

A Different Bomb

By

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For 'Cloud'

This past week a friend of mine committed suicide. She was a forty-something actress, recovering from alcoholism. Although I am a recovering alcoholic myself I knew her best through my work as a fund-raiser for treatment for those needing alcohol and drug rehabilitation. We first met about seven years ago. One day, in an open counselling session at which adult men and women of all ages were present, she suddenly revealed her central issue. From as early as she could remember, as an infant girl she had been sexually abused on a regular basis by her father, and in his presence by several of his friends. At first, she referred to her father as a 'priest'. Later she revealed that these were members of some kind of religious cult. A charity with which I am involved paid for her to go for treatment for depression at The Priory last year. She was greatly improved when she came out. Partly I think because her story was believed. She had felt safe, and various innovative new therapeutic techniques promised to help her further. She became a day patient.

Within a few weeks she started to slide again, pleading to be allowed to go back in for further live-in treatment. There were no further funds available to pay for this. After a month or two, emotionally speaking she was back where she had started: at a rock-bottom. Her friends endured an oscillating love-loss relationship with her. She was funny, honest, energetic and smart. But she was often desperate for affection, attention and help. As a result she could be exhausting. For all of us who helped her, including several women who themselves experienced similar sexual abuse as children, her suicide was both a tragedy and an act of brutal insanity. What pushed this woman to the brink was not self-obsession - though God knows she enjoyed her share, like any individual ensnared in alcohol or drug addiction - it was the fact that she discovered her father was in a new relationship and had access to some young children.

It seems then that the greatest terror for an adult who remembers sexual abuse is the thought that other children might suffer as they did.

In my writing in the past - especially *Tommy* - I have created unusually unmerciful worlds for any infant characters. I am often disturbed by what I see on the page when I write - never more so than when I draw on my own childhood. Some people who were abused in their childhood have written to me to say how much they identify with the character of *Tommy*. But what is powerful in my own writing, and sometimes most difficult to control and model, is the *unconscious* material I draw on. It is what is unconscious in me that makes me scream for vengeance against my friend's abusers, rather than an adult understanding of what went wrong.

I remember no specific sexual abuse, though when I was young I was treated in an extremely controlling and aggressive way by my maternal grandmother. This is not unusual. It might be described by some as insignificant. Almost everyone I know experienced similar stuff at some time or other - many friends experienced more extreme 'abuses' and have no obvious adult vices as a result.

On the issue of child-abuse, the climate in the press, the police, and in Government in the UK at the moment is one of a witch-hunt. This may well be the natural response triggered by cases like that of my friend who committed suicide. But I believe it is rather more a reaction to the 'freedoms' that are now available to us all to enter into the reality of a world that most of us would have to admit has hitherto been kept secret. The world of

which I speak is that of the abusive paedophile. The window of 'freedom' of entry to that world is of course the internet.

There is hardly a man I know who uses computers who will not admit to surfing casually sometimes to find pornography. I have done it. Certainly, one expects only to find what is available on the top shelf at the newsagents. I make no argument here for or against 'hard' or 'soft' pornography. What is certain is that providers of porn feel the need to constantly 'refresh' their supply. So new victims are drawn in every day. This is just as true on the internet as it is in the world of magazines and video. However, what many people fail to realise is how - by visiting their websites - we directly and effectively subsidise pornographers. This is true whether we do so unwittingly or deliberately, out of curiosity or a vigilante spirit. Vigilante campaigners I have contacted on the internet tell me that many porn sites that claim to feature underage subjects do not - in fact - do so. Many that are 'genuine' do feature much the same content on the inside as they do on their free pop-up pages that litter search engines. So why do these pornographers bother with us at all? They can't be getting rich. Why can't they remain secret?

As someone who runs a 'commercial' website of my own I am fully aware of how direct the avenue is between the provider and the user of any internet site. I am also aware - as are most people today I think - of how easy it is to trigger the attention of an internet service provider (ISP) when certain 'buzz-words' are used in a search. These are, in effect, words - or combinations of words - that alert attention at the ISP.

