How Could He Do It?

Emma Charles

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Extract

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In many ways we were an ordinary family: mum, dad, two kids, three dogs, one rabbit, two guinea pigs. Mum stayed at home, studying with the Open University, and Dad worked, and the kids went to private schools. We lived in a rather nice semi in a rather nice area of Edinburgh, with a rather nice Volvo in the drive, and took rather nice holidays, wearing rather nice clothes. I loved Daniel deeply and I thought – no, I was sure – he loved me deeply, too. And we both loved our kids deeply (I thought). And that was as it should be. We had it made.

In some ways we weren't a completely ordinary family. There was Daniel, for one; he worked for most of the time we were married as a ship's engineer, and so he was away from home for up to four months and then home on leave for up to two. And his name: Schenker. His father's family came from Switzerland, where Daniel was born, and his father still owned a house and land there, but his parents were now settled in Glasgow. Tamsin, our older daughter,

had specific learning difficulties and attended a specialist boarding school, and Claire, our younger daughter, had asthma.

But I'm just ordinary: an unlikely heroine. I am disabled because of back problems, and I use crutches outside the house. I'm pretty fat – I've put on a lot of weight through lack of exercise and, yes, comfort-eating! I've still got acne and I wear glasses. Not the stuff of movies.

But I never for a moment dreamt that my family was all that extraordinary – until that day.

10 December 1996

It started out as a good day, that early December Tuesday. Claire, who had just turned thirteen, was safely installed in her small private school for the day. Tamsin, who was fifteen, had an interview at Glasgow University for a place on an adventure trip to Sinai the following summer. As a treat she was allowed to wear the new clothes which were to be her Christmas present. She looked very smart and grown up in a short tartan kilted skirt and lambswool polo neck, topped by a chocolate wool blazer, and with gleaming brown boots on her feet. Her hair had just been cut to shoulder length and it framed her face in a shining chestnut sheet.

In high spirits we drove through to Glasgow and found the right building (just in time), and I waited in the car while Tamsin went in alone. Half an hour later she emerged beaming all over; it seemed the interview had gone very well. Then we set off to visit Daniel's parents for lunch.

It was always a bit of a strain visiting the in-laws. Mother made no secret of the fact that she wore the trousers, although

in the best possible taste, and this was even more evident since Father's stroke a couple of years previously, which had left him with a paralysed arm and leg, and not much short-term memory. I always got the impression Mother was trying to cause rifts between me and Daniel, which secretly amused me. It didn't stop until after Claire was born.

Anyway, it was a pretty average visit. Mother brought up the fact that I hadn't sent her any photographs of the girls for years (in a way that made it obvious that she was hurt, but wasn't going to complain – do mothers-in-law go through a training course in making you feel guilty?) and I promised to send some. I then realised that I had forgotten to bring my late uncle's stamp collection, left to Tamsin, for Father to value. At some point in the conversation, Tamsin called her father 'a silly boy' and was reprimanded by Mother, who made it clear that she thought I should have been doing the reprimanding. But that was a bit difficult, since on that point I agreed with Tamsin.

Finally we were released and, as always when leaving there, the first thing I did while pulling out of the drive was to light a cigarette (Mother is a self-righteous ex-smoker). I was looking forward to spending some time with Tamsin during the Christmas holidays – I missed her during term time. She attended a specialist school for high-ability dyslexics as a weekly boarder (paid for by the local authority, I hasten to add – we have never been that well off), and had a month's holiday at Christmas and Easter because they didn't have any half-term holidays. We chatted as we drove along the motorway about how she would spend her holidays. That was when the first hint of discord arose.

'Can I phone Jane tonight?' Tamsin asked casually.

'You phoned her last night,' I pointed out. 'We have to think of the phone bill,' for she had been on the phone to Jane for nearly an hour – Jane was a friend from school.

'Well, can I have my own phone for Christmas then?' persisted Tamsin.

'I don't think so!' I replied. 'Who's going to pay the bills?'

'I'll pay them out of my pocket money,' she replied.

'But we give you your pocket money, so we'll still end up paying them,' I explained. I wasn't prepared to give way on this, and began pointing out the sacrifices Daniel and I made for her and Claire. But for once, Tamsin was impervious to reasoned argument.

