

# FLAGRANTLY ANOREXIC

A MEMOIR  
AND  
CALL TO ACTION

---

*Lisa Nasseff*

Flagrantly Anorexic: A Memoir and Call to Action

Copyright © 2019 by Lisa Nasseff

All rights reserved. Neither this book, nor any parts within it may be sold or reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems without permission in writing from the author. The only exception is by a reviewer, who may quote short excerpts in a review.

[www.lisanasseff.com](http://www.lisanasseff.com)

ISBN (hardcover): 9781642377750

ISBN (paperback): 9781642377767

eISBN: 9781642377774

*To my Father, who had unmatched faith in me and my recovery. To the memory of my Mother, whose courage and grace I aspire to. To my Brother, a hero, who cheered me on and on and on.*

In Loving Memory of

KATHLEEN ANN

Born

Wednesday, December 31, 1947

Entered into Eternal Life

Saturday, July 2, 2011

Age – 63 Years

# Contents

---

## Prologue viii

### Part One

#### Mirror, Mirror on the Wall

One: Think Happier Thoughts.....	3
Two: Flagrantly Anorexic .....	25
Three: Glory Road .....	35

### Part Two

#### I Didn't Choose This

Four: Love on the Rocks.....	47
Five: Enveloped in Madness.....	59
Six: Into the Abyss .....	77

### **Part Three**

#### Not a Lost Cause

Seven: Done Too Soon.....	89
Eight: A Righteous Anger.....	99
Nine: Pretty Amazing Grace.....	111

### **Part Four**

#### A Call to Action

Ten: Hypnosis, Hoaxes, and Hysteria .....	119
Eleven: We Need a Mental Health System .....	137
Twelve: I'm On My Way, Hell Yeah.....	161
<b>Epilogue: Forever in Blue Jeans.....</b>	<b>175</b>
<b>Acknowledgments.....</b>	<b>179</b>
<b>Sources.....</b>	<b>181</b>

# Prologue

---

**M**y purpose in writing this book is to save lives. I nearly lost mine several times to the demon of anorexia, a scourge that has tormented me for more than thirty years, since the age of ten. I have survived several suicide attempts due to my illness, and I thank my higher power that I am still here to tell you this tale.

For most of my life I have been misunderstood, ridiculed, treated with contempt, and shamed for my eating disorder. I was told by medical professionals that my anorexia was “attention seeking,” something I could willfully “control.” I was lectured over and over by doctors that my illness was a “choice,” an immature indulgence, a condition I could simply “give up,” if only I had the character and strength to do so.

At 16 I was committed by court order into a psych ward, accused by the judge of being “flagrantly anorexic.” As an adult I suffered the mental torture of being “treated” in an eating disorders clinic, where I was subjected to phony hypnosis therapy

that claimed my illness stemmed from childhood sexual abuse and my participation in a satanic cult. Throughout this nightmare I was failed by a negligent insurance “industry” that sanctioned the lunacy of a dysfunctional “mental health system” staffed by incompetent treatment “professionals” who understood neither the complexities of anorexia nor humane and effective ways to treat it.

Despite great fear and trepidation, I decided to write this book so that others battling eating disorders will never be subjected to the nightmares I endured. Doing so was a terribly daunting task. Many times I had to put the book aside, overwhelmed by intolerable memories of the past. Many days I could not face the page, unable to confront my demons. Numerous times I abandoned this book once and for all, certain I would never return to again. But I persevered, convinced that the struggle would be worth the pain if even one person could be helped by this account.

*Flagrantly Anorexic* is both a memoir and a call to action. It recounts in detail my struggle with anorexia, but in the end it isn't a book about me. It's about the 30 million Americans affected by eating disorders. It's about the inadequate treatment the vast majority of these victims receive. It's about what we need to

do to create a mental health system that treats eating disorders with proven, evidence-based treatments rather than with hucksterism and witchcraft. And I say “create” a mental health system rather than “reform,” because in my experience we don’t have a mental health system. We have to start from scratch by repairing a fragmented approach to providing quality healthcare.

Every 62 minutes at least one person in the U.S. dies from an eating disorder. Nearly half of all Americans know someone with one. Anorexia is not a “condition” and absolutely not a choice—it’s a mental illness. Yet research into these illnesses is drastically low. While eating disorders are more prevalent than breast cancer, HIV, and schizophrenia, we spend 300 times more research dollars on those illnesses. U.S. federal funding for eating disorders is \$28 million a year, which comes to less than one dollar per person diagnosed with this condition.

I want this book to light a fire under lawmakers. Our Congress and all elected officials work for us—for all Americans. Never forget that. This is a crisis that can’t be ignored. We need a mental health system now! We need enforcement of laws and valid accountability now! We need vigilant oversight and

evidence-based care now! We need a revolution in how we treat all mental illnesses.

After more than thirty years in hell, I've come to accept me as I am. No longer embarrassed and ashamed by the hand that was dealt to me, I have discovered a freedom that I never knew before. I have found my voice and I am using it to ask you, the reader, to join with me and help fight this crusade. We need to use all our voices. Together.

I know there is hope. If you have been a casualty too, please don't give up. I never did. No one is a lost cause—no one. Let's fight for the treatment and dignity we deserve.

I hope you can hear me.

