

AN INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CONTEXTUAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF A SINGLE
MOTHER'S EXPERIENCE AS IT INTERSECTS WITH MISOGYNY, PATRIARCHY, AND
HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

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by

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This dissertation, by Heidi Sampson, has
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who recommend that it be accepted by the faculty of
the Graduate School of Leadership & Change
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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

AN INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CONTEXTUAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF A SINGLE MOTHER'S EXPERIENCE AS IT INTERSECTS WITH MISOGYNY, PATRIARCHY, AND HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

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This dissertation is a contextual autoethnography of my lived experience with stigmatization, stereotypes, and institutional obstructions as a divorced single mother who previously experienced intimate partner violence and was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. The purpose of the study is to shed light on the complexity of the single motherhood experience, both internally and externally. From 2009 to 2019, the institutions I accessed for assistance as a single mother and those I interacted with for my children, my job, my health, and even within the church were unnecessarily burdensome financially, physically, and emotionally. This dissertation takes a contextual look at print media, legal statutes, laws, other domestic violence cases, court cases, and institutional issues in my lifetime that may have affected either those I encountered or my perceptions. While looking at my autoethnography and the contextual experience of the time period, I will also be examining Jack Holland's (2006) *A Brief History of Misogyny: The World's Oldest Prejudice* to extend his findings into the realm of a single mother's lived experience. Holland's work will show how the dualism of misogyny has infiltrated every institution through patriarchy's ideal conception of family, which uses hegemonic masculinities as its strong-arm enforcer for societal control with stereotypes and stigmatizations as the quickest way to keep

single mothers in line. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA (<https://aura.antioch.edu/>) and OhioLINK ETD Center (<https://etd.ohiolink.edu>).

Keywords: contextual autoethnography, leadership, single mothers, stereotypes, stigmatization, intimate partner violence, marital rape, verbal abuse, emotional abuse, institutions, religion, misogyny, patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, post traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, post traumatic stress symptoms, PTSS

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my boys. I tease you both for all the times you made me throw up—all day, every day, for all 9 months—before you made your grand appearance in this world as tiny human beings, but regardless of how sick I was, I love you both. You both will always be the greatest gifts I was ever given. If, in the future, you decide to read this dissertation—long after I am gone—know that your future can be whatever you want it to be, with whomever, wherever, and however you want. You write your futures. The past does not dictate your future. You write your future by consciously choosing love, patience, compassion, integrity, and equality. Also, never forget that life is too short to do or be a part of anyone or anything that compromises who you are.

I also dedicate this to my sister, Dorinda. You are stronger than you know. I love you.

To all the single mothers out there, do not let them rank and divide us by categories, by who accepts child support and who does not, by who was abused and who was not, by who makes more money and who does not, by who asks the government for help and who does not, or even by who chose to be a single mother and who did not. Or any other measurement they can come up with to create division. Single motherhood is hard enough. Every single mother knows she deserves far better than she will ever be treated, which is why we must tell all our stories, all of them. We must keep telling our stories until they hear us, and I mean *hear* us. Once we are heard, we keep sharing and fighting for long-lasting change that cannot be undone. We must remember that we will always be stronger when we fight collectively as a whole, than we will ever be, divided.

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Second, I want to acknowledge two more influential women I was blessed to have known for a time. The first of these women is my grandmother, Helen Sohre, who passed away in July 2011. When I worked with hogs after high school, she never criticized where I ended up. However, I knew she would rather I had gone to college after high school than work with pigs. While I miss her, I hope my dedication to my chosen educational path and life honors her memory. The second is my great aunt, Beata Sampson, who passed away in February 2023. Aunt Beata was more like a Surrogate Grandmother to us. I hoped she would have been around for my dissertation defense, but we ran out of time at 99 years of age. Thank you for being a soul of inquiry, history, light, love, compassion, and hope. I miss you so, so very much.

I want to acknowledge Doug Midthun. In a rural community, single moms do not have many people they can trust to be on their side 100% of the time, professionally. However, I

trusted Doug Midthun with my taxes from 2010 until his passing in December 2022. It may seem like an odd thing to be grateful for, a tax accountant. Nevertheless, some single mothers can identify with the concept of someone they could trust wholeheartedly to be on their side if they were lucky enough to have anyone at all. Doug was the one person I could trust. He was that *one* person. With his passing, I realized how much I had come to rely on that dependability and just how rare it was in all my other professional relationships. Doug, thank you for being safe, secure, and dependable.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In opening this dissertation, I would like to offer a story that situates misogyny, stereotypes attributed to single mothers and provides an example of a person's total inability to empathize or even to try to grasp the complexities of a single mother's lived experience when she decides to tell her truth. The dissertation aims to shed light on the complexity of the single motherhood experience, both internally and externally.

Part of a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) creative nonfiction (CNF) writing course at Minnesota State University, Mankato, involves sitting through a 45–60-minute feedback session in which the writer must listen to the feedback delivered by fellow graduate students and the professor, without talking or justifying the authorial choices made within the writing. At the end of the feedback session, the writer can ask follow-up questions based on the feedback received to round out the feedback for a future revision of the writing piece. Also, the reviewers can ask the writer direct questions regarding their piece once the main feedback session is complete, and the writer has asked their follow-up questions.

These sessions can go in one of two ways. First, the students and professor will understand the written piece and provide helpful feedback for revision fodder. Second, the students will only understand the written piece if they have the appropriate life experiences. However, there happens to be a conservative misogynistic patriarchal professor who claims to be a feminist but does not in any way understand feminism, feminist issues, the idea of intersectionality, or the need for diverse voices regarding feminist topics. To this professor, “feminist, and most all social justice topics, have all been done before. Therefore, they do not need to be rehashed out in writing, like ever.” His words. Not mine.

There are variations of the two possible classroom and professor examples listed above. For instance, it is possible to get an understanding professor from the first example and students who lack life experiences from the second example. While this option may not be the best option for a writer during an extensive feedback session, a good teacher can and will curb the feedback, holding the students lacking life experiences in check. The writer will obtain valuable feedback from this classroom dynamic for revision. On the other hand, if one were to get the conservative misogynistic patriarchal professor who claims to be a feminist but has no idea what feminism is from example two, and the students capable of understanding the written piece from example one, it is possible to receive some helpful feedback. Of course, this assumes that the students would not be afraid to drive the feedback towards constructive and valuable comments, essentially becoming the voice of reason despite the professor's inadequacies. However, if one lands the conservative misogynistic patriarchal professor who claims to be a feminist but is not, and his students are afraid of him and do not desire to rock the boat, the dynamics associated with this type of classroom will also produce a useless feedback session for the writer. Then again, useless may not adequately convey the damage these types of classrooms could have on a student writing about a traumatic experience or their experience as a member of a marginalized group or identity.

Unfortunately for Vivian (not her real name) and myself, classroom example two would occur within our first M.F.A. creative nonfiction class during the fall of 2013. Somehow, we had landed students who could not understand our writing because they lacked real-life experiences. We also had a conservative misogynistic patriarchal professor who openly claimed to be a feminist but did not understand feminism, feminist issues, the idea of intersectionality, or the need for diverse voices regarding feminist topics. To this professor, feminist and social justice

topics occupy the realm of what he called the “victim narrative,” and he was sick of reading it. So, when Vivian handed over a CNF piece about her experience as a single mother holding multiple jobs while trying to get an education post-divorce and how she navigated a creatively abusive ex-husband, I was delighted. For once, I was not alone. I identified with her story on so many levels. The only difference was that she was further down the divorced path. At the time of our shared CNF class, she was obtaining a second master’s through the M.F.A. program, her two kids were grown adults, and she was happily remarried for several years by the fall of 2013. On the other hand, I was in the thick of post-divorce life, hoping I could hang on for one more day.

I felt that Vivian’s CNF piece placed the reader firmly within her experiences as a single mother trying to get a college education post-divorce. At the time, she was working multiple jobs—one of which went late into the evening—she, too, struggled to stay afloat financially, and she dealt with the continual barrage of issues presented by a creatively abusive ex-husband determined to bankrupt her in every way possible. For instance, Vivian’s ex-husband utilized the youth sport of ice hockey to drain her resources financially. Luckily for the ex-husband, there was an added benefit to signing his kids up for ice hockey: the demands of the sport, the practices, and the endless games—from September to March—would drain Vivian both physically and psychologically. To fully understand the sport’s demands on Vivian, we must understand how she came to be in that position.

Through the ex-husband’s encouragement, her son decided to participate in youth hockey rather than a school-sponsored sport like football, basketball, or baseball. Vivian’s ex-husband is what I would call creatively abusive because he has found a creative way to drain what little resources she has, covertly and abusively, while looking like the model ex-husband. What follows is how he has chosen to do so. Since the school did not sponsor hockey but rather a

community league, she had to pay a hefty price for half of the equipment needed for her son to play the sport, as well as the ice time needed for practice, games, and coaching fees. Therefore, hockey required a lot of practices and games, which could take place anywhere within Minnesota, primarily since the team was not confined to a school network or a division of school rivals. So, if the equipment did not financially drain her, the lost hours in wages and her inability to access quality time for her college studies—due to running a child to practice and games every night of the week from September through late March—plus, mileage, and wear and tear on her car, would come close to draining whatever resources she had left financially, physically, and psychologically.

While he waits for signs of the fallout from the sport's financial, physical, and psychological obligations on his ex-partner, there is the bonus of social exclusion forced upon Vivian by the richer "Hockey Moms." Since Vivian is the only single mother in an arena full of wealthy, married moms, the apparent social exclusion only compounds the problem. No one wants to be treated as a pariah. However, while Vivian felt her social exclusion was unfortunate, it also worked to her advantage in one small way. The social exclusion allowed her time to study for classes while watching her child practice and/or participate in hockey games. So, to offset the lost study time, she bought a more oversized purse, after which she smuggled her books and assignments into the hockey arena.

Flash forward to the fall of 2013. My ex-husband utilized downhill skiing to drain all financial, physical, and psychological reserves I may have had by refusing to pay for anything downhill ski related for our youngest son. Instead of paying—even though he would have made sure to have just finished paying for two of the girlfriend's children and my oldest son in front of my youngest son for maximum effect—he would tell my youngest son that I was selfish and did

not love him enough if I refused to pay his ski expenses, which included his coach fees—because downhill skiing was not a school-sponsored sport—season pass lift fees, lodge food fees, lift fees for each of the ski locations visited for games, plus any expenses related to reserving a portion of the ski lodge for the team to warm up. Therefore, downhill skiing was how my ex-husband chose to be creatively abusive post-divorce because abusers do not stop what they enjoy doing. They just become more creative in their measures to exert their power and control.

Unfortunately for me, the downhill ski mothers I experienced were notorious for planning elaborate meals on game days. I was expected to bring enough of my assigned food for 30–40 kids plus parents. My assigned food could range from expensive name-brand health foods to main course meals, side salads and desserts, Gatorade, and soft drinks. I dreaded game days with a passion, which occurred two to three times a week from early November through March, depending on snowfalls and cold weather. For the better part of 10 to 11 years, my constant source of anguish existed in one question and one statement. How would I feed 30 to 40 kids plus parents, two or three times a week for 16 to 20 weeks? I barely had the financial ability to feed myself and my boys any week.

If one ski team of wealthy parents and kids was not enough anguish inflicted upon my life, my ex-husband went one step further. For about 4 years, he found a second Development Team Ski League—often called the D-Team for short—that also practiced every weekend from November to March. I literally packed a bag full of my schoolwork, computer, chargers, snacks for the boys, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, water, and a thick blanket. I would then find the corner furthest from the doors with a wall plugin—those were not easy to find—and begin to do my schoolwork. On Saturday and Sunday, from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., the boys would practice with their teams, and from 4:00 to 8:00 p.m., they would ski for free. The D-Team held a ski

meet once a month against other development teams that were at least two to three, if not 4 or 5 hours away, which added a weekend hotel expense to the budget and missed time from work if it fell on my weekend at the barns. If I could not escape the barns, the boys would hear, “their mother did not love them enough to attend,” from their father. On the weekends I could attend, what did the wealthy mothers of the weekend D-Team organize for game days? Full meals, expensive organic foods, snacks, and drinks for skiers and their parents. For me, it was one more meal for 30–40 kids plus parents to buy.

Like Vivian, I also completed my academic studies while my children practiced for cross-country, competed in cross-country meets, during band recitals, theatre practices, downhill ski practices, development ski practices, and even on game days for skiing. I can recall a cross country meet at Montgomery Golf Course in Montgomery, Minnesota, for state sections, where a flash of light and a bolt of thunder caused the officials to pull all the 300–500 high school students back to their home buses to wait out a brief pop-up storm in late October to early November. My car was over a mile away due to the inaccessibility of the golf course. Plus, there were no buildings for the parents to take refuge from the storm. As most parents started the long trek back to their cars, I realized I could waste time walking back to my car and then waste more time walking back into the golf course once the students were allowed to come back, or I could stay put and study. So, I pulled a book out of my purse and went to sit below a tree on a hill. Thinking back, it probably was not the best idea during a rainstorm with lightning, but the tree provided some cover, and I finished some schoolwork. What can I say? When you are a single mom, you make do with what you got.

Therefore, anytime my children were not center stage, I had my nose in my academic books, my pen scratching up the margins of my many notebooks, or my hands moving across a

keyboard writing an essay. I also knew that my only way out of the poverty my sons and I were experiencing would be through education. Without a college education, no one would give a female a better job with better pay. As a result, I would study wherever and whenever I could. Therefore, my social exclusion from the married and extremely wealthy ski mothers worked in my favor, as I also utilized the exclusion for studying. However, I would be remiss if I did not also say that social exclusion wears on one's soul. I got the impression that part of my exclusion was because they thought single motherhood was catchy. Some years later, while volunteering as an advocate for victims of abuse through the church, I would tell a fellow single mother and friend that the social exclusion I experienced from the ski mothers felt a lot like trying to have a general conversation about intimate partner violence (IPV) awareness with a husband and wife. However, the duo runs away from the discussion, fearing that IPV is catchy and that any discussion of the topic would somehow result in their divorce. She knew exactly what I meant, having been socially excluded a time or two for being a single mom as well. Being a single mother felt like I had a contractable sickness nobody wanted. When my mom or friend noticed the social exclusion at ski events, I shrugged my shoulders and replied, "Apparently, I am single mother contagious."

When Vivian revealed her past struggles as a single mother in our creative nonfiction classroom during the fall of 2013, not only did her experiences mirror my own, but I could identify as a fellow single mother. More importantly, I could feel her pain and frustration during that period of her life. Unfortunately, in what I could only guess was an attempt to buffer against her choices as a single mother and those that could be taken the wrong way by someone who has never been in her shoes, she opened her CNF piece by saying she loved her children. After reading Vivian's story, the professor immediately asked my classmates and me if we felt she had

the right to say she loved her children. A barely 20-something young woman callously said, “I don’t think she loves her children. She’s doing homework at hockey practices and games instead of paying attention to her children.” To my horror, the entire class nodded in agreement while Vivian’s face drained of color.

In an attempt to defend Vivian, I angrily explained that what she was doing was not the absence of love but the very definition of love for her children. Despite everything, she had not only managed to keep affording the impossible through multiple jobs while trying to better herself through education, but she was there for her children. Her ex-husband had not even bothered to show up for practices or any of the games. Clearly, his pushing the children into the sport was not about creating an optimal family or childhood experience for his children but rather a direct shot at making life more difficult for Vivian. Nevertheless, his actions were not scrutinized at all. Despite my objections, the rest of the class and the professor were convinced Vivian did not love her children. There was nothing I could say to change their minds. They firmly latched onto the selfish single mother stereotype, where the single mother is portrayed as selfish and only concerned with her well-being. As a result, Vivian was forced to listen to a 45–60-minute bash session regarding her ability to parent appropriately, which had nothing to do with her writing technique. To them, her actions destroyed her credibility as a single mother. For me, her actions pointed toward resilient perseverance to keep moving forward during a difficult period. After class, Vivian thanked me for trying to get them to understand a single mother’s point of view and for standing up for her choices. However, I walked away from that class feeling defeated. If they could not understand Vivian’s single mother experience, they would never understand mine.

Unfortunately for Vivian and myself, we would have that professor and those students for all our M.F.A. experience. While he remained convinced our topics were pointless and had been done before, I was,

Convinced that [the] social injustices [we brought to light in our writing as single mothers], while changing in form, [would] remain a permanent part of the [larger] landscape until far more people realize[d] that the subordination of other people serves as a major barrier to their own ability to move up the economic ladder. But does this prove that all the attempts, large and small, to combat these injustices were failures? Absolutely; and absolutely not. (Bell, 2002, p. 161)

Somewhere between Bell's (2002) absolutely and absolutely not dilemma lies the very reason for why I never stopped bringing my stories to class.

The rest of Chapter I will cover the statement of the problem, which includes a discussion regarding poverty, the abnormally high value of two-parent families to the detriment of intimate partner violence survivors and their children in the court system, as well as a brief look at the intersection of misogyny, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity. Following the statement of the problem, I will lay out the research questions. Please remember that the purpose of the study is to shed light on the complexity of the single motherhood experience, both internally and externally. The theoretical framework will briefly focus on stigmatization and stereotypes, whereas the methodology for this study will focus on autoethnography and critical autoethnography. Finally, the significance of the study as it relates to Jack Holland's (2006) book, the organization of the dissertation, and the conclusion for chapter one will also be discussed.

Statement of the Problem

Single Mothers and the Welfare Queen

As with any topic, a wide range of categories is subsumed within the term single mothers. For instance, there are families led by lone mothers (Gustafson et al., 2016);

single-mothers-by-choice, who pursue motherhood through adoption or reproductive technologies; the out of wedlock mothers; teen mothers; poor single mothers; single mothers; welfare-dependent single mothers (K. Myers, 2019); widowed single mothers; divorced single mothers; and even kinship single mothers, which are generated from a siblings death whereby that sister or grandmother chooses to take on the children as their own. Believe it or not, this is just a sampling of the different kinds of titles attributed to single mothers, or sometimes, these are titles that single mothers may choose for themselves. Whether the title is attributed or chosen, each title signifies a particular spot in the “hierarchy of single motherhood” (K. Myers, 2019, p. 1). Rest assured, single mothers are aware of the hierarchy, as is the entirety of the American public, simply because the hierarchy of single motherhood has been reinforced across media and by politicians for decades.

According to Sandler (2020), the term Welfare Queen came from a 1976 campaign speech given by Ronald Reagan. In the speech, Reagan recounts how a Chicago woman had stolen roughly \$150,000 while collecting welfare checks under 80 different names (Sandler, 2020). After his speech, a newspaper slapped the words Welfare Queen across the reporter’s coverage of Reagan’s speech, and history was officially made (Sandler, 2020). From that day forward, Welfare Queen would become synonymous with any woman who decided to ask for help from the government, and since single mothers are most likely to ask for help, Welfare Queen and single mothers became one and the same. The term Welfare Queen would remain a part of the public vocabulary to humiliate generations of American women for decades to come (Sandler, 2020).

The Washington Star (1976) tried to correct Regan’s inaccurate claims about the infamous Welfare Queen stereotype. From what *The Washington Star* was able to ascertain, the

“welfare queen” Reagan referred to was Linda Taylor, a 47-year-old Chicago welfare recipient, who did not use 80 aliases but four, and the alleged \$150,000 she stole was actually \$3,000.

Unfortunately, the damage was already done, and the truth is not what anyone remembers.

Holland (2006) fittingly argued that as far as a historical catalyst is concerned, misogyny will continually play a profound role in determining the future course of our lives, and the role public affairs will take over and over again. It is safe to say this was one of those times where misogyny played a profound role because, as time will prove, some of the most brutal cuts will be made to the social safety net over the next 30 years.

The Poverty Measure’s Official Architect

According to Desmond (2023), Social Security Administrator Mollie Orshansky was the architect of the Official Poverty Measure developed when she realized poverty could be calculated on two pieces of information, the cost of food and how much of a family’s budget ended up dedicated to it each year. Therefore, if poverty was about a lack of income to cover the basics and food was a basic fundamental necessity, Orshansky determined that a third of a family’s budget was dedicated to a bare bone, quite literally, consumption of food (Desmond, 2023). Desmond (2023) argued, “Today’s Official Poverty Measure is still based on Orshansky’s calculation, annually updated for inflation. In 2022, the poverty line was drawn at \$13,590 a year for a single person and \$27,750 a year for a family of four” (p. 10). Although Orshansky’s calculation is the official measure of poverty for the federal government, as with the title of single mothers, there are multiple levels of poverty as well. According to Desmond, there is even a deep poverty level, which would be cutting the poverty level in half, then falling to that poverty level to live out the days, think subterranean. Can poverty get worse? Yes. Poverty can also impact the person who lives just above the poverty line but cannot qualify for assistance, and

their student loans eat up their entire paycheck, which means their debt-to-income ratio is so high, they cannot get a mortgage or a vehicle (Desmond, 2023). Then what does the person do?

Single Mothers and Race

According to Sandler (2020), most of the people experiencing poverty are women and their children. According to Sandler (2020), most people experiencing poverty are women and their children. Kendall (2020) narrowed the numbers down as follows:

Forty-two million Americans are struggling with hunger . . . at least half of that number are women, but given gender bias in wages, the real percentage is something like 66 percent . . . [who are] struggling with hunger are headed by single mothers. (pp. 41–42)

Of that 42 million, 70% of the nation's poor are women and children (Kendall, 2020).

A disturbing fact brought to light by Baughman et al. (2021) is that for Black, Brown, and Native families, any assistance from social, medical, judicial, and/or the educational services network often means asking for help will place the family in the direct sights of the family court and the child welfare system. Regrettably, families come under constant attack with increased threats of separation and forced surveillance rather than receiving the direct monetary or material support they sought to begin with (Baughman et al., 2021). Alarmed at the prospect of forced surveillance, I looked closer at Minnesota's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program from 2009, which would have been 1 year before the time in which I would end up becoming enrolled in TANF myself, to see if this idea of surveillance was on the agenda in Minnesota.

Sadly, Minnesota's TANF program was already well on its way to establishing the cross-collaboration it needed among the different service sectors to enforce more surveillance protocols among families seeking help in 2009. At the time, I was unaware of the 3-year, eight-county pilot program across Minnesota's more racially diverse counties, in which the sole goal of the pilot program was to find out if the parents living in poverty and/or parents receiving

TANF assistance also abused their children (Idzelis, 2009). According to Idzelis (2009), the next goal was to streamline the overlap in requirements for families receiving financial services through TANF and those receiving services within the child welfare programs and begin exploring a better intentional cross-agency collaboration for dealing with people experiencing poverty. The main idea was that the cross-collaboration of services would lead to less child abuse among those living in poverty and/or receiving TANF. If successful, the 3-year pilot program would be enacted state-wide around 2014, the year after I stopped collecting TANF through the county.

In the years since I left TANF, the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP)—as the state chooses to call its TANF program now—has only gotten stricter. Due to a study by Courtney and Dworsky's (2006), the 2009 pilot program expected that 42% of families receiving assistance to have a child abuse claim within 5 years of seeking help from TANF. Even though the 2009 pilot program was never able to prove that the cross-collaboration of services was effective at reducing child abuse, mainly because fewer than 8% of the families had a child maltreatment report filed during an 18-month period and fewer than 3% had a child placed outside of the home, the state of Minnesota still moved forward with the implementation of the program (Idzelis & Skrypek, 2011). According to Idzelis and Skrypek (2011), 93% of their participants were women, 51% were White, 31% were Black, and 12% were Native American. It is disheartening that they expected at least 42% of the women to be abusing children, since that was the primary participant's gender, in Minnesota utilizing their programs to abuse their children. Another interesting statistic mentioned is that 49% of households within the study were of the traditional nuclear family style, they are not very specific as to what accounts for the other 51% of households, nor do they mention the words single mother specifically (Idzelis &

Skrypek, 2011). However, if women comprise 93% of the participants and 42% are nuclear families, where are the men in this study? It is discrepancies like these that should make us reconsider how we are accounting for and treating our single mothers, as well as the women seeking assistance within the state of Minnesota, because relying on this study as a basis for a pilot in Minnesota also says something about us, our motives, and our priorities too. Why does the Department of Human Services, as an institution, expect 42% of those seeking help from TANF also to beat their children? Why did this report and the subsequent reports afterward not raise some alarms among the feminist communities in Minnesota? Considering the majority of Minnesota's population is White at 4,458,035 in 2021 (Minnesota Compass, n.d.-b), where are White feminists, male or female? According to Kendall (2020),

There's nothing feminist about having so many resources at your fingertips and choosing to be ignorant. Nothing empowering or enlightening in deciding that intent trumps impact. Especially when the consequences aren't going to be experienced by you, but will instead be experienced by someone from a marginalized community. (p. 23)

However, as Kendall (2020) argued, alleviating poverty does not appear to be a critical feminist issue, or at least not a critical White feminist issue either.

Unfortunately, alleviating poverty or listening to single mothers is not at the top of many people's lists as a critical issue worth listening to. In early February, I was tasked with generating some details for a possible impending eulogy regarding my great aunt—who was like a grandmother to us—and was a single mother in 1960 due to her husband's death from cancer. Out of curiosity, I called the Minnesota Historical Society in her county, asking for information regarding her location and the families within that defined rural area. I also asked for anything about single mothers, thinking there might be contextual information for my dissertation in that location. I was promptly told by the person on the other end of the phone that any search regarding single mothers would be futile and that I needed a better research topic for a

dissertation. They suggested I investigate the consolidation of schools over the last 100 years, as that was bound to be a more interesting topic than anything I could come up with concerning single mothers.

Sadly, this is not the first time I have had someone tell me to drop pursuing topics related to single mothers. If one thing has been consistent throughout my academic career prior to coming to Antioch University, it was that anytime I brought up single mothers, I was guaranteed to get shut down and told to pursue another topic. Unless I was pursuing the topic of single mothers in the Gender & Women's Studies program or class, then the topic was acceptable. As a "hood feminist,"¹ Kendall (2020) advocated that White feminists listen to the people who have occupied positions of oppression differently from them because the ones experiencing those difficulties are the experts in terms of their own needs. The fact that those identified needs might look different to someone who has never had a similar life experience does not make them less critical (Kendall, 2020) or unworthy of a dissertation topic or a creative nonfiction piece in a creative nonfiction MFA class.

I am not saying that as a White woman, I have experienced more oppression as a single mother living on welfare in southern Minnesota because that would never be true. I am positive there are women in Minnesota, especially those who are not White, who have had more difficulties, shed more tears, and experienced more roadblocks than myself. Kendall (2020) argued that liberation rhetoric cannot be the advancement of one group at the expense of others. I fully agree, which is why I am not here to advance my story at the expense of anyone else's. We

¹ Kendall defined "hood feminism" as, "the feminism of the working class of people who live in inner cities, rural communities, who absolutely have to make a way out of no way, regardless of jargon" (as cited in Booker, 2020, para. 6).

need to give all single mothers the space and the platform to share their stories, and we need to listen to them when they are ready to share. Kristina Delgado said it well:

White women believe that their womanhood puts them on the same level of oppression as [us] and that's where the conversation stops. They seem to believe in equality to the point that they are more interested in having the same power and privilege as White men rather than dismantling oppressive attitudes and systems for all. It's angering because I'm on their team but I don't understand why our narratives can't bolster each other up. (Hamad, 2020, p. 121)

I never want to be the kind of White woman that Kristina described. I want our stories to bolster each other up and to work for change. I do not want the same power and privilege as White men.

I would much rather dismantle, topple, and destroy the oppressive attitudes, systems, and institutions that hold all women back. I believe that can only happen if there is space for all of us.

While I want single mothers to be heard, I also know that it is not always feasible for a single mother to share her truth while caught in the thick of single motherhood because having a voice could also be detrimental to her family's livelihood. For instance, if she is still fighting her abuser for custody, over and over and over, having a voice—any voice at all—could mean the loss of her children in the courtroom of the wrong judge. Therefore, we cannot say no to any voice until we can gather a large collective of stories encompassing the totality of a single mother's experience, fully understand the collective experiences, and create the lasting change we need. Until we can all be heard, we must keep telling our stories.

The Complexity of Single Motherhood—Stigma and Institutions

Since my divorce, there have been moments when I have openly wondered if life could get any worse, and as soon as those words were uttered, I would retract them for fear of finding out the answer to my question. For myself, family court, divorce, single motherhood, bankruptcy, foreclosure, and navigating family services are formidable oppositions to one's sense of self, but poverty erodes what is left. When there is no way out and or viable solution, it

is easy to get caught up in what is. Especially when the institutions a single mother should be able to obtain assistance from devalues and discredits her experience.

Turgeon (2018) conducted 69 critical discourse analysis interviews with the Ohio Works First (U.S.) program managers to determine how they discuss and evaluate their welfare participant's mothering skills. Turgeon discovered that welfare program managers expected their single mothers to model intensive mothering practices, as in clearly putting the child first, spending time with them, and being able to save for college. Also, mothers should hold capitalist ideologies around work, in that any work was better than no work, even if that work paid nothing. Single mothers should be willing to work twice as hard or twice as much, regardless of pay otherwise she was lazy and reproducing poverty for the next generation. Finally, she must find reliable childcare and keep it. Otherwise, she is purposefully subjecting her children to a life of poverty by choosing not to work. Turgeon realized those single mothers were experiencing a no-win situation in an environment hostile to single mothers experiencing poverty while simultaneously being held responsible for subjecting children to poverty in which she has little control. Facing stigma in institutions where single mothers seek help is not new.

In 2010, the Pew Research Center reported that 69% believed a single mother with children was bad for society, while 61% believed children must grow up in a two-parent household to be happy (Shoener, 2014). Shoener (2014) spent 2 years studying intimate partner violence services and discovered the most common barrier to a woman's safety, concluding,

The high value our culture places on two-parent families . . . The truly alarming part, however, is the extent to which the institutions that are intended to assist domestic violence survivors—protection order courts, mental health services, public benefits programs and child custody system—reinforce this [single mother] stigma with both official policies and ingrained prejudices. (paras. 1, 6)

By the time the Pew Research Center report was released, I had been divorced for a little over 1 year.

Fast forward to 2022. the Pew Research Center conducted a similar study to see if Americans approved of women raising children independently or if it was still harmful to society (Hurst, 2022). In 12 years, only 47% of adults believed that to have a single mother raising a child alone is terrible for society (Hurst, 2022). While this seems like an improvement from 2010, along party lines, 73% of Republican men and 62% of Republican leaners believe single mothers are bad for society, compared to 45% of Democratic men and 36% of Democratic leaners (Hurst, 2022). While the Pew Research Center does not explicitly say that children are better off in the nuclear family setup, the survey question and the results imply the answer.

When I was in the thick of single motherhood, what I did not realize at the time was just how much misogyny, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity had infiltrated every institution I encountered, whether I was at work, setting up cable services for our television, in the family courts, utilizing family services and/or domestic violence services, getting a routine pap smear, at church, my son's confirmation classes, or even when advocating for my youngest son at his school. Worst of all, misogyny—with the dualistic nature of a double-edged sword, patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity worked in tandem to restrain and control single mothers through marginalization, blame, and stereotypes, especially for the women who dared to raise their children outside of the traditional family structure. I would learn the hard way that not only did my experience and stories not matter, but that the women who I felt should have been able to at least empathize with my situation because of our shared gender would become my most formidable opponents as they fought to keep wayward women in check. Our legacy is that “among developed countries, no nation fails its single mothers as gravely as does the United States” (Sandler, 2020, Introduction). This is true. By upholding the misogynistic and patriarchal

structures we were all taught to obey as infants, young children, teenagers, and even adults, we fail our single mothers horrifically when they need help the most.

The Intersection of Misogyny, Patriarchy, and Hegemonic Masculinity

Misogyny

According to Holland (2006), misogyny is one of the most persistent and tenacious prejudices ever to infiltrate humankind, morphing to seamlessly embed itself within every era's social, religious, and political issues throughout history. Holland was mainly concerned with society's inability to see and recognize misogyny. As a result, he sought to reveal why and how society continues to justify the oppression and brutalization of half the world's population. Therefore, he traced representations of misogyny from its roots to the present day. He was alarmed to realize how quickly misogyny had become a socially accepted norm, stating, "[The] unprecedented convergence of philosophical, mystical, and historical claims helped create [the most] powerful ideological underpinning for the world's oldest prejudice" (Holland, 2006, p. 19). Holland argued that the history of misogyny repeatedly demonstrated how dualistic systems of thought place women on the losing end of the spectrum. Men deserve to enjoy positions of privilege and power while viewing women as never content but continually seeking to undermine men. Remember, misogyny is a prejudice that has infiltrated every ideology, religion, culture, and institution, the very same institutions a single mother relies on for the success of her family. Unfortunately, women primarily run some of these institutions and/or where women occupy a large percentage of the employee population.

Society's inability to recognize misogyny for the harm it creates was a driving motivator for Holland (2006) to finish and publish what would end up being his last book, *A Brief History of Misogyny: The World's Oldest Prejudice* (Barcella, 2006; Kelly, 2006). While in the hospital

dying from cancer in May of 2004, Holland and his daughter worked through the final edits of his completed manuscript (Barcella, 2006; Kelly, 2006). Unfortunately, the book's release was delayed by 2 years when immediately after Holland's death, Viking Penguin deemed the manuscript unpublishable and demanded half of the \$100,000 advance back (Kelly, 2006). A year and a half later, Holland's widow and daughter found a different publisher willing to publish the manuscript with virtually no changes to the original manuscript (Kelly, 2006). To my knowledge, no one has ever taken Holland's book one step further and applied its findings to a single mother's lived experience. Therefore, in my dissertation I apply Holland's book to my own lived experience as a single mother shedding light on the complexity of the experience, both internally and externally, while also looking contextually at what was happening around my family at that time.

Mythic Roots of Misogyny

In 2013, I brought to my CNF class a piece about my cousin's wedding at a conservative branch of the Missouri Synod Lutheran faith. Throughout her wedding ceremony, the Pastor kept bringing up the story of Eve as the basis for her husband's understanding of his wife's actions—now and in the future—in which her husband would need to continue monitoring and be vigilant of her willful disposition. A disposition, the church believed, was inherited from Eve's actions, which would lead to my cousin paying for those actions through the inevitable pains of childbirth. The idea of Eve's disobedience being an inherited trait among women was the primary message I had heard while growing up, so it was not a new concept.

My college education in gender and women's studies and the extent to which the Pastor hounded the idea of women needing to continue to pay for the sins of Eve did not set well with me as I contemplated how this message was heard by my boys, who sat beside me. I felt our

religion afforded men a lot of unspoken power and privilege, which was not granted to women because of Eve's actions. Once I got home, I wrote about the Pastor's comments as I openly questioned the church's stance, which was not something we were ever encouraged to do within the church. My main question centered around the church's complete inability to ask why Adam did not bear any of the blame for that fateful day. After all, he did have agency. Eve did not drug, tie him up, or force him to eat the apple. He chose to. At that time, I also questioned if the story of Adam and Eve did not hold more unspoken power and privilege for men in the church and our society than we realized or were willing to recognize.

Now, imagine my 2013 CNF classroom dynamics with the pseudo-feminist professor and their inability to understand, empathize, or even identify with experiences unlike their own. I heard things like the story of Eve did not have a hidden agenda. Adam and Eve were a myth. Churches might say women have to continue to pay or that they need to be monitored and controlled because of Eve's actions, but they do not mean it. Indeed, mankind has progressed further than Heidi's writing suggests. Vivian responded that the story was precisely why she stopped attending church and was reluctant to argue theology with the rest of the class and the professor. However, my favorite response during that encounter was, "The story of Adam and Eve is just that, a story. A story that does not matter today. Therefore, your writing does not matter and does not hold the necessary weight of a master's level class."

Fast forward to my PhD work in Leadership and Change at Antioch University. I come across Holland's (2006) book on misogyny. Holland believed that if misogyny had a birthday, that birthday would fall around 800 B.C. E. Why? Because it was:

Around that time in both Greece and Judaea, creation stories that were to acquire the power of [legendary] myth arose, describing the Fall of Man, and how woman's weakness is responsible for all subsequent human suffering, misery, and death. Both myths have since flowed into the mainstream of Western civilization, carried along by two of its most powerful tributaries: In the Jewish tradition, as recounted in Genesis (which a majority of Americans still accept as true [according to statistical evidence presented by Steven Pinker (2002)]) the culprit is Eve; and in the Greek [tradition], Pandora, [with] the Greeks [occupying the role as] the first colonists of our intellectual world. (Holland, 2006, p. 24–25)

The Greeks were responsible not only for the vision of our universe and its natural laws but also for science, philosophy, and the creation of the first democracy. Oh, how I wished I had read Holland's (2006) book before 2013. Sadly, I had not. In 2013, I left my CNF class feeling utterly defeated. I scrapped the story. Ask me today if a story as old as The Fall of Man matters, and I would still argue it does. The story of the Fall of Man (and the story of Pandora) paved the way for "the world's oldest [ideological] prejudice" (Holland, 2006, p. 19) to take root and flourish. Maybe, one day, I will mail him Holland's (2006) book anonymously.

