

Inch by Inch

Finding a Home
within My Skin



Monique Lisbon

- Foreword -

The traumatic effects of childhood abuse are overwhelming. They can imprison the victim for years in cycles of depression, anxiety, dissociation, somatisation, self-injury, suicidal attempts, insomnia, hypervigilance, risky behaviour, body dysmorphia and other life-denying, self-loathing behaviours.

Healing occurs in stages. Recovery is hard-won and takes courage. The links between morbid obesity and child abuse are well documented.¹

Inch by Inch can proudly take its place among reports of women victims of childhood sexual abuse and their individual journeys toward healing. It is the third account by the writer to chronicle the stages of her healing.

Sexual abuse is never just something that happened in the past. It seeps into the body, mind and soul of the victim and is forever part of their life. This text focusses on the victim's experience of how, in various manifestations, we are our bodies. As a leading trauma expert reminds us, 'the body keeps the score'.²

Monique's fear, confusion and overwhelming need for protection from unspeakable assaults on her little body was not

met with the comfort of safe motherly arms. Instead, her terror was assuaged by rewards of strawberry tarts from her abusive father. She discovered that her deep hunger for love was quelled by the comfort of chocolate, devoured in secret. The sensory pleasure of food soothed her anxiety. It became a guilty solace.

Neuroimaging of the brain reveals how our fundamental needs for love, connection, safety and nurture become mired in confused and distorted images and behaviours, when those whom we are programmed to love, hurt us. It can also be the case that the abused victim's relationship to food becomes disordered.

Monique illustrates how her struggle with weight and eventual morbid obesity played out in her life and relationships from childhood to the present. Of note is the course of her struggle to wrest her body back from her mother. Monique was given the message that her mother wanted her to literally disappear. She thoughtfully reflects that her obesity was a silent challenge to her mother, saying, in effect, 'I'm not going anywhere.'

Her prior book, *Keeping Mum*³, was not only about the ways her father's coercive threats, and her mother's denial, kept her 'mum'. The figure of speech also speaks to Monique's yearning for her mother's love and approval. Unfortunately it kept her stuck in an erratic dance with her weight. This would continue as long as she sought to keep [her] mum.

Reaching the hard-won decision to walk out of these imprisoning relationships with her family, one at a time, over a fifteen-year period, was crucial to her liberation. Then, as with many who walk free from imprisonment, there is much work to be done on the other side. Learning to be free is no mean feat.

Attempts to engage with the pain and shame lodged deep within layers of fat and to risk trusting one's body as a place of safety and even desire, were fundamental precedents to Monique embarking on the road of re-claiming and re-imagining her body for herself. It is a tale of homecoming, of embracing all of her shattered self and

1 Vincent Fellitti, 'Adverse Childhood Experiences Study', quoted in Olga Khazan, 'The Second Assault', 15 December 2015, www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/12/sexual-abuse-victims-obesity/420186/, accessed 18 August 2020.

2 Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* (Penguin Books: 2015).

3 Monique Lisbon, *Keeping Mum: The Silent Cost of Surviving Childhood Sexual Abuse* (Living Hope Resources: Ashburton, Victoria, 2017).

the challenge of feeling safe in her body.

This is an intelligently written and careful account. It is raw, honest and pulls no punches. As a reader, it invites you in quickly and smacks you into the heart of the victim's experience as she moves from childhood, through latency, adolescence, young adulthood and through to middle age. As if in a movie, the camera moves from the plight of a small helpless child, shocked into speechless terror to a woman who carried her pain and protest in massive mounds of flesh that threatened to seriously disable her; a living reminder of the cruel damaging of her tender life and spirit, so ruthlessly robbed from her.

Monique's abuse and stress reactions, if triggered, will always tug at her. Nevertheless, today their power is diminished, particularly as now she is held in her own deep embrace.

This chronicle exemplifies the ways in which Monique authored and became the arbiter of her own recovery, with her characteristic grit and determination, as she walked, step-by-step, to come home to herself; a quest full of grace and truth.

*– Dr Diana Kelly-Byrne PhD
Psychologist (Melbourne, Australia)*

- Introduction -

I lived for decades in a land shaped by humiliation, shame, disgust, alienation, immobility, hatred, judgment and powerlessness. Initially this terrain was invisible – it was shaped in my mind and psyche, the primary loci of damage from abuse.

Yet abuse is not merely conceptual or abstract. It is concrete. It occurs within the landscape of a human body.

Over time, my body grew as the nexus of the long-term damage I experienced throughout my childhood. It grew both in its power to limit and constrain me, and it grew in physical size. By the time I reached adulthood, I was well on my way to feeling powerless to ever escape the prison I carried everywhere. I had temporary jailbreaks – finding ways to flee from my body through self-denial, dissociation, fads, and intensive and unsustainable changes in lifestyle.

But one can never truly escape oneself. And it is counter-productive to try.

I have now lost nearly two-thirds of my body weight. When I look at 'before' photos, it is hard to recognise myself physically. What I do recognise is the life, determination and tenacity displayed in the eyes and smiles in those photos. Yes, the smile was genuine. There is no way I could ever have moved to this new land – one of freedom, self-respect, mobility, health, a lightness of being, even joy – without a fundamental belief in my own sense of agency and power to change.

I never want to reject the 'old' me as a source of disdain and shame – that would defeat the purpose of the transformation I have experienced. There is no 'old' and 'new' me. My body, mind



and psyche are central to who I am. They have been with me since I was born and, even as they undergo constant change, they will stay with me until I die. I look on my 'before' photos with compassion and admiration of my spirit.

My journey from morbid obesity to living health has also been a trek from self-hatred and shame, towards self-respect and freedom.

– *Monique Lisbon,*
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