

# The Hand that Hits is Not Always Male

BY ADRIENNE BLENMAN

**T**here has been much work done on the issue of assaults of women within the context of their primary relationships with men. The literature, however, has just begun to look into the still hidden arena of battering within lesbian relationships. The only source of information that I was able to find on this disturbing reality was *Naming the Violence: Speaking Out About Lesbian Battering*. This text has been a guidebook not only for me, but also for many other lesbians who find themselves caught in, or recovering from, violence in their relationships. My hope is that this article will shed some light on the realities of living with lesbian violence. I will use my own experience as a battered lesbian to address some of the similarities between same-sex battering and male-female abuse as well as some of the important differences between these two types of abuse. I will also address the lack of resources and support that were available to me. My hope is that by speaking out about this violence — bringing it out of the closet — lesbians will no longer have to hide in shame from each other or the heterosexual community. Violence against women affects us all regardless of sexual orientation. I believe it is imperative that women acknowledge and support each other's experiences and then work together to end the violence.

My partner and I met when I was twenty. We were drawn to each other through our mutual interests in music, sports and writing. After the first few hours together, it felt like we had known each other for years. We spent as much time together as possible, playing basketball, discussing "issues" and just generally enjoying each other's company. Although we never discussed lesbianism, I was very aware of our attraction to each other. However, when the sexual tension between us became too uncomfortable for her, she brought up God. She had recently become a Christian and was intense in her religious fervour. When I finally did tell her about my lesbianism, we ended up having a very angry discussion with her trying to save my soul, and me insisting that my soul didn't need saving. I tried to reconcile her verbal abuse with the woman I lay out at night watching the stars with, or the woman who was the first person I trusted with the secret of my sexual abuse as a child. I told myself she just wasn't ready to be challenged on her religious beliefs because they were still so new. Having been raised in the church myself, I assumed she was feeling vulnerable and consciously decided to avoid conversations that might threaten her. This decision was to set a pattern for the rest of our relationship — my partner becoming verbally abusive and brow-

beating me with her religious beliefs, and me being afraid to challenge her for fear of taking advantage of what I perceived to be her vulnerability.

Our relationship progressed as we spent time alone talking about our childhoods and marveling at how similar they were — sexual abuse by male relatives, feelings of worthlessness, self-injury and prior substance abuse. I was not happy with her assertion that she had risen above these things because of her new relationship with God. Even though I found her attitude self-righteous, I never challenged her on it. After all, she was older than me and I had been raised to respect my elders and comply with their wishes no matter what. I hadn't yet begun to heal from

my childhood abuse and I was still caught up in the patterns of self-hate and denial that had helped me survive as a child. I didn't think I deserved anyone's love or attention and this enabled me to get caught up in what was a very unhealthy relationship. Incidents of verbal abuse and shoving continued for several months before any serious physical abuse started. The first time I was hit, it was a shock for both of us. We had been arguing. I'd had enough, and turned to walk out of the apartment when she grabbed my arm, swung me around and hit me in the face. There was an eternity of shocked silence and then she began to cry. I had never seen her cry before and I knew how much she hated crying so I held her, feeling awful that I had done this to



her. This also became a pattern in our relationship — my partner being physically abusive and me comforting her. I loved her and I didn't want to lose her.

We had been going out for just over ten months when the sexual violence began. Weapons such as knives and brooms had been used to threaten or assault me with during her violent rages but she had never been sexually violent. This soon changed. During one fight in which she had me pinned to the floor, she threatened to rape me with the broom handle she held. I almost laughed because it sounded so absurd. I quickly learned how serious she was. This was the first incident that necessitated outside help. I was badly beaten and bleeding heavily. A doctor friend was called. Unknown to my partner, this woman and I had become quite close because I had been going to see her after many of our arguments. This wonderful woman had been trying to get me to leave the relationship for almost six months, but I refused to listen. I was sure that if I cared enough and loved my partner unconditionally, I could save her from her violent temper. After attending to my injuries as best she could, this friend insisted I go to a hospital and privately urged me to go to the police. Again, I

refused. The incidents of sexual violence escalated to the point where I was being bound and forced to endure minor burns and cuts to my breasts and genitals. Even this did not get me to leave. The only reason I finally left was because I had begun to strike back during our fights and I knew that I had stored so much anger towards her that I was afraid of hurting her. It was my guilt over wanting to hurt her that got me out of the relationship. It was not that I thought I deserved something better.

