

A mother's story
of her daughter's murder

AND I DON'T
WANT TO LIVE
THIS LIFE

Deborah Spungen

*And I
Don't Want to
Live This Life*

Deborah Spungen

BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

Copyright © 1983 by Deborah Spungen

Introduction copyright © 1994 by Deborah Spungen

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following for permission to reprint previously published material:

Liveright Publishing Corp.: "A Poet's Advice to Students" by e. e. cummings. Reprinted from A MISCELLANY, REVISED, edited by George James Firmage with permission of Liveright Publishing Corp. Copyright © 1955 by e. e. cummings. Copyright © 1965 by Marion Morehouse Cummings.

Copyright © 1965 by George James Firmage.

Some of the names of the people and places have been changed throughout the book.

www.randomhouse.com/BB/

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 96-96704

eISBN: 978-0-307-80743-4

This edition published by arrangement with Villard Books, a division of Random House, Inc. *Villard Books* is a registered trademark of Random House, Inc.

v3.1

Author's Note

I am especially grateful to writer David Handler for the many difficult months he spent guiding me toward what it all meant and showing me how to say it.

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Author's Note

Introduction

The Aftermath

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Dedication

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Introduction

Murder: *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* defines it as “the unlawful killing of one human being by another, especially with malice aforethought.” The mother of a murdered child has a different definition: “The blackest hell accompanied by a pain so intense that even breathing becomes an unendurable labor.” I know; I am the mother of a murdered child.

Our oldest daughter, Nancy, was murdered on Thursday, October 12, 1978. She was twenty years old. I was at work when I received the phone call from the New York City police that changed my life and that of my family forever. “I’m sorry to tell you that your daughter is dead.” I had been expecting that phone call and those words for years. Nancy has been emotionally disturbed since a neurologically traumatic birth. There was no cure for her pain and suffering, nor for ours. She self-medicated with heroin and other drugs, and by the time she was a teenager, I began to anticipate and fear the inevitable “overdose,” “suicide.” These were words that I could understand. I heard the detective continue, “Mrs. Spungen, your daughter’s boyfriend, Sid Vicious, has been arrested for her murder.” *Murder!!!* That was a word I could not comprehend. It only happened to other people on the six o’clock news.

The first few days after the death of a loved one are usually filled with a numbing sadness as the family goes through the ritual of saying good-bye, as they begin to mourn. This is not the way it is for the family of a murder victim. We had to contend with so much that we were not prepared for: identifying “the body,” involvement with the criminal justice system, dealing with the media. As we stumbled through this maze, we discovered that we, too, had become victims. I kept wondering if another mother had

ever experienced and survived this horrible ordeal. “Where is another mother?” I asked over and over again, but no one answered.

As I gradually moved back into the outside world, away from our protective circle, I encountered many unexpected feelings and reactions at every turn. I was astounded to discover that there is a stigma attached to homicide. There is a strong analogy to the rape victim’s experience, though for the family of a homicide victim, the blame and the resulting implications extend beyond the victim to include them as well. I remember that on several occasions someone, when my back was turned, pointed me out and said in a loud voice, “That’s the one whose daughter was murdered!” It was as if Nancy’s murder had not only made me deaf and blind, but also at fault.

My life slowly began to fall into a more normal rhythm again, albeit a different one. I no longer felt as consumed by Nancy’s death, but in place of the obsessive thoughts, I felt a curious mixture of frustration, anger, and pain. My former levels of energy and drive were slowly being restored, but I had nowhere to direct them. What I found interesting and meaningful before Nancy’s death often seemed empty and insipid now.

Eighteen months after Nancy’s murder, I made contact with Charlotte Hullinger, the founder of the Cincinnati-based support group, Parents of Murdered Children (POMC). There was no chapter in Philadelphia, and I wasn’t prepared to get involved. One day, after five months of long-distance conversations, Charlotte called to tell me that no one else had come forward to start a chapter and asked me, once more, if I would be willing to do so.

I heard myself answer, without hesitation, “Yes, I can do it.” I saw the image of those words in front of me, as if they were encapsulated in a cartoon balloon, and once uttered, I couldn’t take them back.

