Shotgun Strategies

I'm forty-three years old now. Twenty years ago I went to my first consciousness-raising group—an extraordinarily important event for me. I have talked about that day many times since, but what I have rarely discussed is how desperate I was, almost at the point where I was ready to give up. I was practically suicidal, madly in love with yet another completely bitchy mean little girl who was not giving me anything I needed, and working myself near to death with long hours at the Social Security Administration. I was working longer hours helping to publish a feminist magazine, volunteering in the childcare center, and answering phones at the rape crisis hot line. I was feeling those six-meetings-a-week-don't-need-to-sleep-anyway blues.

I went into that Sunday afternoon lesbian CR group, sat down, and everybody started talking—mostly about other women who were not there with whom they had recently broken up. But one of the women, the one sitting in the beanbag chair across from me, spoke about her father. Whispered that she really needed to tell people how much she hated him, how she dreamed every night of going home to kill him. She dreamed in powerful, agonizing detail of a double-barrel shotgun, blue gun metal and wooden stock. She dreamed of breaking down that gun and packing it in a bag, holding it close to her body until she could take it out when he was right in front of

her once again. She needed to say that the dreams had become so vivid, they were the only things she still looked forward to.

Listening to her, I remembered my own dreams of a gun just like hers, blue-metal powerful and cold. I leaned forward to hear every word she said and did not say, to see the strain in her neck and the way her hands pulled at each other, the pain and rage plain in everything. She was as close to breaking as I felt myself, as desperate and alone. I wanted to touch her, not like a lover, but like family, to offer comfort and love and hope. Instead, I offered her the one unfailing gift of my family—bitter humor. I gave a little laugh and said, "I'll do yours, if you'll do mine." I was joking, but I was also half-serious. And then I told her I'd had the same dreams.

It was the first time I had told anyone I wanted to kill my stepfather.

That was the beginning for me of being able to talk about how I had grown up. I had been taught never to tell anyone outside my family what was going on, not just because it was shameful, but because it was physically dangerous for me to do so. I had been repeatedly warned throughout my childhood that if I ever revealed what went on in our house, they would take me away. I would wind up in juvenile detention and spend the rest of my life in and out of jail. It did not matter that what was being done to me was rape and that I had never asked for it. It did not matter because I was who I was, the child of my family, poor and notorious in the county where we lived, poor and hopeless. Oh, I had dreamed of killing the man, but little girls do not kill their fathers and get away with it. I was taught to be very quiet, very polite in public, to talk to the Sunday school ladies with good diction, to work to get that scholarship and get the hell out of my home. That is exactly what I did.

I got away so successfully that I convinced myself only poor men beat their daughters, only poor men rape their daughters, and only poor women let them. I believed that grown-up middle-class girls were different creatures, that sexual abuse didn't happen in their families. That was another reason not to tell. But the woman in the

beanbag chair wasn't just middle class. She was a failed upper-class kid, a runaway. In talking to me about her life, though, she was telling me about mine. She told us when she was a girl, she used to fight with her little brother about who was going to have to sleep closer to the door. That was something my sisters and I had done until I left home and they had to deal with our stepfather alone. She talked about sleeping over with girlfriends, not because she wanted to be friends or even to make love, but because then she wasn't sleeping at home. She talked about how the sex was the least of it, though it was always the part that everyone else wanted to know about. Far worse was the daily ongoing contempt.

That was my life she was talking about, a world removed from the place and the family where she had grown up, but my life just the same. Both of us had grown up believing that being beaten is normal, that being backhanded is ordinary, that being called names is a regular part of life. That everyone does it, that they just don't talk about it in public. We both had thought ourselves freaks. Monsters. What we discovered talking to each other—and eventually there were four or five others discovering this together—is that we were cut from the same cloth. For all of us, the family had been a prison camp: a normal everyday horror, fully known and hidden.

I didn't start writing—or rather I didn't start keeping my writing—until 1974, when I published a poem. Everything I wrote before then, ten years of journals and short stories and poems, I burned, because I was afraid somebody would read them. Always in the back of my mind there was my mother's whisper: "They'll send you to detention. You'll wind up in the county home and your life will be over. You don't want to do that."

Even now, all these years later, I dream I am a thirteen-year-old girl locked behind bars, her pussy hurting, not knowing how to talk to anyone. Sometimes I still dream that I go down to Florida with a shotgun, broken down and packed in a suitcase.

