



Coercive sexual abuse in a marriage

Very early in our relationship, I had surgery for an ectopic pregnancy. A week later I was still wearing pyjamas in bed, and my husband's pattern of behaviour emerged for the first time: 'I know it's irrational but...' I know it's irrational, but I feel that by wearing pyjamas you are putting barriers between us. I know it's irrational, but I understand sex as love, so I feel like you don't love me. I know it's irrational, but unless we have sex every 3 or 4 days, I feel vulnerable and unloved. I know it's irrational, but my first marriage ended because my wife wouldn't be intimate with me after our daughter was born. I know it's irrational, but I feel like that's how a couple shows they care.

Sometimes there was no disclaimer, just self-righteous fury. 'You promised me sex today: how dare you make promises you don't intend to keep?' Days of sulking and quiet rage. It was so irrational, so impervious to reason, laughter or emotion, that I put up with it. Made myself announce on the third day whether or not we would have sex. Felt sick with nerves on the fourth day and watched his face and shoulders when I had to say no, no sex today. I drank a lot to make it bearable.

But then it got less bearable. Last year, his mother died, and shortly afterwards I started having flashbacks to my own history of sexual assault and gang rape - things I had never forgotten, but which I'd carefully flattened out and walked around. Things I'd blamed myself for because it was easier than facing how powerless I'd been at the time. I told him. Half an hour later he said, 'This is going to have an impact on our sex life.'

Over the next six months he woke me up screaming 3 in the morning because I had put barriers between us by having an extra blanket in bed. He threw mugs across the kitchen and raged. Announced calmly one evening that I had to tell him everyday if we were going to have sex later, because men have needs and that way he would know in advance that he had to 'take care of himself.' Told me that I needed to get some rest because he wanted sex the next day and didn't want any excuses. Talked through fantasies of me being gang raped while he acted them out on my body and told me I was a whore who enjoyed it. Saved my facebook conversations with other people into documents, then denied having done it. It must have been the drink.

Finally, the thing that broke me, he put together a dossier of all the electronic exchanges we'd ever had, asked me to sit with him, and told me that he didn't recognise himself anymore. I agreed. Only it turned out that he meant that I had driven him insane. Everything was my fault. I wasn't tactile enough; didn't hug him enough. Made him feel insecure. I slept in another room that night, woke before him, got my son to school in the morning, and then ran in the clothes I was wearing.

I found it very hard to understand what was going on, what was really going on, for a very long time - even when the panic attacks started; even when I began planning to kill myself to get away. I still have to fight against the idea that this doesn't count as 'real' abuse; that I am not a good enough or clean enough victim. He never hit me, after all; he never held me down. Then



again, he didn't have to. I'm posting this so that other women can read it and realise that they don't have to live this way.

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