On the second anniversary of Nancy’s murder, October 12, 1980, my husband, Frank, and I sat in our living room with seven other families at the first meeting of the support group. For the first time since Nancy’s death, we felt comfortable talking with others about what had happened to Nancy and to our family; we had finally found a safe place.

Ed Rendell, the present mayor of Philadelphia and then the district attorney in Philadelphia, attended the third meeting of the support group, in January 1981, to talk to us about the criminal justice system and how it impacts on families of murder victims. Ed sat in our living room on a bitter, cold, gray Sunday afternoon and said, as he looked at the thirty families seated in the large circle, "It's your task to represent your loved ones in the aftermath of the murder; it is the family that stands in for the homicide victim throughout the criminal justice process. It's the last thing that you can do for your loved one; it's a way of saying good-bye."

As Ed continued to talk to this gathering of people, who had nothing more in common than the fact that their loved ones had been murdered, he said, "It's important to be here to share your pain and your tears and your laughter, but it's not enough. *You* need to do more, *you* need to get involved with the criminal justice system, *you* need to go to court with families and make a presence in the courtroom." Frank has teased me since that day; he assures me that when Ed said "you," he meant the generic "you" and not necessarily me. But I thought that he meant me. With his words Ed gave me my bearings and set me on a positive course in a new direction. In so doing he gave me the ability to restore a sense of control over my life, something that I thought was irretrievably lost when Nancy was murdered.

As the support group continued to meet each month, I began to see my fellow parents, not just as friends, but as family. It was this new family that gave me the strength and courage to speak out and share my experience, not just of Nancy's life, but also of her death. I now felt prepared to carry out a promise that I had made to myself when Nancy was seventeen years old.

During Nancy's lifetime, whenever I experienced a particularly difficult and trying episode with her, I had the habit of replaying the events of the day in my mind, as if somehow I might be able to undo the frustration and the turmoil. The images would unfold in a linear way, like chapters in a book. One day, as I was going through this futile exercise, I realized with a sudden insight that Nancy's life read like a book, only it was real, not

fiction. It was at that very moment that I made the decision that someday I would write about her life. I felt that only by writing about her life could I discover its meaning and value. If I could share that with others, then in some small way I might be able to help others by letting them know they were not alone. I realized that the book would have to be put off to some future time and that I would know when it was the right time. And I knew, in my heart, that day would come sooner than I wanted or anticipated.

It took almost two years to write *And I Don't Want To Live This Life*. It was not an easy task to dredge up all those minutes and hours and days of pain and turn them into words. Sixteen months of writing was evidenced by the growing pile of filled yellow writing pads that lay on my desk where they stared back at me in mute witness to what had been and what might have been.

In the fall of 1983 Frank and I flew to Pittsburgh; I was to address a group of some four hundred people at a “book and author” dinner for a formal kickoff to the publication of *And I Don't Want To Live This Life*. As satisfied as I was that I had accomplished what I had set out to do, I realized that the journey I had resolved to take did not end after the completion of the book. I have learned that each journey begets another one and life has a way of exponentially creating new roads to follow.

During the time that I was writing and editing *And I Don't Want To Live This Life*, I became more deeply involved with the support group and the entire field of victims' rights. At the time Nancy was murdered, the term “victims' rights” didn't enter into the equation. The term “victim,” as pejorative as it may be, was certainly not accorded to us or anyone else who had had a loved one murdered. This was the result of a widely held misperception that the “victim is dead” and that homicide leaves no survivors. But I knew better.

By 1986 I had outgrown the confines of the support group. The name of the organization was changed to Families of Murder Victims (FMV), and the newly formed agency opened a victim advocate office, a desk and two chairs, within the homicide unit of the Philadelphia district attorney's

office. The district attorney's office was a few blocks from city hall, where the criminal courtrooms are situated. My first assignment was to attend the homicide preliminary hearings the following Tuesday. As I entered the courtroom my hands were cold and clammy and my heart was pounding. I'm not sure what I was afraid of, perhaps that the specter of Sid Vicious would appear in the courtroom. I knew that I wanted to be an advocate for the other families who had a loved one murdered, but I wasn't sure what price I was willing to pay.

