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## WRITE TO HEAL: GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND RECOVERY WITHOUT ACCOUNTABILITY IN AURÉLIE MOEREMANS' MEMOIR *BROKEN STRINGS*

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Abstract	Article Information
<p><i>This study examines the representation of gender-based violence (GBV) and its aftermath in Broken Strings (2025) by Aurélie Moeremans, with particular focus on child grooming and the narrative construction of “healing” or recovery. This is a descriptive qualitative study, with the analysis grounded in feminist theoretical frameworks. The findings reveal that abuse in the memoir unfolds as a gradual and processual form of violence, characterized by manipulation, coercion, and the erosion of agency. The narrative further demonstrates how silencing is actively produced through psychological control, while failures of institutions, family, and media contribute to the persistence of harm. As the text progresses, a tonal shift toward healing and self-reclamation positions recovery as the primary form of resolution. However, this emphasis simultaneously exposes the absence of accountability, as the perpetrator remains unpunished and institutional justice inaccessible. The study argues that while the memoir foregrounds survival and resilience, it also reflects a broader tendency within GBV narratives to displace responsibility onto survivors. In doing so, Broken Strings highlights the tension between recovery and justice, raising critical questions about how violence is ultimately resolved within contemporary survivor discourse.</i></p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Gender-based Violence, Child Grooming, Broken Strings, Memoir</p>	<p>Received: 07/03/2026</p> <p>Revised: 17/03/2026</p> <p>Accepted: 19/03/2026</p>

### INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a widespread and systemic global issue, affecting millions of individuals across diverse cultural, social, and geographical contexts. GBV is broadly defined as violence directed at individuals or groups based on their gender; in practice, it disproportionately affects women and girls. This highlights how GBV is em-

bedded within unequal social structures and power relations between genders. GBV commonly manifests in physical, psychological, and sexual forms, which may occur independently or overlap in complex ways. Drawing on WHO's typology of violence, Kerr (2022, p. 37) identifies several forms of GBV, including self-directed violence (e.g., self-starvation, cutting), interpersonal violence (e.g., domestic abuse, sexual abuse by an intimate partner), and collective violence (e.g., female genital mutilation, "honour killings"). Beyond the aforementioned forms, GBV may also manifest through microaggressions—subtle, everyday experiences and behaviors that reinforce gender stereotypes, biases, and structural inequalities. These may include teasing, name-calling, or sexist jokes; which, although often normalized, contribute to the perpetuation of gendered harm. In addition, cyber violence may constitute another significant dimension of GBV. This includes making threatening or degrading comments toward individuals based on their gender, as well as sharing sexually explicit content without consent. Such practices extend the reach of GBV into digital spaces, showing its evolving and pervasive nature in contemporary society (Kerr, 2022, p. 37).

Despite increased global awareness and advocacy efforts, GBV continues to persist at alarming rates, revealing the limitations of legal and institutional responses in protecting vulnerable populations. To put into perspective, according to WHO, more than 30% of women worldwide have experienced either physical or sexual intimate partner violence, while 7% have been subjected to non-partner sexual assault. Additionally, an estimated 100–140 million girls and women have undergone female genital mutilation, with more than 3 million girls at risk each year in Africa alone. Early and forced marriage also remains prevalent, with nearly 70 million girls worldwide married before the age of 18, often against their will (Ellsberg et al., 2015, p. 1555). Women and girls, in particular, remain at heightened risk due to intersecting factors such as age, dependency, and restricted social agency. These vulnerabilities are especially pronounced in contexts where violence is minimized, silenced, or rendered invisible, allowing harmful practices to persist without accountability.

Within the widespread and varied forms of GBV directed at females, the experiences of young girls demand particular attention. Young girls are at profound risk in the face of GBV. In many cases, abuse against young girls remains undetected and unchallenged, as the phenomenon is often underreported and insufficiently documented. This underreporting can be attributed to several factors, including the normalization or tacit acceptance of certain harmful practices, which are not always recognized as abusive within specific cultural or social contexts. Moreover, many victims are too young or too vulnerable to articulate or disclose their experiences, and even when abuse is reported, institutional responses—such as legal systems and child protection services—frequently prove inadequate or inaccessible (UNICEF, 2014).

As one of the forms of GBV, sexual abuse experienced by children is particularly complex. One of the most insidious manifestations of such violence is child grooming. Broadly understood, child grooming refers to a deliberate and manipulative process through which perpetrators gradually build trust and emotional connection with a potential victim, creating conditions that facilitate abuse while simultaneously discouraging disclosure. However, it is important to note that within existing literature, the concept of grooming is defined

in various ways, with no single definition achieving universal consensus (Winters et al., 2021, p. 926). The cultivation of dependency on the perpetrator constitutes a central element of the grooming process, often involving manipulation, the strategic use of secrecy, and forms of excessive affection intended to build emotional trust and facilitate further exploitation. Since these dynamics are experienced by young victims, they may be unable to recognize such processes as abusive or violent, further complicating identification and intervention.

Not only are young victims of child grooming often unable to recognize that they are being exploited for the perpetrator's harmful intentions, but such abuse also tends to remain concealed due to their limited ability to articulate and report their experiences. This challenge is further compounded by the difficulty in distinguishing between seemingly normal adult-child interactions and those driven by exploitative motives. Many grooming behaviors—such as giving gifts, offering attention, or engaging in playful activities—may appear harmless on the surface, yet can serve as calculated strategies to gain trust and facilitate abuse. Moreover, the identification of grooming is complicated by the variability of these behaviors, which may differ depending on the perpetrator, the victim, their relationship, and the broader context in which the interaction occurs. Such variations make it increasingly difficult to detect consistent patterns, thereby allowing grooming practices to persist undetected and unchallenged (Winters et al., 2021). This difficulty is further exacerbated by the failure of adults and institutions to adequately recognize warning signs or respond effectively. Such failures are often reinforced by broader social tendencies to dismiss, downplay, or silence children's voices—particularly when their accounts disrupt established power relations.

As a result, victims often experience long-term psychological, emotional, and social consequences. These impacts stem not only from the traumatic nature of the abuse itself but also from the absence of protection and the lack of accountability for perpetrators. Consequently, victims are frequently left to navigate their experiences in isolation, which can intensify feelings of self-blame. Many come to internalize the violence they have endured, accompanied by profound shame and embarrassment, as well as the belief that they will not be believed or protected if they speak out (Wolf & Pruitt, 2019, p. 4).

To communicate the experience of GBV in general, and more specifically childhood sexual abuse in cases of child grooming, personal narratives and memoirs have emerged as crucial spaces of expression—particularly in contexts where legal and institutional frameworks fail to adequately represent victims or hold perpetrators accountable. Historically, the voices of survivors have often been marginalized, dismissed, or rendered unintelligible within dominant discourses. Their testimonies are frequently constrained by implicit social norms that question their credibility, portray their experiences as implausible, or frame them as exaggerated or untruthful. Survivors may be stigmatized as unreliable or emotionally unstable, further undermining their ability to be heard. In this context, personal narratives and memoirs become vital platforms through which survivors can reclaim their voices, challenge dominant silences, and articulate experiences that have long been suppressed or denied (Alcoff & Gray, 1993, pp. 265–266). Through their emphasis on lived experience, survivor memoirs play a crucial role in raising awareness and validating the experiences of those who

have endured violence. This is especially significant in cases where formal justice mechanisms fail to provide recognition or redress, positioning narrative as an alternative space in which survivors can be heard.

