

The Case of Susan Turner

On September 3, 2005, the Allentown Police Department receive an anonymous telephone call at 3:00 a.m., asking them to check on the welfare of children. It was the caller's belief that at least two children were unattended in an upstairs apartment and that their mother had left several hours previously with a friend and had not returned. The children were awake for awhile and crying for their mother.

The Allentown Police proceeded to the stated address in a downtown, inner city location. In the second floor apartment of a three-unit row house, they find a male and female child unattended. Both children are terrified and cannot respond verbally to the police officers' requests for information. The two male police officers call for backup from a female officer. When she arrives moments later, she comforts the children and calms them down. In the meantime, all of the officers observe that a radio has been left on, quite loudly, and that the air conditioning had been turned to high. There were several small boxes of cereal in the children's beds, all empty. Walking through the apartment, they notice piles of unwashed laundry, scattered empty plates, a collection of magazines and newspapers, and garbage throughout the apartment. One small side room had several mattresses on the floor and was covered with garbage and roaches. Among the debris were several straight-edge razors in razor holders. The kitchen was spotless. The refrigerator was empty.

The female child, later identified as Angela, age seven, has marks all over her shoulders and back. When asked what happened to her by the female officer, she states that her mother hit her with a rug beater, which she shows to the officer. The other child was not marked in any way.

The neighbors on the first floor provided the following information, although they are unwilling to say it was they who telephoned the police. Susan Turner, about age 24, lives in the two-bedroom apartment with her three children--Angela, about seven, Jacob, about five, and a newborn boy. Susan keeps to herself in the neighborhood although there are often friends in and out of the apartment.

The police wait a half hour or so for the mother to return. When she does not, they telephone Children and Youth Services to take the children. The caseworker arrives about a half hour later and meets the mother on the steps as she is returning home. When Susan Turner learns that the police are there, she goes ballistic, shouting and screaming at the police, her children, and her neighbors, alleging that she had only been gone a few moments to get aspirin for her sick infant, Scott, born July 2005, who she has with her.

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Although she does not smell of alcohol, Ms. Turner appears to be under the influence of something. The police take all the children into custody and hand them over to the caseworker for placement. The children receive cursory pre-placement physicals in the local emergency room and go to an emergency foster home for the rest of the night.

The next day, the caseworker returns to speak in more detail with Susan Turner. By the time she arrives at the Turner apartment, it is late afternoon. Ms. Turner is much calmer than the night before, and, in fact, looks quite weary and much older than her 24 years.

Over the next week, the caseworker learns the following:

- Scott, the two month old, is not developing well. The doctor has a tentative diagnosis of failure to thrive. He was born a healthy seven-pound, four-ounce infant but has not gained weight well. He is now in the fifth percentile for weight and the 40th percentile for height. He gained two pounds in the first week of foster care. He has not been seen at any health care providers for well-baby checks since his birth.
- Jacob, although five years old and eligible for kindergarten, is not enrolled in school. He has not attended any pre-school programs and appears to be developmentally delayed. His birth date is July 2000.
- Angela was in first grade during the previous school year and passed to the second grade. Her teacher, the school counselor, and the principal all identify her as a very troubled child. She is being treated by a psychologist with the local mental health office which operates in the school. The caseworker consults with the psychologist and learns that Angela is very bright and very depressed. The psychologist suspects some kind of abuse but is unable to be certain. Angela's birth date is July 1998.
- Susan Turner agreed to have a drug and alcohol evaluation at the local D&A treatment site, which agreed to see her on an emergency basis. She was diagnosed as having a mild dependence on cocaine and marijuana and the evaluator recommended outpatient treatment.