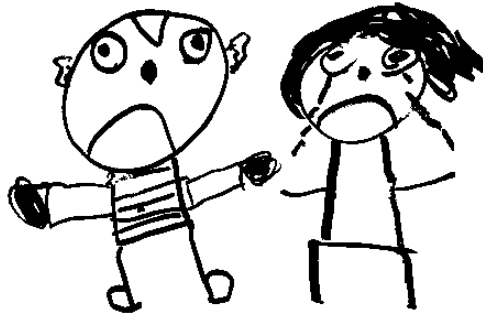


HELPLESS HEART



By Gerri LeClerc

I'll call her June because that is the month she died. We worked together in a small covert office for one of the intelligence communities. This type of work creates families as well as colleagues; we are under oath to keep government secrets and can only discuss our work with each other. As a result, we work tightly together and make deep relationships that often last a lifetime. June's lifetime was too short, too unhappy, and her work family was unable to prevent her loss.

June came to speak with me because she knew I was a nurse; though I was not working in a clinical position, she knew I would keep her confidence. Her problem had been diagnosed by our co-worker and psychologist, Doctor Mike. June was a deeply depressed battered woman. She'd been in her situation for years and at the time I became involved she was in a stage of psychological paralysis, helplessness.

I am not an expert in any way on battered woman syndrome, though it has always frustrated me as a nurse and a woman when a spouse cannot escape an abusive husband. Even as June's personal experience was opened to me, it only confused me more.

Women in just one generation have achieved stellar goals in our American society. We recently had our first woman candidate for president of our country. We've

made strides in equal pay, military combat, as CEOs, doctors, lawyers and business owners. These changes in a woman's freedom and financial independence have not significantly reduced our submission to abuse or the number of deaths related to it. Why?

June was well-educated and respected in our organization. She kept to herself; was pleasant, and we thought shy. When she talked to me about herself, it was as if she were discussing someone else. She imparted only small tidbits of her situation, and always rationalized her husband's behavior. She spoke of their mutual love for each other, which was her reason for not leaving him. She knew intellectually that her depression was caused by the abusive relationship, but she was unable to walk away.

Battered women often feel guilt or responsibility for their partner's anger. Even if she recognizes the beatings she receives are unjustified, she often stays to try to repair the marriage. June felt hopeless to resolve her own situation, instead she turned inside herself and became depressed. Perhaps her spouse had threatened suicide, or maybe he threatened to take away her children or told her he would kill her if she left. I don't know. We have all seen the sad numbers on abuse related deaths; we have all been affected by news stories of men who murdered their wives.

The last time I remember June with hope in her eyes and a smile on her face was her last Christmas. Our office had a crazy gift exchange called a Yankee Swap. Everyone brought a gift and got a number. Number one started and chose a gift, opened it. Number two opened a gift and had the choice of keeping it or taking number one's gift. And so it goes until the last person. There are always some returned treasures, a laminated pizza slice, an ugly lamp, or a ladies retro hat. The laughter never quits and this year, June joined in.

As the snows melted, a breathtaking Virginal spring emerged. Flowering Bartlett Pears, Forsythia, Azaleas, and Rhododendron turn our area into a wonderland of color, but is also a damp and cloudy time. I think its beauty can make a depressing contrast if your life is not happy. I think it may have for June.

As she moved deeper into depression, Doctor Mike asked my assistance in convincing June to undergo electroshock therapy. He was very worried about her and thought the treatment might be effective for her. I did my part and June agreed to have the treatment. One month after her therapy, June took her own life.

I'm sharing a little of June's plight so that I may touch even one life in trouble. Unlike years ago, there are a myriad of organizations set up to help any victim of domestic violence. The internet is a source of knowledge of every aspect of assistance available to anyone who needs it. (If you're in an abusive situation, access information from a computer at the library or other safe place, not from your home.) Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) to find information or crisis centers near you. Please, there are people waiting to help you—don't settle for abuse; don't become a number! You deserve to fulfill your own life and no one in the world has the right to hurt you.