An illustration of a woman with curly hair, wearing a patterned top and black pants, standing with her back to the viewer and her arms raised in a gesture of triumph or freedom. She is in a residential neighborhood with various houses, trees, and a utility pole. The scene is rendered in a muted green color palette. A large orange circle in the upper right corner contains the title text.

HOME FREE

Women's journeys to safety from domestic violence
Real stories written from conversations with Moya Sayer-Jones
Drawn by Alex Mankiewicz



Women's
journeys to
safety from
domestic
violence

Real stories written from conversations with Moya Sayer-Jones

Drawn by Alex Mankiewicz



Liz Reedy... where this book started

HOME FREE: WOMEN'S JOURNEYS TO SAFETY FROM DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Real stories written from conversations with Moya Sayer-Jones

First published in Australia in 2017 by
Bonnie Support Services Ltd.
P.O. Box 57 Canley Heights NSW 2166
www.bonnie.org.au

Copyright: Bonnie Support Services Ltd. 2017

ISBN 978-0-646-97935-9

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher in writing.

Content, design and production: Only Human Communication

Written from conversations with Moya Sayer-Jones

Illustrations: Alex Mankiewicz

Printed in Australia.

The creators of *Home Free* would like to acknowledge the first people, and their descendants, of the land upon which this book was made – the Aboriginal people of Australia.



A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

Contents



7
FOREWORD
Tracy Phillips



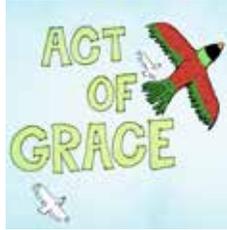
8
FOREWORD
Jane Caro



9
WRITER'S NOTE
Moya Sayer-Jones



10
DEENA'S STORY
Be Loved



16
VIOLET'S STORY
Act of Grace



34
KELLI'S STORY
Soul Woman



42
NINA'S STORY
The Tables Turned



46
MIMI'S STORY
Cat in a Box



50
CAROLYN'S STORY
A Life of My Own



56
HETTY'S STORY
The Road Ahead



78
Acknowledgements



80
Help Pages

“It takes courage
to seek help,
move away from
the familiar and
trust strangers
with your story,
your fears and
your hopes for
the future.”

FOREWORD

Tracy Phillips



Here at Bonnie's we hear stories every day but the thing that never ceases to amaze us is what these stories tell us about women's resilience, and their ability to dig deep and move on.

Stories play a huge role in the work we do. We listen to stories, we tell them and we constantly see their transformative power in supporting change. When women come together in our groups, their stories resonate across age, culture and circumstances. They'll talk about the turning points: the moment they knew enough was enough, the people they found to help, the strangers who made a difference. Or the first time they turned the key on the door of their own safe home.

Each woman's experience is uniquely her own and so to share it, particularly for the benefit of others, is a huge act of generosity.

Many readers will see themselves (or women they know) in this collection: they'll recognise the violence but they will also see new possibilities. It's our hope that this book will spark both recognition and action towards stronger, violence-free lives.

Bonnie's is the second women's refuge ever established in Australia. We were founded way back in 1974. But every new story we hear helps us understand

and do more. And do it louder. This transmission of feeling, power and knowledge is what makes this storybook so important. We are definitely all getting stronger!

Thanks to all the partners who saw the importance of giving to the project and recognised the valuable contribution that it can make. Thanks to – NSW Health Education Centre Against Violence (ECAV), Parramatta City Council, Uniting Newpin, Sydney Community Foundation, Western Sydney Community Forum (WSCF), Bonnie Support Services Ltd., and Western Sydney University.

The idea for the book was conceived by Liz Reedy and the partnership with Moya Sayer-Jones, from Only Human Communication, made it happen. It wouldn't be such a rich and valuable book without these two women.

We have all gained from it.

Bonnie's is honoured and privileged to be the custodian of these stories that the women have so generously shared.

Tracy Phillips
Executive Officer
Bonnie Support Services

FOREWORD

Jane Caro



The quiet courage and generosity of spirit of women never ceases to amaze me. Particularly that of the women who have survived brutality. Perhaps it is because the stubborn inequality which still affects the lives of so many women and girls does give at least one gift – the ability to show compassion and empathy.

These stories-of-strength from the women who share their journeys in this collection are remarkable enough for the difficulties and horrendous experiences these women have overcome. But, even more astonishing, is the resilience that characterises the way these women view their past. They do not let their past define them. They are moving on with their lives, and staying focused on their future. And their children's future. All I can do in response is salute them.

Jane Caro
Ambassador to Bonnie Support Services

WRITER'S NOTE

Moya Sayer-Jones



When Liz Reedy first suggested this book, I immediately put up my hand to join the party. I didn't quite know how she was going to make it happen but I knew from her passion for the project, that it would indeed come about. Within a few months, many other women and organisations were captured by Liz and the need for this book. The funds were cobbled together, the expertise flowed and before I knew it, we were on our way.

How did it happen so quickly? I suspect a positive conversation around women and their safety was so needed, and so wanted, that nothing would get in the way.

These stories are written from transcripts of conversations with seven remarkable women – they are told in the storytellers' own words. We sat in lounge rooms, on verandas and at kitchen tables. We talked over sandwiches and cups of tea and Tim Tams and yes, over tears and laughter, too. In positive storywork like this, it's always great to watch a storyteller stumble on a new memory or insight and be amazed again by their own journey – and themselves.

In this book, we wanted to show that there's no 'one type' of woman who might need to find safety. These stories show the rich, the poor, the young and

not-so-young, the English speakers, migrants, Aboriginal women, city dwellers, and regional women.

These are frank, feisty, and often, very raw accounts, and the insights are invaluable. They show how the women came to understand their situations and what it took to find safety: including the people and services that made all the difference.

A chance lunch with the talented artist, Alex Mankiewicz, was the start of a great collaboration that resulted in the drawn stories you see here. We wanted to reach as many women as we could and we especially wanted to attract younger women readers. In researching this book, we'd heard over and over again – 'If only I'd been able to read the signs sooner' or 'If only I'd known more before I got pregnant'.

We hope this combination of drawn and text stories in *Home Free* will keep you reading and inspire you to share this book with others.

Moya Sayer-Jones
Only Human Communication



DEENA'S STORY

Be loved

Saying goodbye is a good thing. You've got to keep your head up and keep moving. When your spirit's being knocked around and you're living a life of emptiness, that's not a life.

I first ran away from home when I was 16. I was a lone wolf, out to discover the world. I hitchhiked down to Sydney and got straight into a relationship with a man ten years older than me.

I walked into this wild pub called the Empress Hotel and there he was. He just seen me coming. Within a month, I had been assaulted by him twice. Stitches in the lip: Saint Vincent's Hospital. He knocks me down but I get up and I just keep moving.

The Aboriginal Medical Service paid my plane fare home to Brissy. I get off the plane and my parents are there. My dad's crying. Three months out of home and there I was, back with a busted mouth. How could it have been any other way?

Mum and Dad were deadset crazy. Dad was a habitual criminal, so he was in and out of jail.

There was nothing that I didn't hear as a child. I knew about Mum's affairs, I knew how it felt when she got rejected by a man, I knew how it felt when Dad was the worst bastard on the earth. I had to ring the police on him more than once but I was always spoon-fed, 'Dad loves ya'. That was one thing every one of us agreed. Through rain and storm, Dad loved me. How he loved me is another thing.

I remember one time, I complained about a cousin's boyfriend who was talking nasty to me. We're sitting in the car; me and my sisters are all in the back, my mother and father in the front with a kid in the middle. My father calls this guy to come over and then pulls his head through the window and just hammers him over and over, till he falls back onto the road. 'If you ever say anything to my daughter again, I'll kill ya'.

This is the family that I cried for in the orphanages. These are the people I longed to be around as a child.

My sisters and I were in and out of the Homes from when I was four years old. I remember Mum signing us over, and one time my nan and pop sitting out the front of Nudgee orphanage, refusing to leave until we were handed over. Before long we were dumped on someone else.

We didn't know otherwise. We didn't know what another sort of love looked like. I remember one Christmas, four of us families had been camping at Redland Bay with my grandparents. Our parents pissed off so we were sent back to an aunty and uncle. I can remember they had these really beautiful, shiny, polished floors, and this fantastic tangerine lounge; real early 70s. My aunt was beautiful and shiny too, with red lips. I'm just sitting there, staring at the table, and my uncle goes, 'Come here, Mary', and pulls her onto his lap, gives her a cuddle and a kiss, and they look at me and giggle. And I just thought, 'Yes, *that* is love'. But that aunt committed suicide so God knows, maybe it wasn't.

In my nine years of schooling I went to around 12 different schools and left the day I turned 15. No hanging around – went to work in the pineapple cannery. By then I couldn't wait to get away from Mum and Dad. It was either live there and protect the other kids from their violent, abusive, drunken life, or get up and go. What could be any worse outside for me? That's why I ended up with that bloke in Sydney. That's why I got that busted mouth.

I hung around for a few months back in Brissy after that, licking my wounds. Then I headed up north and ended up in Townsville. I stayed with my friend's cousin and his partner, and they were so nice. But he was violent to her. It was all part and parcel of the houses that I went to. I really assumed that's how people lived. When I met my son's father all the signs were there but I wasn't seeing them.

There used to be a disco up on the hill in Townsville back in the 70s and all the blackfellas would go there. I was 17 by that time. This guy come over and asked me for a dance: this big, strong, beautiful, black chocolate Torres Strait Islander man. And I thought he was hot.

I didn't worry too much about the blood on his shirt (he'd just bashed someone outside). In the short time we were together, I was severely assaulted four times and within 11 months of meeting him, I had my son. One time, he broke the top of my mouth, all the roots of my teeth and fractured my cheekbone. I can still see me looking at myself in the mirror and thinking, 'Why would someone do this to me?'.

My younger sister came up on the bus from Brissy to get me. Her and I walked the seven kilometres into Townsville with the baby. I went to the police station and they put me in a little safe house. I remember sharing a bottom bunk with my little boy, and it rained and rained.

Four months later I was back in Sydney, staying with some friends of my sister in Enmore. I was still having scary dreams about my ex – sleeping all day and putting my boy in front of the TV. I would have been there just two weeks and in walks the person I would marry: the mistake of my lifetime. It was the week before I turned 19. We had our first child a year later and were married after that.

My sister-in-law said, 'Deena, you can't just keep having children, you have to get married'. So she organised this big wedding for us in 1983. I had a lovely dress that I bought at Parramatta at the bridal shop. She bought me my engagement ring and ensured that we went and put a lay-by on wedding rings. It was beautiful. I remember thinking, 'This is it, I'm married. I'm happy, everything's perfect'. I look back now and think, 'Fuck, I was delusional'. I thought a husband would be someone

We knew the backgrounds we'd come from and we agreed on lots of stuff ... But early on, even before we were married, I could see the cracks.

who was kind and beautiful and gentle to you. What I'd found was probably the most dysfunctional fucking male in the world.

The thing was, I thought we had something in common. He'd had an abusive childhood; I'd had an abusive childhood. I'd experienced orphanages; he was in Boys Town. We knew the backgrounds we'd come from and we agreed on lots of stuff – not having parties at our house, not drinking in front of our children. But early on, even before we were married, I could see the cracks.

There'd been one big incident where he punched me and I think, that night, he made a decision not to do it again. He'd seen enough of that, growing up. He wanted to hurt me, sure, but he didn't want to be the type of person who's going to bash me to do it. Talk in the most degrading way, yes; intimidate me as a drunk, yes; steal from me, yes. Every single thing that could be done to a woman in a relationship, I experienced it with him.

It was living in Sydney I loved. Sydney was big. It was beautiful. It was somewhere I thought you could be whatever you wanted to be. By 1987, I started finding me.

We were living on Eveleigh St in Redfern. My oldest two were at school and the two little ones going to a preschool directly opposite our house. The preschool was offering these adult education courses, so I just start doing them. I'm there with this amazing group of Aboriginal women. I loved it.

My two younger sisters are also living with me by then: they're 15 and 16, and one day, the mum of my sister's school-friend drops in and she goes, 'Deena, would you like a job?'. It was a traineeship with an organisation that provided housing for women sexual assault survivors. I jumped in. A few years later, when I was breastfeeding my sixth child, I co-founded an Aboriginal women's drop-in centre. By then I'd taken on the role of providing for the family, keeping a roof over our heads.

Barry didn't work. He was like a demon in my house: an intimidating drunk – the type of person to smash a vase next to you but never quite hit you. And intimidation like that wasn't big on the radar of what abuse was, then. He would go AWOL for three, four nights and I wouldn't even know if he was dead or alive. Or he'd say, 'I'm going up to Queensland, my grandmother's been really sick', and he'd just go up and have affairs. Then he'd turn back up.

It was me holding things together, working full-time, getting the kids up and into the world. And it continued like that for 18 years – sitting in misery, with my self-esteem on the ground. No matter what I did or said, or how I behaved, I wasn't good enough. You know why I stayed in that marriage so long? It's called optimism, hope and faith. And I am, to this day, the most optimistic woman.

All the support I had came from the women in my life: some wonderful older Aboriginal women who taught me a lot about being a good mother to my children; the women I worked and learnt with; a fantastic sister-in-law and an aunty-in-law who were so loving and caring and made up for his shortcomings.

Then there was my sister – she was really the one who half-reared my children with me. She'd come pick them up when I was feeling down in the dumps; she'd take them to the zoo and had all the books in the house for them. She was really consistent and a beautiful loving aunty to my children. She was the one who said, 'Wake up to yourself, Deena. Can't you see it, you're a mat!'

What took me so fucking long to get out of there? I always knew he was a piece of shit, but I just didn't know how to act on it. Sometimes when your self-esteem's low, you think you're the piece of shit next to him. I almost had myself convinced that we were the same type of people, but we're not.

When she was 16, my daughter fell pregnant and that broke my heart. She was this beautiful dancer – she'd already danced at the Opera House. I wanted her to continue, but she was going to have the baby whether I supported her or not. Barry was in and out of living at the house at that time and he goes, 'Send her off to your mother'. I couldn't believe, considering the histories of both our families, that

What took me so fucking long to get out of there? I always knew he was a piece of shit, but I just didn't know how to act on it. Sometimes when your self-esteem's low, you think you're the piece of shit next to him. I almost had myself convinced that we were the same type of people, but we're not.

he would say that. 'My daughter's not going nowhere', I told him. 'You fuck off'. That was a turning point.

And then, the day came when my granddaughter was born. I was on Cloud Nine. Barry came up to the hospital with our nephew and I invited them to come and have something to eat. I remember we went up to Newtown, to a Vietnamese restaurant. It was a celebration dinner for my first grandchild. I was just sitting down and he says to my nephew: 'Get what you want, she can fucking pay for it'. And I looked at him and I thought, 'I can't stand this person'. I wanted him out.

Pretty soon after that I made friends with someone else, and I let him live with me briefly. He was quite a large man and that kept Barry away. That relationship lasted about a year. He was my buffer against Barry coming back into my life. But in the end, this new man and I had a blowout and I told him to go.

Of course this was gold for Barry – he thought it was his way back in. One day he came round while I was out, and I walk in and he's sitting there and he says, 'I've cleaned up for ya and I did this for ya and I did that...'. When I asked him what he wanted, he said he wanted to talk about us. I said, 'There's nothing to talk about for us', and I told him to go.

