

When husbands attack

Studies -- and tragic headlines -- show how risky leaving an abusive spouse, can be reports The Globe's GRAEME SMITH

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Kim Eyer was stirring a pot on her stove during a warm October evening in 1991 when she heard the hinges of the screen door squeak. She turned around and saw her ex-husband crouched in the front hallway, holding a .38-calibre pistol.

Reflexively, she blurted out his name. He stood and walked toward her, wordlessly pointing the gun at her face. The 32-year-old factory manager remembers the menace in the eyes of the man who had signed their divorce papers little more than a month earlier: "He damn near killed me."

Just then, a friend came downstairs, distracting the ex-husband. Ms. Eyer burst out the door, hearing gunshots behind her, and hid in a nearby barn. Her friend also escaped, and the worst damage was a few bullet holes in her car.

Some women who leave their spouses suffer much worse. They make headlines, like the mother in west Toronto who told her husband that she wanted a divorce and arrived home last weekend to find that he had gassed himself to death along with their five-year-old daughter. But many more women privately tell stories like Ms. Eyer's -- of harrowing close calls as they ended relationships.

An analysis of about 750 Canadian cases of women killed by their partners from 1974 to 1994 showed that about one-third of the deaths happened after a breakup. (Men can be abused and sometimes killed by their wives and girlfriends, but their risk of violent death doesn't increase after they leave them.)

Statistics Canada recently released homicide figures for 2001, indicating that women were about eight times more likely to die at the hands of their partners during or after a breakup than during the relationship. The risk is highest immediately after separation -- 49 per cent of the killings happened within two months, and an additional 32 per cent within the year.

Ms. Eyer hears these stories every day now that she has left her abuser, remarried and founded an Internet forum on domestic violence based in North Carolina.

Bernadette (last name withheld), a ballet dancer in Toronto, lived with an abusive commercial artist for seven years before she decided to leave him in 1989. Escape wasn't easy: He locked the dead bolt on their apartment door from the outside every morning, and took the telephone with him. He demanded receipts for every penny spent when she was allowed to go shopping. And he beat her, leaving black eyes, bruises and

a broken jaw.

One evening while he was watching sports on television, she fetched him beers as quickly as he could drink them until he passed out. She snuck out carrying nothing but her jacket -- no wallet, no passport, no luggage, no money. She spent two years in a YWCA women's shelter to rebuild her life. It's still difficult for her to think about the days when she was a young, anorexic dancer fresh from England, with no friends or family in Toronto.

"It's hard looking back now and realizing that somebody actually did that stuff to me," she said. "But over the years, he had controlled so many things."

So had the man who stalked Connie, an office manager for a computer networking company in northern California, when their on-and-off relationship ended after nine years. "I had always considered myself a rather strong woman," she said, but during that time he destroyed her bank card and cancelled her credit cards, smashed her furniture, slashed her tires, punched her, head-butted her, hurt her back badly and pushed her from a moving vehicle on the highway.

He continued to harass her after she broke it off. She called the police, and the saga ended with him leading a high-speed chase driving the wrong way on a freeway, with a helicopter and cruisers in pursuit. It took a spiked belt, police dogs and a taser to finally stop him.

The best way to leave an abusive situation is to call a women's shelter and discuss a safety plan, experts say. (Canadian shelters are listed at <http://www.shelternet.ca>.) Precautions should be tailored to each situation, but counsellors often tell women three things:

Prepare in secret. This can include gathering personal documents, copying keys, talking with lawyers, opening a bank account and arranging lodging.

Leave quickly. Take children out of school, and explain to the spouse by telephone afterward. Police can escort women back to pick up extra belongings later.

Stay away. Depending on the risk involved, some women even change their names and social insurance numbers.

Women often underestimate how dangerous their mates are, said Eileen Morrow, coordinator for the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses, sometimes because they cling to an idealized notion of romance.

Even while her abuser sits in jail, Connie can still remember how perfect he looked when she first met him at a bar -- brown hair, green eyes, strong jaw and a dimple in his cheek, in jeans, green shirt and cowboy boots.

"They're not the monsters that everybody thinks," Ms. Morrow said. "They're men who women fell in love with and hoped to build lives with, have homes with, and have children and the dream of a happy life. And the disappointment that comes with realizing that, no matter what you do, that's not going to happen, is very hard."