

Jane's
story

IT HIT YOU
IN THE HEART

WHEN I WAS A CHILD, I WAS FRIGHTENED TO GO TO SLEEP AT NIGHT.

I was particularly scared if my father was out because you never knew when he'd come home and whether there'd be a row, and I wouldn't go to sleep until I knew what the outcome was.

My father used to beat my mother up, but we never saw that. That would happen in the bedroom late at night. We'd see the black eye or the cut lip. It was always presented as having been an accident, and it wasn't until I was about 12 or 13 that I realised it wasn't. We never talked about it. My mother knew that I knew but it was unspoken.

She would never know what it would be that could set my father off. He would often walk into the kitchen when he came home and sidle up to the stove and look in the pots. If he was in a good mood, that was fine. If he wasn't, he'd lift the lids and say "don't serve me that crap, I'm not eating it". That would be the start, and it would go from there. A tirade of abuse would come out of his mouth.

We'd get out of his way. If one of us four kids dared to say anything we'd get belted. Our father used to deal to us as a group. If someone did something wrong and didn't own up, we all got it. The unfairness of that was incredibly hard to deal with. I was the eldest and a very compliant, good child. I was too scared not to be.

We were lined up, knickers taken down, bent over the knee and properly belted with a strap. Often he'd take the belt out of his trousers. He was not a little man, and he could leave his hand marks on you just smacking you. I used to go to school with hand marks on my backside.

My mother was powerless, and so she wasn't able to protect us from our father's violence. In fact as we grew up, it was "wait till your father gets home" – because she didn't know how to deal with us and she knew we were scared of him.

But I was mainly scared of my father because he was so unpredictable. You never knew how he was going to react. One day something you did was fine, but the next day you'd get a clip around the ear for the same thing. It would all depend on his mood.

That psychological stuff was much more damaging than the physical stuff – for my mother and also for me. My enduring memories are about the control he had over everyday life.

He didn't let my mother do things. She was expected to be at home at lunchtime just in case he decided to come home for lunch. If he came home at any time and she wasn't there, there was hell to pay. He censored her friends, and she wasn't allowed to join women's clubs



or go out with the girls. If I wanted to go to a friend's place, my mother wouldn't dare let me go unless he knew about it.

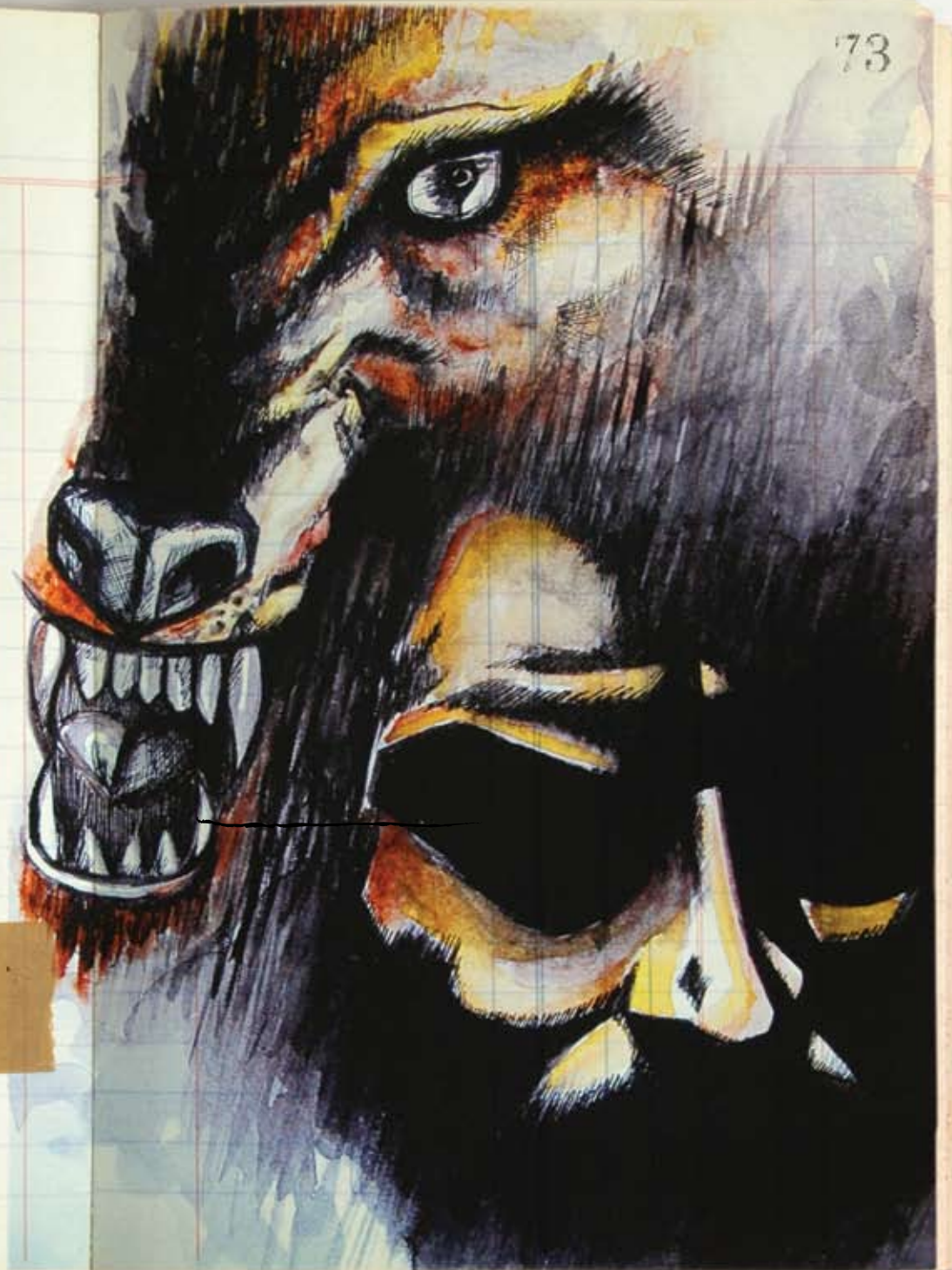
He mucked up all the holidays, all the family occasions. If I brought a friend home he'd delight in bringing me down in front of them. He'd make personal comments – say I was fat, which I wasn't, and stupid. Or he'd just lose his rag in front of them and shout and scream. So I just didn't bring people home and from about the age of ten I didn't want to go home myself.