We arrived home and, feeling somewhat exasperated and ruffled, I went off to fetch Claire from school. She trailed out as usual, carrying her rucksack of books and wearing her version of school uniform. She could not wear tights then without developing eczema on her thighs; so in winter she wore black leggings under her school skirt. The skirt was almost full length, which was just as well as she insisted on wearing jodhpur boots under it. Her light blonde hair was cut in a chin-length bob, and the adult hairstyle and her height made her look much older than she was.

On the way home, Claire asked how the day had gone. I told her about Tamsin's demand for her own phone, and Claire seemed to agree that was somewhat unreasonable. But she could offer no explanation for Tamsin's behaviour.

The argument continued all through the evening. By now I was really puzzled and hurt. Tamsin began making personal attacks on Daniel and me, something she had never done. Again and again I pointed out that she and

Claire had everything we could afford to give them, and we did without things we wanted for their sake.

'So adopt me out!' snapped Tamsin.

I could not believe that this was my Tamsin; she was so unlike her usual self. We squabbled, like all mothers and daughters, but about tidying rooms and picking up mess and cleaning out the rabbit and guinea pigs – we never said hurtful, personal things to each other. At bedtime we did kiss goodnight as usual, but for the first time in Tamsin's life, we parted with an unresolved argument and a coolness between us.

11 December 1996

The next day I woke Claire, we walked our three dogs, and I took her to school as usual. No sound from Tamsin's room. I spent the day writing Christmas cards and pottering around. I heard occasional sounds from Tamsin's room, but she didn't come out. I was still hurt and angry, wondering where the argument had come from and what was the best way to handle it. For once, I decided, I would let Tamsin come to me. Often if we had a disagreement I would make the first move to reconciliation – after all, I was supposed to be an adult, I had to show her how adults resolve their difficulties. But not this time. If she was old enough to demand a phone, she was old enough to explain herself. Doubts crept in through the day – she did have learning difficulties; she'd had a hard time being bullied at her last school. But then I would catch myself softening, and resolve anew that this time it would be different. And so my thoughts see-sawed all day.

In the afternoon I fetched Claire from school.

'Has Tamsin said anything yet?' asked Claire in the car.

'Not a word,' I said grimly. 'I really don't know what's got into her, Claire, she's never behaved like this before.'

At home I decided that enough was enough and went into Tamsin's room, to find that she had actually been asleep most of the day.

'So, have you decided whether you want to be part of our family?' I asked, hating myself.

'Not bothered,' mumbled Tamsin, who had closed herself off from me.

'I don't believe I'm hearing this, Tamsin,' I stuttered, trying not to cry. 'We've done everything we can to make your life as good as possible.'

'You have no idea what I've been through,' she snapped.

'Okay, I know you had a tough time at your last school because of the bullying, but at least your mum and dad have always made sure you know we love you!'

'Maybe you love me too much!'

I recoiled, aghast, and began crying, against all my resolutions. Leaving Tamsin to stew, I wandered around downstairs. Claire was watching TV in the sitting room; I went into the dining room, where I found a pile of Tamsin's possessions lying where she'd dropped them when she came home from school the previous week. In a sudden fury I gathered them together and dumped them in Tamsin's room, saying, 'Well, if you're leaving home, you'll need these!' Then I returned to the sitting room and sat crying. I hated myself for not being able to handle it calmly, but I was also very angry and hurt. Claire was really upset too, and hugged me.

Suddenly, Tamsin burst into the room and flung a piece of paper at me. She called her dog and stormed out of the

house while I was still trying to read and absorb the contents of the note.

'Your preshus Daniel has been after my tits and cunt for the last five years. I have to leave or he has to, and you seem to need him. And fuck you, you probly wont beleave me anyway.'

In those few seconds, my whole world came tumbling down. I could almost hear it. Bricks falling into rubble, like you see when a building is blown up. I could almost see the dust, and the dust obscured my vision, and the noise blasted my hearing, so that for a few moments I was blind and deaf.

Claire ran into the room. 'She's gone out and taken Sally, and she's got a bag with her! What's wrong, Mum, what's happening?'

Quickly I folded the note so that Claire couldn't see it. Some part of me was still hoping it was all a misunderstanding.

'It's about Dad. Run after her, I'll follow you in the car,' I cried, struggling to my feet and lifting the car keys. Claire ran out into the early evening gloom, and I climbed into the car. Wiping away more tears in an effort to see clearly, I backed out of the drive and drove around the corner to the main road, where I met Claire returning from the cycle track.

