

# THE COURAGE TO GROW

Crime and therapy in society

*Lisa's Story*

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Quickfox

## **Author's note**

My goal in writing this book, with a woman named Lisa at its centre, is to empower society to heal, through learning.

To prevent the possibility of causing damage through blaming, some dates and all names (except my own) when referring to personal relationships have been changed. The book exists only because Lisa courageously agreed to participate in it. In my view, the unfolding of her growth has the potential to teach us all to become more fully human in our own capacities on every level of life.

It focuses on human beings working at different levels of society (individual, interpersonal, family, community, socio-political departments and society as a whole) on a controversial path. Each of us have, at different times, touched the life of someone like Lisa. Yet, typically we place people like 'Lisa' at the bottom of the hierarchy, even though she has some of what it takes to teach us about prevention of crime. Her healing and ours depends on all of us facing our own missteps in this journey and, importantly, learning how to work with missteps in such a way that growth is the consequence.

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## Preface

*Pachypodium namaquanum* is a slow-growing succulent plant growing up to two metres or more in height. It has had to arm itself out of necessity and its spikes are needle sharp. Its growing tip, which is covered in a tuft of leaves, is tilted to the north, and in silhouette against the skyline, the plant looks almost human-like. Because of this, the local Afrikaans name for the plant is *halfmens*, which translates into English as ‘half human’. Indigenous Nama people from the arid parts of north-western South Africa and southern Namibia tell the story of how the halfmens plants were created. Folklore has it that refugees, fleeing south from conflict, stopped to gaze longingly northwards to the land from which they had fled. The gods took pity on them and turned them into halfmens or half humans so that they might look towards their homeland for eternity.

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At no point do I intend to justify disrespectful behaviour, criminal or not. I describe a journey lived through a 24-year therapeutic relationship with Lisa. This journey brought about the uncomfortable realisation that I form part of a society which, for the most part, unintentionally, grows crime. Since 1998, the South African government, generally supported by society at large, has attempted to contain crime through highly publicised but reactive measures under the banner ‘*war on*

*crime*'.<sup>1</sup> This war focuses on the individual, the 'offender', as the cause of crime and the sole element to be rehabilitated. Accordingly, I started my relationship with Lisa in 2000 focusing on her. My journey with her in the correctional centre informed me that there are many relevant and equally important elements giving rise to and sustaining crime in South Africa. Reflection led to me realising that blaming caused me to get stuck, but when I focused on myself, I was also an important element triggering an effect in the other. This realisation gave rise to a need to question, critically, the context within which crime emerges. However, critical questioning itself was considered disrespectful in institutions if, in their view, it made them 'look bad'. In 2004, the University of Cape Town provided me with an acceptable platform from which to do research and to critically question why rehabilitation was mostly unsuccessful.<sup>2</sup> During this research I concluded that, if rehabilitation is to be worked with seriously, all elements of crime must be taken into account, and the 'offender' is not the only, or most serious, element.

In the early 2000s, I was employed by the Department of Corrections as a therapist to inmates at Pollsmoor Prison, one of South Africa's largest correctional centres. I was newly qualified at the time and had only been in the position for a couple of weeks when the head of the female section, Mama Sizane, asked me to try to help a so-called particularly difficult client. Her name was Lisa.

Lisa was not on the waiting list to see a psychologist. The request to consult with her as a favour opened what I saw as a possible quid pro quo opportunity. Resources in the prison were stretched, and so I agreed to help Mama Sizane if she would help me have access to a therapy room. Mama gamely gave up her office to me for the day. I hoped that this would set a precedent and signify to the warders that if the head of the female section could take the psychology department seriously, perhaps they could too.

Although Lisa was only 20 years old, and therefore still a juvenile (inmates are considered adult at 21), she was widely considered by

staff members to be one of the most difficult inmates in the female section.

The day we met was one of those typically freezing, wet, windy mornings intimately known by those who live in the south of the Western Cape. As Lisa walked into the office, I was immediately struck by the incongruity of her tiny frame when measured against both her reputation implied by Mama Sizane and her 'do-not-mess-with-me' attitude. Lisa was all hunched up and drawn into herself. I was confronted with an extremely dark scowl that lurked behind a thick, rigid fringe.

Metaphorically, the manner in which Lisa identified herself to me, her therapist, in the early 2000s, called to mind the tough semi-desert plant called the halfmens. It conjured up the way she most commonly saw herself in the world, as I would come to learn over time – a solitary, brown being living on the margins, close to and protective of her sisters, always longing for acceptance and validation from her birth mother. For her own protection, she had learned the importance of hiding her vulnerabilities so deep that she sometimes struggled to see them at all, let alone view them as resources. The aptness of the halfmens as a symbol was reinforced when Lisa spoke directly and angrily about her discomfort regarding her identity: a 'coloured', no dad or description of a dad, which she had passively absorbed until she became more aware of her ability to make choices for herself. She referred to this status in a letter she wrote in 2003 to Claire, her art teacher, when she said: 'Here in SA everything is so diverse that they ended up calling it the "rainbow nation"... Especially here in Cape Town where you can find half Jews, half English, half Dutch, half everything. Nothing here's really authentic except for the mountain and even that is being swallowed up by their ever-growing concrete jungles. It truly is unique cause nowhere else will you find such diverse people living together in such a small space.'