Within fifteen minutes I had been able to locate several families of murder victims by timidly calling out during a break in the proceedings, "Is the family of—here?" I tried to answer their questions about the criminal justice system, and sometimes I could offer no more than just to sit with them and hold their hands, or give them a hug. When I left the courtroom that afternoon, I was emotionally spent, but I also felt very exhilarated. Not only had I come face-to-face with my own demons and stared them down, but I had seen the beginning of a new era in victims' rights. This was the first courtroom in the United States where families of homicide victims were being assisted by their own victim advocate agency.

As I was walking from city hall back to my office, I remembered an essay sent to me by a stranger in the aftermath of Nancy's murder. It's called "Reflections on Time and Change." The note that accompanied the essay said the sender hoped it would provide me with some answers as well as some challenges. It was only now that the true significance of the words became meaningful to me and I understood why and how I would be able to apply them to my own life.

I often wonder what people are thinking when they say, "You'll get over it." Sometimes it sounds to me as if they are talking about a case of mumps or my despair at income tax time. But what can they mean when they say it about my grief? Maybe they mean that grief is just an interruption in life. Their theory seems to be that life is basically happy

—buying stuff, working, watching TV—but that a time of death and grief is an unnatural, sad time in that happy life.

I cannot agree with that view.

Time can lessen the hurt; the empty place we have can seem smaller as other things and experiences fill our life; we can forget for periods and feel as if our loved one didn't die; we can find sense in the death and understand that perhaps this death does fit into a bigger design in the world; we can learn to remember the good and hold on to that.

But we cannot “get over it,” because to get over it would mean we were not changed by the experience. It would mean we did not grow by the experience. It would mean that our loved one's death made no difference in our life.

There is an interesting discussion in the Talmud, an ancient Jewish writing. Those Jews had the custom of rending their garments—literally tearing their clothes—to symbolize the ripping apart that death brings. But the question was raised—after the period of mourning, could you sew the garment up and use it again? The teachers answered yes, but when you mended it, you should not tuck the edges under so it would look as if it had never been torn. This symbolized the fact that life after grief is not the same as before. The rent will show. The next question was, can you sell that garment? The teachers answered no. The rending and mending of our life is ours and others cannot wear it.

No, we don't get over it. We change and grow. Our life has a difference which is ours alone. Perhaps we can help each other make that difference the kind of difference that increases the world's supply of compassion, love, and healing. (adapted from “Reflections About Time and Change” by Dennis Klass)

Nancy's murder was the catalyst for my original involvement with Families of Murder Victims. But at some point, I don't remember the exact hour or day, or year, it all began to stand on its own. I was drafted into the victims' rights movement, but I have chosen to stay and make it my vocation.

My experiences since Nancy's murder have provided me with a life far different than I could ever have imagined or planned; I have written *And I Don't Want To Live This Life*, I have returned to school and earned two graduate degrees, I have seen the development of a unique victim advocate agency grow out of the gathering of a few tearful families in our living room, I have had the opportunity to meet and speak to thousands of people who I might otherwise have never known.

I would like to see FMV go out of business, but that remains a dream until we can begin to stem the tide of violence that surrounds us. I have helped to establish a new agency, the Anti-Violence Partnership of Philadelphia, which includes FMV and a new program, the Student Anti-Violence Education Program (SAVE). SAVE is designed to offer young children, in their classroom, the skills necessary to choose nonviolent means of resolving conflicts. I have come full circle and can once more look to the future with increased optimism, because my tomorrow is dedicated to everyone's children.

In May 1993, I stood at the front of a church in Philadelphia, aptly named Bright Hope, and watched as more than five hundred families of murder victims came together to share the pain of a common experience. For thirteen years I had served as a voice for many of these families, and now this was their opportunity to speak out, to be heard, and to be acknowledged. One by one they called out the names of their loved ones, brightened only by the candles they held and their common purpose, commemorating the lives of those lost to violence. It was a day to celebrate the strength of the human spirit that gave all of us, in that church, the courage to go on, to live, and to love again.

DEBORAH SPUNGEN

January 24, 1994

The Aftermath

THE REPORTERS were back.

They crammed our front porch and spilled out onto the lawn, jabbering with each other, jockeying for position close to the front door. There were photographers and television cameramen. There were microphones and tape recorders and lights. One of the reporters rang the doorbell. He kept his thumb down on it so it rang over and over and over again, demanding my attention and cooperation. My husband, Frank, had already left for work but some of our neighbors hadn't yet. As they wormed their cars past the double-parked vans and cars, they craned their necks to watch.

