



Audrey's seventh birthday party

# "I WAS SIX WHEN MY NIGHTMARE BEGAN"

*Writer Audrey Delaney, 41, describes how her childhood was ruined by the very man who was supposed to protect her. Audrey is divorced and lives in County Cavan in Ireland with her children Tyrone, 12, and Robin, nine*

One September afternoon 18 years ago, I was driving in my car, happily listening to the radio, when a news story came on about a recent court case. Suddenly, I found myself sitting bolt upright, my heart pounding and my palms sweating. Three words rang in my ears. Child. Sexual. Abuse.

As I felt a wave of nausea sweep over me, I couldn't understand why I was reacting so violently to the programme. But then, suddenly, images of my father flashed into my mind. He was standing in my bedroom, the next second he was climbing into my bed, his rough hands tugging at my pyjamas. And I was a child again – just six years old.

Until that moment, I'd convinced myself that my father had been a respectable businessman who had spoiled my three brothers and me with expensive toys and holidays. And yet, the more I shook my head in denial, the more my body quaked in horror, as the truth about my father came rushing to the surface... the truth that I'd buried for so long.

From the outside, Bernard Delaney seemed like the perfect father. Born into a poor Irish family, he'd left school at 12 to

work as an office boy, but went on to train as an accountant in his twenties. Bright and hard-working, he was eventually appointed as chief executive of a local wholesale company. He and Mum had four children – my older brother Mark, me and my two younger brothers Fergus and Dan – and we enjoyed a privileged upbringing. We lived in a spacious house and my father took us all camping most weekends. In fact, our neighbours even nicknamed us 'The Brady Bunch'. "You're so lucky," my friends would sigh. But no one suspected what really lay behind the picture-perfect façade – not even my own mother.

## A CHILDHOOD BETRAYED

I was so young I can't even remember when Dad's behaviour towards me started to change. It began innocently enough – he would sit me on his lap and tickle my legs. But gradually his hand moved higher and higher until, when I was six, it crept under my skirt and into my underwear.

As a small child, I accepted what he did – he was my father after all. I soon learned to zone out during his nightly visits, turning on my side and picking away at the wallpaper until a big round

shredded patch started to appear on the wall. Afterwards, my father would simply go back to his bed as if nothing had happened. But I'd lie awake for hours, full of confusion and shame.

Meanwhile, his behaviour had become increasingly brazen. I remember going to church one day when I was about seven. Dad and I were standing at the back, in front of two young girls. When the service began, I saw his hand slide backwards and start to fondle one of them. I was horrified and my face burned with embarrassment. The little girl's face drained of colour, but she didn't make a sound. Just like me, she was far too frightened and confused to do anything.

Dad didn't threaten me verbally, but I never breathed a word to anyone about what was happening to me. I thought that this was what all daddies did to their daughters. But as I grew older and started spending time at my friends' houses and saw them with their fathers, I began to realise that this sort of paternal attention was far from normal. And by the time I was 10, I'd begun to realise that what he was doing was totally wrong, but I thought I was to blame for his advances. Also, >

I didn't want to be responsible for breaking up our family or hurting my mother and brothers.

#### BECOMING DESPERATE

And so I kept his behaviour a secret and tried to avoid him as much as possible. I even stopped inviting my friends round because I was terrified he would make a move on them too – like the girl in the church. But while I was pretending to the rest of the world that nothing was wrong, my subconscious was screaming with the indignity and injustice of it.

When I was nine I began to complain of stomach pains, just so my mother would take me to the doctor – and get me away from Dad. Specialists carried out scans and X-rays but, of course, they couldn't find anything wrong. Later on, I developed some strange rituals and phobias. I'd insist on eating my breakfast cereal from one particular bowl and between each mouthful I'd turn the bowl a few degrees to the right. It was my way of gaining back some control over my life.

By the time I was 12 we'd moved to a huge house in an affluent suburb of Dublin. But I felt so overwhelmed by my secret burden that, one day, I opened the medicine cabinet and swallowed every pill I could find – aspirin, old antibiotics, anything. Then I lay down and waited to die, but I'd probably only taken a few pills – and ended up with severe stomach cramps.

