

Andrea 2012

Andrea is no stranger to living in terror; it has been part of her life since she was a young child. But the last five years have been different; almost a respite. For perhaps the first time in her life, Andrea has been able to really settle down and be in control of her life – and feel safe. She owns a house in a small Victorian town and has slowly built up a successful home childcare business. She is almost financially independent. Or was, until two months ago, almost financially independent.

Within days of discovering her ex partner had finally tracked her down, after ten years of running and hiding, Andrea, with her young son, slipped back into refuge. Now relocated to a new town, she is a stranger again without history, friends or connections. Already behind her is all that she has worked for, her security shattered. Andrea knows he will come after her; he always has. And he knows how to wait. He is a patient man, he's always said that.

Boxes filled with her life are still unopened as she tries to settle in to her new house in a new town she never imagined living in. Her son, Jack, is eight years old. He had just made a new friend before they left in such a hurry. He will have to start all over again, too and he doesn't really know for sure why they are here.

Despite the sudden move, the complications with leaving her home and business and the sheer terror that turned her back into a fugitive, Andrea says she has slept better here than she has for weeks. There are some constant, comforting sounds, like the train and traffic, and she has her GPS personal alarm system (Bsafe) that will trigger a prompt response from the police. She hopes she doesn't have to activate it, but it is a comfort to her, and to Jack, who only knows a story that a 'bad person' contacted his big sister on Facebook and could come after them. She showed him how the device works, that activating it will alert a VitalCall operator who has their details and who will in turn notify the police. She is a priority. Jack is a clever and articulate boy; he can use it, and he feels safe. That is one less major anxiety for Andrea.

Bsafe has been part of her safety strategies since 2009; as a single woman who has experienced sudden aggression by a parent when she was unable to mind his child, she knows she is vulnerable.

Andrea who says she has '*never feels safe without the Bsafe device close by*', recently upgraded to the GPS model that can identify her location anywhere. Her choice to make a new home in this town far away from both her family and her new life is solely dictated by the availability of Bsafe in the Hume region. Now that the man she fears most in the world knows where she has been living, it is more important than ever before.

Two months ago, in May 2012, a Facebook entry re opened a door into Andrea's extraordinarily violent life; a door she had firmly closed a long time ago. The older children, now 18 and 20, knew of their father's violence – why they had to be careful about where they lived and who they spoke to about their circumstances. Andrea had drummed that into them. Not that they knew the extent of his violence – no children needed to know that. Two careless Facebook entries and an approach by their father, pretending to be a woman, online, gave away Andrea's secret and shattered any semblance of safety. The possibility of attaining financial independence flew out the window the second she knew. She, and Jack,

would go back to a life of hiding and vigilance where every corner could be hiding a threat. And not just her ex-partner; his friends, too. Bokies and hardened criminals; drug addicts and cruel men not averse to causing harm for a mate, or more likely, for money.

Andrea bears none of the external signs of her hard life. She doesn't smoke or take drugs and is not a drinker. She says she has put on weight, but she has a youthful plumpness that makes her seem much younger than her 38 years and her smile is wide and generous, her scars are hidden. As she recounts her life she says, 'I'm over it', meaning perhaps that those memories no longer bother her, or haven't until just recently. They bother me.

Andrea met Steven while visiting a friend in jail. He was already a criminal but that was hardly a deterrent – she felt worthless and suicidal, the product of family violence and sexual abuse – his criminality was hardly an issue. By the time she was 16, Andrea had given birth to their first child, Josh. She lived with Steven and his mates amongst the fog of dope a metre deep. She didn't smoke, but remembers sleeping all the time and marvels at the healthy child she bore. The violence came early, and frequently. The time Steven held a knife to her throat and threatened to kill her, she dared him to do it – it impressed him no end, her courage – and for a short time, she had his respect. Little did he know, she meant it; killing her would be a relief.

For over ten years, at a rough average of twice a week, Steven, seven years older than Andrea, would torture her. His beatings were regular and ferocious – once he tied her up with a chain. The horrific sexual violence he played out on her body put Andrea into hospital on many occasions, often by ambulance. Her injuries were clearly not self inflicted, as Steven proposed to the doctors, who asked no questions and were ready to believe. Doctors who never questioned why this man would not allow his bleeding partner out of his sight despite the internal injuries that told the story clearly.

She shakes her head at the memory. 'Why didn't they see that? No one in their right mind would do the things I had to do.'

She tells of one occasion she attempted suicide, when the doctor asked her why – and she told him, of the violence, the constant fear, and the endless sexual degradation. His response was to prescribe Zoloft, an anti depressant that fogged her mind, numbed her body and left her helpless to maintain the constant vigilance needed to protect herself.

Steven's usual tactics included holding a filled syringe to her (he was an intravenous drug user), sometimes filled with speed, to stop her passing out; threatening her with knives and strangling her until she became almost unconscious. And he took photos – evidence of the deviant and cruel ways he used her body, forcing her to 'smile for the camera'. Once she presented this film and photo evidence of her damaged body to the police. Her case was dismissed by a CIB officer saying, 'Because you're married, the judge won't consider this'. And 'You look like you're having a good time'. (Later, this same officer told her he'd keep the photos, to 'look at them now and then.')

Steven admitted to all of it yet the police still refused to charge him. He was never charged for violence against Andrea.

She says, 'He did terrible things to me when I was pregnant.'

'In the end, he was really trying to kill me'.

During these years Steven was in and out of jail. Life could progress – Andrea worked hard and bought a house in Melbourne. He did a six year stint for burglary. Life was relatively peaceful. When he came out he appealed to Andrea, as the father of her children, to take him back. 'Foolishly' she let him stay in a caravan behind the house. His violence started again, immediately and if possibly, worse. This time he was threatening not only to kill Andrea, but the children, too. It was the last straw.

Since 2003 Andrea has had no contact with Steven. She doesn't know what gave her the courage to break away, possibly the confidence a kind refuge worker gave her, or possibly it was just a matter of 'one slap too many'. And of course, the children.

'I've had to cut all ties with my friends. He is very intimidating and would try to get my address.'

Only her family knows where Andrea is at any time. She went into hiding in 2004. She heard that her grandmother had a visit from him, straight out of jail, at 1am in the morning.

Andrea has no doubt this violent, possibly psychotic man will look for her. She knows him too well to think he might give up. He put his ex-wife in a wheelchair for good, her internal injuries crippling her for life; her own partner 'disappeared'. He talked about biding his time with her, too. Steven is not one to live and let live.

He now has a girlfriend, a health bureaucrat, and lives interstate. This woman helped him track his children – and Andrea. She feels sorry for the woman; what she must be going through – there is no imagining he might be different in anyway, might have changed. Her freshest grief is that Steven has connected with their daughter, a young woman who was showing signs of following her own path; involved in drugs and bad company. Just lately she had turned a corner; committed to studying and cleaned up her life. That's all changed. Her birthday was spent on a drug binge, supplies courtesy of her father. Now she says she will stay with him.

Andrea is exhausted. She has only started to sleep again; until this last week or two she has woken at every noise, ready to get up, grab Jack and go. She has bags packed throughout the house – at the front door, in the bathroom.

She can't get an IVO because he hasn't done anything. Not yet.

But at least for now the anxiety has eased. Bsafe gives her another layer of safety and she is not so worried about Jack.

'I don't know if I can ever go back home', she says. 'Maybe after his funeral'.

Ends.

