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## Just One More Day

**Susan Lewis**

### Chapter One

#### Susan

I'm very brave. No-one else knows I'm being brave, because I haven't told them. It's a secret - between me and my dad.

I'm sitting at my desk now, in my classroom, watching the teacher chalk things up on the blackboard. It's something about poetry, but I'm not really paying attention, which would make Daddy cross, because he loves poems. I've got a lot to think about though, because it's not always easy being brave, and I have to make sure I'm doing it right.

As I think about it, I stare up at the big, oblong window with twelve square panes, where I can only see milkcoloured sky outside. If I stood on a chair to look I'd see the library next door, Warmley Hill and the petrol station opposite where my friends and I sometimes sneak into the ladies' toilets to play doctors and nurses. But that's another secret and I'm definitely never going to tell anyone about that - not even Daddy. And if Mummy ever found out I know she'd tell the police, because she already nearly did once. That was when she caught me and my friend Janet in the garden, pulling down our swimming costumes to show the boys our chests. We were so scared when Mummy came storming out of the house, telling us we were wicked and that she was taking us to the police, that we ran and hid in Mr Weiner's shed. SINGING THE WALLS Mummy wouldn't look for us there, because Mr Weiner's German and Mummy doesn't have anything to do with him because she still hasn't forgiven him for the war. Daddy has, but Daddy forgives everyone for everything.

Today my hair is in plaits with two white bows at the end of each one. Grown-ups are always going on about my hair, saying how lovely it is, all thick and red and curly, but it's all right for them, they don't have to put up with Mummy's brushing every morning, or the horrid, smelly boys in my class who call me Ginger and pull it. Granny told me once that Mummy, whose hair is the exact same colour (I bet Granny never used to be so mean



with a brush when Mummy was little), used to beat people up if they called her Ginger, or worse, Ginge. I've never done that, but I do get really angry, especially on the days when Mummy forces my hair up into a high-topped ponytail that the boys keep swinging on, then running away before I can punch their noses.

I've got freckles too. I hate them. But even worse are the glasses I have to wear. As if they don't make me look stupid enough, the right lens since I was six (I'm seven now) has been covered up with a white patch to make my left eye see properly. It doesn't though, so I have to keep peering over the top so I can read my books and watch the telly. When Mummy spots me she puts her fingers under my chin and tilts my head up again. She's very strict and won't ever let me take them off. But even she laughed when we first got them from the optician. I was sulking and wanted to cry because I knew already how stupid I was going to feel in them, and how much fun everyone was going to poke at me. Then the optician gave us a pair of round National Health frames, which came for free, and when I put them on Mummy split her sides laughing. I love it when Mummy laughs, because it always makes me laugh too.

I think I'm being quite brave at the moment, because I don't mind that Mummy won't be there when I get home after school. The first time she wasn't there I was more frightened than when Daddy took us across the Clifton Suspension Bridge and we looked all the way down at the river. I was little then and hid behind Daddy's legs. I still don't like looking down when I'm high up, and I don't really like it when Mummy's not there, but I'm being brave, so I won't cry. I expect Gary will though. He's my brother, who's four years younger than me, which makes him only three, so he's allowed to cry. If I feel like crying too, I'll wait till I'm on my own so no-one will see, because I don't want Daddy to know I'm afraid in case it makes him afraid too. You see, it's all right to be scared of the dark, and of spiders and witches and things, and to make Daddy sit at the bottom of the stairs singing and telling his silly jokes while I go to the toilet, but it's not all right to be scared about Mummy not being there, because that's just silly when we know she's coming back.

Five and twenty ponies,  
Trotting through the dark -  
Brandy for the Parson  
'Baccy for the Clerk;  
Laces for a lady, letters for a spy,  
Watch the wall, my darling, while the Gentlemen go by!

