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INTRODUCTION

When I was a child, I was so busy trying to survive, so busy living in the moment, that I never put any time into thinking about what I wanted to be when I grew up. How I wanted to live.

What sort of man I wanted to marry. I've spent a lot of my adult life living the same way because I never learnt any different. I went from an abused child to an abused wife. It was all I'd seen, all I'd known.

I was born in [REDACTED], Victoria, one of six children, one of a pair of twins, always one of something. My mother had sustained a [REDACTED] injury in a buggy accident when she was a child. It left her shy, introverted, perhaps a little slower and more vulnerable than many and volatile, boy was she volatile. At [REDACTED] she was working as a housekeeper in the local boarding house in [REDACTED], her hometown, when a handsome boarder going by the name of [REDACTED] told her a whole lot of sweet nothings and despite her family begging her to let the drifting vagabond go, she wouldn't listen, she was in love and he was her knight in shining armour despite having nothing at all to offer her, and they ran away together when she was 18.

My maternal grandfather had emigrated from [REDACTED] when he was sixteen. He'd worked on the Tod River Scheme and the Gorge Road project, endured racial discrimination that would make your heart break, before he found his way to my [REDACTED], found my Grandmother and purchased ten acres in [REDACTED]. He was a proud man who worked hard, was respected by his community. [REDACTED] was not good enough for his daughter. And he was right, [REDACTED] wasn't even his name - he was dodging conscription and the other family he'd left down in Tasmania. But [REDACTED], my mother, wouldn't listen to him, her brood of siblings or anyone, she was in love. Another similarity with my mother.

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They went back to Victoria and made four babies, my older sister, [REDACTED], me and my [REDACTED] sister, [REDACTED] and my younger sister, [REDACTED]. Dad spent most of his time doing whatever he pleased while mum hustled to keep everything together. My grandparents took [REDACTED] under their wing and the rest of us just survived as best we could. Dad was off wherever he was, usually the pub. Mum got some housekeeping work. We moved house a couple of times, each time, my grandparents refusing to let go of [REDACTED] thinking Mum and Dad would have a better chance with just the three of us but really, they'd grown so attached to her, they thought of her as theirs.

It's a long way from those humble beginnings to holding a seat on my local council, being re-elected by my beloved community time and again to do work that is important, locally at first, and through the people I met, in a wider sphere, work that I gives me so much joy to be able to do. Even if I'd been able to dream when I was I child living on the banks of The Murray, I don't think my little brain could have even begin to imagine the things I could do and the impact I could have. It was so far outside of my comprehension. So far outside of all that I knew. My mother spent her life surviving; and I spent my life running, hiding, hoping, surviving, I didn't know there could be more. I hoped it, I hoped someday I could be loved, that I could be safe but that's as far as I got.

Today I have [REDACTED] children, [REDACTED] grandchildren, [REDACTED] stepchildren, [REDACTED] step-grandchildren and as growing number of step-greatgrandchildren. I don't think of any of them as steps though, they're just all our kids.

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I am, or have been, Patron and/or Committee Member, including Chairperson of dozens of local and SA wide organisations in sport, charity and service clubs, as well as being recognised for my services to local government with various awards, having been continuously on Council since [REDACTED].

I've been many things in my life: a daughter, a sister, a granddaughter, a guilty survivor, a rebel, a tearaway, the beaten, the laughed at, the nursemaid, the instigator, the follower, the thief, the hungry, the desperate, the molested, the hated, the despised, the forgotten, the ignored, the saved. A runaway, lover, wife, mother, beaten, worthless, left with nothing. nanna, stepmother, another lover, the loved, the cherished, the carer, the forklift driver, the business owner, the council woman, the foster carer, the kinship carer, a friend, a mentor, a champion of causes and people. I have been many things but all I really am is a woman who survived. A woman who wants to make a difference. A woman who found something to believe in. A woman who eventually climbed her mountain and found her way in a sometimes unforgiving world.

Domestic Violence can be generational. It stopped with me. But it haunts me, it will always haunt me. But I will always be a woman who can overcome anything because I've done it before. But there is no place in my life now for the unkind, for the aggressors and the perpetrators. I'm no longer a victim, I am a survivor.

I am writing this for a number of reasons.

Foremost, it was personal. I wanted all I'd been through, all I'd overcome, to be documented, I wanted to dig deep into myself and unpack it all and maybe be done with it because it does still plague me today.

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It's impossible to walk away from parental abuse and domestic violence and just voila! - be okay. You carry those scars, emotional and physical with you. You live with the fractured relationships. You retell the stories, sometimes forgetting bits, sometimes remembering new bits, in an effort explain yourself or to heal those fractured relationships, to say I'm sorry, this is why. I wanted to remember it all, one last time in the hope I don't have to remember it all again, see them in my dreams, be haunted by the memories and the fear and the worthlessness in my lowest moments but to also say to anyone who is suffering, there is hope, there is another way and you can be more. To those who suffered like I did and are also out on the other side dealing with all the baggage you take with you, I see you, I am you and you're doing great.

[REDACTED]

I don't know for sure what the first defining moment of my life was, my mother was a woman who struggled with many things, I'm sure recall was one of them. But I know when I was 18 months old, I toppled into a copper. The day's nappies were boiling, Mum and [REDACTED] were inside and somehow, I made my way into the copper full of boiling water. I was only in there for a few seconds before my screams brought my mother and [REDACTED] running to my rescue before Mum raced me to the hospital, but I was in there long enough to leave lifelong scars [REDACTED] that would define how I saw myself as a person and as a woman for a lot of my life.

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My father made fun of those scars every chance he got so I grew up thinking they defined me, embarrassed to wear a [REDACTED] swimsuit, shy around boys, thinking my body was that of a freak and wondering who would want to have sex with me? I covered those scars with beautiful clothes but as with all scars, they don't go away just because they're covered in a pretty brocade. They're still there. They're always there and I never forget. If I dared forget for a moment, my father's words would ring in my ears. The memory of him and his brothers pointing and laughing and taunting me like I was a circus freak, would flash behind my eyes. Even today, as a mature, respected and successful businesswoman, I am loved by my husband who thinks I'm beautiful and sexy, but still there are times when I am that scarred, frightened, shameful little girl expecting someone to point a finger and laugh at my inadequacies, that any second, they might discover that hidden beneath the embroidered A-Line dress, I am a circus freak. I'm old enough and wise enough now to know where it all stems from, the cause, that is says a lot more about my father than it ever did about me and my worth but on those days where my bravery shakes, where the tiny fissures in my confidence appear, that little girl and her fears and her shame over something she had no control over, pokes through, for just a moment, and I'm reminded all over again of how far I have come. There is a reason why the word scared and scarred are so alike.

It was 1954 and like so many other things, medical care was still progressing to where it is today. I spent three months in the Royal Women's Children's Hospital in Melbourne fighting for my life and it was probably the first time I escaped death. It would become a theme in my life, death, pain, escape. I don't have a first-hand recollection of the copper incident and relied on my mother's retelling and the ever-present scars that are still visible today, faded but they're there, but the rest, well, those are stories I remember very well.

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They are the stories that have shaped me, they're the people who have built me into a woman who is passionate about her children and grandchildren, her community, about making her little corner of the world a better place. Who, every day, has to dig deep, past the pain and scars, the self-doubt and the frightened little girl who always felt so worthless, to live this extraordinary, blessed life.

A lot of people look at me and see a well-dressed and confident woman.

A tidy suit can say many things to the world and hide just as many things, but there were many days in my life where I was sure I wouldn't see another, that I'd reached the end. But I've always been gutsy. Even in the womb, I'm told I was a survivor, taking more of the food than my [REDACTED] sister. So, I'm still here, and I'm still going and I'm still fighting, not just for me, but for the people, community and causes I believe in. I champion things like community sport because I know how important it is, because there was a time the sporting community and its people saved me. But we'll get to that. To know why I needed saving in the first place, I need to take you back to the beginning.

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[REDACTED]

In [REDACTED] my [REDACTED] was murdered by her ex-fiancé in the beautiful [REDACTED] town of [REDACTED] in South Australia. With its limestone cliffs that glowed orange with the pink candy floss sunsets, it was a town where you could wander freely, where you could swim in the brown river for hours and hours during the summer without a care in the world. Where people flocked for their family long weekends to soak up the sunshine and the goodness of nature.

