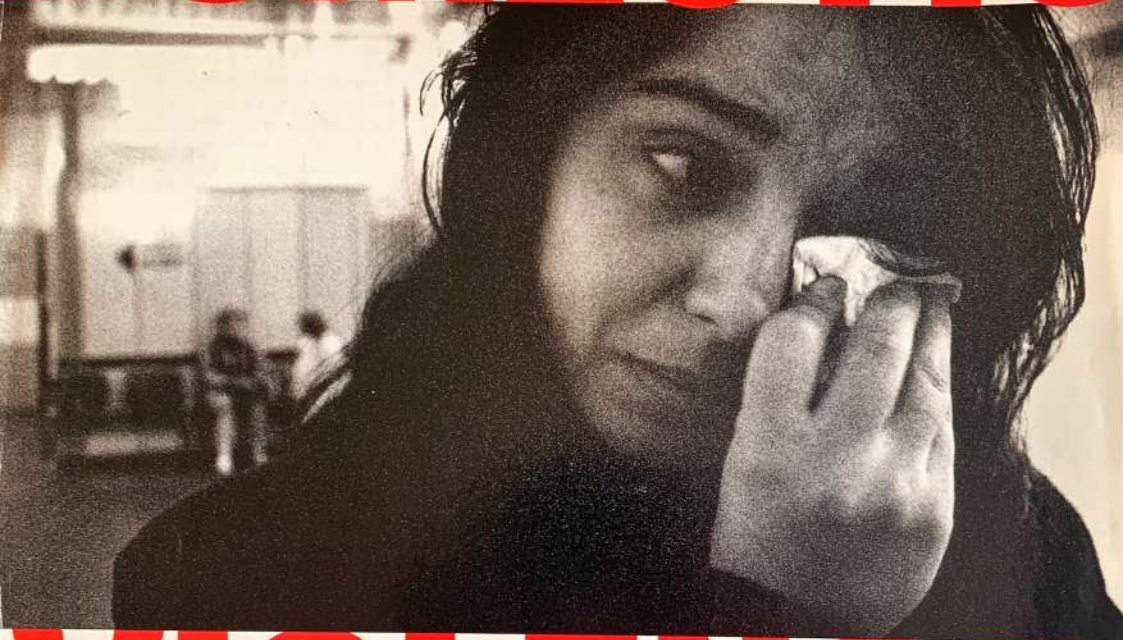


DOMESTIC

report



VIOLENCE

THE CHILD VICTIMS

Women may be the most visible victims of domestic violence, but the children who witness it can also suffer long-term emotional trauma. Interviews by Sarah Marinos

Deborah* was 12 years old when her mother remarried. Her stepfather, an American sailor, was violent towards his wife throughout their two-year marriage. Deborah is now 39 and the mother of four children.

*My mother met Bob, my stepfather, at a naval base in Exmouth [WA]. Soon after,

she told my younger sister and I that they were getting married and we were moving to the United States. We lived on a rented farm miles from anywhere and, within weeks of arriving, the violence began.

"Bob first hit Mum on the day she organised a surprise birthday party for him. She'd invited a lot of people over and the

food ran out, so she went to get more with a male friend of theirs. Bob was beside himself. I could feel his rage building up while Mum was away. When she got back, Bob dragged her out of the car and out of sight. When she walked into the house a few minutes later, she was dishevelled and tearful but trying to hold it together. I ►

was terrified because I'd never experienced anything like that before.

"A few weeks later, she was making Bob breakfast and I walked into the kitchen to find him yelling and smashing into her. He was a big man – over six foot [1.83m] – and Mum was very slight. He pounded her head with his fists and dragged her outside.

"My sister and I ran out and I was screaming hysterically, 'He's going to kill her, he's going to kill her,' but there was

nobody to hear us. He smashed her on the back until she went limp and unconscious. I can still remember the sound of his fists hitting her and the feeling of terror, absolute terror. There were many times that my sister and I stayed in our room, listening at the door to the thuds of those fists, feeling scared and powerless and wondering whether it would ever stop.

