

This Is What Male Violence Does by Natalie Collins

Today is my son's 9th birthday. He is an amazing child; intelligent, articulate, funny and extremely cute! I am married to the most extraordinary man, who has selflessly given so much of himself, his gifts, his time and his energy to enable me to fulfil that which I have been called to. I have an 11 year old daughter who is wonderful; clever, sensitive, funny, kind, beautiful inside and out. Today should be a day of celebration and for my son and daughter that is what today is.

I have wept most of the morning and the pain inside weighs me down. Most of the time I feel blessed to have such a beautiful life, most of those who know me, know me as I am now; confident, strong, articulate, filled with the spirit of the living God. Yet, today I weep and am filled with great pain.

Nine years ago today my beautiful son was born 3 months premature weighing only 2lbs 6 oz. He was born premature because a week before his birth my ex-husband raped me. Nine years ago today at 5.30am in the morning I gave birth to a tiny precious life and immediately he was whisked away to be ventilated, I didn't get to see or hold him. In fact the first time I held him was about 3 weeks later. I was then put on drugs to keep my contractions going for another 4 hours in case anything from the birth was still left inside me.

I saw him briefly before he was transferred to a hospital an hour away. He was in a large plastic box, naked, hooked up to machines, his chest moving mechanically as the ventilator kept him alive. There was blood on the towelling mattress where they had pierced his skin with intravenous drips.

Later that day I went home to collect my clothes in order to be driven by my dad to stay in the hospital with my precious son. My ex-husband was in the house and took forever to let me in. 2 years previously he had been placed on the sex offenders register after being found guilty of sexually abusing teenage girls. As I collected my things, I realised there was a teenage girl hiding in the house; her jewellery on the fire place. Hours after watching me give birth 3 month early, he had invited a fourteen year old girl to the house and abused her. I couldn't face calling the Police. The last time I called them to report my ex-husband's abuse of teenage girls, the officer who interviewed me said to me, "Don't you think you should stop allowing him to see teenage girls?"

I can't remember much of those hospital days. I remember it took a lot to convince my ex-husband to bring my two year old daughter to the hospital. That in the end, it was less than two weeks after the terrible event of my son's birth which convinced me to separate from my ex-husband, for the last time. That I would express milk using an electric pump in a little room, day and night. That my daughter and I lived in hospital for five months in total. That I would take her swimming, to the park and

to toddler groups, because she would remember being neglected in favour of sitting in a hospital room with a tiny baby on the edge of life, but that my son wouldn't remember that I could only sit with him for a little while at a time because my daughter needed the stability.

I only cried a few times in that whole five months; once was when a nurse told me not to touch my son so much as it could cause him distress. People naturally want to stroke tiny babies in their plastic incubator boxes. But you can't stroke them because their skin is too fragile. All you can do is gently hold their head and their bottom and even then, not for too long.

My daughter would do her dolls' observations, checking their temperature and using the little pink sponges we used to wet my son's tiny mouth to pretend to wet her dolls' mouths. We shared a room in most of the hospitals we stayed in and it was only because we lived so far from the hospital that we were allowed to stay, most parents travelled in each day.

After a month of being in hospital with my son, I reported my ex-husband to the Police. Friends took my daughter out while I made a statement at the police station. It took hours.

One of the hospital cleaners asked me where my ex-husband was. I said we had separated, she asked me why I'd let such a good one get away.

During the time I was in hospital I would pray, a lot. At first I prayed for my son to live. Hoping that he would make it through. And then God clearly said to me that I needed to stop praying that my son would be okay. He said, "Stop praying for him to live and start praying for my will to be done. Can you praise me the same this week, with your son alive, as you will praise me next week if your son dies?" In that place of utter desolation, God wanted to take away even my hope of a better future. And I thought for a long time about whether I could and from that moment on I stopped praying for my son to live and began praying for God's will to be done.

I don't explain this lightly or without knowledge of how this sounds to those who do not have a relationship with God. But I can tell you with all surety, that I would not be who I am today without having surrendered everything to God. Because when everything is stripped away and there is nothing left, it is then that true freedom and life can be found.

