

Life Hurts

A doctor's personal journey
through anorexia

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with Nick and Carol Pollard

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PUBLISHING

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I Know a Girl

I know a girl
Whose life is a lie
She sets herself targets
Never asks herself why

I know a girl
Who's tired and weak
She stutters and trembles
And struggles to speak

I know a girl
Who hates what she sees
She tries to improve
Is eager to please

I know a girl
Who's not sure who to be
She's desperate and lonely
This girl is me

I wrote this poem in January 2007, when I was fourteen years old, in-between an emergency admission to general hospital and my time at a long-stay inpatient hospital.

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Chapter One

I Couldn't Believe It

'She's not going anywhere. Her heart is struggling. She's not stable enough to move.'

I couldn't believe what the doctors were saying. I thought I was just going to the hospital for a check-up, and now they wanted to keep me in; not just in the hospital, but also in the bed, I wasn't even allowed to stand up or walk.

But then I couldn't believe much of what the doctors had said for many months. What was wrong with losing weight? That was how to be attractive, that was how to look good, how to be good. I thought the doctors had it wrong. I was fourteen years old, I knew my own mind, I could make my own decisions. Every few days, for months now, I had been in a doctor's surgery or clinic being weighed and measured, or in a consulting room being told about the dangers of what was happening in my body. And I simply couldn't believe them.

But now there was something different. My dad was there, even though he was supposed to be away in meetings, and he was looking worried. My mum, who had been firmly holding herself together for months, was very emotional. And the doctors, gathered in their huddle at the bottom of my bed, were talking about dangerously low levels of electrolytes in my blood, about cardiac arrhythmia (abnormal and irregular heartbeats) and the risk of cardiac arrest.

I had only agreed to mum taking me to the hospital because of the pain in my abdomen. It did hurt and I was scared. I'd put up with pain for many months, but this was much worse.

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It began in my maths lesson. I liked maths. I loved quickly solving problems and working out solutions. But that day I couldn't concentrate. I couldn't think about anything other than the ache that had started in my lower back, and was spreading around the front, growing into an excruciating pain. By the time Mum picked me up, the agony was overwhelming. When we got home she tried to give me some water but I couldn't touch it.

When you are living with anorexia you experience overwhelming fears that make you see the worst in everyone and everything. As Mum offered me the glass of water a thought immediately rushed into my mind: 'She's stirred sugar into that, it's full of calories, don't touch it.' So, I didn't. At that time, the anorexia had such a control over my mind that I had hardly eaten or drunk anything for days. I couldn't even brush my teeth because of intrusive thoughts telling me that toothpaste has calories in it.

As I lay on the couch, Mum tried to get hold of Dad, but he was away in meetings with his phone turned off. So, she persuaded me that I should go to the hospital. I can't recall all the details of the admission, but now, as a doctor who has admitted patients, I can piece together the memories I have.

The doctor asked me endless questions about my life and health, about what had been going on recently and a detailed history of my eating pattern. The nurse came to record my vital signs; she took my pulse and blood pressure, and tried not to react at how dangerously low they both were. Then she tried to take my temperature, and this time she couldn't help but react. I vividly remember the look of shock on her face. She tried to take my temperature again, but to no avail. My body was shutting down so rapidly that my temperature was too low to be recorded.

Next, I was wired up to an electrocardiogram (ECG) to look for any changes in the trace of my heart. And blood was sent to the lab to check the levels of my electrolytes (including sodium, magnesium, potassium and phosphate). If a patient has had a highly restricted nutritional intake they are particularly at risk of low levels

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of electrolytes. This can have a devastating effect on the electrical activity of the heart, resulting in dangerous arrhythmias which can rapidly trigger a lethal cardiac arrest.

I can picture myself as the admitting doctor that day. I've been in similar situations in my daily job. These are the patients for whom your heart sinks. They are so unwell that you start to doubt that anything you do will make any difference, because their body is already shutting down. On that day, my body was shutting down.

