

THE **Hunger** THAT KILLS

By: Donna Tranquada

A year ago,
Lynn Carpenter's
daughter Sheena died of
starvation, alone in her
own kitchen in Toronto.



A few months later, Lynn spoke with writer
Donna Tranquada about her daughter's battle with
anorexia, her grief, and her struggle to understand.

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On a Sunday evening in November, Lynn Carpenter, worried because she'd been unable to contact her daughter for two days, finally went over to her daughter's apartment. On entering, she realized her worst fears – every mother's worst fears. Sheena, 22, lay dead on the kitchen floor, her long blond hair loose, her blue eyes wide, her body wasted away to a mere 50 pounds. Ironically, the refrigerator and freezer doors stood open; perhaps Sheena had died looking through her collection of nuts and cookies.

Although the police who had helped her open the door wouldn't let Lynn see her daughter's body at first, she stepped past them, knelt down and held Sheena in her arms, trembling and crying. Then she became hysterical. She ran through the untidy apartment, opening drawers, lifting the covers of her daughter's bed: "I needed to touch everything that Sheena could have touched while she was alive."

Today, Lynn thinks Sheena died because she had such a beautiful face. "She wanted to be a model," she recalls. "When she was 14, she went to a modelling agency and was told that she would be more photogenic if she had a thinner face. And that's when it started."

Lynn didn't notice at first that Sheena had begun to lose weight, since her daughter wore baggy clothes to hide her increasing thinness. What did alarm her, though, was her daughter's new obsession with food. Sheena refused to let her mother cook for her, and never cooked for herself- even though her bedroom bookshelf was stuffed with cookbooks. "She would just read the recipes, the ingredients," says Lynn. "She knew the calorie count of every kind of food. She had to know every detail about food even though she hated it."

By the time she was 18, Sheena weighed just 75 pounds. Still, while she was obviously thinner, Lynn says she didn't realize just how much weight her daughter was losing, thanks to the layers upon layers of sweaters and shirts she wore constantly. Then one night, after eating dinner, Sheena locked herself in the bathroom and began vomiting. Finally realizing her daughter had an eating disorder, Lynn called a doctor, who said Sheena needed immediate attention plus ongoing therapy. But when Lynn took Sheena to see their own doctor, he seemed less concerned. "He said he thought we'd caught her in the early stages and there was no threat to her in the long term." The doctor told Sheena to gain about 20 pounds, and she did.

But over the next three years, Sheena's personality and body underwent dramatic changes. She continued to purge and starve herself, and lost increasing amounts of weight. Her periods stopped. Her mood swings became erratic, and she was often depressed. Her teeth began to deteriorate because of the acid in her vomit. When family members commented in shock at her emaciated appearance, she simply withdrew.

Sheena also became sloppy in hiding the evidence of her illness. At restaurants, she would order the same dish as her mother did. But every few minutes she would spit a mouthful of food into her napkin and crumple it in her lap. Her bedroom was a mess, the carpet and bed littered with half-eaten muffins

and cookies. Once, when Lynn was vacuuming the living room, she discovered several small paper bundles hidden under the cushions of the sofa. To her shock, she found the crumpled napkins contained the hardened remains of regurgitated food.

By now, Lynn was desperately searching for doctors to treat her daughter. Some never returned her calls. Others said they weren't taking new patients. When she did get through to one specialist, she was told there was a six-month waiting list. "I could see she was dying slowly. And kept asking myself, 'How can I save her?' I read about bulimia and anorexia and tried to follow the advice in the books. I didn't talk about food. I tried to treat her as normally as possible."

Even so, there were bad times, when Lynn pleaded with Sheena to get help. "I'd say, look at what you're doing to yourself!" and "It's killing me to see you this way!"

Indeed, Sheena's illness was taking its toll on their close relationship. Lynn had raised her daughter alone, after splitting up with her abusive ex-husband when Sheena was about a year old. Sheena had had virtually no contact with her father since then, and mother and daughter had become best buddies. In fact, they became so enmeshed with each other that even Lynn now admits their relationship was too intense. Sheena preferred being with her mother's friends, and Lynn, who was often away on business, enjoyed being with her daughter when she was at home. She even cancelled dates so they could be with each other. "Sheena was intensely jealous of any men in my life," Lynn says. "If I went out, I would call home four or five times during the evening to speak with her. I always felt guilty."

But the lowest point came one night in the fall of 1992, when mother and daughter actually discussed a suicide pact. "We sat down and talked about how our lives had become such a hell. Her disorder. My inability to cope. Sheena said, 'Maybe I should just end it, Mom.' And I said 'Not without me, honey.'"

Within days of that conversation, Lynn made an appointment with a therapist, hoping not only to get help for herself, but also to inspire her daughter. No luck. It wasn't until the spring that Sheena finally agreed to undergo therapy. Before she entered the daily group sessions, Sheena wrote her mother a letter.

"The last five years I've hated. It was enough of a step to start getting help....A hospital just scares me to death. I'm not ready for that. Please, I'll do anything first, before that. I'm pleading. I'll buy a scale tomorrow and I'll show you every day, if desired, that I'll do it now!...Please understand. I beg! I will show you! I love you that much that I'll do that on my own before available counselling. But a hospital feels threatening. Please try and understand. I love you. Goodnight." Looking at her daughter's letter rips Lynn apart, she says, because she knows that the only reason Sheena agreed to counselling was to please her.

