



## A Life Left .

(Images from book, *In My Room* by Janine Browne. Book design Harley Manifold)

Often called 'domestic violence', partner abuse and assault is far from domestic. 'Domestic' congers up notions of homeliness, a safe place, something of lesser value or significance.

Whilst physical abuse is visible, tangible evidence of abuse and suffering, the covert undermining and erosion of self worth through verbal and emotion abuse can be as damaging, if not more, than its physical form.

Often hidden behind closed doors and behind the 'happy couple' façade, partner abuse has the very real potential for ending in the tragic loss of lives. The gross misunderstanding of this issue is most often reflection in peoples response to this crime;

“Why doesn't she just leave?”

My own personal story  
may provide some insight....

Please be mindful that reading the story may be upsetting or raise some strong emotions.

# At 18 I met the man of my dreams.

I believed he would create my 'happy ever after' - we married when I'd just turned 20.  
He told me how beautiful I was, how talented I was - how fat,  
ugly, dumb and  
stupid I was.

He could be loving, kind, gentle, caring—a best friend and lover. He could be cruel, sadistic—a potential  
killer. The abuse could be bruise free—covertly undermining my sense of self with verbal and emotional  
put downs or by constantly conveying disapproval. Demanding sex, not taking no for an answer—  
domestic rape.

So why didn't I just leave ?

Believing his remorseful pleas, I was initially convinced it was a one-off, deserving of an opportunity to  
disprove my poor judgement. One more chance turned into years of one more chances. Between  
outbursts there could be months full of love and tenderness - that's what gave me hope, what I kept going  
back for. I also lost my sense of clarity in the madness of the abuse. I experienced it yet my husband  
minimised and denied it. I became entombed by shame—paralysed by fear.

He'd threatened to kill  
me many times - I had no reason not to believe him.

The dilemma was—do I leave and live in fear of my life, that of my child, and my ability to survive on my  
own; or do I return to a man who is convincingly remorseful and relentless in his pursuit of promises,  
gifts, tears and hope for a new beginning?



At 18 I thought I was the luckiest girl in the world when the man of my dreams turned his attention to me. He was popular, funny, gentle, polite, good looking, well groomed and came with a reference of his life-long friendship with my brother and family. I believed he would create my 'happy ever after' - so we married when I'd just turned 20.

This 'Mr Right' could also kick, punch, spit, strangle, deliver savage knock out verbal blows, and threaten to kill, even throughout my pregnancies, three of which ended in miscarriage.

He told me how beautiful I was,  
how talented I was—  
how fat, ugly, dumb and stupid I was.

He could be loving, kind, gentle and caring, a best friend and lover. He could be cruel, sadistic and a potential killer that filled me with paralysing terror. I lived on the edge of the unpredictability of his rages.

He wasn't an out of control drunk, he was a man in control enough to strategically place a blow to an area of my body that escaped inquiry from others. It could be bruise free, covertly undermining my sense of self with verbal and emotional put downs or by constantly conveying disapproval.

Demanding sex,  
not taking no for an answer—  
domestic rape.

The abuse wasn't just about what he did though, it was also about what he didn't allow me to do. He controlled every aspect of my life – every aspect of me. I desperately wanted his love and approval and I was prepared to sacrifice anything (including myself) to gain it.

As a Mother, these choices were further complicated. Do I stay to ensure I can maintain a constant, vigilant presence to protect my child? Or do I leave and on regular access visits be faced with placing a defenseless child in the care of a man I know is capable of inflicting emotional and physical harm?

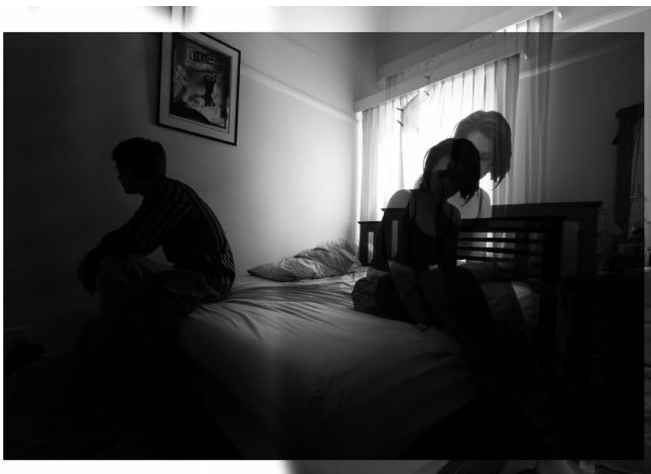
Remaining in an abusive marriage, was easier to bear than the pain from the loss of our family, the loss of the 'happy ever after' I wanted to believe was possible.

With the support of counseling and family, I took the step from one fear-filled existence into another. Fear of my husband's violent retaliation and fear of the unknown future which lay ahead. Life as a single mother was far from the happy ever after I dreamed of. What it did offer was the opportunity to experience a different kind of relationship - a special man who has become my rock and has opened the door to a place I thought never existed.

Fifteen years away from the physical presence of my ex-husband, those experiences - they remain the most fierce and unrelenting demon.

What helps is to honor the pain and suffering of those years by not seeking to forgive this man - by seeking to forgive myself.

Allowing myself to grieve over the good things that held me in that relationship and the realization that it's over.



I believed if I could be good enough,  
careful enough,  
he wouldn't feel the need to hurt me.

I also believed I was responsible for the choice I'd made to be with this man. I fiercely maintained the façade of a happy couple, a perfect marriage. The truth, I believed, would reflect my poor judge of character; place me at more risk of abuse and under pressure from others to 'just leave'.

