

A Victim's Experience

Names and places have been changed to preserve anonymity. If you use this resource, please do so respectfully.

After being friends for 2 years and in a relationship for a further 2 years – in March 1991 we got married. There was a considerable age gap, but he was a kind, sweet, caring man who made me feel safe and secure, and very loved. My family, although with some reservations, accepted and welcomed him into their lives too. My mother had died the previous year so it was a bit of joy in an otherwise sad time for us all.

It was during our honeymoon in the Peak District that things rapidly changed. After an evening out in town I started to feel ill from possible food poisoning so we went back to the cabin earlier than intended. When we got there he let me get out of the car then drove away at considerable speed leaving me in the middle of nowhere late at night.

When he eventually returned some hours later I tried to ask what the problem was and to my horror had a bread knife held to my throat with the threat of being killed whispered in my ear. He said I was selfish and self-centred, he had spent a fair amount on the meal and instead of being grateful all I was doing was complaining. That I should leave him alone or he would kill me, because dead people couldn't be annoying.

I left him alone, tried to laugh it off, tried to understand it, but could do neither.

The next morning, he apologised, said he had been tired and unwell himself, and that it would never happen again. The rest of our time there was without incident, but there was an underlying tension all the time and I was very careful about what I said or did.

Deep down I knew my life would never be the same again.

The next month or so was without incident then out of the blue one evening while watching the telly I asked what else was on. The answer came in the form of the remote control hitting me on the side of my head along with a tirade about how I was never happy, always moaning and completely useless.

From that day on I never knew what to expect nice, caring John or vengeful, spiteful John. Anything could instantly change him from the first into the second.

A perfectly prepared dinner could end up thrown in the bin or at the kitchen wall because I hadn't mashed all the lumps out of the potatoes or put enough salt on them for his taste.

Once, during that summer he accidentally locked us out of the house, but despite there being a dodgy lock on one of the windows he refused to break it to get back in because I had suggested it. About 6 hours later, at about 10.30pm, he made me go to the neighbours and ask for a screw driver to open the said window. When our neighbour came to help he was told how stupid I was for locking us out a few minutes earlier.

He apologised for disturbing him so late at night and thanked him for his help. But once inside his mood changed and I beaten hard around the arms and screamed at for embarrassing him so much by being so stupid, that now the neighbours would know how useless I was too.

I was pinched, spat at, slapped or shaken, hit with a remote control, sweeping brush, rolled up newspapers, kitchen chairs, slippers, or whatever weapon came to hand and I was verbally abused and insulted on an almost daily basis.

Public humiliation and embarrassment were also a major feature, shouting at me in the street or in a shop, seemed to make him feel especially powerful.

At the time I only had a provisional driving license so he refused to insure me on the car saying it would cost too much. My job involved working weekends. My dad was self-employed and still grieving for my mother. My sister worked long hours, commuting from Glossop to Derby every day and trying to do everything else at the weekend. So, over time it became easy for him to isolate me from my family.

If anyone wanted to get together, I was expected to make-up an excuse as to why I couldn't see them. And eventually my only contact with any of my family was by phone, and even that was limited and censored. If I tried to argue he would threaten to embarrass me in front of them and show them what a complete waste of space I was.

The only people we saw were his brother and family, who seemed oblivious to what he was really like.

Over the years the abuse, both verbal and physical, became endless. And as time passed it became our normal life and for reasons I cannot explain, I still loved him, and thought things would improve. After-all he always explained it away by telling how much pressure he was under from his boss at work, to pay the bills, and especially having to put up with me, and how much I relied on and needed him.

There were times when everything was great and I could still see that kind, sensitive man inside him, but they never lasted more than a few days and there were so many

times when I wished he would just carry out his ever-present threat and kill me, because at least then I would have been free.

At one point, around 1996, he lost his job, basically because he couldn't be bothered getting there on time. But then I had to leave my dream job in Derby city centre, in Mr Middleton's Garden Shop, because the bus ticket cost too much, as mine was now the only wage to live on.

But when I got a job in Bolsover, working as a cashier in a petrol station, everything ramped up a gear. And when mobile phones came out things went from bad to worse. There was no escaping him, as he would constantly text and call me, throughout the day, and if I was a minute late home from work, or shopping, a full interrogation would take place, as to where I was, and who I was with?

And if he wasn't calling or texting, he would drop in to see if I was ok, or to walk me home. My colleagues, like everyone else, thought he was lovely man and that it was very sweet. What a great husband I had. He must love me so much.

