

A Survivor Speaks

Maria's Story

When I first met M. I had a vague idea of what domestic violence was, but not really. I did not think a 'woman like me' would ever find herself in such a situation. And by 'a woman like me' I mean an upper middle class and college-educated person who had had a history of healthy-enough relationships. I pictured the typical DV victim to be probably 'very different' with my limited knowledge of the subject matter back then.

In hindsight, all the red flags of his abusive behavior were there from the start, the very same night I met him. I just did not know how to read them. He was there at the same pub. We made out. A simple drinking-at-a-bar story. I wasn't even particularly interested in him, but the behavior that followed sucked me in before I knew what was going on. After that one night of making out at the bar, M. aggressively pursued me within a short period of time. Lots of text messages. Being everywhere I was. Suddenly always hanging out with my group of coworkers. Wiggling his way into every area of my life. A few short weeks later introducing me to his father and stepmother. Not long after that we even moved in together because my rental apartment was being sold, and he offered we could try out sharing his place. The textbook abuser approach of what is called 'love bombing'. I had recently broken up with someone and was in a vulnerable place. A new country. A new job. No old friends or family around. Abusers, of course, have a sixth sense for that kind of vulnerable stuff. It's like they can smell it from miles away.

Within days I knew his ex 'was a b..tch and cheated on him.' According to him. I later had the chance to speak with his ex and her story was of course completely different. She had never cheated on him and he had abused her in horrendous ways, too. His language when talking about women in general was derogative and demeaning, which is also a red flag for an abuser. Things escalated slowly into him following me to events and places he hadn't been invited to. He was 'just worried about me'. It was flattering at first, and I made excuses to myself and others later on as this pattern of controlling my every whereabouts continued and increased. The worse it got, the better my excuses for him. He just cares about me, I'd tell myself. He would start doing really odd things, such as forbidding me to cook what I wanted, and insisting he cooked instead. At first, I thought how brilliant that was! A man who wanted to cook. But it was really just another manipulative technique to control every aspect of my life.

The social isolation that is so typical with abusers didn't take long to show up as well. He would single out, one by one, all of my friends, and say something bad about them. Finding reasons as to why I should not go to places. Making up lies about what others had done and said. He would try to make me believe I acted out when I drank alcohol. The shame I felt was unbelievable. But each time I checked in with others who had been present when I was drunk, they all had nothing but good things to say about my behavior. They'd say things like: 'You just had fun and had a few to drink. You did not do anything bad.'

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The first time I tried leaving him, was after we got into a drunk argument walking home from a social event. He shoved me so hard that I fell onto the street. That bruised my left elbow pretty badly. But that wasn't even the worst of it. The scariest part was when I looked up at him – his face was stone cold and his eyes empty and dark and black. Almost pleased. As if he was content with what he had just done. The next day at work I could barely lift things, and others asked me about the dark blue bruise. I lied about where I got it, of course.

The morning after he shoved me, he had written me this long apology letter, comparing our 'special love and connection to Romeo and Juliet' and making promise after promise. Lots of crocodile tears too, which is so common for abusers. I blamed myself for having been drunk, plus I had actually also pushed him the night before in defense. I felt we both had issues, things got heated, and I was just as much to blame. Now I understand that me being about half his weight and way shorter, using a weak push was not an excuse for him to shove me violently until I fell. But abusers do that. They try to provoke you into doing something that is wrong, so they can do something worse, and blame it on you. And after M. had enough of the honeymoon phase, the tension came back, and he started to shift the blame to me. My bruised elbow was my fault, according to him. I made him do it. The sad thing is, I believed him. I knew physical violence was never ok, and I had turned into a person I could barely recognize at this point. I must be bad and broken goods if this is what happens in my life. Those are common thoughts DV survivors have.

