

BRAVERY OF BRIDE WHO LOST HER LEGS ON WEDDING DAY



EXCLUSIVE
By SALLY BECK

WITH her amazing bravery – and her fiancé's loving devotion – it was a story which inspired the country.

Dawn Auty is the bride who lost both her legs in a motorbike accident on her way to church. Steve Flood is the loving groom who married her as soon as she was well.

It was a real tale of triumph over tragedy by a courageous couple. But one year on there has been no neat happy ending.

We can reveal that Dawn and Steve Flood are now battling another tragedy. She has become an alcoholic prone to violent drunken rages as she tries to come to terms with her horrific injuries... and their marriage has come close to breakdown.

Dawn, 43, and Steve, 34, have both had affairs in the aftermath of the cruel twist of fate on their planned wedding day. He has been so engulfed by depression that he has attempted suicide.

Now, with their first wedding anniversary approaching, they think the time is right to tell the world the truth.

"We want everyone to know how tough things have been for us," Dawn says. "We want people to see how hard it is, for us to get over what happened. Perhaps we made it look like some kind of fairytale ending, but it isn't."

The trauma that struck the couple beggared belief. Dawn, radiant in her satin bridal gown, was on her way to church to marry Steve, riding there in style on a three-wheeled motor-trike driven by a friend.

Then, in the last few yards, her dress got caught in the bike's chain, dragging her into the mechanism and trapping her. Her injuries were so bad that both of her legs had to be amputated at the scene.

Steve watched helplessly, then kept a vigil at her hospital bedside, wearing his bridegroom's suit all the time.

He vowed he would never abandon her. He slowly nursed her back to health. And 18 months later, at the same church, they finally went through with their marriage ceremony.

It looked as if the couple had overcome their tragedy and found true happiness. But that was the outward appearance. In private, their life together was sliding into bitter despair.

Dawn was already drinking heavily, up to a litre of vodka a day. "I'm now an alcoholic, that's the simple truth," she says. "I can be horrible and violent when I get drunk."

Shaking and chain-smoking, she adds: "I'm hard work – not physically, but mentally. Because of

6 I've even attacked Steve with a hammer and knives

the drink I have very violent mood swings and I become a different person. I've even attacked Steve with a hammer and knives.

"Before the accident, I was very easygoing, I was a nurse so I had a lot of patience, I was calm."

Steve adds: "Dawn, without drink, is the most beautiful, amazing and absolutely gorgeous person. But once she hits the bottle, all hell breaks loose. I love her, but there have been times when I've hated her."

The couple have moved into an adapted bungalow in Fleetwood, Lancashire, determined to mark their anniversary by putting their married life back on course.

"My mood swings are due to frustration, when I can't do what I want to do," says Dawn.

"Stupid things set me off, like I can't reach the top cupboards or I can't clean the skirting boards because if I try I fall out of my wheelchair."

Sometimes, struggling with shopping, she has scattered bags over their tiny kitchen, then furiously berated Steve until she collapses in tears in his arms.

Dawn, who has two grown-up children from a previous relationship, said: "I turned to drink because it makes me forget. It makes me sleep and then of course I can't remember that I don't have any legs."

People who don't know the couple, she adds, don't realise how hard they struggled to come to terms with Dawn's disability and the shock of the accident.

They see bubbly Dawn joking about how she's always hated buying shoes anyway, and laughing



Before... wedding video of Dawn on the motor-trike



After... emergency crews at the horrific scene

Picture: NICEL BENNETT

I've become a violent, bottle-of-vodka-a-day alcoholic, we've BOTH had affairs but we're STILL IN LOVE

Dawn and Steve now... still in love, still together, but struggling to cope



Joy... Dawn's courage at her wedding was inspiring. But the trauma was to come

as she downs another vodka. They see that Steve doesn't work and assume they are rolling in money.

Dawn says: "People in the pub try to get close to us. Because they've read about us in newspapers they think they know us, but they don't."

"They don't know how we cope day-in day-out. I have had fits since the accident, and black-outs. They don't know that I fall out of the chair when I've had a fit. I can be incontinent then."

"Steve's the one who has to pick me up and help me get washed and changed."

"They don't see this. All they see is Steve and me out having a drink, seemingly enjoying ourselves."

Steve, who gave up a successful market stall selling toys to care full-time for Dawn, believes people have stolen things from their house to keep as grisly souvenirs.

"The gold watch my mum gave me for my 21st birthday has gone. The worst was a picture my son drew for me at nursery. Our honeymoon video has gone, photographs, ornaments, all sorts of things. It's horrible."

To make matters worse, people think Dawn is a battered wife because she sometimes has visible bruises. The truth, she says, is

that the bruises come from falls out of her wheelchair.

The pressure on Steve – who has a son Connor, six, and an adopted son Stephen, 12, from his previous relationship – got so bad he could only see one way out.

"I thought I could do it all, be a full-time carer, a dad and run a business. I couldn't."

"After I gave up the market stall I started doing karaoke in the evenings. I thought I could work for three hours, twice a week and make the same money."

"That way, I could be there for Dawn. If I wasn't around, she'd sit by herself, staring out of the window, open a bottle and by the time I got home she was plastered."

"One night, I was doing a karaoke gig in the pub and Dawn got drunk with a group of people. I came off the stage and there was a woman sat in Dawn's wheelchair and Dawn was sitting on her knee."

"I said, 'I can't push both of you.' Dawn said, 'We're both pissed so you'll have to.'"

"As I came out of the pub the front wheel of the wheelchair went down a grid. Dawn fell out, the woman fell on top of her and Dawn cut an eye open."

"People saw Dawn with a shiner and nearly battered me for it. I couldn't take it any more so that night I took a load of sleeping pills – I was taking them to stop the nightmares."

"In them I see the accident and see the paramedics picking Dawn's legs up from the road and putting them in a silver bag. Luckily, Dawn

6 I drink to sleep.. it helps me forget I have no legs

realised what I'd done and had called an ambulance. I woke up the next day in hospital."

The marriage was now in a downward spiral. One night, after drinking heavily, Dawn accused Steve of bugging the house. They had a huge fight and Dawn locked him out.

"I slept in the car for two days," he says. "Then Chrissy, a friend, offered me a room. I had to get away so I booked a holiday to Morocco."

"I was going to take Dawn but I heard that now she was dating a neighbour of ours, Rob, so I invited Chrissy instead. We had a fantastic week and we got very close. We kissed, but not much else."

Dawn says: "It was terrible. At that stage Rob was just a friend, but when Steve went away with Chrissy I decided to have a fling with him."

"He's much older than Steve, he's 57, but his wife died and we were both lonely."

Six weeks ago the couple decided to try and patch things up. Steve moved back in.

"I've really cut down on my drinking" says Dawn. "Steve and I share a bottle-and-a-half of wine in the evenings. I've finally got some help around the house, but no counselling yet."

"Steve's an amazing man. I love him and I'd do anything for him, but if the situation was reversed and he put me through what I've put him through, I'd say, that's it I'm off."

Steve says simply: "When Dawn's sober she's a totally different person. That's the person I met and that's the person I married. I'm just trying to get things to back to how they were."

● DAWN and Steve talk in Weddings From Hell, Thursday June 22, at 9pm on ITV1.