

“An act of courage.”

—KAILASH SATYARTHI, 2014 Nobel Peace Laureate

THE
YEARS
OF
FORGETTING

A Memoir

SOFIA ABDULLAH



“Sofia transforms her own trauma into support for other survivors of child sexual abuse who are on their path of healing. This is what makes this book an act of courage, and also an act of compassion.

There is no voice more formidable than those of survivors to challenge the conscience of the apathetic and complacent. I hope this book speaks to other survivors who are trying to make sense of their own journey to healing.”

—**KAILASH SATYARTHI**, 2014 Nobel Peace Laureate

“The wounds inflicted on us as children continue to destroy our futures until we can return to our pasts and understand the weaknesses and pain of those who inflicted them on us. To understand all is to forgive, but not to condone. Many of us have been abused. All of us need to find ways to escape the fear and distrust that it imposes on us. If you are one of us, you cannot do better than read and reread *The Years of Forgetting*.”

—**PROFESSOR E. A. (TEDDY) BRETT**,
Emeritus Professor of International Development,
London School of Economics and Political Science

“When I finished reading *The Years of Forgetting*, I found myself wishing Sofia’s writing continued—as I know her life continues. Her searing pain at being abused by a beloved family member is contrasted by the poetic beauty, hope and joy she expresses. Her story is a cautionary one for those who continue to believe—wrongly—that most sexual abuse comes from strangers. My hope is that this book will support other survivors in their own healing journey, and serve as a resource for experts working with both child and adult survivors of child sexual abuse.”

—**LAUREN C. ANDERSON**, Former FBI Executive and Global Women’s Advocate

“Sofia’s poetic writing about the bitterness of childhood abuse and adulthood misuse is a brilliant, powerful work that examines the wrongfulness, violence, culpability and lack of criminal accountability of her childhood sexual abuse. *The Years of Forgetting* is a masterclass in truth-telling. The right questions are asked by Sofia while examining the truth through the ebb and flow of myriad relationships—the joys, pains, secrets, lies, deaths and reconnections.”

—**LISA C. WILLIAMS**, Author of *Reshaped by Truth and Beautiful Layers: Stories from Those Who Survived the Life of Prostitution and Child Sexual Exploitation*; and Chair of the International Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Council, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)

“Sofia’s journey through the memory lanes of specific moments of her childhood and adulthood weave a spider web story in *The Years of Forgetting*, which speaks not only of her pain but also of her healing. The difficult subject of her child sexual abuse is handled not only with delicacy, but also unflinching immediacy and truth. It is a call to reflect on our families and how to protect children in the one place that should guarantee them safety.”

—**TATIANA KOTLYARENKO**, Advisor on Anti-Trafficking Issues, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)

“The life testimony in this book will educate our society about sexual abuse and violence perpetrated on our children. *The Years of Forgetting* helps raise awareness on child sexual abuse especially within the family, and it will be of help to you—whether you are a survivor or the parent of a child sexual abuse victim, or if you know someone who is.”

—**SHANDRA WOWORUNTU**, Member of the International Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Council, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR); and Founder and CEO of Mentari Human Trafficking Survivor Empowerment Program Inc.

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EPIGRAM

“It is very hard for survivors to share their stories publicly. *The Years of Forgetting* will help others deal with their own trauma. Sofia’s memoir will also help to break the silence surrounding child sexual abuse. I applaud her courage and strength in this endeavour.”

—**ELSAMARIE D’SILVA**, President of the Red Dot Foundation and Founder of Safecity

“There is no bigger hopelessness, helplessness and loss than the feeling of being alone and not being understood that survivors of child sexual abuse feel for years. They die a million deaths everyday, as they are unable to comprehend or express what they are going through. This book should be an inspiration for anyone who has faced sexual abuse, and should guide families and friends on how to react when approached for help by someone who has faced sexual abuse.

‘Be there, be present, be available’ is the mantra.”

—**BHUWAN RIBHU**, Child Rights Activist

“Reading through this memoir, I am triggered as a survivor of three gang rapes and prolonged sexual abuse by people known to me. However, I am aware that the experiences of sexual abuse are deep and they take work to be on the path of healing; that healing is not a moment, but a conflation of processing addressing the different ways in which trauma shows up. Sofia has shown us that it is possible to heal.”

