

## Sue

My daughter died. It happened on a Tuesday in 1979. It was just an ordinary day and there was nothing wrong with her. We were having breakfast in our kitchen. I was smoking and buttering bread for packed lunches and playing Delia Smith, 'Take two slices of bread. I'm using three-day old Mother's Pride, but you could use fresh bread, or even brown.'

I was giving a master class in spam sandwich making to a live studio audience. I had to do it in my head. We weren't the type of family that encouraged eccentricities.

Angela, who was ten-years old at the time, was trying to get me to look at her verruca. She had her sock off and her foot up on the table. It was the sort of thing she did to annoy me because she knew I didn't like anything to do with feet.

She said, "Mum. Listen. If it doesn't go soon they might need to burn it off."

"Take your foot down. Eat some Sugar Puffs," I said.

"There's none left."

She shook the box to show me, so I gave her a Wagon Wheel and carried on with the packed lunches. The butter was straight from the fridge and I kept tearing holes in the bread. I went back to Delia, 'I'm using Co-op butter, but you could use margarine. Spread it right out to the corners. No portholes.'

Terry, my husband, was sitting next to Angela and reading the back page of *The Mirror*. To keep us in Wagon Wheels he drove a bus up and down between Romford and Oxford Circus. He was on lates that day. I could hear the traffic outside in the High Street and Mrs Roast's radio playing next door. It wasn't very loud, but the walls of our flat were made of plywood. Terry said we should be grateful. He said it saved us putting our own radio on.

I couldn't hear anything from upstairs. My other daughter, Judith, should have been getting dressed. She was twelve-years old and had just started secondary school. I called her twice

before I came down, but she didn't reply. I wondered if she was alright.

"They get something so cold that it's actually hot," said Angela. "It's a chemical and they paint it onto your foot and it burns and then the verruca dies."

Terry kept his eyes on the newspaper. He never talked much in the mornings, unless he'd had one of his dreams. When I first met him he used to say to me, "Sue, we're in love. We don't need speech."

We had been married for thirteen years, which was about ten years too long. We lived in a maisonette, above a pet shop. We couldn't afford a house. The flat was okay, but the kitchen was depressing. The walls were the colour of mustard and if I boiled a kettle they ran with condensation. Black mould grew on the metal window frames and I had to scrub it off with bleach.

Angela said, "You can get a rubber verruca sock from the chemist. It only costs 25p."

I couldn't think of anything to say to that.

'Place the spam in the centre of the bread making sure it covers the butter. I'm using Lipton's spam. You could use corned beef, but then it wouldn't be a spam sandwich.' I imagined myself calm and in control, just like the real Delia.

Terry said, "They've set up a phone line, for the Yorkshire Ripper. You can phone it and hear his voice. If it is him."

Angela said, "I am Jack," in a northern accent.

I said, "Read my stars to me."

Terry turned the pages of the newspaper. He said, "Cancer – You may have to rely on instinct to guide you through the day. Load of rubbish."

I was getting the tin foil out of the cupboard when the postman walked along the balcony outside the kitchen window. I heard him shove something through the letterbox. Angela got up to see what it was and as I watched her I got the feeling that something was very wrong with Judith. It was so strong that I dropped the tin foil and stubbed out my cigarette,

even though it was only half smoked. I left the room. I didn't say anything to Terry or Angela.

I passed a pile of comics on the stairs and when I got onto the landing I trod on a pencil sharpener in the shape of a Smurf. I opened Judith's bedroom door without knocking. I never did that. Her curtains were still drawn and I put the light on.

Judith was in bed, lying on her back with her arms out of the blankets. She was wearing a royal blue nightdress. Her long brown hair was spread out over the pillow. I felt sick when I saw her. I put my hand up to my mouth and held onto the doorframe. I didn't call out. I didn't want Terry or Angela to come up. I went in and shut the door behind me.

Before I was married, I worked in a hotel near Regent's Park and sometimes old, lonely people came there to die. They wanted the hotel to take care of everything. They didn't want to die at home on their own. One man stayed for five months, but they all went in the end. So I knew what I was looking at.

I sat on the bed and touched her arm. It was cold. I thought that she must have been dead for a long time. Her eyes were shut and her face was white in the middle where the blood had drained away to the sides. I didn't cry. I made a sort of humming noise to stop myself. I sat holding her arm and stroking her hair, as if she was ill and needed comforting.

The walls of her bedroom were covered in pink patterned paper and Terry had painted clouds on the ceiling. There was a *Grease* poster behind her bed and a pile of library books on her bedside table, unread, half finished. Her school uniform was laid out on the chair by the door. It was red and white and made me think of blood and bandages.