The teacher's reciting my favourite poem now. I recite it to Granny sometimes, though I keep forgetting bits, which makes her chuckle and then she hugs me to her chest, which is like a great big fluffy pillow. Granny is Mummy's mummy and is very old and lives in a house full of ornaments and photographs and bottles of stout that she likes to drink. She plays bingo a lot too, either at the Regal in Staple Hill, or the Vandyke in Fishponds, or near us, at the Made-for-Ever youth club. When she goes there Mummy usually goes with her, and if it's Saturday, and I've been good, they take me for the first session, and let me have my own card to cross off the numbers. I



won a pound once, but I can't remember what I did with it now. After the first session Daddy comes to pick me up and take me home to bed. Later, Mummy and Granny walk back to our house, then Daddy drives Granny home in his blue Morris car.

Daddy doesn't like bingo very much. Or telly. He prefers books, which he reads under a lamp in the front room, while Mummy watches her favourite programmes all snuggled up by the fire in the dining room. It's lovely snuggling up with her, but she doesn't let me stay up very late. I have to go to bed earlier than everyone else on our street, probably than everyone in the whole wide world, which is horrible, because in the summer I can still hear my friends playing outside. But Mummy won't give in. She's really strict, and sometimes I don't like her very much. She makes me want to go and live on an island where no grown-ups are allowed, and children can do anything they want whenever they want. Daddy read me a story about it once, and I've always remembered it, because that's where I'm going to go if I ever run away. My dad's the best story-reader in all the world. He sits out on the landing every night, between my and Gary's bedrooms, and tells us all about Alice, or Pooh, or Brer Rabbit, or my absolute favourite, Naughty Amelia Jane. I want to be like her, but Mummy wouldn't put up with it.

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Mummy's going to miss Coronation Street tonight. She hates missing it, and never does, unless she has to go away, like now. I wonder if there are tellies where she is. Children aren't allowed in, so I don't know. Usually, Gary and I go to Granny's while Daddy visits her. Sometimes I go with Daddy, but I have to wait outside in the car.

It's half past three now, because Mr Dobbs, the headmaster, is ringing the bell, which echoes up and down the corridors, and we all stand up to say 'goodnight' to Mrs Taylor, our teacher, which seems a bit silly when it's not night at all.

Me and Sophie (she's my new best friend) go to get our coats from the cloakroom, and even though it's going to be May next week, it's still a bit cold outside, so we make sure all our buttons are done up. Then, with our satchels strapped across us, we join the crowd gathering round the lollipop lady who's always there to see us across the road.

'Got any money for sweets?' Sophie asks me. 'I spent all mine on tuck.'

'My dad gave me tuppence this morning,' I tell her. 'I've still got a penny ha'penny left.'



'Hey, it's Ginge with the one eye!' Kelvin Milton shouts, and he pulls so hard on one of my plaits that I scream and try to bash him with my fists. I always miss though, because he's too fast.

'Cry baby, cry baby!' two more boys start singing. Then some girls chime in, 'Cry baby! Cry baby! Susan's a baby.'

'One-eyed monster, you mean,' someone else shouts.

'Ginger biscuit.'

Sophie puts her arm round me, but I push her off.

'I hate you!' I scream at the grinning Kelvin Milton. 'I'm going to tell my mum about you.'

Kelvin merely pokes out his tongue and waggles his hands either side of his head. He looks like a cabbage flapping its leaves.

'Come on, come on,' the lollipop lady shouts. 'I can't hold the traffic all day.'

Sophie links my arm as we cross over. 'It's all right, they're just stupid,' she says. 'Let's go in the shop and get some sweets.'

I can't find my clean hanky so I dry my eyes with my coat sleeve. I hate Kelvin Milton so much that I'm going to think of something really evil and nasty to do to him. If I was a witch I'd turn him into a slug, then my brother would eat him, because my brother eats slugs. Or he did once, before Mummy snatched it away then stuck her fingers down his throat to make him sick.

