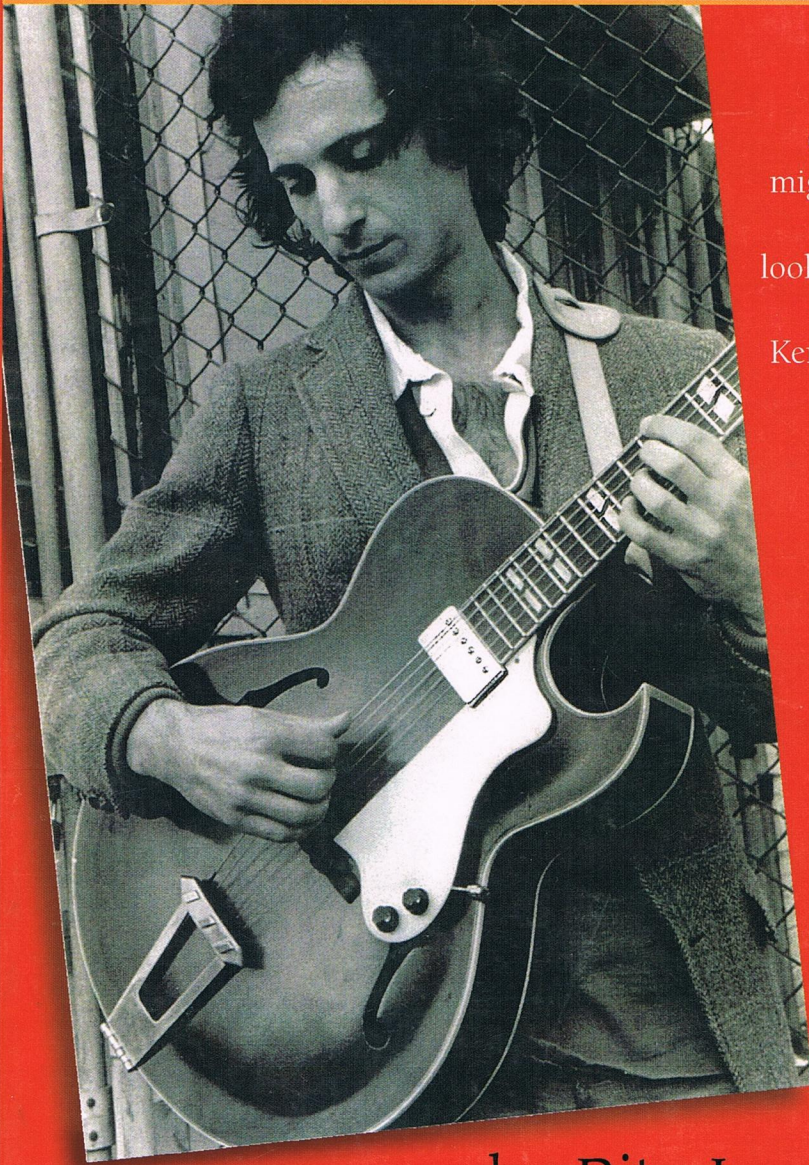


One-Way Ticket

Our Son's Addiction to Heroin



"Powerful and eye-opening... *One-Way Ticket* might just change the way you look at addiction."

—Christopher Kennedy Lawford
Author,
Symptoms of Withdrawal

by Rita Lowenthal

Praise for *One-Way Ticket*

"A tribute to loss that holds invaluable insight for any parent who finds his or her child in deep trouble."

—**Carolyn See**

Bestselling Author, *Making a Literary Life*

"Rita Lowenthal has written a little masterpiece on motherhood and addiction. It is a fount of wisdom, compassion, and insight."

—**Ethan Nadelmann**

Executive Director, Drug Policy Alliance

"Do not read this book if you feel comfortable about how the 'War on Drugs' is going. Do read this book if you suspect we are unlikely to get to the bottom of the 'problem' until each of us has, in some measure, understood the truth of what we face in the scourge."

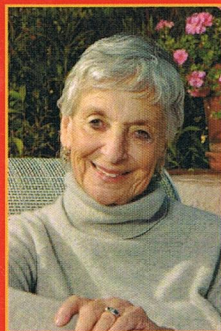
—**Uri D. Herscher, Ph.D.**

President, Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles, CA

"Rita Lowenthal's compelling and honest look at her family's wrenching personal experience should inform, not only parents and children, but all those who hope to make a difference through humane public policy."

—**Sheila James Kuehl**

California State Senator



RITA LOWENTHAL is retired from the faculties of Hebrew Union College, School of Jewish Communal Service, Los Angeles, and the University of Southern California School of Social Work. Currently she is on the Boards of the Progressive Jewish Alliance, where she serves as Chair of the Drug Policy Committee of the Criminal Justice Task Force and is a member of the Community Action Committee of Progressive Christians Uniting. She is married to Jerome Cushman.

