

When the Flame Flickers

Emerging from Marital Abuse

Latha Christie

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Chapter Summaries

PROLOGUE

Another book on abuse?

It is amazing how right through history the law has permitted husbands to “chastise” their wives. Men who beat and abuse their wives are rarely punished, if at all. The author, **Dr. Latha Christie**, believes it is time for us to re-conceptualize and re-litigate domestic violence, to draw back the curtain that shielded it from the scrutiny and censure of the law. She passionately presents the narratives of women who have come out of abuse and who are looked down on by society, leaving them isolated and wounded. This book is the first step of Dr. Christie Latha’s mission, to draw victims back into the mainstream and lead them to the source of a new life governed by dignity, self-respect and joy.

CHAPTER ONE

When Love seems to flicker out...

Does ‘eternal love’ exist? Does love always have to die after marriage? What can be done with a marriage that is dying a slow and painful death? Let us begin that long and painful voyage of learning how to deal with marriages that have gone out of control...it will hurt and perhaps burn the soul...but let us endure until the arrows have been pulled out and the wounds cauterized.

CHAPTER TWO

Abuse: Towards a definition

Many couples go through conflicts in their marriages, and it would be difficult to find a single couple who has not had a serious argument or has threatened to leave the other spouse. But abuse in a relationship should never be confused with every day conflicts. Some men may have their unguarded moments. But a systematic pattern of control, through violence, is the very symptom of an abusive relationship.

CHAPTER THREE

The Legacy of Abuse

You'd think that after witnessing years and years of their mothers being abused that little boys would grow up to become more understanding and loving towards women and little girls would grow up stronger and stand up for themselves, right? Wrong. These little boys and girls are so scarred and confused, that when they grow up, they follow their parents footsteps, in this vicious cycle.

CHAPTER FOUR

To Measure the Rope

Can every marriage be saved? What if a victim wants to save her marriage but needs protection from an abusive spouse? How can an abused wife assess if her husband can really change? (with the help of society, counselors, through trials, separation, etc) How long should the rope be, that is given to an abusive husband, in the hope of his transformation? Should he betray that confidence again and again, when must the rope be cut off?

CHAPTER FIVE

The 'D' Word

Any other word can be preferred—heartbreak, failure, anguish, downfall, rupture or even wreck. But the 'D' word? Let's start out by saying it: D-I-V-O-R-C-E. There, we've said it. Now, let's deal with it.

CHAPTER SIX

Rebooting

The author wishes some formula could help you solve your grief and help you wake up to a new life, the next morning. But there isn't one. It is something that you have to walk through. When you experience divorce, you are coming face to face with grief, rejection and heartbreak. But the good news is that you discover yourself and you suddenly realize that you have more than you knew.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Blueprint for life's second chance

There will be good days and there will be bad days. The important thing is that life has given you a second chance and you need to do whatever it takes to see that nothing stands in the way of your new lease on life. There are ways to build up emotional and spiritual power, as you sketch life's new blueprint.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Beauty for Ashes

The phoenix rises from the ashes to give way to new life. Every death brings in its wake a new beginning. From amidst the debris of broken memories, a brand new life can emerge. Only one person can make that happen, says the author.

When the Flame Flickers
Surviving Marital Abuse

CHAPTER NINE

Inspiring Anthems

This chapter provides the culmination of the book's intent – a much-needed reality check. We present three women, varying in age, race, and predicament, who have actually thrived after being forced to initiate their own divorces. Their intense fears of financial, emotional and romantic ruin were never realized; on the contrary, their lives improved immeasurably, and their self-esteem soared!

Foreword

A constant contribution to the upliftment of others is one of the things that drove and sustained me throughout my life, and perhaps this, combined with my drive for social justice, made me to step beyond the traditional role assigned to women and become the first Indian lady IPS officer way back in 1972. I believe that engaging in social issues and understanding injustice should make us angry, and this anger should be channeled into positive action. This belief made me choose 'Drug Abuse and Domestic Violence' as the topic of my PhD which I completed during my active service in the Indian Police. Even after my retirement from the post of Director General of India's Bureau of Police Research and Development, my main motto is to help underprivileged women and children whose tears go unnoticed.

