

Side by Side

A THERAPEUTIC JOURNEY
THROUGH SECONDARY TRAUMA



DR SHOSHANAH LYONS &
HELEN TOWNSEND

Side by Side

THE THERAPEUTIC JOURNEY
THROUGH SECONDARY TRAUMA

We take a privileged step
inside the unique
relationship between a
parent with secondary
trauma and her therapist.

From these two
perspectives, we explore
what it looks like, how it
feels and what it takes to
hit rock bottom and climb
out the other side.

Whilst some details have
been changed to protect
the identity of the children
involved, this journey is a
genuine account of the toll
trauma takes on a whole
family and the power of a
therapeutic team around
that family.

SIDE BY SIDE

DR SHOSHANAH LYONS
& HELEN TOWNSEND

Part One



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ROCK BOTTOM

DR LYONS

Helen and her husband opened up their home and their hearts to a beautiful boy, who had suffered stress in the womb; and who had suffered loss, separation and disrupted care as a baby.

The child, 'Sam', was hurting badly inside from what he had been through; and joining his new 'forever family' was terrifying for him. Sam had learnt that adults disappear, and that emotions are too dangerous to feel and certainly too dangerous to express.



He was so good at hiding this pain from the world, with his cheeky smile and easy going company.

Who knew that underneath this, was a boy who was in agony?

Sam was so scared of letting his new mum and dad get close to him in case he was abandoned again. He did what he knew best, he protected himself from even more pain with his armoury of his attachment-seeking behaviours. When Sam wasn't smiling sweetly, leading adults to think all was well; Sam was hitting, punching, kicking, screaming, biting, spitting, running, hiding, crying, and withdrawing. He was in survival mode, and keeping safe was all that mattered.

Helen began her journey as an adoptive mother with open excitement, hope, compassion, knowledge, empathy and acceptance. She was ready to love, and had so much love to give. Over time, something profound changed.

Sam pushed Helen away again, and again and again.

He could not bear the possibility of a mummy leaving him all over again, nor the possibility of mummy getting too close to him. It began to dawn on Helen that her love was not enough.

She began to feel all the things that Sam felt – powerless, ineffectual, shamed, trapped, hurt, anxious, vulnerable, terrified. She tried time and time again to open her heart to Sam, and each time Sam gave her a little bit more of the trauma that he was carrying.

Helen, through her love for her son, took on his trauma.

She began to carry it. Her safety in the world and in her family was under threat, and she could no longer keep herself or her son emotionally safe. She knew it too, and this was the deepest pain she had ever experienced.

Helen was suffering with secondary trauma and blocked care. She no longer had love to give as she swung from numbness to fear. Love cannot be felt in either of these states of trauma. She was in survival mode too, and nothing else mattered but surviving each hour.

Helen had joined Sam's world, and it was terrifying for both of them. She could no longer repair Sam's pain, as she was frozen in it alongside him.



ROCK BOTTOM

HELEN *IN FLIGHT*

Trapped in your own body, encased in a skeleton prison so tight, that some days you can hardly breathe, hardly think.

Never sitting down, never absorbed, books too long, TV holds no escape. Evading family, friends, anyone and all sapping precious energy reserves, instead, head down walk fast, get in, get out.



Easier to be alone.

You think about running, leaving, but there's nowhere to go, they'd track you down. You think about dying, turning the wheel, tempting, an option. But what if it didn't work?

You'd have to go back.

For now there is the short lived respite of the supermarket - 'we need more bread, milk', who cares, slamming the door to the brief solitude of being alone in the car.

Hiding no-where, sobbing or even worse, drowning in the silence, wondering if you'll forget how to breathe and just fade away.

Feeling that ever present knot of dreading, sitting heavy in your stomach.

Knowing you have to turn around.

Go back.

ROCK BOTTOM

HELEN *IN FIGHT*

You feel it starting to swell in your chest, just under your skin, you can almost see it.

Ready to protect.

Knowing what's coming, it helps you scream louder, teeth snarling, mirroring the rage on your child's face. Seeing their look of triumph, they know they've got you.

You clench your fists, nails cutting deep into your skin, fighting with yourself not to raise your hands, knowing it will be the end of everything, but knowing the desire is there.

When the violence starts, you push back, maybe a little too hard, knowing you can say you were 'just trying to protect yourself' when really you want to squeeze harder, wanting the abuse to stop.

While you fight the urge to show how well you can really protect yourself, an attack starts on a younger child, a tortured pet, you feel it overwhelm you, take control.

Now the wild animal screaming with rage is you, you lunge ready to protect the weak but knowing deep inside, the raw nerves screaming out, the person you're really trying to save is yourself.



