

MY CAREER HAS
DEFINITELY COME
OUT OF MY

CHILDHOOD
EXPERIENCES



Elaine's
story

One of my earliest memories is of Dad coming into the house and just going off over something and Mum running down the gravel road – we lived out in the country – and trying to hide in the blackberry bushes.

Needing to run away was one of the things I learnt early in my family. I am definitely a flight person, not a fight person. If I feel it safe to have a conversation, I'll stay and have it, but if I feel it's unsafe I've got to get out. I believe that came from my early childhood because when Dad blew up like that, you got out of his way.

I now see that my father had unresolved issues – including insecurities about his place in his own family and what he considered to be cruelty from one of his brothers when he was young – and that these fuelled some of his reactive behaviours. Things would accumulate and then he'd explode.

It was particularly dangerous when he had been drinking. Once, when I was about seven, he swerved around a corner in our VW van and we kids came flying out of the sliding door. No seatbelts in those days! I remember the sensation of rolling around on the gravel. I had to have my head shaved, and wear a scarf to school. I know it created some trauma because years later I couldn't do gym as I couldn't put my head in certain positions. The gym teacher asked me if I'd ever been in an accident and that's when I made the connection.

I'VE GOT TO GET OUT!

On one occasion, my younger sister and I went into town with Dad to buy stores. He gave us a bit of money to spend and then he went into the club. We waited in the car for hours. Finally we started saying to people “could you tell our father we want to go home?” It got dark and people were rolling out drunk.

Eventually Dad came out. He didn't say a word, but when we got well out into the backblocks he stopped the car and said “you girls get out and walk home”. Then he drove off. It was pitch dark and we knew there were wild pigs in the bush. We just hung on to each other and started walking. We got round a couple of bends and found Dad kneeling down in the middle of this dirt track of a road. When we got up to him he said “have you learnt your lesson?” We didn't know what he meant, but we said yes.

Dad was a man of few words, but he had very set ideas about how things should be and how males and females should act. We always behaved ourselves around him. He takes pride in the fact that he never actually hit us, but he didn't have to because he always had control.

I was very connected to Dad, in spite of his violence. Sometimes I stayed with him when everyone else ran because I felt he was still worthy of having someone there. I felt sorry for him because although he could be ‘a big noter’, I saw that he was a bit of a loner.

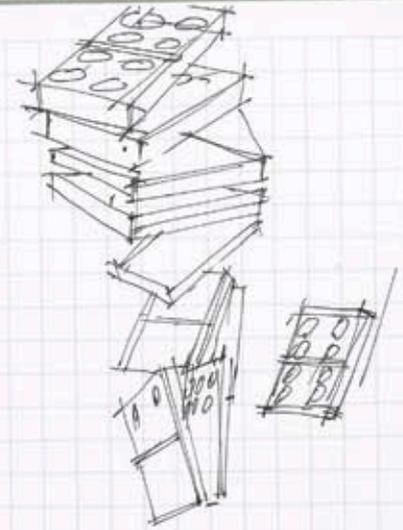
He was well known for his drinking, gambling and womanising. But he was also extremely hardworking and a competitive sportsperson. He was someone who could focus on a goal and work to achieve it. He would give the shirt off his back to someone who needed it more than he did. But he carried grudges and got very bitter about people he thought were unjust towards him. Some people respected him but others thought he acted like an animal.

I felt that my mother didn't love me – or even like me. I think she took a lot of her frustrations with Dad out on me. She used to call me “a lazy bitch”. I took that on board because I think I was quite depressed through my childhood.

I blamed Mum for part of Dad's violence towards her, but I've come to realise that it was safer for me to blame Mum than to expect more of Dad. It was only one day when I was in my late thirties that I suddenly thought “Dad was really violent!” I'd never had that level of clarity before, and I realised that this was probably because I could now handle that realisation.

We moved off the farm and into town where we lived next door to my grandmother and other relations. Dad fought with both his mother and his sister. I don't know what the arguments were about, but I remember the day he smashed my grandmother's glass-topped table.

IT TAKES ONLY ONE PERSON



After that my grandmother became an eagle-eyed woman. She would very carefully check on how I was, and she would sprinkle statements to counteract what she clearly understood was going on for me – things like “people can overcome all sorts of things” and “this is not your fault”. She also said to me, “You are not destined to be just a housewife”. Children are like sponges for those kinds of messages.

It takes only one person in a child's life who gives them unconditional love and acceptance and time, and I believe my grandmother is one of the reasons I survived my family situation. She showed me Dorothy Nolte's poem ‘Children Learn What They Live’, which begins: “If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn.” It is about how children learn from the behaviour they see rather than from what they are told. I thought about that poem a lot over the years and eventually I used it as the basis for a parenting programme I developed.