In the present Indian scenario, seeing the prevalent cruelties towards girls and women, it is the duty of every Indian to confront the issues that make women vulnerable. Intimate partner abuse is one such issue. Now and then, newspapers report stories of crime against women perpetuated by the husband. These men often claim to love the victim but subjugate her to be fully dependent on him, so that she does not talk of the abuse to anybody, thinking at all times that she is the one at fault. I sympathize with such women. Abuse does not happen far from you. It happens in your neighborhood, among your colleagues, friends' or maid's home. Dr Latha Christie's book *When the Flame Flickers—Emerging out of marital abuse* is an accurate, intelligent and articulate treatment of the subject of abuse. Latha Christie, a senior scientist in Defense and a PhD from Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, has done an erudite examination on the most complicated subject of intimate partner abuse with a matchless ability to bridge the worlds of theory and practice. She has penned this book with compassion and the drive to pursue the right path for a bigger and higher purpose. She has wrestled with the issue of divorce, which many prefer to avoid. In her clear and strong conviction, she penetrates the curtain of confusion, shame and silence.

Women who are abused often wish to speak to someone who understands them and appreciate their pain and confusion. This book will serve as a handy tool for those who want to talk with a woman who had been there and had come out beautiful from the abuse. There may be others who want to read to understand what is happening in the lives of their loved ones. Many might be confused about whether what they are undergoing is abuse or some obsessive behavior of their spouse. You may be a victim of abuse, or browsing through this book in a bookstore - I welcome you to the pages of this book, which will take you on a journey of understanding one of the most misunderstood subjects and the one most ignored. This book is filled with inspirational and practical insights on how one can still make one's life beautiful even after having been entangled in a life of abuse, and I encourage you to read it with expectation.

Women, whose stories you will read in this book, became aware of their rights and mustered up courage to come out of abuse, motivate other women to come out of exploitation and suffering. The healing process detailed gives women the self-esteem to become self-respecting human beings. This unique book attempts to answer the following questions: Why are some men abusive? Does their upbringing and their life experiences, especially as children, play a role in them developing into an abuser? Are they able to break free from being an abuser and if so, how? Why does a woman, who is in an abusive relationship, stay in the relationship, and why does she tend to move from one abusive relationship to another? Do any events in her childhood influence

her choice not to leave? How does a woman deal with divorce after an abusive relationship? Is there any hope of healing an abusive relationship? And if so, how does one go about making the necessary changes? All of these questions and many more are addressed in this book, not only with skill but also with a refreshing honesty. This book has been written with a mission to draw victims back into the mainstream and lead them to the source of a new life governed by dignity, self-respect and deserved joy. The author has penned the different laps of this significant journey through the wilderness in a narrative that is bound to bring millions of women in this country to the crossroad of choice, and beyond that, to the road to serenity, peace and a future filled with divine promise. Going through this manuscript left me with a feeling of encouragement that there is hope for the abused woman. Thank God for her clarity of vision, and I am happy to contribute this word of grateful appreciation to this book.

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INTRODUCTION

History has left us with strange views on how men were superior to the fairer sex. Indian society has been one of the more staunch advocates of this thought process. 'Patibaghwanhai' was a repeated chant in more than a few households and the deification of men has been sustained over time, regardless of the religious background. The result of such beliefs have done Indian society untold damage, one of the results being abuse within marriage.

History has always been what it was. That cannot be changed. But a legacy can be left behind, one of freedom and safety. The bizarre idea that women were created inferior has to be laid on the table, to be dissected and analyzed, before the diagnosis and healing of the sickness can begin.

I have written this book with a determination to bring clarity to what Domestic Violence really is and to give hope and healing to those women who have been broken by such atrocities, within the walls of their own homes. The burning desire and aim behind writing this book is to lead victims of this kind of abuse away from the shadows and to rebuild that which was destroyed: dignity, self-respect and a desire for life.

People easily confide in me their closely guarded secrets. I don't know why. '...your kind eyes, your ability to listen patiently,' they say, that puts them at ease. As they pour out their woes to me, I can't help but listen and accept the role of a confidante.

My most treasured memory was of a woman telling me that she came to me because I had seemed to understand intuitively, all that she had confided in me, and that she could see that I had a deep longing to help her. She was right. I long to help women like her. I do not know where this empathy comes from; maybe some resonance from my distant past? I want to make a difference in the lives of as many women as I can reach and I believe more and more women are being sent my way, by an unseen hand.

All of life is a tapestry. The coming together of that beautifully woven creation depends on every twist and turn the thread is forced to take. Behind the originality of this work of art is a Master Craftsman. He makes every thread of experience and every turn of events count in the long run. This book is written under the direction of this Master Craftsman.

