

SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY

How Joy Lynn Bruce learned the shocking truth about her husband—and her marriage

As told to Sandy M. Fernández

ON TUESDAY, October 6, 2009, I spent the day calling my husband's cell phone. Howard and I had been married six years and owned a business together in Pueblo, Colorado. We normally talked three or four times a day, and text-messaged even more: Howard often checked in to see how I was doing. It was unusual—and not a good sign, I thought—that he wasn't picking up.

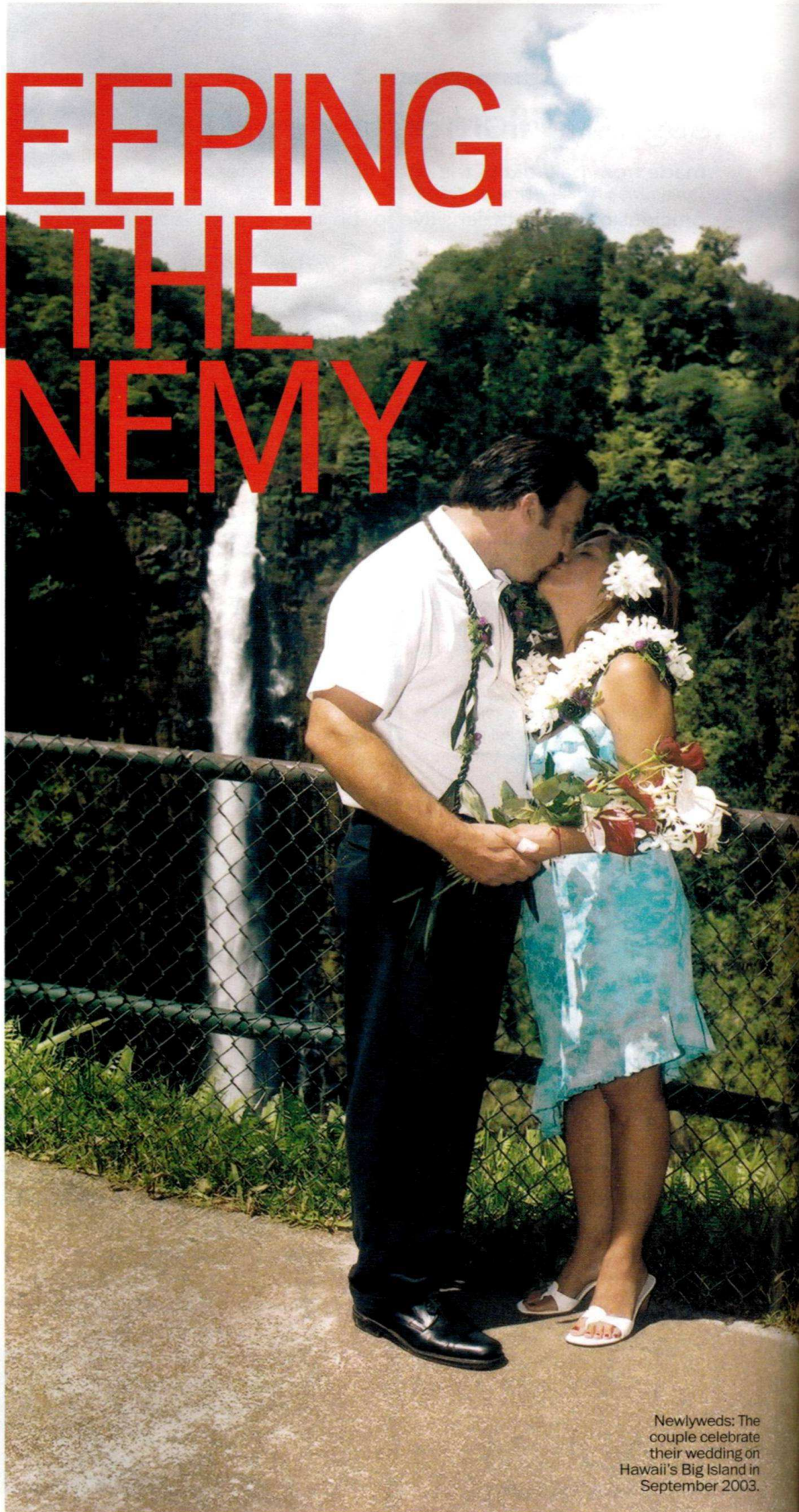
By the time 5 p.m. rolled around, I just knew something was wrong, and I was worried enough to call Robert, Howard's teenage son from his first marriage, to ask him if he knew where his father was.

