

1-1-2001

Peace Be with You

Mary E. Davis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.uchastings.edu/hwlj>



Part of the [Law and Gender Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mary E. Davis, *Peace Be with You*, 12 *Hastings Women's L. R.* 307 (2001).

Available at: <https://repository.uchastings.edu/hwlj/vol12/iss2/4>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at UC Hastings Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Hastings Women's Law Journal* by an authorized editor of UC Hastings Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact wangangela@uchastings.edu.

Peace Be With You

*Mary E. Davis**

Some years ago, when I worked as a volunteer in the Yale-New Haven Emergency Room with battered women, I read a psychological profile I knew intimately:

The Controller has a history of getting his own way Nonviolent abuse among Controllers is characterized by discounting the needs, desires and feelings of their mates. Violence occurs when the Controller feels he can no longer dominate or when his authority is questioned. He believes himself to be justified in his abuse, and his wife will sometimes accept his reasons.¹

Coincidentally, this article was published the same month and year my husband left me. But even then, I could not recognize him or my situation in the profile.

Todd always possessed a volcanic temper, but I had never felt like a battered wife. In the first year of our marriage he grabbed my shoulder hard enough to rip my blouse. I cried only because I had monogrammed it with my new initials. After the birth of our first child, he thrust his fist through the wall of our cheap apartment. We mended it and hung a picture, but before we moved he made another hole. After the last two babies came thirteen months apart, he aimed a telephone directory at my head because I forgot to call a babysitter. Struck on the temple, I simply declined our evening's invitation. Over the years there were uncounted broken dishes, and in our first house, two antique chairs smashed—thrown against a wall we had just papered. Again, I lamented the loss of the modest heirlooms and the new wallpaper.

Todd was also quick to take out his anger on our older son as he approached adolescence. There were terrifying moments when Todd would

* Professor of Legal Studies, Brandeis University. J.D., Yale Law School, 1990; M.A., Ph.D., University of North Carolina, 1970; B.A., Ohio Wesleyan University, 1962.

1. Margaret Elbow, *Theoretical Considerations of Violent Marriages*, SOC. CASEWORK, Nov. 1977, at 519.

suddenly pull him to the basement and pound him. I hated those moments, which were punctuated by their shocking randomness. Was it anxiety, insecurity, our son's own quick tongue, their growing male rivalry? I blame myself even today for not intervening more forcefully. "Just don't *you* get into this," Todd would say menacingly. I would remain silent. What did he mean? That I too could be assaulted? That I loved our children too much and disciplined them too little? Though Todd had beaten our son, I felt like the wrongdoer. I was convinced to accept not only his acts but also his unreasonable assessment of their provocation and aftermath. I was excessive, not he. He stilled my criticism while transferring the blame.

I rationalized. Everybody gets mad; eighteen years is a long time to live together; raising children is inherently stressful. Even while writing this, I questioned: why was I wallowing in the past? But recently, while moving, I came across family snapshots of my younger son, dated Christmas 1965. He was seventeen months old, a sickly baby who often cried and rarely slept. Three hospital stays had not cured his chronic ear infections. In these color photos his face bears the bruised imprint of his father's four fingers—a hard slap to an infant cheek. Then I knew that the issues were far bigger than me or our family. I know now that the pattern of domestic abuse is bigger than personal anger, his or mine.

His coercive and abusive behavior still floods my mind. When Todd left at age forty, he told me he needed space and time. I had just completed a year-long fellowship at Columbia, so I understood his need for change. In a day of no-fault divorce, how could I bar his leaving? I also knew (as my sister had guessed) of his affair with our brother's wife. Todd knew that I knew, despite his enraged denials. That knowledge should have strengthened me to let go; instead, it kept me humiliated and subservient. The night before he left, he insisted we make love. Two weeks later at Thanksgiving, we were given the same bedroom in the home of his elderly mother. He slept between blanket and sheet to avoid touching me.

