

Patterns: A Woman's Story of Recognising Coercive Control

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More than half of adult women experience some form of gendered abuse in their home (Fanslow & Robinson, 2011). Recognising patterns of abuse embedded in and through white heteronormative coupledom can be difficult. Speaking of felt unease and danger can be fraught particularly in the absence of explicit physical abuse, stereotypically understood as domestic violence. As researchers, we have heard many stories of women's endurance of abuse by someone they love. Women we speak with have often expressed the desire for their stories to be shared so that other women may see themselves in such stories, recognise danger in their experience of abuse, and become safer in their lives. In this paper, we share one woman's story of coercive control in her relationship in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand. We provide an orientation and coda for her story, gifted to us in the hope that others may recognise more quickly the entrapment of coercive control.

Keywords: coercive control, domestic violence, gendered violence, narrative, patterns of abuse

In Aotearoa New Zealand, community interventions to improve women and children's safety from gendered violence in the home have been mobilised since the Refuge movement began. Taking account of physical and sexual violence, and emotional and psychological forms of abuse, more than half of adult women have lifetime experience of gendered violence in the home (Fanslow & Robinson, 2011).

The National Collective of Women's Refuges (NCWR) (2021) recognises that women may leave their partners as many as seven times, on average, prior to being able to establish their lives more safely for the future. Since the late 1990s, patterns of violence have also been linked to the gendered social power relations that enable particular men to coercively control their partners (Stark, 2007). Becoming "a victim of violence is never a choice" (NCWR, 2021), so coercive control provides an explanation for the ways in which violence occurs within contexts where social expectations of women and men in relationships obscure the forms of harm that are perpetrated, enabling women to remain in unsafe homes so that they continue to responsibly care for their partner and familial relationships (Stark, 2007). Coercive control mobilises gender norms relevant in specific social contexts, and the patterns of abuse that Stark (2007) relates are embedded in the gender norms predominant in his Anglo-American context. In the colonial context of Aotearoa New Zealand, Elizabeth (2015) and The Backbone Collective (2017) provide evidence of coercive control operating, for example, within the institutions of the Family Court. We as Aotearoa New Zealand researchers in psychology are located in a geo-political region where European colonisation continues through the predominance of Pākehā norms and institutions. We locate our knowledge production at the margins of this colonial context, collectively engaged in the work of decolonisation through telling stories of how women in Aotearoa New Zealand become entrapped through predominant social norms that draw attention to the colonial heritage of domestic violence (Pihama et al., 2019), and the urgent need for mobilising decolonial responses to violence within our local communities, together, with attention to the multiplicity of differences in how violence is experienced – we recognise patterns through difference. In previous research within criminal justice systems local to us, women have provided accounts that articulate abusive

relationships as an interplay of shame, love and responsibility for care (Morgan et al., 2008). There can be shame and ‘foolishness’ felt in the decisions to stay, as well as the recognition of the social responsibilities as women to care for partners, especially when they’re distressed. While advocates in the community come to recognise the interplay of coercive control, social coercion and patterns of violence, even in retrospect, women’s recognition of coercive control as a form of harm can be difficult given the stereotype of violence as physical assault, and the normalisation of gendered responsibilities in heterosexual relationships. Contemporary research draws connections between how coercive control is entrapping and insidious, and the effects remain long after the relationship ends (see Lohmann et al., 2024). The harm from coercion requires attention to understandings of feeling safe, including problematising linear understandings of safety in the context of insidious abuse that is normalised through dominant cultural norms in Aotearoa New Zealand. Women have explained that coercive control can feel like “agitation in the air all the time” (Denne et al., 2013, p. 87) that is difficult to articulate.

In this paper we present the story of a woman’s journey from the beginning of a romantic relationship, to recognising that coercive control harms her in the everyday life of her partnership. We are researchers who have heard many women’s stories of violence in intimate relationships, and each bring our own personal experiences to our research perspectives and location. Informally, women participating in research projects we conduct or supervise, whether related to the criminal justice system or community interventions or their collaborative responses to domestic violence, have often told us that they volunteered so that other women might learn from their experience: perhaps others might recognise abuse earlier and become safer sooner if they are able to see themselves and their situation through another woman’s story.

The story we are telling here is written with a similar spirit for opening up possible new understandings from sharing our processes of sense making through story-telling where patterns can be recognised from multiple, intersecting positionings. The narrator came to share in story-telling with us through a research project where women speak their experiences of intimate partner violence. Unlike research where we have provided more extensive analytic interpretations of stories we have been told, here we do not attempt to analyse the process of recognising coercive control by a partner we have loved. Rather, we listen as the story unfolds, as the narrator speaks to her former partner. We listen, as she tells him of events and other relationships through which she learned how to relate to him intimately. As understood through traditional academia, our analysis here is minimal, with italicised emphasis woven through by the collective of authors, guided by the storytelling, in recognition of our own experiences within the story told. Through collaborating on how to emphasise patterns, we bring together all the women who have contributed to the wider project in sharing our recognitions and feelings of patterns of coercive control. We travel with the narrator as she moves through her retelling how she came to recognise her most intimate relationship as dangerously harmful.