To this day, I don't know why I'd been so afraid to do it before. I've always had this strong belief that things will work out, but this life with Barry was not going to work out. It was totally dysfunctional. I kept having to say that to myself to get the guts to end the marriage once and for all – to just say 'no'.



My mum and dad couldn't say 'no' to each other. They could never end an ugly thing, but you know, saying goodbye is a good thing. You've got to keep your head up and keep moving. When your spirit's being knocked around and you're living a life of emptiness, that's not a life. No one has to walk around on tippy toes for a man because that makes him feel good.

But I cried many a night – lay in bed with my two grown daughters and cried. I didn't want him back but I thought I did. I was frightened. This whole new beginning was opening up and I didn't know where I was going.

I knew there were things I was good at, like helping a sister out, and I could be kind to someone.

I knew I was very good at loving my children, that's another thing that helped me. And I knew that I was now on a pathway and that I couldn't turn back.

That's when I realised I'd moved on. I actually had jumped the broom, the bridge, the fence. I was out of that paddock and I've had no regrets ever since. My life has opened up in more ways than you could possibly believe. I've been places and met people that I would only have dreamed of.

There's nothing to be saved from the past. It's all done and dusted.

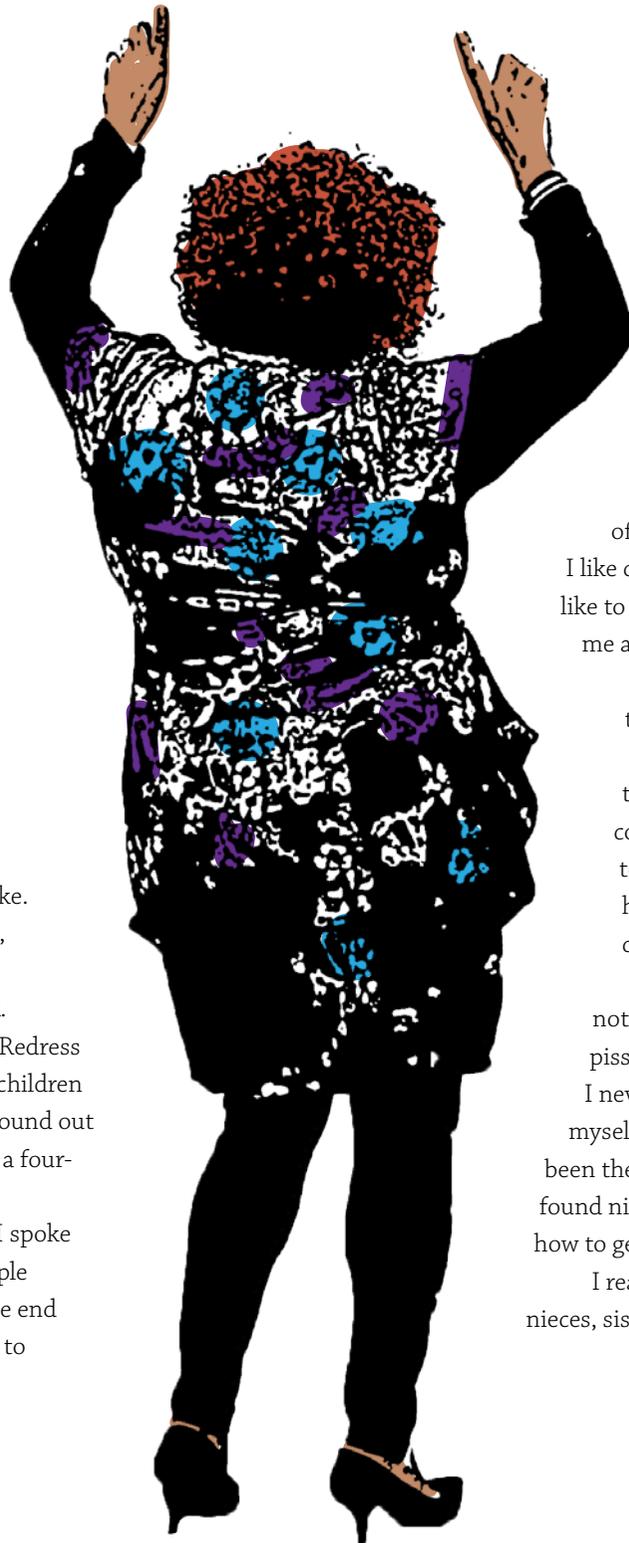
My solace at that time was music. After seven years at the Aboriginal Women's Centre, I stopped working and went off and did a performing arts course. I found singing so fulfilling and so healing. It was all about finding my voice and being able to sing all kinds of songs, whether they are songs of sorrow or happy songs.

The graduation performance was a huge event. I looked over at my daughters while I was singing and they were crying. That's when I realised I'd moved on. I actually had jumped the broom, the bridge, the fence. I was out of that paddock and I've had no regrets ever since. My life has opened up in more ways than you could possibly believe. I've been places and met people that I would only have dreamed of.

I've been half a dozen times to New York City, and presented at the UN twice. I've been to South-East Asia. I've flown around the backstreets of Bali on a little motorbike. I wanted to go to Jamaica all my life, so I went. There I was, up Bob Marley's mountain, having a crazy affair with a beautiful Jamaican man. I'm actually a woman of the world.

In 2007, the Queensland government established its Redress Scheme. They had investigated all these orphanages where children had been abused. I'd been in three of the worst ones and I found out the government had kept every detail of my life since I was a four-year-old child.

I was working at Redfern Legal Centre at the time so I spoke to the CEO and organised a meeting. Thirty Aboriginal people turned up who'd been in the Queensland orphanages. In the end we got our files back. Mine was a bloody thick one. I gave it to



Dad, well threw it at him actually, and later I destroyed it. I didn't want it in my life anymore.

The great thing was that the minute I started saying, 'No, that's not what I want', I had to start thinking about what it was I did want. I had to go and look for that, and what do you know?

It was there all the time. I just didn't know how to access it.

Kindness is what I want in my life. I love it when people are kind in how they talk and how they think about other people. I love people who have a bit of hope. I like being loved, and I like to give love, of course. I like companionship – someone who likes to cook for me, and I like to cook for them occasionally; someone who's going to drive me around, because I can't drive.

I've learned how to be kind to myself, too; like my trip to Vanuatu, for example.

I'd come to a stage in my life when I'd heard more than I needed to hear about child sexual assault in our community. One day, when another colleague rang and told me about a family experiencing it, I said, 'No, I can't hear this anymore'. I just fell on the desk and cried and cried for every single child.

Before, I wouldn't have known how to escape. I would not have said, 'Deena, you can take your annual holiday and piss off to a little island for a week or two'. But now I did. I never thought I could have that much courage but I took myself off to Vanuatu and I stepped onto that island as if I'd been there all my life. I went swimming; I walked on the beach; found nice island food; got my hair braided. These days, know how to get up!

I reared my kids up in a five-bedroom house full of nephews, nieces, sisters, grandchildren, foster children. I went from sleeping

with my sisters to sleeping with men to sleeping with my children, to sleeping with my grandchildren, even. Now, here in this little one-room apartment, it's the first time I've lived by myself in my whole life.

And I live quiet and safe. You know what safety is to me? It's every day going home to a place where you can sit down and you're not going to have to jump up. It's not laying there at night waiting for a drunk to come through the door.

If the abuse happens a couple of times a week or a couple of times a year, it's still getting done. That's not good. They don't do it at the pub, they don't do it when they walk past the big security guard; they don't even do it in the cab. They wait until they're in that house, standing in your living room or up in your bed, throwing things around.

Over the years, I've dropped off family members because of their violent talk and threats. When my mum or dad came to my house, I had a standard of how they had to talk and how they had to treat my family. They couldn't bring their old, ugly ways here because I refused to tolerate it. I would say, "This is my house, you have to go". I didn't want that in my life but I had to be strong to walk away from my family.

I'm a different grandparent than what my darling grandparents were – they were just run into the ground with kids. They had to be the bloody main carers of us because my parents never thought twice about it.

I'm never going to be that. No one else is worthy of rearing them kids up other than their parents. Not as long as they've got a breath in them, and they're walking around and healthy. They can do it for their kids. And my kids think like that, too, so to me, that's success.

My youngest son Josh says to me, 'Dad had it pretty bad', and I say, 'Josh, we both had the same sort of life. But we had a choice on where we were going with the next part of our lives.' We sure made different choices.

I love my children. I love my grandchildren – all 24 of them. And now I am in a nice space, because I have a real say in how I'm going to be. I'm not obligated to anyone.

My youngest son Josh says to me, 'Dad had it pretty bad', and I say, 'Josh, we both had the same sort of life. But we had a choice on where we were going with the next part of our lives'. We sure made different choices. §



VIOLET'S STORY

ACT
OF
GRACE



Growing up, I never actually imagined a situation like this.
I just expected I'd have a bright future.
Our family always hoped for the best.



We were naïve...



This is me and my beautiful family in Fiji.

I'm the little one in the pink flowery dress.

We were close. My life was sheltered and safe. Modern and traditional.



I felt very loved. It was a quiet, respectful house.



Mum was a maid and Dad was a postman: just an average family.



We didn't have much money, but my family valued education a lot: luckily I was the smart kid at school.



I studied hard and did my chores. It was always important to me to do things the right way.



When I graduated from high school, I felt freedom like I'm a bird!



The next four years were my glorious years: I worked in an office and then studied at night for more qualifications.

Good wages, independence and lots of friends.

My boss encouraged me, too:

That all changed when my sister heard of a family in Australia with a son who was ready to marry.



Settle down? I still had so many dreams!

The family flew in to meet us.

They seemed nice enough and were very persuasive.

I spoke up for myself. I wanted to be open and frank about the life I wanted.



While our parents chatted, we had a short time to get to know each other.

What should I do? My parents were getting older.

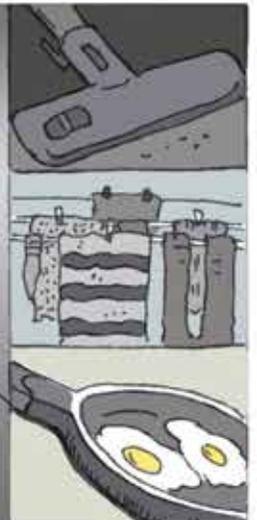


Looking back, there were early signs but I didn't want to see them...

Instead, as always, I looked at the positive - he was loved by his parents and they were a prosperous family. I would study, have a better career, and my parents wouldn't worry. So I said goodbye.



I was very happy.



Who wouldn't be excited? A new country and a new marriage. I was ready for this new beginning.

But it didn't go as I thought. We lived with his parents in a big house - five bedrooms and everything. I had to adjust to being a daughter-in-law and a wife. His mother was powerful.

She worked nights and my father-in-law worked long hours as a plumber. Money was the most important thing.

Every day, the house was empty.

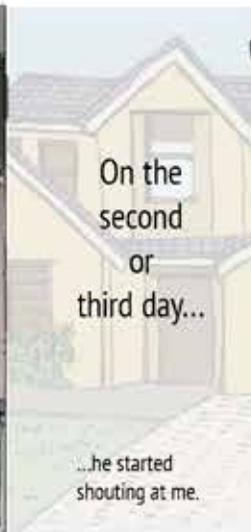
Basically my job was to cook and clean and do the washing...



Eggs not too fried - how you like it, right?

Stop hassling him, girl!

Mmph.



On the second or third day...

...he started shouting at me.



Where did you put them?

Put what?



MY SOCKS!

Why is he doing this?



No one had ever spoken to me in that way.

But I didn't shout back. It would be a long time before I could shout back.

I wanted to make my husband happy and support him. I thought he'd do the same for me.



They were not the family I thought they were. There was fighting every day in that house.



He was like his mother's daughter. I was like my mother's son.



I got a job working in a factory. On my feet. It was hard, hard work and low pay. All my late nights studying and here I am packing boxes?



It was very draining inside. I wanted to scream.



When I got home, the work was not over.

I needed to keep working but get off my feet.

A friend of the family mentioned an opening at her workplace. It was a security company.



After the second interview, I saw life might get better. I was so happy.



I suddenly saw what life was going to be like if I wasn't an Australian citizen. Suddenly it all came crashing down. I felt trapped, caged.



I waited for the baby to come.

His mother turned her back on him after a very big fight.

We were kicked out.



For months we moved from place to place, living out of bags.

He created trouble with his jealousy and rages. He drove people away.

In the winter, we finally found a place of our own. I was going insane, so was really relieved to have my own space. It was very poor like us...



Because of my visa, any government support cheques went to him.

We were a long way from anything.

It was hard with the baby and no washing machine or tub, just the shower to scrub the clothes in.

His rages got worse.



The only thing I could do was close down. Not speak to anyone. Not go anywhere without him.

My relatives in Australia knew how nasty he could be. But they had troubles of their own.

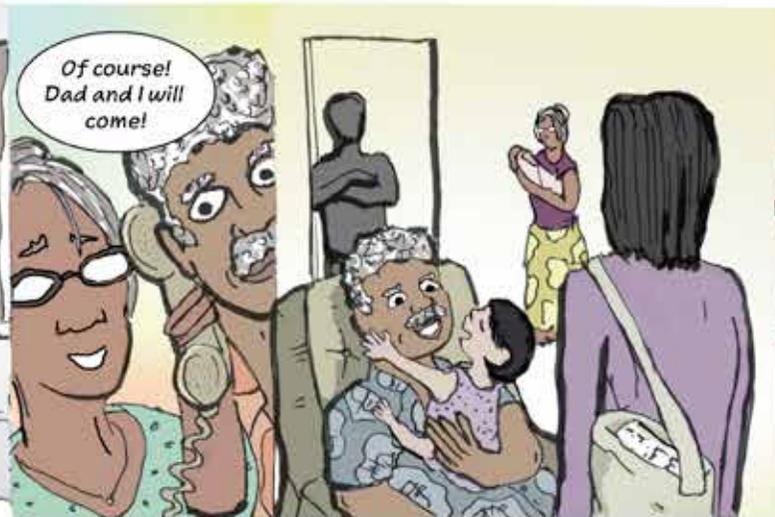
No money. No friends. No job. No country. The only thing I had, was him...



I could feel myself disappearing.



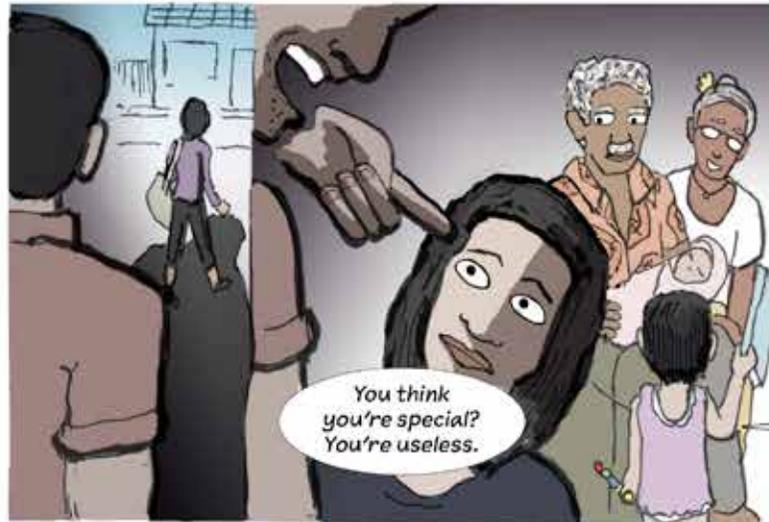
But with the new baby, there was hope.