One of his tactics was to get you all wound up about something and then snidely laugh and sneer at you. He had a mad cackle. That part of it was worse than anything – worse than the welts on your backside. They went down.

**BUT THE WAY HE LAUGHED AT
YOU DID THE LASTING DAMAGE –**

**IT HIT YOU
IN THE HEART.**

Growing up in that environment made me hyper-alert. I was always on the lookout for trouble. If you watch a dog that has been mistreated, it is always looking around, wondering where the next hit is going to come from. When you live as a child in that sort of unpredictable environment, in which you constantly think you might be in danger of a tongue lashing or a belting, you are always in that hyper vigilant state – eyes wide, looking around, guard up – because you think you might do something unintentionally to provoke an attack. If you live in that state constantly it is detrimental to your physical and mental health and general well-being.





My mother had had a very controlling father and a mother who should probably never have had children. My grandmother was not warm or maternal. She married quite late for those times, in her thirties. I think she owned her own business and worked fulltime until she was well into her seventies. She was a very smart, astute woman but a very cold mother. There was no closeness between her and my mother – or us.

When she visited she always came laden with lollies and presents, but I don't remember ever being cuddled by her.

My mother had stopped going to school – it was said because she was a sickly child, although I suspect it was probably a stress-related condition. She had had a couple of years doing correspondence school, and then when she was 13, her mother put her on the train and sent her from the country to

the city to live with her aunt and to go work. She was very close to her aunt, my grandfather's sister. She has beautiful memories of that aunt, and sometimes says I remind her of her – possibly because I've always looked after her like that aunt did, because I became very protective of my mother from a young age.

I think my mother grew up scared of her parents, so that's what she knew, and she repeated the pattern by marrying a man who frightened her – and her children.

My parents met in small town New Zealand. My father was a very handsome man and my mother was a beautiful young woman.

My mother was 20 when they married. She probably thought he was going to look after her. I don't think they ever had a functional relationship, but I do remember displays of affection.

My father was a tradesman but never made a fist of anything, and always seemed to be in financial trouble. When I was about 14, he bought a house and a bit of land. The house was condemned. No one should have been living in it. It was a spooky old house up a

long drive. We had apple boxes to put our clothes in and there was nothing on the walls.

My father dumped us in this house and shot off down the country, saying he was going to get work. After that we never knew when he'd turn up. He would come every few weeks and cause mayhem and shoot off again. It went on like that for two or three years.

