
Notes From the Diary of an Abused Wife

by Ashley James

We were 21 and in love. We first met at Emmanuel Missionary College, now Andrews University. Before repeating our vows before the minister, we carefully examined what they said. We deleted the word *obey* from my vows, as we did not feel that was part of our marriage plan. The “love and to cherish. . .until death do us part” we repeated and believed would never change.

We went the usual route of the post-World War II veteran. Graduate school for him and a job for me to support us. He finished with a dental degree, free of debt. We had even managed to buy a brand new car that was completely paid for. We shared a great feeling of accomplishment at having jointly achieved these goals.

We worked together to establish a practice and shared our pride in each new patient. He began to get involved in community affairs, for example, the Junior Chamber of Commerce and the Rotary Club. We became active in the 125-member Adventist church; I played the piano and organ and taught in children’s Sabbath School; he served as superintendent of the Sabbath School. There were several young professional couples in the church with whom we enjoyed many pleasant social occasions.

I had our first baby and then 13 months later another, and happily busied myself with them. I felt so fortunate to be married to such a handsome man, with a charming and powerful personality. He became the Junior Chamber of Commerce Young Man of the Year when he was 35—the

Ashley James is a pseudonym for a woman who not only participates in the civic events of her city, but is once again a leader in her Adventist community.

most prestigious award the town gave to a young man for personal, community, and church accomplishments. The members of the little church took great pride in this award. How could I have even imagined that 15 years later I would be a battered wife and leave him?

Diary Excerpts

Slowly and insidiously, things are beginning to change. Last night he spent the whole evening complaining about the real estate man who sold us a house and had not taken him to lunch after the deal was set—eight years ago! I am shocked at his hostility toward this man for a such a petty oversight so long ago.

He berates the children more—especially our son. He stays away from their piano recitals, school plays, and other activities. He always has something more important he wants to do, usually a golf game, dental meeting, or cocktail party for community affairs.

I know that most of his problems are the result of the dysfunctional family he grew up in—his father beat his wife as well as his sons. However, even before our marriage he had often commented that he did not want a home life similar to the one he had known as a child.

. . .Yesterday—even though it was our wedding anniversary—he hit me for the first time. I had left the garage door open. This morning he said he is sorry and that it won’t ever happen again. I believe him.

. . . But it happens again and again. At first,

infrequently (maybe only every month or two), but now oftener and oftener. When I ask the next day what I have done to upset him, the answer is always, "If you don't know, I'm not going to tell you."

I have everything—except life without fear. I constantly worry about how I and the children can avoid yet another tantrum, along with the swearing, verbal abuse, and violence. I know I am not the cause of his temper tantrums, but the excuse for striking out whenever he needs to.

His unreasonableness baffles me. We went out to dinner with another couple, and I finally was able to get him home. He immediately goes to bed. As I brush my teeth in the adjoining bathroom, he keeps shouting that I am taking too long, that it is disturbing him from falling asleep and since I was so anxious to get to bed I should brush less. Rather than undress with the light on in our dressing room, I go into our large walk-in closet to take my clothing off. He complains that the light under the door is bothering him, gets up, and drags me half-dressed onto the bed. I struggle to get free from him and then he begins to choke me without letup. I fear for my life, especially when I look into his eyes and see the hatred in them. Somehow I have the strength to free myself, get in the car, and go to a friend's home where I am mildly hysterical. What saves me is that he is naked and I am not, and I am able to escape before he can get dressed and follow me. After calming myself down and knowing he would be asleep, I return home to yet another sleepless night.

... We have been out with friends. They have car trouble and we take them home. He is angry at me for telling the punch line of a joke he told before anyone else has had time to guess it. As we return from our friends' home, he becomes extremely abusive, shouting obscenities and berating me. Suddenly he stops the car and shoves me through the door at 2:00 a.m. onto a major highway several miles from home. I start to walk on the shoulder of the road, but am terrified that he will return and run me down with the car. I finally walk up a nearby hill where some friends live, wake them, and they take me home. Walking into our house, I feel terror, not knowing what I will encounter. What I find is someone raving, de-

manding to know who has brought me home, why it has taken me so long to get back. All the time he is slapping me around to show that he means it. The next day, unbeknown to me, he calls our mutual friend and thanks him for bringing me home. But not a word of regret is said to me. I know what I did annoyed him, but I don't think I deserve the punishment he meted out.

And then there is sex—how confused I am with his physical abuse at night and his sexual advances the next day. The tenderest moments between man and wife become nightmares. I feel so degraded and rejected for the evening before I have to fight down the bile rising in my throat, but am too afraid to deny him. After the hate and hostility he has shown a few hours earlier, how can he demonstrate any "love" for me? I begin to understand it is just another of his ploys to control me absolutely in body and soul. I am shattered.

Why don't I go for help? The answer is very simple. In my small American town there are no hot lines to call, no shelters to provide housing, and the average person, including the police, tend to blame the woman and vindicate the man.

... After each episode I struggle to control the hysterics I feel—I am determined through all this to maintain my dignity. But I do cry for my children and can see no way out. The town is too small for both of us. My minister father lives thousands of miles away and does not condone marital discord or divorce. Also, I don't want my children to hate me for taking them away from their friends and school.