Lisa Nasseff  
Sept. 1, 2019

# **Part One**

---

**Mirror, Mirror on the Wall**

## Chapter One

# Think Happier Thoughts

---

**M**y heart was pounding through my chest and my legs were cramping up. Couldn't stand—if I had tried, I would have faded to black. So sick I had to crawl like an animal from the bathroom to my bedroom, where I could only sit on the floor. No energy to climb on the bed. Mom sat with me, her arm draped around my shoulders.

The sound of the sirens rising higher and higher. Louder and louder. Closer and closer. I couldn't breathe. Was I beyond the point of no return?

The bright lights inside the ambulance were blinding as I lay on my back and they fired question after question at me. "What were you thinking?" they demanded with contempt. "Why would you do this?"

I hadn't committed a felony; I simply took too many laxatives. And now I was making my first trip to the emergency room for anorexia, at age 13.

Suddenly they were scrambling around inside the ambulance. My heart was misfiring and my blood

pressure was terribly low. The sirens echoed inside my brain. I cried *please stop, don't make me fat* as they poured liquids through my veins and gave me a huge shot of something. They babbled in a language I didn't understand, never looking me in the face.

"How many calories does this stuff have?" I demanded.

My pleas were ignored. Lying there terrified with the wires, the beeping, and the anger that permeated every bit of space. My panic left unnoticed as I feared for my life.

We arrived. Glaring bright lights pierced my brain. The corridor filled with white light. Doctors, nurses, and staff crisscrossing everywhere in this cold maze. Every corner and corridor looked the same. Gray floors and white walls.

*What have I done? What is happening? Why such anger directed at me?*

The inflatable balloon pants were next, squeezing my legs oh so tight to increase my blood pressure.

*Would someone talk to me please? I'm right here!*

The doctor stormed in, shouting. "We have people who need to be treated because they're sick! Not because *they make themselves sick!*"

Explaining nothing about the wires, the pants,

and what were they putting inside my body—I was supposed to be in charge of that! After an eternity, a nurse came in to check the machines. Not a look or a word. The doctor arrived again, still furious. Why was I wasting their time?

*“You don’t look like you have an eating disorder. These attention seeking antics could be fatal! I hope you learned a lesson!”*

The tears came on and I thought they would never stop. An attention seeking gimmick? I wanted to disappear—all the time. I felt disgust for my body, along with shame and guilt. I hid in oversized clothes, pushed people away, and rarely left the house.

I was repulsive and unlovable. I would never admit to hunger because I was ferociously afraid of food, afraid that I would lose control and eat everything in sight. This fear inhabited my every thought.

**I** was held for 72 hours, rehydrated, and sent home, where the cycle started all over again.

Our family dinners had become a war zone. My parents’ rules were that I had to sit at the table until I finished my plate. I had until 8 p.m. to do so.

I considered this punitive, but they must have thought setting a deadline was the only way to help me. Sometimes I sat there for almost two hours after they had already left the table, silent and defiant, roiled by anger and resentment, while they did their post-dinner chores around me. Sometimes as she passed by mom would say to me, “Lisa, why are you doing this?”

I stared at my plate—a large white plate with peas scattered about. With my knife I tried to herd them into close proximity, but they rolled in different directions, intent on ignoring my wishes. I couldn’t bear to eat a single one. The idea repulsed me, made me nauseous from fear, not lack of hunger. I tried once again to herd them into a group; once again they defied me. I glanced at the clock. I could wait it out until 8 p.m. My only thought was to defy my hunger, or to chew my food and spit it into my napkin until the deadline passed and I was free.

But I was never free.

*Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the thinnest of them all?* Mirrors didn’t lie. I scrutinized myself in them, made disparaging comments about my body, compared my shape and size to those of others. A person with anorexia can look in the mirror and see a reflection that is greater than her actual size. I never

would have believed this if I had not experienced it firsthand, over and over again. A friend of mine once had me try on her jeans, as I was sure I was bigger than she was. They fell to the floor. I was confused, shocked. But the mirror didn't lie.

It wasn't that I didn't like food. I was terrified of it. Terrified of liking it. Terrified of hunger. Terrified of losing control and gaining weight.

I would intentionally eat things I couldn't stomach, food I didn't like. Soup right out of the can, as punishment for my hunger. Eating rituals soothed my discomfort and uncertainty, offering the illusion of stability, reliability, and control. My rules were many, rigid, and unforgiving.

One of them was to eat only one thing at a time. Foods couldn't be mixed. On Thanksgiving I had to eat the stuffing first before I ate turkey or mashed potatoes. Had to eat at the same time every day, organizing everything around that time. Soon I couldn't eat in public and eventually not in the presence of anyone, not even my family.

By age 13 I had experienced nearly every symptom of anorexia. Amenorrhea, or lack of menstruation. I don't think I ever had a regular flow. Elevated liver enzymes. Dizziness and fainting. Hair loss, which

was devastating. Dry skin. Intolerance of cold—all the time. Irregular heart rhythms with very low blood pressure. Dehydration over and over again. But my rules never wavered.

Yes, I was a lost cause, losing control over the very thing I was trying so frantically to control. Relentless fear and self-loathing with no relief in sight. My boat wandering adrift with no energy to row, no verve to fight this fight. In grave danger, sinking fast and furiously, with too much weight to carry. I was not equipped for white water rafting, nor was my boat. Could I throw this baggage overboard? Alone? Not a chance.