—**DR STELLAH BOSIRE**, Rape Survivor

*For
my
grandmother
and
mother*

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Cover design by Jael Ng

Published in Singapore by Epigram Books
www.epigram.sg

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**National Library Board, Singapore
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

Name: Sofia Abdullah.
Title: The years of forgetting : a memoir / Sofia Abdullah.
Description: Singapore : Epigram Books, [2021]
Identifier(s): OCN 1236387725
ISBN 978-981-49-0164-2 (paperback)
ISBN 978-981-49-0165-9 (ebook)
Subject(s): LCSH: Sofia Abdullah. | Adult child sexual abuse victims—Singapore—Biography. | Child sexual abuse—Singapore.
Classification: DDC 616.8583690092—dc23

First edition, April 2021.

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by Associate Professor Daniel Fung

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FOREWORD

One of the first areas that I was exposed to as a trainee in psychiatry almost thirty years ago was the horrifying tragedy of child sexual abuse. I found myself repulsed and intrigued at the same time.

Repulsed because of the trauma (both immediate but often delayed over time) that has long-lasting effects on the life of the innocent child. Intrigued because it was hard to understand why someone could perpetrate such behaviour and why different children have different outcomes. My work with and study of this group, as well as the research that has arisen over the years, suggest that child sexual abuse is one of the preventable causes of mental health morbidity and mortality. Why this is an important issue that needs addressing is that there is transgenerational transmission. Victims of child sexual abuse could become perpetrators if the cycle is not stopped.

To stop this cycle, we must dare to speak up and share. Sharing can be cathartic and liberating, and can help us move individuals and agencies to address this problem in all societies. No longer should such issues have to suffer the

stigma of public shaming. No longer should we sweep such matters under our carpet of outwardly normal relationships. Child sexual abuse tends to occur within families. In Asia, there is a taboo in discussing family issues in public because we do not like to wash dirty linen openly. However, it should be discussed before we are faced with an emotional epidemic of negative mental health outcomes in our society.

I am heartened by Sofia and her intent to share about her life. I think it would help her—and help us— create a better world for the next generation.

Associate Professor Daniel Fung
CEO, Institute of Mental Health, Singapore
President, International Association for Child and
Adolescent Psychiatry and Allied Professions (2018–2022)

PREFACE

I am a survivor of child sexual abuse. I have chosen to use a pseudonym and have obscured certain details about my life to protect the sensitivities and identities of those who have played a role in my story. When the time is right, I will reveal myself as the author of this book. I think it is important to come out into the open and break the taboo surrounding child sexual abuse.

I was born and raised in Singapore. I grew up in Marine Parade, along the coast, in one of those “point block” high-rise apartment buildings. In the mornings, when I left for school, I could feel the ocean breeze on my face and see the twinkling of the lights coming from the freighters out at sea.

I wanted to leave my little island as soon as I could, so at the age of eighteen, I obtained a scholarship to study in England. I worked abroad for some time before deciding to concentrate on the issue of child protection, specifically on the issues of child sex trafficking and child labour. I wrote these vignettes over a span of more than two years, from February 2015 to June 2017. For most of the period that I was writing this, I was in Delhi, India. I relocated to New York in 2017.

Memories are a fickle thing—even more so when you are a survivor. It is frustrating sometimes when my mother asks, “But don’t you remember that, Sofia?” My reply seems inordinately stubborn, when I don’t mean it to be. “I don’t, Mama. I have no recollection of it at all.”

My storytelling—and the storytelling of other survivors—must be, of necessity, a non-linear process: there are starts and stops; there are flashbacks. Memories come back in bits and pieces. Our memories are often faulty, but that is not to say that the abuse did not happen.

My hope is that this collection will be of help to you—whether you are a survivor of child sexual abuse or know someone who is. May this book help raise awareness on this subject. It is only by mainstreaming the issue that we can talk about it and address why it happens, determine its wrongness, and help prevent child sexual abuse from occurring ever again.

Sofia Abdullah

2021

PROLOGUE

My grandmother's name was Saloma; however, thanks to a mistake made by a British scribe, her name became written as "Salama".

We called her Nenek (Malay for grandmother). "Nek", for short.

What I remember most about her is the sweet smell of Johnson & Johnson's talcum powder that she would apply generously on her neck and underarms.