M. would sometimes wake me up in the middle of the night by pulling my hair. He would only do it very briefly, so that I barely woke up and went right back to sleep. I remember the cold and empty look on his face those nights. It felt so surreal, I wasn't sure if I had dreamed it or if it really happened. I left him for the first time a few weeks after the elbow injury incident, but straight away received non-stop phone calls, apologies, him begging me to come back. And I did. It takes a domestic violence victim on average seven times to leave. It took me three.

After I got back, things were ok for a while. As they tend to be. I already experienced traumatic bonding, also known as Stockholm syndrome, but did not know that was what it was. I knew it was wrong that I went back, but I craved him at the same time, almost like a drug. When the abuser realizes he is losing control, he chooses to be on his good behavior just long enough to hook you back into his destructive game.

Over time though, my sense of self came back. I felt empowered. The relationship had begun to feel like a prison, but by that time he had tied me financially to him in a cunning way. We had rented a bigger house together and left his small apartment, and most of my savings were invested in the deposit of that house. I was living far from home and felt too ashamed to ask for money from my parents. I was 24, supposed to be an adult and handle my own affairs. I made my bed. I had to find my way out and blamed myself for being in that situation. It would be a few more months until I finally left for good.

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The last day we lived together, he had gone out drinking with a friend, and I was home working on my master's degree applications. When he came back, I could tell he was different. Agitated. I don't remember what exactly was said, but I felt frustrated and went upstairs to our bedroom with my laptop to continue working. I felt it was best we both cool down.

What followed was the worst night of my entire life. I had just sat down on the bed when he stormed up the stairs. He called me all names under the sun. A fucking c...t. Whining, whining. Always just complaining and nagging. Names I have never been called by anyone. The hair on the back of my neck stood up, and I knew this was serious. He slammed my laptop shut. I opened it again. He grabbed it, and I held onto it. He was bigger and stronger, so eventually he got a hold of it. He held it out of the window, with that "crazy eyes" look abusers get on their faces. If you experienced abuse, you know exactly what I mean. He threatened to drop it out of the window. Slammed the laptop back onto the bed. Grabbed it again, and this time he threw it down the staircase with full force. It shattered and landed somewhere at the bottom of the stairs.

Of course, he chose the laptop. He knew I relied on it to communicate with friends and family, with work, with my future. It was a part of my life he could not control. Abusers may seem out of control, but it is deliberate. Which is why there will be people who will not believe you. Abusers can turn their abuse on/off like a switch. Back in the day, that was why police would assume the woman was just hysterical, because by the time they showed up at the door, the abuser was calm and collected, while the woman was crying and beside herself.

That's just what M. did. I was devastated after I saw my laptop break into pieces, and what followed was just like out of a movie. Except when you are in it, it's not fun at all. It is pure primal survival. I knew without thinking what I had to do, and my body took over. It felt at times as if I was watching the scene from the corner of the ceiling, having left my body. I tried to calm him down and apologized profusely, promising to be a better partner. I didn't mean it, but I knew my life was actually in danger. When that happens, you just know. Flight or fight kicks in, and I hope I will never have to feel that again in my life. He continued to smash my phone after I had called his father to ask for help. His father is probably just as abusive as him, and so he didn't do anything and also did not call the police after his son smashed the phone. I kept reassuring M. I would not leave, and he kept on asking "You're leaving me now, aren't you?" He followed me into the bathroom downstairs and watched me as I brushed my teeth. I somehow convinced him I would just take a quick shower, and he should go to bed, and I'd be there in a second. That we would work things out. That I loved him so much and agreed that I had been out of line with my behavior. I said whatever I knew he wanted me to say.

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It took a long time, but eventually he did go upstairs. I turned the shower on without going in. There was this one moment I will never forget. I stood by the sink, looking into the mirror. And I saw the woman looking back at me. And I thought: "No. No. No. This is NOT how this ends. This is NOT you." I now know that when you get into an altercation with an abuser, you should NOT be in the bathroom or kitchen (knives and hard surfaces...), but back then my thought was the bathroom was closest to the main entrance.

