

## **THE MONSTER IN THE ROOM: It's not just about Jimmy Saville**

*by Simon Prentis*

There's something very important that's in danger of getting lost in the orgy of outrage about Jimmy Savile. Not that any of this outrage is misplaced – the crimes he got away with, in plain sight or otherwise, are utterly sickening. But if we let the story become all about him, the BBC, or about any of the other as-yet-unnamed stars who are now being investigated, we are missing the real monster in the room. And that monster is the hideous, horrifying and yet all-too-real possibility that this is just the tip of an iceberg.

A few years back I found myself sitting next to a young woman on a plane back from New York who was having to use an oxygen bottle to help with her breathing. When we eventually got to talking, she told me she had just risked her life to go and see a concert by her favourite pop star, because she didn't want to die without having seen him. It turned out that she was one of the first generation of GUCH patients whose life had been saved by pioneering corrective surgery when she was a baby, although she still had many health problems, and had been strongly advised not to travel by her doctor.

Despite her obvious physical difficulties, she was bright, bubbly and amusing, and as we talked more she casually mentioned that she had written a book called *Wednesday's Child*. She didn't want to tell me what it was about, but I promised to get it and read it when I got home. When I did, I discovered it is the horrific tale of a teenage girl, a victim of systematic serial abuse from childhood, trying to come to terms with both the emotional trauma of what had happened to her and the inflexible attitudes of institutions which always somehow seem to blame the children for their problems.

I called her and asked why she'd chosen to write about such a subject. She paused for a moment, then simply and quietly said "Because it's my story." She went on to tell me about how she'd been physically and sexually abused by her step-father from the age of eight, despite her medical condition. Nor did it stop with him. He'd passed

her around a ring of paedophile men who included a judge and a local politician – who she would only ever refer to as ‘Snake-face’ – until she finally got up the courage to run away from her situation at the age of fifteen. She’d been in and out of care homes ever since.

The story was so astonishing I had trouble taking it seriously. It was bad enough to think that it could happen at all, but to a child with a serious heart condition? It sounded like a bizarre fantasy, but the more I expressed my doubts, the more insistent she became that it was all true. In the end, she said that if I didn’t believe her I should talk to her therapist and social worker. When I eventually did, they told me enough to convince me that these things had really happened. I asked why the social services were not taking action, and they told me it was because Amanda would not press charges.

It was only when I talked to her about this that I began to realize how hard it is for the victims of such abuse to come forward. If you have been beaten, threatened and cowed from a very young age by powerful people who make you believe they have the ability to ruin your life, the only thing you want to do is get away. And even if you do want to do something about it (she once said that she’d rather see her stepfather spend even just one day in jail than get any amount of money as financial compensation for what she’d been through), the odds are not in your favour. In Amanda’s case, the very thought of reliving these experiences in court, of having to speak publicly about the terrible things that had happened – let alone having to confront these men again in person – was too much. I tried to encourage her to speak to the police and begin the process of getting justice, but she had such low levels of trust in the system, such paranoia about the potential reach of ‘Snake-face’, and lack of confidence in her ability to withstand the process of questioning, that she could never bring herself to do it.

Sadly, there wasn’t enough time for me to be able to do much to help her anyway. Her damaged heart finally gave out one night in her sleep, and she never woke up. I still feel bad that I wasn’t able to do any more for her, but it’s not that easy to be a whistle-blower either. In the end you need hard evidence, and as the Jimmy Savile case illustrates, that’s what people often don’t have. Then there’s the inevitable

pressure of disbelief. If you've never been or known a victim yourself, it's hard to believe that such things can actually be happening. Even Sigmund Freud, one of the first to identify child abuse at the heart of the hysterical behaviour he saw in his women patients over a century ago, was defeated when it came to bringing the problem to light.

So we need to start talking about it. We need to start recognising that it's probably much more common than we think, and is not just confined to the upper tiers of the BBC talent roster, Catholic priests, or those in public positions with the opportunity to take advantage. Earlier this year, Sue Berelowitz, Deputy Children's Commissioner, reported to the Commons home affairs committee the words of a senior police officer, who had told her "there isn't a town, village or hamlet in which children are not being sexually exploited." However incredible or exaggerated that may seem, we need to start believing it – and more importantly, we need to start believing the children who tell us about it, because the disbelief that so often greets them when they report it can actually be the hardest part of the ordeal. If we don't, Wednesday's child will not be the only one who's full of woe.