The question I remember being uppermost in my mind was why was I being beaten by a woman? I didn't connect my abuse to the abuses suffered by women at the hands of their male partners. I believed that as a lesbian, I was safe from violence in my relationships because women didn't hit each other. I think it was this belief that kept me involved for so long. It never dawned on me that the things going on in my relationship were much the same as the things I was studying in psychology. Because we were two women, I was unable or unwilling to see the connection. It wasn't until very recently that I could see the commonalities between my experience and that of heterosexual women in abusive relationships.

One of the most apparent commonalities between my experience and male-female partner battering was the way I was always made responsible for the abuse. She told me she wouldn't beat me up if I didn't give her reasons to. I was too demanding; I was too confrontational; I didn't know my place; I provoked her; I couldn't do anything right. I ended up walking on eggshells because I was never sure how she would react at any given time. I tried to anticipate her every wish to avoid being hit, but then she would hit me for having the audacity to presume to know what she wanted. Like most abusers, she was remorseful after every incident and swore she would never do it again. She would buy me flowers and little gifts or be especially nice by running me a bath and taking care of any wounds I had. As time went by, however, the period between remorse and beatings became shorter and shorter until there were only beatings and little, if any, remorse. The degree of violence increased until I began to fear for my life. I didn't realize that my experience was being played out all over the city in lesbian and



gay as well as heterosexual relationships. I have recently become aware of the additional factors facilitating my abuse.

One of the main factors contributing to the abuse was my partner's homophobia, even though she was involved with a woman. Homosexuality went against every new religious belief she held. In a way, every time she hit me, she was beating up on the lesbian part of herself. I don't condone her behaviour, I am just trying to make sense of it. I can't begin to express the sense of betrayal I felt being beaten by her. It damaged the very core of my soul in a way that the rapes I suffered at the hands of my male relatives did not. I recently read *Talking Back* by bell hooks. One essay in particular, "Violence in Intimate Relationships: A Feminist Perspective," stood out for me. Reading this book has helped me better understand connections between past abuse and abuse in intimate relationships. It has also given a voice to my sense of betrayal. hooks writes:

*One undiscussed aspect of the reality of children who are hit finding themselves as adults in similar circumstances is that we often share with friends and lovers the framework of our childhood pains and this may determine how they respond to us in difficult situations. We share the ways we are wounded and expose vulnerable areas. Often, these revelations provide a detailed model for anyone who wishes to wound or hurt us... When partners create scenarios of abuse similar, if not exactly the same, to those we have experienced in childhood, the wounded person is hurt not only by the physical pain, but by the feeling of calculated betrayal. Betrayal. When we are physically hurt by loved*

*ones, we feel betrayed. We can no longer trust that care can be sustained. We are wounded, damaged—hurt to our hearts.*

In reading this, I recognize many aspects of my experience, especially in respect to having shared my childhood hurts, and how those were recreated by my partner to hurt me.

One of the things I found hardest to understand is how my partner could have assaulted me given the violent home she came from. I had always been told that most male children raised in abusive homes become abusers, while many female children were revictimized as adults. When I discussed this with my therapist, she gave me something to consider: Suppose a girl grows up watching her mother get beaten by her father. This girl may feel she has only two possible choices: she can identify with her mother as victim, or her father as abuser. I disagreed with this theory because I knew the dynamics between my partner and her father, so I couldn't imagine her wanting to identify with him. It was then suggested that perhaps she wasn't identifying with her father, but refusing to become a victim like her mother. Although I am not totally convinced of the validity of this, I do agree that refusing to be a victim was a big part of the rationalization my partner used to continue to be violent with me. Perhaps more important was the fact that my partner hadn't done any healing work on her experiences of child abuse. Our ways of coping with our past abuse locked us into a bizarre dance. She was enraged at her past treatment and struck out. I felt worthless and took whatever came my way because I didn't believe I deserved better. Our relationship was also strained by issues of racism and classism. As an interracial couple, we were unable to cope with the very real pressures our relationship created. My own internalized racism prevented me from feeling that I could be an equal in a relationship with a white woman. As well, my partner was being told that she could do better than a black woman. Perhaps if we had both been stronger emotionally and had a healthy relationship, we could have fought this pressure. As I have begun to heal from my past and gain strength and pride in being a black woman, I have been able to see more clearly the societal oppressions that were impacting on us.