Patriarchy

Holland (2006) provided substantial proof of the connection between misogyny and patriarchy. Patriarchy is believed to have been in existence since the time of Adam and Eve. Eisenstein's (1999) definition of patriarchy is simply that it is gender-based and hierarchical. Whereas Gilligan and Snider (2018) expanded the definition of patriarchy to include a binary, hierarchical, and gendered culture in which the masculine is privileged above the feminine. Gilligan and Snider firmly believed gender was at the heart of patriarchy, and therefore gender was also what held patriarchy in place.

For myself, the place of relentless indoctrination into patriarchal values was the church, Missouri Synod Lutheran. I was raised in a two-parent household and around many strong-willed older women who had lost their husbands and never remarried. At times, I experienced

conflicting messages. Looking back, the earliest messages I received from pastors, and Sunday School teachers were twofold. One, the gender hierarchy was clearly established. Christ is the head of the church, as my father is the head of my household, as my husband will one day be the head of my household. Two, the gender hierarchy and the messages contained within that hierarchy, those justifying its existence, are never—and I mean never—to be questioned. If either of those first two statements is questioned, that is the mark of Eve upon your soul—it is the mark of rebellion. When Holland (2006) wrote, “What we call history is merely the tale that patriarchy wants to tell, and misogyny is its ideology, a system of beliefs and ideas the aim of which is to explain the domination of men over women” (p. 20), the pieces of my past started to fall into place. History is full of stories that justify patriarchy’s continued presence. If Holland is correct regarding patriarchy’s control of our historical narrative, with misogyny as its chief ideology, then hegemonic masculinity is patriarchy’s silent but deadly enforcer.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity is not assumed to be normal but is certainly normative in that it requires all men to position themselves in relation to it, with its very definition justifying and legitimizing the subordination of women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). According to Hearn (2012), hegemonic masculinity is elusive and, yet, understood as a configuration of practices, aspirations, cultural ideals, ways of being a man, as well as types of men. Hegemonic masculinity permits men’s collective dominance over women to continue, including the use of physical violence for the stabilization of gender dominance (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). A strong indicator of the pervasiveness of hegemonic masculinity is its adaptability to changing family dynamics (Sanz-Barbero et al., 2018). What family dynamic could potentially halt a man’s dominance over a woman and his children? Single motherhood.

Unfortunately, a single mother will never be able to stray far enough away from hegemonic masculinity's influence. Therefore, hegemonic masculinity's ability to adapt and infiltrate the non-nuclear family structure is essential if patriarchy and misogyny are to continue unimpeded. As the enforcer, hegemonic masculinity is most likely to appear within patriarchal institutions through the employees who will assume the role of patriarchal enforcer, governed by the ideology of misogyny. Regrettably, the institutions most likely to encounter a single mother range widely from family courts to their children's schools to religious organizations. For instance, in Minnesota, the divorcing couple must try mediation before a divorce case with minor children appears before the courts. Mediation is where the divorcing couple and their attorneys sit down with one man and one woman—who are supposed to be neutral—to facilitate a custodial arrangement between the couple. On the surface, the presence of one person from each gender looks like the mediation process will be equal for the divorcing couple. However, that idea could not be further from the truth. In my experience, mediation is nothing more than a verbal battleground of gendered assumptions, stories, and stereotypes playing out in real-time.

Before my experience with mediation, my lawyer informed me that I would be one of two women in that room, and men would occupy the other four seats. Therefore, as a woman walking into that situation, my lawyer warned of the necessity to be highly cautious of the female mediator. It was his experience that more women lost custodial privileges during mediation because they incorrectly assumed the female mediator would see things their way due to an assumption of shared parental challenges pertaining to gender. Unfortunately, that little nugget of wisdom was the only time my lawyer would be dead right.

I pointed out during mediation that I completed 95% of the primary caregiving responsibilities for our two children during our marriage and that when I could not complete my

caregiving responsibilities the other 5% of the time, I made sure another woman would fill in for me because that was what my husband mandated, I do. The female mediator responded that I was making unfair assumptions about my soon-to-be ex-husband's future parenting ability because I was basing my assessment on his past behaviors. I was at a loss for words. If I could not use legitimate, proven, and documented past behaviors as proof of potential future custodial problems, what proof did I have? However, one of the questions asked of us was if we were headed to college, to which I responded that I would like to go, eventually. Sadly, my future college plans weighed more heavily on my ability to parent than my soon-to-be ex-husband's proven avoidance of parental responsibility over the past 9 years. What I know now was that hegemonic masculinity fueled by misogyny had swooped into the mediation proceeding to appear as a female mediator who was bound and determined to ensure patriarchy had a foothold over what choices I could and could not make until my children would turn 18 years of age. All of this leads me to ask the following research questions.

Research Questions

1. How do misogyny, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity show up in the social systems and institutions designed to help single mothers and the social systems and institutions a single mother is most likely to encounter?
2. How did misogyny, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity appear in my own life as a single mother through the social systems and institutions I encountered?

Purpose of the Study

Within this dissertation, I aimed to shed light on the complexity of the single motherhood experience, both internally and externally, while utilizing a contextual autoethnography of my lived experience with stigmatization, stereotypes, and institutions. From 2009 to 2019, the

institutions that I accessed for assistance as a single mother and those I interacted with for the sake of my family were unnecessarily burdensome financially, physically, and emotionally. Therefore, this dissertation takes a contextual look at print media, legal statutes, laws, other domestic violence cases, court cases, and institutional concerns that were happening within my lifetime that may have affected either those I encountered or my perceptions at the time. While looking at my autoethnography and the contextual experience of the time period, I will also be examining Holland's (2006) *Brief History of Misogyny* to extend his findings into the realm of a single mother's lived experience, both internally and externally.

Statement of My Positionality

As a White, middle-class, married mom, I was more protected and privileged than I realized or took the time to consider prior to single motherhood. I left my husband in 2008 due to verbal and sexual abuse, and by July 2009, I was officially no longer a married woman. I thought I was free to start my life with the same privileges I experienced as a married woman and had held for the more significant part of my life. How wrong I was! My new status was a threat, and while I quickly realized something was not right, I did not have the language to describe what was happening in 2009. I spent a lot of my time-fighting false narratives, assumptions, and/or stereotypes that seemed to be common sense and/or common knowledge in which my behavior, actions, and thoughts were continually on trial within the community where I lived, at my children's school, as well as the beautiful misconceptions, assumptions, and stereotypes fed to my boys by their dad and new step-mother, that were inevitably repeated to me.

In 2010, I became a Creative Writing and a Gender and Women's Studies student at Minnesota State University, Mankato. For myself, college was where:

Critical thinking pursues freedom [by] revealing conditions of suppression which are not ordinarily visible . . . also termed "subjectivity," this sense of self is shaped by social

institutions . . . and can appear to be taken for granted. Our ways of knowing about ourselves can thus seem to be simply “reality” or “truth” until they are interrupted or “refused.” (Sinclair, 2007, p. 43)

Therefore, as I attended college, it took time to develop the necessary language to name the experiences I had as a single mother. Until the language could be developed, all I knew for sure was that I went from solid married middle class to divorced, bankrupt, and beyond poor, the kind of poor that makes poor look like a dream come true. I went from being a married mom to a single mother; from one job to two and three jobs; from owning decent cars to praying the thing would start; from owning a home to foreclosure to life as a renter; from being someone who could get a loan to someone who could never get a loan, and still cannot get a loan despite the bankruptcy and foreclosure having been removed from my record years ago. However, the most hurtful aspect of my new life as a single mother was that I went from being the parent the school called when the boys got sick to never being the one the school called when the boys got sick. I also went from being a valued full-time employee to a part-time employee at that same organization, and in somehow becoming a single mother who went to college, I became a threat.

For 17 years, before and during my college experience at Minnesota State University, Mankato, I worked for a man who saw the single mother’s identity as a threat to his way of life. Prior to becoming a single mother, I do not recall him as being a misogynistic person. However, when I became a single mother, he would go out of his way to tell me how single mothers were stealing his money. Daily, I would hear the following assumptions of which single mothers were guilty of: through the filing of state and federal taxes in which single mothers received higher tax returns for fewer hours worked; for strategically placing their children in school districts with better financial resources due to open enrollment policies, while intentionally avoiding the schools closest to the single mother’s home address, thereby forcing him to pay for a better education for the single mother’s children; or single mothers were often synonymous welfare

queens and welfare fraud; but the most egregious thing a single mother could do would be to claim they are a victim of circumstance or structural inadequacies within the more extensive social system. For him, victims equaled more significant financial assistance because single mothers were just plain lazy. Therefore, they could not be victims.

If a couple got caught scamming the welfare system, literally anywhere in the United States, I was the first person he sought out at work to relay the information surrounding the latest female caught stealing. Yes, I stated that correctly. Whether it was a couple scamming the system or a solitary woman scamming it, the only one he thought held the most culpability for the crime was always the woman. At the time, I was in the welfare system for health care and food assistance. I was so afraid of him finding out that I cautiously guarded that knowledge. I knew deep within my bones that he could not, and would not, be able to distinguish between my life as a single mother and my life as a proven long-term hard-working employee. I knew the false narratives, assumptions, and stereotypes he believed were common sense and/or common knowledge of single mothers for him would be cross applied to me.

Then the laws changed, or one could say they were tweaked within Minnesota. I was now required to tell my boss, at every position I held—utilizing a proof of work form which my boss would have to sign stating that I did work for them and for the number of hours I claimed—while also finding out that I was indeed a recipient of assistance from the county. My greatest fear was pounding at my door. I had two choices. Tell my boss or lose the meager assistance we received. I had felt like the state of Minnesota was out to shame those who sought help from them before with a few of their rather dumb rules, but this new requirement in which my boss essentially signed my permission slip for benefits proved it. I spent an entire afternoon arguing with the county and, finally, a state worker within what amounted to the family services fraud detection

unit. I tried to get them to understand that I would tell my other two bosses of my need to seek assistance, and they would sign the form. I could handle that part of their request. However, I would never, ever, and could never, give the new form to my main boss—where I earned the most significant part of my meager income—because he would fire me.

During my sustained conversation with the family service workers regarding my boss's hatred of single mothers, they tried to reassure me that I could never be fired for being a single mother because that would be an act of discrimination. I responded with maybe not. However, I could be fired for one of a hundred reasons. Something I have always done at work successfully and without recrimination would suddenly become a matter of write-ups, suspension, and then removal from employment. After all, I had seen them employ similar strategies and tactics for workers who utilized work comp claims for work-related injuries. The common knowledge masquerading as a false story, assumption, and stereotype surrounding the employees who utilized work comp claims was that they were lazy and lied about their injuries. At my employment, paying for the injury yourself was far safer, so long as the injury would not require long-term care or loss of limb.

An added complication to my experience as a single mother was my diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in January 2014. The doctor who diagnosed my PTSD figured I had been operating with untreated PTSD for a long time by 2014. The doctor believed my PTSD started within my marriage as a direct result of the verbal and sexual abuse suffered by my husband. I thought my odd quirks and responses to difficulties were typical until the sustained removal of the threat from my immediate environment—my husband—did not relieve those odd quirks and responses.

My PTSD manifested in many ways, but the one that was and is the most difficult to deal with has been the kinesthetic or tactile recollections at night. Intellectually, I knew I was the only one in my room, but I could still feel the bed give way under my ex-husband's weight when I was within seconds of falling asleep. As the bed gave way, I would wake up in a panic, unable to distinguish reality and the past. My inability to sleep did not help my situation. If anything, it only compounded my problems. My sleeplessness led to my endlessly walking the house, checking the window and door locks, before retreating to my bed, where as soon as I was about to drift off to sleep, my ex-husband would crawl into bed beside me. I would sit bolt upright in bed and begin my walk around the house all over again.

The sleeplessness was a never-ending cycle until I got Lucas, my all-white male boxer. He has not been officially trained for several reasons. One, I cannot afford it. A dog trained to deal with PTSD can cost upwards of \$40,000. In 2016, it was \$10,000 to \$20,000 for a dog trained to work with its owner's PTSD. Two, most dog training programs for PTSD are for veterans with PTSD, and even if they consider your case, if a veteran in need comes up, you will be pushed off to the end of the line. There is no guarantee that you will get a dog. Three, the only grants available to assist in training a dog for PTSD exist for Veterans with PTSD and are not available to the broader public. As a single mother, working two and three jobs to survive, a trained dog was out of the question. Luckily, Lucas was highly sensitive to my needs and has bonded well. At night, he lays on the corner of the bed where my ex-husband would crawl into bed without my ever having to teach him to do so. When I have nightmares, he moves to sleep with his back against my back. Sometimes, I will wake up to find he has placed his chin with his droopy cheeks on my neck and across the side of my face.

Despite having Lucas in my life to help me sleep, my diagnosis of PTSD has been and continues to be a source of shame. When I was diagnosed, I felt like I was failing at life, at being a single mom. Who gets PTSD and has never served overseas in a war? Does that make me weak? For a long time, the doctor would tell me that PTSD was a normal reaction to an abnormal event. However, I heard the doctor say PTSD was an abnormal reaction to a normal event, which meant I was the problem. Sadly, I was afraid of, and ironically enough, I simultaneously believed in the false stories, assumptions, and stereotypes most often associated with those who have PTSD without serving in the military, in that those who served in the military had a legitimate right to their diagnosis. I did not.

By 2014, I had been dealing with survival threats to myself and my sons for 5 years. The great recession was still pestering most of the United States. For those of us struggling with poverty, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 led to a “complete dismantling of the safety net for poor and needy persons and families” (Riccucci, 2007, p. 156) and was profoundly felt. However, my lived experience within that very same system was one of anguish, shame, endless monitoring, control, and paperwork—oh my God, they loved paperwork—and finally, as a system in which the workers seemed to suffer from the same false narratives, assumptions, and stereotypes as my boss. I could not begin to count the number of times a family service worker asked me if I sold my body for money under the table. My only response was, “Seriously? When would I have the time?”

I hated being at the mercy of what seemed like an unforgiving system. Therefore, as soon as I could barely leave the county, I did so. I decided that if worse came to worse, and I ended up living with my boys and our dogs in my car, we would still be better off. Desmond (2023) stated, “Poverty is the feeling that your government is against you, not for you; that your country was

designed to serve other people” (p. 19). I was not those other people. I was tired. I was tired of the endless humiliation, shame, and degradation that seemed to be par for the course when asking the county for help. According to Abramovitz (2000), deterrence and blame are the best way to limit and control welfare rolls. Blame single mothers through the usage of stereotypes, stigmatize those who seek help within the larger public, reward states financially for reducing their welfare rolls, and then sit back to watch states enact formal diversion programs to keep those who need assistance from being able to apply for help (Abramovitz, 2000).

Formal state-sanctioned diversion programs can look like telling a poor woman to seek help from family and/or friends first, to take out a lump sum payment from anywhere, or even to seek out a job, and all before allowing the woman to apply for assistance (Abramovitz, 2000). If those suggestions do not work to sufficiently deter the woman from applying, subject the woman to long wait times, encourage multiple return visits, neglect to tell the woman of other programs or benefits that may be useful to her during her time of need, and if all else fails, find ways to reject the application rather than to process it (Abramovitz, 2000). Some believe differently, such as Brandwein and Filiano (2000) argued that the federal government cannot and should not shame and punish those seeking assistance while simultaneously trying to protect and empower survivors of intimate partner violence because those are the very same people they are trying to help.

At the time, I did not know for sure if the state of Minnesota employed a formal deterrence or diversion program. However, looking back on my experience with them, it felt like it. Despite what seemed like a never-ending barrage of difficulties, single mothers are more resourceful, strong, and resilient than we are ever given credit for. From my own experience, I

argue that single mothers must be resourceful, strong, and resilient because no one will be coming to their rescue.

Theoretical Framework

While in the thick of single motherhood, single mothers often do not realize that they already have the power to control their lives. One way single mothers exhibit control of their lives is through resilience. Although resilience can be developed, single mothers must know they are already resilient. They got this, even if society says they do not.

Resilience

Coutu (2002) believed that there are three distinct elements to resilience; the ability to face down reality, which appears most often in the form of acceptance of a particular moment in time; a search for meaning, which can be found in the individual journey into one's values and beliefs; and finally, through ritualized ingenuity, the uncanny ability to improvise and to learn from their circumstances. Hormann (2018) captured *ingenuity* well in this description:

Sometimes ingenuity looks like an intricate, beautiful weaving or an amazing idea that appeared out of the clear blue sky, but more often it looks like the messy kitchen drawer that contains a bit of everything . . . Ingenuity grows as individuals . . . gain experiences. (p. 98)

For me, resilience looked like the first entire winter after my divorce was finalized. The boys and I struggled to stay ahead of what felt like record-breaking snowstorms at the marital farm site, the home I got in the divorce. At the farm site, there was a quonset with a giant heavy door controlled by a remote inside the door. That winter, the lever that connects the overhead door to the track broke. Below the remote was the piece needed to fix the door. At some point during our marriage, my ex-husband must have been aware of a potential problem and, therefore, obtained the part. Alternatively, given that he kept absolutely everything, he may have acquired

the part with something else and merely kept it below the door on the off chance that one day, it would break.

Regrettably, I made the mistake of asking my ex-husband for help in fixing the overhead door. Instead of helping, he came over while I was at work and took the piece I needed to fix the door. In what would become a constant game of chess between us, I realized that I never should have asked for help. Therefore, my first mistake was asking for help because in asking for help, I not only revealed a vulnerability, but I conveyed the potential solution I held within my grasp. Furthermore, I incorrectly assumed he would help. My assumption that what affected me also negatively affected our children if my car died from winter exposure would be a point he and I could agree on. Therefore, he would help us because this problem should have been above and beyond pettiness, but it was not.

Instead, I had to find a way to lift the 100-pound door. Digging around in one of the other sheds on the property, I found a 10-foot solid metal pipe. I took the pipe to the Quonset, where I could leverage the door just enough to get my Dodge Intrepid inside and out of the elements. At the time, it felt like one more problem on top of a pile of petty divorce problems with no visible end in sight. I accepted the situation. However, grudgingly I may have felt toward my ex-husband. While I had no idea what meaning could be gained from my ex-husband stealing the part, other than the fact that I would not let him win by calling and asking what he did with my part, I came up with a creative solution. At that moment, I was mad as hell, but I was also resilient.

Like Coutu (2002), I also believe that resilience is something we realize we have after the fact. Resilient people possess three characteristics, a staunch acceptance of reality; a deep belief, often buttressed by firmly held values, that life is meaningful; and an uncanny ability to

improvise (Coutu, 2002). In the story of the overhead door, I may have grudgingly accepted the situation I was in, and even though that acceptance may have been fueled by anger at my ex-husband for taking advantage of the situation to inflict more pain, I became determined to succeed. Taking the mechanical part would not break me, but his theft led to my improvised solution. In Coutu's experience, resilient people do not describe themselves as resilient, preferring to shrug off their survival stories, often chalking them up to luck. When I found that 10-foot metal pipe, I did not think I was being resilient or that my ability to discover a solution in any way pointed toward an inner resilience I may or may not have possessed. I do remember thinking I was either lucky that my ex-husband did not steal all possible solutions to my overhead door problem, or I needed to utter a silent prayer thanking God for my ex-husband's lack of foresight toward other solutions within our sheds, which meant he did not steal the pipe and the part at the same time. I would argue that for a single mother, resilience is a necessity and requires a tenacious ability to subvert power structures to create a life within the mess.

Critical Theory

Throughout my life, I have found numerous ways to challenge the status quo, often within whatever power structure I found myself. For example, when I was married, the clothes and handbags, jackets, and undergarments I purchased for the barn were closely critiqued and monitored. If my husband thought what I purchased looked like I wanted attention, which was defined by his ever-changing standards of what I could and could not wear, it resulted in an endless barrage of verbal insults geared toward absolute control over my choices. After 10 years of marriage, I finally realized I would never win. I was left at a crossroads. Is this behavior something I keep enduring while knowing I will always be in the wrong, or do I find ways to subtly fight back?

Then it hit me—nail polish. I could be me through nail polish. As a result, I went out and bought the darkest but most wild nail polish colors I could find. I decided to seek out dark colors because those were the colors I was allowed to wear. Next, I began my subversion of the power structure by only painting my toes at first. I knew he would see the nail polish, but I also knew he likely would never comment on my choice of colors for my toes because the socks covered my toes. Once he became desensitized to the nail polish on my feet, I placed it on my fingers. Like clockwork, the verbal insults started. He hated the nail polish, and he hated it even more when I would retort, “Well, it didn’t bother you when it was on my toes. What’s the difference?” I knew the difference, and he knew I knew, but I did not relent in my position.

Given the nail polish story, it should not be surprising to find my interest in critical theory for this dissertation. Therefore, I believe Bronner (2011) who said,

Critical theory refuses to identify freedom with an institutional arrangement or fixed system of thought. It questions the hidden assumptions and purposes of competing theories and existing forms of practice . . . Critical theory insists that thought must respond to the new problems and the new possibilities for liberation that arise from changing historical circumstance. (p. 11)

Consequently, critical theory will offer the most contextual look at my past and the roles of institutions in my life post-divorce. Bronner (2011) states that critical theorists must look backward to move forward. Since the study aims to shed light on the complexity of the single mother experience, both internally and externally, context will be fundamental to my assessment of that particular time. From 2009 to 2019, the institutions that I accessed will provide contextual fodder for a deeper critical look at print media, legal statutes, laws, other domestic violence cases, court cases, and institutional issues that were happening at the same time that may have affected either those I encountered or my perceptions. As a single mother, my insider status would lend an interesting perspective to the contextual complexity of the lived experience for critical analysis.

Methodology

Within Antioch University's PhD program, I stumbled upon autoethnography as a method for a dissertation topic. Upon further examination, I was intrigued by the methodology's potential for uncovering the lived experience. Autoethnography's ability to amplify voices at the margins and the array of creative possibilities to present the lived experience as a method of research for a creative writer made the dissertation process seem possible. Plus, I must admit, the idea that autoethnography was a bit of a renegade in the academic field made the method seem even more appealing. I could not think of a better way to subvert power structures than by utilizing a method that challenges academia to see research differently, to see research as stories and stories as research.

Autoethnography

According to Denshire (2014), autoethnography is a relatively new and highly contested research method. As a methodological approach, autoethnography is a powerful method for addressing social justice topics (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014a). Autoethnography "seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273). Autoethnography invites the reader into the lived experience of the other, giving voice to the marginalized, initiating discussion across differences, and seeking to explain contradictory standpoints (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014a). Autoethnography provides agency and voice to the voiceless. Consequently, I believe autoethnography is a method that would be best suited for capturing the experiences of a single mother within a creative format. More detail will be provided in Chapter III.

Critical Autoethnography

Critical autoethnography reveals the intersectional nature of identity and identity politics (Alexander, 2014). Crenshaw (1995) developed the term intersectionality to examine the many intersections of lived experiences, such as the intersections of gender and race, which is only a small example of the multiple intersections possible for a single lived experience. An example of critical autoethnography would be a contextualized study of lived experience within a particular cultural community through which the intersectionality of identity, positionality, lived experience, and a cultural community intersect (Alexander, 2014).

Therefore, looking at journals, calendars, emails, and other bits of personal saved materials from my life as a single mother, plus the print media, legal statutes, laws, other domestic violence cases, and court cases surrounding that time period, provides a more profound immersion experience into critical autoethnography for the reader. Also, by taking a significant look over that period of my life, I will be better able to visualize how misogyny, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity continued to exert their influence over my life as a single mother through the institutions that I accessed for assistance, as well as those I interacted with for my children, and even within the church. By utilizing critical autoethnography, I have taken Holland's (2006) *Brief History of Misogyny* and extended his findings to that of a single mother to shed light on the internal and external complexity of the lived experience. I feel critical autoethnography would provide an excellent lens for an inquisitive reader to see and feel the connection between patriarchy, misogyny, and hegemonic masculinity in the institutional obstructions and their combined effect on a single mother's life. More detail will be provided in Chapter III.

This dissertation analyzes my old journals, calendars, emails, and other personal items, as well as print media, legal statutes, laws, other domestic violence cases, and court cases, to bring

to light my lived experience as a single mother. By taking a critical look over that period of my life, I was able to illustrate how misogyny, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity continued to exert their influence through the institutions that I accessed for assistance, as well as those I interacted with for my children, and even within the church. Through this examination, I was able to further Holland's (2006) findings to that of a single mother's experience—both internal and external—to shed light on the complexity of the lived experience.

Significance of the Study

Due to Holland's death in 2004, neither he nor anyone else has extended his findings into the realm of single motherhood. My goal is to show precisely how misogyny, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity operate as institutional obstructions instead of allowing those institutions to be resources a single mother can rely on for her family's survival. By making his research visible within the lived experiences offered within this dissertation, it will provide the best chance for a critical look at the issues and the resilient resolve of single mothers. While some stories are hard for people to hear, I challenge my reader to remain open to the experience. Please come with an open mind and open heart.

Organization of Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. Chapter I lays out the problem by shedding light on the internal and external complexity of the lived experience of single motherhood as it intersects with misogyny, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity. Chapter II is a literature review of misogyny, patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, the internal and external complexity of single motherhood, and resilience. Chapter III focuses on methodology in which autoethnography will be the primary focus, having developed from ethnography. Chapter IV discusses religious institutions' internal and external impact on a single mother's contextual lived

experience while debating linkages to academic literature and Holland's (2006) theories. Chapter V contemplates the internal and external impact of institutional obstructions on a single mother's contextual lived experience, linkages among the academic literature, and various single mother stories of similar obstructions while considering Holland's (2006) theory. Chapter VI concludes with reiterating the purpose of the dissertation and recaps the examination of resilience leadership and single mothers' application of resilience leadership. Further, it provides recommendations for future research, and identifies the contribution this work makes to the field.

Chapter Conclusion

The supposed feminist professor I began this chapter with would teach a poetry class during my first year as a graduate student at Minnesota State University, Mankato. I was a glutton for punishment. Much like the creative nonfiction class from the semester prior, he brutalized my poetry during every 60-minute feedback session. Sadly, he did not like my poetry any more than he liked my creative nonfiction. My themes were the same. I wrote about single motherhood, stereotypes, PTSD without verbally naming my PTSD, verbal abuse, needing welfare support, placing my kids on a Santa list because I lacked the money to buy them presents, and my issues with trying to parent alongside a creatively abusive ex-husband. Not once did he or anyone else in the class ever say, "I am sorry you experienced this" or "I am sorry this is happening." Not once. As a professor in my composition classroom, if a student shares a problematic story or a traumatic narrative, I always am sure to write or say, "I am so sorry you experienced this" or "I am sorry this is happening. Is there anything I can do to help?" Sometimes, I know for myself that I just wanted to be heard. In the fake feminist professor's classroom, I was never heard and seldom understood.

During one class in particular, the fake feminist professor was more frustrated with my writing than he had previously been all year. He strongly recommended that I find happier topics like flowers, sunshine, or nature to write about because my poetry was depressing. Also, he felt there was an overriding anger simmering just below the surface of my words. For once, he was not wrong. I was angry. Kendall (2020) argued, “Anger is sometimes the only fuel left at the end of a long, horrible day, week, month, or generation” (p. 200). I could not agree more. He was, however, wrong to suggest that I find a happier topic like flowers, sunshine, or nature. I left his class and went home to write the poem “The Container,” which I brought to class the following week. After he read “The Container,” he did not have much to say, and he never asked me to write about happier topics again.

The Container²

The art of hiding
anger effectively
is like snowmobiling
alongside a fence
in whiteout conditions
between what is said
and what can't be said,
flanked by what one can do
and what one can't do,
battered by the actions
and inactions of daily life,
bordered by having power
and absolutely none at all.

I keep my anger in a solid
cherry wood casket,
with creamy satin interior,
and bronze colored lugs
embossed in crimson
hearts, within the center
of my living room,
a resting place
for my feet
upon its cap,
an ambiguous
coffee table.

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CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Within this literature review, I will map the historical intersections of misogyny and patriarchy, thereby sketching the utilization of hegemonic masculinity as the strong-arm enforcer which utilizes the continued unofficial method of societal control through stereotypes and stigmatizations as the quickest way to keep single mothers in line. The first section will present the map of the historical evolution and intersections of misogyny and patriarchy. The expansion and development of misogyny will follow as it relates to the story of Eve and Pandora. Next, the discussion will focus on the evolution of patriarchy, followed by gender as a foundation, patriarchy as socialized domination and power, patriarchy as divide-and-conquer, patriarchy: the ideological umbrella, neopatriarchy, the new globally unified patriarchy, and finally, the face of modern neopatriarchy or the new patriarchy. Lastly, hegemonic masculinity will be considered, as well as how to see hegemonic masculinity.

Within the second section, the internal complexities of single motherhood are those affecting a single mother as she navigates the external world but feels from within. These internal complexities are a combination of present and past issues converging on her present role. For instance, the internal complexities discussion will focus on intimate partner violence, the long-term impact of an abuser, post-traumatic stress syndrome and post-traumatic stress disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and stigma, and finally, isolation.

Within the third section, the external complexities of single motherhood are the factors affecting a single mother that are primarily outside her control. These external complexities are a combination of institutional obstructions. For instance, a discussion surrounding the external complexities will center on rural patriarchal values, multi-faceted marginalization, medical institutions, medical obstructions to care, institutional obstructions to PTSD treatment, social

service obstructions, law enforcement obstructions, law enforcement influenced by rural patriarchy, masculine power and control, and final, judicial institutional obstructions and the impact on single mothers.

The final section will focus on resilience. Resilience is the one item every single mother will say she does not have but needs more of. Yet, it is the one component every single mother displays through her stark acceptance of reality, her ability to make meaning during difficult situations, and her ability to produce solutions from thin air, literally and figuratively. It is a leadership skill a single mother will discover she has in hindsight.

Mapping the Historical Intersections of Misogyny and Patriarchy

To better understand misogyny, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity, they must be traced from conception through their evolution and intersecting pathways to recognize how gendered hierarchy has played out across time. The development of a gendered hierarchy has led to the unofficial endorsement of stereotypes and stigmatizations, which has become the quickest and most effective method of power and control employed against single mothers. According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), “We need to incorporate a more holistic understanding of gender hierarchy, recognizing the agency of subordinated groups as much as the power of dominant groups and the mutual conditioning of gender dynamics and other social dynamics” (p. 848). Holland (2006) detailed how misogyny and patriarchy have evolved and intersected over time and what has led to the dehumanization and justification of violence against women. Before we move too far into Holland (2006), let’s quickly consider the importance of violence and who gets to name violence because violence is at the heart of misogyny.

According to Hearn (2012), who gets to define violence is crucial. Women who experience IPV recognize an immense assortment of violence perpetrated against them (Hearn,

2012). Male perpetrators tend to see violence through narrower definitions so that violence is more of an incident, a moment in time, or within a specific space (Hearn, 2012). According to Bancroft (2002), the abusive man is like a magician. He needs his victim to look in the wrong direction, to be thoroughly distracted because as long as the victim is focused on his distraction, the victim will not notice the “true cause of his abusiveness, which lies in how he thinks” (Bancroft, 2002, p. 44). Therefore, the violence is not indicative of their character or in any way connected to them, or so the abuser would like the victim to think. The idea of violence as an incident or one-off incident allows men to compartmentalize the violence they perpetrate so that it is separate from the rest of their everyday life (Hearn, 2012). Therefore, separating violence from the individual does not allow for an understanding of violence through a multi-faceted analysis of power and control (Hearn, 2012). To fully understand violence, we must understand how power and control have evolved, been enforced, and maintained over time. With a greater understanding of power and control, we can better understand how it is utilized to maintain dominance in all areas of a woman’s life. At the center of power and control is, of course, misogyny, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity.

Evolution and Intersections of Misogyny

Misogyny, which simply means the hatred of women, is one of the most persistent and tenacious prejudices to ever infiltrate humankind (Holland, 2006). Misogyny has evolved throughout the centuries, morphing to seamlessly embed itself within every era’s social, religious, and political issues throughout history (Holland, 2006). According to Holland (2006), the “unprecedented convergence of philosophical, mystical, and historical claims helped create [the most] powerful ideological underpinning for the world’s oldest prejudice” (p. 19). That convergence appeared within two of society’s earliest mythological stories (Holland, 2006). The

creation story, which details the Fall of Man at the hands of Eve, and the Greek myth of Pandora, another woman who wreaked havoc on men and men's lives, were significant in creating the justification for misogyny (Holland, 2006).

The Story of Eve

The Bible, Genesis, tells the story of Eve, a woman who is to be blamed for all the ills and sufferings of mankind (Holland, 2006). By talking to a serpent and giving Adam the fruit of a forbidden tree, Eve singlehandedly deceived man bringing about his downfall from grace (Ukockis, 2019). Man's fall from grace would be a price that all women would continue to pay during childbirth for generations to come (Holland, 2006). If Eve's deception and subsequent removal of the duo—Eve and Adam—from the Garden of Eden were not enough to solidify Eve's fate as a woman in need of discipline, the fact that she was created as an afterthought would not only solidify her fate but that of every woman after her (Holland, 2006). The idea that she was created as an afterthought from Adam's rib meant she was just that, an afterthought, not an original creation and, therefore, not close to God (Holland, 2006). The story of Eve is often utilized as justification for why women need to be controlled and monitored (Holland, 2006). Unfortunately, hers is a story that at least two billion Christians from 260 countries believe to be true on any given day (Holland, 2006).

The Story of Pandora

Eve's Greek equivalent can be found in Pandora, another woman who would become as disobedient as Eve (Holland, 2006). According to Greek mythology, Zeus created Pandora to intentionally trick or hurt men (Holland, 2006). However, she appeared as a gift from the Gods but with a deadly preordained future given to her by Zeus (Holland, 2006). When Pandora came to man, she brought with her an earthenware vase, which she was also told never to open

(Holland, 2006). Nevertheless, what does Pandora do? She opened the vase. Her actions brought sickness, old age, and death to all of mankind (Holland, 2006). Since Pandora was created as a malicious afterthought of Zeus and not a part of his original creation of men, she also does not occupy a space near the Gods (Holland, 2006). Therefore, Pandora is neither close to the Gods like men, nor is she of the Gods like Zeus.

According to Holland (2006), the Greeks created the first real democracy as the founding fathers of philosophical and scientific ideologies. Greeks were considered to be the intellectual pioneers of their time (Holland, 2006). However, as the history of misogyny bore out, the Greeks would also develop the most destructive and misogynistic views of women (Holland, 2006). Their view would persist throughout time, “confounding any notion we might still have that the rise of reason and science means the decline of prejudice and hatred” (Holland, 2006, p. 24). That prejudice and hatred evolved into misogyny, hatred, or hostility toward women for no other reason than because they are women (Manne, 2018; Wiklund, 2020).

For Greeks, nature was the embodiment of women’s power, which they felt must be contained and controlled at all costs (Holland, 2006). After all, nature was a clear threat, a challenge to men’s intellectual capabilities. Therefore, the Greek method of choice for the containment of women was to dehumanize them. The Greeks believed women started the cycle of birth and death, in which men would forever be victims (Holland, 2006). Women were caught in a culture of contempt, as they were made to feel at fault for their beauty, an unwanted lustful distraction for men. Throughout history, misogyny has constantly confronted women with the same problem. They are to be blamed for arousing desire and lust in men. For women,

It [misogyny] creates a kind of dualism in which woman is the lesser truth, tethered to sexuality that keeps getting in the way. She has to be rejected and denigrated as the ambassador of the mutable world from which he seeks to assert his independence and over which he strives to establish his superiority. (Holland, 2006, p. 279)

Therefore, at the heart of misogyny's dualism is the double-edged sword of her sexuality and the need for her to remain under patriarchal control. Unfortunately, misogyny integrates and employs anxieties and fear to maintain the patriarchal order (Manne, 2018). Anxieties and fear have been and still are weaponized against women, from the right to vote to the equal rights act to a woman's right to choose if she will have an abortion. It is important to remember that misogyny requires a commitment to restoring patriarchal order if and when that order is disrupted (Manne, 2018).

Manne (2020) described misogyny as like dog shock collar that is used to keep dogs under control, while an invisible fence keeps the dog in one's yard. So, even if misogyny does not directly hurt women and girls, it is passively working to keep them within the bounds of a patriarchal order to discourage them from escaping. Misogyny stems from a desire to take women down and put them in their place, what Manne (2018) called the desire for a smackdown.

A recent example of this was witnessed first-hand during Derek Chauvin's trial for killing George Floyd.³ When Emergency Medical Technician Hansen was on the stand, the defense attorney asked a question, she provided a partial answer, and as the attorney walked away, she provided the rest of her answer. Hansen responded, "I don't know if you've ever seen someone die in front of you, but it is very upsetting" (Helsel, 2021, para. 4). At that point, Judge Cahill sent the jury out of the room to admonish Hansen (Lick, 2021). Judge Cahill told Hansen, "Do not argue with the court, do not argue with counsel, answer the questions, do not volunteer information that is not requested" (Helsel, 2021, para. 2). When Hansen tried to defend herself, Judge Cahill told her again not to argue with the court. The interaction between Judge Cahill and

³ I draw information on the trial primarily from Helsel (2021).

Hansen leaves one wondering if Hansen had been a man, would the Judge have made an example out of *him* to the same extent?