'She's not on the railway path,' she yelled.

Just then a woman whom we often met while walking the dogs, called over from the footpath.

'Are you looking for your daughter? She went down towards the shops.'

'Run after her, Claire,' I shouted, 'get hold of her and don't let go until I come, whatever she does!'

Claire sped down the main road as I turned our big Volvo and drove after her. Parking by the shops, I could see in the street lights that Claire was clinging to Tamsin's coat, while Tamsin tried to swing her off. Sally was barking as her lead became entangled in the girls' legs. I flung myself out of the car towards them.

'Come home and talk about this,' I begged desperately, but Tamsin wouldn't look at me and continued to throw Claire around.

I shouted Tamsin's name, grabbed her by the shoulders and made her face me; she looked up, startled. 'You can't say things like this and then walk away,' I continued more quietly, aware that we now had an audience of interested onlookers. 'Come home and tell me about it.' She had begun to turn away when I added, 'Nobody hurts my kids and gets away with it. Nobody!'

Tamsin looked into my eyes and must have been reassured by what she saw. Silently she made her way to the car and climbed with Sally and her bag into the back, while Claire and I got in the front. At home I sent Claire up to her room. She was really frightened by now and crying bitterly, but I wanted to protect her if I could. Tamsin and I sat down in the sitting room.

'Well?' I asked in a conciliatory tone. 'Tell me about it.'

'He won't leave me alone,' she cried. 'He's always putting his arms round me and feeling me up. He brushes against my breasts so I know it's not accidental but he could persuade someone else it was.'

Hope blossomed in my mind. Maybe it was just a misunderstanding, an over-tactile father who would have to learn to respect his daughter's personal space.

'Has he ever touched you between your legs?' I asked.

Hope died.

'Last time he was home on leave,' she sobbed, 'I woke up one morning and he was all over me, and he put his fingers inside me!'

'Are you sure?' I pleaded, 'because you'll have to tell police and social services.'

She nodded. Aware that inside me an earthquake was beginning, I looked up the number, phoned social services and asked for a child protection officer. I could speak when spoken to; tears were falling from my eyes, but I couldn't attend to my feelings. I just knew I had to do the right thing, and that you were supposed to report abuse to social services. Eventually I was passed on to the duty child protection officer – a man, of course!

'Where is the child now?' asked the social worker.

'At home with me.'

'Where is the father?'

'He's in the Far East at the moment – he won't be back until January.'

'Oh, that's all right then,' replied the social worker happily. 'We'll send someone to see you tomorrow. Someone will phone you first thing.' As the sounds of my distress penetrated to him, he added in a gentler tone, 'This has obviously come as a shock to you, hasn't it?'

'Yes,' I mumbled through my tears.

'Well, try to get some sleep. We'll talk to you tomorrow. Bye.'

I put the phone down and, of its own volition, my body wracked itself in spasms of tears. Loud wails issued of their own accord from my mouth: I was horrified by the noise

but powerless to stop it. I was appalled that Tamsin had been treated so; dimly aware that this spelt the end of my marriage, I was grief-stricken; and I was also very frightened. My whole world had shifted in a monstrous cataclysm, and somewhere inside I knew the shift was irreversible.

'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!' howled Tamsin as she flung herself into my arms.

'It's NOT YOUR FAULT!' I yelled as loudly as I could. I could hear Claire sobbing in her room, and I said more calmly, 'Go and fetch your sister. Tell her to come down and see me.' I smiled through my tears to convince Tamsin that I was all right. 'Go on.' I nodded, and Tamsin ran upstairs. Claire burst into the sitting room and demanded, 'What's happened? You have to tell me, he's my dad too!'

'He's been touching your sister where he shouldn't,' I replied grimly, and her face blanched.

'He wouldn't do that, it's not true!' she gasped.

'I'm sorry, sweetheart, it is true,' I said, and she started to cry again. We rocked in each other's arms and Tamsin found us like that.

'I'm so sorry, Mum,' she said tremulously, but I began again the litany that I still repeat now.

'It's not your fault!'

'What's going to happen to us?' asked Tamsin anxiously.

'We're going to stick together and we'll be fine,' I said firmly. 'A social worker is coming tomorrow, and we'll work things out from there.'