Patterns

You were the guy that I always said “No” to. You were a friend. I didn't see you in that way. Besides, you lived in a different town, and I didn't want to do long distance. So, I dated another guy for two years. And when we broke up, you were still there. Asking. But I told you that I wasn't in the right head space. And that I wouldn't be for a long time.

Fast forward a few months, there you were. Asking. *Again*. This time, however, I thought to myself: why not? What is the worst that could happen?

~

After our first date, you pursued me. Hard. And I didn't mind. *It was romantic, right?* Every moment you were free, you wanted to see me. *Had to.* I felt needed. I felt special. I felt important. *But I also felt it was moving too fast.* After a fancy dinner I told you so. But you didn't listen. This was rare between us. We can't let it pass by. We get along too well to just be friends. It's okay to be scared, but it's not okay to say no. *You can't say no to our future.* I listened to you. And felt convinced that this was meant to be. Because you said it was. You also said that if I just let go of my past relationships and trauma and everything that was holding me back, I would finally be able to experience a love I deserved. So that's what I did. *I surrendered to the fall.*

Early on, it was easy to see what your love language was: gifts. I was showered in them from when we first met. Expensive dinners, flowers, chocolates, clothes, weekend getaways, overseas holidays. Nothing was too much for you to give. Or too little. You wrote me letters. On scraps of paper. My love language: words of affirmation. I felt completely seen, and heard, and loved. So when you gave me a promise ring on my birthday, I knew this was it. You were it. *You were sure of me, and that was all that I needed.*

~

My parents were preparing to move out of town. And my sister was still living overseas. So my family home would be free. What an amazing opportunity for us both, to live with each other. And to finally make a start on our life together, for real. You basically lived at my house anyway, since our first date. But to make it official, that would be surreal. The move couldn't come quick enough.

The weekend before my parents leave, you tell me you're not moving. You felt pressured into it. You didn't want to move in so fast. Your life wasn't in my hometown. And it never would be. I cried. I felt so stupid. *But I wasn't allowed to cry.* I wasn't allowed to be annoyed. To feel led on, betrayed, hurt, frustrated, blindsided, or confused. Because it was unfair of me to think that you were actually moving in with me. *Instead, I had to comfort you.* I had to let you know that I never wanted you to feel that way. And I didn't mean to pressure you. But hadn't it been your idea? Hadn't you wanted to take this step with me? To save the travel time and close the distance and make a home? *I couldn't remember anymore.*

A month later it is your birthday. You had given me a promise ring on mine. I had to make you feel special. Keep the day free I said, I have plans for us that you will love. You said you couldn't wait. But on the morning of your birthday, you didn't want to do anything. That's fine I thought, I can cancel brunch. Then you told me you had to work. That's fine I thought, we can still go out for dinner. You get annoyed at that suggestion. You never wanted to do anything on your birthday. It was just another day; you didn't care. What right did I have making birthday plans for you? I was too controlling, organising a day for you. *I apologised.* You were satisfied. Or so I thought.

The following weekend you plan a birthday party for yourself. And tell me the day before. You said you always make an effort for me. And that this was the one time you expect anything from me. It didn't matter that I had work. All I was doing was making excuses. So I made it to your birthday party. And you were so happy. But deep inside, *I felt something move.*

~

Our anniversary is here. You plan a surprise weekend away. It's perfect. I feel so special. We talk about marriage and our goals together. You can't wait to marry me. And the hurt I held

inside from your decision to not move in with me subsidises. *I feel confident in you and us again.* Little did I know that you were noting down every expense and gift and ounce of kindness you gave as a way to justify your demands.

My month-long holiday to visit my sister arrives. It is the first time we will be separated for so long. We are both sad. You were invited of course. But you backed out. For some reason. *That was okay though, I was getting used to the predictive disappointment.* When I get back, you say you have a surprise for me. Your parents are building a new house. *For us.* It will be our first home together. I cannot believe it. Your parents would do that, for us? Of course they would, you say. Your dad even said we can design it ourselves. *I feel so blessed and grateful.* We will finally be able to live together.

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You have a business plan. A new idea. You want to start farming. You tell me it will be a massive investment in our future. So I'm all in. I cannot wait to be your business partner again. Last year you had different business scheme, and I relished the time we worked on it together. We were a team. The best team. *And you made a lot of money.* But it wasn't your passion. So this new venture of yours would be fun. For us.

You take on over 100 lambs. They are unbelievably cute. We raise them together. In the sunshine, the rain, the mud, and the dust. Everything is so idyllic. So peaceful. *Yet somewhere deep inside, I feel something move again. And after a while, I can't shake the feeling that I am living someone else's life.*

One day on the farm you ask me if I have applied for any jobs in your hometown yet. I am confused. But I shouldn't have been. *I had to get a real job.* And work full-time. Because university was over now. And you were sick of me not contributing more. And treating you like you always treated me. So I tell you that I will start looking for more work and pay for nice things. *But I was still confused.* I thought you had told me to keep my part-time job because it meant I was more flexible to help you with your business. I thought you had told me you never wanted me to pay for anything. Because you earned more than me and you wanted to spoil me, just for the sake of it. I thought you had told me you appreciated everything I did and that my help with your business was more than enough. Because all you needed was my help. *Nothing else.*

~

Christmas is here. We feed the lambs in the morning. And gather with your family in the afternoon. It is different, but nice. A strange sense of home mixed with unfamiliarity. This will be my future, I realise. *I'm not quite sure how that makes me feel.*

We are excited. The boxing day sales have arrived. We can finally buy furniture and appliances for our new house. We look around the shops. Weigh up our options. And then decide to wait for the Waitangi Day sales. We need to find the best of the best. I swallow the small sense of panic I feel as I look at the prices. I can't afford the best of the best. And I don't even need the best of the best. I am happy with reliable, and affordable. *But I don't have a choice.* You will be paying for most of it anyway.

