

Transcript for the podcast **Coming Home**

Episode 4: She will be alright

Kate: A warning to listeners. This episode contains references to domestic abuse and violence.

This podcast was made on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, and we pay our respect to Elders past and present and to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be listening.

[Music]

Mary: But the fact that he's now an actual criminal in their eyes. My dad just lost it. My mum lost it more.

Kiara: And I'm saying, "Please stop. You're my father in law. I respected you, but you've crossed a line here."

Neen: He had to fill out his bit for the paperwork and he wouldn't do that for weeks, just to make life harder.

INTRO

Kate: This is Coming Home, where we follow the stories of three women, from childhood, through young adulthood, to their experiences of homelessness. and how they eventually found hope and safety, and a place to call home.

Coming Home will show how women's homelessness look different from men's. We'll examine the systemic drivers that lead to women becoming homeless: the gender inequalities, women's economic disadvantage and family violence, and the profit driven Australian housing system, that can no longer provide enough affordable homes.

G'day, and welcome back to this 4th episode of Coming Home. My name's Kate Lawrence. If this is your first time listening I highly recommend that you go back to episode one and start there, the whole series will make much more sense

In this episode we'll hear from Mary as she grapples with her relationship with Jimmy, the father of her first child. Kiara's world descends into a living nightmare and Neen faces a uncaring, impersonal and bureaucratic support system.

So lets get started.

[Music]

I originally introduced Mary as having some strong deeply held opinions, and before we continue her story, here she is now, eloquently sharing some of the challenges of being a single mum.

She recorded this at home, on her phone, towards the end of 2020, after months of lockdown with two small children, in a house with a bathroom door that doesn't close properly.

Mary: Yeah, I'm just feeling frustrated today. I think it's just a single mum thing. Doing absolutely nothing by yourself unless the kids are away, in another environment altogether or napping. So, when they're subconsciously out.

[Baby crying]

Oh, it's just, yeah, that, yeah, it's the fact you know, that I don't have anyone to, you know, "Oh darling, would you watch the kids while I go just to the toilet." Nah! "Can you watch the kids while I wash dishes." Nah! "Can you watch the kids while I do anything, ever, in the house, around the house, outside of the house, even."

So, when you don't have childcare, and I'm on the weekends I'm still a single mom. Even if I have childcare during the week, I'm still a single mom on the weekends. Even after childcare is over, I got to pick him up at five, don't I?

[Baby crying]

Like, I'm still going to be on this toilet at some part of the day or week, with a kid on my lap.

Like, this is going to happen until he doesn't want to pee in the bathroom when Mum's in here. (laughs) Or I have a house one day, God willing, where I can close and lock the bathroom door. It's these small things that make a big difference in people's lives. I'm thankful I've got a bathroom, but I hate the fact that I don't have a door that closes.

Kate: Again, we can see the limitations and indignities associated with being a renter in Australia. Renters know, you pick your battles, you save your requests and complaints for the big things - bigger than having a bathroom door that doesn't close, because you don't want the potential backlash - rent increases, notice to evict when the lease is up, or not getting the next rental because the real estate agent thinks you're too difficult.

But the other major issue highlighted in Mary's audio diary is that, if ever there was a concept that is paid lip service to the point where it is even its own metaphor, it's motherhood.

To make a motherhood statement is, according to the online dictionary, to make a vague, feel-good platitude, especially by a politician, that few people would be able to disagree with.

Like this one:

Scott Morrison: It is the warmth of the mum's embrace that simply says everything will be all right. I love you. Our Mum's speak of the surety of selfless love, the most powerful force in the universe.

Kate: That's the Prime Minister of Australia, Scott Morrison on Mothers' Day in 2019.

In 2021, the Australian Council of Social Services found that the federal budget brought down by Morrison's government, gave out tax cuts valued at 30 times the amount of the

womens' budget, locking in gender inequality through our tax, employment and superannuation systems, already stacked in favour of men, and doing nothing specifically to support single mothers on low incomes or older women facing homelessness.

Scott Morrison: Everything will be all right.

Kate: The burden on single mothers is huge, on every level: financially, socially, physically, emotionally and psychologically. Yet while the government offers extra childcare support for grandparents, there's nothing extra offered for single parents

And over the last 15 years, rights and benefits for single parents have been steadily decreasing. In 2006 the Howard government moved parents off the Parenting payment, onto the lower Newstart payments, when the youngest child turns 8 - previously it had been 16.

Newstart is not just a lower payment, but there is no pension card, no education supplement, and there are tighter income and assets tests.

Scott Morrison: Everything will be all right.

Kate: And in 2009 for the first time in in 30 years, the Rudd Government excluded parenting payments from regular pension increases.

But the worst was still to come. Since 2018, roughly 150,000 single parents, 95% of them women, have been required to participate in the government's ParentsNext program.

There are set work hours, mandatory appointments and often a list of compulsory activities their children must attend, all tallied up on a humiliating demerit point system by the service provider.

Scott Morrison: Everything will be all right.

Kate: In August of 2021, this year, a cross party parliamentary committee on Human Rights found that a third of participants on the ParentsNext program had had their payments suspended, on average for five days, and more than 1000 single parents had had their payments cancelled altogether, which means no payment for 28 days before they can reapply- 28 days with no money for a single mum and her kids.