So successfully did Lisa wear the mask of sturdiness and prickliness that you would be hard-pressed not to believe that this was the

whole of her. Only after a very long time of testing would she turn around – and only maybe – and honour you with the privilege of seeing her other (mostly hidden) side. This hidden side speaks to why the spikes are smart. They are essential defences. Nothing about Lisa existed without reason.

In the beginning, my formal, face-to-face therapeutic relationship with Lisa comprised more than 100 sessions over five years. Later, after she was transferred to other prisons around the country, our relationship continued through the exchange of letters and messages. This changed means of communicating continued for a period of 17 plus years. During the course of the three years prior to writing this book, Lisa contacted me every day, at least once, sending me messages and pictures, and always wishing me well.

This book is an anecdotal account of some of the mental health hazards in South Africa, but it has at its centre the personal and professional relationship as it subsequently unfolded between me and Lisa from the day of that first session in Pollsmoor. I use my own narrative about Lisa (or more accurately, my perception of Lisa) as witness to my view.

Due to the context from which she came, Lisa organically, and quite without forethought, tested my boundaries in ways I was unprepared for. I had never been taught how to identify these as tests, and I had little, if any, idea how to work with them. As a result, there were times where we both battled with my limitations as a human being and as a therapist. The relationship at times was mutually wary, intense and enraged. On the other hand, it was also extraordinarily close. Predominantly, it exhibited a kaleidoscopic combination of all these emotions and more. And over time, I believe I grew in unexpected ways because of this relationship, at least as much as Lisa did.

Ironically, it is my view that it was the testing of core professional and personal relationships (in our relationship with each other, but also in our relationships within the Department of Corrections and society) that allowed our individual personhood to emerge, when



normally we would both have chosen to hide such vulnerability. I don't believe there has ever been an easy or cautious way to live a relationship like this. It is also one I feel deeply privileged to have experienced.

I stress, Lisa is smart. I have not known Lisa to stay in a relationship when the benefit to her has ended. It may be presumptuous, but I believe our relationship continues because, in our own way, we both benefit from it. The meaning of what constitutes a benefit has changed over time.

Lisa's claim of her personhood may, also ironically, have taken place largely within the harsh context of prison environments. As much as she battled its restrictions and sometimes abuses, prison for her became a form of stability. Although living in such a context for so long would inevitably have institutionalised her to some extent, I nevertheless experienced Lisa's writing existentially, as if I were in it with her.

Using a professional/personal lens – which at times turned out to be deeply ambivalent in itself – my intention in writing this book is to describe profound human struggles and perhaps go some way to answering a seemingly simple question: can we, despite dysfunctional contexts, use a mutually respectful relationship to reach a place of growth, of mental health? I demonstrate how the intersubjective space battles with, and is influenced by, disrespectful elements of the past and present. Those elements are often inevitably experienced as victimising in the moment, yet, if worked with, with respect, there is the possibility that they can contribute to using vulnerabilities in a positive way. Vulnerabilities, which so often are thought of as 'weaknesses', can instead be resources; they can be used and transformed so that they become the cornerstones of learning, growth, healing and intimacy. On the other hand, if worked with disrespectfully, they can entrench anti-social behaviour. Whether the choice of action is respect or disrespect, its consequences will undoubtedly reverberate through generations and across different levels of society. Whether we mean to or not, we all become collusive in the consequences of our choices.

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Lisa is an extraordinary woman. If she were to write and tell her own story, the narrative would of course be different from mine and rich in ways mine can never be. And, like Lisa herself, it would be unique.

## Childhood: place of danger and empty promises

Lisa's life was always meaningless without Meisie, which was the name she used for her mother. It may be a fairly innocuous, harmless word (in English 'girl') and widely used to describe a young female, but there was nothing harmless about Lisa's mother's actions. The pain chronically inflicted upon the young Lisa showed her that there was little hope of protection or wise caring from her mother. As a child, whenever Lisa asked Meisie to tell her about herself, Meisie would become enraged, and so she stopped asking. What she learned about Meisie's childhood came mostly from listening to family gossip. While there was no doubting that her mother had had a difficult young life, she chose not to share any of it with her daughter.

To her knowledge, Lisa had never met her father while she was growing up. Like Meisie's own mother before her, Meisie had steadfastly refused to tell Lisa anything about him, other than yelling in moments of rage that she would end up like her father – in prison! Lisa picked up from others, over time, that her father was a part of her mother's life for a very short period, before he was taken away by the police. Her mother's refusal to speak about him, other than in moments of outrage, suggested to her that Meisie did not consider

him worthy of any respect. This, in turn, suggested to Lisa that she herself had questionable worth; that she, too, was unworthy of respect.

