were passing as if in formal procession and everything was monochrome, fields of greyness, details imperceptible, lost in the mist. Had we really started the journey in sunshine? The rain was still

pouring out of the grey sky and bouncing off the grey road. The headlights of the coach made dirty yellow paths in the grey air and landed palely on the grey forms of the vehicles in front of us. Travelling at the same speed, they seemed immobile, grey shapes geometric in the grey rain. It seemed as if the weather had changed permanently and I settled down to endure rain and greyness for the rest of the long journey home.

Then, slowly, the rain started to ease off. The fields began to gain a tinge of green in their greyness. The windscreen wipers were less frenetic, passing in graceful, rhythmic arcs across the screen again. The miles passed, the rain lessened and suddenly there was a weak ray of sunlight. Slowly but surely we travelled through the storm and emerged once more into a glorious day of sunshine, with light all around and colour restored to the world.

In the next weeks, and months, and years, I clung to the memory of this experience. It reassured me that I *would* travel through this stage in my life.

A real-life metaphor

Of course my husband wasn't telling me what was going on in his mind. His mind was full of plans to leave me. In the days to come the storm I'd driven through became a metaphor for me for the emotional journey I was making.

When I saw the storm coming I thought it was going to miss me. I knew "marriage breakdown" and divorce were endemic in our society, but, like everyone else, I never thought it would happen to *me*! I think that made the storm, when it came, more difficult. People might think that in a divorce things are so bad that you can see the separation coming from a long way off. Maybe for some this is true, but for me there were no great warning signs, no big rows, just a quiet sense of unease and a

strange loss of communication. Everything continued as normal. Sunny days of a happy marriage as they had been for 22 years. I was secure in such a history. I trusted in my husband's complete faithfulness. I trusted in my ability to raise issues and be honest with my husband. I trusted in God to be able to sort out any problems we might have. He always had done before.

But God allows people their own free will. He will not force anyone to change a decision they have made. We call God all-powerful, but he has chosen to limit his power by giving us autonomy over our own lives. When my husband decided to choose to go his own way, there was nothing I could do about it. He made that very clear to me.

There was nothing God could do about it, either. Except hold me.

When the storm rages, there is a sense of fear, a lack of control, as the lightning strikes all around you. A fatal accident seems inevitable. At this stage in the emotional storm I felt an acute fear of the future, and an overwhelming sense of being out of control.

It is like being tossed about in a stormy sea. It is wet and cold and frightening, and the noise and bluster drown out all else. Even God. Self-image is reduced to drowned-rat level. Your ears can't hear. Your eyes can't see. The storm buffets you about, strips you of your dignity. As everything you've ever clung to is ripped out of your hands and flies past your ears, you feel very vulnerable. There was a stage when that was how things were emotionally. So, after the first days of shock, numbness and denial there came for me a storm of emotions.

The trouble with the early days and weeks is that you can have all the symptoms of grief – loss, numb shock, overwhelming fear, raging anger, consuming guilt, dreadful sorrow, storms of tears – all in the same day or even the same *hour*. I never knew what was going to

trigger another emotion, or which one it would be this time. It could be anything. Official letters from legal people, or an impending meeting with my spouse, were impossible hurdles, of course. But it could just as easily have been something very small, such as someone saying, “Look after yourself” (who else is going to look after me?), or the music on an advert. Some evocative scent or sight will do it. Families out for the day together. The other side of the bed still smooth and unslept-in. These things are unpredictable: you just don’t know when they are going to hit you. Crying in the privacy of your own room is one thing, but crying in the middle of the supermarket takes some dealing with.

The overwhelming feeling is of lack of control. That is why work is such a relief, I think, if you are lucky enough to have it. The working environment for me was one where things were still as they had always been. Sometimes, getting lost in the minutiae of a sixth-form lesson, or dealing with a discipline problem, I forgot, for a whole ten minutes or half an hour even, the storm that was raging in my head. But when there was no work to occupy me the tears would come unbidden, overflowing and difficult to control. Yet they had to be controlled, because you can’t cry at work. You can’t cry at home, either, because the children get upset. Angry responses burst out, too. Like lightning they strike unpredictably and without warning. At this stage some people stopped speaking to me, quite rightly, since they never knew what sort of sharp response they’d get – an innocuous question such as “Doing anything special this weekend?” could result in sudden flashes of rage.

