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The long read

‘I couldn’t deal with it, it tore me apart’: surviving child sexual abuse

As a boy, Tom Yarwood was assaulted by his musical mentor. Decades on, telling the story has not become any easier

In telling of the sexual assaults I endured as a child, I have always had the sensation of speaking into the void. I usually offer only the bare bones of the story, because I want my listener to fill in the emotional content, to tell me what I felt, what they might have felt in my position. I want them to explain to me how I could have suffered, when I felt pleasure, and how I was not to blame, though I didn’t resist. But their response is always underwhelming: they seem to understand so little about this kind of thing, less even than me. And it’s all so exquisitely embarrassing that I soon move on, apologise for myself, repeat the usual reassurances. It was nothing, really, it didn’t matter, I coped.

Each telling is a new humiliation, a new disappointment. And yet, like an idiot, I always go on to attempt another. Six months or a year later, usually when I’m drunk, at four in the morning, suddenly I can imagine it again – the moment someone will explain me to myself at last. Because on the one hand, I really do tend to think it was nothing, what happened. But on the other, it never leaves my head, the image of it, the stink of it, and he never leaves me, he is always there, the loathsome, pathetic man. And there’s this enduring longing to relieve myself of the weight of my silence, my slow-burning despair.

Still, something in this picture has shifted lately, since my father’s death three years ago, and my 40th birthday not long after. In childhood and youth, I knew, with the heroism of the young, that I would vanquish the effects of the abuse, by 20, then by 30, or by 35. The idea it might stay with me, in me, was as inconceivable as my own death. But now I’m closer by far to 60, the age at which my father had his first heart attack, than to 12, my age when the other man first laid hands on me. It has dawned on me that the assaults are with me for good. And so in talking about them again, I’m less inclined to defer to others. This time I will stand, for once, at the centre of myself.

As a small child, I was obsessed with classical music. My parents bought a piano from a junk shop in Ludlow, read us stories about the great composers. We didn’t have a television at home on our Shropshire housing estate, and so I spent a lot of time sitting in a little green velvet chair by the record player with my eyes closed, elaborating wild fantasies about my musical heroes as I listened to their symphonies. I started piano lessons at the age of four, but rarely practised, preferring to delight the neighbours (I felt sure) with endless improvisations, generally *fortissimo* and *con fuoco*.

In the summer of 1987, when I was 11, my mother took me and my siblings on holiday to Europe. My father was working abroad at the time, as he often did. In Bruges, we came across a grand exhibition of musical instruments, where I was thrilled to have the chance to try out a harpsichord. While I played, a man approached my mother and told her I was gifted. He said he was a conductor – a specialist in baroque music – and would love to foster my talent. Phone numbers were exchanged, and a couple of cassette tapes offered to my brother and sister and me – his own commercially produced recordings of Handel and Purcell. He was evidently a prominent figure in his field.

That autumn, my father took me to London to visit this dazzling new mentor. We spent the afternoon at the conductor's house, playing the harpsichord and talking about music. I was self-conscious, and desperate to impress. He was charm itself, but I found something faintly peculiar about him. He had a manic, childlike energy, a tendency to clowning in which I detected no genuine mirth, and beneath it I sensed he was very tense. Still, we got on well enough, and my father trusted him sufficiently that I went back to see him for another day of music-making a few weeks later.

Before long, I was spending whole weekends on my own with the conductor, sleeping in his spare bedroom in London and attending rehearsals and recording sessions with him and his orchestra. There was little formal teaching, but I got to listen to some good live music, and doubtless soaked up some other valuable lessons – not least how to make tea, and set up a music stand – and occasionally we looked at scores or listened to recordings together. He would sometimes drive me all the way back to my parents' house in Shropshire himself, and stay for supper.

My anxiety around him never abated. It wasn't only the unnerving air of inauthenticity about his manner. He also seemed very driven, and he could be vituperative towards timewasters. Then there was the social gulf between us. My parents were bohemian members of the new middle class, but the conductor was an upper-middle-class product of the public school system. All was well in his world when people cleaved, outwardly, to the "sensible" values expressed by the authority figures of his childhood – headmasters, barristers, clergy. Those who made a fuss of their differences were "mad". More unsettling still was his disdain for children of a certain kind – the vast majority, I suspected – the rude ones, the dirty ones, the ones who were not good.

