

“He Won’t Hurt Us Anymore”: A Feminist Performance of Healing for Children Who Witness Domestic Violence

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This autoethnographic essay is my attempt to work through a history of violence my mother’s ex-husband enacted on us. At the intersection of trauma, memory, and performance, I have uncovered the violent moments that haunted my adolescence and early adulthood and led to feelings of helplessness, fear, and anger. Feminist storytelling helps untangle my victim identity from the powerful moments of my survivorship. I hope that the stories I share of my embodied experiences of gendered violence demonstrate the significance of feminist storytelling for survivors of domestic violence. Looking to feminism as a performance of healing from memories of trauma is a new way to move feminism from the theoretical to the pragmatic. Communication scholars must investigate more of these narratives to secure feminism’s place as a forum for healing.

Keywords autoethnography, domestic violence, feminism, identity, performance

I am 10 years old. I can tell it is going to be a good day because Eric, my stepdad, is smiling and playing with RyRy, my two-year-old brother. Mommy cooked breakfast, and a breeze is blowing the curtain up at the kitchen window and helping spread the smell of bacon through the rest of the house. I am excited because she said I could take a shower for the first time. I’m a big girl now. Baths are for babies.

After breakfast, I turn on the faucet in the tub. I move my fingers through the stream of water. It’s warm and comforting. I step into the shower, pull the curtain forward, and shout, “Mommy, I’m taking a shower!”

“You’re such a big girl, Dani!” she responds.

I hear Mommy join Eric in playing with RyRy. Yes, today is a good day.

I love how the water forms beads of all sizes and rolls off my skin. This fascinates me so much that I lose track of time. I turn the water off and pull back the curtain. The bathroom fills with steam, and I am suddenly hot. I grab a towel, turn my head upside down, and wrap it just like Mommy does. I am too short to see all of my face in the mirror above the sink, but I smile at the perfect twist sitting atop my head. I’m happy, but something seems wrong. With the water off, not only is the room quiet, but the rest of the house sounds eerily still.

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“Mommy?” I shout. No reply. “Moommyyyy?!” Nothing. I grab another towel, wrap it underneath my arms, and tuck it like I’ve seen Mommy do. When I step into the hallway, I shout for her again. “Mommy? Mommy!”

No response.

My body tenses. I don’t know where anyone is. The front door is open, sunlight blaring through the screen onto the already shiny hardwood floors. I peek out and see Mommy running at the end of the block. Her eyes are wide with fear. I hear screaming, her own terror-filled cry for help, as well as Eric’s shouts of rage that match his crazy, yet determined, expression. Eric is chasing her with a knife in the opposite direction of our house. She jumps over a chain link fence.

Where is my brother? I don’t know what to do. As I see them run back toward the house, I run to my room and think about what I will do if he comes in. I look out my open window. We live on the first floor, but it’s a long way down to the yard. Where’s RyRy? I don’t want to leave him, but I’m scared. As I stick one leg out the window, Mommy comes into my room. I run into her arms and cry.

“It’s going to be okay, sweetie. He won’t hurt us anymore. The police are on their way.”

I don’t realize it, but I have been holding my breath. I let it out over Mommy’s shoulder. I feel like crying, but for some reason I can’t.

Domestic Violence and the Importance of Voice

According to Edleson (1999), most studies on the impact of domestic violence on children rely exclusively on mothers’ reports. However, there has been a rise in exploration of children’s direct experience (Buckley, Whelan, & Holt, 2006; Hague & Mullender, 2006; McGee, 2000; Mullender et al., 2002). McIntosh (2003) labeled children as silent witnesses whose voices must be excavated in qualitative research. Scholars must find ways to make sense of children’s experiences (McIntosh, 2002; Mullender et al., 2002) and navigate around the “complexity and terror intrinsic to domestic violence” (Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008, p. 798). While my story is unique to my experiences, domestic violence affects one in four women in the United States (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2007), and up to 10 million children witness domestic violence annually (The Center for Women and Families, n.d.). Of families who have experienced domestic violence, McGee (2000) found that 71% of children witnessed the physical assault of their mother and 10% witnessed the rape of their mother. In 2013, U.S. Congress almost failed to renew legislation for the Violence Against Women Act (Helderman, 2013). Feminist communication scholars must reinvigorate scholarship on violence because domestic violence impacts hegemonic public discourses about gender and family roles (Nettleton, 2011). In addition, domestic violence harms our bodies and our parent–child relationships, including our identity formation informed by those relationships (Cunningham & Baker, 2004; Levendosky, Huth-Bocks, Shapiro, & Semel, 2003). I use this space to continue academic research on violence, exploring through autoethnographic inquiry the impact of violence on the identities of children who have witnessed it.

As this essay demonstrates, autoethnographic inquiry both “shows people in the process of using communication to achieve an understanding of their lives and circumstances” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 111) and allows readers to witness an author “learning how to live, struggling to make sense of their lives and their losses, healing their wounds, trying to move on from and survive the unnerving blows of fate to

which all of us are vulnerable” (p. 118). I thought I had already come to terms with my experience of violence, but my mother’s death from lung cancer a few years ago brought to the surface an arrested process. This autoethnographic essay is an attempt to work through a history of violence enacted on my mother during a present where I am on my own in making meaning from our shared trauma. My story maintains a decidedly feminist stance in that it embraces a reflexivity that often eludes social scientific studies of relational concepts such as violence to allow voice for me as an author (Foster, 2008), but also in that it moves a social problem from being mere statistics or case studies into the realm of lived, felt experience as a way of knowing (Manning, 2009).