ROCK BOTTOM

HELEN *IN FREEZE*

Mute.

Words don't come.

You tell yourself it's because words make it worse but you know it's because you have nothing to say.

Nothing that won't give away how powerless you are.

That you have nothing left.



Once the death threats don't provoke the anger needed to feed the wildcat destroying your child from the inside, the violence starts.

Almost gently at first, gauging what you have left, before, and with visible delight, it intensifies.

You let it.

Once upon a time you cried but you couldn't stomach the mocking laughter so now you shut down.

Numb.

Some of the blows don't even hurt anymore. You know it will stop if you just wait.

Burying yourself deep inside, you've almost stopped breathing, just enough to stay alive, body so heavy it feels like your sinking through the floor.

You sit and wait.

That's where it's safest.

ROCK BOTTOM

HELEN *IN SUBMIT*

A stranger stares back at you from the mirror, day after day.

Make up too heavy, a pointless task that wouldn't help anyway, hair grown long through neglect, anyway, it hides your face that way.

It's easier to just let things happen to your outside, the same as your insides, they grow lifeless and more inconsequential every day.

Hope is not allowed here.

Life will be like this forever with nothing you can do to change it, no way to turn and you've failed anyway so just put one foot in front of the other knowing that this is the way it is.

There is no point in looking up, even if you were offered a torch to light up the end of the tunnel you wouldn't know which direction to choose.

It's just best to stay unnoticed, so no-one can see what you've done, that way at least what is left will be kept safe.



SIDE BY SIDE

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Part Two



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FIRST STEPS

DR LYONS

A family psychological assessment showed that Helen had secondary PTSD and blocked care; and that Sam suffered Developmental Trauma.

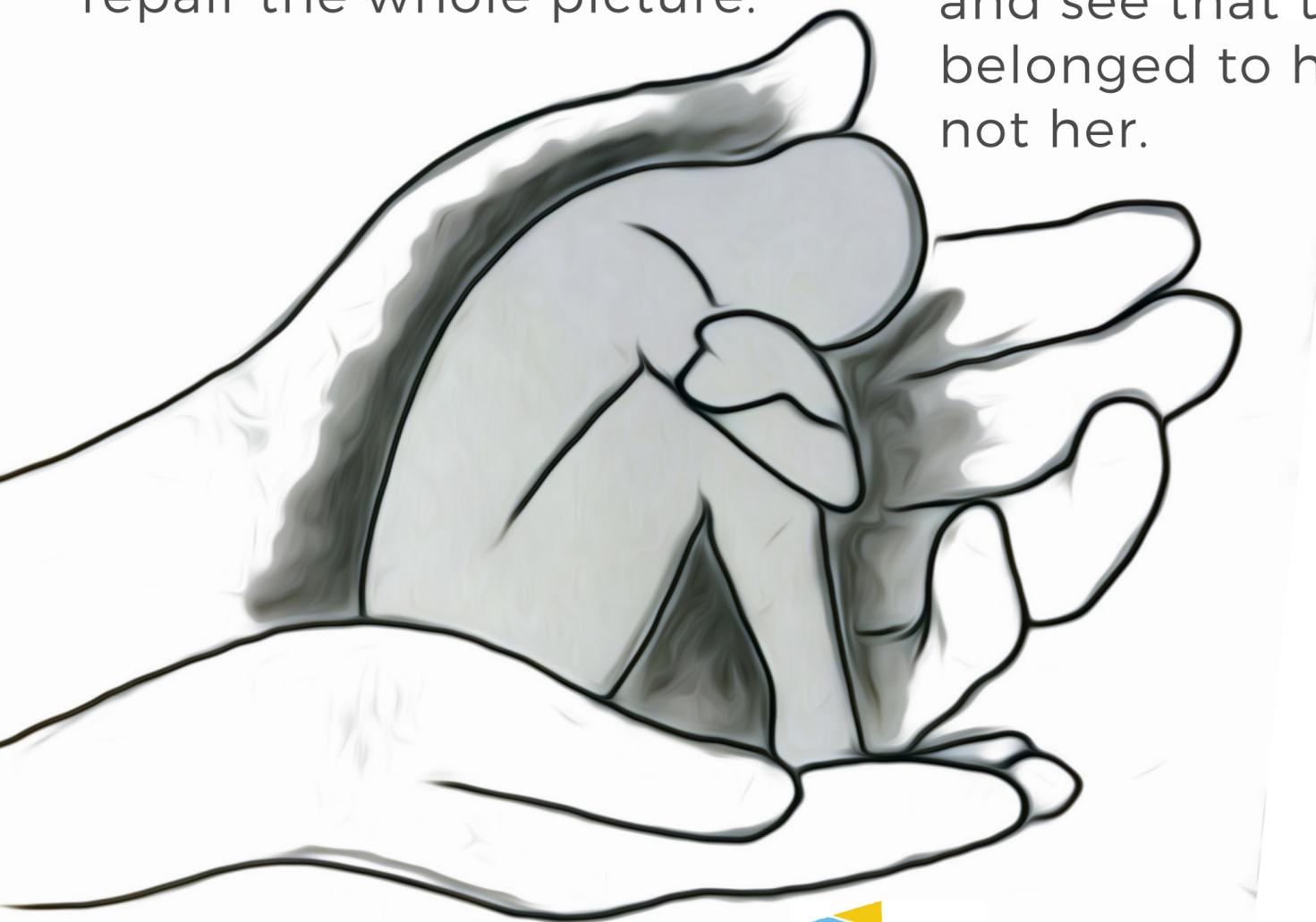
A holistic and sequenced intervention plan was needed – and needed urgently. Family life was on a downward turn and this family were on track for a placement breakdown.

