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Washingtonian

August, 2000

**SECTION:** HIDDEN LIVES; Pg. 101

**LENGTH:** 4133 words

**HEADLINE:** My Private Hell

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**HIGHLIGHT:**

Our Marriage Looked Like a Dream Come True, but Nobody Knew I Was a Battered Wife

**BODY:**

THE NIGHTMARE WOULD COME IN the hours before morning. It was always the same. I was crouched in the corner of my kitchen, hands over my head, eyes shut tight, gasping. In the background I could hear someone shouting obscenities while pummeling my back.

Sometimes I'd wake trembling, trying to get my bearings in the middle of the night. Fists clenched tight, my heart beating hard, I'd slowly take in my surroundings. *It was just a bad dream, I'd tell myself. You're safe. No one is going to hurt you.*

Years later, I can believe that I'm safe. But as one of the 4 million women physically abused every year by their husbands and boyfriends, it's taken the death of my tormentor for me to go public.

Many of those women are professionals, like myself, even elected officials, which I once was. Their abusers are clergy, doctors, psychologists, and executives, belying the stereotype that domestic violence is most prevalent among the poor or uneducated.

"Despite having greater resources available, it can be as difficult for middle-class women to leave a batterer as it is for poor women," says Chevy Chase psychiatrist Susan Fiester. "They feel humiliated and believe they will be stigmatized once the community finds out about the situation."

But going public gives another battered woman a chance to see that she's not alone. So it's a gamble worth taking for me.

IT WAS THE YEAR OF SQUEAKY FROMME AND Sara Jane Moore. Cher divorced Sonny, and Jimmy Carter was preparing his run for the presidency. In my mid-twenties, I'd finally reached a point where I felt that life was good. I had become a mother at 17, and my daughter and I had weathered a lot together, but by 1975 our lives were placid.

We lived in Chicago in an apartment with a view of Lake Michigan. I was editor of the community newspaper, the *Hyde Park Herald*, and my daughter attended third grade at a neighborhood school. My parents helped with my daughter, and my friends formed a tight circle of support, albeit one that concentrated mostly on assisting each other with dating advice.

That spring I enrolled my daughter in day camp at the Jewish Community Center. Soon after, a staff member there asked if I'd consider writing an article about the new executive director, considered a rising star in the community. Besides, she said, he was single.

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After quick consultations with my friends, we decided this was the perfect opportunity. I could find out everything I wanted to know about a potential suitor in a legitimate interview.

LOOKING BACK, I CAN SEE WHY THE INCENTIVES to settle down were so strong. My parents disowned me when I became pregnant at 16. We had no contact for three years, and when the reconciliation finally occurred I swore I would do whatever I could to become a "good girl" again.

By the time 1975 rolled around, the relationship with my parents was smooth. The only thing missing in my life was the companionship of a man. In my mind, this man, through his religion, education, occupation, wit, and style, would be the acknowledgment to the outside world that I was approved.

Enter Larry.

The day of the interview I primped for an hour, double-checking my questions. By the interview's end, I was smitten with this Yale-educated man. That afternoon he called and asked if I'd like to go to a Smothers Brothers benefit that weekend.

The next few months were an avalanche of lavish dinners, weekend trips, and beautiful gifts. He won a high approval rating from my family and friends. By the time the engagement announcement ran on page three of the *Herald*, we were considered a hot couple in Hyde Park.

There were just a few things that I chose to ignore.

IT DIDN'T OCCUR TO ME TO QUESTION WHY Larry neglected to tell me that he had been married twice before or that his tendency to disappear into another room several times a night was a chance for him to down a couple glasses of vodka.

I felt no need to respond when his father, as gently as he could, suggested I might wait a bit before making this commitment, but didn't tell me why that might be wise. The day before the wedding Larry was upset that I was on the phone for a long time with my best friend. I chalked it up to nerves when he found an antique cup my friend had given me and smashed it against a wall.

By winter of 1977, blinded by my new standing in the community, I didn't notice that there had been a shift in power between Larry and me.