My overseas holiday with my friends arrives. You aren't happy that I am going. Because you need help on the farm. You don't get to just go on holidays, like I do. You have to work, hard. *And I shouldn't be wasting my money.* I should be spending it on anything but myself. Like our house. Like our farm. Like you. I leave feeling guilty. Your disapproval clouds my holiday. *I feel watched. Monitored. Supervised. Even though I am on a different continent.* You tell me

you hope I am having the best time. Then complain that I am not there to support you. You tell me you hope I am enjoying myself. Then complain that I didn't listen to your advice. I come to learn that a compliment or praise or good word from you is never just that. *There are conditions to your love. And I am not following them.*

~

My sister is moving back to New Zealand. I am ecstatic. My favourite person in the world will finally be able to meet my other favourite person in the world: you. I can't wait. My family plans a big 'welcome home' gathering. We decorate the house and prepare her favourite food. But you won't be able to make it. You're too stressed about the farm. It hasn't rained in over a month. And there isn't enough hay. *You need me there to help you.* It will make you feel better. But my sister is arriving home. I tell you no. I can't. I will help you another day. Besides, are you sure you can't come? Just for one day? It's really important to me for you two to meet. I shouldn't have asked you that. My sister arriving home is overshadowed by your *constant messages*. My family tells me to get off my phone. To be present. So I try my best to ignore the notifications. *But my mind feels far away.*

The messages don't stop. You need my help. *I have to support you.* Thankfully, my family understands. We plan to meet you halfway. It won't be the perfect setting for my two favourite people to meet, but I don't mind. I just want it to happen. I know you two will get along so well. You have to. *Somehow our messages get crossed* and you thought we were driving all the way to your house. When I remind you of what was arranged, I can tell you aren't happy. Your messages become short and sharp. *I swallow my dread.* And pretend that everything is going to plan as we drive. But inside, my stomach churns. *I know I will pay for this later.*

When we pull in next to your car, you don't look up. I smile at my mum and sister. Let me just say hi first. He mustn't have noticed us. I knock on your window and beam at you. This is the moment I have been waiting for. You roll it down and tell me to hurry up. *My heart sinks.* Can you please say hello to my sister? She's really excited to meet you. And my mum hasn't seen you in a few months. Only for a few minutes, then we can go. Please? You sigh a frustrated sigh and get out of your car. This is my sister! I say with as much energy as I can muster. *I hope that it hides that something is wrong.* But I catch my mum's eyes and can tell that it doesn't. You bark at them that we have to go. Now. And then get back in your car with a thud. We all freeze. Time slows. *What just happened?* Finally, my mum takes the lead and says let's go to my sister. But as they hug me goodbye, *I can no longer look my mum in the eyes.*

I try to process what just happened as we drive. And why. I knew you were stressed. But to snap at my family? To ignore my sister? *It didn't make sense.* I tell you I understand that everyone has bad days, but everyone knows they have to hide it when they need to. That was a moment you needed to. You look at me, seething. You didn't do anything wrong. I shouldn't have brought my sister along. *I should have known you weren't in the mood* to meet her. Why did I think today was a good day for you two to meet? *It was my fault.* No one else's. *I cry silently* all the way to your house.

After some prompting, you say you will make amends with my mum and sister. A fancy dinner is arranged, your choice. I pray for it to go well. And it does. I sit next to you and opposite my sister. We laugh and drink wine and chat happily. This is it, I think to myself. This is what I wanted. Later that night you tell me you are hurt that I didn't speak to you much at dinner. You felt left out. You went to all that effort, paid for the meal, and drove us all there and back, only to be ignored as I talked to my sister too much. *I am confused. I thought we all had a nice time.* But you didn't, of course. I apologise and say I will make sure you feel more at ease next time. It wasn't my intention to leave you out. On the contrary, I wanted you to feel at home. Like

you normally do with my family. You laugh and say that it's okay because hanging out with my sister won't be a regular thing. You are too busy with the business. Besides, you don't need to be close to her. You don't want to be. *A little bit of me breaks inside.* What kind of person doesn't want to be friends with their partner's best friend? Their sister? I tell you that it hurts me that you don't want to get to know her. But you just shrug it off. *And say I shouldn't have had such high expectations to begin with.*

A few days later you tell me that I need to buy a new car. Sharing with my sister is no longer an option. It wasn't fair on you to wait a week between visits. Or to meet me halfway. It didn't matter that I didn't have the money. *It was important for me to be there for you whenever you called.* Because you were going through a rough time. And I was the only one who could make you happy.