"I can't talk right now. I'm with the police," he said hurriedly. "They're accusing my dad of something."

"What?!" I asked, flabbergasted. I could hear radios and voices in the background.

"Trying to kill somebody," Robert said. "I gotta go." And he hung up.

Oh, my God, I thought. It's true. Howard is the Ether Man.



Newlyweds: The couple celebrate their wedding on Hawaii's Big Island in September 2003.

I'd met Robert Howard Bruce in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in June 2001, when I was 27 and recently divorced from the father of my two preschool-age sons. I was getting by managing my sister's business towing and auctioning off repossessed cars, trying to figure out what was next in my life. I hadn't wanted to go out that night, but my two childhood best friends refused to let me sit home and mope. When they picked me up from my house to take me to a local bar,

weekend trip to San Antonio, the weather was hotter than I'd packed for, so he bought me a whole new wardrobe. And when I tagged along on one of his business trips to California and he had to leave me behind for a day of meetings, he rented a car, gave me \$200, and said, "There's the mall. Go shopping." I'd been the breadwinner and caretaker for my kids for so long that I had a hard time accepting his support at first. But pretty soon, it felt like a weight had been lifted.

as a challenge. After he moved, he drove back every other weekend to see me. Nine months after we met, he got down on one knee, tears in his eyes, and asked me to marry him.

But I didn't say yes; something held me back. Maybe it was his extravagance with money, or the fact that the more time we spent together, the more often I heard him talking about other women in a cold, even harsh, manner. He often commented on how they were dressed, calling any girl

JOURNAL

*** WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER

Back on Trail of 'Ether Man' Rapist

times," said a woman who was
called

Police say the man attacked
10 more women in Albuquerque
over nine years.

First time a New Mexico grand
jury had indicted someone
under a DNA profile.

Detective Scott St
the Austin Police
"This guy"
"a track"



“

There I was,
on-screen,
clearly
unconscious
as Howard
had sex with
me. Head
spinning,
I ran to the
bathroom
and
threw up.

”

I couldn't even be bothered to change out of my baggy shorts and T-shirt. But once we got there, a tall Ben Affleck look-alike kept turning and smiling at me. A mutual acquaintance introduced us; she'd worked with him at Intel, where he was a technician. By the end of the evening, we'd exchanged numbers.

Howard was my Prince Charming at first. He was 12 years older, but he was in great shape and loved going out. He was generous, and I was a struggling single mom: When he took me on a romantic

I loved being able to relax and not worry about money for once.

Like me, Howard was divorced and was super-involved with his three kids. Almost immediately after we met, he told me he was about to move to Pueblo, about two hours from where I lived, because his ex-wife was there and he didn't want to miss out on his kids' lives. "So don't fall in love with me, because I'm moving," he said. I laughed, and told him the last thing I wanted so soon after my divorce was another relationship. Maybe he saw that

in shorts or tight jeans a slut. "They sleep with anything and everything, especially the college girls," he'd say. "Howard, you have a daughter!" I remember exploding in anger once. "Would you want some man talking about her like that?" There was another issue: My mother didn't like him. Her intuitions about people were usually right, and when she told me, just a month into our relationship—before she'd even met him—that she'd had a terrible dream that I'd married Howard and moved far away, it only contributed to my lingering sense of unease.

Howard persisted, though, and promised that if we got married and I moved to Pueblo with him, he'd pay for me to return to school to become a teacher, a dream I'd always thought was out of reach. I finally accepted his proposal, and we tied the knot in September 2003, next to a waterfall on Hawaii's Big Island.