This first came to my attention when in 1997 a man who had briefly worked for me was arrested in the UK for downloading paedophilic pornography. I was cautious of openly condemning him. He had performed in one of my musicals and was a popular figure in the soft-pop pantomime of the UK music scene. When he went to trial, the buzz-word that the newspapers kept reprinting - that he had allegedly used in his regular internet searches - was 'lolita'. A few weeks into the trial *The Guardian* newspaper revealed that www.uksearchterms.com listed 'lolita' high on the list of the most searched words in the UK ('sex' is often No.1). It seemed to me that there was some hypocrisy going on. Who were all these people typing 'lolita' into their browsers? They were surely not all paedophiles. They may have been vigilantes. I'm fairly certain that in most cases they were simply curious of what they might find.

The terrible part is that what they found on the internet will almost have certainly found them by return. It is not to suggest that every one of them was 'hooked' as soon as they found a porn site professing to display underage subjects, it is to say that because their visit was undoubtedly recorded by the site or sites in question, the pornographers who run those sites would have found validation and commercial promise for their activity. They would then have redoubled their efforts in that area.

Many porn sites use software triggers so that when you try to leave a site upon which you may have unwittingly stumbled, another similar - or worse - site immediately pops up. When you try to shut that site, another pops up, then another, then another, the content getting more and more extreme until your browser is solid with pornography and eventually will seize up as though choking on some vapid manifestation of evil itself. Thus it is that the pornographer's validation is spawned at the same time. One site opened triggers another dozen or more - all of which you have unwillingly 'visited'. All of which will have a record of your computer's unique address.

It was obvious to me (though obviously not to the rest of the country) while the man I knew was on trial, that 'lolita' is not a word to use carelessly when searching the internet - even if one happened to be studying Nabokov for a literature degree. So I had my first encounter with internet paedophilia by accident.

Ethan Silverman, a film director friend, had made an extremely moving documentary about an American couple who adopted a Russian boy. As a charity fundraiser (and, I suppose, philanthropist to boot) I wanted to support the work of such orphanages and decided to see if I could - via the internet - find legitimate contacts to help. (I had tried many other methods and failed). The various words I used included 'Russia' and 'orphanages'. I used no words that could usually be taken to be sexual or lascivious, except - perhaps ill-advisedly - the word 'boys'.

Within about ten minutes of entering my search words I was confronted with a 'free' image of a male infant of about two years old being buggered by an unseen man. The blazer on the page claimed that sex with children is 'not illegal in Russia'. This was not smut. It was a depiction of a real rape. The victim, if the infant boy survived and my experience was anything to go by, would probably one day take his own life. The awful reality hit me of the self-propelling, self-spawning mechanism of the internet. I reached for the phone, I intended to call the police and take them through the process I had stumbled upon - and bring the pornographers involved to book.

Then I thought twice about it. With someone on trial who had once been connected with me - however loosely - I spoke off-the-record to a lawyer instead. He advised me to do nothing. He advised me that I most certainly should not download the image as 'evidence'. So I did as he advised. Nothing.

I mentioned my own internet experience to a few people close to me. The trial of the man who had been in my musical was on everyone's agenda. It became clear very quickly that some people I spoke to were sceptical of me. I think they thought that if I had searched using the *right* words, my exposure to that terrible image would not have occurred.

It might be strange to hear that I was glad I found it. Until then, like my ostrich-like friends, I imagined that only those who communicated on the internet using secret codes, private chat-rooms and encrypted files would ever be exposed to this kind of porn. But I learned through this accident that such images were 'freely' available through the machinery of common search engines and User-Groups, and openly available for sale through subscription via credit card. I was then concerned that there would be those 'providers' of paedophilic porn who felt the need to regularly 'refresh' their supply of images. It is a chilling thought isn't it? Even so, I found myself wondering whether that thought brought fears for me that were, perhaps, quite out of proportion with reality: maybe I was stirring my own subconscious memories; maybe I was just being pompous.

Now my friend has joined a long line of suicides who were sexually abused as children, and I feel I must speak up.