When I set out to write my novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, I

wanted to do two things: to recreate the family that I deeply loved and was not saved by, and to put in print everything I understood that happens in a violent family where incest is taking place. I wanted to show people that everyday life is everyday life, even if you are being beaten and raped; that mostly they come to get you at night, or when your mama is working late; and that the biggest part of the struggle as a child is about trying to believe you are not the monster you are being told you are. You need to know that you are a real person, that this thing happening to you is not something you are making happen—because when I was a child I thought I was doing it. I thought that if only I were a little better, a little smarter, a little meaner, a little faster, or maybe even a better Christian, none of those terrible things would be happening. So I wrote as strong a story as I could about a young girl who is slowly being convinced that she is a monster, and who is not saved by those she loves most.

What has always been missing for me, both in reading books about incest and in talking to other survivors, is how I felt about my mother. I don't need to tell anyone what my stepfather did to me as a child. I have worked through enough of the violence I survived that it is no longer a necessity for me to talk about it as much, other than to bluntly state the facts, to refuse to be ashamed of my childhood or who I became through surviving it. I have to be matter-of-fact about what happened to me for my own sanity, in order not to deny myself, not ever to surrender to the constant pressure to do that. So I try to be straightforward about being a survivor of incest and violent contempt, but the things I still need to figure out, to talk about, are not the obvious issues, those most readily accessible.

Rather than the details of sexual abuse, it is the questions of family and loss and betrayal I want to examine. I need to understand and talk about my mother, about the choices she was forced to make, the impossible grief of her struggle to create a family and care for her daughters. How, I ask, can love and betrayal become so deeply intertwined?

I come at my mother's life from my own, remembering that I

loved my little sisters but wanted them to sleep closest to the door. I look at my life, remembering being a child who loved my mother absolutely, and hated her every time she was late coming home from work. Every time she was an hour and a half late and I had to survive that hour and a half alone—at five, seven, nine, and eleven—I raged at her. I truly loved my mother, but I could not, as a child, understand why she did not take us out of there, go anywhere, live in any condition other than the one in which we were trapped. I knew absolutely that my mother loved me and my sisters, and that she did everything she could understand to do to try to save us. But I also know that my mother had no idea what was going on in our home: partly because she was telling lies to herself to stay sane, partly because we were lying to her to save her and ourselves, and partly because the world had lied to her and us about the meaning of what was happening. The world told us that we were being spanked, not beaten, and that violent contempt for girl children was ordinary, nothing to complain about. The world lied, and we lied, and lying becomes a habit.

I have promised myself to break the habit of lying, to try to make truth everyday in my life, but it is not simple. Piecing out lies and truth is sometimes excruciatingly complicated, particularly for writers. I make fiction, construct it, intend it to have an impact, an effect, to quite literally change the world that lied to my mother, my sisters, and me. The fiction I make comes out of my life and my beliefs, but it is not autobiography, not even the biomythography that Audre Lorde* championed. What I have taught myself to do is to craft truth out of storytelling.

My sisters do not remember all of our childhood, and one of the roles I have played in our family is being the one who gives it back to them. A problem that arises with my fiction is that sometimes I take small pieces of things that happened to us and move very far away from them, and sometimes my sisters don't know the difference between the story I made up and our lives. What I had to do

* *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name* (Crossing Press: Freedom, California, 1983)

in the year after I finished my novel was sit down with my little sister and go through some of it. I had to say, "That page is true. It didn't happen to me, though, it happened to you." And I do not know anything that has been as hard as that. When my little sister and I finally used the word *incest*, and talked about the worst thing, the everyday hatred we breathed in as girls, she told me she wouldn't allow any man "like that" to be alone with her girls. I had to say to her that it isn't just men, and it isn't just men "like that." I had to talk to her about the women I had found after I left home, women who breathed out hatred as steadily as the worst man we had ever known. I had to say that the world is a bigger, meaner, more complicated place than anyone ever told us, and the tools for dealing with it are real, but we have to invent them for ourselves, make them up as we go along.

One of the reasons I write is to make up my own rules, discover my own tools, in order to show my sisters a few of the things I have learned. And in so doing to create a conversation between us so that I can get back from them the things they can teach me.

Another reason I write is because of that woman in the beanbag chair, the one who did not live my life but who did. Not too long ago I received a letter from her. She lives in Iowa with her daughter, and in that letter she told me she doesn't dream about shotguns anymore. She just thinks about it now and again in the daylight.

This essay is derived from a panel discussion, "Self-Revelation: Writing as Transformation," held at the LAB in San Francisco in Spring 1993. The panel included Cheryl Brodie, Christine Cobaugh, Sapphire, and Sue Martin. A section of the talk appeared in *Critical Condition: Women on the Edge of Violence*, edited by Amy Scholder (City Lights Books: San Francisco, 1993).