The sessions started out on a promising note. After the second day, Sheena wrote in her diary, "Went in feeling more at ease...looking forward to each new day I experience." On day three of her therapy, Sheena was excited. She wrote,

“Showed group pictures. Fully accepted and preferred my appearance with the fuller face. This insight is allowing positive thoughts of self.”

Sheena opened up at home as well, and was critical of her mother. “She told me that I never let her be a child,” says Lynn, admitting, “Perhaps we did love each other to a fault.”

Other feelings emerged in the group sessions – dark and buried memories from Sheena’s childhood. She revealed that she’d been sexually abused as a young girl by a relative’s boyfriend, a neighbor’s husband and two other men. These awakened memories were to haunt Sheena over the remaining months of her life.

Two weeks into the therapy, Sheena became despondent after discovering she had lost weight. A week later, she quit the sessions. There are no more entries in her little blue diary. The following month, May of 1993, she lost control of her bodily functions and was defecating in her bed. Then she had a seizure.

She was in the kitchen when it happened. “She was just standing there, gripping the counter with her eyes fluttering,” recounts Lynn, her eyes filled with tears. She rushed her daughter to the hospital, where it was discovered that her glucose and potassium levels were dangerously low and that she weighed just 57 pounds. She was admitted to the hospital’s psychiatric ward, where she spent three months, begging for therapy. Her doctor refused to give Sheena private therapy for her eating disorder, saying it was pointless until she became healthier physically. “It was a nightmare. Sheena refused to eat and had to be force-fed. She hated the ward. One man threatened her and another used to wander around the women’s rooms and masturbate.”

Sheena promised her mother and the staff that she would eat if they stopped force-feeding her. The doctor complied, but Sheena was made to eat her meals sitting in front of the nurses’ station so they could make sure she was eating. The nurses also locked the bathrooms so Sheena couldn’t purge her food. Tests revealed that her liver, heart and brain were damaged. One doctor wrote to the Ministry of Transportation recommending that Sheena never be allowed to drive because of the permanent brain damage, and in case of seizures.

Eventually, Sheena gained 23 pounds but plateaued at 80 pounds. Experts advised Lynn that her daughter needed to take more responsibility for herself, even live by herself. Because of this, Lynn was reluctant to take her daughter home. “I told her that. I said ‘I don’t think I’m helping you. You almost died while living with me. How can I help you?’ She cried and said she couldn’t believe I was doing this to her.”

With her mother’s help, Sheena found an apartment not far from Lynn’s. But she wasn’t happy, and Lynn was appalled at how quickly she began to slip again. It was now October, and her weight had tumbled to about 65 pounds. She was incoherent on the phone. She stopped eating altogether, or at least never ate in her mother’s presence. When Sheena refused to go to the hospital on her own, Lynn won a court order to have her

admitted to a Toronto hospital.

There, she was put on an intravenous drip, all the time terrified that her mother would have her readmitted to the psychiatric ward. But instead, she was kept overnight in the emergency ward and released the next morning. She returned to her apartment.

For a brief time, it seemed that Sheena might have turned a corner. Her new apartment was spotless, and she appeared to be getting better. Lynn found her a new therapist and booked an appointment for early November.

But then some old demons – memories of the childhood sexual abuse – returned in force. Sheena began complaining of voices in her head, and describing the abuse in graphic detail. She even linked her aversion to food with the sexual abuse. She said ‘Mom, you don’t know the guilt I feel when the food goes into my mouth. It makes me feel dirty again.’”

The following Saturday, Lynn called Sheena at her apartment; there was no answer. By Sunday, Lynn was concerned. She went over to her daughter’s flat, and, finding a police cruiser nearby, asked the two officers to help her open the door.

The apartment was filthy and in disarray. Sheena, apparently repulsed by her wasted appearance, had sprayed some kind of cloudy liquid on the mirror tiles in the kitchen so she couldn’t see her reflection. And Sheena was dead.

Months later, Lynn is still wracked by grief and tremendous guilt. She believes her own low self-esteem probably played a role in Sheena’s misery. “She grew up hearing me complain about my own body. If I’d been able to deal with my own self-esteem problems, then I might have been able to recognize her problems so much earlier.” And then there’s the guilt. “If I’d been more of a parent than a buddy to her, then perhaps we would have had a healthier relationship. She needed me as a mother, not as a friend, and I can’t ever get her back. I can’t ever make it right for her.”

Lynn had her daughter’s remains cremated, because Sheena was always cold and Lynn wanted her to be warm. “I miss holding her,” she mourns as she breaks down. “There are times I wish I hadn’t brought her into the world for all the hell she went through. I’ll never forgive myself for not letting her come home to live with me. Maybe she would be alive today.”

It was five months after Sheena’s death before Lynn could bear to have her daughter’s photographs displayed again in her apartment. She visits a counsellor once a week. And she is trying to keep Sheena’s memory alive by establishing a hospice for young people re-entering the community after treatment for an eating disorder. It’s to be called “Sheena’s Place.”

Not long after Sheena died, Lynn found a note her daughter had written to her, dated four months before Sheena’s death. “You’ve been my inspiration,” it read. “Your love and warmth have certainly helped with the everyday changes and coping I experienced. I love the strength you hold...”

It was never finished. ♦