It also enacts a feminist aesthetic of examining forgiveness. In not forgiving my mother for making decisions that kept me a witness to her abuse, I could not forget a shared past informed by violence in ways that impacted my identity and relationships. Admitting my own victimization meant seeing my mother in myself, an acceptance I was not ready for during her life. What I once rejected, I now embrace as an opportunity to find meaning in the interrelationship of trauma, memory, and performance. My performed self is rooted in the stories of violence I heard from my mother, experienced with her, and told to myself and others. Just as Butler (1990) reminds us that identity categories are not stable but responses to social norms and scripts, I need to recognize that my experience does not lock me into a victim identity. I need to untangle my feminist self from the victim self linked to trauma.

Tamas (2011) interviewed other survivors of spousal abuse to contextualize her own trauma, resulting in a mosaic assemblage of performative dialogue and poetry. While my project did not include discussions with other surviving witnesses to family violence, my process of remembering, writing, reflecting, connecting to published scholarship, rewriting, and reflecting again is itself a performative act. Young (2009) turned to narrative as a methodological approach to explore identity construction via stories she shared with her mother. In my mother’s absence, I turn to recollections of violent acts and conversations shared with my mother, and moments I experienced after her death, to write my identity story. This approach builds on the layered account introduced by Ronai (1995), in which I place different versions of myself at various points of my identity development in conversation with one another. To distinguish between present-day writing from memory work, I use italics for vignettes drawing on recollections of past experiences. The narrative is not chronological but instead thematic, layered moments of witnessing violence in my childhood, coping with my mother’s illness and death, and coming to terms with my survivorship. Through my autoethnographic process, violence—that performed on us and by our own hands—moves me beyond a fixed victim identity to an entry point for a flexible performance of healing.

Autoethnographic research has carefully explored loss and death (for a complete discussion, see Ellis, 2007, p. 14; Vande Berg & Trujillo, 2008), topics that complicate the ethical responsibilities of the researcher. Some of these essays of loss serve to memorialize loved ones (Ellis, 1993). Others serve to co-construct meaning through memory. According to Fox (2010), the focus on the individual who is writing autoethnography “is precisely what makes its considerations of memory particularly important and heuristically provocative” (p. 17). Other essays reflect the role of narrative and reflexivity as an act of healing. According to Ellis (2007), “Writing difficult stories is a gift to self, a reflexive attempt to construct meaning in our lives and heal or grow from our pain” (p. 26). My excavation of trauma through feminist storytelling

not only helps my own healing but might also help others who witnessed domestic violence during childhood. I can move from what Caruth (1995) terms the “isolation” of surviving trauma to a belated communication of “departure” with others (p. 11). Caruth (1991) argues that we can only experience trauma by “the act of leaving” (p. 190), for the actual traumatic event is never fully known during and in the wake of trauma when forgetting is a survival mechanism. Through writing and storytelling informed by a feminist ethic of care, I begin to find power in traumatic moments of powerlessness.

My autoethnographic account, while informed by memories of trauma with my mother, my brother, and stepfathers, is still *my* account. The narrative process of remembering and constructing my identity story results in what Medford (2006) terms “slippage”: “The difference between what we know (or what we cannot remember) and what we write is *mindful* slippage” (p. 853). While my identity story is perhaps ethically muddled (Ellis, 2001, p. 615) since I cannot obtain consent from my mother,¹ it is still an important narrative blueprint (Fox, 2007, p. 8). My testimony, or what Felman and Laub (1992) term “bearing witness” (pp. 4, 62), connects my survivorship to my mother’s death but also to others’ tales of loss and survival of trauma. While I may never fully move past my experience of witnessing violence for so much of my childhood, by listening to and communicating my trauma (Felman and Laub, 1992) I become part of a network of survivorship. The primacy of voice, listening, and connection compel me to argue that this is a distinctly feminist endeavor. Survivors of domestic violence can connect to stories of trauma in my childhood home that I want to forget and, simultaneously, reclaim. This story is part of a broader social milieu of gendered family violence that informs my identity as a feminist scholar. I offer my story as a blend of modernist (social-scientific) and traditional (art-oriented) forms of understanding (Manning & Kunkel, 2014) to extend this feminist enterprise.

A History of Violence

In the 30 years I've shared with Mom, the past few have been the best. I think since I've moved so far away, we've tried to make our days together count. For example, my first spring break after moving to Athens, Ohio, for graduate school coincided with my birthday. During my visit home, Mom surprised me with a trip to the Magic House. Sure, I was 25, but I don't remember going there as a kid, so the whole experience was fun and exciting. I have a picture of our hair standing on end from the static electricity ball. I also loved going with her, Terry (my stepdad), and my dad to watch my brother, Ryan, play football, baseball, track, or whatever sport he was into at the time. However, shouting for Ryan—the fast, little guy running past (or under) the slow, fat guys—brought the most joy. And in no disrespect to the other fabulous, loving people in our lives, the duration of Mom's pregnancy with Ryan, when it was just the two of us, provided some of the most cherished moments of my then seven-year-old existence. We picked out baby names, clothes, watched movies late at night, and baked cookies whenever we felt like it. Although I enjoyed having Mom all to myself during that time, the anticipation of the arrival of a new sibling to share all that love Mom had to give made my heart so full and open wide.

The preceding paragraph comes from an entry to the blog I created when Mom was diagnosed with cancer. I posted it on her birthday, about a year into her treatment, and encouraged others to share their favorite memories of her, too. My first-grade year is one of only a few genuine moments of happiness and contentment

with my relationship with my mother. It is not that I selfishly enjoyed her sole attention. Rather, my younger years with her were informed by her escaping the loss of my twin sister during our violent birth. She coped with the loss through drinking and dancing into the early hours of the morning. I spent many nights during my first five years with family and friends, especially after my parents' marriage dissolved before my second birthday, something common for parents who lose a child (Worden, 2009), and my mother began single parenthood.

I didn't realize it at the time, but my father expressed his grief and frustration in violent outbursts toward my mom a few times, including after the divorce when they tried living together again. I was angry at her for leaving him over and over, but years later I recalled scenes from when I was in preschool of the police arriving to our apartment and my mother refusing to press charges. Instead, we started anew, and she fell in love with and married a coworker, who ended up being abusive and manipulative. Soon after that divorce, she met the man who would later become her third husband, the most controlling and violent of them all. It is an unfortunate story that happens for many women. Those who have a relationship with an abuser tend to enter other relationships with abusers (Brewster, 2005).