The storm distorts reality. I lived through a long time when life seemed very grey. I remember having the sinking feeling that the whole journey of life was now going to be like this, with little enjoyment and even less hope. (I have written about this in more detail in chapter

five.) I think that this is actually the most dangerous part of the storm. Outbursts of emotion look dramatic and painful, because they are, but in a crazy way they are proof that you are still alive and kicking. When hope dies there seems little point in being alive.

Finally, there is the dawning realisation that the rain is at last easing off. Imperceptibly at first, and much more slowly than I ever would have imagined, I emerged into the sunshine, which is really the focus of this book. There is joy in my life now, real confident happiness that other people notice, and that I would never have believed possible. There is joy such as I've never known before, and a security in God. The last five years have been like travelling through that storm. I emerged into full sunshine again, and after a few miles the road dried off and it was as if the storm had never been. Yes, it is a surprisingly long process and people travel through the storm at different rates. But the storm will not last for ever. It does get better. Often, progress is only obvious in retrospect. There is a progression, but at the time it doesn't always seem like that. A minor incident or comment can throw you, and it seems that you have come nowhere. It is weeks, months or years since your partner went and still you haven't adjusted to it! However, the violence of the emotions becomes less intense and the gaps between bouts greater. As you look back you can see clearly how far you have come.

But at first I was devastated.

The devastation

Devastated. It is the right word. Everything you have known is in ruins. Devastated. Destroyed. Barren. Your home, your family, your social life, your sex life, your emotions, your self-esteem, your prayer life. All devastated. Your trust in that one special person, your trust in all

people, your trust in God. Devastated. If the one who knows you so well, better than anyone, can't love you, who can? Can God even? But you can't even bear to look at that one yet. If God has so much as a flicker of doubt about you you'll not only be devastated, you'll be utterly destroyed.

In the devastation you are powerless. Powerless to change a thing. Powerless to win him back. Powerless to make him love you. No glue mends a broken family. You are powerless to soothe the hurt and confusion in your children's eyes. Powerless to stop the determined approach of the law that will sever you permanently. Powerless to prevent the loss. You don't even have power over yourself. Emotions hit you unbidden and overcome you against your will. You pray and pray but the agony continues. There is no last-minute rescue here. You fight and fight but the onslaught is too great. You might as well brace yourself to hold back an advancing tank. Superman might be able to do it, but you are not Superman. Or *Superwoman*. You haven't got the strength. You have two options: get out of the way or get crushed. So you get out of the way and watch the tank rumble on, crushing all that is precious to you. Leaving devastation.

Where is the hope in all this?

To begin with, there is none. The only glimmer of hope you begin to discern in the darkness is God. The rebuilder of ancient ruins. The Restorer. God really is in the business of restoration.

God is in control

God is in control – he sent me the real storm as a warning and a sign of the emotional storm that was coming. He knew in advance what was going to happen, even if I didn't. I found that thought comforting.

When I was in the middle of the emotional storm Isaiah 54 kept coming to me. You know the sort of thing:

the preacher's text at church on Sunday is Isaiah 54, and then it turns up in your daily readings. A friend phones and says, "Have you read Isaiah 54?" and then the cat knocks over your Bible and it falls open at page 752 – yes, you've guessed it – Isaiah 54.

I finally decided I'd better take a good look at it. Isaiah 54 was written about 550 BC and it shows that human nature hasn't changed a lot since then. The writer of the passage refers in verse six to a wife who married young, only to be rejected in later life. It's a metaphor here, but at least it shows that the idea was understood even then. It made me realise that God has seen it all before. The husbands who in mid-life fall for the younger woman, the women who cheat on their husbands, the violence and abuse that masquerade as love. He's seen it all before. Millions of times. Even if he didn't know each of us individually and intimately, he would know the process through observation over the aeons. He understands the process, and is skilled in dealing with it. To you or me it is completely new and frightening. We don't know which way to turn. To God it is very familiar, and he knows exactly how to handle it. God is expert at sorting out the messes people constantly make.

God has immense power. He limits his power in order to give us free will. Without free will there can be no true love. But, nevertheless, he has enormous power, and if we surrender our lives to him he will take over. He won't override our free will but he can and will control our lives if we let him. This whole situation was too big for me but it was not beyond God.