When we got back, I remained in Albuquerque so my kids could finish the school year before we moved. One day, a friend told me she'd spotted Howard at the local Pueblo country bar the night before. "It was College Night," she said. "They don't even serve alcohol." Although our relationship had been largely long-distance, until that moment, I'd never thought he might be doing something behind my back. Now my heart dropped. Could he be cheating on me? When I confronted him about it, he said he'd been having trouble falling asleep that night and had just gone out for a bit. I was upset, but his explanation seemed just plausible >>

enough, so I let it go after a few days.

When I finally moved with my kids to Pueblo in 2004, things turned tense. Howard became controlling—and cheap. My hair dryer broke, and he refused to replace it. When I wanted makeup, he said no—his new job had him traveling 14 days at a time, so I wouldn't have any need to get all dolled up while he was gone, he said. He was strict with my sons, who weren't used to it, even spanking my 4-year-old against my wishes after a quarrel with one of Howard's sons. When I brought up going back to school, he always had a reason why I needed to wait. I alternated between fury at him and fury at myself.

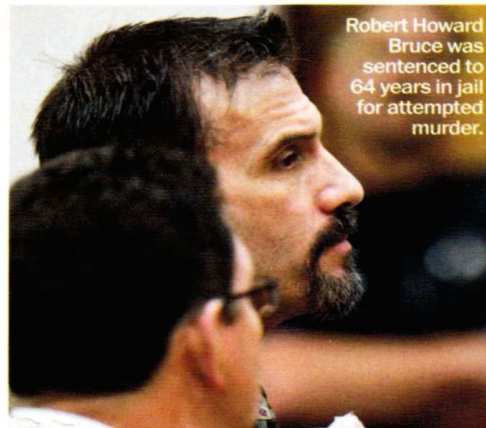
One day in early 2006, I needed to know a detail of our medical coverage, so I pulled out his benefits handbook. Inside, I found a list of girls' names and addresses. My blood ran cold as I skimmed it—they were all in cities he'd visited recently for work. Was it possible that while I was home alone, Howard was having affairs all over the Southwest? Impulsively, I called one of the numbers. She was in Lubbock, Texas—where he'd gone a few times in recent months—and had a star by her name. "How do you know my husband?" I demanded. "I don't want to talk to you," she said, and hung up. In my mind, that confirmed it. When Howard called home—he was away, of course—I said, "I found your list of girlfriends." Irate, he screamed at me for going through his things. But he wasn't as pissed as I was. When he got home, I planned to sleep on the couch while I figured out my next move. But he wheedled me back into bed, saying they were all just girls he'd met before we were in a relationship, and that he'd found the list again recently after switching jobs. Against my better judgment, I listened to him.

But our fights continued—messy ones where he called me names and I'd threaten to leave. After a blowout, he'd send huge bouquets of roses and come home with gifts: perfume, expensive clothes, jewelry. The presents convinced me that he was serious about making things work, and the fights always seemed silly in retrospect. Plus, I didn't want to uproot my kids again by moving back to Albuquerque. Every time Howard pledged that things would be different, I'd swallow hard and hope he was right.

About a month after I found the list of names, I was looking for a video of my older son's school play, popping the

videos from Howard's camera bag into the VCR. Suddenly, there I was, on-screen, clearly unconscious as Howard had sex with me in our bed. My head spinning, I stopped the tape, ran to the bathroom, and threw up, collapsing on the floor and sobbing in disbelief. How could he do something like that to me? I called him. "I just found your sick tape," I hissed when he answered. "Did it turn you on to watch it?" he asked coldly. I threw up again, right there on the phone with him. He started spouting excuses, explaining

appear with bags of groceries. Over time, I softened. Not every marriage is perfect, I reasoned, and I knew going through with a divorce would be a struggle—financially, even though I'd gone back to work at my sister's auto business, and emotionally, since Howard was sure to put up a fight. As I wrestled with the fate of our relationship, one thing nagged at me: A few times when we went out, I wouldn't remember the end of the night. I knew I wasn't getting overly drunk—I was just having a drink or two. Worried, I told my doctor.



Robert Howard Bruce was sentenced to 64 years in jail for attempted murder.

He'd stalk his victims, police theorized, then break in, subduing them by forcing a chemical-soaked cloth over their faces.

