

It was nothing special, just a house with a long, narrow back garden in Brentford, on a street of three up, two down terraces, not far from the old football ground. But it had been our home; the place in which I'd grown up, where I'd played with my sister, had sleep-overs with my friends, and been loved and cared for by my parents. It was where I'd sat with my father during the long evenings of silence as cancer had eaten away at his wasted body. It was where I'd discussed her diagnosis with my mother and how she wanted her care to be organised.

Now she was in the hospice, her race almost run, and the house was shortly to be put up for sale. It had been cleared of furniture and I walked up the stairs and into my old bedroom for what I knew was going to be the last time, my footsteps echoing against the wooden floorboards and the vacant walls. I have never been an overly-emotional person but I suddenly felt an overwhelming urge to cry. I held my breath and closed my eyes in an effort to reassert control; it would simply not do to reappear downstairs with mascara running down my cheeks.

The moment passed and I turned on my heels. Whatever this house had been for me was now gone and it was time to move on. I retraced my steps on the stairs and began to show the young woman from the estate agent around.

Later that evening, my husband and I were clearing up after dinner. The children were upstairs, supposedly doing their homework but more likely playing on their phones. Richard closed the door of the dishwasher and pushed the button before sitting down on a stool at the island which took up most of the space in the centre of the kitchen. He drained the dregs from his wine glass and poured himself a refill. It was the first opportunity that day for us to

have time to ourselves and we talked about my visit to my mother. We had side-stepped the topic in front of the boys in order to avoid upsetting them, but it couldn't be ducked.

There wasn't a great deal to report. She'd looked frail and had hardly known that I was there. The nurses had confirmed that the end was getting close but that it was impossible to know when it would happen. It could be days or it could be weeks.

Richard nodded and I noticed how pale and drawn he looked. He was working hard, too hard I thought, and the strain was beginning to show. When I had finished, he looked into his glass for a few seconds before speaking.

'I spoke to Aaron today about the bonus situation. The answer was that it's not looking good. He said that I have to prepare myself for the possibility that there won't be any. If he's right, we're going to have to cut back a lot on our spending. The truth is, Louise, we're living way beyond our means. The boys' school fees are crippling us. We're stretched to our limit on the mortgage, the apartment in Portugal is like a millstone around our necks, and we have four credit cards between us that are absolutely maxed out. If we don't change something soon, there's a real possibility that we could be declared bankrupt.'

Other than the news about the bonus, he wasn't telling me anything that I didn't know already, but it was frightening all the same. I loved our life. I loved the big house in Notting Hill, the expensive holidays, the fine food, and the social status associated with being successful. I didn't want anything to change, but it was clear that we were fast approaching a point where big decisions would have to be made.

'I had Mother's house valued today,' I said.

He suddenly looked very interested. 'Go on,' he said.

‘It’s only the first valuation but the Estate Agent thinks that it will sell very quickly if we were to put it in the market for three quarters of a million pounds.’

He did the calculation quickly. ‘That would be £375000 each for you and Theresa. That’s serious money.’

I was a bit more cautious. ‘We could use a chunk of it to pay off the mortgage and the credit cards. But when you take into account the school fees as well, it will get the monkey off our backs for a while but it won’t solve the underlying problems.’

He ran his fingers through his hair and said, ‘No, it won’t. But it would keep us afloat long enough for things to improve at work or to allow us to come up with a plan.’

He was right, and we both knew it. I was now in a position in which I was both dreading my mother’s death, and anticipating it.

I had not seen my sister for almost six months but my mother, in one of her few lucid moments, had asked me about her and I felt that I had a duty to be able to give her some answers. The following morning, I got in my car and drove the relatively short distance to Tower Hamlets. My destination was an eight storey, grime-grey, block of council flats in an area that was in the news every week, mainly because of endemic knife crime and drug abuse. I knew that leaving a BMW anywhere around there was an open invitation to having its windows smashed, so I parked half a mile away, not far from the Shard, marvelling again that such an ostentatious monument to wealth and vulgarity could exist so close to some of the worst housing conditions in the country.