So accustomed was I to his control that I actually asked Todd if I should see a lawyer. "Of course not. Why do you always overreact?" He reassured me, "I haven't seen a lawyer, so don't go cry on some stranger's shoulder." I didn't call a lawyer. Instead, I believed he was coming back. In late November I received a bill for one hour of "pre-divorce consultation." A mistake, I thought, but the lawyer's secretary informed me, "Your bill's correct, only it's not really yours. Your husband came in but left no forwarding address."

"Todd," I sobbed into the phone. "You lied to me. You set me up." But still I appealed to him, "What should I do now?" His response was one of righteous wrath. "You have no right to bother me. You're crazy . . . everybody thinks so." (Later I learned that my brother's wife had screamed repeatedly, "Your sister's crazy.") Todd went on, "You've ruined our

marriage. Now you want to discredit me in front of my own kids.” I tried to explain that the kids were downstairs; I cried behind the closed door of our bedroom. He hung up on me. The reiterated message from the profile was clear: the Controller manipulates his wife “by presenting her as unreasonable and overly emotional.”²

Is it surprising that I could not always defend my own children? That I never saw myself as abused until Todd had been out of the house for more than two months? I finally went to a lawyer that day, a further impetus to his anger. When he came to the house, he went directly upstairs where I was changing clothes. Quite literally, he caught me with my pants down. Although he had not touched me since the night before he left, he grabbed me and threw me back on our bed. He muttered close to my face as he gripped my shoulders, “I ought to put your goddam head through that goddam wall.”

At that moment I did not capitulate despite being pinned flat by a man I still loved, a man who had fathered my three children. I heard myself tell him calmly that he would make incredible legal problems for himself if he hurt me. He drew back and shouted, “I hope you rot in your lonely bed.” Then, leaning against the pineapple post of my grandmother’s bridal bed, he began to cry.

I wish I could affirm this as the turning point of my life. It was not. I was still full of cowardice. I still had to face the bizarre details of the divorce, as well as its aftermath. Belatedly, I see that twenty years of suffering my mother’s angry rages enabled me to endure two more decades of Todd’s irrational bullying. I see now that my often passive response to Todd’s sporadic violence toward our sons paralleled and underlined my failure to protest his treatment toward me. In all likelihood, in my immaturity (I was just twenty at our marriage), I saw Todd as a surrogate for my mother. And I probably appeared to him as a stand-in for his demanding mother.

The article I read in the ER concludes:

[H]is wife symbolizes the parent who controlled him and allowed him little room for his emerging autonomy as a child. Consequently, the expectation he brings to his marriage is that he will be dominated if he does not control.³

After our divorce, Todd asserted, “I no longer have any temper since I left you!” Finally, I was able to question not only his personal perfection but point out that he had abandoned virtually all stressful details of daily life: child-rearing, home-owning, commuting, pets, broken furnaces and me. In shedding these responsibilities and turning to a close female relative

2. *Id.* at 520.

3. *Id.*

in my own family, Todd was also able to act out some long-held hostility against another woman—his mother. In a brief counseling session before he left, he lashed out at me, “I was under *her* thumb for twenty years, and now I’ve put up with *you* for twenty more!”

Despite the epiphany of that terrifying moment on our bed, I had much to learn about the mindset of a battered woman. This essay explores the lives of three other abused women whom I befriended—one before and two after this revelation in my own life. Through them, I can now understand my own helplessness and passivity.

I. DOREEN

Seven years before Todd’s leaving, I finished my Ph.D. and earned a tenure-track academic position. Our children were five, six and almost eight. Todd’s salary was bigger than mine, a fact over which he often pulled rank, but even still we could use two incomes and the college gave me a flexible schedule. That year I ferried my daughter to kindergarten for the requisite half-day. She was due at noon; I taught two days at 12:10 fifteen miles away. On the other three days she went to work with me in the mornings. There was no day care.

When I began to glimpse beyond my own demanding routine, I found another set of children—my students, elderly adolescents. These young women wanted to confide in me—I was just thirty-one, but I had little energy to nurture anyone else. One student, however, stuck in my mind.