Dad and Mum both had affairs and that created a very unsafe world for us children. They separated many times. One time Dad was living at the local pub and Mum went and confronted him. He ended up dragging her home. He came through the house, pulling her by her hair and yelling at me that my mother was a "whore", and trying to get me to side with him.

Mum often ran away, but she came back because there was really nowhere to escape to. There was no Women's Refuge then and I think it is highly unlikely that she would have gone to strangers for help anyway. It would have been very difficult for her to get a job and support us, and the stigma of divorce was huge. There would be a brief 'honeymoon' stage when she came home, but then we'd be back to normal.

Dad controlled the money, and he'd take issue with what Mum spent. Once, when I was a young teenager and everyone else had taken off because Dad had gone ballistic about something, I found him setting light to all Mum's clothes on the back lawn because of the money she had spent on them. That night I felt so scared I had to get out. I put my pyjamas on and then I waited till Dad conked out, which he did because he had been drinking, and I sneaked off to the woman up the road who took me in for the night.

**WE WENT TO SCHOOL
WITHOUT ANY SLEEP
BECAUSE MUM AND DAD
HAD A BIG FIGHT**

When we moved into town Dad worked as a contractor and he was often away. Mum went through phases of not coping with us kids. Sometimes she'd tie my little brother up to the clothesline as he was doing things like lighting fires in his wardrobe and under his bed.

Mum was a great cook but we didn't have regular mealtimes – or bedtimes. Sometimes we'd go to school without any sleep because our parents had had a big fight, and Mum had taken off and we'd have had "who do you want to live with?" from Dad – which raised a lot of guilt and loyalty issues for us.

School was a sanctuary, as were other things outside of home. But we found it hard to connect to those things fully. We sat on the edge because that was a safe place to be. You don't have to sort out relationships if you are a bit removed. You don't invest yourself in friendships. You go through the motions but you are not really there because you're protecting yourself emotionally and psychologically.

The worst case of physical battery on my mother by my father happened late one night after they'd been out to some big do. He totally lost the plot. He smashed windows and pulled her hair out by the roots. We just heard it – the breaking glass, the screaming, my mother pleading with him to stop. I got a pillow and wrapped it round my head, over my ears. My little brother got out of bed and hid somewhere.

Dad was a big fit man, and Mum was little. He punched her in the face and it would have been with a closed fist because the following day I couldn't recognise her face. She couldn't see out of her eyes.

She went to a doctor, and told him what had happened. That was the first time she had ever talked to anyone about what was going on. She'd never felt anyone would believe her. She and Dad separated after that night, and I remember thinking "I'm so glad", but they got back together again.

Mum didn't talk about the violence and neither did we, not even to each other. We'd go into each other's rooms or just close down in our own little spaces. It was all very non-verbal.

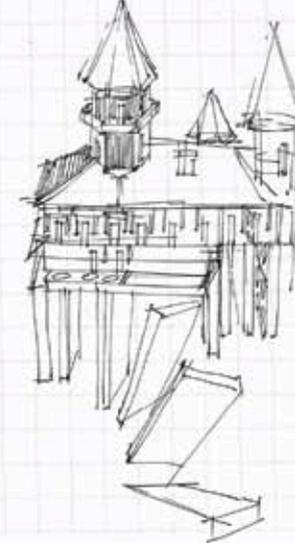
In a family, even though you all experience the same situation, you pick up on different things as the ones that traumatised you. But one thing we've talked about recently is our sense of emotional abandonment and the effect that had on us. Our parents were so caught up in their own situation. We were so busy trying to keep ourselves safe and trying to make sense of it in our own little minds that we all closed down on lots of levels.

It impacted on us in different ways. The major impact on me was that I became very non-demanding and non-competitive. My father's family was quite sporty, but I didn't like competing – and I really didn't like winning, because I couldn't handle the attention. I became a background person, someone who just supported everybody else and made an effort to be what others wanted

me to be. This happened both within the family and outside of it. I think what happens in the family translates into all other relationships.

I grew up being the responsible good girl, partly because I was the eldest. I had a telephone conversation with my father recently and when I told him about my job in the justice system he said "I'm not surprised because you were always a good girl". That's how he perceived me to be. You try to line up with those perceptions when you are in these violent family systems. As a result, you can grow up totally removed from who you really are. Later you've got to work to connect with your real self. But you've also got to come to terms with the fact that all those awful experiences have impacted on you, and you have to integrate that stuff because it is part of you.