She always wore a short kebaya blouse and a batik sarong with deep purple or red flowers set against lush foliage. She had an ample bosom; when she went out for weddings and festivities, she would pin a golden brooch to the top of her kebaya. We have a saying in Malay that a woman without jewellery is like a paddy field without water. Her wrists would be heavy with thick, gold bangles, which would jingle whenever she waved her hands to emphasise a point. Her earlobes drooped a little from the heavy gold earrings that she liked to wear.

Nenek, a petite woman, was purportedly of royal lineage, from the house of Solo on the island of Java, Indonesia. I

don't know much about her childhood, save that she had helped raise her stepsisters, who were much younger.

In 1964, when racial riots took place in pre-independence Singapore, Nenek protected her best friend, who was Chinese, by declaring that her friend was Malay if they were passing by a predominantly Malay neighbourhood. (Her friend returned the favour whenever they were in a Chinese area.) They both spoke Hokkien and Malay and my grandmother was very fair, so it was not difficult to look the part. My grandmother also spoke Japanese, harking back to the time Singapore was occupied by the Japanese, when we were renamed "Syonan-To"—Light of the South.

Nenek bore five children, my mother being the fourth child and the only daughter. Their family was probably quite unusual at the time as my grandparents were both multilingual. My grandfather spoke Malay, English and Japanese. Theirs was the first home in the neighbourhood to own a television set. My mother remembered children clamouring to watch the telly from outside the windows.

Nenek took care of my brother and I over the weekends, when my parents had errands to run. After my youngest brother was born, seven years after me, this became more frequent. Because she was always busy entertaining visitors

and taking care of her grandchildren—there were at least four of us there at any one point—Nenek never had the time for photographs. I realise now that I've never had one taken with her alone. Usually, it is a group photo where you'd spot Nenek beaming amongst wedding celebrants and at festive gatherings.

Nenek busied herself in the kitchen, delighting in making treats for us grandchildren. She'd make epok-epok (curry puffs), pisang goreng (banana fritters) or jemput-jemput (fried banana dumplings), amongst other snacks, which my brother and I would eat in copious amounts, running in and out of the kitchen as Nenek prepared yet another batch.

"Jangan lari! (Don't run!)" she would shout after us. We would giggle, ignoring her.

My cousins, my brother and I would watch TV or play games. Nenek was always somewhere in the background, watchful, never interfering.

It was bliss. At least it was, until the abuse began.

PART I

THE REMEMBERING



New Moon

(Rises and sets with the sun)

THE MAN IN BLACK

February 2015

Delhi, India

Sometimes, I think I had a normal childhood. The abuse seems like a long, distant, forgotten thing; a bad memory. Like a stain on one's coat that you desperately want removed.

I still remember the first time I told my mother that I had been abused sexually as a child. I had prepared months for the telling.

It was December 2009. I was home on a break after a two-year stint in Berlin. I told her that I had something important to speak with her about. She must have thought that it would be a short conversation—she stood by the door to my room, not coming in. I remember feeling somewhat cross when I saw that. Throughout my childhood, she would always rush out of the room I happened to be in. I would begin to say something, notice a shift in her body language, and then be compelled to hurry through what I had to say so that I could catch her response before she disappeared. I maintain that this is why I continue to speak fast even today.

Mama's face looked grim. No one likes being told "We need to talk". But she was fully unprepared for what I said next.

She walked into my room and sat down heavily on the bed. She looked bewildered. "Why didn't you tell me? All these years, and you never told me!"

I started to explain how at that point in my life, I had learnt not to trust anyone, especially adults. I had been nine.

"I had taught you about what safe touch was, remember? Why didn't you tell me?" Her face crumpled.

What she said next took me a decade to recover from: "You know, I've had it worse." She stopped there, and to this day, waves away my attempts to elicit an explanation.

It felt devastating, like she was dismissing me and my pain somehow. I assured her that I was not raped, although there was one incident where he had spread my legs on his bed. I remember feeling desperate, even though I had no idea what was happening—something was not right, and this was certainly not to be done. "Please," I had begged him in Malay. "Please don't do this."

He stopped.

Subsequent conversations with my mother were somewhat strained. By necessity, they had to be conducted

over the phone as I had returned to Germany; I felt freer abroad—safer, somehow. I didn't like her prying questions. The usual refrain, "Why didn't you tell me?", was usually spoken in English to maintain some emotional distance, I suppose. Or maybe she thought the emotional import of her words would reach me better in English rather than in Malay, our mother tongue.

