

Alice #11

Why do women put up with domestic violence? It was a question I asked as a bystander. However, when I became a victim I found it was not that easy to walk away.

However, I did, and feel it is time to tell my story as a survivor.

As a strong, confident, independent and carefree young woman, I moved to a new town to start a dream job in a tropical paradise. And to top it off, I fell in love with a charmer. He would end up snaring me into a trap, where I felt I had no escape.

We met in a hotel. Being new to town, we were both staying there until we found more permanent accommodation. One night he asked me to dinner. We had a wonderful time and started to date. We spent a lot of time together, soon fell in love and started to talk about a future together. Then came the news that his contract was to finish and he would be moving back to the big smoke – would I come? “Of course,” was my answer.

Back in the city, I found what seemed like an amazing job. I was in love, we were living together, and on the weekends we would go and work on his dream house. Then, a new manager at work started to bully me. I went to the company’s owner who just apologised and made excuses for him. I left a couple months later and picked up some temporary contracts then a permanent position.

However, my self-esteem had been battered and instead of helping me to rebuild, my boyfriend started to pull me down. At first it was verbal abuse: criticism of my hair, clothes, weight, cooking. It started in jest, as jokes, then escalated to emphatic remarks and gradually became full-blown tirades. His drinking increased dramatically along with his work hours. There were all-nighters and full weekends as well nights out with his workmates. In hindsight, I believe he had started taking drugs, as they were common in his industry.

I started to go out with my friends and work colleagues. He didn’t like it and several times locked me in the flat. On the way home from being with family and friends, he would belittle me about my behaviour or conversation. He would laugh, tease, joke and bully me about everything I did, including our sex life. He would tell me that he had discussed it with his work mates and they laughed and agreed I wasn’t normal and felt sorry for him.

An interstate contract came up and he took it. You would think it would have given me freedom, but it didn’t – I was well and truly trapped. So much so, that I even went and spent a week with him. He had a house out of town in the sticks. He would leave and appear with no warning – I would be stranded with no car and no mobile reception.

One night, we went into town for dinner with his workmates. As we left the pub, he started an argument then pushed me out of the car. I started to walk back to the pub, while working out how I was going to get money and a ticket to return home. He drove back and threw my bag at me. I picked it up and kept walking and he drove beside me hurling abuse.

He drove away and returned apologising and begging me to get in the car. “No,” I said. “I can’t live without you,” he pleaded again and again. I caved and got into the car. I was a nervous wreck and felt trapped. I had no money, as all my salary went into our flat, bills and groceries, while his went into his dream house.

I was ashamed to go to my family and friends, as I had been isolated, felt worthless and believed it was what I deserved. At one stage, I asked a friend to help, to stay in his spare room while I sorted things out. “I don’t get involved in domestics,” was his reply. I took this to believe no one would help me.

Then one night after a party, it happened – he hit me. After a shower, I returned to the bedroom in a towel and he went for me. He pinned me against the wall screaming abuse about his friend wanting a foursome. He held me by the neck spitting the abuse in my face along with his saliva. His eyes were bulging, he had gone mad. I was so scared. “Let go of me,” I screamed. His hand loosened for a second then he hit me with the other one. My head hit the concrete wall behind me. As he tried again for another shot, I screamed, yelled, scratched and kicked. I don’t know how long it lasted but he eventually backed off and retreated to the lounge room. I lay curled in a ball trying to decide what to do. I was naked, drunk, battered and bruised; physically,

mentally and emotionally. I crawled into bed and stayed awake plotting my escape.

In the morning he apologised. He was attentive and loving with flowers, chocolates and dinners. It didn't last; within a week we had an argument, this time I escaped before I was locked in. I wandered the streets, not knowing what to do, where to go. I was a mess and thought about taking my life. I saw a doctor's surgery and headed towards it. I entered the office hysterical. The doctor booked me in to counselling. I went, he went and we went. He took all the blame; it was his fault, the alcohol, and his possessive behaviour. He didn't understand it - he would never hit me again. He loved me.

A week later, the emotional abuse started again. However, I was still seeing the counsellor and was building my self-esteem and self-awareness. Soon after, he came home to change for a work party. I wasn't invited. He told me not to go out, as he wouldn't be long. I sensed there would be trouble when he returned. Several weeks earlier, we had been out with a friend of mine. He went to the toilet. "Are you okay? I am here if you need me," she said quietly before his return.

That night I rang her, picked up my handbag, toothbrush, a pair of undies, left a note and went. I ran to the bus, looking over my shoulder, jumped on to the first bus and sat nervously watching every car. I was scared he would find me and take me back. From the bus stop, I walked quickly to the train station. It was filled with people leaving the cricket. I felt so relieved to be surrounded by the crowd – it felt safe. I boarded the train. At the other end my friend was waiting. I cried. I told her some of it but not all. We hugged and cried then I slept peacefully for the first time in ages.

Next day, I decided to go to my parents. I turned on my phone and rang mum. There was no explanation just I was coming home for the weekend, alone, could she pick me up from the station. While on the phone, it kept beeping. When I hung up, there were close to 100 messages and texts. "Where are you?" through to begging, pleading then swearing and threats. I didn't answer any of them and turned off my phone.