With Larry's encouragement, I'd left my beloved newspaper job and, at twice the salary, went to work for a local hospital as communications director. Because I'd never had to manage this much money I began turning my paycheck over to him, receiving an allowance in return.

I barely noticed that my circle of friends had dwindled since I was increasingly unavailable. Even lunches out became hard because my allowance was not large, and every penny needed to be accounted for at the end of the week.

My parents took care of my daughter every weekend because Larry felt we needed time alone to do things as a married couple. In our new apartment, amid the nice furniture and lovely wedding gifts, my attention wasn't focused on reality. We weren't going out at all. The weekends were spent in the apartment, with me trying to read and him drinking vodka openly now, constantly complaining about his job.

In the spring of 1978 the problems at his job were overwhelming. Larry had alienated people by his argumentative posturing at meetings, and many of the community leaders with whom I had been close were calling for his ouster. I felt torn between my duty as a wife and my knowledge that these were good, decent people who were seldom wrong.

Finally, one of Larry's mentors suggested the time was right to leave. There was a job opening in Tulsa, Oklahoma, to head the Jewish Community Center there. Within a few weeks, the job was his.

WE WERE SCHEDULED TO LEAVE AT THE end of August. Larry had lived in five cities. I'd never lived anywhere but Chicago. The farewells were wrenching.

Our car headed south toward unfamiliar Tulsa and away from the city and the life I'd always known. No friends, no job, separated from my family, with no money of my own, I went to Oklahoma. My isolation was now complete.

Larry was elated. We bought a beautiful home and, with my 11-year-old daughter in an excellent school, the halcyon days were back. My urge to go back to work was met with approval and within two months I'd found a perfect position, with the Red Cross.

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By the time I turned 30 the problems in Chicago were a distant memory. My work was exciting and my daughter was thriving. I'd made new friends and was freelance writing for a daily newspaper.

It's hard to remember when the ground shifted. Once again the changes were slow and subtle. It might have been when I resisted handing over my paycheck for the first time or when the phone kept ringing because I'd won an award for my newspaper column.

The pouting and drinking seemed to increase incrementally with any outside recognition that I received.

Such jealousy and possessiveness are common traits of batterers, who become overinvolved in their partner's life in order to feel secure themselves, according to Lenore E. Walker in her landmark book, *The Battered Woman*. Also not unusual was Larry's insistence that I turn over all money to him.

"The use of economic deprivation as a coercive technique results in bargaining and tradeoffs," Walker writes. "Not only is the woman deprived economically, but also she is emotionally deprived as an adult."

So I started withholding information, sharing only those items that I knew would gain Larry's approval. A raise would do that. Or another freelance job. Once again I signed my checks over to him.

We'd been in Tulsa for two years when the complaints about his job started. "They" didn't appreciate him; he was much too good for this; he was tired of constant meetings and decisions. And I was no help. I was more concerned about my own job and my daughter than about his troubles. The cleanliness of the house wasn't up to his standards. The dogs were a nuisance. I wasn't making enough money. I looked ugly. On and on and on.

I CAN'T REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME LARRY hit me. I've blocked that memory. I know by the summer of 1981 his behavior was bizarre. Somehow he was able to function at his job, but when he came home it was a different story.

The minute he arrived he would open a half-gallon bottle of vodka and start to drink. He then began a ritual of going through the house to see what was wrong. The infringements could be anything from a spoon out of place to an unmade bed. The worst were when one of the dogs had an accident or my daughter failed to put away her clothes.

At first the aggression was confined to pushing and verbal abuse. If the plates weren't lined up in the dishwasher just right, he might grab my arm and propel me into the wall. Or, if I saved my allowance and bought a new dress, he would complain about how badly it fit or how ghastly the color was. Nothing I did was right.

Logic says that at this point anyone with any self-respect would have left, but my self-respect was in shreds, and I felt there were no options. I couldn't go back to Chicago. In my mind that would be admitting defeat, hurting my parents again. I barely had contact with any of my old friends and I felt my return would be shameful. It was unthinkable to tell Larry's family, and to "come out" in Tulsa would have been impossible. I felt I was too well known, too respected to let anyone in on my secret.