It wasn't until a year later, when I was 13, that my feelings of anger and resentment finally erupted and I found the strength to stand up to my father. One night, when he crept into my room, I wrapped the duvet tightly around me and stared at him defiantly. "No!" I protested. And, without a word, he turned and left.

Relief rushed through me, but it was quickly followed by sickening shame. It had taken just one word to stop my father. Why hadn't I said it sooner? Was it my fault it had carried on for so long?

He never touched me again, but the damage had been done. On the outside I looked like a normal teenager, but inside it was eating me away. At first I tried to dull the pain with alcohol, and then it was drugs – marijuana, cocaine, ecstasy, and anything that helped me to forget. My schoolwork suffered – it just didn't seem important any more – and I was eventually expelled. I had one close friend, but I never felt comfortable bringing her home, so we

drifted apart. I was unable to confide in anyone and felt terribly lonely.

Then, at 16, I fell for a local boy named Billy. After we'd been seeing each other for four months we slept together. It was the first time I'd ever had full sex and I was terrified he'd be able to tell that I'd been abused. Billy was sweet and affectionate; making love with him couldn't have felt more different than Dad's hideous advances. But my anxiety about how he might find out the truth was so great that I ended the relationship, which broke my heart.

Eventually, I managed to convince myself that the abuse had never happened. It sounds extraordinary, but the reality is that denial is a powerful tool – and my mind wasn't prepared to accept the truth. I simply shut out the past and moved on.

#### MAKING A NEW START

Then, when I was 19, I met Joseph who was 26 and the manager of the gym where I worked on reception. Every night after work he'd walk me to the bus stop. He made me feel protected, showing me such kindness and concern. We quickly fell in love and, after three years together, we bought a small three-bedroom house outside Dublin – and I moved out of the family home for good. I should have been happy but I wasn't. I only saw Dad every few weeks, but when I did my stomach would clench and I'd develop the most terrible migraine. Yet, I never associated my symptoms with being near my father, such was the extent of my denial.

Until, that is, I was 23 years old – and heard that news report on the radio. After such a reality jolt, the uneasy memories of my childhood slowly started seeping back; every day I'd remember another sickening experience and I realised, for the first time, that I had to tell my family – and Joseph.

I couldn't bring myself to say the words out loud, so I wrote Joseph a letter, tears streaming from my eyes. I rang him at work, sobbing that I needed him to come home immediately. Then I left the letter in the kitchen and waited, nervously in the living room, feeling nauseous as I imagined him reading it. Ten minutes passed before he finally came to find me. Shaking his head in disbelief, he held me silently as I broke down, crying both

for myself and for the little girl whose childhood had been destroyed.

Understandably, Joseph was angry and wished my father dead. But I didn't want him dead, what I wanted was his confession – in front of the whole family. But first I had to tell my mother. I knew that what I was about to do would tear her life apart and it broke my heart, but she had to know the truth. I was terrified she'd blame me in some way, so I got my brother Mark to bring her to my house. It was 10 minutes before I could force the words out. "Dad abused me... Sexually," I finally stuttered.

My mother froze, her face turned white and it was several minutes before she could speak. She just sat there, eyes wide and staring, her whole body shaking before finally whispering, "Why didn't you tell me?" Tears streamed down our faces as we held each other. I felt, at once, enormous relief and terrible guilt at seeing her so affected. She never once doubted that I was telling the truth, but insisted that she should be the one to confront my father.

Mark took her home while I waited nervously by the phone. He was standing right behind her when she asked my father if he had abused me. In a calm, even tone, his response was simply, "Maybe... once or twice... I can't really remember." My mother immediately threw him out of the house. Meanwhile, I still didn't feel ready to face the police – first I needed time to come to terms with the awful truth.

