

“What Do You Do When A Girl Hits You?”

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Joseph Kerr wasn't prepared when his wife became abusive—and the systems in place to help weren't ready either.

What do you do when a girl hits you?

I was sitting across the desk from the child protective services supervisor, who spoke with confidence of things he didn't know.

“You've been to Iraq, we know all the guys who come back are fucked up in the head... If you need medication to stay focused or to see someone for mental issues — we know the military just sends you to war and spits you back out on the streets — we can help you with that.”

That's one hell of a worm in the water. I had steady hands on my gear as the bullets were flying. My voice was confident when addressing senior leaders no matter the circumstance. Now I wore a nice-guy smile and kept cool as the guy who was going to decide if I was fit to see my daughter again belittled my Marine Corps career and used my stack of medals to weigh the scales against me; to prove my psychosis.

My hands lay gently on the table; the identification tabs from jail and the hospital were stacked on my left wrist. I turned my head slightly. He'd have to continue to insult my manhood and military service into a baseball-sized lump enveloping my eye.

“What do you do when a girl hits you? ... You wouldn't just stand there, right? I mean you're a big guy, you're a Marine, you're trained to fight, the Marines wouldn't teach you to get beat up....”

Clever.

Getting hit by a woman is a new kind of scary for me. I can face fear, I can fight scary, but I can't hit a woman. It's a prisoner's dilemma for the assaulted. The guy laughed at me when I said there's nothing to do except just turn away. I asked what he'd do if I were a woman and started hitting him in this private interview room. “I'd grab your arms and hold you back,” he said. I countered, “that's going to be tough for you to explain why I'll have your handprints and bruises on my arms and there's not a scratch on you.”

He made a final attempt to reduce me to a crazy-veteran archetype. One more question and I could relieve him of the work required in an actual investigation.

“So the police thought you were lying, right? That's why they arrested you. If they believed you they wouldn't arrest you.”

Breathe. Think. Pause, not too long. The words have to sound calm. Breathe.

My marriage wasn't great. Heck, let's be straight, it was on the verge of collapse. Probably had been there for at least two years. I was staying for the kids. My wife and I fought (verbally) nearly every time we had more than a few sentences to say to each other. We were roommates with children running around. It was horrible, but each weekend I was home and I had my kids. My two awesome kids. I'd take them out as often I could and do anything I could so they didn't need to be in the middle of their mom and I.

Finally it was going to end. She wanted to move out of state with the kids and had no interest in discussing sharing custody. "We're not discussing it, you can't stop us from leaving. Sign it or I'll get a lawyer and make you sign it." She handed me a do-it-yourself version of divorce papers.

I reached out to some divorce lawyers. This life sucks for me, for the kids, for everyone. What do I do? "It's a game of chicken in your house now," the he said. "Neither one of you can leave with the kids, and the first one who leaves without them is a step behind in trying to get custody."

Is there a worse possible way to resolve such a pending disaster?

Then the email confirmation — plane tickets, one adult, two children, one way, leaving soon. Tomorrow morning would be different, but sleeping on the couch was normal. I ended up on the ground next to the stairs. She kicked my head into the solid wood base. I blacked out, came to, stood up, bleeding. My daughter was screaming, "Stop hurting daddy!"

It was over. We were over. I headed out the door to the police and then the hospital. My daughter stopped me. "Daddy, you need to go to a doctor, here take this," she handed me a bandage. "I love you" was the last thing I said to her. It's been almost a month.

I walked into the police station falling apart. What happened? What will I do next? What happens on Monday? What happens for the rest of my life? How will I explain what just happened to my kids? My head was spinning as much from the injury as from the complete collapse of my home life. I knew the officer, I had came by the night before suspecting that my wife was leaving with the kids, he assumed why I was crying, "hey man, it's alright, you knew this was going to happen...."

I pulled off my sunglasses and revealed my bloody face. "Whoa, what the hell happened?"

I started piecing together what happened. The argument, her throwing the breakfast I was making for the kids on the ground, grabbing my laptop, the stairs, my kids, screaming. I pulled out the Band-Aid and broke down again.

"Is she hurt? Did you hit her...?" No. Never. I waited.

"We're sending a car over there to talk to her." I waited some more.

"Your wife is telling a bit of a different story, as happens a lot in these situations, she says you threatened her."

"We're going to take you into custody now."

"Stand up and put your hands behind your back."

An hour later I was handcuffed to a hospital bed waiting for CAT scan results to know if my head was bleeding. I looked at the officer.

“What do you do when a woman hits you?”

“I don’t know what to tell you, man” he confided. “We don’t like doing these things, but our hands are tied. We have to look at who is the primary aggressor.”

Stop Violence Against Women aggregated legal writings and produced a list of determining factors for the primary aggressor. Below is a portion of the list:

- The height and weight of the parties
- Which party has the potential to seriously injure the other party
- Whether a party has a fearful demeanor
- Whether a party has a controlling demeanor

Like most men, I am taller and heavier than my wife. I’m a Marine veteran with combat training. Studies have shown that gender (either biologically or by social framework) plays a role in being fearful. Women are more likely to report being afraid^[1].