At the same time, the production of personal narratives can serve not only as individual expressions of experience but also as acts with broader political significance. As argued by hooks (1997), the articulation of personal experiences has the potential to generate political awareness and transformation, rather than merely confining such experiences to the private sphere. In this sense, survivor narratives operate within a tension between personal healing and collective critique, where the act of storytelling can both reflect and challenge the structural conditions that enable GBV. This is particularly significant given that, across different social positions, women are often socialized to understand themselves as inherently vulnerable to sexual violence, while simultaneously being made to feel responsible for such harm (Vera-Gray, 2023, p. 25). Such internalized narratives further complicate how trauma is experienced, expressed, and interpreted within survivor accounts.

While these narratives create opportunities for visibility and recognition, they are also shaped by cultural expectations regarding how such experiences should be told and resolved. Survivor memoirs often follow trajectories from suffering to healing, emphasizing recovery, resilience, and personal transformation as central endpoints. Although empowering, this focus raises critical questions about what is foregrounded—and what remains unaddressed—particularly in relation to accountability and justice. By privileging healing, these narratives may implicitly frame survival as an individual responsibility, thereby obscuring the broader structures that enable GBV, including perpetrators' actions, institutional failures, and persistent social conditions. As a result, the burden of resolution may shift onto the survivor, who is expected not only to endure violence but also to recover from it. Furthermore, the circulation of survivor narratives within media and public discourse introduces additional complexities, as such accounts may be selectively framed or sensationalized to prioritize emotional impact over structural critique. In these contexts, survivor stories risk becoming objects of consumption, with disproportionate attention given to the details of violence, potentially reinforcing voyeuristic tendencies and diverting focus from systemic issues (Alcoff & Gray, 1993, pp. 262–263). These dynamics suggest that while survivor narratives can challenge silence and generate awareness, they may also be shaped by dominant frameworks that ultimately constrain their transformative potential.

Again, if healing is positioned as the primary resolution, it becomes necessary to ask: who is held responsible for the violence itself? When perpetrators are not required to answer for their actions, and when institutions fail to intervene or provide protection, recovery narratives risk reconfiguring the locus of responsibility. Rather than being directed toward those who inflicted harm or allowed it to occur, responsibility is subtly transferred to survivors, who are expected to process, survive, and ultimately overcome their experiences. While “write to heal”-centered narratives may offer a sense of closure, they can also obscure the absence of justice, normalizing a framework in which violence is survived rather than addressed. This dynamic reflects broader patterns within GBV discourse, where the emphasis

on resilience and empowerment can coexist with, and at times conceal, the lack of accountability for perpetrators and the failure of protective systems.

These concerns are particularly evident in contemporary survivor memoirs that depict GBV in the absence of accountability, such as *Broken Strings* (2025) by Aurélie Moeremans. The memoir offers a deeply personal account of child grooming, sexual violence, domestic violence, and coercive control; documenting the author's own experiences of manipulation, abuse, and entrapment within a relationship marked by significant power imbalance. Through its narrative, the text reveals how violence unfolds not as a single event but as a sustained process of control, gradually limiting the victim's autonomy and capacity to seek help. Notably, *Broken Strings* presents a narrative in which the perpetrator does not take accountability for the violence inflicted, and no external intervention effectively halts the abuse. The absence of meaningful institutional or social response underscores the vulnerability of the victim and highlights the broader systemic failures that allow such violence to persist. In this context, survival emerges not through protection or justice, but through the author's own eventual ability to endure and break away from the situation. Adding to its significance, *Broken Strings* is a self-published work that gained widespread attention and went viral among Indonesian readers in early 2026; circulating rapidly across social media platforms and sparking public discussion on child grooming and "surviving and healing" after the abuse. More than ever, now, its reception reflects a growing engagement with survivor narratives within contemporary literary and social discourse; raising important questions about how such stories are interpreted, particularly in relation to the concern of accountability and justice.

Despite the extensive narratives and body of scholarship on GBV, much of the existing related texts and research have merely focused on trauma, testimony, and processes of recovery, often emphasizing the importance of narrative as a means of healing and self-reclamation. Studies have highlighted how survivor testimonies function as acts of resistance against silence, as well as tools for personal and collective meaning-making. However, comparatively less attention has been given to the ways in which these narratives may also reproduce problematic frameworks, particularly in relation to the distribution of responsibility. In narratives where perpetrators remain unaccountable and institutional responses are absent or ineffective, the emphasis on recovery may inadvertently contribute to a displacement of responsibility from those who commit or enable violence to those who experience it. There is a critical need to interrogate how survivor narratives construct healing, and to what extent such constructions obscure or normalize the lack of accountability within broader GBV discourse.

Addressing this gap, this study examines *Broken Strings* by Aurélie Moeremans as a literary study of a survivor narrative that foregrounds recovery—a classic "write to heal" discourse—in the absence of accountability. This research seeks to analyze how the memoir constructs a trajectory of healing following experiences of child grooming and sexual violence, and how this trajectory reflects broader cultural and discursive patterns in representing GBV. Drawing on feminist frameworks, the study explores how experience of abuse to recovery is narrated, and what remains unaddressed when accountability is absent.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Feminist Theory, Gender-Based Violence, and Child Grooming**

In the discussion of GBV, feminist theory understands the phenomenon as both systemic and structural in nature. Central to feminist arguments is the recognition that violence experienced by women—as well as other gender minorities—is rooted in unequal power relations. Within this framework, GBV manifests in a wide range of abusive practices directed toward those in more vulnerable positions, including emotional manipulation, coercion, sexual exploitation, and other forms of control that function to sustain dominance over victims.

In the influential work *Surviving Sexual Violence*, Kelly (1988) introduced the concept of the continuum of sexual violence, through which gender-based violence is understood as a spectrum of interconnected experiences rather than a series of isolated incidents. Within this framework, various forms of abuse—ranging from harassment, coercion, and pressure to assault, rape, and child sexual abuse—are situated along a continuum that reflects the pervasive and normalized nature of gendered harm. By conceptualizing these acts as part of a continuum, Kelly highlighted how seemingly “minor” or everyday forms of violation are intrinsically linked to more extreme manifestations of violence, reinforcing patterns of control and inequality. This perspective is particularly significant when examining forms of abuse such as child grooming, which often operate subtly and progressively, making them difficult to identify while remaining deeply embedded within broader structures of GBV.

Building on this framework, Kelly further reflected on how power operates in cases of child sexual abuse, emphasizing the ease with which adults—particularly men—can misinterpret or deliberately recast children’s openness and trust as sexual in nature. This dynamic reveals how children’s natural dependence on adults, and their belief in adult authority, can be exploited to justify and conceal abusive behavior. Such power is reinforced through broader social conditions that limit children’s access to knowledge, autonomy, and the ability to make informed choices, thereby sustaining their vulnerability (Kelly, 1988, p. 17). Although Kelly did not explicitly theorize child grooming, her concept of the continuum of sexual violence provides a critical lens through which abuse can be understood as an ongoing process rather than a singular act. Within this perspective, grooming can be interpreted as part of a broader pattern of coercion and control, where manipulation, trust-building, and the gradual erosion of boundaries function to enable and normalize abuse over time.

