

Bertrand Ossé

Still a
Victim

A Story
of children
at the Cathedral
of Toulouse
France
in the 20th century

Toulouse
2019



To my family

my children,
my wife,
my parents,
my brother and sisters,
my aunts and uncles,
my in-laws,
etc.

To my comrades and friends

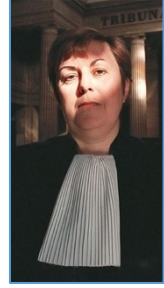
those who have chosen to leave us,
those who failed to do so,
those who didn't feel the need,
those who still support me,
the ones who held the mouse for me,
those who have reread this book,
etc.

*This book was first issued in French in May 2019
and provoked written threats and insults from two priests
& one lawyer. No complaint was ever made.
Everything is true or reported in good faith.
Translation completed in May 2020, Ascension Thursday.*

Preface

« You're not depressed!
You're not a victim!
It's a defense strategy! »

Brigitte Lanfranchi, March 31st, 2007.



This is the response of the Vice-Prosecutor at my trial, someone apparently responsible for a children's defense association, to what I said for the first time in 25 years. At the age of 34, I chose this moment (did I really have a choice?) for my trial in public — because, exceptionally, it is not held *in camera* — with my mother and wife behind me, far behind me, to tell what was done to me when I was a child at the boys' choir of the cathedral. In short, “laid bare” again. But the so-called child abuse specialist doesn't recognize the one she has in front of her, because he has become an adult.

I have been testifying for over ten years without being read or heard. These first lines were written in 2016. It is in February 2019, thanks to the opening

of an unprecedented meeting on the protection of minors in the Church, convened in the Vatican by Pope Francis, that I have to write and bring to completion this work that is so laden with filth.

Then many of my fellow citizens, Christian brothers, neighbors, will be fiercely against this “*Liberated Word*” (*La Parole libérée*), as my colleagues in Lyon call it. Are not 36 years of suffering enough for one to have the right to break this law of silence, the very law that crushes you with the hammers of justice and morality?

Then the writing will be painful and will have to be done in a continuous line, almost in a continuous flow of memories, interspersed with necessary pauses, such as the one I have just taken after only three paragraphs... But in retreat in my Pyrenees and that of my forefathers, which has become indispensable after so much exhaustion, I will find the strength and the time for this salutary completion, which will perhaps even have the virtue of giving me back, if not a place in society, at least honest work. (*Edit. — i.e. note after rereading: It did!*) End of the letter of motivation: Yours faithfully, dear public, my greetings *etc.* (I go out in the sun again.)



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Chapter I – Harassment

Christmas 1981 or 1982. I'm 8 or 9 and a half years old. In the picture, I'm sitting at the piano, next to the Christmas tree that is put up every year at “la Mané” (pronounce *Ma-ney*). I have at most 2 years of piano at the Conservatory behind me, what I play is certainly rubbish, but “the Abbot” is there, next to me, and he insisted that I show my talents in front of all these people that I've barely known for 2 months or 1 year, these new comrades, in singing more than in religion.

There, not knowing where to start, I took the first image that came to mind. Why am I here? because I was first in music theory and singing at the Conservatory (but last in piano: a class I'll repeat twice before being expelled at the end of 5th grade before secondary school) and so cute: my picture will be used on posters and programs. (As I write these lines, I am told the following anecdote: a former nanny, left without children, remembers me like this : “*Ah! Bertrand was adorable, with the head of a cherub!*”) Why the Conservatory? Mum and Dad had noticed that I was “*a good student who*

was ahead of his year” and that I enjoyed singing. I remember why I accepted: the timetable of the Alexandre Fourtanier primary school would be adjusted from the 2nd grade onwards, and I'd have to give up the Wednesday swimming pool sessions that I'd had for a year in 1st grade. I hated the pool, it was a door of salvation!

This is one of the sources of the harassment, which I only recently understood. For that, let's go back as far as 4 years old. First of all I was discovered to have a **first infirmity**. My health record bears the date of February 22, 1978, I am not yet 5 years old: Prof. J. Claux notes in Ranguueil Hospital that I am deaf in my left ear, which is still to this day an invisible handicap.

