



# George's story

WE DO CHOOSE OUR  
BEHAVIOURS

Most of the violence in our household came from my mother. I decided when I was very young that she was a wicked, evil person. I remember thinking from about the age of seven that I would get out of home as soon as I could. By the time I was 14, I was actively plotting to kill her.

She was a very angry person and she needed an outlet for her anger. My eldest sister, who was not my father's daughter, copped most of the violence, but much of it was taken out on the five boys, of whom I was the eldest. My other sister escaped most of it because she was my Dad's favourite, and my mother lived in fear of his retribution, so there was a kind of force field round her.

The tiniest thing would set my mother off – losing her keys, the towels not being folded properly, the bench not being perfect according to her standards, or a biscuit missing. She was meticulous in counting the biscuits. If there was one missing, she would fly into an absolute rage. But she'd let you wait, maybe all day. It was like a little game. She'd ask everybody "who took the biscuit?" We would be in absolute fear waiting for what we knew was coming.

The dog always got out the door first; he knew what was coming. She'd line us all up and get the jug cord out. She'd strip us all naked – she'd even take the babies' nappies off – and then make us wait for about 15 minutes. Then she'd come in and start whipping us with the jug cord or the vacuum cleaner cord doubled over.

HER VIOLENCE WAS EXTREME AND  
SOMETIMES REALLY CRUEL.

If you'd touched electric plugs or put your hand near the stove, she'd hold your hands over the element. We all had to stand around and watch while she made an example of one of us.

Once we reached puberty and adolescence it was humiliation. She'd strip us naked and send us outside to get a stick from the hedge. She'd tell us the dimensions of the stick she wanted, and we'd have to go outside in full view of the street and our friends and get one from the hedge in front of the house.

There was no discussion in our house. You learnt never to speak your feelings because that created more violence. You didn't answer back. Even a look could get you double the hidings.

SHE'D STRIP US NAKED  
AND SEND US OUTSIDE

TO GET A STICK FROM  
THE HEDGE.

DON'T ANSWER!  
DON'T LOOK!

YOU'RE GONNA  
GET IT!

My mother would say "you're going to get 10 hits with the cord" for whatever you'd done wrong, but if you gave her a look that in any way challenged her, it doubled. So you would keep a neutral face.

Mum used to work as an agricultural labourer, and if any of us weren't home when she got home, my eldest sister would cop a real hiding – and she was only about 10. As I grew older I realised she was being unfairly treated and I started to admit to things she was being targeted for. My next brother did that too, and we shared it between the three of us. We felt a need to protect our three youngest brothers; we used to call them 'the three babies' as there was only a year between each of them.

Sometimes Mum would get Dad to beat us, but he'd give us less of a beating. I always wondered why he didn't intervene when she was beating us because sometimes he was there and he saw it. I once asked him and he said he couldn't intervene. I said, "What do you mean? You're supposed to be a man." He was a fighter, one of the best fighters in town. He said he was scared that when he went away our mother would do us some real damage.

He didn't spare himself where my eldest sister was concerned though. He used every opportunity to demean her, verbally and with severe beatings with sticks and jug cords. Everybody had to watch. I remember her bleeding around the face after he and Mum had both hit her. One of Dad's favourites was stripping her naked. One day they did it when she was having her period, and blood was running down her leg. I couldn't understand how the blood from her bleeding nose had got down her leg. I think my parents would be jailed today for what they used to do.

I THINK THAT IF MY PARENTS HADN'T BEEN UNDER  
SO MUCH STRESS THEY WOULD HAVE MADE  
A GOOD COUPLE BECAUSE MY MUM REALLY  
DID LOVE MY DAD,  
AND HE REALLY DID LOVE HER.

There was stress because they had married each other. Mum came from some sort of royal blueblood Maori line, so to marry a white man, one of the subjugators who had stripped their family of land, was a slap in the face to her own people. And Dad was under pressure from his family because he had married a Maori girl who had already had a daughter by another man.