At that time all the other staff in the garage were male and he became convinced I was having an affair with one of them, called Chris, who worked the same shift as I did.

At the Christmas party that year he shared his theory about my affair, with Mark, one of the other lads from work. Mark told Chris, who firstly started to ignore me, and then a few months later handed in his notice and left. At that point Mark decided to tell everyone else at work that the affair theory must have been right and for months I was the talk of the place, and the butt of everyone's jokes.

It was no better at home. The name calling was at an all-time high and every word was more insulting and degrading than the last. My whole life was a lie and I was just about managing to hang on. I did try to leave, but without much money and no real friends, no-one would even give me a room.

Not long after the shop was extended and they opened a deli. At that time Cynthia came to work there. She was separated, with adult sons and a teenage daughter. At last I thought I might have an ally, but when I tried to tell her she just laughed, and said not to be messing about such a thing.

It was then I finally realised I was trapped. He was right no-one would ever believe me. Sure, he was a lovely man, who everyone liked and I was a useless waste of space, too weak to stand-up for myself, and too stupid to survive without him.

For several more years I carried on with my false persona, of a happy home life with everything rosy and bright, that we were the perfect couple, with everything just as it should be.

Then one day a customer came into the shop, who worked as a driving instructor. He was about to open his own driving school and asked if I knew anyone wanting lessons would I pass on his phone number. A few days later I applied for a new provisional license and a few weeks later I booked my first driving lesson with him.

For the next year I had one hour of freedom every week, driving with Michael, in his little blue Nissan Micra, laughing and chatting like normal human beings. When John had agreed I could take the lessons he said it was because it was just something else I would embarrass myself with, and fail at.

But I proved him wrong. A year after my first lesson I sat my driving test for the first time and passed. With new confidence I got a small loan from the bank and bought a cheap second-hand car. Now I had freedom, and he really didn't like it.

I applied for a new job, in the garden centre Dronfield, and got it. That was the beginning of the turning point in my life. Although I was still answerable for my every move, I became clever, and didn't phone to say I was leaving work until I was a good way down the road. Then I would park the car, and have some me time. And I made friends, ones he couldn't control me seeing, or talking to.

Then he was offered a job in a new warehouse, which he took, only to find out he would be working nights. That was my next step to freedom. I was gone to work before he got home in the morning and I was only home an hour, or so, before he had to leave in the evening.

Suddenly I had a life. I was able to go to for a drive, or out for dinner, and there was nothing he could do about it. The worst days were my days off, but he was usually asleep for most of them, so the time together was more bearable. And I had bought him a season ticket for Donington Park, as a Christmas present, so at weekends, if I was off, he was there.

In September 2002 we went on holiday to Spain. Only a day or two into the fortnight he picked a fight over nothing, and didn't speak to me for most of our time there. The isolation of home was bearable because at least I was at home, or work, but to be so isolated in a foreign country was just another level.

And when we got back home, he decided he wasn't going back to work and that I would have to leave the garden centre and look for work in Bolsover again.

It was then that I made a plan. I counted the tea-bags and decided the day they ran out would be the day I left. I know that sounds really stupid, but I had to have a tangible, physical reason to leave, and that was as good as any.

A few days later I packed my bags, with all but enough clothes that he wouldn't notice. I went to see my dad and asked if I could come home for a few weeks. Then I went to talk to my boss and asked him to sort out my income tax and wages for me and to make sure that I could get D-day off work. And I rang our landlord and arranged to pay the rent until the lease expired 6 months later.

On the morning the tea bags ran out I went to the supermarket. I bought enough food to fill the cupboards, the fridge and the freezer and I took what small savings I had out of the bank, left it on the kitchen table, and then I told him I was leaving.

He begged me to stay. Said that he would change. That it would all be different, but I had heard it so many times before that I just didn't care anymore. I knew that if I gave in and relented that one way or another my life would end that day, and so I put my stuff in the car and drove off.

I only saw him once after that, about 2 weeks later, but I did speak to him about once a week for the next few months, just to make sure he was ok. I also rang his brother to tell him I had left, and to ask him to keep an eye on him, but his answer was 'that I had made marriage vows, so go home and abide by them.'

Finally, I was free. Or was I?

When word spread that my marriage was over, the gossip took over and speculation that it was probably my fault was the topic for weeks. Even when I eventually told a girl I had considered a good friend for 2 years, she laughed at me and said 'don't be ridiculous.'

