



JUDICIARY OF  
ENGLAND AND WALES

**R**

**-v-**

**Sean SADLER**

**In the Crown Court at Birmingham**

**Sentencing Remarks of the Honourable Mr Justice Saini  
26 March 2021**

1. Sean Sadler you have been found guilty by the jury of the murder of a toddler Lilly Hanrahan (Count 1), and of having subjected her to a serious assault some 7 to 10 days before her death (Count 2). You are now aged 32 years.
2. Lilly died in the Birmingham Children's Hospital on Wednesday 22 November 2017 as a result of the catastrophic brain injuries she suffered following a violent assault by you on Sunday 19 November 2017. You inflicted these injuries upon Lilly when you were meant to be looking after her at what should have been a place of safety- her home, 33 The Green, Northfield.
3. Lilly was a healthy and delightful girl of 21 months at the time you killed her. She was under the legal guardianship of her relative Helen Corlett. Following a challenging start in life because of her mother's heroin addiction, Lilly had joined Helen and her 3 daughters at The Green in July 2016. Those girls were aged 4,8 and 10, respectively and Lilly became their sister.
4. This morning I have heard a moving statement from the family to the court about Lilly and her role in their lives. As described Sophie Hanrahan who read this statement to me, Lilly was loving, cheeky and a perfect little girl.

I was told Lilly was mostly shy and cautious around new people, but it would never take long before she was dancing around with her arms in the air. That sounds like exactly the girl described by those who knew her from the Fig Tree Nursery.

5. As I have said, having come to live at The Green, Lilly became one of four sisters in a loving family. Helen was a devoted and kind mother to all of them. Despite the difficulties of being a single parent, Helen went out of her way to provide unconditional love and care to all of her girls.
6. You came into this happy family's life when Helen rekindled an earlier relationship with you in April 2017. During the course of that year you came to spend nights at The Green and in due course ended up spending most of your time there. From around late August 2017, Helen began to leave Lilly in your care when she was busy taking the other girls to dance lessons or attending her University courses.
7. From September 2017, Helen began to notice bruising on Lilly and you yourself started to photograph such injuries and encouraged Helen to do so. I am satisfied so that I am sure that many of these injuries were caused by you and your photographing of them was part of an overall subterfuge by you to trick Helen into believing you were not responsible. This was part of a diversion tactic involving false claimed concern for Lilly's welfare. I will return to these injuries in a few moments.
8. Your trickery also involved you encouraging Helen to seek other explanations for the marks including suggesting that these injuries may have been caused at Lilly's nursery or by other accidents. Helen was thrown off the scent by your deception and arranged for Lilly's nursery to keep a body map of her injuries. Helen also took Lilly on more than one occasion to her GP and then on to the hospital because of the unexplained bruising. Mr Hankin QC for the Crown was right to describe you as a perpetrator "hiding in plain sight". Helen did what she could to seek medical explanations for the marks she found on Lilly's body.
9. The evidence is clear that Helen was suspicious that you may have caused the bruising. Having seen you give evidence I am satisfied that you are an accomplished liar and managed to deceive Helen into believing this was not the case. You manipulated Helen throughout by assuring her you would never have harmed Lilly.
10. The evidence of the witnesses from Lilly's nursery was that she had very few words of her own: she could only say things like "mummy" or the names of her sisters. That explains why she was not able to explain to

anyone the abuse she was suffering at your hands. However, she did her best by her actions as a toddler to show her mum she was scared of you. The nature of those actions can be inferred from the WhatsApp exchanges between you and Helen. I am satisfied that Lilly was terrified of you and was doing her best, as a toddler of limited words, to indicate this to Helen. Lilly would run to Helen when you came in the room, become very upset when Helen left her and became excessively “clingy” towards Helen as her way of reacting to your abuse.

