

Should have said you wont have a chance to kill me  
I'm gonna kill you for thinking you can hit me like that  
screaming that you love me  
You said, "I havent hit a woman in 8 years."  
8 years bad luck my head caught it  
My arns in dishwasher scrubbing out my father's shoe  
the dream tells me  
you're familiar  
that brutality I slide in without a horn  
"You dont have to be beaten to be loved," the therapist said  
I held the cool shock of those words  
against the purple bruise of still wanting you  
You've hit me with that irresistible  
deadly weapon:  
hatred dressed in the shoes and socks of the words  
I love you

## **The Second Closet: Battered Lesbians**

*Donna J. Cecere*

*You feel like you are in a no-win situation.  
Damned if you do and damned if you don't.  
The tension between the two of you starts to  
build and you have already learned that noth-  
ing you do or say is going to make a difference.  
As they say: "You don't deserve it, but you're  
going to get it anyway."*

Your stomach hurts a lot these days.

*It seems that nothing you do is good enough.  
You make the bed, only to have her take it apart  
and make it again. You map out a trip that the  
two of you have been planning, and she takes it  
to someone at AA to do it over. You are not  
trusted with the simplest of tasks.*

You begin to feel worthless.

*Except for occasional token atonements, your  
wants and needs seem to always come second.  
It is easier to give in to her demands than to go  
one more round. You find yourself agreeing  
when you want to disagree, swallowing your  
pride and sacrificing your personal integrity for*

*the sake of keeping peace. You give in to prove your love.*

Physically and emotionally, you feel exhausted.

*She accuses you of sleeping with other women (and your male friends). You are expected to account for all your time away from her. She is jealous of your friendships and your family. You feel set up to choose between her and your friends, her and your children, her and your work. You gradually isolate yourself from the world to try to make her feel more secure and more loved—and to avoid another fight.*

You feel you are suffocating.

*You know that she loves you, but when something (anything!) out there angers her, she takes it out on you. You try to compensate, try to control the environment to keep her from getting upset, but sometimes she walks in the door that way. Maybe this time she'll just yell some insults and blow off steam. Maybe she'll throw you up against the wall or hit you. Maybe she'll beat the hell out of you. Would she actually kill you?*

You feel helpless, responsible and guilty.

I have to admit right off that I resisted even starting this writing for a few reasons that I can identify: One: I feel a lingering sense of embarrassment (self-blame/shame?) at having been involved in a battering relationship, though it is now five years, light years worth of personal counseling and growth and countless hours of community-awareness organizing later.

Two: There is still a touch of fear of retribution from my ex-lover/batterer. From time to time I berate myself for being so “paranoid,” but I also know that in my life I generally do not

fear when there is no reason to fear. I no longer suffer nightmares of her trying to kill me. But the sound of her, voicing accusations into the phone, has been enough to make me careful about how I do my work, where I work, and whether or not I use my name. I still do not name her. But, today I learned of a fellow worker in our community who is presently being terrorized by his ex-lover/batterer. He, like me, continues his work, looking over his shoulder, and lives with the ever-present awareness that there is someone out there who has proven himself/herself a danger to our personal safety and well-being. I can't keep quiet.

The third reason I resist the task of this writing is that it obviously isn't the most pleasant thing to write about. I'm sitting here in Chessman Park watching people play, enjoying the first chance I've had this year to sit in the sun and watch the clouds and the kites in the sky. I count nine. Two grounded. It's just too beautiful a day to write about violence and fear.

Then again, I've been promising myself for five years now that I would put all of this down on paper — for the sake of setting the record straight, to help those in battering relationships to name their situations, and also because I still feel the need to tell my story.

We were together for two years. The abuse began early on, though I didn't know enough then to make such a connection. Though a Lesbian Feminist activist for years at that point, I still thought of battering as, first, a male-against-female act, and second, as being a physically violent act. I had no concept of what emotional, psychological and spiritual abuse was about.

Like many battered people, I didn't see it coming. And if I had had a sense about what lay ahead, I was far too ignorant to call it what it was. After all, we were in love and we were intelligent women of high political consciousness (whatever that means).