Therefore, the complexity behind the power and control in patriarchy's misogynistic view of women comes from three sources, the Fall of Man, Plato's Theory of Forms, and Aristotle's belief that he had scientifically proven women's inherent inferiority. According to Holland (2006):

Plato's Theory of Forms is the philosophical basis for the Christian doctrine of Original Sin, in which the very act of conception is viewed as a falling away from the perfection of God into the abysmal world of appearances, of suffering and of death. (p. 41)

Where Plato made misogyny more palatable philosophically, Aristotle made misogyny scientifically and socially acceptable (Holland, 2006).

For Aristotle, a woman's inferiority meant that obedience was a woman's natural state, which also meant that a man would be her ruler (Holland, 2006). Inevitably, Catholicism would utilize the Fall of Man, Plato's Theory of Forms, and Aristotle's scientific and socially acceptable brand of misogyny as a basis for their gendered hierarchy (Holland, 2006). Therefore, God's hierarchical plan was preordained, unalterable, and not fluid or beneficial for women. With fixed spheres for men and women being advocated among Catholics, the idea would take root socially, morally, religiously, intellectually, and in all things sexual. The fundamental belief of the male identity as God-centered masculinity and the idea that men mirror the true character of God is often not fully considered as the root of misogynistic problems outside of the church or within the family (Hoover & Coats, 2011). Ironically, women would view religion as a positive support system for conservatism, as women often find their own space, friends, and community within the religious arch of conservative masculine control (Hoover & Coats, 2011).

According to Manne (2020), an illegitimate sense of male entitlement can produce a wide range of misogynistic behavior toward women. Like all prejudices, misogyny is most notable and destructive when utilized as a justified reaction to changes threatening men's understanding of women and themselves. Bahlieda (2015a) observed,

In Campbell's view [in *The Masks of the Gods: Primitive Mythology*], ideologies such as patriarchy are not random and spontaneous but the willful acts of a self-interested and controlling male culture . . . [in which] social power has progressed from overt and periodic to covert and continuous. (p. 24)

Manne (2020) argued that misogyny was not just a deep-seated psychological hatred of girls and women but could best be conceptualized as the law enforcement branch of patriarchy. As a system, misogyny functions to police and reinforce gendered norms, expectations, and how we view history. Unfortunately, what passes for history is constructed within a patriarchal society, a society where the contributions of women are discounted and/or altogether ignored (Holland, 2006).

From Greek mythology and the Fall of Man, misogyny would not only thrive but strengthen across the Greek's most philosophical thinkers, to Christianity, colonists, enslavers, missionaries, western and Eastern philosophies, Islam, the Taliban, and Isis, as each have directed their rage at women, tried to control their sexuality, and if all else fails, blame women for men's shortcomings (Holland, 2006). Within patriarchy, misogyny occupied a complex role in fueling male superiority, aggression, and violence, but it also strived to keep women in their place, defensive and full of self-hatred (A. Johnson, 2014). Manne (2020) argued that there can be no universal experience of misogyny. Therefore, misogyny is always part of gendered norms and expectations that intersect with the localized power and control systems to produce forms of oppression and misogyny unique to a particular locale.

Evolution of Patriarchy

Although the definition of patriarchy has remained static with only a few adjustments and additions, the evolution of patriarchy is as elusive as its effects on society. Believed to have been in existence since the time of Adam and Eve, Eisenstein's (1999) definition of patriarchy is "a sexual system of power in which the male role is superior" (p. 202). Gilligan and Snider (2018) expanded the definition of patriarchy as a binary, hierarchical, and gendered culture in which the masculine is privileged above the feminine. Patriarchy's elevation of some men over all men and women is one example of how the patriarchal hierarchy functions regarding what is valued and what is not within society. Gilligan and Snider believed that patriarchy forces a split between men, women and societal expectations of gender roles. For instance, men have selves and remain autonomous, as they are not held responsible for anyone but themselves, whereas patriarchal expectations are that women are selfless and, therefore, have an overriding internal desire to serve not only men in general, but they have a responsibility to serve their significant other and their children's needs above their own.

Gender as Foundation

If gender is at the heart of patriarchy, gender is also the foundation that holds patriarchy in place. Patriarchy is illusive because it cannot be physically held, grasped, or touched traditionally. However, its effects are indirect and constant. To uphold the patriarchal order, there must be an environment of female compliance, submission, and silence. According to Acker (2006), the pecking order associated with patriarchy makes the system distributive in that self-policing and self-leveling determine an individual's location on society's metaphorical patriarchal ladder. Unfortunately, to ensure the environment stays favorable to those at the top of the patriarchal ladder, male dominance and violence become the tools necessary for its survival.

Bahlleda (2015a) believed society's view of patriarchy was that of an old familial tradition of centuries past rather than an invasive, morphing, and growing ideology. Regrettably, society tends to forget that patriarchy is not a historical curiosity but a living, breathing, and transformable entity that has maintained its hold over all our lives, free to expand, act upon, invade, and even negatively influence the world. As a governing ideology, patriarchy negatively drives society in ways that most of humanity does not support or desire. In fact, according to Bahlleda (2015b), patriarchy,

Elevates one gender into a preferential position over the other, one leader over another, and one religion over another in a destructive, competitive, never-ending battle for supremacy while encouraging attitudes, values, and beliefs of gender elitism, arrogance, and favoritism that have created tension, divisiveness, adversarial conflict, domination, resistance, and violence throughout history. (p. 78)

As an ideology, patriarchy's destructiveness is rarely held to account.

Patriarchy as Socialized Domination and Power

The advent of women's rights has brought about a decline in critics willing to take on patriarchy's ideology and those willing to name its harmful effects (Gilligan & Richards, 2008). Part of the reason for the decline is twofold. The first is that society has become complacent, preferring to think of patriarchy as belonging to another time, especially since women have rights in the most general sense (Lerner, 1986). In other words, the battle is over. Women have all the rights they will ever need. Second, women have accepted their subordinated positions without reason, question, or challenge to the status quo. According to Laxer (1999), patriarchy is less about gender and more about how socialized domination and power are employed within society. It is important to note that although ideologies that suppress human freedom tend to be universally rejected by citizens, this is not the case for patriarchy (Bahlleda, 2015a).

Patriarchy as Divide-and-Conquer

Socialized beneath the patriarchy's umbrella, men have consciously and unconsciously reaped the rewards of a society that utilizes divide-and-conquer strategies (Bahlieda, 2015a). Those rewards have worked in favor of strengthening patriarchal values for centuries. Unfortunately, ideologies with a rigid belief system become repressive and dangerous, primarily where little to no critical reflection of the ideology can occur, as with patriarchy. Regrettably, "attacking patriarchy and the status quo is often like shadow boxing because patriarchy has no form, no substance, and no reality beyond that evoked through human interaction" (Bahlieda, 2015a, p. 19). Until patriarchy can be universally replaced with a more equalitarian system, motivating men and women to change their beliefs about patriarchy will not occur.

According to Bahlieda (2015a), patriarchy is the oldest group-think ideology. The ideology of patriarchy is interwoven into all aspects of culture, religion, education, leadership, power, and all our social institutions. Walby (2004) believed that the myth of patriarchy was centered on a destabilizing competitive battle, where there must be those who lose and those who win. If not, how does control over the more extensive social, intellectual, human, and material resources occur? O'Sullivan (2001) believed every culture and race within the modern world had maintained a dogged adherence to an uncritical examination of patriarchy's dominant, repressive, and long-lasting effects. This dogged adherence has allowed for cultural socialization and accepted lineage of male power and authority within familial and social relationships, passed down through father-to-son transmission, guaranteeing normalized physical power, authority, and control for generations (Bahlieda, 2015a).

French (1985) pointed out that patriarchy is a militant ideology in that for a society to believe in supreme power, it would also have to be willing to sacrifice life for power. French

argued that the sacrifice for power began when a community that worshiped power expanded its power over neighboring communities. Those neighboring communities may initially protest the idea of patriarchy. However, they have only two options available: surrendering to a patriarchal society or mounting a defense of equal and opposite power.

What would an equal and opposite power look like? Could that equal and opposite power maintain sustained interest in a way that stops the patriarchal transmission of power and control? French (1985) and Lerner (1986) believed that once male dominance became the norm, the potential for any society to envision a more successful social system with which to organize human behavior would have been next to impossible. The problem with patriarchy is that it is subtle, covert, and invisible, with its most potent and long-lasting backers being religion and myth (Bahlieda, 2015a). According to Bahlieda (2015a), “We have built our modern civilization on a base of mythological male power, control, conflict, and forced submission and agreement, rather than [on] unrestricted freedom, democratic decision making, and human autonomy that is unencumbered and free of intimidation (French, 1985)” (p. 45).

The insidiousness of patriarchy ensures that it will continue for generations, as it is learned within the home and reinforced through school systems, society, and religion.

Patriarchy: The Ideological Umbrella

Patriarchy is believed to be an all-encompassing ideological umbrella that subsumes all other ideologies (Bahlieda, 2015a). Patriarchy also maintains the ability to be the core influencer within the evolution of the subsumed ideologies. Therefore, patriarchy would have been the core influencer for ideologies such as capitalism, nationalism, conservatism, and even more positive ideologies like feminism and environmentalism, to name a few. According to von Werlhof (2007), patriarchy has assisted in producing all major religions, economic philosophies, and

social ideologies since the dawn of time. Unfortunately, patriarchy's stronghold ensures there will not be a "critical analysis of this ideology [that] calls into question the underpinnings of our modern social structures and beliefs, [or an analysis that attacks] the credibility of . . . moral claims of civilized superiority and advanced development for humankind" (Bahlieda, 2015a, p. 63). Despite small societal advances such as women gaining the right to vote, the civil rights movement, and affirmative action, the modern version of patriarchy has sought to reabsorb these successes while turning back the clock so that oppression continues in spite of any subordinate group's gains toward equality (Vavrus, 2002). Lerner (1997) agreed that any gains toward true equality had been systematically rolled back during the rise of neoconservative backlash in the 1990s, with rollbacks still happening today (Bahlieda, 2015b). The most recent rollbacks happened after President Donald Trump dismantled any gains achieved by his predecessor, President Obama, and more recently, the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*.

Neopatriarchy: The New Globally Unified Patriarchy

Although traditional patriarchy was a loosely organized and yet, extremely gender-based ideology that was practiced by almost all cultures at the familial level, according to Bahlieda (2015b) neopatriarchy is a globally unified social ideology. Neopatriarchy appears most often through the utilization of government and capitalism, intensifying the impact of patriarchy (Bahlieda, 2015b). As a more sophisticated ideology, neopatriarchy is even less evident in its recruitment methods. The industrial class of wealthy, conservative, right-wing White men has gradually taken over every aspect of daily life, from business to government, to religion, education, and mainstream media (Foster, 2004). The core value of conservative culture is virtue, which focuses on morality where fathers, masculinity, and manhood must be at the center (Hoover & Coats, 2011). Kimmel (2013) believed the core value of conservative White men is

an aggrieved entitlement in that they feel they are the rightful heirs to American prosperity. As rightful heirs of the American dream, they receive the benefits of that dream by birthright. Aggrieved entitlement appears anytime that power and control are taken away from White men and given to government bureaucrats, underserving minorities, women, immigrants, and those of differing sexual preferences (Aggrieved entitlement flourishes when there is an us versus them mentality (Kimmel, 2013)).

As White males are the dominant race, allowed to live unquestioned and unseen lives, neopatriarchy also enjoys a presence that remains unquestioned and entirely unseen (Bahlieda, 2015b). Sadly, women have become co-collaborators of neopatriarchy's infiltration into society by refusing to acknowledge and/or willfully choosing to remain blissfully unaware of just how invasive neopatriarchy is (MacKinnon & Bullen, 2002). Believing that women have achieved equality and, therefore, feminism is no longer needed is one example. Manne (2018) cautioned that White women who enable patriarchy and the misogyny associated with patriarchy still suffer despite their enabling role. Unfortunately, siding with patriarchy and/or neopatriarchy out of self-preservation does not change the fact that women are still primarily responsible for the home and all caregiving needs within that home.

The Face of Modern Neopatriarchy or The New Patriarchy

The ideological face of modern neopatriarchy is witnessed through two visible political ideologies; neoliberalism and neoconservatism. As with the idea of patriarchy as an umbrella ideology, neopatriarchy has subsumed and influenced the rise of neoliberalism and neo-conservatism (Bahlieda, 2015a, 2015b). Where liberalism believes in individualism and the entrepreneurial spirit, seeking to keep government out of the lives of citizens, neoliberalism embraces government to implement, control, and reinforce its agenda (Apple, 2006).

Neoconservatism shares identical beliefs as those of neoliberalism but chooses to filter those beliefs through the lens of right-wing, Christian traditional family values as the governing guide of society (Apple, 2006; Dobbin, 1998). Unfortunately, “neoliberalism and neoconservatism strive to make their philosophies the only social belief tolerated in society” (Bahlieda, 2015b, p. 85). To become the only tolerated belief, right-wing Christian men have often sought to reinforce the idea that media and the media’s message is morally bankrupt (Hoover & Coats, 2011), especially if the media refuses to endorse their narrative of faith, ideology, religion, or even political views (Ben Am & Weimann, 2020).

The new patriarchy or neopatriarchy is utilized by the government, military, and police to repress dissent and maintain unwavering control over society’s view of reality by monopolizing the stories chosen for print, television, and electronic corporate media (Bahlieda, 2015b). Right-wing policies and economics are the foundation of the new patriarchy’s growth progression amid a media fantasy of normalcy and success (Bahlieda, 2015b). There is an elaborate fiction being created by corporate media that plays up the idea that modern economics is excellent while simultaneously forgetting to mention the massive exploitative realities that many individuals face on a day-to-day basis. Interestingly enough, those within the neopatriarchy movement have discovered that the best way to maintain the status quo is to allow some resistance and critique of patriarchal and neopatriarchal systems, but only in order to prevent an all-out revolution (Bahlieda, 2015b).

However, when minor resistance and critique are not enough to calm the disgruntled masses, patriarchal societies often pull out what they deem unquestionable. According to Miller (2017), overall,

Patriarchy . . . as embedded in the Old and New Testaments in the Bible and in Roman legal precepts, has been a powerful organizing concept with which social order has been understood, maintained, enforced, contested, adjudicated and dreamt about for over two millennia of Western history. The concept has been used to tell people dissatisfied with their lives that they should stop complaining and do what they are told, because, as written in the Bible, that is how things have been from time immemorial. (p. 11)

Once justified, patriarchy, fueled by its ideology of misogyny, utilizes hegemonic masculinity to ensure the chosen system of power and control goes unchallenged.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Connell (1987) argued that the hegemonic dimension of hegemonic masculinity means that social ascendancy must be achieved by means other than brute force or power. Therefore, hegemonic ascendancy is achieved through an embedded combination of social forces such as religious doctrine, mass media, the wage gap, and other social structures that assist in upholding masculinity. Connell believed that ascendancy could not be achieved through artificial means, such as using a gun or threatening someone to gain access to a more dominant societal position. Ascendancy gets convoluted, but Connell said that even though ascendancy could not be based on force, it was still common for force and ascendancy to function as a unit. For instance, “physical or economic violence backs up a dominant cultural pattern . . . or ideologies justify the holders of physical power . . . the connection between hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal violence is close, though not simple” (Connell, 1987, p. 184). While hegemony did not mean violence per se, hegemonic masculinity could be supported by force or violence so that ascendancy or a rise in power could be achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

A common misunderstanding of hegemony is that it is accomplished through total cultural domination or the complete removal of all other cultural alternatives (Connell, 1987). True ascendancy is achieved through a balance of forces that are in play at the social and cultural

levels (Connell, 1987). Connell warned that a narrow vision of hegemonic masculinity would miss the many forces at play daily and hinder our ability to fully see the historical changes and changing definitions of gender patterns on a much larger scale. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) advocated that hegemonic masculinity is distinguishable from other masculinities, especially those considered subordinate. According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be the normal masculinity of choice. However, it was normative in that it required all men to position themselves in relation to it.

Connell (1987) believed that hegemonic masculinity was constructed in relation to women and other subordinate masculinities. The intersection of hegemonic masculinity and subordinated masculinities are essential to the patriarchal social structure as it ensures global masculine dominance and local control. According to Connell (1995), hegemonic masculinity is “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (p. 77). As a result, hegemonic masculinity sustains powerful men, and most men will readily support them in hopes of achieving similar power. The main reason for this unwavering support and compliance from men is that most men benefit directly or indirectly from the subordination of women. Hegemonic masculinity operates as a collective strategy that does not contain a simple, uniform, or straightforward path to dominance. Given the complexity of gendered relationships, the collective strategy of hegemonic masculinity must maintain a mix of strategies and elements—such as violence, misogyny, domesticity, and even heterosexual attraction—to maintain control (Connell, 1987). Unfortunately, as it is practiced today, the most critical feature of hegemonic masculinity is

heterosexuality and the institution of marriage, which work in conjunction to produce an ideological warfare for which women are woefully unprepared.

Bierema (2003) asserted that gendered power relations' rules, roles, and expectations are so ingrained within society that they are invisible and rarely ever questioned or challenged by most citizens. This unquestioning invisibility of gendered power relations is insidious and pervasive. Therefore, hegemonic masculinity has saturated every aspect of our culture, media, government, legal system, employment, religion, personal relationships, and even what activities we choose to do during our leisure time. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) traced the origin of the concept of hegemonic masculinity. They argued that while hegemonic masculinity is not something that anyone wants to reproduce socially, there is a need to recognize how social struggles lead to subordinated masculinities influencing the more dominant or hegemonic forms of masculinity.

Concerned about how subordinated masculinities affect the more dominant forms of masculinity, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) suggested that hegemonic masculinity be reformulated. The four distinct areas of reformulation involved include the need for a more complex model of gendered hierarchy; that we need to take into account the local, regional, and global nuances of hegemonic masculinity; we need a greater understanding of the embodiment of privilege and power; and finally, a stronger emphasis on the dynamics and internal contradictions of hegemonic masculinity is needed to create a more gender equal world.

How to See Hegemonic Masculinity

According to Hearn et al. (2012), to see hegemonic masculinity a framework for looking at masculinity as a social construct shaped by power and intersected by one's position, gender, and/or sexuality was needed, one that would make visible gendered power relations. Therefore,

the framework would also make male dominance more accessible and the hierarchical order between men easier to view while maintaining a focus on the subordination of women.

Messerschmidt (2018) thought hegemonic masculinity was best understood as a pattern of practice that allowed for power over women to continue because it was based on things done and should not be viewed as a set of gendered role expectations or even based on masculine identity.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) suggested the following three levels be looked at when studying hegemonic masculinity: first, pay attention to locally constructed masculinities as they interact with families, organizations, and within the immediate community. For example, pay attention to the family structure, the local communities, organizations, and institutions to see how hegemonic masculinity is constructed locally. Second, look at how hegemonic masculinity is constructed regionally, within the culture of that region or nation as found in the informal aspects of the region, all things political, and within the people who live in that region. Consider how hegemonic masculinity is constructed at the statewide level, politically, by the institutions that receive funding and the religious institutions that are successful. Third, look at the global construction of hegemonic masculinity within the transnational arenas of world politics, transnational business, and mass media. Additionally, it is necessary to consider how hegemonic masculinity plays out on a national and global level; look at the political world stage, the Women's Health Organization for unmet needs, media headlines, business trends, educational access, and the religious structures that are the most prominent. At each level, hegemonic masculinity will show itself within the contextual fabric of everyday society. This road map of levels is relevant to my work, as it will assist in illuminating the layers of intersecting hegemonic masculinity that I encountered as a single mother.

According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), masculinity is tricky because men can dodge masculine definitions to adopt the ideas of hegemonic masculinity when it serves them to do so. Then those same men can strategically distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity at optimal times to avoid negative backlash. Unfortunately, “‘Masculinity’ represents not a certain type of man but rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practices” (Ging, 2019, p. 643). For those trying to pin down and stop the effects of destructive masculinities, it is a bit like hitting a moving target where the game’s rules are constantly in flux.

For example, consider the family courts. In an interview with *The Washington Post*, Joan Meier, a professor of clinical law at George Washington University Law School, discussed her team’s findings in a study of 4,388 family court custody rulings between 2005 and 2014 to determine if there was indeed custodial favoring once abuse allegations—proven or not—were brought to the court’s attention (Schmidt, 2019). Meier’s team discovered that in cases where the abuse was documented, the mother was only believed 36% of the time; if there were allegations of physical child abuse, then the mother was believed 28% of the time; and if the mother brought forward allegations of child sexual abuse, she was believed 19% of the time (Schmidt, 2019). Ironically, if mothers reported intimate partner violence and child abuse, they lost custody 28% of the time compared to fathers who alleged intimate partner abuse and child abuse by their wives. In these circumstances, men only lost custody 12% of the time. If the mother alleged intimate partner violence and/or abuse of the child and the father comes into court claiming alienation—as in the mother is explicitly trying to keep him away from his children—she was twice as likely to lose custody of her children, she was four times as likely to lose custody in child abuse cases specifically, and she should not even attempt to bring forward child sexual abuse cases because her chances of success dove horrifically (Schmidt, 2019).

Sadly, during the instances where the father contributed to his damaged relationship with his children, the mother of the child is frequently blamed for the bad relationship. Meier observed, “It’s on the mother ‘to pretend he’s a great father, and it’s not on him to repair the damage . . . That is what’s so patriarchal’” (as cited in Schmidt, 2019, para. 26). Meier’s example highlights how hegemonic masculinity operates in that the mother is expected to fulfill her gendered role: to nurture and grow a positive relationship between her children and their father, regardless of what he has done and if he deserves to be in their life. In this instance, the father is not punished for his lack of parenting, told to take parenting classes, or even told to do better.

The mother is punished in his place because the unquestioned rules and gendered expectations of hegemonic masculinity have stated that she is at fault in a court of law. Therefore, the father leaves the courtroom, goes right back to doing what he was doing, and tells the community that his ex-wife got in trouble for wrecking his relationship with his kids, but he never changes his actions. The mother is now powerless before the court of law and before the court of public opinion. In this instance, hegemonic masculinity saved the father from corrective action while in court, which allowed him to leave the court, distancing himself from the hegemonic masculine assistance/favoring/protection he received. Now, he can pass off the bad relationship as the fault of the mother of his children and escape the backlash of being a lousy father who won a skewed court battle because an all-male patriarchal and hegemonic masculine institution protected him. To the father, the court was fair.

Misogyny, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity work in tandem to maintain the status quo at all costs within every institutional structure available to women. The status quo is reflected in the three things I was taught as a young girl. First, I was not to question authority. Second, I already have all the rights I ever need. Third, I will never be head of my household.

Those three precepts are tied up in the history of misogyny, the continued rule of patriarchy, and the unquestioning enforcement role of hegemonic masculinity, which are essential to my autoethnographic dissertation. However, when I was experiencing single motherhood, I did not fully understand why the rules affecting my life seemed to have changed. In reality, I had to learn the language of what was happening. Then I had to learn how misogyny, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity operated within the institutions I came into contact with as a single mother.

I suspect there are leaders and/or potential leaders working with single mothers who have experienced intimate partner violence and may or may not have PTSD. Those leaders may not see the connection between misogyny, patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, and institutional obstructions, which is why this first-hand account is essential. The domestic violence field has a lot of published work up to and immediately after a victim leaves. However, the field lacks information regarding the years after the victim has left. To my knowledge, no one has provided a first-hand account of their interactions with institutional structures and the institutional obstructions influenced by misogyny, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity, after having experienced intimate partner violence.

The Internal Complexities of Single Motherhood

The internal complexities of single motherhood are the factors affecting a single mother from within as she navigates her position. These internal complexities combine present and past difficulties converging on her present role. This discussion will center on the internal complexities associated with intimate partner violence, the long-term impact of an abuser, a brief history of post-traumatic disorder, post-traumatic stress symptoms and post-traumatic stress

disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and stigma for a veteran, post-traumatic stress disorder and shame for intimate partner violence survivors, and finally, isolation.

Intimate Partner Violence

There are many factors at play regarding the experience of intimate partner violence (IPV) besides the abuser and their tactics of power and control over the survivor. One experience often overlooked in academic studies is the community's treatment of the victim and/or survivor of IPV. Initially, the push to address IPV was centered primarily in urban areas, as the battered women's movement emerged as a grassroots effort to establish shelters, telephone hotlines, victim counseling services, and public education programs (Van Hightower & Gorton, 2002). As the movement grew, a coalition of domestic violence and feminist organizations held officials politically accountable for their actions, statements, and negative stereotypes of IPV survivors.

Although this process of social change from the bottom up has led to increased public awareness and services for survivors in urban areas, the feminist politics behind the battered women's movement struggled to infiltrate rural areas fully (Van Hightower & Gorton, 2002). Without political activism, IPV policies in rural areas tended to be shaped by patriarchal values. Patriarchy as a political condition contributes significantly to IPV as "battering is an obsessive campaign of coercion and intimidation designed by a man to dominate and control a woman, which occurs in the personal context of intimacy and thrives in the socio-political climate of patriarchy" (Van Hightower & Gorton, 2002, p. 869). Unfortunately for a survivor of IPV in a rural area, they will face significant roadblocks due to a community's prominent patriarchal political ideology, the long-term impact of an abuser, lack of access to needed resources, and all of which leads to a greater likelihood for a more profound felt experience of marginalization.

What does domestic violence/intimate partner violence look like in Minnesota?

According to the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (2019), 33.9% of females and 25.1% of males experience IPV, IPV rape, and/or IPV stalking within their lifetimes (as cited in National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2020). The National Network to End Domestic Violence (2020) reported that while 1,975 adults and their children who were victims/survivors of IPV were reported to have been served by 74% of Minnesota's domestic violence shelters in one day during 2019, another 352 individual requests for assistance went without help due to a lack of resources. Pittman et al. (2020) found that when women were experiencing homelessness, and they did not have any alternative housing option available to them, 53% of them chose to stay in the abusive relationship rather than leave. According to M. Johnson (2020), if a victim of IPV is actively gathering her resources to escape her abuser, the process of escape is complicated not only by the abuser's attempts to thwart her progress but by a society where the institutional obstructions she may experience are more complicated than it would be if we lived in a more equitable society.

The Long-Term Impact of an Abuser

Suppose IPV is a complex web of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse motivated by an intense desire to exercise and maintain power and control over a partner (Arroyo et al., 2017). In that case, the idea of an ex-abusive partner continuing their reign of terror post-divorce or separation should not seem impossible. However, Shoener and Sussman (2013) believed few researchers had considered the long-term ramifications of an abuser's actions to sabotage the survivor post-divorce through direct and indirect economic consequences forced upon their victims. The abuser successfully opened the door for future abuse and more exploitation, whether from them or a new abuser, if the cycle repeats. According to Stark (2007), the period

after an abuser of IPV officially leaves the relationship should be renamed to coercive control to capture best the kind of abusive tactics that the abuser is most likely to engage in now that they have lost access to their previous options. When Stark (2007) worked with survivors, they repeatedly described the coercive control experience as:

What [was] done to them is less important than what their partners have prevented them from doing for themselves by appropriating their resources; undermining their social support; subverting their rights to privacy, self-respect, and autonomy; and depriving them of substantive equality. Coercive control is a liberty crime rather than a crime of assault. Preventing a substantial group of women from freely applying their agency in economic and political life obstructs overall social development. (Shoener, 2016, p. 21)

Coercive control would not differ from the coercive techniques employed within an abusive relationship. According to Herman (2022), to establish coercive control within the relationship, abusers utilize techniques such as inflicting systematic, repetitive, and psychological trauma by instilling fear and terror, utilizing disempowerment wherever and whenever possible, instilling a sense of disconnection between them, and others, also a disconnect between them and their sense of self, and finally, making them feel helpless. Herman (2005) believed that survivors of IPV understand that remaining safe after separation, whether an intuitive or conscious act, required maintaining control over the ex-partner's exploitative behavior by controlling the ex-partner's access to the survivor.

Any safety measure must withstand constant attempts to subvert the survivor's progress in a new life (Herman, 2005). Leaving an abusive partner will not end the violence, as the abuser will adjust their tactics. According to Herman (2022), the goal of the abuser is to make the victim believe he is invincible and that her resistance would be useless. Her life depends on his leniency, sympathy, and understanding, and only total compliance with him will suffice. Therefore, survivors of IPV must remain vigilant and thorough in their risk assessment of the ex-partner's current and potential future ability to create further havoc, bodily harm, and death

while also modifying their safety plans to match the ever-changing circumstances brought on by the ex-partner (Herman, 2005) during their escape and even after they have been out of the situation for a while. Vigilance does not end merely because a victim/survivor moved out last week, month, year, or even 5 years ago. If this sounds exhausting, that is because it is exhausting. The emotional and physical vigilance required to constantly reassess one's safety, to withstand the continual barrage of an ex-partner intent on extending their reign of domination and control, is intense, physically and emotionally exhausting, and soul-draining. Unfortunately, the continued stress of an abusive ex-partner can lead to a greater risk of developing PTSS and PTSD.

A Brief History of PTSD

According to Herman (2022), psychological trauma was forced on the public consciousness as a possibility after the First World War, when the reality of trench warfare destroyed the illusion of battle as a glorious, heroic, and manly honor. Instead, service members were subjected to the constant threat of death, confined to inhospitable conditions, while many watched their friends die horrifically right next to them. During the 4 long years of war, the service men began to lose control in shocking numbers, from those who broke down, to those who screamed and wept uncontrollably, to those who froze and maintained an inability to move, to muteness, unresponsiveness, lost memories, and even an inability to feel anything at all. According to British battle causality records for World War I, 40% of their men suffered from mental breakdowns, which they attributed to a physical ailment at the time (Herman, 2022). Therefore, the men had to be placed in hospitals.

Charles Myers (1940), a British psychologist, coined the term *shell shock* to explain the disorder attributed to exploding shells. However, they would discover that the illness suffered by

the men from the trenches was also present in the men who had not been directly exposed to physical trauma, which forced them to reconsider their shell shock theory (Herman, 2022). Eventually, they realized that psychological trauma could be induced by prolonged exposure to violent death, which produced a symptom resembling hysteria in women, except now it was also in men (Herman, 2022). Regrettably, progress from the confusion of World War I to a time when post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) and PTSD would be recognized as a severe illness would be painfully slow, and after several more wars.

Forty years ago, PTSS and PTSD were still not considered official psychiatric illnesses. Men were returning from war traumatized with no recourse available for treatment, nor was there even recognition of their symptoms because of the trauma they experienced. According to Herman (2022), the Veterans' Administration commissioned a study to trace the impact of wartime experiences on the lives of veterans post-war, with the study producing a five-volume document on PTSD, its direct relationship to combat and its legacies after combat, which removed any reasonable doubt that the illness existed. In 1980, "for the first time, the characteristic syndrome of psychological trauma became a 'real' diagnosis" (Herman, 2022, p. 49). When PTSD became an officially sanctioned illness, it allowed for naming the residual effects of war (Lasiuk & Hegadoren, 2006). Recognizing PTSD created a conceptual framework for systematically studying trauma. Therefore, an external agent was responsible for the illness versus some inherent weakness within the individual. Most importantly, the formal declaration of PTSD as a severe and long-lasting consequence of trauma validated and legitimized the lived experiences of affected war veterans (Lasiuk & Hegadoren, 2006).

When the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s took shape, women realized it was not men returning from war who experienced the most common post-traumatic disorders but

rather the women who were silenced by fear, shame, and the invisibility the private sphere afforded their abusers of domestic and sexual abuse (Herman, 2022). Due to feminist pressure, the National Institute of Mental Health opened a center for research on rape, with the principal investigators for the study consisting of women in 1975 (Herman, 2022). The National Institute of Mental Health's investigation confirmed what Freud dismissed as hysteria a century before, that sexual assaults perpetrated against women and children were endemic and catastrophic. Susan Brownmiller (1975) wrote a vital book, *Against Our Will*, calling attention to the role rape played in society. She argued:

Rape as a means of maintaining male power. ... From prehistoric times to the present, I believe, rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear. (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 15)

Not only did the women's movement begin to gain awareness for rape and domestic violence, but their work opened the first rape crisis center in 1971, and a decade later, hundreds of rape crisis centers would become available across the United States (Herman, 2022).

PTSS and PTSD

According to Card-Mina (2011), PTSS are the beginning stages of PTSD, with PTSD diagnosis happening after symptoms have been experienced for three months or more. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2022), an early reaction to a traumatic event can also look like Acute Stress Disorder (ASD), where symptoms are similar to PTSS and PTSD. Statistically speaking, women are twice as likely to develop PTSD (PTSD Alliance, n.d.-a) with 10% of women to 4% of men developing the illness, while women are four times as likely to have long-lasting PTSD (Card-Mina, 2011). The experience and trauma of a physical assault or severe beating equals a 31.9% chance of developing PTSD for the victim. However, the

experience and trauma of rape increase the risk of developing PTSD to 49% (PTSD Alliance, n.d.-a).

PTSD Symptoms

PTSD is characterized by extreme general physical arousal due to the nervous system becoming sensitized to overwhelming trauma, as even general arousal can elevate the nervous system, which in turn overreacts to minor stressful events (Card-Mina, 2011; PTSD Alliance, n.d.-b). As a result, the survivor's nervous system tends to operate in an extreme state of hyperarousal. As its standard, natural state of being. According to Card-Mina (2011) and the PTSD Alliance (n.d.-b), signs of extreme general physical arousal include but are not limited to; issues with falling asleep, trouble staying asleep, night terrors, irritability or outbursts of anger, difficulty concentrating or remembering, hypervigilance, and exaggerated startle responses. PTSD can cause physical, emotional, mental, and even spiritual fatigue, during which the survivor can experience discouragement, hopelessness, and despair (Card-Mina, 2011; PTSD Alliance, n.d.-b). It is common for those with PTSD to feel shame and guilt regarding the traumatic event or events, as the survivor may even feel responsible for what took place within the relationship. Bouts of fatigue, guilt, and shame only compound the issues a survivor of IPV may face, which in turn creates the possibility for more fatigue, guilt, shame, fear of stigma, and despair.

PTSD and Stigma for a Veteran

For veterans, the stigmas associated with psychological problems often prevent them from obtaining medical interventions for psychological difficulties and illnesses, such as PTSD (Greene-Shortridge et al., 2007; Nash et al. 2009). There are two stigmas experienced by those with PTSD, public stigma and self-stigma (Greene-Shortridge et al., 2007). Public stigma is

found in the public's reaction toward people with mental illnesses or PTSD. At the same time, self-stigma is the internalization of how the public portrays people with mental illnesses or PTSD. According to Greene-Shortridge et al. (2007), stereotypes develop into prejudice, while the behavioral outcome of prejudice appears as discrimination, which leads to public stigma and self-stigma. They also found that the most significant factor stopping veterans from seeking help for mental health issues and/or PTSD was the perceived stigma associated with admitting there was a problem.

There are three themes to a community's stigmatization of an individual. A community tends to believe that individuals with mental illness are irresponsible and unable to fend for themselves, people with mental illness should be feared and restricted from the larger society, and finally, the public tends to hold a theme of compassion for people with mental illnesses, so long as the illness is not in their face or disrupting the larger public life (Greene-Shortridge et al., 2007). Veterans or service members with PTSD are more than aware of public beliefs surrounding mental illnesses and anticipate negative consequences for something they have no control over (Greene-Shortridge et al., 2007). IPV survivors with PTSD are also aware of what veterans have faced with stigma, so the fear that the stigma will be cross applied to those survivors is not out of line, especially when they have not served in the war.

PTSD and Shame for IPV Survivors

Intimate partner violence survivors also feel intense shame following their traumatic exposure, so much so that theoretical (Lewis, 1971) and clinical (Dahl, 1989) studies have wondered for a while if shame could be the root cause for the development of PTSD later (Saraiya & Lopez-Castro, 2016). According to Saraiya and Lopez-Castro (2016), as "a universal and social emotion, shame can be briefly defined as a painful set of affective and cognitive states

typified by self-judgment stemming from a perceived transgression of social/cultural norms or expectations” (pp. 1–2). Saraiya and Lopez-Castro (2016) argued that the experience of shame after chronic intimate partner violence produced a tendency to blame oneself for developing PTSD or to blame oneself for the traumatic event that led to the development of PTSD, both of which prohibited the survivor’s ability to recover. Immense feelings of shame can lead to a tendency for self-isolation.

Isolation

According to Shoener (2016), the trauma a survivor experiences within an intimate partner violence relationship could affect how that person appears in social situations after the abusive relationship ends. For instance, survivors who suffered severe psychological abuse may come off as overly sensitive, apathetic, unreliable, difficult to understand, or having more than one train of thought, when really, they may be overwhelmed, overburdened, or suffering from a confounding effect of the abuse itself (Shoener, 2016). Some survivors choose to self-isolate due to a lack of trust in the people and situations around them. Depression, anxiety, or fear of the abuser also led to extreme measures in self-isolation protocols. In terms of how single motherhood felt, Pierce (2016) stated:

If you’re a single mother, the level of bullshit is increased 10-fold and navigating it all is much more intense because you are alone. That being said, it’s not always difficult being a single mother. But for a vast majority of single moms . . . it’s lonely, and isolating.
(p. 66)

While that was the case for how Pierce (2016) felt as a single mom, it also does not help if the ex-abuser adds to the isolation. For instance, some survivors lost their reputations after the ex-abuser sabotaged them within their communities, as some ex-abusers preferred the usage of stigmatizing rumors such as mental health problems, alcoholism, and other highly stigmatized behaviors likely to get someone ostracized from their community (Shoener, 2016). If the

survivor moved communities, ex-abusers were known to track down, stalk, and sabotage their survivors wherever and whenever they ended up (Shoener, 2016).

