

In Memory Of My Little Sister Susanna

I was seven years old when my mother aborted my little sister, Susanna. I already had two younger brothers but they'd come along when I was still too young to really appreciate them, at seven I was just the right age to get happily self-important about helping with a new baby. I must have overheard that my mum was pregnant because I went around telling people how much I was looking forward to a new brother or sister.

I learnt about the abortion in stages. First of all, Mum claimed that the baby would have been handicapped – it was only later that she felt able to admit that hers was an abortion for social reasons, not medical ones.

My father pressured my mother into the procedure and, although they didn't divorce till I was an adult, I'm convinced that my parents' marriage died the same day as that little girl (Mum was sure that the baby would have been a girl and since she was accurate about all three of us, she is likely to have been right). How it was that my Dad could love my mother (because he did, when he was terminally ill and mother brought herself to visit him, his face lit up at the sight of her, 20 years after their divorce) and yet not recognise that here was a woman whose whole vocation was for motherhood, I will never understand.

As an eldest child, I was precocious, and, because I was older than the others, I was allowed to stay up later. Dad worked the night shift, so it was just me and Mum, and we would make tea and toast, and Mum used to talk to me about history, about different beliefs, and about ethics – abortion was a frequent topic. As an adult, when I learnt of my mum's abortion, I realised why the ethics of abortion had so often come up in our discussions. The situations mum described to me were not necessarily cases that she had encountered when she was nursing but were rather a chance for her to talk about the issue in an attempt to find some understanding and comfort.

When my mum did open up to me she described how on the day of the abortion she lay on the couch at the clinic, and wanted nothing more than to run out of the door – she just wanted to protect her baby. She stayed because she didn't dare return home still pregnant. One Christmas, when I was an adult, mum asked me if I would buy her a life size baby doll as her present. After she told me of the abortion, I realised why that doll, in her Moses basket with her sets of pretty frocks, and her lace trimmed christening gown, had been so important to her.

As a young man, one of my brothers had a girlfriend who already had a baby boy with cystic fibrosis. They lived with Mum, and she helped to care for Davey. When they separated, Mum said to me "My arms ache for that baby". I later realised that baby Davey wasn't the only one for whom she felt that yearning. After a few years, the ex-girlfriend reached out to Mum, and mum was re-united with Davey, and with his, by then, four siblings. Five years before Mum's death, Davey died aged 16 as a result of cystic fibrosis. Mum was shattered, completely devastated. As bad as losing Davey unquestionably was, I am convinced that it re-awakened the earlier loss of Susanna.

Mum described to me how she worked out when Susanna's birthday would have been and used to look at the children in the school playgrounds, year on year, and think "My Susanna would have been that age now." (I'm tearing up as I write this, at the thought of her enduring such raw agony).

Although I knew that I had been a much wanted child (Mum described to me how, on learning from her GP said that she was pregnant, she walked on air all the way home), when you find out that a sibling has died in that way, you can't help but think 'That could have been me. I could have been the one who was conceived last'

My mum, an ex-nurse, had her abortion in 1970, three years after abortion had been legalized. For the next 44 years until she died, mum mourned that child. The last time we were all together was on my mum's birthday. My two brothers and I were with her, mum burst into tears, and when we asked what was wrong, she said 'I've had a really lovely birthday with you all – but something is missing – there should have been four of you.' Some people say that abortions would happen anyway irrespective of the law but I know my mum wouldn't have considered going to a back-street abortionist. If the 1967 Abortion Act had not been passed my mum would never have had an abortion and my little sister Susanna would be here today.