

Translated excerpt

Barbara Peveling
Gewalt im Haus
Intime Formen der Dominanz

Edition Nautilus, Hamburg 2024
ISBN 978-3-960-54376-3

pp. 22-35

Barbara Peveling
Violence in the Home
Intimate Forms of Dominance

Translated by Zaia Alexander



Not Every Night, Every Day

I'm writing this essay on a day, when I don't lack the strength to think about what happened all those nights. Instead I prefer to believe it had been an error, a mistake, a ridiculous coincidence that occurred only once; a malfunction and not a system — a never-ending nightmare. I am writing this text from the abyss of those days; on a day when fear doesn't breathe down my neck, or make me docile as a submissive woman; a woman born and raised to serve a man. And should she refuse him, he has been accorded the right to be violent. I am writing this text for all women whose fear is greater than their next breath; whose only recourse is obey the system, subordinate themselves, even though they know, or suspect, at least hope, that it is wrong; that they are worth far more than the function assigned them in the house. I am writing this text for all women who lower their eyes; who are forced to submit, who slump their shoulders, who leave the house in shame because the thunder behind the walls of their home never ends, although the thunder ought only to happen outside, in the great outdoors; and not in the safety of their home, in their intimate areas.

I am writing this text for the women who have managed to leave violence behind; and who wonder how it ever could have happened; who wonder why it happened to them. I am writing this book for every woman who had to give up her life; who died at the hands of a man. I am writing this book for the children of those women who live with a knot in their stomach; every night and every day. I am writing this book for the children who lie in bed listening to the loud voices with eyes wide open. I am writing this book for the children who cannot yet read or write, but are forced to ask themselves where they can live and with whom for tomorrow, when things shatter for good, they know one of their parents will be

gone forever. I am writing this book for the child I used to be, who had never been able to answer that question.

I am writing this book for the child I once was, and who knew she would be forced to live with her father, because her father—that was clear even back then—had nobody else. I am writing this book for the love children feel for their parents, and for the right to love each one of them; because love cannot be divided or subtracted like a math problem. The right to love your parents means also having the right to your own identity. I am writing this essay for the fathers of those children. I am writing this essay for every man who cannot control himself. I am writing this essay for every man who loses his temper, over and over again, even though he has promised not to next time, not to use swear words, not to hit, not to use violence. I am writing this story for all men who know they could control themselves, if they'd wanted, yet do not.

I am writing this book for every man who interrupts a woman while she is speaking. I am writing this essay for every man who wants to be the boss; who needs to be the boss, who plays the *big man*, regardless whether he wants to, or cannot do otherwise. I am writing this book for every man who resolves to be different; different from his father, from his brother, from his uncle, from his neighbor, from any one of those countless men who interrupt women because they think they know better; who make women feel as if men know better, that women are *down*³⁰ for them; for men who make comments about women not being able to park a car, who make jokes that reinforce their male superiority, who touch women even though they don't want to be touched, who get furious because *their* women don't want to be touched, who suppress their anger, or not. I'm writing this text for the men who have suffered at the hands of other men because they couldn't keep up; with drinking, sports, the day-to-day competition of toxic virility. I am writing this essay for all those who follow the hashtag #NotAll-Men because yes, of course, not all men beat, kill, humiliate, or use violence. Not all dogs bite; not all women have experienced, or admit they have experienced misogyny; but as long as there are people who are oppressed by other people because of their ascribed or chosen gender, as long as social structures exist that cause people to be oppressed; it concerns us all. After all, I am writing for my father, who became a perpetrator because he was a victim, and who in the end was only a victim again. I write so that there are no more victims, because without perpetrators there are no victims and vice versa.

I write.

Honeymoon

It will continue until the climate of tension builds again. When did the therapist say that sentence to me? Which of my stories had elicited that answer? Which of my memories had triggered those words?

