

## **Voicing My Domestic Violence Story**

I can't help but wonder when it will stop; when I will finally be free. It is not freedom from abuse, humiliation, shame and suffocating guilt that I seek. Those things I am sure will walk beside me always. It is a simple freedom I yearn for. To go a day, or two, or perhaps more, without thinking of him and worrying about what is next. There is an old adage that suggests that time heals all wounds, but some wounds, if left unattended, can fester, and so the following is an attempt to heal my still open sores. One day, God willing, I will walk bravely and freely and independently, not looking over my shoulder and not steeped in guilt and grief. One day I may, even for a brief moment, forget. This is my journey and I would like to share it with you. This serves as therapy for me and hopefully will make a small difference to someone somewhere who is experiencing the same level of despair.

Physically, I left almost four years ago now. Emotionally, there is no escape. No reprieve. I spent nearly three decades of my life with a man who abused me, physically, emotionally, psychologically and financially. A man with whom I had three children. Three beautiful, intelligent, kind, compassionate, loving children. Two are adults now, but they have reached this milestone without ever having a healthy father/child relationship. And for this I feel an overwhelming sense of guilt. What if things had been different?

Children deserve to be loved. Children deserve to feel the unconditional love of a mother and a father. It is unconditional, overwhelming and all-encompassing the love I feel for my children. But I am their mother. I tried to be both mother and father. I tried to make sure they didn't feel that they were missing out. There was no love, no warmth, no paternal pride or guidance. Just an emptiness. A narcissist cannot be a parent. Their lack of empathy for others; constant need for admiration; grandiose fantasies of their own brilliance and success; and their conviction that they, above all others, are deserving of special treatment, makes it impossible for them to unconditionally love and parent. They care for no one, even their own flesh and blood, as much as they care for themselves. So, what if?

So, what if? What if I had left? What if I wasn't so proud? What if I wasn't afraid to admit I had made a terrible, terrible mistake? What if things were different? I stayed because I couldn't afford to leave. He had total financial control. I rarely had \$5 to my name. But even I know his is a weak excuse. Do you really want to know what kept me there for so long? A debilitating sense of shame. I am an intelligent woman. I have a loving family, a support network. I worked hard and did well in my career. Most of all I worked hard at never, ever, letting anyone know the extent of my grief

and despair. I could be in tears in the passenger seat of the car on the way to a family function with him screaming at me about how useless and stupid etc I was, only to pull myself together, put a big smile on my face and act like everything was perfect. Never let them see. Especially never let them see you cry. Never appear weak or afraid. I learned to lie, to deceive and to duck and weave. The person I lied to the most of course was myself but I was so caught up in the pretence that I was oblivious. What if, I kept thinking, what if he changed? What if I could make this work? But much more pathetically, what if all the things he said were true. What if I couldn't manage without him? What if he was right?

It took a tragedy for me to finally wake up. To snap me out of the fog that I had been living in for such a very long time. You see my youngest brother passed away. Very suddenly, very unexpectedly.. I will never forget that early morning phone call from my father.. the confusion, the pain, the shock. I was pregnant at the time. I raced around to my parents' house. I needed to be with them. My family flew, drove and raced from all corners to come together. A lot is a blur. I couldn't talk without breaking down. We huddled together for a few days and did all the things that needed to be done. Everyone stayed at Mum and Dads. Sleeping over in their old rooms, all together. Except me. I wasn't allowed to stay. The closeness of my family always upset him. So late one afternoon when we arrived back to our own home he let me have it. I was being selfish. I wasn't thinking about him and how all of this made him feel. I was making it all about me and leaving him out. I sat at the kitchen bench with tears rolling down my face as he screamed and yelled and threw things at me. I'm sure the neighbours heard. It wouldn't have been the first time, but no one ever came to see if I was okay. No one ever called the police. No one asked when they saw me in the front yard if I needed help. Instead I felt embarrassed, ashamed and worthless. My brother's death took the limelight off the narcissist and in a most tragic way left me with a clarity that was blinding in its intensity.

It took me a further four years to leave. I cannot begin to explain why. The threats of what would happen if I dared ever take 'his' children away from him. The fear of where I would go. How would the children cope leaving the only home they had ever known? Again, all pathetic reasons but I have learned that right now I can only look forward, not back. Yes, I should have left many, many years ago but the most important thing is that I did eventually leave.

He however did not let go. He continues to threaten and abuse. He killed my daughter's cat. He assaulted my son. He threatened to kill my parents, my siblings, and me. I went to the police. I showed them the messages, the vile, abhorrent messages. My son came with me and reported the assault on himself. The police officer looked at us both over the counter, from behind the glass, and suggested that we go away and think about whether we really wanted to report the incident. It was

2015 and only three months after Tara Brown had been run off the road and bludgeoned to death by her ex-partner.

I did go away and think about it and then returned to the station about half an hour later and insisted our statements were taken. My son and I left hours later feeling exhausted and like we had been a bother. To finally discover my voice only to have it muffled infuriated me. We also knew that we had started something that, in all likelihood, would increase his rage, a fact that simply did not register with the police. That I had potentially just infinitely increased the potential for a violent reaction was not lost on me. I was frightened. I was frightened for my children, my parents, my siblings, my brother and sister in law. And even worse, I had set it all in motion. What if, I had just remained silent?