I need to clarify at this point, that the abuse I suffered was mostly verbal and emotional, which many battered people will testify as being the real event. You can be involved in a

devastatingly brutal relationship, with all of the extreme emotional consequences, and never have a hand raised against you.

For myself, the physical outbreak of violence occurred infrequently, but I lived with the knowledge that the threat or possibility of physical violence could happen. I was often distracted from the real issue in our relationship and quieted by her reminders that the brutality suffered by her lovers previous to myself was far worse than anything I suffered, physically. I'm sure this is true, but the real message she was delivering (and which I bought) was that I didn't have anything to complain about since others had suffered more harm than I, and after all, she was trying to control herself.

I backed off.

I understood.

I forgave.

And I felt sorry for her.

I still feel sorry for her. Well, it's more like pity. She came from a home situation where she was the victim of what ranged from severe neglect to severe violence, which I later became convinced also included sexual abuse, though she would never betray her family by claiming such a thing.

She was so afraid and so tormented by her past. I listened and I held her through all the tears and the horror stories and the re-living of the terrifying and bloody nightmares she experienced so often.

I sometimes felt like I was taking care of a scared little girl while she told her stories with all intense emotions as though it were twenty-five minutes instead of twenty-five years that had passed since the actual event. She carried such a rage around inside of her. Part of me was paralyzed with fear of that rage and part of me wanted to relieve her of its burden and torture.

I loved her for her ability and willingness to survive a childhood filled with such trauma and pain, and I sympathized. We moved right into a way of relating in which it became my role in our relationship to *make up* for all that pain, all those terrifying times and denial of love. Clearly an unhealthy way of relating, but it wasn't clear to me at the beginning. I thought the strength of our love could heal all

those old wounds.

And I felt for a long time that I had failed her.

We loved each other and I was taken with the apparent intensity of her feelings for me. I guess "dramatic" might be more accurate a term, but it was the first relationship for me in which the woman I was so in love with was also in love with me. I couldn't believe my fortune. There was all the specialness and passion I had ever wanted. She was striking and intelligent and always willing to take a stand. We opposed and fought sexism, racism and homophobia, with pride and conviction.

The stickler in our little paradise was a growing habit of condescension which I at first interpreted as a by-product of ageism (she was ten years older than I). She didn't seem to value my opinions much and had little trust in my intellect. My stories more amused than moved her and I became more and more hurt by it. I let it go and let it go until I could let it go no more. The next put-down was met with a challenge. I let her know that some of her attitudes towards me were insulting and I felt I deserved more respect.

From that came our first fight (a yelling match) in which she told me that if I was so insulted and felt that I was being treated so badly, I could leave. I took her apartment key off my key ring, left it on the bed and headed for the door. That's when the first incidence of violence occurred.

In the following two years, I tried to walk out on her many times; each time the attempt was met with physical violence or threats of suicide.

The physical abuse I endured ranged from pushing and being restrained against my will to slaps and a tackle which produced a back injury that left me in pain for several months. I never sought medical help, mostly out of fear of having to explain or lie about what had happened. My injuries were not visible, except perhaps in my mood. For many months I repeated to myself, "This is not happening." I knew *it was* and did not want to believe it. It was a very personal hell.

There was the time that she made a move to strangle me, and was shocked that I bothered to defend myself. And there was the time when she woke me in the middle of the night with her crying because she had awakened to find me sleeping so

still that she imagined she must have killed me.

There were the tantrums and the dramatic mood swings. I was at a loss to try to find the rhyme or reason to what would set her off.

There was the time I had to talk her out of buying a gun, not out of any strong convictions on my part around gun control, but because I thought I had a pretty good idea who she might threaten with it. It was the only time in my life I've ever used the words "I forbid it!"