**MUM AND DAD SEPARATED
I'M SO GLAD**



One of my sisters developed mental health issues, and I believe that was a direct result of her violent childhood experiences. She has had to process out a lot of the trauma, and to have medication in order to cope with life. My brother was into drugs and alcohol, but he gave it away because he knew otherwise he'd be dead by 30. That's the level of damage that family violence does.

When I was 14, I was sexually attacked. I was staying in the workers' quarters on a farm. One night after I fell asleep a man wandered in looking for sex. He pinned me down by the neck. I couldn't breathe, and I thought I was going to die. I went into a form of shock, but eventually I squeaked something out and he backed off. In the doorway, he turned and said, "I'll be back". I got up and had a shower because I felt really dirty and ashamed. I got a butcher's knife from the kitchen and sat on my bed waiting for him to come back. When the others returned from a party they found me traumatised.

I had bruise marks all up my neck for weeks. And I felt numb for a long time. It was as if I was here and everyone else was over there. Although I told my parents, there was no conversation about it, no mention of going to the police. It was just something that sat with me, and I tried not to think about.

**I TOLD MUM AND DAD,
BUT NO ONE TALKED
ABOUT IT.**

It was one of those pivotal incidents that change you for life. It took my self esteem to a much lower level, and I developed a sense of not having any worthiness in connection with males.

Not long after that, Mum got to the point where she simply couldn't cope any more. I didn't understand it that way at the time. To me, she deserted us. That's the term Dad used. He was really bitter, and he was always trying to get me to collude with him about how bad Mum was for leaving – and I did feel angry towards her for leaving us with Dad.

I left school at 15 – partly because I didn't think I had a chance of getting School Certificate, but it was also as a result of Mum leaving. We were 'home alone' children because Dad was away so much, and I had a deep-seated fear, almost a paranoia, that if people knew what our lives were like we would be split up and put into a children's home, so I used to cook the meals and look after the others.

My little brother was too scared to let me out of the house, and I found that really demanding. My younger sister got into religion and then into boys. My youngest sister seemed to be away with the fairies. Dad used to haul her out of bed to do hula dances in front of his mates. There were lots of boozy parties at our place. I'd cook for them, and clean up afterwards. Sometimes there were fights, and I'd be cleaning up blood.

Mum had escaped to Australia but we didn't know that for about a year. Then she tried to commit suicide because she couldn't live with the guilt of having left us. She tried to gas herself and ended up in hospital. Dad went over and brought her home.

After a couple of weeks she left again, taking one of my sisters with her. After that, the family just fell to bits. The house was sold. Dad went to live with a mate, my other sister went to live near relatives, my brother went to boarding school, and I boarded with a family.

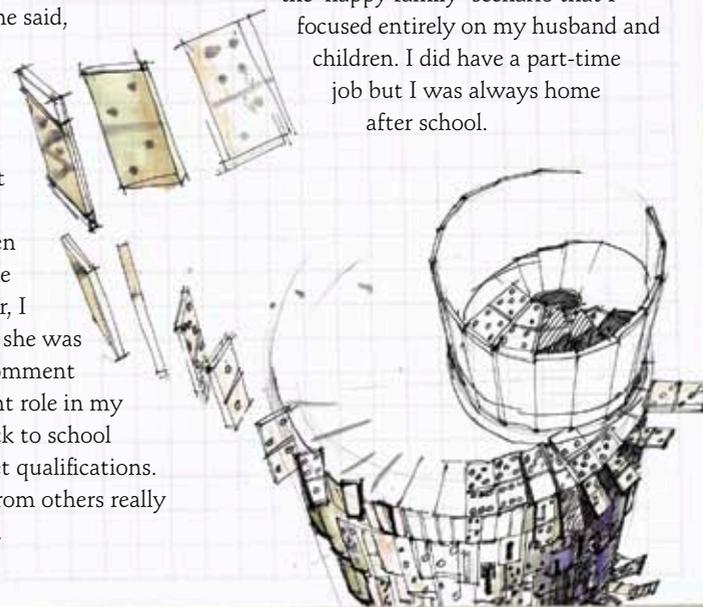
I had wanted to get into hairdressing, but I could not support myself on the small apprenticeship wage you got in those days. So I got a job in a shop.

I felt I was dumb and a failure, but years later when I made a flip comment to my aunt about having done so badly at school, she said, "you absolutely could have got School Certificate and University Entrance; you just didn't have the opportunity". Even though at the time I didn't believe her, I really heard what she was saying, and her comment played a significant role in my deciding to go back to school as an adult and get qualifications. Those messages from others really make a difference.

MUM IS GOING TO DIE!