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PREFACE

At thirty-eight, Josh was dead from a heroin overdose.

In 1970, at the age of thirteen, he went from shooting hoops in the suburbs to shooting heroin in the ghetto. His journey took him from the bimah of the synagogue to the ultimate humiliation of San Quentin. He spent twenty-six years in and out of rehab programs, jails, torment, and hope. Throughout his nightmare he maintained strong ties with many of his friends and family, who were waiting for a drug-free Josh to emerge. When he drugged out, he hid out. When he was in recovery, we gathered new strengths.

In June of 1995, he quietly brought his journey to its end by taking his own life.

Eight days after Josh's funeral, when the family and friends had left, I awoke to a terrifying stillness. As I began to face those silent days I started to write—at first as a catharsis, a need to stay connected to him. I made up dialogue, trying to understand with him what had happened, as if he were still able to have conversations. My stream-of-consciousness became a collage of reminiscences, family history, insights, questions, answers, doubts, facts, letters, and jokes. The pages piled up and I was encouraged by friends to think about writing a book; I wasn't sure. They convinced me that since there is hardly a family untouched

by drug or alcohol abuse, my experience could be helpful to others.

But how helpful? Wouldn't it be enough to compile our family's personal history and tuck it quietly away in the drawer? Must I expose our failures so others going through similar nightmares might identify and not feel as uniquely insane? My political women friends wouldn't give me a break. "We thought you believed that the personal is political," they said. That pretty much did it—they added guilt along with a purpose. I would see Josh's story through to the end.

In the years since Josh's death I have become all too familiar with the War on Drugs—an international catastrophe that will not go away—and believe its failure has added to and abetted the misfortunes of the addicted.

Of great help in my coping process has been my political involvement. I preferred anger and action, with like-minded folk, to depression from impotency.

This story is neither a "how to" or a "how not to" raise a drug-free child. I profess no simple or sure answers. But this much I know: Many children, like Josh, cannot be stopped by family alone. There have always been adolescents who put their lives in peril—a youthful recklessness that they often outgrow. But physical addiction to hard drugs does not pass quickly or easily. Josh explained it this way: "At least for awhile, drugs give as much as they take. So cool it, Mom. You can't compete with heroin."

My hope is that in reading *One-Way Ticket*, the parents of addicts will feel less guilty and develop a greater social perspective surrounding their children's plights. In upper- and middle-class white neighborhoods we are more likely to keep our embarrassing secret between families, close friends, private mental health practitioners, or expensive treatment centers. We differ from the poor and from people of color, in that we more often escape the criminal justice system.

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Unlike members of organizations like Save Our Sons or Families Against Three Strikes, if our kids blow it, we have only ourselves and them to blame. But there is no difference in the pain, disappointment, fear, shame, anger, and guilt that most parents feel. My thoughts are shared by many of the mothers of addicts, regardless of race and class, whom I have met since Josh's death. We are all obsessed with similar questions, thoughts, and facts.

I believe that the criminal justice system helped tie Josh and millions of others to their addictions. Their records are tattooed on their wizened souls and patchy resumes. How many like Josh fear that their prison histories will never be overcome and their futures will remain unpardoned? With a hill so tough to climb, why not turn back to that familiar, pain-free place?

Several years after Josh's death I am finally putting this manuscript to rest. I thought I had completed it many times, but each time I put it away with a sense of incompleteness. As I have learned and processed more, my understanding of our family, addiction, treatment, and government policies has changed. In the doing I also realized that my lack of objectivity—combined with mourning—would not enable me to portray a full picture of my complicated son. I have included memories of his friends, some of whose names have been changed, and a selection of his letters and journals from San Quentin. Most of his letters were not mailed and were found after his death in a gym bag along with his few other effects. I have also included a short story written by Richard Ely about his relationship with Josh. Richard's story is about a Josh I could not imagine. It was forwarded to me after his death.

Unexpectedly, this process became a double-edged sword. I became privy to layer upon layer of Josh's life. Some of it was more than a parent has the right to know, and I often felt that I was invading his privacy. Learning about Josh's disin-

tegration and his suffering broke my heart. It also helped me to understand his need to end his life.

I like to think that our family's experience will touch readers and that they will find this book useful. If nothing else, some parents may be able to shed their sense of uniqueness and guilt and see themselves as citizens of the world, influenced, like everyone else, by their family's particular landscape, biology, geography, politics, timing, heroes, history, and luck. Perhaps my story might encourage the thousands who mourn quietly behind their shame or sense of impotence to speak out against the War on Drugs as it is currently waged, an indisputable failure in stopping addiction and in suppressing the criminal element involved in the drug trade.

Finally, possibly Josh's story will influence a few kids who, like him, crave excitement and think it's cool to be a part of the drug scene.

Josh Lowenthal was an adored child, born with an abundance of blessings, who should have thrived and contributed, but who instead perished in a modern-day plague.

I hope he would approve.