Mum was also under a lot of stress because my father was a contract fisherman. He was away for a week or two at a time and sometimes he came home with no money, as he only got a percentage of the catch – not a wage. My father was a drinker and sometimes he'd come home depressed about the catch and end up drinking any money that was left. He was a womaniser too and sometimes Mum would find out his boat had landed, and she'd catch him in the pub with some foreign woman in his lap.

My mother also had demons from her childhood. Her father had been a very violent man and the story we heard was that her mother had been killed by him, beaten to death during pregnancy. I suppose a shadow fell over my mother because she was the baby who was born just before her mother died. That's what she carried round with her, and I suppose that affected her behaviour as an adult. It was the trickle-down effect that goes through generations.

My mother joined the Jehovah's Witnesses when I was about eight, so she also had the struggle of conforming to a new code of behaviour and criticism from her family for having changed from the Church of England.

Religion gave her a sense of certainty and hope. One of the scriptures the Jehovah's Witnesses quote is from Revelations – that God will wipe out every tear and death will be no more. You are told you won't have any memories of the past and you will be able to construct a good life for yourself.

After my mother turned to religion, I decided to throw myself into it too. It was the only form of sanity I could apprehend at that time, and I took comfort that good things were supposed to happen if you believed – it gave me hope that I wouldn't go completely mad at home.

When I started reading the Bible and saw Mum's behaviour didn't square with the principles in the scriptures, I thought that either she'd got it wrong or she was just completely mad. I read Germaine Greer, RD Laing and other psychosocial texts – trying to work out why my mother was the way she was. I started thanking her for the hidings – "Thank you for doing that, Mum. I see what I have done is wrong" – and the hidings started to diminish.



The Jehovah's Witnesses wrote articles about good families and the role of parents, so Mum started trying to have discussions about things. But by then I didn't want her asking me things. I'd just make something up, deliberately using terminology that would flummox her. By then I had developed into a very plausible liar.

My parents never had an input into our education. They had no education themselves. My father had left school at 12 or 13 to go out to work. But he was an armchair scholar. He had an enquiring mind and he loved reading – but he always read in the bedroom, not in front of us.

Although I was bright I didn't like school, as a lot of boys don't. You had violence at home and violence at school – the strap, the cane and humiliation. In those days local Maori kids got a lot of humiliation from teachers, but I escaped that because I could pass off as a European as I was so light-skinned.

One of the reasons I didn't perform well at school was because the religion taught us that the Armageddon, the end of the world, was coming. So you didn't have to worry about things like education. Everything was going to be wiped clean and we were going to live in a paradise on earth. People wanted to know, "When is it coming?" And we were told the end of this whole wicked world would be in 1975. People made huge decisions based on this – gave up their careers, sold their houses and donated their money to the organisation.

My father thought the Jehovah's Witnesses were a bunch of crackpots and he was disappointed when I turned to it. I idolised my father, but I sensed very early that I was a disappointment to him because I wasn't going to be an All Black or a rugby league player. I was a little bible-reading nerd who won chess competitions.

I was nearly 15 when I told my father I wanted to get baptised (I wanted to get baptised by 1975 so I would survive and not be counted with those who would be destroyed). He said no. I said, "Well, I'm going to". He said, "If you do you won't be living here". I said, 'That's fine'. So he said, "Well, you leave now then". I was only allowed to take what I had on, so I left in my school uniform, and was only allowed to take my school books. He told me "don't ever come back".



I LEFT IN MY SCHOOL UNIFORM

## IT WAS ABOUT EIGHT O'CLOCK AT NIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF WINTER WHEN I LEFT HOME.

I walked down the road and met a Maori guy I knew from the fish shop. He invited me to stay at his place with him and his older sister and her husband. He made this announcement that I was coming to stay for a few days. I ended up staying there for nearly two years and becoming part of the family.

Luckily I had been working from the age of nine. I was hungry for money, and I always had more than my Dad, so that was an irritation for him. I had some legitimate jobs, like a milk run and working at the local fish shop. But I had also been stealing pornography from shops and selling it to other kids.

I kept working at the fish and chip shop and going to church meetings. From time to time I went home, when Dad wasn't around, to see the three babies and have a cup of tea with Mum.