Her long, wispy, pale hair accentuated her fragility. Her eyes were big and blue, but she rarely made eye contact. The first time Doreen spoke to me was to ask about doing an independent study on Emily Dickinson. I agreed. She then explained that marriage and a child necessitated her dropping regular courses next term. I still said yes, perhaps identifying with her responsibilities. I wondered if she would finish college and pondered her ironic choice of Emily Dickinson, a single woman who spurned the Victorian roles of wife and mother.

We agreed to meet weekly and she asked if she might bring the baby. Again I said yes. Though both blond, her son was stalwart where Doreen was frail. And his name was Adam. In class we were studying Puritan literature. She said darkly, “It fits—remember the verse you showed us from the Puritan hornbook—you know, ‘In Adam’s Fall/We sinneth all’?”

“Doreen,” I countered, “How could you ever connect this beautiful baby to Original Sin?”

“Well, I had to get married . . .” She faltered. So we spoke of poetry and women and life and death and God—everything but her own life. She and Adam existed in some inverse ratio: as he grew chubby, she lost weight; as he learned new words, she grew quiet. I began to agonize at home about her unstated plight.

Todd had scant sympathy. Perhaps he inferred criticism since the bulk

of child-rearing remained mine. Perhaps he felt compelled to defend men. He concluded correctly that I gave my time and empathy too freely. My insistent underdog mentality coupled with a disturbing (to him) feminist stance impelled me to defend women. He also resented my mother-confessor stance. I saw it simply as liking to talk with and listen to women. Todd suggested female faults: an eagerness to gossip and an over-developed maternal instinct. Early in our marriage I had almost enjoyed his possessiveness. Later I saw it as simple jealousy, even of our children. After their births he would say unsmilingly, "You know, in your order of priorities, I fit in right below the dog."

Then, Doreen arrived one Wednesday with a puffy black eye. She said she'd walked into a glass sliding door. May came and Doreen handed me a paper entitled "Emily Dickinson: Creativity and Freedom." It was riddled with errors, and her typewriter ribbon was so gray and worn that some pages were almost unreadable. I gave the paper a B- and then guiltily asked a colleague to look at it. He said that a D would be a gift. I stuck to my B- and went to my students' graduation where Doreen's classmates were celebrating. One of my best students, June, had been accepted to three fine graduate schools; we toasted her future. Did Doreen have a future?

One week later I was called to my stepfather's deathbed in Ohio. A humble and obliging man, he lingered only briefly. When I returned and scanned the local paper, I found June's obituary. A suicide at twenty-two, she had argued with her boyfriend over her acceptance of a fellowship at Wisconsin. In her brilliant senior thesis under my supervision, June had developed an inordinate fascination with Virginia Woolf's suicide in 1941. Woolf had loaded her pockets with rocks and walked into the river behind her country home.⁴ June swallowed a bottle of pills as she argued on the phone with her angry boyfriend.

I went to her funeral, which was far sadder than the service for my elderly parent. Scanning the young faces, I realized that Doreen was absent. That night after midnight, still trying to sleep and recalling Emily Dickinson:

The sweeping up the Heart,
And putting Love away
We shall not want to use again
Until Eternity . . .⁵

I heard the phone ring. It was Doreen, wanting to know about June's

4. See ROGER POOLE, *THE UNKNOWN VIRGINIA WOOLF* 254-58 (1978).

5. Emily Dickinson, "The Bustle in a House," in *FINAL HARVEST: EMILY DICKINSON'S POEMS* (1961).

suicide. Then she said quite distinctly, as if she'd been thinking about it for a long time, "I think that's for me." She told of her trip to the ER; her husband had beaten her again. When the harried doctor found time to examine her, she asked about psychiatric counseling. There was a waiting list unless she had attempted suicide.