With Eric, her third husband, we should have seen the signs, especially when he accused her of cheating and left her when she told him she was pregnant with my brother. Although I was only six years old, I implicated myself along with my mother in this failure to see—blindness? inability to see?—because at the time we seemed like one unit. She and I had been through so much that sometimes our parent-child roles and responsibilities collapsed in on each other. Regarding the complex interrelationship of battered mothers and their children, Levendosky and Graham-Bermann (2001) found that “even if the mother is able to maintain adequate parenting, the changes in her affect and mood could have deleterious effects on her children's emotional well-being. For example, the child may worry more about the mother” (p. 184). In the example here, my mother's problems became my own, despite her trying to maintain traditional parent-child roles. Eric wooed us. He knew that to earn my mom's trust, he had to win over the kid. He damaged that trust when he abruptly left. However, around my brother's first birthday, Eric contacted my mom. He wanted us to forgive him and allow him to be a father to Ryan.

I have included some of my mother's relational history here because it led into the violent experiences that are the main thread of this essay, so describing it functions as an important step in the process of autoethnographic performance. Mom's background is something I have always known, yet only writing memories on the page allowed for connections between my experience of my mother's choices and my identity development. My lived experience can become a performance of healing only when I work through it. Working through it, for me, is writing my story. Because my story is informed by much of my mother's story, I must share for both of us at times.

“Don't move!” the man with the gun to my mom's side shouted. “If you scream, little girl, I will kill your mommy. Don't fuck with me.”

He had grabbed her as she walked back to the car from the food stamp office in midtown. He pretended to be talking into the passenger window of a car next to ours, which was parked conspicuously close to the driver's side of our Pontiac Phoenix.

When she reached the door, he turned around and shoved a gun into her ribs. She threw her keys inside the car and clutched her purse. I grabbed the keys and jumped on top of Ryan's car seat.

Despite the man's orders, I screamed. I screamed louder than I knew possible: "HELP! HELP US! HE'S GOT A GUN." The man was stunned. He couldn't believe the little girl had such a big mouth. He jumped into the other car as the driver furiously pulled away.

The gun incident happened before Mom and Eric were living together. Although in my teen years, I had thought Mom and I dealt with Eric's later violence as a team, it did not seem so at the time. Mom wanted to be alone, crying, or sleeping in her room. But *this*, this violence, this gun to her hip as I screamed for her life (perhaps risking my own) had forged us into survivors. Instead of going to counseling, like I now realize we should have, we never talked about the incident. Mom curled up in the fetal position on the living room rug after we reported the crime to police, who arrived moments after the attacker fled. This might have been when I started doubting the existence of God. I had read Job in the Bible. My mom was not Job. She was just a woman trying to provide for her kids. She wanted safety, security. She thought Eric could provide that for us.

"Mommy, please, please, please don't marry him," I begged her shortly after Eric moved in with us. It's not that I didn't want her to be happy, but something did not seem right about Eric. He left us. I know Daddy left, too, but Mommy made him leave. He didn't want to, but they couldn't get along. I miss Daddy, but I'm glad the fighting stopped. He is happy when I see him now. I get to have both Mommy and Daddy to myself. Well, I share them with RyRy, but that's okay. I love RyRy. I do not love Eric.

"You promised, Mommy!" I shout at her when she tells me a few weeks later that she will marry Eric. "You promised!"

"I know, honey, but you'll see. We'll make this work. Eric loves us. I love him."

I'm not buying it, but what can a nine-year-old do? My pouting turns to huge tears just before Mommy walks down the aisle of the little church. She wears a beautiful peach summer dress, Eric a gray suit. I am the flower girl, so I wear an ivory lace dress with long sleeves and delicate buttons. Eric kneels down next to me, gently holds my shoulders, looks me in the eye, and says, "Dani, I will never leave you again. I love you. Don't you love me?" I slowly nod and force a smile. Mom kneels too, and the three of us hug.

"See? A happy family," Eric says.

"A happy family," Mom repeats.

Soon after they were married, the physical violence that would define my adolescent development began.

"Who told you that you could leave?!" Eric shouts. He spits in her face. I've never seen her so sad. Nothing, not even fear, is in her eyes.

She had come home very early in the morning. She doesn't usually leave us alone with Eric, but I think she needed to get away after Eric had made her stay in their bedroom for a few days. I don't know why he makes her do that sometimes. Mommy is good. Eric is bad. HE should be the one sent to his room.

While Mommy was in her room for so long, I had to make SpaghettiOs for dinner for me and RyRy. I burned my finger on the stove, but if I had bothered Mommy it would have upset Eric.

Eric's hands wrap around her neck. He lifts her off the ground and thrashes her body back and forth against the foyer walls.

I can't move. Why can't I turn away? What if this is it? What if he kills her? I want to see her eyes. I want to know she is alive. I want her to know I am here. Mommy, I'm up here! Fight! Stay with us! He slams his fist into her jaw. CRACK! She falls to the ground.

Silence, then sirens and flashing lights fill my senses. The ambulance takes Mommy away. The cops take Eric. Maybe my aunt takes me and RyRy. I don't remember.