[Ominous music]

Scott Morrison: Everything will be all right. Everything will be all right. Everything will be all right.

Kate: The same parliamentary committee said that the program breached the human rights of parents and children and should be made voluntary, but so far all signs are that the government will continue with ParentsNext.

For single parents, doing the toughest job in the world, instead of support, all the government can do is pay below the poverty line and set up hoops for single parents to jump through, as if being a single mother isn't hard and impoverished enough.

Scott Morrison: To all of our mothers, happy Mothers' Day wherever you are today.

Kate: Yep, a motherhood statement is well named.

[Music]

So far, we've heard about Mary's childhood growing up in an immigrant Turkish family, the death of her sister, her love of work, two early relationships and then Jimmy, her most significant partner to date, and the father of her baby.

Jimmy comes to the birth drunk, and then after the birth, when Mary and Jimmy and the baby are staying at Mary's parents' house, one night Jimmy doesn't come home at all.

The next day there's an altercation with Mary's parents and Mary blindly follows Jimmy's instructions to pack up and leave. They drive 80km to Jimmy's house in regional Victoria and we pick up her story from there.

Mary: They've left the house in a pig sty. I literally order some cleaners to come over and I'm sitting in the car breastfeeding my three-week old and don't know what the next step is. I'm crying so bad. And BEEP honestly was over the moon that we're away from my parents.

So, I fixed up this house. I bought everything from scratch for my little family and yeah, we lived there for six months before I found out he was cheating on me.

I would question where he was all the time. Always got, "I'm doing overtime, I'm doing overtime." Where's the money if you're doing overtime? I wasn't that stupid, but I was not getting anywhere with just asking questions.

Something just pushed me one night, wake up, and I did, and I could see that his phone, he had it next to the bed and it was, it was just lighting up,

It's like three o'clock in the morning. Why is this phone lighting out? He's passed out from the alcohol. And I grabbed this phone and I just saw it- the messages, the pictures. He has top off photos of himself. He's single, he's working, he's living his best life and he's got 100,000,001 girls following him.

These girls, "Goodnight, darlin'. See you tomorrow." And, "I miss you already," you know. "I can't wait to see you on the weekend." And I was up for the rest of the night. I was going to town. These girls saw the photos, they were messaging him. "Who's this? What's going on? Why'd you lie to me?"

And I would reply back, "That's my wife. That's my son. Married, got kids," Changed his whole life in a second. And I packed up and by the time he got up, he'd not one clue, what I'd done. And then he called me, "You're f'ed up now, you're gone now. I can't believe you did that."

I've done something so bad, compared to everything he had done. He was cheating on me for months and what I had done was bad? I had no care factor at this stage. I still loved him, but love's not enough. So, I left. I took all my belongings, all my son's belongings and I left with my son, went back to my mum's house.

Kate: For Mary, her safety net, her ability to be autonomous and to make her own decisions in relation to Jimmy, her ability to leave him, is because she has the option to go to her parents' house. For many women, they have no other options. With the state of our current housing system, there is simply nowhere else to go.

Mary: Well, he begged that whole time for us to be back together and he got a really good job. But he said, "I'm only going to take it if you come back. I've got no other reason to work other than to support my family, and, well that sounded like an adult conversation to me at the time. (laughs)

So, I thought, okay. Um, give him another chance. So I gave him another chance. Who is he? The father of my son. Why would I not give him a chance? You'd think? (laughs) So, you know, he's probably, he is the only man out of my whole three massive relationships in my life, the only one that I've given a second chance to: second; third; fourth; fifth; a million chances.

And he tried, I guess, you know, he made dinner. He's a good cook. He would vacuum probably once a week. Wasn't too bad for a good couple of weeks. And then my parents decided to go on a Turkey trip. And invited me. I was so iffy, I really, a massive part of me did not want to go, because I still didn't trust him.

But I thought I don't need to think about that, man. I've got this trip that is probably once in a lifetime at this stage, that I could do with my son and my parents are gonna help me. This is worth it. So, we went.

[Turkish music and aeroplane noise]

We came back and it, everything seemed okay for the first couple of weeks, but then it went straight downhill.

He was trying to, pick up half of the netball team. And then I found out the worst possible thing he could have done from his best friend's partner. Everyone had known for a year, pretty much the day it happened. And, um, sorry. I didn't even know if I can repeat it, to be honest. I want to, but it still feels like the slap is raw and it makes me so angry.

At myself, just as much, if not more angry at myself than I am with him. Still, yeah, the next day I just left. After that, I didn't see him or speak to him for three months. We got together again for our son's first birthday. Probably the week later, after our first son's birthday, he just kept calling, calling and messaging and doing all that. And he said, "Let me just take you guys out." So every weekend for about three weeks, he wanted to just take us out. So he did.

Kate: But on one of these outings Mary again finds evidence of her partner's infidelities.

Mary: I said, I'd have had enough of this, and I did. He messaged and called. I didn't reply for a good 'nother month and then, about January I got a phone call from a lawyer.

