

PLEASE READ ME



INTRODUCTION

In August 2010 Proteus Theatre began a project called Punchbag that set out to explore the theme of domestic violence but through the eyes of women who were either in refuges or seeking regular support through outreach projects.

Over three months the women in those places took part in a number of workshops including film making, photography and visual arts. They also took part in writing workshops.

Some, but by no means all, of the women had left education early and some had language and learning difficulties. All were very nervous about writing about their experiences for fear of what it may bring up for them emotionally but all those who took part had the courage to try and put their feelings and experiences into words.

All the work contained in this booklet has been written/created by women who have lived with or are still living with domestic violence. Not all the work is about violence – some is about what makes them happy, some is about their children and some is about their journey away from violence.

Domestic violence is still a taboo subject, something women are ashamed to admit to. Those who live with it often keep it secret for fear of being thought weak, those who escape to a refuge are not allowed to speak about their experiences to others or keep regular contact with people from their previous life for reasons of personal security. Those who have escaped often do not want anyone to know that this time in their life existed either because they find it too painful or because they don't want the violence to define them. What all these women had in common was that they had been denied a voice to talk about what had happened to them, how it had affected them, how they'd escaped – or not – and how some had now found some sort of peace.

These are their words, pictures and experiences.

For reasons of security all names and places have been changed or removed.

A longer version of this book containing all the work from the writing workshops will be available after the Punchbag exhibition.

MASK

When I'm out a mask I wear
Without the mask I feel bare

The mask I wear with new folk
Makes it easy to laugh and joke

The mask I wear when at work
Is the face of the office jerk

The mask with family is old and worn
The same old thing since I was born

I don't remove it even with friends
The mask wearing never ends!

There are some who see behind a chink
Which makes me have to stop and think

I might show the real me one day
But what would people have to say?

Would they simply stand and stare?
Because I'm completely stripped bare

What if they didn't like what they see
Cringing because it's the real me?

Where I'm Happy

The air is filled with a gentle breeze as it works its way bristling through the trees rustling the leaves into life. In the distance I hear dogs barking hello as they come across each other. The sun glows brightly in the sky, a mix of yellow and oranges giving a sepia aura to the skyline. Reflected in the water, the sun like thousands of diamonds scattered on the surface. Two kite fliers are struggling to keep hold of their brightly coloured charges as a sudden gust pulls them away and higher in the sky. I look at the kites, twisting and turning up high, almost seeming to dance to an unheard tune. I see a family enjoying the later afternoon sun, throwing a ball to each other, cheering and laughing as the game progresses.

My Daughter

XXXXX is my daughter. She is nearly 3 but sometimes she thinks and acts a lot older

She is quite tall for her age. Most people think she's about four. She has just below the shoulder length blonde hair which is a lovely golden blonde in the summer. As the winter is now coming her hair is changing to a beautiful golden brown. Her eyes match her hair for both tones. They are a blue green colour in the summer months and more blue in the winter which I find matches the weather. Green for the grass in summer and blue for the cold in winter. She always smells so lovely and she nearly always has a wonderful smile on her face that could cheer up a room full of sad people.

My Daughter - Poem

Seasons change her
Golden blonde in summer light
Winter darker, my hope.



This is one woman's story in two parts, contrasting her time in a violent relationship to the life she has now.

BEFORE: Holiday

Holiday for two, a romantic interlude. Just the two of us. That intimacy just making love, the being together and sharing time, thoughts, feelings, experiences.

The journey down – the sense of freedom, the green fields, warm sun on free skin. The fun of settling into the hotel. The exploration of the unknown town. The mesmerising sea, the peace. Lazy days. Aimless shopping, Postcards home – like a cloud moving across the sun. One to my lodger. Male. Different relationship. Not a problem. Not a threat. But now eyes flashed, colour rose into his face, glowering rage. Decision made. Choice but no choice. Consequences. Loading bags into the car. Confusion. Journey home. Reflecting on what happened. What happened? What else could I have done? Oppressive silence then unceremoniously dumped at home. Holiday over.

AFTER: Birds

First thing when I'm making a cup of tea – first cup of tea, radio on, leaning on the kitchen sink, solid, reliable. The wire containers swinging in the breeze. Something catches my eye – a movement, sudden and indistinguishable.

Then in a flash it transfers to the feeder and morphs into - what will it be? The excitement rises – the tiny fluffy optimistic blue tit, feeding greedily looking workmen like. Then just as quickly, gone. Replaced by a large jackdaw. Watchful suspicious on the guttering, nervous. Sensing danger, weighing it. Drops heavily, beady eyed onto the bird table. A sense of excitement, sheer joy, thankful for this gift, how lucky am I? Always a pleasure to see, stop and watch, catch its moment.