Doreen could not leave her husband—she had no money and had lost her parents' support by getting pregnant and dropping out of school. They had insisted, however, on her marriage. Their admonition: "God intended every child to have two parents." She called almost nightly while her husband worked the third shift in a local gun factory. One night she told me that, while Adam was napping, she and her husband began to argue over her desire to finish college. Instead of hitting her, he grabbed the sleeping baby, slid down three flights of stairs, jammed the baby into the open window of the car and took off. For the first time, Doreen called the police who recovered Adam, still asleep after a high-speed chase. There was no basis for kidnapping charges since her husband was the child's father, but Doreen's ability to dial 911 altered everything. She could tolerate abuse of her own body, but when Adam was threatened, she rebelled.

On an impulse, I asked her to bring her son and come live in our house that summer. In fact, Doreen would perform a great service in our absence. Feeling rich with two academic incomes, we planned to camp cross-country for seven weeks, our first vacation in eight years. Doreen and Adam hid in our house that summer, using our second car. In return, she took care of our Dalmatian, three cats, a guinea pig named Jonesy and countless tropical fish. She managed to stay safe and sane and filed for divorce against her parents' wishes.

When we arrived home in late August, our floors gleamed with unaccustomed wax; fresh flowers from the well-tended garden covered every flat surface. Even Jonesy had been combed. Doreen was so relieved and relaxed that I scarcely recognized her.

One year later she came back to college. Her class with me was creative writing, in which she wrote a marvelous story called "Saturday Morning." She told me the title came from a song that was popular then:

Come Saturday Morning
I'm goin' away with my friend
We'll Saturday-spend till the end of the day
Just I and my friend
We'll travel for miles in our Saturday smiles
And then we'll move on
But we will remember long after Saturday's gone.⁶

6. THE SANDPIPERS, *Come Saturday Morning*, on THE STERILE CUCKOO SOUNDTRACK

In Doreen's story, the mother watches through half-open eyes as the child sits on the end of her bed, waiting for their Saturday morning treat—pancakes. It is not yet seven o'clock. They can sleep late; the child does not go to day care; the mother does not go to work or school. The other side of the bed is empty, but the child cannot crawl in or he would never sleep in his own bed. He waits with his blankie, knowing that cartoons don't come on until seven and that Mommy will soon fix his pancakes. The story ends with the mother's concession that yes, she must get up and start another day, even though it's Saturday.

Over the next few years, Doreen and I spoke frequently, then sent chatty Christmas cards and finally fell out of touch. But I never forgot her. When I found myself suddenly alone, I needed to be nurtured. Out of nowhere came a book of poems in the mail. It was Christmas, just a month after Todd had left. Doreen just wanted to tell me her good news that she had found a job teaching high school English, with a curriculum that included Emily Dickinson. And she was about to remarry. Her abusive ex-husband had committed suicide, drunk and alone, the previous Christmas Eve.

It was hard for me to admit my own loss and let her mother me. Being nurtured was alien to me. I was the middle child, caught between adorable twin boys and a brilliant older sister. All four of us existed with an angry, chronically depressed mother and a father we had not seen in twenty-seven years. We were all emotional orphans. That is one reason I entered teaching—to nurture others freely and to erect a facade of order and power unknown in my own life.

But once again Doreen and I could talk freely. "You're going to be okay," she would begin. "I was young and dumb and scared. You're a survivor."

"But I'm ten years older than you and just as scared. And twice as stupid—I didn't see what was going on right in my own family."

"Don't blame yourself. That's what he's always done; that's what he wants you to do. If you could forgive yourself, you'd be okay." How much my student taught me!

II. KAREN

When Todd left, our children were twelve, thirteen and almost sixteen. He assured me that they were "nearly grown," that he'd done all the child-rearing he could. Our oldest, Ben,⁷ was about to drive, starting to shave, meeting girls—the hallmarks of adulthood. Ben, like the younger two, was stung by his father's liaison with their aunt. Now I see that his trauma,

(A&M Records 1969).

7. Not his real name.

combined with the pressures of adolescence, pushed him to become involved with a very troubled girl.