At some point he was interviewed by the police. Despite my asking to be notified when this had occurred I was never informed. I wanted to be prepared. I wanted to be vigilant. I wanted to know when he realised that I had finally stood up to him and gone to the police because I knew he would be furious. I didn't ever hear. I also wasn't told when he went to court. I wasn't notified of the outcome. Eventually I rang the station and asked what was happening. They couldn't tell me anything over the phone. I had to go to the station, with my ID so that they could confirm that I was who I said I was. I did that. He did go to court and I was granted a Protection Order. An order that really is not worth the paper it is written on.

I have to say things settled down a little after that. He was quiet and left us alone ... at least for a while. But this was just the calm before the storm. Without going into each and every incident since the time the Protection Order was granted, he has now breached it five times. The fourth time I went to the police was when he entered my home. Just walked in the door. He knew where we lived because he took our son on a drive around the suburb, until he pointed out the house. And yes, up until recently he was having access to our youngest every second weekend. Why you ask? Because he has not physically harmed him in any way and the courts feel that both parents are entitled to equitable time. Emotional and psychological harm are as devastating as physical harm in my opinion. My youngest coming home to me and crying about how he wishes we were all a family again and how he missed 'the good old days'. There were no good old days and he was being manipulated. But he didn't hit him, so his fathers' rights must be a priority. His father who has never paid a single cent in child support, never contributed to school fees, clothing, feeding or keeping a roof over his children's head. His rights are very important.

I digress...he entered my home. A place where finally the children and I felt safe. We had settled. He walked in the door and turned everything upside down again. I was at work. Our youngest was at home with our daughter. It was the last day of

school holidays. He walked in and terrified my daughter. She was left sobbing and shaking for an hour. She went to the police. They turned her away. She is not the “aggrieved” on the Protection Order and it would just be her word against his. Please let that sink in for a minute. I left work and returned to the police station with her. We both gave statements. We both explained how frightening it is to have him enter our home. We both explained how he terrifies us and we are unsure what he is capable of. We gave our statements and went home, looking over our shoulders and no longer feeling safe. Again, I asked that I be contacted once he had been spoken to. Again, it was explained that they are very busy and though this would be “best practice” that sometimes it just doesn’t happen. The date was early October.

Two weeks later , starting at 4pm, I began to receive an avalanche of messages. “You deserve what’s coming”. “You’re fucking insane” .. the usual. Then he stepped it up a notch. He knew that I had started seeing someone and he somehow managed to get his phone number and began to threaten him too. So the next day I returned to the police. They still had not managed to find the time to pop round to see him regarding the incident from two weeks earlier. I gave another statement. They took screenshots of the messages. Again I asked “what happens now?” Again it was explained that they are very busy. They will get round to talk to him at some stage. Given that we were now up to the 5<sup>th</sup> breach I wondered what the procedure would be. I was told that when they catch up with him he will be questioned at the watch house but given that the watch house and jails are at capacity, and the breaches are quite low on the scale, he would more than likely be released on bail and given a date to appear in court. I was told that if he had assaulted me, then that would be a more serious breach. What if....???

So anyway, it is now 25 October and I still have heard nothing. I have phoned every couple of days to be told that they haven’t managed to catch up with him and the matter is still under investigation. So now the kids and I must move again. I can’t stay here knowing that he could turn up on my doorstep at any moment. I have no money. I walked away from my marriage, after 20 years of paying a mortgage, with nothing. I started from scratch in my early forties. Saving money is impossible when you are raising children on one income. I have to break my lease. It is all just too much and too overwhelming to think about. I have to get up every morning and get my son ready for school and go to work and come home and cook dinner and do the washing when all I want to do is admit defeat and curl up in a ball and stay there forever. But I can’t. I won’t. I will start over... again. I will wait for the phone call from the police that will never come. I will assume that at some stage he has gone to court again and I imagine he gets a fine, and/or a slap on the wrist. That is my best guess anyway. And I will wait for it all to start again in one month, or two, or three.. and again I will feel totally and utterly alone.

The horrifying reality however is that I am far from alone.

- On average, at least one woman a week is killed by a partner or former partner in Australia;
- One in three Australian women has experienced physical violence, since the age of 15;
- One in five Australian women has experienced sexual violence;
- One in four Australian women has experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner;
- One in four Australian women has experienced emotional abuse by a current or former partner.

**On average at least one woman a week loses her life.** Why are we not outraged by this number. Why, when one of these women present to their local police station are they made to feel like an annoyance.

On Saturday 7 July this year, three unrelated women were killed by their partners on one day. This took the total to 34 for this year alone. In any other country this would be considered an act of terrorism. Task forces would be set up, government officials would grandstand and fake a tear for the cameras. But no, not in Australia, not even one fake tear by a politician. What if...what if someone had the courage and decency to make a stand. My God, what if we actually had the same level of debate, protest and outrage about domestic violence as we did about same sex marriage. To those in high places who pray to their God about the threat of homosexuality, ask him next time you visit, what she thinks about domestic violence. Where is our shame???

So that is my story, and I do feel better for having shared it with you. I don't feel safer, my guilt and shame no less crushing, but I have used my voice and my experiences to call out to those in power, to shout my disdain and anger to those who should know better. What if my story makes a difference?