I could still hear the radio playing in Mrs Roast's, even upstairs. It was Radio Two, playing Neil Diamond. Downstairs I could hear Angela's voice. She must have been talking about school because I heard her say, "long division," twice and something about teams. Angela talked too much. I don't think Terry said anything in reply.

I should have gone downstairs and told them what had happened, but I didn't want to. I didn't think it was real. And I couldn't leave Judith. I loved her more than anyone. After a while Terry came to look for me. I like to think that he realised something was wrong, but he probably wanted more tea or perhaps he heard me humming.

This is where my memory goes wrong, like a series of pictures: Terry grabbing Judith to try to revive her; Angela in the doorway, white-faced, her sock in her hand; the bedroom door, with Judith's dressing gown hanging on the back, opening and closing; the *Grease* poster and the uniform; the pink patterned paper and the clouds. I can see all the scenes, but I can't fit them together or make a film out of them. I couldn't move.

Terry kept shouting, "What's wrong? What's happened?" Although I could see from his face that he knew.

I sat holding Judith's arm, stroking her hair and humming. I was surprised that Terry didn't tell me to shut up. I was annoying myself. The room was cold and I started to shiver. We didn't have heating upstairs and it was cool for September.

I wondered how she had died. I couldn't tell by looking. She looked perfect. Terry couldn't tell either. He said it might have been asthma, but it was years since she'd had an attack. She didn't even need an inhaler. Terry told me things, but I wasn't listening. Nothing seemed real; as though I was sitting on the sofa, watching it all on television with the sound turned down.

I found out later that Angela had gone next door with Mrs Roast. I didn't see her for hours. Mrs Roast was Angela's special friend. Her real name was Bridie Sullivan, but I called her Mrs Roast because she was always cooking joints of meat. There was a picture of the Pope in her hallway. She had central heating and she showed off by turning it on in the summer. She thought I was common.

I only left Judith once, when the doctor came to examine her. I didn't know him, but he seemed young and nervous.

Our usual doctor had retired and this was a temporary one. At first I refused to go. I put my head on her chest and said, "There's been a big mistake. I don't think she should be dead. It was her birthday a few days ago. She's only twelve. She can't be dead already."

But Terry said, "Don't Sue." So I waited on the landing. I stared at the Smurf and tried to remember what I had said to Judith before she went to bed. I thought the last thing I ever said to her was, "Don't read too long. You've got to be up early."

Terry tried to be useful. He said he would call the school and tell them I wouldn't be in. It was a special school and I cleaned the classrooms in the afternoons. It didn't take long and it was extra money. We were saving to buy a freezer. I didn't like letting people down, but I didn't argue. I sat with Judith and I let Terry deal with everything. I kept thinking, 'My daughter is dead,' but it wasn't believable.

Some men arrived and had to take Judith away. They brought up a bag, black with a zip in it. It was the sort of bag you would use for a suit. When I saw them I said, "She doesn't normally look like this. She's really very pretty," but they didn't say anything.

I kept hold of her arm. When they put her in the bag I tried to get in with her, though I could see there wasn't enough room. Terry had to hold onto me while they carried our daughter down the stairs and put her into a van. I shouted, "I want my baby." I knew I was behaving like a character in a soap opera, but I couldn't stop myself. Terry didn't seem to know what to do. He said they were taking her to the hospital. He said she would be safe there.

After they had taken Judith away I calmed down. I made some tea and tried to think of something to say, but there weren't any words. It was only eleven o'clock. I had a cigarette, but it didn't make any difference. And then Terry, who had been so practical, collapsed. He sat in his armchair, looking at the television. It wasn't switched on. I knew that we should be

comforting each other like proper married people, but instead I went upstairs and put my face into Judith's pillow so that I could smell her and cried until my head hurt and the pillow was soaked.

In the afternoon I said to Terry, "We've got to phone Judith's school. You're supposed to phone before nine if they're not coming in," but he stared at the carpet as though he hadn't heard.

Then I said, "She'll get into trouble if we don't phone," but he still wouldn't answer, so I had to do it myself.

I got through to the school secretary and said, "I'm Sue Lawley, Judith Lawley's mum. I'm phoning to say she won't be in today. She's not well." And then, before she could reply, I added, "In fact she's dead." And I hung up. I wasn't very good on the telephone.

I sat in the kitchen and cried until Judith's headmistress called me back about ten minutes later. She tried to be kind, but it didn't help. While I was listening to her, I noticed Judith's blue anorak on a peg by the front door. It set me off again.

I kept asking Terry, "Is it true? Has she really gone?" At first he was patient, but after the fourth time he stopped answering me.