The ex-fiancé, who I will not give perpetuity to by naming him, came begging for a chance to chat one afternoon as [REDACTED] and her [REDACTED] were readying themselves for a night out. With Grandad's blessing, the ex-fiancé drove himself and [REDACTED] out to park in nearby [REDACTED] [REDACTED]s fields for the chat. We'll never truly know what was said – but we know what was done - as she ran for her life, the ex-fiancé [REDACTED] [REDACTED] in the back before proceeding to shoot her [REDACTED] and then leaving her there in poor [REDACTED] fields. She was [REDACTED] years old.

This is what brought us home to [REDACTED]. I was three years old and revelled in the unending love and attention showered upon us by my mother's family. They gathered us to them in the wake of their tragedy and held us and loved us in a way we hadn't yet known. Our [REDACTED] grandparents had bonded with [REDACTED] more than [REDACTED] and me. They'd held on to her whenever my parents had moved house in Victoria, and they held on to her again when we came home to [REDACTED]. They didn't trust my parents to care for [REDACTED] the way they could, to love her the way they could.

Afterall, the [REDACTED] had so many mouths to feed and my father had his bar tab to fund and even then, Mum struggled to mother. She was volatile, fragile and easily frazzled.

SUBMISSION BY [REDACTED] TO -
THE.ROYAL.COMMISSION.INTO.DOMESTIC?FAMILY.™.SEXUAL.VIOLENCE

[REDACTED] happily stayed with [REDACTED] and the rest of us went home to the [REDACTED] acreage in [REDACTED].

We lived in a shack at the back of Grandma and Grandad's house. They were so excited we were coming that they hustled to get it ready for us, making sure it was nice and homey and had everything we needed. They were all grieving for [REDACTED] so the distraction of a bunch a rowdy, undisciplined toddlers was very welcome. They'd worried for mum the whole time she'd been gone with my uncles periodically going to Victoria to check on her, so they were glad to have her home where they could keep an eye on her. Mum also enjoyed being able to help with all that needed doing in the wake of [REDACTED]'s death.

The ex-fiancé had eventually killed himself to avoid being captured so they hadn't had to endure a trial on top of everything. But they still needed so much from each other. Everyone felt guilty for one reason or another, Mum for not having been there for [REDACTED]'s formative years, others for allowing her to go off with him that day, for not stopping them.

Eventually my uncles went back to Victoria for [REDACTED] and then our family was complete. I'd be glad for it in the years to come when Mum became worse and worse. [REDACTED] eventually became the mother we didn't have, our advocate, our protector, Mum's protector. Maybe she would have been better off staying in Victoria and never seeing all that she saw, but it this is what happened.

The little [REDACTED] that came home to [REDACTED] was a fighter. I'd fought for my life for three months after the copper incident. I'd fought for my life in the womb, or at least consumed the the majority of the nutrients. Even then I must have known what was to come, that I'd need my strength and my wits.

SUBMISSION BY [REDACTED] TO -
THE.ROYAL.COMMISSION.INTO.DOMESTIC?FAMILY.™.SEXUAL.VIOLENCE

After a while, we moved out of the small shack at the back of my grandparent's house to our own council house a few minutes away. With less help at hand, Mum became worse, the [REDACTED] children harder to manage as we grew, a problem made worse, no doubt, when she gave birth to my brothers, [REDACTED] and then [REDACTED].

She was easily set off and you never knew what would do it and if you weren't quick enough to run, you copped it. She loved us in her own way, I guess, but she'd never coped, never fitted in and was prone to a vicious and cruel temper. We probably weren't easy children, there were so many of us, and we had no structure, no structured parenting or rules and just ran rampant for most of the time. We never knew what we were in for, so we lived, I guess, me at least, on the frenetic edge of fear. I'm sure it palpitated off me more often than not. Sometimes, Mum would just flip, out of the blue, when something would just be too much.

When I was six, I was getting ready for school, just a normal day. I guess I wasn't doing it the right way, or fast enough, or helping, or I was smart-mouthing or asking for something or who knows what, I can't remember.

We were always giving Mum a hard time about something. Dad did it and I guess we just followed suit. But with us, she fought back. Whatever it was this particular day, it caused Mum to turn and throw the knife she was holding at my [REDACTED]. It stuck right in there too. She had to pull the knife out and over to the doctors we headed.

One thing we always understood without having to have a conversation about it, was that mum already had too much on her plate. We never wanted to add to that, so we always went along with the lies told to the doctor. I have no idea if he ever knew the truth about my family, about what happened to us kids.

Did anyone?

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We were gossiped about, our misfortunes spoken about in hushed conversations in the main street, we were watched cautiously and pointed at but if anyone knew the truth, the real truth, I don't know.

It was a time, I guess, where people just let other people be. What happened behind your closed doors was your business and good, proper people didn't involve themselves in other people's business, especially not when it related to people like us.

So, when Mum told the doctor that day that I'd scratched my head on a bit of tin, I went along with it. We might have been dysfunctional, but I was always aware we had each other and that meant having each other's backs. The doctor patched me up, popped a bandage on my head and off I went to school.

I got good at being tough, resilient. I dreamed of pretty dresses like the ones I saw in magazines, but I was content with the limited, shared wardrobe I had with my sisters mostly supplied with dresses handmade by my aunts. I didn't care if people made fun of me, if they looked down their nose at me for what I was wearing or how I was behaving. I let them gossip and snigger. After all, I survived way worse at home.

Between my father's taunts and my mother's temper, competing against my sisters and brothers for attention and food, there was nothing the schoolyard could throw at me. But of course, I was secretly envious of their clothes and their lunches, the hugs they got from loving parents at the front gate, the lunch money they carried and the books they used and the bags they carried. But I'd long since resigned myself to my lot in life and there wasn't much opportunity for wishing, I was too busy surviving. But I was never alone and I think that's what got me through. I had my sisters and brothers. One of us was always standing up for the others in one way or another. We were a package deal, a tight unit.

SUBMISSION BY [REDACTED] TO -
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The day Mum was packing her hospital bag, preparing to give birth to my brother, [REDACTED], we were all forced to wait in the living room. We weren't allowed to leave the room. I think she wanted to keep track of us, keep us all in one place and out of mischief and our clothes clean until she was done, so we waited for her to gather her things. But my sister needed to go to the toilet. She got so desperate that she ended up pooping in mother's hospital case. Well, mother was beside herself. Every one of us got a got a belting.

'Which one of you did it?' Mum kept demanding, belting each one of us in turn, waiting for the perpetrator to confess.

It went on and it was going to keep going on until someone confessed. Eventually, I just couldn't stand it anymore. I confessed. I always thought it made me the weakest one of the group. Everyone else was just hanging in there, they had [REDACTED]s back. No one was dobbing her in and they just took it, time and time again, holding their tongues until I gave in. But I wonder with adult hindsight if I just couldn't stand seeing everyone else getting hit more so than not wanting it myself. I got an extra hiding for the confession, but mother stopped hitting everyone else and eventually, when she was done with me, she went back to getting ready.

That's how it was, we never knew how anything would go, she could snap in a moment, and it was terrifying. It didn't stop us from giving her a hard time though, I guess somewhere in our child minds we thought we had safety in numbers. We didn't. We were powerless against her outbursts. It was like in those moments she couldn't see reason, she couldn't see anything but the rage that filled her. We couldn't talk her down or around, we just had to wait for it to pass.

What we copped in the meantime was just how it went.

SUBMISSION BY [REDACTED] TO -
THE.ROYAL.COMMISSION.INTO.DOMESTIC?FAMILY.™.SEXUAL.VIOLENCE

She could be cruel, the incident with the suitcase was proof, but mostly she was indifferent.

She'd give her command then go about her business until someone or something interrupted

her, and she'd snap. My sister laughs about pooping in the suitcase now; but me, all I

remember is the fear and the pain of those moments, the anticipation, being next, taking the

punishment that wasn't mine. It's hard to let go of fear. It's like a little bird sitting on your

shoulder everywhere you go, chirping in your ear with everything you do. I don't know why

[REDACTED] didn't remember the fear the way I did or why I don't remember the funny side of her

pooping in the case, but I guess that's just the way some of us are built. And maybe my siblings

got off a little easier than I did, were tortured a little less. It appears so sometimes from my

vantage point but they may see it differently. I can't speak for their perceptions, only mine.

You'd think Mum's volatile personality would have made us meeker and better behaved but it

didn't. We were tearaway children. We would run barefoot to the [REDACTED] road and walk along

the main pipeline. We'd wander for hours doing as we pleased, getting up to mischief, avoiding

being home as much as we could.

I can't remember what we'd done that led to the first time we ran away but it was something

we knew we were going to be in trouble. Big trouble. The kind that came with a thorough

belting.