I spend all my spare time searching for cars. But the ones I view aren't up to your standard. So you find and approve one for me. Your mum boasts to everyone about how wonderful you are for finding me a new car. It was so selfless of you to give up your time to help me. You do so much for me. Aren't I so lucky? I nod and smile. I am just relieved that the pressure will now be off me. *I begin to wonder how long that will last.*

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Things seem to calm down as we settle into a new routine. You work on the business, while I balance my time between my friends and family and you. Although I am busy running between different towns and jobs, I feel excited for the year ahead. Because at the end of the year, the house should be finished. And our dream of living together will finally come true.

Once again, you ask me how my job search in your hometown is going. Since I will be moving, I should have a permanent job lined up already. I remind you that I won't find full-time work until the end of the year. I need to remain flexible so I can help you with the business and still live in my hometown. Besides, I still have plenty of time. That mutually known fact does not make you happy. You tell me you can't do long distance anymore; it's taking too much of a toll on you. We have been together nearly three years. It isn't right that we don't live together. And it is my fault that it hasn't happened yet. *All of a sudden, that heavy feeling, that weight of pressure, that overwhelming sense of guilt, comes flooding back. And settles within me, making itself at home.* But I need this year to say goodbye to my life, for you, forever. *So I hold my ground.* And you act betrayed. I am made to feel like I have broken you. Every moment I spend in my hometown is met with your unrelenting discontentment. *Only when I return to you does the feeling ease.* To appease your hurt, and relieve my stress, I find a casual job at the local mall in your hometown. *But it isn't enough.*

One random afternoon when I arrive at your house, you seem more excited to greet me than usual. *I brace myself.* Your uncle wants to talk to me. He has an opportunity to discuss. A part-time job in line with my passion, designing. I don't know what to think. It has been a dream of mine to be a designer. And to be paid for it? *It sounded too good to be true.* You tell me you know I've been struggling to find more work. And you don't want me working a job that I'm not happy in. I thank you profusely. And begin as soon as possible.

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I have a missed call from my sister. She knows I am working at the local mall, so it must be an emergency. I take a break and call her back. She sounds panicked and upset. We are going into lockdown. COVID-19, she says. Please come home. My heart sinks and my stomach drops. I had seen the havoc it was causing around the world. But I didn't think it would be here so soon.

As I head back to work, chaos has hit the mall. Shops are closing. People are leaving. Children are crying. And soon it is a ghost town. I text you saying that I just want to go home.

When I get back to your house after securing the shop, you and your family are glued to the T.V. There are only 48 hours of permitted movement to get ready. To get home. To get safe. To then wait. *I feel sick*. I think about my sister and my grandma, both all alone. With no one to help. I have to go back home and look after them. If we are together, everything will be okay. After the news, you turn to me and tell me you are so happy that I am already here.

When I tell you I am leaving, *all hell breaks loose*. How could I even think that? How could I put my family over you? Why did I lie when I texted you that I wanted to come home? It isn't fair of me to be with my family. *I am your family*. You tell me that you hate my sister and hope she catches COVID-19. *My breath quickens*. I can't believe you said that. What has she ever done to you besides wanting to be your friend? *I am mocked for my crying and confusion*. It shouldn't be that difficult to know what to do. *If I truly loved you, there wouldn't even be a choice*. Because you would choose me over your family, without a second thought. You are so hurt by my instinct to look after my family that I end up comforting and reassuring you that I love you and that I will stay. No matter what.

I call my mum in tears. What do I do? I want to go home to my sister, *but I feel trapped. Cornered. Unable to move*. It would be a betrayal to leave. Especially in this uncertainty. What if something terrible happened? I would never forgive myself. My mum comforts me and tells me that of course she wants me to go home to my sister, but as a family they support my decision to stay. My sister and I cry together on Facetime. It is decided. Yet a few hours before the lockdown begins, you tell me that you don't need me to stay. And I really don't have to if I don't want to. You don't want to force me. And if I leave now, I can make it. But I don't allow myself to show any interest. I can't. *I now know for certain that you would use it against me*.

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As each day nears closer to my sister's birthday, I feel the guilt build. She will be all alone. Because of me. I try my best to hide my sadness, but you catch on, *and a switch is flicked*. You tell me to go home. That I am not wanted here. You can no longer be around me; my energy is dragging you down too much. I tell you to stop. Please stop telling me to leave. *But you are relentless. I break down. I am trapped, literally trapped*, with someone who wants to kick me out. *I feel so alone. So isolated. I don't know what to do*. Your parents arrange a family meeting. When I try to explain that you begged for me to stay, only to tell me to leave a few weeks later, *they tell me to stop being so sensitive*. And that they also think it is best if I go.

The night before I leave, you are so sad at the thought of us being apart. You don't know if you can go without me for an uncertain amount of time. My heart aches. *I don't know what to believe. Or who to believe*. What side of you is the truth? In the morning I tell you I will miss you. *And then I scream and cry and curse as I drive away*.

It made my heart so happy to see my sister again. I knew this was where I was meant to be from the start. I felt safe. I could relax. And be myself. *But soon enough, I wouldn't feel safe anywhere at all*. Soon enough, I would learn that going home was a mistake. The wrong choice. *And I had to pay for it*.

