

# Mothers', ruin

Fathers often lose contact with their children after divorce. Now, more and more mothers are going through that same searing experience. **Caroline Scott** reports.

Photographs: **Manuel Vazquez**







Lucy opens the door to her study and pulls two pink, candy-striped memory boxes from a high shelf. They are filled with the few treasures she has managed to salvage from her children's lives. In one, a crumpled baseball cap, a small, fluffy toy and a few scraps of paper, daubed with felt tip. In the other, a baby blanket, an old cinema ticket, and a flowery diary with an entry entitled: "Why my mum is the best..."

It is three years since Lucy had any physical contact with her children. The last time she saw Zoe and Jake — who were then 10 and 6 — they were jumping into their father Paul's car after an August bank holiday weekend with her, spent doing "normal things". "We did a bit of shopping, we had supper together." She has deliberated to the point of madness about what she might have done better, how she could have prevented what happened next. They are now 13 and 9, and apart from a brief sighting of Zoe out shopping with friends a year ago, she has not set eyes on either of them since.

Lucy and Paul decided to share custody of the children after they separated because, Lucy says, "whatever our problems, I wanted them to have a good relationship with their father". For almost a year the arrangement worked: she had them one week and Paul the next. Until, one Friday night, they didn't arrive. Instead, there was a phone call from her solicitor, who read out a letter from Paul's solicitor explaining that he would not be bringing the children back. The next day she received a handwritten note, a page of childish scrawl, from Zoe and Jake. "Too scared to say this to your face... we've decided to live with daddy. Daddy helps us with our homework." At the end, six-year-old Jake had written in hesitant, emergent letters: "i love you mummy".

Lucy was a GP, a woman practised in listening to others' distress and dispensing advice. Consumed with a court battle that has taken over her life, she hasn't worked for three years now. She describes a volatile relationship with her ex-husband: communication via Post-it notes, violent outbursts and impenetrable silences. "When I finally told Paul I wanted a divorce, he told the children I was leaving them, and then threatened to commit suicide." In the detail is a portent of what was to come.



Lucy has had no contact with her children for three years. She believes her husband turned them against her

Paul, Lucy says, has a highly systematic mind and she believes he planned his hijack of the children meticulously. "They never had any homework when they came to me because they'd already done it, and their reading books had always been signed by him." Paul would later file them with his court papers as evidence that "Daddy listened to them read" and Mummy didn't. She produces a couple of crumpled bits of paper, covered in Zoe's writing, then closes her eyes so she doesn't

## LUCY SAYS SHE'S 'LOCKED IN A WORLD OF PERPETUAL GRIEF'

have to look at them: 1. I wish mum would leave us alone and stop making us go to court. (sic). 2. I wish I did not need to worry.

Suddenly, feeling cold, Lucy jumps up and puts the kettle on. Then, forgetting it, begins to rustle distractedly through papers and files, stacked 6in deep on her dining-room table. Official court transcripts mingle with sheaves of foolscap, tightly filled with vitriol and blame. As the court appearances ramp up — in all she went back to court eight times in three years to try to secure contact with her children — so does the complexity of the evidence submitted.

It feels both sad and invasive, looking at the desperate attempts of a woman forced to try to prove her children love her. There are school reports and a crayoned picture of her, drawn by Jake, then seven: "Look, he's drawn me smiling!" An excerpt from Zoe's Hello Kitty diary, and a letter written a week before Lucy last saw her, saying: "Dear mummy, i love you to the moon and back, love Zoe."

Reports from psychiatrists and psychologists were commissioned and filed, every aspect of her mothering turned over and examined in forensic detail. At one point the Cafcass officer (the social worker appointed by the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service) notes that Zoe and Jake repeatedly complain that mummy "worked too much" and "didn't have enough time for us". I wonder how many of us would come out of this unscathed. Lucy's one point of consolation was no one actually said: "You're a bad mother."

"My barrister said few people would withstand this kind of scrutiny as well as I did. Those are precious words to me."

But it made no difference. The court considers that, at 12, children are old enough to make up their own minds about where they want to live. In the end, every day spent information-gathering between each court appearance took Lucy progressively to the point where the legal system would no longer be able to help her. The judge, while acknowledging there was "emotional entrapment", allowed sole residency with Paul to continue, according to the children's expressed wishes, giving Lucy regular weekly contact, "none of which materialised". "Paul

would say they had a 'tummy ache' or they didn't want to come. He wouldn't answer the phone and, if I went round, he'd complain of harassment.

It would then be another

couple of months of no contact before the next hearing." But how could the judge allow the situation to continue? Lucy's shoulders slump. "You've got to understand, Paul is such a charming person. He'd say to the judge, 'I've tried so hard, but despite my best endeavours, my children do not want to see their mother.'"

Recent figures from the Child Support Agency (CSA) suggest that the number of women losing sole residence (formerly known as custody) of their children is rising. The instances where mothers are registered as the non-resident parent rose from 57,000 in



she's forced to dredge up memories that she begins to unravel. "My husband, Robin, was tall, dark, handsome and well paid." She splutters: "How could I have fallen for that?" Robin began an affair with the nanny. "She was my best nanny, as a matter of fact," says Sophie, with a mirthless little laugh. "I employed her because she was brilliant with the kids."

