

'We were enjoying a wonderful summer holiday.



The next minute my husband was gone'





In 2018, while on holiday in Crete, Anne Sebba's husband Mark died suddenly of a heart attack. He was 69, a father of three and grandfather of six, the man who had been at her side since she was 17. Here, Anne shares her heartbreaking story of grief, survival – and why she's finally optimistic for the future

Portrait by Tami Aftab



**T**hree years ago, on a beautifully sunny July day, my husband and partner of 43 years suddenly died. He was a youthful 69.

No illness, no lingering goodbyes, no advice about how to unlock his laptop, just, 'Please can you get me a glass of water.' Those were the last words he ever spoke.

We were on holiday in Crete, in a magical corner of the island, which we had visited many times over the last 10 years. We had made friends there and had an established morning routine. Waking early, we'd walk down the hill to the sea, swim for 10 minutes, then walk back up the hill. That morning was no different. By 8am the sun already blazed in a cloudless sky and, as soon as the Greek salad and coffee was swallowed, I set to cooking – gazpacho, cheese pie and other local dishes I had recently mastered, depending on whatever was available in the market. Mark meanwhile attacked household chores, mostly preparing the beds as we had friends coming to stay. He always joked that he liked the unskilled tasks.

Having made a huge mess in the kitchen, I turned to Mark and asked if, while I set the table outside, he could do the washing-up. If only I could unsay those words and tell him instead all the wonderful things he had meant to me over the years. At first I thought he was just hot but by the time I had produced a glass of iced water he was slumped in a chair, breathing heavily. I knew immediately something terrible had happened as he couldn't speak and his hands were blue.

I must have made some frantic phone calls as first on the scene was the kindest of friends, a neighbour, then the owner of the local taverna, all of us trying to administer CPR, which I had never done before and had to be taught. Nothing seemed to make any difference.

After the longest 20 minutes of my life, an ambulance arrived. I saw from the solemn faces of the two paramedics as they set up their defibrillator there was little hope. They told me that Mark must have had a massive heart attack; how befitting of a man with such a big personality. They would

take him immediately to the local hospital, half an hour away. There was no time for any questions.

Not allowed in the ambulance, I followed in a car driven by a friend whose holiday I had interrupted. As we drove along the stunningly beautiful coastal road, which Mark and I took most days to shop or eat, with yachts out at sea and mountains beyond, I remember thinking: we will never again share this view.

From the car, I called my three children at work in London, all adults (the youngest 25, the oldest 40 at the time). As I delivered the news that none of us could compre-



**Previous page** Anne and Mark in Crete in 2014. **Above, from top** Together in 1978;

at their daughter's wedding in 2009

hend, I forced myself to stay very calm.

After an hour in the hospital emergency unit, a doctor came out. They had not been able to revive Mark and so, in a sterile room of a Greek hospital, I said a final, private goodbye to my husband. It was only then, as I realised how ridiculous I looked, still wearing a swimming costume with a damp kaftan over it – that I finally let go and wailed.

No one can prepare themselves for this. One minute the man I had spent most of my life alongside was apparently full of energy, the next gone. Did he want a burial or a cremation? I had to guess. Like many couples, we had only spoken about death as something on the distant horizon. Worse still, I had little idea what was required after the death of a loved one in a foreign country.

Minutes later, functioning on autopilot, I was in a Greek police station where I registered the death and agreed to a compulsory autopsy. I remember the cold stone floor of the furnitureless office very clearly, answering many times over the same questions about precisely how Mark had died. The officer explained that when a death occurs outside a hospital such questions were obligatory, too polite to add why this was necessary. But I understood why they had to ask. I just wanted to be back home in England hugging my children.

Finally, I returned to the villa, where my four guests were now waiting; they thought they had arrived for a holiday with us but discovered instead they had landed in a parallel universe. There was enough food for the next month so we could have had a feast that night. But I couldn't swallow a thing and in any case my mobile was ringing constantly once people had heard the news and wanted to say how sorry they were. But there were urgent practicalities to deal with, mostly to do with insurance at that stage.

