

Living with domestic abuse: ‘Our marriage is over when I say it’s f**king over’

‘He was telling me not to see my friends . . . I thought that was love’

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Jennifer O’Connell

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“He was a true gentleman. A really lovely guy. He couldn’t do enough for me. And then, the second night of our honeymoon, the abuse started.”

Priscilla Grainger was a strong, independent woman before she married her ex-husband. She was streetwise and proud of it. The only child of two parents who adored her, she had never known anything except love and kindness in her relationships.



So while “there were red flags” in their five-year relationship before the wedding, she adds: “I didn’t see them, because I was never looking out for them. He would do this thing of ‘You’re not going out with your friends again’. He was quite controlling and very intense.”

What she was beginning to experience, though she didn’t yet recognise it, is ‘coercive control’ – a pattern of acts of assaults, threats, humiliation, and intimidation or other forms of psychological or emotional abuse.

According to the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) in 2014, one in three Irish women have experienced some type of psychological violence by a partner since the age of 15.

Coercive control, which is to be punishable by up to five years in prison under the Domestic Violence Act 2018, is so common amongst perpetrators of domestic abuse it’s as though they’re following a script. It frequently starts in the same way – with an unhealthy intensity.

“We met on a blind date when I was 20. Within a couple of weeks things had gone from zero to a hundred,” says Aisling Byrne of the early days of her relationship. “I saw him every night, he’d ring me five or six times a day from payphones. It was only a few weeks before he asked me to marry him.”

She was madly in love, but her parents didn’t like him, Byrne says, which she now recognises as a warning sign.

“We broke up for a few weeks, and I was devastated. I remember my mam saying ‘You don’t have to get back with him. We don’t like the way he treated you’. He was telling me not to see my friends. He was critical of everyone. He’d drop me to the bus in the morning, and I’d come out of work and he’d be waiting for me. I thought that was love.”

For both women, who feature in a TG4 documentary to air on Wednesday night, the control became more intense after their wedding; and more intense again after they became pregnant with their first children.

The mantra

It was on the second night of their honeymoon that the abuse in Grainger’s relationship turned physical. She was jetlagged, and wanted to go to bed, and so she said goodnight to her husband in the hotel bar, and told him she was going upstairs to read a book. When he came up later, he was furious.

“He started on at me, ‘Don’t you ever leave your husband downstairs in the bar like that’.” Grainger, who was in bed reading, stood up. “He grabbed me and fired me onto the bed, and he kicked me in the side.”

She was shocked, but he immediately said: “I didn’t touch you, I only tipped you.”

That became the mantra that defined their relationship. “I only tipped you,” he would say, as he hit her and kicked her and pushed her, careful at first never to leave bruises where they would be seen.

Later, he cared less – once breaking her jaw, after he threw her against a radiator – because he knew she’d cover up for him.

“You actually do become addicted to making excuses for them, and that’s all you know. There was a bit of me thinking what would people say, the stigma of it,” Grainger says.

Ainie
Grainger
and
her
Mum,
Priscilla
Grainger
-
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domestic
violence
survivors
-
tell
their
story
in
in
Tabú:
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on
TG4.

The same research by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency found that one in four Irish women reported some form of physical and sexual violence by a partner or non-partner, and 79 per cent of who experienced it did not report it.

It took Grainger many years to get help. The shame kicks in, she says, the self-esteem begins to be stripped away, and it becomes impossible to leave. It’s a kind of grooming, she says.

When she was pregnant in 1998, her ex-husband threw a glass ornament at her. Although she was only 32 weeks pregnant, her waters broke, and her daughter, Ainie, was born prematurely. After that, she became even more terrified to seek help in case she lost her child, a fear that is not uncommon amongst victims, says Safe Ireland.

Byrne’s husband’s behaviour also intensified after their first child was born, although in her case the abuse was primarily about coercive control.

“At one point I remember saying to him, ‘tell me when I do something right, because I know I do everything wrong’. When you have a baby the fight goes out of you. She never slept for more than three hours and there was constant arguing because she kept crying and he kept saying ‘Can you not get that baby to shut up?’.

On eggshells

She felt he controlled who she saw; how she spent her time; what she could spend their money on.

“It chipped, chipped, chipped away at me. Throughout all that time, you think ‘It’s me, I’m not a good enough mother, I’m not a good enough wife.’ In his view, he was perfect. He didn’t drink, he didn’t smoke, he was the perfect husband, he didn’t me beat me and he gave me his wages.”