It was more than simple attraction—his Good Samaritanism, like mine, came from firsthand involvement with pain. I liked the fact that he brought Karen home, but she was hard to know. And she clung to him. I am sure he needed that clinging too, although I liked far less that he ignored his friends and schoolwork for her. Karen spent both Christmas Eve and Easter with us. Since our family had shrunk, it seemed right to welcome another person. Her family was also fractured; she and a brother, the products of a first marriage, lived with her mother, her mother's third husband and their young children.

One May weekend when Todd had been gone for ten months, Ben was off camping with some classmates. I awoke early, listening to the birds, feeling good about life, when I heard a pounding at the back door. It was 5:30. There stood Karen, her eyes red, her jaw puffy, her lips caked with dried blood. Her stepfather had hit her—again, I discovered—and she had fled. Pausing only to pull an old denim jumper over my nightgown, I headed for the nearest emergency room. Driving too fast through the empty streets, I kept thinking, "Someone has to see this; someone has to know what to do." Although Karen was battered, I think the horror was just as much mine. Abuse was all too familiar to both of us.

We arrived at the hospital and I surrendered her gratefully to a nurse. Then the hospital social worker asked, "Are you Karen's mother?"

"No, but don't worry about insurance. We'll pay somehow."

"Are you her legal guardian?"

"No, but she came to me for help."

The hospital wanted the man who had abused her to sign for treatment because she was a minor. I did not want to deliver her back into her parents' hands. We left the hospital with only a wet towel. From a pay phone I called a friend with a practice in adolescent therapy. She suggested we go to a state agency where we met for an hour with a social worker, who told Karen that she could leave home without being treated as a runaway. The state, however, could not help financially if Karen had any income. Most importantly, we were directed to go to our local police to have her face photographed and to swear out a warrant for her stepfather's arrest. We found that he had frequently slapped her around for trivial faults like failing to rinse the sink after doing dishes, hitting her once with a board and leaving scars on her back. And although he had also abused Karen's brother until the boy outweighed him (after which he focused on Karen), he did not abuse his own children.

Most shocking was the fact that he had made increasingly bold sexual overtures to Karen in the past year. He had fondled her and come into her bedroom when her mother was not home. When Karen installed a lock on her door, ostensibly to keep the younger children out of her cosmetics, he

removed the lock to “fix” it, then appeared several times at her bedside during the night.

As we entered the police department, nearly empty on a Saturday morning, Karen clutched my arm and whispered, “That detective knows my dad!” Her stepfather was a director of the local Little League, well-known in our small town. She was afraid to tell her story and afraid she would not be believed. I asked for a female detective, not even knowing if the department had one. In the half-hour we waited, I watched Karen’s face—swollen, bruised, sleepless—and kept wondering what to do next.

The detective was a wonderful role model as she talked to Karen while photographing her cheek and jaw. But Karen was embarrassed and afraid. No, she could not go home. No, she could not press charges. The detective explained that people like Karen had to help halt the epidemic of abuse. Karen was fearful of her stepfather and fearful of upsetting her mother. Finally the policewoman drew up two affidavits—one for documented physical abuse and one for threatened sexual abuse. Karen had one year to press charges. The detective also called both parents to warn them that if the stepfather interfered in any way with Karen, he would be arrested. She then mentioned a new battered women’s shelter where Karen could stay. Karen, however, clearly wanted to stay with us.

I took her home, put her to bed and began calling people. Karen’s godmother was a pleasant woman who offered to take her in for a few weeks if she would baby-sit occasionally. Karen would be safe there, I thought, and with people she knew. Within moments, the woman called back and said that the stepfather had just come by and was furious over his call from the police. The godmother was “really scared.” Should I be scared, I thought. I’m a single parent; she has a husband. Can’t women *ever* protect themselves?

Karen lived with us for a while. At the very least, we represented no part of her threatening family. But her relationship with my son and her distrust of any authority made things very difficult. In the thirteen weeks Karen lived with us, she was many things—affectionate, helpful, rebellious, angry, homesick—but she was never abused.