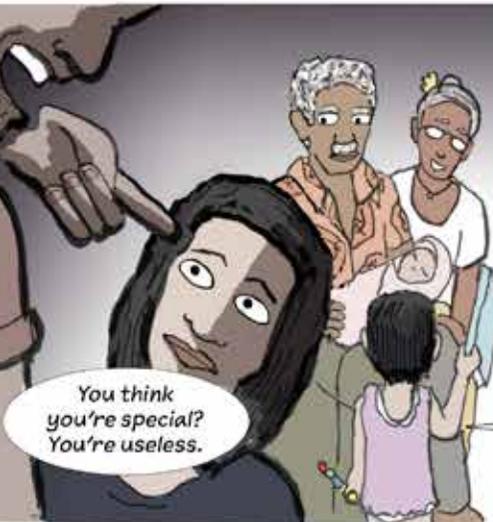
I got my old job back, and felt more positive about our future together. I would give it my all. That's how I was raised.



Maybe I'd get my life back.



But every step I took forward, he saw as a step away from him.



Mum and Dad saw so much. I was ashamed.



My parents were very gentle people. They couldn't understand him.

I told you I don't like this!



I couldn't protect them. And they were helpless to protect me.



Now that my husband wasn't working, I was paying all the bills.



They refused to go. I felt guilty but relieved - I needed them to stay.



He'd taken control of me. I don't know how it happened.



Now I was just walking in his shoes.



Then the trouble at my work started.



I was always scared. I never knew when he'd turn up.



His jealousy went out of control.



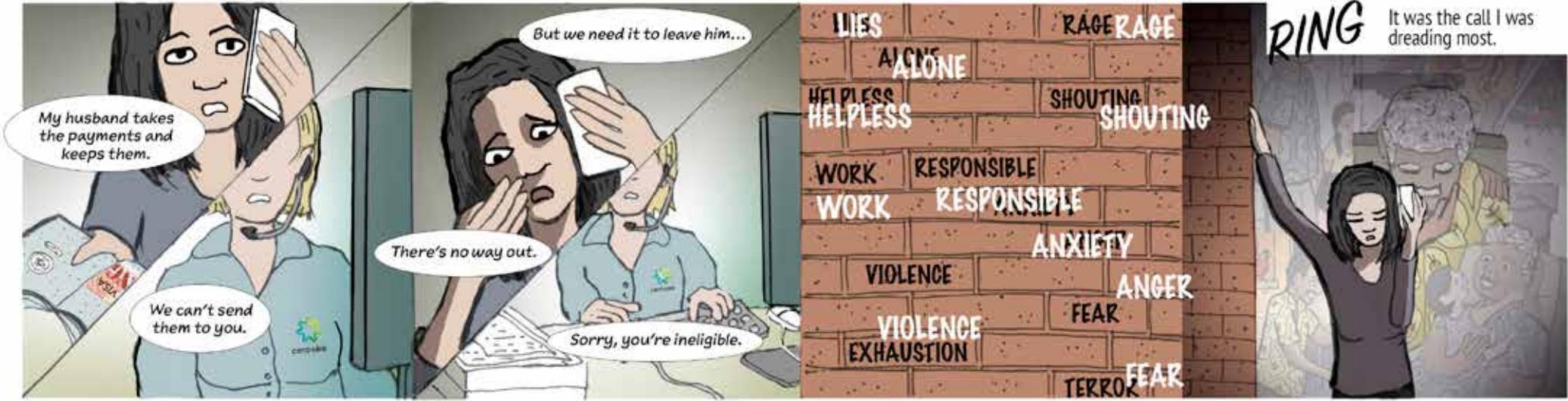
Giving up my job was so hard - it was my independence.

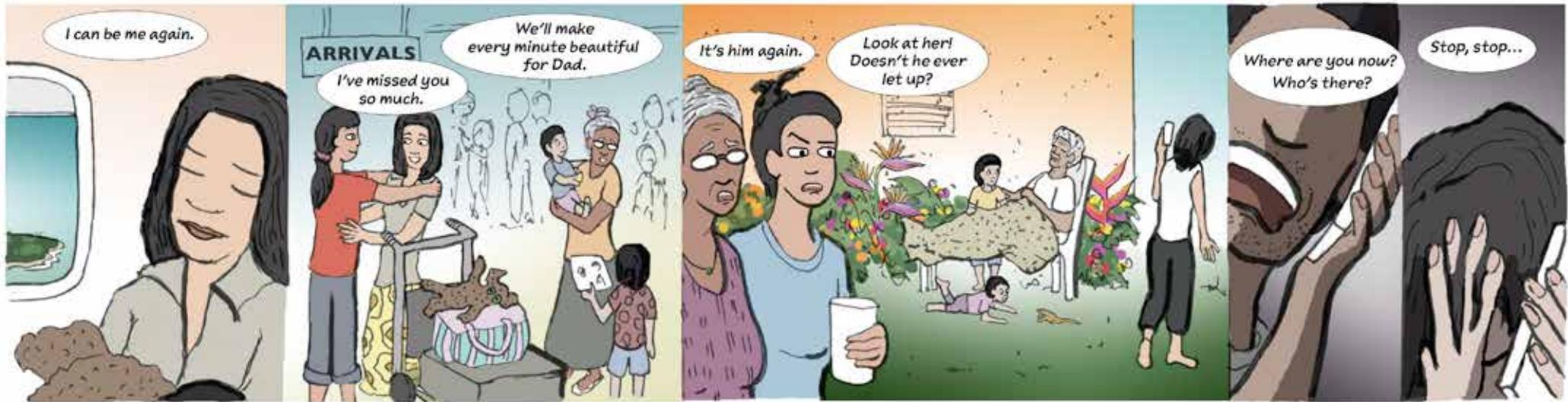
One day, he hit me in front of my father for the first time.

I was now completely on my own again.



I learnt how to shout back.





My sister flew home all the way from America.

This was my time with the family ... and he was taking it away.



I didn't know where my life would take me. I didn't know how I could do it.

It was a big step into uncharted waters.



He was down there.
Waiting for me.



They put us safely in a taxi. We were out.

The very next day,
my father died.

I was like a zombie.



When I filed for custody, he tried harder to make my life hell.



My life was totally upside down.

No one organisation could help with everything.

*Vocational education institution



This meant I had to tell my story many times, over and over.



No, she does have a visa...

(Is that right?)

Yes but ...

Our story was very complex: no easy answers.



Sometimes I feel like I'm just another folder on a desk.

But you're not a folder. You are a beautiful girl!

Yes, Mum. OK! I'm a beautiful folder!

You're new to the area?

I kept trying, until finally...



That's ours, at the top!



And you'll have a new school and new friends.



I hope she'll be happy... So much change!



Need a hand?

Sure. We're neighbours!

Really?



Look Dad! It's only a start...

But I'm feeling hopeful again.



My life might not be easy – but it's my life.



One day, things got a lot easier.

Months and months and emails and letters later...



I want to keep moving forward. I missed a lot of fun. I lost a lot of my life.

There are good people in my life now.



Life didn't go as I thought it would, but the future will be better.

I am free. I am loved. I am me.

KELLI'S STORY

Soul Woman

I had a loving childhood but it had difficult aspects that made me vulnerable to a predator like Dean. I was used to secrecy, and that's what he preyed on.

I grew up in the northern suburbs of Sydney. There was Mum, Dad, older brother and me – beautiful home, elite private schools. Dad was in publishing and Mum was an interior designer.

Dad's mother was bipolar – she was terribly unwell and tried to suicide five times. Mum's mother was hugely abusive, and Mum was in an abusive relationship with an alcoholic before she met Dad. Because they both came from painful and

horrific backgrounds, they just wanted to make the perfect family, as a couple. It didn't quite turn out like that.

My brother is on the autism spectrum and has recently been diagnosed as bipolar. He was always extremely difficult in many ways, and I was seen as the 'golden girl'. The feeling was always, 'If only we had two like you'. I was just a normal kid though; getting along with everyone, going to parties, hanging out with my friends. I wasn't special, but compared to my brother, I was easy. There was this weight of responsibility on me to be perfect and carry the dream. That meant being the good girl, being happy, never crying in front of them (it got to a point where I just stopped crying), and being the peacemaker of our house.

The world we inhabited was so privileged, so out of touch with reality, and my private school bred that. It was very gendered. I wanted to do drums but no, 'women don't do that kind of thing'. We did ballet. Girls didn't do bands either. I learnt piano. In my friendship group, for example, no-one's mum worked except mine.

The boys' schools bred a very similar fucked-up thing. The boys we hung out with were all 'women-in-the-kitchen' types. None of their mums worked, they went to Pilates instead – keeping thin and blonde and beautiful for their husbands to fuck. It's just so gross, really. Everyone seemed shiny on the outside and dead inside.



There was no soul in that for me. I had a very tight group of friends from Year 5, who I still love, although we have nothing in common. But I never fitted in to my school. I couldn't connect.

My brother's autism, and all the difficulties that came with it, was a family secret. I didn't tell anyone until I was 19 because Dad wouldn't allow it. Speaking out would have been a total betrayal of the family – we didn't talk about the inner being of our family, our precious intimates, our tribe. If you spoke the truth, even inside the family, you felt like you were betraying the whole idealised picture of who we were. It was, 'This is our problem. We're going to keep it in'. The thinking was that if anyone else knew, 'Oh my god, the shame!'. The problem for me though, was that not talking about it was internally shameful.

When I did get into the abusive relationship with Dean, this is exactly what he preyed on. I was very used to secrecy. I was also used to being invaded.

From an early age, my brother was constantly invading my privacy, invading my body. There was some sexual abuse stuff with him when I was about seven or eight – some sex games I wasn't comfortable with. It didn't last for long but the culture of secrecy in our family was already established. I was 21 before I told Mum.

Growing up, I was mainly able to keep it all in but there was one time I lost it. I was in Year 7 and I'd had a big blow-up with a friend. I was crying my eyes out and I remember my year coordinator took me onto the oval and asked what was happening, and I told her some things about my brother. She never followed it up. I remember seeing her in the hallway afterwards and she said, 'Did you have a chat

to your mum?'. I lied and said I did. And that was it, no more about it. This was such a lost opportunity for me.

By Year 9, I was quite depressed and constantly talking about suicide. Every lunchtime I would ask my friends, 'How would you do it?'. I know now, that this is a really bad sign. Body loathing came into it as well, which was very typical. From the outside though, no one would have known what was going on. My disguise as a smart, happy, normal, confident girl was water-tight.

I know now that our family history of abuse and mental health issues meant I'd had no example of normal, healthy boundaries. I hadn't learnt to speak out and be able to say, 'No! I'm not comfortable in this situation'. Or, 'No! This is not what

I know now that our family history of abuse and mental health issues meant I'd had no example of normal, healthy boundaries. I hadn't learnt to speak out and be able to say, 'No! I'm not comfortable in this situation.' Or, 'No! This is not what I want.' I had good healthy relationships with women friends. But when it came to men, I really struggled to assert myself.

I want'. I had good, healthy relationships with women friends. But when it came to men, I really struggled to assert myself.

As I got older, I seemed to invite inappropriateness. Guys were always pushing me beyond what I was comfortable with, sexually. From the age of 18, it's constantly, 'Can we have anal sex?'. They feel entitled to that. If you have hair on your vagina, you're disgusting and they won't go down on you. I used to date dumb guys because I thought I could have the upper hand, but when it came to sex, I still felt pushed.

I was 23 when I met Dean. I had finished uni and was working in Los Angeles under this very lecherous boss, who was recently divorced and was being really fucking inappropriate. Worse, he was a family friend, so there was a real position of power that was being abused. His attentions isolated me from my workmates because they all thought I was reporting back to him, so it was a really lonely situation.

I suspected that as soon as I got a boyfriend, it would all stop with the boss – and I was right. I started seeing Dean and I became a lady again in the boss's eyes. That's the negotiation between men; I had a man now and he had to respect that man. That's how it works.

So in the beginning, Dean was my safety. I thought he was quite liberated because he was a country boy from Ohio, living in LA, and he was an actor and had all these gay friends. He seemed down-to-earth and open-minded. This was quite a false idea of what he was, but in those early days, he embodied so many things I hadn't experienced. It was exciting. The sex was incredible, too. I hadn't had that kind of eye-opening experience before, and in one way, I'm still grateful for having had that.

I was shocked that my ideas could spark such a response. But in some twisted way, the jealousy was romantic – you know, in that moody, brooding stranger, Twilight sort of way.

One of the best things was that I was totally comfortable with him. I could be human in a way I hadn't been allowed to before: I could pick my nose and fart in front of him. 'Good women don't fart', was never explicitly said when I was growing up. But it was always the undercurrent for how you conducted yourself in that whole northern suburbs, privileged world. Girls don't fart because that's disgusting to men – only men are entitled to be human.

The start of the relationship with Dean was incredible. He showered me with love and praised me constantly: 'You're my dream. You're my world'. I know now that this is a common tactic of predators. It sends you off balance; it's like, 'Whoa, what is going on here? This guy worships me!' By the time the predatory, the uncomfortable, the challenging behaviour starts, you're hooked.

Things didn't take long to change. Two months after we met, I went back to Australia for Christmas. While I was away I read this book called *Sex at Dawn*, about Bonobo monkeys that travel in groups of 120 and are constantly fucking each other. When I got back to New York, I told Dean, 'I've read this book and it's amazing. I just don't believe humans are designed to be monogamous'.

I didn't say I wanted an open relationship but that *slight* openness was interesting to me: *monogamish*.

Once we had that conversation, everything was different. This paranoia developed in him. All of a sudden, I wasn't up on the pedestal anymore, I was this little slut, instead. That was a real turning point. He didn't like me having a mind of my own, especially a mind like *that*. It was threatening.

I was shocked that my ideas could spark such a response. But in some twisted way, the jealousy was romantic – you know, in that moody, brooding stranger, *Twilight* sort of way.

Despite my reservations, and the changes I was seeing, I moved in with him almost immediately. Over the time I'd been away, a lot of my friends had moved out of the city and I was isolated and lonely. Moving in together seemed the next step. In hindsight, it was a huge mistake. Suddenly, we were living in one room and I had no space to go, 'Wait a minute. What do I want?'

I would never move in with someone in the first year now. My advice would be to get out of the honeymoon period, have a few arguments, see where your values are. Just wait a year. That's part of the keeping safe.

The way I morphed was quite astounding to me. I became a shadow of myself; quiet, brooding, obsessing over him, jealous, prying into his phone like he did with mine. My life changed, totally.

Anyway, we lived in this apartment in LA for six months, with a whole lot of flatmates and the first sign of what was to come was the withholding, the quiet, the stonewalling. We would have an argument and he would storm out and leave a chasm of silence. There were doors in our relationship that I wasn't allowed to open; questions I wasn't allowed to ask. I couldn't speak up without getting paid back for it. And because I never had my voice heard in the relationship, it just became him controlling everything (If a partner won't answer my questions, that's a really big alarm bell for me now).

