

# chat

**BOOM!**

★ **18 RED-HOT  
PUZZLES!**  
★ **29 SIZZLING  
CASH PRIZES!**

UK ONLY

**I used an APP**

**To TRAP  
this RAT**



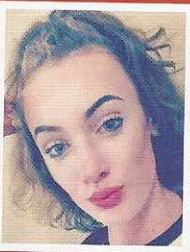
*(and he soon squeaked!)*

**AFTER FRANCESCA...**



*How could I find  
joy without my  
precious girl?*

**Mum's DIRTY secret  
smashed her  
GNASHERS!**



**This talented  
teenager: DEAD**  
*Because of  
WHO SHE WAS*

**Babysitter goes berserk**



# I HEARD MY BONES BREAK

**The golf club snapped...  
so he reached for another**

**IT'S BANGIN'!**

**The best  
Bonfire Night  
grub EVER**



# Life after loss

*How could I carry on without my little girl?*

*Mina Blair, 55, Midhurst, West Sussex*



*1 year old and defying the odds*

**F**eeling a tell-tale itch, I pulled up my top and spotted a smattering of fluid-filled bumps on my tummy.

*Chickenpox*, I sighed.

It was spring 1995, and my toddler Karina, then 3, had recently picked up the contagious infection at nursery.

All the other mums were chuffed that it was doing the rounds.

'Get it over with,' they said.

I'd no idea I hadn't had it growing up and wasn't immune, though.

And the trouble was, I was 3 months pregnant.

'Don't worry, the virus can't cross the placenta,' my doctors reassured, and the spots soon cleared up.

Only, by the time I was seven months gone, my belly was huge.

Far bigger than with Karina.

Scans showed a tiny baby floating in vast amounts

of amniotic fluid.

Doctors remained confident she was OK, but that October, three weeks early, Francesca was born via emergency caesarean.

It should've been a special moment for her dad Malcolm, then 56, and I.

Only, panic erupted.

Francesca had severe breathing difficulties, muscle wastage on her left leg and a club foot.

At 10 days old, she needed surgery due to bowel complications.

And I spotted something

else. Tiny circular scars on her skin.

*It can't be...*

'Is this because of the chickenpox?' I asked the doctor.

But nobody could say for sure.

As Francesca grew, it became clear just how poorly she was.

At 3 months, we discovered she had vocal-cord paralysis, giving her a mute cry.

A faulty epiglottis meant the lid covering her windpipe let food and liquid fall into her lungs.

It was irreparable, left her unable to breathe or feed properly.

By 6 months, she had a tracheostomy – a

tube through her windpipe to help her breathe.

She was tube fed, too.

'No part of her works properly,' I despaired.

She needed five different specialists – neurology, respiratory, ear, nose and throat, gastrointestinal and orthopaedic.

Plagued by lung problems, and with no clear prognosis, every time I rushed Francesca to A&E, I feared that we'd lose her.

Yet, as months turned to years, she defied the odds.

One vocal cord started

working, so she could speak hoarsely.

Then when Francesca was 5 and 6, the tubes in her stomach and throat were respectively removed.

Despite chronic pain and suffering, she was mentally unaffected and grew into a beautiful, kind-hearted girl.

'She has such a zest for life,' I gushed to Malcolm.

She loved spending time at the nearby nature reserve, identifying flowers and bird watching.

'That's a chaffinch,' she'd



*Yoga has helped me cope*

# ter



*My precious Francesca*



*She grew into a kind, nature-loving young lady*

grin proudly.

And when she wasn't outside, she played Barbies with Karina, who was so patient, having learnt early on that her sister was sick.

Because she was so frail, Francesca was mostly homeschooled, but on the days she could go, she excitedly joined her friends.

Her bubbly personality shining through.

We made sure she lived the life of any other girl her age – and she was happy.

It wasn't easy, juggling Francesca's care with my corporate job. The strain sadly led to my split from Malcolm in 2005.

I moved out, and though the split was tough on the girls, we shared custody. Stayed friends for their sake.

For the next two years, Francesca was hospitalised regularly, mostly with lung infections.

*This isn't looking good,* I realised.

A devastating reality to face.

So I buried my fears

down deep.

Then, in 2007, Francesca, 12, stopped growing, and was having more breathing difficulties.

That November, while at home, Francesca collapsed after episodes of vomiting.

At hospital, doctors found fluid build-up on her already-weak lungs.

Suctioning treatment to remove it proved futile and fatal rates of carbon dioxide were detected in her blood.

Her lungs simply weren't working, and I just knew...

*It's the end.*

'We have to be brave,' I told Malcolm.

Treatment was stopped, machines packed away.

And after consent from medics, I told Francesca, 12, we were going home.

'OK, but not for the last time?' she asked calmly.

'No, sweetheart,' I replied softly, fighting tears.

I couldn't tell my girl we were taking her home to die.

That night, Malcolm and I took her back. Cooked her favourite meal, pasta in tomato sauce.

After, we got her ready for

bed, gave her kisses and cuddles and watched as she dozed off.

Then, in the early hours, with her family by her side and after years of pain, suffering, surgeries and treatments, Francesca passed away.

Knowing she was at peace was comforting.

Yet, though we'd spent 12 years preparing for this day, it didn't make it easier.

Distraught, Malcolm, Karina, 15, and I felt Francesca everywhere.

Her pink bedroom untouched, clothes hanging up and jewellery in the drawer where she'd left it.

I tried to hold it together.

But masking my emotions both at home and at the office was exhausting.

Feeling utterly lost and numb without my little girl.

Over the next years, I engrossed myself in spiritual textbooks and teachings.

Travelled to far-flung places, like Bali and Mexico, took up yoga to cope with my loss.

Through much soul searching, I had a spiritual awakening, and in January

2009, I gave up my job to become a licensed psychodynamic counsellor, and eventually a yoga instructor in 2017.

In the years since, congenital varicella syndrome, a condition caused by maternal chickenpox, has become a recognised disorder.

And while I often wonder what Francesca would've become – an artist, or teacher's assistant like her sister, now 29 – I don't dwell on 'what ifs'.

Francesca's short life and death taught me how resilient I am.

That I can withstand an insurmountable amount of pain and grief and still find joy in the little things.

A flower or bird.

The nature that Francesca adored.

Because life is precious.

And I know that, while she may be gone physically, my memories keep her alive.

## I cooked her her favourite meal, pasta in tomato sauce

**Not For The Last Time** by Mina Blair (£8.99, MatChat Books) is available at [amazon.co.uk](http://amazon.co.uk)