

LEAVE **AN** ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP

By Dawn Lauren Anderson



As I lay next to my passed-out husband at the end of the day, my mind went through the checklist of things I would need. Knowing I would leave the next morning before dawn soothed me and I easily went to sleep.

As usual, I woke without an alarm — only this time it was much earlier than usual: 2:18 am. I silently crept out of bed; so afraid I would wake him. In the dark, I felt my way around the familiar territory of our bathroom, gathering all those necessities of

life — hairbrush, hair dryer, deodorant, and make-up. There were no thoughts in my mind — I just needed to leave. I crept by our open bedroom door to my office. It was more than just an office ... it was MY space. Routinely I kept all my clothes there so I

wouldn't disturb my husband when I got up at 4:00 am to get ready for work. I changed out of my nightgown into comfortable sweats. Using the grocery bags I'd placed in the room the previous day, I stuffed my toiletries in one and filled two more with

clothes and shoes. My laptop was next. In the dark, I unplugged and packed up all the peripherals — I'm gone for good! The absence of my laptop was the proof that I had left.

Still in the dark with all my bags in my arms and the computer bag draped across my shoulder I carefully tiptoed downstairs barefoot. I couldn't imagine what would happen if he woke up and found me sneaking out, but I knew it wouldn't be good. I turned on a light far away from the front door where it wouldn't be noticed upstairs. "Oh gosh, I'll need a towel to take a shower at work!" Grabbing another empty bag, I went into the guest bathroom and snatched one off the rail. Next door in the laundry room, I added the clean jeans not-so-absently forgotten there from the last dry cycle.

Now I had more articles than I could carry at once. I lined them up behind the couch like soldiers at attention along the pathway leading to the garage — and escape. As fear mounted I carried the bags two at a time and placed them in the trunk of my car.

Before opening the garage door I locked the house door. I felt sweat drip down my back as I settled in the driver's seat and locked the car doors. "What if he heard the garage door opening, and notices that I'm not in bed and comes to look for me?" I quickly looked in the rear-view mirror as I backed down the driveway; too afraid to glance forward as I pressed my car's built-in remote control to close the garage door. I paused and noted the time on the clock: 3:09 am.



As I drove away, I started thinking about what had brought me to this point. Through the years the warning signs that there was something wrong in my marriage changed from fuzzy messages seen at 60-mph to the clear SLOW and then the STOP of a road construction flagger. It was my time to put a stop to the abuse.

My husband was a volatile, well-educated Cuban, much different from my quiet, hard-working family who held our anger in check. I told myself his threats to harm his previous wife were just histrionic ranting without any backbone. However, a lot had changed in the past two years. His alcoholism had worsened, his medical marijuana use had escalated, and he had started using prescription steroids. I had seen his alcohol use soar from 3 beers a day to a whopping 60 beer weekly habit.

His threats and aggression toward neighbors brought police officers to our door many times. It had only been a few weeks since I had stood at my front door and listened to one tell us that the next time he responded to our address, he would be required to charge my husband with harassment. I assured the officer there wouldn't be a next time. As I locked the door, my husband silently turned around from his place at the top of the main floor stairs, walked to the refrigerator and opened a beer.

Luckily, I have a large group of female friends, many from work. One such friend in Human Resources suggested I attend Al-Anon. Al-Anon is a 12-step/group meeting for friends and families of problem drinkers and/or addicts. It was easy to find a convenient meeting close to home. I arrived early. Assessing the chair arrangement, I sat where I could easily slip out if I felt uncomfortable. Attendees slowly drifted

in, greeting and hugging each other until it was time to begin.

“HOW COULD IT BE? I ANSWERED, “YES” TO THE QUESTIONS OVER AND OVER AGAIN.”

When the first timers welcome began, I stated my first name, adding that my husband was an alcoholic. Sitting there, listening to other participant stories, I thought, "This is similar to the one-on-one therapy sessions I had — only this is free!" I wondered why it had taken me so long to attend, especially since my husband from my first marriage of 23 years was also an alcoholic.

During the next two meetings, I felt a kinship with the other participants' lives, and opened up a little more about my specific situation. No one told me what to do, but I found that many others had decided to stay with their alcoholic loved ones, using coping skills to separate themselves and live their own lives in self-love. This helped me see that I wasn't a total dolt for living with an alcoholic.

After the second meeting, I talked to the meeting leader who mentioned the book, *'Co-Dependent No More,'* by Melody Beatie (January 1, 1992; 2nd Revised edition; Hazelden). Amazingly, I was already on the last chapter, having received it from another friend. In reading it, I realized that my co-dependent behavior was life-long, enabling me to stay in destructive relationships.

The Al-Anon community was very supportive and comforting, but it was easier to be more specific about my husband's behavior and its effect on me while talking with another close friend at work. I told her about his threats and how he scared me. She said, "I think this is abuse. You



may be in danger. Why don't you call our Victim Assistance Unit director and get his opinion?" I was aghast at such a foreign idea, but I trusted her.

Within a week of speaking with him I was

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in the local spousal abuse center, Denver Safe House, filling out an intake form. How could it be? I answered, “yes” to the questions over and over again. The counseling session I experienced the following week gave me even more courage to acknowledge my safety was at risk.

I received the name of a divorce lawyer who gave me free advice by telephone. That prompted me to open a checking account using some of the cash in a joint account. I felt financially safe, but I kept thinking

“How can I leave? How do I do this?” like a broken record in my mind. Finally, while at a conference on the Sunday afternoon, just days before my early morning escape, three friends simultaneously yelled, “You HAVE to LEAVE!” After seeing the anguish on

their faces, I made my decision and waited for the right moment.

That moment came less than 48 hours

later, at 2:18 am on that Tuesday morning.

The ‘ding’ of my car’s low fuel warning brought my attention back to my car. I made a detour to the filling station on the corner. As I pumped the gas in the cool pre-dawn stillness, beneath the bright fluorescent lights I felt oddly warm in my aloneness. I’d really done it. I was starting my journey, my new life.

Turning onto Broadway, I headed toward downtown. The first stoplight was green,

the next — also green. Every stoplight was green for the entire twelve miles. I thought, “So this is what it’s like to be free. The world is supporting me!” I parked on the street behind my building. As I left the relative safety of my car, I had no idea where I would be that night, but now I felt in control of me. Every avenue was available to me for the first time in my life. I had given myself permission to leave, permission to be free and permission to be me.



Photo: D'Arcy Benincosa

Through her essays, Dawn Lauren Anderson, shares her life experiences so others may see their own situations from a different perspective, listen to their inner voice and find their courage. She is retired from the Denver Police Department, enjoying her native plant garden, Dahn yoga, and hiking the Rocky Mountains.