

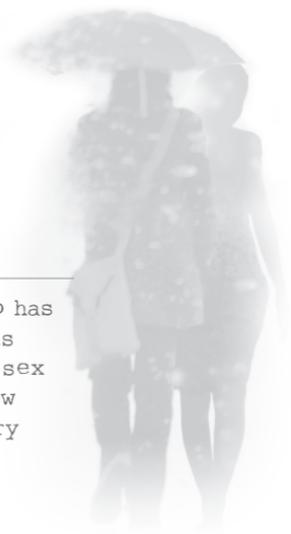
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01~ Her Story

What goes on in the mind of a child who has suffered abuse and abandonment? How is she enticed into the sleazy sphere of sex trafficking? How does she survive? How can we reach out to her? Shelia's story is our first glimpse into that world.



As hard as I try, I can't forget that first night. I was seven years old. I'd put on my Princess Ariel pajamas and brushed my teeth. I'd climbed into bed with my white stuffed pony, the one I always slept with, the one my dad had given me two years before when my parents split up. I knew my mom wouldn't come to say good night because she was on a business trip. So it didn't surprise me when Brad, my stepdad, came to my room instead.

But I was surprised, and scared, when he turned off the light and crawled under the covers with me. "Shelia, we're going to play a game," he said.

Only it wasn't a game.

Brad began touching me in places he wasn't supposed to touch. I didn't understand what was happening. I was confused and too scared to say anything. Brad was so much bigger than me, and he had a temper.

When he finished, he made me promise to not tell anyone about

our “game.” If I did, he said, he’d hurt my mom and Sarah, my little sister. I believed him.

For the rest of my elementary school years and into middle school, the game continued. The only way I got through those nights was to think about something else. It only happened when my mom was gone or out of town. She never suspected a thing.

Outside of my home, I lived a normal life. I made good grades, played sports, and had a few close friends. But on the inside, I felt dirty and worthless. I felt like I needed to hide. Sometimes I wanted to die.

If anyone had paid attention, they might have noticed how the light in my face had been extinguished. I never laughed and rarely smiled. I swayed back and forth between screaming inside for attention and help, and not wanting to be known at all. How would I know if a person was safe? How could I ever trust again? Mom was gone a lot, and even when she was home, she fought with Brad most of the time. She didn’t seem to have much energy for me.

By the time I was twelve years old, the chaos and pain were too much. I couldn’t take it anymore. I was sure there had to be something better outside the walls of my home. I was worried about Sarah, but I had to get away from Brad. I thought I could find someone who would care for me, someone who saw value in me. I ran away.

The Nicest Man

Suddenly, I was alone. I had no food and no place to sleep. But it wasn’t long before I met the nicest man. He bought me a cheeseburger at McDonald’s. I was so hungry I ate three of them.

The man’s name was Michael. He wore a heavy jacket and a blue stocking cap. He was a big man, but he had a soft voice, not like Brad’s at all.

“Shelia, you don’t seem like the other girls I see on that street,” he said. “You’re pretty and you seem really smart. How did you end up out here?”

Before I knew it, I was telling Michael everything about me. I’d finally met someone I could open up to, someone who understood me. He seemed to know that I needed someone like him to take care of me. He offered a place to stay. I couldn’t believe it. I actually had someone I could trust to help me. I didn’t have to stay silent and scared anymore.

Michael took me to a fancy townhome. There were seven other girls my age there. I thought, *This is like a boarding place for girls who need help.* I never noticed that the doors were bolted from the outside.

Around 10 p.m., Michael said he and the other girls needed to go out for a while. He told me to make myself at home. I made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and sat down to watch TV. It felt great to be alone and safe.

About thirty minutes later, the front door opened. Three men staggered in, laughing. “Well, hi there, honey,” one said. His words were friendly, but his voice was not. These men made me nervous. Something didn’t seem right.

My instinct was correct. All of a sudden, one of the men grabbed me by the arm and roughly steered me into a bedroom. Before I knew what was happening, they pushed me onto the bed and held me down. They pulled my clothes off. Then they raped me repeatedly.

A few minutes later, I was alone and shaking. *What is happening to me?* I thought. *This can’t be real.* Finally, I got the courage to get my clothes on and start moving. I had to get out of there, get back to the streets. But when I tried to open the door, nothing happened. I realized it was locked from the other side.

I was trapped.

An Unending Circus

When Michael returned later, it was as if the night had turned him into a different person. It turned out he wasn't nice at all. He told me that I would have to "earn my keep," that this was the way it worked in his world. He would take me to a place, and I would service every man who walked into the room. My life was spinning out of control.

The next night, Michael put me and the seven other girls into a van. Sure enough, he dropped each girl off at a different place. I noticed that each time a girl entered a house or apartment, a man stood guard just outside the door.

I was the last one to be left. The apartment was dark and smelled of sweat and smoke. In just a few minutes, a man entered, and I did what he said. I had no choice. The scene was repeated again and again. I don't even know how many men came in that night. The only way I could endure the pain was by thinking about something else, just like I did with Brad. At the end of the night, which was actually morning, Michael picked me up. He said I'd done well, that I'd brought in a thousand dollars. I was relieved. Maybe, I thought, this would be the only time I'd have to live through a nightmare like this.

