

Alice #58

I would start by saying, "I used to want to forget, but it does stay with you, it never leaves, no matter how many years go by, or even finding happiness with another husband, and another life entirely, it is still somewhere deep in your gut, deep in your emotional being... it remains. However, I have come to realise it *should* stay there, as a constant reminder that you should never, ever, ever stand by and let that happen to you, your mothers, your daughters, your colleagues, your friends".

Here is a snapshot into my life some years ago. I met my first ex-husband and at that stage, like many, he was charming. Two years in to our marriage and I knew that I had to leave, but then fate intervened in my life. A major accident led to his unemployment, excessive drugs, alcohol. Anything that got him through the day became normal life. Looking back, use of drugs and alcohol were always present, I just didn't grasp the depth of the problem being so new into the relationship. So the accident was not to blame, it just escalated things. His temper became unbearable – this was definitely an emergence of his true colours.

I was asked to speak to a group recently, which was my first time to verbalise what I went through. I asked the group to close their eyes and imagine what it is like to lay awake every night in fear of falling asleep in case "he" needed something; in case he came home drunk or stoned; someone had upset him at work; or if he doesn't think the house is tidy enough; or doesn't like what you have prepared for dinner. I asked them to imagine going to a function and being followed around the room in case he doesn't like who you are talking to, or to be concerned every time a male person looked in your direction, or heaven forbid smiled at you. Visualise every birthday, Christmas and all special occasions being ruined because alcohol is present. I came to dread my own children's birthdays, wondering why he hates me today, and wondering why he wants nothing to do with his own children. Imagine someone prepared to assault his wife in a public place.

I then asked this group to imagine enduring all of this and trying to maintain a job, to go to work every day, while hiding the truth from everyone you know. Picture yourself hiding the bruises on your neck, or trying to disguise the limp from "falling" down the stairs. Years of psychological and emotional abuse, the yelling, the belittling, the constant assault on my appearance, was almost worse than anything physical. There were times, when I almost wanted him to hit me to "make it stop".

Then, imagine all this with children in the home.

It became a constant battle to shield and protect them; however, I spent my entire children's childhood wishing them to turn 18. My biggest fear was that something would happen to me, and I would leave behind my beautiful children that would remain in his care. It is a sad thing to wish your children's lives away.

Whilst it is impossible for people not in this situation to understand why women stay, I believe, we stay for different reasons, in my case: pure fear, not what he would do to me, but fear of my children's safety and wellbeing if I tried to leave. It took some years, but I eventually found the courage to leave.

I felt so alone. My mother was from the old school; who on many occasions told me to stay, stick it out, your duty as a wife, "oh, he just has a bad temper - learn to live with it". Lost in a miserable situation, seeing no way out, friends no longer visited, no joy in your life, your only existence is to survive and get the children through the day safely. I remember driving home from work and thinking how easy it would be to let go of the wheel and it would be all over. But each and every time, the thought of leaving the children with that man, was unbearable and brought me back.

It is only when you are out of the cycle, away from the situation, that you gain personal strength, strength from those around you. This strength enables you to look back and say "I should have never stayed; I should have got out after the first "event". There is help out there, you just have to reach out and grab it. Many of my friends said "we didn't know it was that bad", "why didn't you tell us?" I recently came into contact with a colleague who I worked with years ago, and upon listening to an account of my life back then, burst into tears and said to me "I had no idea at all; I just cannot believe you hid it from all of us".

There are more victims within these stories, not just the wife, but the effect it has on your children long-term is telling. I look back and realise I had a little child who never smiled, who thought normal behaviour was yelling and shouting. It took me years to reverse the effects of this ingrained behaviour.

I stand here now, proudly saying that I am in a happy marriage, have raised beautiful children, have a wonderful husband and have built a successful career. I left my ex-husband when I had little funds and no furniture. At the end of the day it's just stuff, money can be re-gained, furniture that can be bought. DO NOT STAY for financial reasons!

I have a beautiful home and my life is filled with peace. I am strong, and have raised my children to know that they should never accept second best; they should never accept this type of behaviour. Our sons have been raised to respect the women in their lives, treat them with kindness and courtesy, and never to raise a hand to a woman.

And this is what we must do as fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, sons, daughters, brothers and sisters, colleagues, employers and friends. We must foster kindness and respect, and support any cause that assists in raising the profile of the fight against any form of violence, but particularly domestic violence - as these crimes are carried out by people who profess to love us and care for us.

Acts of violence do not represent love or caring. Violence characterises the need of the violent to exercise control over another person - which should never be tolerated in our society..
