Surviving Rape and Abuse in an International Marriage

Description

The AutoEthnographer

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Authorâ??s Memo

I write at length about my experiences surviving rape and abuse as a Western woman in an international marriage in Japan. I married my Japanese/Black American husband back in 1999, and my life was never the same. The abuse I suffered caused me to reflect deeply on my unique experiences as a *gaijin* (foreigner) in Japan, as a woman in Japan who was very much the â??nail that sticks outâ??. The desperation I felt at being trapped abroad, with my children, and being held there by the Hague Convention on parental child abduction (please see Filiaâ??s Hague Motherâ??s campaign for clarification on the situation faced by abused women and their children) led me to realize that I was not trapped just by my husband, but by the Patriarchy as a system.

The abuse I suffered was enabled by both the highly patriarchal nature of Japanese society, by the Western patriarchal systems, and by the men who were close to me who kept me and the children trapped. I suffered terrible physical and sexual abuse. The police in Japan were not interested and in fact found my black eyes and my appeals for help to be amusing, laughing at me when I begged for assistance, and offering no relief.

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Although my story is a very personal one, I believe it has wider implications. I am a well educated woman who was teaching in Japan and if I can fall through the cracks due to the Patriarchy, anybody can. I became nobody, I became my husbandâ??s body. I ceased to exist in my own right as a human being and as a woman. My motherhood was threatened. I was not allowed to even consider being my authentic self.

> This experience of being a privileged Western woman who had her life destroyed by men is by no means unique to me. I was lucky to get out alive.

It is not just my life, my youth that was taken away and ruined. This happens to many women. I hope by sharing my experiences with others, then perhaps I can shed light on the fact that women are playing a game with the odds stacked against them. I had no family to return to, and when I did try and return I was thrown back by the Hague convention, back to being raped and abused.

I concentrated on the bigger picture aspect of my story in this piece, but would be interested in writing further about being a Hague mother, and my treatment in courts spanning three continents.

Obviously, I am still not totally safe and therefore need to be very careful. To get away and hide I had to go to the USA where I was not legal but had support. I fell through the cracks, and it has been very hard to get back. This experience of being a privileged Western woman who had her life destroyed by men is by no means unique to me. I was lucky to get out alive.

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Photo of Japanese Jizo statues by Jordy Meow for Pixabay

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When I left my home country to go and teach English as a foreign language, I was not looking for anything other than an escape from the monotony of being trapped in a life that was swirling out of control. I had always been abused by men. As a young girl I was abused, my body invaded and colonized for the pleasure of men who didnâ??t care for innocence or decency, nor criminal abuse charges. Men used me and abused me as if they were immune from prosecution, and to be frank, events proved that men could indeed hurt and rape without any negative consequences. I was in my

early twenties and had spent my teens and early adulthood in a haze of opiate addiction.

I worked out I was a lesbian in my mid-teens, but due to the bullying and enforced heterosexuality around me, and the sheer fear of being seen as a predator in my all-girls school, I remained closeted, and my relationships kept quiet. I did not see any other option than to accept men in my life and in my body and sought to interact with men in a way that pleased them. At least then, I reasoned, I could at least stay safe. What a fool I was!

I wanted to get as far away from my old life, from Western society as possible. I was running from family who had never protected me and seemed to detest me and my tomboyish ways. I was running from addiction. I was running from myself, as unwise as that proved to be.

When I got off the plane and walked into the Tokyo afternoon furnace I was overcome with a feeling of being unanchored. Me with my white skin, from my Western perspective, felt as if I had landed on an alien continent. It was 1999, and before Tokyo had inched even closer to Western culture. There were no Starbucks, the food was very much traditionally Japanese, and I felt cut adrift. Scrabbling around for rice balls stuffed with anchovy fry and wrapped in seaweed, drinking Pocari Sweat and staring at a TV blaring out programming I could not understand nor comprehend felt totally freeing. It was then that I met the man I would marry.

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Mr. Charming was three quarters Japanese. His father was a lean Japanese man with a wide smile and freckles on his face; his mother had dark skin and curly hair and was the product of American colonization of Japan after World War Two. Mr. Charming had been to college in the United States and his English was excellent. We gravitated to each other. I got to pretend I was not damaged, that I was not a recovered addict, that my body had not been abused or raped. I got to try and force myself to be straight. I could not envision any kind of happiness or fulfillment as a lesbian woman, so did my best to erase myself. There might not have been fireworks, but I saw a life in his Tokyo apartment as possibly happy. There was the possibility of children and I wanted desperately to be a mother. I thought we could live happily mostly separate lives â?? him a traditional Japanese salaryman, married to his company, and me, a Western woman in Japan devoted to her babies. It was doomed from the start.

Mr. Charming showed no signs of being anything other than charming before we married. We rarely argued, he was quiet and restrained. One incident where he â??accidentallyâ?? banged my ankles with his suitcase while we were taking the dirty clothes to the laundromat was written off as a mistake. He showed no signs of really wanting much in the way of sex, and was not domineering or unkind.

We got married and immediately started trying for a baby. I thought my plan to be normal, to have a normal life and therefore be happy within patriarchal society, playing the game by menâ??s rules, was a perfectly reasonable one. It was clear I would never escape men, so I had to learn to live with one that was as safe and gentle as possible. I saw Mr. Charming as my refuge from Western male toxicity.