I remember at one point telling them I needed to go to the toilet and a group of doctors watched me as I walked. I knew I was weak. I felt dizzy even when I had been lying down. Each step felt like I was walking in thick mud. I had to summon all my energy to continue moving forward, keeping my eyes open and focusing on what was in front of me. But I thought to myself, 'I'm walking, I'm OK, I'm fine.' Little did I know that this was the last occasion I would be allowed to walk for a long time.

Mum has written a diary every day for most of her life. Her entry for that night includes this:

Wednesday 22nd November 2006: Lizzie put on bed rest and taken to ward. Nick in London out of communication. Sending texts and phone calls everywhere telling people the situation. Feel desolate. Staying overnight with Lizzie, in a bed beside hers, but can hardly sleep. Eventually got hold of Nick. He will cancel meetings and be here as soon as possible.

I was scared, really scared. I didn't want to be in hospital. I would do anything I could to get out, except eat. I remember the nurses coming every two hours throughout the night to do their observations, taking my pulse, temperature and blood pressure. I remember people coming with food and saying encouraging things to me. I guess they thought they could tempt me to eat. But that was exactly how my mind interpreted it: a dangerous temptation that should be resisted.

I felt a bit better the next morning when Dad arrived, but still nothing could make me eat. The consultant came to see me, and then had a separate meeting with my parents. She made it clear that my body was in a dangerous state. If I didn't eat she would have to insert a feeding tube through my nose. But if I could eat then I would gradually be allowed out of bed, and eventually out of the hospital. Apparently, it was as simple as that! Nothing about what was happening in my mind, or what was causing me not to eat. Just a simple refeeding programme that would rebalance my electrolytes to a safe level, bring my pulse and temperature up to an acceptable figure, and thus render me safe for discharge – back to my world of anorexia.

When you live with anorexia you fight your own thoughts and fears, your own self, every second of every minute of every day. I knew that if I used all my focus and all my determination I could reach the targets this consultant was setting me. I also knew that it wouldn't make any difference to what was going on in my head, but it would get me out of the hospital.

So, when the next piece of food was put in front of me, I forced myself to eat it. Not because I wanted to get better, but because I was determined to get out of the hospital, and back to my ways of restricting food intake. Of course, the doctors now had to ensure that I didn't succumb to the other lethal condition known as 'refeeding syndrome', which may occur following a rapid intake of calories.

Normally, the body uses food to build stores of glycogen, fats and protein (this is known as an anabolic state). But, during starvation, the body switches to breaking down this store (known as a catabolic state). When nutritional intake is then suddenly increased the body switches back from the catabolic to the anabolic state. However, to start storing all of this new energy the body requires potassium, magnesium and phosphates, which are electrolytes that have been seriously depleted during the catabolic state. The resulting sudden and dramatic shifts in the body's fluid and electrolyte balance places the heart at risk of a dangerous

arrhythmia, which could result in a cardiac arrest.

So, initially I was just given a quarter-portion of lunch, which I ate. Then a very small snack in the afternoon, followed by a quarter-portion of dinner, which I also ate. Over the days that followed these gradually became half-portions, then three-quarter and finally full portions.

I fought against my thoughts and fears in order to eat these meals, because I was determined to meet their targets and be released. I wanted to get out. I wasn't given any effective therapy in addressing those thoughts and fears that had brought me to this point. It was all about risk management as they tried to free up the hospital bed. At the time I didn't understand the pressures the doctors were under with bed spaces, nor the protocols they were expected to follow. And neither did my mum and dad, who were very concerned that, as they saw it, the emphasis was on getting me out rather than getting me better. In fact, at times, they became quite cross with the doctors because even though I was now actually in a hospital no-one was addressing the underlying causes, just the symptoms.

Over the many following hours that they sat by my bedside, Mum and Dad encouraged me to talk about my life. They helped me to reflect on what had led me to this point. We wrote down those thoughts in a journal (in fact, much of this chapter is taken from what we wrote together around my bed). This wasn't any formal counselling, or structured cognitive behavioural therapy, we just talked and wrote things down. But it did help me as I began to get some perspective on the preceding months. I told them things I had never shared before.

At that time I thought it had all begun the day I broke my leg. It was my brother Luke's birthday, 1st March 2005. As always we were having a family celebration but it also coincided with a scheduled horse-riding lesson. There was some question about whether I should go, but the course had been paid for and the family all decided that I should not miss it. I was the most reluctant, which was unusual because I absolutely loved horse riding.