You stopped texting me for days at a time. That was new. *I was used to the unending messages, not silence*. I didn't like it. It made me anxious for your response. And your responses were never nice. *I felt on edge. All the time*. I would flinch each time my phone vibrated. But I

couldn't put it down. *My mind, mood, and body were under the control of your words.* Waiting for a kind message that never came. I didn't understand what was wrong. *I felt like I was being tortured.* I lay in bed for days at a time. Too scared and too tired to move. My sister would make sure I ate. And felt loved. But I didn't have it in me to do anything. If you weren't happy with me, then I wasn't happy with myself. How could I be? *Everything was my fault.*

Our anniversary came and went without so much as an 'I love you'. *I kept questioning over and over and over again what was wrong with me.* Battling with myself about the past and present. How could so much change in one year? What did I do wrong? *Why wasn't I enough?* I decide to search for answers. For clarity. For some reason, any reason, as to why this was happening. And find out that you want to talk to new girls. And meet new girls. And don't think that I should question it. I tell you I understand that making new friends is important, but going about it online makes me uncomfortable. So you delete your social media. And tell me to delete mine too. *Then label me as controlling to your friends and family.*

My graduation is spent in lockdown. I feel so loved and supported and cherished by my family and friends. But the day is dampened by you not acknowledging me. *I yearn for your praise and approval. As your opinion is the only one that matters.* So I decide to tell you that I am wanting to pursue further study next year. At last, the messages stream in. You can't help but feel bad for me. How sad it is for me to have spent all that time and money and effort on a degree that hasn't even been able to get me a real job. You don't see the point of me pursuing university anymore. It wouldn't be fair on you, the pressure of me studying while you work. You don't want to live together if I choose to study. You think I should stay in my hometown if I do. *It is my choice.* And then the messages stop. *I feel like I have been kicked in the stomach.*

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As the COVID-19 restrictions ease, I try to prove myself to you again by finding more work. I balance four jobs alongside working on the farm and helping you re-establish your previous business venture. And for a little while, you are impressed. Happy, even. I have finally listened to your advice. But that doesn't last long. *You somehow find more faults.* Suddenly, I work too much. I don't spend enough time with you. I should be helping out on the farm more. It's our future, after all. It's mine as much as it's yours. *But is it?* As soon as I do something you disapprove of, it becomes yours. *Everything of ours somehow becomes yours.* And secretly, deep down, *I am afraid of our future when it seems like it is only yours.* But I hide that fear. And resort to functioning on autopilot; *making sure I do exactly what you tell me to. Without question.* Because there is too much hurt to be found in questioning your reasoning. I have learnt that the hard way. So I stay quiet and adjust my life to fit around yours, once more.

~

One day you decide that it is no longer okay for my sister to use your stuff that has been sitting in my garage. I am still allowed to use it, of course. Because you trust me. But my sister isn't to be trusted. With anything. And I can't control you. So if I respected you, I would respect your decision. But I didn't have it in me to tell her. I was still too embarrassed and ashamed and hurt by your immediate dismissal of her to let her know how you truly felt. So I don't say anything. Somehow, I think you knew that I wouldn't.

A few weeks later when you ask me if my sister is still using your stuff, *my stomach drops.* I know I can't tell you the truth. But I know I can't lie either. So I resort to a half-truth. And tell you a half-lie. She has been using it with me, since you trust me. That's okay, right? It is not. You have never been so disrespected in your life. Or so betrayed. This is a hurt like no other. I beg you to let me handle it. But now you can no longer trust me. So you take it upon yourself

to message my sister. And blame her for my mistake. When she sticks up for herself, *you see red*.

You text me that you are on your way to my house. I text you to turn around. I tell you I don't want you to come. *I am terrified of what will happen*. It's the middle of the night. I can't go anywhere. I have work tomorrow. *I feel trapped inside my own house*. My sister asks me if you have ever hurt me before. Physically. I tell her no, of course not. You would never do that. *But I can't stop shaking. And screaming for someone to call the police. She doesn't understand why I am so afraid. Too scared to move. Petrified of the punishment that is to come*.

You pull into my driveway and start grabbing your stuff. I don't move. I can't. But I have to. I have to make things right. So I start helping you pack away your belongings. And you continue to tell me how disappointed you are. How hurt. How let down. How annoyed you are at my sister for causing this problem between us. Your hate for her seeps through your words. And I worry that the neighbours can hear. Suddenly my sister appears and tells you to leave. You turn to me and ask how I could just let my sister abuse you.

Why didn't I stick up for you? Where was my loyalty? How could you ever trust me or my family again? *Messages of blame, guilt, and shame bombard my phone*. Then a new one. Something worse. Something too far. *You tell me that you wish you were dead*. And then you don't respond to me for days. When you finally do, I am scolded for going behind your back to check if you were okay.

I decide I need time. You laugh and say you need time. *You are the true victim*. No one can be as hurt as you. I ask you to listen to me. But you tell me I am being unreasonable. I should be there for you, after everything my family has put you through. I tell you I still love you and care about you. But I need time. To hurt and heal. On my own terms. You let me know that during our time apart the house may be built. And if we aren't talking, I won't be able to have any input on the final designs. *I sigh and let it go*. I know this is your last bid at contact. I tell you I need at least two months alone. You protest. *But I stand my ground*. For once.

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Two months alone stretch out in front of me. Two months of quiet. Two months of peace. Two months of freedom. Or so I thought.

It's not even a day later that you message me. You couldn't help it; you needed to ask me something. And also wanted me to know that you respect my space and need for time alone. And will wait as long as it takes. But you really miss me. And hope I am not slipping away. I reassure you that everything will be okay.

