

*When we fled our home, my sisters and I had no idea of the horror we'd left behind, or that it was about to tear our family apart. **By Theresa Fazzani, 59***

# 'Your mum's just sleeping'

**W**alking through the front door, I could hear music from the kitchen.

I made my way through and was welcomed with the familiar sight of my mum, Helen, boogying away to Elvis.

'Dinner won't be long, love!' she said as she stirred a big pot of spag Bol.

Mum was so full of life, always dancing and singing.

When she wasn't looking after me, Janet, five, and our two younger sisters, she was working behind the bar at the local pub.

Our dad Malcolm was a lorry driver, but he was out of work, so it was up to Mum to make sure we had enough money to make ends meet. With Christmas coming up, she was taking every shift she could get.

But she never moaned, and however tough things were, she never took it out on me or my sisters. With us, she was like sunshine.

Now, Mum shouted up to my sisters.

'Come on, girls, dinner's ready!' she called and they came clattering downstairs.

Once Mum had dished up a pile of pasta for us and Dad, she bustled about getting ready for her shift at



the pub.

'I'll see you girls tomorrow,' she said.

With Mum gone and the babysitter round to look after us, we played for a bit before bedtime.

Soon after, Christmas arrived and my sisters and I were excited to find presents waiting for us under the tree.

Mum cooked a lovely dinner and then we spent the afternoon playing with our new toys.

But a couple of days on, I woke suddenly in the early hours of the morning. It was still dark, and something made me get up and head to Mum and Dad's room.

Gingerly, I peered around the door and found Mum lying on the bed in just her underwear.

She was so still, it didn't

feel right.

Then Dad appeared, took my arm and pulled me out of the room.

'Your mum's just sleeping,' he said. 'Go and get ready with your sisters. We're going out.'

Dad spoke with such urgency that I didn't question him. I just did as I was told and woke my sisters.

After getting dressed and helping them to do the same, Dad hurried us into the back of the car.

We didn't even get to say goodbye to Mum. Then we drove away from her and our home in Newport.

We spent the next days on the road without stopping for food or breaks.

I felt too tired and confused to ask questions, and just focused on taking care of my little sisters.

But I missed Mum, and I knew they did too.

As Dad drove for miles in

silence, I knew something wasn't right.

One day, Dad pulled up outside a hotel. We were all cold, tired and hungry, and as we waited in the car while Dad went inside, my little sisters started getting upset.

While I did my best to comfort them, I felt like crying too.

Then minutes later, before Dad had come back, the police pulled up. They got us all out of the car and took us to the police station.

'Where's Dad?' I asked.

At first, they didn't answer. But then we were taken to a room where a female officer came to speak to us.

'Your dad has murdered your mum,' she said. 'He's now under arrest.'