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I loved the smell of the horses as I approached the stables. I loved the sound the horses made when I got closer. I loved saddling up my ride and leading him out to the arena, particularly if it was set up for jumping – I loved jumping. It was my mum who usually took me riding, even though she didn't like anything about horses or what she described as 'smelly, noisy, dirty stables'. But she always took me faithfully to every lesson; even when she had literally just come out of a two-hour tooth extraction and her mouth was full of blood and dressings, still she took me and stood in the cold while I rode.

But this day, because Mum was doing a special meal for Luke, my dad took me. Perhaps my life may have been different if I hadn't gone, or Dad hadn't taken me, or at least if I had been concentrating fully on the jumping. My mind was half on the horse underneath me in the arena, and half on my brother waiting for me at home. A group of us at the stable were building up to some competitions so the jumps were quite high. As I approached the first one the horse must have sensed that my mind and body weren't totally focused. So, he refused. And because I wasn't fully concentrating I went over his head and landed hard on the ground, hurting my shoulder.

Dad's attitude to pain was always to 'tough it out'. Perhaps this came from the rugby fields at his school when Dad, who wasn't great at rugby and usually came off worse in a tackle, was taught to 'run it off' after getting hurt. He taught me the same. So, seeing him watching me from the side of the arena, I got straight back on the horse and tried again. If I wasn't focused enough before, I was certainly concentrating even less now. And the horse knew it. Again, he refused. This time he veered at the last moment and I fell straight off onto the jump, landing awkwardly on my leg.

I was in a lot of pain as I hobbled away, but I told people I was OK and someone kindly took the horse from me. Dad eased me into his car and drove me home. When we arrived, Mum had everything ready for Luke's special birthday meal, and I didn't want to spoil it. I was also quite embarrassed about falling off so stupidly. So, it was some time before I went to the hospital for an X-ray where they

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told me there was a fracture. Looking back on it now, I think it was probably a small greenstick fracture of the fibula, and possibly most of the pain was from the damaged ligaments in my knee. But, either way, the hospital decided that I should have a leg brace fitted and would be required to use two crutches for at least six weeks.

At the time I was attending an all-girls Roman Catholic school, and they had a rule that for health and safety reasons I couldn't attend while I was on two crutches because I would not be safe going up and down the stairs. Therefore, I was destined to spend that time out of school. I'd just turned thirteen and initially I quite enjoyed the prospect of sitting at home watching TV and reading magazines.

My mum and dad had recently started an educational charity which had a growing staff team, and they both needed to be at the office every day. So, every morning, Mum would help me gather everything I needed into a bag and take it down to the lounge. She, and Dad if he wasn't away, would come home several times during the day to spend whatever time they could with me. But hardly any of my classmates came to visit. I suppose they may have been jealous that I was having all this time off school. Each day I became increasingly lonely.

Mum had bought me craft to do, books to read and videos to watch, but I found the only thing that really consoled me was something else from Mum – her cakes and sweets. My mum is a great cook who makes fabulous food. I have always enjoyed it. Each day I would eat some homemade biscuits or fudge before heading off to the gym club, or swimming or dancing or horse-riding. Now I couldn't go anywhere, but I could still eat, and I did.

And the more I ate, the more I wanted to eat. The food comforted me, it made me feel better. I began to use food to control my emotions. I started to binge, eating until my stomach cried out in pain, and then just a few more mouthfuls. Mum and Dad didn't know how much I was consuming. But I knew. In fact, I became aware that it was getting out of control, and that I should stop.

As I lay on the couch, day after day, I spent a lot of time reading

magazines and looking at the photos of beautiful celebrities. They were slim and so obviously attractive. Next to these pictures were articles about diets, and the connection was obvious. So I tried them. But they never worked. Mum's lovely food was always around and I couldn't resist it; I gave in to the temptation and ate another cake, another sweet, another biscuit. And then I felt such a failure. Where was my willpower? Where was my self-control?