The freak show was on again.

I hadn't opened my door to the press since the nightmare began three and a half months before, when my oldest child, Nancy, was found under the bathroom sink in room 100 of the Chelsea Hotel in New York City. She had been stabbed in the stomach with a seven-inch hunting knife and had been left to bleed to death. She wore only black lace underwear. The man accused of murdering her was the man she shared the room with, her lover—British punk rock star Sid Vicious of the defunct Sex Pistols. He was out on \$50,000 bail.

She was twenty years old when she died.

The reporters kept ringing the bell, shouting my name. The neighbors honked. None of them would go away, ever, it seemed, until I opened the door. So I opened it.

"He's dead!" one of them yelled.

"Sid's dead, Mrs. Spungen!"

“Overdose—!”

“Middle of the night—”

“In Greenwich Village—”

“Celebrating being out on bail—”

“Some celebration, huh?”

“Care to comment, Mrs. Spungen?”

“How does it make you feel, Mrs. Spungen?”

“Get what he deserved?”

“Happy?”

“Sad?”

“End of ordeal?”

The shutters clicked, the TV cameras rolled. Pens were anxiously poised. I said nothing. I felt nothing. Just my own pain.

“Don’t you want to comment, Mrs. Spungen?”

“How about the criminal justice system?”

“What do you think of it now?”

I closed the door in their faces.

“Wait—!”

“We need a statement—”

The reporter nearest the door began to ring the bell again. I leaned against the inside of the door, the ache in my chest making it hard to breathe. The pain had started right after I had learned of Nancy’s death. It would not go away. I’d seen a doctor but he said I was in perfect health. I thought about running from the press. I had my coat on and my keys in my hand. I always did now, so I’d be ready to run. But I knew I’d never get away from them. They’d follow me. They’d find me, wherever I went.

The repeated ringing brought my seventeen-year-old son, David, downstairs. He hadn’t yet left for school. Not that leaving was anything more than a token gesture. He rarely made it to school. Mostly, he sat in the public library. He had stopped seeing his friends. He had stopped living. We had all stopped living. I had quit my job; Frank went off to work like a zombie and came back that way; Suzy, who was two years older than

David, had isolated herself in her apartment in the city. She seldom went to her classes at the Philadelphia College of Art and we saw little of her.

But the reporters didn't care about any of us, just as they hadn't cared about Nancy. All they wanted was another installment in their ongoing freak show, to sell papers, to boost ratings.

"What's going on?" asked David.

"Sid OD'ed. He's dead."

David nodded grimly. He wasn't surprised. He had no more capacity to be surprised. He had grown up with too much anger and pain and tragedy. He had grown up with Nancy.

"I'll call the police," he declared, and went off to use the phone. I just stood there in the hallway.

A patrol car came immediately. The Nancy Spungen-Sid Vicious case was the biggest story Huntingdon Valley, our little Philadelphia suburb, had ever known. Any call from the Spungen residence brought a quick response.

The officers moved the reporters off our property and sent them on their way. David and I watched from the living room window.

As soon as the policemen left, two English tabloid-newspaper men returned and began to ring the bell again. When I didn't answer, they backed up onto the front lawn and began to yell.

"How dare you call the police!"

"We're not bothering you, Mrs. Spungen!"

"We just want to talk!"

One of the reporters was particularly abrasive. Three days after Nancy's funeral he'd shown up with a copy from a page of an English newspaper carrying the banner headline NANCY WAS A WITCH. He told me if I didn't deny it people would assume it was true. I said "No comment" and closed the door. Somehow he managed to shove the page inside the door before it shut, then told the police I'd stolen it.

"We have a right!"

"How dare you call the police!"

David went out the door after the two reporters, fists clenched, face red. Six feet tall and powerfully built, he ran toward them. They turned and took off. He chased them across the lawn and down the block to their car. They jumped in, surprised and frightened, and sped away.

When David came back, I asked him to please go to school, to at least make the effort.

“You sure you’ll be okay here all by yourself?” he asked.

“I’ll be fine.”

“Why are you wearing your coat?”

“I’m cold.”

He walked to his car and drove off. The phone rang. I thought about not answering it, but it might be Frank. Possibly he’d heard the news. I picked up the phone. It wasn’t Frank.

