

WILD CHILD

“Hey!” There was a loud banging on the kitchen window.

Jessica and I, out in her back garden, looked up at her dad mouthing words we couldn't hear.

We had been busy digging holes in the lawn to make a golf course. It was Jessica's idea – another one of her madcap schemes. Jessica, who lived next door, was three years older and I looked up to her. She was what, in those days, we called a tomboy. Tall and skinny and physically undeveloped for her age. There was nothing undeveloped about her brain. She was doing well at school and was predicted to get the grades she needed for university.

Her parents were teachers. Her mother taught domestic science and sometimes helped me with my sewing. She was a quiet, prim, nervy woman. In the mornings she gave us both a lift to school. We'd sit in the car waiting for Jessica to appear. At last she'd come running out of the house, clothes awry as if she had put them on in the dark. On the way she'd fiercely brush her long tangled hair. Her mum drove at a snail's pace round the town centre and I'd worry that I'd be late for school. She was a very nervous driver and her driving made me nervous. Could a 14 year old have a heart attack I wondered?

Jessica and I were back garden friends. In many ways I hardly knew her. Aside from the help with sewing, I had never been inside her house or she in mine. We didn't talk about school or anything that mattered to us.

One never knew what she was going to do next. One time we'd had to wait in the car while her mum popped into a shop. Jessica climbed into the front seat and let off the hand brake so we sailed back into the car behind. She then nipped back into her seat and her mother, on her return, was not aware that anything untoward had happened.

School exams came along and I saw very little of Jessica. Our paths didn't cross and we were getting too old for playing in the garden.

One day I happened to glance out of the front window and saw a posse of photographers outside Jessica's front gate pointing their cameras at her house. “What's going on?” I asked my mum. “Why are they there? My mum was reluctant to tell me. It turned out that Jessica's parents had come home to find her body hanging in the stairwell. Apparently she had been watching a programme on slow hanging the night before and had decided to experiment. At least that's what we were told.

To this day I don't know why she killed herself. Her parents never spoke of it. She had just been offered a place at uni and was on the brink of what could have been a wonderful future.