In addition, feminist scholars have long emphasized the structural dimensions of GBV. In her analysis of patriarchy, Walby (1991) argued that violence against women and other marginalized genders is sustained within broader social systems, shaped by cultural norms, institutional practices, and legal frameworks that often fail to protect victims or hold perpetrators accountable. This perspective is crucial to understanding GBV, as it highlights how such violence persists not only through individual actions but also through systemic inaction and neglect. In this sense, violence is both enabled and sustained within institutions that fail to recognize, address, or prevent it. Within this framework, the persistence of violence against victims—women, gender minorities, and children—is closely linked to systemic limitations that undermine prevention, protection, and accountability. These structural

failures not only allow violence to recur but also create conditions in which meaningful intervention is absent. As a result, victims often experience both direct harm from perpetrators and secondary harm arising from inadequate or ineffective institutional responses.

Furthermore, within the broader scope of feminist theory and its discussion of GBV, child grooming emerges as a particularly insidious and processual form of abuse. Rather than having a single, fixed pattern, grooming may take different forms depending on the perpetrator; however, it consistently involves the gradual cultivation of trust, emotional connection, and dependency. These dynamics are often reinforced through behaviors that may appear “nurturing” on the surface but are strategically intended to facilitate further—often sexual—exploitation. Instead of occurring as a one-time act, grooming operates through ongoing and calculated forms of manipulation, including the use of attention, affection, secrecy, and control. Such practices progressively erode boundaries between perpetrator and victim, normalizing abusive behaviors and making them more difficult to recognize. In this sense, child grooming aligns closely with Kelly’s (1988) concept of the continuum of sexual violence, in which abuse unfolds as a series of interconnected and escalating practices rather than discrete events. This process is deeply shaped by power dynamics, particularly in relationships between adults and children, where authority and dependency create conditions for exploitation. These dynamics underscore that grooming is not merely an individual pathology but is embedded within broader structures of inequality, where children’s limited autonomy and social authority heighten their vulnerability. Positioned within the discourse of GBV, child grooming thus reveals how violence is sustained through processes of coercion, normalization, and silence, reinforcing existing power hierarchies while remaining difficult to detect and challenge.

### **Feminist Critiques of Recovery Discourse**

Within feminist scholarship, the notion of “recovery” in the context of GBV has been critically interrogated, particularly in relation to how survivor experiences are framed, narrated, and ultimately resolved. While the idea of recovery or healing is often positioned as empowering, feminist critics argue that such narratives risk becoming prescriptive, suggesting that trauma must be processed and overcome in specific, socially sanctioned ways. The dominance of recovery discourse, therefore, may limit the range of acceptable responses to GBV, privileging particular modes of expression while marginalizing others that do not conform to expectations of healing and resolution.

Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, this regulation can be understood in relation to the politics of recognition and the norms that govern intelligibility. Butler (2004) argues that not all experiences are equally recognizable within dominant discourses; rather, they must conform to certain normative frameworks in order to be acknowledged as valid. In the context of GBV, this often means that survivor narratives are considered legitimate when they align with ideals of resilience and eventual recovery, while those that remain fragmented, unresolved, or resistant to closure may be marginalized or rendered unintelligible. A key concern within this critique is the tendency for recovery narratives to privilege linear trajectories, in which survivors move from victimhood toward empowerment and closure. Such framing risks simplifying the complex and often ongoing nature of trauma, reducing it to a condition

that can—and should—be resolved at the individual level. In doing so, it may obscure the structural conditions that produce and sustain violence, including patriarchal power relations, institutional failures, and broader cultural norms that normalize harm. As a result, the emphasis on recovery can inadvertently shift responsibility onto survivors, positioning them as accountable not only for enduring violence but also for successfully overcoming it.

In contexts where perpetrators are not held responsible and systemic inequalities remain unaddressed, the emphasis on recovery risks functioning as a form of containment—redirecting attention away from justice and toward personal coping. Consequently, feminist critiques call for a more nuanced understanding of survivor narratives, one that acknowledges the political dimensions of trauma and resists reducing violence to an individualized experience detached from its structural roots. In this regard, feminist critiques have also questioned the prominence of resilience as a central component of recovery discourse. As Bracke (2016) suggested, resilience is often framed as a desirable and even necessary mode of survival, particularly for women, positioning them as capable of adapting to and enduring adversity. However, this emphasis may inadvertently reinforce the very structures that produce violence, as resilience becomes a means through which individuals are expected to accommodate and persist within harmful conditions rather than challenge them. In this sense, resilience can be understood as a form of reproduction—sustaining not only the individual but also the broader social and political systems that enable such harm to occur.

Moreover, the focus on recovery and resilience raises critical questions about the assumption that trauma can be resolved through a return to a prior state of wholeness (Bracke, 2016). In cases of GBV, such a “return” is often neither possible nor meaningful, as the violence experienced fundamentally reshapes the survivor’s sense of self and reality. Framing recovery as a process of restoration risks minimizing the enduring impact of trauma while diverting attention away from the structural conditions that allow it to persist. More importantly, it may obscure the absence of accountability, where perpetrators remain unpunished and institutions fail to provide justice. As a result, the emphasis on healing not only individualizes responsibility but also risks normalizing the lack of systemic response, reinforcing a cycle in which survivors are expected to recover while the conditions that enabled the violence remain largely unchanged.

Taken together, these critiques highlight the limitations of recovery-centered frameworks in fully addressing the complexities of GBV. While narratives of healing and resilience may offer visibility and affirmation, they risk obscuring the structural conditions that sustain violence and the absence of accountability. A critical feminist approach, therefore, moves beyond individualized models of recovery to examine how trauma is shaped by broader relations of power. It also calls for greater attention to narratives that resist closure, foreground unresolved harm, and expose the silences surrounding perpetrators and institutional failure. In this way, survivor narratives can be understood not only as stories of healing, but also as sites of critique that challenge existing structures of violence.

### **Existing Studies on Moeremans' *Broken Strings***

One study that engages with *Broken Strings* is conducted by Halik and Firkawati (2026), who examine the text through the lens of human resource management and organizational psychology. Their analysis focuses on how abusive power relations, particularly those shaped through psychological manipulation such as grooming, contribute to imbalances that affect both psychological well-being and professional behavior. Drawing on frameworks such as abusive supervision, psychological capital, as well as theories of power by Foucault and Bourdieu, the study argues that such dynamics operate through the depletion of individual psychological resources, ultimately resulting in diminished agency, organizational silence, and a decline in professionalism. Importantly, the findings highlight how authority, when left unchecked, fosters environments in which compliance is driven not by integrity but by fear.

While this study provides valuable insight into the broader implications of abusive power relations, particularly in professional and institutional contexts, its primary focus remains on organizational outcomes rather than on the experiential and narrative dimensions of abuse. Nevertheless, its identification of systemic power imbalances reinforces the argument that the violence depicted in *Broken Strings* is not incidental but structurally enabled. This perspective supports a broader understanding of how unequal power relations create conditions in which abuse—including forms such as grooming—can emerge and persist, even if the narrative complexities of such processes remain underexplored within this particular study.