By the time I was 17, I was pregnant, and by the time I was 18, I was married to the father of my baby. When I first met my husband I was attracted to something I could not define. Later I realised it was his emotional unavailability and his uncommunicativeness and that he unconsciously reminded me of my father.

I so wanted to be a good mother, and give my children a real childhood and opportunities in life. I really thought about how to parent. My children would have regular meals, go to bed early – and be happy. I really tried to orchestrate a different childhood for them from the disruptive unhappy one I'd had. I was so dedicated to the 'happy family' scenario that I focused entirely on my husband and children. I did have a part-time job but I was always home after school.



I felt I was rewriting the negative story of my childhood. But the problem was that I'd linked up with the wrong person. One day when my daughter was a baby I was heating up some milk on the stove and I turned to my husband and said "keep an eye on that". He reacted to the way I said it and slapped my face – just with his hand, but with real upper body force.

In that moment, I started my process of denial. I knew then that he was capable of cutting up rough, but that's as far as my thinking would allow me to go. That's when I should have said "violence is not okay" and left. Not making a stand at that point set the scene for the lack of respect my husband showed me, and our marriage, in the following years.

One common denominator people from violent backgrounds have is what's called "control behaviour". I learned as a child to control my behaviour and not be who I really was. As an adult I went on controlling myself and trying to control the environment to achieve certain outcomes. For example, when my daughter was a toddler my husband smacked her so hard on her bottom that he left bruises, even though I'd asked him to stop. I took responsibility for discipline after that and worked to present my husband with perfect children so that he wouldn't get annoyed at them.

**I SHOULD'VE SAID
VIOLENCE IS NOT OKAY**

**I WAS IN A PLACE OF
SHAME**

My husband was a chameleon, someone who showed different faces to different people. As with my father, people either liked him or they didn't. He was chauvinistic and heavily into power and control. I wanted to be his equal but I was in a very subordinate place with him, though I did gain some equality by being good at managing the house and supporting him in his career so that we could get ahead.

Two years after our daughter was born, we had a son. I was in a real mess at the time because I'd caught my husband with another woman – in a very public forum. I had been determined that affairs would not happen in my marriage because they had been so destructive in my parents' marriage. Once again I felt I was in a place of shame, just as I'd been in my childhood. I didn't have anyone to talk to about it because I didn't have any life of my own outside of my marriage, our children and our own families.

After I found out about that affair, I went even deeper into denial about the unhealthy dynamic of our relationship. I tried even harder than I had been to get my husband's attention, and I actively shut out anything that mirrored my parents' unhealthy relationship – but I had no idea what a healthy relationship was.

I would now label my ex-husband a very sophisticated abuser. His tactics to control me were often very subtle. For example, he went away a lot for work, and he'd say "I'll ring you tonight". He'd never give me a time, so to make sure I was there when he rang I never went out. He also sabotaged opportunities that would have given me a fuller life outside the home, like promotions at work.

I gradually became more withdrawn and socially shy and powerless, unfulfilled and lonely in my marriage. I didn't see that what my husband was doing amounted to psychological violence. I didn't have the framework of thinking, or the language. I didn't know the concept of 'power and control'. I only saw violence in terms of physical stuff I'd seen as a child.

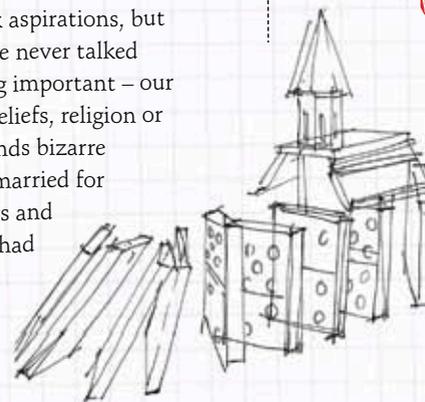
One thing that made me feel insecure with my husband was that there was no intimacy in our relationship. We filled our lives with projects – doing up houses, the kids' sports and music. My husband would talk at length about his work aspirations, but beyond that we never talked about anything important – our children, our beliefs, religion or politics. It sounds bizarre that we were married for seventeen years and that we never had a meaningful conversation

about anything other than his work. But it wasn't strange to me, because we had never discussed important things in my own family. My husband came from a family where they'd talk about everything except the issue, or homogenise it into something else.

The kids and I used to walk on eggshells, we dreaded him coming home when he'd had a few drinks. He behaved very much like my father. He'd be doing the lawns and the mower would conk out and he'd start throwing parts of it round the section. I'd save money from my job to buy a new lawnmower so that he wouldn't pack a wobbly again.