The first time he hit me I was so shocked I could not comprehend what had happened. I was four months pregnant, and we had gotten on a train to the center of Tokyo from our suburban apartment. It

was meant to be a pleasant trip to the shopping mall in Ebisu. We were going to browse baby things and eat some junk food together. I watched as Mr. Charming tripped over his shoelaces and the tray of hamburgers and fries and drinks slid to the floor. We were earning two wages, we could afford more food, and besides, what happened was not my fault. I smiled, giggled and bent down to help him clear up. My smile said â??no problem, sweetie.â?? Unfortunately, he put two hands on my chest, and pushed my pregnant body backwards, shoving me violently so I fell back hard onto the concrete floor. He stormed over to me, snatched my purse off me and ran off into the distance before I could even haul myself up.

> My body belonged to my husband. I was not free to use contraception â?? since my husband forbade it and doctors were unwilling to prescribe without his consent, even if I did manage to get to them. My husband forbade abortions, I had miscarriage after miscarriage due him beating me. My body and psyche were under siege.

He had my bag, so I had no cell phone, no money, no purse, no keys, nothing. It was absolutely burning hot and so humid I could barely breathe. A small elderly woman helped me compose myself, and asked me in broken English why he had done that. I could not fathom why she thought I had the first clue why. I simply had no idea. I was the whipping boy once more. Once more I was the person being abused and I had no power over it. I could not consider leaving whilst pregnant, I had nowhere to go to back in my home country and I was in total shock. I begged some money from another foreign woman that I spied in the train station. She got me back to my train stop, and I walked back home. He would not even let me in the apartment. I had to sit outside, needing water, pregnant and in tears, in the burning heat of a Tokyo summer.

Things went from bad to worse. He took out all his hatred of his life, of responsibility which he had freely entered into, of his mother who was cold and standoffish, onto me and our unborn daughter. He told me I belonged to him. Life settled into a carousel of abuse. He would rape me, pulling me off the sofa that I had started to sleep on, and invading my body. It didnâ??t matter I was pregnant or struggling. After a few beatings I realized that struggling made everything worse. The less I was compliant, the more violent he became. I wish I had run, but where to and how I had no idea. To go back when I had no home, no money, no airfare, nothing, and to go so very far, whilst pregnant, seemed like an impossible mountain to scale. He beat me badly when I was around seven and a half months. The baby came early.

We both almost died. There is something that happened in my brain which I suppose kept me alive â?? I started disassociating from the rapes and the beatings. I became use to being vilified by his family and by the man I once cared for, though never loved. I was told by his family that I was making him angry because I fed him pasta and pasta is Italian, and Italian people are passionate and have big emotions. I was told to apologize for America using nuclear bombs on Japan in World War II, despite not being American, and despite being a pacifist. I was forbidden to go to work and had to give up my job. My world was reduced to the four walls of my husbandâ??s apartment in Tokyo. I had no access to bank accounts, and was kept hungry, without essentials, having to submit to sex acts in exchange for baby milk and diapers for our tiny and unwell daughter. He beat her out of me, yet failed to show even passing concern for her needs. We were on our own.

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husband forbade abortions, I had miscarriage after miscarriage due him beating me. My body and psyche were under siege. I pushed my self down under in order to survive.

> Sometimes it feels as if being a woman means that I am not free, and can never be free.

I have often been told by other women that I should have fought back, physically and loudly pushed him away when he hit or raped me. It hurts immensely when other women judge how I survived, considering it not ideal, or somehow faulty. I pushed my husband away once, when he started to rape me the day I came home after having a c section. My stitches were still in place, I was bleeding and very sore. The baby was screaming and I desperately needed my body to not be touched in any way. I needed to be allowed to heal. I stood up and grabbed my baby off the low futon on the floor. He punched me so hard that me and the baby flew over backwards, the baby thankfully landing on top of me. Every time I didnâ??t comply he came closer and closer to killing me.

I started to make plans to get away with the baby. It took me a long time and another child before I was able to get away for good. I quietly slipped away and disappeared with the children. We lived outside in campgrounds for over five years. It was better than being raped and beaten up. He would regularly tell me he was going to kill me, and that the only way out of the marriage was in a box. I am still married to him, though I have not seen him for over 7 years now. He has blocked the divorce in Japan, and refuses to respond to any request for a divorce. I am still not entirely free and autonomous. This â??ownershipâ?? of my body, my name, my legal rights weighs heavy on me. I feel the courts refusing the divorce is a direct assault on my rights as a human being. Sometimes it feels as if being a woman means that I am not free, and can never be free.

I had to fight so hard to get away, and get away alive. I have permanent injuries and severe post traumatic stress disorder. I struggle to survive. In order to get away, I had to accept that I could not go back to my birth country, but instead hide in the USA where I had support, so me and my child are also illegal. Being illegal as a human being, just so I could survive my husbandâ??s abuse is incredibly stressful and frightening, but at least my body is my own. At least no one is hurting me. At least I am no longer living in fear of being raped or beaten up. At least I am free in the most important way that matters. At least I have been able to reconcile myself to my innate lesbian sexuality and am able to live authentically. But the fact remains that this man took decades of my life and stole my health, and got away with doing so, enabled by the patriarchal legal system, and that is unforgivable.

Editorâ??s note: *The featured image shows Japanese Jizo (å?°è?µ/womb of the earth), statues that protect the spirits of children who have passed away. Learn more here.*

Featured image of Japanese Jizo statues by Jordy Meow from Pixabay

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