

# **Fragments of Home**

Piecing Life Together  
after Childhood Sexual Abuse

Monique Lisbon



Published in 2010 by Acorn Press Ltd ABN 50 008 549 540  
Office and orders: PO Box 282, Brunswick East, Victoria 3057, Australia  
Web: [www.acornpress.net.au](http://www.acornpress.net.au)  
Email: [orders@acornpress.net.au](mailto:orders@acornpress.net.au)  
Tel/fax: 03 9383 1266  
International tel/fax: 61 3 9383 1266

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**National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:**

Author: Lisbon, Monique  
Title: Fragments of home : piecing life together  
after childhood sexual abuse / Monique Lisbon  
Edition: 2nd ed.  
ISBN: 978-0-9082849-4-8 (pbk + CD-ROM)  
Subjects: Lisbon, Monique  
Child sexual abuse – Religious aspects – Christianity  
Adult child sexual abuse victims – Religious aspects – Christianity  
Pastoral psychology  
Spiritual healing  
Religious life  
Dewey No.: 261.83273

This second edition published 2010.

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Cover design by Monique Lisbon, based on an illustration by Rob Leach ([istockphoto.com/leach](http://istockphoto.com/leach)). Illustration used by permission.

Book layout by Mono Unlimited: Computer & Printing Support.

Book printed in Australia by Openbook Howden Publishing, Adelaide.

CD replicated by MultipliCD.

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## The Lumbering Elephant

*Little girl, how do you see the world –  
Do you see the lies of love?*

LITTLE GIRL

Little girl  
How do you see the world –  
Do you see the lies of love?  
Your innocence  
In trust it tints him white  
Your heart it bleeds red tears  
You see the world as he pretends  
And pain and fear your only friends

Little girl  
How do you see him now –  
Behind the lies of love?  
Tormented soul  
Still trapped within his arms  
Your heart still bleeds red tears  
Disgrace the message which he sends  
And guilt and shame your only friends

Little girl  
If you could only fly –  
Far from the lies of love!  
If only time  
Could take it all away  
Your heart must bleed red tears  
You thirst for healing as it mends  
But strength and hope still far-off friends

Words and Music by Monique Lisbon  
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Thin tall lights tower over the familiar freeway. I drive under the Clifton Hill bridge, into the early evening traffic towards cosy eastern suburbia, the summer sun still lighting up the sky.

I am on 'auto-pilot'. My mind is in another place, another time.

'Have you ever been sexually abused?'

What had he meant when he asked that question? Why did he ask it?

At the time, I hesitated, just for a second, before answering, 'No.'

And he moved on to the next question. But it caught my breath. Like a fly in the sticky threads of a spider's web, my mind could not shake itself free.

And so the question hung, flat and heavy, over the ninety-minute string of well-worn questions from Dr Daniel, this aloof psychiatrist. Ninety minutes! I had thought writing a prescription for anti-anxiety medication would only take five. Then I could go back to my far more sensitive psychologist Anne to discuss my steadily growing distress.

Now, several hours later, his question haunts me as I drive. 'Have you ever been sexually abused?'

No one has ever asked me that before. Of course I haven't. And of course I'd know if I had been.

I am nearly twenty-one years old.

It's hard to believe it has been five months since this turmoil began. Last night I woke with a strange urge to hurt myself. When I successfully drew blood, strangely settled, I soon fell back to sleep. A disturbed calm.

Have you ever been sexually abused?

Anne used the term 'emotional abuse' to describe what my father did to me as a teenager; his excessive control over me. 'Emotional abuse' was bad enough – and I still feel a jolt in my stomach when I think about it. But sexual abuse? That is another matter entirely! Of course I haven't.



I am twenty years old.

Perching uncomfortably in my armchair, I force myself to look at Ron as he speaks. 'It's not normal to be in the state you're in ... Look at you – you can't stop shaking! And this has been going on for weeks! That's why I asked Tony to come ...'

Ron glances helplessly at Tony, a doctor from church. I can't help thinking that surely Tony has better things to do on a Saturday night than listen to this nonsense.

Tony speaks. 'I think what Ron is trying to say is that he's worried about you. All your friends are worried about you. Don't you understand why?'

'It's nothing really. I'm OK ... I mean, I'm sure I'll be OK if I can just get some more sleep.'

'Well, will you at least agree to see a counsellor once?' Ron asks. 'Just to see if they think you need something more than just sleep?'

It's been three weeks since I saw the film that unstuck my world. When I stumbled out of the cinema after watching *Dead Poets Society*<sup>2</sup>, I couldn't stop crying. And it feels like I haven't stopped falling apart in the weeks since then. But how can I explain to these two men why a Hollywood blockbuster has affected me so much? Why can't I just snap out of this?

If only I could just forget the boy in the film and his controlling father! They both seem way too familiar. Except that the boy managed to escape his pain for good.

Will my pain stop if I kill myself too?



