

Karen Kelly, 49, is a mother of three from Belfast. Just after their 'best Christmas ever' last year, her youngest child, Martin, then 21, went missing...



MY SEARCH FOR MARTY

It was our best Christmas ever. But I didn't know it was going to be our last. Because as the festive season came to an end, on New Year's Day, my wee lad disappeared off the face of the earth.

Martin was my youngest and the only one still at home. His sister Suzanne, 26, had moved to London and Fiona, 27, the eldest, was pregnant with her second child and living with her husband, Paul, not far from us in Holywood, Belfast.

Me and my partner Drew, 48, had decided to move to a bigger house so Martin could have more space - he was 21 and needed a bit of privacy. We'd bought a lovely house with a loft conversion.

So it was our last Christmas in the family home and we made the most of it. I had to cook for 13 friends and family on Christmas Day, but it was no problem. Martin made the prawn cocktails and a few drinks helped keep me merry.

Caollin, my first grandchild, now two, had just started running around and no one could stop him. Martin was his godfather and they doted on each other - Martin doesn't know he's now got another nephew, Aidan.

'I'll take Caollin home to bed after dinner, Mum,' Fiona told me. But he was so excited when another 25 or so of Martin's friends turned up for a party on Christmas night,

he kept going until he collapsed at one in the morning. The rest of us managed a couple more hours of partying.

We spent Boxing Day meeting up with more friends for a meal.

'Hadn't we better start packing yet, Mum?' Martin laughed. 'It can wait, Marty,' I told him. 'Let's enjoy New Year first.'

Martin was working in our local pub, The Priory Inn, that night so Drew and I went for a curry before joining him to see in the New Year.

'This will make you VERY happy, Mum,' Martin said as he handed me

'He said he'd catch up with friends. He never arrived'

a huge cocktail with a smile on his face. He was right - it was lethal! The bar staff were allowed to stop working for a few minutes



as the New Year rang in. Martin and I had a dance together, gave each other a kiss and said 'I love you'. That's how we saw in what was about to become the worst year of my life. It was the last time I saw my lovely boy.

Martin went on to a couple of parties, stayed the night at a friend's, then spent New Year's Day watching a football match in the pub. But he must have been in the loo when his mates all caught taxis and went on to another pub. They called his mobile, though, and he said he'd catch them up a little later when he'd finished his pint. He never arrived.

The next day, Drew and I went to the sales to buy furniture for the new house. Then we went looking for Marty, thinking he'd have stayed at someone's house and we'd catch up with him in one of the town's bars.

We met one of his friends, but she said no one had seen him in 24 hours. We were immediately worried. We waited up all night