I realize I have many unresolved feelings about our relationship and the abuse I suffered at the hands of the women I loved and who loved me. Another woman encouraged me to give some thought to the idea that violence itself can be considered an intimate act and experienced as such despite the pain and disbelief due to feelings of remorse, guilt, reparation and loving that come after. Looking at the violence in the relationship in this way has helped me accept some of the feelings of love and caring that I continue to feel for my partner even after everything she did to me. I feel angry when I think that through all the hell I endured, there was nowhere I felt I could turn. The lesbians I did speak to were adamant that I not talk about this too much or go to any type of shelter for help. Their biggest fear (and a very realistic one) was that the lesbian community as a whole would suffer even more abuse and derision from heterosexual society, which already saw us as sick and perverse. Not finding any kind of

support from my own community of women hurt almost as much as the betrayal I felt in the relationship.

While I do agree that there are similarities between the abuse suffered in male-female partnerships and the abuse in lesbian relationships, I believe that it is important to recognize the differences. The emotional damage done by same-sex violence can have an added devastation in lesbian relationships. Public education has provided most of us with an awareness of the extent and pervasiveness of male violence against women. Nothing in my experience prepared me for abuse I might suffer at the hands of another woman.

My one hope is that this lack of support is rectified before more life is lost. I wanted to kill myself because of the abuse I was suffering and also because I knew I had nowhere to go for help. Fortunately, I was one of the lucky ones who has lived to talk about my experience. Others are not and will not be so lucky. We cannot afford to lose any more women to the violence —

whether it is suffered at the hands of men or other women.

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## fable

what shape did you imagine  
coming for you out of the snow  
as I prepared to leave  
your tiny face  
pressed against glass

*what's wrong?* and you said  
almost under your breath:  
*the baby slitter is coming*

how could I not laugh  
robbing language of its terror  
its power

and how could I not laugh  
when you searched  
for your library book on its  
*day doomed*  
because it had to go back  
to where it came from

*write a story so that children  
won't get hurt  
or taken away*  
you tell me as you leave for school

so I begin  
to write a fable at that moment  
I know you are standing on the road

the entrance to the park  
is to your left

you give it wide berth  
wait for the traffic to clear  
and turn towards school

remember this fable  
on the day I am unable  
to imagine where you might be

on the day you turn left  
instead of right

following the twisted path  
that leads to the river:

A little girl is lost in a city park. The trees lift their bare limbs in a sour wind that blows around the planet, picking up the scent of deserts and factories and the moldy smell of old mine shafts. Every time she closes her eyes she thinks she might be somewhere different; the dust bowl of Africa, she thinks, or the raw green edge of stripped rain forest, but when she opens her eyes, there is only the snowy park, and she is alone. Men in uniform are dragging the black river for the body of a woman last seen balanced on the railing on a bridge. She hopes it is not her mother. She doesn't go near. The moon above is milky white, suddenly blocked by a man hanging over her like a shabby shadow. She backs away, feels the chainlink fence bit-

ing into her shoulders and wonders if he will leave her alone if she is polite, if she says *please*. As his hands come out of his pockets, a voice calls across the snow: *Hey!*, and he turns, spits words that she's seen scrawled under the bridge, then shrinks away when he sees the whirling shape, an animal blur of fur circling, tracking by scent. The girl lifts her eyes, and there she is; a fierce young woman with white hair spiked around her head like a solar eclipse. From her ear hangs a starfish on a chain. *Your mother sent me*, she says. Then, she whistles, and the animal leaps into her arms, nuzzles back inside her coat as she stoops to help the child stand. *It's a ferret. Do you want to hold it?* The young woman unbuttons her coat and the child is surprised by how soft and white her breasts are. The ferret's claws have left red dents, but the skin isn't broken. The child forgets she is lost. She touches its slinky, quivering length, so furtive and so explosive under her small hand. *If you're not afraid, it can help you*, and she places the ferret inside the child's coat, warm, where her breast will grow one day. The woman walks away and leaves her, the ferret curled next to her heart.

*Nadine McInnis*