My eating disorder spoke another language. I was unable to receive compliments. When someone said “You’re looking good” or “You look healthy,” that meant I was fat. “What did you do today?” was an accusation that I was lazy or just a waste of skin. People were dishonest when they said I was too thin; I was certain I was not. I became suspicious, losing all trust. With my self-hatred running so deep, every intention and word meant failure.

*“Just deal with it—eat.”*

*“Lisa, everyone feels this way sometimes.”*

*“We’ve all been there.”*

*“Maybe try thinking happier thoughts.”*

Everyone feels this way? Just think happier thoughts?

If only they could be in my shoes and hear these words.

**M**y first day of kindergarten. Mom fixed my wild hair into big smooth curls, and we put on my new red dress with navy blue embroidery down the front. White tights and patent leather shoes. I was ready for class pictures as we packed up to go, excited but also nervous that my classmates wouldn't like me. Always a very anxious child, always feeling the sadness of others as deeply as my own. So sensitive that even as a young child I couldn't watch the news. The many tragedies left me devastated.

And sensitive to people's bodies. I was only three when I told my mom she had a fat butt, but not to worry because it was “only in the back.” My cousin later told me that I would point out people who were “really big” when I was at the library or shopping, which really embarrassed mom. I have no idea where that came from.

The wind tossed my curls as we drove the few blocks to Catholic school. The leaves were changing to brilliant reds and oranges. Mom had over-prepared me for anything I could encounter—Kleenex, Band-Aids, pencils, a sharpener, little erasers in the shapes of animals. Things I didn't even need, but she thought of everything.

My mom was born to be a mom. Our friends called her June Cleaver, the principle character in the American television sitcom *Leave It to Beaver*. June and her husband Ward were the archetypal suburban parents of the 1950s.

We were everything to her, me and my little brother Mike. Her birthday parties were the talk of the town. Always a new birthday dress for me. She invited friends and foes alike, and everyone came because they knew Mrs. Nasseff put on a great show—gift bags, great food, fun games, and the Master of Ceremonies took charge of it all. She was a marvelous cook and baker, famous at school bake sales for her cookies on a stick. She was good and pure and had love for everyone who crossed her path. Yes, we got on each other's nerves, but that was mostly me. Me and my ED.

From a very early age I craved perfection. To be

the absolute best. I failed if I couldn't achieve my self-imposed goals. Getting a B on a test filled me with shame and self-hate.

I started dancing when I was four, dreaming of those graceful ballerinas floating across the stage with seeming ease. Mom was a master at making my costumes, the tutus and the blue leotard.

And, of course, tap and jazz too. I loved tap dancing! I felt free—the rhythm you could create while the mistakes went unnoticed. Jazz was a little too embarrassing for me, too dramatic. It left me feeling exposed. Ballet was very disciplined, nothing like I had imagined, requiring meticulous control over my body's movements. But I loved the ballet bar and the mirror that traced my every move, never imagining the mirror would turn on me with dreadful effects.

I remember dancing for the governor with my fur coat and a hat that was so much bigger than I was, Vegas style. Balancing the monstrosity on my head, afraid I would fail. Embarrassing everyone who knew me.

My Catholic school uniform was a green plaid dress with patent leather shoes; they made us kneel to make sure our skirts reached the floor. And, oh my goodness, our priest was larger than life and the most

petrifying man I had met thus far. His voice booming as he walked down the aisle of the church. We attended Mass every Sunday and I learned to fear God and sin and hell. I always mouthed the singing as my voice was abysmal, which the Father confirmed, shouting, “Let’s hear it—He gave it to you, now you can give it right back.” He reminded me of Darth Vader, shaking his head with disappointment as he looked down at me. If I could have done so without upsetting God, I would have crawled under the pew.

It wasn’t until fourth grade that I became a “social butterfly.” I wanted everyone to like me, craving popularity so badly that I was awful to a few classmates. That’s not how I was raised; everything we were taught was black and white. But I forgot—was teasing other kids a mortal or a venial sin? Guilt and shame when confronted by my mother. I made it worse by lying, more evidence that I was a sinner. Appalled and humiliated. All I wanted was to be liked, but more seeds of self-hatred had been planted.

It was also in fourth grade I started playing the trombone, soon switching to clarinet like the other girls (I couldn’t make a sound with the flute). I loved the band conductor, but since I wasn’t the best I gave it little effort. But he understood that: “You’ll never

be first chair without practicing.” I was breathing through my nose, which was unacceptable, so he had me put cotton balls in my nostrils and they shot right out. I laughed even though it wasn’t very funny.

I was horrible in gym. Always the last to be picked. Always so embarrassed. That’s when I first began feeling uncomfortable changing in front of others. I had matured faster than my peers and it was demoralizing. I worried about my body constantly and this only fueled my self-hatred. “You’re a fat pig,” I told myself.

One day in fifth grade class, when I was nine, that self-hate was confirmed. I was sitting at my desk when the boy behind me poked me with his pencil. When I turned around, he called me a fat pig. Why, I have no idea. I asked the teacher if I could go to the bathroom, so devastated that I slammed the door on the way out. The classroom clock fell off the wall.