Honeymoon, she had said, a moon full of honey, a lunation of happiness that keeps renewing itself, but doesn't last, flitters and flirts like the song of lovers, is part of the so-called vicious circle of domestic violence. But I ignored her words and continued telling the story. I had to get something off my chest; unload my suffering, leave it there in that session, everything that had felt unconquerable to me. I wanted to leave her office after the session with the melody of hope in my heart; like a child spinning a serinette.

Later, I wrote letters to all of my blood relatives. I wrote that I wanted a divorce. I said it was hard and I couldn't take it anymore. That it didn't *work* anymore. I didn't write help me, get me out of here. Just that it could not *continue*.

What had I expected back then? Certainly, something other than the benevolent responses they gave me. *The two of you will figure it out*, they said, *you'll come up with a good solution like grown-ups*. Maybe, my family found it exhausting to answer me at all. After all, it was none of their business, just his and mine. Surely, they thought they were doing their best. Nothing more could be *done*. Silence also is a form of shame.

What would they have done, had I written: I'm going to kill myself before he kills me; I'm terrified; get us out of here, please, help me, help the children. I can't take it any more; if this *continues*, I'll drive the children into the nearest tree.

There are no official figures in Europe about women, who commit suicide as a result of domestic violence. Although psychological violence is punishable by law, it is difficult to prove, especially in partnerships. If, for example, the number of suicide victims were added to the existing number of victims, the picture of domestic violence would be even more dramatic than it already is today.

Perhaps I should have been sent to a psychiatrist for treatment. Not talk therapy, I needed medication to sedate me, especially my mind. Nobody took me away from the house; nobody had me hospitalized, but don't think it was for my sake. Who would have looked after the children, if not I? Who would have been the caretaker in the house?

The therapist's words: *honeymoon*, *climate of tension*, *crisis*, have stayed with me. These references to cyclical moments, to a recurring rhythm, to phases like a thunderstorm: growth, maturity and decay. Lenore E. Walker also had assigned three phases for the cycle of domestic violence: tension – crisis – honeymoon. I wondered whether these

cyclical events could be predicted, perhaps even combinable and therefore controllable, like the recurring notes of a melody.

There were many things that I'd kept silent about with the therapist; many moments that I couldn't tell her about without feeling ashamed and guilty.

The children were still very small and especially restless that evening. They kept running from the table in the restaurant to the play area, and because they were still so small, somebody had to be in that area with them. A TV was playing Disney clips in an endless loop. A mother from the kindergarten came over and spoke to me. Donald racing a camper through a ravine was playing. A moving house that couldn't be slowed down. I wondered how many times I had seen that scene. We exchanged just a few words, small talk between mothers, about the caregivers, about the facility; nothing of importance, when suddenly he stood next to us and said something. His voice sounded angry; it would be another horrible evening, impossible to keep the children under control. Not just me, but the other mother winced as well. His tone was unmistakable. He could barely take the situation anymore and blamed me, his wife, for the failed evening, the noisy children, the restlessness, the lack of fun. The other mother apologized with a smile and left. I was filled with anger and shame. He went back to the table; I followed him and sat down. He didn't apologize, but I tried to calm the children, but of course in vain, my voice was quivering. He continued to speak in that angry tone. The meat on his plate had gone cold because he had to deal with us. Later he would say: I just wanted to have a moment between the two of us. He'd say how disappointed he was that it wasn't possible; that we didn't have a single quiet moment together; that he couldn't even exchange two sentences with me in peace. That was how he apologized later; the tension was over, the crisis too. He said it during the *honeymoon*. And he said a lot more, especially that *it* would never happen again. But we were still sitting together at the table, while the tension was building; it crashed down on us like a light shower of rain. He mumbled to himself and down at me, into his beard, as they say in German about men, whether they have a beard or not. Today, I can't recall whether he had one; or had shaved for the evening, but a little later, as the children ran excitedly through the restaurant again, the tension continued to build; let's say the rumbling got louder, until lightning suddenly struck. There was this hyper child earlier, our child, who ran up to the table and tipped over a wine glass.

