

Alice #28

My name is Alice #28.

I love watching the Brady Bunch. I am Cindy's age. I imagine living her fabulous carefree life with a big family and a happy home. I pretend my name is Cindy and I have wonderful blond curly hair and everyone dotes on me with my lisp. I also love watching Bewitched, because Tabitha who's also my age, could wiggle her nose and make the impossible happen. I try making my nose wiggle by itself. It refuses to do the wiggle wiggle even though I practice it so hard.

I keep trying to wiggle my nose over and over. If I could just do it once, I might be able to stop Dad's car pulling up outside after he's finished work. Wiggle. Wiggle. Why doesn't it work?

I can hear his car pulling up outside our house right now. Just like every other work day. I know what is coming.

My stomach flips, I think I might be sick. Again. I run to the TV and switch it off. I run outside to the backyard and jump the fence and run to my best friend Fiona's house a few blocks down. Fiona's mum opens the door and hugs me, gives me some lollies and lets me stay playing with Fiona until it starts to get late. Fi's mum says 'You have to go home now honey, I'm sorry, but it's getting dark, I'll walk you half way and make sure you go in. It'll be Ok, don't cry. Come on, the sooner you go the sooner it'll finish'. It never finishes.

I dawdle all the way up the hill, a huge 50 meter slope. With every step I can hear the yelling getting louder. I look back to Fi's mum, who is wiping her eyes for some reason.

I can't put it off any longer. I'm back home. My stomach churning, please please don't vomit, its worse when you vomit! The mess you make !! I walk inside and realise it was my turn to set the table. My big sister has covered for me thank God so at least that's one less thing to be in trouble for. I creep into my sister's room. She's hiding under the bed. I climb under the bed with her. "Where've you been! I've had to hide for hours under here!" she says. I whisper I'm sorry, just as my legs are grabbed and I'm yanked from under the bed. He's seen me come home.

"It's past six o'clock! Where have you been?" he yells while dragging me to the dinner table by my hair.

"Just leave her alone you bastard. You don't give a shit about the kids!" Mum yells from the kitchen.

She brings out the steaming hot baked dinner and places it on the table. My big sis is smart enough to know to sit at the table quietly and not walk around the head of the table where he sits. We both know what happens if we walk near him in this mood. Pain.

"What is this?" he says.

"Baked lamb and vegetables" she says staring at the salad bowl.

"We can't afford baked lamb!!" he says, picks up the hot baked dinner and hurls it straight at her face. Food flies everywhere and I see she already has a big bruise and burns on her face. I look at big sis and we both immediately duck out of our chairs and get under the table holding each other. "Shhhh" my sister whispers. "It's worse when you cry."

She stands up from her seat at the table. She throws her glass at him. The plates, the cutlery ... anything she can grab. "How dare you treat me like this in front of our children! You're nothing but a worthless pig! Look what you've done to me girls, you bastard". He drags us out from under the table. We are both crying now, there is no stopping it. He yells at her: "They should know what a useless bitch you are! They're just the same as you!" and he thrusts both of us at her. We are stuck, both piggies in the middle, ready for slaughtering. "Look at a fine example of a father, girls" she says. "He's burnt my face and no dinner for anyone.". She pushes us at him. "You're a bastard! Look what you've done to me!". He spits at her. She lunges at him and scratches his

face with all of her long fingernails. My sis and I are in between them both. Again. He starts to punch anywhere he can, at her, at me and my sis as we're still stuck between the two of them. I manage to squeeze out, and run for my bedroom, my sis close behind. I lock the door and we push the chest of drawers behind it. They are still yelling and punching and throwing things, so we are safe. Then it's quiet. It's over. We both hold each other and close our eyes. "I want to live with Nanny" I say to my sis. "They never do this!". "Shhh" she says, "he might hear you!"

CRACK! My bedroom door is being bashed in, his whole body weight making it cave in toward my sis and me. We push so hard against the door to stop the lock from snapping but we are no match for a fit grown man. "You useless brats! I wish you'd never been born!" he says as the hinges snap. And here it comes. Our turn.

No school for us for at least 2 weeks until our visible bruising heals. "They've got Chicken Pox" she tells our school. Yet another lie to cover the hell they are making us live through.