The way I morphed was quite astounding to me. I became a shadow of myself; quiet, brooding, obsessing over him, jealous, prying into his phone like he did with mine. My life changed, totally. I made no room for my own creativity anymore; my own direction; my own life. I couldn't make my own decisions. I didn't know what I wanted to eat. I had trouble identifying my emotions.

I couldn't say 'no', so I didn't know what I wanted to say 'yes' to.

Here's an example of what things were like: one night, there was an incident where I got drunk with a housemate and we invited some people we'd met at a bar back to have a drink at ours. In Dean's thinking, that was a betrayal because a man was a part of the group. Dean came home from work and found us all laughing and having a wonderful time but his response wasn't to join us. It was to pour a glass of wine, drink it, smash the glass on the ground, and leave. I was so stoned and drunk at that point, I just lay on the couch and cried my eyes out.

Incidents like that were the norm. They were constant and there was no predicting when he'd explode. I literally used to walk on my tippy toes. Even now when I talk about it, I hold my throat and flex my toes – it's a very visceral feeling.

Our flatmates were originally Dean's friends and there was a childish loyalty which stopped them saying anything about what they were seeing. Despite the fact that they were all actors and used to big, dramatic shows of emotion, it was bloody obvious there was something not OK there. But I was left alone with it. No support.

When my visa was up in July, we decided to move back to Australia together, and that's where it escalated.

All of a sudden, I had friends around and he wasn't in control anymore. We lived with my parents for three months and things dropped to a simmer – he couldn't be smashing wine glasses and storming out. So the violence became much more psychological – with a slow but poisonous erosion of my confidence.

'Baby, you're depressed', he'd tell me.

'It's so sad. It's like you don't fit here anymore'. He'd make fun of women's bodies that were exactly like mine and



when I'd get upset, he'd say, 'You're so sensitive, why does everything have to be about you?'. But at the same time, he was always cutting me down: 'You don't exercise enough, you don't eat right'.

Mum's got a very good gut intuition about things. She could sense what was happening. But she lost her sister to an abusive man and was afraid if she intervened it might become a Romeo and Juliet situation. In hindsight, she was probably right – I was in too deep.

At that point, I was working three jobs to support him and I just hated who I'd become. I was jealous, I was depressed, I was obsessed with him. And I became paranoid – 'Who's he looking at? Is he interested in that woman walking down the street?' We'd be going through each other's phones, spying on each other. I guess I was so used to having my privacy invaded by my brother, it was familiar. It was home.

By the end, all this weird stuff happened to my body. I lost a lot of weight and developed auto-immune issues and allergies. I was a husk of myself. I now realise it was a chronic state of anxiety. Everything good about me had been scooped out and set on the counter and was gone.

There were times I just wanted to go to sleep forever, but sleeping was never safe. He used to get me so fucked up, we'd have all kinds of crazy sex. When I think back on it I realise I was so *not* OK with that. One night we had anal sex with a butt plug and afterwards I said, 'I really don't feel comfortable' and I'll never forget how gleeful he was. It was like, 'Yes! I've violated her!'.

We'd been together just over a year, when we moved out of my parents' house and into a place of our own in Manly. It was the first time we were living completely alone and I became quite deeply depressed almost immediately. In that apartment, I was like a dog, cowering because it knows it's done something wrong: all the hair on the back of my neck raised, creeping around trying to not spill a glass of water in case he blew up at me.

I remember cooking turkey meatballs for one of our first meals in our new place, and he stood there, with his arms crossed, criticising everything I did. There was the slamming of doors, the punching the wall beside my head, the disappearing for several hours at a time and then coming back and pretending there was nothing wrong. I felt like I was going crazy. I stopped wearing mascara at that

time because my pillowcases were ruined from crying. I'm surprised, to this day, my tear ducts still work.

The threat of physical violence was escalating. If we were out, he would hold me by the upper arm, pinching that tender place at the back. I knew I was in danger and that it was only a matter of time. I started planning how to get away from him. Before we moved into Manly, I started a graphic design course because it finished after his visa ended and I knew he would have to go back to America.

But the day I found the strength to get out was the day my old friends from school saw what was really going on. The secret was out and there was no going back from that...

We were at a party and I was already on edge because he was drinking heavily and usually that's when things would escalate. I was trying to stay in control, watching him. My friends were there and I thought I was going to vomit because I was so anxious about what they would see and what would happen. I'd probably had a couple of hours sleep the night before because we'd been fighting.

Then everyone decided to walk down to the beach. Walking along in front of us was this girl who looked quite a lot like me – same height, same body shape. She was wearing a red bikini and I thought to myself, 'Wow, doesn't she look great? I should get a cossie like that'.

I remember feeling him gleeful next to me because he'd spotted her too and he said, 'Oh my god, look at the cellulite on the back of her thighs, I think I'm going to throw up'.

It was precision criticism: he knew I was self-conscious about my legs. At first I thought I was going to puke or have a panic attack but then the anger kicked in. I just thought, 'You fucking arsehole'.

We started bickering then; I was so ashamed of what we must have looked like. I said, 'Please keep your voice down' and he's like, 'I'm not fucking keeping my voice down, you're being dramatic'. Meanwhile his grip on my

hand got tighter and tighter until he suddenly let go and stormed off. My two friends who were behind me just gently came one on either side – the looks on their faces said it all.

When he came back, he grabbed my hand again. The feeling of menace was unbearable. I burst into tears and became quite hysterical and my friends immediately walked away to let us have it out, which is what you do with couples, isn't it? I said, 'I can't do this anymore' and his response was, 'When you act like this I don't even want to be with you'. I fell to the ground then and the river broke. Because I knew it was over.

I knew I had to get my shit out of that flat and I had to get myself safe. All I wanted to do was leave with the shred of dignity I had left. Walking back to the car, I could feel myself going through the motions, acting the part, and I was able to make up some excuse about going back to my parents to pick up some stuff. I left him and got myself home.

Mum laid on my childhood bed with me for about four hours while I heaved and heaved, like a child, on her chest.

We'd been together just over a year, when we moved out of my parents' house and into a place of our own in Manly. It was the first time we were living completely alone and I became quite deeply depressed almost immediately.



I vomited out the whole story and, at the end, it was like his power had gone. I called the next day to check if he was at work, then went in and cleaned out the entire house.

At first, I was kind of in shock, swinging between relief and grief. But just a few weeks later I went out with my girlfriends who had been at the beach with us the day we broke up. I was so raw. It was like the skin of my chest had been carved out and they could see all my shit pumping. I was going in and out of crying but I remember feeling so high. It was the first time I genuinely laughed for a really, really long time.

It was probably two or three months afterwards when the real weight of the pain hit me and I fell into a very significant period of depression. I dealt with that by having heaps of sex with inappropriate people and getting fucked up all the time.

Oh yes... and I also started therapy! That was such an education. I don't know how I would've got through without that ongoing, healthy voice of my psychologist. Having stable work was also really important for me at the time – something to get my mind off it. I moved into a house in Glebe with my good friend Vivian who'd also been in an abusive relationship, and it was like, 'Wow, we got through it' – a sisterhood thing. There was this wonderland of language – a whole new world that we were opening our eyes to.

A huge part of the healing for me was the talking. I needed to talk and I still refuse to be silenced around it. It's not easy – people aren't lining up to listen. I remember a dinner party not long after I'd got out of it; I'm sitting there talking about it, knowing that I'm losing the people listening to me, one by one. I already



I felt such pressure not to be ruined in the eyes of men – ‘damaged goods’, as my Dad put it. One of the worst parts for me, after I got out of the relationship, was this idea that I’d betrayed my family’s image of who I was.

feel disgusted that I’ve been through this, but do I stop talking about it so as not to make other people uncomfortable?

In the world I grew up in, we don’t air our dirty underclothes in public. And here I was... talking and talking. I actually had a vision of myself passing period-stained undies around the table, the sense of disgust in the room was so strong. It was like, ‘Put it away!’

I had very few friends who could give me what I needed – just to sit with me and let me tell my story. To let me cry and not try and fix it. Just to bear witness is actually the biggest gift you can give someone. Over time, my best friends learnt with me and my friendships now are stronger for it. They felt guilt that they didn’t know what was happening to me, but they *couldn’t* have. I was so good at keeping secrets and keeping it together on the outside... I’d practised my whole life.

One of the most interesting things about the response from other people, though, was the, ‘Did he hit you?’ question. It’s the one question that gets asked again and again. Because I wasn’t actually physically assaulted by my partner, it was like my experience was less legitimate, both to me and to those around me.

I felt like an inconvenient friend, but rushing the grief process is so unhelpful. I had no social support to help with what I was going through and there was no education around it. If my friends had been a little bit more educated it would have really helped me, but the bottom line was, people just expected me to get over it. My friends would ask me, ‘Have you fucked someone else yet?’ while I was still having dreams he’d come to kill me in my sleep. There was such a disconnect with people thinking this was just another relationship, another breakup. The internet was my saving grace. I could lie in bed, crying my eyes out, and find comfort in other people’s stories. You type into Google what you need, and boom, there’s an incredible think piece from someone in Mississippi, or someone in Kenya, who’s just got out of a similar thing.

Aside from dealing with the grief and trauma, a lot of the work I did was undoing what I’d learned about being a perfect woman. It’s such a problem because you’re bound to fail and we don’t prepare women for that. What does failure look like? Being the ‘used fruit’, as Missy Higgins put it: ‘the bad fruit no one buys’.

Your inner compass is so thrown off when you have this experience. I was attracted to this fucking monster. How do I ever trust myself? Am I totally broken within? I really struggled with that idea for a long time, wondering whether I would be able to have vulnerable, intimate moments with someone without thinking they were going to take advantage of me.

These days, I trust my gut instinct if something doesn’t feel right. I’m a deeply empathetic person but I don’t see that as a weakness anymore. It’s a quality I embrace but need to be protective of. I’m careful who I let under my skin and I’m quite selective with my friends and confidantes.

To me, safety looks like self-confidence; like the ability to call out bad behaviour and not internalise it; not take on responsibility for it. These days I feel safe in my convictions and my opinions and, if people question them, I know where I sit.

My most recent relationship is not crazy fireworks and me on a pedestal but more like best friends. I’m so grateful for that. We just get along. I don’t have to be anyone but myself around him. I don’t have to rely on the false empowerment of being this ‘perfect’, flirtatious woman. But I don’t have to be the very serious intellectual either.

I’m hoping I can be playful and have fun. That’s where I’ve got to. Rather than making me vulnerable, my experience is now keeping me safe. §

NINA'S STORY

The Tables Turned

I was born and raised in Fiji... Back in our country there was no awareness about domestic violence then. In my heart I knew what he was doing was wrong but I felt so helpless, embarrassed and ashamed.

I met my husband as a 16-year-old school girl. We married when I was 17, and I had my first child a year later.

When I returned home after the birth, my neighbour took me aside. She said my husband had brought other women home while I was in the hospital. By the time

I was 23, two weeks after the birth of my third child, I was diagnosed with syphilis. But my husband's infidelity was just the beginning.

He immigrated to Australia alone. But, not long after, there was a military coup in Fiji and he sent for me and the children. It was in Australia that the jealous rages began. He accused me of having affairs and started verbally abusing me, hitting me, punching me and sexually abusing me. I was just receiving. Receiving and being quiet. Back in our country there was no awareness about domestic violence, then. In my heart I knew what he was doing was wrong but I felt so helpless, embarrassed and ashamed. He tortured me for 22 years and I never told a single person what he did to me. Then one day I just couldn't hold it in any more.

It was after my mother died. We were back in Fiji for the funeral ceremony, which in our culture takes 13 days. Everybody was together in this little house – my husband and I and our five children, aunties, uncles, cousins, my brother and his friends – and he's demanding sex. There's no privacy in that house and I'm mourning for my mother and he's getting angry. He storms out of the room and in front of all my family he says, 'That's it. When we go back to Australia, you're out of the house. You're not going to stay with me!'



That's when the bomb blasted and I spoke up for the first time in my life.

This was the moment I started to take my life back. I couldn't put up with it anymore.

And that's when the bomb blasted and I spoke up for the first time in my life. I went for it. I'm bloody pouring my heart out – 22 years worth of built-up anger and frustration and pain. He went back there to put on a show for everyone – be the big man. But I put on a better show! None of my family members had ever seen me like that. It was the first time I had reacted that way in my life. I had always been a very calm, patient, caring person – never outspoken.

I could have just kicked him out from there and got my brothers to give him a few punches. But he would have taken the children and I couldn't risk that. He used to belt the crap out of them. They were not safe with him.

After my outburst, one of my aunties, who lives in Canada, said to me, 'Nina, come on! It's your life now! You decide what you have to do and just do it. Enough is enough'.

When we came back to Australia, the tears wouldn't stop. I'm grieving for my mother and all he wants is sex. One day he landed a solid punch in my head that made me wet my pants. But when I went to the GP the next day, he just said, 'You really have to take some action for yourself, Nina'. I doubt if he even documented anything.

But by then I had started getting my brains back and I began to seek support. The first port of call was a social worker from Centrelink. She was a lovely young woman – very empathetic and helpful. While the kids were in school I would hop down to Centrelink to see her. She was monitoring everything and documenting it all. She worked with me on a safety plan. She referred me to the Liverpool Women's Health Centre for counselling, and to the Department of Housing, and provided me with all the information about what Centrelink support I would be entitled to.

I began planning my escape. I was sleeping in my daughter's room and my husband would come in and pull my leg and call me into his room for sex, and I wouldn't go, even though I could see the anger in his face. Since we came back from Fiji I never slept with him or had any intimate relationship with him again. That was a difficult thing to do. In our culture, when we get married, it's as if the men own us, like property.

I started keeping a little book with all the important information I was gathering, which we hid under my daughter's mattress. She was 15 at the time, still in high school, and she was researching rental properties for me. I collected together



I started keeping a little book with all the important information I was gathering, which we hid under my daughter's mattress.

all our documents, passports and everything, ready to take when we left. I had always had a separate bank account in my name, for Centrelink payments, which helped as well.

My two eldest children had both left school by this stage and were studying and working. They didn't earn much but they got the finance together and bought a car, and that enabled us to escape when the time came.

It felt like the tables had turned and I began to have the power. But I had to take it slowly and be calm so he wouldn't hurt the children. I was waiting for the right opportunity.

One Sunday, my son was at work and all the other kids were home. I was in the kitchen at the sink when my husband stormed into the room and said, 'If you want to go, you pay me \$30,000 and you can get out of the house'. It was some of the money he spent on my mother's cancer treatment, and accommodating her in his house, before she died. I said, 'I haven't got any money but hopefully one day I will pay you', and he slapped me right in the face. It was painful but I didn't cry. I knew it was the last time he would ever hit me. I had made my decision. It was time.

When he left the room, I grabbed the keys, my handbag and the documents and information we'd been collecting, and we got in the car and drove away. I rang my son and told him what had happened and he said, 'Good. You're never going back there again'. We went to the police station that afternoon, reported the assault, and got an AVO.

It was amazing to have the support of my three older children. They had just been waiting for my decision and were right there with me, helping me find my way.

