

# 'Sexually abused for 11 years... by my mum'

Susannah Faithfull, 54, was betrayed by the person closest to her

When I looked at the shrunken woman who'd terrorised me as a child, I felt 10ft tall. I hadn't seen Mum since I was 14. My heart raced as I stared down into her eyes, as she'd done to me as a child. 'I remember what you did. I hope you rot in hell,' I said and left. I'd never forgotten what she'd done and I could never forgive.

My parents split up when I was four months old, after Mum took an overdose. Although Dad tried to get custody of me, I was sent to live with Mum and her family in the south of England.

We were a poor family and lived in a chaotic household, six of us sharing a big, dingy house. It was in Nan's room that my mum first sexually abused me. I remember staring at the bright green eiderdown as she hurt me so much that I passed out and fell off the bed. I was only two or three years old.

From then on, the abuse happened daily and I lived in fear. Mum worked as a factory supervisor. When she came home, I'd have to go to the room we shared so that she could abuse me.

Mum was very volatile. Sometimes

she'd be loud and chatty, but when she went quiet, I knew I'd be in for it. She didn't just sexually abuse me but would also force me to eat tins of beetroot or pots of cream until I felt sick. She'd take her frustrations out on our cat, too, throwing it against the wall.

The constant fear and humiliation made me shy and withdrawn. I didn't eat properly, had a stutter and shied away from physical contact. I tried to tell people what was happening and even mentioned it to my aunt, but she just called me a liar. When I was seven, I tried telling my dad too, but he just pretended that I hadn't said anything.

I think Nan knew something bad was happening, but she was deaf and couldn't work out the truth. Mum covered her tracks, secretly washing my clothes separately so that nobody would see my bloodstained underwear.

When I realised no one would believe me, I gave up. It was as though part of

me had been obliterated. No words can describe the devastation I felt.

Some relief came when I was 14. Mum, who'd been in and out of mental health institutions, went to a psychiatric hospital for good. But although the abuse ended, the scars would take years to heal. I was terrified of turning out like her because our blue eyes looked so alike – but hers were cold and mine were warm.

**'I realised that nobody would believe me'**

Two years later, I left home. I spent some time with my father, but we lost touch and he has since died. Nan died not long after, and I lost contact with all Mum's family, keeping my terrible secret to myself.

I began training as a nurse. I loved my work and did well, getting praise from my teachers. But my self-esteem was so low I didn't believe compliments.

Unable to cope, I started collecting painkillers from my GP. I began stuffing them into my mouth, but I was crying so much that I couldn't swallow them. I gave up nursing and got married,

aged just 19. I was desperate for a normal life and longed to erase the past, so I rushed into the marriage.

I had a physical relationship with my husband but found real intimacy difficult. I had to keep telling myself that what we were doing was normal.

Still, I was delighted to get pregnant. I'd been scared I wouldn't be able to have children, because of the damage Mum had done to me. I loved my son instantly, but when I was breastfeeding him and changing his nappies, I had to reassure myself that this closeness was OK – that it was natural.

My second son was born a couple of years later but, sadly, my marriage broke down shortly after. That's when a friend recommended that I try counselling, addressing the terrible anger I still felt.

I confronted Mum in her psychiatric hospital, walking away after my outburst. I felt in control. I did visit her a couple more times, but that was all I could bear.

Later, I began working in mental health and met Nick, now 52. We were just friends to start with but then we fell in love.

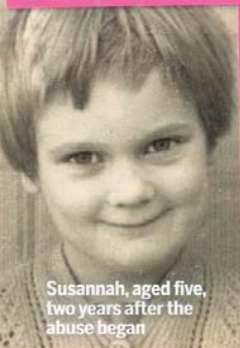
We've been together for 11 years, and set up the Aurora Health Foundation to help adult survivors of sexual abuse and trauma.

I still can't work out why Mum did it. Only an abuser could understand that. The hardest thing is reconciling my opposing feelings. Although Mum hurt me in the worst way possible, there's still a part of me that loves her.

Last year, 11 years after we'd last met, I got in touch with the hospital where Mum lived. They told me she'd died a year ago. In spite of everything she'd done to me, I cried.



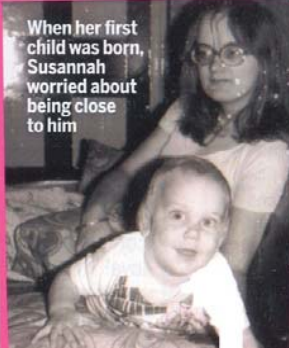
## The scars that last a lifetime



Susannah, aged five, two years after the abuse began



14-year-old Susannah's torment stopped when her mum went into hospital



When her first child was born, Susannah worried about being close to him



Susannah is a devoted mum after the horrors of her own childhood

## 'I want to help other survivors'

The Aurora Health Foundation ([www.aurorahealthfoundation.org.uk](http://www.aurorahealthfoundation.org.uk)) was set up by Susannah and her partner Nick to help survivors of all forms of childhood abuse. To protect clients' anonymity, the centre is based in an ordinary, unmarked house. Staff use a range of therapies and treatments – movement, colour, drawing, reiki and massage. Clients can also just drop in for tea and a chat. Susannah says it's very important to do ordinary things as well as offering therapy, so that survivors of abuse feel accepted, no matter what they've been through in the past.



Susannah and Nick now work together