We were naughty and adventurous with big imaginations so it could have been any number of

things. But whatever it was, it was done and there was no undoing it. All we could think to do

was run away. Get out and be free, be somewhere else. There was never enough of anything at

home, anyway, never enough love or food or safety, we thought for sure we could do better on

our own.

SUBMISSION BY [REDACTED] TO -
THE.ROYAL.COMMISSION.INTO.DOMESTIC?FAMILY.™.SEXUAL.VIOLENCE

I'm not sure whose idea it was to run away but I think it was mine, or at least partially mine. We just didn't think we had much choice so we packed up what food we could scavenge and some clothes and off we went. The first time we ran, we went to the big water tower, thinking ourselves very clever, that no one would ever find us there. I can't remember what our plan was for after the water tower or how long we planned to stay there but it didn't matter, because of course it was somewhere the police would eventually look, which they did, much to their relief, and took us home to receive our belting.

We were grounded too and scared off trying to run again for another six months.

The next time we ran, we slept in an abandoned car on the side of the local garage but again, it wasn't long before we were found and returned home. We tried a few more times. But each time, we were unsuccessful. We provided the town with plenty to gossip about though. Those wild [REDACTED] kids running all over town causing trouble like no one owns them. They looked at us sideways, huffed and grumbled when they saw us, some were even brave enough to have words and give us a verbal *what for* or have words with our parents not realising the belting we would get for it. Or maybe they did, maybe they thought that's what we needed. It was a common school of thought in the day, a good belting would set a ratty kid straight, but we got so many of them they meant nothing after a while. It was just another and another. A blur of beltings.

We were a law unto ourselves at this point. I was six, seven, and we were all doing whatever we pleased.

Dad was out most of the time, spending as much time as he could at the pub, going out to dances and doing who knows what while mum was home with us kids doing whatever she could not to go mad.

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SUBMISSION BY [REDACTED] TO -
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Even whilst Mum was pregnant with [REDACTED], Dad was off dancing and drinking and having a jolly old time, spending all of the money and leaving little for food. There were times during the summer we'd spend our days swimming in the river eating nothing but a loaf of bread. But it was his money, he thought, he had a right to it, to do whatever he wanted with it, and he wanted to go dancing.

When he was home, he was belligerent and abusive. He called Mum names, called us all names. Made fun of us. Used his fist or his open hand if he pleased, if we didn't listen or do as we were told.

Or, if Mum didn't listen or do as she was told. Or, if she complained too much about him being out, not having any money to feed her kids or any of the usual things. So it was better when he was out.

But he did come home, and we tried not to listen, we buried our heads and minded our business. I guess that's what the whole town did most of the time. It must have echoed down the street; they must have heard. They must have buried their heads under their pillows too, no doubt tsk tsking with each other at the goings on.

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THE.ROYAL.COMMISSION.INTO.DOMESTIC?FAMILY.™.SEXUAL.VIOLENCE

EVERYTHING CHANGES BUT IT ALL STAYS THE SAME

Then one day when I was about eight, on the way home from a dance in [REDACTED] kilometres from home, the car my Dad was in rolled. Both my Dad and the driver were stinking drunk. Dad lay trapped for some time before being rescued and sent to the hospital where they diagnosed a life altering [REDACTED] injury.

Life got harder after that.

There was such relief having Dad out of the house for a while as he recovered in hospital and then there was a lot of toing and froing back to the hospital. We spent some time in Adelaide with family which was nice as we were fussed over. But back home, there was less money, less of everything and with Dad being possessed by repeated fits as a result of his [REDACTED] injury, Mum was even more stretched beyond her limits.

When Dad came home from the hospital, he was a changed man. We'd somehow forget the man he was, the cruel man who taunted and belittled, who hit and punched and drank.

Somehow he became a superhero, the man who survived the impossible. Who survived fit after fit. He lost his cruelty. He stopped taunting us. He lost a lot, I guess. He wasn't the same man. He'd lost his pride. His ego was left somewhere on the highway. He became vulnerable and dependent. He needed us for his very survival. I knew somewhere inside he was still that man, the fear still lived inside me but day by day it eased, just a little and when the fits got too bad for Mum to manage he'd spend some time at the local hospital or the RAH in the city and then I could fully breathe, knowing for sure the man he was wasn't coming back, at least for a few days.

SUBMISSION BY [REDACTED] TO -
THE.ROYAL.COMMISSION.INTO.DOMESTIC?FAMILY.™.SEXUAL.VIOLENCE

Dad received a payout from the accident, and we used it to buy a house. We moved out of the council house and into our own. We gave up on trying to run away when we moved to the new house, but we built a tunnel in the front yard. We covered the hole at the tunnel entrance with a bit of tin and we'd hide in there for hours. We'd break into the shop at the main street for lollies and drinks but somehow we were always caught. So our supplies in the tunnel were few and we'd always have to come out eventually and just hope that when we did, whatever trouble had sent us there in the first place, had passed or been forgotten.

The church community did what good Christians did and tried to help mum out. She had six children and a sick husband; she couldn't do it alone. They invited us on excursions, sometimes to their properties for a visit, for a play or even an overnight stay. They took turns taking us to their farms they made us cake and cordial and at first it was fine, it was nice to be away from home, to be taken care of and for mum I guess it was such a relief to have a break from us all or at least some of us. We gave the poor woman so much grief, tested her patience, pushed her to the brink and beyond and then ran for the hills.

Mr [REDACTED], we shall call him, was one of the church leaders. A big, imposing man. Or at least he was to eight year old me. He was always around offering to help out and take us for the day, offering to drive the van or pick us up from wherever it was we were. Mum was so grateful; he could have been Hannibal Lecter for all she cared. But he wasn't, he was this pillar of our community. One of those selfless, goodhearted people who was always the first to lend a hand. The unsung hero of the church and our community.

Mum was doing the best she could, but she was struggling and here was this saviour who'd come and take us places, he'd drive us to people's farms or pick us up, so mum didn't have to.

SUBMISSION BY [REDACTED] TO -
THE.ROYAL.COMMISSION.INTO.DOMESTIC?FAMILY.™.SEXUAL.VIOLENCE

He was always there on the church outings, doing his part, always insisting I sit up the front with him.

“Bad things will happen if we tell, you know that don’t you,” he’d insist as his big man hands touched me in places I knew he wasn’t supposed to touch me.

He’d hush me and the tone in his voice, the look in his eye, sent fear racing through my body.

Eventually, just a look from him from across the way would send a rush of fear through my little body.

“It’s because you’re special and beautiful,” he’d say.

I became so afraid of those outings, of that man that I began thinking of all the ways I could stop it. I had nightmares of him coming to the house to invite me for a drive. Mum would have consented without a second thought. She was so grateful for everyone at the church for helping. I dreaded the outings, but I couldn’t tell anyone. I was too afraid. I thought for sure he’d kill me some day. [REDACTED] [REDACTED] died because she made her ex-fiancé mad. Dad threatened us all with certain death when we made him mad and sometimes, I think he tried. It’s what I knew and this man, the coldness in his voice when he threatened me, it was the same. If there was anything I knew, it was that, and how to survive.

I’d try to sit somewhere else in the van, to stay with the other kids, to not be alone with him, but it never worked. It was like being the teacher’s pet and there was nothing I could do about it without making a fuss, drawing attention, making him mad or telling people what was happening, and then bad things would happen, he’d told me so. If anyone even believed me. And how could I have told Mum when she had so much else to worry about? Dad was fitting all the time, in and out of hospital; I knew better than to add to her load.

SUBMISSION BY [REDACTED] TO -
THE.ROYAL.COMMISSION.INTO.DOMESTIC?FAMILY.™.SEXUAL.VIOLENCE

I was eight years old, and it was [REDACTED]. My father thought I was shit, my mother had a violent episode at the drop of a hat and threw knives at my head. This man wouldn't leave me be and I slept with the feel of his hands on me, the fear of him always hanging over me.

I didn't feel like there was anyone who could save me.

I'd heard about a kid who had died from eating the white milk inside a weed and I remember thinking it was an excellent idea. That maybe it was my way out. I could escape all of it: Mum, Dad, Mr [REDACTED].

So, one day I found some and I squeezed out the white milk and waited.

Eventually, I woke up in the hospital. They kept me there, feeding me assorted sandwiches and plastic pots of jelly until the swelling went down. I liked it in the hospital. Everyone was nice to me, and I was safe. No Dad, no mum, no Mr [REDACTED] and no siblings to compete with.

No one suspected I'd done it on purpose, so they sent me home and it wasn't long before I used the milkweed again, failing again. It wasn't working, I needed something stronger, I decided so I upgraded to my Dad's medication. Dad was on heavy medication for his seizures and three times I downed those pills so I could go to the hospital.

