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Allison Pearson 'We face a lifetime of grief. He should face the same'

Jenny Stancombe, the mother of murdered seven-year-old Elsie Dot, summed it up best when talking about the anguish Rudakubana has unleashed

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Bebe King, Elsie Dot Stancombe and Alice da Silva Aguiar were murdered by Axel Rudakubana Credit: Merseyside Police



Allison Pearson
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Numb. A great obliterating numbness settled over Court 5-1 as the recitation of the list of wounds inflicted on the little girls went on and on.

They fell under a section called Pathological Evidence. However bad you may have feared the Southport atrocities committed by Axel Rudakubana were, this was so much worse. One parent said what had happened on July 29 at a Taylor Swift dance class was like being trapped inside an extremely dark 5D horror video game except the victims being hacked at and slain were not digital avatars but people's flesh and blood, children for God's sake.

Elsie Dot, Alice and Bebe (such an enchanting gappy smile she had because, aged just six, her grown-up teeth hadn't come through) were killed in the most savage manner (this wasn't an English murder, it was a Hutus and Tutsis-style massacre); eight other girls suffered the preferred euphemism "life-changing injuries". For the first time, we heard exactly what was done to them. Deanna Heer, the exemplary prosecuting barrister, read a roster of horrors out with a remarkable calm, forensic dignity before turning to the families of the dead and the injured who sat in one corner at the back of the courtroom, separated from the dock by an opaque panel. "Anyone want to leave at this point?"

(There were about 30 of them, 80 of us altogether in the pale wood-panelled room, including four barristers in wigs, court staff and a handful of reporters who were allocated a seat near the judge's bench.)



Tributes left outside Liverpool Crown Court on Thursday Credit: ADAM VAUGHAN/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

A few of the relatives got up and left, faces already ashen, but most decided to stay and endure. If the kids had to live through it, why shouldn't the adults hear exactly what happened? That was the guiding spirit of this most harrowing of days, I think. Honour the girls and their courage, acknowledge all they had suffered while making sure the evil bastard who did that to them was put away for good.

(Earlier, in the canteen of Liverpool Crown Court, there were strong views among the tea-drinkers about what punishment Rudakubana, the son of parents who sought asylum in the UK after fleeing the Rwandan genocide, should get. Sir Keir Starmer and his human rights lawyers would not have liked the Scousers' eye-for-an-eye concept of justice. Tracy, who was there to see her husband and son sentenced for major-league drug offences, told me she thought they might be travelling back to prison in the same van as "that disgusting lad" and could take the opportunity to "do 'im in, like". The canteen loved that idea. "Brilliant!" Most of Britain would concur, I reckon.)

In the courtroom, the 11am start time had passed and an hour later we were still waiting to look upon the face of evil. (The first time the families would be in the same room as Rudakubana, who was said to be refusing to appear.)



Rudakubana escaped a whole-life order because he was 17 at the time of the murders

Deanna Heer was in full flow, talking about “stab wounds to the children’s backs as they tried to escape, longstanding obsession with violence, killing and genocide”, when, suddenly, there he was. Very tall, slender as a pipe-cleaner, he loped in wearing a pale grey tracksuit. As soon as he was seated, just on the other side of the glass, he ducked down, burying his head in his lap so all that was visible was the sticky-up, matted, jet hair and, very occasionally, the coal-black pupils which rolled back into his head revealing the bright whites of his eyes.

(The only Satanic thing about him, those scary eyes. Court artist Elizabeth Cook who has studied the killer closely says that, when his mask is off, he pulls constant faces, gurning, hands jerky and fidgeting.)

The body language was that of a stropky teenager who pulls up his hoodie to blot out his annoying parents. He would have been wearing headphones if they’d let him. Nonetheless, there is something coiled about him, combustible; rage is just beneath the surface. Sure enough, it didn’t take much to set him off. His counsel said he was fine to appear and he cried out, “I’m not fine. I feel ill. Paramedic! I need to speak to a paramedic because I feel ill.”