I sat in the bathroom and cried. My fears had been realized—I *was* a fat pig and everyone knew it.

**I** was only 10 when the mirrors turned on me. I was at the ballet bar and looked at my body from the

side. My stomach protruded from my red and blue-striped leotard with the fancy blue belt. I looked at the other girls and theirs were flat. And my legs were way too big, out of proportion with my body. Instant repulsion. I would never be a ballerina. I was fat and had to lose weight. The battle had begun.

I turned to drawing and my teachers found that I had some talent. Drew the yearbook covers and for art shows. Even my science projects were a work of art. My mom and I would spend hours together as I shared my ideas and she helped me bring them to life. One of my favorites was—how ironic—a digestive system that I carved from styrofoam, using playdoh to sculpt the inner organs.

Again, perfection always the goal. Anxious by nature? Or because perfection was elusive, always beyond my grasping reach? Questions I still can't answer.

School was supposed to be easy—allegedly I was gifted. But mostly I felt a failure and fat. I hated home economics. I could never imagine being a wife. Never dreamt of being a bride. Instead, I wanted to change the world. But how? I had always felt things so deeply, and couldn't stop the pain and darkness that were creeping up on

me. How could I save the world if I couldn't save myself?

Enter Neil Diamond (for real). His lyrics were singing my song. I listened and listened and listened; I was sure he understood me. His eyes were rich with emotion. Wrote letters asking if he would adopt me. I went to his concerts with my aunt and was awestruck by all the people cheering as he glided across the stage dancing to the music. Telling my story with words that I couldn't articulate. To this day the most talented songwriter—ever! I wanted to make people happy like Neil did. He sparkled like a star—my star.

Have you ever had a song in your head you couldn't let go? Soon, my song was all I could hear—food, calories, weight, and exercise. I was unbearably miserable. A darkness, a black depression that I struggled to explain. By age 12 I was using laxatives to purge myself. By age 14 I wouldn't change my clothes or shower for days in a row. Avoiding the body I had treated with disdain. Getting out of bed was beyond my capacity. Too exhausted. When I did, it drained me for hours afterward.

I longed for my family to understand the darkness that encircled me. Obsessed that people could see the panic and fear in my eyes—the window to my soul.

Afraid of leaving the house, of answering the phone, of looking in the mirror.

Obsession from the time I woke up in the morning until the time I went to bed at night. *Fat and Skinny had a race, all around the pillowcase. Fat fell down and Skinny won the race.* Anxiety off the charts and frightening depression. Every thought, word, and movement was an effort. Not laziness. Not lack of will. Not attention getting. Not a choice. I was malnourished, isolated, brimming with self-hate and unrelenting fear, something I couldn't fix on my own. Dancing with death. Dancing with a stranger.

My mind was always racing. Exhausting and overwhelming, like pressing on the gas and the brakes at the same time. Like watching a movie in another language with no subtitles. Like having the radio on high and trying to read. Food—weight—fear. No reprieve, just madness, as the hours crawled by.

My dad was angry; he thought my behavior was a cry for attention. My mom was confused but trying hard to break through to me. Without much success.

I had become an accomplished anorexic who wanted to be the best. My friend had anorexia and I was jealous of her success. So I mastered all the

tricks and how to mask them. Diet aids, exercising excessively, the constant lies. Chanted “*I don’t need food, I don’t need food, I am fat, I am fat*” as I ran on the treadmill. Dressed to hide my condition. Abused massive amounts of laxatives. Stole money from my family to purchase them. What did the lady behind the counter think, seeing me every other day, my head lowered in shame?

But my “solution” turned on me, stealing all reason and reality. The laxatives cleaned out my feelings along with everything else. With my emotions numb, I made reprehensible decisions. Wounding many people in my path. Never fitting in but always trying to change myself to do so. I had lost my identity, if I ever had one. I thought I *was* my eating disorder; I couldn’t see myself with any objectivity or proportion.

High school was Catholic, as had been grade school and junior high. This led to a series of calamitous events. I begged and pleaded to go to public school, where all my friends went. A resolute NO was the answer. However, I was able to circumvent the all-girls school by reluctantly deciding on another Catholic high school in the area, a smaller one not far from home with an accelerated track. It had an

accomplished marching band and a struggling dance line.

Marching band practice in the heat of the summer. Relearning the trombone rather quickly, so I could be in the front line. *Dress left dress!* A sharp look to the left, so embarrassed of the body I had dressed to hide. My contradiction—I wanted to be perfect but I didn't want to be seen. Exposed in my black polyester uniform, with a hat resembling a large white fedora. Soon learned about a powerful diuretic in the medicine cabinet. So powerful I could lose several pounds in just hours. Those pounds crept right back just as quickly.

The band traveled each year to various locations across the country; it was a challenge to fit in while immersed in my quest to disappear. But I could always fake being more together and excited than I was. I did this well—too well.

Schoolwork was not thought-provoking. Thank goodness, as the space in my head was rather limited. My pursuit for perfection led to more extracurricular activities. Soon joined the dance line, giving performances and entering competitions. Became a choreographer in my junior year and then co-captain my senior year. We practiced every day. Dreading

competitions, as our attire didn't hide much. Therefore, more starving, more laxatives, more diuretics. And more lies.