ETHER MAN LED DOUBLE LIFE

Could Be as Many

that he'd made it one night when we'd been drunk; we'd begun fooling around, and then I'd passed out. "You weren't doing anything you wouldn't do normally," he pleaded. But I was done, already sleeping on a beanbag in my son's room when he got home from his latest business trip. My mind was made up.

A month later, after my kids finished school for the year, I packed our car and moved us back to Albuquerque. And just like that, Howard morphed back into the guy who'd wooed me. On weekends, he'd drive to see me, desperate to reconcile. When I told him my grandmother was in the hospital, he asked about her every time we talked and rushed to Albuquerque to be by my side when she died. He'd

He said I was still drinking too much for my body weight. But there's no problem when I'm with friends, I thought. My roommate joked that Howard must be drugging me. Ridiculous, I thought. He'd never do that.

■ At the end of September 2009, I was at work. It'd been a slow day, so I grabbed some newspapers. As I was doing a week-old crossword, the front page caught my eye. "Cops Back on Trail of 'Ether Man' Rapist," said the headline above a police sketch. I'd never heard of the Ether Man, but skimming the article, I learned that he was Albuquerque's most notorious rapist and had been terrorizing the area around the University of New Mexico since the early '90s. His suspect-

ed victims—numbering close to a dozen—were all young women, often college students. He'd stalk them, police theorized, then break in at night while they slept, subduing them by forcing a chemical-soaked cloth over their faces. Then he'd sexually assault them, sometimes for hours. When the women woke up, they had little or no memory of the attack, much less their attacker. Police had his DNA, though, and knew he'd struck again—this time in Austin.

Immediately, the thought hit me: Oh, my God, that's Howard. The idea was insane, like I'd woken up in the middle of a Lifetime movie. But the timeline fit: He'd moved to Albuquerque in the early '90s; and the article indicated that the assaults had apparently ended around 2000, shortly before he'd left for Pueblo. I knew he'd been in Austin for work in May 2006, when a rape there had occurred. And then there was our own weird history with the tape. It all clicked. But a second later, I felt crazy for even considering it. He couldn't ever do something like that—and

Even so, my skin crawled every time we touched that weekend. When he left, he hugged me and told me how much he loved me. "You fit perfectly in my arms," he said. I didn't respond—I was too terrified about how he'd react to my ending things. Whether he was a rapist or not, I no longer trusted him. I knew I had to leave for good this time.

Two days later, when I couldn't get him on the phone, I called his teen son, Robert, and heard the news: The police suspected that Howard had tried to kill someone and were looking for him. It's true, I thought to myself, in a panic. Howard is the Ether Man. That night, his ex-wife, Rosa, called with the stunning details: He was suspected of having placed a homemade bomb outside the house of a police officer who had been planning to testify against him in a Peeping Tom case that morning. Had it detonated, it could have killed not just the officer, but his wife and little boy. The police quickly linked the bomb to Howard and arrested him later that night in a Kmart parking lot.

Three Pueblo policemen showed up at

a DNA test. They said they'd have the results in a few days, so when I didn't hear anything, I convinced myself I'd let my imagination run away with me. Three weeks later, my mother called. "Oh, my God. What have you gotten yourself involved in, Joy?" she asked frantically. Howard was the Ether Rapist, she said. The DNA was a match; he was all over the news. I forced my crushing devastation inward—my son was home, and I had to get him to school. I dropped him off, then drove around aimlessly for hours, sobbing. My head swam with anger and confusion as I replayed moments from our marriage. Every time we'd had sex, he'd closed his eyes. It always bothered me, and when I once asked what he was thinking about, he flirtatiously said I didn't want to know. Now I wondered if he'd been reliving the awful things he'd done to those girls. I felt revolted, and I couldn't believe I'd been so duped. But worst of all had been the judgmental tone of my mother's voice on the phone. If she blamed me for not seeing the truth, how would my friends and neighbors react? A wave of shame crashed over me as I thought about how other people would see me now. A banquet for my son's football team was just a few days away. I shuddered at the prospect of facing the other parents.