11. Those messages show that Helen retained her suspicions of you and sought to limit the opportunities for you to babysit Lilly. Sadly, you were able to convince Helen to still allow you to have charge of Lilly. I am confident that this is a decision which Helen will regret for the rest of her life.
12. The jury have found that on one of these occasions when you were meant to be caring for Lilly, and about 7-10 days before Lilly died, you committed a serious assault on her, causing fractures in her vertebrae and a pulmonary haemorrhage— that is, bleeding in the lungs. The expert evidence demonstrates that these injuries were caused by forced forward flexion of Lilly’s spine and by blocking Lilly’s airways.
13. I am satisfied that this assault was an escalation of the assaults to which you had been subjecting Lilly since at least early September 2017 as evidenced by the photographs to which I have already made reference. I am satisfied so that I am sure that where those photographs show injuries to Lilly’s ears (30 September and 28 October), gripping or bruising marks on Lilly’s thighs (19 September, 2 October and 17 November) and the scalp (28 October and 17 November) you were responsible for these injuries - even if the other marks in the photographic evidence might be explicable by the accidents any toddler learning to walk suffers.
14. I turn to the day of the fatal assault. On Sunday 19 November 2017 Lilly and one of her sisters aged 4 were in your care while Helen was taking the older two girls to a dance class. When you were alone with Lilly you subjected her to extreme violence in the living room, where she had been playing or taking a nap. This involved what the medical evidence satisfies me was an extreme episode in which you shook Lilly. I am satisfied so that I am sure that this was likely to have been an episode of repeated shaking involving movement of Lilly’s head. Your acts may have also involved causing Lilly’s head to be struck against a yielding surface but the evidence on this is not clear and I cannot find that proved.
15. Given that she was a toddler rather than a small infant and would have developed a strong neck, I am satisfied that the amount of force you would

have applied to Lilly's body was substantial. Fingertips marks were found by neurosurgeons on Lilly's scalp when preparing her for brain surgery and I am satisfied that you applied some form of pressure to her head as part of your actions which led to her collapse. I am satisfied that the injuries to Lilly's two temples were caused by you as part of this overall assault.

16. I am also satisfied that your attack caused her to suffer spinal nerve root injury in her neck and lumbar sections, broken ribs and extensive eye bleeding. You took a photograph of Lilly following your assault. That is a distressing photograph - it shows her unconscious and in a decerebrate position on the sofa. It is a photograph of a very sick child holding her body in an unnatural position. This photograph was taken by you at 1.09pm. However, an ambulance was not called to The Green until nearly two hours later. That was when Lilly could not be roused, and you continued your subterfuge by acting as if you did not know what had happened to Lilly. You accompanied Helen to hospital as a concerned partner knowing full well that you were responsible for Lilly's condition.
17. Despite heroic efforts by neurosurgeons at Birmingham Children's Hospital, Lilly died a few days later on 22 November as a result of the catastrophic brain injuries which had been caused by your violence towards her.
18. I now turn to the issue of the sentence under Count 1, murder.
19. In respect of your murder of Lilly, there is only one sentence that the law allows to be passed, that is a mandatory sentence of imprisonment for life. I am however required to specify the minimum term, pursuant to Schedule 21 of the Sentencing Act 2020, which must elapse before you can be released on licence.
20. The first step, in determining the minimum term, is for me to assess the seriousness of your offending. I am satisfied that the appropriate starting point is that under paragraph 5 of Schedule 21, namely a starting point of 15 years. Having chosen that starting point I am required then to take into account the aggravating and mitigating factors in your case.
21. Statutory aggravating factors are set out at paragraph 9 of Schedule 21. The following sub- paragraphs apply to this case:
  - (i) the fact that the victim was particularly vulnerable because of age; and
  - (ii) the abuse of a position of trust.

22. I have in mind that very often these two factors overlap where a child has been killed by someone left to care for them. They are two sides of the same thing. However, I consider the Crown is right to argue that your breach of trust went beyond that. You gave express assurances to Helen that you would never hurt Lilly when she was already worried about you as the perpetrator of Lilly's earlier injuries, and that must have influenced her misguided decision to leave her with you. In the context of this case, the aggravating features of the vulnerability of the very young victim and the fact that you were in charge of her are properly to be regarded independently as aggravating factors under the schedule.
23. Having considered the very helpful and measured submissions of Mr Hankin QC and Mr Smith QC, I consider the following further six non-statutory aggravating factors are also present:
- (1) First, although Lilly is most likely to have lost consciousness at the point her fatal injuries were inflicted (and therefore sub-para (c) is not engaged) there is clear evidence to which I have referred, of you grabbing Lilly's face area and head prior to shaking her, which must have been both frightening and painful for this toddler.
  - (2) Second, there was also substantial period of time prior to her death (from 2 September to 19 November, a period of 11 weeks) when Lilly was suffering significant distress, pain and discomfort as a result of your intentionally inflicting bruising injuries by forcefully gripping her ears, head and limbs.
  - (3) Third, you delayed seeking medical help for a number of hours after committing the fatal assault and, in so doing, showed callous indifference to Lilly's suffering. As I have said, Lilly would have lost consciousness at the point her injuries were inflicted. Damage to the respiratory centre in her brainstem would have resulted in apnoea, causing hypoxic-ischaemic damage and secondary brain swelling. It would have been obvious to you that she was very seriously hurt. On the medical evidence I have heard, it is likely that Lilly's injuries were unsurvivable even with timely medical aid (such was their severity). However, it is an aggravating feature that you put your own interests over those of this desperately ill child in urgent need of medical care.
  - (4) Fourth, you cynically misdirected and manipulated Helen Corlett in such a way as to prevent her and others (including family members, nursery and medical staff) from identifying that Lilly was being physically abused. One consequence was that Lilly was subjected to unnecessary medical examinations and procedures including investigation for a potential blood disorder.
  - (5) Fifth, you conducted your defence in such a way as to effectively point the blame for the killing towards Helen Corlett as to only other possible adult who could have assaulted Lilly on that day. This was a shameful and cowardly effort by you to escape the consequences of what you had done.
  - (6) Sixth, quite separately to the fatal episode, you assaulted Lilly on a day between 5 and 12 November 2017 (count 2) in a manner I have already explained. The assault