Kate: The lawyer wants Mary to be a character witness for Jimmy in relation to criminal charges for events that happened when Mary was overseas in Turkey the year before.

Mary's not keen on being involved at all, but Jimmy begs and pleads and so she agrees to meet with the lawyer. It turns out the court case is on the same day. The case is adjourned in the end, but communication between Mary and Jimmy is reopened.

Mary: He kept calling and begging and everything and there was this big cricket club thing, coz he was in the cricket club as well.

[Voices and cricket match sounds]

It was a cricket charity event. BEEP drank a lot more than I thought he did. They drank on the field. Well I thought, wow, this is, this is just an alcohol event really.

It went on for hours. I thought, I can't do this all night. This is ridiculous. You came, you took a photo with his son. We're leaving now. So, you can either get a lift back with someone else or whatever, but he was like, no, it's all right, I'll come with you. So we went back to his house, only to drop him off, but I wanted to see if I had anything left in the house that was mine.

Yeah. I was walking around the house to see if I had anything and before I knew it, he was going through my bag in the lounge room. I thought, what are you doing? And he was looking for money. We had a fight straight away. He started going through, looking for my keys to see if I had any money in the car.

The last place he thought of was my phone. So, it was my last 50 and I grabbed it out of my phone and I put it down my front, the front of my bra top and without him seeing, and he grabbed my phone, he got really happy and he threw everything out. And then he turned around and got so angry, that he threw me. He just grabbed me and threw me and then I ended up on the floor and I didn't realise that this at the time, but my son's gotten off the bed and he's just standing at the door and he's watching all of this.

Before I knew it, he was strangling me. He was on top. I was pinned down on the ground with his hands around my neck and my son's watching. Before I could, you know how your eyes roll back for a second, then you come back? Like it was a split second. And I thought he has to get off me, right, coz he doesn't know what he's doing. He's the drunk one. He thinks he's just going to scare me. This could go way worse than he thinks. Like, and the only thing I thought is, even if he kills me right now, if he gets angry and does anything to my son, that's the worst part.

Like he could kill me, okay. But what about my son? What's he going to do to him? He's a, he's a baby. So I just kned him straight in the, wherever he was, it was between his legs, but I did it as hard as I could and he just flopped straight to the side of me and was in, I'm guessing a lot of pain, and I grabbed my son. I ran outside, straight to the neighbour's house and I'm banging on her door to help me and I didn't know where my phone was, I didn't have keys or shoes on or anything. And my neighbour came out and I said, just your phone, just call the police right now. You need to call the police. They were there within two minutes, but he had jumped the fence and ran.

After that, I went to the doctor, found out I was pregnant. I was so happy. I thought, oh my God, it all was worth it. It was all worth it. (laughs). Okay. Such a weird feeling. I didn't have their dad in my life, which was sad for them as well, as well as me, because of who he is, I guess. Didn't work out, but it was fine. I felt complete with two babies.

Kate: In the meantime, Jimmy was convicted of violent offences for events that happened when Mary was away in Turkey the previous year. He's sentenced to six months in jail. And for Mary's parents, this is the last straw.

Mary: Nah, they couldn't do it. I don't know why they thought it was okay that we're not together, as long as he's not in jail (laughs) and you're having a second child to him. But the fact that he's now an actual criminal in their eyes.. My dad just lost it. My mum lost it more, which has really surprised me coz, it's not like I was sticking up for him, but I didn't want to talk about it anymore.

And my whole point of the argument that we had in the fight was okay, I get where you're coming from. I completely understand and agree, Mum. You're right! He is everything you're saying. I know this, let's leave it now. She had a fight with me about the same thing for a week straight.

[Voices arguing]

And I was not comfortable, and it was just my, I'm pregnant. You know, like that's enough is enough. The insulins already going up and down, I can tell. It didn't move on. But after that my mum, Mum just went spastic one day and just said, "Get out. And that's enough. I just don't want you here and go." I packed up. Kinda of just loaded my car a bit and left.

[Car starting]

[Music]

Kate: Life is full of challenges and we can all find ourselves in stressful unfamiliar situations we weren't expecting, grappling with how to re-establish ourselves. But without independent, affordable housing options we're dependent on others, usually family, sometimes friends.

Some of us don't have these, or we wear them out or, like in Mary's case they break down, and then we are in free fall. Whatever challenges we had, they're suddenly huge and unsolvable and compounded, because we don't have a house.

And for women the system is always harder. The risks and threats are greater, as we try to survive in a world that devalues who we are and what we do. We're disempowered by our choice to have children, because we're expected to do it for nothing, despite this task and role clearly being central to human survival and flourishing.

And for the record, at the same time, we're judged and condemned, labelled barren, shallow or unnatural if we don't have children. For women, it's a lose-lose.

[Music]

Kiara is the third of four girls raised in the northeastern suburbs of Melbourne, in a Vietnamese family. She's artistic and we'll hear some of Kiara's writings in this episode. Kiara's husband is unsupportive, unfaithful and financially controlling and she leaves him, only to face enormous social shame for a failed marriage.

She then meets a man who is totally adoring and charms her kids as well, but Kiara's father is not charmed and he disowns her. After Kiara and the new man move in together things start to change. He becomes jealous and possessive, but Kiara is desperate for the relationship to work.