My reaction fit author Lenore Walker's description of "learned helplessness." The battered woman, she says, presents a passive face to the world, while somehow finding the strength at home to manipulate her environment enough to prevent further violence or being killed.

In my case, the "incidents" were spaced far enough apart that a pattern hadn't emerged. I could excuse it by blaming his moods on stress. Periodically he would become maniacally nice, sending flowers, buying extravagant gifts, and, in one rare instance, letting me keep my paycheck.

And so I stayed.

AROUND THIS TIME IT BECAME APPARENT that Larry was going to lose his job. Again, it was his confrontational nature -- arguing with volunteers, posturing in meetings, fighting with his boss. So the only place he felt totally in control was at home.

One day I came home from work to find everything taken out of the kitchen cabinets and scattered over the foyer. I was told that because I was such a poor housekeeper it might be easier to keep everything on the floor, and that nothing should be returned to the cabinets. He delighted in lining up his empty vodka bottles on the floor of his study, one of the rooms in the house that were off-limits to me.

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My daughter, meanwhile, was in the throes of a difficult adolescence. We didn't talk about what was happening to me or about what she heard or saw. Once an outgoing and sunny child, she now was increasingly sullen and withdrawn. She was hanging out with a wild crowd, and I didn't have the energy to help her.

The abuses seemed to expand with my success. In 1982 I was cited nationally by the Red Cross for my work, and I traveled to Atlanta to receive an award, leaving my daughter with friends.

Larry seemed contrite when I arrived home. He handed me the newspaper. The Tulsa dailies listed all arrests for drunk driving, and there was his name.

He lost his job immediately. And I came to learn that the previous abuse was a rehearsal for what was to come.

THE NEXT TWO YEARS HAVE BLENDED together into a bad memory. I was no longer allowed to sleep in the bedroom; Larry told me I was so unattractive that I didn't deserve to be in the same bed with him. My choices were the kitchen floor with the dogs, the front hall surrounded by the cans and dishes, or with my daughter.

He threatened to kill my favorite dog and make me watch while he did it. His pushes escalated to slaps, and then punches. He was careful not to hit my face. To cover the black-and-blue marks, I wore long sleeves and long pants, even in the heat of a Tulsa summer.

By 1984 I was in a deep depression, but had become so adept at hiding my wounds and my psychological pain that no one guessed what was going on at home.

I was like many battered women, as described by Lenore Walker: socially isolated, humiliated, and believing that if I did not obey orders I would be seriously harmed. The battered woman might not reach out for help because she sees her abuser as more powerful than anyone who might attempt to save her.

Middle-class women, especially, think no one will help them, Walker says, because no one wants to believe that men regarded as pillars of the community are capable of this behavior.

THAT YEAR TWO IMPORTANT THINGS happened: I was selected to be a member of Leadership Tulsa, part of the same movement as Leadership Washington, and I was recruited to run for the school board. Without any sound reasoning, given my personal circumstances, I chose to do both.

Leadership Tulsa had a graduation requirement: You had to serve for a year with a nonprofit organization -- one with a mission different from that of any other group you had worked with in the past. I was assigned to help run the capital campaign for Domestic Violence Intervention Services -- never revealing my own situation.

The group that asked me to run for the school board was headed by the mother of one of my daughter's friends. It was the friend whose house I insisted my daughter stay at when I went out of town for work, or sensed an incident was imminent.

The election and my work with the domestic-violence group took on lives of their own. When I was out making speeches, or helping raise money for the new shelter, I almost felt like myself again. The election was tough, but I won. And then the ground shifted again.

One night Larry started a new game. He would turn off all the lights and hide. I would sit in the kitchen, waiting for him to emerge. Some nights nothing happened. Other times the battering took new turns. He took the dog's flea spray and held it on my face in an unrelenting stream. He kept a bat under his bed and threatened to bash my head in. Instead, he shattered all the wedding crystal.

When he'd knock me to the ground, my new way of coping was to pretend I was wrapped in yards and yards of cotton, so I couldn't feel the blows. I also had a fantasy of sending my soul to the ceiling so the only thing he was breaking was my body, not my spirit.