I try to decipher what went wrong and where and when. If I could just pinpoint the moment, then maybe I could understand it. But nothing makes sense. Everything that has been said and done contradicts each other. *I can't even trust my own judgment anymore*. How can I know what to do if I don't even know what has happened? So I decide to open up to a friend that I can trust. Maybe they will be able to help me see something that I can't yet.

After I share it all, the highest of highs and the lowest of lows, they tell me that our relationship sounds emotionally abusive. I pause. No. That isn't it. It can't be. It was toxic behaviour, sure. I knew that the way you treated me was unhealthy. And that love wasn't meant to feel like this, all the time. But abuse wasn't something I could associate with you. With someone I love. *Because what did that say about me?*

You text me to let me know you've started counselling. That you are taking the right steps to make things better. For me. For us. And our future. You are learning to let things go. To not hold onto everything so much. You want to be the man I fell in love with again. You say I deserve that. *There is a glimmer of hope.* Maybe, just maybe, things can go back to how they used to be.

You message my mum about how much you want to change. Your mum messages me about how much you are doing to change. And I truly believe that you are a good man, somewhere, deep down. So I send you messages of encouragement. And tell you how proud I am of you. I think that if I love you enough, you will become the man I see you as. But at the same time, *my heart is split in two.* Because how can I love someone who hates my sister? And at times, *seems like they hate me too?*

I decide I must prove everyone wrong. Including myself. This wasn't you, at heart. I knew you. *So I knew that you just needed help.* Because loving you was once so right. And it still was. It had to be.

A week later, we reunite. But this time, it is on my terms. At least I tell myself that it is. I set boundaries. You promise not to cross them. And seem so sincere in your apology that my heart aches. I desperately want to trust you. And to feel safe around you once more. *But that feeling is still there. That indescribable unease.*

~

For a while, it was like we did begin again. We went on dinner dates and weekend getaways and laughed like never before. I felt special. It had been so long since I had felt special. Long enough, that I didn't want to see the patterns repeating. Long enough, that I didn't want to know what I already knew, deep down inside. That the gifts, which came at least once a week, and the kind words you wrote to me, on scraps of paper, and the lunches you bought, and the attention you gave, *were all just more conditions.* Another excuse. Another justification. Another reason to hurt me.

One afternoon you tell me that your counsellor said my sister needs to apologise to you. For the abuse you endured. And the trauma she caused. So you can move on. For us. *My body floods with that familiar feeling. That heavy, unmovable weight. That pressure.* I was holding onto the smallest hope that everything would work out. And that peace would finally rest between my two favourite people. But now that hope is gone. Still, I try in vain to tell you that she was only trying to protect me. From you. You knew that. But somehow, *the truth was changed.* You look at me and tell me you won't back down. You deserve an apology. And I have to support you through this, unlike last time. We are a team, no matter what. *Remember?*

~

A week before my mum's birthday dinner, *I feel sick.* I don't want my mum's night to be overshadowed by your presence. But I know if you aren't invited, *I will have hell to pay.* So as we sit in your bed, I tell you that you can come, if you want. But that proposal isn't convincing enough. Because you automatically question why I don't want you to be there. Is it because of your sister? *I snap and tell you it is because of you.*

You punish me by driving off into the night. And as I anxiously await your return, your parents tell me that you are upset because you feel rejected by my family. Especially by my sister. And they just can't understand why she would do such a horrible thing, to you. Or how my family can still support her. *When I try to tell them the truth, I can tell they don't believe me.*

As we enter the restaurant you barely acknowledge my family. *I grit my teeth.* And swallow my embarrassment. This is going to be a long night, I think. I try to hide your lack of engagement by overcompensating as we wait. *Laughing too hard and smiling too wide.* At last, my mum enters the restaurant. And for the briefest moment, when we all yell ‘surprise’, *I forget who I am standing next to and feel happy.*

During dinner, I muster more fake smiles and fake laughs, hoping I can convince everyone that we are okay. That I made the right choice. But no matter how hard I try, I can’t help but notice that my sister is sitting at the end of the table. And that you keep checking your phone. And that you barely touched your dinner. And that you are growing more and more frustrated with my little cousins sitting opposite you. *I wish desperately for you to just try as hard as me.* But then you get up to take a phone call. From your mum. And walk out without saying goodbye.

When we arrive back at my house, you tell me you are going to get your bags and leave. You don’t feel comfortable being around my sister. And you never will. *You wish that she was dead.* I follow you inside and watch in shock as your anger dissolves into remorse. Instead of leaving, you cry all night. *You act so broken and helpless that I have no choice but to hold you together.* And for the first time, as I look at you, with your face scrunched up in mock pain, *I feel resentment.* But still, I comfort you. And I tell you that everything will be okay. *Because I am scared of what will happen if I don’t.*

You leave early the next morning. Then bombard me with messages once you are home. You aren’t happy with how I treated you last night. All I did was make you feel worse. And now you hate yourself even more. When I question what I did wrong, you tell me that you are trying your best. But you feel that I don’t think it’s good enough. *I have to understand that you can’t control your behaviour at the moment.* And I should just be happy that you are trying.