I hadn't had any other sexual partners so my whole sexual experience was with my husband. I said to him once, "I feel as if you should leave some money on the side of the bed". It just came out of me, but it reflected the way I felt in our sexual relationship – that I was just an object to him.

**I FELT
CHEAP**

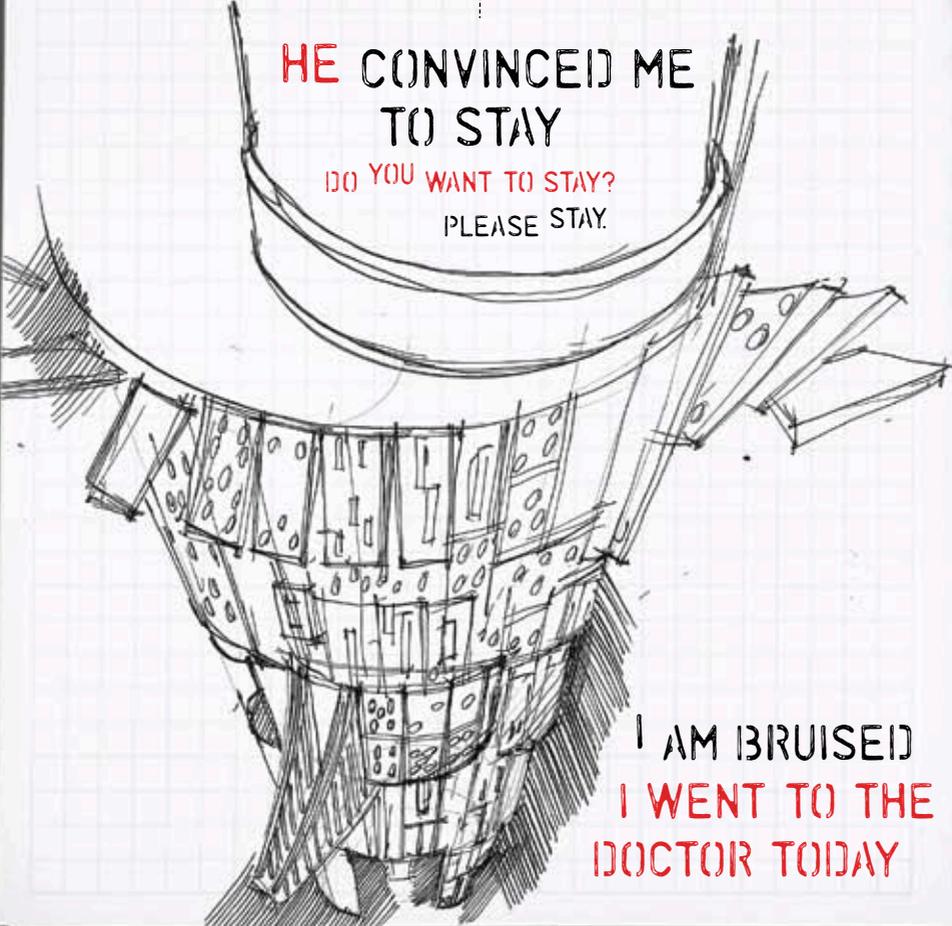


He expected sex when he wanted it and if he didn't get it he'd go elsewhere. But he still wanted me to be there taking care of him and the family, and because I did that it enabled him to go off and have affairs.

His infidelity was very damaging because over the years it undermined me as a wife, as a woman and as a sexual being. I once looked out the kitchen window and saw him kissing another woman. I threw my wedding ring at him and took off for a while.

But when I came back he was being a really nice guy and he convinced me to stay.

That pattern repeated itself over and over. When I'd start withdrawing from the relationship, he'd show me a lot of attention and get me hooked back in. He'd write little love letters or send me flowers at work; my colleagues thought that was lovely. But when I was back in there, he'd withdraw again, and I'd be sitting at home on a Friday night while he was out having a single time.



HE CONVINCED ME
TO STAY

DO YOU WANT TO STAY?
PLEASE STAY.

I AM BRUISED
I WENT TO THE
DOCTOR TODAY

I didn't consciously think about how unhappy and dissatisfied I was. I did think "there's got to be more to life than this" but I couldn't think beyond that statement because I was so closed down.

I became much more closed down when my husband raped me one night. I just didn't want sex and he forced himself on me. I didn't call it rape at the time because I blamed myself for not wanting sex. He took me to the doctor the next day because I was bruised and very sore. I really liked my doctor but when he asked me, "How did this happen to you?" I was so ashamed that I couldn't tell him. Again, I was in a situation where it was safer not to talk about the violence just as it had been when I was a child. And I did not want to acknowledge that my husband had treated me with so little respect sexually.

