

SASKIA VAN GELDER

ROCK BOTTOM TO ROCK HARD

TRANSFORM TRAUMA AND DESPAIR INTO
A POWERFUL BODY AND MIND

b:k light

This book is dedicated to two very special and strong women in my life: my daughters.

To my eldest daughter Chantal. She encouraged me to share my story in this book. I was not able to raise her, but our connection is stronger than ever.

To my youngest daughter Michèle. She made me 'rock hard'. Pushing me in the gym and supporting me mentally to never stop reaching for my goals.

FOREWORD

By Bassem Youssef

I had the chance to get a second chance. A second chance in life and a second chance in my career. When I decided to become vegan in 2013, my decision was met with ridicule and scrutiny. Yet, I pushed through and I have now created a movement in the Middle East. A movement that focuses on understanding life decisions, starting with making a decision three times a day about what ends up on your plate.

I was fortunate enough to meet amazing and inspiring people that went through incredible journeys to reinvent themselves the same way I reinvented myself and my life.

But nobody comes close to Saskia.

This book will allow you a glimpse into the wonderful life this amazing human has had.

I might have complained about setbacks and failures in my life, but if anyone knows what rock bottom means, it is Saskia. Her resilience and strength are extraordinary and inspiring: she has managed to transform the loss, pain, abuse and multiple life threatening diseases into a powerful body and mind. Through eating a vegan diet and bodybuilding, she has managed to cure her cancer and regain her health. And even more than that: she currently performs on a high level in professional body building as a 60+ female. All natural and all vegan.

There are so many preconceptions about both veganism and bodybuilding. But Saskia is living proof of how a plant-based diet is the best medicine for both body and mind. And she shows that body building is so much more than just building and toning your muscles. It is about building character and mental strength. For her, body building in combination with a plant-based diet and a spiritual practice was the ultimate solution for facing her life challenges. It changed her from being the victim to the victor.

In order to get there, she studied the principles of transformation, how the body, mind and soul cooperate and how you need to work on all three levels to reach your goals in life. She translated these principles into a simple five step plan, which she shares in this book. Anyone can do it, no matter their circumstances. Once you have completed this process, you will not believe how much life has to offer and how happy, healthy and fulfilled you can be. Only then, when you have learned to love yourself, can you be of service to others and to the world. And that is my wish for you.

Every day I live in awe of the amazing abilities humans have to transform and reinvent themselves, to rebound from loss and to triumph. I went through loss and setbacks myself, but reading about Saskia's unusual story gave me hope that there is a chance to come back better and stronger.

Now it is your turn, dear reader. It is not a coincidence that you have this book in your hands, now is the time to transform your life and fulfil your purpose.

Bassem Youssef

Former Heart Surgeon and host of Albernnameg and currently a comedian and author who lives in Los Angeles

PROLOGUE

Holding the divorce papers in her trembling hands, she collapsed. It felt as if all life had been sucked out of her at once. She gasped for air but it seemed as though the empty house she had just walked into no longer contained any oxygen. Everything was gone! The only thing she had found was that big envelope next to the fireplace containing the divorce papers and a horrifyingly harmful letter, of which the contents could not yet fully sink in. Upon opening the letter she had gone as white as a sheet, her legs shaky. She slowly collapsed further onto the cold floor. The floor of the house which, up until that morning, had been filled with furniture, warmth, and the liveliness of two small children. A thought that filled her with nauseating terror and desperation. Where were her children? Her three year old daughter and her son, barely a year old? She had seen them just this morning when her husband – with the children in the back of the car – had dropped her off at the boutique store where she worked. She had waved them off unsuspectingly, assuming she would see them again later that day, assuming she would cuddle her babies, tuck them into to bed, read them a bedtime story. But now they had been taken from her, just like that. They were out of her life. She felt a giant gaping hole forming in her soul. A sharp pain in her chest, complete turmoil took the best of her. She stared at the empty walls around her whilst sitting in a fetal position, clenching her knees. Rocking back and forth in misery she repeated words like a mantra: ‘you will get through this’ and ‘he has the kids now, but you will have them as adults.’ Because even though she felt completely betrayed now, as if she had been kicked straight into her own grave, she knew one thing for sure; no matter how difficult it would get, she would do anything, move heaven and earth to get her children back. Nothing would stop her. ‘You will not break,’ she kept

repeating to herself. This would become a matter of survival, only she did not yet know how.