The queue inside the corner tuck shop isn't very long, and no-one horrid is in there, because the horrid children never have any money. I just hope they're not waiting outside to steal our sweets. As we move up the queue Sophie and I greedily eye all the jars, mouths watering. What shall we have? A sherbert dip? A lucky bag? A packet of Smith's crisps with a little blue bag of salt? A penny-ha'penny would buy us three sticks of red liquorice, or six fruit salad chews, three white chocolate mice or six mojos. We end up getting four mojos, and two aniseed twists, which are Sophie's favourites. Even though Sophie's parents are rich, I don't mind paying for her, because she shared her potato puffs and Wagon Wheel with me at playtime.

She lives in a really big house with a tower and a weathercock on the top, and hundreds of rooms which are great for hide-and-seek, but I'm a bit nervous of the secret passageways and trapdoors under the rugs. If one of them opens up I could be swallowed down into the centre of the earth and might even end up in Australia, where Rolf Harris comes from, and I wouldn't be able to find my way home then. The paintings on the walls are really scary too, because the eyes move. It doesn't matter where I stand, they're always looking at me. I'm glad we don't have any paintings like that in our house, which isn't nearly so big as Sophie's. We don't own ours either.

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It belongs to the man from the council who comes round to collect the rent every week.

Kelvin Milton and his gang have gone when we go outside, so we're safe to share out the sweets. Sophie nudges me, and tells me to look. Marilyn Caldwell and Ruth Myers are crossing the street. They're in the fourth form and are exactly like me and Sophie want to be when we're eleven - pretty, popular, lots of friends, and all the boys after us. It'll probably happen for Sophie because she's already really pretty, but not for me with these stupid, horrible glasses and freckles.

'See you tomorrow then,' Sophie says, sucking on an aniseed twist and pocketing her mojos. She lives in the opposite direction so we can't walk home together.

I start walking along the road between the shop and the petrol station, going down Holly Hill, past the prefabs that were put up after the war, then the phone box outside Jackie Wilshire's house, and the small rank of shops where Mummy sometimes goes to get her cigarettes in Smarts, the newsagents, or some pork chops and chitlings in the butchers. I don't like the butcher much, he's always making rude jokes with Mummy and winking, and looking like he wants to kiss her.

Once I get past the shops I run up to the top of the tump then all the way down again. I like doing that, and I would have done it again, but then I remember that Mummy isn't going to be home and I don't feel like it any more. I skip on down the hill being brave and feeling very different from all the children swarming down the hill too. Their mothers will be waiting when they get home. They're lucky, but I bet they don't feel like a heroine in a book, the way I do, because I have to be grown-up now and take care of Dad and Gary. I'll cook their tea, make their beds, scrub the floors, chop wood, darn socks and vacuum up after them, because they always make a terrible mess, and wear my fingers to the bone, and what thanks will I get?

I asked Sophie once, 'Do you ever feel different to everyone else?'

'In what way?' she'd answered.

I didn't know how to put it into words so I just shrugged and didn't ask again.

The cul-de-sac we live in is called Greenways. It's a bit like a clock with the hands poking out the wrong way. The face is the green, where the boys play football and the girls do leapfrog. The hand that sticks out from nine o'clock is the way into the street, and our house is almost at the bottom of the hand that pokes off of six o'clock. I'm still skipping as I turn into the street, plaits flying as I bob past Julie and Adam Prentice's house - Adam, who's a year older than me, has iron things on his leg because he had polio when he was little - then I speed past Mr and Mrs Weiner's because he's foreign, and also past the Crofts' house because they're a bad bunch whose garden is scruffy and whose uncle has been in prison. Sally Croft is three years older than me and already smokes and goes out with boys.





'She'll come to a bad end, that girl,' Mummy always says when we see her. 'I don't want you going near her.'

A lot of our neighbours are scared of Mummy because she's tall and always speaks her mind. They're her friends too, because they're always coming in our house for cups of tea and a fag and a chat about the kids. Most of the houses down our bit of the street have children about the same age as me and Gary, so there's always a lot for the mums to discuss.