I began volunteering at a women's shelter during graduate school. Just a few weeks in, a paid shelter aide position opened. Although I had moved 500 miles away to complete a PhD in media studies, a need for more income and a desire to help women and children who had experienced violence compelled me to accept the job. Despite having lived through it, nothing could prepare me for the scared looks in the children's eyes when I would bring them and their mothers to the shelter. The first woman for whom I completed an intake had three children. The oldest was six. Like me when I was little, she took on the role of calm caretaker to both her siblings and her mother, stroking her little brother's face and telling her mother that everything would be okay. I went home that night to my graduate student apartment and wept in the fetal position. *Crying. Always crying.*

I lasted almost two years at that job, when the need to pass my comprehensive exams in a timely fashion led me to quit. During that time I spent a depressing Christmas overnight in an empty shelter. Women would feel guilty having their families apart at the holidays and would leave on Christmas Eve or sooner, only to return often days or weeks later after another violent scene. *Returning, always returning.*

"Do you want to see me kick your mommy?" Eric's eyes are wide. He grabs Ryan from her arms. His nostrils flare as he tosses my baby brother to the couch.

I gasp.

It happens too quickly for me to catch him. He lands on the cushions and blankets. He is okay. I hope he doesn't know what is going on.

Eric's mouth tightens as he lifts his leg behind him, swings it forward, and plants his leather, thick-soled boot on her chest. Her body falls backward into the chair as I scream.

"There!!!" Eric shouts in Mommy's face. "That will show you to leave me alone, bitch! Whore!" A satisfied smile covers his face. A red boot print flares on her bare collarbone area. He swings his arm, his fist tight, and punches her face.

"Why!!!!" I scream. She had only recently recovered from the broken jaw. I don't think it's broken this time, but it's hard to tell right now.

My mom was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer the day after Valentine's Day in my second year in a tenure-track position at my university. I interrupted semesters multiple times to fly to be with her at important stages of her treatment. The first was within a week of her first hospital stay for what she thought was pneumonia. It turned out to be inoperable small-cell lung cancer. My last visit with her was for a week about a month before she died. She seemed more distant and slow during that week. However, since she had not experienced rapid weight loss or appetite reduction yet (like all the research I'd mined said would happen), I thought we had much more time left together. I had been visiting for an extended fall break while my department colleagues covered my courses. Although my visits to my hometown in the nearly 10 years since I first moved away to attend graduate school were usually scheduled with seeing old friends and extended family, this time I spent most of my days and nights talking and watching television with my mom—or at least trying to.

Mom had been spending more daytime hours sleeping and evening hours sitting in the basement with her cigarettes and soap operas. I tried not to resent her for it, as her oncologist's hospice recommendation from earlier that autumn indicated that

smoking now could not make her prognosis any worse than it already was. To be fair, she had quit smoking for a few months after her diagnosis and agreed to many months of invasive treatment. I think knowing that her cancer was terminal, whether or not she smoked, justified her decision to continue with the vice. However, observing her grab her cigarette pack, lighter, and jug of iced tea before descending into the dark, secluded basement gave me no comfort at all. Over and over that week—the period that I didn't realize would be the last opportunity to spend time with her—she told me to join her. But despite wanting to be near her, it hurt too much to watch her slowly give up. I begrudgingly joined her a couple of times that week. I now see my own selfishness in not accepting her choice to be selfish in her own way.

“What do you want to watch tonight?” she asks. In the years since I moved away, my mother and I often spend my visits home binge-watching television shows that she knows I cannot view on my own, as she and Terry subscribe to premium cable. These viewing sessions are reminiscent of our late night movies of my childhood.

“We're all caught up on Weeds, Dexter, and United States of Tara,” I reply. “Is there something new I haven't seen?”

“I started watching The Big C on Showtime,” she says. “Laura Linney is amazing in it.”

“Um, isn't that the one about cancer?”

“Yes, but it's so funny, Sissy. I mean, there are some parts that are hard to watch, but I know what she is going through. Her son reminds me of RyRy, and her husband is like Terry—so supportive. She is a teacher, like you. Well, she teaches high school, but it makes me picture you in the classroom with your students.”

We both smile.

“You know, Sissy,” she continues. “I always said I wanted to sit in on one of your classes. I bet you are the best professor. I thought there would be plenty of time for that,” she chokes up as I reach for her.

“I don't know why I was so embarrassed about the idea,” I apologize. “But don't forget, you DID show up with a video camera when my conference was here a few years ago. I was mortified.”

“Too bad,” she laughs. “Your friends didn't seem to mind.”

She's right. The problem was all mine. Despite my face turning the same shade of red as the recording light on the video camera when my mom shuffled in a few minutes late during my presentation, I felt special that she cared enough to shake her anxiety to attend and then have drinks and dinner with us. What I would give for more of those opportunities? Instead, I don't know how much time we have left. She has been on hospice for about a month but is still moving around okay. I don't notice a difference from when she and Terry visited me for their wedding anniversary last month. In fact, she was in more pain THEN than now. It must be because treatment is over and the biggest concern has switched to managing her pain.

“Let's start watching it, Sissy. But first, will you pass me that lighter, please?”

Questions that I did not ask as a child but wanted to as an adult remain unanswered: What happened when I went into the shower? Why can't I recall my brother being present? He always has been a heavy sleeper. Could he really have slept through the whole thing? I wake up at the slightest noise. Is there something important I am forgetting? Did the neighbors help? Why didn't Eric stay in jail? Why did he grab a knife? In high school and college, I saw how difficult it was just for my

mom to get out of bed, so I did not bother her with these questions. Now that she is gone, I will never have answers. I do know that my mom's friends came over and helped us pack after that terrifying incident. We moved a few cities away, but within the year Eric broke into our new apartment and beat and raped my mom while my three-year-old brother watched. I had been staying with my dad at the time and became suspicious when she picked me up wearing sunglasses on a gray afternoon. She didn't remove them when we walked into the apartment. Instead, she said she needed to take a shower. Within minutes of her entering the bathroom, I heard a thud and she cried out. I ran to check, when she said she had fallen and slipped in the shower. Her eye was bruised and dark.

"I'm sorry to worry you, Sissy," she said. "I'm such a klutz."

