

Alice #10

My earliest memory was being in the kitchen and being very scared. I was three or four years old. Daddy was shouting and threw a pot of hot soup. He then hit my Mum. I followed him up the hall to my bedroom in terror.

Mum used to open the door of the linen cupboard in the hallway to block some of the bad sounds coming from the lounge room...so we would not be so frightened. I used to get out of bed and hide behind the door to keep an eye on Mum when Daddy came home...trying to stay awake to protect her made me an insomniac into my 30's.

I was constantly afraid of Daddy, and being a child I tried to get him to see me in a good way, and love me...but he basically ignored me and my younger sister. Sometimes when we had friends over he would be unsure as to which of us were his children. I was scared, not that Daddy would hit me, but that he would kill Mum and I would have to look after everything. A standout as a child is recalling Mum's strength and protection of us. Daddy never hit us; Mum copped all the physical abuse. I witnessed much violence until I was seven years old when Mum divorced Daddy.

There never was much food in the house as Daddy spent it on himself and his girlfriends. I remember a favourite meal was fried bread and tomato sauce...not realizing that that was all we had in the pantry. Sometimes Daddy took my younger sister and myself to the pub – we had to sit in the car for hours, but he would bring us lemon squash to drink. We did not see the neglect; just saw it as a treat. Other than infrequent pub visits I do not remember good moments with Daddy. He did not take much part in Christmas and birthdays...fortunately Mum and her brother were constants. Daddy made promises about presents. They never eventuated. He even sent a telegram one year from interstate "Happy Birthday Sweetheart, I will have a present for you when I come back". For months I went excitedly to our postbox looking for a present from Daddy. It never arrived and this only emphasized the idea that I was worthless. It would have been less painful if he had not said anything.

Daddy started taking us on 'picnics'. He would drive us way into the country on dirt roads and leave us for hours while he went to visit his lady friends. Mum's courage was amazing. I remember it being very dark and Mum said we should hug the trees to comfort them in the night. Daddy would finally turn up – he thought it was very funny. I became frightened of dirt roads as a result.

We attended a local church for a while, but I stopped going after hearing the ladies saying nasty things about my mother. They wondered what she had done to make Daddy hit her (notice the focus of blame?). One example was not long after Daddy had bashed Mum, I was in the Christmas play, and she came to my performance with bruises all over her face. No one would sit next to her. On occasion the beatings were so bad that she was hospitalized.

I was the poor kid with second-hand everything, desperately wanting to be loved and accepted. Even my own house was not safe so I felt I did not belong anywhere. By building a strong wall around myself from early childhood, I sought to protect myself (and eventually my son). Over the years I managed to play many roles behind the wall: Good daughter, good friend, good wife, good employee, good mother, and good boss. It is amazing what you can do with a wall to protect you. The wall began to come down when I was with husband number 2 at 35 years of age – this is when I first felt truly safe.

When I was seven years old, Mum divorced Daddy on Battery charges (unlawful use of force) – from when he broke her face and she was hospitalised. It was unusual for divorce to happen back then, but Daddy's violence against Mum made it possible. The neighbor's kids made fun of me because in those days divorce proceedings were printed in the paper. To protect us, Mum had not told us it was happening which made the neighbor's cruelty even harder to accept.

Several years later, Mum remarried, and I felt safer. He was the man that I think of as my Dad, however his love was conditional: "You should try harder and do better". I wanted his acceptance and to have him proud of me...I don't think he knew how to do this. Sleep was still hard to come by, but I was not so scared. His behavior made me stronger, but harmed my sister's self-belief.

Mum was frequently sick, but Dad was not sympathetic and found it an inconvenience (his perspective: her job was to look after him, not the other way around). As the oldest he expected that I would take on the household responsibilities. He was very rigid and old fashioned – if things were not perfectly done to his expectation he made his displeasure known to everyone. Mum was not allowed to work or watch television during the day – her focus was to be totally on him, us and the house.

How did these events impact me as an adult? Having been used to feeling sorry for myself, in my early 20's I was introduced to yoga and Eastern thinking. The yoga practice helped me begin to deal with my insomnia through the use of meditation. Early on I began to understand the power that we have within: "I am responsible for what I see, I choose the feelings I experience, and I decide upon the goal I would achieve." I came to believe that everything happens for a reason.

I was still vulnerable, but refused to be the continual victim, but instead began to understand what I have gained from these experiences. The greatest gift I have received is a depth of empathy and intuition that allows me to be really effective in working with, leading and teaching people. I believed that I survived by learning to be resilient (Mum helped). I have the conviction that there is a higher power and while I am not of a particular faith or belief I would class myself as spiritual.

My experiences have variously scarred me, hurt me and have provided me with courage, the ability to reflect, better empathy and intuition. I feel fortunate to have survived and grown. I forgave Daddy at his funeral as I felt it was the right thing to do for me (and for closure). I have moved on and hope that my story helps others.