Sophie's biggest hurdle was that the nanny was already living in the marital home and the awkwardness of this arrangement — "they'd constantly be giggling in the kitchen together" — led her to make what she considers her biggest mistake: she went to stay with her parents. "I should never have left. But I was weak and vulnerable. He wanted me out of the house and I wasn't strong enough to fight him."

**A**fter a month, Sophie had a letter from Robin's solicitor informing her that he was applying for residency. Did you imagine he'd be successful? "Never. I wasn't worried for a moment. He'd barely changed a nappy. I could not imagine any court would support him." Sophie had "an amazing barrister". "He totally 'got' Robin. He thought he was a manipulative, controlling bastard who wanted everything his way. 'You'll be fine,' he said." Sophie frowns and looks at her shoes. "Right until the last moment, we both thought everything would be fine."

The judge ordered psychiatrists' reports. "But I was on the back foot because Robin got there first. The psychiatrist was no expert in MS but he drew a terrible picture. He said, as my disease progressed, I was likely to be short-tempered with the children. God knows where he got that from. Robin was so charming,

the Cafcass officer was smitten with him. She was always saying to me [adopts pitying tone], 'You can't do things, can you?' She was terribly old fashioned." After 13 court appearances, the judge awarded full residency to Robin, with contact with Sophie during holidays.

When the small amount of contact Sophie had been given failed to materialise, she went back to court to force Robin to let her see the children. The judge ordered Robin to comply and suggested she saw them every other weekend too. "On the steps outside the court he said, 'Don't imagine this will make a difference.' A few months later, Robin moved halfway across the country. To begin with, a friend drove Sophie to see the children — a



Helen lost contact with her sons when their father told them to choose between him and her

300-mile round trip — but in the end, contact gradually petered out because the children didn't want to see her. "They were so little, the longer they were apart from me, the more they didn't want to come back to me." Her voice sounds hollow. "I hadn't had enough time with them to leave an imprint."

Her sitting-room walls are lined with school photos; she rings their schools and asks for them. But other than a suitcase filled with court papers on top of her wardrobe, she has nothing of theirs. Zac is now 12, Lottie 9 and May, 6. She has no contact with Lottie and May, but sees Zac sporadically: "Because he was always a mummy's boy and he pushes. But the court order giving me contact isn't worth the paper it's written on." She says she's "rebuilt her life from scratch". "I've done a degree in psychology, which has helped me understand what my children are going through. And I've

## 'YOU'RE THAT EVIL WOMAN WHO'S NOT LIVING WITH HER CHILDREN'

worked hard to stay healthy so I'll be here when they want to see me." Can you be happy? She shows me her diary, the pages filled with all the things she wants to say to them but can't. "The hardest thing," she says, tears finally falling, is he's taken away my chance to be a mum."

There are no clues in Helen's home to suggest she's ever been a mother. Every item in the kitchen of her terraced house is new, from the toaster to the kettle to the mugs she serves tea in. Last year, at 48, she made the decision to take a job in a new area where very few people know her. "In a small town, there's an awful stigma. I couldn't even watch my boys play rugby, because you're not one of the mums any more. You're that evil

woman who's not living with her children."

Helen's sons, Harry, James, Theo and Jake, were born in quick succession. "Before I knew it, I'd abandoned my business career," she says. "But I was happy because I loved my kids and I loved my home." Her husband, though, became increasingly possessive and violent. "I look back now and think, 'What were you thinking?' But when you're in that situation you become numb to it. You just don't see a way out."

Going back to work when Jake was eight was "like a wake-up call". With some money of her own finally, she rented a farmhouse nearby in the hope that, "like most couples, we'd work something out. I remember taking the boys to choose bedding and toys for their new bedrooms, but from the start Stephen said to them, 'This is your home. You have to choose between me and her'."

Helen gradually saw the boys less and less. "I'd go round with birthday presents and they'd refuse to come out. Stephen's a big man, quite intimidating. They were frightened of his disapproval." Was she ever angry with them? "No. I understood what Stephen had done to them, because he did the same thing to me."

The court case dragged on "over one horrible autumn and winter of endless appearances". Stephen told the judge confidently: "I've never told the boys they can't see their mother."

"He didn't have to," says Helen. "They knew if they tried to see me he'd make their lives a misery. They just wanted him to love them." Although awarded joint residency, Helen has had no contact with her boys for four years. "I did everything you're told to do. I phoned,

wrote them letters, went back and forth to court. Meanwhile, he'd drive them to school so they wouldn't have to walk past my house. In the end his strength was greater than mine."

Helen describes going through all the stages of grief. She now lives with the "awful guilt and helplessness" involved in knowing her boys are growing up without the emotional support of a mum. She texts regularly, but has never had a reply. "They think I'm a bad mother," she says, "but I don't think I could have done more."

Upstairs, the spare room is painted blue. A bed is made up and there are posters of racing cars on the walls. She looks embarrassed.

"Children grow so quickly... I've no way of knowing if they're even into cars any more. But I want them to know that, if they need me, I'm here." ■

*The names of the parents interviewed, and those of their children, have been changed*