The External Complexity of Single Motherhood

The external complexities of single motherhood are the factors affecting a single mother that are primarily outside her control. These external complexities are a combination of institutional obstructions converging on her present role as a single mother. This discussion will center on the external complexities associated with rural patriarchal values, multi-faceted marginalization, medical institutions, medical obstructions to care, institutional obstructions to PTSD treatment, social service obstructions, law enforcement obstructions, law enforcement influenced by rural patriarchy, masculine power, and control, and finally, judicial institutional obstructions.

Rural Patriarchal Values

Rural patriarchal values compound the situation for a mother in the thick of intimate partner violence (IPV) and for a single mother who desperately tries to survive after leaving her abuser and/or post-divorce. According to Van Hightower and Gorton (2002), rural values often emphasize a private patriarchy that contributes to and validates the abuser's right to violence. It is not unusual for a woman's rural religious community to undermine her efforts to escape by encouraging her to practice patience, tolerance, and love. At the same time, she also experiences intimate partner violence at home (Ross, 2020).

In the face of strong patriarchal values, community service providers often take a more passive stance, which can partly be explained by a lack of in-depth training in IPV (Van Hightower & Gorton, 2002). Unfortunately, a lack of training leads respective social service agencies only to address the problem when it is brought to their attention before they may even

attempt to respond (Van Hightower & Gorton, 2002). Van Hightower and Gorton (2002) found that domestic violence training was often limited and superficial in rural areas. Sadly, they also found that criminal justice officials even believed that social services for survivors of IPV were limited and inadequate. Therefore, the lack of social services means survivors of IPV must rely primarily on criminal justice interventions for assistance. In a rural setting, patriarchal views can also skew criminal justice interventions. That view can alter what decisions a woman can make and cannot make for her family's safety.

Rural patriarchal values will reward those who play by patriarchal rules and punish those who do not or choose to step outside the community's rules. Ross (2020) believed that when a husband and wife enter a Christian union, "they are often subscribing to a whole set of religious tenets and beliefs around the nature of heterosexual relations, childbearing, childrearing, and obedience to authority" (p. 270). However, entering such a union in a rural setting while experiencing intimate partner violence invites confusion, a sense of feeling trapped, uncertainty, and an inability to escape. The intimate partner violence I endured was not physical, so our entire community thought I had lost my mind when I left my husband. Due to the rural patriarchal values of our community, I could not say what happened because I would be speaking ill of the father of my boys, which is also severely taboo in a rural patriarchal setting. It may have been a different story if my boys had been girls, but they were not. Instead, I walked a fine line between receiving help or no help, even over something as simple as filling a propane tank for heat, snow removal in the winter, and any other problem that conceivable arose to cripple my finances. After our divorce, our community came together to provide toys, furniture, and other items for my ex-husband's household, or so he claimed. I always hoped he had lied when he and the boys

told me. I wanted to believe that in 2009, our rural community would not have been that blatantly callous, cruel, or cold because no one came to my aid, not like that.

It is important to remember that IPV does not stop once a woman leaves her abusive partner or gets a divorce. The physicality of the abuse may stop. The sexual abuse may stop. The verbal abuse will not stop. Most likely, the emotional abuse will not stop either. Rural patriarchal values will assist in opening a whole new avenue for continued abuse post-divorce. My ex-abuser turned into the lead man for a rural community's abusive puppet master, and if there were an award for the role, he would have taken it home every year for the next 12 years. Regrettably, the actions of an abusive ex and a community centered in rural patriarchy only set a single mother further back—financially, emotionally, physically, in terms of a career—creating a marginalization that is nearly impossible to fully recover from.

Multi-Faceted Marginalization

For a single mother, marginalization exists in many ways and across many platforms. Therefore, the marginalization a single mother experiences is multi-faceted and not always visible. Many institutional obstructions and systemic problems complicate the journey through single motherhood, such as finding adequate housing, access to social services health care, and a decent job (Shoener, 2016). Shoener (2016) felt domestic violence and social services seemed more interested in changing their clients' personal behaviors rather than working to solve the systemic and structural problems that created their clients' marginalization in the first place.

For myself, marginalization appeared in housing costs, the enormous amount of paperwork needed by family services and their mandatory "worktime only" meeting hours, access to health care meant telling my bosses I was on assistance, working multiple jobs to barely cover the cost of bills and an ex-husband who routinely tried to get me to fail school by

missing school or fired from my job. Hildebrandt and Ford (2009) believed that “poverty can [simultaneously] be a deadening cycle of trying to survive and living at the margins. Threats to survival come from many directions, and often, there are no good solutions or defenses for dealing with them” (p. 296). Anderson and Saunders (2003) argued for studies that detailed the separation and post-separation process because they felt it was necessary to understand the stressors and violence that took place within its full context over a significant period.

Medical Institutions

IPV survivors have poorer health overall, but what leads to better health is often up for debate (Coker et al., 2003; Davis et al., 2008; Guess, 2006; Wilson et al., 2007). The relationship between IPV and health for a survivor is complex, as IPV affects women’s health in direct, indirect, short-term, and long-term predicaments (Jewkes, 2002). The most fundamental barriers to treatment for many survivors of IPV are limited transportation, finances, lack of family support, and not knowing how to access treatment (Davis et al., 2008). Women who have experienced IPV are more likely to have medical and emotional symptoms (Bassuk et al., 1998). Shoener (2016) reported that survivors who had generated significant debt due to their healthcare needs felt constraints on their resources and ability to continue seeking support. Also, other survivors of IPV reported job losses, an inability to remain focused at work, the effects of proscribed medicine making it impossible to stay awake, reduced feelings of self-worth, and becoming more easily angered, as these were just a few of the mental health symptoms they struggled with daily.

Regrettably, practitioners infrequently ask about domestic violence/IPV unless protocols are in place to force the questions (Bassuk et al., 1998). According to Van Hightower and Gorton (2002), “the health care administrator for a local health clinic did not view domestic violence as

a public health problem and therefore relied on patients' individual initiative to seek assistance" (p. 863). Asking a survivor to self-identify as abused or having experienced IPV is asking a lot. Especially if the survivor has not yet made the connection between the abuse suffered and the person they love as an active abuser. The most basic barriers to better health are even more complicated to navigate but become significantly worse if the survivor is also experiencing PTSD.

Medical Obstructions to Care

Unfortunately, PTSD is often underdiagnosed, left untreated, or just plain misdiagnosed, especially since those who seek treatment tend to present a variety of symptoms of which medical and psychiatric providers can struggle to make the connection between the symptoms and PTSD (Davis et al., 2008; Guess, 2006). Due to symptom confusion, the traumatic event and the relationship to the presenting physical and psychiatric symptoms are often left unexplored and untreated (Lauterbach et al., 2005; Yehuda, 2002). Therefore, early intervention of PTSD is extraordinarily vital and more beneficial than care provided after PTSD symptomology has become a chronic problem (Guess, 2006). Other significant barriers to accessing medical care are physical health, high levels of daily stress, and lack of time to go to a clinic (Davis et al., 2008). Shoener (2016) argued for affordable healthcare for survivors of intimate partner violence for the simple fact that if healthcare is affordable, survivors do not get saddled with an insurmountable healthcare debt that ruins their credit, they can stay economically independent, and they can manage their safety better if they do not have to go back to an abuser. Wilson et al. (2007) identified what they coined as a survivor mentality, where survivors of IPV prioritize food, shelter, and safety above their own health needs. The basic premise is that when a survivor is living in the constant chaos of IPV, all resources go to living through the day, and therefore,

healthcare moves down the list (Wilson et al., 2007). For example, if a single mother is trying to keep food on the table for her children, her own health needs—whatever those might be—would move down the list of priorities, the top priority being the need to secure money for food.

Institutional Obstructions to PTSD Treatment

Sadly, Davis et al. (2008) discovered that the more a survivor experiences individual and institutional barriers and obstructions blocking their path toward essential everyday items needed for survival, the more severe PTSD symptoms could become, compared to those who reported fewer institutional barriers. The stress of limited access compounds the effects of IPV, which could lead to more severe PTSD symptoms. For many survivors, especially women, the main systemic barrier appeared within the cost of medical care and prescriptions (Wilson et al., 2007). If a single mother does not have access to health care, whether the job does not offer it or she cannot afford it, receiving the treatment needed for a diagnosis of PTSD because of IPV will be complicated, to obtain. Also, a lack of health insurance and medical care may even mean that a survivor of IPV is living with undiagnosed PTSD.

According to Perez and Johnson (2008), PTSD symptoms may interfere with a survivor's ability to access and utilize resources outside of medical care effectively. In terms of shelters and community agencies most likely to encounter survivors of IPV, they must offer trauma-focused treatment to survivors and assistance with material and other tangible needs (Perez & Johnson, 2008). Therefore, treatment focusing on PTSD symptoms may be required before survivors of IPV can effectively utilize resources from social services or escape the cycle of IPV (Perez & Johnson, 2008). To assist in minimizing the long-term impacts of IPV on women and children, “there must be an environment of support rather than blame for victims, accountability and early interventions for abusive partners, and a societal commitment to zero tolerance for partner

abuse” (Coker et al., 2003, p. 266). Unfortunately, ending victim blaming and holding abusers accountable is an ongoing struggle.

Social Service Obstructions

On an institutional level, the hassle of obtaining medical services might be muddled by a lack of health insurance, requiring knowledge of social service eligibility and how to access social service agencies (Davis et al., 2008). For example, an institutional barrier or obstruction might look like a single mother who works two part-time jobs to feed her children, and yet, the two jobs do not pull in enough income to pay for 2 weeks’ worth of groceries. The single mother must request food assistance from the Department of Family Services. However, the Department of Family Services is only open from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The single mother works from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. during the week and most weekends. She has no luxury of vacation or sick leave from her two jobs. To leave work for the Department of Family Services means less money in her paycheck, which she desperately needs to cover rent, fuel for her car, and her son’s allergy medicine.

Shoener (2016) witnessed the same phenomenon in that social service office hours were only available when they were the least accessible to those without paid time off. Social Service office hours worked better for those with some form of economic security or even a vehicle. According to Shoener (2016), a person seeking help would need a stockpile of emotional and psychological resilience to withstand the additional trauma of judgment and doubt hurled at them when the services they sought were at odds with what the services worker perceived to be society’s ideal mother, or the concept of a good woman. Shoener argued that the difficulty in obtaining the needed structural support and security within the social services system meant that

many women either returned to their abusers and declined the help to get out of the relationship or never left their abusers.

Law Enforcement Obstructions

Campbell et al. (1998) found that half of the women who experienced IPV had good results with law enforcement officials, as the police were helpful, they took proactive actions such as taking the abuser's gun, assisting the woman in getting to a shelter, or with obtaining an order for protection. Law enforcement officials were useless for the other half of their study participants, as women heard that nothing could be done to help them. Unfortunately, Campbell et al. found that was only if the police bothered to show up, to begin with. According to Evans et al. (2020), during the COVID-19 pandemic, even though domestic violence increased, "a victim's ability to call and report decreased" (Gavin & Kruis, 2022, p. 179). Gavin and Kruis (2022) argued that the decrease was due to lay off, lockdowns, and working from home. According to Shoener (2016), many women who experience law enforcement feel isolated. The judgment, aggression, skepticism, and loneliness they experienced were more challenging to endure from a law enforcement official than their ex-abuser.

Regrettably, the degree to which women who have experienced IPV expressed satisfaction with law enforcement, prosecutorial, and judicial services depended primarily on whether they were accorded respectful and courteous treatment by criminal justice officials (Van Hightower & Gorton, 2002). One of the most significant hindrances within the law enforcement and judicial institutions for survivors of IPV is the abuser's ability to manipulate both systems in their favor. Women described their partners' active attempts to manipulate the police, which discouraged future police engagement, mainly when police believed the perpetrator (Decker et

al., 2019). Rural patriarchy is one ideology that allows for the perpetrator to be believed, as an almost common-sense approach to IPV.

Law Enforcement Influenced by Rural Patriarchy

In this section, rural patriarchy is the physical manifestation of the rural patriarchal values mentioned earlier in this chapter. Rural patriarchal values fuel the decisions of the rural patriarchal community and, therefore, have a direct effect on the actions and inactions of decisions made by law enforcement personnel. Unfortunately, law enforcement responses in rural settings are affected by the physical isolation of the location itself, as the isolation provides abusers with the best opportunities to engage in abusive behavior, which bleeds over into the patriarchal attitudes of rural law enforcement officers slowing timely and effective responses to IPV (Websdale, 1998; Websdale & Johnson, 1997). Van Hightower and Gorton (2002) found that rural police officers provided inadequate protection to battered women. The passive police response to IPV could be partly due to an officer's acquiescing to the authority of husbands over wives (Gagne, 1992). However, accepting power over a woman leads to more severe difficulties for a survivor of IPV. Websdale (1998) believed that rural patriarchy utilized a more privatized form of power relations because rural communities protect the private sphere of the household, as well as the exploitation of women's domestic labor, and reproductive capacity, all of which are controlled by husbands and/or partners. While the feminist political ideology has been instrumental in creating change regarding IPV in urban areas, the ideology falls significantly short in rural areas (Van Hightower & Gorton, 2002). For instance, for some rural or more conservative communities, feminism translates into women wanting to break up. The fear of women and their potential power is passed down from father to son and held in check from father to daughter, much like Holland (2006) outlined in his *Brief History of Misogyny*.

Unfortunately, rural patriarchy can perpetuate itself into an officer's decision-making process. Law enforcement does not always view victim protection as a higher priority than the protection of abusers (Van Hightower & Gorton, 2002). So, while officers should make an arrest whenever probable cause exists, an officer's inexperience and the absence of standardized procedures for assessing probable cause within a violent relationship severely hinder survivors of IPV. Also, according to Russell and Sturgeon (2019), significant gaps in training leave officers at a loss for identifying the difference between the offender and the victim. Van Hightower and Gorton (2002) discovered that when officers are uncertain of what to do in determining probable cause or who was responsible for the abusive situation, they substitute learned criteria for judging a victim's credibility. Therefore, when deciding whether to arrest a suspect during an IPV situation, victims who were thought to be unreliable were ignored (Van Hightower & Gorton, 2002).

A classic example of how easily women are mischaracterized or viewed as hysterical during an intimate partner violence incident played out across television networks after Gabby Petito went missing. Petito had disappeared on a camping trip in Wyoming with her fiancé, Brian Laundrie in 2021 (Hauser et al., 2021). One month prior, on August 12, 2021, police officers from Moab, Utah, responded to reports of a man slapping a woman (Helsel, 2022). One of the responding officers had 16 years of law enforcement experience. Nevertheless, he could not recognize the signs of intimate partner violence in a relationship choosing to side with the calm and subdued fiancée, Brian Laundrie, over the highly agitated and distraught Gabby Petito (Helsel, 2022). For many survivors of IPV, watching law enforcement critically question Gabby as though she was the perpetrator was unsurprising. In contrast, the actual perpetrator was viewed as the one in a position of power and control in that rural patriarchal setting.

Unfortunately for Gabby, the officer's lack of appropriate training and intervention on her behalf as the real victim of IPV resulted in her death at the hands of her fiancée. Brian was never in any danger. However, his masculine power and control position within his relationship with Gabby was in danger.

Masculine Power and Control

Another aspect that hinders police from fully assisting survivors of IPV is their continual, almost hyperactive focus on male power and control (Russell & Sturgeon, 2019). Sadly, if law enforcement training reflects the male paradigm of power and control, issues related to women and minorities are seriously discounted (Russell & Sturgeon, 2019). Officers are more likely to rely on heterosexist evaluations and stereotypes when making decisions. At the community level, social norms that encouraged police avoidance also discouraged police contact during instances of IPV (Decker et al., 2019). Regrettably, community norms are amplified for IPV and sexual violence survivors, who often look to their informal networks before seeking support through formal systems. As a result, it is critical to address any community or social norms that discourage access to law enforcement officers or even domestic violence services and advocates (Decker et al., 2019). As Van Hightower and Gorton (2002) discovered, women living in rural areas encounter acute difficulties in accessing supportive law enforcement and domestic violence services. Community, social, and cultural norms that believe law enforcement cannot be trusted, that the judicial process does not care, and that domestic violence services are not supportive situate women experiencing IPV at a deadly disadvantage.

Judicial Institutional Obstructions

For survivors who encountered the District Attorney's Office, their assessment of the D.A.'s office was often mixed. Unfortunately, according to Hightower and Gorton (2002), some

survivors of IPV felt the prosecutor provided inadequate information about the status of their cases, refused to file charges against the batterer, or reduced the severity of the charges without telling the victim. Insufficient access to legal assistance was also a significant dilemma. Frustration with the judicial process was usually associated with the lack of action in obtaining protective orders and insensitive treatment by judges (Van Hightower & Gorton, 2002).

Shoener (2016) described how as a college student observing a judge's courtroom, she watched as a young woman who had filed an order for protection against an older man, was not taken seriously by a judge because the older man happened to be on crutches the day of their court appearance. Once the judge learned Shoener was a student, he yelled to the back of the courtroom, "What does she need a protection order for? It's not like he can catch her if she runs" (Shoener, 2016, p. 118), which made a mockery of the woman's case in front of the entire courtroom. Shoener argued that during her time observing the court, the judicial system behaved as though the intimate partner violence survivor's well-being was unimportant to their daily work.

Unfortunately, when known batterers were placed on probation, they continued to harass their ex-partners without fear that their parole would be revoked for bad behavior (Van Hightower & Gorton, 2002). According to Van Hightower and Gorton (2002), criminal justice officials employed in the court system, district attorney's office, and adult probation-parole department members revealed three significant findings: an ethos of victim blaming within the local criminal justice community, a reluctance to use incarceration against batterers, and insufficient services for the victims of intimate partner violence. Several criminal justice officials blamed the women for their abuse, as victim blaming was frequently expressed in the context of a survivors' lifestyle choices, their failure to prevent IPV, and for not leaving an abusive

relationship as soon as possible. Unfortunately, survivors of intimate partner violence also faced the exact opposite problem when they did decide to leave their abuser and their children's father, as they were often met with resistance by the courts, judges, and law enforcement officials who all felt it was more important to preserve the two-parent family structure than to guarantee the safety of the mother and children (Shoener, 2016).

Resilience

Single mothers need resilience to deal with the many setbacks associated with single motherhood, IPV, and marginalization. Coutu (2002) asks, "Why? What exactly is that quality of resilience that carries people through life" (p. 46), and why "resilience is something you realize you have after the fact" (p. 47)? Coutu argued that resilient people possess three characteristics, acceptance of reality; a deep belief in firmly held values. People who are resilient believe life has meaning and they possess uncanny ability to improvise solutions. In order to have a staunch acceptance of reality, resilient people must have a down-to-earth view of reality, especially those that matter for survival. However, that is not to say that optimism does not have its place in the life of survivors of IPV, but for more significant challenges, a calm, almost pessimistic sense of reality is far more critical (Coutu, 2002). Therefore, "the fact is, when we truly stare down reality, we prepare ourselves to act in ways that allow us to endure and survive extraordinary hardship. We train ourselves how to survive before the fact" (Coutu, 2002, p. 50). While it may sound odd to a survivor of IPV, survival post-IPV is predicated on the ability to train oneself to survive by contextualizing past experiences, present possibilities, and the likelihood of repeat offenses.

Coutu (2002) believed one's ability to see reality is closely linked to the ability to make meaning during difficult situations. To assist in meaning-making during difficult or extreme

situations, it should come as no surprise that resilient people possess a strong value system, as solid values provide a sense of meaning, offering ways to interpret and shape events. For Coutu, the third building block of resilience, ritualized ingenuity, is the ability to make do with whatever is at hand. In Coutu's experience, resilient people do not often describe themselves as resilient, preferring to shrug off their survival stories, often chalking them up to the luck of the draw experiences. Resilience is an unseen reflex, a way of facing problems and understanding the world, deeply etched into a person's being. Resilient people face reality by making meaning out of hardship instead of crying out in despair, and they become masters at improvising solutions from thin air.

After Coutu (2002) laid the groundwork for the characteristics of resilience and resilient systems, others who studied the phenomena elaborated beyond the characteristics to envision resilience as a contextualized state and not a static state (Kennedy, 2005; Massey et al., 1998; Ungar, 2004). The importance of resilience as a dynamic process or contextualized state allows for adaption and change over time (Kennedy, 2005). Kennedy (2005) argued that these resilient capacities are best understood as dynamic processes, evolving and developing as the individual's context shifts. Therefore, listening to the survivor's stories, each "resilient participant's 'trajectory of agency' unfolds and takes shape, with all of its nuance, complexity, and distinctiveness" (Kennedy, 2005, p. 1510). Crann and Barata (2016) extended the idea of shifts in resilience for survivors of IPV, as resilience involves many cognitive, emotional, and behavioral shifts over time, to bring the survivor from the point of resistance to a place of positivity in resilience.

Grych et al. (2015) in their Resilience Portfolio Model, suggested that in order for a survivor of IPV to move from a place of adversity to resilience, they needed

assets—characteristics that promoted a healthy lifestyle—and resources, or items outside of the person, as these assets and resources would be part of their portfolio of strengths. What Grych et al. called the additive point of view justified their reasoning in deciding to add more strengths to their Resilience Portfolio Model just in case what they had was not enough. Therefore, they add density—which equals intensity in the strengths of the individual; diversity—a wide variety of any strengths that could help the individual to overcome adversity; regulatory strengths—which are goals that maintain a sense of stability over time; interpersonal strengths—developing and fostering close relationships with others; and meaning-making strengths—making sense out of chaos, coherence from random events and combining those events with the broader beliefs and values of the individual (Gonzalez-Mendez & Hamby, 2020). These additional strengths could be added to the Resilience Portfolio Model to assist survivors in moving from adversity to a position of positive resilience (Gonzalez-Mendez & Hamby, 2020; Grych et al., 2015).

Resilience is necessary for this dissertation, not because I have mastered resilience. I do not. My life looks like I have none. I am not even sure it would show up if I told my story. Whether or not I have resilience is open to interpretation. However, my personal favorite resilient model is Coutu's (2002). Living a life as a survivor of PTSD is complicated enough. I will keep it simple. Coutu's approach works for me. Therefore, resilience appears in how I keep showing up, even when I do not want to, even when I do not think I can, and even when I would rather not. I have a magnet on my kitchen fridge that says something to the effect that courage is not the roar of a lion, but in gentle words, I will try again tomorrow.

Chapter Conclusion

Within this literature review, I traced the historical intersections of misogyny and patriarchy, thereby sketching the utilization of hegemonic masculinity, its primary strong-arm

enforcer, and the continued unofficial method for societal control through stereotypes and stigmatizations to keep single mothers in line. Within the second section, the internal complexities of single motherhood were a combination of present and past obstacles converging on her present role. Within the third section, the external complexities of single motherhood were the factors affecting a single mother that was mainly outside her control and appeared in the form of institutional obstructions. The final section focused on resilience, which was the leadership skill a single mother only knows she has in hindsight.

Therefore, my research questions for this dissertation are as follows:

1. How do misogyny, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity show up in the social systems and institutions designed to help single mothers and the social systems and institutions a single mother is most likely to encounter?
2. How did misogyny, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity appear in my life as a single mother through the social systems and institutions I encountered?

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

With a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, I knew I would be drawn to any dissertation methodology that would provide the opportunity for stories over stats, math, and equations. When I stumbled onto Ritchie's (2019) *An Autoethnography on the Geography of PTSD*, which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, I was floored. I told everyone who would listen to me for the next couple of weeks, what she did in her piece, how she wove her story with facts, and that she was brilliant. Then, I started researching autoethnography. If Ritchie could help someone understand what it felt like to have PTSD through her autoethnographic writing, maybe, just maybe, I could do the same thing, but from my position as a single mother, having experienced intimate partner violence and PTSD. Plus, autoethnography was a bit of a rebel in the academic field, which also fit me perfectly. As a single mother, my position is against the grain of society, so why not choose a methodology that goes against the grain too?

According to Denshire (2014), autoethnography is a relatively new and highly contested field of study. What makes autoethnography alluring for tenured and new researchers alike? Autoethnography occupies a space between what academics have always done—such as continuing to abide by a set of stringent and rigid rules as to academic format and method—and the possibilities for what academic research could do, which is to push what constitutes academic research into a new realm of possibility (Denshire, 2014). Phillips et al. (2014) and Weatherall (2019) argued that as researchers, we need to pay more attention to how we write and how continuing to write in the conventional academic format upholds hegemonic masculine writing conventions while simultaneously marginalizing research and writing that is different. Norton (2013) believed the divide between academic and creative writing is relatively simple because

academic writing is still creatively inspired. Therefore, the leap from academic writing to creating autoethnography is found in the realization that there is no distinction between living life and research (Muncey, 2010).

How does one describe ethnography in a meaningful way? As a methodological approach, autoethnography “seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273). According to Boylorn and Orbe (2014a), autoethnography is a powerful method for addressing social justice topics. Autoethnography invites the reader into the lived experience of the other, giving voice to the marginalized, initiating discussion across differences, and seeking to explain contradictory standpoints. Autoethnography provides agency and voice to the voiceless. In this way, autoethnography is a particularly relevant methodology for my study.

The Origins of Autoethnography

During the 1960s and 1970s, early attempts at autoethnography most often appeared within anthropology (Denshire, 2014). In 1979, Hayano realized that autoethnography could give marginalized people a voice. However, he also began to question who has the right to represent the lives of marginalized people at about the same time (S. Hughes & Pennington, 2016). Hayano’s (1979) question would fuel an ongoing controversy that continues today (S. Hughes & Pennington, 2016). Who owns our story, and how much of that story is ours and ours alone?

Due to Hayano’s (1979) questions and many others, attempting to complete an autoethnographic research project was and still can be very difficult. The methodology itself can quickly bring to light areas of concern such as objectivity, data quality, legitimacy, and course ethics (Wall, 2008). Although autoethnography originates in ethnographic and anthropological research, it did not emerge as a distinct methodological approach until the 1980s (Curtis &

Curtis, 2017). In 1995, Carolyn Ellis demolished the wall of ethnographic tradition with her autoethnographic novel, *Final Negotiations: A Story of Love, Loss, and Chronic Illness*. Ellis' (1995) *Final Negotiations* is an autoethnography within an autoethnography. The outer autoethnography is a personal account of Ellis's first husband's chronic illness and subsequent death of emphysema. The inner autoethnography occurs years after his death as Ellis contemplated her aging process, how the events surrounding her first husband affected her second marital relationship, and how all the events, circumstances, and interpersonal experiences fit within the larger cultural life. With the personal nature and vulnerability within *Final Negotiations*, Ellis opened a new realm of possibility for autoethnography's seeking to move away from ethnography to tell their own stories.

A Variety of Descriptions of Autoethnography

Going forward autoethnography's main difficulty is developing a consensus on precisely what autoethnography is (Kaufmann, 2020). Unfortunately, autoethnographic writers describe their works in various ways, which makes locking down the elements of what goes into an autoethnographic account next to impossible (Turner, 2013). For instance, Sparkes (2000) believed that autoethnographic writing is a highly personalized account that works to extend sociological understanding. Holt (2003) and Sparkes (1996) argued that autoethnography seeks to link concepts from academic sources to the lived experiences of the writer. Whereas Ellis (2007) believed autoethnography is a dance between experiencing and examining the self to reveal the broader social context. Pillow (2003) pointed out that autoethnographic writing could be anything from an academic article to a thesis or even a plain old rant. Ettorre (2017), Frank (1995), and Giorgio (2009) agreed that autoethnography appears only when a writer writes to heal, whereas Gannon (2006) felt autoethnographic writing could never be complete because it is

an embodied lived experience. Kaufmann (2020) believed that what constitutes as autoethnographic writing can diverge dramatically from one autoethnographic text to the next, but at its core will always be the story itself. When used successfully, autoethnographic writing can change how people think, understand each other, and even change the world (Kaufmann, 2020). Since the descriptions of autoethnography can vary widely, the essence of autoethnography is the story itself and the one point that almost all autoethnography's agree on. Therefore, let us look at what goes into autoethnography.

What is Autoethnography?

When researchers conduct ethnography, they are looking to study a culture or group of people's relational experiences, beliefs, and values—to assist members within and those residing outside of that culture—to better understand the culture that is being researched (Maso, 2001). Of course, that assumes that the ethnographers have the best interest of those they study at the forefront of their research intentions.

Typically, when researchers participate in autoethnography centered on lived experiences, they write retrospectively utilizing personal experiences to relay varying aspects of the cultural experience while also analyzing their experiences for greater personal understanding (Ellis et al., 2011). However, the past tense is not the only tool when writing autoethnographies because tense depends on how the writer intends to reach their audience. For instance, Adams and Holman Jones (2011) told the story of a parent's relationship with a teenage daughter at a time when the daughter is coming into her sexual orientation. To protect whose daughter they are talking about, they utilized the second person point of view, which places the reader in the position of the parent. So, using a different voice within the text is entirely possible. It truly depends upon the intent of the writer(s). Therefore, there is a sense of reciprocity within

autoethnographic writing in that audiences are not passive participants but engaged with the unfolding story (Holman Jones et al., 2016). How a writer brings that engagement is left to their discretion.

Smith and Sparkes (2002) recognized the autoethnographic writers' ability to weave stories to construct meaning, as the writer takes contradictions and distortions from our often-fragmented lives to create coherence and art. According to Holman Jones et al. (2016), "the one characteristic that binds all autoethnographies is the use of personal experience to examine and/or critique cultural experience" (p. 22). Kara (2015) argued that theory, practice, policy, and the personal are interrelated within autoethnographic writing. Prendergast (2009) believed arts-based research is particularly beneficial when investigating complex topics, such as those surrounding social justice issues. Researchers are increasingly turning to poetry, stories, theatre, screenplays, and other creative techniques to provide a fuller understanding of the research project and its results (Kara, 2015). As a creative endeavor, autoethnographic writers seek to show versus tell within their stories (Holman Jones et al., 2016).

What is Autoethnography Research?

How does a researcher know if they have conducted autoethnographic research? In autoethnographic research, the researcher

Seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience [to] understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act . . . as a method, autoethnography is both process and product. (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273)

Researchers do not live in a bubble (Ellis et al., 2011). According to Adams et al. (2015), they continuously discover, perform, and analyze concerning others, and those relationships that affect their findings.

Reflexivity is integral to autoethnographic data collection and analysis (Curtis & Curtis, 2017). By practicing reflexivity, the researcher can better discern how their beliefs, relationships, and practices have influenced the research process and its findings. Therefore, autoethnography is a process of self-discovery where reflexivity is considered a type of analytical production. For Curtis and Curtis (2017), reflexivity demands the writer review, rework, and rewrite to be truly reflexive. Reflexivity involves diving deeper into the writing through a drafting process requiring more than one version.

When writing creatively, the autoethnographic writer must know that the value of narrative truth is entirely based on what a story does—how it is used, understood, and responded to, or its effect (Bochner, 1994; Denzin, 1989). The truth of autoethnographic writing is that writing can never contain stable truths because memory is active, dynamic, and changing (Holman Jones et al., 2016). Therefore, as we grow older, our perspectives change, as well as our relationship to the events and people of the past (Holman Jones et al., 2016). Another point to consider when discussing memory, truth, and narrative truth, is that the terms by which research is measured also change concerning the genre of the autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2011). Within my creative non-fiction classes, the concepts of memory, truth, and narrative truth come up quite often.

Memory and truth are a lot like they sound. For instance, the following is my description of a memory from a moment in time for class. Our teacher had us draw our 5-year-old neighborhoods for CNF class as an exercise in memory. I drew mine with a big brown brick house diagonal from ours. The brown brick house contained my first crush, a blond-haired boy, and across from him was a big white house with another girl. We all hung out together. The little girl and I cried the day he moved away. My creative non-fiction teacher guaranteed my class that

our neighborhoods are no longer like we remembered them as we drew them. Thinking I could not be that old, I scoffed at the idea. However, a few months later, I drove through that small town and discovered the brown brick house had burned down, and the white house was boarded up. Therefore, my memory of that moment in time is my memory, and it may not be the same as the little blond boy I crushed over or the girl across the street.

The truth would be the exact truth of the moment. An example of truth in the memory above is if I went back to that town or county and decided to look up the land records for those three houses. I know where we lived. So, using my old home as a point of reference and the time frame I knew we occupied the house, I could search those years for the names of the individual families of the other two homes. I could then search birth records, or old newspapers, to prove that a little blond boy and a little girl were born to those families and that they might have lived across the street from each other when my family lived in our house. The records would prove the truth of that moment in time.

Narrative truth is more brutal to describe. In 2013, I wrote a creative non-fiction piece called “Transgressions,” published in Antioch’s *The Lunch Ticket*. “Transgressions” was partially about a pastor’s horrible eulogy in which he discussed the sins of women and, by extension, my grandmother’s sin instead her life. Transgressions were partially my attempt to work through my memories of her and the memories of his horrible eulogy. In the end, Transgressions was a series of shorts—each mini story is about one page—in which each story starts with something from the pastor’s eulogy, the funeral, or graveside service and then contrasts that experience with what I knew of my grandmother through my experiences.

My goal was to place the reader within both experiences, the funeral, and my experiences of my grandmother, from the point of view of the woman sitting in the pew that day at the

funeral. According to Bochner and Ellis (2016), narrative truth “requires depicting experiences as believable, lifelike, and possible—and, on the other hand, staying close to the facts as we recall them” (p. 172). I was truthful in recalling the Pastor’s words that day because I had written them down directly after the funeral. They were saved on my computer. I stayed close to the narrative truth of the day because I was recreating how the events happened, but I was also trying to get at the emotional truth of that moment. I wanted my reader to be at the church, hot and sticky, in July, listening to that horrible eulogy—spoken of a woman the reader looked up to and loved words that conflicted with memories—and the powerlessness of being unable to change the narrative. I wanted my reader to leave the church and hear the men behind her say, “What a great sermon.”

When applied to autoethnographic writing, research context, meaning, and utility are altered so that reliability refers to the narrator’s credibility. Ellis et al. (2011) stated that questions of validity refer to a story’s believability. The question of generalizability falls to the audience’s discretion in that the audience/reader must decide if the story speaks directly to them or speaks to the experience of people they know (Ellis et al. 2011). Therefore, autoethnographers “view research and writing as socially-just acts; rather than [maintaining] a preoccupation with accuracy, the goal is to produce analytical, accessible texts that change us and the world we live in for the better” (Ellis et al., 2011, pp. 283–284).

As a qualitative method, autoethnography offers a personal and complex look at lives, experiences, and relationships rather than some abstract general information regarding a culture and/or group of people. Therefore, Adams et al. (2015) argued that the autoethnographer should strive for the following when designing their research study:

- recognize the limits of scientific knowledge, especially regarding personal identities, private lives, and the explicit, complex, and often ambiguous personal and cultural relationships a researcher may be entangled within;
- be able to connect insider experience, insights, and knowledge with the more extensive cultural and political contextual conversations;
- feel as though they are answering a call to write narratively, which means they place as equal importance on theoretical knowledge as they do on the artistic craft of writing;
- always consider the ethical implications of autoethnography for themselves, their participants, those they write about, their readers, and whomever their audience is or may be; and
- assume that the people they will write about will one day read what they have written.

In summary, autoethnography centers on lived experiences to investigate the larger cultural context within which the lived experiences are situated. Autoethnographers should seek to show versus tell within their narrative writing. An autoethnographer will also practice reflexivity as an analytical tool for information gathering. Rather than being focused on truth as accurate renditions of lived experience, autoethnographers seek to write narrative truth in which the story speaks directly to the audience and/or represents the lived experience of someone the audience knows.

Political Possibilities of Autoethnography

When autoethnography first began to filter its way through academia, many ethnographers did not see autoethnography as a transgressive research practice capable of challenging norms, resisting the dominant discourse, or even in its ability to extend boundaries

(Bochner & Ellis, 2016). For Bochner and Ellis (2016), autoethnography offered a chance to navigate lived experience, shed light on human suffering, trauma, and social justice, encouraged new ways of being reflexive, and allowed researchers to express personal experience with a level of creativity that was usually not available to academics.

When done well, autoethnography displays multiple layers of consciousness while connecting society's personal, political, and cultural domains (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Autoethnographies are often written in the first-person point of view but can also be written in second and/or third-person. Autoethnographers utilize the "ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations" (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 66). Since autoethnographers can move from the wide-angle lens to the much narrower personal lens, they can blur the boundaries of lived, cultural, and academic experiences within their narratives.

Critical Autoethnography

Critical autoethnography reveals the intersectional nature of identity and identity politics (Alexander, 2014). Crenshaw (1991) developed the concept of intersectionality to examine the many intersections of lived experiences, such as gender and race. An example of critical autoethnography would be a contextualized study of lived experience within a particular cultural community through which the intersectionality of identity, positionality, lived experience, and a cultural community intersect (Alexander, 2014).