After that he withdrew from the relationship as well. On one level this suited me as he was less demanding. I suspected he was having an affair but I didn't trust my instincts. It took me more than a year to get up the courage to ask him. He replied, "If I was I wouldn't tell you" and walked out of the room. But I found out because the woman he had been involved sent me one of his love letters to her.

After that I knew that the only way forward was out. There was a turning point for me when I thought, "I'm not going to get what I want here". What

HE BECAME MORE VIOLENT

I wanted was what any of us want – love and care, appreciation, acceptance, respect. I wanted my dignity and respect as an adult, a woman, and a mother. Realising that the only way I could have that was to step out of the relationship was the key for me.

Because my husband knew he was losing control of me his violence started coming out. He tried to beat me up in bed one night, and on another occasion he pinned me up against the wall and threatened to "do" me. I was very concerned about how involved the children had become as the violence escalated. One day my teenage son got between us to prevent my husband bashing me up.

He also threatened to commit suicide. When he made a statement that suggested he could kill the children and me, I began to worry about his mental stability.

As in a lot of violent relationships it was at its most unsafe at the time of separation. People need to understand that this is why so many women find it hard to remove themselves from violence. In fact, lots of women and children lose their lives at that stage because while the woman is trying to distance herself from the violence, to her partner this symbolises a loss of control, and that brings up huge levels of anxiety and fear and motivates him to use tactics to gain his power back.

When I left my marriage, I was 36 years old, my daughter was 17 and my son was 15. My husband had often told me I wouldn't survive on my own and when I first left him I had doubts myself. I was running on pure adrenaline from fear and anxiety about being unable to cope and support my children. I didn't sleep and I lost a lot of weight. But I used to say to myself, "If you can have nothing else you can have your dignity". I don't know where that came from – maybe from the sheer need to survive – but it was so helpful when I was enraged or despairing.

I felt sad, mad and bad as I started the long process of debriefing and healing. An aunt gave me a book titled *I'll Cry Tomorrow* and that helped me keep moving forward in spite of feeling so terrible. And I went to counselling because I knew I was screwed up in my thinking.

My first counsellor was very motherly, and I cried buckets of tears. My second asked me "what is your stomach telling you?" I said "I'm really scared". I thought then that my husband was capable of seriously harming us. That counsellor said, "Pay attention to what you know" and that helped me create a pathway of distance between myself and my ex-husband.

He was very intimidating to the children. In a violent incident with my daughter, not long after we'd split up, he punched her in the head with a closed fist, and threatened to kill her.

He told her she was "talking too much – just like your mother".

I CRIED BUCKETS OF TEARS

Afterwards he turned up at my house. I suddenly connected with my anger. I walked up to him and eyeballed him and said, "Go on then – do it". I was beyond caring, beyond being afraid. Till then I had been locked into being afraid all my life, but in that moment I started the process of reclaiming my life and asserting my power. He went to head butt me but he suddenly backed off. He knew then that I was prepared to call the police and he wasn't prepared to risk public exposure.

I started to reconnect with people almost immediately after I left my marriage.

I went to various women's empowerment groups and gained an understanding of how children pick up messages about how to act in, and be treated in, relationships. I linked into things I hadn't known existed – like a 'making it alone' course. I was just so needy of being filled up.

It was great to gain a couple of friends as I hadn't had strong friendships with women during my married life. One of them mentioned Women's Refuge, but I didn't think I fitted into the category of a victim of domestic violence because my perception of violence was my mother's face after Dad beat her up.

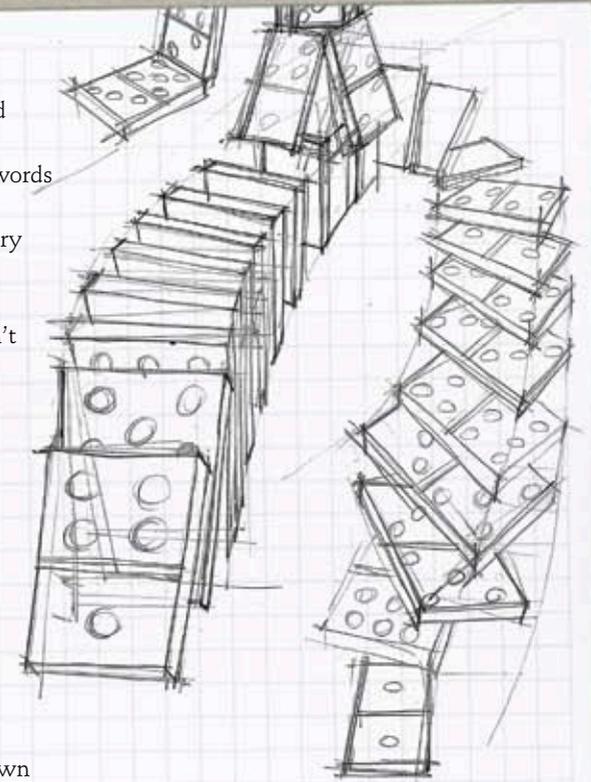
I learnt a new language – and I finally found my voice! I had had so much going on in my stomach, and now I had the words to express it with. I suddenly became very articulate and very clear. When my husband said "I want us to be friends" I found I was able to say "I don't need to have you in my life".