Half the wine ran down his pants. I couldn't tell what got him more furious, the spilt wine or the stained trousers; but clouds gathered, he snatched the child, grabbed his arm so harshly, that the boy's eyes widened in fear. He said he didn't love him anymore. If he

didn't behave immediately, he threatened to kick him out, because he didn't want to be his father anymore, wanted nothing to do with him. It was an irrational punishment. I had to swallow hard. I was dumbfounded. My blood began to boil, and I hissed he had to stop threatening him, that it wasn't just mean, he'd never be able to pull it off. I said it was capricious and, – he cut me off mid-sentence and said – if I let him slap the children, it wouldn't be such a bother to parent them, and if the wine weren't already on his pants, he'd throw it in my face that very second, he said. Lightning struck. I knew we would continue to fight like that; there would be lightning, thunder, maybe even hail, until I ducked again under his dominance. Since I didn't want that, I checked on the children, who weren't hyper anymore but terrified. I literally dragged them into the street and ordered a cab, while walking. I didn't turn around. If he didn't have the car keys in his pocket, I'd have simply driven off in the car. I remember hiding from him behind a bush, knees trembling for fear of the lightning and the thunder. If he were to go looking for us, I wouldn't want to talk to him; he wouldn't listen to me anyway, the storm was there, the crisis too. I told the children to keep calm and stay with me. While sitting in the cab, I turned off my cell phone. Afterwards, I quickly locked all the doors and shutters and then put the children to bed. I kept quiet, while he was shouting at me from outside. But then he got so loud I was afraid the neighbors would call the police. When he banged on the door, I turned my cell phone back on. Told him to get out, find a hotel, he had the car. I had no right to demand that, he shouted, I was destroying the family. I was destroying him. But he left. That night, I acted instinctively, on impulse; I was the wife and mother who ran away from the storm, trying to prevent a fire caused by lightning. At the time, I hadn't yet realized that the house, as the center of the nuclear family and the roles assigned to it, was the most intimate arena of the struggle for dominance, and that it was society's concept of home that I needed to flee from.

I'm ashamed of that scene; that's why I never told the therapist, even now, as I write these words, the shame is there. I am ashamed, and not because I was treated so condescendingly by him that evening, and not because I had resisted, gone home, locked the doors and locked him out – but because I opened them again a day later, and I am ashamed of that. I'm ashamed of my weakness. The tension was over, and so was the crisis. *Honeymoon* is the first and last phase of the cycle of domestic violence.

I had never been in love with a man who was *violent*. I fell for men who acted stereotypically *masculine*, went for the strong shoulders and hard biceps, who sat with their legs spread wide apart, and who enjoyed seeing me as a *woman*. And I especially

liked that they loved my body, for its *femininity*, which I emphasized through my style of dressing, make-up, dieting. If we went out to eat, I ordered salad and not a steak. I chose a feminine drink, a Kir or glass of chardonnay, not whisky or hard liquor. I chose my words carefully, was attentive, always kept the necessary utensils for emergencies in my purse, aspirin for migraines or hangovers, wet wipes for when the children spit up. I was mindful and was thrilled by these men of mine, their charisma, strength, their words, decisions and their cocks when they came close to me. I wanted to feel their hardness, that was important, this mutual attraction, especially the physical attraction, it legitimized *being* together. I liked that masculine way of suddenly grabbing me between the legs, insistent but not too firmly, listening to me. At the time, it seemed as if I were listening, but actually it was just the beginnings of sentences I'd overheard. At the time, it seemed natural to me that a man had more to say than I did, that he interrupted me mid-sentence by tenderly stroking my head, kissing my neck, cutting me off, finishing my sentences for me, just as a man does with a woman. In the midst of that encounter, that love, I wanted to anchor myself in society through my body. I was trying to define myself as a woman through my body; my counterpart was struggling to define himself physically as a man, and the arena of this struggle was the house. The *Honeymoon* was merely the break between each new round.