Alexander (2014) provided an excellent example of what is known as critical autoethnography by looking at the intersections within his own life through a photo. The photo is of Alexander, a queer Black man, and his three Black heterosexual brothers at one of the

brothers' heterosexual weddings. Alexander analyzed the photo through the context of lived experience and queer theory while challenging the status quo of heterosexuality. He observed that he was not invited to the wedding because of his being a queer black man, which means he will never be able to get married. Through critical autoethnography, he also looks at privilege and how he is allowed to be in the photo as an observer but that he will never be in a wedding of his own.

Critical autoethnography can be beneficial because it gives credence to first-person accounts of discrimination and difference and seeks to challenge assumptions with truths (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014b). Critical autoethnography “utilizes three central features of critical theory, which include: to understand the lived experience of real people in context, to examine social conditions and uncover oppressive power arrangements, and to fuse theory and action to challenge processes of domination” (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014a, p. 20). Therefore, critical autoethnography asks the researcher to conduct a critical exploration by exploring more profound questions to tell a more rigorously contextual and critically intersectional story of being and becoming, with the potential to transform self and society (Alexander, 2014).

Autoethnography Ethical Dilemmas

Those who distrust autoethnographic writing may agree with Walford's (2021) likening of it to selfies on Facebook because academics are not interesting enough to be the subject of any writing, let alone a selfie. Walford's idea of autoethnographic writing is equivalent to that of selfies on Facebook, and academics do not have lives worth studying. Naval gazing arguments aside, there were four prominent overarching ethical concerns almost every autoethnographic writer touched upon. Those themes centered around getting permission, what is truth, is slippage a lie, and should autoethnographic writers be cognizant of a subject that hits too close to home.

Turner (2013) asked the question almost every autoethnographic writer has posed at some point. At what point should the researcher obtain permission from those they write about? Who owns the writer's experience? Who is responsible for the impact of autoethnographic writing? Was it practical or ethical for that responsibility to fall solely on the autoethnographic writer writing about trauma? Ellis (2007) and Sparkes (2013) argued that our stories are not our own and that we do not have the right to tell the story of others. Turner (2013) took the opposite stance:

If I am to reveal a person's identity alongside their words, it is still my experience of their words, filtered through [me] . . . I would argue that my experience is my construction of events. Within a constructed ontology, there ceases to be 'factual' accounts which can be identified as the 'true' version of events, there are just different constructions of an event, or [of] moment[s] in history. (p. 220)

Wall (2008) raised an interesting question about research participant truth, and which researcher's rendition of the truth was more legitimate in the eyes of academia. For instance, if Wall was interviewed by a researcher regarding her experiences as an adoptive mother, and that researcher recorded and transcribed the interview, why should that researcher's work be considered as more legitimate data when an autoethnographic text written by Wall herself, would be based on the same set of memories. These are important points to ponder.

Tullis Owen et al. (2009) looked at what was deemed as truth, what was not, and what truth meant for the autoethnographic writer. They believed that what constituted truth was rather fickle and should not be the criterion for evaluating autoethnographic work. Those who engaged in autoethnographic writing strove to engage their audiences with the essence of an experience rather than worry if a recreation of a past event is 100% accurate (Couser, 1997; Kvale, 1995/2002). Autoethnographic writers opted for self-revelation over factual accuracy (Hampl, 1999), which can lead to trouble. As a result, Tullis Owen et al. (2009) believed that truth changes and depends entirely on the writer's representation. Therefore, framing

autoethnographic writing as accurate or truthful was contingent and a waste of time. When one writes, one asserts order in the mess of life as authors seek to regain control of their lives and narratives (Giorgio, 2009). Rather than silence autoethnographic writers because of their faulty memory, Poulos (2006) suggested the ethical thing to do was to draw the stories out. Therefore, to spend time in the mess of the story to find the narrative truth, or the essence of the story.

Medford (2006) brought up a concept called slippage after she was left out of an autoethnographic account written by a former lover. The former lover was co-authoring an autoethnographic piece on monogamy in which the former lover claimed to have been monogamous for 4 years with the co-author of the piece. The problem arose when Medford realized the monogamous claim was bogus because the former lover was with her for two of those 4 years. Medford (2006) believed mindful slippage was best described as follows:

Slippage between Truth (or our experience of reality) and truthfulness because sometimes it seems appropriate—even necessary—to abbreviate, edit, or otherwise modify our life stories in our writing. Maybe we do not remember the exact words that were spoken or the background details seem irrelevant, or maybe we are honoring someone's request not to be included in our writing. The difference between what we know (or what we cannot remember) and what we write is mindful slippage. (p. 853)

However, what if the author—or, in this case, the former lover—neglects to be truthful regarding the main subject of the autoethnographic work (Medford, 2006)? Medford asked if slippage was just slippage or was slippage a serious ethical issue. In this case, slippage misses the severity of what her former lover claimed in a monogamy piece, and that was that the lover had no right to claim a status or position they did not inhabit. The former lover, if allowed to publish his autoethnographic piece on monogamy, was entirely based on lies. In this case, omitting was the equivalent of lying.

Only some autoethnographic writers discussed the idea of protecting themselves while in the process of autoethnographic writing. Nevertheless, what happens if the research process

triggers unhealthy thinking or behaviors? Chatham-Carpenter (2010) advocated for autoethnographic writers to make sure they are in a safe space, that it is okay to feel the pain, to be open to learning throughout the process of writing, and not to be afraid to ask if the cost of writing a particular piece outweighs the reasons for doing so.

Therefore, the four prominent overarching ethical concerns centered around obtaining permissions or who owns the story, what is truth and what is not, slippage as an outright lie, and remember autoethnographers need to be cognizant of subjects that hit too close to home, and to produce autoethnographic accounts of integrity and worth. Next, I want to examine my ethical dilemma as I went into this dissertation process.

My Ethical Dilemma: Autoethnography and My Children

An ethical dilemma I have struggled with was telling my story in a way that would not harm my children. I wanted to complete this dissertation as a fictional novel, to push autoethnography beyond anything anyone else has done before, but also because through fiction, I could guarantee my children's safety. Or maybe it is not their safety as much as it is a rough topic for us, and fiction felt safe. So much of my story is tied up in their dad and stepmother. While he did what he did to me, I do not feel I have the right to ruin their relationship with their dad. Plus, I have never told my boys I have PTSD. Well, at least prior to this project, I had not. When they were little, I could not. If I did, their father could subpoena those records and use them in court to pull my children from me. At least that was what my local domestic violence shelter told me, so I guarded that diagnosis as if our lives depended on it, and they indeed did, especially my youngest sons. If I went for help, I had to be strategic and I had to be careful. I could not be seen by someone who knew me. I had to ensure that anyone who encountered my records did not know my ex-husband. If I had a "bad PTSD Day," I isolated myself because it

ensured my quirky behaviors would not get back to my ex-husband. Furthermore, I always, always, made sure I had an exit plan. Now, my children are 21 and 23, so my fear of the courts are over, but sharing openly is still not easy for me. I have spoken with them about why I am writing this dissertation, so they are aware. For once, I want to be heard, and I want to be truthful to the experience.

Deconstructing Autoethnography

To fully understand how autoethnography works, as well as to avoid the pitfalls and ethical issues mentioned above, I now deconstruct an exemplar text, Ritchie's (2019) "An Autoethnography on the Geography of PTSD."

What Makes Autoethnography Work?

As with any creative writing class, all writers must learn to deconstruct the text of the writing style they are most interested in. Creative writers should consider what works for the text and what does not. To write effectively, the authorial choices that went into creating the text in question must be clear and understandable (Badley, 2009; Yoo, 2019). Therefore, Ritchie's (2019) autoethnographic text, is perfect for deconstruction.

Deconstructing the Geography of PTSD

Ritchie (2019) examined PTSD from a geographic perspective while exploring the sociopolitical structures and physical environments that she—a person with PTSD—must navigate daily. What does it mean to try to function in a world that may not view PTSD—from sexual violence—as legitimate? Ritchie showed how the geography of the mundane—places and locations ordinary people do not think twice about—are also a location of significant inner turmoil and emotional distress.

Ritchie (2019) essentially wove a braided creative nonfiction essay with data on PTSD. The audience witnesses Ritchie's present problem of navigating a grocery store while living with PTSD. It also witnesses the short- and long-term effects of stalking and sexual assault through the clips of her experience. Ritchie (2019) wanted her readers to realize that "only by understanding the geography of violence and PTSD can we interrogate and push back against current spaces and structures of oppression" (p. 81). She demonstrated this by utilizing scenes to her advantage.

Ritchie (2019) began her autoethnographic account in scene. She explains why she is in a grocery store, shopping, or at least attempting to. What she calls a mundane activity for the average individual, for her, was a location of danger and blurred realities. While walking through the aisles, Ritchie tells how she navigates the store, describing the environmental triggers such as noises, lights, and people. She is also triggered by the items on the shelves with unwanted memories. For instance, while looking for Advil, she notices condoms, which seamlessly moves her into a flashback. Ritchie was in a Planned Parenthood-style waiting room looking at a bowl of condoms, wondering why they look like a bowl of Halloween candy. Therefore, condoms become the connective thread between Ritchie's present and past realities.

Ritchie (2019) transitions to the examining table and stirrups, which leads the reader to believe this is most likely a gynecological visit. Ritchie is seen struggling with the procedure during what seems like a routine exam. She tries not to cry but does anyhow. Her response is not a normal response to a routine checkup. Something is not right. Something has happened to her. During the exam, the female doctor tells her that she has substantial scarring, which may never disappear. The doctor implies the scarring is Ritchie's fault by saying she should be more careful and asks if she plans to have kids. Ritchie wonders why the doctor misses the real reason for the

trauma she has endured. The reader is left wondering how a female doctor can be so callous. A second thought crosses the reader's mind: What could Ritchie have done to scar herself?

Seriously. What? If the reader is female, she knows women are not carelessly causing the kind of internal scarring that could lead to a life of never being able to give birth to a child. As women, we know that must be some severe scarring. However, instead of acknowledging the truth—something terrible has happened to this woman—the doctor implies that Ritchie is the typical overly promiscuous college student. For Ritchie, the doctor is one more person who would rather not have a challenging conversation about violence. The reader is left wondering why the doctor is allowed to practice medicine. Suddenly, an older woman asks Ritchie for an item on the top shelf. The woman's request brings Ritchie back to the grocery aisle. The scene ends, and the reader is left wondering, *what happened to her?* What was so bad that she might never have children? I suspect an assault.

In the next section of her paper, Ritchie (2019) moves into an academic discussion of PTSD. She explained,

[PTSD] affects [the] mind, body, and spirit, challenging societal worldviews and, more acutely, affecting personal geographies and ontologies. The essence of how someone navigates and perceives of their environment (i.e., their sense of place or place-making ability) is altered neurobiologically under the catalyst of violence—they take on or embody a geography of trauma. (Ritchie, 2019, p. 71)

PTSD is a geography that Ritchie (2019) has intimate knowledge of because she has just explained her attempt to navigate it in the previous scene. She also brings in other facts about PTSD, how it is acquired, its symptoms, and the barriers PTSD creates for the individual.

In the next section, Ritchie (2019) attempts to use a box of spinach to ground herself while being triggered by excessive noise in the grocery store. From her attempts to ground herself, one recognizes that Ritchie is trying to practice a coping strategy she probably learned

from a therapist. However, a burst of cold air brings her into a full-blown panic attack, which also changes her writing style. She quickly moves from narrative to a poem of short, terse lines, which creates a disorientating experience, almost like someone is hyperventilating. Within the terse lines of the poem, Ritchie is seen in the emergency room. She is waiting on a case manager to arrive. A male doctor asks if she has been drinking. Does she want to press charges? The doctor stereotypes Ritchie. To him, she represents one more woman who drank too much and had sex. To him, it is her fault. The reader may also think, “Oh, she was drunk,” and fall into minimization and victim-blaming. Then there is the scarring: the reader, hopefully, may feel guilty for ever thinking it could be Ritchie’s fault, and wonder why it takes remembering that she has substantial scarring to see that she is the victim, not the perpetrator. By the poem’s end, we are back in the grocery store and watch Ritchie grab more spinach as she tries to focus, to bring herself back to where she is, a grocery store.

The next section of Ritchie’s (2019) paper discussed violence against women with statistics for sexual assault, stalking, and rape. She advances the idea that once a person has lived through a traumatic experience, it means having lived through it physically—but that is all it means. Ritchie explained that a traumatic experience is never wholly lived through or over. She also discussed masculinity, how we raise our boys, and how we make excuses for bad behavior, pointing out,

We are brought up in a culture of silence and a politics of denial, which arise in situations where an obvious truth is not recognized (McKinney, 2007). The elephant in the room is often ignored socially and culturally in favor of sensationalized acts of violence, minimizing or ignoring the importance of everyday acts of violence that are inscribed on certain spaces and social structures (Zerubavel, 2006). (Ritchie, 2019, p. 78)

Ritchie (2019) spent some time then on the concept of victim blaming. She finishes the section with a nod to the “geography of PTSD” and how it is shaped by sensory intrusions witnessed in both scenes, as she has shown us through her writing style.

In the last scene of the grocery store, Ritchie (2019) was in the checkout line. As a pasta box on the conveyor belt passed, she transitioned to the campus dining hall, eating a half-cooked noodle. He—the man who will stalk and assault her—sits down at her booth before asking permission to join her. Immediately, she felt he has violated her space but gives him the benefit of the doubt. If the reader is a woman who watches too many true crime television shows, they know that women are trained from a very young age to put other people’s interests first. The reader knows this is the most fatal flaw almost all little girls are taught: ignoring their internal warning system. The reader also knows that Ritchie has learned the fatal flaw lesson the hard way, not because of what she has told about the assault, but because she gave him the benefit of the doubt. She ignored her internal warning system.

It turns out that the boy is an alpha male who then stalks her for days, months, and years. She tells us he discovered her schedule, followed her at night, and walked past her classrooms. He finds out where she lives and gets past her locks. The reader knows the small sentence where he gets past her locks, is the moment of the assault. Ritchie swiftly moved from those four words to her friends and how they dealt with her quietness afterward. They encouraged Ritchie to drink but could not understand how hypervigilance and self-surveillance—both symptoms of PTSD—were taking over her life. 2 years later, Ritchie still feared for her life. She finally comes forward at a women’s center on campus. Shortly after, she learns he is a repeat offender. She is a statistic. What happened to her has happened to others. The reader suspects there was no resolution and that there will be others like Ritchie.

In the final section of the paper, Ritchie (2019) discussed how she is fundamentally different because of the trauma. Ritchie offered suggestions on how to help other survivors of sexual assault and stalking who also have PTSD. She finished by saying:

Therefore, I ask you, the reader, to take from this a reminder: The next time you hear someone say we no longer need feminism, please remember the woman in the grocery store—tortured not by her own mental and emotional delusions, but by reality. (Ritchie, 2019, p. 81)

For Ritchie (2019), there was still so much more feminists could be doing with PTSD, college assault, stalking, rape, repeat offenders, and what happened to her. She presented her autoethnographic writing as creative nonfiction utilizing powerful fragments of memory (Crawford, 1996) and examples of daily life with PTSD to tell the reader what her lived experience is like. Fragments are helpful for the following reasons:

- Fragments are excellent for showing an audience the various trajectories and juxtapositions of lived experience.
- Fragments are like channel surfing. They switch rapidly between past and present, the private and public, community and society, self and others, and the macro and micro elements of lived experience.
- Fragments disrupt, dislodge, decenter, restructure, and provide glimpses into multiple perspectives and positions.

Ritchie (2019) excelled in her autoethnography at what Ferdinand (2009), called bringing “vitality and strength to an otherwise obscure experience by creating a plot that asks readers to live the experience with the author” (p. 5). Autoethnography that makes the reader take notice of the writing says, “Take a walk with me. Witness this moment.” Ritchie let readers witness what a day is like for someone with PTSD. Ritchie is the perfect exemplar for how I was to write my autoethnographic stories of single motherhood mixed with contextual information.

My Autoethnography Methodology

Ritchie's (2019) autoethnographic format of a creative nonfiction braided essay that incorporates fragments with contextual information, offered the best model for me to blend my factual data, analyzed interpretations, and lived experience into a format that would situate the reader firmly within my experience, as seamlessly as Ritchie does within her own story of PTSD.

By utilizing critical autoethnography, I was able to extend Holland's (2006) work to the lived experience of a single mother. Holland traced misogyny from its inception to the present day, through its many intersections with patriarchy as the ideal conception of the family. He extended this finding to highlight misogyny's dualism in that for women, sexuality was a double-edged sword. Also, Holland believed misogyny is rooted in men's need to keep constant control—often maintained through hegemonic masculinity—over women as a resource to be exploited. Eve and Pandora were cunning and beautiful, ultimately leading to man's downfall, which means they must be controlled at all costs (Holland, 2006). As Holland argued, where dualism exists, women lose.

This dissertation took a contextual look at print media, legal statutes, laws, other domestic violence cases, court cases, and institutional issues that were happening within my lifetime that may have affected either those I encountered or my perceptions at the time I was a single mother. While looking at my autoethnography and the contextual experience of the period, I also examined Holland's (2006) study to extend his findings into the realm of a single mother's lived experience. Holland showed how the dualism of misogyny has infiltrated every institution through patriarchy's ideal conception of family, which uses hegemonic masculinity as its strong-arm enforcer for societal control through stereotypes and stigmatizations as the quickest way to keep single mothers in line.

Therefore, my research questions are particularly relevant: How do misogyny, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity show up in the social systems and institutions designed to help single mothers and the social systems and institutions a single mother is most likely to encounter? How did misogyny, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity appear in my life as a single mother through the social systems and institutions I encountered?

Limitations and Delimitations

The first limitation of the present research is that “I am a single mother.” For many people, uttering those five words automatically discounts and discredits my lived experience. Period. End of story. I believe these sentiments are a direct result of false narratives, assumptions, and stereotypes. Therefore, I understand that anything I have to say regarding my lived experience as a single mother will automatically be weighed against my worth as a human being. I say this because a single mother’s worth is often judged alongside statements like, “Well, what did she do to deserve the difficulties she faces? Good people do not have these problems;” “If she were not so lazy, she would not be in this mess;” “She will say anything for a payday;” “What did she expect? Life is hard;” “Stop whining;” “She chose her fate. She needs to stop acting like a victim;” “When her back is up against a wall, she is a difficult person to deal with anyway.” And my “favorite” of the many lines that I have heard from people I trusted and loved:

If God has made a person’s lot in life more difficult, it is because he has preordained that life experience to be difficult. Who are we to step in and alter what he has set in motion? The more difficulties mean, the greater the reward in death. Be grateful.

The idea that the only reprieve granted to a single mother comes in death is beyond depressing and absolutely not helpful.

The second limitation was that I used my lived experiences to critically examine the institutional obstructions I encountered during a difficult period. With this limitation, I also want

to discuss a problem I have only alluded to up to this point. The single most significant barrier to any personal story and/or narrative is the false narratives, assumptions, and/or stereotypes the audience brings to the telling of that story/narrative. While it is crucial to tell a story and/or narrative, if those who hear that story and/or narrative are not receptive, then the story and/or narrative will mean nothing. Sadly, I live in a highly divided, narcissistic, and close-minded world in which stories from those on the margins of society do not matter. Therefore, I knew I did not want to interview other single mothers during or for this dissertation solely for that reason. I would not subject another single mother to the possible feeling that their stories do not matter. If I used a single mother's narrative, it would be from a previously published book or article. Otherwise, I would primarily rely solely on my own experience, not because my experience is more significant than theirs, but because I did not want to offer false hope, nor did I want to subject another single mother to public criticism. We catch enough hell. We do not need more of the same for sharing our truth, which is often difficult enough to do.

According to Niemi and Ellis (2001), a complex story is a story that is personally or socially problematic in that a difficult-to-tell story is most likely an emotionally charged story. It reveals something shameful or embarrassing for the storyteller. A complex story to hear for a listener could be due to how it is presented, the context of the story, or the topic itself being personally problematic. However, at some point, the story's teller must decide if and when enough is enough. The storyteller must decide for themselves that there is a need to tell the story and when they are ready to disrupt the status quo by sharing their truth. Once the storyteller is ready, Niemi and Ellis (2001) argued,

Source material must be shaped. What matters is the careful and conscious process of making a 'story' out of the raw material of our lives . . . Story is not about being limited by the facts in order to tell the truth. Story is about crafting the facts, what is said and

what is not said, to make the meaning of the experience clear. Story as art is about integrating the world of what happens with the world of why it does so. (p. 40)

What constitutes the form of the story depends mainly upon the storyteller's comfort level.

Polletta and Redman (2020) studied research about the power of personal narratives and their effect on structural social problems that require government action for concrete change. They sought to understand if a personal narrative could change an audience's preexisting beliefs, assumptions, and/or stereotypes so that the audience could absorb the entire message, empathize, and endorse actual structural and systemic social change. Given the toxic and polarizing nature of our culture today, it is not surprising to find that even if a story and/or narrative is powerful—capable of persuading the most aggressively hostile of audiences—that story and/or narrative must be understood by its audience as not having a hidden agenda, the victim/survivor is blameless, and the victim/survivor could not be a victim/survivor of circumstances or bad choices (Polletta & Redman, 2020). Sadly, even if all criteria are met, there is no guarantee that a personal narrative will successfully persuade anyone to change anything. Polletta and Redman did offer several ideas to improve a story and/or the narratives success rate, in that a story and/or narrative needs to be complex and not simple, and it needs to deal directly with false stories, assumptions, and stereotypes that pass as common sense and/or common knowledge.

Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined my attraction to autoethnography as a methodology and traced its origin and the variety of descriptions by which it is often described. As a qualitative method, autoethnography offers a complex view of a lived experience, utilizes creative non-fiction elements and factual data to pull the reader into the writer's world. Critical autoethnography offered the ability to bring a first-hand account to the forefront, challenging traditional ways of knowing, discrimination, and difference. Ethically, I examined how this study

could affect my family. I utilized Ritchie (2019) as an exemplar model for my autoethnographic writing by deconstructing what worked and why it worked within the autoethnography. Next, I laid out how Ritchie and Holland (2006) will inform my dissertation and elaborated further on the methodological approach of my study. Finally, I looked at the limitations and delimitations of this study, which centered around telling a problematic story.

CHAPTER IV: RELIGIOUS INSTITUTION

When I began this dissertation, I offered what was essentially an autoethnographic story of an MFA creative nonfiction classroom experience. I wanted my readers to discern how easily misogyny and the stereotypes attributed to single mothers play out in real-time with little thought behind the consequences of the words uttered in the presence of single mothers. I also wanted to shed light on the complexity of the single motherhood experience, both internally and externally. Therefore, I will begin each chapter in a similar format to Chapters IV, V, and VII with an autoethnographic story that best encapsulates my experience as a single mother with that chapter's institution of focus. Next, I will provide context for the autoethnographic story through the newspaper archives of *The Free Press* of Mankato, Minnesota, other archival items of note, and supporting contextual background information. After I provide the contextual information, I will add the academic linkages necessary to bring the autoethnographic story and the contextual information together for further academic analysis. Following the linkages section, I will look at Holland's (2006) *A Brief History of Misogyny* to describe his theory on how misogyny affects the institution of focus, which would also affect the single mother. Finally, I will consider if Holland's work embellishes, confirms, or contradicts a single mother's experience with the chapter's institution of focus through autoethnographic experiences, the contextual information, and the academic analysis provided below.

Story—A Woman's Place: Branding and Submission

The boys and I are in St. Cloud, Minnesota, for my first cousin's wedding. Out of 17 cousins, 11 of us are girls. While I am the oldest cousin, the cousin getting married is probably the smartest. She went off to college, found a good job, then a nice guy. They got engaged, and now, they are about to get married. The only problem with the wedding is, of course, the church.

I generally stay away from churches of all kinds unless I need to take the boys to Sunday School or I need to attend a funeral. Mostly, I avoid the church like the black plague. I do not want to face the overwhelming sense of animosity and unexplained fury I feel every time I enter the house of God. Two years ago, I was fired by my 12-step sponsor because I was “too angry at God” for reasons she “could not understand.” I responded, “Become a single mother and then come talk to me.” It is now 2013. I have a new sponsor. We are working on the God thing, but church and the God that occupies the church, I am not interested in him.

On this semi-overcast fall day, my cousin’s Pastor—a fortyish-looking man with jet-black hair—is just beginning his sermon on marriage. “The problem with today’s society is that women are told they can have anything they want,” he said. “Look at any magazine rack. Look at any grocery store; you will see promises that women can have it all. That entire idea is sinful. Marriage is not about women getting what they want.”

I roll my eyes and take a deep breath. Typical. When the Pastor wants something, it is his right. When I want something, it is a sin. I nonchalantly glance to the right to check if my boys are listening, but both blond heads appear to be watching an animated airplane on my youngest son’s Galaxy notepad screen. I take another deep breath. I look to the red leaves fluttering on the breeze to my left, out the stained-glass window.

There was a time when I only wanted a life like my parents. They met at their after-school job during high school—Happy Chef. They dated, fell in love, married, had children, still loved each other, raised those children, and kept loving each other, but minus esophageal cancer and death at 46 years old. However, even as we sat at his bedside in our living room in his final moments, as he looked at each of us, his last look at Mom summed up their time together. He produced his best boyish lopsided grin, the one he gave her when he was about

to do something he knew she would disapprove of, and he was already caught. His lopsided grin had—in equal parts—infuriated her and softened her heart when we were children like the day he brought home a St. Bernard/Labrador puppy. It was one day before we were moving our entire house—in one trip with over 80 miles—to our new home. She was livid when her eyes landed on that little reddish-brown bundle of legs with a black muzzle in his arms. In that moment of his last breath, I saw a glimpse of the lopsided grin of a much younger father talking her into a dog—for mom, the teenage boy she met at Happy Chef—shined through the pale yellow, gaunt, and once deeply tanned face of the veteran MNDOT worker, as the weathered wrinkles of 26 years of marriage softened his hazel eyes, and in his last breath what passed between them was something I knew in my bones, I did not have in my marriage in 2003.

From the front of the church in St. Cloud, the Pastor drones on with his ideas of the female gender and want. This is ridiculous. What the hell kind of church did my cousin join? I vaguely remembered seeing the word “Lutheran” as we had entered the cream stucco building with its triangular stained-glass windows half an hour earlier. I shift in the pew as I reach for the red hymnal—which rests on a thin drop-down piece of wood—below the seat of the ebony-colored pew in front of me. As I bring the hymnal to my lap, I shift again. The pew consists of two stiff boards—one for the upper back and one thick board to sit on. There are no sloping semi-comforts of a wooden pew designed to look like it might conform to the needs of a body, not in this church. I take a deep breath. I shift again. Maybe they believe one becomes closer to God if their butt goes numb. It is not working for me. My butt is numb, and I still do not like their God.

I flip open the hymnal to the title page, Missouri Synod Lutheran. My cousin may have moved 3 hours away but did not stray far from her religious roots. She stayed with our

Grandmother's Lutheran preference, the religion my cousin's father and my mother were raised in. I, on the other hand, attend our grandmother's church. It is no longer necessarily my religion of choice, but by the divorce decree, my mandated religion. At least for another 3 years until both boys are officially confirmed into the faith. However, I have become increasingly more disenchanted with the church every other Sunday, especially when I am left with taking more damage control measures, which I had never planned. Their view of society is so narrow and so very limiting for women. I worry about how that will affect the boys.

Returning to my family's church felt partially like an act of rebellion at the time of the divorce. I also worried my soon-to-be ex-husband would write into the divorce decree that we were to attend his church as one more way of keeping a guaranteed constant eye on our activities post-divorce. To garner distance and to protect myself where I could, I had agreed to keep the boys in the Missouri Synod faith when the issue of religion came up. However, only if the boys and I were free to attend my family's church on the weekends they were with me. He agreed, so long as they were confirmed in his church, which was only 10 miles away. Technically, my family's church and the church we attended as a married couple were both Missouri Synod, and they shared the same Pastor, which meant the Pastor split his time between the two towns—Good Thunder and Amboy—on Sundays.

Was I making a break for freedom? Yes and no. What I craved was the feeling of family—my Grandmother, great aunts, aunts, and uncles—and the comfort I used to find within the vaulted ceiling, the soft plush 1990s rose carpeting, the cream-colored walls with rose and gold hand-stenciled borders, and the many stained-glass windows lining the first and second floors of the 1870s brick church, complete with a working clock and bell tower. In 1990–1991, I attended the Lutheran school attached to the church for the seventh and eighth grades. We had

confirmation classes daily at the school. Of course, part of our confirmation class requirements, besides memorizing a ton of scripture, focusing an awfully lot on the story of Adam and Eve, Eve's rebellion, and Original Sin, was to attend church every Sunday to take sermon notes, which completed during rainstorms, snowstorms, summer vacations, and holidays.

The sermon notes were mainly easy as we had to write three complete sentences for each of the three main sections within the Pastor's sermon. The main sections were divided up as follows: How does the Pastor's sermon relate to the Old Testament? How does the Pastor's sermon relate to the New Testament? Finally, how should we apply the three major points of the sermon to our life?

As a young female in the Missouri Synod faith, those three questions were easy on any given Sunday. The first question's answer was do not. Whatever the topic, if a woman was involved, she was probably at fault and, therefore, do not. Except, women in the Old Testament had a habit of not listening, so make sure to mention how wrong the woman was for being disobedient and include do not. The second question's answer was that Jesus died because we screwed up, but really because of Original Sin—that is, Eve—which got mentioned often on the off chance someone—as in women—forgot they were the ones that screwed it all up. Therefore, whatever the chosen topic was, be sure to mention what Jesus died to save us because we are sinners, but—for extra brownie points, a better grade, and the off chance that I forgot to remember a scripture passage perfectly that week—also state, that the person most responsible for the introduction of Original Sin was Eve. The third question's answer involved restating the sermon's three main points, but it was necessary to flip those into something that could be used as guidelines for daily life. For a female, this was also easy to do. Be sure to include the topic of the sermon and the following words within the three guidelines for daily life: first, no, do not,

and as a woman, disobedience is never justified; second, guard, protect, subdue inner desires, and submit; and third, do not question—not God, the Pastor, your father, or your future husband—or risk the flames of hell for all of eternity.

Also, if we felt a disconnection from God at any point in our young lives, we had but two places to look for that disconnect as women. It was either because Original Sin and/or Eve doomed us to a life of strife and pain, or we needed to relook at the three guidelines. Where did we go wrong following those guidelines? If we had a cheat sheet at that time to point our young minds directly to where we went wrong as women, it would have said that the problem was with disobedience, submission, and questioning. Stop it. Just. Stop. Already!

When I was a young girl, my family sat on the left side of the balcony, second row from the railing. My grandmother would sit about seven rows from the back, on the left side, next to the aisle. During the sermons, she looked to see if we were in church. At this point, she would wink and smile at me. Therefore, I carefully balanced my time between writing and observing my grandmother because I knew I wanted to ensure I smiled back. Of course, as soon as the service ended, I would race down the steps to hug her. She was my best memory of that church and the Missouri Synod Lutheran faith. She encapsulated the love I felt there.

In 2009, when I returned to my family's church, my grandmother was in a nursing home, most of my relatives had left for a more hope-filled message elsewhere, and I was treated with tolerated but distanced kindness. The final straw with the Missouri Synod Lutheran faith occurred in July 2011. My grandmother had passed away. At her funeral, instead of the Pastor recounting her life as the strong, capable, widowed, single mother, agricultural businesswoman, and grandmother that she was, he provided a rundown of the greatest sins a woman commits. Those sins included: swearing, coveting, and harboring ill feelings toward another. Those would

have to be forgiven if she were to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. When the Pastor finally got around to talking about my grandmother, he read from her obituary. There was not a single personal story shared. On that hot July day, as we followed her coffin out of the church, I heard a man behind me say, “That was a great sermon.” I did not look for who commented, even though I wanted to. I wanted to scream, “Bullshit. Her life was not a sin.”

My cousin’s pastor pauses in St. Cloud to look over his flock. I imagine he is trying to gauge which of us are the wayward “wanting” women he has been rambling about for the past 10 minutes. I do not drop my gaze when he glances my way.

“Every kitchen should have the words, ‘Wives submit to your husbands.’ Every garage should have a sign that reads, ‘Husbands should love your wives as Christ also loved the church.’ The problem is I have yet to see a kitchen containing those words,” said Pastor.

I have never seen a garage with a sign that said anything remotely close to what he is suggesting, let alone that the Pastor’s garage is probably without a sign. I glance at my children. They are still engrossed in the Galaxy notepad screen.

“I know submission sounds like a bad word,” said Pastor. “You are probably thinking, why? Why even bother getting married if I have to submit?”

I take a deep breath and shift in my seat.

My oldest son starts to giggle beside me. He elbows me in the arm. He knows that I despise the word “submission.” I roll my eyes from him to the Pastor. He giggles some more. I lean forward to grab the communion slip of paper from the back of the pew in front of us, the worn-down pencil next to the paper, and the hymnal from below the seat. I sit back and write on the communion slip of paper, “Do you think he knows any other words?” I show my son the slip

of paper. He mouths the words, looks up, smiles, and shakes his head no. I smile back and tousle his soft blond hair.

In April of 1997, I thanked God the interview at the 2,500-head hog barn was over as I threw open the yellow sliding door of the makeshift horse barn. I knew my fiancé was unhappy with my decision, but this decision was not about him or his company. I am not a hog farmer. Stepping into the horse barn, I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and allowed the smell of leather, hay, and sweet molasses to seep through the tension in my neck and shoulders. As my eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, Skipper's silhouette slowly became more visible, his head crammed around the corner of the stall. Pawing his hoof against the stall floor, the clack and scratch of his shoe sliding across cement and wood chips, eager to be turned loose, he snorts. In 10 quick steps, I closed the distance between us. With Skipper's head in my hands, I nuzzled his long black nose, his reddish chestnut coat smooth and velvety against my cheek.

Since I need to finish the chores, I let Skipper out of his stall into the yard. He runs the length of the fenced-in area, eats some hay from the round bale, and comes back to check on my progress. I deposited half of a bale into the stall, filled his water bowl, grabbed the wheelbarrow, and shoveled manure. The exciting thing about horse manure is that it smells sweeter, like cinnamon buns with caramel topping. It was a different smell than, say, that of a pig.

Unfortunately, the pig smell did not bother my fiancé, and he landed me the job interview against my wishes. His reasoning was economically based on the rising fuel cost, or so he claimed. Well, that and we were roughly 3 months away from being married. He felt it was time for me to settle down and accept responsibility closer to home. To my dismay, the hog barn was less than 6 miles from his home—which would become our home—and my job in Mankato would be a half hour away once we were married.

Finishing Skipper's stall, I straightened my back from scooping and sniffed the air. What is that smell? Grabbing the edges of my reddish auburn hair, I pulled it across my face and sniffed. I sniffed again. No . . . No . . . The smell of hot stale corn, yeast, and hog manure had embedded itself into the molecules of my hair. How can this be? It was not as if I had not scrubbed my hair four different times with their honey apple shampoo only an hour before. Christ, what would 5 years do if one hour at a barn affected a person's hair this much? I would end up having to shave my head. I take a short breath... Oh my God, I am going to be a bald woman. As I dropped my hair, my fingers grazed the tip of my nose, and I sniffed. I lifted my right arm, pulled up my sleeve, and sniffed. I followed the same procedure for my left arm and sniffed again. Christ, that smell is there too. Lost to sniffing my various body parts and clothing, I become startled by the sound of the sliding door creaking behind me. Whirling around, I grabbed the wheelbarrow, placing it between me and whoever was at the door.

"My boss will be here within the next few minutes to see if you want the job," said my fiancé. His tone was matter-of-fact, as if he expected me to tell his boss "yes."

"You are kidding me, right?" I asked. "I called you on the way home. I said I was not taking the job." Picking up the wheelbarrow, I started to head towards the shed's opening, but he stepped directly into my path, blocking the exit.

"You will tell my boss that you liked the barn and will agree to start working there in 2 weeks. There is no other option," he said.

I repositioned the wheelbarrow to go around him, but he quickly blocked my exit again. Frustrated, I dropped the wheelbarrow between us. "Why do I have to take *this* job?"

"You need to be realistic," he said. "You are a doer, a worker, a farmer, not a pretty office girl who sits behind counters answering phones and doing her nails."

Clenching my fists, I realized for the first time that my short, stubby nails were not digging into my skin. How does this happen? How does one get predestined for a line of work? However, as quickly as the dispute began, it abruptly ended with the arrival of his boss, as we watched his forest green Ford pick-up truck pull up to the shed. When his boss asked me my decision, I glanced at the wheelbarrow half-full of shit. I looked back at the stall in need of woodchips. I scrambled for an easy out answer, but my mind was blank. I do not have to look at my fiancé to know his jaw is clenched as he waits and watches my every move.

I took a deep breath. A fleeting thought crossed my mind as Skipper stomped in the pathway to the yard behind me. Can a wedding even be canceled three months before the date? I glanced at the ring on my hand, the heart diamond I picked out, the promise I had made to fulfill in front of God in a few months. With a sinking feeling, I know without a doubt what my answer must be, and I do not have a choice.