Poem

Sense of excitement

Sheer joy, how lucky I am

Thanks for this gift

These two pieces were written by the same woman. One about her life at home and one about her time away on a holiday.

Away

As we stepped off the plane the heat felt like a physical force hitting you. I felt blinded by the sun. All I could see was black until my eyes adjusted and spots crept across my eyes until I could see the runway.

The sun was shining bright and the air looked like ocean waves of heat rippling the air.

Such a contrast from the cold dark icy XXX in February.

I suddenly realised I'd actually done it. I'd arrived.

My stomach knotted. What do I do now? I've never travelled before. Where do I go?

My son strapped in the baby carrier, crying as I struggle with the bag on my shoulder. I felt like I was drowning in the noise until a familiar face appeared from the crowd. Her long dark hair shining and her smile lighting the way. She screamed with excitement and ran towards me and took control, leading me out of the crowded stuffy airport into her cool air conditioned car and I breathed a sigh of relief. I had arrived.

Home

Everything went blurry all the sounds muffled all I could see was the dusty faded pink lamp cover swaying gently left to right.

Everything felt like it had been put on pause. I felt like my body was slowly collapsing inside of me like an avalanche. Wiping away all the foolish hopes and dreams then suddenly – a spark! My Son.

I have him, I have to snap out of this. I have my son that is my family. As this dawned on me an anger burned in my chest then finally I heard the bang of me being thrown against the table.

CRACKS - *Violence doesn't start with a punch. It starts with control. Below are two pieces that look at the early stages of abusive relationships and how that control can be exercised.*

Happy Birthday

Dark night, lights outside – music playing – putting on my favourite black pin stripe dress. Children excited. We're going for a party tea at Ma's house – "Happy birthday mum".

All the family are calling in: Becca and Mark, Will and Rachel, Sarah, Nick, Chris – Hannah and Thomas, Toby and Sue and Simon. Simon will be home from work soon. He left really early this morning – did say Happy Birthday but he didn't look too happy. Gave me cards from the children but not one from him. I didn't "deserve a card" from him, not after the way I'd been "behaving lately". But I know he didn't mean it – I know he loves me really. I mean things have been tough for us both recently – I know we've both said things we shouldn't have done – but we can get through this. I know we can. We always do. AND we do love each other. AND it's my birthday.

Nancy looks beautiful in her purple dress – she runs into the bedroom with her hairbrush: "Can you brush my hair, Mummy?" We sit on the bed as I gently brush the shine through her long blond hair.

"Will cousin Tom be there?"

"Yes, cousin Tom will be there"

"Oh Yeah!!!"

Charlie comes in

"Can we go now mum?"

They help me select – boots or shoes – shoes or boots – they are the ultimate fashion gurus.

We put on our coats and walk up the road to my mother's house. Bless her – the sight that greets is balloons, banners, the sitting room table laden with sandwiches, Jammy dodgers and these little salmon things that she knows I really like. Everyone is there.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY"

Mother opens a celebratory bottle of champagne – result. Raise our glasses.

"Where's Simon, Clare?"

"He'll be here in a minute – he's still at work"

But my heart is telling me a different story.

"Shall we open the presents?"

Everyone was so generous. A beautiful top from my sister, a book from Rachel, some money from my mum. The children playing – everyone chatting. A beautiful day. I am so lucky.

We pack the tea up. Everyone leaves – “thank you.” “Happy Birthday”.

“Come on children we have to go home”

“Is Simon not coming Clare?”

“He must be late – I expect he got held up. Thanks for everything mum – I love you.”

Get home, children bedtime, need to get them into bed quickly. Know I need to be quiet. My heart is screaming, shouting – panic.

I feel sick rising in my throat.

Sick. Cold. Fear.

“Night babes.”

“Happy birthday mum”.

Quiet.

Black.

Then I hear, car in drive, lock of the door, smell of beer.

I won't say anything. Won't say anything.

A Night In

Was looking forward to a quiet night in for once that would be relaxed and prove to me finally that thing could change and be good with us. I had the DVDs and made an effort and got in the works, always remembering what is his favourite to make the night perfect. The night started well. The place was tidy. My daughter was in bed and ready for him to come home. I felt on edge to see what mood he was in but this was our night and things could change. I really believed it. Ok, so no flowers, no hugs but that doesn't matter, I've made an effort. He should be happy, right? Nope. As usual nothing has changed. The foul mood is still there and nothing is good enough.

What could have been a lovely night ended in tears and arguments, slamming doors and silence. Why did I believe things would be different this time. Once again my perfect night is me sat wondering what to do and where is my fairytale like those DVDs that never get watched. Where is my prince that uses his hands to love not to hurt? I never do leave and never have managed to but one day I will open and close that door for the last time.