Theresa lived in a small one bedroom flat. There was no working lift so I had to walk up an external stairs, avoiding the urine and dog shit. I got some curious looks from a pair of middle-aged women that passed me, and a hard, cold stare from a young man. I ignored them and eventually found myself outside a door carrying the number 510. I took a deep breath to calm both my breathing and my nerves and rang the bell.

It took her about ten seconds to answer and, when she did, the shock must have been evident in my face. She had put on several more stone and, there was no other way to say it, she was now morbidly obese. Her face, which had attracted considerable male attention when she was young, was now puffed and bloated and her dark hair hung from her head in greasy strips.

She smiled, although there was little humour or friendliness in it, and I saw that she was now missing a front tooth, which gave her a slight lisp when she spoke.

‘Good morning, sister. What brings you here?’

There seemed little point in beating around the bush. ‘It’s mother. It’s getting close to the end and she was asking about you.’

‘You can tell her I’m fine.’

‘You’re clearly not fine. You look like shit.’

A flash of anger passed across her face and she said, ‘If you’ve come here to insult me then you can push off.’

I softened my voice. ‘I want to speak to you, Theresa and I’d prefer not to do it here where the neighbours can hear. Can I come in?’

She hesitated for a moment and then turned her back on me, leaving the door open. I accepted the invitation and entered the flat, closing the door behind me and following her down the corridor.

I could smell damp and there was mould on the ceiling. The carpet was threadbare and, as I passed the small kitchen, I could see that the sink was filled with dirty pots and dishes. The furniture in the room where we sat down consisted of two rickety chairs and a small coffee table. The curtains were drawn and the only light was delivered by a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. My sister was living in abject squalor and it made my skin crawl.

‘What do you want?’ she asked.

‘I want to know how you’re doing.’

She waved her arms at our surroundings. ‘What do you think?’

‘The last time I saw you, you said that you were trying to get off the heroin.’

‘That’s true, and I did. I just moved on to other shit.’

‘What is it this time?’

‘What business is it of yours?’

I stood up and moved back the way that we’d come. I opened the door to her bedroom and almost gagged at the smell of body odour and stale food that flooded past me. I held my breath and entered.

A single bed was shoved in the corner with a dirty duvet thrown over it. Several tin cartons that might have once held curry were scattered on the floor and some clothes were thrown over a small dressing table. I went to the bedside locker and opened the top drawer.

A minute later I was back in the living room with two bottles in my hand. I held the first one up to Theresa.

‘This is Flunitrazepam,’ I said. ‘It’s another name for the date rape drug, Rohypnol.’

She shrugged and I showed her the second bottle. ‘What the hell is oxycodone?’

‘It’s none of your business.’

I asked the question again, speaking slowly, anger making my voice shake. ‘What is it?’

Her eyes slipped away from mine and went to the floor. She answered, the reluctance making her voice quiet. ‘It’s an opiate.’

‘And you’re using this stuff,’ I was almost shouting at her. ‘They’re prescription drugs. Where the hell are you getting them?’

If she was bothered by my anger, she didn’t let it show. She looked up again and shrugged. ‘If you have the money, you can get anything you want. It’s just a question of asking the right people.’

‘And where the hell are you getting the money for this? You don’t have two pence to rub together. You’re on benefits for God’s sake.’

She gave me that smirk that used to infuriate me when we were young. ‘There are always ways of getting what you want, just as long as you want it badly enough.’

I’d heard enough. I threw the two bottles at the wall, turned my back on her and stormed out of the flat.

That night, I told Richard about my visit to Theresa. He held me in his arms and kissed the top of my head.

You're going to have to accept it, Louise. Theresa is gone, and there is nothing to be gained by chasing after her. You have to let go.'

I knew that he was right, but it was easier said than done.