I was not prepared to be on the receiving end of 'power and control' games or act like a victim any more. I cut my losses as regards matrimonial property. My lawyer made sure I got enough settlement to make a deposit on a modest house – though I was turned down for a mortgage by every bank in town until a young bank officer pleaded my case and got me one.

I had two part time jobs both with an irregular income. Some weeks I didn't know how we would survive and I had to resort to asking for a food grant. But something would always come along – a tax rebate or a friend giving me a treat.

My children were fantastic, very validating of me and the path I had chosen. I told them we were now "cash only" people. They got part-time jobs and largely paid their own way through the rest of school.

I NEED TO CARE FOR MYSELF



I DIDN'T NEED HIM IN MY LIFE ANYMORE

Their father had always been emotionally unavailable to them. But after I left the marriage I decided not to do all the work on keeping the lines of communication open between them and him any more. I realised that I needed to care for myself as much as I had cared for other people in the past. My son finally told his father where to get off because he kept ringing all the time. One day I heard him say, "I'm telling you I'm not going to have anything to do with you ever again".

This is a kid who was always polite and whom his father used to call "boy" in a really derogatory way. I once said to my husband, "Let him beat you at something; he needs that", but he just couldn't let go of that need for control. My son said he's always felt invisible in his father's presence. He still doesn't see him at all. My daughter is starting to reconcile with him because she doesn't want to deprive her children of a grandfather, but she supervises any contact.

When I came out with my new voice people were shocked. I had seemed so timid and now I seemed very strong. Well of course I was strong! You are strong if you have survived that physical, psychological and emotional violence. It's the strength of your own spirit that gets you through.

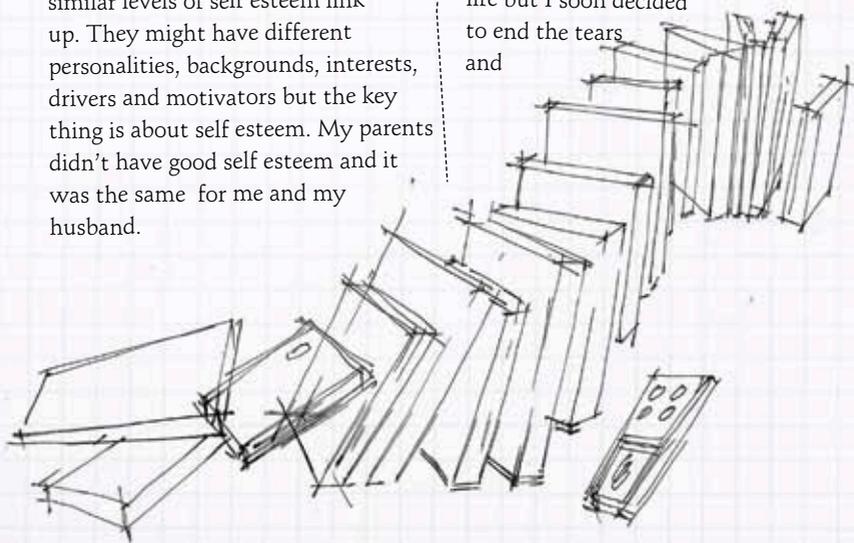
I believe that what happens in adult relationships is that people with similar levels of self esteem link up. They might have different personalities, backgrounds, interests, drivers and motivators but the key thing is about self esteem. My parents didn't have good self esteem and it was the same for me and my husband.

WHO THE HELL AM I? WHAT AM I TO BECOME?

He seemed very confident but one of the reasons he was so into money and power and status was that he came from a poor background and that he wanted to transcend that.

I also think unresolved issues translate across generations. Because we never talked about any of this stuff in my family system, it continued into new generations. My daughter got involved with a younger version of her father – though she got herself out of the situation much earlier than I had.

