

Never Ever Give Up Hope

I sit on the cold, damp bathroom floor, my head between my knees; dry sobs wrack my body. It seems like the end. I have bolted the door. I hope against hope that he will call me, but I know he won't. I look at my wrists -there are ugly red marks and swellings where the watch strap has bitten into the flesh. He gave me the watch for my birthday. My arms ache. He does this often. Once I bit his ankle in retaliation, but he was so brutal thereafter that I never tried it again. When I do not bow down, when I argue about a point, or do not accept something said by his relatives, he twists my hands till I cry out in pain. Then he makes me beg for forgiveness.

The first time he dragged me by my hair from the bedroom to the draw-ing room and threw this watch into the fire. He retrieved it and had it put right. I was young then, married just over two years. When the watch came back, I loved him more, convinced that I must have done something wrong.

I should have left at that time. Fresh from university, a freelance journalist, I could have managed even with a baby. But I loved him, was inexperienced, and hid my problems from my parents lest they worried or encouraged me to quit. And I was sure he would improve.

But it went on a little worse each time. From hair pulling and wrist twist-ing to forced lovemaking and slaps. It became a habit with him. We were childhood neighbours who fell in love and married with our parents' approval. His father was very harsh to him. His stepmother, a beautiful person, was constricted by relatives who said she was being stepmotherly whenever she disciplined him, so she let him have his own way always.

I was very sought after for my painting, writing and social activities such as public speaking and acting. A friend once told me that I should stop being in the limelight and allow my husband to show up more. It was difficult to stop being what I am. I thought I could overcome all his complexes with love but they seemed to get worse over the years.

Why am I sitting here? Am I not capable of managing on my own? At the moment I do not even have money to buy a ticket and go home. He is not letting me near the telephone to talk to any friend. Fifteen years have gone by. I have two boys in school. There have been moments of joy but the ugly incidents obliterate all. I am a prisoner in my own home.

I should leave now. To whom do I go? My parents are old. I need money to educate the children. I no longer have faith in my earning capability. I need a home and cash to tide me over a year or two. For years I did not tell my parents. They said I looked unhappy. I said I was fine. I appealed to my in-laws. At first, they sympathised with me, but gradually, started believing that I was the cause of his behaviour. I was expected to praise his family and listen to abuse regarding mine.

In desperation I went to some lawyers. They told me Christian marriage law in India dates back to the mid-nineteenth century. It demands irrefutable proof and is totally male favouring.

Two years later, I did leave. I had no respect for myself and was apologetic for my very existence. My parents gave me perfect strength and support, and shared whatever they had. My children opted to stay with me. I went from job to job. Finally, journalism and a well paid

executive job made us three comfortable and restored my confidence.

The idea of another marriage hurt and I avoided it. Then I met this wonderful man, a divorcee like me. Like wounded souls, we avoided each other. Over a long period of time we discovered that we could not do without each other's support. We got married and now have a child. My first husband too has remarried and has two children by the second marriage.

By divorcing through mutual consent, I had to waive my rights to property, maintenance and household goods. My two sons lost all their rights too. For this I will feel guilty all my life.

I would advise others: never ever give up hope. Do not make the children an excuse for accepting brutality. Most probably, they are having a rougher time than you imagine but are too frightened to say so. My son was told by his father: "I didn't burn her, did I?" Always operate your own bank account and keep adding to it from the household money, junk sales and any tiny amounts you can gather. Keep your jewellery in your personal locker. Take out education policies for the children. Keep your parents or near relatives informed so that they can support you when necessary and are not taken by surprise. Have faith in the working of god. But god did not ask you to bear sadism and brutality. Religion today is being interpreted the way men want it.

The world around us offers a million opportunities. Let us take courage, have faith, break away and make a better world for ourselves. Let us not get burnt before we can make a decision. This is the least we owe to ourselves, our children and each other.

Name withheld on request