By the time I was nine years old, I'd tried to end my life [REDACTED] times.

Mum's family all banded together to help her as well. Everyone chipping in when they could. I would spend weeks at a time at my grandparent's house. My grandmother looked like a hard woman, but she wasn't, she was warm and soft and kind. She was a woman of few words, but she didn't need them, she didn't need to hug and coddle me to show me she cared, I felt it.

Chubby cheeked, she always wore an apron, something I picked up from her and do when I'm home, and she was always sucking on a butter menthol.

SUBMISSION BY [REDACTED] TO -
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At my Grandparent's house, the wireless was always on playing something like *Dad n Dave*, the sheets on my bed were always crisp and the food was always laid out on the table beautifully. We'd say a prayer before we ate. There'd be a spread of cold meats and salad for lunch, hot food and sweets for dinner and my grandfather sitting at the table. His hair would always be parted in the exact same spot, nice and neat and he was the greatest storyteller. It was very different to home. There was always a *People* magazine in my room, and I loved to read the comics, *Blondie and Dagwood*, they always made me laugh.

Nothing was too much trouble for Grandma. I could have lived there forever. It was always a warm and happy place. Grandma was a very private woman. She was a practicing [REDACTED], [REDACTED], She was gentle and kind and always sharing wise words that I guess came from her beliefs, but she never tried to take us to her meetings or involve us in any way, so they were just nice words from a kind woman and they made us feel seen and loved. Sometimes she'd read to us from the bible, and we enjoyed those times of being close with her. Then, in the mornings, she would wrap a twenty-cent piece in a handkerchief when she sent me off to school and I felt like I could conquer the world.

Uncle [REDACTED] and Aunt [REDACTED] lived up the road from my grandparents and I spent as much time there as I could. They would have me over for tea and I'd play with their five children. Aunt [REDACTED] made us dresses, beautiful dresses. These were the safe times, happy memories where I could finally relax and breathe and just be a kid. I didn't worry about anyone's temper or misbehaving or being made fun of and it was wonderful. I found out later that Uncle [REDACTED] and Aunt [REDACTED] almost adopted me but with five children of their own so close in years, they just couldn't but it was lovely of them to think of it.

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I'd always eventually go home though and there - nothing changed. When we weren't up to mischief or running wild around the town, we were helping with dad. We were often sent across the road to the doctor's house whenever my father had a bad seizure, and Mum couldn't get it to stop. What he must have thought of my family, who knows. But on Good Friday, April [REDACTED] the doctor was too busy to come and help and my father died during a seizure.

My mother was devastated. She had six children to care for and not enough of anything to go around. I remember being relieved, as though a weight had been lifted but still, I grieved him.

THE MONSTER

We struggled along for four years, scrimping, scavenging, surviving. My mother remained distraught over my father's death. She had six children to care for and not enough of anything to go around. We became tearaway children after Dad died, no boundaries, no parenting, an unstable, lonely mother. She became more and more subdued and more and more withdrawn as the years progressed.

In [REDACTED], my mother responded to an advertisement in the lonely-hearts column of the newspaper and began corresponding with a man from nearby [REDACTED]. He made her feel all the things she hadn't felt in so long.

They corresponded for a while, finding the connection and support Mum had been missing.

Then he started to visit, to take us all out and Mum was smitten. He wanted them to be together, all of us to be together.

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Even The Monster's own father couldn't talk Mum out of it. He came to the house one day and knocked on the door, "Mrs [REDACTED], I am here to warn you about my own son. He is an alcoholic and no good. I don't want you to leave your security here as he has nothing, and he intends living at the bottom level of my home with you and your children. Please, I have come to plead with you, it won't work," Mr [REDACTED] begged.

But Mum wouldn't hear of it and three months later, she sold the house and packed us up and off we went to live in [REDACTED], leaving behind all our family and everything we knew.

Everything Mr [REDACTED] had said was true, which must have been very hard for him to say, to admit that his son had become what he was. Mum and The Monster took up residence in the bottom floor of Mr [REDACTED] home as predicted, the rest of us were sent upstairs to live with Mr [REDACTED] and his wife, [REDACTED].

Mr [REDACTED] was kind to us. Before long, we called him Pop. We ate because of him; he did his best to look out for us. Sometimes he'd take one of us on his [REDACTED] run and we talk and laugh, and he'd buy us cakes in [REDACTED] and those days were so lovely.

Mrs [REDACTED] though wasn't well. She had [REDACTED] so she was tough to care for. It was in the later stages when we arrived so there weren't any good days. She required constant care and attention which Mr [REDACTED] couldn't give while also working so I helped out. He'd been so good to us. And before long, I'd quit school at 14 to care for Mrs [REDACTED] full time. It was hard work. She needed help with pretty much everything from toileting to eating and I had to watch her constantly to make sure she didn't wander off out the front door or burn herself on the stove.

Within six months, The Monster had spent all the proceeds from the sale of our house in [REDACTED] and most weeks spent most of Mum's [REDACTED] pension as well.

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Mum really should have listened to Pop that day he'd come to the house to warn her. The Monster beat her at least three times a week. For speaking out of turn, for not having dinner ready, you name it, if he didn't like it, he let her know.

[REDACTED] did her best to stand up to him, stand up for mum, for all of us but she was still just a kid too, there was only so much she could do with a man who would happily throw a child out of a moving car on the highway because he didn't like what they said, or they weren't being respectful enough. That was his way. He was mean and cruel and nothing anyone did or said could stop him.

We begged mum to leave before someone died but she wouldn't, really, she couldn't. There wasn't the support services there is today, and she had nothing - no money, no home to return to and she was embarrassed, ashamed. She couldn't believe it had happened all over again but then she believed that that was just how things were. She believed she deserved it; that if she tried harder, did better, it would all be okay.

After a while, Mrs [REDACTED] died, and we moved house when The Monster couldn't stand Mr [REDACTED] interfering anymore. He didn't like his dad looking over his shoulder. I got a job so I could be out of the house, to make my own money in the hope I could somehow do something. I peeled buckets and buckets of potatoes for the chip fryer at the local roadhouse. In the summer I worked in the kiosk at the [REDACTED] selling ice creams. I began finding my independence. What it was like to not be controlled by Mum or The Monster. To feel productive and valued and that on its own is very empowering.

My aunt had ignited a love of fashion with all the lovely dresses she'd made us when we were younger. My very first pay was used to send away for a suit from Harris Scarfe's in the city. I felt a million bucks with that suit.

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Over the years, The Monster would leave mother destitute more times that we could count. She would keep returning to him though, time and time again as though there'd be a change this time, something different, he'd be better. I just think she couldn't be on her own. She had nothing. In between she'd stay with family, and they would try, I guess, but she always went back. They'd pick fruit and what not until he eventually died.

Mum would never truly recover from him, from dad, from the beatings and the degradation. She would spend many bouts in [REDACTED] having awful [REDACTED] treatments that were a medically approved treatment at the time. She died in [REDACTED].

EVERYTHING CHANGES AGAIN

With some money in my pocket and my new found independence, I went to cabarets in the evenings with my sisters and friends. We'd dance and laugh and then end up on the riverbank gathered around a bonfire until the early hours of the morning. These were good times. I looked forward to them all week.

One Friday night in 1967, I was 15, [REDACTED] and I were getting ready to out for the night. We'd found some friends to drive us to [REDACTED] to see a boy [REDACTED] Before we left, she gave The Monster a stern talking to, telling him he better not beat our mother while we were gone. "I wish you were dead!" The Monster called after us as our ride pulled up and we left.

Unknowingly, his words would turn out to be prophetic. As we were driving along the highway, the car caught some loose gravel, slid, spun out of control before rolling, over and over, five times it rolled over with all of us inside screaming. I'll never forget the sound of the screaming and then the quiet when we the car stopped.

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[REDACTED] was no longer in the car. Panic and fear raced through me as I freed myself from the car in search of my sister. I found her lying on the road, still. She was so very still, just a trickle of blood around her nose. I called her name, I tried to wake her.

It was years before mobile phones so we couldn't call for help. I had a bruised knee and a chipped tooth and was very shaken. The lads with us were also shaken. But we were well enough and began walking to [REDACTED] to find help. Luckily for us, one of the farmers who was off to pick up his daughter from town stopped and gave us a ride to the police station where we waited.

They called for an ambulance which took [REDACTED] first to the [REDACTED] hospital and then to the [REDACTED] in the city. But we couldn't afford a car. We had no way to get to the city to be with her. Eventually on Monday, three days later, we found someone to take us to Aunt [REDACTED] in the city and then we went to the hospital to see [REDACTED]. By the time we'd finally arrived, [REDACTED]'s life support had already been turned off and my beautiful, kind sister loved by everyone, was dead.

