

## *If Only...*

*Jan K. Jenson*

From my hospital bed, surrounded by vases of beautiful flowers, I studied the reflection of the pathetic creature framed in my mirror. It was more than the blackened eye, the swollen mouth and the tense facial lines. Lifelessly, the dull, sad eyes stared back at me. What has happened to me, I asked myself, as I choked back the sobs. It hurt too much to cry. It hurt to move. My broken leg had just been set in a heavy plaster cast. My doctor had informed me that I would have to walk with crutches for the next six months. How could I take care of my baby and my two young children? What was I going to do?

Tears scalded my eyelids as scenes from last night's attack flashed before my eyes. David had been so angry. I still wasn't quite sure why. It had started at the dinner table. Everything was wrong, according to him. He was sick of spaghetti (normally his favorite meal). Dinner was fifteen minutes late. The baby shouldn't be crying. I had committed the unforgivable sin of buying another head of lettuce when I already had one in the refrigerator. The more I apologized and tried to diffuse the situation, the more violent he became. The inevitable beating culminated with an excruciating surge of pain as my leg snapped when he slammed me down onto the floor.

In the background, I had been aware of the piercing wail of the baby crying out in fear. I could see the terror in the faces of my two toddlers huddled together in the hallway crying silently. What was this doing to my poor, innocent children?

What had happened to the self-confident, intelligent and dynamic high school girl I had been five short years ago? The one

with all the dreams and goals, lots of friends and a bright future ahead. What had David done to me? Or, rather, what had I, in the name of love, allowed this man to do to me? It was time to take a good hard look at this stranger in my mirror. Yes, I was David's doormat. Beaten down into fearful submission, my spirit had been crushed. My self-esteem was shot.

The flowers . . . yes, the flowers . . . I couldn't escape the irony of it all. Bouquets of fresh flowers delivered to the hospital throughout the day . . . from David. Little love notes accompanied each delivery. "All my love forever," he signed them. Notes of apology, promises that he would never hurt me again as long as he lived, that he needed me and could never live without me. All this from the man who had just broken my leg. He had cried real tears and begged for my forgiveness. It was the usual "after-the-beating" routine. But this time, something more than my leg had snapped. This time, I found the courage to tell the doctor the truth about what was happening to me. Maybe it was the haunting memory of the faces of my terrified children hiding in the hallway that gave me the strength to face the truth. There would be no more lies about my falling down the stairs or off a ladder.

The lights of the city glowed in the darkness outside my window. Alone in the dark, I wondered what was happening behind the closed doors of all those homes. I wondered if there was anyone else like me out there. But this is *not* me, a small voice cried out from within. Five years ago, when I was sixteen years old there was another me, the real me. Were there other high school girls out there who were madly in love the way I was, blinded from seeing the dark side of their partners until it was too late? If only I could go back in time.

But that was the hard part. Remembering the good times, remembering the way it was when David and I first met and fell in love. We were so in love that we were inseparable. Nothing else seemed to matter except being together. Looking back, I was actually in love with "love" itself, caught up in the glamorous myths of love as portrayed in the movies and the songs that blared from my radio. I believed in living together happily ever after. I believed that if you really loved someone, you couldn't live without him. And even when things didn't always go as smoothly as they should have, I held on to my conviction that by loving someone enough, you could change him.

David came from a violent home: His father beat his mother

regularly, and sometimes David as well. But David promised me that he would never lay a hand on me, especially after seeing what his mother went through. Poor David. I felt so sorry for him. Just knowing what he'd gone through brought out my maternal instincts: I wanted to care for him and make up for his abusive childhood. If only I could love him enough and be a good-enough wife to him someday, I knew I could make him happier. If David didn't love me the way I wanted him to or if he wasn't happy, it had to be my fault. There must be something wrong with me.

As time went on, David reinforced my ideas. If he was moody, depressed or irritable, it was my fault. As a matter of fact, nothing was ever David's fault. When he got into trouble at school, it was because the teachers were picking on him. He frequently got into fights with the other guys, sometimes physical fights. I remember seeing him shove people out of his way and up against the lockers as he walked down the hallways at school. I didn't like that, but David convinced me it was their fault. They had asked for it by the way they treated him! And, of course, if his parents weren't the way they were, he'd have no problems at all.

At least David never hit me, not until later. He "loved" me so much, however, that he'd get extremely upset over the little things I did or didn't do. Stupid little things, he called them. Looking back, belittling me was his way of boosting his own low self-esteem. I had to play the inferior role in our relationship. I figured that would change someday when David was secure enough in my love.

