

I had a younger sister until I was thirteen.

Her name was Louise but she preferred Lou, which didn't please our mother at all. Mum said it was a boy's name and not suitable for such a sweet little girl.

Lou called me Tickers, although my name was Ricky. She'd struggled with that name when she was younger, and even after she'd learnt to say 'Ricky' she still preferred 'Tickles'.

Lou and I were close. She was my baby sister; I was her big brother. She was three years younger, and liked girly things, which I made it my business not to like, because that's part of the job description. I also pretended not to like her, but I don't think I fooled her for a second.

Our mum and dad were a bit, well, different, from other kids' mums and dads. We didn't really understand that at first, of course. To us, our world was normal. But the more we saw of the outside world, the more embarrassed we were about our own lives.

Other kids had TV in the lounge room. We had a small raised stage and would put on shows for each other.

Other kids had Facebook and Instagram. We had conversation.

Mum was an artist; Dad a musician. Neither had a regular job, nor did they want one. Mum always said that regular jobs were for regular people.

She occasionally sold a painting through a local art gallery. Dad sometimes got a gig as a studio musician, or helped out in the backing band when some rock star came to town.

In between gigs, he would busk in the park. Mum would sit next to him and draw cartoons of people. On weekends I would go with them and do face-painting at a dollar a pop. We were never rich, but we never went without a meal.

We weren't regular. We were quite irregular.

I've got a photo of Lou on my dresser. Most of the time it is just there, just part of the background. But three times a year it takes on special significance and I just lie on my bed and stare at it. Those days are Christmas Day, her birthday, and the anniversary of her death.

Today is one of those days. Two years she has been gone now, and on both anniversaries I have set aside a special time for Lou. To remember her.

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Everybody loved Lou and she knew how to turn on the charm. She had a smile that could light up a room and she knew how to use it. She had eyes that sparkled like the surface of a moonlit lake and dimples that you could dive into. She was gorgeous in that cute little sister kind of way, although to really see it you had to look past the birthmark.

Lou was born with a large reddish-coloured birthmark that covered most of the left side of her face, from her cheekbone down to below her chin. The doctor called it a haemangioma, but most people would have called it a strawberry birthmark.

You can get them treated with lasers apparently, but that was expensive, and also not recommended in case it caused scarring.

Anyway, the doctor said it would probably be gone by the time she started school.

Lou didn't seem to mind the birthmark at all. To be honest, I don't think she even knew it existed until she was about three, and then she just accepted Mum's promise that it would go away before she started school.

It's so easy for adults to promise things to kids. We always believe them. We assume they can't be wrong, simply because they're older.

I don't think any of her friends noticed the birthmark. I mean they saw it – you couldn't help but see it – but I think they all looked right past it and just saw Lou.

Her friends were mainly kids from our apartment building, or from pre-school, and roughly her age, so they had known her long before she even knew she was a bit different.

The first time that the strawberry birthmark became a real issue was the day before her first day at school. By then Lou was starting to get a bit self-conscious about the mark, at least as far as strangers were concerned. And it hadn't faded away like the doctor promised.

The doctor had changed his tune by now and was 'almost certain' that it would be gone by the time she was ten.

We might have been all right if not for Mrs Lee's grandson.

Mrs Lee lived on the floor above us and her grandson was visiting. We met in the foyer, where the two of them were waiting for the lift. Lou and I had been playing in the park and were about to begin our trek up the stairs (elevators were for lazy people according to Mum).

The boy was standing by his grandmother and they turned around when they heard us coming.

I gave him a big smile and he smiled back, but then his face dropped when he looked at Lou.

'Ewww. Alien skin,' he said.

Mrs Lee hushed him immediately and I whisked Lou away up the stairs.

But the damage was done.

Lou went to bed that night crying and in the morning flatly refused to go to school.

I remember my first day at school. It was probably the most exciting day of my life. You're no longer a baby; you're one of the big kids. You put on your uniform and strap on your backpack and you're off on a whole new adventure.

So it seemed especially sad, it seemed wrong, that for Lou, this special day was a nightmare.

She wasn't a tantrum kid. She was always calm and happy. 'Placid' was the word I heard Mum use when describing her to others. I looked that word up in the dictionary and although I understood why she used it, it didn't seem quite right. Placid, to me, implied a lack of excitement, of enjoyment, and Lou was full of both. 'Serene' would have been better. The dictionary defined it as 'shining bright and steady', which was exactly what she did.

But on the morning of her first day at school she was far from placid or serene. She threw a tantrum and it was a real screamer.

There was no way she was going to school, to face all those strange kids, with her blotchy red face.