What was needed to stop breakdown in its tracks? A multi-disciplinary, multi-dimensional intervention was needed to focus and repair the whole picture.

First and foremost - Helen's secondary trauma: This was addressed using the powerful trauma treatment – EMDR in weekly, individual therapy. The first priority for Helen was emotional stability and building up her inner resources and resilience. Without this, the rest of the intervention would not have been enough.

To repair the child's trauma, the parent must be repaired first.

Helen's blocked care: This was thought about in fortnightly therapeutic parenting sessions to support Helen to self-care in meaningful ways; and then to turn on her 'thinking mind' so that she can begin to stand back and see that the pain belonged to her son and not her.



FIRST STEPS

DR LYONS

Sam's school environment:

An educational psychologist worked with school to help them understand Sam's adaptive attachment strategy of hiding pain at school; and unleashing pain at home. The network around Sam began to share an understanding of his needs. The 'therapeutic web' was activated.

Through this first phase of work, Helen slowly started to know in her mind and feel in her heart that the trauma pain did not belong to her; but that she was carrying it for her son.

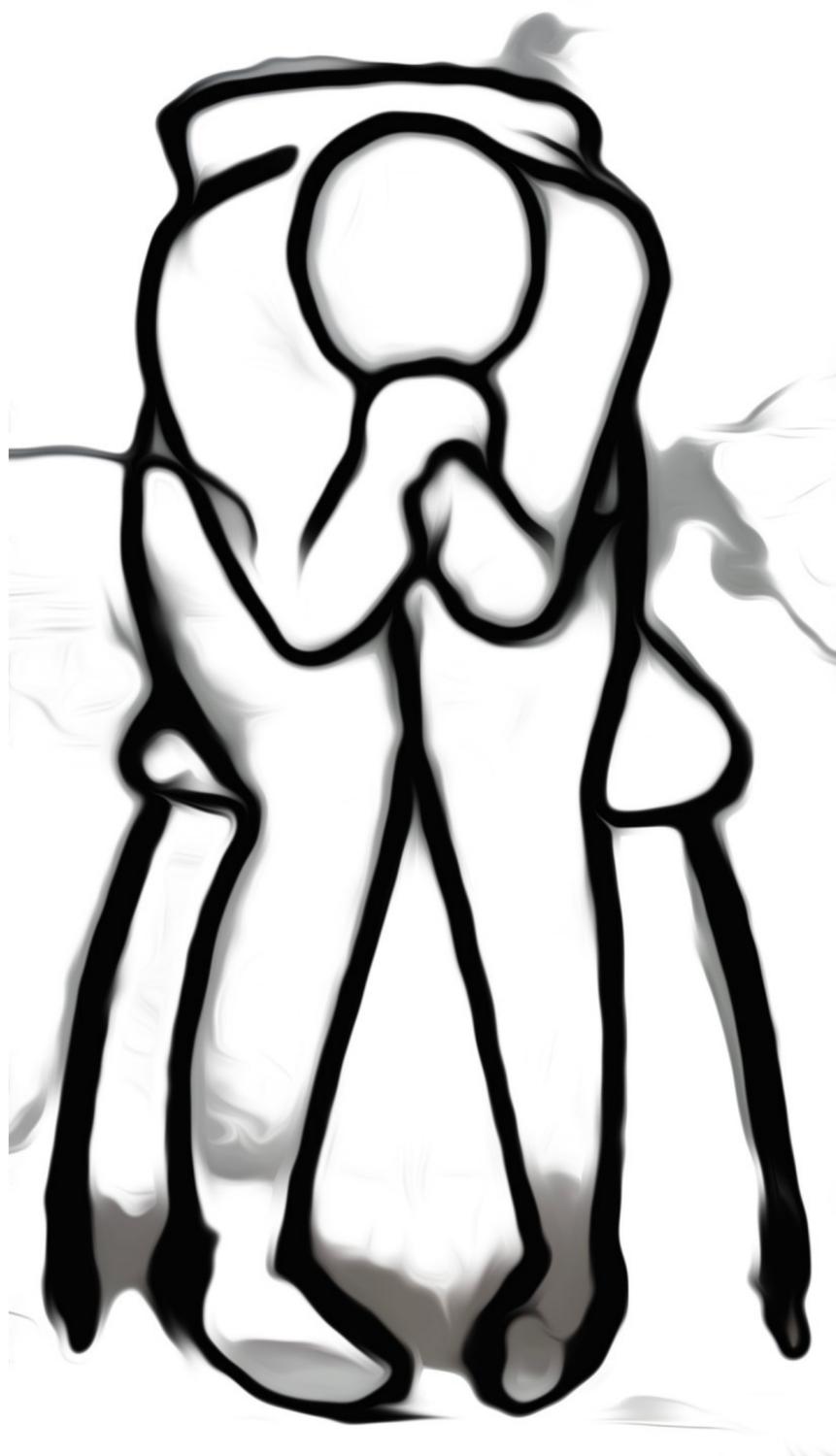
It was still overwhelming for her, and she worked courageously in therapy to face her daily feelings of profound shame and fear.

