

More Than a Statistic

Stars hung low against a velvet-black sky. It was as if I might have been able to touch one with a little more stretching. Half an hour later, a silent fog steeled over the thin strip of coral in the Pacific Ocean and the twinkling stars were visible no more.

Husband Lee, two young daughters and I have lived three years in the Marshall Islands, under assignment focusing on economic development through the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA). As was his habit, Lee flew from Majuro earlier in the day for a two to four-day trip, visiting Trust Territory officials in Saipan. Meanwhile, I was settling down for the evening after checking on the children in a room a few quick steps away. Nights, just north of the equator, could be so humid simply breathing proved exhausting. The heavy air pressed me into a restless doze.

I woke with a jerk. I wondered: *What was that?* There, on my bedroom door, soft, hesitant knocking.

“Yes,” I called out and stepped closer to the door. I heard urgency in a voice. I cracked the door. Bent over her small four-year old daughter was Dilini. Her distressed facial expressions communicated before she spoke: “We, we need help!”

I swung the door wide, pulled them into the small bedroom, looked around, and seeing nothing I closed the door.

“Don’t turn on the light,” Dilini whispered. “We’re safer in the dark.”

“Okay,” I whispered back. “Here. Please sit on the bed. Take a minute to catch your breaths, then tell me what’s happened? What can I do?”

Delini, her husband Bermish and little Angel had appeared one day on our doorsteps. They had heard from other Marshallese volunteers that we needed interpreters to enlist additional input and participation in the Marshall Islands Development Project from residents living on the outer islands. We explained our plans briefly and what we could offer: a modest family room for the three members of their family, three meals a day, and a stipend, amounting to less than a \$100 a month.

They were expected, as each of us working on this ICA project, to join the group planning sessions as well as participating in support activities like cooking meals one night, washing dishes the next and painting island landscapes on marine plywood the next. They agreed and became part of the total effort for about five months. Dilini was pleasant; Bermish was a bit moody but he seemed pleased with the prestige being an interpreter gave him. Angel, frequently called Ange, warmed up immediately to the staff and volunteers’ children.

And now on this muggy night, Dilini whimpered softly, holding her little girl in her arms. Both swiped their damp faces on the edges of clothes they were wearing. Quickly, I dashed through the dark into the bathroom to grab several fresh face cloths and a towel. I dampened one piece of terrycloth, thinking its wetness might come in handy, plus a bottle of boiled water. Then, without a sound, I hurried back into my room.

Now, Dilini moved against the door on the floor, as Angel curled up in her lap.

“I have a flashlight, if-”

“No, no light, Leah! Bermish is drunk and crazy. We need to stay where he can’t find us with you here for tonight . . . By daylight, we’ll be gone, okay?”

“It’s okay. Would you like to cool Angel’s face with this damp towel?” I felt her nod and I placed the terry cloth in her hands. As my night vision sharpened, I turned to deal with practical things like pulling sheets tightly on the bed and turning down the top sheet just right. Next, I cooled their faces, necks and arms with the damp cloth. When I ran out of practical things to comfort them, we together in the dark. Then, we began hearing stumbling and bumping from outside.

“Dil-ini!” Bermish must have fallen for we heard yells and a garbled “God Damn!” as well as a string of Marshallese words that he shouted angrily.

“He is very drunk.” she whispered disgustedly. “May I place Ange on your bed?”

“Please do.”

The child stirred but was asleep before her head hit the pillow. Dilini rejoined me on the floor. Our shoulders touched and we waited, our backs to the bedroom door and knees bent, making an easy place to hang our elbows. Some moments later in the long night, we joined hands. Meanwhile, her husband thrashed about and screamed her name until he was hoarse. Still, he croaked out God-awful things he planned to do to her.

“He is getting tired. Leah, he is angry because I enjoyed singing up front tonight with that small group of singers during dinner. And so, to punish me, he took his burning cigarette and pressed it against my breast.”

“What? I’ve never heard of such a thing! Where’s that flashlight?”

“Look.” she directed as she unbuttoned her blouse.

My eyes could not believe what I was seeing. On her honey-brown skin, were six or seven blackened scars, a few burn bubbles with streaks of red, like comet’s tails marking her chest. Most of the burned places were round, as if he had used her breast as an ashtray. In the heat of this sultry night, those places must have stung and burned a great deal.

I flicked off the flashlight. The burned-flesh smell sickened me; I feared I might throw up. After standing a few minutes by the room’s only window for some fresh air, I asked: “Has he done this to you before tonight, Dilini?” My fingers fumbled for ointment I kept in the bed-side table. It took me a few minutes to finally feel the ointment tube and to bring it back to her heat radiating chest. I dabbed the ointment on her wounds.

“Bermish, he’s been drunk and mad at me many times; he’s shouted, kicked me, even knocked me around, but he’s never been this mad and this drunk--never hurt me this bad,” she whimpered again with her hand pressing against her mouth, so as not to be heard.

“Do you have relatives here on Majuro Atoll?” I asked.

She shook her head no. “He wants to kill me. He promised he would.”

“Leah, you were the only one I knew would help us. He won’t hurt you.” Dilini leaned her head back against the old door, rolling her head back and forth steadily.

Slowly, my mind began clearing as ideas darted from one thought and ricocheted off another with no rhyme or reason.

What is he doing out there now? If Bermish were that drunk and mad, what would keep him from setting fire to this house and doing away with us all? Maybe he’s gone for more liquor. Do I smell smoke? I need to check.