I stayed at school, but I had no real direction and no one to direct me. I still thought it didn't matter if I passed School Certificate because the end of the world was coming. I did my English exam in three quarters of an hour and went surfing - showing off to my mates. I only got 49 percent even though I'd got 86 percent in an informal exam the previous year. The staff wanted me to go for a recount, but I was too humiliated. I went into the second-year fifth, but I could only stomach it for six months before I left.

I knew nothing of the outside world because we'd been such a sheltered family. I didn't know about adult responsibilities or paying your share. So when this Maori guy asked me to contribute, I was outraged. I didn't understand that people pay for things – even though I'd been one of the top students in Commerce.

I left town and went to stay with my oldest sister in the city. She had crept away from home when she was 17 because she was pregnant to her boyfriend. I helped her. I knew all the creaking floor boards and how to unlock the door without it squeaking, so I guided her out late one night, and she married her boyfriend – much to my parents' displeasure.

She had been the most mistreated of all of us, but she was very gentle with her four boys. I took a lot from that because I felt I was a fairly gentle person too. She had a very caring spirit towards her kids. Sometimes she'd strap them, but she didn't reach for the jug cord. She'd usually use other measures like prohibiting their privileges. It was so balanced, so nice. Her boys got to adolescence and started flexing their muscles and wanting more independence, but she held them so well. She was always into their sport, always out on the field with them, and most of them became rugby league stars. She was always talking to them and encouraging them, and they all love her.

I don't know if there is such a thing as attracting violence, but she seemed to. Every man in her life was violent to her – until she got into her mid-forties and began to pick older men who allowed her to have her own opinions and to take the lead role in most things.

I used to get irritated when I visited my parents and they said derogatory things about her. They were still going on about her stealing biscuits when she was young. I wondered if they were completely insane and whether they loved any of their children.

SOME OF MY SIBLINGS  
TURNED OUT TO BE  
CRUEL TO THEIR KIDS TOO.

They seemed to be living devout lives, but behind closed doors they were different people, and it really shocked me that they followed my mother's behaviour.

After I moved to the city, I hit obstacles all the way. I had no skills, and I couldn't hold down a job because I resented authority. I always felt I was smarter than the bosses, and I didn't understand that you've got to follow the chain of command.

I OFTEN LOST JOBS BECAUSE  
I'D GET INTO A RAGE.

I'd feel this dead cold feeling coming over me. It was almost paralysing in a sense, but it felt good. It didn't feel good having to hold it back. Sometimes I would just give vent to it and let it run – and lose my job as a result.

I got married at 19. I didn't want to marry my wife. She was a Jehovah's Witness too. She was five years older than me, and she asked me to marry her. When I told her I didn't think I loved her and didn't want to marry her, she just fell apart. I'd surrounded myself with people from my religion who began to put pressure on me – "You've been going out with her for nearly two years, you made her fall in love with you, so you should do the honourable thing" – though I hadn't slept with her. So after much cajoling, I agreed to marry her – which was a terrible thing to do.

Reality dawned after we were married, and my resentment grew. My wife wanted me to rise up in the church and become an elder. I never saw myself in that role because I had no respect for authority and because, although I had a deep theological curiosity, my thoughts didn't always equate with what the Jehovah's Witnesses were saying. When I told my wife that, she'd ring the elders and inform on me.



She would often say derogatory things about me in front of my friends. For example, we'd be at a party and she'd say something she knew would spark me off – like that I'd got a low-paying job compared with someone else's husband, and that she thought she'd married a loser.

I wouldn't say anything at the time. I'd just wait. My wife would see the change in me but she could never work out what was brewing. It was like a tsunami building up. I started to understand how my mother felt about her anger. You want the whole lot when you give it to them. It's like a huge orgasmic feeling.

I'd talk to my wife about what she'd said, and she'd just laugh it off. That would give me the pretext I needed, and I'd launch into her and give her a beating. It was mostly open-handed slaps. I think you get more shock from an open-handed slap, and I wanted the best. It sounds a bit demented, but that's the way it was. I was calculating my violence, and it felt so good having this sense of power over another person and humiliating my wife in return – because she'd have to go out in public with bruises or marks.