I wondered what Delia Smith would recommend, something like, "Take fifty aspirin and a bottle of whiskey. I'm using single malt, but you could use a blend. Lie down and place a pillow over your head. Stay like that for as long as you can." Ideally forever.

Terry said, "I'm not going into work. I can't drive a bus today. There's the medal to think about."

Terry was in line for a medal because he'd driven a bus for five years without crashing into anything. I didn't know how he could think about a stupid medal when our best daughter had died, but I only said, "Don't go if you don't want to. Nobody is forcing you."

He phoned his stepfather, Eamonn. I stood in the kitchen and listened to bits of conversation and made up the rest in my head. I think Eamonn wanted to come over, but Terry said he should wait. I wondered what they were waiting for. I wandered round the flat, touching the furniture. It was second hand and none of it matched. I should have been doing housework. I could see a layer of dust on the top of the gas fire. I wanted the day to stop and start again at the bit before Judith died. I couldn't concentrate or eat anything, which was unusual. I had a sweet tooth and normally I could get through a whole box of French fancies if I was upset.

I said to Terry, "It's like falling through a hole," but he wasn't listening.

When she came back from Mrs Roast's, Angela said, "It's not a joke, is it?"

Judith liked practical jokes: disappearing ink, fake blood and scars, bandaged fingers, sugar cubes filled with plastic flies. But Angela was right. There was nothing funny about being dead.

Angela wanted to know where Judith's soul had gone. I didn't know the answer to that so I told Angela to go and sit in her room. I wasn't much of a mother that day. I wasn't much of a wife either. I should have talked to Terry and made him talk back to me. But it was nothing unusual; I was only a good wife and mother when I was pretending to be someone else.

Terry wanted me to go to the hospital and tell my mum what had happened. I couldn't tell her over the telephone. I needed to sit with her and spell it out. But I made excuses. I didn't want to leave the flat. It didn't feel safe. Terry said, "You'll have to tell her sometime, so it might as well be now," but I pretended I hadn't heard.

I knew we'd have trouble because of the rules. Every family has rules, even if they aren't spoken about or written down anywhere. All the things that you can and can't, that you should or shouldn't, all the things that are encouraged or forbidden. Our public rules were easy to follow. We voted

Labour. We hated Mrs Thatcher. We were on the side of the trade unions and the under-dog. We kept within the law. We liked the Indian family who ran the sweet shop, but we weren't keen on the French. We didn't like Germans, not that we knew any, and we never, ever bought anything that had been made in Japan.

It was the personal rules that were difficult. We didn't draw attention to ourselves. We didn't involve outsiders. We didn't get emotional. We kept a big, fat, stiff upper lip, no matter what. They weren't my rules. They were invented by Terry and I didn't see how I could follow them and grieve for Judith.

At five o'clock Alice phoned. She was my best friend and her daughter was in the same class as Angela. When I answered the phone she said, "Is Angela alright? Roxana said she wasn't at school today and Mrs White didn't seem to know anything about it."

I said, "She's fine. She's in her bedroom."

Alice said, "You sound funny. What's wrong?"

And I said, "Judith's gone," and then there was a bit of confusion because she thought I meant that Judith had run away. When she understood what had happened I had to stand in the hallway listening to her cry on the other end of the phone. She was my best friend, but she was no use at all. I suppose it was the shock.

We didn't have any dinner, but we had fish and chips for tea. Mrs Roast bought them for us. It was supposed to be a treat, but it was a waste of money because none of us could eat anything. Angela switched the television on. It was *Nationwide* and I saw the real Sue Lawley looking confident and elegant in a trouser suit and a shirt that looked like it might be silk. She was talking about water rates when Angela said, "So how long does it take, when you've died, for your body to rot away. You know, to become like a skeleton?"

That was when Terry went to bed.

When he'd gone Angela said, "I know Judith's dead and everything, but you mustn't forget to do my verruca. You've got to put the liquid on before bedtime."

After *Nationwide* finished there was nothing to watch. We only had three channels and ITV was on strike that night. They broadcast a blue and white sign to tell the viewers. It was worse than the test card.

Later, when I was coming out of the kitchen with water for the tablets to help me sleep, I saw the letter that the postman had delivered that morning. It was on the telephone table in the hallway. The envelope was blue and I recognised the writing. It was addressed to me. Inside was a birthday card and the letters on the front were arranged to make the message, 'Happy Birthday Nephew.' It was from Terry's mother, Joan. She was only two months late. My birthday was in July. I stood in the hallway and stared at the pattern on the carpet. It was blue and green and red and black. My daughter died. It happened on a Tuesday in 1979. And it was eighteen years before we could bury her.