Since no-one's in at our house I skip on by, still brave, and go next door to Mrs Williams, who's looking out of the window, holding Gary up in her arms so he can see me coming. I give them a wave and push open the yellow gate to carry on skipping down the front path to the front door. Gary immediately drags me into the living room where he's been playing cars in the cardboard garage that Mr Williams, who looks like the film star Robert Mitchum, made for five-year-old Nigel.

I'm not really interested in his cars, so he says, 'Where's Mummy?'

'I don't know,' I tell him.

He looks at me with his big blue eyes and I think he's going to cry.

'Daddy'll be home soon,' Mrs Williams tells him. We like Mrs Williams. She's Mum's best friend, they even went to school together, and when I grow up I'm going to talk over the fence to my best-friend neighbour while hanging washing on the line, the way Mrs Williams and Mummy do.

Gary looks up at her. He's got freckles too, huge great big ones like cornflakes, and crew-cut hair the same colour. Everyone loves him, Mummy especially. I know he's her favourite, but I don't mind - he's my favourite too, when he's not getting on my nerves.

Mrs Williams gives me a glass of milk and a strawberry-jam sandwich which I take to the kitchen table to eat, while watching her wipe the dishes, making everything shine and clink as she puts them away. When I'm old enough I'm going to marry Geoffrey Williams, who's the same age as me, but in a different class at school, and who always dawdles home. We'll go courting, like my older cousins do, and I'll take a long umbrella with a crook handle to the pictures when it rains.

When Geoffrey comes in his mother tells him off for not even saying hello to me which I mind about quite a lot, but don't say anything. Gary and I watch as he shouts back at her, and stomps off upstairs. If we ever spoke to our mum like that we'd be put in a home, or get the hiding of our lives. Mrs Williams looks upset. She stoops down to give Gary a hug and tickles my face with the end of one plait.

After that we do a jigsaw, but Gary gets it all wrong, because he's too young and his fingers are clumsy. He tries to look important though, by resting his

chin in his hands and wagging his feet, the way I do, when I'm studying where to put the next piece.

'Daddy's here,' Mrs Williams eventually calls out from the kitchen. By then Gary and I are huddled in one of the armchairs watching Blue Peter on the telly, which he doesn't understand, and I don't like. I'm feeling grumpy now because Daddy's taken longer to come home than I expected, and Geoffrey's still upstairs in his bedroom, avoiding me.

Gary springs up and charges outside.

'Aren't you going too?' Mrs Williams asks me.

'I want to see the end of this,' I tell her.

I stay where I am, feeling angry with Daddy. Mrs Williams goes outside to talk to him over the fence, then Geoffrey comes down and sneers at the puzzle that I didn't manage to finish.

'This piece goes there,' he snottily informs me, pressing it into place.

'No it doesn't!' I cry.

'Yes it does. Look!'

I leap to my feet. 'It's a stupid puzzle anyway,' I shout.

'It's you who's stupid,' he calls after me.

'You won't say that after I've smashed your head in.'

'You and whose army?'

Anyway, I'm going to marry a smuggler when I grow up.

Later on, I'm standing in the doorway of our dining room watching Daddy giving Gary a cuddle. They're in one of the big brown armchairs either side of the fireplace, but it's not cold enough for the fire to be lit. Gary, like the baby he is, is crying for Mummy, but I'm still being brave. Anyway, I don't care that Mummy's not coming home, because I don't care about anything. I just stand and watch and think how stupid everyone is.

Daddy's face is handsome and pale and his hair is fair. His blue eyes always twinkle, and crinkle at the corners when he laughs. He's not quite as tall as Mummy, and he doesn't have a bad temper either, but it's still frightening when Mummy threatens to tell him if I've been naughty. I don't think he's ever smacked me though, not like Mummy, whose hand really stings my legs when she lets go. I don't like Mummy tonight. I don't like her at all.

'Want a cuddle too?' Daddy offers, holding out a hand to invite me onto his other knee.

I want to, but I shake my head and say, 'No. I've got to go and give Mandy and Bonnie their supper.' Mandy and Bonnie are my two favourite dolls, along with Teddy who I've had since I was a baby.

