Shattered!

Jane’s simple; Camille’s complex. Both are in trouble. Emily Carter reflects on two tales of adult abuse.

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In the first story, the character is named something all-purpose and apocryphal, like Jane. Jane’s husband beats her with increasing frequency and severity. The police take a laissez-faire attitude; her resources are limited. Finally, she flees to a women’s shelter, and with the help of a dedicated group of women, goes through the legal procedures necessary to obtain a restraining order.

One afternoon she is bringing her kids back from day care, on the way to drop them off at a relative’s house between her job and nursing class. Her husband, whom a restraining order deters the way a hurricane fence deters a hurricane, approaches the car and fires two bullets into her brain in front of her terrified children. The system has failed her; now she’s one more martyr in the war against women. This is a story that at least has the virtue of an identifiable villain—and it is, of course, true as death.

The other is less widely told, because it’s more complicated and relies on that slippery psychological catalyst, the self, to set it in motion. This woman, call her Camille, is also getting beaten up. And cheated on. And stolen from. Every six months, Camille shows up at my doorstep in the middle of the night, packed and ready to go to a shelter, kids in tow. I make her tea. She’s on her way—this is the last time. Then the phone rings.

In fact, Camille has run out of doorsteps. We know she’ll keep going back to her abusive old man until, finally, he leaves her and her children for a much younger woman who understands the pressures that cause him to drink heavily. At which point Camille might slit her wrists, allowing her terrified children to discover her in the bathtub. And while I no longer drop everything for a role in Camille’s drama, I have no intention of judging her harshly. Her relationship with her husband is a mirror of my relationship with smack and coke and other things that led to my turning up HIV positive.

In a way, Jane’s struggle was easier. The enemy was on the outside. The enemy within is more cunning and dangerous than the one without. To root it out you have to ignore all the heinous crap the world is constantly pulling and point the finger squarely at your own chest.

The dynamic of victim and perpetrator is a poisonous little spinning top. It’s hidden someplace so

dark that neither education nor political empowerment nor the rhetoric of self-esteem can find this venomous little mechanism, which whirls around with a hissing, perpetual hum, impervious to reason. And it exists outside of class, race, serostatus and even gender. I can name college graduate friends who made up well-written lists on their computers of reasons they were getting out of bad, even dangerous, relationships. Then the phone would ring and the lists were forgotten. What did that tell the men hurting them?

Probably that they could do whatever they wanted and the women would come crawling back. If you were endowed with only a human amount of cruelty in your psyche, it would be tempting to take advantage of such a situation and kick the dog cowering at your feet. Just because you could.

The question then, is not just how to make people nicer to their dogs, but how to make dogs less likely to take a kick in the ribs. I say this having spent my time in the kennel, playing Camille. Trust me, no rational discourse could have changed my belief that only the one who hurt me could make me feel better. I would've had to verbalize it first, and that would have been unthinkably shameful.

HIVers, it has to be said, often got the bug by taking risks with our bodies, behaving in compulsive and addictive ways. We went back again and again to abusive lovers—human and chemical. In the dichotomized discourse of today we either absolve people of all responsibility or blame them completely. This is black-and-white thinking at its worst. The masochistic repetitions that led me and others to return to our abusers should be neither stigmatized nor enabled. You don't yell at someone for being a drug addict. It wouldn't work in the first place, and then you'd only trap them in their shame. It's the same with someone in an abusive relationship. On the other hand, there's no reason to help them hurt themselves—or you.

The war on adult abuse must be fought on two fronts. Humanists with a legal bent need to fight the visible enemy. On the unseen front, there's only one person who can keep you from becoming a victim. She can do this not by telling you to value yourself, but by showing you, through her own actions, that she values herself. That person, of course, is Mom. And the more young women who grow up without the gnawing worm of self-loathing hidden in their breasts, the more mothers there will be who will show their daughters how not to take shit.

This is how you fight a war for people's souls. If we win, there will be a lot fewer battered lovers, a lot fewer people risking their health and harming their own bodies. And fewer people who will jump up, helpless and frantic, when the phone rings.

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