Keeping up with the rigorous practices soon became a challenge that I couldn't meet. My depression became apparent; my dark days were increasing rapidly. I overheard our vice-principal say sarcastically as I passed in the hallway, "What's wrong with Lisa now?" But no compassion or concern or follow-up from him. I was a joke.

In my junior year of high school, my friend and I were both chosen to go to New York City to try out as models for an agency. We were standing right outside the gym when my friend delighted in telling me that the modeling agency thought my weight was a problem even though they had accepted me. My friend's mother had apparently snuck into my file to find out that private information. I hadn't known we were in a competition. This incident sent me into a downward spiral, and I ended up not going to New York because my eating disorder kicked up again.

I was friends with different groups or cliques, of varied interests and depth. I harbored a deep desire to be liked by everyone and yearned to be in the "popular"

group. When I began dating a college student in my junior year, I felt I fit in a bit more.

Nevertheless, that wasn't enough, and I soon began to self-medicate. Smoking pot and trying alcohol. The latter had calories, so I was careful and didn't need much. I was the girl the teachers asked to check the bathroom for smokers. I'd have a few puffs before reporting back. I didn't know how to smoke, which is how I met one of my very best friends who had the pleasure of teaching me. After several months I learned that my friend also had a drinking problem with serious suicidal ideation. I understood that ideation all too well. We became closer as we shared our misery.

I confided in her about my struggle, as I had overdosed once before when I was 13 from taking Tylenol. It wasn't a serious attempt. Didn't want to die, but it was too painful to live. She also had a couple of suicide attempts, labeled as "attention seeking." Her desperation overlooked. Her begging for help.

We made a pact. If one of us committed suicide, the other would soon follow. This friend went into treatment for alcohol and my parents forbade me to be her friend. I was crushed, but got around that rule once she was out. We made ourselves available

to each other in our secret ways. Six weeks later she hung herself, April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1986. She was 15.

I was sure it was my fault. The school announcement was cold and matter of fact. I overheard a classmate say, “Now her druggie friends will be moping around.” A few of us left school, overwhelmed with sadness at the news.

I remember seeing my psychiatrist, Dr. Doom, a few days later, so sick and dehydrated that I was barely able to walk into his office. As I lay down on his couch, he inquired about why my symptoms were so severe. My mom was with me because I was so sick. We shared that my best friend had just committed suicide. Dr. Doom simply said “Oh” and moved on to another subject with no reaction at all. Had he heard me? Could anyone hear me?

One of my friends confronted me, telling me our friend’s suicide was my fault because I knew of the previous attempts and because she had started giving me her things. I couldn’t breathe. Already overwhelmed with guilt, our “friend” only confirmed it. I had nightmares for months, as my bestie’s image floated outside my bedroom window, seated Indian-style, staring at me. Tormented by my biggest failure yet. Why hadn’t she called me? Why? My heart

ached with a pain so deep that it took me over completely.

I never kept my end of the pact. Or perhaps I did—starving, laxatives, diuretics. Killing myself slowly.

I was a master of pretending to be okay, but pretending I could only go so far. I couldn't hide any longer. At ages 14 and 15 I made thirteen trips to the emergency room. After the last trip I wasn't discharged after I stabilized, which was the usual routine, but was instead sent to the psychiatric ward, terribly depressed and irrational. Dr. Doom, my psychiatrist, said to me, "You're dangerously dehydrated and we're trying to save your life. Why are you doing this to yourself?"

You tell me, Dr. Doom. Why?

He had no answer and neither did I. I cared about nothing and no one. I existed only to count calories, exercise, and lose weight.

Dr. Doom was on a rampage. He had no understanding of eating disorders. He thought my symptoms resulted from repressed memories of sexual abuse and was relentless in convincing me of this fact.

“Do it!” Dr. Doom demanded. “Remember what happened to you. Just do what I say.”

Just cooperate with his treatment and follow instructions. But what was I supposed to do exactly? Remember something that never happened? Or had I forgotten it? All my symptoms indicated sexual abuse, Dr. Doom said. But by whom? My dad? Had he abused me and I didn’t remember?

First I was defiant; then I wondered whether Dr. Doom was right.

Anger, so much anger. *Just eat. Just remember the abuse. Do it!* My symptoms, he told me, were too grave not to have deep-seated roots. Repressed memories, he told me over and over again, were the cause. But I couldn’t remember anything. I was a hopeless case, only confirming my fears that I was innately broken and hopeless.

I was just 15 years old. A child.

## Chapter Two

# Flagrantly Anorexic

---

I learned from another patient that I could sign myself out of the psych ward when I turned 16. That was the day I waited for, as they probed me for repressed memories that were the root of my illness.

I barely listened as Dr. Doom droned on about the eating regimen I should observe at home once I was discharged. In the middle of our session, a man stuck his head in the office.

“Are you Lisa Nasseff? You’ve been served.” He handed me a slip of paper—a court order revoking my pending discharge and petitioning the court to commit me to the hospital indefinitely beyond age 16. Signed by mom. Dr. Doom had gotten her to do this without a word spoken to me.

Anger surged through my veins, blinding me. My shrink’s lips were moving but I heard nothing. I don’t know what stopped me from ripping the papers to shreds and throwing them in his face. Why had they

betrayed me? Why hadn't my family talked to me? Why couldn't I be freed from jail?