My experience is that if you give yourself and your life to God he will tenderly and expertly restore. There is one thing you can say about this period. The emotions come unexpectedly and uncontrollably but they do pass. You soon learn that one emotion can just as quickly be replaced with another. That's the exhausting part.

However, the point is that they come but they go again. So it is with this whole stage. It will pass. Emotional stability will come again. On 25th October 1998 he gave me this passage from Job 11:16-19 (Amplified Bible): “For you shall forget your misery; you shall remember it as waters that pass away. And your life shall be clearer than the noonday...you shall lie down and none shall make you afraid.”

I didn't believe it then. I do now. I didn't believe it then because it didn't *feel* as if the storm would ever pass. But feelings do pass. The facts are that if you have given your life to God he is irrevocably committed to you, whether you believe it or not, whether you feel it or not. It's not to do with you or your behaviour, it's to do with him. As he says in Isaiah 54:10 (NIV), “Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed.”

What's more, God is immensely powerful, “The Lord Almighty”, “The God of the whole Earth”. Infinite power mixed with infinite tenderness and compassion. What a combination! You are safe in his hands. He is all-powerful and all-loving. Always. There is nowhere safer.

Isaiah 54 is about restoration. Without minimising the pain, it offers hope of a new life. When all seems in chaos around you, the hope of a new life can be a real anchor in the storm. Verse eleven sums up the whole chapter for me: “O you afflicted! Storm-tossed and not comforted. I will build you with stones of turquoise and lay your foundations with sapphires” (Amplified Bible). God sees things as they are. He doesn't try to make out that they are better than they seem, or that you should be feeling better than you are. “Afflicted, storm-tossed and not comforted” – yes, that was me all right, as a diary entry of the time shows:

Have They Really Gone?

What an awful, awful week. I felt so alone! I got stressed out and twisted up with hurt and insecurity and exhaustion and panic and fear. I hate living like this!... Everything is so second-rate. Even chocolate! Especially alcohol! Nothing satisfies! Friends' words clang tinnily. Their advice jars on my pain. Television is shown up for the cheap deception it is, saccharine-sweet instead of nourishing. A clanging cardboard cut-out representing reality. Sleep is evasive. A warm bath fills time but brings no peace. I don't like the waves of confusion. I hate the constant struggling to find reality. Only God satisfies. Only God brings sanity and peace in this storm.

When things are this bad, the normal comforts don't work any more. But as well as acknowledging the reality of my situation, Isaiah 54 goes on to offer hope of restoration in the middle of the devastation. "I will (re) build you with stones of turquoise, your foundations with sapphires." I happen to love the colour blue. Can you imagine it! If the foundations in this building, which are never even seen, are to be of sapphires, what will the walls be like? The next verse tells us: "I will make your battlements of rubies, your gates of sparkling jewels, and all your walls of precious stones." Here is God's plan for rebuilding/restoration/repair of storm damage. This is "above and beyond" stuff, isn't it? It's an extravagant metaphor from an extravagant God.

What are you looking for to restore your house? Wood? Granite? Flint? Sandstone? Common brick? Forget it! God is building in jewels! The end of Revelation, chapter 21, makes it even clearer. This is God's building style. Layer on layer of precious stones. Gates carved out of huge pearls. Walls overlaid with gold. Extravagance!

There are splendid buildings in this world: the Taj Mahal, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, the splendour of the baroque cathedrals, every inch gilded and painted.

These are breathtaking, but how can even the greatest artist or architect compare with the creative genius of God? Who can imagine what this building will be like? I've never seen anything similar. Who knows what God is preparing for me, for us? Whatever it is, it will be good. That's British understatement. It'll be amazingly, breathtakingly, joyfully bejewelled. It'll be God's building. Riches beyond imagining. Sometimes I fear the future. There's no need to fear *this* future. This generosity is overwhelming. When God restores or rebuilds, he does it in style.

He can and will restore the devastated places in your life, if you will allow him to. The tears and the turmoil are a season in your life. Take it from me: the rest of your life will not be like this.

Let's finish with a classic, so often quoted it is practically a cliché, but none the less true for that. Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV) reads: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Yes!