We buried [REDACTED] in [REDACTED] beside Dad in an unmarked grave, there was no money for anything else. [REDACTED] and Dad stayed that way, alone with nothing to say who they were until 2006 when my second husband gave [REDACTED] the recognition she deserved, creating a large enough grave site to accommodate [REDACTED] Dad and Mum with a lovely plaque. It meant so much to us all to finally be able to bury her properly, with all the love she deserved.

Losing [REDACTED] shocked me all to my core. Afterwards, I just couldn't find myself, couldn't find my feet. I felt guilty for surviving. Mum made me feel guilty for being the one that survived. I couldn't blame her. I didn't protect anyone or advocate for anyone. I didn't help mum the way [REDACTED] did. It was no wonder everyone wished it had been the other way around. I wished it too.

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[REDACTED] was our light, our glue, our everything. I assumed my entire family wished it had been me and I carried that with me until my mother's death in 2012. It was in my brother's eulogy that he said how glad everyone was that I'd survived the accident that I realised I'd been wrong for all those years. I found so much peace in his words.

I couldn't understand how all I had was a chipped tooth and she was dead and never coming back. It didn't make any sense. Nice, sweet, kind, good [REDACTED].

It had happened and I had to find a way to live with it. I was supposed to, I knew I had to, but I couldn't. I couldn't bear the judgement of everyone around me, or so I thought at the time, I couldn't stand to have them look at me that way anymore, I could barely stand to look at myself.

Mum withdrew even further after [REDACTED] died. Never reaching out for help, she fell further and further into a pit. The only sign she was there were the occasional outbursts, name calling and tantrums. Most of which felt directed at me. She hated me more than before, I felt. I had lived and everyone's beloved [REDACTED] had died. [REDACTED] was our light, she eased Mother's burden by caring for all of us, she eased all our pain with a hug, she bravely stood up for us all, protected us, and she was gone. What could I offer in her place? I was nothing, nobody. Mother made it clear, the Monster made it clear - why wouldn't Mother wish it had been me who'd died? I wished it had been me who'd died.

My Grandad died later the same year, and the hole just kept getting bigger and bigger.

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I couldn't stand seeing my mother disappearing, being treated the way she was or being hated anymore. I couldn't take any more of the abuse. I was already dealing with so much, or trying to. My heart was broken. My life shattered. The loss of [REDACTED] left such a gaping hole in me. I just couldn't take any of it anymore, so I left. It would be for good this time because I knew I couldn't stay, not if I wanted a chance to live.

THE BIG CITY

The kind folks at the local [REDACTED] Service Station knew people in [REDACTED] and helped me find a place to board in the city. Once there, I got my first real job at [REDACTED] at Winfield in their [REDACTED] section. I was finally free. I was living my life, and no one was telling me what to do or criticising me. I earned my money and I came and went as I pleased within the rules of the boarding house.

And then I met [REDACTED].

YOUNG LOVE

[REDACTED] worked at [REDACTED] as well, he was a [REDACTED]. He was born and bred in the area and played football at the local football club on the weekends with many of the other local factory workers. He was very sweet and suave and, oh, so protective. I felt like a queen. He'd take me to the drive ins to see a movie or we'd go parking. I felt loved and safe, and I wasn't alone anymore. For the first time in my life I had someone looking out for me, protecting me.

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But I was only 16 and he was 21. It was against the law for us to be sleeping together, even though it was definitely consensual. [REDACTED]'s beautiful mother, [REDACTED] worried about [REDACTED] getting into trouble for what we were doing so she told him, "If you're going to do that, you'd better marry her"

It wasn't particularly romantic, I suppose, but I didn't mind, we were in love - madly in love- and he treated me so well. I was so happy, so I got the form my mother needed to sign to allow me to marry at sixteen and [REDACTED] and I went to see her.

I felt like a big city girl returning home, telling everyone about my job and introducing them to my fiancé. Not much had changed at home, my siblings were still trying to survive just as I had. I wished I could have taken them with me, I still feel the guilt of it, but I was only just surviving on my own.

I thought it might have been an ordeal to get Mum to sign the form, but it wasn't. At first, she thought I was pregnant and even though I denied it, I'm not sure she believed me entirely. But she signed it without protest with The Monster laughing in the background, happy there was going to be one less of us for him to worry about now.

So with all the paperwork signed, we were able to marry. We went to the Registry Office with one couple as witnesses, [REDACTED] a man [REDACTED] worked with in the boning room and his wife, [REDACTED]. And that was it, all over and done with and we went to live in our half cottage in [REDACTED] [REDACTED].

I should have known what I was going to be in for. One night before we married, we were parked at Outer Harbor when [REDACTED] threw a tantrum and ended up breaking his watch. I can't remember what it was over, but he said I might as well know what he was like, that he was sometimes angry and jealous and that he'd been the same with his ex-girlfriend.

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Looking back, the future was clear but then, I was blinded by love and hope. He was such a good man, he was so good to me, his family was so good to me, one tantrum didn't make him The Monster. I'd seen what bad guys were like and [REDACTED] was good and sweet. So I ignored it, and I ignored his warning and went on to marry him.

THE FIRST TIME

The first time [REDACTED] hit me; I was pregnant with my first child. I was 17 years old. Neither of us had brought the skills needed to make our marriage successful. We didn't know what to do with money or how to manage a household. We only knew how to care for ourselves and survive on our own. [REDACTED] was 21, but until I came along, all he'd had to worry about was showing up to work and footy training on time. He drank beer after training, after a game, if he had a girl he'd show her a good time. I'd spent most of my life running wild without any rules. What business did we have getting married and starting a family? So, we fought. We fought about all the things neither of us knew how to do, but knew needed doing.

One night, he was in a particularly sulky mood and I was being brave enough to stand up to him and tell him to lift his game. It surprised me when he hit me, took me a second to even comprehend what he'd done and even as he began to tell me he was sorry, my body filled with the urge to run.

Which is exactly what I did.

I wasn't my mother, and I would not stand around and be treated that way. This was during one of the times The Monster had disappeared, leaving mum and my remaining siblings destitute. With nowhere else to go, she'd gone to live with my Aunt and Uncle in [REDACTED] so that's where I went looking for help, advice, something, I'm not even really sure what I thought my beaten mother could offer me. But she was still my mother and so that's where I went.

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Mum felt sorry for me for sure but told me, "I'm living with family, there's no room for you here, you have to go back." She told me it was likely I had caused him to hit me, that I shouldn't push him so far.

My aunt told me that sometimes these things just happen. They said I should just go home and do everything right and maybe it won't happen again.

So there was nothing she could do for me and nowhere else to go. So I went back. After all, I should just be lucky someone had married me. That's what I'd thought. I wasn't smart, I barely had any high school, my body was scarred from the copper incident, it was a miracle anyone even fancied me. So I returned home with my tail between my legs.

I committed myself to being a better wife than my mother had been. I had nowhere else to go. Maybe if it had just been me, I could have found a way. But I was pregnant. I had to think of the baby, make sure the baby had a home and money for all the things it would need when it came. When I returned, he told me he was sorry and promised everything would be okay.

BEING A MUM

In 1970 at 17 years old, I gave birth to my [REDACTED]. Then, [REDACTED] days after I turned 20, I gave birth to my [REDACTED]. I would have loved more children, but it wasn't meant to be. I threw myself into loving the two I had. They were and are amazing. They are the loves of my life. When times were bad, I always had them, their smiling faces looking back at me making everything better. I can't regret going back to [REDACTED] after that first time because I could never regret my daughter. Just like I can't regret keeping everything from my son, even though doing so fractured our relationship for so long. But I never wanted him to know, to see the pain, to feel responsible. He joined the army when he turned 18, when he came home, I never wanted to burden him.

SUBMISSION BY [REDACTED] TO -
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He says to me now, why didn't you say something, I could have helped you, but it wasn't his job to save me, it was my job to love and protect him and that was what I did.

THE CLUB

When I met [REDACTED] he was playing football at the [REDACTED] along with what seemed every man in his age group from the area. They worked the factories, the abattoir, the railways and they came together each week to play football. His parents were one of the founding families of the club. Generations had played and still play there.

The club was full of the most incredible people, the most incredible women. All who came together with enthusiasm. They'd sit in their cars on the mound that surrounded the football oval, they would travel with their husbands and children to ovals all around the state. If they couldn't sit in the comfort of their cars to watch, they would pull out their folding chairs and gather in groups.