Why am I actually writing about this struggle in the form of an essay, in a text form wherein I virtually undress myself as an author and expose myself? I've also written a fictional text about a relationship like that, about a love affair. With one of those kind of men, starting with my father. An excerpt from this old fictional story had once been nominated in a reading competition. It had been chosen by the only female jury member. To this day, I still feel ashamed when I recall the discussion about my text. The female juror had unsuccessfully tried to defend it against the male jurors. Words like *women's* literature were used.

After that discussion, some female colleagues came up to me, female authors, yes, I am emphasizing the word female. They told me they also had once been with a man like that when they were young. They could *relate* to my story. They had pity in their eyes, and I couldn't tell whether it was because of their own experience or because the discussion about the text had been so dismal. And so here is the *other* body of text; the one without the cloak of invisibility; the one that doesn't hide behind the fictional, that exposes all the bodies, their suffering and their struggles with and against each other.

I am sitting on a train as I write this. An elderly couple took a seat in the row next to mine. The woman keeps looking at me, smiling, while the man stares at his newspaper for the length of the train journey, which lasts more than three hours. He reads his newspaper, while she unpacks the disinfectant gel and hands it to him. A bit later she takes sandwiches out of her bag and gives them to him, then some water. He practically drinks it from her hand; his eyes on the newspaper. She is the giver, he is the receiver.

The short story "*Read your newspaper!*" by Jean Cocteau comes to mind. *I shout, I ask, I get upset, I lose my mind. And my counterpart? A newspaper.* Cocteau was one of the few who had stood by Françoise Gilot, the painter and author who emancipated herself by writing the text *Life with Picasso*. In an interview, she later recounted that Picasso had once stubbed out a cigarette on her face.

The man on the train continues to read his newspaper; when his wife struggles to get up, her fingers trembling as she ties her support belt around her waist to support her aching limbs, he doesn't even look up. Later, when he puts on his backpack, she is immediately by his side. She tugs at the buckle from behind, holds the bag so he can effortlessly fasten the belt from the front.

She takes *care* of him, while he *ignores* her.

"No one is more arrogant toward women, more aggressive or scornful, than the man who is anxious about his virility," writes Simone de Beauvoir. I make a mental note of the *work of worrying about virility*. Images flash in my mind; memories of my child's classmate whose father had parked his Harley in front of the elementary school entrance. He had his seven-year-old son get off as though he were Tom Cruise on the red carpet. It was the same boy who had teased my son for his supposedly girly bike basket. My child's father had warned me not to buy that basket. He said they'd laugh at him, but my child still rides with it to this day. Caring about virility is tough business.

Perhaps I should write more generally and less personally, just like Simone in *The Second Sex*. She doesn't waste a word on Jean-Paul, who perhaps had been anxious about his own masculinity. She simply writes: Man. War of the sexes is another common expression I grew up with. This war, which like all, or almost all the other wars, had been fought in front of the children or behind their backs, while they were asleep, with muffled voices, whereby we barely managed to stay calm during those battles, because everything was at stake, childcare, household money, after work, breathing, maybe even a lawsuit. Those wars during the time before Christmas, the wars shortly after the holidays, the wars at Easter, on birthdays, during colds or pandemics, and when the daycare centers went on

strike. Those wars that reeked of pride, remorse and arrogance, and also of the insane fear of loss, kept coming and going, and I completely ignored the fact that I could never get used to them, only submit to them. A few weeks after the crisis in the restaurant, he invited me to the theater. I thought about it, but only briefly, because he had been able to control himself recently, and promised that he'd changed, that the therapy was doing him good, and that he was much calmer now. I accepted the invitation because I also had this hope inside me; it jingled in my heart like a tiny music box; it had been with me for so long. Long before I became a mother, long before I loved him, before I even knew what it was to love; there was already this hope that somebody would love me; a man, forever and ever, for better or for worse, and if he hadn't died, then he'd love me to this day, and so I accepted the invitation and we went out together. One last time.