Driving on the freeway, my mind surveys the last five months. Seeing that film. My friends talking in hushed tones as they watch me sitting in the corner in my pyjamas, shaking and whimpering. A wary acquaintance with counselling to try to put words on my bizarre feelings and actions. Stopping work. Deferring from uni. And now finally, today, seeing a psychiatrist. That's something I never thought I'd do. What has happened to me?

Have you ever been sexually abused?

Then somewhere before the Burke Road turnoff, my stomach fills

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<sup>2</sup> *Dead Poets Society*, Director: Peter Weir, Touchstone Pictures, USA, 1989.

with an anxious dread.

Surely that 'game' couldn't be called sexual abuse, could it? I have never forgotten my discomfort and humiliation as a pubescent teenager when my father would play with my breasts through my clothes, making a nonsense sound which firmly relegated the experience to the realm of 'fun'. I would never have thought to call that sexual abuse. I vividly remember feeling powerless, frozen on the spot whilst desperately wanting to disappear into the ground ... but my mother and brother and others were around when he did it, so there couldn't really be anything serious about it, could there? Sexual abuse? That's the stuff of tabloid newspapers and greasy-haired tattooed criminals. Not my father, who always smells of soap and supplies kitchenware to department stores. Not me.

Have you ever been sexually abused?

As I flick my car's indicator and exit the freeway, I realise the truth. As simply as that. That was sexual abuse. I have been sexually abused.



When I next see Anne, I am painfully aware of the lumbering elephant swaying in the corner. The enormity of this experience is ludicrously unavoidable, but until now has been pushed to the periphery of my world. Until this hour, I have never uttered aloud that humiliating childhood experience. In the last five minutes of the session, I hesitantly tell Anne about my dreadful realisation.

She listens carefully and silently, and then quietly says, 'I thought so.'

And so, it is 'out there'.

But why does this memory distress me so much? Surely all children grow up feeling powerless when their fathers embarrass them publicly? Even if that was 'sexual abuse', how can it cause my life to unravel to such a degree?

Yet unravel, it does.

I am admitted to a psychiatric ward with the generic diagnosis 'acute depression and anxiety'. Upon arrival I remain silent, avoiding eye contact with the other patients in the confining space of the common room. How could I wind up in a place like this? That night I curl up on my bed, trying to convince myself that more than just a thin curtain separates me from my crazy roommate. When I beg a nurse to reassure me I am really not mad, her kind response falls with a dull and empty thud.

My pattern of self-harm escalates in a futile attempt to find relief.

Within a week of discharge, I take my first overdose and end up back in Ward 3F. This marks the beginning of a long cycle of admission and discharge at this ramshackle centre for 'healing'.

My friends, my family and the hospital staff keep asking one question: What is going on?

I cannot enlighten them. All I know is that my world has blown apart; a world in which I was the life of every party and the exuberant mania of my present shielded me from the horror of my past.

As I lie awake in my hospital bed, enveloped in a growing shroud of blackness, I can see no future.

## **Reflections**

I experienced five months of intense anxiety, panic attacks, depression and self-injury, before I finally consulted a psychiatrist to try to curb my chaos with medication.

I felt out of control in the emotional swell of experiences I did not understand; first flailing in an unfamiliar stream, but soon drowning in tumult. As I floundered in waters incomprehensible to me, I had no idea that incidents from my childhood could possibly cause this torrent of symptoms.

I had only ever known two people who had been sexually abused. Even as they entrusted me with snapshots of their past, my own history remained locked away inside a self-protective amnesia. Their stories felt quite separate from my own.

When the lid finally flew off my own Pandora's Box, the demons which emerged seemed horrifically familiar, although I still had no names for them.

I did not know that many people who were abused as children feel overwhelmingly trapped, even decades later. Yet this alarming experience was becoming my daily reality.

I had never heard that many people brutally wounded by others, feel soothed when they intentionally cut themselves. Instinctively I knew that doing this would help express and relieve the emotional pressure that loomed over my waking and sleeping hours. Hurting myself felt like a means of regaining my power, even though I could not name the ogre who rendered me powerless in the first place.

I thought the term 'flashback' referred to the experiences of drug addicts, horribly caught in euphoria gone wrong. I did not know it

described a common experience for people grappling with traumatic backgrounds. Yet I began experiencing emotions and panic from years before, just as real now as stifling summer humidity.

When I walked into a psychiatrist's office seeking a magical cure, I had no intention of digging to see what lay beneath my need for the medication. I was shocked by Dr Daniel's barrage of intimate questions.

Just one question was all it took to dismantle my self-protective barricade.

I was stunned to realise that before my emotions took me to the point of breakdown, I had not even recognised the lumbering elephant, abuse, which had dominated so much of my life. As I began to acknowledge more and more incidents of sexual abuse by my father, I felt the world I had always lived in, my illusion of safety, disintegrate. My idealised doll's house life had suddenly been picked up and shaken. The only apparent way to escape my heightened despair was by attempting to destroy myself.