

# HER DARK *materials*

*Fashion insiders love The Vampire's Wife for its exquisitely feminine designs. But for co-founder Susie Cave, her work came to represent a path out of despair. By Christa D'Souza*

Portraits by Polly Borland

It's wrong to have preconceptions about the insides of other people's homes. But this airy Regency house on a crescent overlooking Brighton Pier, with its Mary Poppins-ish façade and wellies neatly lined up in the hallway, is not at all what I'd expected. Where are the lamps covered in fringed shawls? Or the gothy purple walls? This, after all, is the residence of Susie and Nick Cave – aka the “prince of darkness”.

Still, a sense of the dramatic pervades. Squawking seagulls outside compete with a Beethoven piano sonata playing in the background. A giant candle burns in the hallway. Underneath the staircase are two large dog baskets neatly lined with vintage fox-fur coats. Then, of course, there is Susie herself, 51, a shy, softly spoken presence and every bit as extraordinary-looking in the flesh as in pictures, with that marble skin and that curtain of raven hair and those unexpected curves. Think Jessica Rabbit via *St Trinian's* with a bit of Colette mixed in. If you're old enough, you'll remember her in the late Eighties as Susie Bick, one of

London's legendary It-girls, who ran away from boarding school on a milk float, was discovered by Steven Meisel at 14 and became muse to Nick Knight, Helmut Newton and Guy Bourdin – and then most latterly to her husband, the lugubrious Australian frontman of Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds.

I'm here to talk about The Vampire's Wife, the label Susie founded with her friend and business partner Alex Adamson in 2014. Having started out as a tiny, insidery capsule collection, mostly for Susie's circle of friends, it has, in the last two years, become a *bona fide* global brand, and the cooler go-to for the red carpet. Dakota Johnson, Ruth Negga, Lily James, Cate Blanchett... These are just some of the fans of the sexy “street-sweepers”, as Susie calls the signature full-length frocks. Kate Moss, another ardent admirer, describes them as “*Little House on the Prairie* dresses” gone luxe. “I have always been a little in awe of Susie,” says Moss, who first met her backstage at a Vivienne Westwood show. “I love how she oozes sex in an unassuming way – a lot like her clothes, actually...”

Welcome, then, to the world of Susie Cave, mother, model, muse – and now fully fledged designer. It's a world that has remained mostly private since she married in 1999, but one that was unavoidably pushed into the spotlight two years ago

when her son Arthur, twin to Earl, and 15 at the time, fell to his death from a cliff after experimenting with LSD.

In the 2016 documentary *One More Time with Feeling*, shot just months after Arthur's death, Nick describes his grief after the event in excruciating detail. Susie, though, appears only fleetingly: detached, cipher-like and glassy with grief. This is the first time she has felt ready to talk about that time publicly and the subject still makes her voice falter. She explains that what helped lift her out of that “treacle of despair”, as Nick once put it, was work: how sustaining her business and watching it grow felt almost like a life force of its own.

“There's definitely a joy in creating,” she says. “I've always wanted to make beautiful things, but at the same time it's about not wanting to be a victim of what happened to Arthur, not wanting to be paralysed for the rest of my life. And of course wanting to show Earl the best way I can survive this. We *had* to keep it together for him and not let him feel scared he was losing his parents.”

We're sitting downstairs at the dining-room table, set with gold cutlery, on which Susie has laid out a delicious vegan spread. Dotted around the room are pictures of Arthur as a little boy and one of the four of them, taken by Dominique Issermann on >



“There’s definitely a joy in creating...” Susie Cave with her husband, Nick, photographed in Los Angeles. Silk dress, £1,395, The Vampire’s Wife. Shoes, Susie’s own. Sittings editor: Jaime Perlman. Digital artwork: Paul Batton



"You feel they are one-offs, like she's made something just for you," says Ruth Chapman of Susie's designs. Liberty-print cotton and silk dress, £830, *The Vampire's Wife*. Shoes, Susie's own

the Sussex Downs. Behind me are four gold helium balloons spelling Earl's name, a remnant of his recent 17th birthday party. Every so often Susie looks anxiously out of the window to see if he is back from school, admitting that ever since the evening that Arthur didn't come home she has been terrified the same could happen with Earl. "It's irrational, I know, but that's how you live after a trauma, constantly on the edge."

The grief is still etched, may forever be etched, in those bottle-green eyes, but it cannot feel as bottomless – if that is the right word – as it did that desperate evening in July 2015. Arthur and a friend, the inquest later heard, had gone out to the cliffs near Rottingdean Windmill to try LSD for the first time, having researched it online the night before. But although initially they were "in good spirits and happy", the pair started experiencing vivid hallucinations. It was after they became separated that Arthur plunged 60ft down the cliff on to the underpass of Ovingdean Gap. He was taken to Royal Sussex County Hospital but died from his injuries.