The EMDR enabled Helen to start processing the trauma; the pain slowly but surely started to thaw and melt away.

In many ways, this was almost more painful for Helen, because she became a little more open to Sam's pain, empathy started to return; and empathy hurts when you love the person who is hurting.

Helen still felt helpless, powerless and incompetent. She asked herself again and again; can this actually, really ever be any different?

"Can I ever find my love for Sam again?"



FIRST STEPS

HELEN

The emotional touch paper is ignited by a wrongly perceived 'no' and the anger appears before my lovely boy has a chance to hear what's really been said.

I watch as Rage takes over his body, gaining quick control of its fragile host before either of us has taken another breath.

Years of experience means I know there is nothing I can do now other than try and keep everyone safe. I've given up trying to protect the house, it's just things, they can be replaced - or not depending on how much I care that day. Using my body to shield my younger child, I usher Rage down the hallway into another room and then calmly watch as a canvas is ripped from the wall and thrown onto the floor, wood splinters and cracks loudly as the frame is torn apart by soft, young hands.

The painting I've spent days on is destroyed in moments. Fleeting I wonder if I'm meant to feel anything, what the reaction is supposed to be? It's such a familiar scene that it's hard to work out what's normal, perhaps everyone lives like this? Perhaps everyone has paint instead of wallpaper so it can't be torn off? Perhaps everyone has taken wooden train tracks to the charity shop because they make such good weapons? Perhaps everyone's child wishes they would die a violent death?

Perhaps everyone has had a split lip or a black eye from the child they taught how to walk?



FIRST STEPS

HELEN

Except these thoughts are dismissed as fast as they arrive, as fast as emotional missiles are thrown at my head. I know it's not normal, that this one moment would be considered a traumatic event in a 'normal' household.

Excepting that there is nothing I can do has been the hardest lesson to learn, interventions are pointless, I've tried them all, it just escalates things, Rage is so powerful that it deafens and blinds my child until it has left his body. I have to wait it out, keep us safe and wait. I feel myself going into a calm almost meditative state trying to make sure any words that do have to leave my mouth are quiet and calm, almost loving in tone, but mostly I keep a silent vigil, just watching and waiting,

I can't leave my boy to deal with Rage alone. He has to feel it take over his body, I only have to watch.

Today is a good day, is only saturates him for an hour and my efforts to contain him in one room have earned me a few blows to the stomach and a punch to the face but also a massive cuddle at the end and lots of tears, his grief, his palpable loss is blamed on the destroyed canvas.

He seemingly moves on swiftly, ready to run away from Rage and into the peaceful arms of a computer game, ready to give his poor brain a rest and I accompany him there until I'm sure Rage has left us for now.



FIRST STEPS

HELEN

I move away into another room, then the adrenalin of keeping calm and safe hits me.

I start to feel shaky and weak and have to sit down.

Once again dinner is now a matter of convenience rather than what I had planned.

It's survival for the rest of the day now until I have a chance to recover.

As many yes's as needed to get through until bedtime. Until I can rest my head on the arm of the sofa and zone out myself.