I allowed her to convince me that I was the one who instigated the abuse. It seems that any time my needs differed from hers, I was being abusive. If she wanted to go to the movies and I wanted to stay home and finish schoolwork, *that* was supposed to be abusive on my part. Fights erupted almost daily over these kinds of things, and I gradually came to see that for *her* this was normal. *Every* couple fights, right? But our conflicts were almost constant and I gradually lost weight (down to eighty-nine pounds, at one point), I was constantly exhausted and suffered from headaches and an ulcer condition. I developed several cysts and PID and was almost hospitalized for these lack-of-health conditions. In trying to relate to my best friend what was happening to my body (which for all of my life up to that point had been relatively free from illness) I realized that for the months that this condition was developing, my lover had repeated to me many times that I was going to die. Upon learning of this my best friend said, "For Chrissakes, she's talking you into it! You've got to get away from it." Which I did for three days. Long enough to fast, do some soul-searching meditation/healing work and set into process a momentum to correct the conditions that had caused the deterioration of my health.

We were together only six months after that. I had told her at one point that I would no longer accept apologies from her, figuring that it was in part my forgiving of these acts that allowed her to turn around and repeat them. All I actually succeeded in doing was obliterating the only nice phase of our relationship — the "making-up" phase. Our relationship became a two-part cycle: tension-abuse, tension-abuse.

I remember thinking that the only way out, the only way to

change this situation was for one of us to die. I couldn't leave her because of the threats and also because I still loved and needed her. I was half convinced I'd never find love again and not so sure that I would want to after this anyway. But death came to seem the only way out and that thought scared me. I came to understand how battered people sometimes finally murder their batterers.

But I found another way out: I went to therapy. She left me two weeks later. After two years of the confusion of our relationship (How could someone who loves me treat me this way?), suffering accusations and always struggling to prove myself and my love and yet blaming myself, I was left emotionally and behaviorally paralyzed. I worked with an excellent counselor who had some experience counseling lesbians and some experience counseling battered women, but never a battered lesbian. We did good work together and with the patience and support of my close friends and an understanding family I set out to recover and to transform my pain into personal power. I worked through guilt and fear and my own outrage at what I had put up with. After all the self-doubt and self-blame, it was a powerful realization and an important step in self-affirmation to be able to say that it was not wrong of me to trust her. *It was wrong of her to betray my trust.*

Along with personal counseling I did the feminist thing and began to work on bringing the issue of battering in gay and lesbian relationships out of the closet. I hooked up and helped to form a group called RUTH, which was a support group for battered lesbians. Along with my friend Blair, I put on workshops, did interviews with the lesbian press, circulated information on how to determine if you are a battered person, spoke to mental health groups and shelter workers. We received phone calls from women all over the country, proof that our experience was not an isolated and unique problem.

As with many problems that we confront within our community, we translate the personal pain and fear into activity. We form support groups, organize conferences, set up hotlines, provide safe space and opportunities for learning, sharing and healing. We present our stories of horror and

survival. We cry, we mourn, we get angry. We blame ourselves, we blame someone else and eventually work our way to the calm after the storm, pick up our pouch of learnings and move on. Some of us move on to other issues, working against other forms of assault on our people and our spirit, and carrying with us an awareness and a reclaiming of the right and the ability and the courage to love, and to no longer live in fear. We laugh again.

For me, the real crime, the real sin in battering is the fear it strikes in a person's heart. Anything that makes you afraid is an act against your spirit, for when you are afraid, you don't really live.

I resent the phone calls (since our break-up) from my ex to inform me of her latest suicide attempt, and then the remorse and tears over the ending of our relationship. And the angry reminders that a "relationship is a two-way street, you know, Donna!" Yes, a relationship is a two-way street. Abuse isn't necessarily. My point is: the abuse doesn't always end with the divorce.

I still don't know why, when it is so common to grow up with violence in all its forms, that some people go on to continue the tradition of violence and some people manage to rise above that particular training and do good work and lead loving lives. I don't know what makes the difference.

I still have not found it in myself to forgive her. I sometimes think that if I forgive her that it will somehow make me vulnerable to her again. I'll never trust her to put my rights ahead of her violent impulses.

Early on, when Blair and I were first putting out literature on the RUTH support group, we were asked, "So? Who's battering the lesbians?" *Cringe*. Some dykes tried to explain my own experience away by pointing out all the "stress factors" in my relationship. There was an age difference. We were of different racial and class backgrounds. She was more educated than I... perhaps we were unconsciously acting out "roles."

These arguments imply a belief that somewhere there is an understandable reason for battering. Enough stress, enough complicating factors, enough "provocation" and violence is bound to occur. No! We've learned better than that after all

these years providing safe space for straight women.