We stayed in a motel that night and the next day we went to Centrelink to see my social worker. She'd passed all our information on to the Department of Housing and they were waiting for us. We got some temporary accommodation paid for while we looked for a house.

I was very open about our situation with the real estate agents and I think that helped. One young agent was amazing. Within two days he gave me a call, 'Nina, we've got a two-bedroom property for you. The lease is all prepared. You just need to come in and sign it'.

I would recommend to any woman, speak your heart out if you're able. The more you say, the more you'll be heard. If you can't talk to a friend, open up to someone. Keeping it inside is just killing you more.

So we had a house but it was completely empty – no furniture, nothing. I was washing our clothes in the bath for the first six months. One night we arranged to go to our old house and pick up some mattresses, while the husband of my distant cousin was there. I thought I would be safe but while the children were packing their clothes and school things in the next room, my husband came into the room, locked the door and raped me. I couldn't call out or scream – I was worried what the children would do to help me. When I left the bedroom, I saw they knew something had happened.

Counselling was what saved me during that difficult time. Inside my head was like a hard piece of ice. I was depressed; having trouble sleeping. I felt worthless. My psychologist referred me to a psychiatrist, who put me on medication.

I couldn't believe there were so many facilities and services available to women. It made me feel appreciated and special. My kids were so supportive too, looking after the younger two, cooking, letting me sleep when I could, and helping me set up the house.

Over nine months of counselling, I could feel the ice in my head, slowly melting, little by little. It's amazing work – the building of trust and connection with someone. I could feel my confidence and self-esteem growing, not overnight, but little by little.



Group therapy also gave me a lot of strength. Meeting other women that had been through similar experiences; knowing that you're not the only one; talking and understanding, with the help of a supportive facilitator, that was a really big factor in my recovery.

Although we were no longer in the same house, I continued to live in fear of my husband for many years. He started stalking me – he would follow me in his car. One day, outside my son's preschool, he came to my car window and said he had a knife. I ran inside for help and they hid me but they let him take our three-year-old son with him. Later he told me his daddy had a parcel of knives to 'chop Mummy's head'. So he was going to do it.

We moved heaps of times, trying to hide from him. But he would always find out where we were. He would come and look through the windows and call and knock at the door. He threatened to kill me on more than one occasion. I did call the police a few times and they would take him down to the station but he always talked his way out. He never went behind bars – it was his word against mine, wasn't it? The torture and trauma continued for about six or seven years until, finally, he got another wife.

During that time, I started work, which was another huge step. I began with some volunteer work at a big hospital, doing patient labels, managing the doctors' pagers, filing, and serving meals. That was great for my confidence. After two-and-a-half years I was ready for the next step. I went to TAFE to ask about a computer course but the only thing they had available was Introduction to Social Welfare. I said I'd give it a try and God, it felt so good. It was like being back in school, which I had loved. After marking my first assignment, the teacher said, 'You'll be an excellent community worker'.

When I finished the course, the facilitator of my DV group suggested I apply for a traineeship position as a DV worker. I did the six months training and then I had an interview – the first one of my life. I wore my mum's dress and got my hair done at a salon for the first time. I felt so confident. The three women on the interview panel could see that and they gave me the job.

I worked in that position part-time for 10 years and managed to send my two youngest boys to private school. The support from the women I worked with was so lovely: They made my life. They knew I had young children so there was flexibility



These days I'm not scared of anyone in this world. I'm an independent woman.

with my hours. If a child was sick they would say 'go home'. They understood that family was a priority. That's what I love about working in the women's sector.

I'm 54 years old now. I lived in fear for almost 30 years. It was a long journey but I got my freedom. These days, I'm not scared of anyone in this world. I'm an independent woman. No one can touch me. §

It felt like the tables had turned and I began to have the power. But I had to take it slowly and be calm so he wouldn't hurt the children.

Cat in a Box

I was a lion in the world and a mouse at home.

I've never been a good picker. Three husbands and each one worse than the last, despite years of therapy and training, full awareness of my childhood, total commitment to change. By the time I met my third husband I was a very rich woman, but that final marriage cost me everything.

My childhood was pretty much like torture. My mother was an alcoholic. She told me every day she'd be happy if I hadn't been born. I cooked, I cleaned, and I did all the chores. My father, before he died, said I was like Cinderella.



My mother used to have a cat and, when the cat went on heat, she put her under a box because of all the toms.

Marriage was my box.

My mother used to have a cat and, when she went on heat, she put her under a box because of all the toms. Marriage was my box. I discovered boys quite early; they were a way out of the house – a release. But when I went off to university in Sydney, I found the male attention overwhelming.

I was 19 when I married Joseph. He was an academic and about six years older than me; dominating, possessive, controlling and emotionally abusive. He did everything he could to thwart my success. I didn't ever want to have children because I'd suffered so much as a child, but in the middle of my degree he got me pregnant. We were having sex and he was wearing a condom, and he just took it off.

He had to make all the decisions. I didn't have a say in the names of either of my children. He named them both when he went to fill out the birth certificates while I was still in hospital.

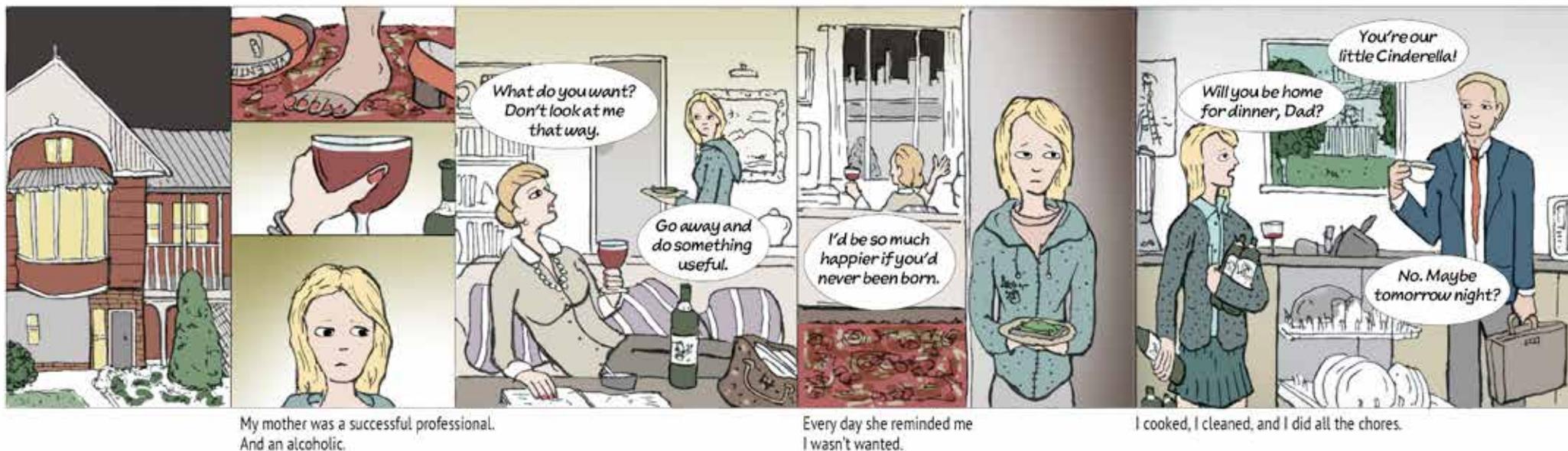
Despite his best efforts, I finished my degree in early childhood education, was awarded the university medal, and took up a high profile job in the social sector. With his control threatened he became increasingly nasty and manipulative.

When he first met me, I was a mediocre student and very meek. The more successful I became, the more violent he got.

Soon after our second child was born, I enrolled in an MBA and it was like I'd come to life. I'd discovered the study of something I loved. But they were difficult times. Both my children had terrible asthma and were often sick. So, I was studying, I was looking after two sick children, and I was lecturing at the university. I remember somebody saying, 'Mimi, some people have the energy of an ant. You have the energy of a nuclear power station'. But when I was at home, I bottled it. I was a lion in the world and a mouse at home.

I was terrified of Joseph. Living with him was like walking on cut glass – you go past this point and you're in big danger. There was no verbal threat of what the danger would be but I could feel it. Twice he sat on me and put his hands around my throat. He didn't actually strangle me, but when you're sitting underneath a man who's six foot four and he's got his hands around your throat, you're not thinking that it's a joke.

When I was 28, I had an affair, and when Joseph found out, he punched me and threatened my life. My solicitor told me, 'Walk out now or we'll be carrying you out in a box'. So I walked.



I left the children with my husband because, at that stage, he had a job, he had a house, he had money. I had nothing. He did everything he could to keep me away from them. He told the children that I'd left because I didn't love them. He only thought about how he could hurt me. The kids were a vehicle to do that. When I brought the children back to live with me at the end of that year, he couldn't give them back fast enough.

It's hard to be a single working parent, but it's almost impossible to be the working parent of children that end up in hospital all the time. My husband gave no support. I had no women friends. I remember making the decision that I could fit work and children into my life and that was it.

Over that time, I continued to be fearful for my safety. I had no concept of self-protection. I had a number of lovers, but they weren't good choices either.

I was 35 when I met William. He was a lovely, cultured, charming, intelligent man, and a rageaholic. He'd throw tantrums and he'd sulk for weeks. I called him a stress creator.

At this stage, I had debt up to my ears. I hadn't been working. I'd been looking after my dad, who was dying, and my kids. Finally I landed a management job at a big company. I brought all my professional and academic experience to my work. That was the beginning of my life as a corporate nomad. William stayed home and minded the children while I ran these incredibly high pressure workshops all over the world.

When I was home, there was no rest. He'd badger me night and day, keeping me awake, complaining and berating, saying how hard it was for him. It's like there were two Mimis. People were paying me \$10,000 a day for my wisdom at work, while I've got this creep abusing me at home.

Of course, I got really sick. I'd had diarrhoea and insomnia for years, and I was exhausted. I was basically burnt out because I got no rest. When the children left school, I finally allowed myself to collapse. That was the end of my second marriage – almost 20 years long.



It's like there were two me's. People were paying me \$10,000 a day for my wisdom at work...
...while I've got this creep abusing me at home.

But then I ended up with someone worse – mistake number three. Mr Alcoholic, big time. Richard wooed me. He presented as a non-drinker, as someone that was charming, and fun, and nurturing. The first year was wonderful. But on the night of our commitment ceremony he started to drink and he really never stopped. His behaviour was the worst of all of my husbands.

The next 18 months was a living hell. I watched my company collapse. I was just too sick and stretched to do anything about it. I lost everything. I went from being a multimillionaire, to being a woman in debt. I'd lost my career, I'd lost my company and, in a way, I'd lost my reputation. I hit bottom.

Soon after, I found the best help I've ever received when I started going to Alcoholics Anonymous. It's strange and a bit funny because I don't have any of the drinking attributes of an alcoholic. I don't think, in my life, I've ever been drunk; I've certainly never blacked out. But I grew up in an alcoholic home and I definitely think like an alcoholic.

For example, I go straight to disaster. If I burn the potatoes, I don't think, 'I've burnt the potatoes', I think, 'I want to die'. If I'm walking down the street and a bolt of lightning hits a telegraph pole, and the telegraph pole falls over and hits the man in front of me, I'll think it's my fault. That's how I was brought up.

In this group, I found my ilk. I went, 'Shit, these are my folk'. Suddenly, I was hearing, from others, this madness that has been in my head all my life. For the first time, I was able to make sense of my mother, and I was able to make sense of my ex-partners.

I learned about how alcoholics can hate their children simply for getting in the way of the drinking. I heard people get up and say, 'When I drink I become demonic' and that was my mother. And all of a sudden these things made sense – not just in my head, but in my body. They made sense in my soul; they made sense in my heart.

In AA, as I experienced love and acceptance and incredible honesty, my neural pathways started to change. I could ring my sponsor ten times a day and he was there, ten times a day, saying, 'It's alright, honey. You'll be fine'. I wasn't ringing him to say I needed a drink. I was ringing him to say, 'I want to kill myself', or, 'I'm in so much grief I don't know how to function', or, 'I'm in physical pain because of the emotional pain'.

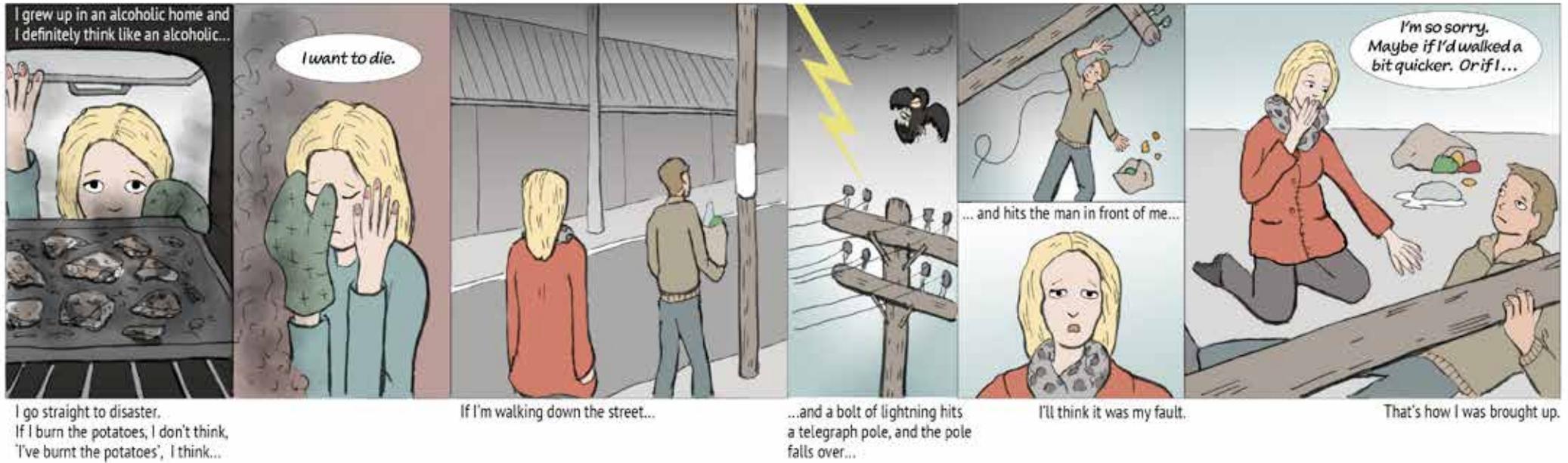
I really needed a long period in community and that's what I've had. In AA, I get a loving, accepting community that I don't pay for, so I trust them. They tell me the truth, not because they're professionals but because they've suffered, like me.

I'm now an elder, I suppose, within that community, so I'm nurturing and helping other people. It's a spiritual program – you give what was given to you.

After Richard, I chose to be celibate for three years because I'd never done it before. I'd never not been in a relationship for more than a couple of months, and I thought, 'I haven't been too flash at this relationship thing, I might have a little break and see if I can get better at it'.

And I did! Now I have a lovely relationship. I keep looking at my partner and thinking, 'you're kind and you're loving, and you're clever, and you're nurturing'. I've waited a long time for this.

If I had any advice for other women, it would be, 'Please don't blame yourself'. I don't blame me! I've certainly not been a good picker, but I know I haven't created the abuse that has been such a huge part of my life. §



When I look back, it's a big life, you know? I've had more success than most people would ever dream of. I've had more travel. I've had more luxury. I've had more passion. And I've had more misery. But I don't actually think I know anyone who's happier than me. And that's something, isn't it?