Another study on *Broken Strings* by Suryaningrum and Wuwur (2026) approached the text from a semiotic perspective, focusing on how meaning is constructed through fragmented narration and shifting viewpoints. Drawing on contemporary semiotic theory, the study examines how disruptions in narrative coherence function as formal strategies that reposition the reader and generate meaning through instability, absence, and tension. By conceptualizing perspective as a dynamic and fluid process rather than a fixed narrative position, the authors highlight how the text challenges conventional modes of storytelling and reader alignment. However, while this analysis offers valuable insight into the formal and structural dimensions of the narrative, its focus remains largely on textual mechanics rather than the socio-political implications of the experiences depicted. As such, issues of GBV, power relations, and the representation of trauma—particularly in relation to grooming and survivor discourse—are not substantially addressed.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that Moeremans' *Broken Strings* has been examined through diverse disciplinary lenses. While they offer valuable insights into power dynamics and narrative form, they do not fully engage with the text's representation of GBV, particularly in relation to child grooming and the complexities of survivor narratives. This gap highlights the need for a more integrated approach that situates the memoir within feminist theoretical frameworks, allowing for a deeper examination of how abuse is constructed, experienced, and narrated, as well as how issues of accountability and structural inequality are negotiated within the text.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the representation of GBV and its aftermath in *Broken Strings* by Aurélie Moeremans. The primary method of analysis is close reading, through which the text is examined in detail to identify patterns of narration, representation of abuse, and the construction of recovery. The memoir serves as the primary source of data, while relevant scholarly literature on feminist theory, GBV, and survivor narratives functions as secondary sources to support the analysis. Grounded in a feminist theoretical framework, this study aims to explore how the experience of abuse—particularly in the context of child grooming—is narrated, and how trajectories of recovery are constructed within the text. In doing so, it also critically examines what remains unaddressed, particularly in relation to issues of accountability and the absence of structural response, thereby situating personal narrative within broader socio-political contexts.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Before engaging in the analysis, it is important to situate *Broken Strings* within its narrative context. The memoir recounts Aurélie Moeremans' experience of entering a relationship at a young age with Bobby, an older figure who gradually emerges as the central antagonist. Initially presented through charm and attention, his character develops into a controlling and coercive presence that drives the progression of abuse. Rather than being defined by isolated acts, Bobby embodies the mechanisms of manipulation, domination, and violence that unfold over time. Positioning him as the central antagonist allows the text to trace how abuse evolves from subtle emotional manipulation into sustained coercion, establishing the foundation for understanding child grooming as a processual form of GBV.

### **Child Grooming as a Process of Gender-Based Violence**

This section presents a close reading of *Broken Strings*, focusing on how GBV is constructed, experienced, and narrated within the text. Drawing on a feminist theoretical framework, the analysis examines the gradual and often obscured processes through which abuse unfolds, paying particular attention to the dynamics of power, control, and manipulation. Rather than approaching violence as a singular or isolated event, this study emphasizes its processual nature, exploring how it is embedded in everyday interactions and normalized over time. Through this lens, the following discussion begins by establishing child grooming as a form of GBV, highlighting how abuse is systematically produced through relational and discursive practices.

At the early stage of the narrative, Aurélie has just begun working closely with Bobby after several prior encounters, marking the initial phase of their intensified interaction. The relationship is framed within a professional setting, where Bobby occupies a position of greater experience and authority, creating the conditions for an emerging power imbalance.

He started sending me funny messages while we were still filming. At first they were silly comments about people on set, little jokes made behind their

backs to get a laugh, but I knew what he was doing. He liked me, and he wasn't hiding it.

I'll admit, I liked him too. I was attracted to him. He looked mature, he was charming, and to my fifteen-year-old eyes, he felt like the popular guy in school, only older, louder, funnier. (Moeremans, 2025, p. 14)

This quotation illustrates the early stage of grooming, where trust and emotional connection are established through seemingly harmless interactions. Bobby's use of humor and private communication functions as a strategy to create intimacy, positioning their relationship as special and distinct from others on set. While these actions appear casual and socially acceptable, they mark the beginning of boundary crossing, particularly given Aurélie's age and Bobby's adult status. The narrator's admission of attraction highlights how grooming operates by aligning with the victim's emotional responses, making the interaction feel mutual rather than manipulative. Importantly, the framing of Bobby as "mature" and desirable reflects a perception shaped by age and authority, reinforcing the asymmetrical power dynamic. In this moment, violence is not yet visible as overt harm; instead, it is constructed subtly through affect, attention, and normalization, laying the groundwork for further exploitation.

Following their initial interaction, Bobby's presence becomes increasingly frequent and deliberate, extending beyond the professional setting into Aurélie's personal and domestic space. This marks a shift from casual interaction to sustained contact, where access, attention, and emotional engagement begin to intensify.

From that day on, he kept showing up at our house, saying he was just in the neighborhood, even though his home was more than an hour away. We believed him. He messaged me constantly, asked questions about my life, said he missed me, missed my family too.

He told me, "Your pureness is rare. You're rare. You're not like the wild girls out there."

I believed him. No boy had ever said anything like that to me before. The others I had met only cared about kissing, rushing straight into things without really seeing me. But Bobby looked at me as if there was more, as if who I was mattered. In his eyes, I wasn't just another girl. For the first time, I felt special. (Moeremans, 2025, pp. 14–15)

This passage demonstrates a deeper stage of grooming, characterized by persistence, emotional investment, and the strategic construction of exclusivity. Bobby's repeated visits and constant communication function to normalize his presence, while simultaneously creating a sense of closeness and dependence. His compliments, particularly the emphasis on Aurélie's "pureness" and distinction from "other girls," operate as a form of emotional manipulation disguised as care, reinforcing a narrative in which she is uniquely valued. This not only strengthens her attachment to him but also subtly isolates her by positioning other girls as inferior or less worthy. For a fifteen-year-old, such validation carries significant weight, shaping her perception of the relationship as meaningful and genuine. The language of being "seen" and "special" masks the underlying imbalance of power, as Bobby leverages his age,

experience, and authority to cultivate trust. In this way, the grooming process advances through emotional affirmation and normalization, further blurring boundaries and embedding control within what appears to be affection.

As the relationship progresses, Bobby's presence becomes increasingly embedded in Aurélie's daily routines, extending into her professional environment and reinforcing his constant availability. This stage reflects a deeper consolidation of emotional dependency, where his actions are framed as care but begin to produce subtle psychological pressure.

He also began accompanying me to work, waiting through long hours on set as if he had nothing better to do... At first I told myself it was sweet... But beneath that comfort was something heavier I couldn't name... It felt like an invisible debt, as if I owed him for every hour he sat and waited... I liked it... this is what it feels like to be wanted. (Moeremans, 2025, p. 15)

This passage reveals a critical shift in the grooming process, where affection becomes entangled with obligation. Bobby's persistent presence is initially interpreted as devotion, reinforcing Aurélie's sense of being valued; however, it simultaneously creates an implicit expectation of reciprocity. The narrator's articulation of an "invisible debt" signals an emerging awareness of this imbalance, even if it remains difficult for her to fully articulate or resist. This dynamic exemplifies how grooming operates not only through emotional validation but also through the gradual imposition of psychological pressure, where the victim feels compelled to respond in ways that maintain the relationship. Importantly, Aurélie's internal conflict—feeling both comforted and uneasy—demonstrates how manipulation is normalized and internalized, particularly for a young victim encountering such attention for the first time. In this moment, the language of being "wanted" masks the growing asymmetry of control, as care is strategically transformed into a mechanism that binds the victim more closely to the perpetrator.