My dad had never understood my eating disorder. He thought I was choosing to destroy myself. With allegations of sexual abuse floating around, we had stopped talking. Only my mom gave me any semblance of support and understanding. And now she did this? Unable to contain my rage, I stormed out of my shrink's office and bolted to my room. That night I tossed and turned, haunted by the same incessant demons that never left my mind. Would I ever be normal? Would anyone ever understand what I was going through?

Committing me to the psych ward was a legal proceeding and I was called before a judge. It was utterly unreal, as if I were being called to judgment for a crime I had forgotten. The judge lectured me from the bench, which towered over me, larger than life. I will never forget that moment.

"You're being committed," he said angrily, "because you are flagrantly anorexic."

Had I really heard those words? So poisonous they pierced me to the core. Was someone with depression "flagrantly depressed"? Was a person with cancer "flagrantly cancerous"? As judge and

executioner, his one word summed up all the ways I had been mistreated for years—belittled, blamed, and completely misunderstood.

Over the next few days, the nightmare intensified. The staff told me I had a “choice”—if I followed the program in the hospital, they wouldn’t commit me to the state mental institution. But what program? I was in a hospital that didn’t know anything about eating disorders. I was thrown in with the general psych population, people with all kinds of severe mental illnesses that I didn’t understand any more than they understood mine. My roommate scared me; in a fit of rage, she had tried to murder her mom. Holy shit!

I had an eating disorder and major depression, which they treated by feeding me, period. I was forced to eat three balanced meals; a staff person sat next to me to make sure I didn’t confiscate anything. They weighed me every morning; if I hadn’t gained half a pound from the previous day, I was confined to my room between meals. Solitary confinement for anorexia! But the isolation didn’t bother me. Much preferred to the various groups that never addressed the disease that had claimed my life.

They continued to instill in me that the severity of my eating disorder meant that I had suffered sexual

abuse earlier in my life. Every day I met with Dr. Doom.

“Let’s think back to when you were a child,” he asked once again. “Was your dad ever inappropriate with you?”

“What are you talking about?” I responded. “Inappropriate how?”

“Lisa, did he ever touch you in an inappropriate way? Or have any other physical contact with you that was inappropriate?”

“I’ve told you—no!”

“Are you sure? Or could it be that you don’t remember? Try to think back.”

The reality was that I didn’t have memories of *any* physical contact from my dad, not even a hug.

I dreaded my therapy sessions. The tension enveloped me. I was either fighting with Dr. Doom or not saying much. He interrogated me like a suspect in a police precinct. *You’ve got to get in touch with your feelings. We have to figure this out, so you can get out of the hospital.* This went on for months on end.

It soon became clear what would get me out—I had to say what they wanted to hear. Might it be possible that I had been sexually abused and just didn’t remember? Maybe it had happened. I began to believe

it. It was a terrifying feeling not to know the truth, to have no memory of something so profound. Was this why I had been starving myself? A deep depression gripped me again. It was my fault, my failing, my moral weakness, to have allowed myself to be abused and to not remember it.

Dr. Doom would get me into a relaxed state and say, “Let’s think back to when you were a child.”

I didn’t know how to answer him. I didn’t understand the concept of repressed memory, which was the subject of almost all of our individual sessions.

They had me see another therapist, because they thought it might be easier for me to talk to a female. “You have to start eating and gain weight,” she said, as if I were a misbehaving child. She tapped her pencil against her legal pad impatiently and waited for me to respond. I kept staring at her red blouse, unable to meet her judging gaze. It seemed like we went back and forth over the same territory, had the same conversation, day after day after day. Why couldn’t they hear me?

I vividly remember saying to Dr. Doom, “What happens if the sexual abuse isn’t true and I’m just crazy?”

He said, “Well, that would be easier to treat.”

What did that mean? Easier to treat if I were full-blown crazy? What did that say about my condition?

My unwavering fears around food plagued me every day. Whenever I was in the dining room, I was terrified I would lose control and start eating. And if I started eating I was petrified that I wouldn’t be able to stop, that I would gain and gain and gain. That was always the core fear, the primordial fear, the fear that never deserted me.

My body and my eating took up all of my thinking, when I wasn’t being asked to dive into past memories that weren’t there. Months went by and their questions never changed.

*“Are you sure you don’t remember? Because that’s what everything’s pointing to. Think back to when you were young. What was your father like around you?”*

What compounded the problem was that I had family therapy in the hospital with my parents, where the sexual abuse theory was openly discussed. The first time it was mentioned, my dad stalked out of the room and my mom and I went into hysterics. I had to

uncover the sexual abuse and get to the magic weight number to get out of the hospital, but I couldn't do either.

Sometimes I wouldn't finish my food and I'd have to sit in the dining room after everyone was gone. They became frustrated when I cut everything into little pieces to forestall the process and keep them waiting. Back in my room the panic hit me—how I could burn it off? I ran in place, did pushups, sit ups, leg lifts, anything to consume the calories.

Some of the other patients became envious of the attention I was getting. Like my dad, they believed my ED was a manipulative, attention-getting mechanism. My roommate told me what the other patients were saying—that I wasn't eating so I could get more attention. Sometimes people said that in group therapy, although none of them had an ED.