These incidents happened about once a month. I got quite extreme because I believed in this strange Biblical thing – that you must pay them back four times as much as what they did to you, or 10 times. But I think around your early twenties, you're so full of testosterone and issues, and the two fuel each other.

SO THE VERY THINGS THAT  
I HATED IN MY MOTHER,

I BECAME.

I was sociopathic. I had no empathy with other people. I used to go on field service for the church, going from door to door telling people the end of the world was nigh. I was with one of the elders one day, and said to him, "I don't particularly care whether these people are saved or not. They are not us, they don't have 'the truth', and they don't want it. Why should I care? If they die, they die – as long as I don't." He went quiet, then said "well, we're supposed to care". Up 'til then, I had been playing the role. The elders were looking for fresh blood, and I was a rising star. When I came out with this pronouncement there was absolute shock.

Then one night we had a group of elders over and we were playing five hundred. My wife and I were partners, and just to piss me off she played 10 no trumps, the highest gamble you could make, and then she played the wrong card deliberately. I was so shocked, I just leaned across and smacked her in front of everybody – with a closed fist, probably for the first time. Cards erupted everywhere and there was a huge kerfuffle, but I was in such a rage I didn't care.

That was the beginning of the end of my spiritual life. I had been concealing all these problems – that I'd married the wrong girl, that I had become cruel to her, that I was miserable, that I felt I was becoming like my mother, and starting to think I was completely mad myself. I began to miss meetings and not go on field service.

I started to calculate my way out of the terrible mess I'd got myself into. I wanted out of my marriage, but when you are a Jehovah's Witness you are in there for life. The only way out is adultery, but the other party has to not forgive you – and they are counselled to forgive where possible.

It wasn't long before I found another female for my escape plan. At home I slept on the couch, deliberately putting distance between my wife and myself. I think she sensed that something had changed in me. Her comments became passive and nice. But by then I was like a freight train picking up speed. I was going to get out of there, I just wasn't telling her yet. I had been fired from my latest job because I'd threatened the boss, and had got a job as a DJ because I loved music, I could dance and I was good with the women.

There was a voice in my head saying what you are doing is evil and you are going to be destroyed. But there was another voice saying your life is over anyway because you've done all this unforgivable stuff, so have a good time while you can.



Eventually the elders asked me point blank, "have you committed any immorality?" I said I had. By this time I was living apart from my wife, but taking money home for her and our daughter. The elders said they wanted to see me, and I told them the lot – and they dis-fellowshipped me. That was a relief in a way, but it was hugely painful too because you lose all your friends. No one speaks to you or even looks at you because you are carrion – rubbish. You're worse than anyone because you've known God and abandoned him.

### AFTER THAT I WENT FROM RELATIONSHIP TO RELATIONSHIP,

LOOKING FOR LOVE, I SUPPOSE, BUT ON MY OWN TERMS.

In some of those relationships there was violence, in others there was not. Usually it was sparked off by what I considered to be humiliating comments. I chose that to be my trigger.

At the age of 30 I thought I really had to settle down. I got into a relationship that was very stressful but I stayed because of that thought. Even on the first date, when I was five minutes late because I'd been dropping my daughter off, she barrellled into me. She was a strong personality and gave vent to her anger. After a while I stopped holding back and started arguing with her, and that would just accelerate her. I'd met someone like myself!

One of the worst incidents happened on a Saturday afternoon when a friend had come over to watch a boxing match on television. I loved the feelings boxing instigated in me – pure rage! The fight was about to start and Sheila breezed through the door and asked why I hadn't done the dishes. I told her "there are only a couple of plates there". But she said, "Get up now and do them". I said, "But the fight's about to start!" I wasn't feeling angry, I was feeling distressed because she was humiliating me in front of my friend.

She went over to the television and flicked it off. I told myself "don't lose it" and turned the television on again. She turned it off again. I grabbed her by the hair, marched her down to the bedroom, threw her in and shut the door. She was at the television again before I could even get back! I dragged her towards the bedroom again. My mate was saying, "Stop this! I'll go home!" But by then I was in a rage.



