NIGHTMARE on RECOVERY

With horror movies for relaxation, the residents of a women’s refuge prepare for the outside world. For the staff, language and cultural barriers make life on the collective an ideological minefield. Lyndell Fairleigh recalls.

The suspense is killing me. As always, it’s the anticipation of violence that keeps me on edge, as though mesmerised: it’ll be a relief when the blows finally come.

I can’t sit here waiting, though, so I retreat to the solitary comfort of the office and leave the others to their TV watching. They don’t need or want to talk; for the time being the television is enough.

Why wouldn’t they see a connection between their own experiences of violence in the home and the extraordinary violence of the horror and thriller films this group of women watched at any opportunity? Didn’t they see how odd it was that they should be hooked into watching endlessly repeated images of women as screaming victims? I asked myself. Especially when some of them couldn’t sleep at night.

In retrospect, I wonder whether those films didn’t offer more than just a masochistic identification with the supreme (and importantly, innocent) victim. Wasn’t I overlooking that, for the heroine of these dramas at least, the violence against them was continually being deferred, that while living in a state of terror they were at least saved at the last moment. It didn’t matter that they were, or felt, inept or that their high heels got in the way, because someone would consider them worth rescuing. For women whose self-esteem has literally been bashed out of them and for whom the dash to the refuge was a profoundly courageous if ultimately frightening act — this could have been comforting. Even if the “monster” could return (in the film sequel at least) and even if they weren’t quite as white, slender or clear-skinned as the woman on the screen.

Not everyone was glued to the TV screen, zonked out in a longer than usual respite from the attacks that would surely begin if they went back defeated. Some struggled to put together a new life, having left behind nearly everything they’d ever had, or worked for. Others seemed blessed in their determination never to return. Like Anne, as I will call her; even though leaving her husband isolated her from her Fijian Christian community. Anne had two much-loved boys, but longed for a daughter. Already pregnant when she arrived at the refuge, she grew big while waiting to be allocated public housing, yet refused to be anything but optimistic. After three or four months she had a house in Sydney’s western suburbs and her daughter was born.

Living way out west was a relief to Anne because it meant she was far less likely to run into her husband or any of their community (they would pressure her to return). At the same time, of course, it isolated her from the support the refuge offered her as
well as the most centrally located community and government services.

"Ex-res" (ex-resident) work was one of those hopeful items on the weekly collective meeting agenda, so often neglected in reality because we didn't have the time or resources. It involved visiting women who had (recently) left the refuge. Usually living in the western suburbs, because that was where most of the public housing suitable for women with children was located, they struggled alone. Few had the skills or confidence to find work in a tight market, so they depended on the supporting parent's benefit.

Living in a house bare of everything but a few necessities, and probably no affordable child care, was enough to test any woman's resolve. If they didn't give in to their former partner's pressure to return, they often did to their own loneliness and doubts at being able to cope alone. Another man, just like the last, moved in.

Most had been only too happy to move into their own homes, however. For at least three months they had been waiting on tenterhooks for housing. For many, too, the refuge had been their first experience of communal living and, combined with the high levels of stress, it had proved unsettling.

I first met my fellow collective members when all thirteen of them interviewed me in the refuge lounge room. The light oozed through the dark green shutters on the front window and it felt for all the world as if we were at the bottom of a dirty fish tank. My mind was just as clear. Everyone had their own question ready: two have stuck in my memory. When I was asked how I felt about accompanying a woman back to her house to pick up her things, even if her obviously violent partner was there, I sidestepped any honest mention of my fears by answering that it was undoubtedly better that she not go alone.

I was also asked to describe my understanding of racism. Race and cultural difference were burning issues within the women's movement at the time. It permeated our discussions on employment procedures and collective structures as well as our dealings with the women of various cultures who used the refuge. While it was easy to agree
that we needed to employ more Black (particularly Aboriginal) women and women from non-English speaking backgrounds, when it came to the specific criteria by which we chose those workers, differences often escalated.

Leila’s four children ranged in age from ten to under one: three were girls. Moussa, the only boy and third eldest, was already a tyrant at three. All were, however, a handful.

