

LIKE A LION watching gazelles

AFTER HER PARENTS' DIVORCE, WHEN LUCY WAS TWO-YEARS-OLD, HER MOTHER BEGAN LIVING WITH DRAGAN VUJICIN. Seven years later, her sister Sophy, aged thirteen, who had been living with their biological father, came to live with them and not long after dropped a bomb that turned Lucy's world upside down.

Lucy's story

Lucy had a happy childhood. She clearly remembers the first day she met Dragan Vujicin, her mother, Virginia's Serbian-born boyfriend. She must have been two and a half at most. Playing at the neighbours he came to her and engaged in a board game with her. What struck her was how he came down to her eye level and how his engagement with her filled her with the distinct feeling that she was the only person in the world. His gesture affirmed her and made her feel recognised and valued.

Dragan was always like that with Lucy. Present. He was caring and fun. He was also the one to pick her up from school, he watched her school plays and sports events, gave her baths and supper at night and took interest in her daily life. Her mom, Virginia, worked long hours. To outsiders this may have explained why Lucy was so close to Dragan and not to her mother. Dragan was her go-to person. Should she have had any secrets, he would have been the one to tell; it would have been unnatural to have gone to her mother. Dragan was extremely nurturing and loving; the exact kind of person a child wants to be with – fun, full of games – nothing that would make anyone go, “ooh, that looks dodgy...”

For Lucy, from day one to the day Dragan left, the relationship felt positive and loving. She never had the sense anything was wrong or terrible.

Her mother also never felt he was playing or touching Lucy inappropriately. Virginia thought the closeness between

them was a result of him always being at home and Lucy's primary caregiver.

Even the fact that Dragan had subtly introduced nudity into the home and over time made everyone very comfortable with walking around in various stages of undress did not raise any eyebrows.

Grooming

While other people may have frowned on Lucy and Dragan's closeness her mother was groomed to believe it was normal. Unbeknownst to her and Lucy, Dragan also orchestrated distance between mother and daughter, making himself the preferred parent. When Sophy, Lucy's sister came to live with them she had not been normalised to the situation she found in her mother's house. And she, unlike Lucy, had not been groomed from the age of two to view naked contact – let alone sexual contact - as normal.

As a young girl in puberty, Sophy would eventually speak out about the sexual contact she was experiencing. This disclosure brought Lucy's experiences to the light as well. Other than banishing Dragan from their lives, the family never spoke about what had transpired. It was thirty years later when Lucy learned Dragan was accused of having raped four underage girls in Swakopmund. She decided to make her own statement in solidarity with those girls. She also decided to meet with him and film a documentary that would delve into the mindset and the grooming process the paedophile nurtures, and how he preys on and selects his targets. The

documentary would appropriately be titled, “Dragan's Lair”.

In the documentary Sophy questions Lucy whether she felt groomed by Dragan. Emotional, Lucy exclaims, “He was attentive, he was caring, he was loving. He knew I never experienced that. Yes! He groomed me.” The picture Sophy sketches is that their mother worked day and night and was not available to her and Dragan knew she was hungry for love.

Dr Marcel Londt (Head of Department of Social Work at the University of the Western Cape), explains, “paedophiles don't only go for the child. Paedophiles and sexual offenders are adept at spotting psycho-social vulnerabilities. They may select a vulnerable adult. So initially that person becomes the gateway to the child.” Having lived in Serbia (former Yugoslavia), Germany, South Africa and Namibia, Dragan has generally lived in communities where children are predominantly unsupervised. And in the film he admits, “[I am] like a lion watching gazelles and deciding which one to go for”.

In his interview with Lucy, Dragan affirms he chose to be with her mother in order to be close to her (Lucy).

Dr Londt explains that the paedophile also grooms the other adult in the relationship so that they are grateful for the paedophile in their life and grateful the child has such a good relationship. Lucy concurs that Dragan taught her mother to be blind to their intimate world, and their closest friends and family were also none the wiser. Normalising



nakedness in the house was part of the grooming so that touching each other's naked bodies did not feel dirty or foreboding to the young Lucy – for Lucy had often run to Dragan in her underwear when he would pick her up and wrestle with her or give her a rub down – in front of other adults – and nobody frowned on that.