VIOLENCE

New Year's Eve

It was New Year's Eve and I was sat in a pub with the 'psycho'. We had just arrived. I didn't want to be there, it was my mum's birthday but he would not let me see her. In the pub was a man the 'psycho' didn't like but the other man was a better and stronger man so we had to leave. He was really angry and I knew what was coming. So I said I didn't want to go home. He got me into the car park and picked me up by my throat and carried me to the car, I was terrified and started to scream. He tried to put me in the car but my legs were hanging out so he started banging the car door onto my legs. The pain was excruciating. He punched me in the head. It felt very numb. Then sirens, the police arrived. A policewoman screamed at me to keep still. I was terrified and confused. She came out to me and told me to keep still. He had stabbed me in the head.

Poem

He punched me
He kicked me
He said that he loved me
If that's what it's about
I can do without
A hypocrite
A liar
A cheat
A denier
He still excuses
The way he abuses
The bruises
The pain
What has he to gain
A crime of passion
Is what he is saying

Our Son's Birthday

The evening before my eldest son's 6th birthday I wrapped all his presents and put all his cards and gifts on the table for him for his special day. He's been looking forward to this day for ages! We, my partner and I, went to bed and made love that evening. My son woke me in the early hours of the morning asking to go and open his pressies. I turned to wake my partner but he wasn't there.

I went downstairs and seen all my son's cards ripped open and presents were missing. My son said 'why are all my presents and cards open, Mummy?' I didn't know what to say. I immediately tried to ring my partner but his phone was off. I instantly knew he had been gambling again. I couldn't hold my emotions back. I tried to for my son. I felt the worst ever like I'd let my child down on his special day even though it was his dad that had taken from him. I was left to pick up the pieces. I was full of guilt. Why did I not realise he was going to do that to our son? Why couldn't I stop this from happening? I instantly knew I had to leave now this was affecting my children. He's got to me and I can't let him get to the boy.

Poem

Why disappoint me?

You always have to hate me

Why not just love me?

ESCAPE

Recent History

A few months ago I was the victim of domestic abuse where my partner at the time attacked me in front of our daughter. I felt fear for my daughter, listening to her screaming her head off as well as listening to him shouting at me. At that time my head was throbbing and my heart pounding so hard that I could feel it in my throat.

After the incident was over and he left and my parents rallied round I felt relieved but still scared until a few months later when me and my daughter moved. I still have nightmares that he's going to take her away and sometimes wake up to the smell of stale cigarettes, sweat and his aftershave. However, I know he doesn't know where we live. It doesn't stop me looking over my shoulder, feeling that lump in the back of my throat.

My daughter keeps me going as I have to be there for her. She makes me melt like butter with her smiles when I'm down.

Coach Trip

When I left the place that had suppressed me for years it was very strange. I stayed at a friend's, he's an old age pensioner and I met him at my local charity shop and he would let my son have cheap toys and we became friends. When the violence started he would often see me and say to try and get away. I trusted him and he was my outlet along with the charity shop, tea and sympathy.

The last three months of me staying in XXXXX was so extreme with my psychotic partner I would try to find pockets of time to pop round to my friend's. When finally I could take no more and was given help by the police and the women's centre, my friend let me stay at his house for some days until my stuff had been sorted out and my son had gone somewhere safe.

The morning I left was so strange. My friend's mate came at 7ish to get me and a huge suitcase and 2 big hold alls my mum had given to me before she died. I had her spirit with me. I went to the National Express bus stop with my female escort and she told the bus driver to make sure I didn't miss my two connections. I told her not to wave because I was scared any of my ex partner's friends might see me. She waited round the corner to see me off. I was very emotional as we drove away, the view from my old back garden behind me, on my amazing journey to my future.

REFUGE: *Not all women choose to go to a refuge and those who are in the refuge system are not allowed to let anyone know where they are – even their families. Each woman has one room which she shares with her children. She can only bring what she can carry or put in a car. There usually isn't room for furniture apart from what is provided. However, for some, the refuge is a lifeline, a place where they can begin to rebuild their lives*

Arriving at the Refuge

Greeted with a smile

“your suitcase is really big”

My life is inside

Poem at the refuge

The sun shining through

Different colours throughout the year

Brightening my path

Leaving the Refuge

Big cuddles and tears

Of new friends found through no choice

They are friends for life

Many thanks to all the women who chose to share their work with us and allowed us to publish their work in this way. These women need support and help so please wear your ribbon on White Ribbon Day and give generously.

Free National Domestic Violence Helpline - 0808 2000 247

Southampton Domestic Violence Helpline – Clare Lord 07595275720

Basingstoke Domestic Violence Helpline – 01257 350996