Mum was at the station. I didn't say much and she didn't ask, except "how long are you staying?" "I don't know," I replied. I can't remember how long it was. I did a 250-kilometre round trip commute each day to work in my mother's clothes until I went and retrieved my own with mum and dad in tow. He rang, we talked, and he was seeking help. He begged me to come back. "No," I said. He visited me but I was always made sure there were people around. I chose the place and was adamant I would get myself there and back. I still loved him, I thought, but didn't trust him or myself.

The commuting wore thin and I move back in to the flat but slept in the lounge room, near the front door. I tried to mend the rift and I think he tried too. Then the clincher came, a lucrative overseas contract for him in Asia for several months. He wasn't sure - he wanted us to get back together. In the back of my mind, I knew if he accepted the work, it was over. An offer to visit my sister in Europe happened about the same time, he was invited too. He declined and accepted the Asian contract. I decide to go Europe for three weeks so I could get my head together, and call in to see him on a stopover. Before my departure, he called and said the stopover wasn't convenient for him. "Can you change this and that, then maybe," he said. "No," was my answer. I cancelled the stopover. I rang from the airport during the transfer, he didn't answer. Nor did he answer any of my calls when I was away.

When I arrived back in Australia, flowers were delivered and the phone calls started every night, friendly and loving, but if I didn't answer the phone the accusations and abuse started. His contract was extended. Then one night, he badgered me to say, "I love you". I realised I couldn't because I didn't. "I don't love you, anymore," I whispered. "You will need to find somewhere else to stay for when you return to Australia." The pleading and crying started. "Sorry," I said, "goodbye." I was shaking when I hung up and felt very unsafe, even though we were on different continents.

Next day, I rang mum and asked if she would help me move my gear out of the 'dream house'. We did it the following day. Then I changed the locks at the flat and packed up all his stuff and put it in the storeroom. Our stuff, I divided down the middle and his half went into the storeroom too.

After the call, his contact was spasmodic. When he did ring, he went from begging through the same cycle to threats. I knew he would try and come back to the flat to take me back. I waited. There was a vague date of his return and no confirmation. As the date came closer, I became nervous and worried about the repercussions from my stance.

Then the call came. "What the fuck is going on? My car is gone and I can't get into the flat." "Yes, sorry about the car I needed it for work, I have changed the locks and stored your gear in the storeroom, and I had told you to find other arrangements." He started screaming down the phone. "Please don't yell. I will bring the car to you within an hour, met me at the flat," I said calmly and clearly.

I went and told my manager briefly what was happening. She suggested my assistant go with me in another car, so we had a quick and safe getaway. She asked about the police. "No," I said. So, we decided she would call in 45 minutes. If I did not answer, she would ring the police immediately. We arrived and went in together. He wasn't there but within several minutes, he arrived in his 'bristling' glory. That was quickly notched down when he saw my companion.

"What is she doing here," he said pointing at my companion. "Giving me a lift back to work," I replied. "You didn't need a bodyguard," he quipped. "Don't I?" was my retort. "The lock to the storage area will be changed in a fortnight and most of your gear is in there," I said handing him the keys to the car and storage area. "As for the furniture, ring and give me a date you wish to pick it up."

In disbelief, he looked at me, opened his mouth, shut it, narrowed his eyes and snatched the keys. The phone rang, it was my manager making sure I was okay. He stormed out, but I knew it wasn't over. The stalking started at home and work. Then he would run into me, and act surprised when I was out, especially alone. There were the phone calls, the same cycle from begging to threats plus some hang-ups at all hours. Clothes, mainly underwear, went missing off the line. I stayed strong but it was wearing.

As fate would have it, my work drew to an end with a restructure. I found another position pretty quickly in the outer suburbs; it meant I needed to move. I was happy to start afresh. I felt I could disappear off his radar. So I changed my work and address but not my mobile phone number. It was my lifeline to my family and friends.

He kept calling, I didn't answer, however, each time I saw his number it unnerved me. Then he stopped. Then I changed to a more public role, especially in his family and childhood friends' circles. The calls started again: "How are you? Where are you? Who are you with? I miss you". "Good, out with friends, how are you?" was my reply each time. He would give me information about his life; I felt safer knowing where and what he was doing. However, the calls still rattled me.

Then one night, a guy I was dating asked me about the calls. Next time it happened, he took the phone. "Look mate, she is with me now - move on." The calls stopped.

It always amazes me. I never thought to contact the police about the stalking and I coped by myself with no assistance from family, friends or professionals. I have had some counselling but not much. It has taken years to rebuild, especially my trust in men and myself. I am now in a loving and healthy relationship with a kind and supportive man. However, I have never discussed the violence I endured to him, family or friends. I still feel a lot of shame of allowing myself to be in such an abusive relationship and not able to leave.

Some comments and actions still trigger me but I am learning to not let them rule my life. The healing has been slow and I believe telling my story will help it. I also hope it will help other women, victims and survivors alike, not to feel so alone. This happened 15 years ago, now there are more support and services available or I am aware of them. If you are in an abusive relationship, my advice would be to tell a trusted friend, seek help and support, leave, look after yourself and foster healthy relationships.