I was wrong. The next night it was the same scenario, and the night after that, and the night after that. The circus was unending. Most of the time, I had little to eat. To make sure we were "productive," Michael put drugs in our drinks. The drugs made us stay awake for days at a time. It all seemed to go on forever. Nights turned into weeks, weeks into months.

About five months later, on a Tuesday night, I was dropped off at a different apartment. I went in and began to prepare myself to separate my mind from what was about to happen. There was a knock on the door. It was Sanchez, the man who always stood guard to make sure I didn't run away.

“Our first customer is late,” he said.

Suddenly I was alone at the apartment. In the early days, I’d fantasized many times about escaping, but there had always been someone watching. Besides, where would I go? Michael and Sanchez would find me and probably kill me. Before long I’d given up hope of ever getting away.

But now, unexpectedly, there was a chance. I checked the locks in the apartment, barely daring to hope, when I discovered the bathroom window was unlocked. I remembered seeing a fire station a couple of blocks away from the apartment. It hadn’t meant anything then, but now I wondered. Could I really do it? Would they be able to protect me? Could I get there without being seen?

I climbed on the toilet and was able to squeeze through the window. My heart hammered so loud I was sure someone would hear or see me. My fear mounting with each step, I found myself walking to the entrance of the complex and into the street.

Once I reached the sidewalk, I broke into a run. It was the longest two blocks I’d ever covered. Finally, though, I reached the firehouse and pounded on the door. When a man in a blue fire department uniform answered, I burst into tears.

“Please help me!” I cried.

I don’t know exactly what I expected, but the “help” they provided wasn’t what I’d hoped for. I ended up spending that night at a youth detention center. I remember walking into a cold, dark place with bars all around. Concrete walls and grey concrete floors surrounded me. After I was “processed,” I was taken to my room. It was so small. The bed was made of metal and had a thin, green, plastic cushion. There was a metal chair and metal sink and metal toilet and metal mirror. I was alone again, in the dark. My life had gone from bad to worse.

Is This What Love Feels Like?

After being in jail for about five days, a lady came to “evaluate” me. She asked a lot of questions. She told me that what had happened to me wasn’t my fault, and that I could go to a home where I would be safe, go to school, and get counseling. I thought, *I wasn’t born yesterday. Everyone who’s said they have something good for me has only used me.*

After the woman left, I continued to think about what she said. Even though I didn’t want to take the chance on going somewhere new, I didn’t want to stay in jail. What if I got out? Michael would surely find me. These last few days were the first I’d slept and eaten in a long time. The more I thought about my options, the more I thought maybe I should try this place.

So that Friday I was taken to the home and introduced to the staff. They seemed nice, but I kept up my guard. I would have my own room

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It was like a dream.

and bathroom. The rooms
were nice, but so was the first
townhome my trafficker took
me to. Could I trust them?

That first month, I resisted
everyone’s attempts to reach
out to me. I’m glad they didn’t
push themselves on me, but gave me room to get to know them and
get comfortable in my new setting.

One thing that surprised me was that they worked hard to determine my past school credits and helped me create a plan to catch up on all I’d missed by being out of school for months. I found out later that they did this for each girl in the home. Each girl gets to choose what subjects she wants to work on and the teachers and volunteers help everyone stay on track.

Soon I met Becky, my counselor. She began to help me talk through everything that had happened to me. She helped me understand what I was truly created for. She believed that I was a person of value. In fact, everyone there seemed to think I was a great person. No one had ever had confidence in me. No one had ever been so patient with me. I had never known anyone who would do something for me without asking for something in return. It was like a dream.

Before long I was again excelling in school. I began to think there might be something to this program.

I kept waiting for things to change for the worse, like they always had in my life. But day after day, I encountered people who seemed to really care about me and believe in me. It wasn't just the staff. There were so many volunteers who came in each day either to help me with my classes or teach me something cool or help me dream about a career or maybe college someday.

Is this what love feels like? I wondered.

I pondered this question a lot. I knew there was something unusual about these people. They were different from any people I'd ever met. They all seemed to believe in God, but they didn't use a lot of "churchy" words. They just cared for me whether I was in a good mood or not, whether I made an A on a test or not, and whether I responded to their love or not. I hadn't thought much about God before. I didn't know if I believed in Him. But I started thinking it might be time to find out.

While I was in the program, I changed from a girl who was shy, scared, and silent to a girl who had learned to express herself, laugh out loud, and become confident in herself. I reconnected with my mom, who'd divorced Brad, and with Sarah. Months went by, and my graduation date approached. One of the volunteers asked if she could

be my mentor when I left the program. I really couldn't believe that! A person who was a stranger months ago now wanted to spend time with me.

I don't know what the future holds for me, and I still have occasional nightmares about my past. Sometimes it's still hard to trust people. But I'm working on it day by day. I can only say that my life is different because so many people reached out to me and believed in me. I know now that I'm not worthless—and that life just might be worth living again (www.thewhiteumbrellacampaign.com/video/#Everything).