He introduced me to alcohol, mixing gin and tonics for me, and cocktails sweet and heavy with cassis or curacao. I was drunk when he assaulted me for the first time. It was early on a Sunday afternoon, and he was in the kitchen, making a bland English bachelor's lunch of pork chops, potatoes and frozen peas. He seemed to find something about the peas amusing. With wildly contrived laughter, he tossed them about the kitchen, pretending he was dropping them. I was embarrassed for him. He tipped several peas down my T-shirt, and chased me into the living room and around the sofa with the rest. I'm not six years old, I wanted to say. I grew out of this sort of thing quite a while ago.

He dropped a frozen pea down my trousers and wrestled me on to the sofa, undoing my trouser button. I ceased to struggle when he grabbed my penis. "Ah, the pea!" he said, as he tugged at it. After a while, he pulled down my pants, and complimented me on my first pubic hair, which I

had noticed only days before. Nothing more was said as he went about his business. I did not move a finger. Afterwards, he cleaned me up, pulled up my trousers and did up my fly, telling me meanwhile that this was what boys did, and wasn't something to worry about. We returned to the kitchen and the pork chops.

Not a single day has passed in the three decades since this incident without some effort on my part to cut through the tangle of dark thoughts and feelings it induced, and to understand the insidious effects it has had on my life. The physical sensations were pleasurable. But I did not want any kind of sexual contact with the conductor. I found him repugnant, and had he asked me whether I wanted him to continue at any point, I would have said no, and meant it. I had experimented sexually with friends in childhood; I had turned down sexual overtures from other friends. In this respect, I knew my own mind. And this is why it always seemed so strange to me that I said nothing, and didn't resist.

I still remember the all-consuming shame I felt on being manhandled by a bigger creature, at relinquishing control of my body to another person, against my will. And I remember too how destroyed I felt at the exposure of my sexuality to an adult. The secret, underdeveloped heart of my psychosomatic being – still fraught with danger, still hedged around in thorns – had been torn out and thrown quivering before me, in full public view.

But it is only in recent years that I have gained the distance from these horrors – the sense of security in myself – to acknowledge their intensity. As a child, it was impossible for me to face my victimhood, impossible to own and name what had come to light.

I withdrew into a kind of mental panic room. *This is nothing*, I told myself. *This doesn't matter. This is him. This is not me. I will remain aloof. I will rise above.* I marshalled all my contempt for the conductor and all my knowledge of sex. *He thinks I find him attractive, but in fact I find him repulsive.* I saw him, the adult in control of me, as a child – a "silly" child, as my mother would say, still fixated on other children's penises like this. It was an extension of his general puerility, his weird clowning, his fake laughter. *How pathetic, how contemptible, how sad.* I had reversed our roles in my imagination – a fatal self-deception.

The panic room became a prison, a lunatic's cell. This, I hazard, is the snare in which many victims of childhood sexual abuse find themselves – they are traumatised, but unable to face the fact. For almost three decades, I could not look back (or look down) at what the conductor did to me, but had to keep moving on, moving up, clinging to a reassuring sensation of balance like one of those weighted toys that always rights itself, no matter how hard you hit it.

Now that I can gaze more steadily at the ancient scene, I am struck by how very strange it appears. How strange it sounds, to have sex, to feel your body consumed by that fire, and actively to deny to yourself that you are involved in it at all. And how strange it looks – the child's mute stillness, and the adult's complete camouflage of his own desire, his voice never wavering from an even, nannying tone, as if he were teaching chess or changing a nappy.

The memories of the abuse still return many times a day, stirred up by chance impressions – scents like the soap the conductor used, or of his sweat, music that reminds me of his – even, of

course, my own sexual thoughts and erotic sensations. And with these impressions come the associated emotions – the shame, the fear, the grief. But I always recoil instinctively from naming them, from facing the half-known horror that paralysed me during the assault. Lots of boys go through this, I might tell myself. He didn't mean any harm. I'll survive. Anything but the truth, the big taboo, the real words of power: I didn't want it, I couldn't deal with it, it tore me apart.

The loneliness was terrible. The abuse came between me and my parents, my siblings, my peers, sapped art of meaning, experience of joy. I felt a constant, immense pressure to speak, but something always seemed to intervene at the last minute, catching my words in my throat, forcing them back down, sickeningly, into my belly. I was, I can see now, the dream victim for a predatory paedophile. My father was often absent, and my mother's attention was taken up by my adopted younger sister, who had severe behavioural problems. Since toddlerhood, my older brother and I always felt that we were holding the fort: the idea of turning myself into a problem child was anathema.

