

“My neighbour groomed me to be a sex slave”

This woman spent her teenage years being abused by a man she trusted – but things were about to get even worse.

Now 23 and finally free, she agreed to anonymously tell GLAMOUR her harrowing story.

As told to **Julie McCaffrey**

Lying there, eyes streaming, teeth clenched in pain, it was not how I imagined my first time. The man on top of me was not a long-term crush or school boyfriend I'd decided to lose my virginity to. He was a neighbour who insisted this was how I should repay him for his gifts and attention. He was 70. I was 13.

My neighbour, Keith*, seemed lovely at first. He lived just opposite our terraced house and we became friendly around the time I turned 13. We would chat in the street about his dog. Whenever it rained, he magically appeared at the bus stop to offer me a lift to school. When I had an argument with my mum, he spent hours listening to my side over mugs of hot chocolate at his kitchen table. And whatever craze I was coveting, whether it was gel pens or a Morgan school bag, he bought and gift-wrapped it for me.

At the time, Mum had taken on three cleaning jobs to support me and my older sister. She was out of the house from 6am until 11pm, so barely noticed my ►



◀ developing relationship with Keith. If anything, it was a relief that someone was keeping an eye on me. Dad had left us shortly after I was born, insisting my skin was so fair, I couldn't possibly be his. Later, they divorced, so Mum was under immense stress as a single mother. Meanwhile, my 16-year-old sister was always off with friends, keen to shake off her little sister.

Keith made me feel he was the only person who truly understood and appreciated me. He convinced me my jumbled adolescent thoughts mattered. He said he saw my potential to be beautiful and brilliant. When our conversation segued into suggestive questions, alarm bells didn't ring. "Have you ever seen a man's willy?" was the sort of thing we all asked each other at school. "Had anyone popped my cherry?" was just Keith trying to really get to know me.

In the first six months of knowing him, the time and money Keith spent on me made me feel special. Then indebted. Keith said he was lonely and needed more from me than

“ He gave me a drink that made my body numb. When I woke up, I was naked ”

hugs. He said it was payback for all his presents. So in the back room of his house, a few doors from my own, I paid that debt. It was painful, but I didn't resist him – I remember thinking, 'Maybe this is what you do for men who give you things.'

When I told friends at school I'd had sex, I was proud. I felt elevated. Only the prettiest, most popular girls had older boyfriends and I felt promoted to their ranks. But as the weeks went on, when Keith picked me up from school and took me to his house for sex, I knew it was wrong and something I had to keep quiet. Not just because he told me so, but because, deep down, I felt ashamed.

I thought of telling my mum, but I didn't want to burden her. She came to the UK after marrying Dad and still tried to live by the very conservative values of her Asian family. Her relatives believed that her divorce tainted their family honour and they disowned us. If she'd known I'd had sex before marriage, let alone



with an elderly white man, she'd have felt deep shame and fury. Since Dad had left, she'd already suffered nervous breakdowns. She stayed indoors for days, crying, and repeatedly banged her head on the walls. I didn't want to add to her problems.

Then there was my sister, who had warned me about Keith. She said it was weird that he always asked for hugs, and held those embraces a few seconds longer than were comfortable. At times, I wished I'd listened, but I also wanted to be grown up, independent and make up my own mind. And I craved the affection and attention he gave me.

At school, I tried reaching out to teachers. In class we studied Tracey Emin's *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With* artwork, which was a tent scrawled with all the names of her sexual partners, so I attempted something similar. I ripped Keith's love letters into pieces and used them in my art project. I daubed phrases like, 'I wish my body was mine' across them. The school contacted Mum to say they were concerned about my expressive work.

After that, social services visited. It caused more rows between me and my mum. I denied any sexual activity and then later cried about the fall-out on Keith's shoulder. By then he was giving me cash to save me the embarrassment of claiming free meals at my well-to-do school. This meant I fell deeper into his debt and he kept repeating that ▶

◀ nothing in life was free. We'd never had money when I was growing up, and I was taught that to get nice things we had to work hard. In a way it made sense to me that I had to repay Keith for his cash and gifts.

Two months after I lost my virginity, Keith asked me to sleep with friends he invited to his house. He owed them money and said that if I had sex with them, I'd help him stay out of harm. I'd been brought up to respect my elders, so I obeyed.

Keith gave me a drink that made my body numb, my mind woozy. When I woke up, I was naked and couldn't move my legs. But I knew I'd had sex with multiple men – not just because I was bleeding, but because they had explicit photos of me on their phones. When they showed me them, I felt sick. I begged them to delete the pictures, but they said they were for personal use.

The photos were used to blackmail me into having sex with other strangers. They threatened to show them to my mum, which seemed somehow a worse prospect than what they were doing to me. It was horrific, but the more men I slept with, the more I liked Keith. He was so much nicer to me than they were. He didn't refuse to wear a condom like they did. He didn't beat me up after rough sex, stab me with a coat hanger or carve his name into my skin like they did. Maybe he actually cared?

I'd creep home late in the evening, nursing my injuries, but Mum was never there, and my sister was very private. If I stayed out all night, I told them I was at a sleepover.

With so many secrets, it was hard to concentrate at school and my work bombed. I was suspended for not wearing my uniform, but couldn't tell teachers it was covered in semen. I was given detentions for refusing to do PE, but I didn't dare explain I was hiding severe bruising on my legs.

When a teacher alerted social services to the cuts on my face and body, Mum was interviewed, but she denied she'd inflicted the

injuries. To counter this, Keith would call the police and say he'd witnessed my mum beating us. He lived so close he could often hear us arguing, so it seemed believable. He ensured all fingers pointed at Mum and away from him.