A few months later, the Headmistress of the Fourtanier kindergarten refused to let me skip the last year of kindergarten. The consequence will be lasting during my schooling: I will be identified as the first in the class until high school and the classmates will be ruthless: I will be “**the nerd**”, one of the first symptoms of their jealousy. And even afterwards: in the mouth of the Prosecutor and my neighbor-aggressor, “*You're intelligent, aren't you?*” is not to be taken as a compliment. **Harassment — Act I**, jealousy.

Kindergarten is also the age when **puns** start: “*Ollé bull! Whole lay! Hole hey! Ollé olé!*” etc. I would like to thank Raymond Devos (sort of George Carlin) for teaching me to magnify the puns, because starting school was not easy. **Harassment – Act II**, childish.

But you get used to it, and it's not a big deal. The most terrible thing was the relationship to my body. It so happened that we spent every summer on the beach in the Mediterranean, and for my misfortune, I was so made that, shirtless, my ribs were seen. I was “**the skeleton**” for my playmates on the beach and at Mickey Club. As I was afraid of the water (it took me many years to learn how to swim), I was not going to be happy to show off on the sand. **Harassment – Act III**, childish. Yet there was already a ray of human sunshine in this social jungle: reacting to my puns and jokes, no doubt very frequent, inherited from the family in probable response to the quodlibets about our name, an African animator of the Club called me: “joker!” rolling the r and with a big smile, giving me a positive counterpart to the “nerd”.

Thus, I lived each September as a relief, because I could get dressed before moving among my

comrades, relieved of this handicap of the image of a skinny body. But in 1st grade: kerplunk! *L'Education nationale* imposed a weekly swimming pool session, and what was only an **annual summer harassment**, increased in frequency to **once a week...** That's why I fled this place of torture to take refuge in the Conservatory. As I was very bored in the 1st grade, where the teacher wouldn't let me come to the board, just like Bích Vân, the other “nerd”, in order to allow others to give the right answers too, I devoured the music (and made a second profession of it!).

That's how I experienced two (school) years of relative calm, with a first reconnaissance and a little revenge at the beach. The Mickey Club organized various contests of skill, sports, shows, disguises, *etc.* (photo below: as a fakir at 7 years old, in 1980)

I was enrolled in the musical show, and I was disguised as a peasant girl, with a colourful dress, to sing what I learned at the Conservatory: a traditional melody.



Apparently, nothing extraordinary or very sexy. Especially as I'm following a girl much older than me, a teenager dressed as Alain Bashung and singing in playback *Vertigo of love* (the hit of 1981), a fake cigarette in her mouth. So is it the *a capella* performance of the transvestite 8-year-old kid, or rather the comic pirouette I improvise at the end by falling grotesquely, that earns me victory?

Unfortunately in 1982, I jumped out of the **frying pan** into the **fire**. My music theory and singing teacher, Louis Massot, having noticed me, my parents sent me to sing in the best children's choir of the time: *Les Petits Chanteurs à la Croix Potencée, Maîtrise de la Cathédrale Saint-Etienne de Toulouse*. I went there with my cousin Mark*, who was a little older than me.

But *La Mané*, as it was called (for *manécanterie*, “singing in the morning”) had *her* codes, *her* hazing. There's what they used to tell you openly: “*Anyway, you gonna be hazed on the first trip, you'll get 'laid bear'.*” *Huh?* You need to understand “laid bare”: we catch the boy (the group is not mixed) and we

* The asterisk marks an altered first name.

strip him naked, preferably in a public place. Oh! I've got a year to get used to the idea: it's still the time when there are enough candidates, so I'll be an “aspirant” before becoming a “permanent” and being able to go on tour, in France or abroad.

I've often been asked why I didn't say anything. People didn't ask us children to say anything. What's more: we were asked to keep our mouths shut, and a smartass would get a smack. A kind of sacrificed generation: as children, we had a tough time (others worse...) and as adults, we had to pay for the mistakes of the past, those of our own executioners... Yet Emmanuel's mother shouted as much as she could (in the appendix), alerting priests and two archbishops... As they wouldn't listen to an adult, why would they listen to me? Only my voice interested them and as a soloist, not only my voice...

I remember one rehearsal day when I was playing football in the courtyard with the others. An unintentionally displaced pebble hit the rocker panel of Vincent's car — he was a bass in the choir, in his thirties (the ensemble is made up of children whose voices haven't broken yet, generally pre-pubescent, soprano and alto, and children and adults whose

voices had broken, generally pubescent therefore, tenor and bass). Furious, he dislocated my jaw with a masterful slap, having taken a run-up. I remember perfectly my reply: *“You won't get away with it in Paradise!”* As if I already had the notion of divine justice: he died before he was old.