After the first attack, I buried my head in the sand, imagining that perhaps it had been a one-off, like a trip to Alton Towers. But on the next visit, I woke up late at night to find the conductor sitting on the edge of the bed with one hand under my duvet, stroking my thigh. He assaulted me again, and another sleepless night ensued.

I started working on my mother, trying to communicate my distrust of him. For a while, after several more assaults, it worked: she stopped phoning him, and each time he called, she found an excuse for me not to see him. Then, to my horror, he appeared on our doorstep in Shropshire – like a sexual Terminator, quite unfazed by what I thought of as the vast gulf between my family and the city. Although it makes me feel unhinged to think of it now, I had an overwhelming fear of what might come out if he were crossed, and so I insisted repeatedly to my parents that everything was fine.

When he had me strapped into the passenger seat of his Volvo, he drove a little way, pulled into a layby, took off the Schwarzenegger shades he wore when motoring, looked at me with wide eyes (his face, as usual, too close to mine), and told me that he knew he had upset me by what he had done, and that he promised, absolutely promised, that should I please him by resuming my visits, he would never, ever touch me again.

After that – and after he had been redeemed entirely in our family conversation – the assaults started again, becoming steadily stranger. He would pick me up and carry me up the stairs like an infant, apparently expecting me to find this humiliating horseplay as amusing as he pretended it to be. He would insist on bathing me. And as the assaults escalated, he took to putting a pillow over my head so I didn't have to involve myself in what was going on – but I found this the greatest mortification thus far. It suggested he imagined I had thoughts and feelings about what he was doing, whereas I needed him to understand that I was not there.

It didn't matter to me what he did, so long as he would let me be alone, inviolate, in my head. As an adult, I notice people often want to know the mechanics of the abuse you went through, and

especially whether it was painful. Did he beat you, cut you, tie you up? If not, you sense, perhaps you're making a bit of a fuss over nothing. The law also seems to operate like this, with its intricate scale of sexual transgressions, escalating in perceived severity, above and beyond the mere fact of exploiting a child for your own erotic gratification.

Pain and physical injury are traumas in their own right, but I suspect that the insult specific to sexual abuse in childhood is simply to have another person take ownership of your body against your will – to destroy your sense of sexual self-possession – after which everything can feel, indifferently, like rape.

Perhaps that is hard to imagine if you haven't been through it yourself – if you haven't felt forced, for the sake of your psychic survival, to dissociate yourself entirely from your erotic response, and then struggled to put these two aspects of your being – you and your capacity to feel – back together, to get them to work again as one.

I went to Eton on a music scholarship at 14, entering the school in the second year. The conductor had suggested it to my parents, after I was offered similar bursaries by Shrewsbury and Westminster. I came top of the music exams during my first term there, competing against boys who had spent years at choir schools and had enjoyed Eton's excellent music tuition for a year longer than me. And that term I also told a wonderful new friend about the abuse, bursting into tears as I reassured him it was nothing. He told a senior music teacher. The teacher did nothing.

The conductor assaulted me more than 20 times over the course of three interminable years. The last attack came after a gap of several months, when I was 15 – old enough to acknowledge what he was doing. I objected repeatedly, and he overruled me, repeatedly, returning to my bedroom three times through the course of a single night, and finally getting what he wanted when both of us were haggard with sleeplessness, well after dawn.

At 16, I finally plucked up the courage to tell another adult at Eton the story in person. I gave them no room for doubt that I had hated my encounters with the conductor, but they explained to me that such incidents often cropped up in boys' lives, and generally originated in the younger man's admiration for the older. If there was no force used, they said, there was no reason to suspect harm.

Though I had long feared it, the revelation that the grown-up world as a whole couldn't understand what I had been through came as a shock. My anger, my shame, and the ceaseless war between them – all this was my fault, it seemed, a fault in me. I was, in short, crazy. My immediate response was to give up music. It was a cry for help, a deliberate act of self-harm – killing off the great love of my life – but no one took much notice.