I dreaded the attention. I wanted to disappear.

They experimented with giving me passes home, letting me leave for a night or weekend. My relationship with my parents was very strained. How could it not? I was sleeping in a house where my dad might have done something to me and my mom may have covered it up. I contemplated running away, but where would I go?

When I reverted back to my behaviors and lost weight while out on a pass, that privilege was revoked. Why would they send me home in the first place if they had believed that was the genesis of my eating disorder? None of my problems were being treated in a logical, credible way. We just kept going around and around in a dizzying, never-ending circle.

My court-ordered commitment to the hospital was open-ended, at the discretion of the doctor. I was about to turn 16 and could have been committed indefinitely. Missing school and my friends was not on my radar; my sole fixation was on getting out. It got to the point where I said to my therapists, “*Help me remember it. Please, help me to remember!*” I started having dreams that seemed like flashbacks. I was a young child and someone was in my bedroom. I was overcome by anxiety, wondering if I should reveal my dreams in therapy. If I did, what would happen to my family?

I was a wreck. I had no answers. I didn’t understand my obsessions and compulsions, and never had. I thought my fingers were too chubby. I was even afraid to lick envelopes and stamps. Would I ever leave the psych ward?

Nearly a year passed. I couldn't spend another week there. I asked my therapist, "What do I need to do? Is it possible something happened and I'll never remember it?"

Her response: "It could be."

I never gave them a specific memory of sexual abuse, but I did tell them the truth—that I was scared to sleep in my bed at home starting when I was a young child. Instead, I'd sleep on the floor in my parents' bedroom. That could have been an attachment issue, but my therapists thought it was highly peculiar and evidence of their theory.

I was giving them something to work with, even if it didn't make sense—if my dad was abusing me, why would I sleep on the floor in my parents' bedroom? Seek comfort in a dangerous den?

What finally got me out was hitting the magic weight number and my willingness to do family therapy upon discharge. I gave them what they wanted: the clear message that I might have been abused and that I was going to get to the bottom of it with mom and dad.

At this point my relationship with my dad was ruined. He didn't yell, but he was a very intense person with a look on his face that could be piercing. I thought it was obvious that he was very disappointed

in me, convinced my illness was an attempt to win attention. It became harder to be around him. We weren't talking that much to begin with because he worked nights; now we just passed each other in the halls. Before we had been at odds because of my eating disorder; now it was because of something far more disturbing. So disturbing that I apparently couldn't remember it.

## Chapter Three

# Glory Road

---

**M**y parents and I went to a handful of therapy sessions together but we didn't spend much time exploring an accusation that none of us thought was true.

Senior year. When I came out of the bathroom one day, a teacher hugged me and said I had been elected Homecoming Queen by a landslide. "Fix your hair nice," she said, "it smells like smoke." It was from the other girls in the bathroom, I assured her.

My feelings were mixed. Mom was a homecoming queen, so I was excited to follow in her footsteps. Did being elected mean that people liked me? Perhaps, but it also meant more attention and I was a fat pig. As we rode around in the car during the football game's half time, waving at the crowd, I was self-conscious as hell in my dance line costume.

I finished my high school credits and graduated. I took a year off before starting college but quickly relapsed once I got there. Although "relapse" might

not be the word because I was never healthy, had never been properly treated. And so I teetered on the edge. Another near death experience in the company of friends. Saved by tireless paramedics and emergency care.

For the first time I truly realized my mortality. Watching them work on me as if it were a scene from a bad movie, seeing myself from above as I floated away. No more laxatives, I vowed—ever. Instead, I continued to self-medicate—pot, cocaine, alcohol, prescription pain meds, even LSD. Anything to numb my unrelenting pain. Horrible choices over and over again. More lies and deception. More guilt and shame.

I dropped out of college and had a great deal of trouble finding a decent job without my degree. Self-medicating every day. Wasted. Anorexia was like a drug—I got a high from starving. It made me feel like Wonder Woman when I could lose weight while others struggled, and I kept trying to get that feeling back. Like I was stronger than everyone else because I knew how to control and deny. To defy hunger cues and basic physiological needs and still carry on—a functional anorexic. Facing down temptation as I walked the tightropes of food and weight.

I found a job as a real estate closer, which I knew

nothing about, with the help of my cousin's girlfriend. They were so busy I had to learn in the line of fire, which is how I learned most everything. I went back to college at night. Hitting my rhythm at work, making as much as I could in this field. I couldn't do any more closings. Not enough hours in the day.

So began my quest to pursue a more meaningful career, to right social injustices, to attack racism and poverty, to fix what was broken. I was always for the underdog. Politics! Lawmakers! Social change! I was studying sociology and urgently wanted to work for the mayor of our city. He was inspiring and going places, and I wanted to be a part of it.

Soon I had a job working for him, a place on the inside with rich and powerful people who made big decisions. A ride on Glory Road. I met donors and high ranking public figures, including Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush. It was amusing to be underestimated time after time and then blow their socks off.

My dad would always caution me as I was too enamored by these folks: "They all put their pants on one leg at a time." But from where I was looking, these people had no rules and no limitations. At least none that I could see.

*Money talks. But it don't sing and dance and it don't walk.*

Again, Neil Diamond. Spot on!