The years have taken their toll though; my recovery time is longer. The next day my tolerance levels are low, any loud voices put me on the defensive. I startle easily, flinching at nothing.

I know it's time to call in reinforcements, I know I can't parent them alone today.

I arrange our day so I am not alone, hand over my responsibility's until I am strong enough again.

It's still on his mind days later as he attempts to make a painting for me to replace what has been destroyed, my words of reassurance only do so much, the telling space on the wall too large to keep it too far from his mind.

And so, we go on, Rage being the unwelcome tenant in my house, in my child.

We all work hard to evict it but it clings on, it's fetid grip, powerful.

SIDE BY SIDE

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Part Three



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HEAR ME, SEE ME

DR LYONS

Helen continued to work tirelessly in her EMDR therapy, and her secondary trauma was lifting.

EMDR is quite something – it grabs hold of a distressing feeling or memory that has got stuck in the brain & body, and it shakes it up until it is all worked out. Distressing experiences lose their grip, they lose their power and they take on a new meaning.

Helen realised that her own childhood memories of feeling ineffectual were being triggered, because every parents' 'childhood memory map' is opened up when confronted with threat and pain as a parent.

This is entirely normal, and Helen realised that she was not bad or crazy.

It really began to dawn on Helen she could save her family from breakdown.

More profoundly, Helen started to feel that she could see inside Sam's heart again; and she became more and more confident that he needed her to protect and advocate for him.

She found a new and energised ability to assert herself on behalf of her son, sometimes with a vengeance!

I noticed that on the outside Helen could come across now as bold in her assertions to others...she exuberated: "I know what my son needs from you". I also noticed that with a little scratch - just beneath the surface there was still painful self-doubt.



HEAR ME, SEE ME

DR LYONS

Helen was easily knocked but was beginning to bounce back each time.

Helen's ability to know what Sam needed from others (school, family, friends) was strong and growing.

What was still to come in her therapeutic journey was her ability to tolerate what Sam needed from her; which was the risk of falling in love with him all over again.

Home and school had stabilised, and it was therefore time for Sam to begin his own individual therapy.

The work with Sam focussed on his emotional regulation, and on his trust to draw on Helen (rather than the therapist) in the therapy sessions when feeling vulnerable.

We used stories, play, movement, conversation, art and sand. We also used EMDR 'tapping' to strengthen Sam's inner resources.

Sam moved like a pendulum between emotional avoidance and emotional expression in his therapy.

He was experimenting – how safe is this? What if I show you my pain?

I remember a special moment, after many weeks in therapy, when Sam felt 'that funny tummy feeling'...he turned to Helen, and he snuggled in; and Helen snuggled back.



HEAR ME, SEE ME

HELEN

I stand up and face the ugly truth of trauma pain every single day.

I charge into the melee with little regard for myself. I am battle weary, exhausted, the prolonged conflict of getting the rest of my world to help me on my journey of healing is depleting my reserves.

I am my child's greatest resource so let me know that until I beg you to stop. Let me know that my simple existence and choice to stay is vital and important work. Tell me that I am the person who will ultimately heal the pain of trauma and I make the difference. Bestow on me your respect, be my champion, be my knight in shining armour.

Teach me how to listen to my child to hear what they're telling me when no-one else is around and to respond with healing work unique to our relationship accompanied by the tools you have access to but most of all - with me,

I am the greatest healing tool my child has.

Empower me to believe that, teach me how to communicate with my child using the language that is ours alone and ensure I understand that silent messages of love are powerfully healing too.

Have an unwavering belief that I know my child the best, even if our time together is still in its infancy, I am the expert, the specialist of my children, of the life that you have been given rare permission to cross the threshold of, my perception of this reality is what counts.



HEAR ME, SEE ME

HELEN

Perhaps you wonder if my anxiety is making my child behave in that way, perhaps you think all kids do that – maybe your kids do that, it could be that you wonder if they'll grow out of it, that it's just a phase or that they're fine now, safe in my home and we just need some time?

Do not sit on my sofa in a house I've felt obliged to make clean for your visit, drinking a hot drink I'm really far too exhausted to make and require your voice to be the most important one in the room.

Silently thinking those thoughts is your right as a person, perhaps even as a parent in your own world but please, not as my knight in shining armour. My child has lived a lifetime before me, before you. They may be behind their peers, maybe you think they were too young or delayed to even remember but, they are wiser beyond their years, survival aging them prematurely.

Don't underestimate their ability to read your mind, your body, your tone, to survive what life continually throws at them, they will outwit you, you will be fooled it's the only way they know how to endure their wounded existence.