(It amazes me that I had kept going with music for so long; it is so tightly bound up with sex in our brains and bodies. My skin used to crawl every time the conductor called a favourite piece "erotic", but somehow I had succeeded in imagining that there was music like his and music not like his, sex like his and sex not like his. Those lines became hopelessly blurred after I told my story to an adult at Eton. Touchingly naive adults such as my parents aside, the world was

teeming with paedophiles and their sympathisers, and I was damned if I was going to open my body and soul to share the food of love with them again.)

I spent puberty and adolescence trying to construct in fantasy a relationship with my sexuality that was pristine, personal, free of the stain of rape. But when at last I went to Oxford and plucked up the courage to pick up another man for the first time, a friendly PhD student in his mid-30s, I was shocked to find that this mental construct had not taken root in my body. Something within me just wouldn't move, wouldn't melt, wouldn't let go. Anger followed, shame, despair – all muted by stoicism. This is just me, I said to myself, this is my fate, I'll get by. As a young adult, I developed an anxiety disorder to set beside the depression and insomnia that had plagued me since the first assault, and became prone to panic attacks.

The voices of denial – denial not that children have sex with adults, but of the fear and shame that shackle them, and of the violence of the act – always leave me feeling faintly deranged.

First came the voice in my head during the assaults. Then came his voice, explaining that the abuse was just a fact of life, an inevitable expression of my nature as a boy. And later, there were the voices of those from whom I sought help during my 20s – the mentors and teachers and parents and police and therapists and boyfriends – in whose responses I always found some admixture of bewilderment, embarrassment, incomprehension or indifference.

But only recently did I notice how closely these voices echo one another. It strikes me that our resistance to confronting the horror of child sexual abuse has common roots in human nature. The silence of victims and the general silence must also have reinforced one another over the millennia. I imagine those to whom I looked for help were simply as fearful as me – as fearful and more ignorant. I should have been bolder all along.

In 2007, when I was 31 years old, I heard from a friend that the conductor had been arrested and charged with sexually abusing four other boys in the 1980s. I am sceptical about the value of retributive justice, but I decided to join the prosecution. I needed to tell the world the truth.

The conductor was sentenced to three years and nine months in prison. I had no desire to see him punished, but I took this jail term as an indication of how seriously our society regarded his crimes. It seemed rather light. In his ruling, the judge apparently drew attention to the fact that the conductor had recently married and had a child, arguing that in doing so he had entered a new phase of life.

Searching the internet for commentary on the case not long afterwards, I found the loudest voices were those raised in my attacker's defence. In classical music discussion forums, his admirers persuaded others that his "alleged" victims could well be liars, and had most likely suffered no harm anyway. And in the Observer, the poet James Fenton used his opportunity to comment publicly on the conductor's conviction – the most prominent proven case of child sexual abuse in the history of classical music – not to consider the hurt he might have caused to the talented young musicians he assaulted, to their hopes of fulfilling themselves through music, nor to ask

how the music industry as a whole had so long allowed the conductor to get away with it – but to argue passionately that his mistakes in life should not be allowed to damage his career. Fenton was relieved that the judge had allowed the conductor to keep associating with children: “To be debarred for life from working with the male treble voice would have been a harsh fate.”

In all this, I saw further evidence of our culture of denial. And I see it too in the way the music industry has welcomed the conductor back since his release from jail. Singers and instrumentalists with MBEs and honorary positions at the Royal Academy of Music go on appearing with him in the world’s most famous concert venues – the Wigmore Hall in London, the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg, the KKL in Lucerne, and so on – and fans go on funding his performances and recordings.

They have restored to him the power and status with which they had entrusted him before, in putting their talent, labour, property and good names at his disposal. And they have done so despite the fact he abused all this – abused them – to gain the confidence of families and attack their children, and even though he called his victims “liars” and “loonies” during the trial, and has not expressed remorse.

There’s nothing more we can ask of the conductor himself. He apologised to me when I was 13, and went on to assault me again: another apology would be meaningless. And he has served his time. I don’t want revenge. I don’t want to dwell on the past. And there are doubtless many other moderating thoughts to which I should also give voice – about the value of mercy, for instance, and about how blessed my life has been in other respects.

But it has fallen to me to say something simpler here. I did not ask to be one of the ones who had these words to speak. They were a burden given to me a long time ago. I might have felt less crazed by others’ silence, or by their denial, had I spoken them earlier – shouted them from the stage of a London concert hall 30 years ago, perhaps, into the darkness of the stalls.

They are the words for which I have reached so often, the words I needed to hear when I was a child. Make of them what you will.