We sold our house in the country at the end of that summer and moved to a small one right in town. There was no room for Karen there. She was almost eighteen, the age of majority in our state. My son was going off to college; in fact, they broke up soon after. When I called the state agency, her social worker confided that she was preoccupied in finding a place for an abandoned nine-year-old. With sorrow and anger, Karen first refused to move even though I found her a room less than a mile from our home and paid a deposit on it. She slept for two nights in her old car, parked at the curb of our house, and then moved in with a girlfriend. She did not return for her senior year of high school.

Her unhappy self lashed out in the violence she had so long been dealt. Once, she came by to retrieve some clothes stored in our garage. In a sudden

flash of anger, she knocked my son to the lawn with a single punch, breaking his glasses. She did not leave until he, pushed beyond empathy, turned the garden hose on her. Another night he got a call after midnight from Karen's girlfriend. Karen had taken her two kittens and left. We found her sitting Ophelia-like on the railroad track behind the local Dairy Queen. The next train was six hours away, but her anguish was very real.

At Easter, nearly two years after that traumatic time, my daughter and I went to a new church. A row or so behind us sat Karen, all alone. I whispered to my daughter, "We'll talk to her when we come to 'Peace Be with You'." When we turned around to extend our hands, she was gone.

But just as Doreen came back into my life when I was the needy one, Karen was eventually able to respond to yet another abused girl who came to live with us.

III. DIANE

Diane, a high school friend of my daughter, was also escaping a brutal father and an acquiescent mother. She lived with us for more than a year, and I became her legal guardian until she finished high school. During the spring of that year, the two girls went off to the movies on a Friday night. They returned late. Often they had walked around in our small town and I did not worry, but it was nearly midnight when they burst in. "Mom," my daughter began, "we just saw Karen."

"Where?" I asked. I had always expected to run into her and when I hadn't, finally concluded that she had left town.

"Well," said Diane, "we went into this pizza place down on Main Street and she came right up to us. I didn't know who she was."

"Mom, she asked all about our family. She's twenty now."

"Twenty," I mused. Maybe she'd finally been able to grow up. She'd been forced to grow up too fast and never really had a chance to mature. "What's she doing with her life?"

"She finished high school and then she took a course to become a licensed practical nurse or something. Now she works in a nursing home—she really loves it. Isn't that good?"

"That *is* good."

"She was engaged, but she broke it off. He hit her once. She said to us, right in the pizza place, 'I wasn't going to go through that again.'"

"Good for her. No one ever should have to."

"She kept asking me, 'Is your mom mad at me?'"

"What did you tell her?"

"I said no. Then I said, 'My mom really cares about you and she always says on Christmas and stuff, 'I hope Karen is okay and has enough to eat and all.''" Besides, Mom, everybody knows how hopelessly sentimental you are. Then she got tears in her eyes and said that we saved her life. Finally she said, 'I was a jerk, wasn't I?'"

“Did you introduce her to Diane?”

“Sure. And you know what she did? She took both Diane’s hands, right there in Pizza Place with lots of people, and said, ‘I just hope you know right now how lucky you are.’”

I sat there, trying to stitch all the pieces together. They began to cohere: my abusive marriage, my husband’s curse and threat; befriending my battered student, then her befriending of me; the shock of Karen’s abuse; then my daughter’s bringing home yet another white, middle-class abused child. I also remembered a paper recently submitted in my American Autobiography course where the final assignment was to narrate a piece of one’s own life. Sifting through the usual first date, first kiss memories, I found a story of a father who sexually molested his own daughter from her fifth year until she ran away from home at the age of fourteen. The author of this “slice-of-life” sat in the back row and never spoke. Was there ever an end to such a pattern?

All these moments connected and cohered—some traumatic, some hopeful, all pieces of the same pattern. “Let’s go to bed,” I said tiredly to the two girls. “It’s already another day.”