After I'd done some processing of my childhood experiences and how they had influenced my adult responses, the way was open for me to think, "Who the hell am I, and what am I to become?" For a while I beat myself up about wasting so much of my life but I soon decided to end the tears and



take responsibility for what I wanted for myself. I decided I wasn't going to bother with relationships because I was going to deal with my relationship with myself. I replaced my old self-message of "I'm not good enough" with a new one – "I deserve this".

I went back to school and set out to prove that I did have a brain and something valuable to offer. I did studies in social work, and then I became skilled in the field. My career has definitely come out of my childhood experiences.

In the job I have now, I work with those who commit the most serious offences – including murder and rape. I feel that I work for women with men. I used to think that we needed to protect women and children from men who acted violently. Now I think we all need to do what we can to "say no to violence". I believe the problem of family violence does not just sit at the level of the individual or of relationships. I think we need to take more of a familial and societal approach.

We need to learn to care for people better. I say to them, "how are you keeping yourself safe?" If men are keeping themselves safe, then there aren't going to be those victims of male violence. We need to all create safe environments so that people can be honest with each other, so that we can all have a voice and feel heard.

My mother said to me recently, "communication is huge". She believes that if she and my father had learnt to communicate and be honest with each other, the violence would not have been there. And I believe that if my husband and I had been able to communicate to each other who we were and what was really going on for us, we wouldn't have had all that psychological warfare.

I want to help men and women have self respect and act with dignity and integrity. It comes down to taking ownership of where you've come from, where you're at and where you want to go.

I hear heavy-duty perpetrators continually blaming women. What they are doing is minimising their own violence. They blame women because they think women are stupid if they don't leave or if they keep coming back.

I WANT TO HELP
MEN AND WOMEN HAVE SELF RESPECT
AND ACT WITH DIGNITY AND INTEGRITY.

Women want what they can't have in those relationships. They go in with an agenda of wanting a happy family and they don't get it, but they continue to want it. And if they are with someone who is telling them from time to time "I do love you and I do want you" they attach themselves to that and live in the hope.

It is very difficult to own up to that. How do you face the fact that this person who says he loves you is violent to you? It defies logic but you have to realise that you're not going to get what you want in that relationship – which is what I finally did.

Why do women stay, and go back? I think what happens is that every time something violent occurs you are developing a kind of reality checklist. When you don't have a great sense of yourself, you don't trust your own judgement and because you can't make sense of it you need things to happen more than once to register them as violence. When my husband did something violating of me, I couldn't front up to it because it was beyond my comprehension. When I went to the doctor after he had raped me, I couldn't put words to it because I couldn't own it. It was only at the end of my marriage, just before I left, that I named it to my husband. I said to him, "You raped me".

**I TOLD HIM THAT
HE RAPEID ME**

So you can't expect a woman who's been treated violently to have the level of self-care that is necessary for her to move out. She can't. It's easy to minimise and normalise a certain level of violence when you are in it. I did that.

That's why you need external comments from others and places like Women's Refuge and people who are prepared to offer support out of these situations. People say you can't rescue people. I don't agree. You need the person who notices, whether it's the woman down the road or someone working in an agency, to say "I am here if you need me. Violence is not okay."

I eventually became a Women's Refuge volunteer. Usually I was just helping women to get from one place to another, but they'd often suddenly open up and talk. I might just say a few words like "no one deserves that" and that would start them off.

Once a woman said to me "I'm a believer in God, and it's not okay to leave a marriage." And I replied, "No God would expect you to put up with this. This is violence." I wondered if I had gone too far, but years later that woman came up to me and thanked me. Her beliefs and values had kept her in that violent situation and what I said had started her questioning.

**PEOPLE SAY YOU
CAN'T RESCUE
PEOPLE.
I DON'T AGREE.**

I'm big on people just being there and allowing others to share where they are at without judging. We are so judgemental! We let people know by all sorts of signals, direct and subtle, that they can't talk to us about certain things, that it's not safe to share, that they can't have a voice. There are little silos you can go to if you are experiencing violence – like Women's Refuge – but you can't really say it out loud in society. So I think everyone should give some thought to what their position is around violence, and then be transparent about it.

For me, the important thing is that there are pathways out of it. I will never forget the first shower I had after I'd finally left my marriage. I just felt so free under that shower. I felt I owned my own body, my own space, my own life. I can still remember what that felt like – light and free and aligned with myself. It was an euphoric feeling. It was as if the whole world was possible. I didn't clearly know who I was, but I felt I was in a very honest and pure place because I had said, "This is not okay. I am worthy of more than this crap." I was out and on my way to my new life – and to my real self.

I FEEL LIGHT...