I am now 43 years old. My memories of home life are as vivid and as fresh as they were when I was 5. And 6. And 7 and all the way to 17 when I left home, unable to cope with my home life any longer. My parents kept up their farcical marriage for another 13 years: what a wonderful example of love and family life they set for their children. So much so, that I swore I would never have children of my own and make them suffer the way I did. Don't you know? *"Kids wreck a marriage, we had a great time before you came along"*. Delightful. What sage advice.

I developed anorexia at 12 years of age. It was my only way of controlling *something* in my life. At 17 I weighed 39 kgs. After I left home, my anorexia continued until I was 23. After a lot of inner strength and a very adoring boyfriend, I learned that *I* was in control of my life and free to make decisions without fear of being hurt. I gradually got better, and regained weight.

I excelled at school, determined to be the best I could be, determined to escape the life that I was living and get the hell out of there. Be independent. I loved school. the peaceful quiet of the library. The routine, the predictability, the rules and of course, no one fought except the stupid boys. I came top of most years, and was accepted into arts law after year 12.

There was no way I was staying around either of my parents. So it was fortuitous that my boyfriend, (who I moved in with when I was 17) was transferred as far away as he could be from my home town. I jumped at the chance, changed universities and graduated with an arts law degree. Then a Master of Business Administration with Honours. Of course there were hurdles. There was a year I had to live alone when my boyfriend was sent to another job and I had to work two jobs at the age of 21 to afford the rent, food and still go to uni. I admit I filled my backpack with uni toilet rolls on one occasion as I couldn't afford toilet paper. I rode a pushbike to and from uni every day until I was 25 and I bought my first car. It was a bomb, had a leaky sunroof so you had to use an umbrella inside the car when it rained. But I couldn't have been happier. I was unchained from the past and living life on my terms. Fiercely independent and no contact with the parents. I thought I was free and unscarred from my childhood.

At 19, my boyfriend asked me to marry him. I said yes, but it took me 9 years to actually get married. And my biggest rule of all: NO CHILDREN.

Time chugged by. I became a lawyer and I fight every day for my clients... but not once have I touched a family law matter, or a care and protection matter. It's just too close to the memories of my childhood.

I learned from my husband (over a very long period of time) what love really meant and how a marriage should work. Respect, truth, love, admiration sharing each other's joy and achievements, helping the other through rough patches, and caring for each other. I was 39 when my husband managed somehow to convince me that we should have children. I was 40 when my son was born. Aside from those awful colic months he was my joy, a reflection of my husband and me and I was so astonished at the love I could feel for this little thing. Why on earth had I waited so long? Was I crazy? This kid was awesome! So much fun and joy he

brought to our lives. We decided to try for a second as soon as possible. I fell pregnant again, but miscarried at 14 weeks.

I grieved for what could have been, but was told miscarriages are not uncommon at my age, and to try again as soon as possible. About 6 months later, I decided to try again and as easy as pie, I fell pregnant again. How lucky can you be at such an age to conceive naturally! The sting of course, is that being an older mother, there's greater risks. And my baby I was so joyful about is a testament to that. At 12 weeks, the scans showed at 1 in 2 chances of Down Syndrome. I had to struggle through a CVS test and wait another 2 weeks for the 100% correct result. Which of course just confirmed my worst fears, and I had to make the hardest decision of my life. To terminate a life inside me. I could not bear to bring a child into this world with severe disabilities knowing that I would not be around forever to care for him or her. I could not bear bringing a child into this world knowing he or she would suffer forever.

Despite the rational side of the decision to terminate, it was the hardest thing I have ever had to do in my life, and I don't know when or if I can ever forgive myself. All because I was constantly told as a child that children wrecked a marriage and waiting too late to have children. My childhood and parents can still hurt me now even without being a part of my life for a long time.

I grieve every day for the child I should have. As I write this, I would have been having another baby in 5 days. Add to that 2 months ago the love of my life, my son, was diagnosed with severe autism. Overwhelmed with grief and loss, I caught every bug going around and was finally laid flat two months ago after developing bronchitis and whooping cough. I am now taking antidepressants, have counselling and exercise to try to get through this dark dark year.

A child living in a house with domestic violence has a long and difficult road to travel, and finding a life that is not scarred with plates being thrown at walls, with food dripping onto carpet, parents punching each other and using their children as pawns in a fight between them. Children growing up with domestic violence are Alices. Scarred forever. Hopefully others like me have managed to escape the terror, found a way to trust others and find peace. This Alice is striving to find peace but one day I hope it will come. One day.

With all my love,

Alice