HEAR ME, SEE ME

HELEN

Feel free to be scared by my child's behaviour, know that your own past experiences and personal traumas are weighing in on how you see me, see my family. Then shield us from your private fears, denial of my reality is destructive, don't taint us with your personal worries we cannot carry these as well, the burden is too great.

Maybe you don't like the choices you have to offer me? Perhaps you have nothing but your presence? The truth is what I value the most, I would take a thousand 'I don't know how to help you' over one false desperate promise of support that never appears or can't be accessed because you don't know what else to do.

You can change my world just with your sensitive, straightforward and honest presence, knowing how to sit and really listen, to believe in the power of me alone.

Stand guard over my heart, make sure it is not depleted and silenced by other professionals that don't know me, don't realise or can't believe that I am my children's expert, their voices cast doubts in my mind, knock my fragile confidence and sap my energy, I cannot afford this I have too little to spare.

Desperation annihilates my self-respect, my self-esteem and eventually my ability to parent the child that was chosen for me so help me not to get that far. I am my child's greatest resource but you can be mine. The simple truth, is that I really need you, I need you to be my advocate, the voice that empowers me, give me the strength to carry on the fight.

Be my knight in shining armour.



SIDE BY SIDE

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& HELEN TOWNSEND

Part Four



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THE DAY THE LOVE CAME BACK

DR LYONS

Therapy is a roller coaster, filled with the highs and lows of joy and fear. As the therapy team around Helen and Sam, we could feel that we were on track.

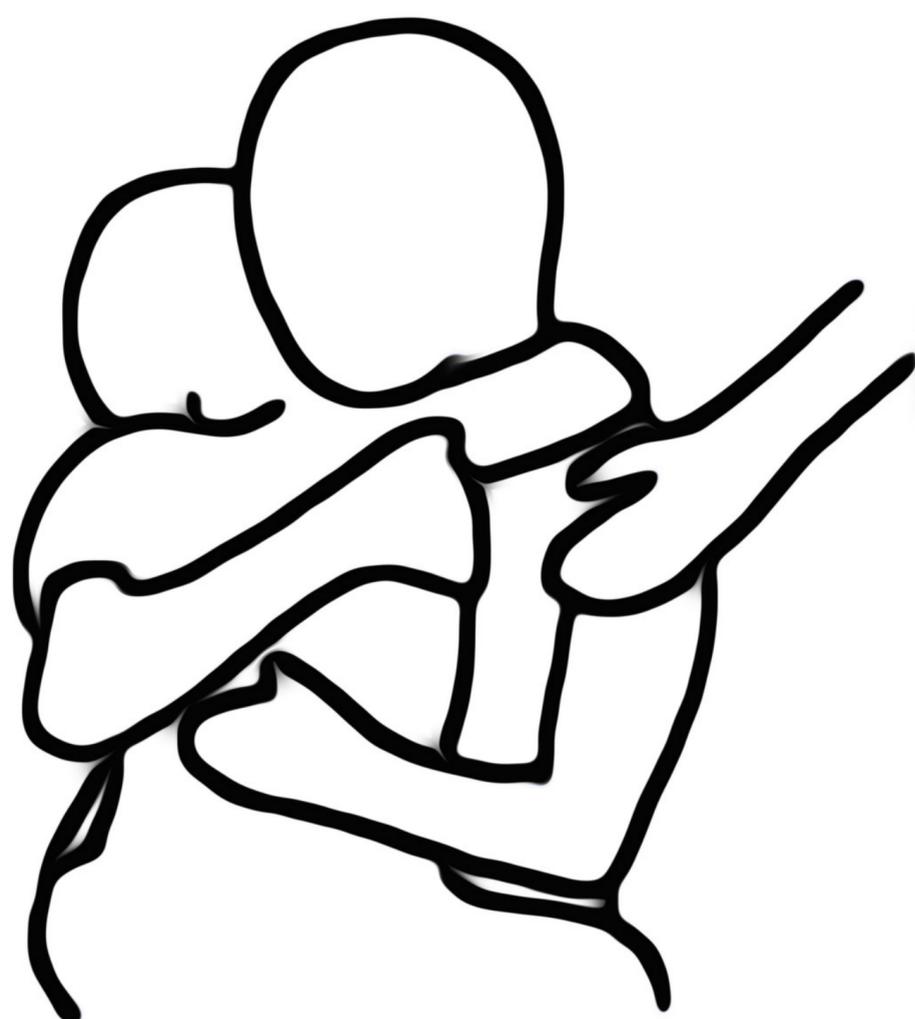
Helen's trauma had been processed, she no longer carried shame and terror with her every day. Her resilience was robust – she could bounce back again and again. She learnt the art of emotional repair with Sam; she knew that when she got it wrong (as all parents do!) that she could repair the rupture with Sam by saying 'I'm sorry'; or by putting her hand gently on his back.