I would look in the mirror after a beating and I couldn't seem to make out my face. I was that detached from myself.

MARCH 10, 1985, WAS ONE OF THOSE yellowish-gray Oklahoma days that portend a storm. The night before had been particularly hard, and I knew the night to come was going to be no different. I called the mother of my daughter's friend and asked if my child could spend the night there.

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This time she didn't automatically say yes. She started questioning me: Why wasn't I letting anyone into the house? How come I was always wearing long sleeves? Why was I always so secretive about Larry? And then she asked the question. "You're being hurt, aren't you? Can I help you?"

In that moment I knew I had to let her into my life, at least a little. I told her I was in a bad situation that was getting worse. I promised that if she let my daughter spend the night at her house I would sleep in my daughter's room with a portable phone nearby.

When I arrived home from work Larry was drunk. I turned on the oven to heat a frozen dinner.

Larry grabbed me by the hair and threw me to the kitchen floor, kicking me as I tried to crawl away. Crouched in the corner, hands over my head, eyes shut tight, gasping, I prayed for my life. I prayed that there would be a sign that someone cared about me. Larry wouldn't let up, finally grabbing my arms and sticking them in the oven, burning them on the rack.

I fell screaming. He kicked me again, stormed into the bedroom, and soon passed out from the alcohol. I found my way to the bathroom and put salve on my arms. So drained I could barely move, I crawled into the guest room and fell asleep on the floor.

A few hours later I heard pounding on the front door. It was a police officer and the mother of my daughter's friend. She had tried to call, but I hadn't heard the phone. She cared. Suddenly, I cared too. I walked outside and into her waiting arms.

WE DROVE TO HER HOUSE, AND I SPENT the next few hours talking about everything that had been hidden for so long. My daughter joined us, visibly relieved. Although Larry had never touched her physically, her mental anguish was palpable.

Our friends said we could stay with them for a while. They lent us money until I received my next paycheck, the first one I could use to finally establish my own checking account.

I called the director of Domestic Violence Intervention Services and told her everything. She told me she had suspected something from watching my behavior and other clues. She contacted the DVIS support network and in no time I had an attorney and a therapist. The more people who knew, the less alone I felt. My embarrassment began to fade as I learned more about abuse.

The divorce was not easy. Because I'd left in the middle of the night with only the clothes on my back, we needed a court order to get back in the house so I could retrieve our clothing, some furniture, and our dog. I was even able to see the humor in my friend's shock at the pots, pans, and food in the front hallway. She thought Larry had emptied the cabinets earlier that day in a fit of pique.

The attorney filed a protective order. Larry was required to stay away from my daughter and me. I didn't want a long court battle, so I decided not to file assault charges against him.

I called my parents and told them what had happened, omitting the worst parts. They were not surprised. After all this time, my mother said she always thought Larry was a bit odd. My father agreed. So much for my concern about their anger.

MY DAUGHTER AND I FOUND A SMALL apartment and moved in within the month. It was the first time in years that we were able to live in a place that reflected who we were. The house had always been dark because Larry insisted that the curtains remain closed. Now we opened every window and let the sunshine inside.

Within months the divorce was final. On that day, I spent the time with a friend making a picture frame for a print for our apartment. I wanted to do something I'd never tried before and looked for the type of activity Larry would say I could never accomplish. The framed poster hangs in my living room today.

My daughter had graduated from high school that June and decided to attend the University of Arizona. She wanted to become a social worker with a special interest in working with abused children -- a goal she has accomplished.

The following spring, in 1986, I was offered a position at Red Cross headquarters in Washington. When the plane circled the city, I knew I was coming home.

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I thought I had left behind the drama of domestic abuse. Yet while I was waiting in a real-estate office one day, my gaze fell on the cover of that month's *Washingtonian*. It was a photograph of an attractive woman looking straight at me. Her name was Charlotte Fedders, and she told the story of her marriage to a powerful lawyer, her country-club membership and house in Potomac, and how her husband often beat her.

I couldn't believe there was another woman in circumstances like mine -- a life filled with outward appearances of success but tortured by abuse. Reading her story confirmed for me that I had done the right thing when I left my husband.