They shared gossip from the week, their children played together, roaming off for hours, returning for food or as the final siren sounded. We huddled together in the cold and the rain on the sidelines. We ate canteen food or food we'd packed at home, we drank hot coffee from thermos and we became friends.

For me, a sixteen year old wife from a highly dysfunctional country family, this was both intimidating and exciting. But the incredible people that they were, they welcomed me in like I'd always been there, like I belonged. I learned so much from these women. Women of all ages. I started out by spending time with my [REDACTED] and her friends and slowly branching out as she introduced me to more and more women.

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I learned things about life my own mother had never taught me, I learned things about being a woman, being a wife, being a mother.

Week after week, I looked forward to seeing these women, my friends. To spending time with them, learning from them, anticipating what stories they had to tell each week. I watched how they interacted with their husbands, the way they spoke to each other the way they looked out for each other.

After the games, we would return to the clubrooms, huddled around the heaters on the wall telling stories. If we played at home, most of us would have watched the game from the warmth of the car and this was our chance to connect.

We'd tell tales of our week, of our kids, funny stories of our husbands as we sat around big round tables. Our husbands brought us drinks, we ate leftover pies and pasties from the canteen for dinner with our kids when we could drag them away from the arcade games hidden in the back room. In the early days, sometimes there'd be a cabaret, as time went by and times changed, they became discos. The kids would sleep on the benches, and we'd dance. It was the most fun I'd known. I'd come alive in those moments.

[REDACTED] didn't like me dancing though. I would hold off as long as I could, watching the other ladies get up and dance and laugh and have a great time. Eventually they'd pull me in. I wanted to feel what they were feeling, I wanted to be a part of their world, their happiness. And I was. But it would inevitably end when [REDACTED] came and grabbed my arm, dragging me from the floor.

I would always plaster a smile on my face. "Oh, [REDACTED] I'd chuckle", but I knew I'd be in for it when we got home. But I didn't want anyone to know, I didn't want to ruin their night, share my shame. Because I was ashamed.

SUBMISSION BY [REDACTED] TO -
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Why was this my life. How had I become my mother? But I wasn't her, I reasoned. Most of the time [REDACTED] was good, he was nothing like The Monster, nothing like my father. He was good to the kids, he had a job and provided well and as long as I did things within the lines of his expectations everything was fine. He was just being overprotective. He was jealous because he loved me so much. He was worried he'd lose me because he loved me so much. He knew of all my hardships, so he wanted to protect me from the whole world because he loved me so much.

It would be years before I'd even realise it was his way of controlling me. And because it mostly manifested at the club, it was easy to say it was because he'd had a few drinks, he was tired, whatever. I could still have fun without dancing. I could still have friends, he never stopped me from doing that. So he was nothing like my father, nothing like The Monster so that made me nothing like my mother, right? That's what I told myself.

The club and it's people became my sanctuary. The place I could be me for at least a little while, so long as I didn't go outside the boundaries of what [REDACTED] considered acceptable. While he played his game of football, I chatted with my friends. While he drank at the bar, I laughed with the ladies at the table. Sometimes he would hover to check in on what we were talking about and then satisfied it wasn't him or our personal lives, satisfied I was laughing at other people's stories and not directing the conversation, he'd move on happy enough.

But as much as it was my sanctuary, it was also the catalyst for a lot of things. Sometimes it would depend on how the game had gone that day as to how his mood was, as to how much he drank that night.

SUBMISSION BY [REDACTED] TO -
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Sometimes, we'd get home, take our sleepy children or our surly teens out of the car and put them to bed and then he'd round on me. He'd seen me smile at another man, he'd seen me laugh too loud, he'd seen me talking to someone while he was on the football field that he didn't approve of, probably a man and it was probably a polite hello and exchange of pleasantries to one of his father's friends but he'd have saved them up and round them off one by one and if I was appropriately contrite it might be okay, but it just depended on how much he'd drunk, how the game had gone, how mad he was about the perceived indiscretion as to whether my apology was accepted.

There were days nothing I said would have changed the outcome and some days I'd had just enough to drink myself, been emboldened by my wise friends who weren't afraid of their husbands, and I'd stand up for myself, tell him to stop being ridiculous, that he was imagining whatever it was he thought I'd done, the intent with which he'd thought I'd done it, and I'd pay the price.

VOLUNTEERING

The ladies of the club weren't just bystanders to the goings on, many of them participated in the running of the club. A club like that can't run, not in those days anyway, without the women pitching in on the sidelines. Selling raffle tickets, organising events, washing the football jumpers, working in the canteen or behind the bar. Everywhere I looked, it seemed, someone was doing something. So when one of the ladies asked me to help out in the canteen, I jumped at the chance.

SUBMISSION BY [REDACTED] TO -
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It seemed like such a simple thing. Each lady was given a quarter of the game so that no one person missed too much football. Some worked a little more, particularly the ladies who took charge of it all. There was a constant flow of customers, pies, pasties, sausage rolls, soft drinks, mixed lollies and potato chips were the main currency in those days.

Each time I worked with different ladies, made new friends, had new conversations. I met and chatted to lots of people buying things too, from our team and from the other team. All between watching snippets of the game because, even in those days, the ladies were avid supporters of the game, the club and their men. They cheered loudly and wholeheartedly from the sidelines, and it didn't stop in the canteen. Sometimes we'd even stop serving while someone was kicking for goal.

Working in the canteen was the start of everything. I felt like I belonged. I felt like one of them and it all snowballed from there. For [REDACTED] years I've been volunteering as much as I can there because 35 years ago, volunteering saved me. Those women saved me. That club saved me. They'll never know how much it meant to me, how important their welcoming was to me, how just having them there and belonging and having all of that to look forward to at the end of the week kept me going, made me brave.

When things were bad at home. When [REDACTED] and I were fighting over money or responsibility or whatever other basic everyday thing we fought over, because that was usually all it was, all the things neither of us had ever learned to do, I'd walk into the club on the weekend, and it would be like walking into a safe, comforting home.

People would say hi, they'd smile, they'd ask how my week was, they'd talk nonsense and we'd scream at a grass field full of men chasing an odd-shaped leather ball as though what they were doing was of some great importance. It was, to us.

SUBMISSION BY [REDACTED] TO -
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It brought us together, it gave us all a purpose, a common goal. People who might never meet would chat like old friends over something that happened in the game, thank you for feeding them or whatever. It brought us all together and when you feel so alone you might die, like you might just fade away because no one sees you, sees your pain, feels what it is like to be nothing, it is the most important place in the world.

I felt so good with my small contribution, I wanted to do more. I wanted to keep chasing that high, keep saying thank you for accepting me. And I liked when people told me I'd done a great job, when they said thanks and gave me a small pat on the back. I liked having people know my name and say hello when I walked in the room. So I did more.

I worked so hard for the club because I was so grateful, and I wanted to please everyone, I wanted them to ask me back, to give me more things to do. I fit in there. They gave me [REDACTED] [REDACTED] at the annual presentation night. Eventually I would go on to win a record amount of [REDACTED] awards. That first time..... but still I thought I had to do more, try harder, live up to that [REDACTED] Award year after year. I wanted to earn it, to be worthy of it. I never felt like I did enough, so I did more.

I joined the Committee so I could do more. It also meant more time out of the house. My children were older now, they didn't need me. [REDACTED] had joined the army at 18 and was busy serving our country. [REDACTED] was 15 and sensibly independent, so I wanted to do more, for me.

Then, I began assisting the [REDACTED] on a long-awaited project [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. The original clubrooms had been built by the founders, the men who played for [REDACTED] as it was known then back in the 1920s.

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Brick by brick they'd built it by hand and it showed, there was so much love and warmth and personality in the place but it no longer suited modern day requirements. The changerooms needed updating, the canteen, the kitchen, the bar, the community spaces, they all needed an upgrade. So [REDACTED] and I worked on that together. I'd known [REDACTED] for a long time, a descendent of one of the founding families, he was one of many of his family that were still playing and frequenting the club. He was a force, a bear of a man with a booming voice and a vision. We needed support from the Council for the rebuild. We worked with the Community Development Manager at the Council who requested a submission for the grant we needed. We needed to give evidence of the hardship, pride and hard work that the early founders and players endured and enjoyed in the post war times. I helped interview and meet with the elders of the club to get their stories. It was a memorable time to go back and hear the rich tapestry of the club's history. To hear how the club had provided a home and somewhere to belong in post war days, just as it did for me.