In 2006, the spokesman for the New York Mass Transit Authority, Gene Sansone said, “a lot of psychologists agree that people are more receptive to orders from men.”^[2] Of the full list of 12 criteria to consider, it seems unlikely the man in any situation wouldn’t have at least these four lined up against him from the moment the police start looking at the evidence. Another third of the list involve prior histories, and the final few ask the officers to weigh the injuries of both.

The two officers escorting me to and from the hospital and then to central booking didn’t have any advice when I asked what I should have done. “Sorry, man.”

They never took photographs of the side of my face.

Thirty hours later I stood in front of a judge and had a county prosecutor argue against me: “His wife is afraid of him. She said he...”

Released on my own recognizance; order of protection outlaws me from contacting her or my kids for a year.

A few days later my eye had an almost cartoonish discoloration. I’d gone back to the ER complaining of headaches and the light bothering me. She cleared out my bank account. I was a friend’s couch away from adding to the homeless veteran population — 62,619 + 1.

I sat across from my lawyer and talked about the other time. She grabbed me and ripped my shirt. Her nails cut my face. I bled. I tried to walk out the door. She blocked the door. I was a gym-every-day, active duty Marine, fearing someone a fraction of my size. If she had a penis I’d have a dozen ways to put her on the ground. Instead, I was left to sneak out a bedroom window and spend the night in a parking lot.

I tried the police and now in front of a guy practicing law for nearly as long as I’ve been alive I tried again.

“What do you do when a woman hits you?”

“Run. Run and don’t go to the police.”

That’s it.

I reached out to a few domestic abuse support groups. “How can this actually be happening? How can I be the one to have been arrested? Why?”

I spoke to a nice lady on the phone and tried to pass my confusion into a question they were built to answer: legal advice, criminal cases, orders of protection. I was going to have to get rid of this order of protection if I was going to get my kids.

“Sir, are you calling about domestic violence?” — yes.

“Okay, we’re going to help you. Has there been an arrest?” — yes, me.

“Ummm, wait what?”

Their web site mentioned they deal specifically with custody in cases of domestic abuse. Sounded like exactly whom I needed.

Then came the second punch. “Do you have custody of the children?” No, that’s why I’m calling.

“I’m sorry sir, our charter only allows us to help domestic abuse victims who have custody of their children.”

This silly game of catch-22. Why don’t I have my kids? Should I have taken them with me as I went to the police station? Should I have asked them to explain the nice officer how mommy had hit daddy and be an accomplice in her arrest? Would any of it matter? There were no injuries on her; plenty on me. They’d have just watched their dad get handcuffed and be as confused as I am.

At this point I couldn’t help but think beyond my situation. How I am I going to explain this all to my kids when I see them again. What would I tell my son if he ever was in a relationship that had gone as bad as mine had? If he called me up one night and said, dad....

“What do you do when a woman hits you?”

I never realized how much violence against men by women was a part of TV shows. There must be something disarming in realizing that the larger, stronger man is allowing the woman to do something physically to him. One of the classic tropes of the *Seinfeld* series was Julia Louis-Dreyfus pushing the other male characters[3]. Sometimes it was playful, sometimes it was out of anger, but it was always her pushing him.

The HBO hit show *Newsroom* takes it a step further with Olivia Munn’s character, a socially awkward economics Ph.D. When someone suggests making up lies about her online to get a story on an internet prank group she grabs the guy and throws him up against a wall and yells at him[4]. After her ex-boyfriend posts naked pictures of her online she goes to her office and kicks him in the groin then punches him in the face, finally taking a photo of him laying on the ground with blood pouring out of his nose[5].

The character's anger could be understood for either gender, but could the violence? There is no way a guy could go to his ex's office and touch her no matter how grievous her transgressions, yet somehow Munn's attack feels like a triumph over her emotional tailspin during the majority of the episode.

So, what do you do when a woman hits you?

Guys can laugh off a slap from a girl. It's a punch line in sitcoms whenever there's a crass joke. But be careful that those never become more than playful. Because I've never found a helpful answer to the question. I hope you never have to.

Photo—tinou bao/Flickr

[1] "Gender role and behavioral avoidance: The influence of perceived confirmability of self-report," McLean, Carmen P., Ph.D., University of Nebraska – Lincoln, 2007 <http://gradworks.umi.com/32/62/3262188.html>

[2] "Voices Down Below", by Justin Rocket Silverman, AM New York, 2006

[3] Seinfeld YouTube clip <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-XgvHPt1cg>

[4] Newsroom YouTube clip, Season 1, Episode 8 <http://youtu.be/LZC0Nz255KQ>

[5] Newsroom screen grab, Season 2, Episode 5 <http://imgur.com/a/GN3ou#0>