A Life of My Own

Mum thought girls should be subservient: defer to men, grow up, get married and have babies. That was my mother's mantra through my whole life really: men get steak and you get sausages.

I was born on the coast and it was a wild place. Home was a crowded little three-bedroom house with eight kids in it.

I'm the eldest of Mum's second marriage. She had two boys from her first marriage and then came four of us girls in the space of five years. On top of that, she had two little ones much later. My dad was a very affectionate person, but he travelled a lot for work and wasn't often around.

I was the child that was raised to take care of the others, you know? And from a very early age, I did. One of my younger sisters had epilepsy and my job was to sleep with her, so that when she had a seizure I could call out to Mum.

Mum was good at looking after the sick child but everyone else missed out. If child protection had been around then, I don't know that we would have been intact as a family. Mum was very neglectful in her parenting, particularly around her gambling addiction. From the very beginning, I never felt safe. I was scared all the time. I had to be vigilant for everyone else and I was always responsible for someone or something.

When I met John, I was just 15 and my life became all about looking after him. My older brother Richard introduced us. They were best friends in Sydney and Richard seemed to have some strange idea that it was his job to find me a partner. He brought him home to meet me. John would have been 21 then. He was gorgeous with a nice car and, of course, I thought he was really cool. When I look back, I have

no idea what my mother was thinking when she invited him to come and live with us. I was this infatuated, silly, 15-year-old schoolgirl – still just a child. Mum put a little room on the back of our house, especially for him. That sealed the deal, really. By the time I was 16, we were in a sexual relationship.

When I left school in Year 10, a number of teachers asked me why, and I said, 'Why would you stay at school? What would be the point?' I honestly didn't know. I was really enjoying studying but that just wasn't the culture of our family. There was no consideration that you might want to do something else with your life.

I found some retail work, nannying, waitressing, and pumping petrol. John was in and out of jobs. He'd pick things up really quickly but he could never stick at anything.

I see now that the early signs were there. If he got upset, if something didn't go his way, he'd get into that car of his and he'd just take off in a wild rage, from zero to 100. I'd never really experienced that kind of rage from a man but I didn't listen to myself. I just thought I really loved him. He made me feel like I was important – not by anything nice he did, just by wanting me, I guess.

Things broke down at home when John's car was re-possessed. He loved that car. But one morning he got up and it was gone. That's when the truth came out. John had been giving Mum money to make the hire purchase payments for him, but she'd gambled it away instead. So he upped and moved to a different town on the coast. I would go there on weekends and hang out with him. It was there, away from everyone we knew, that his behaviour went from being verbally abusive to physically violent.

I see now that the early signs were there. If he got upset, if something didn't go his way, he'd get into that car of his and he'd just take off in a wild rage, from zero to 100. I'd never really experienced that kind of rage from a man but I didn't listen to myself.

One night, we were having an argument and I said, 'You're being just like your dad'. That's when he snapped. He grabbed me and slammed me into the wall and then locked me out of the house in my undies and bra. I remember lying beside him, after he let me back in, frozen stiff and terrified.

In the morning, it was all, 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean it', but he also said, 'Never say that to me again'. The minute I heard that, I blamed myself. I knew he'd had a horrendous relationship with his father and it was a terrible source of pain for him. I thought to myself, 'I caused this problem by what I said. It's me, not him' and instead of getting out, I stayed. Of course, I knew something wasn't right but I was shutting that instinct down.

It was how I was raised: men are right and it's a woman's job to listen and make them OK in the world. Also, there was such a story of grief around his childhood and, you know, I really empathised with that because that's how I felt as well.

Not long after that night, I left home and moved in with him. We split up a few times over the next couple of years, but as soon as he knew I was reconnecting with my friends and getting my life back, he would reel me back in.

The last time we split up, I was 19. I was working, saving money, going out with my mates and feeling like I was moving forward. Then, after a brief reconciliation, almost a one-night stand, I fell pregnant with Ashley. At that point, I knew it wasn't a relationship I wanted anymore but I didn't think I had any other choice but to be with him.

On our wedding day, I remember standing there thinking, 'What the hell am I

doing?' But it's like you're on a train that's speeding along the tracks and it's going to crash but you've got no way of getting off.

I was pretty isolated by then. There was no-one to pull me aside or to say, 'You don't have to do this. We can work this out'. My sisters knew he was unstable, but because of how we were raised, none of us had much in the way of emotional resources. They were just trying to survive their own journeys; we couldn't help each other. And most of the girls I'd gone to school with had gone off and were doing their own thing. It was just me.

I had Ashley when I was 20. She was born at 28 weeks and had pretty high needs, including really bad asthma. I had Billy a year later and then Miranda, three years after that. We were living in a little house in the suburbs, a long way from anyone we knew. We were living in poverty, really. John's boss was an alcoholic, and every night after work they would go for drinks.

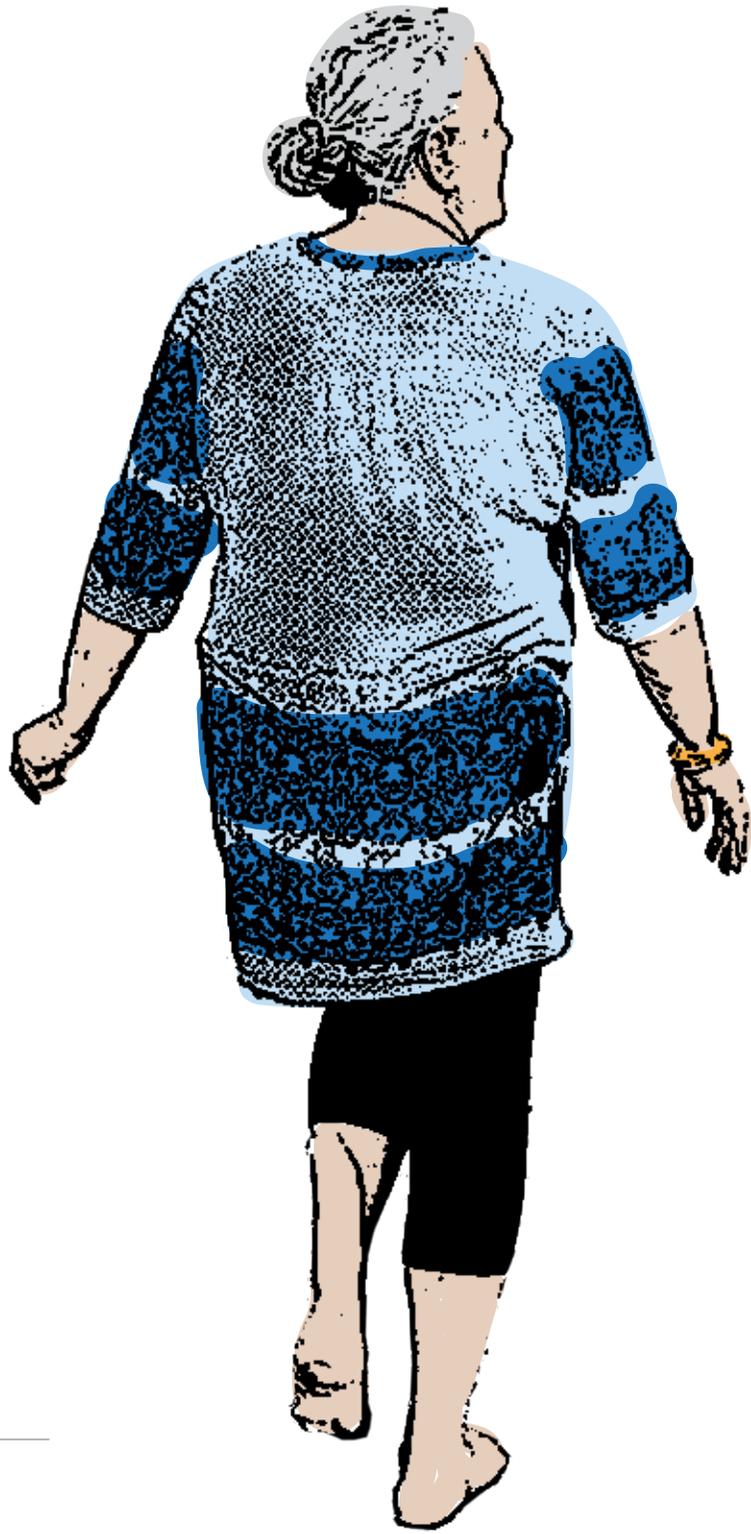
John would have no money to pay his share, so by the time pay-day came around, all that drinking money had to be taken out of his pay. We got what was left and that wasn't much.

I knew the signs well by then. If he wasn't home by dinner-time, we were in for it.

He would come home drunk, raging about people at work. He'd be looking around the house and wanting to know what I was 'fucking doing all day?' I spent a lot of time trying to calm him down but often that didn't work. It would blow up and he'd yell and scream and push and shove.

He always liked to rip my nightie off – to stop me fleeing the house, I think. Eventually, he would storm off to bed.





I remember one night – I was so exhausted – I had the first two little ones, who were just a year apart, and he'd been going on and on, weeks and weeks and weeks of these nights, and I thought, 'I could just kill him'. I remember picking the pillow up and thinking, 'Could I? Could I really do it?' I didn't, of course, but you get desperate because it's so endless. And at that time I didn't have a car, I had a pram. I didn't actually have any escape.

We rarely went out, and going anywhere was always terrifying. I spent the whole time on high alert because he would always lose it. Whatever the occasion, he would get drunk and there would be a fist fight, or he would be smashing something or abusing someone.

He would never have physically attacked me around Dad but he would be verbally abusive. He would do the whole 'You're coming with me' thing. If he was losing it, Mum would say things like, 'Just take the kids and go with him'. It never occurred to her what that meant for me.

Over the next four years, nothing was stable – he got jobs, he lost jobs. He'd get on this high and then plummet again. The cycle was exhausting. Same routine as always – coming home drunk, angry; the fear and the pushing around; the rage. But there wasn't really any way out. I was terrified of leaving him because I really believed he would kill us. Over time, apart from these moments of immense anger and rage, he just retreated more and more into himself.

Up until this point, the violence was always directed at me but his shaming of our little boy, Billy, was really bad. One day, when Billy was seven, John attempted to take a strap to him. He got the leather belt out and, for me, that was it. I just threw myself in front of my son.

I said, 'You either get help or I'm going to leave'. And maybe because there was still this other part of him that really didn't want to be the person he had become, he agreed to get help. He started seeing a psychiatrist, Dr Bowles. He probably saw him twice and then he came home and said, 'He wants to see you. He thinks you're my problem'.

Now at that time I wasn't doing well at all. The pressure was just too much and my mental health broke down. I stopped sleeping, I stopped eating, I was really struggling and that terrified the kids. Our family doctor, who I had known since I was a child, came to the house and she said, 'I want you to go and see the

psychiatrist. You need some help'. In two sessions of two hours with this man, my life changed. The first thing he told me was, 'It's not you.'

We didn't just talk about John. I gave it all to him, all my story. We talked about my family, my mother and her gambling, the responsibility of caring for the kids. He asked me, 'What do you love about John?' And I suddenly realised that I loved the hurt little boy – not the man I was married to. It was such a powerful moment and that's when I made the decision to leave him.

At that time I didn't know how or when I'd get out, but once I'd decided, I started to disconnect. For the first time, I actually started finding happiness in myself and happiness with the kids.

While Dr Bowles was working with me to get me out of there, he prescribed John with medication that took the edge off things. He was still angry and toxic but he spent a lot of time on his own, in his garage, building things. The doctor's approach with me was more about building up my own resources and relieving the stress. I started swimming every day. He taught me deep muscle relaxation and I would do that for an hour, every night. John might be up all night on his benzos but I'd just go to my room and do the relaxation tape. I got really good at activating the quiet.

He also taught me to 'stand on the balcony' – to watch John's behaviour but not be part of it. I recognised, for the first time, that his behaviour wasn't my responsibility; that the story I was carrying wasn't mine, it was his.

There were many discoveries – the lights were going on. For example, one day I took the kids to a plaster funhouse and I remember walking around trying to choose a figurine to paint. But I just could not make a choice. It made me realise how

Standing up to my mother was another big step. In the midst of my own breakdown she would ring me and put pressure on me to help my sister who wasn't doing so well. One day I asked her what she was doing to help my sister herself. It was the first time I'd been able to hand back that responsibility.

disempowered I had become. Eventually I did choose something and I painted it and it felt so powerful to me. I mean, it seems like a really small thing but for me it was like, 'I get to make this decision. It's for *me* and it's not for anybody else'.

Standing up to my mother was another big step. In the midst of my own breakdown she would ring me and put pressure on me to help my sister, who wasn't doing so well. One day I asked her what she was doing to help my sister herself. It was the first time I'd been able to hand back that responsibility.

As I changed and became stronger, John could see his old ways of pulling me in had stopped working. He got more and more fragile, and more and more unstable.

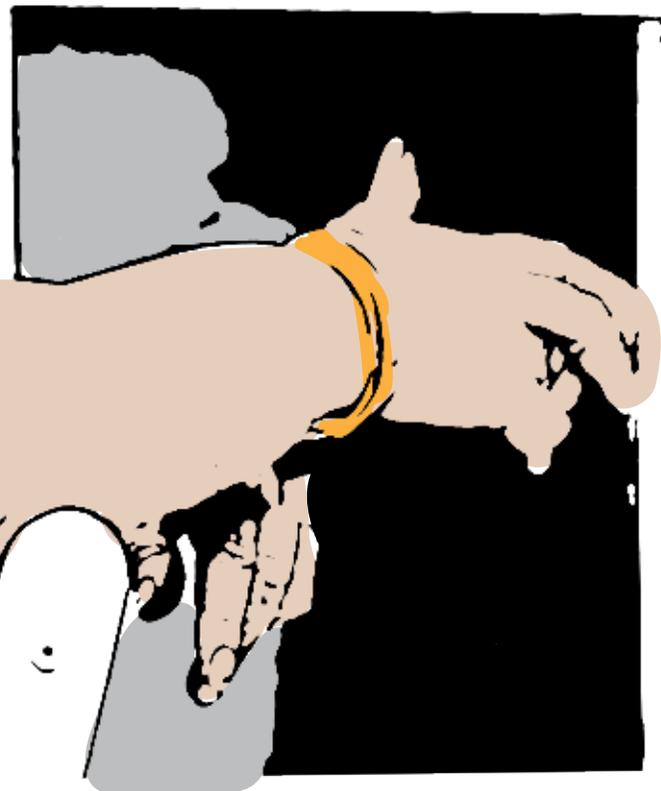
On Christmas Day 1988, we were at Mum and Dad's and I knew it was going to turn ugly. I decided that I was going home and taking the kids. 'I'm not fucking going home, I'm going to keep drinking', John said. I thought, 'Oh my God, this is bad'. When I got home I left the keys in the ignition of the car and I said to the kids, 'If Daddy comes home and he's angry, we're going to your auntie's house. So if I tell you to get in the car, you do what I say, OK?'. And that's exactly what happened. He came home drunk and aggressive and when he went to the toilet I grabbed the kids, put them in the car and we drove up to my sister's place.