I went with her story at the time but could not ignore the images of Eric shaking and punching my mom violently the previous year—sending her to the hospital with a busted jaw for only one day when he made her leave and come home to take care of him. If Eric had hurt my mom again, I wanted to know so that I might be able to tell a family member in the hopes of convincing my mom to press charges and get a restraining order. My experience is consistent with scholarship on children and domestic violence (Holt et al., 2008), in that we become aware of the impact of abuse on our mothers and in turn try to prevent it if possible. A few days later I asked her to tell me the truth.

"What gives, Mom? I know you're not clumsy like me." In fact, Mom had the best reflexes of anyone I knew. She was an athlete throughout high school. Later, she had to learn how to move quickly to avoid the blows. "How did you hurt your eye?"

"It was Eric," she confirmed, her eyes avoiding mine.

While some parents and researchers might judge my mother for exposing me to the reality of the situation, she knew I could see through her earlier intent to protect me from this knowledge. She eventually obtained a restraining order, which Eric soon violated with a baseball bat, sending my mother to the hospital for a much longer time and resulting in her honorable discharge from the Naval Reserve when she failed her next physical exam due to bruising, bone fractures, and constant pain. When we finally left Eric, Mom needed more income as a single head of household with two young children. She turned to training as a dental technician for the Navy Reserve, for which she was usually gone only one weekend a month.

"Honey, I have something to tell you."

"What, Mommy?"

"Mommy's not going to be leaving for weeks at a time anymore. I'm going to spend more time with you and RyRy."

Although I love the surprises Mommy brings me from her Navy training and assignments—once she brought me a beautiful hand-painted mask from New Orleans and another time saltwater taffy and seashells from Virginia Beach—I am secretly happy that Mommy will be home more. But because she looks so sad about it, I do not want to ask her why. Purple and yellow bruises cover her arms and face. Why does Eric keep hurting her? Why don't the cops throw him in jail forever and keep us safe? Why doesn't Grandpa or one of my uncles beat him up and show him how it feels? Mommy hugs me and cries. Crying, always crying.

"Mommy's tired, sweetie. Let me get some rest, please."

I've lost track of the beatings, the flashing blue and red lights, and the restraining orders. I am just a couple of years older than my mom was when Eric beat her with the bat. My back aches after just an hour of sitting and writing. How did she ever manage the constant pain? Not just the blows to the jaw, eye, ribs, and spine but also the

chronic soreness of unhealed wounds? All those years of not understanding why she was rotating between crying and sleeping, of thinking she was weak, I realize now that not only was her body beat up—so was her spirit. Although I did not realize it at the time, my spirit was also fading. If she was 32, I was just a few weeks shy of 12, both of us too young to feel so old.

Edleson (1999) summarized decades of literature on the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive problems children experience following witnessing domestic violence. Struggles include depression, trauma-related symptoms, and low self-esteem, but emotional coping is the most difficult adjustment. Children not only witness the violence but also sometimes the destructive coping behaviors of the battered mother. Watching my mother grow detached impacted my own emotional health. Herman (1992a, b) found that many battered women exhibit symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including depression, anxiety, and dissociation. I realized later, after my mother sought addiction recovery and clinical therapy, that she was clearly in the throes of PTSD. She chose to suppress the trauma using alcohol and drugs.² While not diagnosed as a PTSD victim, I am a survivor of my own trauma. How did I get from there to here?

The tears flow as I recall the violent scenes of my youth. I have always wanted to find a way to make sense of the bruises, the broken bones, the sleepless nights. My mother and I watched films about battered wives but never discussed them. The made-for-TV movies, such as *The Burning Bed* starring Farrah Fawcett and *A Cry for Help: The Tracey Thurman Story* with Nancy McKeon, sting because they are too real. Eric was just as much a monster as the abusers, although we never burned his bed or got a law enacted. The Hollywood films are too melodramatic. *Sleeping With the Enemy* with Julia Roberts and *Enough* starring Jennifer Lopez make it seem like women must have super sleuthing skills and strength to overcome their victimization, ultimately killing their abusers. Perhaps this early critical response to media visibility and representation is where my personal feminist identity began emerging. My professional feminist identity emerged in my first undergraduate gender communication class. During college, I also worked as a student journalist and in community relations at a nonprofit for disadvantaged children. For me, advocacy and policy were the most tangible solutions to counteract violence. Through scholarships and grants, I had the privilege of developing a middle-class feminist political viewpoint at a university. However, growing up in a racially mixed and economically underprivileged community informed a social justice feminist motivation. These intersections of race, class, and gender, while not unique to my experience, led me to want to escape a cycle of violence and victimhood. Education was my exit point. *Learning, always learning.*

“Honey, I’m so happy for you,” Mom told me when we learned I received funding to attend a PhD program. She helped me pack and drove with me 500 miles east when the time came to leave Illinois. When my academic friends would complain that their families did not seem to care about their research or teaching, I felt special for feeling comfortable discussing my work with my mom. She consistently asked what I was studying and how my students were doing. I did my best to translate the academic jargon of feminism and critical theory. As my nonacademic friends began marrying and having children, it was always my mom who knew not to ask when these life changes would come for me. Most everyone else would ask the dreaded question: “When is it your turn?” But not my mom. I was enough for her.

For all my criticisms and confusion over my Mom keeping us in a cycle of violence, there is no replacement for a daughter knowing she is enough. Sadly, I did not know it when I was a child. As I grew into adulthood and began to forgive my mother slowly, I realized that I had not accepted that she was enough for me, but I was certainly enough for her. When other moms were encouraging my friends to go on diets or convincing them to try out for cheerleading or pep club to be more popular, my mother accepted my body, encouraged my mind. As I write, I am careful to not make this story into revisionist history. During my recollections of feeling love and not blaming my mother, I want to be clear that this is not how I felt as a child. It took many years of living away from my mother, possibly her death, and especially now this writing process, to fully understand how trauma impacted our lives.

“Have you been working on anything new?” Mom asks over the phone. Even though the last round of radiation before the doctors recommended hospice has left her tired and weak, she still makes sure to ask how I am doing. She knows work is important to me, especially while I’ve been struggling to want to just be home with her instead of teaching and writing.

