

Woman who falsely accused her father of rape reveals 'doctors hijacked my mind'

Daily Mail - Femail - Last updated at 01:10am on 26th October 2007

As she galloped over the rolling downs of Perthshire over the weekend, her father riding alongside her, Katrina Fairlie felt a peace which had eluded her for many years.

It was the sort of invigorating 'hack' that father and daughter had enjoyed together when she was a girl.

For a long time, though, such an excursion would have seemed unimaginable. Eleven years ago, Katrina, now 37, accused the father she adored, a man who was once a prominent politician and deputy leader of the Scottish Nationalist Party, of rape and sexual abuse.

The accusations devastated her family and sent shockwaves through Katrina's community. Jim Fairlie, she insisted, had not only horribly abused her but also led a 17-strong paedophile ring.



Father and daughter: Jim and Katrina Fairlie

It would be several tortured months before it finally emerged that these unfolding memories were pure fantasy - the drug-induced ramblings of a woman pushed to the brink of sanity by a controversial form of psychotherapy known as recovered memory syndrome.

In the space of 15 months, the therapy had transformed 25-year-old Katrina from a healthy and independent girl to a suicidal depressive.

It is an extraordinary drama which culminated last week in Katrina accepting a £20,000 payout from NHS Tayside after she had launched a medical negligence lawsuit.

Though to suggest that this verdict has brought with it some form of closure is far from the truth. Speaking for the first time about her ordeal, Katrina says: "I thought I would be able to put it behind me, but it's not that easy. This has been almost all I could think about for the past decade.

"It's been with me for so long that it's hard to switch off from it.

"I have lost a huge chunk of my adult life because of this terrible episode. I was a normal young woman, with dreams of a husband and family. I should be married with children of my own - but instead I am still piecing my life together. All I can do is take one step at a time."

Scratch the surface of the relatively calm demeanour presented by this troubled woman, and the fallout from the nightmare that has engulfed her family is still all too raw.

Her confidence shattered, she still does not feel able to take on a full-time job, and while she has a new relationship, trust has proved to be an issue.

"He has been incredibly patient and supportive, but it's been difficult for both of us," she says. "Trusting anyone is hard after everything that has happened."

The youngest of five children, Katrina was raised in a close-knit, affectionate environment by Jim and her mother Kay, a former nurse.

"Dad was very hands-on - he wasn't the type to just sit there with the newspapers," she recalls. "He would take me and my sister for Sunday walks, and also used to take us skating, swimming and riding. As the youngest, I always felt very loved."

Professionally, Katrina had hopes of following in her mother's footsteps, but she struggled to find a training vacancy, so took a job in a post office sorting office to help carve out some financial independence.

To her surprise, she found that she liked it. She was promoted, and by her early 20s was renting an airy two-bedroom Georgian flat in Perth with a close friend.

"I was living a happy, normal life," she says. "I loved my flat, had good friends, a good relationship with my family and regularly saw my nieces and nephews. Life was good."

The chain of events that was to turn that life on its head began in June 1994, when Katrina returned from a family holiday to Wales. Experiencing severe abdominal pains and sickness, she was admitted to Perth Royal Infirmary.

Initially, doctors thought her appendix was to blame and it was removed, only for it to be found healthy. After further examinations, her gallbladder was removed, too, and Katrina, heavily dosed on the painkiller pethidine, was discharged to the family home to be nursed by her mother.

But, in increasing pain, she was readmitted to the Infirmary in the November.

"I was frustrated and bewildered," Katrina recalls. "I didn't understand why, after two operations, we couldn't get to the bottom of it."

This time, however, the doctors concluded that, with the lack of any obvious physical cause, Katrina's symptoms were psychosomatic. At the start of 1995, she was admitted, under protest, to Perth Royal's psychiatric annexe.

"When they said it was psychosomatic, I insisted it was rubbish," she says. "But everyone seemed to think it was in my best interests, so I went, assuming that I would be there for just a few days.

"I desperately wanted to get to the bottom of it, too. I now know what a terrible mistake that was."

In fact, according to medical notes subsequently obtained by the family, it appears Katrina's physical condition may have worsened due to a simple clinical oversight: at the time of removal, Katrina's gall bladder was chronically inflamed. In such cases, pethidine is not recommended as pain relief because it can actually cause spasms which replicate the original pain.

No matter: the doctors at Perth had now found a new focus for their investigations. Following her admittance, Katrina's parents told doctors a family secret, believing it might help with their diagnosis: as a child, Katrina had been abused by her paternal grandfather, now deceased.

It was a secret she had kept until the age of 17, when it came to light that he had abused two other children in the family. When Kay Fairlie questioned her own children, Katrina revealed the truth, and all family contact with her grandfather was severed.

"Of course it was difficult to face that horrible part of my childhood, but I truly believed I had dealt with it," she says. "I had worked it through with my family and moved on."

But in the wake of this revelation, and in a seemingly desperate attempt to make some sense of her symptoms and evident physical pain, Katrina underwent several sessions of the controversial Recovered Memory Therapy.

This treatment claims to unlock memories so painful the patient has blocked them out from their conscious mind, so that they are 'retrievable' only through dreams and hypnosis.

It is a therapy that was completely discredited by the Royal College of Psychiatrists in the late Nineties - but that was too late for Katrina.

During the sessions, in which a consultant psychiatrist, two psychologists and a nurse endlessly probed Katrina's memories of her childhood, intense scrutiny was brought to bear on the legacy of the abuse by her grandfather.

"Every day, the abuse by my grandfather was brought up over and over again," Katrina recalls. "They asked me outright if anyone else in the family had abused me.