So here we are. First trip. I'm the youngest in the band, and unlike my cousin, I don't have any friends from my school in the band. We're in Murcia, Spain. No matter how much warning, being on the lookout, when three or four boys older than you catch you, hold you and undress you in a public square, there's not much you can do, apart from holding your trousers, struggling, protesting, *etc.* **Assault #1.** But after all, it's not death! It's still just pants down and a pecker in the air, that's all. Besides, to sweeten the pill, I was told: *“Can you imagine? if you'd arrived a few years before, they'd have given you a ‘takémané’.”* Huh? again... There, it's all *La Mané* attacking you, hitting you. It's the violent version of being laid bare, but it's fallen into disuse. Not content with getting naked, you're completely beaten up. Or you were thrown into the nettles! like Didier Addot (not “the Abbot”), who could testify to this. You could also be tied to a tree, with a firecracker placed between the rope and your

chest. Which of course we would blow up! You could ask Dominique — or Didier, and Dominique for the nettles... I'm not sure anymore, but it really scared the hell out of you! **Harassment – Act IV**, teenagers' hazing. The beginning of a (too) long chapter.

You'll tell me that my being laid bare wasn't even complete. In fact, it was interrupted by the arrival of the choirmaster. If that did indeed stop the merry-go-round, there was no explanation, no reprimand, no punishment. That was the way things were. That was the custom in the Society. I am capitalizing this word because we had a figure of Justice with us. A mother accompanied us (we were told of the need for a maternal presence in this male group) and she supervised us. Several of her children were part of the group, including one of my age, and for more than 10 years. She was an assessor at the juvenile court. For us, for me at 10, Marie-Claire Chansou was a judge.

“Amen, I say to you: as much as you have done to one of these my little brothers, you have done that to me.” (Mt 25:40)

The following anecdote comes back to me, which I have never explained to myself. I'm 10 years old, it's my birthday — so I should be happy. I'm at my grandparents' and I come across a magazine advertisement for a colorful ring that would reflect one's mood. I choose to say: “*I'm depressed!*” — to my mother's amazement.

When I started secondary school at the age of eleven in 1984, I used my high-pitched soprano voice in the courtyard and shouted “*Nip!*” on the highest possible note. Since none of my friends could reach this note, I became “*Papa Nip*” and the others the “*Young Nips*” (but without the red cap of Papa Smurf). It's the era of arcade games, where you could sign your best scores on three letters (the Americans having three initials): I sign N. I. P. on *Pac-Man*, *Space Invaders*, *Elevator*, *Asteroid*, *Shinobi*, *N. A. R. C.*, pinball machines, *etc.* (or at least those that allow it) on these machines near the school or in the St. Georges shopping center.

Edit.: And as four misfortunes never come alone, a fifth is needed: my choirmaster notices, during the Christmas candlelit concert at the Abbey of Solignac (in 1984, I am 11 years old) that I squint to look at

him. I am myopic, I have to wear glasses. I will be “four-eyes”. A word that the spellchecker marks in red. **Harassment** – Act V, childish.



St. Anne Yard by the Cathedral ~ May 10, 1986

I'm going to Etienne*, in the center. He committed suicide.



Chapter II – Pedophilia

This sexualized hazing, which is barely concealed and which is prevented without punishment, is only the logical extension of a sexualized atmosphere that was clearly visible, even assumed, in the early 1980s.

Sexual swear words were commonplace, ordinary smutty jokes and permanent sexual innuendoes, sometimes accompanied by suggestive gestures. First of all, 13 years after 1968, the brutal sexual liberation was still producing its effects (*Edit.*: 22 years after the “Blue and Pink Ballets”, 74 years after Apollinaire, see below). Then, in 1974, President Giscard had lowered the age of majority from 21 to 18 years of age. Finally, President Mitterrand had just officially decriminalized homosexuality in 1981. As a result, the sexual intercourse of an 18-year-old boy with a mature man, who was called a “*pédé*” (faggot in French), was no longer prohibited. So much so that for us children, the word “pedophilia” was unknown, and “*pédé*” was synonymous with homosexual. And it became commonplace by the force of law.