

## It's all OVER . . .

Today a half dozen or so other domestic abuse survivors and I spent the better part of the afternoon waiting in a stuffy room down at the local county housing authority to get on the waiting list for section 8 housing. After the first 2 hours of squirming in our uncomfortable metal chairs & staring hesitantly at one another across the table, one of us finally broke the ice and we began chatting and sharing "war stories."

One lady began by saying that she had come to the shelter after her husband had put her in the hospital with contusions so bad that she couldn't open her eyes because of the swelling. "I told the doctor that I didn't want to call the police. I was afraid it would be worse when I got home. But he said that if I didn't call the police that DYFS would take my children away from me." The next spoke of being beaten with a folding chair until she passed out. Her son had tried to intervene and sustained injuries as well. "But I never called the police," she said, "When I came to, he cursed at me because I hadn't finished the laundry. It was back to life as usual. That was a few years ago. I only finally came to the shelter because my boys were starting to treat me just like their father. I didn't want them to grow up to be like him."

We all just sat, listened, and nodded as the familiarity of our experience sunk in. None of it was surprising or shocking to us. It was simply our reality.

Hearing of the various physical injuries and trips to the emergency room, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy.

"It was different for me," I slowly began, "My husband didn't really hit me too much. Sometimes I wished he would. I think I even told him a few times to just hit me and get it over with – that that would hurt less than what he was doing to me. Honestly, there was no NEED for him to hit me anyway – he just told me what to do and I did it." I explained that I had learned early on in our relationship that resisting him didn't do a bit of good anyhow. Over the years, he'd gained complete control over every part of me to the point where I no longer really had thoughts or feelings of my own. Eventually, I felt like a robot. I don't even know exactly how or when it happened -- it just did. He used food, sex, money, sleep, use of 'his' car, and sometimes even our children alternatively as either 'rewards' or 'punishment.' "I didn't have the same injuries that you had," I mumbled, "he didn't break my bones ... he broke my spirit."

For a minute or two, we were all silent. A few of the women that I hadn't even met before today day reached over and squeezed my hand, tears filling their eyes. Whispers of "Me too" and "Yo tambien" drifted through the stale, heavy air.

Somehow we drifted onto the uncomfortable topic of our mates' aberrant sexuality.

One woman began by nonchalantly mentioning one of the times her husband made her HELP him proposition some people on the internet. He'd told several complete strangers (both men & women) on an internet dating site the EXACT location (address, hotel room number, etc.) where they'd be staying on their upcoming vacation and asked for their assistance in 'surprising his wife with a unique sexual experience' (I can't bring myself to use the actual words). He had told them that "she may not be a willing participant, but we'll MAKE her willing. She's learned to pretty much do whatever I tell her to do." She commented on how proud her husband had been of the fact that he had broken her spirit, but that he said it wasn't as nearly as "fun" for him now that she "doesn't fight it anymore" so he was looking to "spice things up again."

Stifled giggles from the peanut gallery. "I think they ALL want a threesome, don't they?"

Our laughter caught in our throats, though, when she told of the terror of waiting throughout the whole vacation, never knowing when the knock on the motel door might come, signalling that her husband's "surprise" had arrived. She started to tell us about what had happened next, but broke down into silent tears and hid her face in her hands.

One of the other gals tried to comfort her & chimed in naively, in broken English, "But you have the PROOFS don't you, you have the way of showing what he spoke them on the internet. You could print it out, could you not? Surely the judge listens to this kind of proofs."

Speaking from personal experience, I just wanted to scream at her -- "It doesn't matter! It NEVER matters!"

Sure, she might have the printouts of his online messages somewhere, but even if she COULD remember where she put them, there's no way she can prove he wrote them.

"But don't you have the photographs of your hurtings by him? Or don't you have those of the medical records from your goings to the hospital?"

"I have a few pictures," she tried to explain through her tears, "but most of them are too personal and I'd be too embarrassed and ashamed to show them to anybody. And besides, in the eyes of the law, they're completely worthless because there's no way of proving the photographs are of me unless they show my face, a tattoo, or a birthmark or something like that. The legal advocate at the shelter said that EVEN IF the photos clearly show that it was me, there's no way of proving WHEN or HOW it happened or that he did it to me. He could claim that it was an accident, that I did it to myself, or that someone else had done it to me. The advocate said that in order for pictures to do any good, the incident would have to have been documented in some other way by somebody else. And supposedly EVEN IF I could prove that my husband had done it, that in order for him to be convicted, a lawyer would have to prove INTENT, which I guess is virtually impossible to do."