With literally no experience in matters such as these, I was reeling. Oh, I had heard of spousal abuse, but my family never really talked about it. My closest friends never discussed it either. I felt at a loss about what I could actually do for Dilini in my own country, much less in a foreign culture. Who was I to take this on?

The thought came to me: *Well, I could physically stand between Dilini and her husband, if he stormed into the house. That sounds pretty stupid. For now, I'll hide with her in the dark, but even that decision is inadequate.*

Only then I remembered: When I was a senior in high school, I attended a dance, where a fine-looking college guy asked me to dance. Matter of fact, I danced with him most of the evening. He was charming, handsome and a talented dancer. He asked to take me home, but I had a ride and didn't need one.

The next day Fran Travis, a member of our Methodist church, called my mother. She said her son, who was a friend of mine, came home last night concerned for Leah, because JC McCormick seemed to have targeted Leah as his next victim. Fran shared an experience that her daughter had with JC. He man-handled her daughter roughly demanding she "have sex with him". When daughter Anna refused, he roughed her up. Anna came home with a black-eye, battered and bruised—and a great deal wiser. Mother was grateful for the call and moved on it immediately. That night, my family had a long session after dinner about JC and others like him. There were moments my dad was emotionally beside himself with what I understand today was his fear for me. Mother stressed this was a learning moment for all of us, especially for me. I recall sleeping soundly that night after creating our detailed plan for handling JC.

Maybe I know more about the abuse of women than I thought? Wasn't there a bit of protection in this situation with my being a white, female and a United States citizen and Bermish being a Marshallese male? Although I had never consciously used my citizenship nor my whiteness as entitlement before this moment, I wasn't against pulling it out boldly in this case. I can learn what I need to know for Dilani and Angel's sake. And, if need be, I knew how to be loud and dramatic!

A bit of possibility trickled through me, as we clutched each other and continued to hide, like cowards in the dark.

The husband was silent. Perhaps, Bermish passed out. Or he'd gotten so tired that he needed a rest before his next attack. Maybe he was just getting more alcohol. alcohol. Maybe he was no longer outside this house but waiting just down the road. We remained listeners only, on alert for several hours. Slowly, I felt her head slip to my shoulder and heard her soft, relaxed breathing. I waited then alone.

Much later, I realized I needed to move about. I was getting very stiff. "I'll check to see what's happening on the other side of the house and yard." I announced softly. "Why don't you get up on the bed with Angel and rest at least a little while. That floor is hard. I'll be back in a minute."

I made the rounds to the front of the house, at the sides and out back. The house was a wide opened structure without one single lockable door. Why, some entrances didn't even have doors.

We are really vulnerable.

Back inside, I paused in the children's room again, long enough to lean in close at each bunk. All was quiet, save for the waves chasing each other to the shore about 20 feet from the back of the house.

“Nothing. I think we are okay.”

Dilini patted the bed, indicating there was room on the bed for me, too. My walking around the house, had given her time to think also.

“There is a freighter at the dock that is going to stop at my home island in two days. Ange and I can board early tomorrow before people are moving around. No one will see us board. We will be on our way before Bermish drags his sick self out of bed.”

She smiled for the first time in our hours together, “He will be feeling horrible. That binge will cost him. Ange and I can stay with my people until I decide what I want to do—without him.”

“How are you fixed for money?”

“I have ticket money.”

“Good. Let’s rest ‘til dawn.”

In pre-dawn light, I dressed while she helped Angel walk down the hall to the bathroom. Shortly, they returned bright-eyed and ready for the new day. I handed the ten dollars I had to her.

“I wish I had more cash, but that’s it. Use it for something to drink on the ship. Take this jar of peanut butter and ship biscuits (thick, hard crackers popular for their resistance to humidity and dampness in the tropics). Peanut butter goes a long way in keeping hunger away, and I know Ange loves it. Don’t you, Ange?”

The child beamed.

“Are we ready? Then, let’s get going.” I declared upbeat.

“No, Ange and I must go alone. If you come, someone will notice us. It’s important that we just disappear, right? Thanks for everything.” she said as she gathered bag straps in one hand and Angel’s small hand in the other. Before I knew it, they were gone.

One afternoon about six months later, I was walking on Majuro’s main street. Having completed an errand, I was headed back to my worked at Kwajalein Importing and Trading Company (KITCO) and I heard someone call my name. I turned to see Dilini, hurrying to catch up with me. We swung into each other’s arms.

She explained she was in town for only the day, but she wanted to see me to say she and Ange were doing fine. I believed her, too; she looked great! I inquired if she had heard from or seen him; I had not.

“No, no!” she confirmed with a small shake of her head, “That marriage is gone—no more. For the first time, in a long, long time, I feel strong, happy and grateful to be alive.”

I have written this story because my friend’s experience still haunts me. Her story could have ended very differently--many do and tragically. Our daughters and sons, and their daughter’s daughters and son’s sons need to be warned and be educated about sexual and physical violence to women.

Recently, I read these facts: from U.S.A. Center of Disease Control (CDC), report of 2017:

“Almost 50% of American Indian/Alaskan Native women,
41.1% of non-Hispanic Black women,
37.3% of White women,
34.3% of Hispanic women and
18.3% of Asian Pacific Islander women.”

experience contact sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetimes.

And, from UN WOMEN, Global Database on Violence Against Women of 2014:

“A report by Women United Together-Marshall Islands has shown that 51 percent of women experience domestic violence, while more than half of the population generally agrees that it is normal to commit violence against women in marital relationships.”

This story is based on real events; however, names have been changed--except for my own--to protect the innocent as well as the guilty.