

Finding your voice

All she wanted was a quiet distraction for a few hours a week
– little did Susie know it would be the start of a new chapter

Susie walked slowly towards the bus stop; it was an effort these days to go anywhere after 6pm. She spent most evenings doomscrolling on her phone, watching TV or texting her small circle of friends. Many of them had been lost on what to say since she lost her husband, Dan.

Arriving safely in town, with her coat wrapped tightly around her, she suddenly felt anxious. She peered into the dimly lit bar with no idea who she was meeting in this new group. No one had put their profile picture on the website. Thankfully, an enthusiastic young woman bounded over. 'Are you Susie?' she said, guiding her to the group's table.

Instantly, she saw that she was the oldest there by far. The girls sat behind their laptop screens. Apologetically, she pulled out a chunky notebook from her bag and fumbled for a pen.

Her fellow aspiring writers at the writing group were already settled in, typing away. Susie felt self-conscious, but decided a large glass of Sauvignon might steady her nerves. Looking around for the bar person, she noted that the girls already had drinks. 'The QR code is on the table,' one said helpfully.

Thankfully, she'd used her phone to read a QR code before and zoomed the camera on to the black and white square. Faced with an array of drink choices, she hoped she'd done her order right. What happened to being served by a person?

She'd lost confidence since Dan died, and QR codes – the norm for many – seemed yet another challenge to overcome. She took a much-needed sip of chilled white wine and felt pleased with herself for negotiating the code successfully.

She knew the group members were all working on novels, and as they chatted, she learned that two of the girls were co-writing one. Susie felt a bit uncertain about what to write, although she had always yearned to do so. She'd had no time to pursue hobbies with a husband and two children.

She was thankful that no one judged or critiqued another's work and, mercifully, no one read their work aloud at the end. The purpose was to sit socially, but work independently on a writing project of your own choosing.

Initially, Susie mostly scribbled down anything just to look busy like the others. Her writing focused only on what she'd been doing. She'd read that journalling was a useful way to put your thoughts and feelings down on paper and that it could result in unleashing some of your best creative ideas.

As the weeks progressed, Susie started to look forward to her Thursday night out, a feeling she'd not experienced in a long time. She found it uplifting to be around gen Z-ers who still felt optimistic about the world. Dealing with everything alone – bills, walking her labrador, Rufus, finding reliable tradespeople and a million other jobs – was exhausting and lonely.

'Anyone fancy another drink?' said one of the girls at the end of the fourth session. Susie thought of all the things that

needed doing back home and wondered if they really wanted her there. But, persuaded by their enthusiastic encouragement, she thoroughly enjoyed herself.

The girls shared amusing anecdotes, mostly involving nights out, while she regaled them with funny tales of Rufus's antics. They all laughed and Susie felt her confidence soar, her mouth aching from all the laughing and smiling she did that evening. She even slept the best she had in months.

The class followed the same format every week, writing for 30 minutes, stopping for an interlude to discuss their progress, then writing for a further 30 minutes. Susie scribbled down every feeling she'd had lately – loneliness, embarrassment (when she couldn't get the barcodes to scan at the self-checkout), sadness and the way grief hits you unexpectedly.

By the sixth week, Susie realised that her writing was becoming peppered with some happy moments – mostly from connecting with her new group.

Gradually, she started to focus on an idea for a short story. She created a plot and imagined different characters. She bought herself a laptop (the girls helped her set it up) and learned the basics of how to write a Word document.

Susie had joined the group to escape from life's mundanities and to bury her grief for a few hours each week. But as the weeks rolled by, she began to find herself again. No longer just thought of as part of 'Dan and Susie', she was now carving her own life for herself and finally felt happier. Dan would be so proud of her.

As she emerged from behind the laptop screen, Susie realised this moment had been a long time coming, but with the help of her writing group, she was finally finding her own voice and self again.

DO YOU HAVE A WAY WITH WORDS?



This month's winning author is Abby Williams, from Worcester, who wins £100.

She says: 'I was inspired by joining a writing group and observing how writing helped people to build confidence. I imagined what their lives might be like, their challenges and how the group was helping.'

To be in with the chance of winning, email your entry of 800 words maximum to yourwinningstory@hearst.co.uk or post your entry to Your Winning Story, Prima Features, House of Hearst, 30 Panton Street, London SW1Y 4AJ, including your name, address, phone number and a good-quality photo of you. Please note, unfortunately, Prima cannot return any photos or stories.