So why didn't I just leave ?

Believing his remorseful pleas, I was initially convinced it was a one off, deserving of an opportunity to disprove my poor judgement. One more chance turned into years of one more chances.

Between outbursts there could be months full of love and tenderness - that's what gave me hope, what I kept going back for.

Back and forth for over six years - sometimes a few days, other times a week, a month. I'd return believing I was stronger, that I could make it work this time, I could 'fix' my husband, change him. I felt I failed, over and over again. So I tried even harder to stop the abuse.

I believed if I did nothing to upset him  
I could suppress his rage-  
and the necessity he felt to hurt me.  
If I made sure his washing and ironing was done,  
the dinner was served on time . . .

L e m o n t r e e

Crouched in darkness under my lemon tree,  
Trembling canine companion close to me.  
Not a game of hide and seek out here,  
A deadly pursuit, final outcome unclear.  
Frozen with anticipation, will he find me,  
break my glassed stare?  
Is it safe to come out or another fist will I wear?  
Rain, cold, quiet, still, into the black I stare,  
Broken only by a chilling voice,  
a madness filling the air.  
'Come on, I know you're out there.  
You're getting wet, come in.'  
I can't feel the wet, only the burning on my skin.  
I hurt all over, a blur of pain,  
Could not tell you where.  
It just hurts, numbing pain, icy drops from drenched hair.  
Wrapped in long wet grass,  
Under dripping branches only darkness and me,  
I sheltered on chilling nights, wrapped in fallen shadows,  
Heartbeat and me.

1997



If I was careful not to disagree; snuck out to meet friends; didn't forget anything or make any mistakes; became pregnant with his child. If I gave up more of myself to make him happy it just might work.

It didn't. It didn't stop the abuse  
or save the marriage -  
I just gradually lost all sense of self.

I also lost my sense of clarity in the madness of the abuse. I felt it, experienced it, was marked with evidence of it, yet my husband minimised and denied it. I questioned whether I was losing my mind. Reality became increasingly blurred, the abuse almost surreal.

I became entombed by shame. The shame from being violated over and over again, being powerless to stop it - and for falling for the deception in the first place. Silence and shame provided an ideal environment for the abuse to continue.

The exhaustion and paralysis of fear  
made it increasingly difficult to leave.  
He'd threatened to kill me many times  
—I had no reason not to believe him.

Frozen in dilemma, I questioned - do I leave and live in fear of my life, and that of my child, and my ability to survive on my own? Or do I return to a man who is convincingly remorseful and relentless in his pursuit with promises, gifts, tears and hope for a new beginning?

As a Mother, these choices were further complicated. Do I stay to ensure I can maintain a constant, vigilant presence to protect my child? Or do I leave and on regular access visits be faced with placing a defenceless child in the care of a man I know is capable of inflicting emotional and physical harm?



Within this dilemma, I fled and returned many times. Each time, his promises and hopes drawing me back, as did the guilt I felt for abandoning him in his sickness and sadness—the obligation I felt to help him change.

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the loss of our family,  
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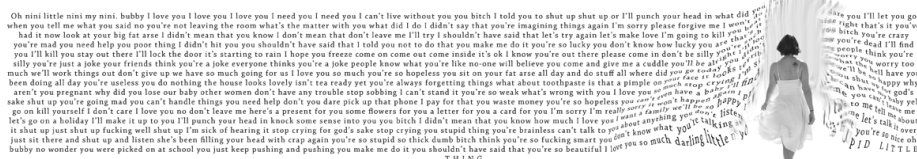
The decision to end the marriage came out of sheer exhaustion. I was empty. There was nothing more I could do to make it work. Being a mother gave me the will and reason to leave. At this point in time my husband attended a mens violence intervention program, and I attended a womens support group which enabled me to see outside of the madness and confirm my right to ensure my own safety and that of our child. With the support of counselling and financial support from family,

I stepped from one fear-filled existence into another-  
the fear of the unknown future which lay ahead.

The loss rolled out into every area of my life. I had to leave my home, the town I was living in, whole community of friends there and social groups. I had to abandon the hope and ideals I had of ‘the happy ever after’ - our future together. We both suffered financial loss. The loss of friendships we shared as a couple. Our family was broken and lost. And I also felt my husband’s loss—my child’s loss.

This overwhelming wave of loss  
is what gets set in motion when  
a woman makes the decision to leave.  
Something she can escape if she stays.

wall of words



I was fortunate and grateful to have had the support of counselling; of close friends; and of my parents throughout these times. They provided a place in which I could seek refuge, along with a financial security net.

Without all of these things  
I'm uncertain if I could have  
upheld the decision and the move  
away from the relationship.

Life as a single mother, living on a Government allowance was far from the happy ever after I dreamed of. What it did offer though, was the opportunity to experience a different kind of relationship—a special man who has opened the door to a type of relationship and life I had given up hope of ever experiencing.

Fifteen years away from the physical presence of my ex-husband, those experiences—they remain as the most fierce and unrelenting threat to how I view myself.

I accept I cannot erase those years, those experiences but I have made a life long commitment to the process of transforming my life and self. To rebuilding a strong sense identity. To speak about it in the hope it puts to rest the question, 'Why don't women just leave' - along with its capacity to inflict further shame, blame and harm on those enduring great, and often silent, and unending suffering.

**'The greatest glory in living  
lies not in never falling,  
but rising every time we fall.'**

Nelson Mandela



## Lemon Tree .

(Art Jamie Russell / Poem Janine Browne)

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 Trembling canine companion close to me.  
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