As Bobby's presence becomes increasingly constant, the relationship begins to reshape Aurélie's social world, gradually limiting her interactions beyond him. This stage reflects a deeper consolidation of control, where emotional dependence starts to translate into isolation from others.

The more he was around, the smaller the outside world became. I stopped messaging friends, stopped going out unless it was for work. He filled my days and my thoughts... It didn't feel like control. It felt like love, though I didn't know what love was supposed to feel like. (Moeremans, 2025, p. 18)

This passage captures a crucial phase of grooming in which isolation is normalized and reinterpreted as intimacy. Bobby's constant presence effectively narrows Aurélie's social environment, reducing external influences that might challenge or disrupt the relationship. Importantly, this withdrawal does not appear as forced separation but emerges through emotional absorption, as Aurélie becomes increasingly centered on him. Her perception that this dynamic "felt like love" highlights the success of the grooming process, where control is masked as affection and exclusivity. The uncertainty expressed in "I didn't know what love

was supposed to feel like” underscores her vulnerability as a young victim, lacking the experiential framework to distinguish between care and manipulation. In this way, isolation becomes a key mechanism of control, further embedding the power imbalance while remaining largely invisible to the victim herself.

Following the gradual establishment of trust, dependency, and emotional closeness, the relationship shifts into a more explicitly romantic frame as Bobby asks Aurélie to be his girlfriend. This moment marks a critical transition, where previously subtle forms of manipulation begin to confront the victim’s personal boundaries more directly.

Then, quietly, I gave him my boundary... ‘If you want more than kissing, I can’t. I want to wait until I’m married...’  
...He laughed, his eyes narrowing as he said, ‘We’ll see.’  
My heart jolted with unease. *We’ll see? What does that mean? Is it a promise, or a threat?* (Moeremans, 2025, p. 19)

This passage reveals a significant moment of boundary articulation and immediate destabilization. Aurélie clearly expresses her limit, grounding it in personal and familial values; however, Bobby’s response undermines this boundary through ambiguity and dismissal. His phrase “we’ll see” operates as a subtle yet powerful form of coercion, leaving the boundary open to negotiation while introducing uncertainty and unease. Rather than respecting her refusal, he reframes it as temporary, suggesting that her position can—and will—be changed. This reflects a key mechanism of grooming, where resistance is not directly confronted but gradually eroded through pressure, ambiguity, and persistence. Aurélie’s internal reaction captures the emerging tension between perceived affection and underlying control. In this moment, the dynamics of power become more visible, as the relationship begins to move from emotional manipulation toward the anticipation of further boundary violation.

### **Silencing and Erosion of Agency**

Building on the processual nature of grooming, the narrative further reveals how control is sustained through the production of silence and the gradual erosion of agency. In *Broken Strings*, silence does not emerge as a passive absence of speech, but as a condition actively shaped by fear, confusion, and power imbalance. As the relationship progresses, Aurélie’s ability to articulate her experience, assert her boundaries, and seek external support becomes increasingly constrained, both internally and externally. Through these dynamics, silence operates as a mechanism of control, reinforcing the perpetrator’s dominance while limiting the victim’s capacity to resist or disclose. The following analysis examines how this silencing is constructed within the text, demonstrating that the erosion of voice is inseparable from the broader structures of coercion and abuse.

As the relationship progresses, Bobby’s control extends beyond physical presence into continuous surveillance, shaping Aurélie’s daily behavior and limiting her sense of autonomy even in his absence. This marks a critical stage in which agency is eroded through constant monitoring and emotional pressure.

Even when he wasn’t there, I wasn’t free. He demanded constant updates. I held my phone at all times, reporting where I was, who I was with, what I was

doing. If I took too long, he accused me. If I replied quickly, he still found fault. Every message was another test. (Moeremans, 2025, p. 27)

This passage illustrates how control is internalized and sustained through digital communication, transforming everyday interactions into mechanisms of surveillance and evaluation. Aurélie's statement that she "wasn't free" even in his absence highlights the extent to which control has been embedded into her behavior and consciousness. The constant demand for updates functions as a form of coercion, where compliance becomes necessary to avoid conflict, yet is never sufficient to satisfy the perpetrator. This creates a no-win situation that reinforces anxiety and dependency, while gradually diminishing her autonomy. In this context, silence and self-regulation are not voluntary but produced through the anticipation of accusation and punishment, demonstrating how power operates continuously rather than episodically.

As this dynamic intensifies, Aurélie becomes increasingly trapped between competing authorities, further complicating her ability to act independently or assert her own needs.

It became a cycle. Each time my mom took my phone, he blamed me. Each time I obeyed her, he called me childish. And every time I finished studying, instead of being happy to see me, he came to fight. (Moeremans, 2025, p. 28)

This passage reveals how Aurélie's agency is constrained through the construction of conflicting expectations, where any action she takes results in criticism or punishment. Positioned between her mother's authority and Bobby's demands, she is placed in an impossible situation that undermines her ability to navigate either relationship safely. Bobby's response reframes obedience and responsibility—such as studying or listening to her mother—as failures, thereby destabilizing Aurélie's sense of judgment and reinforcing his control over her priorities. This cyclical dynamic exemplifies how coercion operates through emotional manipulation rather than direct force, producing a state in which resistance becomes increasingly difficult. As a result, Aurélie's voice and autonomy are not simply suppressed but actively eroded through repeated patterns of blame, conflict, and psychological pressure.

As the relationship becomes increasingly coercive, Bobby's presence in Aurélie's home—particularly following conflicts—marks a significant escalation in both control and violation. Moments of tension are repeatedly followed by what he frames as "compromise," where emotional pressure is redirected into physical demands. Within this pattern, boundaries are not respected but gradually worn down, as each concession leads to further expectations. What begins as seemingly minor requests evolves into progressively invasive acts, culminating in sexual contact that Aurélie neither fully consents to nor feels able to refuse. These encounters are shaped by guilt, exhaustion, and fear of conflict, rather than mutual desire, revealing how coercion operates through persistence and emotional manipulation rather than overt force.

Following a prolonged pattern of coercion, emotional pressure, and repeated boundary violations, the relationship reaches a critical point in which Aurélie's refusal is no longer negotiated but entirely disregarded. This moment marks the transition from grooming and coercion into explicit sexual violence, where control is enforced through physical force.

As if none of my refusals mattered... he yanked up my dress, his hand clamped over my mouth... And then he pushed in. Fast, sudden, without warning... I froze, tears spilling from my eyes... The pain wasn't the first thing I felt. The betrayal was. (Moeremans, 2025, p. 35)

This passage makes visible the culmination of the grooming process, where earlier patterns of manipulation and boundary erosion enable the perpetrator to act with complete disregard for consent. Aurélie's repeated refusals are rendered meaningless, emphasizing how coercion has already dismantled her agency prior to the act itself. The use of physical force—silencing her, restraining her, and proceeding without warning—confirms the violence as rape, yet it is significant that this moment emerges from an ongoing process rather than an isolated incident. Bobby's earlier strategies of control create the conditions in which resistance is both anticipated and overridden, illustrating how violence is constructed over time. The narrator's emphasis on "betrayal" foregrounds the relational dimension of the harm, where trust and emotional attachment are weaponized against her.

