

**Cosmo inspiration**

Siobhan hopes her story will help other abuse victims



**M**usic can create such powerful memories. And whenever I hear a '50s rock 'n' roll classic by someone like Chuck Berry, memories of my dad Bill crash into my head. If it was you, you might remember your dad's laugh, or the TV show you always watched together. Not me. Instead, my most vivid memories are of Dad abusing me over nine long years.

"My dad and stepmum Jackie brought me up until they separated when I was six, and the abuse began not long after that. I'd stayed with Jackie but saw Dad once or twice a week. My brother Sunny lived with him but sometimes Dad and I would go by ourselves to a caravan he owned near his home in Hampshire.

*If I asked for anything, he'd touch me first, so it felt like I'd somehow 'earned' it*

"It was there that he started talking to me about sex. He asked me if I knew what certain words meant. I just shook my head. But then he closed the caravan door and started touching me. I was too young to understand what had happened, and was completely confused – especially when Dad bought me fish and chips afterwards, for being 'a good girl'. Of course, I was too young to know he'd committed a crime. But I sensed it

wasn't something to be mentioned to my stepmum.

"So instead, I buried what was happening – even though Dad started abusing me almost every time I visited him. Whenever it happened, he'd reward me with computer games and CDs. If I asked for anything, like chocolate, he'd touch me first, so it felt like I'd somehow 'earned' it. I've no

memory of him doing anything nice just for the sake of it. Just him abusing me, sometimes several times a week, casting a shadow over my whole childhood.

"I felt so ashamed, even though I didn't understand why. It wasn't until I got a bit older that I started to realise what he was doing wasn't normal – and my sense of shame grew. I began to feel as if I had a choice; that by not stopping him, I was >

# 'I jailed my abusive dad'

*Siobhan Pyburn, 19, felt she was powerless to protect herself from years of abuse – until a chance conversation changed everything*



A happy three-year-old, with brother Sunny

**Cosmo inspiration**

consenting to what he was doing. But, of course, Dad had made sure I had no choice at all, by telling me so many times that my life would be over if I told anyone. So I didn't tell a soul, and assumed I was the only person in the world going through such a terrible ordeal. The closest I came to telling someone was when I was about 12. I started talking to Jackie about a gay character on *EastEnders* – and it dawned on her that I knew more about sex than was normal for my age. 'How do you know about that?' she asked. 'Dad told me,' I said, before going on to tell her some of the other things he'd said to me.

**The truth comes out**

"I didn't tell her much, but she was still suspicious enough to gently ask if he was doing anything to me. But Dad had threatened to kill himself if I told anyone. And, strange as it might seem, I loved him. He was still my dad. So I shook my head, we carried on watching TV – and the abuse continued. By the time I turned 13 and started dating boys, Dad's abuse had even more of an emotional impact on me. I'd started seeing a boy, Alex\*, but Dad would only allow me to see him if I let him abuse me first.

"I felt almost like I was cheating on Alex, and couldn't even look at him without thinking of Dad and the vile things he did to me. I came to hate myself for what was happening and felt inferior to the other girls at school. I couldn't relate to their lives at all. I was different. I'd cake my face in makeup, and hide in the toilet at lunchtimes, convinced I was too ugly to go outside. The only times I felt really free were when I stayed with my real mum for the school holidays. It meant weeks without Dad touching me, and I felt like I could be myself. And it was during one of these visits that I had the conversation that would change my life.

"I was 15, and Mum started telling me about a child-abuse case she'd known of. After talking about it for a while, she



Clockwise from top right: aged four, with Sunny; at 12, Siobhan (here with her mum) was regularly being abused by her father; free at last – with friend Louise at 17



changed the conversation – but I steered her back to the subject again and again. If I'd realised what I was doing – that I was desperate for Mum to ask me about my abuse – I would have stopped. But I barely recognised my own cry for help, until Mum asked, 'Dad isn't doing anything to you, is he?'

"I nodded. In that instant, everything changed. At last my secret was out. But there was no sense of relief. Mum was too shocked to speak. And as police were called, I felt I'd started something that couldn't be stopped.

*I saw him for what he was – a sad, weak man, not the monster I'd grown up with*

"Giving a video statement at the police station, I felt numb. And even when Dad was arrested, I felt worse, not better. It was as if everything I'd been sure of had suddenly been ripped from beneath my feet. The true horror of what I'd been through hit me for the first time.

**Justice done**

"I told Alex what had been going on, and he and his family were so supportive. But our relationship felt tied up with my abuse, and didn't last much longer.

"As we waited for Dad's trial, I moved to a new school and managed to make a fresh start, and I confided in a counsellor

and a few close friends. Then in March 2007, 14 months after Dad had been arrested, he appeared at Southampton Crown Court to deny 11 charges of indecent assault, having sexual activity with a child and causing a child to engage in sexual activity.

"I only had to give evidence once, via a video link – although it was incredibly difficult being accused of lying. I stayed away for the rest of the trial, so a week later I was at home when I received a call telling me Dad had been found guilty. I burst into tears – the first time I'd felt relief since I'd told Mum the truth. I went to court to see him sentenced to three years in jail, and it helped to see him for what he is – a sad, weak man, rather than the monster I'd grown up with.

"Since that moment, my life has been on an upward spiral. My childhood still has an impact on me – if men tell me I'm beautiful, I assume they just want one thing – but at least I know I'm free of those awful times forever. If I choose to tell people about my past, they're always surprised that someone as grounded as me could have gone through something so traumatic, which I'm proud of.

"But it pains me to think of all the children still suffering in silence, so I've set up a website to encourage them to tell someone about what's happening. I had help from *ITV Fixers*, a TV show that gives young people the chance to tackle things they care about. I featured on the show, telling my story anonymously, but as soon as I turned 18, I was determined to speak out publicly to show I have nothing to be ashamed of. If I can positively affect the life of just one victim, I'll be happy.

"Instead of dwelling on the past, I'm focusing on the future – on studying law later this year, and building my self-esteem. Despite the odd blip, I have a healthy attitude to relationships and sex, and I've dated other men since Alex. For now, though, I'm just enjoying being by myself. "These days, I wear makeup to enhance my looks, not as a mask to hide behind. I've even got some '50s rock 'n' roll tunes on my iPod. The more I listen to them, the more that sinking feeling fades, and loosens Dad's grip on my life. Given time, I might even grow to like them."

• Visit Siobhan's website at [www.the-phoenix-project.co.uk](http://www.the-phoenix-project.co.uk) and *ITV Fixers* at [www.itvfixers.com](http://www.itvfixers.com). ♦

BY MAGGIE MORGAN AND ROSIE MULLENDER. PHOTOGRAPH: JESS LONG. \*NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED