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Finally Freed from Endless Fears

Last year my ex-husband died and I breathed a sigh of relief. I hadn't seen him in more than 30 years, yet what he was and what happened to me while we were together were still alive in my mind.

Only by his death could I finally be freed from my endless fears.

Recently, I addressed a group of hard-working philanthropic women whose goal, to support a shelter for abused women and children, is not only noble, but necessary. Just talking about my experiences as an abused wife brought back memories I thought I'd forgotten. But can we ever really forget the pain we experience when someone we believe we love responds with brute force and hateful words?

We live in a transient country where many of our neighbors are strangers and our relatives are scattered to the winds. When times are tough, as they most definitely are when you're being beaten up by your spouse, you can call the police but they won't put you and your children up for a few days. That's what the shelter does for such unfortunate women.

Guilt, embarrassment and fear – in that order – keep the abuser safe from authorities and relatives. Neighbors and friends rarely know what goes on in someone else's house. Telling neighbors and friends about your predicament is usually counterproductive. Even those who profess to be close to you are hard-pressed to remain close once the dirty little secret is disclosed.

A fantasy most abused women have in common is that their mates will die in an accident. It would be an easy solution to a terrible problem, but I wouldn't count on it happening any time soon.

“What has she done to make that man beat her?” This is the first question that comes into the minds of those to whom you confide your situation. This happens because most men don't hit in public so no one can bear witness.

My ex-husband always treated me as a beloved wife in public. He would praise me and glow when he talked about me to others. What a shock they would have gotten if they could have been flies on the inside walls of my home. Drunk or sober made little difference when my ex was feeling like smashing me. There didn't have to be a reason for his actions. I finally realized there was no rational reason for his behavior, there were only empty excuses.

Abusive mates want to control you absolutely. My moment of truth finally came after years of increasing terror when my ex demanded that I choose between his company and that of my best friend. It took all my courage, but I stood up to him. Had I chosen him, he would have been able to isolate me even more than he already had.

My story is old-hat. Men are still beating up on women they profess to love. Just look in your local newspaper. The fact that we rarely see women of means in these columns doesn't mean that it's not happening to them. Abuse crosses all lines – economic, social and racial.

Women have the power to teach their sons to be good, kind men without losing their macho manhood. Hitting a woman is a power game. The insecure man wants to control his environment by manipulating his spouse. Abuse grows in time; it never disappears once its ugly head appears. Staying in an abusive relationship takes all the stamina you have to keep yourself from falling apart.

The shelter offers women temporary support to hide and recuperate. Education and financial independence are a woman's best ammunition to protect herself from an abusive husband because she can walk away and make a new and better life.

I know, because I did just that.

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