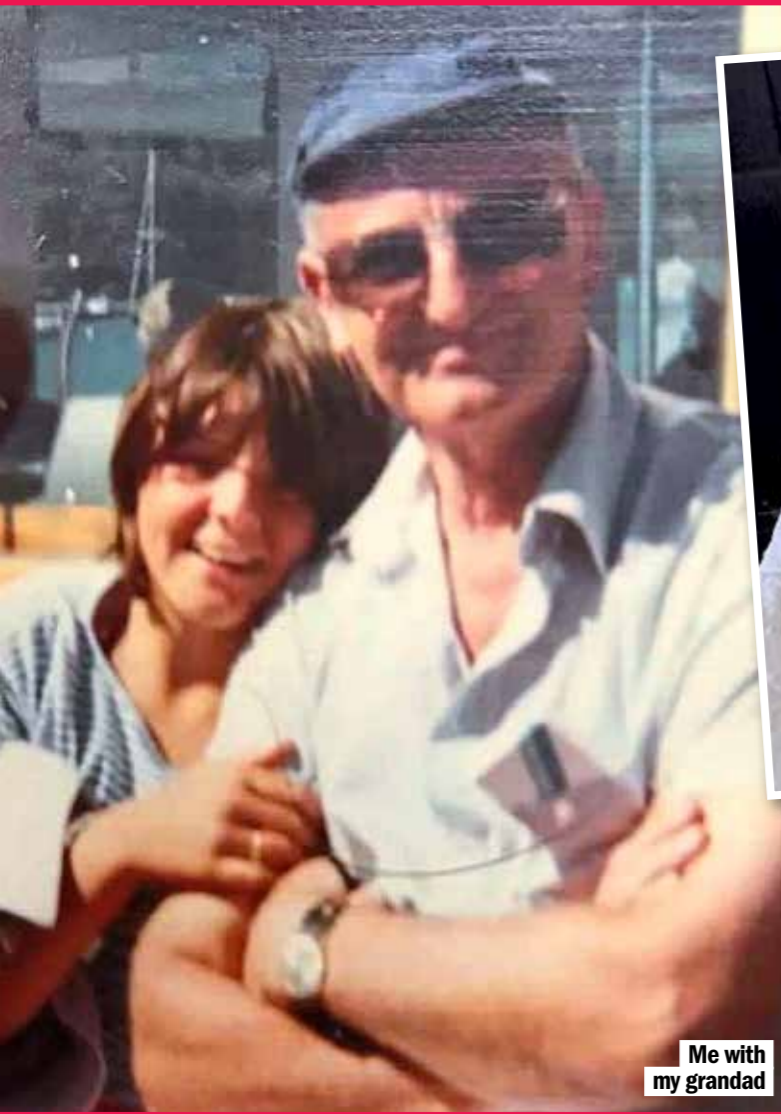
I was only eight and I felt shocked and confused.

I'd never once seen Dad hurt Mum and he'd never raised a hand to me or my sisters either, so it didn't

Mum

**'Go and get ready with your sisters'**

# 'I have to find them'



Me with my grandad



Janet and me

make any sense. My sisters were definitely too little to understand what Dad had done, or that we were never going to see Mum again. But they were scared and unsettled all the same, so I just hugged them tightly and said, 'It'll be OK.' The days of driving meant we were now in John O'Groats, miles and miles from home, and we were placed in foster care there at first. As the eldest, I immediately took on the role of mother, taking care of my little sisters and doing my best to protect

them. Janet, especially, clung to my side, following me round like a shadow. A few weeks later, we were driven back to a foster home near Newport, and told we'd be adopted by a local family. However, one morning, a member of staff at the home took me away from my sisters for a chat. 'Theresa, it's come to our attention that Malcolm Barnes isn't your real father,' she said, softly. 'We have found your biological father.' A fresh wave of confusion hit me. I'd had no idea that Malcolm wasn't my dad. It's

what I'd called him, and I couldn't remember a time when he and Mum weren't together. I couldn't understand how Malcolm could be my sisters' father, but not mine. Before I'd even had chance to get used to this, I was taken to another room and introduced to a man and woman I'd never seen before. 'This is your dad and stepmum,' I was told. As they said hello to me, I felt suddenly shy and clammed up. I was relieved when I was allowed to go back to my sisters. Then two weeks on, they returned and I was told, 'They're taking you out for the day.' But that wasn't true, because they drove me to their home in London and Dad said, 'You'll be living

here now.' 'What about my sisters?' I cried. 'You won't be seeing them and you're not to mention them ever again,' he said. His words felt like a knife to my heart. In the space of a few weeks I'd lost Mum and the man I'd believed was my father. Now, I'd been

**'I don't want to have any regrets'**

torn away from my baby sisters too. I soon discovered my real dad was a cruel, aggressive man. But my stepmum was kind and loving, and she took care of me along with her dad, who became my new grandad. As I got older, I never stopped missing my little sisters and I often wondered where they were and if they were happy. I'd think about Mum too, but scared of Dad, I kept it all inside. In time, my stepmum had a little boy. And eventually,

she had enough of Dad's behaviour. One day, when he was out, she told me, 'We're leaving.' We bundled as much of our stuff as we could into the back of a cab and escaped to a flat she'd found for me, her and my little brother. Leaving Dad behind gave me the strength to carve out my own life. In time, I