must have been painful and very frightening for this little girl. In particular, the bleeding within the lungs -which was significant- demonstrates that Lilly must have struggled to breathe against a closed airway. I find that it is no coincidence that at around this time Lilly was observed run to Helen Corlett when you walked into the room and became clingy. This was a serious, forceful and sustained assault on a young child, which I determine is in Category 2 (greater harm and lower culpability) of the *Definitive Guidelines for Assault*. On a freestanding basis this offence justifies a determinate sentence at the very top of the Category 2 range of 3 years which I will make concurrent. I have given weight in this regard to the vulnerability of Lilly, the context of earlier physical abuse of this same victim, the abuse of trust, the real terror which Lilly must have suffered when trying to breathe, the domestic setting and your previous convictions. I have also had regard in this context to the *Guidelines Overarching Principles: Assaults on children and cruelty to a child* and the importance of recognizing the particular vulnerability of young children in cases of physical violence.

24. Pausing here, it is clear to me that each of the aggravating features of your offending justify a significant increase from the 15 year starting point before turning to a consideration of the mitigating features.
25. I emphasise that I consider that even absent the serious Count 2 assault, the aggravating features would justify moving substantially above the 15 year starting point. I turn then to mitigating factors.
26. The following two mitigating factors are submitted on your behalf:
  - (i) first, you had an intention to cause serious bodily harm rather than to kill; and
  - (ii) second, lack of premeditation.
27. In my judgment, the absence of both such an intention and premeditation provide limited mitigation in this case. This is because of the deliberate and significant suffering you caused to Lilly over the weeks leading up to her death and clear evidence that the fatal attack involved more than a momentary loss of temper. As I have said, I have found that the fatal assault involved acts of forceful gripping of the head, injuries to the temple, forceful compression of the chest with both hands, all as part of or in combination with a violent shaking episode. This was a brutal assault on any view.
28. I have considered the further points submitted with realism, skill and moderation in mitigation on your behalf by your Leading Counsel, Mr Smith QC. But in reality, beyond the limited mitigation available to you as a result of the lack of premeditation and intent to kill, there is no other real mitigation in his case. You have shown no remorse.
29. Your previous convictions have been drawn to my attention by the Crown. Although you have not previously committed offences of the gravity of the present case, it is clear you have

a significant criminal record. In particular, you are a man who has repeatedly committed acts of violence against women who were current or former partners. Such partners include the mother of your own child. Your record shows that you are a man who commits acts of violence against those who are vulnerable and such acts take place in a domestic setting. It has also been drawn to my attention that you killed Lilly at a time when you were still subject to a restraining order imposed a few months earlier.

30. Having regard to all the factors to which I have made reference, I have concluded that the appropriate minimum term in your case is one of 20 years.
31. I have arrived at this term taking into account my duty to reflect all of your offending in accordance with section 322 of the Sentencing Act 2020. I have also stood back to consider what is a just and proportionate sentence, bearing in mind the principle of totality.

**Mr Sadler please stand up:**

32. I sentence you to life imprisonment. The minimum term you will serve is one of 20 years. As regards Count 2, I impose a concurrent sentence of 3 years imprisonment.
33. It is important to emphasise, so that you and the public can understand the position, that the minimum term is just that - a minimum period which cannot be reduced in any way.
34. After you have served 20 years, there is no guarantee that you will be released at that time, or at any particular time thereafter. If after the 20 year period, the Parole Board decides you are fit to be released you will be released.
35. Moreover, if and when you are released you will remain subject to licence for the rest of your life, and may therefore be recalled to continue your life sentence if you reoffend or otherwise breach the conditions of your licence. It is in these ways that a life sentence protects the public for the future.
36. You will receive credit for the 302 days that you were remanded in custody.
37. The statutory surcharge will be added to the record.