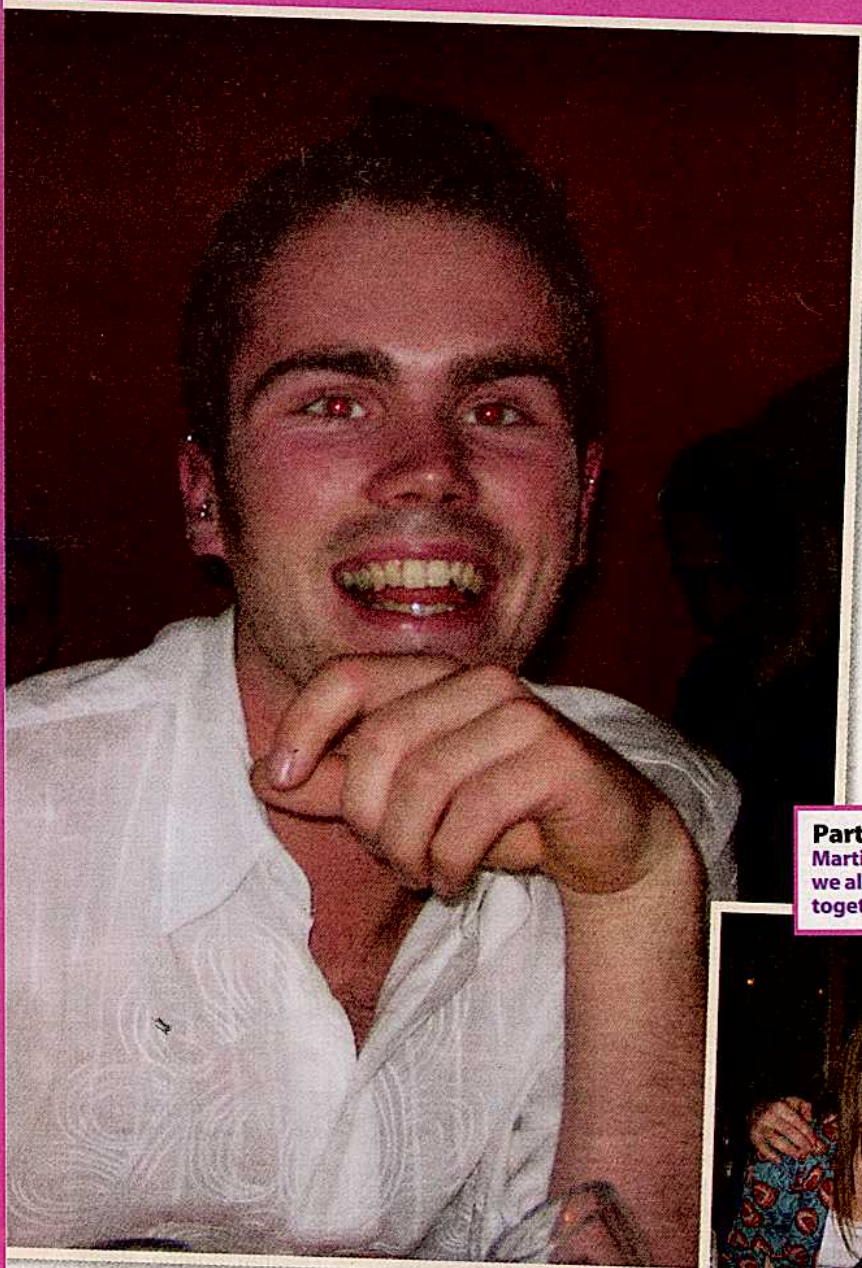
Martin

Suzanne

Me

Fiona

Friend Sarah



for him and then called the police the next morning. We thought he might have had an accident and was unconscious in hospital – all his ID was still in his bedroom. But, as Marty wasn't a child, they couldn't do anything until he'd been missing for 48 hours.

On 5 January there was a knock at the door.

'I'm afraid we have to search your home, Mrs Kelly,' a policeman said as the house filled with forensics experts. I knew it had to be done,

but nothing prepares you for your home being taken apart by strangers in boiler suits, looking for signs that your son has taken his own life – or been murdered by his family.

Two days later, police told us they thought Martin was dead, drowned in the harbour next to the pub he was last seen in, having slipped and maybe knocked his head.

But when divers eventually went down there, they found nothing.

He could have been washed out to sea by then.

We asked the police to look at CCTV footage from the local ferries. There were a lot of Glaswegians in the bar the day Martin went missing. Maybe he got talking to them and decided to hop over to Scotland for the night. But the tapes are wiped every few weeks and we had missed our chance.

We were so busy fighting to be taken seriously, I didn't have time to wonder if Martin was dead or alive. But I think I'd know if my child was dead.

I've found out there's a type of amnesia that can come on instantly, from stress or too much alcohol. Maybe Martin's wandering the streets

Party people
Martin with Suzanne – we all love to get together at Christmas



somewhere, not knowing who he is.

That's why we took a camper van covered with Martin's picture from Scotland down to London, handing out posters to try to find out if anyone's seen him. The people of Holywood helped us raise the £12,000 we needed with a couple of huge concerts.

We also released 100 yellow balloons, each one tied to a



Martin's year
Martin was planning a big trip to Australia

message. Mine read: 'I love you from the tips of my toes to the tops of my hair.' I used to say it to Martin when he was small.

This was meant to be his year. He'd bought a house in Bulgaria he was going to do up. He was due to finish his apprenticeship as a plumber working with Drew. And having already done voluntary work in Africa, he was preparing to travel again, to Australia. We were all planning to join him there for six weeks this Christmas.

In the midst of all this I found a breast lump. I did a deal with God: take me and bring Martin home.

I was so angry when doctors said the lump was nothing to worry about, because life without Martin is just an existence.

Drew and I think we actually died and this is hell.

The whole family has been completely destroyed and, one way or the other, we need closure. But I'll never accept Marty's not coming home.

I'll always look for him. I'll always fight for him. ■

If you think you might have any information on Martin Kelly's whereabouts, contact the confidential helpline on 0800 555111. To find out more information, see www.ourmartykelly.com.



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