As I glanced around the table, I saw tears in almost everyone's eyes. We didn't bother trying to wipe them away -- more were likely to follow. The agony of not being taken seriously by the legal system is something that we are slowly learning to accept . . . but it still doesn't lessen the pain. The only way any of us have been able to get even a small amount of justice is if we have been "lucky" enough to have secondary corroboration from a police officer or a health professional either during or immediately following an 'incident' (because, incredibly, OUR WORDS MEAN NOTHING).

As we went around the table, we all agreed that we almost NEVER went to the doctor for treatment anyway -- unless we could explain our injury in some other way.

One lady had gone for treatment of a broken finger and told the doctor that she had "accidentally slammed it in the car door." How, pray tell, do you slam your OWN finger in a car door? Her doctor sent her for an X-ray, confirmed that it was broken, and never questioned her explanation.

Another told her doctor that she had a miscarriage because she accidentally fell down the stairs. "That was partly true," she said, "I just left out the part where my husband drug me by my hair and then PUSHED me down the stairs."

Yet another told her chiropractor she had dislocated her shoulder "moving furniture." She didn't bother to clarify that she had been hastily moving a dresser full of clothes in front of her bedroom door in a desperate attempt to keep her raging husband from storming in with a butcher knife to rape her.

Most of us agreed that our doctors usually didn't question us about our injuries unless our faces were involved. And even then, it seems that there's a prevailing acceptance of some sort of "Don't ask, Don't tell" policy. And as to the sexual abuse and associated injuries, we admitted that we were too ashamed to even acknowledge them to ourselves much less seek medical attention for them. It was easier to sit in a bathtub of ice-cold water and wait for the pain to lessen, the swelling to go down, or the bleeding to stop than to be poked, prodded, and examined intimately by a health professional. It was our own private pain . . . . and most of us preferred to keep it that way.

We laughed as we compared the efficacy of some of our 'home remedies' . . . Which is better for a bruised & battered perineum -- a bag of frozen vegetables or a topical analgesic? A tampon works alright for anal tears & associated bleeding . . . "But only the slim ones, and only if you absolutely can't stop the bleeding any other way. 'Cause it hurts like hell to yank the damn thing out again."

"An ice pack is too cold, but if you wrap it in a pillowcase it's not too bad."

"That's a good idea -- I never thought to try that."

"Whatever you do, DON'T spray Bactine on it!"

We all chuckled knowingly. You would have thought we were a bunch of "normal" suburban housewives exchanging cookie recipes. The simple fact was that we all knew the desperation of trying to deal with our injuries & deaden the pain with whatever we happened to have had around the house. And we were all equally aware of the shame that had kept us from ever seeking medical attention.

Besides, what would we have told a doctor anyway? My husband rapes me? That seemed like an impossible statement. We didn't know WHAT to call it. Rape is something that happens in a dark alley, isn't it? Certainly not in your own home, with your children playing in the next room or sleeping down the hall.

In my case, my conservative religious upbringing had led me to believe that my body was not my own -- that it "belonged" to my husband. And whatever he chose to do to it or with it was completely up to him. I was to "submit &

obey," regardless of how, where, or when. I was not alone in this crippling belief. "I didn't know that I had a right to ever refuse anything he asked me to do," one woman agreed, "and if I resisted, he just accused me of sleeping with someone else or said he'd get it somewhere else."

We all nodded. We all knew. We all understood. "We were just pieces of meat to them, nothing more," was the general consensus. "Free whores." More shy giggles. "He even told me I was WORSE than a whore because they know their place and don't complain," one woman offered.

We had all been there, heard that.

"I told him if that was the case to go find himself one and leave me alone!"

More nods & nervous smiles. At some point, we had all wished they would find someone else (and many of us still do). We agreed that they would almost certainly do the same things to their new partner that they had done to us -- and that then MAYBE someone would believe us and understand what we had gone through...

As we went around the table, the 7 or 8 of us sitting there sharing our experiences, I realized that we were/are ALL, to some degree or another, at the mercy of an uninformed/misinformed society & justice system that just DON'T GET IT! There's more to abuse than broken bones and bruises . . . and there are some injuries that a woman will NEVER disclose if she can avoid it.

What breaks my heart is that virtually ALL of us could relate to one another's experiences -- and I know there are countless THOUSANDS of women out there who are still suffering. Alone. Many of them, like us, wondering if what they are experiencing is "normal."

We all tried to laugh about it, and several of us said things like: "I thought that happened to everybody. I didn't know any different. I couldn't understand why other couples seemed so happy. I thought maybe I was supposed to enjoy it -- he said other women like it like that."

You can't imagine how confusing it is to be told that something that is agonizing painful is supposed to be enjoyable. You have no idea how impossible it is to stifle a scream, swallow your own vomit, and pretend to orgasm.

