

Here's a true story about a heroic woman.

A long, long time ago, a child in Southampton caught bronchial pneumonia and her lungs collapsed. After spending several days in isolation in hospital, she was released but her lungs were badly damaged and she had great trouble breathing.

As a result, she couldn't join in with physical activity with other children and became left behind – never chosen for teams or games at school and sitting alone in the playground. On holiday, she'd sit on the beach and jealously watch her brothers running on the sand with her dad and, left with little else, she read her older brother's books and began to study. By four, she was reading fluently and was good, kind and upright.

No matter. At school she was weak and knew all the answers and so became a target for bullying. For eight years, she was ridiculed – despite her every effort to be good and kind and helpful, she had her lunch stolen, property broken, was beaten, shamed and cast out. This was the late 70s and bullying wasn't seen as the crime it is today. Scared of telling teachers, parents and friends, she developed the ability to 'take it on the chin' – to swallow the pain, bury the insult, and walk on.

Then, at 14, something magical happened. Almost without warning, her lungs repaired and, like a bird given wings late into its life, she began to enjoy movement. Having learned to keep herself invisible, and determined to rise above the bullying, she worked on her strength – quietly at first, lifting piles of books in her bedroom, doing press-ups and running home from school. Before long, her parents noticed her dependency on medicines had vanished and they rejoiced.

She took up Judo and, in 1988, won a British title. She went to university and made something of her life, even paying her way by working security on pub doors. Far from the weakness of her early days, she'd become strong, physical and confident.

In 1993 she met her husband.

The first attack happened in a supermarket. They disagreed on a curry ingredient and he punched her in the chest. That one act from the person she'd let in to her heart cracked the confidence that she'd built for herself and, that evening, she sat alone trying to make sense of a level of heartbreak that no other time in her life had dealt her.

No one can explain why people stay with an abusive partner, but she did and over the next 6 years, suffered two stabbings and was hit twice, sometimes three times a month by her husband whose drinking started to spiral out of control. Almost every night, she'd walk a tightrope of anger and pacification, trying to keep him calm, tolerating the sex, and making small-talk nervously until he passed out from the drink. She called it "holding her breath for 6 hours".

On top of this was the shame of regularly having to explain the black eyes and the bruises at work. Yes, she was strongly built to look at and I suppose people thought that someone of her physicality was beyond pain. The oddest thing of all was how someone of her training

and ability never fought back. But she never did – because she abhorred violence and clung on to the ideal of goodness.

In 1998 it rose to a head. One evening, in a fit of rage, he threw a large, glass mirror down the stairs, followed by some small furniture and it hit her. Terrified, she picked up the phone and finally called the police. The police separated them and questioned them both. All she knew was that, when they were done, they'd come to no conclusion.

"If we come back here tonight, one of you is going to be arrested." Said the officer. And they left. Her husband had clearly told a lie about the violence and the policeman had believed it, possibly based upon her appearance.

Not five minutes later, as she bent down to pick up the shards of broken mirror, her husband ran at her and kicked her in the head, detaching her left retina and splitting her left ear-drum. Then he went to bed. She drove herself to the hospital, was examined, and told the doctor everything. Finally feeling that the world had listened, she felt a tinge of relief.

She called in sick to work the next day, too bruised and too tired to face her colleagues. At 10:30am the domestic violence unit called and asked to speak to her husband. She handed him the phone but listened to the call.

"Are you OK? Do you want a social worker there? Just give the word and we'll arrest your wife."

She was aghast – in disbelief – destroyed. Her heart sunk to the lowest sea-bed that humanity could ever know. She felt so totally abandoned – so totally helpless – like life itself had condemned her. The drunkenness and the beatings continued until New Year 2000.

Thankfully, not long after that, her husband confessed to an affair and a divorce was arranged. She left with almost nothing except her fighting spirit and faith in good will. Today, she's happy and successful. She's travelled the world, working to overcome barriers in race, culture, politics and poverty. She's even dating, albeit cautiously. She still looks over her shoulder occasionally but, after a lot of counselling, she's put it all in her past. She never heard from her husband again – except a rumour that he was subjecting someone else to the same treatment.

Now, this story is all true – and you might be wondering how I know it in so much detail. Well, that's because I twisted one fact.

She is a he and he is a she.

It wasn't an abusive husband but an abusive wife, and the child who went from broken lungs, to Judo champion, to abused partner is male. In fact. He's me.

I've told my story like this to illustrate one point: domestic violence doesn't have a gender and nor do pain and misery. And yet when I hear about domestic violence I hear it told in

man-on-woman stereotypes. That hurts like hell and I feel like there's no one I can tell so, I do what I always did: I take it on the chin, keep quiet, and walk on... "just like a man".

Domestic violence doesn't happen to women and children, it happens to people. I've earned the right to say that.