

Living without my sister

Twenty years after losing her twin, novelist Diana Evans still feels incomplete, yet she's finding ways to share the loss – and celebrate her sibling's life – with her children

My children have never known their aunt. She lives inside picture frames and memories. She is a white stone cross in a cemetery a long drive away, which we visit periodically with flowers. While we are there, my daughter makes some kind of arrangement of twigs at the foot of the grave, as an offering to her invisible aunt. Afterwards, she and her younger brother play among the stones, chasing each other and finding sticks. It is a perpetual sadness to me that they will never know my twin, or experience the fun and opportunity of having her in their lives.

She died 20 years ago. Were it an ordinary death – in as far as any death is ordinary – the matter of communicating it to my children would be more straightforward. Suicide is complicated. It's prickly, dangerous, loaded with potential pitfalls, mistakes and consequences. It poses a huge and, to a child's mind, possibly indigestible question: is being alive a choice? Is here and now personally extinguishable? After years of struggling with depression, my twin decided that it

was. She made that final, irreversible choice and made her exit from this world and I have missed her ever since, every day. She was my best friend, my reference point, my eternal comfort.

In her absence, my children are accustomed to an incomplete mother. The other mother, the completion, is verbal rather than visceral. She is a familiar history, a beautiful ghost who liked pink, who is spoken about in warm and wistful tones. We talk more about the life of her than the death, but the death is so much part of the life – it is, in fact, for them, the main event, because it is what deemed her invisible. Despite this, it has always felt right to me, through conversations with my children about death, that I would only reveal the finer details of their aunt's absence when they were ready.

On a summer's evening when my daughter was eight, we were walking to the shop to buy milk and a flash of my twin passed across her face. This happens sometimes, she looks a little like her and, momentarily, the likeness solidifies, emitting a particular glow, a little shock of resurrection. When I remarked on this to my daughter, she found it hilarious. 'Did you dress the same and look the same?' she asked. I told her that we looked alike but hadn't dressed the same, though we'd both liked wearing jeans, which she also found hilarious.

'How old was she when she died?' she asked.

'Twenty-six,' I said.

'What happened? Did you decide to play a game where you see who can hold their breath for the longest?'

Now I was laughing with her, it was one of those magical moments with a child where you are carried into the lightness and brightness of their existence where anything is possible. But this question also told me that my daughter was not yet ready. I told her that her aunt had died of an illness, which is a version of the truth. I tell my son the same thing when he asks what happened; an illness of the spirit, which took hold of the body and became the director of it, like someone bad hijacking a ship. It is essential that I do not lie, that what I tell them always contains the truth in some shape, laying the ground for the whole truth to come.

There is an element of my twin's death that remains indigestible to me, even after 20 years: the actual moment of extinction, the breaking of the cord, the imagined pain involved. I try not to think of this, but when I do I enter a dark place that I immediately fight to get out of, a place without breath or calm. Aside from this there is excruciating loneliness, which is both soothed and exacerbated by my children. In a sense they are the ultimate reference point, a much more pressing one, their needs providing a signpost and their love pouring endlessly into the empty space. In another sense, loneliness is self-knowledge, a kind of



completion and, in the context of family life, its value, as such, can be forgotten.

Recently my daughter turned 13. Her limbs have lengthened. She has acquired a fullness and a force of personality that seems deeply rooted in herself, capable of holding the information of the death, the reason behind her aunt's absence, without being accosted by it.

By chance, I come across a radio interview with the mother of James Bulger, in which she talks about not

shielding her surviving children from news reports of their brother's murder. Sometimes the world gives us signs, and this seems to me like a cue to finally lift the shield.

That evening, I sit down with my daughter in a quiet room and tell her of our tragedy. I do not give the precise logistics because they do not seem essential, helpful, or entirely relevant. What is important is that she knows about hope, and remembers to remember it when it is most needed. As we are talking, I imagine that my twin is in our midst, offering useful words and insights, helping me find the right language. My daughter listens with her wide, clear eyes and her enduring innocence.

'Sadness can be too much for a person,' I tell her, 'and they want to go away and leave the world behind. For us, though, this is not an option. You talk to someone or you do something that you love to do.' And then we talk for a while about the things we love to do, such as making planets and hanging them from the ceiling or walking among trees or dancing around to loud music. During this conversation it seems that my daughter and I are becoming closer, that we are crossing a bridge together to an open space we both recognise. She understands and she deeply loves the woman she lost yet never knew but somehow knows.

'Those flowers in my room,' she says, 'the tall ones on my desk – which one do you think she'd like?'

'You choose,' I say.

The next time we go to the cemetery, my daughter brings this tall yellow flower from her room and places it in the ground before the cross with new awareness. The sun shines harder for a moment through the big tree in the distance, like a smile, an acknowledgement. This is how she speaks to us. She is bigger than life, beyond us and within us at the same time.

Diana Evans is the author of 26a, which deals with twin loss, and The Wonder. Her new novel, Ordinary People (Chatto & Windus), is out now.

'SHE WAS MY BEST FRIEND, MY ETERNAL COMFORT'