“The Mad Men research is coming along. If you tried watching it, I think you’d enjoy it,” I respond.

“You’ve said that before, but I can’t get into it. It’s easier to escape into One Tree Hill or old episodes of Dawson’s Creek.” I laugh. Mom started watching reruns of teen TV programs when I moved away to grad school. She says it makes her think of me even though I never really got into those shows. It makes sense, now that I realize college-aged actors were playing the high school roles. I wonder if that’s what she thinks my life was like when I was away at school.

Television was always a connection point for Mom and me. When she would update me on Victor and Nikki I had to pause, remembering they were characters on *The Young and the Restless* rather than her actual friends. It’s no wonder television studies was my first academic endeavor. I am drawn to stories but, more important, stories that resonate with my experience. That’s probably what my mother was trying to explain about *Mad Men*. I began watching it with a critical feminist eye, but also because I thought it would give me insight into my some of my mother’s childhood. Born in 1959, Mom would have been around the same age as Sally Draper, the daughter of *Mad Men*’s antihero, Don Draper. I know now it was probably too painful for my mother to watch the series’ portrayals of alcoholism, secrets, and oppression. The sixth season finale, where Don slowly tries to share his past with his children by showing them the brothel in which he was raised, left me sobbing. I yearn for a chance for my mother to be able to reveal herself to me.

“You’d like One Tree Hill if you gave it a chance,” Mom offers. “But I know you already watch so many other shows for your research. I’m just glad you’re able to concentrate. It’s got to be hard for you to concentrate.”

“It is, Ma. Part of me wants to just take leave—” She cuts me off.

“I won’t hear of it. You’ve flown out here plenty of times now, and there’s nothing you could really do here. Terry’s boss has been great, letting him stay home with me and everything. You have enough on your plate. Besides, aren’t you going to San Francisco for your conference soon?”

“Yes, but I’ve been there before. I can cancel.”

"You will not, young lady. It makes me so proud to think of you talking in front of all of those people. I hate that you're flying that far, though. You be careful."

"I will, Ma. You'll call if things get worse, right?"

"Of course, Sissy. I love you."

"I love you, too. Good night."

"Good night. Sleep tight. Don't let the bedbugs bite."

Mom always had to get the last word in on the phone. When the doctors said they were discontinuing treatment, Mom said she would spend her time at home instead of in a care center. I was terrified of the word *hospice*. It meant the end was near. Since Mom chose home over a professional facility, I deceptively thought this meant we would have more months, instead of weeks, with her. I didn't realize that would be our last real conversation.

"I think it's time, Dani." Terry's voice echoes on the other end of the telephone line.

"Time for what?" I asked but already knew.

"Time to come home. I think she's giving up."

I still wonder what would have happened to us had Mom not met Terry. Her previous husbands, save for my dad, never showed genuine care for her, nor for me and my brother. Eric, especially because he was in our lives so long, had the time to expose himself as an opportunist. He fell into an instant family with a beautiful wife, smart daughter, and adoring son. When that family slipped away, he had only his physical brawn to use to try to force it back under his thumb. Eric hurt Mom one more time after she began dating Terry, beating her so terribly that no man would want her, he said. Terry was not deterred. While Eric may not have fired a fatal bullet, I believe strongly that his many blows to her body killed her slowly.

"Why didn't you leave earlier, Mom?" I ask her when I am much older.

"I was afraid for my life, honey. And yours and Ryan's too," she replies. "I didn't know what he was capable of."

My mother's experience rings true with narratives of other battered women. According to Olson (2004), women who are abused by their relationship partners often blame themselves for inciting violence from their abusers. I heard my mother say things like, "I just need to learn not to aggravate him when he's been drinking" and "He just needs his space." Because Mom shared a child with her abuser, it made it that much more difficult to cut Eric out of her life. After her death, I am left knowing he is still alive. She blamed herself for years, but I want to blame him.

Blame HIM for the feelings of worthlessness that led her to alcoholism and drug addiction. Blame HIM for the fear of safety and isolation she felt even after finding a gentle partner who comforted her during night terrors. Blame HIM for the years of nicotine reliance that were her only comfort after overcoming other addictions. Blame HIM for the anxiety disorder that kept her from seeing a doctor when the coughing would not stop. Blame HIM for my mother not being able to comfort ME in my childhood, adolescence, nor adulthood during her life. Blame HIM for my mother not being able to see ME get married, earn tenure, and possibly have children after her death. Blame HIM for MY own restless nights. Blame HIM for MY insecurities and feelings of abandonment, grief, and trauma. Blame HIM for MY entanglements with alcoholic partners. Blame HIM for my strained relationship with my brother, who has yet to find the necessary outlets to deal with the violence he witnessed his father inflicting on his mother. Blame HIM for the fact that I will never get to tell my mother in person that I forgive her.

“Hey, Dani. Come here, sweetie.”

Eric leans toward me as I stand next to my mother’s casket. I have been preparing myself for this moment since I learned her diagnosis was terminal. Because my mother never wanted my brother to resent her, she did not cut Eric out of our lives, as I wished she had more than 20 years ago.

“A boy should know his father,” she had said. I followed my mom’s lead and was polite to him in the rare times I saw him after she and Terry were married, when Eric finally left us alone. Now Eric hugs me. His touch turns my already cold body to ice, but his term of endearment, “sweetie,” makes my insides boil with contempt. Mom would understand if I pulled away too soon or did not speak to him, but she would not want a scene. She had somehow forgiven him, but I do not know if absolution came before or after her death sentence. Instead I gently smile and thank him as he says, “I’m so proud of you. Your mom was too.”