Kiara: So, Mum and Dad didn't attend the wedding. It was only very small. I got married just before I gave birth.

I had three cesareans with my first three girls. However, the labour went, came too rapidly, so I recall the doctor saying to me, and holding me down and saying that you need to push. You're delivering naturally. And I was like, "No, this is not how it's meant to go." I was trying. It was a very traumatic delivery.

[Ominous music]

When I was at the hospital, doctors and midwives kind of knew and had a sense of something's happening. Try to reach out to me and I, I guess that was my moment to tell them and open up on what's happening in the, to get out. But I didn't. I, it was meant to be like, a new beginning. I had this beautiful baby boy, but I had to come home to my children, my girls. I couldn't leave them unattended.

There was a lot of healing. My husband discharged me against hospital recommendations and they asked me, is your husband trying to do this, get you to leave? I was scared, I was afraid what was going to happen and I was like, no, convincing them it was my decision to leave. Yeah, I needed to get back home.

Kate: Kiara hid the abuse and her fears from both her family and the hospital, still desperate to make it work, worried about the safety and wellbeing of her three daughters at home. She was becoming more and more isolated.

Here's Beth, a Family Violence outpost worker from Juno, who we've heard from in previous episodes.

Beth: I think it's pretty common in this role to work with women that feel very embarrassed about their family violence experience, and in terms of feeling embarrassed or ashamed of family violence, it's that they feel responsible, like it's their fault that this has happened to them. And I think for some women, that's them internalising what the perpetrator has told them over time- that they are at fault.

I think women also feel obligated to their children, to their family and to their communities, to keep the violence private, to protect a perpetrator.

Often women don't want to call the police because they don't want him to get in trouble. So women are very like, sacrificial in wanting to protect the perpetrator, the children, and all the systems around them.

Kiara: Things just escalated from jealousy to every little thing. And then my daughter, autistic daughter, when she used to have her meltdowns, tantrums, he would escalate and he would like, yell and scream at her. I just felt like I was in between the two of them.

And then when I was defended her, then he would be yelling, screaming at me and then when the children were asleep, he would continue 'til sometimes like 5am, 6am, insulting

me, and yeah, swearing at me, calling me every name under the moon. He would deprive me of my pillows, my blankets, as my punishment. The toilet, the bathroom were my safe spot I would just sit there and catch my breath and cry to myself.

[Shower running and ominous music]

Drowning in silence
I'm sitting curled up in the shower
It's all my fault
Hot water falling down upon me
I'm only good on my back
The sound of the fan circles above me
I'm a prisoner
Along with the sound of water
Used and ashamed
Flowing down on me
I feel dirty
Washing away my tears,
Tears of rage
Along with my confidence, self-worth, dignity and identity
Trapped by his abuse
The sound of water surrounding me
Turns out my cry full of hurt and pain
The palpitations, so unbearable
I'm drowning, feel like my soul is slowly drifting away
Wash away the guilt
Feelings of loss and despair consumes me
I put my children through
Everything I was, what I stand for
All fading away, layer by layer.
I face the world and another new day
To trust in love again
I put my makeup on
He put me up on his pedestal
I was the one, he said he worshipped me
He was the lucky one
I wanted to believe it

[Music]

Even when I went to the toilet, I can always hear him. If I was too long, he was monitoring to see if I was actually on the phone. Even the Coles run- ten minutes, message.

Kate: Another concept that is well known in relation to domestic abuse is the power and control wheel.

Beth: This idea that there's a honeymoon period where the current partner is very friendly, lovely, doing romantic gestures, and then there's sort of like a lead up to an incident, which is the tension, the walking on eggshells. And then there's a violent incident. And then we go back around to the honeymoon phase. But in the midst of that, every woman, how she experiences the abuse is quite different. So, some women, yeah, it's a lot of psychological abuse, a lot of gas-lighting, a lot of distorting her reality, isolating her, making her feel like

there is nowhere to go and I think that's how women get really trapped in the cycle of abuse as well.

Kate: Kiara explained that when she moved in with her husband, his father was living in a caravan in the backyard.

Kiara: Initially I had respect for my father-in-law. He was really good with the kids. Had a lot of respect. When he was diagnosed with prostate cancer, I used to ask him, "How are you going? How are you feeling? How's the treatment going?" You know, just as a normal daughter-in-law would.

When my husband would step out, when the girls were actually at school, my son was actually in his cot, his Dad would come into the house. First he was saying things which were inappropriate. He would say that my son doesn't deserve you, and that he's trying to say that he'd be a better person for me and that he will take care of me.

And I'm saying, "Please stop. You're my father in law, I respected you, but you've crossed a line here." And then he would apologise. He'd go, "Okay. Sorry."

And then it would continue. It just got worse from, making inappropriate comments to trying to actually grope me, touch me, pinch me in, in areas. He tried to kiss me. There was times when I changed my son's nappy, he would walk in. He would barge in and he would try to touch me and I, that was when I started locking the doors.

[Door closing]

When my husband came home, he'd try to get into the room and then he would get angry.