That night she wandered through her empty house and through her overflowing mind. She was overwhelmed by a cocktail of heavy emotions. Pain, sadness, disbelief, fear, but also a fighting spirit rushed through her body. And questions, she had so many questions. The first heavy blow from walking into the empty house was slowly starting to wear off and gradually gave way to some clarity in her head. What had just happened? What had happened leading up to that exact moment? She had never seen this coming, not from her husband. While the reality of his relentless deception slowly started to sink in, she also started to realize how long he would have had to plan this move. Months, possibly a year, or even longer? She could only guess, but to empty an entire house, to prepare a divorce, and to abduct two children would obviously take him longer than just one day. All of a sudden she realized that he had even picked her up from work and driven her home, even though he knew exactly what she would find there. The fact that her children had not been in the car had worried her, but he had come up with some lame excuse and had stoically dropped her off at ground zero, as she would from now on call this house.

Not even 24 hours ago, this had been a home. Her home. Their home. The place where they had lived and shared their lives. They weren't perfect lives, she was aware of that, but who had a perfect life anyway? She had learned her share of life lessons as the daughter of narcissistic, tormented parents, so she knew as well as anyone that fairytales do not exist. Her own marriage had not always been a rose-strewn path, but they had once committed to each other out of real love and so she had always hoped they would be able to work things out. But that hope had now abruptly been taken away. He had done absolutely everything in his power to take it all away from her, behind her back. Why, she asked herself out loud. Was he out to destroy her? Had his love for her completely turned into hate? Had she done something to him that was so unforgivable? Her thoughts were all over the place, she searched every memory she had of their life together for clues, anything to explain his sudden, relentless behavior. Their life together flashed before her eyes.

A story that had definitely started as a fairytale. He seemed to be a real Prince Charming, her knight in shining armor that had come to save her from her youth full of abuse and lies. Because as she was growing up, more and more horrible and confusing secrets about her parents had come out. And at the same rate, her desire to escape those secrets had grown. That was the reason why she had become a stewardess, something her father had been nothing but condescending about. And that had only strengthened her conviction; she would start a new life, her own life, as far away from her father and her horrible childhood as possible. Not long after, during a stopover on one of her intercontinental flights, she had met an impressive marine who had charmed her with his refined ways. As a young 24-year-old she had fallen for him like a brick. A Lieutenant Commander with bright blue eyes, someone from a faraway country, with status and an appearance that had swept her off her feet. And he had done everything in his power to impress her. She received the grand tour of the ship, free drinks and food, and even a tour of the officer's room with the nutcracker's suite in the background which had really ignited a spark between them. That same night they went to an officer's dinner together, and the next three days they were inseparable. Three magical days it seemed, back then. Was all of that real, she asked herself, while the coldness both of the empty house and of his actions gave her shivers down her spine. Had he always fooled her, or had something changed in the last few years?

She could hardly imagine him playing her for such a long time. Especially as she recalled some old memories and remembered how he had suddenly shown up on her doorstep in the Netherlands a few months after they had met. He had begged her and promised her she was the love of his life, and that he would hurt himself if she would not marry him. She had fallen for the whole thing and soon afterwards, he had proposed to her officially on a holiday in Switzerland, whilst feeding the swans. True romance; such a strong sentiment back then and even now, despite the hell he was putting her through. No, she thought as she wiped away her tears, no, that was not an act. That was real, their love had been real. Just like their pre-honeymoon, driving around his home country with a small tent in the back of the sports car he had gifted her. During that amazing trip he had made sure she was not left wanting for

anything. What a great contrast to the empty house he had left her in now, four years later, she thought.

A wolf in sheep's clothes. That is what he turned out to be. But had she really never seen that? Had love blinded her so much? She was never naïve. Growing up with her parents, she had witnessed the ugly and dark sides of people plenty of times. So what had she missed? When and why had her husband changed, when had the wolf taken over? Whilst going over and over these questions, she suddenly heard a familiar voice in her head say: 'I warned you, he is not good enough for you, I have always told you this over and over again.' It was the voice of her father, who had been skeptical about the marriage from the start and who had – to put it mildly – played a questionable part in a series of unfortunate events during that marriage. And then she realized, he was not the only one. It felt as if her shortness of breath slowly started to subside and give way to some fresh oxygen. Her clarity in her mind was gaining territory and slowly, bit by bit, the pieces of the puzzle started to fall back in place.

