



Art Jamie Russell

## Nothing domestic about domestic violence

by Janine Browne

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

Being violated physically, emotionally and sexually had a damaging impact of every part of my life, every part of me. It manifested into self destructive beliefs and habits.

Whilst the physical abuse I suffered was obvious, tangible evidence of my suffering, the emotional abuse, the covert undermining and erosion of my self worth, that 'something' that eluded articulation, had by far, the most damaging and long lasting effect.

Often hidden behind closed doors and behind the 'happy couple' façade, partner abuse has the real potential for ending in the tragic loss of lives and it's gross misunderstanding is reflected in the most common response to this crime -

"Why doesn't she just leave?"

The excerpt from my book (below) may provide a deeper understanding of why many women can't and don't 'just leave' . . .

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

*Nelson Mandela*

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, had looks to match 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 paralyzing 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.

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 and rather than admit to poor judgement, 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 failed, over and over again. In a desperate attempt to prevent the marriage from failing, I turned on myself.

I believed if I did nothing to upset him I could protect him from his rage and remove the necessity he felt to hurt me. If I made sure his washing and ironing was done, the dinner was served at the right time, at the right temperature and met favourably with his taste buds. 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 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 of 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 defenseless, unprotected 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. His promises and hopes drawing me back, as did the guilt I felt for abandoning him in his sickness, the obligation I felt to help him change.

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.

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. I had nothing left to lose. Being a mother gave me the strength that had always eluded me.

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 my daughter.

With the support of counseling and financial support from family, I took the step into a fear-filled existence - fear of my husband's violent retaliation and fear of the unknown future which lay ahead.

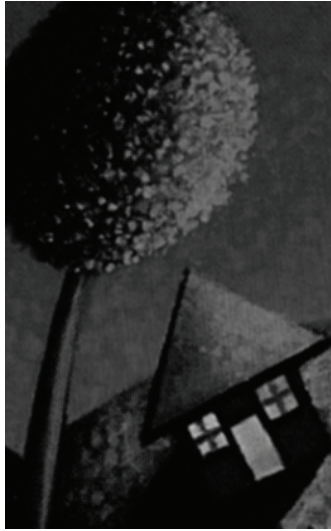
I was fortunate to have the unwavering support of close friends and my parents throughout these times, those years. They have literally saved my life many times over, provided a place in which I could always seek refuge.

Life as a single mother, living on a Government allowance 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 been my rock since soon after the marriage ended. Without his presence in my life I'm absolutely certain I would not be sitting in this relatively peaceful place with the person I have become - he remains my guide, my life-line.

I now accept that I cannot erase those years, those experiences that still affect my life today.

I honor my pain and suffering by not forgiving this man, but by seeking to forgive myself.

As I pacify my surges of anger with truth, begin to own and redeem that part of my life, sadness sinks into the belly of my soul. It is this grief and the acceptance of its presence, that replenishes my wholeness. Allowing myself to grieve for my pain, grieve for the good things that held me in that relationship and the realisation that it's over.



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## Under my lemon tree

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 glazed stare?  
Is it safe to come out or another fist will I wear?

Rain, cold, quiet, still, into the black I stare  
Broken only be 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 the long wet grass  
Under dripping branches only darkness and me.  
I sheltered on chilling nights, wrapped in fallen shadows  
Burning flesh—lemon tree.