Why don't I go for help? The answer is very simple. In my small American town there are no hot lines to call, no shelters to provide housing, and the average person, including the police, tends to blame the woman and vindicate the man. I find this out one terribly violent night when my husband threatens to burn the house down and has even started pouring gasoline around the foundation—the police do nothing. Of course, by the

time they arrive, he turns into Prince Charming.

. . .The church members are much inclined to gossip, and I feel alienated and estranged in their midst. What a choice bit of news I would provide them if I confided in anyone there. Besides, they would say that if I were a better Christian this would not be happening to me. The children and I continue going to church, but because of our situation we do not socialize anymore with the members. As my fervent prayers for improvement in our marriage are to no avail, I feel God has abandoned me.

. . .Being physically weaker than another can be terrifying. Last night after returning from the house of our friends, my husband kicked me to the floor of our living room. I get up and duck as he swings at me; he hits the stone fireplace with his fist, ripping his skin open and bleeding profusely. He yells at me, "Look what you did to me" and shoves his bloody fist in my face.

On more than one occasion I am deliberately accused of causing my marital situation. The biblical admonition to care for the fatherless children and widows in the church certainly does not apply to divorcees.

Anyone who has not experienced such a situation must wonder why I stay. But when we have a few "good days" they cause me to forget the traumas and hope. I can't accept what is happening as real. I live where happy families are supposed to live—in a redwood and stone house with a swimming pool and a Lincoln Continental in the garage. Husbands beat wives only in the ghetto.

I feel particularly afraid for my son who is constantly bullied by his father. I am full of shame that I allow these things to happen to my child.

I try repeatedly to convince my husband that counseling, either on an individual or joint basis, would help, but he flatly refuses to go. If anyone needs such help, he says, it is me, not him. Psychiatrists are for the mentally ill, not for those like

him who are capable of earning a good living.

The moment has finally come when I am emotionally and physically spent. Since I can trust no one in our small town, I go to see a lawyer in a nearby city. I find out that I do have rights and can demand a property settlement. Of course, since my husband is a professional man, the attorney is sure of getting paid. I wonder what he would have done if that were not the case? Would he still have been so eager to help me?

. . .The long night of my marriage is finally coming to an end, but not without additional turmoil. My husband insists that the separation agreement be effective on the anniversary date of our marriage. He smears his blood on the first modest alimony check.

I am now working in an office where everything is new to me. I live in a small two-room apartment in a large city. It is quite a comedown from my previous luxurious living conditions. But the sense of peace and quiet is overwhelming. I am thankful to God that I am still alive.

. . .I am encountering another problem in an unexpected place—the church. Each week I faithfully attend services in one of the largest and best-known congregations of the Adventist denomination. There is a church singles group which I want to become a part of. But after one meeting where they have their first look at me, I am not included in the weekly potluck dinners they hold at various homes.

There are more women than men in the group and the women organizing the singles group pointedly ignore me if they see me at church. I go home to many solitary Sabbath dinners.

I have made the acquaintance of some married couples—they inevitably promise to invite me to their homes, but so far during the five years it has only happened twice. It is fortunate that I have several old-time friends who do include me, though they tend to invite me when their husbands are out of town. I did not anticipate this reaction of the church members to my marital status. Although I am beginning to get my new life in some sort of order, I feel a stranger within the gates of my own church.

No one knows the background of my separation, but since I was the one who left home, they

tend to blame me for the breakup. On more than one occasion I am deliberately accused of causing my marital situation. The biblical admonition to care for the fatherless children and widows in the church certainly does not apply to divorcees. Sometimes I wish I were a widow, with all of the attendant sympathy and legal status conferred by the church.

Wider Reflections

It is hard for me to accept the church's attitude toward remarriage—the crimes of assault/battery and attempted murder are not listed in the *Church Manual* as valid enough grounds for remarriage—only adultery. It would have been so much easier had my husband been cheating on me instead of beating on me. Again, I feel victimized by unreasonableness and irrationality—only this time imposed by my church.

I am convinced that there is a whole sisterhood of us out there within the enclaves of the church who are silently suffering through abusively controlled home situations. Because of our conservative, legalistic upbringing and the “happy family” portrait other families display to fellow churchgoers, we mistakenly think this terrifying situation is unique to us. We are afraid to address

the issue because of our husbands' positions, parental and familial disapproval, and our own tendency to blame ourselves as the cause.

The church needs to know that every family that pretends to pray together should not necessarily stay together. As with so many of our current problems—drug and alcohol dependency, child abuse, abortion, homosexuality—they are afraid to admit God's children have such problems.

Let me end with a happy note. I am now married (although without the church's official blessing), to a gentle, sensitive man who has yet to raise his voice to me. The peace and serenity of our relationship is very special. I again participate in the life of Adventism. The fact that I am still on the church books may be due to a clerical error, since the *Church Manual* clearly states that upon remarriage I should be disfellowshipped.

I now know the scars I bear from my first marriage will be with me forever, and I have no illusions of ever completely ridding myself of them; they have cut to my very soul. I am learning to cope—partially by becoming more vocal and active in helping others who are going through spouse abuse, and by opening my heart and home to those single adult church members who are shunned by their church at the very time when they most need support. Perhaps my story will reassure other abused women that there can be light—and love—at the end of their dark tunnel.