One of the pieces of that puzzle was her wedding day. What should have been the most beautiful day of her life turned out to be the first stain on the crisp white fairytale she had envisioned. Her father had shown his most embarrassing, provocative side. 'Lift up your skirt and run,' he had whispered to her more than once. And as if that had not been enough, her mother in law – whom she had only met a few days before the wedding – was a dominant control freak who had her son wrapped around her little finger. Her will be done, and he never went against her. The way she spoke, with her jaw clenched, had been a first warning sign; her complete interference with the wedding day, a second. The biggest disagreement was about the dress the bride had wanted to get married in; it was not white, since she did not feel comfortable marrying in white because of an abortion she had had after she had caught her first fiancé in bed with a man. His shocking infidelity had not only caused her immense grief, but had also left her with a sexually transmitted disease, and during that downward spiral she had even tried to end her own life. All in all, not the best memories and so she had wanted to get married in a special black, typically South American dress which hugged her curves, with lace and a deep V-neck in the back. Her clean-cut all-American mother in law had hated the

idea. A funny remark 'for every ex a piece of black, and that is why the whole dress is black,' said in an attempt to clear the air, had turned out not to have been the best move. Eventually she had given in and got married wearing a white dress. Her future husband had kept his mouth shut.

As obsessively interfering as her mother in law had been on the wedding day, and during the marriage, as degrading and destructive her father had been throughout. And by doing so, he had played a great role in the failure of that marriage, she now realized. He had spent four years deeply offending her husband, sometimes in the most childish of ways. For example, when he gave him a model kit, her husband's big hobby, but with the instructions only in Dutch since he thought it was about time her husband learned the language. He had also called his daughter on a daily basis to criticize her marriage and to try to convince her to end it, only to then complain to her about his massive phone bills because of all those international calls. She now realized how manipulative her father had been. And while those memories were now shining a light on the miserable situation she found herself in, left behind in a cold and empty house, another piece of the puzzle fell into place: her father had always treated her as his prey. It was classic narcissistic behavior, she knew it well. She was his daughter, his possession, and he could not lose her out of fear of being exposed.

She kept digging deeper into her memories, looking for more illustrative milestones during her marriage. Over the years, little dents had formed, just like in any relationship, but there had also been some drastic, life changing situations. Maybe they had been the essential missing links, leading up to this current rock bottom? And how much of the blame for those events actually fell on her? Granted, she had not always responded in the nicest or most forgiving ways to their increasing frictions and fights. She had to at least take some responsibility for that. Just like her behavior during that one fateful Christmas dinner. She had asked her mother in law about the – in her eyes – strange combination of an apron from Nicaragua over a Chanel dress she was wearing. Her mother in law had answered that it was a special holiday and that girls in Nicaragua should wear their most beautiful aprons on such a day, and that as a tribute she had also chosen to wear 'her most beautiful apron'. To

which she had responded that during her days as a stewardess she had visited Africa many times, and that women of certain tribes would walk around with bare breasts, even on Holidays. She had then taken her shirt off and, to the dismay of her company, had proceeded to dine topless, imperturbably. That night she was committed to a psychiatric ward for the first time.

She had always preferred not to think about that catastrophic night anymore, but now that she was trying to put together the puzzle that was her tragedy of a marriage, she could not deny this was a meaningful piece. It made it ever so clear that her husband and his family had not known what to do with her 'difficult attitude.' That they had found her to be a strange, sometimes even hurtful person. But she had been a part of so many strange, difficult and hurtful moments during her childhood that she did not really know any better. At the time she had not realized this, not even when she was admitted to the psychiatric ward. Instead she had been furious, how could her husband's family have done this to her? And even though she still thought the forced admission had been exaggerated and unnecessarily damaging, she did understand that she was not exactly 'normal.' Just as her upbringing had been anything but normal. By literally moving to the other side of the world she had escaped the physical abuse, but the emotional abuse had actually never really stopped. On the contrary: just when she was at her lowest, most vulnerable point during her marriage, her father had seized his opportunity to give her the final blow.

Ironically, this opportunity had presented itself during one of the few highlights of her marriage: the birth of a daughter and later a son. Unfortunately, she had struggled quite a lot during both pregnancies. During the first she was confronted with guilt and resentment leading back to her previous abortion, resulting in a postnatal depression. But back then that did not yet count as a recognized condition. And so, again, she was seen as instable and yet again, she had felt misunderstood. She had not known how to handle her situation herself either and in an act of desperation she had taken a large amount of sleeping pills, after which she was found unconscious by her husband's family. They had rushed her to the hospital to get her stomach pumped, which had only just saved her life. But as a result she was – for the

second time – involuntarily admitted to a psychiatric clinic. During that hospitalization she had barely escaped electroshock therapy, her Dutch passport had allowed her to refuse this treatment. That whole situation had never really made any sense to her, even now, years later, whilst trying to dig into her past and realizing this must have been an important piece of the puzzle. Because of the depression after her first birth, her father had felt strong enough to use her weakness against her, and to his advantage. He had not let any opportunity pass without trying to make her husband look bad, and when he realized she was not listening to him, he had changed his target to her. In doing so, he had eagerly used and abused her frailty.

