

Alice #18

At the tender age of 18, I met James.

I had only just started in the workforce, as the 'mail girl' for a large manufacturing company. He worked out in the factory.

Just like a moment from a movie, we hit it off at the work Christmas party and, several dates and months later, we moved in together. I had never lived out of home before *or* lived with a boyfriend, so this was me becoming independent and an adult, all at once!

A few weeks into our new life together, we went to yet another work party. This was different though. I was the designated driver and he - the drinker. Sometime during the course of the night, something changed in his behaviour. He got a certain look in his eye - a feistiness that said he was looking for a fight. It should have been a sign.

The night grew weary and he told me to go home, that he would stay and kick on. What a trap I had walked into... as soon as I left, he text me to say he couldn't believe I had left him. Another sign, but this life was new to me and so I did the right thing and drove back to get him.

He caused a scene at the pub before deciding to '*let me*' drive us home.

We were on the highway, half way home when he screamed at me to pull over and let him out. Again, I did as I was told, but continued to drive slowly behind him, as he walked along the road. *And again*, I was trying to do what I thought was right. I was scared, knew he'd had too much to drink and was angry, and I worried he would get run over or cause a fight with others on their way home from an innocent night out.

This displeased him and he showed me that by punching his fist through my car's windscreen while I sat like a deer in the headlights in the driver's seat. That was enough for me. I drove home and lay in bed, waiting.

I'm not sure how long it took him to walk the rest of the distance, but when he arrived home, he was enraged.

How could I have left him!?!

How could I have let him walk home!?!

In one fell swoop, he picked up our whole bed, with me in it, and threw it across our room.

This was the first of many things for me. It was the first home, and bed, I had ever shared with a man. Although, he was not a 'man', nor was he behaving like one.

I called my Mum in a sobbing mess and asked her to come and get me, but before she had arrived, he had convinced me to stay, and I don't know how, but I then convinced my Mum I was okay. I am not yet a mother, so I can't even begin to imagine how a mother deals with a phone call like that, but I have since learned that throughout my relationship with James, my Mum spent many nights on the phone to help lines trying to get advice and support on what she could do. What a beautiful, beautiful lady.

This night was another of those 'firsts'; the first of many nights like this.

Don't get me wrong, James had some great qualities, but not enough. No quality is ever enough to outweigh the abuse endured while he was in my life; mental, emotional or physical.

I am a woman, so I tried to fix him. That's what we women do, right? I tried to make him love so much that he could never imagine hurting me again, but that didn't work. I organised for both of us to see a relationship counsellor, individually and as a couple, but that didn't work either. I tried booking us great weekends away to remove us from our home and the four walls where the damage was always done, but that, too, didn't work.

I tried to internalise my hurt, by not reacting to the abuse or by abusing my own body to realise the emotions. Again, nothing changed. I fought back, hit back, pushed back, but all that did was make me disgusted with the version of myself that I was becoming.

My final idea was to do something drastic. What could I do to get him to see me differently, to see me as someone who *needed* him? As someone weak, who needed to be taken care of?

I came home to find my entire wardrobe of clothes strewn across the front yard of our townhouse one afternoon, and so I packed it all up in the back of my car and drove off. I drove up and down the same strip of road for what seemed like hours.

I'd get to the roundabout at one end, loop it and drive back to the roundabout at the other end. I lapped these two roundabouts over and over. Again and again.

I had my eye on a brick wall that held back an embankment from the road.

After what seemed like the hundredth time, I drove towards that wall with my eyes closed.

I veered straight into that wall with intent. I didn't want to die; I just wanted to injure myself enough that he would have to take care of me. A broken leg or arm would have been enough. Surely he would have to look after me if I was injured. Looking back on this, I see it as an outrageous act, but at the time, it was all I had left.

Like everything else, it didn't work.

The only damage that was done was to my car. I was fine. I like to tell myself that the reason I was uninjured that night was that I was too strong, but I think the universe was too strong.

When I called to tell him I'd had a car accident, he wouldn't answer my calls, so I had to call my Mum. I lied about why I had all my clothing in the car with me. She took me home and my car was towed away. I refused her requests to come in or help me carry my bags, instead insisting she leave.

When I finally walked back in the front door and told him what had happened, he replied: "Well, I hope you don't expect *me* to let you borrow *my* car." That's all he said. No 'are you okay?' Nothing. And that's when I gave up.

Before this night, I still thought I was worthy of being loved, but that I needed to prove it to him, get him to understand. When he reacted the way he did, I realised it was me who needed to understand. It was me who was wrong. I was unworthy. If the 'love of my life' didn't think I was worth loving, then I mustn't have been.

I left twice before I really left. The first and second times I left were after big, fat, disgusting fights.

The final time was for no reason, apart from the biggest reason of all. There was no fight. No hitting. No grabbing. No pushing. No throwing. No slamming. I was sitting at my desk at work one day, talking to my Mum on the phone. We were chatting about every-day stuff and I remember interrupting her and saying: "Mum, I think I will come home." And that was it.

After I really left, my biggest challenge - initially - was something I refer to as "practical guilt." I consumed myself with worrying: 'Where will he live? Who will help him move out of our house? How will he afford to live on his own? How will he tell his family? Will they think it was my fault?' And so on.

I was *so blessed* to have the most amazing family. It still stings my eyes to think about what my family saw and heard during this time.

When I look back now, I know that my greatest challenge was actually becoming the person I used to be, before I met him. I had to learn to make eye contact again. I had to learn to speak up for myself again. And I did. I wouldn't be so many things that I am now without having had this awful relationship.

Now, I stand tall. I stand up for myself. I stand up for what I want in a relationship. Doing so became a personal goal, and I am proud to say I have achieved it.

Today, I am 30 and I am fan-freaking-tastic. I love who I am now and, as strange as it may sound, I love what I went through, because I managed to come out the other side of it. I mean no disrespect to any other woman experiencing such struggles when I say that.

What happened throughout my three year relationship with James changed me completely. At first, it changed me for the worse, but eventually, it changed me for the better.

I am a strong, independent woman now and I honestly do love myself. I am so self-aware and so in-touch with my mind and emotions, and that can only help in every aspect of my life. I am so proud of myself for using this experience to grow and so grateful for an opportunity to write this all down.

If one other woman reads this and realises she can get through what she is going through and find the courage to change it, for the better, then I have done my part.

I think of him sometimes, like any of us do about an ex-boyfriend. He is engaged now with two young sons, and I worry for those boys. I worry that they will grow up learning certain behaviours and believe that those behaviours are acceptable, and part of every marriage, every home, and every man.

My family have been and continue to be just AMAZING, especially my Mum, Dad, my older sisters and their husbands. There are not enough words to describe how important they were and are to me in helping me get away and move on. They helped me stay strong and helped me re-learn to trust people who really do love me.

To other women out there who may have been through something like I have, or who are still going through it, please believe in yourself. You are a woman, and we women can do anything!

Yes, it will be hard, and scary, and frightening as hell, but you will get through it, and you will get to the end of your life and be so happy that you persevered.

Don't think twice about asking for help – from a helpline, a family member, and women's networks and groups, and anyone who you feel comfortable asking. Know that people won't deny you the assistance you are asking for.

If you're a family member or friends of a victim, please don't turn your back. We will come to you and say we are never going back, and we will probably go back. Please keep us safe and make sure we know we can always come back to you. We need that.