Used to living their parents’ hours (a custom which horrified trenchantly Anglo-Celtic mothers), they could be heard from morning to night. (Differences over how to handle children were often the bitterest between women staying at the refuge.) A refugee from Lebanon, Leila was first of all and most painfully isolated by language. No one else at the refuge, workers included, could speak either Arabic or French, so we had to rely on infrequent sessions with interpreters for our closest communication with her. Given that the personal and political beliefs of the interpreters we had to employ varied enormously, no doubt much of what was said was screened, excised or unconsciously, if not maliciously, altered. Day to day we struggled on in English.

As is often the case, her children were picking up English far more quickly than she could. Masibe, the eldest and mummy’s little helper, began to take over much of her mother’s role. Souraya, the second, was not so biddable: at best she was cheeky, at her worst, uncontrollable and thoroughly unlikeable. Yet she sparked with an intelligence I found remarkably attractive. In taking so long to recognize her as an incest survivor, we unwittingly contributed to her ongoing trauma: she didn’t rouse the most sympathetic of reactions, even among the workers. Not long after that we took part in a series of workshops run by Dymphna House, a centre and refuge for incest survivors. Of course, by then that particular horse had bolted.

That summer we took the kids to Kangaroo Valley, staying in a large barnlike cabin owned by the Quaker Society. Leila came too, but the mythical character of the bush had her watching her children even more anxiously than usual. The tuneless din of the cicadas unnerved her. Nonetheless, she was away from the refuge and the more room there was for talking, the more she set aside her self-protective arrogance. Hasibe, Souraya and Moussa thankfully slowed down.

**Often another man, just like the last, moved in**

Leila had always talked about returning to Lebanon but I was only faintly surprised to run into her years later on a Sydney suburban train. Was she living, if not settled, in Australia? She looked as if she wanted to talk, but it was my stop and I didn’t know what else to say.

I hadn’t drunk instant coffee since the long panic-stricken nights of essay-writing in my university days, but it again became a comfort during long hours spent with women for whom even the refuge could become a kind of prison. Often too scared to go out in case they were seen, they were also typically housebound in their ways. Whatever time of day, the TV was always on and a pall of cigarette smoke hung over a crazy litter of half-empty coffee cups. Lighting up a cigarette immediately eased tensions and, with cup in hand, talk flowed. At other times, however, it was a way of asking for a moment’s peace.

Alcohol and the so-called hard drugs were, on the other hand, banned: if residents wanted a drink they were asked to drop down to the local, perhaps with another woman from the refuge, or with friends. This got them out but, primarily, it protected the other residents from drug-affected, if not aggressive, behaviour. It was not unusual for the women to have drug dependencies (prescribed drugs included) so it meant we took on drug and alcohol counselling, even if we only had a workshop or two under our belts. Our responsibilities as refuge workers could take on Sisyphean proportions it seemed, with some danger of being flattened by a runaway rock if we took too much on - both individually and collectively.

Perhaps it was as early as my first day that a longtime worker at the refuge suggested I keep myself relaxed and healthy with a weekly massage, for instance. Some probably followed such good advice; I did sporadically, but it was much easier for most of us to rely on the quick hit that a cigarette or a cup of coffee could provide — even if lethargy later set in. Protecting ourselves from burnout wasn’t seen as just an individual’s responsibility, however. Over the years too many workers had come and gone, putting unnecessary stresses on those who stayed, on newcomers, and on the refuge itself — an unsettled environment at the best of times. Every ten weeks, workers were expected to take two weeks’ leave, making a total of eight weeks’ paid leave per annum.

Sometimes, nonetheless, we had to battle against an unholy urge to give all (for that reason holidays weren’t flexible: you had to take them when they were due). It was also tempting, even among ourselves, to devalue “women’s work” and give in to the history of voluntary labour, to devalue “women’s work” and give in to the history of voluntary labour by not paying ourselves a liveable wage even if we had the funds. Should we be a closed shop and actually work towards award wages?

I’ve heard it’s not uncommon for refuge workers to move as far away as possible from the refuge they’ve worked at when they finish up. Some even go overseas. I left for Japan, but I still don’t know that I’ll ever really distance myself.

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