According to National Crime Report Bureau (NCRB), 1.5 lakh crimes against women are registered annually, out of which nearly 50,000 are related to domestic violence. NCRB statistics also reveal that a crime against a woman is committed every three minutes, a woman is raped every 29 minutes, a dowry death occurs every 77 minutes and a case of cruelty committed by either the husband or relative of the victim occurs every nine minutes. All this occurs despite the fact that women in India are legally protected from domestic abuse, under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005. Global Media Journal, Autumn 2010 & Spring 2011 quotes that ***around 40 per cent of married women in India are victims of domestic violence and face terrible risks.*** Things must change.

The time has come for us to stop being uninvolved spectators to the abuse of women and to begin fighting for those of our sisters who are caught in the mesh of every kind of violence. It is the silence of the good that perpetuates such violence. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the good people." It is time that we spoke out.

Every experience narrated and every case study featured in this book has emerged from real life. Many of these women, who have told us their stories, have actually asked for their names to be mentioned here. But, as much as we applaud their bravery, such exposure inevitably comes with an awful cost. Keeping this in mind, I have chosen not to use their real names.

Dear Reader, if you find that you are not a woman who has faced abuse within her own home, please hand this book over to someone who fits the above description, once you are done reading this book.

And if you happen to be one of those men who abuses his wife, in whatever form or in however violent a manner, please be advised that what you do is not natural. There is so much more that you can be: a loyal husband, a faithful friend, a chivalrous gentleman...the possibilities are endless. The source of the happiness you want lies in giving of yourself to your family and in protecting and nurturing life. If necessary, get professional help. In life, there is always hope for change.

Latha Christie

Curtain Raiser

THE LETTER

As painful as it is to admit that we are being abused, it is even more painful to come to the conclusion that the person we love is someone we cannot afford to be around.



Amma

She didn't know why she did that. This letter needed to be written. Or else, she dies with no one knowing the truth. She tried again...

***Dearest Amma,
It's time you knew. I love you. I am so sorry.
You were always right.***

Now, that wasn't so bad, she decided. As Indian as she was, she felt the need to speak those intimate words, to the woman who bore her, one last time. Tears began to fill her eyes and she breathed in deep. Write, write, write She chanted to herself, as she picked up the pen.

***By the time you read this, I will have died. I woke up
to a nightmare which has lasted ten years. I want out.
I don't want you to hurt because of me. If there was any
other way, any other option, I would have chosen it.
There isn't.***

She didn't know when the tears had started flowing down her cheeks. She swiped at them and realized her hands were shaking.

***It's all a dark, ugly lie. This marriage is no paradise,
ammae. It's a hell-hole. Amma, remember the doubts
you had about Arpit?***

***A mother's instinct is NEVER wrong. How could I have
known I was going to marry a sadistic monster? If only
someone had warned me about who he really was...***

She heard herself whimper. In a fit of rage at her prolonged weakness, she slapped herself hard. The power packed into that venomous blow surprised her. Her thumb nail cut the bridge of her nose, in the process, and she ended up stabbing the inside of her eye. She sobbed softly as she tore at the paper with her pen.

***Listening to you eulogize Arpit to Shantamma last
week made me want to scream. You know what you said!?!
You said, "I feel so sorry I ever doubted my son-in-law.
Arpit has been such a good husband to our Lily. He fills
her life with such good, good things and he..."***

Finally...she screamed. The neighbours at the other end of the street could have heard her but she no longer cared. For the first time in years, she let herself tear at her hair and wail like the life within her was leaving. She sobbed violently as her shoulders heaved and her pain emptied out onto the wet puddle of tears, onto her bathroom floor. She couldn't remember how she had gotten there. Exhaustion came over her suddenly. She gave into

it and shivered on the cold floor. Her head ached from all the crying. Lily wrapped her arms around herself and closed her eyes wishing death would find her, before she went looking for it.

Cobwebs. Too many of those silken entrapments hung suspended from the bathroom ceiling. The softness of the slight threads betrayed their deadly purpose. Surprisingly, they sparkled in the sunlight, streaming in through the high window. They were beautiful.

The steady pouring of thoughts on cobwebs and abuse pounded against her head, as she lay there stretched out on the tiled bathroom floor. The cold floor soothed her sadness, for a little while. She lay there and thought through her plan of action. To kill or not to kill...oneself.

She sat up slowly and her head broke open into a migraine. An old friend. It had become as familiar to her as her own heartbeat. Like a hangover, every night after she had cried herself to sleep, she would wake in the morning and break open again. She got up very carefully and moved to the table, as if in a trance. The words from yesterday lay flat on the paper. They had no life; only blunt facts.