"That day, he took her to the hospital. He carried her to the car, her arms dangling. I thought she was dead. Her skin was grey. I can't remember what my sister and I did after he left. It's a void. I've blocked it out. When he came back alone, there was no mention of what had happened or how Mum was. That night, I slept with my sister and I was terrified he'd come into our room, so I didn't close my eyes once. I felt sick because I was so afraid.

"I don't remember Mum coming home from the hospital or leaving the farm, but we ended up in a flat in Nevada. Bob found us and moved in. Mum didn't want to make him angry, so he stayed.

"One night, he lay on the couch and asked Mum to pass him a cushion. She told him to get it himself, and I felt immediate rage at her because she'd antagonised him and I knew he'd do something. He picked up her cigarettes and began stuffing them down her shirt. Then he poured beer on her and the fists began. I thought he was going to kill her. When he stopped, she told my sister she was taking the rubbish out and made a run for it.

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"Half an hour later she came back with the police and Bob was arrested. Mum, my sister and I were put on a bus and sent to California in the middle of the night to get away. We had nothing.

"I don't know how Bob found us several months later, but I wasn't surprised. I'd lived with the fear that he'd find us again. Mum had a new boyfriend by then and Bob attacked him. I saw the blood spattered on the walls and stairs. It was sickening.

"My daughter saw a lot of the violence. She saw Scott pushing me, kicking me and breaking things. He'd say to her, 'Tell Mummy she's a bitch'" Amanda

"Not long after that, Mum took us to New Zealand and then Perth, and we never saw Bob again. I ran away from home a few times because I didn't feel I could live with her. I blamed her for all the awful things I'd been through. Until Bob came along I'd lived in a nice house in a well-to-do suburb with a nanny. I'd lost everything and I no longer trusted my mother or respected her because she hadn't put my feelings first. I bought a sew-on patch because they were fashionable then and it said, 'Do unto others before they do unto you.' That summed up my attitude to life and to people.

"I'll never forget the violence and I made a pact with myself to protect my own children from anything like that, so I've never been in a physically abusive relationship. I knew from the age of 12 that I wanted four children and I didn't want to let what happened in my mother's relationship hold me back. But I've never trusted anyone around my children. It took 10 years to reconcile with my mother. I believed she'd potentially endangered her children's lives and it took a long time to forgive her for that."

Amanda began living with Scott when she was 19 and he abused her throughout the course of their 10-year relationship. Their children, Caroline, now six, and Ben, five, witnessed many of the attacks. "Scott used drugs, and he began verbally abusing me and pushing me around quite early in the relationship. I'd always thought

of domestic violence as leaving you black and blue, and with puffed eyes and split lips, as something more serious than pushing. In fact, the violence did get more serious as time went by. He began kicking and hitting me, but when the children came along I thought it would stop.

"The pregnancies were planned and I was really excited because I thought it would force Scott to face up to his responsibilities and settle down. He never said

much about the first pregnancy and the abuse continued after Caroline was born. I was feeding her when she was only a few months old and Scott got upset for some reason. He threw a stubby at me. I raised my arm to deflect it. If I hadn't, the stubby would have hit the baby.

"My daughter saw a lot more of the violence than my son. She saw him pushing me, kicking me and breaking things around the house. He'd say to Caroline, 'Tell Mummy she's a bitch.' Caroline would then look at me and say it, but I could see in her face that she didn't mean it. She looked confused.

"Scott smashed up a house we were living in once. It went on for a few hours, until one of the neighbours called the police. Caroline watched him the whole time. She never said a word, never cried. Looking back, I think she was frozen with fear. She was two at the time and Ben was one.

"Ben didn't sleep well at night, and when he was a toddler he always wanted to sleep with me. He'd crawl into bed with Scott and me but he would never sleep next to Scott. He'd always lie next to me, not between us. He wasn't feeding properly, either, and only began eating solids when he was three. Caroline never smiled. She was always jumpy. Scott told her there were monsters under her bed and she'd wake in the middle of the night and cry because he'd scared her.

"My parents told me the kids always looked nervous and scared, but I only ►