“Mrs. Spungen, it’s Anne Beverley,” said Sid’s mother, her voice strained.

We had spoken once before. She had phoned two days after Nancy’s murder to offer her condolences and to say she was certain Sid couldn’t have done it. It had been a bizarre call, but not as bizarre as when Sid himself had phoned me the following day.

“I’m ... I’m sorry your son is dead,” I now managed to say. “I’m sorry for you.”

“Thank you. Our children were very special children. I suppose this is the way it was meant to be. You know, no one else understood them except you and I.”

“I know.”

“Mrs. Spungen, may I bury him next to Nancy?”

I covered the phone, gasping from the pain in my chest. And from horror. How could she ask me to let her bury her son—my baby’s accused murderer—next to her?

“May I, Mrs. Spungen? They meant so much to each other.”

“You ... *can’t*.”

“Why?”

“It’s ... it’s a family plot.”

“Then what will I do? Where will I bury him? Perhaps somewhere else in the same cemetery?”

“I can’t help you. I’m sorry.”

I hung up. The doorbell rang again. More reporters. I let it ring.

I went through the kitchen to the garage and found a piece of heavy, rubber-encased wire with which to hang myself. I’d been thinking about it each and every day for several weeks. In fact, suicide was all I thought about. I kept putting it off. Every day I told myself to wait until tomorrow. Maybe tomorrow the pain would go away. Maybe tomorrow I’d want to live again, have a reason to live again.

But I couldn’t take the pain anymore. It was unbearable and there was no end to it. Death was the only way out. I had no other alternative. Today was the day. This was it.

I went back inside the house with the wire, tied a noose around my neck, and looked at myself in the dining room mirror.

Nothing had worked out the way I’d planned.

Once I had looked forward to life. Twenty years before it had been full of promise. I was twenty then, a nice, reasonably attractive middle-class Jewish girl from Philadelphia. I was a college student, a good student. I had plans and ambitions. I had a kind, young husband who loved me as much as I loved him. I had dreams. Twenty solid years of anguish was not one of them. What had I done to deserve this?

Once I had been happy. I had known how to laugh. I had known how to cry. I hadn’t cried in twenty years. There had never been any time to cry since the day Nancy was born. No time for the luxury of tears. I had made a promise to Nancy the first time I saw her there in the maternity ward nursery. I had promised her a life of quality and dignity. It took every bit of my strength and my love to keep that promise over the twenty years of my daughter’s frightening, misunderstood, tragic life. It took every minute of every day.

I didn’t cry when I finally had to admit to myself that she was not like other little girls.

I didn't cry when I realized she was angry and in pain and that nobody, but nobody, could help her.

I didn't cry when she tried repeatedly to end her pain herself, first with a razor blade, then with a needle.

I didn't cry when I knew she could no longer live with us in our home without destroying her sister and brother. She had already come close to destroying our marriage.

I didn't cry when I got the news that she was dead. I held Frank while he wept through the night, my own eyes dry.

I didn't cry at her funeral. I couldn't. By then, I'd forgotten how.

I had never let myself feel the pain. I blocked it. Now I felt it. Oh, how I felt it.

I kept having the same nightmare. Every night in my dreams, Nancy was a small child of five, running up to me waving her hands in front of her face and exclaiming "Look what I have, Mommy! Look what I have!" When she got up close to me, I saw that what she had all over her little girl's hands were track marks from shooting heroin, the track marks she showed me when she was seventeen to let me know she was a drug addict. "Help me, Mommy," she had said in real life, and in my dream, too. "Help me, Mommy," cried little Nancy.

I hadn't been able to. She was dead. And I was alone, totally alone in the world. My life had no meaning. I had no desire to work, to love, to be productive, to see anyone I knew, to smile. I had no desire to be alive.

I shivered. I was cold, even with my coat on.

I really knew Nancy was going to die young. She had wanted to die since she'd been eleven years old. I had long since accepted it as inevitable. It was just a matter of how and when. I had her death all mapped out in my mind for two years before it actually happened. It was my recurring fantasy. We would get a phone call early one morning from the police saying that Nancy was in the hospital from a drug overdose. Frank, Suzy, David, and I would rush to the hospital. Nancy would be in a bed in a private room,