“Fine,” I said. “I will be there in 2 weeks.”

On my wedding day, submission and the Missouri Synod Lutheran text surrounding submission were not used at all. In 1997, that was not an easy battle to win, but I managed it by seeking out a Pastor from my childhood. Thank God my parents believed in moving a lot when I was younger. Also, this Pastor was more left of the traditional Missouri Synod conservative, I had once been a friend of his daughters, and he had given me my first Bible. Therefore, he agreed to drop the submission text from the ceremony.

Martin Luther’s *Small Catechism* essentially presents a condensed version of the Missouri Synod faith (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, n.d.-b). Although I had heard the submission text numerous times in church, at Sunday School, and during marriage ceremonies, it was not until confirmation class that I finally learned the full extent of what the submission text

meant, as *Luther's Small Catechism* laid out in the Sixth Commandment. We were taught that “God requires married people to love, honor, and respect each other. The wife is the husband’s God-given helper, and the husband is the wife’s God-given head” (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1991, p. 26). This teaching is backed up by the biblical verse that says,

[Ephesians] Eph. 5: 21–23, 25. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, His body, of which He is the Savior . . . Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her. (*Holy Bible New International Version*, 1984, as cited in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1991, p. 26)

Although the text mentioned Christ loving the church and giving himself up for her, the focus was never on that in class. The focus was on submission. The focus was on the husband as the head of the household. By 1997, I wanted to think that society and the Missouri Synod faith were past submission and that equal partnerships were valued in marriage. At the time, I did not identify as a feminist, but I was not about to be a husband’s maid or helper either.

When my sister married in 2008, she had reasoned, bargained, threatened, and finally, outright demanded the Pastor obey. “No,” she said. “You will not use the submission text anywhere in my marriage ceremony.” Plus, she had an excellent reason for leaving the submission text out. She was a sexual assault advocate. Therefore, submission was not an appropriate topic at her wedding. However, as she stood at the altar before her soon-to-be-husband, the Pastor went on a very long submission tirade. I watched my sister’s back stiffen as our second cousin, her maid of honor, glanced back at me. With a slight shake of our heads, we rolled our eyes at each other. We should have bet on the pastor’s inability to follow directions. I would have won.

However, I could not fully see something else at play that day. My sister's first mistake was when she publicly exercised her feminine willpower and voice by saying no to the submission text during her wedding ceremony to a man of authority in the Missouri Synod church. While I wholeheartedly agree with my sister, *Luther's Small Catechism* (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1991) has one very specific rule that the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod follows regarding who is called, qualified, and spiritually able to make pastoral decisions. It draws on the writings of Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:33–34: “As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says” (*Holy Bible New International Version*, 1984, as cited in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1991, p. 116). What the pastor did that day was make sure my sister knew her place within the church. It could also be argued that, by extension, the Pastor was correcting all the women at the wedding party in case we forgot our place. After all, my sister's wedding was inter-congregational, with most of the wedding party having attended the church, the Sunday School, the Christian school, and the confirmation classes. Those in attendance at the wedding had mostly been confirmed, right there in that very church, minus a stray Catholic or two.

When my brother got married in 2013, the same pastor officiated as had officiated at my sisters in 2008. During my brother's wedding practice, his daughter—Cassie (not her real name)—who was around the age of 7, was his flower girl. Headstrong, happy-go-lucky, and daddy's girl, she was adorable at the front of the church. When it came time for her to exit, she was told by the Pastor to wait for the little boy to offer his arm, take the arm that was offered, and walk down the aisle with him. Finally, when it was time for Cassie to leave the front of the church, she waited just long enough for the little boy's body to become even with hers before she

promptly grabbed his arm and hauled him out of the church. Those of us watching started chuckling. The pastor made Cassie and the little boy try it one more time. Again, Cassie waited just long enough for him to get even with her when her arm shot out, grabbed the little boy, and hauled him down the aisle. She was a miniature little lady who knew what she wanted, to get down that aisle, and those of us watching openly laughed. The pastor was furious. He motioned for Cassie to come back to him. When she got close, he grabbed her by the shoulders, leaned down to her level, and told her she needed to learn her place.

My brother noticed the altercation between the pastor and his daughter, walked over to the duo, and asked, “What was going on?”

“She needs to learn to be submissive,” he said. “She must take the boy’s arm when it is offered. Not grab him and haul him out of the church.”

While my brother looked perplexed, my niece looked horrified and on the verge of tears. The man correcting her had baptized Cassie in this church, but I doubted she knew our stupid submission rules.

Now, I was her sponsor. I will never forget holding her in the slippery satin her mother had placed her in, thinking, “I will drop this child in front of the entire church. Holy shit. Cassie is my first niece. They will never let me hold a future niece or nephew if I do drop her.” I was paralyzed with fear for the entire hour and a half service, but most especially for the 10 minutes she and I were around the baptismal font. I had never been so scared. Since my brother never married her mother and he was not necessarily a regular church-going person, I doubted Cassie had had much of a run-in with this pastor before today. I also was not sure what her training was when she was with her mom because there are a lot of Lutheran branches. Some are conservative

like ours or worse, and there are plenty that are not. However, the conservatism I witnessed over the years coincided with the pastor's personal beliefs.

By this point, I had also been divorced for 5 years. This point firmly cemented my position on the outside of the congregation. Therefore, I have nothing to lose. I graduated the week before with a Bachelor of Arts in Gender and Women's Studies and Creative Writing at Minnesota State University, Mankato. I am not about to let the Pastor squash my niece's inner light for some male-conceived idea of submissiveness. Plus, as her sponsor, do I not have a duty to protect her from harm? Granted, that Missouri Synod Lutheran faith probably did not mean I was to protect her from their own Pastor, but who the hell cares? This was wrong, and it stopped here. So, when the Pastor started to restate the problem for my brother again, due to his perplexed look, the pastor barely got the words, "She needs to be more submissive," out before I started whooping and cheering, as did the guy next to me.

"Go, Cassie!" We cheer. "Take that boy's arm! Lead the way! Be assertive!" With our cheering drowning out the sound of his voice, the Pastor shook his head in frustration, glared at us, and returned to the altar. My brother watched him leave and then looked at me in confusion. I merely shrugged my shoulders as if I had no idea what the problem could possibly be. However, I learned a long time ago that it was always better to play dumb when openly disobeying the rules of submission, especially in this church. It was a skill I acquired as a young girl that saved me many times over. Just as he was about to ask me a question, his soon-to-be-wife distracted him, and my brother turned to handle something else. However, my niece has the biggest smile I have ever seen as she leans over, makes a fist with her right hand, and slams it into the forearm of the little boy beside her.

The sermon at my brother's wedding contained the submission text. The pastor also threw in a long piece comparing my brother's future wife to that of a child in that she would act like a child, be a child, and respond like a child. However, she was capable of being my brother's helper. In *Luther's Small Catechism*, we are taught "the wife is the husband's God-given helper;" according to Genesis, "Gen 2:18. The Lord God said 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him'" (*Holy Bible New International Version*, 1984, as cited in in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1991, p. 26). Of course, when the Pastor talked about my brother, he did not compare him to anything. He talked about my brother providing for the family, working on his vehicles outside, and how he would be the adult of the household. His future wife, who was raising three children as a single mother, could not be the adult in the household, but she could always be a helper.

Sometimes when I am bored at church, I tune out the message and play what if in my head. It is an easy game with no wrong answers. For instance, what if Eve had said no? Have you ever wondered? I mean seriously. What would have happened to the institution of marriage, the whole idea that women are to be suitable helpers for men, which evolved from the idea that since Eve was created from Adam's rib, she belonged to him, but what if Eve in a moment of clarity had stood up for herself? What if when God created Eve from Adam's rib, Eve, upon realizing God's intended purpose for the rest of her life, looked up into Adam's deep brown eyes and said, "You know, I think I can do better by myself. I do not want to marry or belong to him, God." Or maybe she could have followed up her statement with a question like, "Do you have another option available? Maybe something that does not involve ownership? I mean, this is my life we are talking about." If it were me, I probably would have asked for a dog instead, a boxer, to be exact.

However bold I imagine Eve could have been on the day of women's collective decided upon fate, I realize the God of my church's (Missouri Synod Lutheran) understanding would have incinerated Eve into a pile of ashes and started over. What if after God incinerated the first Eve, he had tried to create a second woman and then a third or even a fourth woman from Adam's rib? What if each woman created after the original Eve was constructed with the same idea, that this Eve would conform to God's intended plan, but as the pile of ash grew beside Adam, and with each set of Adam's ribs God replaced, God became dismayed. What if, in anger, he had demanded of his most recent Eve creation, "Look, Adam is your only choice. We will write it into history, into that book you will call a Bible, that you agreed to this proposition the first time. Either choose life or become the same pile of ash that has grown up beside us." What if that Eve looked at the accumulated pile of gray cinders beside their feet, then at the beautiful world around her, before looking over Adam to God and said with a sigh, "I really do not want to die. I mean, I just got here." However, what if, in the back of her mind, she had hoped for a different lifestyle, one she could not voice, discover, or fully realize as her own, but on that day, submission was born, and on that day, Eve learned that sometimes there is no way out.

At my cousin's wedding, the Pastor wraps up his sermon in St. Cloud by saying, "Your soon-to-be wife is a sinner. This is why you must love her." In their future lives together, she may commit adultery, love material things, seek jobs that might selfishly advance her career goals, fall away from God and the Church, and finally, refuse to submit to his will. However, her soon-to-be husband was told to love her regardless of her sins because he should forgive her at the end of her life when the tunnel of her past sins is the darkest. He was to walk through the fire or fog, whichever would be cloaking his wife and picking her up. He was to carry her, to stay with her, to the bitter end.

Well, that was a hell of an image. Cautiously, I glance at my children beside me. My oldest son is now flying the airplane on the Galaxy. He is attempting to advance his younger brother into the next world of the game. Sitting in my cousin's church, I wonder if I am crazy. When I left their father, I vowed it would end with me. There will not be another generation of women in this family who will go through what I have gone through. My boys will not do what their dad has done to me. Part of what I wanted to end were the messages of male entitlement, except now I realize those were, in part, passed down by virtue of our chosen religion. At the time, I thought getting them to see and learn that women were worthy of respect would be a start in the right direction. After listening to the past hours' worth of negative messages about women, I am doubtful my influence on these two boys will change anything in their futures.

They were roughly 8- and 5-years-old when I packed up our belongings and fled from their father after his final, failed attempt at marital rape in December of 2008. The first rape happened the second night of our life together, during the middle of the night, in Gillette, Wyoming. It was a small, brown, two-floor hotel just off the interstate on our way to Glacier National Park, Montana, for our honeymoon. We had officially consummated our marriage earlier in the evening, and at 3:00 a.m., most people were sleeping. I was. However, suddenly, I was not. He was almost done by that point. What is there left to do? I rolled over and wiped the tears away.

From 1997 to 2009, I never called it "marital rape." I barely called it marital rape in 2009. I was perpetually conflicted. Was it rape or part of my wifely duty to our marriage that I refused to accept? It was not talked about in our rural community or our church. Who do you talk to when no one talks about what happens in the privacy of the home? The one time I tried to talk about it, the person told me, "Be glad he was interested in you and not another woman. Besides,

he was a young man. He would grow out of it.” Sometimes, I thought something wrong with me that would not allow me to accept that his appetite for sex involved unsuspecting times, which was code for marital rape. As a little girl, I was taught from *Luther’s Small Catechism* that when it comes to marriage, “1 Cor. 7:4: The wife’s body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband’s body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife” (*Holy Bible New International Version*, 1984, as cited in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1991, p. 26). That very Bible verse was sometimes used in wedding ceremonies. If that was true, at what point do I get to say no? At what point was my body mine? Was it ever mine after I said I do?

When I could not reconcile how our marriage was going with what was happening at night, I started drinking. At first, I thought the drinking would dull it. Maybe I would care less, but it required more and more alcohol to get the same effect. Eventually, there was no effect at all. While I prayed for oblivion, I never got it. I never passed out. I never forgot, not once during my drinking career. That was not my story. On March 6, 2008, my coping mechanism would land me in my first Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting, by my own choice, because I knew I could not keep going. Something had to give, and it had to be the alcohol.

In 2023, I was driving home. I had spent the afternoon with a woman I considered to be my grandmother. She was my great aunt and raised my dad as a single mom. On the way home from the last time I would see her, I was listening to a book in my car. I heard something no one had ever said about rape and consent. At least, I had never heard it. I finally had my answer to my perpetual conflict of marital rape vs. wifely duty. Harding (2015) believed one cannot prearrange consent, nor can one gain consent retroactively. Therefore:

A sleeping person cannot consent to sex. . . . Consent cannot be applied retroactively. Ergo, penetrating a sleeping person is always technically illegal, even if that person wakes up and says he or she feels fine about it . . . Illegal acts don't magically become legal just because you're pretty sure the victim of your transgression won't mind. Context matters, but if you misjudge the context, you're still responsible for your actions. So a partner might have forgiven you—even enthusiastically—for waking them up with a sexual act, but they did not, and could not, consent to one while asleep. And if you one day did the same to a person who woke up, felt horribly violated, and called the police on you, it would be because you had, in fact, committed rape. (Harding, 2015, pp. 143–144)

After I left in December of 2008, my husband called in reinforcements: our pastor—the Submission Pastor. I was turning into the barn's driveway at 6:30 a.m. when the Submission Pastor called my cell phone. He wanted to set up a meeting between him, myself, and my husband to discuss how we could get the “marriage back on track.” He followed up with his idea of the problem. “I am fairly certain this is just a miscommunication.”

With the Submission Pastor's last words, I know without a doubt that whatever my husband has said, there was nothing I can say, and if I know anything at all, I know my husband. I know he has expertly crafted his story. He will not be the villain. I also know the Missouri Synod Lutheran faith. Miscommunication is classic code for: “she is overreacting,” “she is not submissive,” “she is not obedient enough,” and “she is not accepting of the way things are in this marriage. She is questioning.” I take a deep breath of air. The musty smells of corn manure filter through my car, even with the windows rolled up and the vents off. I place the car in park. I look at the L-shaped barn in front of me. I can hear metal bars banging, as sows grunt and squeal eager for the feeding time they know is coming.

As Damron and Johnson (2015) have argued, religious communities are not the best places for survivors of intimate partner violence to disclose abuse because they are often not believed and will often shoulder the blame for the abuse. Often, the abuser will purposely distort the scriptural passages, utilize the term submission and women's biblically prescribed roles, reiterate that divorce is not welcome by the church, and all to gain control over their partner

(Mahoney et al., 2015). With the Submission Pastor's voice clear and crisp on the cell phone, asking what day and time I want to meet him and my husband, I know I am screwed if I agree to anything he proposes. My life, my boys' future, and whoever they end up with depends on me. I am not that 18-year-old girl in a horse barn, afraid. She had dreams. I am 30 years old. I am in a job I hate. I have dreams too. I have tried to get out of the barns. He has blocked me every single time. Kendall (2020) believed, "Anger can be cathartic, motivating, and above all else an expression of the innate humanity" (p. 200) of an individual. I take a deep breath. The abuse ends with me. This ends with me... This ends with me. I another take a deep breath. "No," I said. With each word, my voice gets more robust. "I will not participate in a meeting with either of you."

Shared custody was not something that is easily navigated between us. While the courts might think things will calm down eventually, every encounter with their father continues to be an uphill battle even 5 years later. How does one argue on their children's behalf, on any given topic, when the other person is a skilled manipulator? It cannot be done, not when he knows my weaknesses better than I do. Plus, I am still listening to the tone of his voice because that was how I survived for the better part of 16 years. When I need his help with the boys, and I cannot pin him down, I cannot get him to commit. He is unreliable. I do not have the luxury of waiting for him to grace us with deciding to be a parent. One of us must be there for the boys. When I confront him, the only thing that has not changed is that whatever the problem is, it is still all my fault. He can argue in a circular pattern far better and longer than anyone I have ever known. If I do not hang up the phone or walk away at the start of the circular argument, I will likely agree to do what I wanted from him, which started the argument in the first place. It is soul-crushing.

When their father tells our children that Mommy left because she is selfish, she was with another man, or that her school is more important to her than her children are, I hold my tongue. I reassure them that I love them but hold my tongue. When he says I am a bad influence because I question the church, I tell the boys that questioning is okay. They should never accept anyone's word at face value, especially the church. When their father tells them I am the single mother abusing the welfare system for my gain, I tell them my actions should speak louder than any one person's words. Do they believe what he is telling them? Am I doing what he is saying? Do my actions confirm his convictions? When their father's girlfriend verbally assaults them again, and their father denies their reality one more time by saying they misheard her or she did not say it quite like that, I tell them to hold to what they know is their truth. While other parents are cherishing their time with their young children, I find myself secretly praying for mine to age quickly and safely, to end this time we spend in limbo, caught between their father's chaos and total freedom from him. Then as quickly as this thought comes, it is replaced by guilt. What kind of mother prays for their children to age quickly?

I have spent many days wondering if God thinks I am a sinner because I wanted a better life than the one I was given. Since I chose to break the marriage covenant, I have carried the guilt for that decision. How much hell will I have to pay upon my death for breaking my vow? Or will I go to hell? I am not entirely sure why I felt I shouldered the blame alone, but I did. In rural church communities, women may need, as Walker et al. (2015) suggested,

Reinterpreting and reframing [of their] beliefs on divorce, submission, and what it means to be a woman who is cherished in the eyes of God [which] may allow the woman to let go of feelings of guilt regarding her choice to leave. (p. 256)

However, it is a process she must work through. From 2008 to 2017, I had much reinterpreting work to do, and not many people could help.

Although, I never expected my son to come home after his first few weeks of confirmation classes within the Missouri Synod Faith to announce with tears in his eyes that I needed to confess to adultery as I sat at our kitchen table doing my homework.

I put my pen down and looked at my oldest. “You want to say that again?” I asked.

“You got to confess to adultery,” my son said.

Astonished, I asked, “Why would I need to confess to something I did not do?”

He informed me that during their studies of the sixth commandment, the Submission Pastor told the class that unless a member of the divorced couple admitted to adultery, the second marriage by either party would result in everyone going to hell. For my son, this meant my ex-husband, his live-in girlfriend, and I were all headed to hell. My son continued to explain that since I had no one of importance in my life, the likelihood that his father would get married before I would, meant I should be the one to confess to adultery. If I confessed, his dad and his dad’s live-in girlfriend would not end up in hell after they exchanged vows.

“But I will go to hell,” I said. “I will have lied.”

“Yeah, but at least you will not be in hell together,” he said. “Some of you will be in heaven with us.”

“So, you are just going to sacrifice your mother to save your dad because I am not dating anyone,” I asked. What in the hell kind of message is that?

As my son’s big brown eyes teared up and spilled down his cheeks, he said, “I do not want to go to heaven alone.” He then produced the passage the Submission Pastor had discussed earlier. From his red *Luther’s Small Catechism*, he repeated the verse from “Matthew 19:9 Anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery” (*Holy Bible New International Version*, 1984, as cited in Concordia

Publishing House, 2006, p. 82). As I looked over his shoulder, I noticed that above the Bible quote were the words, “God forbids divorce except for marital unfaithfulness (adultery or desertion)” (Concordia Publishing House, 2006, p. 82). Great. Numerous thoughts crossed my mind in rapid succession: Really? Those are the *only* reasons. I guess I will see your father in hell. What does any of this have to do with me? Serious? I will not be able to die one day and get away from this man? I am calling his father and pulling him out of confirmation class. The Submission Pastor is delusional. . . . I force myself to stop. I take a deep breath. Then I remembered who my ex-husband was, and while I was offended, he would not be. Next, I thank God that all my thoughts can happen internally. I take another deep breath.

I turned to my son. “When we go to AA meetings, we say God is love, right?”

My son nodded his head.

“Well, if God is love,” I said, “He will not let you be the only person in heaven. I do not believe God will punish your dad or me for things we did or did not do, either in our marriage or outside of it, or when and if he gets remarried. If God is love, He will be okay with whatever happens, so long as we are all happy and healthy.”

A year later, on a different afternoon, my oldest came home from confirmation excited. I ask why he is so happy.

“Oh, we were having our usual stoning women conversation today,” he said. I immediately regret asking why he is happy. I am unsure I want to know where this conversation will go. “I asked the Pastor why we keep stoning women all the time. I mean, seriously! Those guys were just as at fault. So, I asked him if he thought the punishment was unfair, seeing as how the guys never got punished.”

My curiosity officially perked backed up. Maybe I do want to know. I asked, “Well, what did Pastor say?”

“He said the Bible is never wrong,” said my oldest. “Then he changed the topic! What kind of answer is that?”

Laughing, I said, “Get used to it, Bud. Sadly, that will always be the answer given when Pastor does not like to be questioned. You did good, however. There is no good reason why he cannot answer your question. So, you keep asking.”

Initially, I went to Crossview Covenant Church, a Swedish Lutheran Church in North Mankato, because a friend of mine’s mother had passed away. I was surprised to see a woman lead the service and even more surprised to see an obituary service where the congregation shared their memories of the deceased. After the funeral, I listened online to 2 years of past church services. I kept scanning for the same messages I had heard as a child: disobedience is never justified, guard, subdue, submit, do not question, or burn in hell for all of eternity. No matter how far back I went, the message was not there. During one sermon, the lead Pastor talked about being on a golf course with a group in which one group member was a divorced woman. Somehow, they began to speak of the Pastor’s position at the church. The woman had said, “I do not go to church. God does not want me. I am a woman, and I am divorced.” The lead Pastor said, “If she ever changed her mind, she should come to his church because his God did not judge divorced women. His God did not judge anyone. His God was about love.” A week later, I started to attend Crossview Covenant Church. I wanted to meet his God. I was curious.

Crossview Covenant Church was the first to give me a small yellow book called, *Keeping the Faith: Guidance for Christian Women Facing Abuse*, by Marie Fortune. I found relief in that small yellow book for the first time in years. Fortune (1987) argued that to accept what happened

“as purposeful, as your cross to bear, as God’s will for you, is to allow yourself to be a victim. You do not deserve to suffer abuse at the hands of a member of your family” (p. 24). I was stumped. Could God believe that? I took that little yellow book home and read it cover to cover. Once I got through, I started the book over and reread it. The day I broke free of my guilt for breaking the marriage covenant was the day I fully grasped the meaning behind the words:

Any man who brings violence into his family life is putting asunder the marriage covenant that God has blessed. The violence is what breaks up the marriage, and the one responsible for the breakup. The actual divorce is in fact only the public acknowledgement of the private truth that a marriage has been long since destroyed by abuse. So if you consider whether or not to get a divorce, while it is a painful choice no matter what the circumstance, you are not taking steps to break up a marriage. Emotionally, that has already happened. You are taking steps to let other people know what has happened, to remove yourself and your children from a destructive situation, and to get on with your life. (Fortune, 1987, p. 42)

Therefore, I did not break up our marriage. I merely took steps to acknowledge publicly what had already been known privately and emotionally for years. I was removing us from a destructive situation and moving on with our life. For 2 years before I left my husband, I threw up daily. My body knew I needed to leave that marriage long before I could wrap my head and heart around how I would get us out of that situation, but that does not mean I failed. Leaving does not make me responsible for his actions. Leaving does not make me the villain in some Christian story. The day the implications of Fortune’s (1987) words fully sank in, I got free. God and I would be okay for the first time in a very long time.

The context section will provide background information for the autoethnographic story above. The context section will utilize the newspaper archives from *The Free Press* of Mankato, Minnesota, other relevant archival newspaper information, historical and mission-centered information surrounding the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, historical and mission-centered

information surrounding Crossview Covenant Church, and other necessary contextual background information to support and provide more detail for the autoethnographic story.

Perspectives from *The Free Press*⁴

As I looked at *The Free Press*'s newspaper archives for 1977, I wanted to set a small amount of context for what was happening in my community the year before I was born. As I read the articles, I quickly realized one thing was for sure: not much has changed in terms of the entrenched rural mindset. At times, viewing the various articles and the editorials made me wonder how I ever bought into the idea that I had any rights as a woman. Do not get me wrong: In some areas, Minnesota made swift progress. For instance, a program called the Rape Crisis Center (1975) announced that they would offer telephone and personal counseling options to victims and possible sensitivity training for police officers handling rape cases in January 1975. According to Herman (2022), these were established as a direct result of the women's movement. They were organized outside medical or mental health institutions. They were considered grass-roots efforts to assist rape victims with everything from emotional support to being a medical and judicial advocate. In other areas, my rural community failed to let go of entrenched ideas centered around women.

Planned Parenthood Clinic

On January 10, 1977, a Planned Parenthood Clinic officially opened in Highland Park, St. Paul, Minnesota, which ended a year-long uphill battle to keep abortion services out of the state ("Parenthood clinic opens," 1977). The clinic expected to complete roughly 1,000 abortions in the first year alone I never would have guessed we had a Planned Parenthood Clinic where abortions could be completed in 1977. I do not even think it was something we were taught in

⁴ Many English language newspapers worldwide use the name "*The Free Press*" or just "*Free Press*." In this dissertation all references to *The Free Press* are from the newspaper published in Mankato, Minnesota.

high school. We barely learned about women getting the right to vote. We did not learn about feminism in high school in 1992–1996. Abortions happened in places where they were bombed, like down south, but not in Minnesota, at least not in the 1990s.

Women's Studies Association

Women's Studies have taken off across campuses around the United States, with the first National Women's Studies Association Convention in San Francisco in January of 1977 (De Lesseps, 1977). However, Minnesota State University, Mankato (formerly Mankato State University) offered its first Gender & Women's Studies classes in 1970, with the first undergraduate minor available in 1975, a Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science in 1980, and the Master of Science in 1986 (Minnesota State University Mankato, n.d.).

The First Domestic Violence Shelter Pilot

In February of 1977, Senator B. Robert Lewis of St. Louis Park—a member of the Minnesota Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party Caucus or DFL—authored a bill that would provide for four emergency shelters and support services—two in the Twin Cities, one in the northern part of the state, and one in the southern part of the state—for battered women, which would be the first 2-year pilot program of its kind for the state of Minnesota (“Bill Would Give,” 1977). The program would also create community education programs, increase public awareness, and gather data on the severity and frequency of abuse. Minnesota would become the first state nationwide to provide financial support to women's shelters for domestic violence because of the 2-year pilot program legislation authored by Representative Phyllis Kahn and Senator B. Robert Lewis (Minnesota Women's Legislative Library, 2008b).

The Equal Rights Amendment

The Equal Rights Amendment was on everyone's minds in the 1970s. At the national level, the farming industry is not ready to treat women as equals, even though the law has adapted so that it is not unusual for a woman to drive tractors, own half the farm with her husband, co-sign loans or balance books ("Farm Women Not Quite Equals Yet," 1977). Male farmers are not ready to say their wives are equal in the work they produce or that their wives are an integral part of the farming business itself. Therefore, the wives should not be treated as equals within the farming business, even though the husbands need them for assistance running the farm, balancing books, and for loans obtaining power to purchase much-needed equipment to keep the farm running. I wish the writer would have asked at what point the wife would be considered equal.

By the late 1970s, the fight for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) is in full swing. Kilpatrick (1977)—who seemed to be against almost everything in his editorials during the 1970s—argued,

The steam has leaked out of the drive for ERA. Several explanations may account for the waning enthusiasm . . . [the] unbroken string of cases the Supreme Court has been nullifying . . . that discriminate by reasons of sex. State legislatures have been repealing archaic laws in the field. Sexual discrimination and employment already is prohibited by law . . . the increasing wariness of state legislatures . . . No one knows exactly what is meant by "equality of rights under the law," and no one knows what federal legislation might be "appropriate" to enforce these rights. (p. 18)

My question would be: how can he even ask those questions? How do men, who have full and equal rights and the ability to enforce their rights under the law, have any of these questions? Would not the same standards, rights, and enforcements that apply to them as men be extended to the other half of the population, females? How is this difficult to grasp? Nevertheless, these types of editorials give credence to the idea that equal rights for women are too complicated.

That somehow equal rights for women mean fewer rights for men. What? How? How is it possible that by giving women equal rights, we somehow take rights away from men? How does passing a few laws, such as sexual discrimination, cover what the Equal Rights Amendment would guarantee could never be taken away from women again?

Sexual discrimination, sexual harassment, and even rape laws are all legal maneuvers a woman will very seldom, if ever, obtain enough justification and believability to file a case legally and without recrimination. If she somehow manages to enter the legal area seeking vindication for a wrong committed against her, she will have to hurdle the endless double standards that will only apply to her as a woman, as her believability will be constantly accessed with every word uttered, every choice of clothing worn, with every decision ever made to date, and all will be aired in full for the media, the court, the court of public opinion, her community, and probably in her own home. That is what nullifying and repealing a few archaic laws will get her. There is no promise of Equal Rights for women guaranteed by our constitution.

In October 1991, Anita Hill, an African American law professor, went up against an all-White and all-male Senate Judiciary Committee to discuss the sexual harassment she endured when she worked for the Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas (Pruitt, 2021). Their careers converged at the U.S. Department of Education in 1981, when Clarence hired Anita as his special assistant, and ironically, the duo worked in the Office of Civil Rights (Pruitt, 2021). Later, when Clarence moved to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), Anita moved with him as his assistant, where the same sexual harassment behaviors continued (Pruitt, 2021). In 1983, Anita left Washington to become a law professor in Oklahoma (Pruitt, 2021). Of course, Clarence Thomas won a lifetime position in the Supreme Court because Anita was eviscerated by the questions she received and ultimately, not believed. All those men pretended

they had never heard sexual harassment language before. They made her repeat it and repeat it again on national television. In 1991, I watched that hearing. I knew precisely what Anita was talking about at 13 years old, so how did they not know?

Twenty-seven years after Anita Hill, Christine Blasey Ford tried to stop President Trump's Supreme Court nominee by telling another Senate Judiciary Committee her truth (Sweetland Edwards, 2018). Unfortunately, Christine Blasey Ford's testimony regarding the rape she suffered at the age of 15 by Brett Kavanaugh, 36 years prior, would not stop him from obtaining a lifetime appointment as a Supreme Court Justice in 2018 (Sweetland Edwards, 2018), any more than Anita's truth could stop Clarence Thomas in 1991. John Cornyn of Texas, the second highest-ranking Senate Republican in 2018, would be recorded as saying,

Any woman can ruin a man's life. . . . Every female's got a father, some have a husband, some have a son. . . . I would think they would want those people treated fairly just like we want Dr. Ford treated fairly. (Sweetland Edwards, 2018, para. 9)

As if the rape did not ruin *her* life. As if testifying and telling her truth did not *ruin her* life. In contrast, he obtained a position that would determine the laws that would affect the fate of women for generations to come. But by all means, we do not need the Equal Rights Amendment because those sexual discrimination, sexual harassment, and rape laws that got passed in the 1970s seem to be working for us.

Soliciting Versus Sirens?

In 1977, Mankato police arrested four men for soliciting an undercover prostitute, which came after women's groups and the Minnesota Civil Liberties Union started attacking metro police units for only arresting women for prostitution and leaving their male customers alone ("Four Men Face Soliciting Charge," 1977). On the night of the sting, the four men arrested for solicitation ranged in age and location, the 49-year-old was from Kasota, the 30-year-old was from Mankato, the 43-year-old was from Waseca, and the 59-year-old was from Mankato with

not one of them living more than 45 minutes from Mankato. No one could claim they did not know the area.

The arrest of those four men set off an editorial sexist support platform in *The Free Press* in 1977. Even I was shocked to see it. In the first editorial, the writer called the arrest of the four men a Victorian double standard (“Proxy Doxy,” 1977). Next, the writer compared the prostitute to a drug dealer, a mere distributor. Therefore, the writer asked if it was appropriate to arrest the drug addict, the user of her product. That question caught me off guard because one of the men was also arrested for “possession of a controlled substance” (“Four Men Face Soliciting Charge,” 1977, p. 17). Unless the man arrested for the controlled substance was arrested for—oh, I do not know—Special K Bars or chocolate chip cookies, it is safe to presume that the cops were indeed arresting people for drug possession in Mankato, Minnesota, in 1977. Nevertheless, the writer does not stop there but went on to discuss the out-of-town undercover policewoman, which I suspect may be the real source of the rage.

The writer asked a long series of questions, which essentially boiled down to a kind of woman blaming, except what kind of blaming of a woman would it be in this situation? Slut shaming/blaming? I am not even sure. The questions resembled what men and women asked of rape victims in 2023. Was it her fault? How was she dressed? Did she ask for it? Did she lead the rapist on? The writer asked the following questions:

What was it about the woman that gave four men the temerity to individually negotiate for her wares? Was she dressed provocatively? Did she talk and act in a brazen manner? Was her garb, in short, calculated to resemble the sort commonly associated with hookers? (“Proxy Doxy,” 1977, p. 14)

The writer finished with the pronouncement that while the arrests may not equal entrapment, it was an *enticement* to commit a crime, a “victimless crime” at that, which ended with men

arrested because of an overzealous law enforcement—or so the writer claimed (“Proxy Doxy,” 1977).

The second editorial was titled “Siren’s Song” (Ekstam, 1977). While I do not know the gender of the first editorial writer, I suspect it was a male. In the second editorial, the writer provides his name and address, a Mankato resident. According to Ekstam (1977), the arrest of four men by a woman pretending to be a prostitute was a huge injustice, especially since the result would lead to damaging circumstances for the men. Ekstam (1977) felt the entrapment of the Mankato police department was a “conduct more abusive than the law it pretend[ed] to uphold” (p. 18). Ekstam suggested that Mankato residents take a hard look at their police force because, according to him, the law might not have been broken in the first place if the “enticement” had not been there. It was interesting how she was even denied a gender in his last paragraph. She was nothing more than an enticement. I do wonder if the man had a wife or daughters. What did they think of his editorial?

Shortly after the arrest, three of the men asked for a hearing to debate the issue of entrapment by the Mankato police force and their usage of a policewoman as a prostitute to determine if it was legal or if the men’s rights were violated (“3 Arrested for Alleged Soliciting,” 1977). The fourth man who was arrested, the 43-year-old from Waseca, had his charges dropped, as he agreed to go through an information probation program instead.

The 49-year-old Kasota man and the 30-year-old Mankato man pleaded guilty to soliciting in a court of law (“2 Plead Guilty to Soliciting,” 1977). Judge Miles Zimmerman fined both men \$250 and placed the duo on a year’s probation. Both men waved their right to a hearing scheduled to debate the issue of entrapment. The “siren” from the earlier editorial also appeared in court for the hearing. *The Free Press* described the young woman as:

The 25-year-old green eyed University of Minnesota policewoman wore the outfit to court today that she had worn at the time she met Lyons and Abdo and Mettler's Bar April 16th. The long brown hair and a simple knee-length skirt and blouse, she had the appearance of a college co-ed. Ironically, her blouse was imprinted with the words "police squad" in tiny letters. ("2 Plead Guilty to Soliciting," 1977, p. 19)

The Free Press also detailed how she picked up the men and how extensively the men knew and were familiar with the other female patrons at the bar, who did solicit services at Mettler's Bar, noting a blonde that charged \$20, and an African American that charged \$50 ("2 Plead Guilty to Soliciting," 1977). Mettler's Bar is Mankato's long-standing strip joint, something that has not been mentioned in any article thus far regarding what kind of service they carry out within the bar. Judge Zimmerman does admonish one of the men for going to Mettler's. He believed Mettler's was not doing anything beneficial for that young man or the town.

Judge Zimmerman's comments produced a rebuttal in the paper from the owner of Mettler's Bar and Restaurant, Rene "Fritz" Maes ("Maes Terms Judge's Statement 'Degrading,'" 1977). Maes insisted that his establishment had been a locally owned and family-orientated business in Mankato for the last 70 years. Maes also took the opportunity to remind the community that they had spent several hundred thousand dollars to assist Mankato by assuring their restaurant offering was relaxing and unique. Mettler's bar also offered what Maes described as "adult entertainment at night, which is surely more highly entertaining and artistic than many of the sex or violence type movies being shown on Mankato screens or TV sets in homes," ("Maes Terms Judge's Statement 'Degrading,'" 1977 p. 17). Maes stated they were aware of the prostitutes utilizing their bar but were told they could not deny anybody services. Also, they could not judge a woman to be a prostitute and be wrong. Therefore, what were they to do, which was why Maes felt the Judge's comments were unfair and degrading to his business.

The final piece from *The Free Press* on the problem ran in the newspaper as an advertisement. Fourteen area businesses banded together to run a full-page ad congratulating

Mettler's Bar & Restaurant for their new accommodations and the fine food, drink, and entertainment ("Mettler's Bar & Restaurant," 1977). The whole top page of the ad is a photo of the main dining area, lounge, and stage I assume the large stage is the main stripper's stage, although the ad does not identify it as such. Four smaller photos are lined up below the main large photo. The first shows their hot food service bar, the second shows their salad bar, the third shows their game room, and the fourth shows their brand-new go-go dancer's stage. The go-go dancer's stage is much smaller than the main stage, so I can only guess that this stage is secondary. They also included two pictures of their go-go dancers, a Miles Kitty Singing Exotic—in a thin sheet; and a Venetia, listed as Mankato's favorite, in her dark-colored bra. Of course, the women are placed to the right of the Mother's Day brunch special. The bottom portion of the ad lists the 14 businesses that participated in the construction and furnishings while wishing R. "Fritz" Maes the best. In 1977, although Mankato seemed to be making progress in areas like a Rape Crisis Center and there were Women's Studies courses at Mankato State University (now Minnesota State University, Mankato), it is fair to say they still have a way to go yet.

