

A GUILTY VICTIM

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Recovering Creativity after
Trauma and Abuse

Toby Ingham

with illustrations by William Smith



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‘To restore the human subject at the centre—the suffering, afflicted, fighting, human subject, we must deepen the case history to a narrative or tale.’

—Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, 1985

‘I see it differently now, but back then I was in an impossible situation and I suppose I just went along with him. He was a priest, priests ran the school and you did what they said. He said if I came with him he’d let me smoke in his room. I only wanted tobacco.’

—William Smith, 2018

About the author

Toby Ingham is a UK-based psychotherapist and supervisor and a former clinical director of South Bucks Counselling. His writing has been commended in the *British Journal of Psychotherapy*.

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Introduction

This is a true story of a man's struggle in psychotherapy to free himself from a dangerous self-destructive mindset. I've given him a pseudonym, William Smith, to protect his identity, but this account has been written with his full consent.

When I first met William, he was fifty-four years old and battling with feelings of worthlessness and depression. He had been suicidal at earlier periods in his life and came to see me because he had concerns that those feelings were returning. We worked together for several years and in that time we began to see how he had internalised a critical and aggressive attitude which picked on and bullied what might be thought of as his true self. Any attempt to express himself creatively was met with fierce prohibition. William could do things for other people but not for himself. Towards the end of our work William created a set of pictures, a timeline of his life, and he suggested that I write text to go with the pictures. This book is that text.

Over the course of a long period of psychotherapy a great deal of information is gathered both about a client's life and experiences, and about the process of working together to uncover those details. Information emerges organically, piecemeal, and that can create a problem of how to organise it. Writing an account of the work and basing it around William's

illustrated timeline, provided a framework and solved a problem of how to structure this account.

The central idea of the book is that we suffer not because there is something wrong with us, but because of things that have happened to us. The problem is we often lose sight of those things, or don't pay them enough attention.

Case studies are a valuable way of showing what happens in psychotherapy. By necessity they are often extracts from therapy rather than a full account, and they are often created around composite individuals because of the need to protect a client's identity. It is unusual to have the opportunity to write a case study with a client's permission and approval. I felt that if this was to be written up, then it should be aimed at as wide a readership as possible. A book for general readers, not just for academics, psychotherapists, and counsellors but for people who might be able to relate to the story and might be inspired to investigate their own lives and timelines further. I didn't want this to be a technical book, and I have intentionally avoided jargon and professional explanations and tried instead to show the way the process of psychotherapy unfolds in a series of ordinary if unusual conversations. Throughout, I have tried to keep William's story at the fore.

Psychotherapy isn't about saying clever things or making clever interpretations. It's about being reliable and predictable and trying to find a way to be with someone so that they might be able to settle, their defences lower, and their emotional stability improve. Something has brought the client to psychotherapy; we can never be entirely sure where that impulse began, but we can try to nurture it and see where it might be trying to go.

Among other things, I hope that this book will contribute to the way people think about early trauma, boarding school syndrome, and grooming. Grooming isn't the whole of this story, but it is part of it. Also, that it might contribute to an understanding of the creative dimension of psychotherapy.

A Guilty Victim is told in seven parts and is written in the form of flashback dramatisations interspersed with extracts from psychotherapy. William's timeline pictures are included in Part V. The book begins with a series of four psychotherapy sessions which illustrate how trust began to develop between us. Initially things were touch and go,

but gradually the defences that had built up within him, and which kept William apart from his creativity, started to soften and he was able to say more about what he had been through. This led us to the story of his early childhood, and to a set of traumatic experiences that left him, as a schoolboy, vulnerable to the attention of a paedophile priest. Vulnerability is one of the key traits that predators pick up on.

Though the psyche may have been ravaged by toxic experiences, it still possesses the capacity to develop, recover, and to grow, and so go on to form new and healthy psychological adaptations. Although this is William's story, it might be every person's story too.

I gave William a pseudonym, William Smith, and I decided the narrative worked better if I gave myself one too, so in the text any reference to Julian Tate is a reference to me. I have written this account from my session notes. William has seen and reviewed every word.

Part I

Psychotherapy begins

Chapter 1

High Wycombe, 2012

When someone asks me what psychotherapy is, I say this: psychotherapy is a unique form of conversation, it deepens and unfolds over time. Speaking about emotional pain can feel risky, but discovering the courage to put your experiences into words can be the start of developing insight and self-confidence. Over time, as the conversations develop, profound worries and anxieties can gradually take on more ordinary proportions. But of course, at the start, none of this can be taken for granted.

Before William came to see me we'd spoken once on the phone and he'd told me that he was looking to speak about his persistent low mood. At that time I worked from a room in my garden, it was away from the house and had its own parking area which made it discreet and private. I remember William arrived on time, that he delayed before getting out of his car and then stood for a moment looking around, he was a tall and imposing man. When I opened the door to meet him, he seemed apprehensive and took his time organising himself before coming in. I guessed he was about fifty, about my age.

Watching as he wrestled his green jacket off, I pointed to a hook on the wall.

'It's fine,' said William, flattening the jacket against the bulk of his stomach and glancing around the room. I kept the furniture simple, two chairs, the one nearest the door for my clients so they wouldn't feel trapped, a couch, a few pictures of landscapes, and a print of Van Gogh's *Room at Arles*. From his body language I had the impression that William might not be staying long.