I was sure that he loved me. He often showed it through displays of extreme jealousy and possessiveness. I couldn't talk to another boy. In fact, David wanted me all to himself, to the point that he resented my girlfriends and my family. All we needed was each other, he said. He did a lot of subtle things to discourage me from spending time with anyone else. And if he chose to go out with his friends or not bother to call me, I was still to sit home alone and wait by the phone for his call. If I wasn't there, I was interrogated about where I was, who I talked to, even what I wore. The hassle wasn't worth it. I became more and more isolated, more dependent on David as my sole source of support. Actually, I was a little frightened of David's temper if I didn't do what he wanted me to do. The confusing part was that his expectations frequently changed. I never knew exactly what he wanted from one day to the next. It seemed that I could do nothing to

please him. The more I failed to please him, the more I felt like a failure myself.

I felt it was up to me to make this relationship work. You see, we had become sexually involved by this time. To me, that meant commitment. I had to protect my image of myself as a "nice girl." Our sexual intimacy seemed to create a strong bond of ownership. I was now "his" to control and to use as he wished. My boundaries began to disintegrate as I relinquished my self-identity to become a part of David.

We began to fight a lot. That is, David fought. He was often very angry for little or no reason at all. I'd try to calm him down. He'd smash his fist into a wall or destroy something. That also frightened me. Sometimes he'd swear at me or call me names. That hurt a lot. I'd cry. Then he'd cry and hold me close, begging me to forgive him. He promised not to act that way again. I was the only one who could help him change, he always said. He needed me so much, and he was so afraid of losing me. That was why he acted the way he did. So I forgave him . . . and tried to forget.

We played the "if only . . ." game. *If only* we could get married and be together all the time, we'd be happy and wouldn't fight. *If only* his dad wasn't so abusive, David wouldn't be so angry. *If only* I was more loving and caring, he wouldn't feel so bad. The game went on and on. The cycle of abuse had begun, although we were both too entrenched in denial to see the reality of it all. I needed to deny what was happening to protect my shaky self-esteem. He needed to deny his actions to avoid taking responsibility for changing his behavior.

The honeymoon stage following a fight was always spectacular and provided the reinforcement and caring I needed to continue the cycle. After one particularly nasty explosion, David surprised me with a beautiful diamond engagement ring. *If only* we could get married, he wouldn't be so jealous and accusing. I'd be his wife, so he wouldn't have to worry about other guys. We had such big plans and dreams for our future together. With a love as strong as ours, it simply had to work.

We were married, expecting to live happily ever after and to have a family as soon as possible. That was all I'd ever really wanted—to be a good wife and mother, and I intended to work hard to make our dreams come true.

Little by little, one by one, all my hopes and dreams were

crushed by the harsh reality of living with an abusive partner who had no desire to change. Little by little, the emotional abuse escalated into threats, which escalated into minor forms of physical abuse. It had been such a gradual process that I'd been almost unaware of what was happening, wanting so much to believe that things would get better. By the time that his increasing violence began resulting in bruises and injuries to me, I'd already been beaten down psychologically to the point of feeling powerless to do anything about it. I actually blamed myself for doing things that caused him to "lose his temper." Maybe I deserved to be abused. After all, by this time my self-esteem had been shattered. I didn't feel like a worthwhile, valuable or lovable person. I'd find myself actually comforting him, wiping away his tears, after he'd slapped and shoved me around! He felt so bad about what he'd done. If only he hadn't been abused as a child! He became the victim and he used that role to justify his inappropriate behavior.

Sometimes, lying awake at night after having been beaten, I thought about leaving. But I felt trapped. He said he would kill me if I tried to leave, and I really believed he would make his threat good. I had no job or money of my own. And I did have three young children to care for and, somehow, provide a loving, happy home for.

One by one, the lights in the city outside my hospital room were turned off for the night until all that was left were the street lights illuminating the freshly fallen snow. It was so quiet, so peaceful. Lost in my thoughts, I almost didn't notice two figures huddled together in the park across the street. They were holding hands, their heads close together. A young couple, I observed, obviously in love. Beneath the street light, they clung together, as the light snow swirled around them. I felt a tug at my own heart as I watched them now playfully throwing snow at each other, stopping every so often for a hug or kiss. Yes, that's the way it should be. For us, it was never meant to be. Maybe, hopefully, for them it would be different.