I sat at the table in our kitchen the following day, running through our finances. No matter how I added things up, the answer was always the same. The mortgage was costing us over three thousand pounds a month, which was a little less than the boys' school fees. The timeshare on the Algarve had sounded like a good idea at the time, but we were locked in and it was turning into a disaster. On top of that, we were carrying almost fifteen thousand pounds in credit card debt. Coming in, we had Richard's salary and bonus at the bank, plus the small amount that I was able to contribute from my job on the reception desk at a solicitor's office. We had allowed our lifestyle to be built on the assumption that a sizable annual bonus would continue forever and we were now drowning. The money from the sale of the house would save us for a few years but no more than that. Mother had no money of her own other than a small pension so the house was everything.

I stared at the computer screen and thought about my visit to Theresa. She would get the same as me and the thought was galling. I knew what would happen of course. She'd get a better flat and commit a long, slow suicide, throwing the money away on drugs and alcohol. It was a story that would have only one ending. The local dealers would become rich and I'd eventually receive a visit from the police to say that she'd been found dead. I felt the burning

resentment that had building inside of me for years explode. It was so horribly unfair. I had looked after our parents through their illnesses. I had carried the burden on my own while she'd put every type of shit into her body and spread her legs for every man who'd look at her. She deserved nothing.

This was the moment that the thought first entered my mind. The money would be the death of her, but for my family, it would change everything. It would surely be best for everyone, including herself, if Theresa died before our mother.

I dismissed the thought as being unworthy. Even though I was no longer a practising Catholic, and had not seen the inside of a church since the baptism of our youngest, I considered that the values of Christian teaching were deeply embedded in me, and also that I was a good person. But lying in bed that night, listening to Richard snoring softly beside me, the thought invaded my mind again, like a shipworm boring into submerged wood. Our family and our way of life was under threat and there was one person coming between us and salvation.

It took a week of wrestling with my conscience before my resistance broke and I began to give serious consideration to how I might, as I began to think of it, facilitate the death of my sister. I didn't want anyone becoming suspicious, so the method that I chose would have to be unobtrusive. That of course ruled out things like hitting her over the head or a hit-and-run. In fact, it ruled out any overt act of violence.

I eventually concluded that the best way was going to be interfering in some way with the drugs that she was using. But that presented its own problems. I knew from articles that

I'd read in newspapers that addicts frequently die if the drugs that they are taking are either adulterated with toxic chemicals, or they get hold of very pure versions of their drug of choice and overdose. I couldn't see a route to arranging either of those and that, I eventually decided, left me the option of giving her something, otherwise innocent, which would interact with her drugs.

Six days later, my doorbell rang. I opened the door to find two police officers, an older man and a young woman. They asked if I was Louise Adkins and I answered yes. They then asked if they could come inside. I led them to the kitchen where I was gently told that my sister, Theresa, had been found dead in her flat that morning by a neighbour. Her body had been taken to the local hospital where a post-mortem had been scheduled for the following day.

I sat on a stool, my heart racing and my face registering what I hoped was shock. They asked the questions that I had expected. When was the last time I'd seen Theresa? Had I been aware of any health issues which might have led to her death? Was I aware that she regularly used drugs?

I answered them as honestly as I was able. I had seen her three days before. Of course, I knew that she took drugs. In fact, that was the reason why we so rarely saw each other. We were semi-estranged. This was a shock to me but not, unfortunately, a surprise.

The words flowed from me as I had rehearsed them and the officers didn't stay long. They asked me if I had someone who could stay with me and I answered that I would call my husband. They informed me that I would be asked to attend the hospital after the post-

mortem to provide a formal identification. As they walked out the door, I asked them one question.

‘Do you know what caused her death? Was it a heart attack or an overdose?’

They looked at each other briefly and it was the man who answered. ‘I am not at liberty to say that. You will be provided with that information after the PM. But, off the record, I’d say that it looks like a classic overdose.’

I nodded. ‘Thank you, and thanks for all that you have done.’

I closed the door and leaned my back against it, my eyes closed. The die was now cast and the events which I had set in motion were about to take their course.

I did the formal identification of Theresa the following day and then went to a Funeral Director to make arrangements for her cremation. Later that same day, he called me to tell me that the police were refusing to release the body. They were awaiting the results of further tests.

A week later I received a call from a woman who identified herself as Inspector Jacqui Adams of the Metropolitan Police. She told me that she was the person tasked with investigating Theresa’s death and that she would like to speak to me. Would it be OK for me to attend an interview at the station at ten the following morning?

