

PERSPECTIVE:

“Reclaiming my voice has been a liberating experience”

SEXUALLY ASSAULTED BY HER TEACHER AT AGE 15, GRACE TAME WAS GAGGED FROM SPEAKING OUT BY A LAW SHE'S SPENT THE PAST TWO YEARS FIGHTING TO REPEAL. SHE'S NOW SUCCEEDED AND EXPLAINS WHAT IT MEANS FOR SURVIVORS

“I lost my virginity to a paedophile. There was a film he made me watch, *The Prime Of Miss Jean Brodie*. I can still hear the line: “Give me a girl at an impressionable age, and she is mine for life.” He would sit me in his lap like I was his little girl. That’s what he wanted me to be: a child. “Why didn’t you just say no?” I’m asked, born of the belief that if you appeal to an abuser with reason, they’ll respect your wishes. But to them, reason, respect, even words are meaningless. Resistance only leads to more suffering, so you learn helplessness. *Silence*.”

Psychological manipulation is illogical and oppressive. When abuse is your reality, you have no say. Gag laws reinforce this: abusers dictate the narrative. Predatory behaviour patterns are alienating and incomprehensible to anyone but the perpetrator. Predators thrive in this environment. Misunderstanding spawns fear, which leads to hatred, division and further misunderstanding. Exhausted

by this endless cycle, society lulls itself into a state of passivity. The result is subconscious acceptance. *Silence*.

Abuse is more pervasive than a hand over the mouth; it’s a hand inside the brain, aiming to completely reprogram us. We call this “grooming” – a complete destruction of autonomy, trust, love, families, community. It’s the implementation of six concurrent phases of psychological rewiring: targeting, gaining trust, filling a need, isolating, sexualising and maintaining control. The entire operation hinges on the last of these and it involves striking a perfect balance between two opposing conditions. The first is the false confidence the abuser feeds you to trick your conscious mind into believing you still have control, which explains why you tell friends and family nothing is wrong. This is the lie you live outwardly. The second is your subconscious belief that there’s no escape. Through physical intimidation and threats, your abuser instils fear. This explains the total loss of self-esteem. This is the truth you live inwardly.

“You can beat anorexia on your own.” The same man would look my naked, pre-adult body up and down after assaulting me on the floor of his office and say, “You could do with some more exercise.” Targeting me was easy: he knew I was vulnerable. I shared my insecurities, not realising they’d be used against me. Contrary to the belief that abusers select already isolated victims, I had an attentive support network of family, friends and mental-health professionals. It’s a testament to his malevolence that he dissolved it completely. He identified a void: everyone was toeing the line of tough love, so he became the sympathiser.

Sex was introduced so subtly it almost felt incidental. For months he fed me material like *The Graduate* to normalise it. Predators often pick up where previous abusers left off; to trigger you and ensure you don’t speak out, knowing that doing so

means you have to divulge hidden traumas. I’d told him I was molested by an older child at age six. He re-enacted this, then built on it.

He was sentenced to two years and 10 months in jail, but got out on “good behaviour” after only 19 months. He then boasted on Facebook about what he did, and was sentenced to a further four months. After his release, he gave an interview claiming to be the real victim and insisting he made a “mistake”, neglecting to mention he admitted, in court, to every example of grooming I recounted to police.

Wanting to set the record straight, I reached out to journalist Nina Funnell. Yet we were prevented from speaking out by an archaic gag law: Section 194K of Tasmania’s Evidence Act prevents survivors of child sex abuse from being publicly identified, even with their consent. So Nina and I joined forces with EROC [End Rape On Campus] and Marque Lawyers and launched the #LetHerSpeak campaign to break the silence – and we couldn’t have anticipated the support we received.

In 2019 I became the first woman in Tasmania to be granted an exemption to Section 194K. Now, the state’s Attorney-General has committed to changing the law. It’s a huge step in the right direction. We need to have the gritty conversations. In the absence of survivors’ voices, society lacks the insights needed to inform law. I hope to continue working with the community to educate, revolutionise our collective conscience and pursue a justice system that reflects and strengthens it.

Reclaiming my voice has been the most liberating experience of my life. It is with the utmost pride in our efforts as a community that I can say I am a *survivor*, witnessing all that was ripped apart come together again. For the first time in almost a decade, I recognise myself. I am not his girl. I am my own, entirely. For life. *Unsilenced. E* ”
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