Within hours I had embarked on a strange new life, alone. All three children wanted to fly out to be with me but I asked them not to; I somehow understood that from now on I had to be responsible for myself. But a day or so later, by the time the body was returned from the autopsy and laid out in a Greek

**In a sterile room of a Greek hospital, I said a final, private goodbye to Mark**

Orthodox funeral parlour, my son arrived.

As he helped to negotiate flights home – one for the body and a separate one for us – I realised how morose we both were, unsurprisingly. Then he turned to me: ‘How Dad would laugh if he knew his death certificate was going to be in Greek.’ Mark had hated having to learn Greek at school and especially having to retake Greek A level. Suddenly, we were both laughing helplessly as the man in charge of the funeral parlour looked on in disbelief.

After almost a week of holding back pent-up emotions, that joke had punctured the pain bubble. I’m sure that Mark, whose favourite annual activity was creating ever more complex April Fools’ jokes, would have approved.

**M**ark and I had met at a party when I was 17 and he a worldly four years older. After a first date at the opera in Covent Garden, we went our separate ways, him to Paris to train with an accountancy firm and me to university, before working for the BBC and Reuters. We kept in touch though and he came out to see me in Rome, where I was finishing a posting. We drove home together through Paris where I, although wildly jealous, fell in love with the way he spoke fluent French.

Months later, he proposed.

We were married in 1975 and I imagined we would always find a way to combine our careers, but it didn’t work out like that. After becoming pregnant the following year, I freelanced and wrote books, a solitary worker at home who relied increasingly on this one other person. Mark was not just someone to laugh at my jokes and who never complained when food was burnt, but my first reader, my technical adviser, my number one supporter.

In 2003 Mark joined Net-a-Porter, then a fledgling designer e-commerce company. By the time he retired in 2014, at 66, he was chief executive. We started making plans for when I too would retire, though I joked that writers never do. Good-naturedly, he started to accompany me on trips to New York and

Paris to research a book I was working on; a biography of Ethel Rosenberg, the American woman executed for espionage-related crimes during the Cold War. Mark was passionate about the significance of this book and promised that he aspired to nothing more than being my bag carrier in the long golden future stretching out ahead. Ha!

Clearly, the universe had other ideas.

**I**’ll never forget returning home to England that fateful summer of 2018. My elder daughter had driven to meet us at the airport and I steeled myself to walk into the empty house for the first time. The



**From top** Cards from the couple's grandchildren and a book on grief sent to Anne

following Mark's death; with Rachel Johnson, Siri Hustvedt and Lucy Yeomans, 2014

moment is permanently softened in my memory by the waiting array of handmade cards decorated with red hearts, feathers and messages of love from three of my granddaughters. And then the flowers started arriving, so many beautiful white flowers that I ran out of vases. These were interspersed with books on grief and bereavement, none of which quite made sense as nobody's loss is the same as another's. But I was touched.

In those first few days at home I was stunned and bewildered but busy cancelling plans: I cancelled Mark's 70th birthday party (organising a memorial service instead), cancelled various subscriptions and planned birthday trips, including one to St Petersburg where his father had been born in 1915. I had even managed to discover a street and house number but was not going to undertake that trip on my own.

I was just about holding myself together until one of my friends turned to me. ‘Mark admired you so much,’ she said. Suddenly the tears flowed. How I wished that we had said more of those things directly to each other, not to third parties.

In those early weeks I spent a lot of time worrying about my mother-in-law, who was battling on alone in her 90s. If the loss was immense for me and my children and grandchildren, it seemed unimaginable for her, as she had already seen her 40-year-old daughter pre-decease her after a battle with breast cancer; now she had to suffer the loss of her only son.

I also spent time questioning if I would ever find the strength to complete the biography I'd been writing. Until that day in July, it had consumed every waking thought for the last two years. But Rosenberg's story was a harrowing one; how would I be able to focus once again on something so grim?

The house suddenly felt eerily silent, an unwelcome place to work. Instead of meals, I grazed and seemed to be permanently changing light bulbs, Mark's old job. I tried booking a table at the British Library to do some research but I found I could not concentrate for more than 10 minutes before my

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eyes would fill with tears and I had to go back and reread the same page.

