



A Battered Women's Shelter

From A Child's Perspective

by Andrea Love-Guillory

When I was three years old, my mother married a man that, in hindsight, was the absolute worst possible man she could have married. However, my personal problems with this man did not begin until I was six years old. I'm sure my story is similar in nature to that of millions of children in our country, which, in itself is a horrible problem that desperately needs our attention.

My problems with this man taught me several things about life and about myself which I now find invaluable, though at the time I just felt terrified, lonely, insecure, and, worst of all, ashamed. However, those feelings paled in comparison to the pain I suffered as I watched him physically and emotionally abuse my mother, whom I loved more than life. One such experience stands out in my mind when I think about that time in my life.

I was in my fifth grade math class when one of the worst days of my life began. I had been having a good day – I'd received enviable grades on my homework, and I'd just made a new friend. A member of the school office staff called my teacher on the intercom, and requested my presence in the office. I was such a goody two shoes in school that I knew I was not in trouble, so I was very excited to have an opportunity to leave class to go to the office.

office, I was shocked and immediately dismayed to see my mother sitting in a chair, horribly beaten and bruised. My memory of her injuries is more poignant than accurate, I'm sure, but I do remember a swollen and blood shot eye, what appeared to be a broken nose, several cuts and bruises, and the whole of this mess covered in tears and mascara. I was scared and horrified, but also, I'm ashamed to admit now, very embarrassed that my principle was witnessing this private family moment. To my knowledge, none of my classmates or teachers knew the true state of affairs in our house. I was convinced that everyone would know that my stepfather beat my mother, and abused my brother and me.

My mother brought my brother and me to a battered women's shelter that Friday night. I still remember what our room looked like – more like a cell than anything else. That night was very scary, as I was convinced my stepfather would find us and kill my mother. The next day, my mother left my brother and me at the shelter while she went to spend time with my stepfather. I was so afraid for her, but I was also angry that she abandoned us in a shelter with unfriendly people, no books to read or games to play, and nasty food to eat.

Despite my ambivalent feelings toward the shelter, my worst memories are of leaving the shelter to go back to our house, where my stepfather was waiting for us. I felt that the entire horrible weekend

if my mother was just going to go back to him. I was also terrified of what he'd do to my mother the next time she made him mad; I felt certain that he would kill her.

At twenty-nine years old, with a wonderful husband and four beautiful children, I can honestly say I have come to terms with this time in my life, and can now look back on the past with a fair amount of objectivity – my life experiences have made me who I am today, and I am no longer ashamed of them. However, I have never forgotten the feelings of terror, shame, and abandonment I felt during our stay at the women's shelter. I would encourage our society to make victims of domestic abuse one of this country's most important priorities. Our victims are not to be pitied or remonstrated, but instead supported and loved. I would encourage volunteers of such facilities to have a special place in their hearts for the children of domestic abuse survivors, and make these facilities havens away from home in which children can feel safe, receive counseling, and, most importantly, a place in which these children do not feel forgotten. Each child should be able to say that despite the terror that brought them to the shelter, their family was kept safe, sane, and whole during their stay in the shelter. That is my wish for every victim of domestic abuse.

By the way – my mother finally divorced that man who, in hindsight, was the worst possible man she could have married. I am very proud of her, and I thank God daily that my mother, brother and I are survivors of domestic violence.