The work gave me so much strength. I was achieving something that was going to last lifetimes. I was giving back something beautiful to the people who'd saved me. And [REDACTED] he was always encouraging me, telling me to go for it, that I could do this or that, gave me free reign on things. It had been so long since I'd been given the freedom to make choices or encouraged to stand on my own two feet and it was liberating and exciting.

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THE END

It was inevitable that with all the time and energy I was putting in to this project that my marriage would suffer. It was no longer my priority and [REDACTED] could feel me slipping away as I became this other person, that young girl I'd lost, the one who'd come to the city with big dreams. And I liked her. The woman I was when I wasn't with [REDACTED].

When I was doing all these wonderful things and being praised and thanked for them. I knew, it was time. I finally had the strength to say no, this is not the life I want to live anymore. This is not how a marriage should be. I'd seen all of my friends at the club living however they pleased. Their husbands not even thinking to control a single thing about them. That's what I wanted. That's the life and love I wanted. And finally, I believed that even I could have that. Or some version of it. Anything was better than the way I'd been living.

In [REDACTED], after 26 years of marriage, I finally walked away from my marriage. I left with almost nothing. I took nothing from the house, I didn't have it in me to fight him, I just wanted to be gone and I thought someday the kids would get the house or at least it's proceeds anyway, so it would all work out in the end. He gave me \$9,000 in cash and a \$5,000 credit card debt as my share, all he thought I was owed but it was a lot more than many walked away with, so I didn't care. I was free.

I'd hidden all the awful parts of my life, including my marriage, so well; that when I left my husband, my son just couldn't understand. He'd been in the army since he was 18, before that he'd just been a boy. Every time he came home, I made sure that all he saw was a happy family.

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I didn't want to burden him when he had so many more important things to worry about. It wouldn't be until he left the army, moved to [REDACTED], married and had his second child that we would begin to repair our relationship. He was so mad at me for not confiding in him, not asking for his help. [REDACTED] had never intentionally hurt the children. There was one time when my son was small when [REDACTED] threw something at me, I ducked instinctively but my son was standing behind me and whatever was thrown had hit him in the face. There's a photo somewhere of the egg on the side of his face but had been meant for my head.

I never wanted to colour the kids perception of their father. I always wanted them to feel safe and loved. I didn't want them to have to choose sides or for my son to have to protect me. He loved his dad. He looked up to his dad. I didn't want that to change. But eventually, once they were grown and I got brave, life led me on this new path, I had to protect myself. [REDACTED] was getting worse; he didn't like all the time I spent helping at the football club.

He wanted me home, where he could see me and keep a check on who I was speaking to and what I was saying. And I couldn't do it anymore. Maybe I could have handled things better with my son and I certainly wish our relationship had been better throughout all those intervening years when he couldn't forgive me for leaving his dad. But things are better now and I'm grateful and I don't regret protecting my children from all the things I'd seen growing up.

Domestic Violence isn't a part of their DNA and they both have beautiful relationships and families and are thriving more than I could ever have imagined so I will never regret protecting them from my pain.

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At the time, I was working for [REDACTED] a distributor of [REDACTED] transmission products. I worked in the store as a store person, driving the forklift, preparing orders for dispatch and the sort. It was a minimum wage job but it was enough to keep me fed and moving forward and give a bank reason enough to give me a small mortgage.

I wanted to be the independent woman I imagined I could be and that started with finding somewhere to live. When I first left [REDACTED], I stayed with a friend, but I wanted somewhere of my own.

All throughout [REDACTED], the housing trust was selling off the little post-war maisonettes and all I needed to secure one for myself was a \$9,000 deposit. So I used all the money I'd taken with me from my marriage and bought my first home in my own name for \$66,000.

It needed some work as a lot of them did as they changed hands. But I rolled up my sleeves and I did what I could. I slept outside on the back lawn the first hot night when I didn't have air conditioning, but I have so many wonderful memories from that time, from making that home my own.

I've made many memories since then, too. I still live in that little home, although it's undergone a couple of significant renovations since then to accommodate my changing needs and family. I live there with my second husband, and the great granddaughter we're raising and every time I sit outside in the [REDACTED], I'm reminded of how far I've come.

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COUNCIL

Not long after, just as I was finding my feet in my new life, in 1997, a friend suggested I stand for local Council. That after all the work I'd done for the football club that I could do that for many more organisations, that I could contribute to the entire community and the idea of it was exciting. But I wasn't learned. I'd never even finished high school and I'd spent the last 26 years being told, in words and in attitude, that I was worthless.

By now I'd become friends with [REDACTED] We'd become more than friends. His wife had died and we'd both shared our grief over our losses and then one day, we realised we were in love.

So when I was standing as a candidate for the [REDACTED] in the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] was in my corner, cheering me on and I truly felt like I could climb a mountain.

I knew very little about politics, law, governance and human rights. I barely had any experience with local government politics and issues and was sure I had little to offer.

But I learned. It took many nights and weekends while I was having photo shoots and erecting posters with my face on them all around the Council district in preparation for election day. My daughter and her husband and children helping whenever and however they could.

All those years of being told I wasn't good enough, of feeling like maybe God had taken [REDACTED] instead of me by mistake, I was a naturally shy person. Speaking up and out had only ever brought me pain in the past but the belief I had something to offer had been growing. As the campaign continued, I became increasingly sure I could do wonderful things for the community, and I wanted to have a go at it. I wanted to try more than anything.

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Speaking up was tough, but I had survived worse things, I was sure, and I pushed past it and wanted to be able to actively participate in local government community service activities, discussions and in the debates if I was elected. I won a position on Council.

But then came my first meeting in the Chambers! With the help of some Council friends, Council staff, [REDACTED] and my own growing sense of self-worth, I had a tough time, but learned fast, and found myself both thriving and enjoying my new role in the community.

LOVE TAKE 2

[REDACTED] is an intimidating man. Some thought perhaps I was swapping one bad situation for another. They told me so, they warned me about him, they warned me not to jump in too quickly, to wait, to just take my time. They didn't realise, that even though we had never been together before we were together, we were never unfaithful to our spouses, we'd gotten to know each other. I probably knew him better than anyone I'd known before.

We'd spent enough hours together as we worked on that project and I think you really know a person when you see them in work mode, when they're not pretending or behaving, they're just being them. He was and is definitely a man who likes to get what he wants, is used to getting what he wants, is determined, will always find a way and is hardworking. He worked harder than anyone I'd ever known. He ran his own business, had a bunch of kids and he still volunteered as [REDACTED] and at times [REDACTED] of the football club. He never sat still. He was a lot like me that way. I also like to be busy. I've never been one for sitting down and relaxing. I don't know if it was the way I grew up, if you sat still for too long in my house, you'd probably find yourself in trouble for something. He was, and still is, loud and bossy and impatient. But when he laughs, he laughs with his whole body.

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When he sees potential in someone, he pushes them to reach it. When he sees something that needs doing, he does it, or at least allocates someone to make sure it is done. He'd give you his last dollar and the shirt off his back and he treated me like a queen.

You see in fairy tales how the prince treats his love interest like a fragile piece of art, like something of beauty to be adored and cherished and that's how [REDACTED] treated me. He told me I was beautiful, and he touched me as though those words were true but he didn't try and put me in a cage. If I had an idea to do something, he'd say go on, you can do it and he'd be right there waiting if things didn't go the way I'd planned, and he'd help me figure out another way.

When I ran for council, he was right there beside me cheering me on, telling me I could do anything and I truly, for the first time in my life, believed I could.

So, [REDACTED], I married [REDACTED] in front of all our friends and our families. And boy were there a lot of family. I'd always wanted more children - two just didn't seem to be enough - even though I loved my two and my grandchildren with all my heart. But I'd always wanted a big, noisy family. I was so blessed that [REDACTED] had five children of his own. They were all well and truly grown with children of their own and I felt like the luckiest woman in the world.

There were definitely challenges with such a big brood. They'd loved their mum, and some felt it hadn't been long enough since she'd passed. And maybe it hadn't been long enough. But we'd both found something in each other that we needed, that had been missing from our lives and we knew too much about the fragility of life to not grab a hold of that with both hands. I think of those kids and grandkids as my own, even when we don't see eye to eye.

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I wore the white dress, I had attendants and flowers, music, a reception with speeches and dancing. His [REDACTED] were our flower girls and page boys, all our children were there, except my son who was still in the army and coming to terms with the changes in my life. But when we said I do, we were happy.

When I think back to that broken fifteen/sixteen year old girl who ran away to the city to have a new life, she could never have imagined having the kind of love that we had. We were delirious which was crazy, we were grownups. This was the second time around for both of us. We had grown children, but we were as delirious as teenagers. This was our do-over. Mine at least. My chance to truly be loved for me, for everything I am. And I have been.