In the immediate aftermath, Aurélie struggles to name the experience, revealing how dominant narratives of sexual violence shape her understanding of what has occurred.

At that moment, I didn't realize it was rape... I used to think rape only happened in dark alleys... I didn't know it could happen in a bedroom... followed by a kiss on the forehead... (Moeremans, 2025, p. 36)

This passage highlights the role of social discourse in obscuring recognition of violence. Aurélie's inability to identify the act as rape reflects a limited cultural framework in which sexual violence is associated with strangers and overt brutality, rather than intimacy and coercion. The juxtaposition of violence with gestures of affection—such as a kiss and promises of marriage—further complicates her perception, blurring the boundary between care and harm. This moment reinforces how silence is produced not only through fear but also through a lack of language and recognition, aligning with feminist critiques of how certain forms of violence remain unintelligible within dominant narratives.

As Aurélie begins to register the violation, Bobby immediately reasserts control, reframing the act within a narrative of possession and future commitment.

I stared at him with a look I had never given before, my chest burning with a hatred I didn't know I was capable of. For a split second, the air between us shifted. He saw it too. He stopped smirking, his eyes flickering as if he had crossed a line. Instead of backing away, he leaned in again, his voice softer but more menacing:

"You're going to be my wife."

*What is he even talking about?*

I wasn't thinking about marriage at all. I was thinking about how I had just lost what I wanted to save for marriage. (Moeremans, 2025, p. 36)

Here, the imposition of marriage functions as a discursive strategy to legitimize the violence and contain its meaning. By invoking a future-oriented promise, Bobby attempts to

overwrite the violation with a narrative of inevitability and ownership, further silencing Aurélie's ability to resist or redefine the experience. Her response, however, reveals a rupture: rather than accepting this framing, she focuses on the loss and violation of her own values. This tension marks a critical moment in the narrative, where the imposed discourse of control confronts the emerging awareness of harm. Nevertheless, the immediate reassertion of power underscores how agency remains constrained, as the perpetrator continues to shape both the act and its interpretation.

In the aftermath of the assault, Aurélie's sense of self and agency becomes increasingly fractured, as the violence is followed by sustained psychological manipulation that deepens her silence and dependence. Rather than recognizing the act as abuse, she is drawn further into a cycle where shame, fear, and emotional coercion regulate her behavior.

I couldn't even look at myself in the mirror without shame... he told me that if it had been anyone else, they would've already left... Since I was no longer a virgin, he said I had no reason to refuse him anymore... Every time I tried to refuse, he threatened to walk away... So I gave in... It wasn't love. It wasn't intimacy. It was a lesson. (Moeremans, 2025, pp. 39–40)

This passage illustrates how silence is actively produced through the internalization of blame, fear of abandonment, and the redefinition of consent. Aurélie's shame and withdrawal signal the psychological impact of the violence, yet these responses are further exploited by Bobby, who reframes the assault as a turning point that obligates continued sexual compliance. By asserting that she has "no reason to refuse," he transforms the loss of virginity into a justification for ongoing access to her body, effectively erasing her right to consent. The repeated threat of leaving functions as a coercive tool, positioning abandonment as a consequence of resistance and reinforcing her dependency on the relationship. In this context, silence is not merely the absence of speech but the result of sustained manipulation that constrains her ability to refuse, articulate harm, or seek support. Moreover, the description of sexual encounters as a "lesson" reveals the extent to which agency has been replaced by control. Bobby's actions reduce Aurélie to an object of instruction, where her body is disciplined according to his preferences and corrected when it fails to meet his expectations.

Following parental intervention, which attempts to sever contact between Aurélie and Bobby, the dynamic of control shifts into a more covert and distanced form. Although physically separated, Bobby continues to exert power through digital communication (by pressuring Aurélie to send nude images, threatening self-harm if she did not comply), transforming distance into another site of coercion and silencing. This reveals how silence is enforced through humiliation, control of self-representation, and the manipulation of identity. Bobby's demand that Aurélie include her face extends his control beyond her body to her subjectivity, requiring not only compliance but visible identification with the act. The insistence on appearing "normal" and as if she "enjoy[s] it" (Moeremans, 2025, p. 45) further demonstrates how coercion operates at the level of performance, where Aurélie is forced to suppress visible distress and reproduce an image that aligns with his expectations. In this sense, her voice is not only silenced but replaced, as her expression is reshaped to conceal violence and simulate consent.

Taken together, these moments illustrate that silence within the narrative is not a passive condition but an outcome of sustained coercion, manipulation, and power imbalance. Aurélie's inability to speak, refuse, or fully recognize the violence she experiences is produced through intersecting mechanisms—emotional dependency, fear of abandonment, psychological distortion, and the regulation of her behavior and self-expression. From constant surveillance to internalized blame and enforced performance, her agency is gradually diminished, leaving little space for resistance or disclosure. In this sense, silence operates as a critical tool within the continuum of violence, ensuring its persistence while obscuring its visibility. By foregrounding these dynamics, the text reveals that the erosion of voice is inseparable from the structures of control that sustain GBV.

### **The Absence of Protection: A Structural Failure**

Beyond the interpersonal dynamics of abuse and silencing, *Broken Strings* also reveals the broader structural conditions that enable the persistence of GBV. The narrative demonstrates that harm is not sustained by the perpetrator alone, but is facilitated by the absence or failure of protective systems surrounding the victim. Moments where adults, family members, or authority figures are present yet unable—or unwilling—to intervene highlight how opportunities for disruption are missed. Through these gaps, the text exposes how violence is embedded within a wider context of inaction, where responsibility is diffused and accountability remains absent. In this sense, the memoir frames abuse not only as an individual act of harm, but as a consequence of systemic failure that leaves the victim unprotected.

As the abuse escalates, Bobby's control extends into explicit threats, marking a shift from psychological manipulation to direct coercion. At this stage, Aurélie is not only isolated but also placed under pressure that weaponizes both her personal life and public identity, further limiting any possibility of seeking protection.

And with that, he had what he wanted. Power. Shame. Leverage... 'Go to the authorities,' he said... 'Tell them your parents are exploiting you.' ... 'If you don't, the pictures go out. Everyone sees you. Your career ends.' (Moeremans, 2025, p. 46)

This passage reveals how systems that are meant to provide protection are actively distorted and turned against the victim. Bobby's instruction to report her parents reframes authority as a tool of control rather than safety, effectively redirecting Aurélie away from genuine sources of help. The threat of exposing intimate images further compounds this dynamic, as it binds her silence through fear of public humiliation and social consequences. This moment highlights how structural failure operates not only through absence but through vulnerability within the system itself. The fact that authority can be invoked as a threat underscores a lack of secure and trustworthy mechanisms for protection, particularly for young victims navigating power imbalances. Aurélie's position becomes one of entrapment, where neither compliance nor resistance offers a path to safety. As such, the violence is sustained not solely by Bobby's actions, but by the broader conditions that allow coercion to override access to protection and accountability.

At a critical moment when intervention becomes possible, Aurélie is brought into a child protection setting—an institutional space that is ostensibly designed to safeguard her. However, this encounter reveals a profound failure of recognition, where the system not only misses the signs of abuse but inadvertently reinforces the conditions that sustain it.