Almost as randomly as that part of the conversation had begun, it ended. We were all suddenly and painfully aware that what we were talking about was socially "taboo" to discuss. The reality is, though, that rape was an almost daily CERTAINTY for many of us. There was something cathartic about realizing that we weren't alone. Something that no 'professional' could possibly have done in such a short time had been accomplished. In just a half an hour or so, a group of women felt a little less alone . . . a little less confused . . . a little less broken . . .

And just like that, we moved on to other things . . .

What is on every mother's mind most of the time? Not surprisingly, the biggest concern for all of us is our children. We cannot understand how on earth Child Protective Services can say that our husbands are dangerous to US, that it's not safe or healthy for our children to LIVE with these men, and that we will be at risk of LOSING CUSTODY OF OUR CHILDREN if we ever go back to them -- but then judges can look the other way and say, "but they're HIS children, and he has a RIGHT to see them. You cannot keep them from him. I see no reason why he can't have visitation. After all, he's never seriously hurt his children physically."

Even in the cases where there had been DOCUMENTED instances of their father nearly KILLING their mother, in EACH AND EVERY CASE, he had been awarded visitation -- and in many cases (eventually) *UNSUPERVISED*!

### ***SOMEBODY TELL ME HOW THIS IS POSSIBLE!***

And when we try to protect our children by attempting to distance them from a potentially dangerous situation, the court views our attitude as "uncooperative" and accuses us of "parental alienation."

*WHAT MOTHER WOULDN'T BE UNCOOPERATIVE IF SOMEBODY TRIED TO FORCE HER TO SEND HER PRECIOUS CHILDREN INTO A POTENTIALLY ABUSIVE SITUATION?*

*WHAT MOTHER WOULDN'T WANT TO ALIENATE HER CHILDREN FROM A FATHER WHO HAS, OVER AND OVER AGAIN, PROVEN HIMSELF TO BE MENTALLY UNSTABLE, MANIPULATIVE, ABUSIVE, AND PREDATORY?*

The "funny" thing is, we lamented, that through all of this we're not supposed to "let it get to us." We're supposed to remain calm, cool, and collected. We're not supposed to suffer from any anxiety or emotional upheaval. Heaven forbid we get discouraged or frustrated.

It's *NO WONDER* so many women go back to their abusers -- THE TREATMENT WE GET FROM THE LEGAL SYSTEM AND SOCIETY AT LARGE IS ALMOST AS BAD AS THE TRAUMA WE ENDURED IN OUR ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS!

To constantly have your credibility assaulted, your sanity questioned, your motives examined, your parenting skills assessed, your finances gone over with a fine-toothed comb, your family distanced, your friends isolated (if you're lucky enough to still have any), your character assassinated, your self-sufficiency hindered, your morale decimated, your dignity ignored, your privacy invaded, your hopes dashed, your emotions ridiculed, your terror misunderstood, your pain minimized . . . all of this and more leads many women like us to feel like our lives are OVER!

For most of us, it's just exactly that . . . OVER . . .

- Our needs are OVERlooked
- Our schedules are OVERcrowded
- Our bodies are OVERworked
- Our spirits are OVERwhelmed
- Our minds are OVERloaded
- Our children are OVERactive
- Our bills are OVERabundant
- Our situations are OVERanalyzed
- Our decisions are OVERruled
- Our budgets are OVERextended
- Our priorities are OVERlapping
- Our children are OVERcompensating
- Our partners are OVERacting (*They know how to put on the charm when they need to.*)
- Our legal system is often OVERawed by our husbands' performances (*He seems like such a "nice guy."*)
- Our supposed "rights" are often OVERemphasized (*in theory, but not in practice*), and, in many instances,
- Our service organizations are OVERloaded

*OVERALL*, once we finally manage to leave the men who have hurt us so deeply and thoroughly, in many ways our lives are essentially OVER . . .

But then again . . . there's another way of looking at things. While it is true that in some respects our lives may *SEEM* to be over:

- Our helplessness has been largely OVERgeneralized
- Our newfound strength is OVERflowing
- Our situation's prevalence is too OVERwhelming to be ignored much longer
- Our voices are finally being OVERheard
- Our justice is long OVERdue, and, most importantly,
- **Our challenges are OVERcomable!**

I would like to point out that the statements I've made about the legal system and society in general being largely unsympathetic toward victims of domestic violence and marital rape are not representative of my feelings toward every person or agency. I have encountered many caring & dedicated people who are not only aware of the problems that survivors face, but are also personally involved in finding solutions. To those amazing individuals (both professionals and volunteers) who have given freely of their time, expertise, friendship, and financial resources to help us HELP OURSELVES build a new life:

You have my undying gratitude! Countless women and children owe their very LIVES to your tireless efforts. You heard our cries for help, and YOU are providing us with real solutions to the real problems that we face. Without you, my children & I wouldn't be where we are now -- in a safe place with hope for a better future. You ARE making a difference!

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