Furthermore, as Dr Londt explains, the paedophile works at keeping the child believing their relationship is special, consensual and mutual; that there's nothing going on in that relationship that the child does not want and that they both desire the same outcomes. But this relationship is ultimately steeped in deception and manipulation.

Dr Londt points out that grooming was initially understood to be recruitment, getting the child to comply and to maintain secrecy. But today, she argues, people know better. Grooming includes removing credibility of any accusations and presenting itself in a certain positive light. Dr Londt holds, "Grooming often starts with grooming the child's community, the child's caregiving support system, before the child is exposed to active aggressive grooming... The paedophile puts a lot of effort into maintaining a sense of normality." Grooming is a sophisticated process of subtleties and nuances that blurs the lines and it is for this reason Lucy can honestly claim that she does not recall Dragan ever having asked her to keep that part of their relationship secret.

In the final analysis: Lucy had a number of goals with the documentary of which I will mention four only.

1. She advocates that people must change the language concerning paedophilia so people who are sexually attracted to children will come out and talk about it in order to seek help. It is estimated that more people have the tendency to be sexually attracted to children than can be imagined. But most do not act on it and perpetrate. The fear of stigma – as portrayed by the language used and the judgement around paedophiles – is so deep that these people seldom seek help.

Lucy likens the language around paedophiles to the language and stigma

that branded people with HIV in the 80's and 90's. Yet, the stigma for the HIV positive person was removed through educating society through research to establish the facts. With facts people were able to make changes and dispel fears. And now, society is able to support and help the very same people it branded and shamed.

2. Lucy and Dr Londt argue that the child experiences the abuser as a loving, caring, attentive individual.

When the sexual contact becomes known and the outside world screams they will make the paedophile pay and jail him it is all very frightening to the child. Society's response and the fact that Lucy could not speak about it, brought confusion and intense shame. She shares, "I very quickly discovered that what I had experienced was apparently so shocking that I must not talk about it. When I did try to open that door, it was not well received. And so followed the years of silence. How could I admit that actually, it hadn't been all bad. I had actually had a happy childhood – how could that be?"

Lucy advocates a facilitated separation from the perpetrator because the child has questions. For her the separation felt like the most damaging part of the experience. It was a cold, hard break. No conversation. No goodbyes. No explanations. He was the only father she knew and she had absolutely no concept that there were elements of the way he parented her that were wrong – until society's response and years later when she actively started working through the past. Lucy therefore asks for a "pause moment" where people don't just react, but get help in and facilitate the process of separation between the child and perpetrator.

3. Although presenting an objective perspective, serious damage followed from her relationship with Dragan.

The emotional turmoil of whether she was genuinely loved or only used for Dragan's sexual gratification tore her up. And while he never penetrated her with his penis, the mutual sexual engagement resulted in her not having any sexual boundaries as sex was just something you did. This had the effect

of her feeling she had no value in herself and allowed herself to be mistreated, disrespected and abused in other relationships. Substance abuse with the intention to lose consciousness started with drinking and sniffing tip-ex thinners or anything that made her pass out. Into her 20's the drugs became more intense. Such a relationship, despite its positive aspects, is undeniably deeply damaging.

4. The most important lesson to be learned from Lucy's experience, reiterated by her, Dr Londt, Sophy and Dragan, is: Parents, love your children and be involved in their lives.

Both Sophy and Lucy make clear at different points in the film that there was a detachment between them and their mother. So whilst paedophiles cannot be spotted, they identify their targets based on that disconnection between children and their caregivers or the obvious hunger for affection a child may display.

Dragan says children send messages to their parents, but the parents do not decode those messages because they are not involved. Dr Londt argues, while the paedophile will sometimes create the circumstances to be able to abuse, it is more often that the paedophile selects the child by observing that the child is not getting what they need. She adds the disclaimer, "It is not saying that any child that has been at the hands of a paedophile had negligent parents. But what [she is] saying is that parents can't ever be vigilant enough. So the best way you can protect your child is by having that open communication and closeness with your child. And why? Because the paedophile won't target them if they know the child is close to their parent or caregivers since they then run the risk of being caught out."

In addition, as a mother of two, Lucy tries at all costs to avoid situations where her children would be unable to protect themselves or where their self-perception may get damaged.

Parents are thus ultimately urged to protect their children by loving them and being involved in their lives. ♀