He turned up at 9.00 that night – came through the door and punched me straight in the face. My brother-in-law got him out and John sat outside and cried about how sorry he was. But he knew it was the end of the line for us.

It all happened really quickly after that. He got his own flat but I'd see him following me in the car, or he'd turn up at work and try to lure me back in. He started making veiled threats, too, about how he could kill himself and all of us, if he wanted to.

One day, I'd been cooking quiches for the kids when he just walks through the kitchen door. I'd been feeling pretty safe because he'd been away up north for a month or so, but as soon as I saw him, I knew there was no room for negotiation here. I knew he was going to kill us. I asked him why he was there and he said, 'This is where I live and where I'm staying'. I picked up the car keys. 'Well, I've got to go and pick up Ashley, OK?' I told him. 'I'll take Billy. We'll be back shortly'. I never saw him again.

I went to my sisters and then down to a refuge in Sydney. I was there five months all up. We had no clothes, nothing, when we arrived. But we were safe, and



Of course there were challenges along the way because my journey wasn't about finding someone else – my journey was about finding me. I had to be my own person, and find my own way in the world.

although I hated it to begin with, I ended up falling in love with that place. I met some really nice women from different backgrounds and cultures and my world started to open up. At the same time, John's world was closing down.

A few months after I'd left, he got up one morning, spoke to the neighbour, who said he seemed happy, hooked up the gear, and gassed himself in his car. I can tell you the moment he died because I felt him go. I was in the city with one of the girls I had struck up a friendship with, and we'd gone into this restaurant and were just about to eat, when I knew something profound had happened. I jumped up and left. By the time I got back to Glebe, John had died.

I fell apart then. I thought, 'I am totally responsible. If only I had stayed with him'. Then out of the blue I got a phone call from an old friend. She said, 'Carolyn, this is not your fault'. She talked me through all the horrible things she remembered. That call came at exactly the right time.

I faced a lot of blame for John's death from my own family. My mother went a bit mental and my brother barred me from the funeral. I remember going in to see my dad, who was in his room just lying on the bed and I said, 'Dad, I don't know what to do'. He said, 'Carolyn, you do what you need to do. You do what's right'. That's all he said but that support was enough. It enabled me to move forward. I ended up going back and staying at the refuge for a couple of months until I got a housing commission place.

I didn't speak to my mother for two years after John died. She'd been so enmeshed in that relationship from the very beginning. She would always have private conversations with him about our life and our marriage. I really needed space to find myself before I could connect with her again, and it was a very strained relationship for a long time.

But miraculously, in all of that chaos, I'd met a beautiful man named Walter. I talked to Dr Bowles about him and he said, 'It might not last, but if it's a nice friendship, and it's safe, then it will be good for you'. So he was really generous in giving me permission. Walter and I have been together ever since. He's such a safe human and such a kind and loving person. Of course there were challenges along the way because my journey wasn't about finding someone else – my journey was about finding me. I had to be my own person, and find my own way in the world. I wasn't giving that up for anybody.

Study and education turned out to be my way ahead. I remember when I was leaving school, my commerce teacher had written on my shirt, 'To my number one student who should go on to university'. That was such an important thing to me and I'd held onto it all those years. I thought, 'If he thought I could do it, maybe I could'.

I went and did pre-entry to uni, working in a restaurant and ironing at night, trying to earn money to get my life together. It was a difficult time for the kids, but I was quite selfish. I just knew I had to do this. Otherwise, what was all that heartache for? And I discovered that I'm pretty good at learning and I really like it, so that was very encouraging. I got into Arts and I really enjoyed that. Then I did a Social Work degree, which was full of strong feminists, and that opened everything up even more.

After six years at uni, I got a job at Community Services in child protection. These days most of my work is about supervising frontline staff but I have no doubt my own journey has made me good at my work. When I look back now, I know a stronger sense of self and a safe environment, growing up, would have protected me as well.

I can't say whether my story would have turned out the way it has if John had survived. But I can say my journey to safety began with 'know thyself'. There's

When I look back now, I know a stronger sense of self and a safe environment growing up, would have protected me as well.

an idea that this knowing takes a massive amount of time, but essentially, for me, it took four hours. Four hours in a room with someone who, for the first time in my life, was really listening, and could place everything in a context that gave me understanding.

The tools Dr Bowles gave me were very simple but I would never have been able to get through the terror, and what came after, if I hadn't had those techniques. Whatever was going on, I could activate them and bring such peace and self-control.

The struggles in my own kids' lives are very much the lived experience of them never feeling safe. The pain they feel is always a reminder of that journey. I wish I'd got them out sooner. It took John raising that belt for me to draw the line: 'You're not going to beat my child. I can bear this but my children can't'.

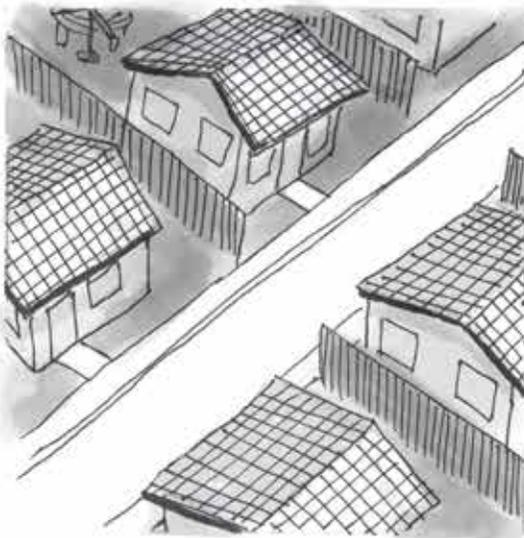
I remember after that Christmas Day when he'd been so openly violent, the kids and I drove down to the beach. I cried that day, like I had never cried before, because I knew I was giving up the dream of the white picket fence. I'd lived on the hope that he could change for such a long time but that was never going to be. Then, I let go of the grieving for 'what might have been' and opened myself up to the possibility of a new beginning. §



HETTY'S STORY

THE ROAD AHEAD





I grew up in the western suburbs of Sydney in the 1970s.



There wasn't a lot going on...



Mum loved me, but she couldn't express her feelings. She just couldn't show emotion.



And this became our family way.



If you were emotional, you were weak.





So I grew up wanting to be strong and tough instead, like my brother, Stew.

I wanted my life to be fast and exciting like his.



Sport was freedom...

and adventure...

The faster

the better.



I know you want to leave school. I know you're bored.

Wow. Someone's noticed.

But if you hang in there, life will be more interesting.

Ok.



So, you'll be production assistant.

I've got the job?

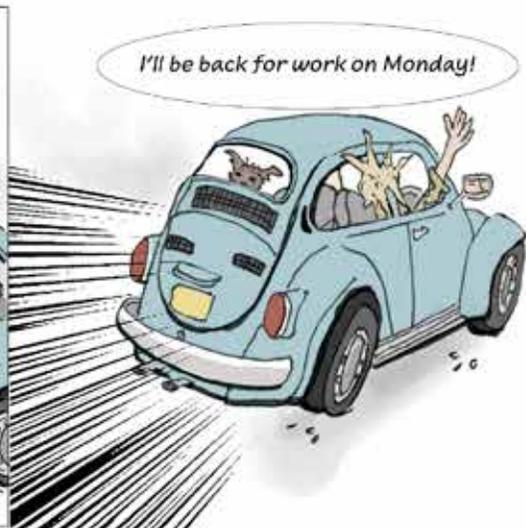
Start Monday.



WESTERN DAILY NEWS

WOO!

Problem was, school was the same old same old. I couldn't wait to get out of there.



And then my life really began...

I liked boys. I liked the affection and hugs too.

I thought I was bullet-proof...

But then I met this older guy.



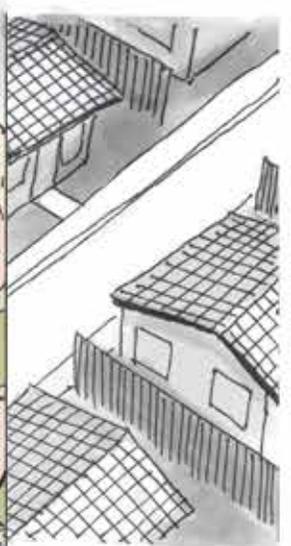
We shacked up fast - big mistake!



It took a long time to feel confident again.

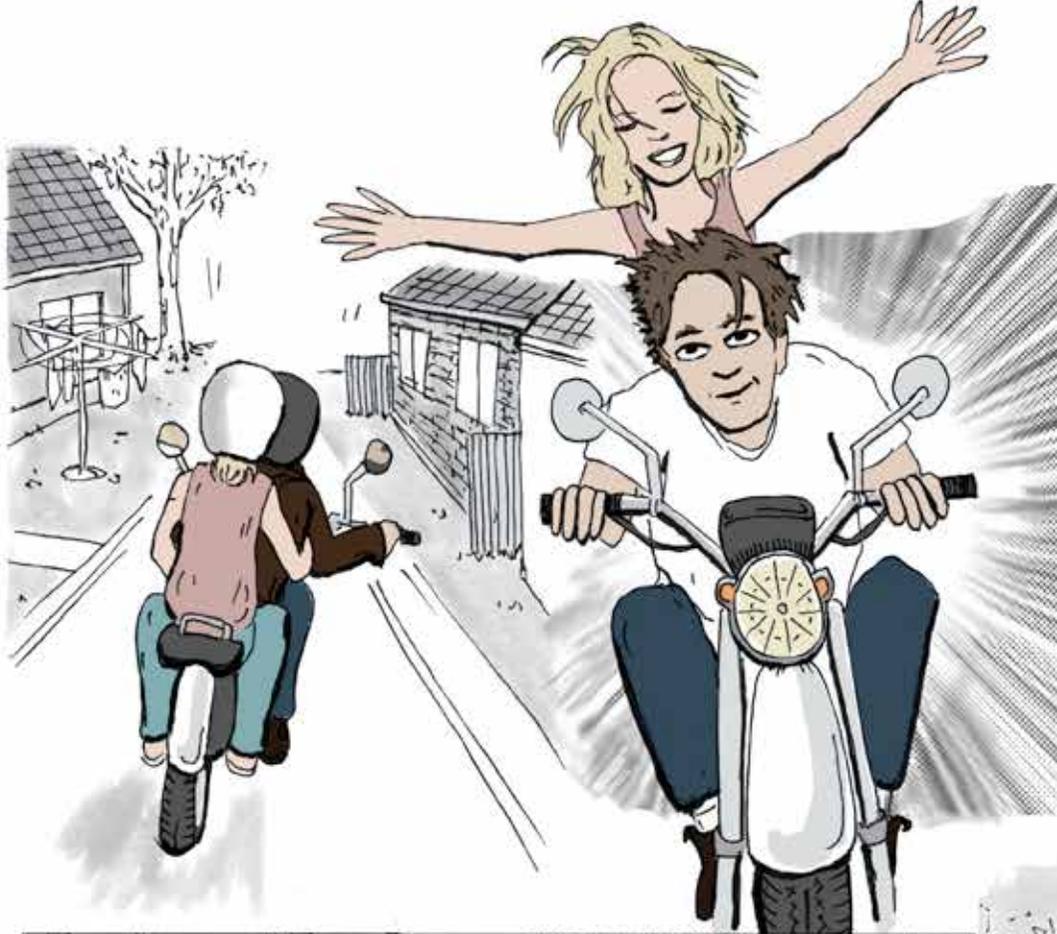


But hey, I was 'sulking' and that wasn't our family way. I needed to move on.



I was 21 years old - and still in the boring suburbs.





Tim was as wild as I was... and people loved him. He was one of the funniest guys I'd ever met.

I could never have imagined what lay ahead for us.



From the start, it felt so right.

It was go... go... go. We loved the same stuff. We were like twins.



The more adventure, the better.

For two years our life was very cruisy.



And even though we were often apart, I was like one of the family.





It was a horrific crash.



But he was strong and determined.



I was absolutely in awe of his ability to push through and I loved him.



At home, the caring instinct just kicked in.



I was totally consumed by him. I got lost in his story.



He was trying so hard to get his old life back...



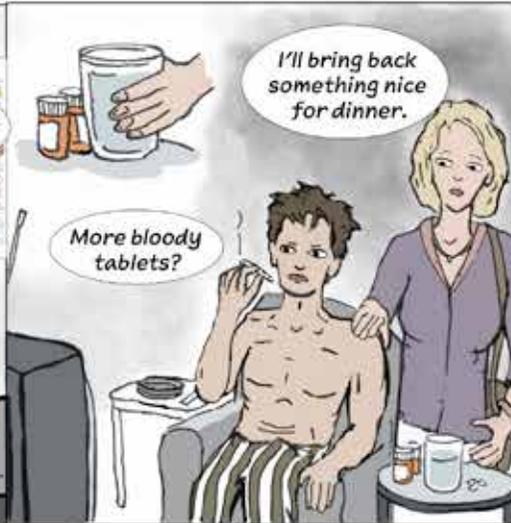
It was getting harder by the minute.



There were still some good times.



But, mainly, life was a wild, confusing rollercoaster.



Without the army in his life, Tim was lost. And bored.



His life had always been all about risk.

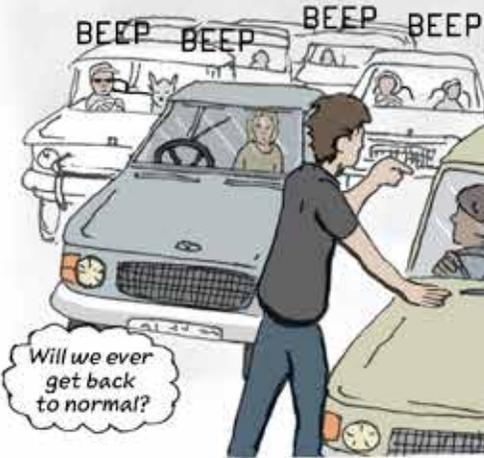


He thought he was bullet-proof.



He was like a different person.

His anger would spiral up and up and up out of nowhere.



Will we ever get back to normal?



Come on, Tim, this is so boring.

Sshhh! Let me watch!

No. I want to go out for a change!

But what I wanted didn't matter anymore.



You want? Always you fucking want?

Oh God! You're hurting me...



He's ready to blow... careful... watch what you say.

I'm sorry, I couldn't change the meeting.

I learnt to keep my head down to avoid it...



...but it didn't always work.



I guess it's not easy on you.

But it's hard on all of us.

His Mum doesn't have a clue what's going on.