It was painful dealing with her pain, her sense of betrayal by her father—she had worshipped him so—whilst also dealing with mine.

I began telling her the details carefully when I sensed that she wasn't going to fall into pieces.

"Mama, remember when you used to come to my room and say how much you missed him after he had passed away? It was all I could do to not start yelling in anger at what he had done."

Another time:

"I once dreamt, Mama, that I was walking in the lobby of our apartment block on a quiet evening. The sun had just set, and I saw a man in black in the shadows ahead of me. He had wings and horns, like the devil himself. He turned around ever so slightly to look at me, and then took off, huge bat wings in the sky. It was him, Mama."

Yet another time:

“You used to think that my moving to England changed me. I was the happiest I had ever been there, Mama! Friends who were nerds like me, growing up alone and liking books. I felt like I belonged there. I started painting again, Mama. Do you not see?”

Her voice was always flat and tired: “I have stopped praying for him. Oh, if only I had known.”

“No, Mama,” I would say, as firmly as I could. This was the man on whose lap she used to sit on; she had hung on to his every word. “Please continue to pray for him. I have forgiven him. I have moved on. You must try to do the same.”

“Oh, what he did to you! He tried telling me, on his deathbed, he tried. I just didn’t understand then what he was trying to say.”

Sometimes when she felt that she could not get through to me, she would say in Malay, “When you have a child, you’ll understand my pain.”

I do love her so. I understand her pain.

But I do so wish that she would understand mine.

WITNESS

February 2015

Delhi, India

A few weeks ago, my friend Jess sent me a song she wrote called “Six Years Old”. The refrain is about what the mother would have done had she known her six-year-old daughter was being sexually abused.

Listening to it, I wondered why my mother reacted the way she did when she walked in on two out of the four incidents that I could remember.

The first time, I think I was in the bathroom at my grandfather’s place. I was ten.

I remember there was a red plastic cup on the floor, used for washing oneself. Describing this to one of my friends later, it infuriated me somewhat that the details of almost everything else were hazy except for the colour of that cup.

Its redness.

My mother put her head around the door jamb, an inquisitive look on her face.

“What are you doing, Sofia?” she inquired. Turning to her father, she asked, “What is Sofia doing?”

My panties were off and I was squatting on the floor. I didn't feel that what was happening was right, but I didn't know how to tell my mom.

"Nothing. Sofia peed. So now I'm cleaning her up," my grandfather said, with all the calmness in the world.

It made me so angry, but I had no words. No words.

My mother held out her hand towards me: "Come, Sofia. Quickly." I pulled up my panties and scrambled out of the bathroom, grateful to hold her welcoming hand.

In my nightmares, that bathroom is a yawning, gaping monster. I would be running, desperate to get away. The floor would rise and I would slide into its jaws. My grandfather was never in my dreams, but I felt his presence all the same.

The second time, I was sitting on my grandparents' bed. He was on the floor, with one finger hooked into my panties. I sat there like a dumb doll, trying not to squirm, trying to pretend to myself that this wasn't really happening. That this could not be real because it was so messed up.

My mother walked in again then. My back was to her so she could not see what was happening. Again, she called out my name, wondering what I was doing. Again, her father spoke up for us. He had removed his finger, quick as lightning.

"Nothing. She's just sitting here."

"Oh? Just sitting? Go and play outside," my mother said with a smile.

Little muppet that I was, I scrambled to my feet and ran out of the room.

Free again.

I still have no idea how long the abuse went on, but it probably stopped when I was in my early teens. Maybe my grandfather was trying to apologise to me, even as early as then, but I never gave him the chance. He was physically challenged, but he was still more powerful than me; he would try to hold on to me when I kissed his hands as a customary mark of respect. I would lower myself as far as possible so that I could snatch my hand away. He would let go then with—dare I say it—a look of despair.

I've found it hard to forgive my mom. She remembers those two incidents too. It shocked her when I first told her my version of what had happened. Her father—my grandfather—was her rock, her everything. Should I blame her?

Whenever she asks, "Why didn't you tell me?", I feel like telling her, but you saw, Mama. You *saw*.

fact that life has treated her much better than she deserves.