Another leaned forward and asked softly, “But you love him, right? You care for each other?”

I stared at them in disbelief. That’s your question? Not about the age gap, not about why a man almost twice my age was in a relationship with a girl my age? (Moeremans, 2025)

This passage illustrates how institutional failure operates through misrecognition and misplaced assumptions. Aurélie’s speech is interpreted by the adults as confidence and self-expression, demonstrating a critical inability to distinguish between genuine disclosure and forced compliance. The officials’ responses—minimizing her situation and redirecting attention toward her supposed feelings—reflect a troubling normalization of the relationship, ignoring clear indicators of abuse such as the age disparity and power imbalance. Moreover, the questions posed by the authorities reveal a broader structural issue. By focusing on emotional attachment rather than consent, power, or exploitation, the institution fails to identify the abuse and, in doing so, leaves Aurélie unprotected. This moment underscores that the absence of protection is not merely due to inaction, but to a fundamental failure in how authority perceives and interprets violence. As a result, the system that should interrupt the cycle instead becomes complicit in its continuation.

As institutional avenues fail to provide protection, Aurélie’s family turns to the media as an alternative means of intervention, attempting to expose the abuse publicly. This moment reflects a shift toward external visibility, where the private violence is brought into the public sphere in the hope of generating accountability.

Desperate, my dad turned to the only weapon he had left: the media... his underage daughter was being manipulated by an adult man... But the narrative twisted. I became known as the disobedient daughter... Headlines painted me as a spoiled teenager... Some mocked me. (Moeremans, 2025)

This passage demonstrates how public exposure does not necessarily translate into protection, but can instead reproduce harm through misrepresentation and victim-blaming. Although the father’s intention is to seek justice, the media reframes the narrative in ways that obscure the structural realities of abuse, reducing Aurélie’s experience to a story of teenage rebellion and personal failure. This distortion shifts attention away from the perpetrator and onto the victim, reinforcing harmful stereotypes that undermine her credibility and agency. Moreover, the media’s portrayal reflects a broader societal failure to recognize GBV, particularly in cases involving grooming and power imbalance. By sensationalizing the story and simplifying its complexities, the media contributes to a discourse that normalizes doubt, ridicule, and blame toward the victim. In this context, visibility becomes a double-edged sword: while the abuse is made public, it is not accurately understood or addressed. Instead

of serving as a mechanism of accountability, the media amplifies existing biases, further isolating Aurélie and reinforcing the structural conditions that allow violence to persist.

Following prolonged coercion and control, the relationship culminates in a forced and staged marriage immediately after Aurélie turns eighteen, marking a moment where personal violence is formalized through institutional and cultural structures. This event represents not a resolution, but an intensification of control, now legitimized under the appearance of legality and social recognition.

Aurélie is trapped into marrying Bobby; in a wedding ceremony that is prepared by Bobby himself, without the approval and the attendance of Aurélie's parents. This exposes how institutional rituals, such as marriage, can be mobilized to reinforce rather than prevent abuse. The ceremony, described as a "performance," (Moeremans, 2025, p. 87) underscores its lack of genuine consent, revealing how the formality of marriage is used to legitimize coercion and secure control over the victim. Moreover, the discussion surrounding legal irregularities—her age, the absence of parental consent, and procedural concerns—highlights a critical moment where intervention is possible yet ultimately unrealized. Despite clear indications that the marriage may not meet legal standards, the process continues, suggesting a failure of institutional enforcement and accountability. Aurélie's fleeting hope that "this wouldn't count" underscores the presence of structural safeguards in theory, but their ineffectiveness in practice. In this sense, the marriage becomes a culmination of systemic failure, where legal, social, and familial structures converge to sustain and legitimize the violence rather than disrupt it.

Following the forced marriage, Aurélie's mother uncovers critical information that reveals the illegitimacy of the ceremony, exposing not only procedural violations but also deliberate manipulation within the institution itself. Moreover, the priest's later admission of guilt highlights a delayed acknowledgment that carries little immediate consequence for the victim. Although responsibility is recognized retrospectively, it does not translate into timely protection or prevention. This reinforces the structural nature of the failure, where mechanisms of accountability are either absent or activated too late to disrupt the violence. In this context, Aurélie's experience underscores how systems that are meant to safeguard individuals can instead be manipulated or neglected, allowing abuse to persist under the guise of legitimacy.

Taken together, these moments reveal that the violence experienced by Aurélie is not sustained by the perpetrator alone, but by a network of systemic failures that repeatedly deny her protection. Across familial, institutional, and public spheres, authority figures are present yet ineffective, misled, or complicit, allowing abuse to continue despite multiple opportunities for intervention. From the misrecognition within child protection services, to the distortion of her story in the media, to the procedural violations surrounding her forced marriage, the narrative demonstrates how mechanisms intended to safeguard are either insufficient, bypassed, or actively undermined. Crucially, these failures do not occur in isolation but operate cumulatively, reinforcing one another to produce a condition in which violence becomes normalized and unchallenged.

### **Recovery and/or “Healing” as Narrative Resolution**

After prolonged exposure to violence—ranging from physical abuse, humiliation, financial control, and emotional manipulation to enforced isolation—*Broken Strings* gradually shifts its narrative focus toward recovery and self-reclamation. During the course of the marriage, Aurélie endures repeated acts of harm; including being hit, spat on, threatened, deprived of financial autonomy despite her own labor, and cut off from social support systems. These experiences reinforce the totalizing nature of control, where violence operates across physical, emotional, and structural dimensions. However, as the narrative progresses, a tonal transition begins to emerge, moving from confinement and suffering toward expressions of resilience, healing, and regained voice. This shift foregrounds recovery as a central narrative resolution, where survival is articulated through emotional rebuilding and the reclamation of self. The following analysis examines how this transition is constructed within the text, paying particular attention to changes in tone, language, and narrative emphasis that position recovery as the primary outcome of the experience of violence.

Following her escape from the abusive marriage, Aurélie enters a transitional phase marked by both relief and unresolved tension, where the possibility of justice is confronted by material and institutional limitations. This moment reflects the early stage of recovery, in which safety is regained but accountability remains uncertain.

...They warned me that moving forward with the police would require money for filings and processes I didn't have. I had nothing. When I escaped Bobby, I left with zero. Every rupiah I earned had gone to him. I was starting again from nothing, and we couldn't afford to gamble with what little we had left. My mom was furious, but in the end she held my hand and said, "What matters most is that you're safe now, that you're with us. You survived." I nodded. I agreed with her. Peace sounded nice, and maybe that was enough. But deep down, I still wanted justice. (Moeremans, 2025, pp. 179–180)

This passage captures a critical shift in the narrative, where survival begins to be framed as the primary achievement, even as the desire for justice persists. Aurélie's inability to pursue legal action—due to financial constraints and the risk of evidence being used against her—highlights how structural barriers limit access to accountability. In response, the emphasis moves toward safety and emotional stability, with survival positioned as a sufficient resolution to the violence experienced. The mother's reassurance reinforces this reframing, privileging recovery over justice as the more attainable and immediate goal. However, the tension between “peace” and the lingering desire for justice reveals the incompleteness of this resolution. While the narrative begins to adopt the language of healing and survival, it does not fully resolve the harm or address the absence of accountability.