THE YEAR AFTER I ARRIVED IN Washington, I met my soul mate. We just celebrated our 11th wedding anniversary and have a seven-year-old daughter we adore. My husband is witty and smart, and in a million years I couldn't imagine him raising his hand to hit me.

My life in Tulsa seemed a distant memory as my life in Washington blossomed. I became executive director of the National Conference for Community and Justice, where my work centers on fighting prejudice of all kinds.

In my job, I meet with community groups and talk about the roles bias and bigotry play in our lives and what we can do to change our behavior. In one exercise I do with groups, we talk about the "real person behind the face." But for the longest time I wasn't able to reveal that part of my "real person" is someone who is a former battered wife.

The biggest change for me took place at home. Like a prisoner of war must feel upon his or her release, I felt that every day is a gift. In the first months after my new marriage, it felt like a victory to wake up with my husband beside me. Putting a pan in the cabinet, buying a new dress, not accounting for my paycheck -- it was like being granted a second chance at life.

And because I wasn't on edge all the time, I found Washington to be a warm, welcoming place to live and work. When we adopted our daughter, our circle of friends grew even larger. The best part is being free to invite these people into our home -- something I never dared do during my first marriage.

LIFE WAS GOOD. EXCEPT I WASN'T SURE where Larry was. Every day I feared that he would reappear and beat me one last time.

I figured he knew I had moved here and it was just a matter of time before he tracked me down. I had recurring nightmares, and despite my husband's assurances that everything was fine, I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop. Every time I'd read a story about domestic violence I'd shudder in fear. During the O. J. Simpson trial I relived my own terror daily.

One night last year I went on the Internet to look for him. There was a listing for a Larry with his last name in his hometown of Kansas City. He was living there with his wife. And according to the listing, her name was Cheryl.

I was frightened. I called a friend who had access to Lexis-Nexis and was able to do a comprehensive search. He called back and asked me to sit down: "You're not going to believe this -- he's dead."

LARRY HAD DIED IN 1995. IN SOME WAYS IT was his final strike at me. I'd spent the past few years living in fear of him, and he wasn't even alive. Because I didn't stay in touch with his parents or his brother, and we didn't have mutual friends, there hadn't been any way for me to hear about his death.

I took a deep breath and called my daughter with the news.

Then I did what years ago would have been unthinkable. I decided to "come out." I wrote an article for the *Washington Post* about being battered. I briefly told my story and made the point that the signs that a person is being abused are apparent if you're willing to see them. And then you have to be ready to act.

I hear from women in this city who have been, or are being, abused. I've been in a high-level business meeting and had a note passed to me from someone who once suffered physical abuse. I've been involved in Leadership Washington and have heard from fellow community leaders who have had the same experience of abuse.

They are like me. Many are middle-class. They are considered bright and warm and generous. And when they read that they were not alone in their confusion, pain, and humiliation, they took a leap of faith and began to tell their stories.

My hope is that every person who is battered will somehow find the strength to walk out of their house of horrors. On the other side of the door, the welcoming arms of a compassionate community will be waiting.

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FOUR DAYS AFTER I WALKED INTO THE arms of my friend in Tulsa, I appeared in the courtroom of Judge Deborah Cross, where I was granted an emergency protective order. The order, dated March 14, 1985, was granted because I was "in immediate danger of domestic abuse and serious harm or injury."

Larry had until March 25 to show cause why he shouldn't comply with the order. He never showed up in court, which made the order permanent.

I carried the paper everywhere, even when I left Tulsa for Washington.

On the job, I went to meetings, gave speeches, and appeared on the news, and the order was always with me. My fear was that one day Larry would show up and finish the job. I never felt safe until the day my friend called with the news that Larry was dead.

I took the long way home from work that night. When I got there, I took the order out of my purse and read it one last time. Then I folded it and finally filed it away.

**GRAPHIC:** Picture, no caption, PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHERYL KRAVITZ; PHOTO COLLAGE BY DOUG STEVENS

**LOAD-DATE:** August 2, 2000