Since 1997 I have been attempting to prepare some kind of document with respect to all this for wider publication. My feeling is that if internet service providers (ISPs) can be enlisted by the police and other authorities to 'snoop' and provide information about customers downloading illegal pornography, they could just as easily filter search terms - or better yet, practice combinations of such search terms on a regular basis and then block

specific site names. Many ISPs do such work. It is part of their regular housekeeping. But the pornographers are rich, determined, and - in the area of under-age pornography - criminal. Banned sites are replicated, renamed and replaced in days.

Why am I suddenly writing this today? My friend who committed suicide was the victim of an active but secret ring of paedophiles. They are still at large today. Only those who knew my friend, and believed her story, feel any urge to speak up against her abusers. But we have no proof. It is frustrating, but for her, at least, the pain is over. Meanwhile, on the internet, vigilante groups and individuals work tirelessly and obsessively both to trace and block certain porn sites and to offer - through 12 Step programmes for sex-addiction - probably the only way out for some ensnared by addiction to what the internet has to offer.

It has all gone public now. The ISP I use allows access to User Groups by using the term 'alt' as a prefix. In 'Google' (a popular search engine) it is possible to reach a questionable array of offered sex sites with very few key-strokes, and without actually typing a single word. The pathway to 'free' paedophilic imagery is - as it were - laid out like a free line of cocaine at a decadent cocktail party: only the strong willed or terminally uncurious can resist. Those vigilantes who research these pathways open themselves up to internet 'snoops'. Many are willing to take the risk. They believe the pathways themselves must be closed. They must be totally and completely eradicated from the internet. If that is not possible they must be openly policed by active and obstructive vigilantes - not just 'snooped' by government agencies and police.

I understand the police believe that snooping on the internet might lead them to active paedophiles - their philosophy being that it is the ones who are secret who do the damage. In the case of my suicide friend I would have to agree. However, in other countries children are not so precious. Brazil, Russia and Thailand all have well-known and tragic orphanages and street-children problems, and these countries probably provide source material for many sites.

In my work fund-raising in the field of drug and alcohol rehabilitation I have come across hundreds of individuals from the UK and Europe whose problems have been triggered by childhood abuse. Not always, but often, the abuse is sexual. Sometimes it is quite minor, but even in those cases - for some reason - spectacularly damaging. Not all addicts and alcoholics are victims. They are, perhaps, a minority. But among those afflicted by addiction abuse is terribly common. In some cases, what is so distressing is how little it takes. For me, a few minor incidents seem to have created a dark side to my nature which thankfully emerges only in creative work like *Tommy*. It is not statistically true that all abusers of children were once themselves abused. That can happen, but often - as in the case of my suicide friend - abuse is part of a reward system of power conferred from one adult person to another. But among pornographers only validation and cash matter. What is certain is that the internet has brought the sexual abuse of children into the open. It is not 'respectable' or 'acceptable' at any level of society. It is simply in the open.

Many returning from my friend's funeral had wanted to punch her father who was present. But they restrained themselves. Many present were recovering alcoholics. They are not given to witch-hunts. They are wary of hypocrisy. But given the chance, many of them would have told their own stories about what was done to them by abusers sodden with drink or numb with drugs, and possibly what they themselves did 'under the

influence' that was equally reprehensible. But if abusers and their accomplices are not necessarily victims of abuse, and not necessarily men, then they are also not necessarily drunk or drugged. Booze and drugs are here to stay. But it must be time to do something more concrete to stop the proliferation of questionable pornography that seems so readily and openly facilitated by the internet.

Another danger is this: I think it must be obvious that many children are becoming inured to pornography much too early and - as I have demonstrated - the internet provides a very short route indeed to some of the most evil and shocking images of rape and abuse¹.

The subconscious mind is deeply damaged and indelibly scarred by the sight of such images. I can assure everyone reading this that if they go off in pursuit of images of paedophilic rape they will find them. I urge them not to try. I pray too that they don't happen upon such images as did I, by accident. If they do they may like me become so enraged and disturbed that their dreams are forever haunted.

¹ Software to filter out and block porn at home is often too complex and sweeping to do the job, or too feeble. At the moment, it's all we have. I recommend CyberPatrol - www.cyberpatrol.com - it isn't easy to set up, but it is powerful. Once it is running it begins to make the internet feel a much friendlier and safer place for our children.