It was not the familiarity of abuse that drove her to the edge. It was the taunting of old, unspoken dreams. With that realization, she lifted her pen one last time, to tell her story.

Amma,

I wondered if I had seen the signs. Or if I had only seen what I had wanted to see. The handsome and charming Arpit, who was the heartthrob of the entire college; the possessive boyfriend who had wanted me all to himself, so much so that I had to cut myself off from all my friends; the future son-in-law who had wormed his way into yours and appa's heart. The mist of lies had somehow stayed.

Looking back now, I see the self-absorbed youngster; the chameleon-like man who easily slide to fit any scenario; the lover who never really spoke of dreams of the future and of a family. I was in over my head, in love. Which is worse: that I was blinded by a fantasy or that I was careless to the signs?

I never told you about the first time he slapped me. It wasn't even after our marriage. This was way back when we were still in college. It was the convocation. You and appa had come, dressed to the nines. You had been so proud of me and I couldn't have been happier. I remember being surrounded by people who loved and supported me. Arpit stood by me in a corner and waited silently, as I soaked up all the praise with a blush.

I was ecstatic. A graduation behind me and a boyfriend walking by my side, with his arm hooked around mine. We strolled down a poorly lit pathway, to the sound of shy insects and restless birds. He stopped and took my shoulders in his hands, as he stared into my eyes with an expression I had never seen before. Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! I had thought that it was love or maybe even passion or desire. I had truly thought that, until I felt the sting on my cheek as I fell backwards and landed on the gravel. He stomped away, leaving me there on the ground with my questions. Something was very wrong and I didn't see it.

The next day, the transformation was very dramatic. He turned into a heart broken Romeo and pleaded with all earnestness that jealousy had forced him to lose control. After a bit of persuading, I gave in and soaked up all his attention, like a delusional teenager. I forgave him because I had somehow convinced myself that this would be the last time. It wasn't.

Flipping through the crisp pages of my wedding album brought back the whirlwind memories of my special day. I was under the impression that I was as ecstatic as any bride. The pictures, however, screamed a different kind of distortion. My face held a shadow. Some of the photos revealed a slight cringe, while HE seemed genuinely happy. Overall, my smiles were plastic and pasted on.

Slowly, it all came back to me today, ma. Appa was dying of cancer. You were excited about getting me married off and that Appa had a chance to see me settle down. We had been dating for five years then. To break off the engagement would have been an affront in the face of tradition. I felt like I was powerless to change my destiny. So, I did nothing. Allowing myself to become numb, I went through the motions of a ceremony.

Eventually, it was all over. We had spent a week visiting relatives and finishing up the formalities in each other's homes. Just after that, we left for our month long honeymoon to Singapore. It was a bizarre series of events. A pattern of passion and punishment emerged from our rancid relationship. At first, he would slap me around only once a week. But, as I got to know him a little better, he increased the abuse as he saw fit. At one point, I broke his favourite mug by accident and he slammed his hand against my body like I was a lump of dough. I screamed and begged for mercy. But that mercy never came.

The years forced me to learn the ways in which I could work around his outbursts. I used feminine wiles, aggressive retaliations and tears to side step his assaults. It finally came down to whether or not I would live to see another day. I put all my strength into trying to change him and understand the source of his anger. But he would not let me in and he controlled my every move.

The worst was when I was pregnant with Anant. By then, I was in too deep. He would batter me twice a week, like clockwork, and then a few times more, whenever he got drunk. You never knew he had a serious drinking problem, did you? He hid it well because everyone was under the impression that he was a very religious man

and I didn't want to die. I have given up religion. It has cost me much. How much? I would wonder where God was when my husband would get up off his knees from prayer and kick me.

Ma, it wasn't always bad. Sometimes, I would get a glimpse of the man I had fallen in love with. He would hold me close and stroke my hair gently. I would almost forget the man he really is. I would let myself go and memorize every inch of that moment. When things became awful again, I would pull those memories out and savour them.

But how long can I live on memories? I tell myself that I must never let hope come alive. It hurts much worse than the blows. Hope, to me now, is to close my eyes and never open them again. Once this is over, I won't hurt anymore. I love you.

*Your Daughter,
Lily*

Lily's hands shook each time she swallowed a bunch of pills with water. A whole box of them went into her. She felt strangely still once the deed was done. She walked over to her bed and stretched out over it. She closed her eyes and waited. She waited to become no more.