As the shower ran, I heard him go upstairs and get into bed. He had previously "jokingly" said things like "Sometimes you annoy me so much that I could strangle you to death". And he was a chef, always bragging about how sharp his knives were. Showing them off. All of that ran through my mind. Abusers tend to use humor/sarcasm to package up abuse and threats, just to test the waters and see how you react. I knew I could not go back up there or I might not be alive the next morning. That's when it first hit me: "This... is...domestic ...violence. And I don't want to be another statistic."

Somehow, I managed to gather a few things. It's incredible what the human body does when on autopilot. I grabbed my passport, my laptop bag with the now completely shattered laptop, my wallet, and left the house through the front door as quietly as I could. Barefoot. With only a pair of shorts and a tank top on me.

I remember the feeling of my bare feet on the front steps. The relief and the fear. I have never been this quiet in my entire life. He must have not noticed for about 5-7 minutes, because that's how long it took me to run up a hill over some gravel roads and through bushland to a friend's apartment. I banged on her door. It was about 2am. She opened. I collapsed. Not a minute later we heard the very distinct sound of his car coming up the hill. I screamed and cried and went into a total panic reaction, hiding under her bed. My friend was the hero of that night. She closed her door, turned off all the lights. Grabbed a baseball bat and stood beside her front door, ready to beat him if needed. Luckily, M. only knew roughly the area where she lived, but not the exact apartment building. Abusers are cowards. He did not dare to wake up anyone else, and after walking around outside for a few minutes he left. We heard his car drive back down the hill. Called the police. They went to our house and took him to a prison cell overnight.

After they had dropped him there, they took me to the house so I could gather my belongings. The police officers were shocked and told me to be prepared. M. had thrown all of my belongings (clothes, uni books, etc.) around the entire house. He had actually put my uni books into the bathtub, and filled it with water to 'drown' them. My toothbrush was cut in half. He had packed one of my hiking backpacks with all of my clothes, and then stabbed the backpack with one of his chef knives. Slicing it open. My clothes were all cut up. The police took that as evidence to the station, and they photographed it all the next day. I had to come in and identify all objects as mine. So here I was. I went from a university educated upper middle-class girl who traveled the world and studied abroad, to walking around a police station, looking at my cut-up underwear and bras and broken toothbrush.

I had become a victim of domestic violence.

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I wish that was where it had ended. But trauma works in destructive ways. After the court date, where he was given a restraining order and ordered to pay for the damage of my laptop only, I contacted him weeks later. We met up one or two times and even had sex. The shame I felt was crushing, and I had become suicidal. Feeling like I was going crazy, and again, blaming myself. Clearly if I went back and did that, something must be awfully wrong with me. Luckily, he became controlling so fast yet again, and this time I had read up on DV and just knew I HAD to leave. This was it. I could NOT go back again. But I understand why so many women go back again and again. I have been there now and felt it in my body.

I moved away from that city and a few weeks later started my master's degree far away. I still remember when the email came from the program I had applied to. Informing me they had accepted me for a full scholarship at a reputable state university. It felt surreal. And there I was, a few weeks later sitting in the orientation meeting with my fellow grad students. Like the upper middle-class "uni" girl I was.

Except nobody could see what was going on inside. I did what I had to do and excelled at my studies, which distracted me, thankfully. And I drank. A lot. Red wine mostly. Just to numb it all out and function. Or so I thought. The panic attacks and PTSD flashbacks became too much eventually, and I had to seek out help from the university counseling services.

That was when my true healing started. If I regret one thing, that is that I waited so long to get professional mental health support. I would advise others to give yourself permission to 'shop around' for the right therapist. It's common to try out one or two before finding the right fit. The internet has great resources, and I recommend reading up on "warning signs of bad therapist" to get an idea of what to expect, and what not to accept in therapy.

I continued therapy for over three years, and it helped me to both forgive myself and move forward in life with this scar.

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