I was dating a lawyer who I loved right away. I also fell in love with my wedding dress on first sight—a perfect dress with spaghetti straps and a beaded bodice blending gold and white beads, which wrapped over my neckline and sparkled as I moved about the store. The bottom had layers and layers of tulle, like Cinderella's dress. I always fell in love before looking at the price. Another father, looking at the price tag, would have told me to send it back. Not mine. We found a tiara that matched perfectly. My uncle's wife, who helped plan the event with every detail of a ball, insisted on a veil and long white gloves. After all, I was a bride—the star of the show, she said. I wanted my hair up but was swayed to keep my curly locks running down my back. My centerpiece flowers were my favorite, white tulips. And our meal was Lebanese, wonderful for all. Who doesn't like garlic?

I felt like a princess. The champagne reception was held in a club rich with history and beauty everywhere you turned. We had a violinist making magic as everyone arrived and throughout dinner. Magical.

Enough of that. It saddens me to think of the

eventual outcome. Like I said, I looked at the price tag after I fell in love.

From the outside looking in, it appeared I was walking on Glory Road. But soon I was self-medicating again. From stage left came Xanax, purchased off the internet. It managed my anxiety, even helped to lessen my underlying self-doubt and self-hatred. Again, more lies. Alcohol reduced my inhibitions under the guise of networking and work-related folly. Wined and dined with the big wigs. Soon I wasn't impressed. It wasn't what I had dreamed about. The so-called brilliance of the rich and famous was an illusion. The magic of social change and making a difference wasn't there. My dreams were extinguished, the fires of my desire snuffed out.

I had the opportunity to be the city's Y2K manager. I enjoyed a unique relationship with the fire department and absorbed a wealth of knowledge through training at FEMA; I attended additional emergency management conferences as well. On seeing that I was conducting a training, a firefighter said to me in disgust: "This is how important this is to the mayor?" I didn't respond but felt crushed to be underestimated again.

I was then hired by a local public relations firm as their chief operating officer, to restructure and turn

around a low-performing company that had one large client keeping them afloat. Responsible for identifying weaknesses, and providing strategic and performance planning. I designed and executed (with my talented staff) public relations/marketing strategies promoting brand awareness in the community. Something didn't smell right, however. The firm was sold to an accountant who knew nothing about public relations and he paid an extraordinary amount. The bad smell became stronger. I had to trust my gut and move on. I and two other very intelligent women started our own public relations and audiovisual production firm, bringing previous clients with us.

But enough of my resume talk. Beneath this outward success, my eating disorder was percolating. Not eating for days and passing out in a client's office. Unrelenting embarrassment. More lies and more Xanax. Looking from the outside in, I was still walking Glory Road. I didn't look like I had an eating disorder. Not yet, anyway.

Soon I was asked to be on several non-profit boards. I was delighted and couldn't say no. I jumped in with both feet. Started on the board of a local children's organization; served on the executive committee; chaired the government relations committee;

delivered nationwide presentations on “Energizing Your Board.” I served on our film and television board, the local police department foundation board, as well as on a local hospital foundation board where I co-chaired the annual wine auction fundraiser. Savoring the benefits of extraordinary friends who still grace my life.

**S**o much fun. My husband showed little to no interest. I mostly attended our events with my friends and colleagues. His love was the cabin. Every weekend. My non-profit work experiences fed my soul. I was making a difference. Unfortunately, that was all that was being fed.

An old client of ours committed suicide, a client who kept the previous firm afloat. With my old boss soon to follow, within a year. The horror of it all. My depression tugged hard on my suit and my heightened anxiety needed more Xanax. My self-medicating and anorexia were destroying what I had worked so hard to achieve. I wasn’t fooling anyone with my wit and lies.

I preferred to be numb rather than face my

reality. My anorexia soothed my discomfort, stress, uncertainty, pain, and sadness but it didn't take long for it to turn on me, once again. I lost the very control I yearned for and my façade quickly fell apart. *Heeere's ED!*

“So what are you doing,” people would ask. “How are you?” My retort was swift—*stalking Neil Diamond and fighting his restraining order*. Followed by their laughter and changing of the subject, as most people like to talk about themselves anyway. But it never failed. Neil Diamond was my shtick. I had become friends with his percussionist, King Errisson, and to this day we remain dear friends. A silver lining. I met King at the finest hotel in the city where Neil and his band stayed. King and a few others were at the bar. I quickly ran over. He was my favorite, the showman of the band. He kissed me on the forehead after my gushing and said I was too young to be such a fan. No way! I was in my mid-twenties. We had breakfast before the band left and have remained friends ever since. King was always calm; I wished I could take in the world the same way.

As I searched for a rebound, I started a company to provide a new way of funding independent films that would benefit the non-profit world. While I got things

started, they never reached completion. No amount of Xanax or starving was going to help me out of the mess I had created. I couldn't think or feel. My mood was becoming too dark to manage; my ability to relate to others waned and soon I couldn't function. And so came the end of Glory Road—stuck in a small pond with very big fish and a few sharks as well.

All I wanted was to disappear. And I did. From everyone and everything. Never leaving the house. The drapes pulled. Afraid to check the messages on our phone. Only by the ticking of the grandfather clock did I know that time was passing while mine stood still.