Eventually, after physiotherapy, I was allowed to go down to one crutch, which meant I could return to school, and I was really looking forward to it. I hoped that I would fit straight back in with the other girls, and I wasn't prepared for the reaction I received. In the evening after my first day back I wrote in my diary, 'What have I done wrong? Everyone seems to hate me.'

I thought it must be something about all-girl schools, that we can tend to bring out the worst in one another, as we try to push ourselves up by pushing others down. Or perhaps it was the fact that I was always slightly on the outside anyway because I was serious about my Christian faith, as much as I understood it at that stage. Because, although it was a Catholic school, being serious about faith made people think you were slightly odd. Or perhaps it was just that the friendship groups had moved on, and the space where I used to fit had closed up.

Even the girl who had previously been my 'best friend' had changed. The school asked her to carry my bag for me, because although the school would let me back with one crutch, they wouldn't let me use the other hand to hold a bag. So, she was delegated to carry it. Except she didn't, she deliberately dragged it along the floor, making a big show of scraping it over the rough concrete. Mum had bought me that bag specially as a back-to-school present and it meant a lot to me. There was nothing I could do to stop this girl from ruining it. The more I asked her to stop, the more she scraped it.

But it wasn't just the general meanness that hurt me. It was the specific comments about weight that really got to me. I had put on

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weight, I knew it. I had been sat on a sofa for six weeks, eating too much food. I was an easy target for the other girls to pick on, as they made sarcastic comments and called me names. Nothing I did could make them stop.

I felt powerless. But Dad had always said that 'every problem is an opportunity' and I decided to take action. I decided to move schools. This time it would be a co-ed school, with boys as well as girls. I was convinced that boys would tone down the bitchiness of the girls.

My parents weren't so keen on the idea, but I had discovered over the years that if I put together a reasoned argument they would always listen and take it seriously. So, I began to research other schools that I could get to from our house by bus, train or bike, and that were co-ed.

Eventually, after a lot of discussion, we decided on a community school in Romsey, a train journey from our house in Southampton. It would mean quite a commitment to get up early, walk for half an hour into town and then catch the train, and walk again at the other end. But I was happy to do that, because it would take me to a new school, where I could start again, where there were boys as well as girls, and where they would accept me as I was.

I remember my first day at that new school as if it was yesterday. I was nervous and excited. Dad drove me there, prayed with me before we got out of the car and then walked with me to the reception. I was wearing my new blazer and white blouse. I felt smart, clean and ready to make a fresh start. The receptionist took me through into the school corridor as Dad walked back to his car. He told me later that he immediately phoned Mum to say 'I think she will be happy here.'

And I thought so too, as I was taken to a room full of pupils who would be my tutor group, the people with whom I would spend much of the next three years, the people who would be my friends. When I walked through the door all eyes were on me. The teacher smiled, welcomed me and invited me to find a seat.

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As I made my way past the rows of desks one particular boy looked up and spoke to me. He was the first boy to say anything to me. In fact, he was the first pupil in the whole school to say anything to me. He looked me straight in the eye and said: 'Hello fatty'.

A LETTER TO MYSELF IN HOSPITAL

Dear Lizzie,

I know you are scared. You've suddenly been admitted to hospital and the doctors talk about the risk that your heart could stop. But take courage. You can get better. You can have a wonderful life, if you will fight the anorexia before it takes even more control.

I wish I could be you again. If only you could feel the pain I have experienced for the past ten years; every second of your life taken over by an internal bully. It hates you and wants to make every ounce of your existence miserable, and to make you hurt the people who love you the most. Tell me, is it worth it?

I don't have the chance to live those years again; I wish I did. But you do. Take the opportunity, run with recovery and don't give anorexia another glance. I wish I could re-write the last decade of my life. I can't, but you can.

Anorexia is a disease. It's not a diet. It will consume you. Right now, you don't want to lose it. You think it gives you control, but that's not true. Anorexia is a bully that is taking over your life. I know you sometimes like to call it 'Ana', as if it is a friend. It isn't. Please read this poem that I wrote some months after I was admitted to hospital, like you. And please think again:

My Friend Ana

My friend Ana
What sort of friend is she?
She tore me down completely
Took everything from me

My friend Ana
Is slowly killing me
Taking my enjoyment
My right to be free

My friend Ana
At least I thought she was
She stole my friends and family
And my life, just because . . .