Howard was charged with 10 sexual assaults in Albuquerque, one in Austin, and another in Pueblo. Police say there could be many others. He was found guilty of the Peeping Tom case in July 2010 and of attempted murder a year later. (He was ultimately sentenced to 64 years for that crime.) I was called to testify at that trial, in Pueblo. I didn't want to—I was afraid to be in the same room with him—but the Pueblo district attorney prepared me for what we'd talk about on the stand, and my parents came with me.

During the 90 minutes I spent testifying, I could bring myself to look at Howard only once, when I had to identify him. As I did, we made eye contact, and he winked and smiled. Nausea flooded through me. I was shocked by his appearance—the former Ben Affleck look-alike was haggard and skinny. He looked mentally ill. I turned my head away in revulsion and kept my eyes steadily on the court reporter for the rest of my testimony.

Soon after, the authorities asked me to talk to Howard on the phone. They'd been trying to get him to take a plea for one of the assaults, but he'd been resisting, thinking, I'm sure, that he could somehow >>>

ER 8, 2009

Copyright © 2009 Journal Publishing Co. - \$1.50

as 100 Victims

more victims. es that he n"
scari. up a Pt
ed to Pueblo. Th
several I

I couldn't be married to a rapist without knowing it! I grabbed a pencil and drew Howard's goatee onto the police sketch. It looked nothing like him.

Still, I couldn't shake the thought over the next few days. What if it was him? Unable to eat or sleep, I even picked up the phone a few times to call the police tip line. The idea of how stupid I'd look after an investigation proved Howard's innocence stopped me. But I had to do something, so I got another copy of the paper and laid it across the kitchen table. "Can you believe that?" I said the next time Howard visited. "I didn't know we had a serial rapist." "There are some sick people in this world," he responded, his face impassive. OK, it can't be, I thought.

my door the next day. They said the crime didn't make sense: Why kill a cop over the Peeping Tom charge, a misdemeanor? As we sat there in my living room, all my fears came pouring out. "I think he's that rapist," I said. "The Ether Man." I told them about the list of women, his trip to Austin, even the video—the first time I had ever talked about it. He'd probably been afraid that if he was found guilty in the Peeping Tom case, he would have to submit DNA to a national sex-offender database, which would link him to the notorious Ether Man rapes. As I heard myself talking, my words horrified me. Yet there was a profound relief in finally coming clean with my suspicions.

The police ordered Howard to undergo

continued from p. 211

wriggle out of the charges. "You're the only one he might listen to," the DA said. So the next time he called me, I picked up, feeling numb. "Take the plea. Do it for your family, your kids," I told him. "Don't put them through another trial." He agreed. Later, he called me back from prison. "Are you proud of me, Joy?" he demanded. "Say you're proud of me." I didn't know what to say—all I felt was disgust. His phone time ran out before I could respond. [As of press time, Robert Howard Bruce is scheduled to be sentenced on January 20 in the assault case. In addition, officials are reportedly working on a plea deal for the other rapes.] In retrospect, I feel like I was Howard's ultimate victim: He chose me because I was naive and fresh out of my first marriage. Most of the crimes he's charged with happened before we met—or after our marriage started imploding. I feel guilty that his rage at me might have been directed at other women, and I'm tormented by the thought of what must have happened at the end of those hazy nights out with him. For months after I turned him in, I had nightmares about Howard getting out of jail and killing or raping me. I'd wake up screaming. I tried therapy for a few months but stopped going after a while—I loathed reliving the marriage. Today, I feel lucky that my community—family, neighbors, and the parents of my kids' friends—has been more supportive than I could have imagined. After I tried to get out of going to my son's football banquet, the coach's wife called me to convince me to come, saying that what had happened wasn't about me, it was about Howard. Another mom hugged me when we bumped into each other at the local Walgreens, saying I was in her prayers. But I still wonder why I didn't have the strength to end things earlier. During my many police interviews, one of the officers asked me, "So what have you learned from this?" "I'm never going to fall in love or get married again," I said, half joking. "No," he answered. "Go with your gut." So I'm working on that. I've gotten another job, with a construction supplier in Albuquerque, and with Howard in jail, it will be much easier to finalize our divorce. I've started dating again, although it will be a while before I'm ready to really trust someone. I'm enjoying time with my sons, and regaining the independence I felt before meeting Howard. Something like this doesn't have to destroy you. **mc**