trained as a mental health counsellor and moved to the Isle of Wight. I eventually met someone and settled down. And while I didn't often speak about my childhood, I confided in them about what had happened. Over the years, I thought about finding my sisters. But then I'd think, *What if they don't remember me? Or feel like I wasn't a proper sister because we didn't have the same dad?* When I did feel brave enough to try, I discovered our files were sealed. And with no help from the authorities, I quickly hit a brick wall. But the older I got, the bigger that missing part of my life felt. As my 60th birthday loomed, I told my partner, 'I don't want to have any regrets. I'm going to try to find my sisters.' I found a long-lost family group on Facebook, and gave their researchers all

of the details I had. Within 48 hours, one of them came back to me and said, *I think I've found your sisters.* I decided to reach out to Janet first, but it was a couple of weeks before I plucked up the courage to call her. 'Janet? It's me Theresa, your sister,' I said, when she answered. Emotion cracked in her voice as she said, 'Oh God, I thought I was going to die without knowing you again.' After years spent agonising about whether she'd want to hear from me, her words were overwhelming. We talked about what we remembered about Mum and the night she died, and Janet told me how devastated they'd been when I'd been taken away from them. 'We never had a proper goodbye,' she said. Their adoption hadn't been a happy one and that broke my heart. 'I was made to feel so guilty for what he had done,' Janet said. I opened up to her about my dad too. Janet confessed she'd tracked me down a few years ago, then got scared. 'I was worried you might not want anything to do with me, because it was my dad who'd killed Mum,' she said. Janet had been contacted by our old babysitter too. She used to look after us in the evenings, even though Dad was around, because he used to drink and Mum didn't trust him. 'She remembered how

**'We never had a proper goodbye'**

loving our mum was,' she explained. After talking for hours, we decided to meet up. And two weeks later, I travelled to Cardiff to visit her. As my train pulled in, I saw Janet barge through the barrier and on to the platform without a ticket. I rushed off the train and we fell into each other's arms and hugged. Over the next hours, we barely paused for breath as we caught up on the last 50 years of our lives. 'I have two grown-up sons,' she told me. 'You'll have to meet them!' But there was something Janet wanted to show me first. 'I found Mum's grave,' she said, and my eyes filled with tears. As kids, we hadn't even been allowed to go to our mother's funeral. Now I could finally say goodbye. We headed to the cemetery. And while Mum's grave was unmarked, just seeing where she'd been laid to rest felt so emotional. 'We miss you, Mum,' I wept. 'We've never stopped thinking about you.' During my visit, Janet and I looked through old newspaper archives to piece together what happened in 1973. We read that Malcolm had bludgeoned Mum to death with a hammer while we slept, because she was going to leave him and take us with her. He'd been jailed for 23 years after admitting murder, but had been released after serving

only nine. He'd died just a few years earlier, without ever seeing his daughters again. One article claimed Mum 'liked a gay life' and had been neglecting us. But Janet's conversation with our old babysitter had reinforced our memories. 'She was a great mum and she adored us,' I said, firmly. Now we're reunited, Janet and I speak all the time and she's been to the Isle of Wight to visit me too. I've spoken to our younger sisters too, which has been incredible. It's shocking that what happened to our mum almost 53 years ago is still happening to women. So, together, Janet and I want to campaign to combat violence against women and girls. We want to use our story to encourage other women to speak out and not be afraid. It will also be a way to keep our wonderful mum's memory alive. Malcolm's act of violence all those years ago didn't just take Mum from us, it tore our family apart. But reuniting with my sisters has filled that part of me that's been missing ever since. And we are determined to make up for all that lost time.

even been allowed to go to our mother's funeral. Now I could finally say goodbye. We headed to the cemetery. And while Mum's grave was unmarked, just seeing where she'd been laid to rest felt so emotional. 'We miss you, Mum,' I wept. 'We've never stopped thinking about you.' During my visit, Janet and I looked through old newspaper archives to piece together what happened in 1973. We read that Malcolm had bludgeoned Mum to death with a hammer while we slept, because she was going to leave him and take us with her. He'd been jailed for 23 years after admitting murder, but had been released after serving



Us now

By Danielle Lett and Olivia Stringer