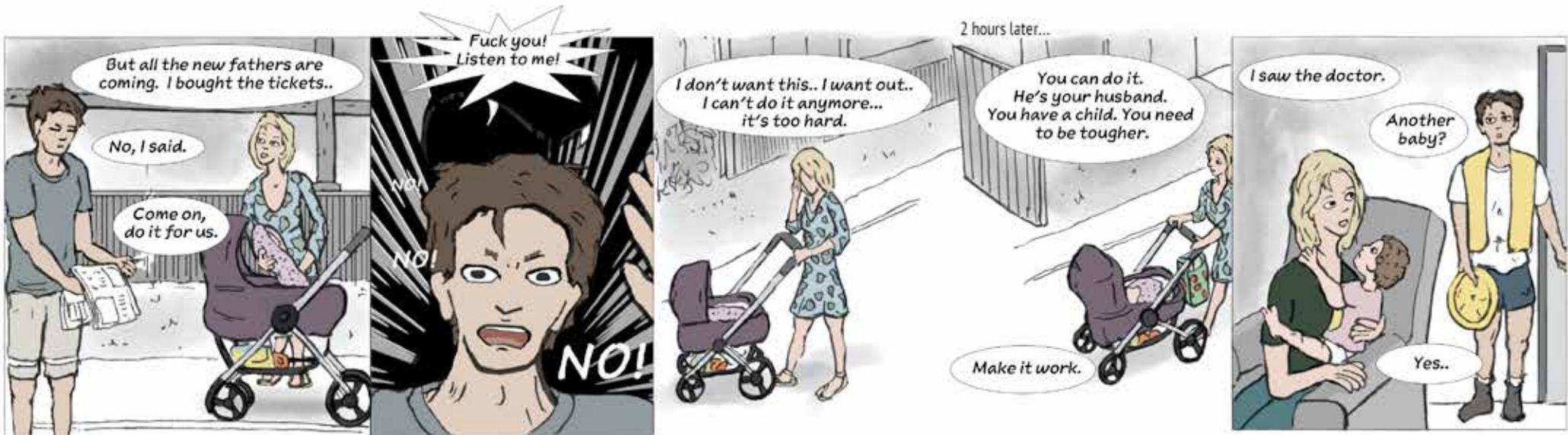
Tell her now... Tell her everything.



I can't find the words to explain it... I can't find the words.



The baby was extra pressure on Tim.



And I wanted more from him as well. I wanted life to be normal.



With two kids, I had even less time to support him.



He was getting worse and couldn't control the rages.

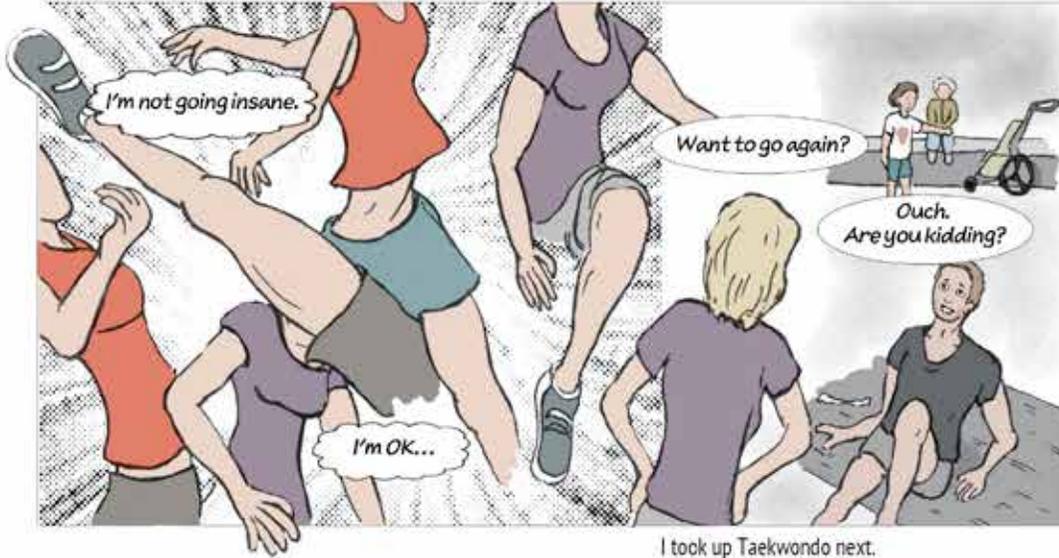


I felt invisible.



I found sport again and played like my life depended on it.

Sport was the ultimate stress release. And kept me strong...



I took up Taekwondo next.



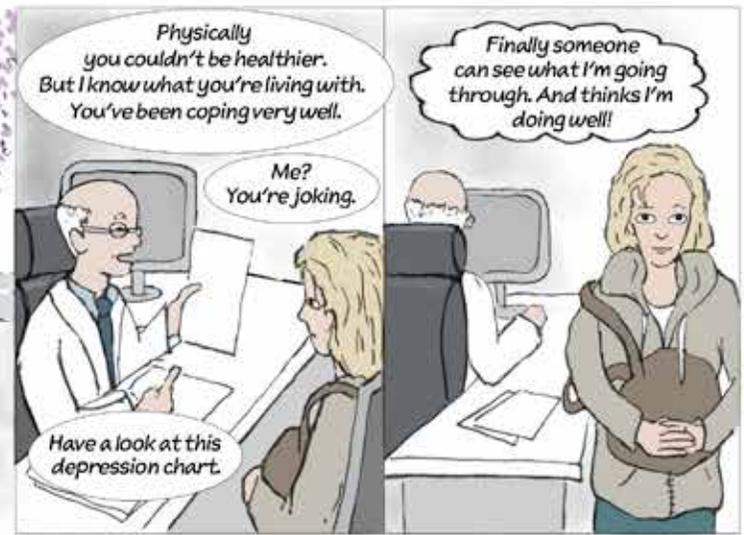
My own family left me alone.



The rages came every six weeks like clockwork.



Our safe place was a park by the river. I wanted somewhere that was nice for the kids.



A new doctor...

It was a pivotal moment. It gave me strength.



That's when I found a church...
Every time I went through the door and
saw friendly faces, I couldn't stop bawling.

Meditation helped, too.

But after all we'd been through - how could I just leave him?
I stayed and stayed.



I kept trying to outrun the pain.
I needed not to think about it.
I needed the release.
I went faster and faster...

My kids would have been
left alone with him.



Something in me had changed. My energy had shifted.



But finally, it was just us.



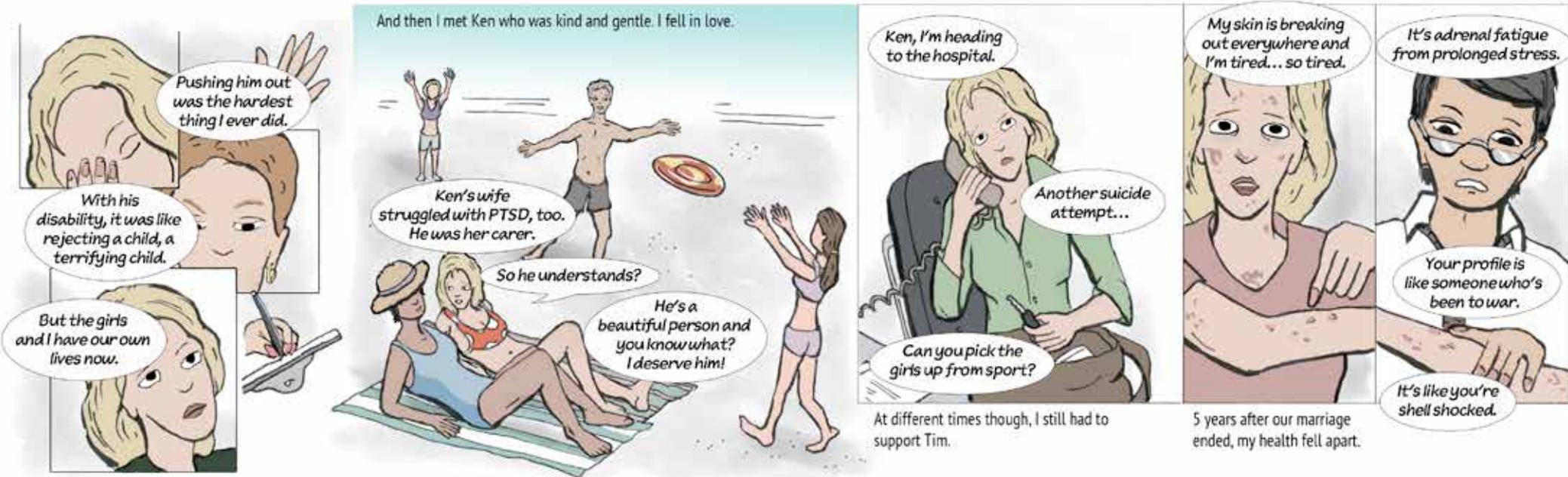
When I made the change, people wanted to help.



My boss was a psychologist and she helped me so much. I needed to find my way out of Tim's story to find my own.

Our life improved every day... but Tim's continued to be a rollercoaster.

And our lives were still entwined.



Women don't always ask for help when they need it most.

Just like Hetty, we keep trying to fix it all by ourselves.

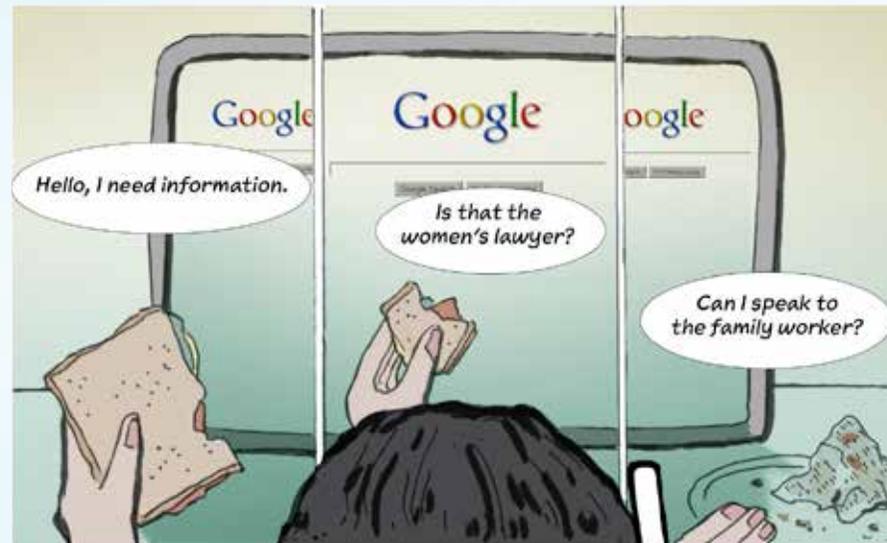
If you suspect domestic violence, speak up and reach out.



Information is a woman's best friend.

There are a lot of services and people waiting to help you see what your future could look like.

What we don't know, can hurt us. The right information can keep you safe.



It's tough making hard choices alone.



And it's easy to lose faith in ourselves. Support from others can make all the difference.

The journey to safety is not always a straight line.



Sometimes it can feel like we're going round and round in circles.

It is hard but don't lose hope. Find support to break the cycle.

There's more to DV than these four words.

'Did he hit you?'
It's a question that gets asked again and again. Because I wasn't actually physically assaulted by my partner, it was like my experience was less legitimate... People just expected me to get over it.

— KELLI



Domestic violence services know otherwise.
They are experienced in all forms of violence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



If it takes a village to raise a child, what does it take to create a book like this?

Home Free is in your hands because of the collective belief, persistence and creative skills of many individuals and organisations. Our thanks and acknowledgements to:

The Women: So many women generously shared their stories in support of this book. Some appear in these pages while others were an integral part of our background research. It goes without saying that without them...

Liz Reedy: Liz conceived this book as a collection of stories that show women's strengths in reclaiming safety from violence. She was a Pied Piper gathering people, organisations and funds to make it happen.

Project Funders: This consortium of determined organisations contributed crucial financial support: Bonnie's Support Services Ltd.; Western Sydney University; NSW Health Education Centre Against Violence (ECAV); Parramatta City Council; Western Sydney Community Forum; Uniting Newpin; and Sydney Community Foundation. We also thank UPS for generously donating to this project.

Academic Partners: Special thanks to Professor Rosemary Leonard and Professor Debbie Horsfall who jumped on board for our partnership with Western Sydney University. This means we have ongoing theoretical research and insights into what the stories tell us about the journey for women.

The Creative Team: Only Human Communication have been partners on this book from the earliest days. Thanks so much to Moya Sayer-Jones (creative director and writer); Clive Jones (design); Dean Golja (photography); and Kate Hamilton (writer). The artist Alex Mankiewicz was 'drawn' by the power of these stories to join us and gifted many extra hours at the drawing board – literally.

Bonnie Support Services Ltd.: Bonnie's energetic and passionate all-women staff work on the frontline everyday. They were our go-to industry experts. Special thanks to Tracy Phillips for her marvellous leadership, energy and advice. And to Catherine Mellors and Asha Zappa for their proofreading skills and advice.

The Steering Group: Expert advice and support – thank you to Catharina Webb; Maggie Kyle; Sabrina Caldalano; Rosemary Leonard; Liz Reedy; and Tracy Phillips.

Sylvianne Heim: Publicity and corporate sponsorship: helping us to get more books to more people.

OUR PARTNERS





000

24/7 immediate assistance with safety

1800Respect

free 24/7, confidential, online or telephone plus interpreter service **1800 737 732** and www.1800respect.org.au

1800 656 463

Domestic Violence Line
assistance to escape domestic violence (NSW)

Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) 131 450

Immigration Advice and Rights Centre (IARC)
free legal advice on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 2pm to 4pm **(02) 8234 0799**

132850 Centrelink social workers



Talk to your doctor or local community health or women's service

Confide in a trusted family member or friend

Your local police station: Domestic Violence Liaison Officers

At work, do they have a confidential Employee Assistance Program or a domestic violence policy?

Educational institutions generally offer free support to staff and students

Do you know a woman who might need your help to be safe?

- > Give her this book
- > Listen without judging and believe what you are hearing
- > Acknowledge the person's fears and concerns
- > Avoid telling her what she should do
- > Ask what she wants to do and then support her to do it
- > Be honest about what you can and can't do to help
- > Don't gossip to others – this could place lives at risk
- > Get support for yourself: talk to a counsellor or trusted friend
- > Young children need responsible adults to protect them.
Call the **Child Protection Helpline (132 111 in NSW)** for an anonymous discussion with a child protection worker

There are plenty of things everyone can do

- > Share this book
- > Take a personal stand: domestic violence is never okay
- > Challenge gender stereotypes that hold men to be superior to women
- > Speak out against cultural messages that present victims as being responsible for the violence perpetrated against them
- > Get your workplace to join in any efforts to fundraise or support domestic and family violence services
- > Go to any local rallies or events that raise awareness of domestic and family violence
- > Participate in the Sixteen Days of Activism – 25 November to 10 December every year
- > Donate money or goods to domestic and family violence support services

And for men...?

- > **1300 766 491**
The **No To Violence Men's Referral Service** can help with information on men's violence and is for men who want to stop being abusive:
www.ntvmrs.org.au

WHERE CAN I GET MORE BOOKS?

Would you like to see more of these books in your local area or organisation?

To arrange for copies to distribute, head over to the Bonnie Support Services Ltd. website at www.bonnie.org.au or email adminofficer@bssl.org.au

HOW CAN WE GET MORE BOOKS OUT THERE?

Your organisation can sponsor the printing of more copies of this book.

Find out more... email adminofficer@bssl.org.au



#homefree



000

24/7 immediate assistance
with safety

1800Respect

free 24/7, confidential, online
or telephone plus interpreter
service **1800 737 732** and
www.1800respect.org.au

1800 656 463

Domestic Violence Line
assistance to escape domestic
violence (NSW)



Bonnie
Support Services

by women and with women

www.bonnie.org.au