The Methodist Divorce Ritual

On the bright side, a Task Force for the United Methodist Church out of New York proposed a divorce ritual in which the divorcing couple would gather before the altar, pastor, family, and friends to exchange vows of gratitude for the blessings of their time together, for charity, and forgiveness, after which their rings would be moved to the right hand (Behrens, 1977). Rev. Jeannie Audrey Powers argued that too often, the Christian community failed the divorcing couple by placing guilt on them for the breakup, treating them as though they were a threat to the well-being of other marriages, judging them, and for refusing to offer the divorcing

couple the gift of community, as they face a difficult time in their lives (Behrens, 1977).

Probably more out of curiosity, *The Free Press* asked the local Methodist Pastors their thoughts on the newly proposed divorce ceremony advocated by Rev. Jeannie Audrey Powers and the Task Force for the United Methodist Church (“Pastor Who Headed,” 1977). The two pastors were divided right down the center. One pastor felt it was a good idea that the church should support divorcees, and predictably, other pastor thought divorce should be handled like the failure that it was and should not be given special attention.

Obey Versus Equality in Marriage Section

The wedding section of *The Free Press* seemed to appear monthly almost religiously with the latest fashions, tips, and news for brides. In one edition, the following words were printed:

“We believe that personal independence and equal human rights can never be forfeited . . . that marriage should be an equal and permanent partnership and so recognized by law” . . . This is not an excerpt from a modern marriage ceremony but from a marriage conducted in 1855 by between Lucy Stone, a suffragette who kept her maiden name throughout her life and her groom, Henry Blackwell. At the request of the couple, the minister also omitted the word “obey” from the marriage vows. (“Equality in Marriage,” 1977, p. 24)

Although “obey” may have been removed from the vows in 1977, I do not think marriage equality has come as far as the newspaper seems to think. If so, it took a severe step backward by 1997. Although we may not use words like obey, subservient, or say the wife is property of the husband (“Equality in Marriage,” 1977) how far have we come? Have we moved past Lucy Stone’s time to true equality, or are we fooling ourselves? Are we not just subbing the words of her time for more words that mean essentially the same thing, that is, submissive, submit, subdue, protect, and belong? What about religions that continue indoctrinating children with old ideas of male privilege at the expense of female individuality and freedom?

The Lutheran Dispute

The nation's two largest Lutheran groups—the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) and the American Lutheran Church—were at odds over a research dispute centered on conservative versus modern doctrine and the ordination of women (“Conservative vs. Moderate,” 1977). Due to the dispute, LCMS recommended a complete severance of its ties with the American Lutheran Church. The dispute was not the first time LCMS had taken drastic measures over its preference for a literal interpretation of the Bible. In 1974, LCMS fired the President and most of the Concordia Seminary faculty in St. Louis, Missouri, which was their largest seminary (“Conservative vs. Moderate,” 1977). Following the actions of LCMS, the students walked off campus with the exiled faculty to hold classes at other seminaries nearby. The main problem developed when Rev. Dr. John Tietjen, Concordia President, and LCMS moderate, advocated that the literal insistence on the Biblical stories—such as Jonah and the Whale and Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden—was unnecessary (“Conservative vs. Moderate,” 1977). The stories should be considered as moral lessons and not literal interpretations.

Lutheran Church Missouri Synod History

For the dissertation, I will use this subtitle: Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. However, when I was involved in the congregation, the church was referred to as either the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod or the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church. At the time, we used them interchangeably. However, I will try to stick with the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod or The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

The Synod officially began on April 26, 1847, when 14 congregations and 12 pastors gathered in Chicago, Illinois, to sign a constitution for a new church body called “The German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, of Ohio, and Other States” (The Lutheran

Church—Missouri Synod, n.d.-c, para. 3). On its 100th anniversary in 1947, the fellowship changed its name to The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

The word “Lutheran” in the church name comes from Martin Luther—a German monk—who became famous for posting the “Ninety-Five Theses” to the doors of the Catholic Church on October 31, 1517, sparking the Reformation (Nafzger, 2009). The documents would later be published in the *Book of Concord* in 1580, solidifying what Lutherans taught, believed, and confessed. From the Book of Concord, Martin Luther created *The Small Catechism*, designed for the heads of the household as a guide for Christians (Barry, n.d.-b). Most editions now contain an explanation, which means that the book also holds questions, answers, and quotations from the Bible to help support the six main topics of the book: the 10 Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed, the “Our Father” (The Lord’s Prayer), the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, Confession, and the Sacrament of the Altar (Barry, n.d.-b). These are the main points that every teenager must know, study, and memorize to be confirmed into the faith.

A few of the central sticking points for those who believe in the teachings of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod are that Jesus Christ is Savior and Lord, the existence of the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and that there are two doctrines of Holy Scripture, the Law—the Old Testament and the Gospel of the New Testament (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1973). However, they “reject . . . that the Gospel is any message or action which brings good news to a bad situation” (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1973, p. 1). The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod also believes that there are no errors or contradictions within the Bible and that all parts of the text are infallible. Regarding Original Sin and Adam and Eve, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod maintains that they were real people and that the Fall of Man was an actual historical event. According to *Luther’s Small Catechism*,

“the Bible is God’s own Word and truth, without error” (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1991, p. 4). Therefore, a literal interpretation is often the chosen perspective when reading the Biblical text.

Therefore, the final sticking point for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod membership is their view of women and any possibility that women might ever lead or hold a role of leadership within the congregation (Barry, n.d.-a). First, they believe the Bible has instructed them that women are not to be given any of these responsibilities. In support of this opinion, they quote several Bible passages such as 1 Timothy 2:11–12: “Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent” (Barry, n.d.-a, p. 1). The text from 1 Timothy 2:11-12 does not match the text in the *Holy Bible New International Version* (1984). In fact, in a general search of YouVersion’s website, a website that houses 3,056 different variations of the Bible (YouVersion, n.d.-b), I noticed there were 11 different possibilities for Biblical quotes that sort of resembled the text quoted above. However, I was more alarmed that there was not an exact match, especially for a congregation that believed the Bible was without error as stated in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod tenet above. The closest I could find was the New King James Version (NKJV) 1 Timothy 2:11-14 which stated, “Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence” (YouVersion, n.d.-a). This discrepancy made me wonder. Why are they (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod) not utilizing the exact text when holding women to their positions? Why change the text at all? They (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod) also used text from 1 Corinthians 14:33-34, 37 to justify why women cannot lead:

As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak but should be subordinate, as even the law says, . . . what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. (Barry, n.d.-a, p. 1)

In looking at the above block quote, the quote matches 1 Corinthians 14:33-34, as found in the *Holy Bible New International Version* (1984). It is only the last few words, “what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command” (*Holy Bible New International Version*, 1984, pp. 1204–1205), that are slightly shifted. While the last adjustment in the block quote is not as curious as the first quote, these tenets are nevertheless nonnegotiable for the congregation members regardless of how they are supported.

Lutheran Church Missouri Synod—The Role of Women

Besides raising girls and young women into their roles as suitable helpers for their future husbands and indoctrinating them into the submission verses found in Ephesians 5:21-23, 25 (*Holy Bible New International Version*, 1984, as cited in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1991), there are also set roles for women. While both men and women were created in God’s image, they have two distinctly different job duties and responsibilities according to Scripture. Men are to be husbands and fathers with a divine obligation to be the spiritual leader in all realms, but most especially in the church. In contrast, women are to be wives and mothers and are only called to assist men in their spiritual leadership capacity of the church. According to The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (1968), the role of women is not a human rights issue or even a matter of discrimination against women. It is merely a matter of following what the Bible has taught them with the creation of man and woman.

When I was growing up, I remember when my grandmother’s church finally gave women the right to vote within the church. I was born in 1978. I remember she fought for the right to vote, but that vote in Good Thunder, Minnesota, had to have taken place in the late 1980s before we moved back to the area during the summer of 1990. While researching The Lutheran

Church—Missouri Synod, I was surprised to realize when suffrage at the national level took place in the church. According to the Project Wittenberg Report conducted by The Commission on Theology and Church Relations (n.d.), which was established by The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (1968), suffrage came before the head leadership board numerous times. However, it began early for the church's leadership because they have a record of men checking into the Biblical accounts for suffrage as early as 1895 and 1897. Maybe their women were not as submissive as they thought. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (1968), claimed that voting rights for men and women were not equalized in the United States until 1928. However, the 19th Amendment was passed in 1920, granting women the right to vote (National Geographic, n.d.). The only other act passed shortly after 1920 containing some portion of voting legislation was the Indian Citizen Act of 1924, which gave Native Americans a chance to vote (National Geographic, n.d.). However, of course, there were no teeth within the act's enforcement (National Geographic, n.d.).

With the passage of the 19th Amendment, the issue of suffrage was brought before The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod at the 1938 convention (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1968).⁵ Only one delegate objected to the idea that women must not be allowed to vote. Although the vote failed, they did agree to develop a group to study the matter further, but no one was officially appointed to carry out the study. Fifteen years fell to the wayside before suffrage reared up again as a topic for debate.

At the Houston Convention of 1953, they asked for an appointed committee to study two Biblical passages, 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2, and any other text related to women's

⁵ The following overview of key moments in the role of women in the Church is primarily based on The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (1968).

suffrage. The report was to be given to the convention for consideration once completed. At this time, the congregation would continue to restrict voting to men only.

At the St. Paul Convention in 1956, the delegates accepted the study commissioned during the 1953 Houston Convention. Despite the study finding no evidence in the Scriptures as to why women cannot vote, the group developed five resolutions to firm up the previously accepted position that women should not be allowed to vote. Also, at this convention, they established the congregational voter's meeting, where congregations would draw up regulations, vote on, and administer the congregation's affairs, allowing each church body to operate as it saw fit. Women were not allowed to attend, but they were allowed to give their opinions if ascertained on important issues by men prior to the congregational voter's meetings. It was believed that women were not resentful off their exclusion from voting membership within the congregation and that if it were to change, only evil results would befall a church that had been blessed for more than 100 years. As to what kind of evil results would befall the church, they do not specify, nor do they elaborate.

In San Francisco in 1959, Houston's appointed committee from 1953 presented their findings again after reviewing the relevant materials and speaking with those both for and against voting rights for women. The report does not say if the people they spoke with were male and female, all male or all females. I assume that they would have only interviewed men. The committee reported the following:

Scripture teaches that for the administration of these matters two principles must not be violated: (a) women must not engage in preaching or in publicly teaching men in the church; (b) whatever participation of women in congregational affairs is granted, the principle must be upheld that women do not usurp authority over men, 1 Cor. 11: 2-16; 14: 34-36; 1 Tim. 2: 11-15. (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1968, p. 6)

They also made one last stipulation, if a congregation had already given women suffrage, they were to cease and desist immediately. The position of women was clear or so they thought.

At the Detroit Convention in 1965, another committee convened to determine if the four separate arguments submitted for women's suffrage had merit (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1968). The Biblical passage of Galatians 3:28, which had not come to the surface before, suggested that the children of God had a relationship with Christ and each other, thereby not canceling the order of God's creation. Remember: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod takes the literal interpretation of the Bible very seriously. Considering the new Bible passage, it was decided to wait until the newest committee's findings report to determine if there would be a change to women's suffrage (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1968).

The 1967 convention in New York determined from the study completed by the 1965 Detroit Convention that some change may be allowed (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1968). They declared that nothing in the scripture stopped women from voting, thereby officially passing women's suffrage within The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. However, this did not mean women would be allowed to hold office because holding office would violate the principles outlined in the order of creation.

In 1967, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod passed the right for women to vote. However, I would have been 10 years old in 1987. While I distinctly remember my grandmother and the women of her church organizing to get the right to vote, I am unclear on the exact year, except that it happened before we moved to the area. Therefore, if we moved to Good Thunder, Minnesota, in the summer of 1990, and I remember the vote happening before our move, that means it took—depending on where the vote fell—at least another 20 years before the women in Good Thunder, Minnesota, were granted suffrage at my grandmother's church. 20 years! That tells us a lot about the prevailing gender norms and ideologies of the rural community into which

I was about to move in 1990. On Saturday, August 16, 1997, I would take my marriage vows in that church, fully believing that I had equal rights in my marriage, community, and church.

Lutheran Church Missouri Synod—Squashing Dissent

In 2015, the current Lutheran Church Missouri Synod President Matthew Harrison was finally able to oust Pastor and Professor of Theology Matthew Becker from the congregation after numerous failed attempts (Fowler, 2015). During the summer of 2015, Becker was informed he was no longer a clergy member and had two weeks to defend himself against expulsion (Patrick, 2015). Ultimately, Becker decided not to defend himself and was promptly expelled from the Missouri Synod on July 15, 2015 (Patrick, 2015).

Becker teaches at the independent Lutheran institution, Valparaiso University, in Valparaiso, Indiana, a university known for being more moderate (Fowler, 2015). Since the 1990s, Becker began to question the denomination's stance against the ordination of women, which had placed him in the hot seat many times over the years (Fowler, 2015). More recently, he has also questioned The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's literal interpretation of Adam, Eve, and the Creation Story (Fowler, 2015) considering different theological and scientific evidence, which culminated in a published essay and a formal charge being placed against him (Patrick, 2015). Professor George Heider, Head of the Department of Theology at Valparaiso University, said:

“Universities of the church are one major place where it does its thinking” . . . he [Heider] finds it troubling any time divisions in the church lead to such harsh results. Both he and Becker agree that it is a theologian's job to pose and wrestle with the difficult questions about faith. (Patrick, 2015, paras. 22–24)

Luckily for Becker, the expulsion did not affect his position of 23 years at Valparaiso University.

Unfortunately, President Harrison's election in 2010 marked an ideological shift for the conservative Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, as they moved into an even more conservative

stance with little room for movement (Fowler, 2015). For instance, after the tragic shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut, President Harrison “asked a church pastor to apologize for participating in an interfaith vigil. The church’s constitution prohibits members from taking part in worship services that blend the beliefs and practices of Lutherans with those of other faiths and Christian denominations” (Fowler, 2015, paras. 20–21). It is unfathomable given the nature and scope of that tragedy, that a pastor from any community or faith tradition would not be looked to for guidance during such horrific sorrow. A pastor should be someone who bridges differences, seeking to bring people together for unity. However, he was not expected to even attend let alone take part in an interfaith vigil after so many innocent lives died. What does that say to the parents of the children who died and are of different faiths than The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod?

Lutheran Church Missouri Synod—Today

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has roughly 9,000 pastors, 6,000 congregations, and 2 million baptized members worldwide (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, n.d.-a). They estimate that The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod baptized 21,087 children while confirming 1,545,124 into the faith (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2018). The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is known for *The Lutheran Hour*, a syndicated radio broadcast spreading its message worldwide. *The Lutheran Hour* began on October 2, 1930, and is the “world’s oldest continually broadcast[ed] Christ-centered radio program” (Lutheran Hour Ministries, n.d., para. 4). The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod also controls the editorial calendar at Concordia Publishing House, the third largest Protestant church-owned publisher in the United States (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, n.d.-a).

Crossview Covenant Church

Crossview Covenant Church is part of the Evangelical Covenant Church of America denomination, as they hold an appreciation of Christian heritage, connecting people to Christ, and wanting to assist in the development of that new personal life or spiritual experience with Christ for oneself (Crossview Covenant Church, 2022). The Covenant's historical roots in Christianity can be found in the "Protestant Reformation, in the biblical instruction of the Lutheran Church of Sweden, and the great spiritual awakenings of the nineteenth century" (Crossview Covenant Church, 2022, para. 5). They are Apostolic in that they confess and believe the faith of the apostles. They are Christian in that they see themselves as part of the universal church of Jesus, through grace alone and faith alone from the days of the apostles until the present time. They are Evangelical because they were born out of Europe's revival movement of the 17th and 18th centuries.

One of the main reasons I stayed with Crossview Covenant Church was the belief in a mission-orientated focus, its social justice focus, and belief in "the reality of freedom in Christ. The Covenant Church focuses on what unites followers of Jesus Christ rather than what separates them. The center of our commitment is a clear faith in Jesus Christ" (The Evangelical Covenant Church, 2005, p. 18), true unity over division. Plus, women have rights in this church. During a sermon on marriage, I heard the lead pastor discuss mutual submission. Some biblical scholars believe the Bible advocates for mutual submission, not the exclusive submission of the wife to her husband (Follis, 1981; Ross, 2020; Scanzoni & Hardesty, 1992). Supposedly, "mutual submission is more authentically Christian because both spouses recognize that they must follow Jesus Christ's model of self-sacrifice and other-centeredness in family decision-making

(Bartowski & Read, 2003)” (Ross, 2020, p. 280). Mutual submission sounds a lot more equalitarian to me.

Linkages

I now discuss the academic linkages that bring together the autoethnographic story and the contextual information for further academic analysis. I will examine academic associations through misogyny, patriarchy, rural patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity.

Misogyny

According to Clark (2015), Mainline Protestant Churches are those that trace their roots to Europe during the Middle Ages and are also those who subsequently left or protested the Roman Catholic Church—that is, the Reformation, Martin Luther—yet comprise many Christian churches in the United States today. However, it is also the Mainline Protestant Churches that have struggled the most with Biblical issues of authority, the roles of men and women, modern culture’s attack on the family, the role of social justice within the church, and dwindling numbers of Christians appearing in church on Sundays (Clark, 2015).

With the church’s struggles, it is unfortunate that IPV is not consistently recognized for its potentially dangerous situation. Damron and Johnson (2015) argued:

It is not uncommon in [their] experience for a religious leader to be very confident that IPV does not occur at all in his or her religious community because the abuse is so well hidden and[/or] because religious leaders often do not have the training to be able to identify signs and symptoms of IPV. (p. 5)

What religious communities may fail to recognize is just how much of a role a religious institution plays in reinforcing IPV through cultural constructs, ideologies, and manipulation, which forces individuals into giving up their most basic needs for safety, often to their detriment (Clark, 2015). Misogyny is at the heart of those religious constructs and ideologies. Clark (2015) argued that until churches could overthrow their cultural view of masculinity and ideologies that

endorse the oppression of women, misogyny would continue to support the institutions and cultural views that prevent women from being empowered. Damron and Johnson (2015) believed clergy need to fully understand how abusers can twist Scriptural texts and other cultural aspects of religion to maintain power over the victim.

According to Ross (2020), male domination over the female species began with the stories in the Genesis book. Eve was created from Adam's rib, making her second of God's creations, versus his being the first of God's creations. As the second created, this is also where the justification comes for why women cannot be leaders. The woman was not created first within a literalist interpretation of the Bible. Rayburn (2015) argued that Adam's naming of Eve and the usage of his rib in her creation indicated to some enforcers of patriarchal views that a woman owes everything to man, including her very existence. Therefore, women would be nothing without the control, possession, and guidance of men. Further, Eve's alleged actions in the Garden of Eden will forever keep women one step removed from God compared to that of men, especially since the Fall of Man is considered Eve's fault (Ross, 2020). However, taking a narrow view of only Eve's role, accountability, and disobedience, utterly circumvents and negates Adam's role as a willing accomplice in sinning against God's command (Rayburn, 2015).

Sadly, for women, misogynous ideologies in male-dominated and/or patriarchal societies have plagued women for centuries. Rayburn (2015) believed our inability as a society to break free from—considering the periods and cultures—the misogynous ideologies and beliefs have proven to be highly “reason-resistant prejudices against women” (p. 30). Aristotle believed women were inferior to men, reducing what women could create in the womb to mere matter only (Rayburn, 2015). According to Aristotle, a man gave the baby form. Socrates warned men

that if they were living immorally, they would be brought back in the next life as a woman and that if sexual equality were obtained, democracy would fail (Pappas, 2003; Rayburn, 2015). In ancient Greek mythology, the Gods and man co-existed peacefully until Zeus created Pandora—the first woman—to punish Prometheus with a closed container full of every evil for mankind. According to Rayburn, in Hebrew society, a woman’s worthiness to her husband was based on her ability to produce male children. Unfortunately, the ability for a woman to be herself and to be treated with respect as a woman was rare in biblical times, with the perception and attitude transferring right up to the present day.

When misogyny flourishes in faith-based institutions through the governing bodies’ tacit blessing, the abusive behaviors and attitudes towards women become locked in place (Rayburn, 2015). Men define themselves as superior, and women owe obedience and unwavering loyalty. M. Johnson (2020) maintained that men’s attitudes toward women—misogynistic ideals and gender traditionalism—support the likelihood that they will be involved in intimate terrorism, that is, IPV. According to Clark (2015), the marriage and submission text is:

Used by abusive men as well as some male church leaders who suggest that a woman has no option but to submit to her husband—regardless of his oppression. “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the savior. As the church submits to Christ, so wives should submit to their husbands in everything (Eph 5:22–24).” (p. 201)

When scriptural text is taken out of context and misapplied to perpetrate continued abuse and oppression, the victim is abused twice, once by the man with the abusive behavior and the second time by an unforgiving and punitive male God (Rayburn, 2015). The second opens the door for many questions when the woman leaves her abusive partner.

Patriarchy

According to Kilmartin (2015), the factor that ties the different interconnected mechanisms regarding the abuse of men’s power can be attributed to sexism, privilege,

entitlement, patriarchy, and toxic masculinity. Of course, Kilmartin considered patriarchy the overarching factor that ties all men's power abuses into one interconnected mechanism. Often patriarchy,

is expressed in the dominant conscious and unconscious values and beliefs assigned to men and women, social customs, economic arrangements (Kilmartin 2010b), and in what historian Gerda Lerner (1986) terms the 'leading metaphors' of cultural systems. . . the most important of these metaphors are theologies constructed around male gods and religious authority, which place women into positions of subservience. (Kilmartin, 2015, p. 16)

Those cultural metaphors are picked specifically from Scriptural passages because of how they can be used to enforce power and control.

Fortune and Enger (2005) developed the term *proof-texting*, which means using a selective passage from the Bible, primarily out of context, to justify one's actions or to bolster a particular claim. According to Mahoney et al. (2015), the scriptures most often used to validate an intimate partners agenda are those that pertain to submission, divorce as bad, the specific roles of women, and the reasons as to why men have authority over women (Damron & Johnson, 2015). To do this, men who use violence against their partners will often proof-text scripture to insist on their partner's forgiveness (Ross, 2020). Other times, when a woman does seek help from a pastor, that pastor may also use proof-texting to recommend the woman stay, pray about their situation, and try harder to be a better wife rather than leave an abusive situation (Ross, 2020). Proof-texting provides easy and accessible rationales for patriarchy to keep women in line.

Rural Patriarchy

Walker et al. (2015) described a rural location best when they said it simply lacks people. Swierenga (1997) strongly advocated that religion and church defined rural communities. These are also notoriously closed communities, as families are known within a historical and social

context, which often includes religion, and outsiders are viewed with distrust (Walker et al., 2015). According to Walker et al. (2015), rural areas' access to good-paying jobs, health services, critical services, a natural environment, and other items that make for a healthy community are primarily out of a rural community's control. Another factor that is not uncommon for those in rural locations would be to take a very literalist view of the Bible without regard to context, which leads to beliefs of submission in all circumstances for women and wives, and divorce as unacceptable except in cases of adultery (Walker et al., 2015).

Often, religious communities are not safe places for survivors of IPV, especially if the survivor speaks with the Pastor, believing the information disclosed will stay confidential (Damron & Johnson, 2015). However, the Pastor may mistakenly believe they are doing a good deed by informing the abuser of what was said in confidence. When a pastor underestimates the seriousness of an IPV situation by telling the abuser what was said in confidence, it could have severe ramifications for the survivor (Damron & Johnson, 2015, p. 6). If a woman has tried everything else and still chooses to move forward with a divorce:

Most women report that this also would mean losing their primary support system, as deciding to leave the marriage would mean leaving the church due to 'congregational condemnation' of divorce. Further, this may leave the woman feeling guilty and alone because, while she may know that she does not deserve to be treated so horribly, she is somehow 'going against God' by leaving the relationship. (Walker et al., 2015, p. 252)

According to Rayburn (2015), the possibility of a woman buying into the messages with which she was raised, those through society, religion, and her husband, can be just as devastating and damaging to her sense of self.

One thing that Walker et al. (2015) advocated for on behalf of all survivors was that when the survivor sought help from a professional for the abuse she endured, her faith, religion, and spiritual context should also be considered critical in the healing process. While a survivor or woman can switch churches and find new religious communities after the abuse, she will need

assistance reinterpreting her beliefs (Walker et al., 2015). If a survivor can reinterpret and reframe her belief on divorce, submission, and what it means to be a woman loved by God, this may also allow her to release her feelings of guilt more readily regarding her choice to leave the marriage (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000; Knickmeyer et al., 2010; Sharp, 2010; Wang et al., 2009).

Hegemonic Masculinity

As a strong-arm enforcer of patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity appears in the assigned expectations of rigid gendered roles within some conservative religious institutions. For the conservative religious institutions that focus on the creation stories, Adam and Eve, and the story of the Original Sin, there is also a tendency to push women towards subservience and submission within marital relationships (Ross, 2020). The “union in a Christian context. . . often [means] subscribing to a whole set of religious tenets and beliefs around the nature of heterosexual relations, childbearing, childrearing, and obedience to authority” (Ross, 2020, p. 270). Those tenets and beliefs are ones protected by religious leaders, organizations, and lay persons when an issue of abuse was brought forward but was viewed as an attack against the religious organization, especially if the abuser held a position of power in the community, was viewed as a pillar of the community, or held a position of power inside the church (Damron & Johnson, 2015).

Unfortunately, religions are not immune to using religious justification for gender-based violence, and therefore, churches are not immune from the classic victim-blaming strategy (Kilmartin, 2015). It is not unusual to hear that “she” must have misbehaved and deserved the punishment she received. In religious settings, women are told to remain silent, not make waves, or to disagree if they publicly receive adverse treatment from men (Kilmartin, 2015).

Applying Holland's Theory to Misogyny and Religion

I will now look closely at Holland's (2006) *A Brief History of Misogyny: The World's Oldest Prejudice* to determine his theory regarding how misogyny affects the institution of religion, which would also affect the single mother trying to leave an abusive situation.

Holland (2006) traced what he deemed was the tenacious prejudice—misogyny—from its inception through the 1900s by contemplating religious texts, philosophical texts, and historical and archival documents. Holland believed it was the rise of Christianity, the endorsement of the Doctrine of Original Sin, which was:

A product of the confluence in Christianity of three powerful currents in the ancient world: Greek philosophical Platonism; Judaic patriarchal monotheism; and Christian revelation, as expressed in the assertion that Christ was the son of God, and that in him God himself became incarnate and intervened directly in human affairs. (Holland, 2006, p. 19)

At the heart of the story is a dual process of dehumanization, in which women can occupy a state of grace with God—such as the Virgin Mary—or fall away from God into the reality of being and sinfulness of which Eve will always be held responsible (Holland, 2006). Holland (2006) believed Plato's Theory of Forms provided the philosophical basis for Original Sin, the Fall of Man, and the allegory of Pandora, with the act of conception as the ultimate falling away from God's perfection, the highest good, for a world of suffering and death, all because of woman's intervention. Plato's Theory of Forms made misogyny philosophically respectable for Christian thinkers influenced by his work in their view of women (Holland, 2006). Aristotle, Plato's pupil, would take misogyny further into scientific respectability. Holland cautioned that although Aristotle's work and doctrines dominated Western thinking for close to 2,000 years before the scientific revolution pushed them aside, its effect in solidifying misogyny's scientific respectability must not be underestimated.

Holland (2006) argued that the God of The Old Testament's divine disapproval was a powerful addition to misogyny's arsenal. However, the New Testament God was remarkably different and mellowed in comparison. According to Holland (2006), "the parables and proverbs attributed to Jesus, as recounted in the Gospels, is the absence of both misogyny and vengefulness. Women were among his first followers" (p. 79). Jesus seemed to be the only one who did understand women's experiences rather than judge them by a rigid code. After Jesus was crucified, the disciples fled while the women stayed to pray on his behalf. Jesus appeared first to a woman, Mary Magdalene (Mark: 16:9), not to a man. According to Holland, Jesus's attitude towards women was revolutionary, and as a result, women played a dramatic role in spreading early Christianity.

From Holland's (2006) perspective, Christianity leveled the moral playing field for women. Adultery became a sin for both the husband and the wife. Both men and women were expected to marry for life, women were less likely to be forced to marry, and virginity became a buzzword. However, even marriage and virginity would fall into an increasingly misogynistic vision over time. For instance, marriage would become the best way to defend against unwanted desires. At the same time, St. Paul would equate sanctity and celibacy with virginity but would not recommend that for all Christians. In the third century, as Christianity struggled to define itself, a new concept was born, salvation, which could only be achieved by rejecting sex. In the background, a series of wars had weakened Rome internally, and two significant epidemics struck the cities and the countryside, killing off a quarter to a third of the population. Despite decades of despair and death, Christianity hit a period of rapid growth with over 6,000,000 members at roughly the same time (Holland, 2006).

Since Christianity had become a religious and cultural powerhouse, it began to assume the role of an established religion in the form of Catholicism, with a Bishop in Rome and a clerical class determined to control women (Holland, 2006). The first item of business for the newly formed Catholic Church was to define the fixed spheres of everyday life in which men and women could participate. As one might be able to guess, women's love of Jesus, their energy in continuing his mission and commitment, all of which contributed to the rise of Christianity, would go unrewarded and absolutely would not be granted through a position of power in the newly formed Church about to be headed by men only. Instead, women were funneled into monastic institutions.

While it may sound like a lonely alternative, the monastic institutions offered women a viable alternative to marriage and childbearing. The price was merely life-long chastity and often a harsher way of life, but it was a price many women would gladly pay to learn to read and write. According to Holland (2006), "By the eleventh century, convents had become a major educational resource for women" (pp. 107–108). In 1250 Germany, there were 500 convents with an estimated 25,000 to 30,000 women. It was also not uncommon for some sisters to rise to considerable positions of power, hearing confessions and overseeing institutions as abbesses, sometimes ruling over men.

However, by the start of the 13th century, many of the abbey lands were lost, and Pope Innocent III decided it was time to place some parameters on women's role in the Church. Communities where monks and sisters lived together were abolished (Holland, 2006). Until then, the priesthood had not officially been closed to them, but that quickly changed. St. Thomas Aquinas declared:

Women cannot be in authority over men and that “the superior male essence” was necessary to become a priest for “Adam was beguiled by Eve, not she by him.” It was necessary for the priest therefore to be male “so that he did not fall a second time through her female levity.” (Holland, 2006, p. 109)

After this point, only priests would be able to hear confessions (Holland, 2006). By 1347–1350, the Black Death had swept Europe, killing an estimated 20 million individuals (Holland, 2006).

In the 14th century, Pope John XXII was a true believer in witchcraft and demons, providing critical support for the existence of demons where there had been none before at the highest levels of the Catholic Church (Holland, 2006). As a result of that support, women would pay the ultimate price. For the next 300 years, women would be burned at the stake for accusations of being called a witch and for the Church’s belief in demons.

According to Holland (2006), the landmark text in the history of misogyny, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, or *Hammer of The Witches*, was written and dispersed in 1347. However, it was not a landmark text because it had anything new or original in terms of misogynistic output; it became a landmark with the invention of the printing press because it became helpful in spreading one of “the most lethal forms of ignorance, fear and prejudice ever to manifest itself” (Holland, 2006, p. 117). Holland (2006) brought forward a question that must be asked:

How is it that women came to be demonized for close to 300 years in a society where learning and the arts were entering one of their most fruitful periods, and the scientific, philosophical, and social revolutions in Europe would soon transform forever how people viewed themselves and the world? Another way of looking at this question is to ask why it was that misogyny, so long a fundamental element in Christian thinking, took on its most lethal form at a time otherwise associated with great human progress? (p. 127)

So, if it is not misogyny, then what was it? The Catholic Church, more than any other institution in history, has held the opportunity to transform how men view and treat women right up to the present day. They may have lost the intellectual argument with the scientific field, but they still hold enormous sway and moral influence over millions (Holland, 2006). No matter the century,

at the heart of misogyny is the “dehumanize[ation of] women through restrictive definitions of what their ‘true’ role supposedly is and in making sure they are confined to it” (Holland, 2006, p. 227). Of course, the ultimate mechanism of control is a woman’s body; her subordination depends upon it. Male patriarchal power depends upon it too.

Does Holland Confirm, Embellish, or Contradict Single Mothers’ Experiences?

In this section, I will consider if Holland’s (2006) work embellishes, confirms, or contradicts a single mother’s experience—both internal and external—with the chapter’s institution of focus on religion through the autoethnographic experiences, the contextual information, the academic analysis, and Holland’s theory provided below.

When it comes to misogyny, as Holland (2006) presented it concerning religious institutions and their role, I am inclined to side with Rayburn (2015) in that misogyny has been a thorn in the side of womankind—within religious institutions and spiritual establishments—throughout history for far too long.

Recently, I came across a sociological study by Slade et al. (2023) in which they sought to find out how many people experienced religious trauma and how many people were presently suffering from religious trauma at this very moment. Slade et al. (2023) agreed with Rossman (2000), a physician, who suspected that toxic religious training might be one of the most unrecognized causes of mental and physical illness. As a result, the North American Committee on Religious Trauma Research’s definition of religious trauma was utilized, which stated:

Religious trauma results from an event, series of events, relationships, or circumstances within or connected to religious beliefs, practices, or structures that [are] experienced by an individual as overwhelming or disruptive and has lasting adverse effects on a person’s physical, mental, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. (Slade et al., 2023, p. 7)

To collect their data, Slade et al. (2023) launched a survey that netted them 1,669 completed responses. They also made a deliberate effort to release conservative results to avoid

sensationalism. Participants for the study consisted of 52% between the ages of 18–34 years old, with 23% between the ages of 35 and 44 years old; 51% White, 25% Black, 11% Hispanic, 8% Asian; 70% heterosexual, 12% bisexual (Slade et al., 2023). Of all the respondents, 65.1% suffered from religious trauma and 37% of participants believed they knew someone suffering from religious trauma (Slade et al., 2023). Slade et al. (2023) believed it could be argued that as “many as one-in-five (20%) U.S. adults presently suffer from major religious trauma symptoms” (p. 19). Respondents reported victim-blaming, witnessing public shaming by a religious leader and/or other congregation members, and being a victim of public shaming by a religious leader and/or other congregation members (Slade et al., 2023).

Koch and Edstrom (2022) created a survey and corresponding scale to help practitioners and those in clinical settings determine when they are working with an individual who has experienced spiritual abuse and may be suffering from the consequences of it. To test the survey, they supplied it to 4,914 participants who clicked on the link, of which 1,692 did not qualify (Koch & Edstrom, 2022). In reviewing their results, they realized,

The highest factor correlation is between controlling leadership and embracing violence (0.764), which may indicate that controlling leaders are more likely to use fear and terror to motivate religious decisions and loyalty. They may also be more likely to support or tolerate violence, either real-life or biblical accounts of violence, to maintain their authority and power. (Koch & Edstrom, 2022, p. 494)

This would align with everything Holland (2006) has put forward. If misogyny is the world’s oldest prejudice, it is the basis and foundation of many institutions today. Religion is the number one offender and indoctrinator for the most extended amount of time.

West (2006) believed churches should be held accountable for policies and teachings that focus solely on the subjugation of women, as well as seek out organizations and institutional practices that deny women a voice. Also, women need a better understanding of how the Bible is continuing to be used and manipulated and how these also affect religious practice and

spirituality so that we can stop the traumatization of women (West, 2006)—and the traumatization of the next generation. Holland (2006) was ahead of his time in drawing the distinctions between religion and misogyny. We need to draw the distinctions between religion, misogyny, and branding because no woman should have to live in shame and guilt for making a life choice to leave an abusive situation.

CHAPTER V: INSTITUTIONAL OBSTRUCTIONS

I begin Chapter V with an autoethnographic story I feel best encapsulates my internal and external experience as a single mother, with this chapter's primary focus on institutional obstructions to allow for a wider net of institutions to be discussed. Also, because there is a lot of overlap and interconnectivity between the institutions, I have chosen to go with the headline institutional obstruction. It was also challenging to separate them, given their interconnectivity of effects and obstructions. Next, I will provide context for the autoethnographic story through the newspaper archives found in *The Free Press*, other archival items of note, and supporting contextual background information. After I provide the necessary contextual information, I will add the academic linkages capable of bringing the autoethnographic story and the contextual information together for further academic analysis. Next, I will look again at Holland (2006) to determine if and how his theory regarding misogyny relates to the institutional obstructions of focus, which affects the single mother internally and externally. Finally, I will consider if Holland's work embellishes, confirms, or contradicts the single mother's experience with the chapter's focus on institutional obstructions through autoethnographic experiences, contextual information, the academic analysis, and Holland's theory provided below.