Mr Justice Goose held his ground and indicated that it was he, not Mr Rudakubana (the courtesy title sounded absurd attached to that foul fiend) who was in control here. But the cries of protest became a bellow, “I can’t remain QUIET because I’m ill, judge. I haven’t eaten for TEN DAYS. I’m not going to remain QUIET.”

In the public gallery, just a few feet away, there was open scoffing and disbelief at this entitled, arrogant display. If there had been subtitles available they would have read, “Our daughters are dead or maimed and you have the gall to say you’re ill! Get stuffed!”

“I FEEL ILL. I FEEL ILL. MY CHEST is hurting.” The judge said he’d like him to “remain quiet and listen carefully.” “I didn’t choose to feel pain,” he retorted, as if this was all about him. “Stop ignoring me!” Was the author of the most infamous massacre in legal history just a monstrous attention-seeker? Evil has seldom looked more banal.

The judge agreed they could take Rudakubana out, but he must return after lunch (he pulled the same childish stunt a second time and missed the sentence being passed). It drained some of the drama from the occasion.

All of the bereaved and shocked people who had poured their hearts into their victim impact statements wanted their girls' tormentor to be there to hear about the appalling damage he had wrought. Even if he'd stayed, I don't think he was capable of comprehending the ocean of anguish he's unleashed.

Jenny Stancombe, mother of Elsie Dot, aged seven, one of the three girls murdered, summed it up best: "He took our daughter, her life, her future and everything she could have been. There is no greater loss and no greater pain. His actions have left us with a lifetime of grief and it is only right that he faces the same."

But Rudakubana escaped a whole-life order because he was 17 at the time of the murders rather than 18 as he is now. Instead he'll be jailed for a minimum of 52 years. I was holding it together until we heard a statement read out from the parents of Alice da Silva Aguiar whom we saw in CCTV footage managing to hobble to a car outside although she was fatally wounded. Her mum and dad's pride and joy, as well as their only child, the nine-year-old's death has left a terrifying void. "Alice's mum often thinks of going to meet her and she hopes her life is shortened so she can be with Alice." Perhaps most astonishing was a teenager who had gone along that day to help her sister and Leanne Lucas, the dance teacher. The judge and barrister were concerned. They kept saying, "she's only 14 but she wants to speak."

They needn't have worried. A beautiful girl with long brown hair, dressed in a plaid skirt and blouse, she was undaunted. Appearing via a screen, and with composure, she let Rudakubana have it, addressing him in the first person with cold fury: "I thought you were playing a joke," she said.

"You didn't look human, you looked possessed. All I could hear were the screams." She ran onto the landing and shouted at the little girls to run away then followed them. "I knew I was running for my life... I knew from your eyes you wanted to kill us all." The fear she experienced, not being able to find her sister, will live with her always. "You stabbed me so severely my arm looked like it was inside out... My lung collapsed. I'm so scared because of what you did to us... You caused that fear in me and my sister. Give me a reason for what you did," she demanded.

Wow! "I hope you spend the rest of your life knowing we think you're a coward." She was the best of British.

As the judge read out the sentence, and after some of the most appalling evidence ever heard in an English court, I thought the nation was right to be enraged about Southport. It was the supine political class that tried to play down what happened and denied it was terrorism that should have been jailed. As one of the families said: “Keir Starmer was more concerned about the victims of the riots than about us.”

No one in the court mentioned that Islamist groups had targeted Taylor Swift’s concert tour. The little Swifties of Southport were their victims, of that I have no doubt. As Leanne, their dance teacher said, so fragile but bravely appearing in person: “He targeted us because we were women and girls – because we were vulnerable, easy prey.”

Yes, he did. Like that astonishing 14-year-old victim said, Rudakubana is a coward. Leanne, like so many caught up in that deafening tragedy, has doubted whether she could go on. Turning towards the empty dock, she stiffened, fighting back the tears: “But Alice, Elsie, Bebe, and all the girls – I’m surviving for you.”

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