[Banging on door and yelling]

Saying why I'm locking doors? Hence saying I must be on the phone with someone and I'm cheating on him. He accused me with, of so many thing which were not true And then yeah, he would always pick fights and argue with me and then, there was times when he would be yelling and screaming in my ear, in my face and I was just so tired, I want to sleep that I'll cover my head and my face, and that's was where my pillows and blankets were stripped away.

He took a mallet to my phone. He just assumed that I was actually on the phone and I that I didn't want him to hear, and how would I tell him, the way he was, that this is what his dad has been doing.

Kate: In trying to protect herself from her predatory father-in-law, Kiara couldn't also manage her husband's obsessive scrutiny and intense coercive and controlling behaviour. The cycle of violence and abuse continued and worsened.

Kiara: He would be hot and cold. Like one moment he could be loving and affectionate, next moment you don't know what will trigger him off. Always hoped my daughter comes off the bus and she's in a good mood today and he's not going to lash out on us. It was always that you're walking on eggshells all the time.

Every time he lashed out, he would throw us out, the children and I out of the house, at odd hours of the morning. At least every month he would throw us out. And then, then reel me back in and apologise and do it again.

Beth: Family violence is not what we've been told it is. It doesn't look the way we think it does. I often get annoyed driving past like government ads for family violence prevention, and it's a man holding a fist, you know, in the darkness, to a woman.

It makes it hard for women to understand their own experiences as family violence. Coz they're like, well, my abuse doesn't look like that. And I work with so many women who minimise what's happened to them because it wasn't physical enough. Women that have been sexually assaulted in their marriages, but they don't see that as abuse. And I think we've seen the physical violence doesn't have to be there. It can escalate very rapidly and lead to like, catastrophic circumstances.

[Music]

Kiara: There was an event where my mum had collapsed and my number was on an emergency list, and I said to my husband, that, look, I know you don't like my parents, and you don't want me seeing them, but my mum. It's an emergency.

The girls were at school. I asked my husband, look, can you watch, watch our son because I need to attend to my mum? He gave me the silent treatment and I knew that he was unhappy. I went to attend to my mum. After my dad came there, I knew that she was in safe hands, I went back home. Um, he gave me the silent treatment and then he accusing me that I abandoned my son to be with my mum, over and over.

[Ominous music]

That night, the girls were, had, um, the shared arrangement. They had gone to their dad's for that weekend, from Friday to Sunday.

And he started escalating after the girls had left and he started chasing me around the house, drowning me with water. I kept on changing and, you just, it was the cold. He kept on throwing water at me and chasing me around the house. The house was saturated with water.

That's when he got hold of the me in the, the bathroom and tried to strangle me. And when I was just, I remember, when I just realised I stopped resist, resisting, and just pretty much from the point where I almost felt like I was giving up. That was when he finally released his grip. And then he pretty much told me to pack my shit and get out of in ten minutes.

I went to the kitchen. He actually grabbed a knife and threatened me to stab me in the eye if I didn't leave. He didn't let me, um, take my son, didn't let me go near him. I was packing my kids' things and that out the door, and he just stood out. He just stepped out of his front door and he started urinating all over our belongings, which I was then picking up and, and it reeked, it was really, it smelt really bad in the car, and around the corner I just parked the car and just sat there for a while.

[Ominous music]

Kate: Kiara sat in that stinking car in shock, fretting about leaving her son, terrified of her husband if she went back for him.

Kiara: Finally I picked up, picked up the phone to call Safe Steps.

Beth: Safe Steps is a 24 hour family violence crisis service. So, that's for women that are experiencing an urgent need for family violence support over the phone. Safe Steps can do family violence risk assessment, safety planning. They can help women with technology safety concerns and link women in with refugees as well.

Kiara: They ah, guided me. They gave me an address, but then my GPS and my phone, in the GPS in the car, was just taking me around. It just took me two and a half hours to get to where I needed to be safe.

And in that time, my husband was trying to ascertain where I was and trying to get me, sweet talk me and get back, you know, I'm sorry again, the same lines. And I had concerns from my son's safety, and I said, I knew, I need to get back. And the fact that girls would gonna come home on the weekend and they can't, and then I'm not there, all these things were in my mind. I went back and that was where, uh, he tried to talk, convince me that he'll get help et cetera, and that we'll work it out.

Kate: When Kiara went back that night to get her son, she went with the police. Child protection also became involved in her family. She decided to try again, she wanted to believe that her husband loved her, but more importantly she hoped that with police and child protection involvement, he'd be accountable and the abuse would stop.

Kiara: I really believed him. Child protection and the police come and taking me and my son away. They questioned him. He downplayed things and said that, yeah I did put my hands on her throat. He didn't, he didn't mention that he threatened me with a knife.

Despite such an extreme, horrendous incident, I thought that that was a final turning back, that we could maybe, this, that there's involvement with the police, DHS and and child protection, that he's going to seek the help that he need. So, he went into anger management. He went into counselling, etc, and we thought we were going to work things out. He convinced me he was a changed man.

[Music]

Beth: I think we underestimate the power of control that a perpetrator can have over a woman's life and making her world feel small. And like, there are no options. That's what coercive control is. It's entrapping her in that life and that abuse with him.