Not long after I left school at 17, Keith moved to the south coast – I never heard from him again. I missed him hugely – in spite of everything, he was one of the few adults who actually looked after me. I felt he loved me. Only

later did I find out he was on the Sex Offenders Register and that his parting shot had been to trade me to a gang of Asian men. All I knew at the time was that my life got even worse – a group of men never left me alone. Every day, I was hidden under blankets in a car and driven to a house or hotel where I'd have sex with up to ten men. I took the diazepam they offered; it dulled my thoughts until I was a zombie, and anaesthetised my body to make even the most painful sexual positions bearable. Soon I was addicted.

At home, Mum was exasperated by my sullen, secretive attitude. I was stumbling home in the early hours, and couldn't get out of bed until late because I was sleeping off diazepam. She thought I was lazy and my suggestive clothes and constant male callers offended her traditional values. From her perspective, I had become the daughter from hell. When she threw me out, I didn't

argue – the gangs knew where I lived, so it was safer for Mum and my sister if I left.

Most nights, I slept on the floor of storerooms above gang members' takeaway shops. I was only ever paid in phone credit, cigarettes or drugs, so barely ever had more than £10 in my pocket. Sometimes men treated me nicely by finishing quickly – I'd be so grateful. More often they were evil. One man felt he hadn't received what he'd ordered because I wasn't fully shaved down below, so he set my pubic hair on fire.

During numerous hospital visits, I lied to the doctors who set my broken nose or ►

GROOMING: THE FACTS

495 sexual grooming offences were reported by the Home Office between September 2013 and September 2014, up 32% on the year before.

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56 UK-born children are thought to have been trafficked for sexual exploitation in 2013 – more than double the previous year.

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“Groomed teenagers are usually unaware they are being abused and often believe they are in a loving relationship,” says Fleur Strong, director of Parents Against Child Sexual Exploitation (Pace). “They may become secretive, stop engaging with usual friends and be prone to sharp mood swings.”

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For more common signs of grooming or abuse, visit paceuk.info

◀ dressed my burnt scalp. I gave them a false name and date of birth. I was too frightened to explain that the man waiting for me in the corridor swore he would murder me if I told the truth.

When routine blood tests for STIs (amazingly, I didn't catch any) showed I was pregnant, my first thought was that this could finally be a way out. But mother and child accommodation is only assigned when you are 20 weeks gone, and I miscarried before then. The father could have been any of the 40 men I'd slept with in the week of conception.

My feelings of utter desolation and desperation grew. I tried to escape, but had nowhere to go, no money. Every exit was

“ It's slowly getting easier to believe I deserve a happy future. I now wake up feeling free ”

blocked. Even if I stepped just a few yards on my own, I was followed. When I ran away to domestic abuse refuges, I couldn't stay long because I didn't fit their remit of a domestic abuse victim – they classed me as a sex worker. I considered returning home, but worried I'd put my mum and sister in grave danger. When I ran to the police, the false details I'd given the hospital meant I couldn't pin down dates of attacks. Being smuggled into houses and hotels prevented me locating where the abuse took place. I had no names of gang members or abusers, nowhere to turn and no hope.

I was so low that in August 2013, when the gang threw me out of their car and doused me with petrol, I thought, 'Go on, then. Light the match. Kill me. I have nothing to live for.' They didn't, but I was picked up by the police. This time, a lady from Victim Support told me to call The Salvation Army because they deal directly with people who are trafficked. It was the first time I'd heard that word. The label confused me at first, then fitted. I had been illegally traded as a sex slave. I wasn't paid, but the gang made a lot of money out of my services.

Within 90 minutes of me calling The Salvation Army, two volunteers arrived

to drive me hundreds of miles away to a safe house. Other trafficked women lived there too, some from Britain, some from abroad, all with their own shocking stories.

At first, I was too scared to believe my nightmare could be over. It helped that the volunteers took my phone, releasing me from the constant threats, and that I was far from home, so I stopped worrying that every car I saw was prowling for me.

But the relief was hard to process. I was finally in a safe house with a clean bed, warm shower and someone to make me a cup of tea without asking for payment in sexual favours.

Over the following months, The Salvation Army pieced me back together. They helped me break my addiction to diazepam and gave me medical support, counselling and support applying for benefits. I'm now having surgery to correct my broken nose as well as anal and vaginal reconstruction, so my body will soon be mine again.

Beyond this, what I want most is to be reunited with my mum and sister. I don't blame them for what happened. They are still hurting, too, because of all the lies I told them, and I will always love them. For now, it's enough that they know I'm safe and that they are too. The police have put cameras outside their home to protect them from gang members who might seek revenge. Right now, I can't face prosecuting the men who abused me. I'd rather focus on getting my life straight.

My ambition is to study at university so I can teach people how to spot and stop grooming. The thought that I might be able to prevent even one case drives me. But first, I'm learning how to live normally. One of the biggest challenges has been believing that I deserve a happy future: 18 months on from my escape, it's slowly getting easier. I now wake up feeling free – and I appreciate that more than anyone can imagine.” ©

WHERE TO GET HELP

If you believe that you, or someone you have come into contact with, are a victim of grooming, sex slavery or trafficking, call The Salvation Army's 24-hour confidential Referral Helpline (0300 303 8151) or the government's Modern Slavery helpline (0800 012 1700). Call the police on 999 if you think someone is in immediate danger. For more information, visit salvationarmy.org.uk/human-trafficking and paceuk.info