My bedroom is the prettiest of anyone's in the street. It has a pink padded headboard with flowers all over it, and the curtains round the dressing table match those at the window and the seat of the stool. I've got quite a big wardrobe for all my clothes, a fold-up doll's pushchair and cot, and a bright orange record player that I have to wind up. It doesn't play grown-up records like the one downstairs, only the nursery-rhyme children's kind, but that's all right, Mandy and Bonnie prefer them anyway.

My Bonnie lies over the ocean,  
My Bonnie lies over the sea,  
My Bonnie lies over the ocean,  
Oh bring back my Bonnie to me.

I stand watching the record go round and round, then suddenly I snatch the needle off. I don't want to listen to it any more. Not that one, so I put 'Bobby Shaftoe' on instead. Daddy sings that song sometimes, or 'Row, Row, Row the Boat', or silly songs that he makes up the words to. Because he's Welsh he's got a lovely voice. Not like Mummy and me, but I still want to be in the school choir one day. I'm quite good at ballet though, and I'm learning to play the piano. Daddy's probably going to call me downstairs soon to come and practise my scales. He might have forgotten though, and I won't remind him, even though it'll make Mummy cross if she finds out, because she's always saying that I have to practise every day - and ballet too.

Three weeks ago I started going to elocution classes. They're really embarrassing. The teacher talks all posh, and I feel really stupid saying things like How now brown cow the way the Queen does. Last week I saw Mummy, out of the corner of my eye, trying not to laugh, and in the end we had to leave because we couldn't stop laughing.

But that wouldn't be the end of it, Mummy warned me as we ran home through the rain. 'You're going to learn to talk proper, my girl, and make a real lady out of yourself.'

There was some talk, a while ago, about me going to a school over by the Downs, which is the really posh part of Bristol, where everyone lives in big houses and has servants, and all the snooty kids wear silly uniforms and ride horses at weekends. I hate horses and I'd rather die than go to one of those schools because I'd miss all my friends and get teased even more, which I told Mummy, furiously, stamping my feet and clenching my fists. I got sent straight to my room, and wasn't allowed to come out again until I could mind my manners. Fortunately no more's been said about it since, so I think she listened to me.

Taking off my glasses, which isn't allowed, I put my nurse's uniform on over my dress, then I hook the heartbeat listener around my neck to check on Mandy, who's been a bit off colour lately. She's lying on the bed with Bonnie and Teddy, propped up by a cushion. I'm probably a bit old for Teddy now,





but I let him sleep with us still because I know what it's like to be afraid in the night. When I get like that I usually creep in with Mummy and Daddy, so it's only right that Teddy has someone to make him feel better too.

Mandy is still looking peaky. 'You've got to get better,' I tell her crossly. 'I don't want you always being ill.'

'Bobby Shaftoe' finishes so I go to wind up the record player again. When it's ready I decide I don't want to be here any more, so I tear off my nurse's uniform and run down the stairs, shouting to Daddy, 'Can I go out to play?'

'Five minutes,' he calls back. His head pops round the kitchen door. 'Don't I get a kiss?'

I want to say no, but it might hurt his feelings, so I go and kiss him, then skip back down the passage to the front door.

'Beans on toast for tea,' he calls after me.

'Yeah!' Gary cheers.

I stop and turn round. 'It's Wednesday,' I remind Daddy. 'We have corned-beef mash on Wednesdays.'

He puts down the knife he's holding and comes to lift me up in his arms. I don't want to let him, but I don't stop him either. 'How was school today?' he says, rubbing his stubbly chin over my face.

I want to ask when Mummy's coming home, but that might not be brave, so instead I put my head on his shoulder and my arms round his neck. 'It was all right,' I say.

He gives me a squeeze and kisses the top of my head. 'It won't be long,' he tells me.

My head comes up. 'Tomorrow?' I say eagerly.

He laughs. 'I hope before that.'

I'm just starting to get excited when I realise he's talking about tea, not Mummy, so I wriggle down and go off outside to play.