The next few weeks feel like a blur. I revert back to living on autopilot; moving between different jobs and roles and responsibilities to please you. But each time we say goodbye, that weight creeps back on my shoulders and sits heavy in my stomach. *My body has learnt that being apart from you always brings me pain.* You have made sure of it. And when I drive the familiar journey between our towns, *I fantasise about disappearing.* Taking the first exit and not telling anyone where I have gone. Because as each day goes by, *the more I long to escape my life.*

~

The walls around me press closer when your parents tell us that they are going to buy the property next door to our future house. *I feel claustrophobic as the news settles on my skin.* I thought that maybe the issue was your parents; always too involved and always watching. And that having our own space would allow you to relax. So you could finally relax your grip on me. But now as I picture our future, never quite ours, never quite mine, *I can’t fucking breathe.*

I feel like I am suffocating. Trapped. Invisible. And completely alone. But I can’t speak up because it is not my place. And I can’t protest because my silence has been bought. My voice has been traded for a house. My freedom sacrificed for your future. And any emotion besides enthusiasm would be a betrayal. So, I smile politely at your parents. And try not to scream.

Over the following months, I disconnect from myself completely. I become a shell of myself. Never truly laughing, never truly smiling, never truly happy. And after a while, I don’t feel anything at all. *Besides the debilitating anxiety.* The unnerving feeling that I am always one word, one look, one sigh, one split second away from disappointing you.

The unnerving adrenaline keeps me going. From place to place, moment to moment. Even though I know I can't keep living like this. But it's only a few months until I move. *So I keep quiet, and keep running on empty.*

I keep quiet when you tell me you can't do long distance anymore. When you tell me you need me to move down, right now. Even though we have nowhere to live. I keep quiet when another woman messages you about going away for the weekend, together. To our favourite holiday spot. I keep quiet when you get angry at me for being upset. And have to walk out of the room because you are so mad. I keep quiet when you belittle my friends. And tell me that I cannot speak to them. Especially about you. I keep quiet when you slander my family. And force me to choose between you or my sister. I keep quiet when you guilt trip me for working. And pressure me to drop everything to help you. No matter the time of day or commitment I have. I keep quiet when you complain that I don't do enough. That I don't pull my weight. That I don't spoil you, like you do for me. I keep quiet when you say I don't contribute financially. I keep quiet when you demand that I change my behaviour, or else. I keep quiet when you compare me to your friends' girlfriends. I keep quiet when your mum complains to my mum about me. And boasts about how wonderful you are. I keep quiet when my design job turns into a personal assistant role. I keep quiet when you tell me how indebted I am to you. And how lucky I am. And how I take you for granted. I keep quiet when you tell me you deserve better. And that you are too good to me. I keep quiet when you tell me that everything you are doing is for me. Because of me. For our future. I keep quiet when you tell me I need to show you some respect. And to stop having mood swings all the time. I keep quiet when you list everything single thing you have ever done for me or my friends or my family as a way to justify your demands of me. I keep quiet when you tell me that relationships are meant to be fair, but ours is not. Because I don't do anything. I keep quiet when you tell me you are tired of being nice to me. And if I don't change in the ways you specify, then you can no longer be with me. I keep quiet when you bring up suicide. And tell me that no one else can help you, besides me. I keep quiet when you tell me that I need help. Because I am not sane. I keep quiet until I can no longer recognise the person who I have become. *Until I have no choice but to choose myself.*

I don't realise that I have decided to leave until my body completely shuts down and I cannot physically bring myself to see you again. Until I can't stop shaking at the thought of being near you. And crying until I vomit. Until what remains of me shatters and my mum tells me I cannot go back. For my own safety. For my own wellbeing. For my own peace of mind. And my family's. At least not while I cannot function. I don't recognise that my body is protecting me. That no matter how hard I have tried to ignore it, my body has finally said: *enough is enough.*

My mind and heart and soul are split in different directions. I cannot make sense of what is happening. Or why it is happening. Or what I should do. The mere idea of leaving makes me feel sick. It would mean losing my dreams. My security. My future. My identity. Myself. *But the idea of staying makes me want to die.* I feel torn apart. Crushed. Winded. Broken. Worthless. Unloved. Empty. Betrayed. Ashamed. Embarrassed. Angry. Confused. Useless. Heartbroken. I sit in denial with what my body is telling me. What it has been telling me for weeks, months, and even years.

Eventually, *I decide that nothing could ever compare to the pain of being with you.* Not even leaving.

Once again, you proved me wrong.

~

I wrestle with the guilt I feel. The knowledge that I am breaking both of our hearts. And inflicting pain on us both. *But I know it is the right thing to do.* For everyone. So I call you and tell you that I will not be coming back. I cannot come back. Because I can no longer recognise myself. And that scares me. I brace for the worst. But you just hang up on me.

At first, you don't acknowledge my decision. You deny it. You tell me it can't be over. Because you won't allow it. Then try your best to convince me otherwise. And change my mind. You tell me I am not thinking straight. That I will eventually come to my senses and believe you. If only I knew how much you loved me. And that you would do anything for me. Then you pile on the guilt. The disappointment. The overwhelming blame. *Until I am drowning.* And finally, you resort to suicide threats. Endless suicide threats. When I am at home. At work. With family. With friends. You text me to let me know you are saying goodbye. For the final time. And that you want me to know that you love me. So much so that you can't live without me. And now you won't. Then you don't respond for hours.