Feminist Performance and a Narrative of Healing

I wasn’t home with my mom until the afternoon before she died. Instead, I was in San Francisco, dispassionately “building bridges” at the NCA convention. Then getting stuck in airports. Then finally making it back to the East Coast. And then packing up to drive to the Midwest with my partner and dog to be with my mom. It’s all a blur. The hurriedness of that day, including running between gates to make the connection, served as a distraction from the visceral realization my mom was about to die. I admittedly stressed over the small things—from the erratic ride in the shuttle, to the long security line, throwing away belongings that really didn’t matter to me so that I didn’t have to check a bag—to avoid the obvious, raw emotion of no longer having a mom.

Although I have not lived in guilt that I was not there with my mom in the last few days, many “what ifs” and questions run through my head. By the time we made it to my mom around noon (just two days after I flew out of the conference city before driving 1,000 miles to get to her), she couldn’t really talk. We weren’t sure if her impaired speech was caused by tumors pressed along her esophagus or by the brain metastases, or a combination of both. She articulated the “la” for love over and over and smiled so big, making sure to look me in the eye each time. She did her best to sing along with her favorite songs, especially Elvis, that Terry had playing in the room. But between the few words I got out of her on the phone the previous Tuesday and that afternoon, something changed dramatically. While I was finishing up obligations for my job, cancer was turning my mom’s body into a prison.

Yes, I was there with her for the first round of chemo and the first round of gamma knife brain radiation. But I realize I made choices that allowed me to miss some of the worst moments following those invasive treatments. I think Mom was okay with that, or she would have said otherwise. The fact that I got two good hours holding her hand and talking to her while she told me she loved me in her way over and over before she fell deep asleep with the assistance of the morphine does help. She didn’t look sad or angry that I wasn’t there earlier. On the contrary, she looked full of love. And the fact that my sweet dog gently woke me in the wee hours of the morning, just in time for me to cross the hall and hold my mom for a few minutes before she took her last breath, helps me know that she was okay with how we said goodbye.

However, nearly three years later, *my* goodbye is still in process. I have seen my mom in various dreams. Some have been random, odd dreams from which it is difficult to place meaning. But others have been deep and specific, letting me know that Mom is no longer suffering. Long before the cancer diagnosis, my mother suffered the aftermath of multiple forms of abuse, including childhood sexual trauma, partner violence from previous marriages, and self-abuse via drug and alcohol addiction. Her stress and depression left her less energy to spend time with Ryan and me, which is consistent with research on women who have experienced abuse (Holden, 2003; Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler, & Sandin, 1997). Despite slowly coming to terms with my mom's journey, I would still love to write off the whole month of November. We buried her the day before Thanksgiving. In addition to working through grief at the holidays, every year for at least the next few years, I will need to prepare for that same conference that I tried to escape the year she died. My social circle and time spent with television, music, research, and practicing yoga has helped me come to terms with my grief. My problem, then, is not so much processing my mom's death as it is making sense of her *life* and how it has impacted my identity.

Olson (2004) argued that battered women's identities "become enmeshed with those of their abusers" (p. 4). While Olson thoroughly examined the systemic cycle of power, violence, and control that abusers enact on their victims as the root of this intertwined identity, the theoretical implications of her argument are helpful in understanding my own "enmeshed" identity with my mother's identity as a victim of abuse and trauma. While my mother certainly neither consciously nor manipulatively controlled my behavior—nor abused me physically—I cannot deny the lack of control and agency I had in being a witness to violence. The men who beat my mother in front of me performed emotional abuse on *my* body. While for many years I resented and experienced anger over my mom not protecting me emotionally (Holt et al., 2008), I also felt empathy and sorrow for her corporeal history of abuse. Because my mom was a survivor of an abusive mother, childhood sexual abuse, and the loss of a child, it has always been difficult for me to implicate her in what I realize now were patterns of unreliable parenting.

While my mother may not have been the most responsible parent on her own due to PTSD, depression, and addiction related to a lifetime of trauma, she did realize that she wanted to raise a strong, intelligent, autonomous woman who would not be a victim. Toward this end, she sought out extended family and friends who helped raise me when she did not feel strong enough. My experience is in line with research on domestic violence and children that points to the importance of a supportive adult family member or family friend to provide social and emotional support (Kashani & Allan, 1998; Levendosky, Huth-Bocks, & Semel, 2002; Ullman, 2003). My paternal grandmother helped fund private, parochial education. My surrogate aunt, whose children my mother had babysat before I was born, returned the favor tenfold by keeping me many nights in my developing years. This aunt, along with family (including my father) constantly read to me, taught me to read, and provided other important opportunities for my education and socialization. In conversations I had with my family once I was an adult, I learned that they often worried about my development and resilience in the face of the violence I witnessed as a child. This was one reason my family always encouraged my success at school. My need to perform a thriving student self makes even more sense in relation to Holt and colleagues (2008), who found that children who witness violence "rely increasingly more on influences outside the

family as role models and as indicators of their own worth” (p. 803). My feminist identity developed in relation to my experience trying to find alternative encouragement and validation in my mother’s emotional absence.

My growth into a tenured academic in a relationship with a kind, compassionate partner is at least some evidence of my ability to keep violence from defining my identity. It is also evidence that my mother did something right. She may not have taken care of herself, but she did make sure my needs were met, even if she did so in ways not associated with the nuclear family. My traumatic childhood haunts me at times, as do the memories of taking care of an alcoholic parent. My mother’s emotional absence left a void that this process of excavating and writing has begun to fill. Violence does not define my identity. But it provides a connection to my mother, even after her death. Stephenson-Abetz (2012) argued that the “abundance of scholarship on motherhood has shown that the strong identification a daughter has with her mother is viewed as contributing to the mother’s ability to serve as a powerful influence in the daughter’s life” (p. 99). Identity work, including identification as a daughter to a sometimes-detached mother, that I did not feel an opportunity to complete while she was alive, begins in uncovering our stories of trauma and survivorship. *Excavating. Always excavating.*

A participant in Stephenson-Abetz’s (2012) research on daughters of feminist activists explained the importance of “being able to talk openly and honestly about her fears” in dealing with her mother’s cancer and reinforcing a desire to “bring awareness to issues surrounding women’s health” (p. 109). My mother may not have identified as a feminist earlier in her life, but during her cancer treatment she read through an essay I authored on feminist pedagogy that inspired her.