As I shut the door of the house that day I shut the door on that part of my life too, locking it away, never to be taken out and looked at, and certainly never to be discussed or disclosed, in case people would think I was pathetic and weak. And when I left Bolsover, and moved to Chesterfield a few months later, I just put on the persona I had worn throughout my marriage, that of a happy smiley face, and got on with my life.

Thankfully when I filled for a divorce, he didn't oppose it, but I think that's probably because he didn't think I would go through with it.

I made new friends, fell in love again and started a new business, but never spoke about my previous life, not until I got engaged and a few close friends asked when we would

get married. Then I had to tell them I was waiting on a divorce, but all I said was it had not been a happy marriage, and no-one ever asked me to elaborate.

In spring of 2003 I received a letter, which had been redirected to my dad's house, saying I owed 24 thousand Pounds, to a banking institute for a debt he had defaulted on and to which I was the guarantor. After seeking advice from a solicitor, paperwork was produced with what appeared to be my signature on it, but which I had never signed. Never-the-less I had to agree to pay or face court, and a possible prison term. In the end, the solicitor managed to negotiate the amount down by 4 thousand, and over the next 7 years I struggled to pay off a debt which was not mine, whilst all the time trying to build up my own shattered credit rating.

All I had ever done was love him and all he had ever done was abuse that love, yet I carried the guilt of leaving him with me for the next 13 years, until I couldn't battle the deep-depression I felt any longer, and finally faced my demons and agreed to go for counselling in 2015.

Until then, I thought the hardest thing I had ever done was leave him, but those afternoon sessions were some the hardest hours of my life. Picking at my life, like it was an open sore, letting go of the deep pain and hurt, accepting that I had nothing to feel guilty about, that he had been fully responsible for his own actions, and finally understanding that I was not in any way to blame for the abuse.

It was a burden that had shaped my life for 11 years and had weighed me down for another 13. Now maybe I would be free.

In October 2019 my dad died and after returning from his funeral my sister and I were looking through the condolence book and the sympathy cards. Suddenly a familiar name jumped out from the page, with a familiar hand writing neatly spelling it out. My heart started to pound, and I had a full-blown panic attack. He must have been there. Why? What was there to gain from it? I guess, maybe it was a final attempt at some form of control.

Then in June 2021 I received a strange voice message from the undertakers, who had buried my dad. They were looking to pass on contact details for a girl called Mary. The only Mary I had ever known was his niece, so what did she want?

I rang my sister and we both looked up local deaths in the newspaper, and sure enough he was dead. I was engulfed with hysteria. The relief was overwhelming. This time I was actually free.

My sister rang Mary to see what she wanted, telling her we had seen the death notice. Her father wanted to know, as his widow, would I be attending the funeral and as he had taken his own life, she said the Police also needed to speak to me.

The next few weeks were brutal. Phone call after phone call with the Police, as no-one seemed to be able to make a note that they had already spoken to me, and then asking if they could share my details with his family. Absolutely not I said, time and again having to explain why I didn't want to speak to any of them, and how long it had taken me to get free of the situation, and to build a new life for myself.

And his niece ringing and emailing my sister again and again, wanting to meet up, and wanting written confirmation that I had got a divorce. The funeral bill would need to be paid, and as his widow I would need to pay it.

I didn't attend the funeral, but I did watch it on-line. I needed to make sure it was real and not just some other scam to gain control. I felt nothing except perhaps surprise as the priest said told the congregation what a great man he was, how his Christian faith shone through, and what a loss he would be to the community. If his photo hadn't been on the coffin, and his family hadn't been on the screen, I would have thought I had tuned into the wrong funeral.

It was only when he died, that I realised I had been living my life always looking over my shoulder, just in case.

Nobody understands what it is like to live through an abusive, coercive relation, unless they have lived through it themselves. People says things like 'why didn't she just leave him?' If only it was that easy. The isolation, and utter worthlessness you feel, overwhelms you, and you really can see no way out. When someone constantly beats you, or verbally insults you, into submission, you eventually begin to believe that you must deserve it.

In my years of abuse no-one ever spoke about such things, and I didn't even know that I could go to the Police to report it, or that there were refuges and organisations, that could help. Thankfully the world has changed, and gender-based violence is now a very real topic of conversation.

A driving license helped me begin the journey to freedom, and a tea bag saved my life. But what will save the lives of the millions of people living every day in fear, abuse and violence? Please, please, never judge anyone, because no matter how well you think you know someone, you never really know what goes on in their life, or behind their closed door.