She wouldn't even put on her bike helmet for the taxi ride to school.

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We lived on St Georges Street in an old apartment above a butcher's shop.

We didn't own a car. Couldn't afford one.

I always caught the bus to school, but by the time Mum calmed Lou down enough to get her into her uniform it was already too late for that, so a taxi was our only option.

Mum didn't like cars much. Too many accidents, she said, and most fatal accidents were caused by head injuries. So when we had to travel by car, taxi usually, we all had to wear bike helmets. They would absorb the impact of the inevitable crash and ensure our survival. Protect us from brain damage at the very least.

I had come to hate helmets. I cringed every time I had to put one on, and prayed that nobody I knew would see me. Some taxi drivers couldn't hide their amusement when they saw us.

Lou never minded, though. She wasn't old enough yet. Just driving in a car was still a novelty for her, and she hadn't learnt yet that other kids didn't have to wear helmets in a car.

But this morning there was no way she was putting the thing on. And no way Mum could make her. She twisted her head this way and that, and swung wildly with her chubby little arms, and if Mum did manage to clamp the helmet on top of her head, she would have it off again before Mum could do up the strap.

At 8.40, and on the verge of running late for school, I had an idea.

I went to get my face-painting kit. Mum put the helmet away, which calmed Lou down a bit, then I sat her on one of the dining chairs and turned her strawberry birthmark into a big red strawberry, complete with pips, a stalk, and little bits of leaf.

I showed it to her in a mirror and she squealed with delight and clapped her hands.

She put on the helmet herself after that and we made it to school on time.  
Just.

At school Lou was not the weirdo she had been so afraid of. Far from it. The other kids were all jealous that she'd come to school on her first day with a big yummy strawberry on her face. One kid even cried because he didn't have one.

The teacher sat all the kids down and explained about Lou's strawberry. How it was really a birthmark, but Lou had felt sad, and worried that they would laugh at her. But surely they wouldn't have been so mean as to laugh at someone just because they were a little bit different!

Lou went to school with a bit more confidence the next day, but still made me draw the strawberry.

There must have been some phoning around among the mothers, because the next day all the kids in the

class, every single one, turned up with a painted face. There were apples, oranges and bananas, a few flowers, and a couple of butterflies.

Nobody else did a strawberry, though.

Lou was the strawberry girl, and they called her Strawberry Lou.

I drew the strawberry every day for a week, but the following Monday she shook her head.

'Don' wannit,' she said.

The doctor was right about the birthmark in the end. By the time she was eight it had completely faded, with no sign that it had ever existed. Day after day Lou had watched it shrink, until it just wasn't there at all.

That same year my baby sister was diagnosed with leukaemia.

She told me herself. She wouldn't let Mum and Dad do it.

She sat me down and said she had some sad news.

'You just found out that you're adopted.' I tried to make a joke because I was already quite worried about what she was going to say.

'No, but you are.' She giggled.

Then she told me the truth.

They gave her chemotherapy, which made her horribly sick and made her hair fall out, but they were just going through the motions. You could see it in the

faces of my mother and father when they came home from the appointments.

Nobody expected her to live.

Lou knew she was sick. At the age of nine she understood that she was dying, but her serenity didn't desert her. She made jokes about it.

'I've got Lou-kaemia,' she'd say. 'It's my own disease.'

We all laughed, and cried later when she wasn't around.

It's hard to be thirteen and have to face the death of someone you love. And I did love my little sister, even if I would never have admitted that to anyone.

I'm sure it would be even harder to face your own death, but Lou handled it better than I did.

I wished they made helmets we could wear on our hearts.

I was at school when she passed, and arrived home afterwards to an empty house.

Passed. Even now I can't bring myself to say 'died'.

Mum and Dad eventually came home from the hospital with their bravest faces on, and Mum handed me a letter, addressed in Lou's careful, ten-year-old handwriting.

I read the letter and had to lock myself in my room for the rest of the day so they wouldn't see me bawling my eyes out.

Brian Falkner

The funeral was four days later, open casket, so family and friends could pay their respects.

I filed past with Mum and Dad, before the rest of the mourners. Lou looked placid, and this time that was the right word to use.

Her arms were folded on her chest, as if clutched to her heart. A pretty little blonde wig replaced the hair she had lost to the cruel chemicals.

And somehow I found the strength to fulfil her final wish.

The left side of her face was decorated with a bright red strawberry, complete with pips, a stalk, and little bits of leaf.

She wouldn't have any problems making new friends where she was going.

Strawberry Lou.

# SINS AND GRIEFS