"I was on anti-depressants and sedatives, drugged up to the eyeballs, and I was mingling with schizophrenics and drug addicts. I quickly became overwhelmed with depression and was losing all sense of reality."

Finally, one morning, the psychiatric nurse asked the question which would send shockwaves through her family. "She said: 'Have you ever been abused by your father?'

"I told them no, of course not. I was shocked they could even think about it; furious in fact.

"But the whole relationship was then subjected to the most intense scrutiny. Did he cuddle me? Did he bath me? Did he kiss me? I was cracking up, but they kept asking me about Dad. I was so confused because of the drugs, and was getting no reassurance from the staff. I was having nightmares in which Dad featured heavily."

As the borders between memory and imagination blurred, these nightmares turned into hallucinations, which staff told her were flashbacks. She must, they said, face up to the fact that she had been abused by her father.

At that point, Katrina began to 'recover' an increasingly graphic series of memories of her father abusing her almost daily from when she was two years old - memories that were spun into scenes of appalling violence. Her father had, she said, attacked her with a screwdriver; she had seen him batter a six-year-old girl to death with an iron bar.

"When I told them all these things, it didn't seem to come as any surprise. It seemed to be the answer they were looking for."

Eventually, she even alleged that he was the ringleader of a paedophile gang which included two local politicians.

"My mind wasn't my own," Katrina says now, tears welling at the memory. "At the time I really believed what I was saying to be true. I was so confused."

Back at home, her parents, unable to see their daughter, remained blissfully unaware of the mounting series of horrific allegations - until they were confronted by their four other children, who had themselves been made aware of the allegations by the hospital.

Katrina recalls: "I was told by the staff that I needed to tell my sister, Sharon.

"She didn't believe me at first, but when she questioned what I had said, she was told that she had to believe the allegations were true to help my recovery, and that she, too, may have been a victim but blocked the memory out.

"It was a truly Kafkaesque scenario. All my siblings were sworn to secrecy."

At the same time, Katrina was also persuaded to make an official statement to the police, although the case was quickly dropped when it became clear there was no case to answer.

By October 1995, however, three months later, Sharon and her three brothers were unable to withhold their shocking secret and confronted their horrified father, who was devastated that his family could ever have believed him capable of such monstrous acts.

Pleading his innocence, he was met with anger by his children because they had been told by the hospital that it had proof the abuse had taken place - but couldn't reveal what it was.

Unable to see her parents, and under intolerable strain, Katrina attempted suicide several times with pills. She does not know why she didn't succeed, but does recall, through the foggy memories of those dark days, that by early 1996 she found herself seized by a renewed sense of resolve. She made the decision to check herself out of hospital and into a nearby clinic. It may have saved her life.

"My medication was reduced, and I just started to feel better, more like myself," she says. "I started eating again and putting on weight. It was like slowly waking up from a coma.

"And one morning I just woke up and had this revelation. I thought: 'This is all garbage' - and there was this enormous sense of release, and relief.

"The first person I remember talking to was my sister Sharon, and seeing the relief on her face."

Nonetheless, the process of repairing her damaged family was not so simple.

"One of the things that has been hardest is imagining what my parents went through, what it must have been like to be confronted by a daughter they loved turning against them like that, as well as their other children," she says quietly.

"The first time I saw my father after making the allegations, he was standing on the doorstep. He'd had pneumonia and looked so vulnerable, and I felt so guilty. All I wanted to do was cuddle him and make it all go away.

"He gave me a big hug and we both stood there for a very long time as he stroked my hair while I cried.

"My parents never once blamed me. There were never any recriminations, either at the time or since, and I have so much respect for them about that.

"Mum often talks of them both watching me go down a dark tunnel, and how they simply didn't recognise the girl who came out the other end. I didn't recognise her either.

"There was an enormous sense of guilt about what I had put Dad and the family through. I felt horrified that I could have ever entertained such thoughts, been prepared for my father to go to jail.

"But I was so lucky because although there was a lot of pain, they welcomed me back with open arms. They never blamed me. I think they were just so relieved to have the old Katrina back that it didn't feel as if our relationship was beyond redemption.

Nonetheless, father and daughter felt a desperate need to make sense of what had happened. How could a bright young woman have been admitted to hospital with stomach pains and emerged 15 months later spouting a string of horrifying accusations, weighed down by post-traumatic stress and addicted to painkillers?

Determined to hold someone to account, Jim Fairlie demanded to see his daughter's hospital notes. Armed with these, and with Katrina's support, he sued the NHS for defamation of character.

His bid for compensation was quashed on a technicality after Judge Lord Kingarth ruled that the doctor in charge had a duty of care only to patients, not to relatives.

It was a blow, but three years ago, Katrina launched her own legal action for negligence against NHS Tayside.

The case was due to be heard this week, but at the 11th hour she was offered an out-of-court settlement which she accepted.

"I was reluctant because I wanted my day in court" - but she says that after she had spoken to her barrister, she decided that the best thing to do was accept the money.

"But it is hard because they still haven't said sorry. Part of me can't accept there is going to be no court case because I have built up to it in my head for such a long time."

Nonetheless, with the judgment behind her, Katrina can dare to look forward instead of back. She has her own flat again, and is sitting exams in English and psychology in a bid to fulfil her longstanding dream of being a nurse.

'It is all I've ever really wanted to do since I was 15, although when I mention it to people after everything I have been through, they look at me as if I'm barmy,' she smiles. 'Whatever happens, it's going to be small steps. I am still struggling to deal with what happened to me, but I also know that I am lucky to have come through the other side.'

She pauses. 'Maybe in a year I will be working and living a normal life again.'

It is, in many ways, the most humdrum of dreams. But after her series of unimaginable nightmares, to be able to dream at all is, for Katrina, an achievement in itself.