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'I was lying there, staring at the wall, thinking, Oh God, this is it'

● Being the victim of abuse by 'one of your best friends' can be the hardest to call out

Sarah was 16 and in transition year when she became the victim of sexual violence perpetrated by a boy she regarded as one of her best friends.

He was 17, a year ahead of her at school, the cool guy everyone in their group looked up to.

They were a bunch of regular teenagers who grew up together on a housing estate in Maynooth, Co Kildare.

"We had a group of friends, boys and girls. We would've been really close from the age of about 12. We were all at school together. And we all kind of lived around each other, in the estates that were beside each other," Sarah said. "We would've been really close, all of us. And then Joe... I was probably closest with him in the group."

Joe was "a very cool lad in school".

"Everyone loved him, and he would get away with a lot. As I said, we were best friends. I knew him inside and out," Sarah said. She and Joe had slept together once. It was consensual, but it was not something she wanted to repeat.

"He did have a girlfriend at the time, and then we kind of both felt bad."

She had not seen him for a while when, one day in March 2018, Joe asked her if she wanted to meet later for a cigarette, which they sometimes did. She texted him back. "I said, 'OK, but no funny business. That's not happening again!'"

He agreed. But when they settled in to watch a movie in his room that evening, he started coming on to her. She told him to stop. He did not. A court later heard evidence of how

he persistently tried to kiss her, put his hands down her underwear, despite the fact that she repeatedly asked him to stop. But he continued.

"I was in shock. I remember just lying there, and while it was happening I was like, 'Oh my God, this is it,'" Sarah said.

"I had said 'no' multiple times and then I just kind of stopped saying no."

He stopped when his mother came upstairs to tell Sarah it was time to go home.

Joe offered to walk Sarah home, but they did not speak.

He later sent her a SnapChat message, acknowledging what he had done and saying sorry.

In her state of shock, she replied that it was "fine".

At the time, she felt she "couldn't make a massive deal" of it because they were "best friends" and she didn't want to fall out.

But the following morning, she sent him another, to the effect that she never wanted to see him again.

Sarah's life changed dramatically over the following months.

She had nothing more to do with Joe. She began to detest school because she could not avoid seeing him there. She withdrew from their friend group.

She was drinking, getting "absolutely so drunk every time I went out and just crying all night and I just couldn't deal with it".

She was in crisis, but could not face telling anyone as she was worried about losing friends, not being believed, being blamed.

"I didn't know how to think about it. Because I had slept with him before, I felt like I couldn't say anything," she said.

"I found it hard to get out of bed. It was really, really affecting me. And I don't think I knew how bad it was affecting me at the time. It's only when I look back, I'm just like, 'Oh, God, I kept that in for so long.'" Sarah got through school to the

summer holidays. She confided in a friend after drinking too much at her TY ball, but as a secret not to be divulged.

She eventually confided in her mother in June that year after a drink-induced meltdown. Her mother later told her she knew there was something wrong.

From that point, everything changed. Sarah attended the Rape Crisis Centre as a victim of sexual assault. She began a lengthy period of counselling at the Alders Unit, which provides specialist services to children aged three to 18 who have been abused.

Sarah also reported the attack to An Garda Síochána. Her school supported her when she returned after the summer holidays.

By then, word had got out. Sarah felt isolated, cut off from the group and belittled.

"Certain people knew. I would be laughed at, called a slut, called a liar," she said.

The group still congregated on the green close to her house.

"I used to get my mam to leave the house with me, or my brothers, I didn't want to leave by myself," she said.

Joe McCabe pleaded guilty in December last year to sexually assaulting Sarah on the night of March 31, 2018.

His conviction was a vindication and a relief for Sarah, but she has little positive to say about the



Joe McCabe

"We had sex before – so I didn't feel I could say anything"

justice system. She endured a long wait for the case to come to trial. In that time, she felt adrift and unable to move on. She missed school. She went to college but dropped out.

She found the legal process "dehumanising".

Parts of her victim impact statement, which she regarded as her chance to be heard, were excised for legal reasons.

"I had to read off a piece of paper that was crossed with a pen," she said.

In it, she spoke of hating herself after McCabe's assault.

"I felt my body had been corrupted and soiled by someone I trusted," she said.

While she had gone through "years of stress and trauma", it seemed to her that McCabe has carried on living his life as if nothing happened.

(McCabe's barrister said this was not the case – his client had made an attempt on his life, had moved schools and said he wished to apologise for what happened.)

Sentencing McCabe, Judge Karen O'Connor said Sarah's life changed "catastrophically" because of the sexual assault. Her education had suffered and the impact on her was "significant and ongoing", she said.

But as McCabe was 17 when he committed the crime, he had to be sentenced as a minor. He left court that day with an 18-month-suspended sentence.

What happened to Sarah reflects a worrying trend, not just in Ireland but internationally, and that is a marked increase in cases of teenage boys and young men sexually abusing young women in their social groups, girls they know and hang out with. Sarah's story is almost a textbook case.

Now 22, she is coming out the other side of a life-changing trauma.

She told her story, using the pseudonym Sarah, with clarity and confidence earlier this month, in a suite in the Alders Unit at **Children's Health Ireland in Tallaght**.

She hopes her experience will resonate with teenage girls and young women who have been violated but feel unable to disclose it.

As someone who is familiar with the chilling effect of peer pressure, she knows how difficult it can be to go against the group.

She described feeling alone and "being bullied for something that wasn't my fault".

But her message is this: "Talk to someone that you trust. If I could change anything, it would definitely be to tell someone sooner."

Sarah does not regret speaking up, saying: "And I am proud of what I did. Even, as much as I missed school and everything like that, I still tried college, I still went. And I feel like I am doing quite well."

Now she is working, she has new friends as well as one or two old ones who supported her.

"This is always going to be a part of me, but it's not all me. It's not going to define me," she said.

MAEVE SHEEHAN



Aideen Walsh, co-ordinator of the Paediatric Forensic Medical Clinic, CHI Tallaght. Picture by Steve Humphreys