The only weekend I had away from the hospital was when I went back to my house to move all my possessions out. My ex-husband left the electricity key so low in credit that it went off during me organising the house, which meant I had to collect the key from him. I removed everything of mine from the house. Cleaned it from top to bottom, so that I could collect my half of the deposit back from the

landlord. This was the same house my daughter had spent most of her life in. The same house I had tried to commit suicide in. The same house at which a neighbour punched me in the face for being married to a sex offender. The same house I had been sexually abused in, day in day out, called names, constantly devalued, intentionally been made exhausted. I stored my possessions in my parent's garage and travelled back to the hospital.

Three months after he'd been born my son was moved to a less specialist hospital. I knew that if I moved back to my home town, I'd re-enter the relationship with my ex-husband. I now know that is because of something called Traumatic Attachment, at the time I thought it was because I was too weak and pathetic to even keep myself safe. We moved to Gateshead. And my son's care continued. Twice after being released from hospital he stopped breathing and went blue/grey. I resuscitated him, once in a car, once at home. When we arrived by ambulance at the hospital, I would do colouring in with my daughter on the floor, watching as my son was surrounded by medical professionals trying to save his life, smiling at my daughter saying, "Isn't that wonderful colouring in? You're doing a brilliant job!"

My ex-husband was charged with rape. The Police contacted me and asked if I thought he should have bail. "Of course!" I said, "He wouldn't hurt me!"

He would call me and threaten to tell people about the bad stuff he'd made me do. He would call me and say he couldn't remember what he'd done. And I would call him. When I needed support, when there was news about my son's health, when I couldn't cope with not having spoken to him. I genuinely believed the only person who really deserved to hear me moan about how hard life was, was him. One time he spent twenty minutes telling me on the phone how terrible a person I was. I cried and pleaded with him to stop, but I couldn't put the phone down. No matter how much I wanted to. He controlled me absolutely. On two occasions while on bail, he manipulated me into sleeping with him. The Police thought he may threaten me to keep himself out of prison, but he used something much more effective than fear, he didn't have to threaten me to keep himself out of prison, all he had to do was pretend to love me.

When asked by consultants, "Are you on your own?" I would respond with, "Yes! I've separated from my husband. He is a registered sex offender." I couldn't just say yes. I needed to explain. To prove I'd really tried at being married, that I wasn't a failure, or worse, one of "those" single mothers the media goes on about (turns out there's no such thing!). This meant that my ex-husband wasn't allowed on the children's ward where my son was being cared for. I received a phone call via a hospital payphone from the police officer who was responsible for my ex-husband's rehabilitation process. He proceeded to shout at me over the phone, berating me for "stopping a father from seeing his child." Apparently I shouldn't have told the hospital about the conviction. I think it convinced him of my vindictiveness towards my ex-husband.

At one point my son contracted bronchiolitis. I came into the intensive care ward to find him paralysed by a drug that stopped him pulling the ventilator out of his throat. All his veins had been used and the only one left was on the top of his head, so they had shaved the area and put a drip in there. He was ventilated and still needing to be resuscitated every two minutes. They said they were sending him for a lung bypass which they explained had a 70% chance of physical or mental disability. On his way to the specialist hospital he miraculously began improving. They didn't need to do the bypass in the end.

Eventually my son was released from hospital on low flow oxygen, not long before my daughter's 3rd birthday. After he turned one he rarely needed any medical treatment.

This is what male violence does. Men take the lives of women and children and destroy them, rape them, kill them. And no matter how wonderfully we rebuild our lives, no matter how beautiful the restoration is, every birthday is never just a celebration of life, it is also a reminder of death. I was 21 years old when my son was born, I am now 30. And each year seems to get harder, as the years travelled show me more clearly what I have lost. My wonderful husband and I have chosen not to have any children that are biologically ours together. The two I brought into the marriage need to know they are enough, and God made it clear to us that we shouldn't have more children. And though that decision was right and obedience to God is always worth it, the pain of knowing that my pregnancies and the early years of both my children were filled with such pain is something I mourn deeply. This is what male violence does.

I don't have any life giving words or clichés about how it all gets better. Even though it does. Because for now, in this moment, the cost feels greater than the cause.

Yet, by the time I collect my wonderful son from school, no matter how much it hurts, I will greet him with the biggest smile, because it's his birthday, and for him that means it's a really happy day.

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