

Alice #74

When I first met my ex he seemed like a great guy. He was successful in his career, his friends raved about how great he was, and he was always the first person volunteering to help someone in need. Women loved being around him, and men loved having a beer with him. He was an attractive, intelligent and entertaining companion, who was kind to strangers and loved animals.

In the beginning there were red flags. Little things. The times he became irrationally annoyed at minor inconveniences. Or when he hinted at wanting to take violent revenge on people over petty slights. But I brushed it off as hyperbole. I was very lonely before I met him, and he seemed so great otherwise. He revealed to me his sad childhood, troubled teenage years that he bravely overcame. And he played himself off as the victim, always. He played me so well. I had my own family issues, my own childhood wounds, and I thought that together we could help each other heal. Big mistake.

Then he started on me. Small things at first, like criticisms over my housekeeping skills, all couched as 'only trying to help'. He was quick to anger, then would apologise, make excuses, say something to make me feel sorry for him. The escalation was very slow. As in most abusive relationships, things were great the vast majority of the time.

But I knew something was wrong. After a while he started throwing objects, swearing at me, and occasionally threatening to hit me. By this stage I was heavily pregnant, so it wasn't as simple as just walking out. I started doing research on abusive relationships. Some of it seemed to fit, but there were common descriptors that didn't fit at all. He wasn't financially controlling or jealous. He didn't try to control my movements. For the longest time this allowed me to stay in denial. I couldn't accept that I was being abused. I was well educated and had a great job! I was strong and opinionated, so how could this be happening to me?

Several times after he had stormed out in a rage I called abuse hotlines and cried to anonymous women. They patiently explained that yes, what I was describing was abuse, and no, in all likelihood things would not get better. Deep down I knew they were right, but I was stubborn. In my pride and secret shame I felt determined to make it work, and would beg him to get help. After particularly horrendous outbursts he would cry, tell me how awful he felt about what he was doing to me, and promise to get help. But when it came to making an appointment there was always an excuse. He is the most manipulative person I have ever met, and the best liar.

By the time I was pregnant again he was regularly breaking things, threatening to punch me, and occasionally threatening to kill me. He treated the fact he had never actually hit me as his generosity, saying that if he ever started hitting me he wouldn't stop till I was dead. I believed him. Over the years I had investigated his possessions when he was out in an attempt to understand him. I found records of former partners who had taken out intervention orders against him. One stomach-churning afternoon I unearthed a printout of his criminal record, including multiple violent offences and weapons possession. When he was extremely drunk he told me he had killed people for money. I never found out whether this was true. From my research I knew he had a number of red flags for men who kill their family members. But I also knew that leaving a violent relationship is the most dangerous time for women. I decided to bide my time and wait for an opportune moment.

I can't even describe how I felt during this time. It was like living inside a horror movie.

The hardest thing was seeing my tiny children witness the abuse. I felt so guilty, felt responsible for emotionally damaging the people I loved more than anything, even though intellectually I knew he was 100% at fault. My kids were the strongest impetus for getting out. And I knew it was a matter of time before he turned on them.

When our children were still very young, my moment came. One afternoon he threatened me in public, and witnesses called police. He left before police arrived, but it shook him up. Hours later he came home, contrite and literally hanging his head, and agreed to move out. I knew what he was up to. He felt he had gone too far and needed to make a big gesture, thinking his best move was to leave me isolated with small children, then lay on the charm so I would ask him to come back. I went along with it, allowing him to think there was hope for the relationship so I could get him out of the house. Then I took out an intervention order. He would use the children as an excuse to talk to me, alternating between abusing me and laying on the charm. It took him a

long time to realize it was really over.

We went through family court, where he made up multiple lies about me and denied his abuse. He was given contact with the children, despite his criminal record and history of violence. I felt let down by the system and was terrified every second he had the children. Thankfully he found caring for them on his own for even a few hours too difficult, and cut off all contact with them. While it sounds harsh, I believe they are undoubtedly better off without him in their lives.

For the first few months after he left, I felt like I was in a tunnel. The rest of the world looked so distant. My whole life was just caring for my children, getting through each day, gradually reaching out to others. I was so lonely, but also felt such utter relief. Counseling helped, but what also helped in the long term is being open about what I experienced. It's not my fault and there is no need to hide it. So often I spoke openly only to have other women tell me about their own stories of being abused. One friend opened up and asked for my support in leaving an abusive marriage. She's now doing great.

To other victims, I would say that abuse takes many forms, and above all you need to trust your instincts. Abusers are so good at getting victims to doubt themselves. They lie and manipulate and shift blame and make themselves out to be the victim. If you suspect you are being abused and regularly feel confused, like someone is telling you that your reality is wrong, then you are being manipulated.

We want to believe that the nice, generous, charming person is the real person, and that the abusive side is just a terrible flaw that can be overcome. But the abusive side is WHY they are so nice and charming; it's how they get away with the abuse. One wouldn't exist without the other. The nice side is a desperate attempt to fool both others and themselves. It's a mirage.