I spiral lower than I ever had before. I cannot cope with the thought of you dying. And it being all my fault. Because it would be. *You told me so yourself.*

Your mum won't stop calling and messaging me. She can't understand why I have left you. After everything you have done for me. And everything they have done for us. She doesn't know how to console you. You are so unwell and confused and upset. You don't deserve any of this. *I must support them in your recovery.* I must hear her out. It's the least I can do.

Throughout her calls and messages, my sister is blamed. For causing you harm. And abusing you into this unrecognisable person. An apology is demanded, at the very least from me. And it is revealed what your family truly thinks of me. How they never really thought I was the right fit. Or good enough for you. And how your counsellor says that my leaving you the way I did and when I did was *cruel. And reflective of me as a person.*

One night you text me saying that you are in my hometown. And want to see me. You think it will be good for us to talk in person. You say you deserve that. When I tell you no, you tell me goodbye. So I panic and message your mum to let her know where you are and that I fear for your safety. She responds by telling me that you are in your room, safe at home. And I begin to lose grip of reality.

I don't feel safe. In my house, in my body, in my mind. So I flee to my parents' house. And my mum takes me to a counsellor. But I struggle to open up. What if she thinks I am cruel too? What if everything you said was true? What if I am the toxic one after all? *I doubt my own memories. My own feelings. My own thoughts. I don't have the words for what I went through and what I am going through. I don't think I ever will.*

The counsellor takes her time. She doesn't push me. And I am grateful for that. She tells me that I have been emotionally abused. For a long time. By someone I love. And that it isn't my fault. She tells me that you are a master manipulator. So skilled that no one would be able to consciously recognise it as abuse if they were in it. She also tells me that she is proud of me, for breaking the cycle of abuse. And that I am brave and strong and capable of getting through this. But warns me that the end is the most dangerous time of all. So a safety plan is made. *Just in case.*

~

You turn up at my work. Unexpected and uninvited. I tell you I cannot leave. You say you will wait.

When I get into your car, you promise me the world. And beg me to take you back. You tell me that you will change. For real this time. And do whatever it takes. And wait however long it takes. Because your love for me will not end. You say you cannot keep living without me. *And that your gun is in the boot of your car.* You just wanted to see if there was a chance, a sliver of hope, before you go.

I start to cry as I tell you that it's too late. That too much has happened for us to recover from together. The damage is done. All we can do now is work on healing and loving ourselves, separately.

The next day you turn up at my house. *Because you want me to know that today is the day.* No going back. You tried your best. But you can't keep going without me. When you apologise to my sister, *I feel sick.* So I message your mum that I am worried about you being left alone. She just tells me to never contact her again.

~

The following months fade into a sleepless haze of never-ending nights and days. *Always on edge. Always dreading. Always waiting.* For a message confirming that you were really gone.

Two years have nearly passed. You still message from time to time. You let me know when the farm got robbed. Twice. And when your friend was in hospital. And when your aunt died. My favourite one. You say that you have no one else to turn to. No one else who understands.

Why am I so nice to you after all this time? I think about that a lot and one day you ask me. I am not sure. I don't have an answer. Maybe I am still scared. Living in fear. Afraid of you. *Of what will happen if I don't respond.*

~

Coda

As we read her storying of recognising emotional abuse in her relationship, we bring our memories of other stories where coercive control is obscured until patterns are recognised, enabling openings for safety. We hear the affective flows of feeling that entangle love and responsibility to care within networks of heteronormative gendered social responsibilities, italicising where these networks become particularly dense, and specifically located with the social dominance of patriarchal colonial culture in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Storying the norms of heteronormative romance enables the recognition of gendered conditioning to the surrender to love and responsibilities for care and support. Even in the face of sometimes confusing doubts, the fall into coupledness is a story told as comforting. Patterns of apologies for perceived wrongs, forgiveness, hope, acceptance, dampening disappointments can be recognised as compounding coercions that entrap. Each beginning again unfolds with new hope and new responsibilities to care again, closing down choices, subduing her voice, entrapping her. She becomes unrecognisable. Unimaginable travel restrictions - lockdowns - begin amplifying constrictions and love, shame and compassion stretch into feeling unsafe, everywhere. Her world circles around him, enclosing her uncertain futures. Persistently, love represents itself hopefully; stubbornly, love is the dream and the patience of care demands endurance, even after the romantic relationship ends and safety becomes a possibility, however fraught and still conditional.

Reading her story within our memories, we follow the mobilisation of heteronormative norms that make coercive control unrecognisable in the everyday responsibilities of caring for those we love. We notice how travel restrictions of the pandemic amplify constraints, so they are ever present. We recognise how struggles to reveal the affective violence of coercive

control are embedded in the predominant cultural norms of Aotearoa New Zealand. We know, diversely as woman and as researchers, that sharing stories of how we come to recognise coercive control and social entrapment strengthens our struggles and journeys towards living more safely.

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The authors are a collective of researchers at the School of Psychology Te Kura Hinengaro Tangata, Massey University Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa, Aotearoa New Zealand. We have research experience ranging from professorial to senior postgraduate levels. We are actively engaged in research where we hear stories of coercive control and social entrapment as we conduct studies into the experience of gendered violence and service provision in the sectors

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