I wanted to be perfect
To fit the flawless mould
Push down thoughts and feelings
And be thin until I'm old

The diets and the calories
Fill my thoughts throughout the day
My life is slowly fading
What more can I say?

My friend Ana
Her voice is bold and tough
But truth is: listen to her and . . .
You'll be dead before you're thin enough.

Love,

dizzie x

Appendix 1

A Father's Perspective

It was the phone call that every father dreads: 'You have to come back, Lizzie's in hospital and it's serious.' My wife, Carol, was obviously distressed, so I immediately cancelled my meetings and started the journey home, getting to the hospital early the next morning with flowers in my hand and fear in my heart. The doctors took me aside and warned me that my fourteen-year-old daughter's vital signs were so low that she was in danger. In fact, her illness was life threatening. They told me that it would take some time to get her stable, and I should expect a long road to recovery beyond that.

That certainly was a wake-up call to me. Carol had been deeply concerned about Lizzie's restriction of her food intake for many months, but I had held on to the hope that it would simply pass.

But now the extent of Lizzie's illness was clearly evident. And so, I swung into action. I was used to solving problems and making things happen, and anorexia, I assumed, was just another problem that I could solve. So, I asked the doctors what their treatment would be and how long it would take. Their answers were vague, which I interpreted as evasive. I've since realised that anorexia is a complex multi-factorial illness that no-one fully understands, and no-one can cure with a simple treatment.

Over the months and years that followed, while Lizzie battled against this illness, I had to make major changes in my attitude and approach. It wasn't easy. Nor is it easy for many other fathers of children living with anorexia. As I got to know other dads in the inpatient unit to which Lizzie was later admitted, I discovered that many of us were action-focused, solution-driven people. Perhaps

that is why many of our children were high-achieving perfectionists, which made them vulnerable to this dreadful disease?

I will be eternally grateful for the work of the family therapists, Dave and Elaine, who spent many hours helping us as a family to consider how we could support Lizzie as she lived through her eating disorder.

First, I had to let go of my simplistic reaction to anorexia, which I have since discovered is prevalent amongst many when they first encounter this disease. ‘What’s the problem with you eating?’ I would say to Lizzie. ‘There’s food. Your hands work. Your mouth works. Just eat it!’ I am so thankful that my daughter has forgiven me for my crass ignorance.

Then, I had to develop an understanding of what we could achieve together. For me, it is probably best summed up by an illustration I often used when talking about how we, as a family, were seeking to help Lizzie. I used to say it was like we were all in a rowing boat, trying to get up a river. And, while I was pulling hard on the oars, I would look around to see that Lizzie was rowing in the opposite direction. So, as a solution-driven person, I felt betrayed and angry. But as I began to understand more about eating disorders, and what was going on in Lizzie’s mind, it suddenly struck me that I was focusing on the wrong goal. Instead of trying to get up the river, my focus should be on keeping us all together in the boat. I should be patient if we went downstream for a while. I should be understanding if Lizzie was going through a particularly difficult patch and was losing the will to conquer her illness. What mattered was that we were all together in the boat.

I couldn’t make Lizzie fight back against her illness. I had to love her and respect her. I had to stay with her and support her as she battled with her thoughts and fears. Yes, there were times when Carol and I, and the doctors, had to step in and take action to save Lizzie from doing irreparable harm to herself. But ultimately, it was Lizzie who had the lead role in fighting this disease. I was just a supporting actor.

Appendix 1: A Father's Perspective

For dads who are used to being in control of their professional lives, and tend to act the same in their family lives, this is a very hard adjustment to make. I had to change from leading her on, to cheering her on. And gradually, through professional help, her strong faith, and the appropriate support that we as a family learned to provide, Lizzie found the hope and strength to overcome. She even continued her education, secured a place at medical school, and is now a hospital doctor. Lizzie still struggles with food and the underlying issues that led to her eating disorder, but she is alive, and healthy, and making a positive difference in the lives of others.

Nick Pollard (Lizzie's father)