How, *how*, does one navigate one's way through a tragedy like this, I have to ask her? How do you put one foot in front of the other? How do you yourself survive? "Well, Nick never really left my side for a year," she says, "and my closest friends and family rallied, but really, everyone was so kind and so helpful... You know, even just the people of Brighton, people we didn't actually know, were extraordinarily kind. And, of course, Nick's fans... We will never, never forget that."

"The week after Arthur died I was in bed," she continues softly. "I said: 'Nick, I can't do this. The Vampire's Wife is over. Everything is over.' And then three months later I got a call from Daisy Lowe saying she needed a dress for an awards ceremony and would I make one for her. So I dragged myself into the office to find the red fabric. And she wore it. And I saw it photographed. That was kind of a breakthrough. From then on I went to work every day. For six months after he died I had this routine. In the mornings I'd do things for me – funny things, like I had a friend who had a horse and I'd just go and stroke it and feed it grass, which felt very grounding. And then in the afternoons,

without fail, I went into the office. Having to show up, having something to do which was physically demanding enabled me temporarily not to think of anything else. Which is probably not healthy, I know, and one day maybe I'll find a therapist to process it all, but to be honest, work is what has saved me."

In the past year the line has expanded to encompass cashmere/silk cardigans in pastel shades, chiffon blouses, figure-hugging, high-waisted pencil skirts and tailored trousers. While I'm here she tries on for me a silk-lined trouser suit in a blue cotton Liberty print and a game-changer of a black lamé jacket emblazoned with red flowers. "My first ever jacket!" she says. "I was terrified when I saw it on the hanger, but the moment I put it on I thought, yes."



From left: Cate Blanchett, Florence Welch, Ruth Negga, Laura Bailey and Karen Elson, all wearing The Vampire's Wife

## "She understands the power of the female form more than anyone I have ever met"

"Susie has spotted something fashion is not delivering," says Ruth Chapman of Matchesfashion.com, which has been stocking The Vampire's Wife since 2015. "Not so much a new idea, but a tried and tested one that makes us feel great: an old-fashioned English sensibility with something that makes us feel super-sexy and feminine. She's effected that very difficult thing of making you feel as if they are one-offs, like she's made something just for you."

"I don't know what it is," says Florence Welch, who wears the label both on- and off-stage, "but they make you look like you're practising witchcraft in a very romantic cult, which is how I want to look

all the time. As a musician, I worship at the altar of Nick Cave, so I've always been fascinated by Susie as his enigmatic muse and inspiration. It's been so beautiful to see the muse become the maker."

Arguably, it is Nick himself who is The Vampire's Wife's biggest fan. It was he, after all, who came up with the name, poached from an unfinished novel of his about the relationship between muse and creative process, and he whose input Susie values most. After Nick's month-long absence on tour, she is excited for him to see an idea of his – a fitted velvet street-sweeper the colour of a Burford Brown egg yolk – made into an actual sample. "When he suggested it, I was like, 'Really?'" she says. "He's much more daring than me like that. But he has amazing taste and I trust him 100 per cent, and he was right, it works. He gets a little shy about his involvement, though."

"Susie took a very small idea and in a very short time turned it into something quite magnificent," Nick offers via email. "I just watch from the sidelines, in awe. She took all the heartbreak of the last two years and through a kind of ferocious will channelled it into something very moving."

"She understands the power of the female form more than anyone I have ever met," he goes on. "She really does not care what others think, she has her own belief in her own concept of beauty and that is the end of it."

The daughter of an academic and brought up partly in Africa, partly in Cheshire, Susie Hardie-Bick, as she was then known, had always been obsessed with making her own clothes. As a girl she was taught by her grandmother how to use a sewing machine, and as a boarder at Dartington Hall during the late Seventies spent hours taking in her friends' jeans. "Remember how flares went out and drainpipes came in almost overnight? No one could afford the new look and it was an easy thing taking them in from the inside." She began modelling full-time at the age of 16. By the early 2000s she had featured on a Roxy Music album cover, appeared nude on the catwalk in Robert Altman's film *Prêt-à-Porter*, and was the face of Dior.

Bella Freud, who met her in the early Nineties and was godmother to Arthur >

(she is now godmother to Earl), remembers her, “this exotic creature”, in her pre-Nick days, with a flat in Maida Vale and a dog called Hoover, and a trail of male admirers (including Prince, who would send her bunches of roses), who without particularly trying caused mayhem wherever she went. “Her beauty was so extreme, and she was always so generous with it, like maybe not aware of how powerful it was,” recalls Freud. “I remember the first time we met, on a shoot in Hyde Park, and this gust of wind was blowing up her skirt, and instead of slapping it down as most people would do she just very gently smoothed it down as if to say, fine, let people see.

“I’ve always felt quite protective of her,” she goes on. “A combination of maternal figure and bouncer, really – because men were always coming on to her, always invading her space. They’d go to me, ‘You’re just a bloody lesbian!’ But it was more like, ‘How dare you even speak to this Venus-like goddess?’”