Most of the time he wasn't living at home, but my mother would have said she was still married to him.

My mother had to go out to work. There was no domestic DPB, and she had four kids to feed. She put her iron under her cardigan and went off and did other people's ironing and cleaning. When I was in my mid-teens my mother got a job in a factory. She managed to eke out a living working long hours.

I was at home after school cooking the meals and looking after the other children. When I got to the end of the fifth form, I left school and got a clerical job because my mother needed help to feed the other three. I would really have preferred to stay at school.

After my father left, I became like a mother to my mother. In fact, I had been like that from early on in my life. It was as if we had a swap of roles.

She clearly had battered women's syndrome. The physical knocks and bumps, the black eye and the broken bones heal, but the psychological damage lingers and it left my mother with absolutely no self-confidence. By the time the relationship was over she felt powerless and her self esteem was low.

People thought she was beautiful, wonderful, a lovely person. She was smart and popular and did her job well. But she was unable to believe that because the person she loved and trusted constantly told her otherwise. If you are told for years that you are stupid and no good and that every time you do something it's wrong, that becomes incorporated into your being – in the face of all other evidence.

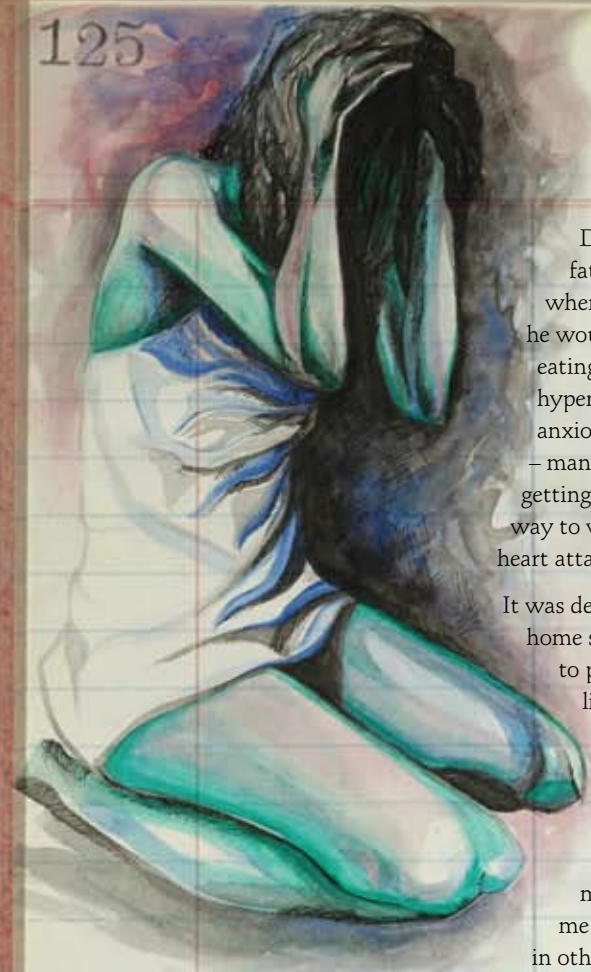
**THOSE MESSAGES
FROM MY FATHER
RUINED HER LIFE.**

For all those years she was married, she had never done anything without checking it out with my father. She got to the stage where she couldn't make a decision. It appeared as if she didn't know how to make a decision. After my father left, if she wanted to do something or if she needed a plumber she couldn't ring up and do it herself. I'd do it. Even when I finally left home when I was 18, she would ring me and check if it was okay to let my siblings go out or spend the night with their friends. Because my father had never allowed her to make a decision about anything she lost confidence and was, in fact, afraid to make a decision in case she got it wrong.

Women with battered women's syndrome often get into friendships where they are dominated by other people. That happened to her. People who dominate other people are attracted to her, or she's attracted to them. In a way she replaced my father with a best female friend who dominated her life and organised every minute of her waking day. At the time she would have said that this woman was her lifeline and she couldn't live without her but now, because we've talked about it, she sees that she had allowed someone else to dominate her.

Nowadays I still have to say to my mother, "You make your own mind up". As time has gone on I've pulled away, not emotionally, but I have not made those decisions for her. If she needs help, I'll do it. But she hates doing that sort of stuff. She is very worried that she'll do something wrong or that people will think badly of her.





During the time when my father was coming and going, when we didn't know when he would turn up, I stopped eating properly. I was living in a hyper-vigilant state and got very anxious about all sorts of things – many of them irrational, like getting run over by a bus on the way to work or suffering a heart attack.

