

I was in an abusive relationship for 50 years. It took me almost 50 years to leave him.

One day my sister picked me up at the hospital and told me I couldn't go back there again, and finally I knew she was right.

I stayed with her for a little while, until she found me a spot in this transition house. I was kind of a wreck and I know it was too much for her, having me living with her. She has always been there for me, and I would not be alive today if she hadn't taken me in so many times.

I didn't want anyone to know what was going on, but she always knew.

I got a concussion last time he knocked me over, and so I was pretty confused at the beginning when I was at her house this last time. Here there are counselors and basically I need a lot of support. I have a lot to talk about. One of the ladies who works here says I have something called post-traumatic stress.

The support group here at the shelter is a real blessing. We are all older women living here. It is helpful to hear other women's stories and to share what I lived with. We laugh and cry together and think about the future. Sometimes I am still afraid... I don't know what to do about anything.... but in my best moments my heart knows we are strong women here.

One other time when I left him I wound up in a different transition house. That didn't work out. That was two years ago. It was right after I had my right hip replaced. I was still in a fair amount of pain, and I had to use a walker back then, and do my rehabilitation exercises. My doctor and the occupational therapist and everyone else were three bus rides away from the transition house. That's 3 hours travel for every appointment. I eventually went back home because I thought, well, at least at home I can get this hip to heal, and then I can figure out what to do. Make a new plan. By then I knew I had to leave some day.

When I got here I had nothing except the clothes they gave me at the hospital. I did not really plan to leave, pack my bags.... so everything I own is still there with him... in my house.

I miss my house. I loved my house. I worked so hard to keep it beautiful. I remember—

My daughter Katie—she is pretty upset that I left her father. She worries about him living alone. "How could you abandon him?" She says. Since his latest heart attack he does need a lot of help, and I guess that role has now fallen to her, poor thing. I feel badly about that, and I wish she could say no, and find him someone else. But I know how hard it is to stand up to him. If he wants something....

Leaving him was the right decision. I am now free from that constant fear. Worrying about what might happen next, that I might say something that would get his anger going—that waiting was almost worse than being hit. I have spent most of my marriage being so careful to avoid making him mad at me.

Katie is not letting me see the kids anymore. She won't even take my calls. I know it is because she is mad at me for leaving her father.

I wonder, what is going to happen next for me? What is the rest of my life going to look like?

Right now I have no income. I think the ladies who work here are going to help me apply for my pension. They think he must have applied for my pension on my behalf years ago. But I never saw any of that money. He had a good income. He has a really good pension from working as a builder so many years. I know we had other savings and the house is paid off. My sister says I need to get a legal aid lawyer so I can get a divorce and get some money from him, make him sell the house. I am not going to be able to live on just the government pension. Of course, I am not going to go out and get a job at 76. My sister is right, but I am not sure how to go about getting a lawyer.

Back in 95 I did start making a plan to leave. Well, actually I started looking for work. I am trained as a legal secretary. I worked in my early twenties, for a few years before Katie was born. Then later I got a few temping contracts after the kids had grown up. So I have some experience, good references. Anyway, I got my resume ready, made copies, and started applying for positions. I spent almost a year applying for jobs. But it seemed like no one wanted to hire a 58-year old secretary when there were much younger applicants. Granted, the industry had changed a lot over the years. But honestly, I had learned a lot as a temp; I knew the technology; I was still fast; I knew how to handle the partners and the clients. But eventually I came to realize I was wasting my time looking for a position. Then I felt trapped again. How could I leave without an income of my own?

I miss them so much, Katie's kids. I practically raised them, taking care of them while she worked. That is what breaks my heart now: not seeing them. The women who work here are very kind; the women who live here—they are like sisters to me. We look out for each other, cook for each other... so I am not totally alone. But it is not the same. The kids are the best thing in my life right now. They make me laugh so much.

One of the ladies here says I should take Katie to court, that I have rights as a grandmother. But I can't imagine doing that. Already I have other things to talk over with the legal aid lawyer, and it seems terrible to have a judge figure this for us. What I want is for her to understand that I did the right thing, or that even if she disagrees with me, that it is still good for the kids and I to spend time together, that it is pointless to punish me this way. For now I am hoping she will come around. I am waiting. But I feel really sad about how

angry she is, and about not seeing the kids. It takes away from that small feeling of peace and quiet that comes from finally getting away from him.