

Dancing in the Dark

I'm sitting here in the dark, questioning my own reality, my own version of events.

I spend my days working with victims of trauma and when they frequently question their own version of events by suppressing, minimising, believing the need to *just get on with it* or to *brush things under the carpet*, I tell them that they know that something was traumatic by the symptoms they experience. I often explain that if you feel high levels of distress, fear, anxiety, if your body starts screaming when you are reminded of something, then you *know* it was traumatic.

But then what happens when you ask for validation, for accountability, an apology perhaps and you are told that it didn't happen, that you weren't abused, violated, disrespected, threatened? What happens when you are told that *you* are responsible for the way things played out, for the abuse, the awfulness?

What happens to your version of reality when you are told repeatedly that he was never threatening, that he never threatened you. That you're mistaken, too sensitive, making up stories and justifications for your own actions. You *know*, you *do* know. And yet, there was rarely anyone else to see. Because so much of what happened between you happened in the dark, in the cave, before you managed to walk outside.

And so you have a tendency to stop and question yourself, your own reality. Because you see the multiple shades of grey in between, because you recognise that relationships are complicated, because you reflect and wonder whether you could have been kinder, more understanding, more tolerant. Whether some shift in your behaviour, your emotional response may have resulted in something quite different. And then you swing back again because you *know*, you *do* know that he stood still with his unwavering superiority, his perpetual intransigence. You were always the one to change, to question, to modify. And the threat and the abuse stood firm with him. It may have been concealed temporarily by a mask, but it remained.

You know that he threatened you – both psychologically and physically throughout many years of your relationship. You can't bear to look but you know there are emails from years and years ago challenging him on his abusive behaviour, threatening to leave if it didn't stop. And yet years and years later, you were still there, questioning your own reality, modifying your behaviour, wondering where you went wrong.

You saw therapists - more than one - who told you that you were being abused, that you were living in a state of threat, of fight or flight and then shutting down, dissociating. You questioned *their* reality, whether you were only presenting a favourable picture of yourself. If they could see what you were *really* like then would they think differently. That he was right?

You know things got so bad that the walls started closing in and you couldn't breathe. You wondered if there wasn't enough light in the back room, whether you needed more space to breathe. Somehow frightened to look at what was standing behind you, watching, waiting for you to fall.

You know that you repeatedly asked him to leave – that you told him you were panicked, scared, that you felt threatened by him. You told him that you were worried about your own health and the health and wellbeing of your unborn baby. You told him you were worried about the children when you frequently collapsed into a frightened, hysterical heap on the floor. And yet he wouldn't leave. He would sneer and respond scathingly that you should go home to your mum and dad's – *because you clearly needed looking after*. He would tell you that you were a bad mother, unable to parent the children. And you wondered if he was right, whether this was becoming increasingly more true as time went on.

You know that when he finally left, you asked him not to come into the house unannounced or without your consent and when you became so frightened and dissociated, you asked your solicitor to write to him threatening him with a non-molestation order. And yet *that evening*, he came to the house, barged in and stood next to your while you breastfed your nine month old baby, demanding that you hand him over. You know that although you were shaking with fear, perhaps more frightened than you had ever been in your life, you looked him in the eyes and whispered "*I see you.*" And his response? To say that he saw you too, and then a tirade of the awful things that you were and had done, that this time didn't even get encoded as memories.

You know that he took the keys to the side door of the house so that for almost two years, he was letting you know he could get in at any time. And that he let himself into the house repeatedly even when you asked him not to. You *know* that you frequently felt threatened in your own home. And yet, he justified his behaviour, his right to enter whenever he pleased.

You present him with all this. Why? Because in some way you need his validation to fully believe what you know? Because there's still some hope of humanity, that sudden empathic realisation that his behaviour may have been abusive, may have been threatening after all. And no matter how many times you receive the invalidation, the disregard, the deflection back, still you sit in the dark questioning your own reality. Questioning whether there's a possibility you could have got it all wrong. The chronology is out of kilter, the memories are fragmented and merged, and you can't help but question. But partly because it's so difficult to accept the lack of humanity, the lack of empathy and the dance you've been doing in the dark.