It was Freud who introduced Susie to Nick, backstage at a Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds concert at the V&A in 1997. For Nick, who has two older sons from former relationships and whose exes include PJ Harvey, it was a complete *coup de foudre*.

Susie remembers meeting him a different time. She was supposed to have appeared in a show of Bella Freud’s, “but I was having one of my panic attacks and begged not to be in it, so Bella said, ‘Yeah, that’s fine, just come and watch it.’

“So I sat next to him – he was with someone else, who I thought was his partner – and I remember being very conscious and self-aware of the moment. It was, who is this person, is he a brother? No. Is he a husband? No. Is he a boyfriend? No. It was this weird, magnetic feeling that he was actually family. Even before we spoke. I thought it was just me; I didn’t think he could possibly feel like that, too... and then I must have given him my number, but for a year before we even kissed, he’d fax me these incredible letters. It was as though we fell in love via that correspondence. Somehow, I have lost them. I lie awake at night sometimes wondering where they might be. I hope they are somewhere.”

The pair got married first at a registry office in Richmond – “on Paradise Road, because we liked the name” – and then had a big blessing at a church in Surrey. The dress was by Bella Freud, and almost completely see-through, which meant someone had to be sent back to the house

to get a pair of knickers. “It was so magical,” she remembers, “and then to get pregnant with twins literally on our honeymoon. My life instantly changed from being never that particularly happy to being incredibly happy. Until two years ago...”

Her voice falters, and her eyes fill with tears. “I’m sorry,” she whispers needlessly. “I’m sorry,” and for 10 minutes or so, because it would feel intrusive to do otherwise, I turn off my tape recorder.

Was it a mistake to open up the wound again, I ask myself? But then I remember an interview Nick gave earlier this year to the *Guardian*. “Initially, I thought it would be impossible to do this in the public eye,”



he said. “The impulse was to hide. But it turns out that being forced to grieve openly basically saved us.” And then, of course, there is their beloved Earl. “I want him to have as much normality as possible,” Susie explains after I switch the recorder back on.

Someone is at the door. It is Earl, and as he walks into the room Susie’s face completely lights up. Wearing a suit and bee-emblem Gucci loafers – not his fur ones, because they’d get trashed in the rain – he is a dead ringer for his father, but with Susie’s features and the light brown hair she was born with. After the pair hug hello, he springs forward to shake my hand, fixing me with his extraordinary grey-green eyes. A budding actor, he has already appeared in the Channel 4 drama *Born to Kill*, and this September he will start working on a film.

Tomorrow he and his mother will fly to Los Angeles to meet Nick for the holidays – it is possible that they will move there permanently, but for now they are just renting. Last time they were there they stayed in the house of Thom Yorke from Radiohead. This time they have a bigger place in Los Feliz to accommodate the two friends Earl is bringing out with him.

Susie has an errand to run in town, and in the car we keep talking. She tells how much she and Nick have missed each other while he’s been away, how the moment he gets off stage he always calls her just to hear her voice. She tells me how it is

he, rather than she, who cooks Earl his breakfast and tea. “I do cook, but it tends to be vegetables with nothing on them,” she admits.

She tells me, too, how, despite her wild past, she has never been terribly good with lots of people, and for that reason avoids large social gatherings unless absolutely necessary. Festivals, she confesses, despite designing frocks for them, are so not her thing. “Me, Arthur and Earl once decided to go and see Nick play and camp out the night before,” she giggles. “It was full-on glamping with make-up areas and fluffy duvets and everything. Awful. It would have been better if it had just been a tent and sleeping bags. We just thought, ‘Oh, God.’”

She tells me how Nick doesn’t like her hair too straight (which is why she uses hot rollers on the ends), and how, because he is not crazy about her wearing perfume, but doesn’t mind the smell of Cire Trudon, she’ll often put on a bit of the room spray. “But I really want to do a scent for The Vampire’s

Wife. That’ll be the challenge. To create one he actually likes.” She confirms how they held each other, how they still hold each other, literally and metaphorically, after the tragedy. “If one of us feels really bad, the other is there for support. Even if we both felt we were falling apart, we’d still hang in there and the minute one of us felt stronger, we’d step up. I don’t know how we did it, but we did.”

We say goodbye and she lets herself out of the car at a cobbled intersection. As I watch this ethereal swirl of bronzed gauze and oversized sunglasses and jet-black hair vanish up a hill, I’m reminded of Nick’s email, how he describes them as being “like a couple of balloons holding on to each other’s string. I know that makes no sense whatsoever, but that’s how it feels.” ■

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*Opposite:* Susie wears silk dress, £1,765. *This page:* Liberty-print cotton and silk dress, £830. Both *The Vampire's Wife*. For stockists, all pages, see *Vogue Information*