“I never thought about it, Sissy, but I guess I am a feminist. Men shouldn’t be able to do whatever they want. Women are just as intelligent and capable. I was raised in a different time. I should have gone to college, but I just wanted to marry your daddy and have lots of babies.

Then Mary died, and I didn’t know how to handle it. You shouldn’t have seen me cry every year on your birthday. I wanted to celebrate you growing up, but every March is also a reminder that she was taken from me. I know I was weak and didn’t make the best choices. I should have been strong for you, but you have always been the strong one.” She grabs my hand and squeezes tightly.

“Like when you worked at that women’s shelter. I always wanted to help women like me—and those kids. I wanted to share my story and maybe help others. I—” she pauses briefly “—I just couldn’t do it. You shouldn’t have had to see that, not when you worked at the shelter, I mean when YOU were little. I know I’ve told you I’m sorry, but I can never apologize enough. I worry about your brother,³ but not you. I know you are going to be okay.”

And I *will* be okay, but it has been through the process of remembering exchanges with my mother such as these, as well as exploring the missed opportunities, that my victim identity has transformed into a healing, *feminist* identity. As my mom did for many years, I let the victim voice remain unspoken, unchallenged. In excavating my story of violence, I perform a feminist identity of scholar-activism. Feminism must be performed, “something that one does” (Stephenson-Abetz, 2012, p. 103). As I have argued elsewhere, feminist theory and performance cannot be separated. They are linked through the body—a body that *lives* feminism (Stern, 2011, p. 251). It is my hope that the stories I have shared here of my embodied experiences of gendered violence demonstrate the significance of the feminist performance of storytelling.

As Nettleton (2011) explained of the absences of representation of feminist resistance to domestic violence in popular culture:

No narratives offer resistance to the popular canon that women must leave, women must change, women must be vigilant, women must cure and treat and prevent. No narratives give men an active role in reducing domestic violence. And there are no narratives addressing patriarchy's role in domestic violence or exploring the cultural and social conditions and attitudes that allow domestic violence to exist. (p. 154)

Feminist scholars must continue to fill the void left by a popular culture and dominant paradigm of silence.

While my story represents a transition from a victim to a feminist, communication scholars must investigate more of these narratives. Communication between mothers and daughters invites change, forgiveness, and love (Sterk & Deakins, 2012). If not for the rich body of autoethnographic literature on coping with loss (Ellis, 1993; Ellis, 2007; Vande Berg & Trujillo, 2008) and finding alternative communicative means in my mother's absence, I might not have had the language—or the method—to begin this journey. However, voices of survivors of domestic violence, especially those of children, are rare in the scholarly intersection of autoethnography and communication. As our identities are formed through and with language, both in our relational interactions and in the annals of printed scholarship, we must share our individual voices of collective identity stories as part of the feminist project of everyday activism.

Feminism is a response to domination, an answer to a problem of power imbalances. My entire life has moved in the direction of disrupting dominant power relationships. I saw Eric impose both physical and emotional power on my mother. He broke her down and made it seem like only he could put her back together. When that failed, she escaped into drugs and alcohol. When I hear my students explain that feminism is no longer needed, I want to remind them of the continued problem of domestic violence (let alone workplace issues and reproductive rights battles). This is my chance to do so. Before tenure I felt uncomfortable bringing my own life into the classroom or my research. Post tenure, I am ready to take the risk. Feminism still matters. By connecting social issues to my personal struggles with gender domination, perhaps I can inspire others to embrace a feminist identity and work toward promoting gender equality.

Feminism is also about community and inclusion. I would not have been equipped to be a scholar-activist if I did not experience connection and motivation from my family and peers. My grandmother enrolled my younger cousin and me into computer day camp for a few summers when I was in middle school. The quiet confidence built from understanding basic computer technology was the beginning of my appreciation of the importance of networks, both online and offline. It has been through this autoethnographic process of excavating my experiences of violence that I am able to embrace the feminist within in the hopes of performing feminist healing in my offline communities.

But ultimately, feminism is about love—love for others and love for self. Despite the trauma my mother and I coexperienced, the difference has been how we reacted to the presence, or absence, of love. The many abuses she suffered left my mother incapable of self-love. She turned to the wrong coping outlets. Education became *my* salvation. My lived embodiment of gender domination combined with the scholarship

I read, and eventually practiced, to create a feminist way of knowing, what I have termed in this essay *a feminist performance of healing*. As Gingrich-Philbrook (2005) has argued, performative autoethnography must “generate new knowledge” about the subject matter. Looking to feminism as a performance of healing from memories of trauma is a new way to move feminism from the theoretical to the pragmatic. At the intersection of trauma, memory, and performance, I have uncovered the violent moments that haunted my adolescence and early adulthood and led to feelings of helplessness, fear, and anger. A feminist praxis leads me not to be angry at men in general but rather to find fault in institutional forms of oppression. I learned empathy for people with less power, including victims of child abuse, racism, poverty, and homophobia, but especially witnesses to family violence. Through performative writing I have transformed those emotions into compassion for my mother, Ryan, Terry, my dad, myself, and others like us. I even have compassion for Eric, but am not yet ready to forgive him. I hope that through more writing and performative healing maybe one day I can articulate those words.

But I forgive you, Mom.

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Notes

1. I did receive consent from my brother and current stepfather. I chose not to put myself and my family at risk by seeking permission from my mother’s abusive ex-husband. His name has been changed in this essay.
2. My exploration of coping with my mother’s addictions is the subject of another ongoing writing project.
3. This essay focuses on my direct experience with family violence, but I elaborate on my brother’s coping in a different essay still in progress.

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