It was definitely connected with my home situation. It was an attempt to put some control into my life. If the rest of your life is out of control, the one thing you can control is what goes in your mouth. This was combined with the negative messages from my father who used to tell me I was fat. Strong as I was in other parts of my life, I had internalised my father's negative messages. If you are told these things by your parents, you grow up believing them.

**I GREW UP THINKING
I WAS WORTHLESS,
THICK, DUMB, FAT
AND STUPID
- AND THAT NO ONE WOULD EVER WANT ME -
BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT MY FATHER TOLD ME.**

I was rescued at the brink of anorexia. The family doctor recognised my problem and instigated treatment. I was lucky that it never got to the stage where I needed to be hospitalised. The best description I think is that I was on the verge of becoming anorexic and I have lived with disordered eating ever since.

I was just lucky. But it's like being an alcoholic. It's sitting there on your shoulders. I fight with it every day. Up until I was 40 I watched every morsel that went into my mouth and the scales ruled my life. I was constantly on a diet. Then I entered a pact with my doctor that I was never going to stand on scales again and that I was going to put my efforts into making sure I led a healthy life, in terms of exercise and eating sensibly.

My mother was still only in her thirties when my father left, but she never had another relationship as such. She's never lived with anybody or remarried. For a long time she didn't like men at all. She had little tolerance for teenage girls' relationship issues. If I came home crying with a broken heart, her attitude was "just stop that nonsense, they are not worth that, they're all bastards".

When I was about 18, I said very clearly to myself: "I'm not going to get involved with a relationship like my mother had. That is never going to happen to me."

I was very wary of men and it took a long time for them to gain my trust. I would drop guys like hot cakes if I thought it was even looking as if they were going to try to control me or give me a hard time.

I met my husband when I was 20 and married when I was 21, and we have had a long, stable relationship – a good marriage. I was pretty upfront at the beginning. My husband is quite self-contained. His wife, his kids and his job are all he needs in life. I remember saying to him very early on that that was fine for him but it wasn't like that for me, that he could not give me all that I needed and so he had to trust me and let me go and that if he did, I would always come back.

That was my way of saying I have to have my life, you are not going to control me, you are part of my life but you are not my whole life. He got that from the word go. He had a very different family background from mine. He had a mother and father together. They had their ups and downs but they gave him a secure family base.

Domestic violence tends to run in families because it is a learned thing. That's what you've seen, and that's how you believe people relate to each other. Unless the penny drops somewhere along the way and you realise life doesn't have to be like that, you perpetuate it.

I don't think there's much kids can do about family violence, the trouble is a lot of this stuff is often really well covered up. My mother wouldn't have been telling anybody her husband was beating her up and that she was in an abusive relationship. You kept your dirty linen inside the cupboard in those days.

As a child I wouldn't have told people. It was not spoken about. It was hidden and so people got away with it. I think nowadays because we've got a family violence campaign that says it is not okay,

**WE ARE BEGINNING
TO STAND UP AS A SOCIETY AND SAY
WE WON'T TOLERATE THIS.**

kids could possibly go to someone and talk about it, but I am sure that very few do. And as I have said previously, it's the psychological abuse that often happens behind closed doors that is the most damaging, and young children don't recognise that.

Eventually, hopefully, the messages will get through. I think it is just a matter of time and education and people saying 'enough is enough' and this is not how we want to be as a society. It's a universal thing, but New Zealand has high rates of child abuse and family violence.

