

1-1-1995

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Recommended Citation

Elizabeth Todd, *Absence of Choice, Presence of of Guilt*, 6 *Hastings Women's L.J.* 115 (1995).

Available at: <https://repository.uchastings.edu/hwj/vol6/iss1/6>

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Absence of Choice, Presence of Guilt

*Elizabeth Todd**

The hedge-apple green baby-doll nightgown —
Where is it now? I don't remember
Throwing it away or burning it. God,
I hope it doesn't reappear some day.

Mother, in a stark, stainless steel hospital bed
In front of the fireplace — you were there too long.
You're in remission now. Why
Weren't you in remission then?

The black cast iron lock on my antique bedroom door — Why
Did I wait until I was twelve to lock it? I knew how to lock it
When I was seven.

The Father's Day dinner I cooked for you at your summer cottage — Why
Did you remind me of the size of my nipples? Why
Did you kiss me? Why
Did I have to ask you to leave?
I was eighteen and had buried the memories.
I thought.

I told my oldest brother. We got drunk.
I told my other brother. He asked if Dad went all the way.
Otherwise it didn't matter.
I told my husband.
If it happened at all, he said.

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Did I consent? Could I have fought back?
You were my dad and still are,
I couldn't have.
I could have.

Mother, where were you?
Your job was that of exclusive nurturer
And you failed to nurture.
You failed to protect me.
Why did you sacrifice me?
You had to have known. He wasn't in your bedroom.

No one would believe me anyway. The laws were
made by men and are
Interpreted and enforced by men.
If I would have told, I would have been punished, not you.
I am certain of that.

Dad, did you know what this would do? Was
This sexual terrorism a manifestation of
Your male dominance?
Did you really mean to punish me
Just for being a girl?

Your intimidation did not work when I got older. But maybe
It did. Maybe
That is why I can forgive you. Maybe
This is what causes me to
Demean and sometimes despise my mother
Like you do.

Your violence against women was taken out on me.
Was I that bad?
Did I deserve it?
Is it truly part of an integrated, well-developed,
But unwritten system designed to control women?
I thought you did it out of misplaced love.

The more I succeeded, the more I could bury
The feelings of worthlessness and contempt.
The more challenges I met and conquered,
The more I scrambled to salvage
Some sense of self-worth.

Now, I can achieve anything I want to.
I can meet and even exceed the performance expectations of others.
But I can never meet or exceed my own.

I do not want to be a victim or a survivor.
Each implies that a part of me was mutilated and
Can never again be made whole.
Instead, I want to be a conqueror.
I want to conquer the feelings of self-doubt and to be complete.
I want to conquer the feelings of mistrust and to believe.
I want to conquer the feelings of fear and to feel safe.

Somewhere
The nightgown still exists.
Somehow
I will eventually destroy it.