As the narrative progresses further into the post-escape phase, Aurélie begins to reorient her focus inward, marking a clearer transition from survival toward emotional recovery and self-reconstruction. This stage emphasizes regaining control over her internal world after prolonged experiences of external domination.

*I focused on what I could control.*

My healing. My circle. My next breath. Little by little, the fog began to lift. Not all at once, but slowly, like light slipping through curtains you're afraid to open. (Moeremans, 2025, p. 183)

This illustrates a significant tonal shift from the earlier language of fear and coercion to one of gradual healing and self-awareness. It reflects a reclaiming of agency, where Aurélie redirects attention from the perpetrator toward her own well-being and immediate environment. The metaphor of “light slipping through curtains” reinforces this slow and tentative process, suggesting that recovery is not instantaneous but unfolds over time. The increasing focus on self, healing, and forward movement contributes to the emphasis of moving away from violence and toward personal restoration.

As the narrative reaches its conclusion, Aurélie reflects on the act of writing itself, positioning it as both a personal and outward-facing process. This moment marks the final stage of recovery, where her experience is rearticulated through authorship and transformed into a form of meaning-making.

Writing this book began as something just for me, a way to make sense of the chaos. I thought I would keep it private. But when my husband read it, he told me, “Maybe your story can help another Aurélie out there, someone still searching for a way out or a reason to hold on.” (Moeremans, 2025, p. 188)

This passage frames recovery through the act of narration, where healing is achieved not only through emotional reconstruction but also through the ability to tell and share one's story. Writing becomes a mechanism of reclaiming voice, allowing Aurélie to reorganize her experiences and assert control over their meaning. At the same time, the shift from a private act to a public one positions her narrative within a broader discourse of survival, suggesting that personal testimony can serve as a source of guidance or inspiration for others. However, this framing also reinforces recovery as the primary narrative resolution, where the value of the experience is ultimately located in its capacity to be transformed into a story of survival and purpose. The emphasis on helping “another Aurélie” situates the narrative within a recognizable trajectory of trauma-to-healing, foregrounding resilience and forward movement. While this provides a sense of closure and empowerment, it also subtly redirects attention away from unresolved questions of accountability, reinforcing the idea that the narrative finds its resolution in recovery rather than in justice.

### **Recovery without Accountability: A Displacement of Responsibility**

Building on the narrative emphasis on recovery, *Broken Strings* ultimately positions closure within the survivor rather than within systems of accountability. As the text moves toward its conclusion, it is Aurélie who brings the story to an end, while institutional and legal structures remain largely absent from the resolution. This shift foregrounds a form of narrative closure grounded in personal recovery, where the restoration of voice and self becomes the primary means through which trauma is resolved. However, the absence of consequences for the perpetrator and the lack of formal justice raise critical questions about what it means for a story to “end.” In this sense, the memoir suggests that while Aurélie is able to

reclaim her narrative, the violence itself remains structurally unaccounted for, displacing responsibility away from systems that fail to intervene and onto the survivor's capacity to endure and recover.

While the narrative moves toward Aurélie's recovery and closure, the trajectory of the perpetrator unfolds in a strikingly different direction, revealing a lack of accountability that contrasts sharply with the survivor's process of healing. Rather than facing consequences, Bobby remains publicly visible and socially validated.

Bobby, meanwhile, was thriving. He went from one television program to another, delighted to be invited because his name was suddenly hot. He played the role of the good, heartbroken husband, the man abandoned without reason. He said we had always loved each other, that I had always been happy with him. He prayed on camera. He said he forgave me. He said he missed me. He even brought photos of me smiling next to him, as proof that I was happy with him. (Moeremans, 2025, p. 181)

This passage exposes a critical displacement of responsibility, where the perpetrator not only avoids accountability but actively reconstructs the narrative in his favor. Bobby's public performances reframe the abusive relationship as mutual and consensual, effectively erasing the violence and repositioning himself as the victim. By mobilizing selective images and emotional rhetoric, he produces a counter-narrative that aligns with socially recognizable scripts of love, forgiveness, and heartbreak, thereby securing public sympathy and legitimacy.

In contrast to Aurélie's private struggle toward recovery, Bobby's visibility within media spaces highlights how systems fail to challenge or disrupt such distortions. His ability to thrive and control the narrative underscores the absence of institutional intervention, allowing the violence to remain unaddressed at a structural level. This divergence reveals that while the survivor is tasked with rebuilding her life, the perpetrator continues unimpeded, reinforcing the central argument that recovery functions as a narrative resolution in the absence of justice.

As the narrative reaches its final reflections, Aurélie directly confronts the limitations of justice, articulating a broader awareness of the structural barriers that have shaped her experience. This moment serves as an explicit acknowledgment of the gap between personal truth and institutional recognition.

But I learned quickly that justice isn't guaranteed... without money, connections, or powerful people on your side, it slips through your fingers... no matter how much truth you carry. (Moeremans, 2025, p. 182)

This passage crystallizes the central tension of the narrative: while Aurélie achieves a degree of personal recovery, justice remains inaccessible due to structural inequalities. Her recognition that truth alone is insufficient to secure accountability underscores the systemic nature of the failure, where access to justice is mediated by resources, power, and social capital. Rather than presenting justice as an inevitable outcome, the narrative exposes it as

contingent and unevenly distributed, reinforcing the idea that institutional systems do not operate neutrally or equitably.

Taken together, these moments reveal a profound displacement of responsibility within *Broken Strings*, where the resolution of violence is relocated from systems of justice to the survivor's capacity for recovery. While Aurélie reclaims her voice and reconstructs her sense of self, the perpetrator remains publicly visible, unpunished, and able to reshape the narrative in his favor. Institutional mechanisms that might have ensured accountability are either absent, ineffective, or inaccessible, reinforcing the structural conditions that allow such violence to persist. As a result, the narrative closes without confrontation, consequence, or redress, leaving the harm fundamentally unresolved. In this sense, recovery operates not only as healing but as a compensatory form of closure, one that fills the gap left by the absence of justice. This underscores a key limitation within recovery-centered narratives: while they make survival possible and visible, they may also inadvertently normalize a reality in which violence remains unaccounted for, and responsibility is quietly transferred away from perpetrators and the systems that fail to hold them accountable.

## CONCLUSION

This study has examined how *Broken Strings* represents gender-based violence not as an isolated act, but as a processual and structurally enabled phenomenon, particularly through the lens of child grooming. Through close reading, the analysis has shown how violence is gradually constructed through manipulation, normalized through power imbalance, and sustained through mechanisms of silence and systemic failure. While the narrative ultimately shifts toward recovery—foregrounding healing, resilience, and the reclamation of voice—this resolution remains incomplete, as it occurs in the absence of accountability for the perpetrator and meaningful institutional intervention. Drawing on feminist critiques of recovery discourse, the study argues that such narratives, while empowering, risk displacing responsibility onto survivors by positioning healing as the primary or sole outcome of violence. In doing so, they may obscure the structural conditions that enable abuse and the urgent need for justice. Therefore, this research underscores the importance of reading survivor narratives not only as testimonies of resilience, but also as critical sites for interrogating the limits of recovery when accountability is absent, and for re-centering the question of who is responsible for ending violence.

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