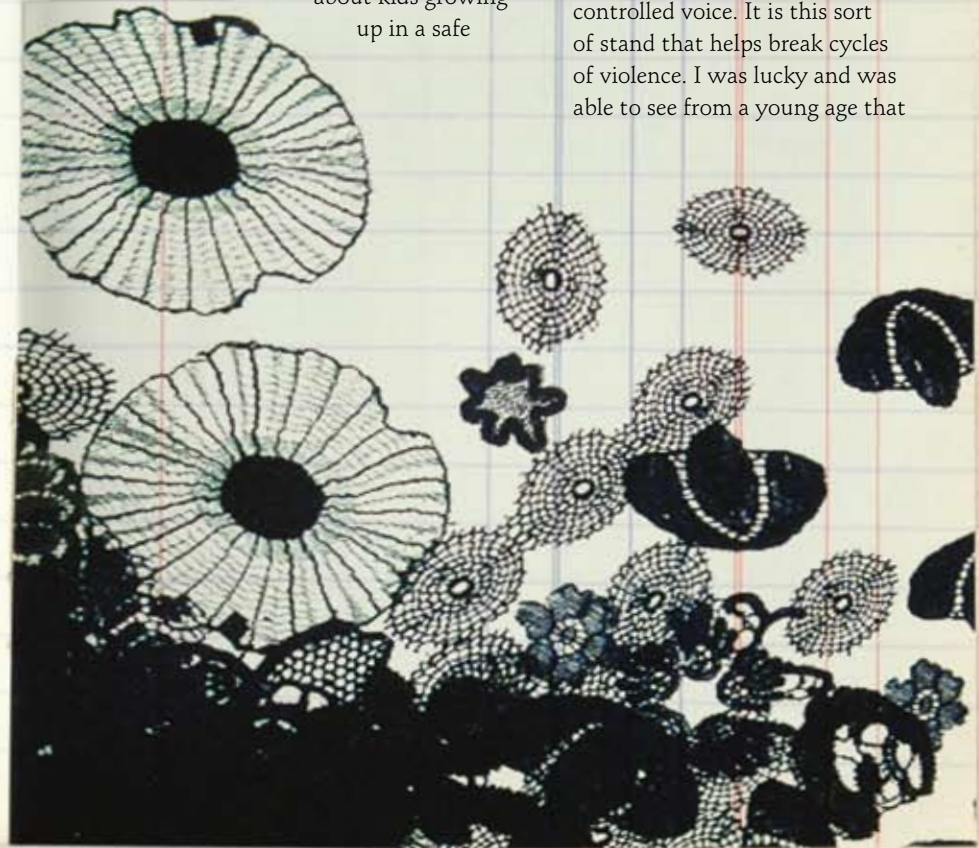
Although people might be horrified by the rates of family violence that have been revealed lately, a lot of this has come about because people are coming forward instead of hiding it. I think it is positive because we are beginning to talk about it as a society, and are not accepting it any more.

However, these sorts of changes can take a generation.

But you can break the mould. I managed to do that in my own family. Despite my background, I have managed to provide my children with a very secure and happy family life. They have had the upbringing that is every child's right – a right, not a privilege. It's not about having lots of money – although obviously the stress caused by poverty can exacerbate family violence – it is about kids growing up in a safe

environment with adults who love and care for them. My children grew up expecting to go to university and to do well and they have.

We are a no-violence family. You don't need to hit your children to get them to behave. In fact by hitting or yelling you are teaching them that this is how you get what you want. My children will tell you that they knew they were in real trouble when I used my quiet controlled voice. It is this sort of stand that helps break cycles of violence. I was lucky and was able to see from a young age that



life didn't need to be the way I experienced it and I turned things around. However, if you never see or realise that your experience is not the norm, you assume that is how all families are, and you will continue to treat your children in the way you were treated because it is the only way you know.

Not having a secure family base makes life harder but if you've got violence in a family, I don't think parents should stick together. People who don't get on together shouldn't stay together 'for the sake of the children' because it doesn't do them or the children any good.

While those years during which my mother was bringing up four children on her own were a nightmare in many ways, at least there wasn't the threat of violence from my father hanging over her or us children. In reality, had the relationship survived she wouldn't be where she is now. For many years now she has felt secure and happy.

She has her own home and is surrounded and loved by her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren – **AND, MOST IMPORTANTLY, SHE HAS THE FREEDOM TO GO WHERE AND DO AS SHE PLEASES.**

I don't know how I managed to become comfortable in my skin despite my troubled childhood. However, through it all I had a close relationship with my mum and I experienced unconditional love. I don't feel bitter, and I never have. I wouldn't be the person I am, and I wouldn't have achieved what I have had life been different. If my family circumstances had been 'normal' – that is, if my father hadn't left – I would have grown up in a family where expectations were not particularly high. If anyone had told me in my teens that I would go to university, gain a doctorate and get a position as an academic I would have said they were mad. I think my background has given me many opportunities, because while I work in a university it means I am well grounded and I understand, and can relate to, people from all walks of life, and that brings big advantages.

So thinking about how I survived those early violent circumstances and managed not to let them pollute my adult life, I think it was a combination of things. For a start, I am a naturally positive person – the supreme optimist!

Also, I had some very caring adults in my life – my mother and several excellent teachers who saw my potential and encouraged me. And in my adult life, I have been blessed by having an extremely supportive partner – and a pinch of good luck to top it off.