Helen had discovered a lovely long list of things that helped Sam to calm his frightened brain when he was in survival mode. Nothing worked all the time, but Helen was able to try different things and if nothing worked in that moment, she stayed close to Sam until his wave of fear had passed.

This phase of the work must not be idealised – family life was still tough.

The change though had come in that Helen was able to accept that Sam's trauma pain was not going to go away, but now she could bear it for him rather than being frozen in it with him.

Helen could also accept that she can never be the perfect therapeutic parent, because there is no such thing! She'll mess up, misunderstand, be too busy, be too tired, snap sometimes; but this would no longer cripple her or indeed crush Sam. They had the beauty of emotional repair in their toolbox.



THE DAY THE LOVE CAME BACK

DR LYONS

In therapy, Sam settled into his weekly space to experiment with emotional expression.

Something else happened which was a lovely surprise to me, Helen became a co-therapist. I started to take a back seat and Helen wondered curiously, played, conversed, named feelings, suggested creative activities and contained Sam. It was a pleasure to see this unfold before my eyes, and I knew we were on the home straight.

Then, the day came.

The day came that Helen could feel, deep down in her heart of hearts, her love for her boy again.

It seemed to come from nowhere, like a bolt of lightning. Of course, it had always been there, but the trauma had been blocking her from feeling it.

Without her trauma in the way, connection was possible all over again.



THE DAY THE LOVE CAME BACK

HELEN

Loyalty saved us.

Loyalty to our history, our shared past. Duty bound by the promises I made to your families to keep you safe, to love you. Obligated by my family and friends who love you so unconditionally.



Loyal to a society, an authority, who expected me to stay because I said I would.

Loyalty to my partner who was sticking it out, turning up, being there regardless.

Loyalty made me faithful to my commitment to you when my love was buried for years in brutal, unyielding trauma.

And then one day, the love came back.

We'd been laying on my bed reading a story, mucking around, laughing at a joke and it swooped over me like a beautiful bird.

I felt it ripple through me, a physical reaction to your company, to your existence in my life.

It meant for the first time in years I was able to give you a proper, meaningful cuddle and be genuinely interested in what you were telling me, purely because it meant so much to you.

THE DAY THE LOVE CAME BACK

HELEN

I felt a connection that hadn't been there in forever. To feel physical love in my body again felt like welcoming in the warm, morning sunlight to a darkened room.

Until that moment I hadn't realised how much my love for you was my motivation to see you, see your beauty, take your pain away, my inspiration to make your life better, richer and filled with joy.

It's the driving force that makes me want to brush your teeth, cook you dinner or fake genuine delight in your tales of football and robots.

It gives me patience and resilience when you're feeling cross and hate me, helps me stay calm and confident when you lash out, makes me laugh inside and keep a straight face on the outside when creative death threats are thrown thick and fast.



I'd treated my love for you badly, without the respect it deserved.

It should have been a closely guarded piece of me, treasured and nourished because without it, I became malnourished, a shadow.

With fresh eyes, I look at my love for you. It's fragile, my most precious internal possession.

Liability to be buried by trauma – yours and my own.

I vow from this moment forward I will be selfish in my pursuit of care for myself and our life together so to protect our delicate and fragile love.

Loyalty saved us. But love made us laugh again.