And then everything started all over again. The storm was over, we were starting from scratch, almost *tabula rasa*, our history would be rewritten. I saved pictures, deleted others. I had this urgent need to sort everything out; especially my life. I deleted the bad messages, but left the good, the beautiful, the tender, the romantic, the erotic. I took this opportunity to delete the letter I had written to my family from my computer. The storm had passed, the little melody was playing again. He and I had regained our sanity.

Him first, and then me, and only because he had gotten his act together again. We buried the hatchet and covered it with as much earth as our small front garden could yield. We wouldn't have arrived there without him, that was the double truth: I wanted to leave; he had held me back again. I wanted to separate because of him, but I stayed because of him. If I didn't have the children with him, this family, this core of intimacy, the concept of the house, then I wouldn't have made all this effort with him and for him. I told myself that over and over again, as if it were a mantra or the melody of my heart's serinette. And now I'm writing it all down, here, in this train: violence in the home exists because domestic life functions through a strict hierarchy of given roles. Without these roles, without this hierarchy, there would be no domestic violence. With each new case of femi(ni)cide, as a society we see just the tip of the iceberg and ignore the "silent violence"³², as Asha Hedayati puts it. The violence that is encouraged by conventional structures. I could have let him fall, just as he had let me fall, over and over again. But now I was there, he had caught me, so I didn't leave, I stayed. I could have started again on my own, instead I let him start again with me, gave him another chance, one more time, and our *honeymoon* began.

Dominance

I inherited my first therapist from my father. He was his therapist, until his violent death. After the therapist found out about it, he wrote my mother offering to continue therapy with her and her offspring. As I write this, I wonder whether therapy, or being in therapy wasn't the most important thing my father had left me. Therapy that ran through my life like a common thread, the need for it; the need to get help in order to get my life together. After his death, they said my father had left nothing behind but debts. He had taken his own life with a hunting rifle a few days after his fortieth birthday. That violent death did not come as a surprise, even if it felt as though a bomb had hit my young life, and tore the roof off our house. It was a bomb that left a crater, certainly, but it didn't come from outside. It had been inside our house for a long time, just like the gun my father had owned. My mother knew about it, and she knew the danger, because she took seriously his threat to kill her and the children. She implored him to get the gun out of the house. She didn't know that he hadn't bought it, contrary to what he had claimed. The gun was the bomb of his violence, ticking away somewhere between the walls in our home, until it went off that fatal night.

Nobody in our family discussed the debts my father had left behind. My parents came from a middle-class background and there were means to compensate for this shortcoming. When I look at my father's life, the milieu of my background stands in contrast to his career. He never found his place professionally or in society. He was unsuccessful, remained a seeker, and his final job had lasted only a year. This was followed by hospital stays; the diagnosis: failure syndrome culminating in depression.

The letter from his psychiatrist states that my father came from a successful family of doctors, but that the family practice had been taken over by his older brother. Training as a doctor, therefore, never had been an option. In fact, my father was sent away from home at a very young age to a childless relative's farm to learn farming, in the hopes that he could later take over the farm. But he never achieved that goal. All that remained of his years of hard work on the farm was a certificate of employment that confirmed my father had been employed there as a fifteen-year-old.

Of course, it is not enough to evaluate a person's development through class and background. The family constellation plays as important a role in their development as the environment they come from. When I look at my father's life, it is marked by the violence that had been done to him. The violence that gave rise to the feeling of having failed

without knowing why; of the failure to find a place in life, because he had not been destined for one, and he lacked the strength to conquer one for himself.

A letter remains from my father's therapy. It was written to him by his therapist. I discovered it thirty years after he died.