

I am no longer A VICTIM

She endured years of abuse but Sarah finally found a way to heal*

As I listened to the disturbing claims of domestic violence, on both sides, in the defamation lawsuit between Johnny Depp and Amber Heard, I was immediately transported back to a painful time in my life when I suffered abuse at the hands of my then boyfriend.

I was 16 when Carl** and I started dating. We went to different schools and were both living with our parents, just around the corner from one another. I don't remember where we met – maybe at a party – but sporting a rock band T-shirt, Ray-Ban Wayfarer sunglasses and smoking Dunhill cigarettes, he was one of the cooler kids roaming the streets of our small town. I couldn't believe that someone like him would be interested in me.

He was the jealous type and, at first, I mistook his unhealthy behaviour for love. For example, I dreamed of being an actress, so I was often performing in plays with our local community theatre. Once, after a rehearsal, I found him waiting for me in his car. I was touched he'd taken the time to pick me up. But then on the drive home, he claimed one of the actors had been getting too close to me and that I should consider dropping out of the production, which I later did.

Out of control

We worked at the same swanky restaurant – me as a hostess and he as a busboy – and one day before a shift he locked me in the bathroom of his parents' house for hours because he thought a waiter had a crush on me. 'I'm not letting you out,' he yelled, as I pleaded with him to open the door. Another time, after he learnt I was meeting a male

friend for dinner, he threw me half-dressed and barefoot into his car. As smartphones did not yet exist, he drove me to the bar and made me walk in wearing his shoes so I could explain to my friend why I couldn't meet him. Afterwards, Carl beat me. I went to school the next day with bruises on my arms and face covered with make-up.

Often the police were involved, like one time, after a night out, Carl sat on my chest in our neighbour's front garden and in a furious rage smashed my head repeatedly into the pavement. My screams woke my mother and her boyfriend, who rang the authorities. I was still crying, gasping for breath, when they pulled up with their sirens blaring. There was blood on my dress, so when the officers asked, 'Do you want to press charges?' I agreed. I thought it would teach Carl a lesson.

But the next day, Carl sweetly apologised, presenting me with a bouquet of flowers. He didn't know what had got into him, he said, and swore it would never happen again. So I dropped the charges. Back then,

police would only press charges if the victim was willing to go ahead – now, they can go ahead without that permission.

Not long after, Carl and I had a fight, probably because he'd been suspicious of yet another man's intentions. He drove me miles out of town, hitting me throughout the journey. As we sped onto a dual carriageway, I pulled the handle of the

passenger door and considered jumping out. Would the pain I felt once I landed on the pavement be worse than the pain I was feeling now I wondered? It wasn't until I pretended to lose consciousness that Carl stopped the car and pulled over. 'Are you OK?' a passer-by asked, knocking on my window. 'No, I'm not,' I said, my face red and tear-stained. When she offered to take me home, I couldn't get out of the car fast enough.

'As he pinned me down, I feared for my life'

Trying to break free

Twice, Carl got me pregnant. Neither pregnancy was planned – we'd simply been careless. To make matters worse, he denied that they were his, which led to even more abuse. After the second time, I'd thrown a party to raise money to pay for the abortion, as I didn't want to ask my family for help, and the next day – the day of the procedure – he broke into my father's house while I was alone and accused me of being unfaithful. As he pinned me down on the bed,



Johnny Depp told the court that the domestic abuse claims made by Amber Heard were false



If you are experiencing domestic violence, call the 24-hour National Domestic Abuse Helpline on 0808 2000 247 or visit their website: nationaldahelpline.org.uk

slapping me in the face, I feared for my life. By the time I reached the abortion clinic, I was hysterical.

It was that summer, and after we had been together for nearly two years, that I made a conscious decision to never see Carl again. It didn't prevent him from stalking me, though, or forcing himself into a flat I shared with two room-mates during my first year at uni. Again, I pressed charges, only to drop them after he told me he was sorry. 'I've never treated any other girl like I've treated you,' he said, making it sound like a compliment.

Eventually, Carl left me alone and it was another 31 years until I heard his name again. In 2016, I found out he'd died of a heart attack at the age of 49, leaving behind a wife and daughter. A friend on Facebook had posted a link to his obituary. I'd be lying

if I said I was moved by his untimely death – because I wasn't. I felt nothing.

Finding peace

Today, I ask myself why the police weren't more involved. Also, where were my parents? And my friends? They all knew about the abuse yet they all seemed to turn a blind eye. I'm not blaming anyone but more should have been done to protect me, then a minor, from a man who was hell-bent on destroying my life. Now, I've moved on – I worked as an actress for years and I now write for a living. I'd love to fall in love, but until I do I'm happy being on my own. I've travelled the world with friends and my family and I have never been closer.

I want all victims of domestic abuse to know it is possible to move on and find peace. Believe me, I would know.

DOMESTIC ABUSE: THE FACTS

- * Two women a week are killed by a current or former partner in England and Wales.
- * Demand on domestic abuse helplines increased in the year ending March 2021 with a 22% increase in people supported by the National Domestic Abuse Helpline in England.
- * Almost one in three women aged 16-59 will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime.

WORDS: TOLD ANONYMOUSLY TO PROTECT THE WRITER'S IDENTITY. *NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED. PHOTOS (MAIN) POSED BY MODEL; GETTY