

## ALICE #12

I was 15 when I met him. I was the quiet, rather shy, introverted country girl. He was everything I wasn't: loud, extroverted, and city-wise. He was 19 and oozing self-confidence. I'd been bullied for years at school and had absolutely no self-confidence. I was the perfect canvas for his manipulation.

By the time I was 17 he had me completely overwhelmed with his attention. When my attention should have been focused on school and HSC Higher School Certificate), I was instead swirling in confusion between what he wanted, what I wanted and what my parents wanted. I didn't know which way to turn!

By the time I was 20 he had me completely convinced that I had no worth; that nobody else would ever want me; that it was either marry him or be alone forever. Looking back this sounds beyond ridiculous. Fancy being stupid enough to believe, that at only 20, life would hold no other possibilities! But I was young, naive and lonely and wanted that "happy ever after" fairy-tale that seemed to be in the grasp of other people I knew.

I'd moved out of home when I was 19 to begin my nursing career in the city and was incredibly lonely. He made certain I didn't make any firm friendships with the people I was working with, and my school friends lived on the other end of the state.

He was always telling me all these little "facts" about things I knew nothing about. When he had me believing him, he'd mock me for my stupidity or he'd do the "trust me, trust me" thing and then break my fingers. I was 21 when I finally married him. I knew it was the wrong thing to do but by then it all seemed like an avalanche crashing down a mountain, something I had no control over.

Over the next few years he did everything he possibly could to destroy the close relationship I had with my family - although this was something that completely escaped my attention. I wasn't aware of it until about 25 years later. My saving grace was that my family held on tight, they refused to let me go.

From here things simply went downhill. No matter how much he verbally and psychologically beat me down I tried to stand up straight and hold my head high. Bruises on my arms and legs I covered up with makeup. Bruises on my heart and soul I covered up with smiles. When this mental anguish threatened to overwhelm me I learnt, completely by accident, if I cut myself and made myself bleed then the pain became an external thing and thus something I could deal with. The first time I escaped was 3 months after the birth of our second child. He came home one afternoon in a filthy mood and for some unforgivable sin on my behalf (my sick, crying baby) he grabbed me by the neck and held me up against the wall in the corner of our bedroom trying to choke me. The reason he was unsuccessful was because our 4 1/2 year old child came in to see what was happening.

When he went to work the next morning I packed up what I wanted from the house and moved my kids and myself to my parent's home. After a month I gave in and went back home. The problems appeared, to me, to be insurmountable. I couldn't have much longer off work, I had a sick baby, my nearly 5 year old had to start school and how could "someone as useless as I was" raise two kids as a single parent. That was assuming that my children would not be taken away from me at some point. He had been telling me since the day I fell pregnant with our first child, that if I ever left he'd say whatever it took to get them taken away from me and that he'd get full custody.

My second taste of freedom happened 4 years later when, after a particularly nasty and violent few months and in a rarely seen brave moment by me, I threw him and all his clothes out of the house. Again I caved after 4 weeks - yet again foolishly believing the "I'll change" line.

It wasn't until 15 years later that I was finally going to be free. After 30+ years of his abuse and violence, holes smashed through walls next to my head; having to move my things to my parent's house when he threatened to put an axe through them and me; continually having to make excuses to my family for his bad behaviour; after him spending all the household's money on whatever new toy interested him at the moment, leaving bills unpaid and the household barely running; he finally left!

He told me he had a girlfriend and he was moving in with her. Over the next few years I found out there had been a string of other women during the course of our marriage. Looking back, I'd been "slow dancing" with depression and anxiety attacks for just about all my adult life. I'd long forgotten how to sleep - nightmares ruled my night times. When he finally left, all of this crashed down on me. I fell into a black hole so deep and dark that I didn't think I'd ever get out of it,

The simple task of breathing took every bit of energy that I had and anything more complex like eating, talking or making sense of the world were beyond me. It was simply due to the grace of God, the constant attention of my parents and kids and the support and hard work of some brilliant social workers that I survived.

But I HAVE survived. I have thrived. I now know that I have worth and there are plenty of reasons to push forward.

I suppose the thing that really gets to me about all of this is that I was screaming out for help for a long, long time and nobody listened. Just because I wasn't using the obvious words doesn't mean I wasn't pleading for help. During a lot of these years I was working in a major city hospital. I must have seen 4 or 5 psychologists and the same number of GP's with every kind of illness and injury that you can think of and still nobody listened.

All I can do is implore people to really listen to your friends, family and colleagues. Even if it means you have to listen to what they are *not* saying.

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