I was gratified that the movie *Spotlight* won Best Picture at the Oscars in 2016. It was about time that the issue of child sexual abuse was more publicly discussed to stamp out the taboo and secrecy surrounding it.

It told the story of the Pulitzer prize-winning team of journalists at the *Boston Globe* newspaper in the United States. In 2002, their investigative work lifted the lid on the widespread and systemic child sex abuse by numerous Roman Catholic priests in the Boston archdiocese.

Watching *Spotlight* again recently, I was glad that the film dealt with the issue intelligently and without excessive melodrama. It would have detracted from the profundity of the subject.

Like many survivors, I didn't want to be identified solely as a survivor of child sexual abuse. It is one of my many identities, but it does not define who I am. I am a woman, a daughter, a friend, a child rights activist and many more. My pain does not become me.

I cannot change what happened in the past, but it has certainly made me who I am today. I like to tell other survivors: the scars that I have today have allowed me to help others. Because we survivors are wary people; it takes someone who has been through the same to understand how others have suffered in similar, yet different ways.

For I am, I suppose, in Brooks' words, a "stumbler". Life *has* treated me much better than I deserve.

And for that, I am profoundly grateful.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my publisher, Edmund Wee, for trusting me and giving me this opportunity to tell my story. I also deeply appreciate Julia Tan's work for her wonderful editing and for gently nudging me for more details, adding a bit here, another fragment of a memory there.

Stace and Lisa: thank you for your belief in me. It means everything during the particularly hard year that was 2020.

My family and friends have been a huge reservoir of love and support. This endeavour would not have been possible without them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sofia Abdullah was born and raised in Singapore. Of Malay and Javanese descent, Sofia went to an all-girls' school in Katong, the Peranakan part of Singapore. She spent her childhood in Marine Parade, by the seaside. Sofia attended university in England on a scholarship. Her work took her to Germany, India and then the United States. She is now an advocate for children's rights and works on the issues of child sex trafficking and child sexual abuse.

The author has used a pseudonym to protect the privacy of her loved ones.

RESOURCES

For those seeking help and those who want to help others

List of International Resources

ECPAT (End Child Prostitution and Trafficking)

ECPAT is a worldwide network of organisations working to end the sexual exploitation of children. For more information, visit www.ecpat.org.

International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children (ICMEC)

ICMEC is non-governmental, non-profit global organisation that combats child sexual exploitation, child pornography and child abduction. Get in touch at information@icmec.org.

KSCF (Kailash Satyarthi Children's Foundation)

KSCF is a non-profit organisation headquartered in India which fights to end all forms of violence against children, including child trafficking, child labour and slavery. For more information, visit www.satyarthi.org.in.

ODIHR (OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights)

ODIHR is one of the world's principal regional human rights bodies promoting, among other things, tolerance and non-discrimination, and the rule of law. For more information, visit www.osce.org.

List of Singapore Resources

AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research)

AWARE is a non-profit organisation that provides critical support services for women in Singapore. For more information visit www.aware.org.sg.

Big Love CPSC (Child Protection Specialist Centre)

Big Love CPSC is a non-profit community-based centre that helps families with child protection concerns. Get in touch at contact@biglove.org.sg.

IMH (Institute of Mental Health)

IMH is a government-run hospital that offers psychiatric, rehabilitative and counselling services for child victims and adult survivors of child sexual abuse. For appointments and referrals, call 6389 2200.

SCWO (Singapore Council of Women's Organisations)

SCWO is the national coordinating body of women's organisations in Singapore, providing services such as legal clinics and a safe temporary refuge for women and children dealing with family violence. Reach out to SCWO at scwo@scwo.org.sg.

Sofia Abdullah was sexually abused when she was little. After forty years of anguish and anxiety, she is finally ready to tell her story, albeit in fragmented vignettes.

In this book, Sofia pieces together the scattered memories of her childhood, coming to terms with the horrific events that have shaped her into who she is today—an international women’s and child rights activist. This is the eye-opening tale of her journey from trauma to triumph.

“A masterclass in truth-telling.”

—LISA C. WILLIAMS, Author of *Reshaped by Truth* and *Beautiful Layers: Stories from Those Who Survived the Life of Prostitution and Child Sexual Exploitation*

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ISBN 978-981-49-0164-2



9 789814 901642

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