When she is apart from her mother, Lisa's analysis of her mother's parenting skills appears at first glance to be mature, although it is mostly emotionally extremely lenient. Perhaps due to a difficult past, it seems unlikely that Meisie would have learned many skills to cope appropriately with being a role-model parent, since it is difficult to teach another anything that has not been learned or experienced by one's self. And unsurprisingly, when Meisie's turn at parenting came around, Lisa and her sisters probably faced very similar dynamics to those that had beset Meisie's early life with her own mother. In short, Lisa felt the deep pain of emotional invisibility.

Meisie was incapable of hearing and seeing Lisa's unique needs and emotions. For Lisa, it was implicit that she was a burden to Meisie. The guilt of being a burden to the person she depended on for her survival became a recurring theme in her life. She tried to lighten her mother's load either by being a peacemaker or else by completely withdrawing. She has mostly doubted that she had an acceptable place in her mother's life, and therefore in herself also, and, by extension, her place in the world.

Lisa's burden of guilt was not idle delusion. As far as Lisa knew, she had a sister, Jody, three years older than herself, who had been given to someone else to look after. She later found out that Jody had been taken into foster care on a permanent basis at this time. For Lisa, too, it felt as if there was no stable place of belonging in Meisie's house. She was told that once, as an 18-month-old child, when she had wet her pants, her mother had beaten her and locked her out of the house for the night. According to Meisie, 'children need to learn how to cope, and the earlier the better'. As a result, Lisa experienced this type of behaviour as normal. This was her life.

Throughout Lisa's early life and development, the way she learned from her mother to deal with stress, whether in the form of a child's

demands or any other event, was to eliminate and banish it by whatever means necessary. The quicker the better. Various tools of elimination included ignoring, denying, punishing, humiliating, making the cause a secret, or drinking any pain away.

Meisie's moods were unpredictable and overpowering. When her needs for acknowledgement were met, she was exciting to be with. When they weren't, she would make herself known in painful physical and psychological ways. And despite some of these being unintended as truths of life, these unfortunate yet powerful lessons were being passed from mother to daughter. Lisa was learning a number of lessons which were important for her survival at that time, including, firstly, that she was not worthy of her mother's protection and care. Secondly, Lisa's vulnerable emotions made her a target of intensely painful punishment if they did not validate her mother's needs for validation. Thirdly, it was dangerous to trust authority figures.

Lisa learned quickly how best to protect herself from emotional pain. When Meisie's children were very young, before they had learned the value of giving, they were deeply threatening to the satisfaction of Meisie's own needs. From the sheer need to survive, they learned quickly how to give whatever was demanded from their mother, rather than demand what were their rights as children – much faster than most other children – though not from the desire to be generous. The sustenance of their emotional and physical lives depended on living life as carers of Meisie, rather than as children who needed to be cared for by Meisie.

Despite Meisie's emotional instability and the fact that she would leave baby Lisa with anyone who would take up the obligation of caring for her for weeks and sometimes months at a time, she did care on a deep level for Lisa in the sense that she did not give her up, or allow her to die. In moments of sobriety, Meisie would, in her own way, try to make amends as best she could. Eventually she would return from her wanderings with sweets, which were always a welcome

gift for the little girl. Then she would stay for a short while before going away again on another of her life's adventures.

When Lisa was about three years old, she was unceremoniously deposited – in her own words, 'plakked down' – with the rich family of her aunt Milly in Johannesburg, who soon wished to adopt her. Milly offered to send Lisa to school and take care of her. After a short while, however, Meisie turned up to claim her daughter. Refusing any talk of adoption, she insisted on reclaiming Lisa as her daughter and taking her back home with her. No sooner had they arrived back home than she abandoned Lisa again. This time she left Lisa with her grandmother, Liefie, who was Meisie's mother.

Many years later, when Lisa was a teenager travelling in the vicinity of Johannesburg, she went to visit 'those rich people' again. This time they didn't want her. They said 'perhaps if she wasn't so rebellious ... if she didn't have so many tattoos ... if she didn't smoke dagga ... and if she wasn't so tomboyish ...' This only reinforced in Lisa's mind that she just wasn't good enough.

When Lisa was four years old, she was again in the care of Liefie while Meisie gave birth to Valerie, Meisie's third surviving daughter that Lisa knew of. It was at this time that Lisa suffered her first experience of violation at the hands of an adult man.

Everyone spoke of Goodman with great compassion, not only because he did some work for the church, but also because he was blind. Up until that moment, Goodman was the most important man who had come into her life that she can remember. He was introduced to her by the people she was closest to – her mother and Liefie – as a kind, gentle 'man of God'. So, Lisa trusted him. She willingly went with him when he gently took her to one side, as if she had earned his special care and attention. As had been the case for Liefie, and then her mother, special attention was a novel and wonderful experience for young Lisa, particularly since she had not until then had the benefit of a loving father or male role model in her life. But she could not