Perpetrators are not all bad or all good. They're not always abusive, or always not abusive. The violence is interspersed with moments of romance or genuine, what seems like genuine love. Even when they leave, it's very easy to get sucked back in to the perpetrator and the relationship, because he turns on the charm and that's the cycle of abuse.

[Music: Stem]

Kate: Kiara was trapped in a cycle of violence and abuse, hoping that eventually the fairy tale promise of a loving relationship, would override her husband's desire to control and harm her.

Like many women, Kiara's experience of family violence was exacerbated by a complex interplay of factors: societal expectations; feelings of failure and shame; lack of financial control; lack of housing options; the demands of parenting; no accountability of her husband; and the impact of a society that turns a blind eye.

It is these same factors that combine to make Australia a place where one in three women have experienced physical or sexual violence and one in four women experience this violence at the hands of an intimate partner.

[Ominous music]

Every year over 3 and a half thousand women are hospitalised for injuries caused by a spouse or domestic partner. On average, one woman a week is murdered by her current or former partner.

But there is hope. Here's Kiara reflecting on a drawing she made of the lotus flower.

[Music]

Kiara: Another piece of artwork that I did was the lotus flower, which is one of my favourite flowers for many reasons. As they say about the Lotus flower:

"Like the Lotus flower,
We too can rise out of the mud,
Bloom through the darkness,
And radiate into the World."

The Lotus characteristics has the perfect analogy for the human condition: despite its upbringing and growing in murky, muddy waters, it still continues to bloom and produce the most beautiful flowers.

[Music]

Kate: As we've seen in previous episodes, Neen had a traumatic childhood growing up in central Victoria. She married a man also from a difficult background, thinking he'd understand. For three decades, for Neen and her two children, home was a place that perpetuated the cycle of abuse. And finally Neen had had enough.

Neen now has two months to pack up her home of 15 years, move out, secure some income, find another house and look after her teenage daughter, all while managing severe health issues and constant pain, and a vitriolic ex-partner.

Neen: Then it was like, right so, I need to find somewhere else to live and he's going, "What am I gonna do?" Don't ask me. What are you asking me for. (laughs) I gotta worry about what I'm going to do, yeah? I have no money.

My daughter was with me. She was still at school. Like, what are we gonna do, kinda thing. And you're dealing with that, you're dealing with Centrelink. I applied for a payment, but you're living under the one roof. He had to fill out his bit for the paperwork and he wouldn't do that for weeks, just to make life harder for me.

One thing I will say, he did still put food on the table. I'll give him that. And he paid the rent. I was sort of in this kind of, there was a bit of blame, if you like. I've broken the family.

I also had to organise and clean the whole lot. Then there was a lot of stuff. And also still dealing with a partner who was nasty. He was still drinking. He was still abusive. He was put on antidepressants by the doctor. Then one night, my daughter was up in her bedroom. He was sitting at the kitchen table and he called out to her and she's like, "Oh what Dad?" She was chatting to someone and she didn't really want to be annoyed by him. And he said, this is what your mother's done to me.

[Sound of pills in a bottle]

And he started taking all these tablets in front of her. "This is her fault. This is what she's done to me." And I flew out of that lounge room and I grabbed the bloody box and I said, not li..., not, he'd already taken about 7 or 8 of them. I said, "Not likely" (laughs) "Not happening."

And I thought how dare, why would you do that, you know? So, I rang the ambulance. I rang triple 0. They said, 'what do you need?' I said, 'well, an ambulance.' And I explained our situation. And they said, could he be violent. And I said, well, I said yeah, he could be. Coz I said, "I don't know what, what the mix of alcohol and, and tablets can do."

I said, but he's, I mean, he's very aggressive with me at the moment, because of the situation. They said, is he, is he up? I said, no, he's gone to bed. And they said, well, he can't go to sleep. You'll have to wake him up. I said, I'm not going anywhere near him. My daughter said, "I'll go in there" and she started, "Dad, Dad, wake up wake up!" They said, is he breathing? I said, "Oh, he's snoring his head off." (laughs) I said, "He's still alive."

Anyway, they said all right, we'll send police out there as well. Well, the police turned up first. Anyway, they got him up. No, no you gotta get up. He's saying, I don't want to get up and he was real, you know. real aggressive with em. And um, "That stupid bitch over there, calling the bloody ambulance. I'm not getting in an ambulance. I can't afford, you know, to get in, pay for an ambulance." And they said, well, she's only doing the right thing. You're doing things like taking tablets and all that sort of stuff, with alcohol.

Anyway, he refused the ambulance and they said, "Well, look. There is one other way, you can go up to the hospital. Either while you're going to the hospital, whether you like it or not." And he said, "What's that?" And they said, "In the back of the divvy van," so they took (laughs), that's how they took him up to the hospital.

So, then it was the fight. I was in for the fight. Another sort of fight of me life. It was the fight to get anywhere with anything. Um, my friend Mark, he said to me, "Neen I'll come with you for the housing stuff, coz I've gone through that, and I know who, how to talk to them."

Haven Homes- they said to me how, you might have to rent privately. I said, how do you do that on \$500 a fortnight? That doesn't even cover the rent. So how do you do that?