I threw Sheila into the bedroom and jumped on her and stuck my knee into her solar plexus to immobilise her for a while. I said "don't come out", but she did, and she grabbed the television, threw it on the ground and said "what are you going to do now?" Then it was all on. I hit her and started sticking the boot into her. My friend intervened, and I started on him too.

After that incident, it just built up steam and I was at my most violent with her. The curious thing is that she tells me we had a beautiful relationship and that some of her happiest times were with me, but I was at my worst with her. She was always creating drama, and I was trying to settle down. I lived in fear of her because I didn't want to ruin the relationship by not doing what she wanted. And I felt I became almost girlish trying to keep the peace. I started to understand my Dad in a way.

Then I realised I might kill her, and I had to get out. I decided I needed to find some clarity, some balance. Surely every man was not as psychotic as me – actually willingly preparing to harm or kill people, and thinking about these things on a daily basis.

I had issues around seeing my daughter from my first marriage and a lawyer said to me, "You've got these legal problems about access, but really you are coming to an age where you have to start thinking about yourself and what it means to be a man". He was head of a group that dealt with men's issues, but he was a shrunken little old figure and he looked as if he'd been whipped into submission, and I thought "who'd want to be like you?" I wasn't ready to hear those kinds of things, but I never forgot his comments.

Others suggested counselling for my anger problems, but I equated counselling with being mentally ill, so I dismissed that. A good friend used to say to me, "You're not fighting against these women, you're fighting against your mother".

I started to wind down my relationship with Sheila. She sensed it and modified her behaviour. She said she loved me and promised to reform. I always made the woman feel it was all her fault. I knew sometimes it was my fault, but I wanted to dump all the guilt on them – if you hadn't done this and this, I wouldn't be doing this and this.

Before I left a relationship, I'd always have another female waiting in the wings. This time it was an Indian girl, Marina. She asked me to marry her because she was about to be sent home to an arranged marriage, and I did love her. There was a lot of interference from Sheila because she wanted me back. She sent me fake letters saying that Marina had been a prostitute in Australia and things like that, and she used to tell me that if I didn't come back I'd never see our son again. But I wanted to be fully settled and I thought I could be with Marina. We had a couple of beautiful children.

But she used to tell a lot of lies. I had an accountancy business by then. When my business partner got married, he and his wife, who was also Indian, came round for a drink. We men went out to watch a boxing match, and while we were away Marina told this woman all sorts of lies about my business partner – that he'd slept with prostitutes and so on. When we got home, she was in tears, saying she wanted to go back to India. My friend was beside himself.



I told him to take his wife home, and I asked Marina what she'd said. "I promise you, I didn't say a word," she told me. But I was fed up with her lies, and I slapped her. She called the cops, they arrested me and I spent a night in the cells. I came up before Judge Mick Brown, and the duty solicitor advised me to do an anger management course because that would bode well with him.

So I did the course. I was simmering inside, but now there were all these other angry guys around me. One Indian guy kept blaming women for everything. And I thought he was right at first. I was always vocal. When they said that we make a choice about our behaviour, I'd say "that's rubbish – we don't make choices, it just happens".

But I finally accepted that we do choose our behaviours. Although the course started out as a strategy to escape trouble, by the end I'd learnt a lot of very helpful things – I even thanked Marina for it. I went before Judge Brown again, and he gave me the benefit of the doubt – "just this time". He didn't convict me, I just had to do some community work.

After that I went to university, got a degree in communications, started tutoring and lecturing and enrolled in a doctoral programme. I just loved it. I started to develop and see the world differently. Before that I had no understanding of society or politics, which is a demonising word to the Jehovah's Witnesses who see Christ's Kingdom as the supreme form of government.

I have been free from violent acts since I did that course in 1993. Once since then I've made a threatening gesture to Marina because she was baiting me, but even then I felt that was reprehensible.

MY ANGER HAS NEVER DIED,

BUT IT'S MORPHED INTO  
SOMETHING ELSE NOW.

It's not anger at my parents any more, I'm just angry at other things – like false statements by the Jehovah's Witnesses (although I am still in the religion).

I live on my own now. I can't give any words of wisdom on domestic violence; I don't feel I have any moral grounds on which to be saying anything. But being called to account was the best thing that happened to me.