I made a determined effort to stop crying and went to the kitchen to start dinner, but as soon as I was alone, the tears flowed again. It was as though my whole body

had turned to salt water and was flooding out of me. Tamsin came up and gently took away the potatoes and knife.

'Go and sit down, Mum, I'll do it,' she said kindly.

I wandered back to the sitting room and found Claire crying quietly. I lit yet another cigarette and cuddled her. What can you say when your child's heart is breaking and you can't stop the pain or make it go away? Especially when your own heart is lying around in microscopic pieces.

My kids are wonderful. Claire began to comfort me and Tamsin kept popping her head round the door with updates on the fate of our meal.

When it came I tried desperately hard to eat it so as not to hurt Tamsin's feelings, but I couldn't eat much. It was really weird. My mind was working more or less normally but I couldn't stop crying. I lit one cigarette after another. Tamsin kept a constant supply of tea at my elbow.

The girls ate with me, and then went to the kitchen where I could hear them conferring. Tamsin came in.

'Who can we phone for you, Mum?' she asked gently. A part of me was vaguely amazed at the difference in her since she told me about the abuse – it was as if she had suddenly dropped the tons of chains which had been weighing her down for years, as I suppose she had. Suddenly she was an adult and in charge and capable, in a way she never had been before.

I mentioned my friend Jenny and the minister, George. Jenny didn't answer her phone but George did. Tamsin said merely that I was upset and needed to talk, and he offered to visit that evening.

I went to the kitchen for my painkillers, and paused in amazement – all the medicines had vanished from the cupboard.

'Just ask when you need something and I'll get it for you,' said Tamsin, appearing at my side with Claire.

'Where are all the drugs?' I asked in bewilderment.

'We were frightened you would take too many,' quavered Claire with tears in her eyes.

'I wouldn't do that to you,' I cried, the tears falling again. 'How could I leave you now when you need me most?' and I hugged them to me. 'I will never leave you!'

We clung to each other for a few minutes. Tamsin replaced all the drugs and topped up my tea, and I sat down again and lit another cigarette while trying to watch TV and to stop crying. But I couldn't. Claire sat with me while Tamsin washed up, and eventually I managed to dry myself up for a bit.

George arrived about eight o'clock; the girls let him in and then went upstairs. I had talked over problems with George before and knew him as a shy but kind man. I tried to tell him what had happened but couldn't. Mutely I passed him the note that Tamsin had written. He read it and looked at me.

'Do you know this is true?' he asked.

I don't know how I knew, I just did. Tamsin hadn't lied to me about anything since she was about six, and in my mind incongruities were clicking into place, events, incidents which had puzzled me at the time but now made sense. There were to be lots of those.

I can't remember now what George said, but somehow he turned the discussion to practicalities.

'What did the social worker say about telling Daniel that you know?' he asked.

'They didn't really say anything, someone is supposed to be coming tomorrow,' I replied in rising panic. 'I hadn't thought about that. What do I do if he phones?'

'It might be as well not to say anything just now, if you can do it,' he advised. 'It might be a good idea not to say anything to anyone until you have seen the social worker and the police.'

George stayed with me for a couple of hours and then took his leave. The girls came downstairs to see if I was all right, and the routine of bedtime began to unfold. Claire begged to be allowed to stay off school for the next few days and I agreed. The following evening there was to be a Christmas party at the dog-training class which Claire attended with her puppy Lucy, and it was agreed that Tamsin would take Sally and my dog, Fly. Claire insisted on giving me one of her teddy bears to cuddle, and would not be satisfied until I had promised I would cuddle it – she knows I always keep my promises. I sat with her in her room while she cried herself to sleep, and then Tamsin came with me into my room. We often had chats alone after Claire had gone to bed, but that night I was exhausted by the storm of emotion I was undergoing, and we didn't talk for long. I did discover that Tamsin's friend Jane knew about the abuse, and that was why Tamsin had so desperately wanted to talk to her every night. Tamsin fussed around making sure I had everything I needed, and finally took herself off to bed.

As soon as I was alone, the floodgates opened again. My eyes were so sore from crying that I could hardly keep them

open, but even with the aid of my usual sleeping pill it was a long time before I slept. I kept going over our lives in my mind, trying to spot where it all began to go wrong, to see if there had been signs I should have picked up.