‘An interview?’ I said, a question in my voice. ‘Is there something wrong?’

She assured me that it was just part of the process and I put the phone down. Then I stood stock still for a minute to recover my composure.

The following morning, I pulled up in front of the police station at a few minutes after ten, just to let Inspector Adams know that I wasn't prioritising this meeting. I was shown into a small, comfortably furnished room and ten minutes later she joined me, accompanied by a female Detective Constable who said nothing but took notes of our discussion. She asked me how my mother was and, when I informed her that she had died three days previously, she made appropriately sympathetic noises. Then she got down to business.

She told me that this was not an official interview and that I was free to leave at any time. Did I understand?

'Yes,' I replied and she began.

'There is something bothering me about your sister's death,' she said. 'But first, I'd like to ask you, do you know what gas chromatography is?'

I smiled and shook my head.

'Well,' she explained, 'it's an analysis technique that, combined with mass spectrometry which enables our laboratories to identify the different constituents within what is known as a sample matrix. In this case, the sample is your sister's urine.'

I contrived to look interested but remained silent. Adams removed a sheet of paper from a folder and placed it in front of me. It was what appeared to be a line graph with peaks, two of which were highlighted. The vertical axis was identified as relative abundance and the horizontal axis as time.

She continued, 'This is a graph chromatogram. I'm sure that it looks like a random up and down line to you, as it did to me when I first saw it. But one of our scientists showed me

how the peaks correspond to the presence of certain compounds. The highlighted peaks correspond to myristicin and safrole, which are both found in nutmeg. And this is my point, Mrs Adkins. We now think that your sister died of complications caused by a large intake of ground nutmeg combined with the drugs that she was also taking. So, my question is, what was the source of that nutmeg?’

I should have been focused on her question but I was having trouble concentrating. I was remembering using my oldest son’s library card to get access to a computer where I was able to carry out my research. It had taken me a while to find it, but I eventually got my answer in a research paper from America about a woman who had died from eating a spoonful of nutmeg while high on Flunitrazepam. It was news to me that this spice, which I used occasionally, contains compounds which break down to adversely affect the central nervous system and is, in high quantities, very dangerous.

Adams was speaking again. ‘Mrs Adkins, did you hear my question? Do you know anything of how your sister might have ingested so much nutmeg?’

I recalled preparing the dough for the hot cross buns which Theresa had loved so much as a child and separating out part of the batch, enough to make one bun. Then adding into it the spoonful of nutmeg powder that I had prepared. I remembered putting the buns in the oven and watching as they rose slowly.

Adams’ voice intruded again, more sharply this time, annoyance and frustration showing through.

‘Mrs Adkins, do you know anything of how your sister might have ingested such a large quantity of nutmeg?’

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘I am still in a degree of shock. So much has been happening recently. The answer to your question is that I don’t know. I last saw Theresa about three days before your officers told me that she had died. She and I had had a big argument some time before and I brought her some buns that I had made as a peace offering. What I can tell you however is that she was constantly searching for her next high, the next thing that would allow her to leave her troubles behind her, even if it was just for a little while. Is it possible that she was experimenting?’

I did not mention going into the kitchen in that horrible flat and leaving a grater which I had carefully wiped and two partly ground down nutmeg seeds in a cupboard. Neither did I tell her about taking a small plastic bag out of my pocket and taking a pinch of powder from it, which I scattered across the surfaces.

She looked at me steadily for a moment and suddenly I knew that she knew. She had figured it out but didn’t have the proof. And unless she could break me, she had no way of finding it. Our eyes locked together for a moment before she looked away. She stood up and the other woman followed her lead.

‘That’s all for today, Mrs Adkins. We may need to speak again. I am able to tell you that your sister’s body will be released tomorrow. Detective Constable Walsh will show you out.

I walked with DC Walsh to the door and got in my car. I took a few moments to lean my head on the steering wheel before turning on the ignition. As I drove out of the car park, I saw Adams standing on the steps of the station, looking at me intently.