Kate: The organisation Neen just mentioned, Haven Homes, is large, with over 200 staff and 3 offices in regional Victoria and one in the northern suburbs of Melbourne. Their website says. "We connect people with housing options and integrated supports, so that they can find and keep a place to call home."

So Haven Homes are a pretty big deal, and they were Neen's best hope of finding a house, because how indeed does anyone manage on welfare payments?

Here's Dr Raynor, a research fellow at the University of Melbourne, and also the academic convener for the Hallmark Research Initiative for Affordable Housing, who we've heard from in previous episodes.

Katrina: The proportion of older women who are accessing job seeker, or Newstart, has doubled, tripled over the last 20 years. And that's because they've moved from different brackets of unemployment benefits or social welfare payments to Newstart, which is much lower than other forms of payments.

And, so that's having huge implications for them trying to exist, trying to care for their children, trying to care for themselves and care for their grandchildren, because it's simply not enough of a payment to live a dignified life if you don't have access to a house or a home that you own.

Neen: It was getting closer and closer to the time where, where we had to move. My friend Mark, yeah, he's like, Haven homes, went down there and applied and he was like, Neen, you can't just apply for something and then not follow it through. You've got to keep on their backs about it. "Yeah Mark, no problems." And I knew what he meant, but I was dealing with so much other stuff as well.

He called me to tell and he's say, "You been onto Haven Homes today?" And I said, "No Mark, but I've been to Centrelink and I'll been and done this and done that." And he'd be like, "Well, you need to get on that."

No shit. (laughs) And so for, for about six weeks, it was constant, constant, constant, constant, and still, same deal with Centrelink. You're in at Haven, you're in at Centrelink.

Tess: Look, it's an incredibly overwhelming and intimidating system.

Kate: This is Tess, a homelessness case manager with Juno we've heard in previous episodes.

Tess: A lot of people will try, they'll find themselves in situations and it might be already, it might be hard to kind of reach out to a crisis service, for support, let alone, a crisis service may not, may turn around and be like, we can't help you. So, there is a substantial amount of effort that you have to go to, there's self-advocacy, and if you don't have those skills or you don't have that confidence, it can be a really awful experience.

Neen: Then they tell you things. They'd say this is what we're going to do. And they'd map it all out for you. You'd go, "Right, okay, no worries." And you'd go away with that and then something wouldn't happen. So you'd say, "This is what I was told was gonna happen."

"No, we, we've never said that. There's no record of that. And we've never said that."

And that happened quite a bit. So, that was really hard to deal with. Mark'd say, "Right that's it, I'm coming in with ya." He'd come in and then he'd ask for a receipt number. Well, I didn't know you could ask for those. And he goes, you always ask for a receipt number because that's your proof.

Next time, something doesn't go according to plan, you say, "Well, I've got the receipt number here. You watch how quick they backflip." And I was like well, if they've already got the information in front of them, why do they do that to people? You're messing with very vulnerable people. Don't do that!

Kate: Over the last 20 years or so, Australian governments have used a range of policies designed to reduce the number and make it harder for people to get a disability support pension. The very people who need help most, face a barrage of barriers to overcome in order to be able to access a secure income, that is still below the poverty line.

As Gandhi said, "The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members".

Neen has a few things on her side - she has her friend Mark supporting and pushing her, and within the limitation of her disabilities, both physical and emotional, she has her own fighting spirit. You could hardly call Neen lucky, so it begs the question, what happens to people without these things?

Neen: Sometimes I'd say to him, I just can't deal with that today, or just not today And he'd say, I know how you feel but... With Centrelink, they did all the tests because my doctors are going, there's no way you can work with the health issues you have. So, I had to go round getting specialists and that, that also took time- specialist letters, having tests done, psychologist reports, all of that sort of stuff.

And then it's like, denied. Why? Oh, we can't tell you why. Put it all in again: denied. And they said, "Ah, oh, it says here that you can work for an hour a week." And I went well, you find me a bloody job that pays over 500 bucks for an hour a week and I'll do it. (laughs) I said, I don't understand what.. "Oh we can't tell you that."

They couldn't tell you. So, anyway, I'm, and then running around meetings with Haven Homes, trying to get that sorted, trying to get Centrelink sorted, spoke to the guy at Haven Homes. I said, "It's absolutely doing my head in. I've applied for the DSP. I've got rheumatoid arthritis and it was right through my body," I said, "A list of other things a mile long. I've put the application in twice and they will not tell me, there's only one thing, they'll tell me that, but they won't say what it is."

And he said, "Well, every Tuesday we have a guy come in from social security and he comes in here and he helps people deal with any issues they might have." So he said, "Come down next Tuesday."

So, I went in and I saw him, explained the situation, and he said, "Oh, there's a few things going on here isn't there?" And I went, "Yeah." Anyway, he said, "Your psychologist..." I said, "Yeah." He said, "You been him seeing him for a while?" I said, "Yeah." And he goes, "Is he a clinical psychologist?" I said, "I don't know." (laughs)

And then he goes, "Oh, the report that's gotta go into Centrelink has to be made by a clinical psychologist." And he said, "By the looks of this, your psychologist is not a clinical psychologist." I said, "Well, he runs from a clinic." (laughs) He's got his own actually. (laughs)

But he said, "That's why they haven't passed you. You need a report from either a psychiatrist or a clinical psychologist. So, if you can get that sorted, there's no issue. You'll get your DSP." Oh, great. So back to the doctors I go. I need to see a psychiatrist or a clinical psychologist.