And then everything came together with that horribly hurtful letter she had found in the envelope left behind in the empty house. The last, most important piece of the puzzle. A letter that her father had apparently sent to his son in law during her second pregnancy, emphasizing his daughter's 'difficult and complex character.' He had also expressed his worries about the state she was in, their marriage, and her pregnancy. His message was painfully clear: my daughter is unstable and unfit for motherhood, end your marriage now and prevent this second baby from being born. That letter turned out to have been the deadly blow. Her husband had clearly taken this letter seriously and had used it as a reason and justification for his plan to get rid of his difficult wife and her jealous and critical father, without losing his children. That plan was now, a little over a year later, unfolding and had left her behind lost and alone in that empty house. Ground zero. And it was there, of all places, in the middle of the night whilst going over every small detail, she found her fighter's mentality, her resilience, her focus. The puzzle was now complete. Her confusion, desperation, or her unstable character, as people around her would label it, disappeared. She had allowed herself to become weak, to end up in this vulnerable position, it had made her lose focus and overlook her husband's evil plan being formed behind her back.

She straightened her back, focused on the horizon, pulled herself off of the cold floor and clenched her fists. A new day had started. She had survived the most horrendous night of her life, and this was only the beginning. With the morning sun, new hope arose, but right at the moment she wanted to start

thinking of her next steps to get out of this situation, she heard footsteps outside the house. Through the window she could see her husband had returned. Thoughts started racing through her mind: did he regret leaving, had he come back to see how she was doing, had he come to apologize, maybe their kids would be in the car parked down the street and if so, would she be able to forgive him, would she even allow him to explain himself at all? Just when she tried to envision how she would react to each of these scenarios, she saw him walking out of their shed with a bag of onions. The onions! He had forgotten the onions and had come back to get them. How dare he? How could he be so barbaric? Completely baffled and confused she saw him walk across their snowy lawn with the bag of onions in his hand. She wanted to run outside and ... and ... do what exactly? And then karma came to the rescue; with a clumsy swoosh her husband slipped and landed face down in the snow, surrounded by the onions he had come to collect. For the first time since that miserable night, a smile appeared on her face. Karma is a bitch, she thought to herself. And if he didn't know that by now, he would soon find out.

This story appears to be the plot of an exciting thriller. But it happened in real life. It happened to me. It is my story, and I have overcome it. With ups and downs. That is what this book is about: facing and solving problems and difficulties, no matter what. About hitting rock bottom and as a Phoenix rising from the ashes, stronger and wiser than ever.

In the next chapters you will read how I have done this, and how I have become both mentally and physically strong enough during the process. So that you can find that strength within yourself as well and that you can overcome your problems step by step. This in order to become a solid and stable rock for others in times of need.

INTRODUCTION

This book is about one all-encompassing question: what is your goal? Or to put it differently: what do you want to achieve, why do you want to achieve that, and how can you make it happen? This sounds very logical, and maybe you even think you already have a clear-cut answer to that question. But, as I have learned now, the answer that seems to be the most logical one is not always the right one. However, to come to this conclusion, I had to sink even deeper, I had to really hit rock bottom. Looking back at it now, that horrible and lonely night in my empty house was not my breaking point just yet.

Even though she had had her first tiny moment of victory when her husband had slipped on their snowy driveway, she knew she had a long way to go to get out of this seemingly hopeless situation. She had absolutely nothing left, not even her onions, and her job at the boutique had for some reason suddenly been terminated. Did her husband's family get involved? Perhaps, but there was no way she could now prove that, nor was it important enough. She had to find a source of income as soon as possible in order for her to survive and to be able to pay a lawyer. Because a lawsuit about the divorce and the custody of the children was inevitable. She put on the only respectable dress she still had left, walked into a hotel opposite the boutique she had worked in until yesterday, and asked for a job. She could start as a maid. It wouldn't earn her much, but she had no choice. The first step forward had been taken. And a blessing in disguise was that she could eat the leftover room service meals, which saved her money otherwise spent on food.