I told him this was a confidential conversation, and that we had fifty minutes to think about what had brought him, after that a short silence ensued.

'Should I start?' William asked.

'Sure,' I said—I try to avoid leading conversations.

He leant forward, elbows pressed into his thighs, most of his jacket disappearing. I noticed a hint of aftershave, something lemony.

'I'm not sure where to start, I've been trying not to think about it, but I'm unhappy, depressed, self-critical, I've never been anything else.' He raised his eyes and creases spread across his forehead. 'It's the endless negative thinking, any sense of personal achievement triggers feelings of worthlessness in me, stops me doing things, didn't want me coming today. And it's old, it started at school. I was unhappy there and I found a way of fitting in by emulating some other boys.'

'Emulating,' I said. The word caught my attention.

'Yes, I found a way of fitting in by emulating them, I was good at sport. I wasn't particularly interested but it gave me a way in. At school if you're good at sport you fit in, so I copied other boys, emulated them, and it worked, for a while, but then we fell out and everything changed. When I left school I started drinking and I've never stopped. I need to get on top of the anxiety, the self-doubt, the endless critical monologue, the hyper-vigilance and the destructive drinking.' He leant his head back against the padding of the chair. 'I wasn't sure if I'd tell you all that.'

'You said you've been trying not to think about it.'

'I worried that if I thought about it too much I wouldn't come. I need to find a way out of this, there are things I want to do.'

'What kind of things?'

'Oh ...' William gave a vague hand gesture, I noticed a silver ring on his right hand. A hint of a smile came and went, perhaps he sensed encouragement. 'Stop beating myself up for one, allow myself the freedom to follow my ideas, creative ideas.'

I asked him if he'd been in therapy before.

'I've seen a couple of people over the years, it's never worked, but I need to change.' Then after a pause he added 'Why did you ask about emulating?'

His question was quick, direct, I thought of him having to emulate to fit in, and the pair of us, meeting for the first time, how were we supposed to fit together?

'I wondered where you'd learnt to emulate,' I said.

William didn't seem to care for my reply.

'I haven't come here because of where I learnt to emulate. I'm here because I beat myself up.'

'Yes I see that,' I said, aware that the conversation had acquired a critical quality.

William drummed his fingers on the pale veneered arm of the chair, his left hand moved across his jacket. I thought he might be about to get up and leave. I noticed his pale blue eyes fix on the Van Gogh.

'Why have you got that picture in here?'

'You don't think it should be here?'

'No.'

'What don't you like about it?' I asked. I felt put on the spot but tried not to be defensive.

'The picture is fine, it's rather moving, do you know the room he's painted?' I did, but I kept that to myself. 'That's his bedroom at Arles isn't it, the psychiatric hospital,' said William. 'I like the picture. I just wonder why it's here?'

Thinking how best to reply I said, 'I think it mirrors this room, in a way.' He seemed to acknowledge there was something in that and leant back, the chair reclining with him. I felt myself relax a little. 'But you don't think it should be here?' I said, interested to find out more about what he didn't like. William looked unsure of whether to say any more, but then sat up.

'Van Gogh suffered. You might like the picture, but people who suffer might not want to look at it, all the strange perspectives, it might remind them of misery.' I found myself thinking he was making a good point, but almost immediately he seemed to backtrack. 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'I don't mean to be rude.'

'I don't know if you're being rude, I think you're making a point, thinking about who you're with, what sort of therapist puts Van Gogh's room on his wall?' I realised as I said it that I wasn't sure myself. William swivelled in his chair and closed his eyes, from outside the room I heard bird song and the murmur of traffic.

'I like your shed, I'm sorry, I mean office, I feel I'm being rude again.'

'It is a kind of shed,' I said, though I was still thinking about the painting and wondered if I'd made a mistake putting it there, but it felt like we were on friendlier ground and I decided not to pursue it further for now.

'No,' said William, 'it's nicer than that, it's a very nice shed. I was thinking I'd come for a few appointments, just to see what it's like, this time works for me, could we keep this time for the next few weeks?'

I checked my diary.

'Yes,' I said, 'this time is fine.'

'How do you like to be paid?' asked William, his wallet appearing from his coat pocket. I told him I would give him a bill at the end of the month.

'That's rather trusting,' said William, 'the last person wanted cash each time.'

After William left, I remember leaning back against the desk thinking we'd only just avoided everything falling apart at the start. I wondered if that was how his previous therapies had gone and I recalled him saying that his self-critical side didn't want him coming today, it made me think of the things that got in the way of his creative ideas.

First sessions often give indications of what is to come and William had made an impression on me, the way the mood changed, warm then cold then warm again. I knew that you couldn't make people come to psychotherapy, that something in William had to hook into something in the therapy, and I felt some sympathy for him, this quick-witted man who could suddenly turn on himself, or me, with his direct questions, and I felt uneasy about the picture. Had someone come who would challenge everything about my setup? Had I put an image of suffering, self-harm, and suicide on the wall? I wondered if everyone who came thought the same? What to do? Removing it would be reactive, for better or worse it would have to stay.