There are powerful forces here at work against the battered lesbian. They are called Shame and Denial. Not only does the battered lesbian or gay man feel the same doubt and guilt associated with victimization, there is also the additional pressure caused by a community which has, up until recently, buried its collective head in the sand. When pushed to confront the problem of women abusing women, the discomfort and anger experienced by the community has, at times, been leveled against the victim.

If a straight woman shows up with black eyes, swollen lips, and broken arms and a story about walking into doors, falling down stairs, *whatever*, any one of us would assume violence to be the true culprit. But when the same thing happens to our sister, we often don't see it. I was as guilty of this form of denial as anyone.

A word about the shelter community:

Lesbians laid much of the groundwork of the feminist theory around why and how violence against women occurs — some of which our own experience forces us to revise, the main point being that we can no longer afford to view violence as exclusively a male-against-female phenomenon, but rather as a control issue. As we began gaining more acceptance and support for the work of providing safe space for battered women in mainstream society, receiving various forms of public and private funding, we were forced to become more closeted in order to attract and maintain that mainstream community support. Many lesbians turned their positions over to straight workers, moving into closeted work or other women's issues. Then lesbians, experiencing violence in our own relationships, turned to these same safe-spaces that we had helped to create and were turned away. Somehow, in the transition from grassroots lesbian staff to mainstream straight staff, some basic information was lost. And we were forgotten.

In some cases, the shelter workers just did not know what to do with us. How is a battered lesbian or gay man different from a battered straight woman (or straight man)? How does one counsel a person of another lifestyle? Which issues are the same? Which are different? Consequently, lesbians and gay



men were without safe space and community resources for dealing with their situations or recovering from them. I know of many instances of lesbians and gays being denied help here in my city. My ex's previous lover, seeking shelter one night, afraid for her life, was turned away, ironically by the same institution that later employed my ex as a relief counselor while she was abusing me.

The stories go on: denial of medical assistance to a lesbian who was knifed by a woman she had left; police officers not bothering to make out a report on an assault case; sexual attacks within our own community; a lesbian psychotherapist who is known to have brutalized ten different women (some to the point of mutilation); a gay activist being threatened and terrorized by a former lover, years after breaking off the relationship.

And so the question remains: What do we do with the batterers in our community? What is our responsibility to our brothers and sisters who may become the next victim? What do we do about those individuals who we know or suspect are batterers or battered? Are there creative, *workable* ways of attending to this problem in our communities?

We're learning not to cover up. And not to make excuses for the violence that occurs and not take responsibility for a batterer's actions. We are beginning to demand accountability from those who commit abusive acts.

It's been quite a few years since I've dealt with this issue on a community level and on a personal level. It all seemed quite behind me. Most of it is. I have recovered, for the most part. But in the last two weeks, I found myself writing in my journal (though I had not set out to) about the one incident at the end of my battering relationship when I finally acted in self-defense, leaving cuts and bruises. An incident about which I experienced an almost suicidal sense of shame and guilt. I hadn't realized that was something I carried like a sin. I had to work that one through, and it's five years later. Also, in the last few weeks, I've learned of two attacks in this area. And I cried when viewing *The Burning Bed*, reliving some of the fear, the helplessness, the loneliness, and the perception that death is the only way out.

I've noticed during the course of this writing an urge in me to give my ex "an out." Allow her an excuse for what happened. Part of me still doesn't believe that this happened. Part of me still fears retribution. But I'm not going to allow her or any abusive person an out. I want them all to be held accountable for their choices and their actions.

Well, the sun is setting and I'm getting chilled. There's only one kite left in the sky, connected to a fishing pole held by a man who is being chased by a squealing little girl in overalls. I hope that their relationship is as loving and playful as it looks.

I'm aware that this writing cannot do justice to the complexity of the dynamics involved in an abusive relationship, the specific way in which the results of abuse pervade, crop up and affect the rest of a person's life. I still look for signs of abuse-yet-to-come in my relating with new lovers and friends. It's always there. The wariness.

All in all, I'd rather be writing love sonnets and stories of passion, courage and healing. And then again, maybe I am. In a way.