I had an urge to tell everyone, even strangers, 'My husband has just died.' I explained this to the librarian when I could not get the photocopier to work and a queue was forming behind me. 'I am not normally so inept,' I added, and she sweetly urged me to go home, offering to do the photocopying for me and email me the results.

Then in March 2019 my younger daughter volunteered to come with me on a research trip to Belarus. It was only when we nearly missed the connection at Vienna and she steered me back to the right terminal that I realised I was still distracted by thoughts of Mark. How grateful I was to have her with me.

But one of the things that had made me determined to go on the trip was Mark. He had been more personally involved with this book than with any of my previous ones. I would finish this for him.

And so, travelling helped ease me back into my old life. Slowly I started to realise that, although what I had lost was immeasurable and obvious, I had in an unexpected way also gained things, like the kindness of friends. In a selfish way, with no one else to consider, I had also gained time. Once I learned to control the misty eyes and lumpy throat, I was able to sit at my desk 24/7 (almost) and work and read and think. There was no one to tell me to stop. Working at something I cared deeply about staved off what might otherwise have led to depression. I could not even consider myself lonely since I lived with this other family in my head.

And then, just as I was beginning to navigate this unwelcome lonely life, Covid struck and in a sense I was no longer alone, as everyone the world over was going through the same enforced isolation during lockdown. The suffering of others made my own loss recede dramatically. When a friend lost her husband to Covid and could not even visit him while he was so ill in hospital, nor have a proper funeral, I realised how fortunate both Mark and I were to have had all those good years together and to be spared such a painful ending.

**Despite what I'd lost, I slowly realised I had gained things, like the kindness of friends**



## HOW TO COPE WITH THE LOSS OF YOUR PARTNER

By Julia Samuel, psychotherapist, author and speaker

### RECOGNISE THAT YOU CAN'T FIGHT IT

Grief is messy and chaotic. Accept that you can't fight or control it. Allow yourself to feel and express your pain, as this will enable you to heal.

**LET YOURSELF BE SUPPORTED**  
Grief is lonely. Allow yourself to be supported by those around you, as this will help.

**FIND WAYS TO REMEMBER YOUR PARTNER**  
Although your partner has died, your love for them hasn't. Write letters to them, cook their favourite food, wear something that connects you to them; find ways to remember them so that your relationship continues after death.

## HOW TO COMFORT A FRIEND OR RELATIVE WHO IS GRIEVING

**REMEMBER THAT YOU CAN'T FIX THEIR GRIEF**  
Acknowledge their loss, and speak to them in the most straightforward and sensitive way possible. Simply say, 'I'm so sorry,' rather than awkwardly trying to solve anything.

**LISTEN**  
This is the most important thing you can do to support someone. Listen when they're silent, listen when they repeat themselves, listen when they're sobbing, when they're raging – just let them express their grief.

**PREPARE TO BE IN IT FOR THE LONG HAUL**  
Do practical things to help them, like taking their children out and bringing them food, and don't expect them to get over their grief in your own time frame. Grief lasts longer than we wish it to, so let them go at their own pace.



At Lyford Cay in the Bahamas, 2017

In the three years since Mark's death I have come to understand the difference between solitude (a choice) and isolation (enforced loneliness with no end in sight), but also to recognise that, though terrible, losing a partner in middle age is in the expected order of things. Recognising this – however sad and unprepared I was – is largely what kept me focused on the road ahead.

There has not been a day when I do not think about the meaning of loss. I have tried to remind myself that every day should be celebrated and life embraced. But, as my own 70th is looming I am nervous of throwing a party, the painful memory of cancelling Mark's still fresh.

Instead, I intend – Covid willing – to walk the Pyrenees' 'freedom trail' from France into Spain, a route those escaping from Hitler undertook in desperation in the 1940s. I'd always intended to walk it with Mark but hope to do this instead with my children. I can't think of a better way to reaffirm being alive.

Oh, and I can now wear lipstick again. Mark hated it.

*Ethel Rosenberg: A Cold War Tragedy, by Anne Sebba, is out now (W&N, £20); order your copy from [books.telegraph.co.uk](http://books.telegraph.co.uk)*