SIDE BY SIDE

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Part Five



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I AM ME

DR LYONS

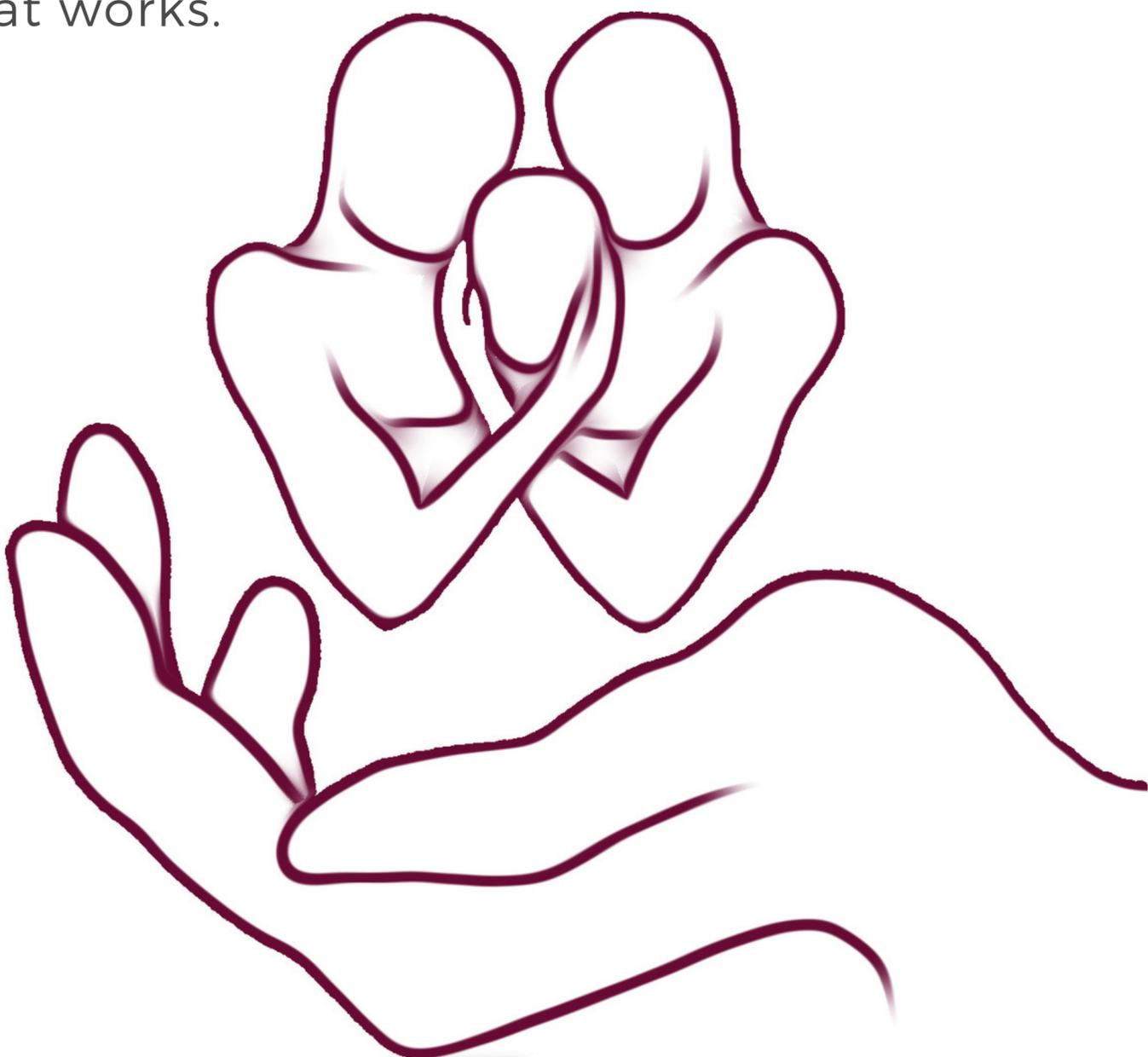
Helen has reconnected with her husband, her own family and has reached out to other adopters who are in the dark place she remembers so well.

Helen now feels prepared for family life to come, because she knows that she can bounce back; and if the worst happens and she cannot bounce back – then she knows that there is such a thing as help that works.

The therapeutic team and the family have said their goodbyes for now.

We all know that for adopted children, the milestones of growing up often throws up new pain which might mean another phase of therapeutic intervention is needed.

The repair of early trauma is a long journey for Helen and her family; but with love back in her heart and the courage to plough on, it is a journey that they will make together.



I AM ME

HELEN

I am me. Not the same as before.

I am me, not the same as before, then, a soul entwined in invisible torment, a mere shadow, buried deep in my blackest part, fading away, locked in a world without air.

I am me, not the same as before, exploding through the surface, taking that precious first breath, life flowing through my limbs, energy pulsating through my veins. I reach out to touch, create, share - exist in plain sight - emboldened by what it took to survive, what it took to heal. Life wraps around me, an embrace of warmth and goodness. Carrying me forward, welcoming me back to my world.

I am me, not the same as before, no longer blinded by hopelessness,

I can see the beauty shining out of my children, it takes my breath away, stopping me in my tracks. My world, my children, are now in sharp focus, they are exquisite, and with it, their courage and tenacity surges through the largest of obstacles, it must surely be seen from miles around. I can believe in them... can hold them, can love them.

I am me, not the same as before. Their roots still cast in long, deep shadows, Rage visits my eldest child often, but I am calm in our discontent. This time I can walk with him in his darkness, knowing my light is powerful, it's beam strong enough for all of us to see in the right direction.

I am me, not the same as before, living a life where joy is often, and love, rich, deep, quiet love is here. I belong in my world again.

I am me.