She felt “the violence was implied. I felt intimidated. I felt the threat of it was always there. I walked around on eggshells for years. I couldn’t win. It was all mind games. If I cooked dinner, he’d come home and taste it and throw it in the bin. If I didn’t, it was ‘What were you doing sitting on your ass all day?’ I remember one time saying ‘Just hit me and get it over with’.

When her two oldest daughters were eight and 12, Aisling began making plans to leave. But then, unexpectedly, she became pregnant.

Aisling
Byrne:
“The
violence
was
implied.
I
felt
intimidated.
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I
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“I think he suspected I was planning to leave, because all throughout the pregnancy, I’d never seen him so happy. Things were good, he was nice to me, and then I had her, and I remember getting out of hospital, and it all started again. When my youngest was six weeks old, I was out walking with my friend, and I turned to her, and I said ‘I can’t be with this man’.”

She couldn’t afford to leave, so instead, she started trying to reclaim her independence, little by little. She constructed a mental wall between them.

“I’d put the kids to bed, then I’d go out to the gym, or if I didn’t I’d go on Facebook. I had completely detached myself from that whole situation – it was a case of ‘you can say what you want, but it’s not going to affect me’.”

One Sunday morning, she was having a cup of tea with her uncle and aunt, and he phoned and told her to come home.

“He started roaring down the phone at me. So I went home and my two eldest were crying their eyes out.”

She'd finally had enough. "It was that night that I said to him 'We're finished'. He walked over, and put his face to mine, and he said 'Our marriage is over when I say it's f**king over'."

"That was the first night of months and months of being terrified."

She sought help from the guards, who advised her to get a safety order, but even with the safety order in place, what she calls the psychological torture continued. "I would wake up and he'd be standing over me."

Back garden

He was later convicted of multiple breaches of orders, but he never got a custodial sentence.

"He basically got a slap on the wrist. I had to leave that courtroom and walk down the quays and know he was walking along the street that was running parallel to it. Why are the courts awarding these orders if there are no consequences?" she says. "It's not worth the paper it's written on."

Agencies like Safe Ireland have been calling for the urgent commencement of the Domestic Violence Act 2018, which will also ensure stronger sentencing for partner violence, and introduce emergency barring orders.

Byrne has returned to college, through the Trinity Access Programme, and is in her fourth year of Ancient History and Archaeology, and Jewish and Islamic Civilisations.

Priscilla
Grainger
and
her
daughter,
Ainie.
"Confide
in
somebody
and
plan
your
exit,"
Priscilla
says.
"A
leopard
never
change
their
spots.
If
they
do
it
once,
they'll
do
it,
again
and
again
and
again."

Grainger's daughter, Ainie, was a constant witness to the abuse and the violence until her parents' marriage finally ended when she was 12.

"I grew up with it, so I thought it was normal. I remember being in second class and asking another child 'Does your daddy hit your mammy?', and the other child was shocked," she says.

The first time it happened to her, she was eight.

“I didn’t want to eat my dinner, so he put me out in the back garden. I had no jacket on, and I have asthma, but he left me out there in the rain until my granny came over.”

The verbal abuse started at the same age: she remembers vividly her shock the first time her father called her “a c**t.”

Priscilla eventually ended the marriage by hiring a security company, which served him with a safety order. It took seven years from that night, for the divorce to be finalised.

Social media

When Ainie was 14, she and her mother set up an organisation to help victims of domestic violence, Stop Domestic Violence in Ireland. They provide practical help for people trying to get out of abusive relationships – mobile phones, food vouchers, clothing, money. Ainie reaches teenagers in abusive situations through social media.

“Confide in somebody and plan your exit,” Priscilla says. “A leopard never change their spots. If they do it once, they’ll do it, again and again and again. There is life afterwards. I have come out of it and I now have three guesthouses, I do a huge amount for the homeless, and I run this organisation for domestic abuse victims.”

Ainie Grainger still sees her father in the street sometimes.

“At the end of the day, he is my dad, but I can’t forgive him. I see him around all the time, and he looks at me in disgust. But I’m not afraid of him. Now that I’m nearly 21, I feel I’d have the strength to go up and to him and say if you ever go near my mam, you’ll never live it down. I have the words now that I didn’t have when I was younger.”

TABú: Ag Teacht Slán is on TG4 on Wednesday November 21 at 9.30pm

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