And I was really freaking out about that because I thought what they were saying was I couldn't see my psychologist anymore. I had to see another one. And I guess that was a bit of the distortion that was going on. It was kind of, "Don't take anything, don't change anything." My doctor, he rang quite a few and they said, "Oh no, we're booked out for 12 months. We can't fit anyone else in."

I said, "Jesus." Anyway, he said, look, there's a psychiatrist over at North Park Private Hospital. He said, "I'll give them a call." "Oh yeah, we've got, uh, an appointment for Saturday if she wants to come in then." And I went, "Oh, hallelujah." But then I thought, oh my God, am I gonna have to go through all this stuff with someone that I've never seen before I get that.

I did it with my psychologist, but we've been seeing one another for, about, two years. So, you know, there was a, a little bit of a thawing that was going on there. Not much, but... (laughs) And now I'm going to walk in like this brick, into somebody new. Anyway, I went in and saw him and he got my Centrelink stuff up on, on the screen. He went, "Oh yeah, no worries," and asked me a few questions and he said, "Um, can you get Henry to send me across, um, a copy of what he sent into Centrelink? I just want to see if I'm on the same page as him."

So, went and did that. He made an appointment for me to see him the following Saturday. I took in the report and he read it and he went, "Yep. That's exactly what I put in," from the five minutes that he'd seen me. He sent that, his report into Centrelink and it was probably the Wednesday they rang me up and they said, "You've got your DSP."

[Music]

And I sorta didn't know, I didn't know how to feel. I was relieved, but there was still so much more that had to be done on it. Okay, you can take a little bit of a breath, but you still don't have a roof over your head. So we're only part of the way through this.

[Music]

Kate: When Neen was granted the Disability Support Pension, she was assessed by a doctor of her own choosing. Now, applicants have to be assessed by a government contracted doctor, adding further stress and barriers to the application process. And while the DSP is more than Newstart, both are below the poverty line.

Carla: Over 3.2 million people in Australia live under the poverty line.

Kate: This is Professor Carla Treloar from UNSW speaking on the release of the report "Poverty In Australia 2020".

Carla: There are a number of key drivers of poverty. Low rates of income provided to those who are on social security benefits, particularly those job seekers and single parents.

Kate: These numbers equate to one in six children and one in eight adults. Over half of the people living in poverty are in rental housing. Single parent families, over 80% of whom are women, have the highest poverty rate of any group in Australia. The children of single parents are three times as likely to live in poverty, than kids in two parent families.

After single parents, older women are both the poorest household type, and the most likely to be dependent on income support. The connection between housing, poverty and gender is clear. Here's Dr Andrea Sharam from the School of Property Construction and Project Management at RMIT university, who we've heard from in previous episodes:

Andrea: There's a very, very strong gender component, to housing because of the nature of the life courses of, of men and women and the systemic issues that remain. So, women might have equal pay, but we have highly gendered work. So, women are overwhelmingly in low paid jobs, but women still bear the brunt of care. And that means that they go out of the workforce for long periods of time, so they don't accumulate savings over a long period.

Their careers don't progress, so that they're not amongst the highest income earners and then of course when you divorce, lots of relationships break down, the women tend to get the children, which means it's hard for them to then have the incomes required to maintain the housing. Even if I do get the house in settlement, they often lose that house, coz they cannot sustain the payments.

[Music]

Kate: So we not only have a housing affordability crisis, but we have economic and social welfare systems that are failing women in drastic numbers.

[Music]

Next episode on Coming Home, we follow Neen's story as she teeters on the knife edge of eviction. Mary's family punishes her when Jimmy goes to jail and Kiara faces the challenge of extricating herself from an abusive and controlling ex-partner.

OUTRO

Thanks for listening to Coming Home, a podcast about the impact of Australia's inequitable gender culture and failed housing system, on three strong yet ordinary women.

If this podcast has raised any issues for you, please call 1800 RESPECT on 1800 737 732 or see juno.org.au for a list of support services.

This podcast would not have been possible without the willingness of Kiara, Mary and Neen to so generously share their stories. It was time-consuming and not always easy. A deep and heartfelt thanks to each of you.

If you like this podcast, please tell people. Word of mouth is the most common way people learn about podcasts. But liking, reviewing and sharing on social media also helps. Podcasting can be like speaking into the void, so we love hearing from listeners.

This podcast is made by Juno, an intersectional feminist social change organisation run by women for women. Since 2002, Juno has been working with women and non-binary folk in Melbourne's north, who are experiencing homelessness or family violence. Juno also advocates to improve systems and structures which contribute to gendered poverty, homelessness and family violence. You can find out more about Juno via their website www.juno.org.au and follow them on social media.

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This podcast is written and produced by me, Kate Lawrence.

[Music]

ENDS