For 22 years we have been building an extraordinary life. We have two family businesses, and I am busier than I have ever been working for the family businesses and still representing the community on [REDACTED] raising our great granddaughter, making sure she sees her sisters and is as involved and connected to her [REDACTED] heritage as she can be. [REDACTED] would love me to slow down but there's still so much to be done.

[REDACTED] and I are growing old together. Things have changed as we age, we deal with all the trials of ageing. But I still love that crazy, bossy, impatient man because he has a heart of gold and he'd hate me to say, but buried inside that bear of a man is a big teddy bear who would tell me I could fly to the moon if I asked. I find his impatience a little trying at times, it definitely triggers some of my emotional past but unlike the past, I can tell him, I can ask him to give me a minute and there'll be no repercussions because he loves me, that's what real love is, and I wish I'd understood it better when I was sixteen.

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NOW

Together [REDACTED] and I built an incredible business. There have been some trials and tribulations with it, sure, but we've built something that we're proud of. [REDACTED] is still a big bear of a man with a booming voice and little patience, but I love him. Together we are raising his great granddaughter, for reasons that don't need to be detailed here, but she is the light of our life. It's hard work being a Mumma all over again (although to her we're still just Nanna and Pa), doing the school run and making [REDACTED] health is not as good as it used to be. He still works too hard. But he won't retire because he loves his business, he loves being up in a [REDACTED] in the thick of things bossing all his people around. But every day we wake, we have that beautiful girl smiling at us. The sound of cartoons and The Wiggles are a constant soundtrack to our lives. I want to make sure she knows who she is though, [REDACTED] and the family she doesn't live with, so we make sure to schedule as much of that as possible. I am still dealing with all the trials of my life though. Whenever I have something to share at Council, my knees still quiver and I'm sure my voice will shake. There's one guy - isn't there always one? - who insists on trying to keep me small, makes fun of me and what-not but I think of where I've come from, I think of who I've become and I just let him have his fun. He doesn't get to bring me down.

My father didn't break me, my stepfather tried and failed, and my husband of 26 years gave it a really good go, but here I am, on top of my mountain, still wearing a suit that has always been the epitome of fashion and power and strength for me and I'm still here.

I'm making a difference. Recently, I went to a fundraiser for Ovarian Cancer Awareness. I'm the

[REDACTED] [REDACTED] We were fundraising for the first ovarian cancer nurse.

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It's a cause I'm passionate about. 120 women will be diagnosed every year, and a pap smear won't detect it. Every time I attend an event or promote a fundraiser, I feel blessed to be able to do so, that maybe someone might listen, that I might be able to, in some small way, save someone's life. Who would have thought that little [REDACTED] could do that?

The same week I went along to support The [REDACTED] as their new season preparations began, [REDACTED], and standing there on the courts, or chatting to founders of the club who happily shared their history, it reminds me of how much good community sport does. I always remember that 16-year-old newly married teenager being embraced by a sporting community as though she belonged and being able to help another of the sporting communities grow to the best they can be feels incredibly special.

In (what year) when I received [REDACTED] services to my community, I was so proud of that scarred little girl who had to lie about a knife being thrown at her head by her mother, that little girl who was assaulted by a grown man and made to feel worthless. That teenager who lost her sister and felt guilty for living then struck up the courage to leave home, despite the guilt she carried over leaving her brothers behind, only to find herself married at sixteen to a man like her father. I was proud of her for fighting, for getting up every day and hoping for a better, brighter day, even when one looked so far off. For the woman who chose to break free, then chose love again when 'love' had never been kind to her, and it came with a whole new set of challenges. For always seeing the good in people, the hope in life and doing everything she could to make her world a better place, for ignoring 'that guy', and speaking up anyway.

I never felt like I'd made it, not even then, while receiving such a prestigious award.

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Every day I fight that frightened little girl afraid to speak out of turn because the work I do is important. The difference I try to make to my community is important, it's important to me because it gives me purpose, it helps people and it reminds me that those me and my mother - didn't win; they didn't break me, I climbed my bloody mountain despite them and the view from up here is incredible.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I am by far, not alone in the struggles I've overcome in my life. According to White Ribbon, on average, one woman every week in this country is murdered by her current or former partner:

- One in four women have experienced emotional abuse by a current or former partner since the age of 15,
- One in five women have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15,
- 85% of women have been sexually harassed,
- Almost 40% of women continued to experience violence from their partner while separated,
- Intimate partner violence is a leading contributor to illness, disability and premature death for women 18-44,
- One in six women experienced abuse before the age of 15,
- Children of mothers experiencing domestic violence have higher rates of social and emotional problems than other children,
- One in three young people don't think controlling someone is a form of violence,
- One in four young people don't think it's serious when guys insult or verbally harass girls in the street,

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- Violence against women is estimated to cost the Australian economy \$22 billion a year,
- Domestic and family violence is the leading cause of homelessness for women and their children,
- Australian police deal with domestic violence incident every two minutes.

I wanted to write this to remind myself that I have survived things so awful, it is hard to talk about, and I'm still here. Not only am I here but I am leading a life of worth. I am successful and I contribute to so many wonderful causes that give me more than I could ever give them. I wanted people who are suffering to see that they can overcome their circumstances. I want to say to every woman out there suffering at the hands of their partner. Leave. Right now, pack a back, grab your kids, and leave.

Okay, maybe wait until he's at work tomorrow if that's safer. But do it. You are not alone. There are people out there ready and waiting to catch you. If you don't know somewhere safe to go, call the 24-hour Domestic Violence Crisis Line on 1800 800 098 for crisis counselling, support and referral to safe accommodation. They'll keep you safe.

I was lucky to have escaped alive. Not everyone is that lucky. Don't be one of those people. Nothing that is happening to you is your fault. You are worth more than you think, you have so much more to give than you believe. It might be hard to see that right now, but repeat my words in your head, read my story and know, it is possible. My only regret is that I didn't do something sooner, that I allowed it to go on for so long.

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Coming back while pregnant with my son might have been the worst thing I could do but I could never, ever, regret my beautiful daughter who came two years later. But staying for my kids, protecting my kids from what was going on, only led to a heartbreaking, fractured relationship with my son. He was overseas protecting our country when I eventually left his dad, and he just didn't understand why I would do that and how I could move on. But he'd never known, he'd never seen because I'd made sure of it. We are doing better now and for that I'm grateful.

Staying, hiding, keeping quiet for the sake of the kids only put my life in jeopardy and made my relationship with my children harder. It made all my relationships harder. I hid so much of myself and my life from everyone for so long. But back in the 70's, even the 80's, you didn't talk about what went on behind closed doors. In so many ways, it was no different to when my Mum suffered at the hands of my Father and The Monster. It was hidden, swept under the carpet, not fit for polite conversation.

Every Saturday, my friends sat at the big round tables after a game of football having a laugh while I smiled politely and considered every movement and facial expression I made, afraid that something would make me a whore and that night's punching bag, never brave enough to ask them for help. They would have helped too, any one of them would have given me and my children a safe place to stay, I know that now, but then, I was afraid of what people would think, ashamed of who I was.

You don't have to endure it. This is not the life you were born to lead. There is more out there for you. There is a way forward. Call the people, make the plan and leave before it ruins you all. And then go and live the best, most beautiful life you can because you deserve to, you were born to, you are worthy of the best and most beautiful life you can find.

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Remember, if you yourself are not suffering, then according to statistics one of your friends or neighbours most likely is. Be aware, be kind, be the safe place they can come, their shoulder, their strength, the place for a safe cuppa. Check in, say hey, make sure they know they are not alone.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The human carnage from DFSV is massive and as a society, prevention and minimisation of this will be a benefit to individuals and society as a whole.

My recommendations to help prevent and reduce Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence:

1. What I would like to see is what can be done to change the mode of women's thinking going back into the same mess after they have had a break,
2. Social support to show them you are worthy you don't have to do this there is a place where you can get support,
3. Currently, an AVO is of little or no help in protecting a woman's life. We need a system where a woman in danger can be activated and she traced by a device (with her consent) in case of danger,
4. We need a device for DFSV perpetrators that can track them, including geo-blocking them from approaching an area near their victims that works 24 hours a day, and removing said tracking device is punishable by a substantial jail term.
5. When alleged DFSV perpetrators are charged, they should wear the above geo-blocking tracking device if not immediately incarcerated, and wear it until conviction or exonerated.
6. Victims of DFSV need to have sufficient services available from the first time it is reported to beyond any convictions relating to the incident, so that the same cycle is not repeated.