Then, four months later, Mum rang me

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**"A NUMBER OF OTHER WOMEN CAME FORWARD AND SAID THAT MY FATHER HAD ALSO ABUSED THEM AS CHILDREN"**

to say she had taken my father back. I was utterly distraught – but I couldn't bear the thought of losing both my parents, so I chose to ignore her betrayal and pretended it didn't affect my relationship with her. I would ring the house and hang up if Dad answered. When I wanted to go and see her, she would get him to leave the house first. But under the surface my feelings of shock and anger were boiling.

When I was 29, I was delighted to find I was pregnant with Joseph's child. And when Tyrone was born I felt the most amazing sense of love for him – I knew I'd do anything to keep him safe, which made my father's behaviour even more confusing. I had been an innocent little girl, who my father was supposed to cherish and protect. How could he have done the things he did?

Joseph and I got married a year later and the following year I discovered I was pregnant again. But while I was pleased to be having a second child, my marriage was sadly failing – we'd sometimes go for weeks without really speaking to each other. We separated when I was five months pregnant, but Joseph was there beside me when our daughter Robin was born.

#### TIME TO MAKE A STAND

I devoted myself wholly to my children – but the stress and guilt of my earlier years were never very far away and I gradually became addicted to tranquillisers and antidepressants that I had been prescribed. They dulled the pain I felt inside. Then,

finally, in October 2000 and with Halloween approaching, I became consumed with thoughts of my father's behaviour and all I could think about was the innocent children who might soon be knocking on his door and asking for treats. The time had come for me to do something. So, when I was 32, I finally reported my father to the police – I was shaking as I made my statement, but the officers were really sensitive and supportive and put me at ease. It was months before they had enough information to arrest him, but once they did he immediately admitted to abusing me. However, his only reaction was one of annoyance. "I'm disgusted that you're making such a fuss over something that happened so long ago," he complained to the police officer. He genuinely seemed to believe that he'd done nothing wrong.

As the police continued with their investigation, other women came forward to report that my father had abused them as children. I was appalled but not surprised. As a child, I'd often seen him groping young girls, leering at them in their bathing suits when we went swimming. Even grown women would recoil from him. I remember once when we were at a neighbour's house, a woman whispering to another, "Here comes Bernard Delaney... Quick, sit here, so he can't sit next to me."

Eventually, six women agreed to press charges alongside me, but it took seven

long years before the police had gathered all the evidence they needed. During that time I finally cut all ties with my mother. She was still living with Dad and it was just too painful to continue a relationship with her. It was May 2007, when I was 39, that my father was finally charged with over 100 counts of indecent assault.

The last day of his trial took place on 15 February 2008. I hadn't set eyes on him in years and was terrified of us coming face-to-face. In the courtroom, my brothers formed a protective barrier around me so I couldn't see him – and he couldn't see me.

My father pleaded guilty to 14 of the charges, so I didn't have to endure a cross-examination, but I had decided to take the stand so that the judge could put a human face to my victim impact statement and take that into account when sentencing him. As I approached the witness box, I was so agitated that I can barely remember what I said, except for the moment I took a deep breath and stated, "When your Dad does that and your Mum stands by him, it just makes you feel worthless."

#### GETTING JUSTICE AT LAST

I held my breath as the sentence was announced – a total of five years, of which four were to be served in custody, with one year suspended. I felt a strange mix of relief that he could no longer harm anyone – but sadness too. Crazy as it sounds, he was still my father, albeit one who had caused me so much pain.

I agreed to waive my anonymity to speak out about my abuse because I wanted to reassure other victims that they should never feel ashamed about their experiences.

With the trial behind me, I'm now happier and more positive than I've ever been. Counselling has helped me to accept that my father's abuse was in no way my fault. More importantly, it has taught me to concentrate on my achievements, such as my wonderful children Tyrone and Robin. I haven't ruled out the possibility of finding a man who will make me happy, but until that time, I'm content to be on my own. My father may have taken away my innocence, and my childhood, but I won't give him another minute of my life. **SHE** + *Innocent by Audrey Delaney is published by Maverick House, £7.99.*

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