Story—MENding the First Year

On a blustery fall evening in 2012, two men came to speak to my sociology class on family violence at Minnesota State University, Mankato (MNSU). One of the two men was Chuck Derry, co-founder of the Gender Violence Institute in Clearwater, Minnesota (Gender Violence Institute, n.d.-a). Chuck was also a co-coordinator of the Minnesota Men's Action Network: Alliance to Prevent Sexual and Domestic Violence, a program initiated by the Minnesota Department of Health and in collaboration with Men as Peacemakers and the Gender

Violence Institute, both of Minnesota. The Minnesota Men's Action Network aims to develop viable strategies for preventing sexual and domestic violence by promoting male leadership throughout Minnesota. Chuck's partner for the evening was Ed Heisler, Co-Executive Director of Men as Peacemakers from Duluth, Minnesota. Ed was also a co-coordinator of the Minnesota Men's Action Network: Alliance to Prevent Sexual and Domestic Violence.

I glanced around the room and realized that only 25% were female. My professor must have opened this class up to the other sociology classes. Our class was roughly 85% female and 15% male. However, then again, we had one male who was a pain from the get-go. He wanted to be an officer, but he took great pride in disrupting every class for the sole purpose of disputing whatever statistics our professor brought forward. For instance, if the professor told us of a rape statistic from the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN). In response to the statistic presented, the male future officer would ask, "What was that?" The statistic might be the fact that an American is sexually assaulted every 68 seconds (RAINN, n.d.). He would follow up his initial question with: "Does that include false reports, those that flat-out lied, or those that wanted attention? What about those who made bad decisions? I mean, those should not count. One every 68 seconds is dramatic, do you not think?" Every class period with him was a lesson in patience for the female professor. The narrow-mindedness, the do-nothing attitude regarding gendered violence, and the gendered stereotypes he peddled as truths constantly reminded the female students in our classroom of the larger world around us. The future officer thought he was correcting the problem by stating *his* truth, not that he was precisely the problem women face every day when they are routinely discredited, untrusted, and told they are liars. Surprisingly, I noticed he sat four rows across from me and two rows back from the front. I am shocked he has even bothered to attend. Well, he should make the class interesting.

“Men who sexually assault or batter women rely on other men to remain silent and do nothing,” said Chuck as he pushed his gold wire-rimmed glasses up the bridge of his nose with his thumb. He strides closer to the opinionated future officer and asks,

“Do you realize abusers rely on our doing nothing? They rely on it. It is how they keep their women under their control. In many cases, they get those women to move back in. Except, I believe we can help. By that, I mean men.”

I glanced at the future officer. He does not say anything, only listens intently. Interesting. Support was one thing I did not have when I left my husband. I did not have much in the way of assistance either. If anything, if people—man or woman—knew my husband/ex-husband, they stayed clear of me with a 100-foot pole, literally. This odd social exclusion—from people I had known very well or thought I did—continued for many years past the divorce, up to the day my youngest son graduated from high school, a good 12-plus years. They would not even acknowledge my presence if it were just me and them standing in a check-out line at the grocery store. At least I did not have to manufacture small talk. That was over. About the only people willing to come anywhere near me: my mom, immediate family, one or two friends from my married days, my AA friends, and other single moms. However, my mom, a barn friend, AA, and single mothers stepped it up when I needed help the most.

Part of my problem was that my husband was a multi-business owner. We owned a snowmobile shop in the evening with another couple. He owned a mowing business he ran all spring, summer, and fall in the evenings—but employed his father, myself, and my closest friend for mowing, which was not optional employment. It was mandatory for me and, in many ways, for my friend. She jokes that it took a divorce for her to retire from mowing. However, my husband considered everything a business transaction or a tradeoff, and I do mean everything. I

kept the kids all winter while he worked at the snowmobile shop. During the spring, summer, and fall, my friend and I would mow, trim cemeteries, and tear down groves. He considered this “my free time away from the boys.” Roughly 80% to 90% of the time, he got a sitter to watch the boys if I was away working for him and then kept the cash, we brought in. When I would get home later in the evenings, I would once again be responsible for my children’s food, care, and bedtime procedures. It was a rare occasion when he took it upon himself to care for our children. The year after the divorce, a single mother AA friend directed me to buy Bancroft’s (2002), *Why Does He Do That?* Bancroft (2002) stated:

No abusive man does his share of the work in a relationship. . . . Uncompensated labor from her means leisure for him. . . . The abuser comes and goes as he pleases, meets, or ignores his responsibilities at his whim, and skips anything he finds too unpleasant. In fact, some abusers are rarely home at all, using the house only as a base for periodic refueling. (pp. 201–202)

From the moment I picked up the book, I swore he (Bancroft) had married my ex-husband. Bancroft (2002) filled in the holes for why my marriage looked the way it did, which at times, was a blessing. Finally, I had the answers. However, reading his book came with a tangled internal mixture of denial, to this was not my fault, to anger—nobody told me about these things in high school, to cursing—because damn it, to a bawling session—I mean seriously, and then to overwhelming and all-consuming guilt—why did I not know better? How could I have let this happen for so long? While Bancroft’s book was written for anybody to pick up, read, and understand quickly, I could only pick it up for half an hour before I was reduced to tears. I felt so guilty I could not keep reading. It would take a day or two to pick it up again, but I had to keep reading. My life depended on it.

I worked for my husband adjacent to my actual second job, where I was a freelance reporter for the community newspaper that covered four small towns, of which I was responsible for two of those four towns. On any given week, I had two to three stories I regularly turned in

for publication. During the day, I worked full-time at the local hog barn while he co-led a third business he did not own, which was agricultural in nature. His company fixed the hog barns, hauled the animals out of the barns, mowed the grass around the barns, and in some cases, placed the cattle to graze around the hog barns, which of course, were the very same barns I was employed at. He was everywhere, all the time. If he was not, he had informants. He had an unnerving and rather unsettling habit of knowing what I did, where I was, and whom I was with, on any given day, at any given time.

Prior to the day I left, I had been doing my homework. I already managed to meet with a lawyer and not get caught. I set up a private bank account, had gotten a second cell phone, and a separate mailing address, all of which had been completed earlier the month before. I was at the deep end of an ice-cold lake, barely treading water, fearing hypothermia in November 2008. How long do I wait? Do I go? Should I wait? What am I waiting for? When do I go? Where do I go? Am I crazy? Do I tell someone of my plans? Who? Who is going to believe me? What if they tell me I am crazy? Should I wait for a sign? What sign should I wait for? How will I know if that is the sign? Every day, there were hundreds of questions in my head circling over and over. By this point, I had been throwing up every day for 2 years. There was nothing I could do to stop throwing up, and there was nothing medically wrong with me. Maybe the puking was the sign, and I was missing my chance.

Finally, I sat down with that mowing friend after Thanksgiving in 2008. I took her to dinner. One of her children watched mine that evening as I laid out my case for leaving my husband. I explained that when I needed to leave, I would need her help to get our things out as fast as possible. I remember she took a deep breath, but she was not surprised by what I told her.

I would let incidents and problems slip out over the years of our working together, not only while mowing but also in the hog barns. She agreed to help. One more problem down.

Next, I had to let go and wait. As it turned out, I would not have long to wait. I had been making excuses not to have sex for the past 3 days. I knew I was pushing it. I was risking a forced sexual encounter, which is what I called them back then. Sure enough, just like clockwork on the fourth night, I woke up to him on top of me, except that time I fought him off. That was the only time he did not get it. He was pissed. He said things. He slammed things. He threw things. He banged things as he left for work to drive a semi. It was the most violent I had ever seen him get over a refusal. It was then that I knew I had to act. If it was not for his having to be somewhere for work, I knew with utter certainty that next time I would not win. Suddenly, leaving was placed into motion. I had one problem left, well, two problems. I needed a place to go, and I had to tell my mother.

I called Mom at her job and asked to go out for lunch at BW3's. She was immediately suspicious, but I played down why I was coming to town: early Christmas shopping. I could not have her calling my husband. If he got an inkling that anything was up, I was not sure when I would get the chance to run again, probably not before the next attack, which for all I knew would be that evening. Calm and composed, I entered the glass doors of BW3's, but one look at me, and I knew she knew something was up. The waiter barely left our table before she said, "What is it? Just tell me." Damn, Mom's radar.

By December 2008, it had been over 5 years since my dad died. I was unsure he would have been on my side that overcast day. I hoped that if he had lived, he would have been. Except I could not get the dad of my teenage years out of my head. He constantly feared I would make him look bad by getting pregnant before marriage, or living with a boy before marriage, or

getting pregnant before marriage. Maybe it was better that he was not here. After all, a divorce would make him look bad. He could not be disappointed if he were not here to witness it.

However, with my mom, I had no idea where she would stand, with me or with my husband. She was a wild card. I was Mom and Dad's first child. As a youngster, I often confused their ages with their age when they had me, which resulted in my telling more than a few teachers that my mom was 21. Although at 30 and about to leave my husband, she was 51 and dating again. Our family dynamics have changed a lot since Dad died. Would she let me leave my husband? Would she let us come live with her? It was a big ask.

I laid it all out for Mom. She had witnessed the verbal and emotional abuse to some extent. She often wondered how much a parent should step in and when a parent should let the kids work it out. I could not blame her; to be fair, there were times in our marriage when she stepped in. She probably saved my life on one occasion.

A year after my first child was born, my husband's day job rented a bus and took all of us to a casino for the annual Christmas party. Before we left my son with the sitter, I was already feeling off. I was nauseous, and my side hurt from time to time. Since this was *his night*, saying anything about my pain was pointless, so I did not. As Bancroft (2002) argued, abusive men have high emotional demands that are continual and constant, not because they are needy or clingy, but entitled. My physical pain would have taken away from his entitlement to the center of the world, to my time, my space, my caregiving, and my duties as a spouse at his company party representing him, and if I voiced my pain, that pain would have made me center of attention. By this point in our marriage, I know the rules.

When we left the casino that evening, I could barely move. I was clammy and more nauseous than ever. The 2-hour ride back to our truck with a side that screamed in pain over

every bump in the road left me silently practicing my breathing exercises from giving birth a year earlier. I had no idea what else to do. He was oblivious to my pain, talking to his co-workers and carrying on. During the short drive to our house, I told him I needed to see a doctor. Something was wrong. He insisted I was okay. After all, the sitter needed to get home, he had said. Who would watch the baby? Plus, you will be fine in the morning, he had said.

By the time I managed to shower, crawl up the steps to our bedroom, and find a way to lay back in our bed without bringing on more pain, he wanted it. I told him no. I hurt too bad. I cannot. He did not much care. He took it anyhow. All I could do was squeeze my eyes shut, hold my breath, and take short gasps to keep from passing out. When he was done, he rolled over to face the wall. I prayed for an end to the pain.

The next morning, my son was up bright and early.

My husband nudged me to get up. "Go take care of him," he said. "Don't be lazy."

The pain wrenched from side to side as I grabbed my stomach, barely reaching a seated position. "I do not think I can," I said.

"Oh, that is shit," he said. "Go get him," as he rolled back over to face the wall.

I do not remember how my son and I got down the steps that day, how we arrived at the kitchen, or even how I managed to feed him in the dining room afterward. Three hours later, my husband and I are arguing over whether I need to go to a hospital. I can no longer pick up my son. At 13 months old, picking him up brings such excruciating side pain that I am quickly reduced to tears. I must put him down for fear I will drop him. I called my mother. She comes straight over.

She does not even fully enter our house. She barely breaches the kitchen, rounds to enter the dining room, takes one look at me, and turns toward my husband, "You will take my

daughter to the emergency room,” she said. “You will leave right now. I will take my grandson. Go.” She pointed to the doorway behind her—end of discussion.

My appendix was removed that Sunday. Following the surgery, my son went to daycare during the day. My friend or Mom came over at night after their jobs to help care for him, especially since I could not lift over 10 pounds for 2 weeks. None of us saw my husband before 9 p.m. because our son was asleep by then.

Mom had probably witnessed more than she realized over the years, even the total lack of disregard and accountability to a partner. After all, she had been the one to take me to the emergency room when I lost my first child to a miscarriage too. My husband could not take me at 5:30 p.m. He needed to prepare to sleep. He was to drive a semi in the morning.

“Besides, this is a girl thing anyhow,” he said. “Can’t your mom take you?”

He woke me up the following day and told me to prepare for work. I had to explain that I was told to take 3 days off. “For what?” He had asked, as if losing a baby was no big deal.

When it came to telling my mother about the forced sexual encounters, that was just downright uncomfortable. I asked, “Was it my fault? Was it rape? Was it just a part of marriage? Was every wife forced to have sex when they did not want to?”

“No,” Mom said. “Your Father never once did that to me. Not once.”

An hour later, we agreed that the boys and I would stay at her house. I would grab them from daycare, bringing them directly back to her. Then my friend and I would load up what we could, as fast as we could, in her Blazer for the move to Moms. In the end, we made precisely one quick trip to Mom’s.

As we stood outside my friend’s Blazer in the dark, depositing her blankets in the back after the move, I said, “We have to go back and tell him it is over.”

“Oh no,” she said, “tell him by phone. No.”

“This has to be done in person,” I said. “No one wants to hear I want a divorce by phone. We have to go back. Or . . . I will go back with you or without you.”

She took a deep breath, then looked at her Blazer. “Get in the car,” she said. As she drove out of my Mom’s driveway, she rolled down her window, popped a Marlboro Light into her mouth, and lit it. As silence descended upon us, she lit one cigarette after the next until we arrived at my marital home 10 minutes later. We waited another 10 minutes in my dining room before my husband arrived at the house.

“What are you two up to?” He asked as he entered the house.

I let him walk through the kitchen, the dining room, and towards the living room before I said from the dining room table, “The boys and I will be living at Mom’s house from now on. I am leaving.” My friend got up and walked to the kitchen.

His first response was not why, what can I do, or where did things go wrong. He said, “You will never make it on your own.” The tone of his voice was dead flat. His hazel eyes flashed black. He put one foot on the step to go upstairs. He motioned me to follow him to our bedroom, but I knew I must stay in the dining room. I promised my friend I would stay where she could see me from the kitchen. I do not have to look back to know her hand is on her cell phone, holstered to her side. “Not with two kids. It cannot be done,” said my husband—his usual argument. I cannot. “You cannot get a college education without me. You cannot get a different job without me. There is no reason to leave. You are overreacting.”

“Really,” I replied. “It has been 11 and a half years. What good has come out of marrying you? I raise our kids by myself. I work in a God damn hog barn. I have tried to return to school

three times, but there is always an excuse. You always have an excuse. I am tired of the excuses. We will be at mom's, and the kids will remain with me every night this week."

As I moved to the kitchen, he said, "What if I kill myself tonight?"

My friend's eyes go large. She heard his question. I slow my progression to the kitchen, my door to freedom. I know we do not own guns. I hate them with a passion. I have never allowed them on our property. Plus, he thinks too much of himself to follow through, or at least that was what I was willing to bank on at that moment. His statement was about guilt and control. It was not a true statement about the possibility of him hurting himself. He wanted me to feel responsible for the possibility of his choices if I walked out that door. He thought I would be scared enough to stay if I thought he would kill himself. Not this time. I am too angry. Determined to call his bluff, I look back, square up, and meet his blackened gaze. "You do what you have to do," I said.

In the Blazer, between puffs of smoke, my friend asked, "What if you are wrong? What if he does?"

Back in our classroom, Chuck and Ed speak with us about a new project they launched called the MENding Project, where male business owners can take the initiative and support women affected by sexual and intimate partner violence (Gender Violence Institute, n.d.-b). Chuck and Ed's motto for the MENding Project is, "Some men are ripping the fabric of our communities apart through sexual and domestic violence. Some men are repairing the harm" (Murray, 2013, p. B1). In 2010, Mankato witnessed a stream of horrific and brutal deaths because of intimate partner violence, which did not allow the community to pretend that the violence behind closed doors was simply a one-off event. That year, domestic violence was in

the Mankato community's face. Plus, the failure of our law enforcement and judicial systems was in full view.

On January 17, 2010, Shawn Haugen, 28, broke into the rural family home of Chester (Chet), 59, and Anna Gronewold, the stepfather and mother of Ashley Sullivan, 25, in Lewisville, Minnesota (Nienaber, 2010l). Ashley's sons, the oldest, a 6-year-old, and her youngest, an 18-month-old, were at the farm (Neinaber, 2010l). As a side note, there are conflicting reports on whether the 6-year-old was at the farm that day, as early newspaper accounts have him there and later ones do not. Just before 8 a.m. on the morning of January 17, 2010, Shawn Haugen entered the Gronewold home killing Chester (Chet) Gronewold by blunt force trauma to the head and fatally shooting Ashley Sullivan, his ex-girlfriend and the mother of his 18-month-old child, before shooting himself (Nienaber, 2010k).

On the late Sunday morning of March 28, 2010, Joel Marvin Munt, 33, of Burnsville, Minnesota, killed his ex-wife, Svetlana Vladimirovna Munt, 32, of Mankato, Minnesota, by ramming her car with his SUV into a tree, effectively pinning Svetlana's car, impeding her ability to escape in Rasmussen Woods, west Mankato, Minnesota (Nienaber, 2010d). Joel Munt exited his SUV, shot her several times, and proceeded to take the children (Nienaber, 2010d). Before March 28, 2010, a judge had granted Svetlana an order for protection from Joel Munt, resulting in Svetlana and the children residing at the facilities known as the Committee Against Domestic Abuse (CADA), Mankato's domestic violence shelter, for six months (Murray, 2010e). Authorities speculated that since Joel's visitation orders provided him access to the children every Sunday for two hours, Svetlana may have been headed to CADA when the encounter with Joel occurred (Murray, 2010e). CADA is quite literally within minutes of Rasmussen Woods (Murray, 2010e). CADA hosts Mankato and Blue Earth County's only Keep Me Safe location

for parents to drop off and pick up their children through a safe exchange so that noncustodial parents can visit with their children in a safe environment through their supervised parenting time program (CADA, n.d.-b). There are two ways into the Keep Me Safe program, one is through a service provider, judicial, social services, or the like, and the other is self-referral, which is an excellent option for those people who are experiencing or have experienced a contentious custodial dispute and want a few extra safeguards in place for custodial exchanges (CADA, n.d.-b).

Around 6 a.m. on August 31, 2010, James Mervin Nibbe, 26, of Lake Crystal, Minnesota, was found dead (Kent, 2010). His wife, Jennifer Lee (Gilman) Nibbe, 33, and her teenage son had been home at the time of the shooting, initially reported as a burglary. Jennifer was a surgery nurse at the Mankato Surgery Center. James was an apprentice at Maple River Electric. James and Jennifer Nibbe had been married on May 24, 2008. Prior to meeting James, Jennifer had been a young single mom. She finished high school in 1995, and James finished in 2002, both graduating from Lake Crystal Welcome Memorial High School (Kent, 2010). Jennifer went to college. In roughly 2005, she purchased the farm home and land from her uncle (Nienaber, 2010f). Between 2008 and 2010, everything fell apart.

Only days after her husband's funeral, Jennifer was arrested in the parking lot of her employer, the Mankato Surgery Center, for the shooting death of her husband (Murray, 2010f; Nienaber, 2010m). According to officers, parts of Jennifer's story were not matching up (Nienaber, 2010m). Jennifer claimed she and her husband were not having marital problems, yet Jennifer's cousin told officers that Jennifer was unhappy (Nienaber, 2010l). Jennifer was sexting another man even though she supposedly loved her husband. Next, Jennifer was obtaining large amounts of prescription pain medicine and spending roughly \$1,000 a month, which meant she

was possibly thousands of dollars in debt (Nienaber, 2010m). The final evidence pointing to Jennifer's guilt was the \$250,000 insurance policy on her husband, issued in June of 2010. However, it was determined that James Nibbe was aware of the life insurance policy taken out in the event of his death (Murray, 2010f).

The final brutal murder occurred October 28, 2010, when Tyler Andrew Wicklund, 23, of Elk River, Minnesota, slashed the throat of his former girlfriend, Jessica Buboltz, 20, of Kasota, Minnesota, before picking up their 14-month-old daughter and fleeing Jessica's apartment (Murray, 2010c). Tyler and Jessica ran into each other at a party in her apartment complex earlier that evening, where he convinced her only wanted to talk about their relationship. Tyler was not arrested until October 29, 2010, when his grandmother called the authorities. She thought Tyler was suicidal and had confided to the officials that he had killed Jessica (Nienaber, 2011d). When the officers searched the grandmother's home, they found blood-stained socks (Murray, 2010c). When they searched Tyler's body, they found blood-stained feet and legs (Murray, 2010c).

By 2012, the Wicklund, Nibbe, and Munt murder trials were in the news, either finishing up or just beginning, but as a community, we needed solutions. The co-founder of the MENDING Project, Chuck Derry, claimed he had something that could help. He motioned for his partner to adjust the overhead projector to reduce the blur on the screen. While his partner fiddled with the knobs, Derry said, "The MENDING Project is about coordinating a broad range of community-based pledges from men who own their own business, or even male-orientated businesses, for pro bono or discounted goods and services for specific things a woman might need like furniture, if he—the abuser—is ripping it up."

"So, how does the MENDING Project work?" asked Ed.

“Good question,” said Chuck as he turned back to us. “Let us say he has slashed her tires. A tire shop could donate free or discounted tires to help her out. Carpenters could agree to repair walls, hang doors, or anything else that might be destroyed within the home. Local domestic violence shelters might be one location where the MENDing Project vouchers could be housed so that sexually assaulted or battered women could obtain them for the needed repairs. Once the sexually assaulted or battered woman had the voucher, they would go to the specific business to seek the needed repair for whatever their abuser had destroyed. The MENDing Project is a way men can visibly stand against abuse. Therefore, you would be helping a woman, and her children, remain independent from her abuser.”

On the overhead projection screen beside Ed, the flat tire example is shown both visually and textually, making the ease with which assistance could take place look easy. Although I must admit, I am leery of the ease with which the 70-inch screen claims to alter that woman or single mom’s life. Could it be that easy? Maybe if they wanted to help you? I guess the key would be finding those people or men, in this case, who wanted to help. Nevertheless, could you find enough of them?

Unfortunately for the boys and I, we landed the marital home in the divorce. In an erratic, unplanned last-minute maneuver before the final court session, my soon-to-be ex-husband does a complete turnaround, dumping me with the house. With one stipulation, he wants unlimited lifetime access to the sheds on the property for his storage—all of them—assuming I never move or for as long as I own the property, and he will not pay a dime for that privilege.

My stomach dropped. I shook my head vehemently, breaking out into a cold sweat. “Absolutely not,” I whispered harshly at my lawyer as he leaned across the conference table toward me. “Did you forget about the marital rape, the emotional and verbal abuse? No. He will

have unlimited access to me. Who gives a shit about rent. I will never feel safe in that house. No.”

“Look, your husband has been erratic this entire time, all right? Minnesota is a no-fault divorce state, so that other stuff does not matter,” he said, waving his hand as if to shoo away a pesky fly. “We need to get him into and out of that courtroom before he comes up with something else you will have to live with. Let us go.” Somehow, we had gone from negotiation to let us get this done, the Judge does not want to deal with this, and between those two points, I lost any chance I had at ensuring my protection. As I pushed up from my chair in the side conference room to head into court for the final proceedings, I stopped to steady myself. I was shaking too hard to move without it being noticeable. The last thing I wanted was to show weakness. I held my position and stared at my purse like it was missing a strap. I was going to get a house and a pissed-off outdoor ex-husband for the entirety of the time that I owned the marital home. Even if I wanted to keep the house, I could no longer keep it because he came with the sheds. I was powerless to change the direction my life was headed, as a group of men not only would not listen to me, but they also just sealed my fate. “Are you coming,” he asked. “Let us not be late. It does not go over well.”

When my PTSD flares up, being overly tired or stressed out will aid the flare-up faster, and two things are likely to happen. One which used to unnerve me to no end and still can do so was that I could be alone in my bed and still feel my ex-husband crawl in beside me as I nod off to sleep. Logically, I know I am the only person in my room. He has not been anywhere near my bed since that November/December night in 2008, and yet, when I feel the bed cave to his body weight beside me, it is all over. I am wide awake. As I drift off again, it will happen a second,

third, and fourth time. It can happen all night long. Sleeping with the light on will not stop my bed from moving.

When the lack of sleep finally drove me to seek help at the end of 2013, the doctor reassured me I was not insane. After a series of questions, she asked if I was ever anxious.

“That is an odd question,” I said.

“Why is that?” she asked.

“Everything about being a single mom is anxiety-inducing,” I said. “You should try it sometime.”

She chuckled at my halfhearted joke, then explained what was wrong. I was experiencing a kinesthetic flashback or tactile memory, she said. It was a symptom of my PTSD, which was “a normal reaction to an abnormal event.” However, while I heard her say that intellectually, internally, I heard her say, “PTSD is an abnormal reaction to a normal event.” Internally, the resulting tactile memories were my fault and not a consequence of 11 years of marital rape, an abnormal event.

“How do I develop a war-related illness,” I asked, “especially if I have never served in a war?” I felt ashamed and weak, like attracting PTSD was somehow my fault. Then I got angry. I came here for help and not to have one more problem added to my list of problems.

“You were in a personal battle for much of your marriage,” She said, “and you thought everything would be all right by leaving. In reality, the only thing that ended was his access to your body. The war continued. Your war was at home.”

The second thing that happens when my PTSD flares up is that I dream of that house, the 4.6 acres, the circular driveway, those damn sheds, the white one-and-a-half-story house with three exterior doors and a sliding glass door, and yet, in my dreams, I cannot escape that house or

the people within it. If I leave the house, I cannot get off the property. Alternatively, the hog barns appear at the bottom of the hillside, and I am forced to work there daily. Every dream is different, with the circumstances varied, and yet they are all the same. I am running out of time. I have to get out. I have to get us out. The “us” changes slightly, but it is always some variation of the same: my boys as babies, children, teenagers, or my dog, Max. There is always someone trying to get into the house to hurt us at all hours of the day, evening, and even during the middle of the night, *especially* during the middle of the night. In my dreams, I walk the rooms with my wooden bat again. On a terrible night, I hide my children so they do not bear witness, but I do not escape the inevitable. Those nights I wake up, my pillow wet. I pray I did not scream loud enough for my youngest son to wake up and look for me on this side of my dream.

When I left in December of 2008, my husband was putting new windows into our home on the second floor and in the kitchen. However, if a house has half-finished projects all over the place, then the house is appraised at a much lower value, which should have been my first clue that something was wrong during the divorce proceedings. Except in 2008, the housing market was on its way to crashing. According to *The Associated Press* (2008b), the housing market was in dire straits:

The number of foreclosures in Minnesota [was] on pace to reach 29,000 to 37,000 [that] year . . . [Governor] Pawlenty said the state rank[ed] 12th nationwide for the number of foreclosures—and second for its per capita rate of foreclosures among subprime borrowers. (p. B3)

So, when my soon-to-be ex-husband made that last-minute dump of the marital home, he got to keep his two businesses free and clear, both in great shape and which would continue to make him money. I ended up with a pissed-off outdoor ex-husband, a decrepit old farmhouse at the start of the housing crisis, remodeling work that stopped the day I left in December of 2008, and to top it off, he took all the materials I needed to finish the project with him when he moved out.

I got the cracked sheetrock in the dining room forever pulled by the foundation tumbling in on itself, a septic system needing replacement, a heater missing a \$600 bearing, and, to make matters worse, debris littered the first and second floors of the house. Possessions I had left behind in my haste to leave 10 months prior were either broken, scattered across the floors, or missing altogether. My mom, my friend, and I spent four days cleaning that house to get it back into a livable state, and before I could even begin to think of moving the boys back into the home.

As predicted, my ex-husband became a regular visitor once we moved back to the farm. He became my pissed-off outdoor ex-husband. Bancroft (2002) argued that a woman's intuitive sense regarding her partner's ability to cause problems or escalate in violence was substantially more accurate than any other warning sign. However, women are routinely disbelieved. Despite being disbelieved, Bancroft (2002) advocated that a woman should always trust her inner voice. I was not wrong that day in court. Bancroft confirmed my suspicions. While there was no foolproof plan to avoid abusive relationships, Bancroft provided three points for consideration. I figured any ground rules that could help me to establish some footing within my impossible situation were better than nothing. However, Bancroft's rules were more for those who thought they might be dating a potential abuser, and I was not about to do that, so I had to modify his rule list. Technically, I only needed the first rule, "make it clear to him as soon as possible which behaviors or attitudes are unacceptable to you and that you cannot be in a relationship with him if they continue" (Bancroft, 2002, p. 122). I was unsure how that last part would work, considering I was stuck with him for as long as I owned the house or until the boys turned 18. However, if AA taught me anything, let us first deal with one problem at a time.

One night, my mother was at the marital home/farm. With her presence for added protection, I went down to the bottom by the horse shed to corner my pissed-off outdoor ex-husband. I wanted to clarify the behaviors and attitudes that would be unacceptable going forward from then on. I chose to be blunt in my delivery.

“I do not want you coming out here whenever you want,” I said. “You need to call first.”
 “This is my house, too,” he said. “You cannot kick me off my property.”

“I own it,” I said. “I want notice before you come.”

I wish I could say that worked. Instead of receiving any notice of his arrival in the following weeks, his friends also began driving into the yard and up to a shed at random times after work, in the evenings, bordering on late evenings, and on weekends. Obviously, he had enlisted help from others—most I knew and considered a friend—to ensure I knew my place. Bancroft (2002) argued that retaliation might not be immediate or straightforward, but it was designed to punish, hurt, and scare because the abuser does not believe we have the right to stand up for ourselves. My pissed-off outdoor ex-husband wanted to make sure I knew how powerless I was with every vehicle that pulled into my driveway, cloaked by the black moonless nights.

When I first moved into Mom’s with the boys, I slept for the first time in years. I stopped throwing up every day. However, I quickly lost whatever peace I gained by leaving the marital home in the weeks after I moved back. Cat napping at night, I would sleep for an hour, maybe two, grab my wooden bat, walk the house’s second and first levels, and check windows, doors, and locks before crawling back into bed for another hour, only to wake up and repeat the process. During the day, I was dead tired. I was also a Department Leader at Barn 10. My boss, Damon [not his real name], often barked, “Christ, did somebody hit you? Why is the skin below your eyes so blue and purple? Get some god damn sleep. What is wrong with you?” Of course,

the f-word is used liberally throughout all barn sentences in the language of hog barns. Since it is its own language, I chose to exclude them here.

In mid-September of 2009, my pissed-off outdoor ex-husband is at the marital farm again. This time, he threatens to drop my last 200 gallons of propane on the ground out of spite. Since he was forced to pay the bill in the divorce, he feels I should not benefit from him financially anymore, even though the 200 gallons were placed in the tank at his request at some point during the previous winter.

“The children live here too,” I said. “You are going drop their only source for hot water for baths on the ground?”

The next day, I called the propane company. Initially, I called to find out if he could take my fuel, whether to have it pumped out and placed on the ground or taken to his farm 4 to 5 miles away. However, given how small our community was, the probability that the person I would be talking to would know him was too great. The last thing I needed to do was provide one more friend of his with an idea of how to make my life a living hell. They could come up with that on their own. I sure as hell was not going to help in the ideal department. At the last second, I opted to ask about setting up a propane plan for the upcoming winter. At the time, it seemed like a safer idea.

I had watched my pissed-off outdoor ex-husband do it for 11 years. He would call the propane company in September, lock in a lower fuel price for the year, they would fill the tank, and we would make payments through spring. At least if he followed through on his threat and took the 200 gallons of propane to his house or dumped it on the ground, the boys and I would have a plan in place to get more fuel. I quickly learned preventative action was better than dealing with him or his friends head-on or even after the fact. Plus, since my initial attempt at

laying down the ground rules, as Bancroft (2002) instructed, did not quit work as I had hoped, I added a few more steps to his process. My process was to anticipate, prevent, be clear, be concise, lay down the ground rules (even if it has to be done 100 billion times, and it would), do not argue, do not engage, never let him talk down to you, be prepared to walk away, always have an exit strategy, and/or hang up.

However, my call to the propane company was anything but ordinary. I was immediately transferred from the secretary to the head propane account handler, whom I will call Dick (not his real name) because he was one the entire time I lived there. Unfortunately for me, Dick was probably a friend of my pissed-off outdoor ex-husband and, possibly, a customer of his snowmobile business.

Without wasting words on “hello” or “good afternoon,” Dick went right for the throat. “Are you filing for bankruptcy?”

No. Hello? Not sure how to respond. I am silent. I am not even sure I know this man. Can he ask me that? How would he know I was considering filing for bankruptcy? What does that have to do with needing propane? What in the hell? Stumped, I could count the people who knew on the one hand: my lawyer, his lawyer, my outdoor ex-husband, my mom, and my sister. Until then, I had not even considered what bankruptcy might mean for my ability to receive fuel. I honestly did not intend to not pay him. I mean, what was he suggesting?

“Yes, I do plan to file, but I guess I did not think about it,” I said, choosing honesty as the best approach. “I just wanted to lock in a price for the winter before propane went up. Who told you I was going to file for bankruptcy?”

“Your ex-husband called to forewarn me,” said Dick.

Of course he did, I thought. I lean forward in the swivel chair with my elbows on the office desk. I place my thumb and middle finger on each closed eyelid, pulling my fingers to the bridge of my nose and pinch.

“I am not going to let you charge fuel and then stick me with the bill in the bankruptcy,” Dick said. “You still owe me from last year!”

“My ex-husband owes you from last year according to our divorce decree,” I said. “That is not at all what I was trying to do.”

“Your account is now on a cash-only basis,” Dick said. “You cannot lock in a price. When you have the money for 200 gallons, we will fill your tank for exactly 200 gallons.” The dial tone replaces his gruff, condemning voice in the next moment.

Back in my sociology classroom, Chuck Derry of the MENding Project is about an hour into the presentation. He has handed off the presentation to Ed. There is rustling behind me as students start to fidget. It is almost 7:00 p.m. when a phone goes off in a series of beeps and rings. All of the students become quiet. The phone goes off again. Our professor has forewarned us that she will dock points for phone usage if we are caught even glancing at a cell phone during this presentation. Although no one immediately moved to silence their phone in front of me, just as it was about to start a third set of beeps and rings, someone managed to silence it because we heard nothing.

Ed strides across the room, past the projected screen, and stops. “Really guys, think about it: if you walk by a woman, you know is having a rough time with her abuser, or quite literally, let us say an abuser is hitting a girl in the street, who are you siding with? What are you saying when you do nothing to help her out?” Ed openly stared down the crowd. When no one

answered, he turned to the projector, preferring to move to the next transparency rather than hammer home his point or even let us marinate in the silence. Maybe the silence was needed.

I know the answer to Ed's question. It is him, the abuser, but part of the problem was that abuse was viewed as private. So, how do you get people to care enough to stand with the woman? Even if it is to say, "I am here. You are not alone." Maybe Ed should have made us answer that question.

By December 1, 2009, I barely had 70 gallons of fuel left in my propane tank. I have started accumulating space heaters from the few friends I trusted. I also have two indoor kerosene heaters I picked up at garage sales. Growing up, I was raised on kerosene heaters, which were second nature. However, when Damon, my boss, overheard my plan at work, he became alarmed. He thought kerosene heaters and electric space heaters were a dangerous combination. I told him I was not dumb enough to place them beside each other. The kerosene heaters were for downstairs when the boys and I were at the house during the day. The space heaters were for our bedrooms and the bathrooms at night.

"A kerosene heater was like a campfire," I had said, "you put that thing out when you go to bed." With no other choices, the weather getting colder, and my bonus roughly 3 weeks away, I was making do the only way I knew how.

Unconvinced, Damon urged me to call the propane company and to try to get on a plan or something. There had to be a better option, he argued.

Well, it was the holiday season. Maybe Dick got a heart? Or maybe I will get someone else entirely. It was a large company. As I dialed the propane company, I wondered what the chances were that I would seriously get Dick again. I no more than barely finished that thought when that was precisely where the receptionist sent my call to Dick.

Once again, there is no hello, no good afternoon, just a gruff, “No cash, no fuel,” said Dick. Suddenly, he chuckles lightly. His voice goes from gruff to maple syrupy sweet, as if handing out hot chocolate at the North Pole to his evil gremlins. Dick can hardly contain his happiness as he explains how the fuel price has increased since September. It is now \$1.69 a gallon. At a minimum of 200 gallons, I would need to come up with \$338 to get his company to drive out to my tank. The entire tank was 1,000 gallons, but only 800 gallons could ever go into the tank. Two hundred is needed for air. To make it through an average winter, I needed 800 gallons of propane, at least to start. Probably another 200 gallons to follow up on late winter. Therefore, I would need \$1,352 worth of fuel to make it through the first part of the winter. Even with my bonus, I will not have that kind of cash.

“Oh, and we will also need to do a right-to-know on your tank since your ex-husband no longer owns it,” he said. “Plus, if something is wrong with the tank, you will have to pay for it to be fixed before we can give you the fuel.”

“Wait,” I said. “If the old account was originally in both our names—my ex-husband’s and mine—how does that not count towards my ownership of the tank now? I still own the tank. It is not like I am a brand-new resident. It has been my home for the past 12 years too.”

“Do you want fuel or not?” asked Dick.

This time, I hung up the phone first. Next, I pulled the handset from the receiver and proceeded to bang the handset against the desk once, twice, and three times. I collapsed hard into the swivel chair as I started to think back over every conversation I had had with my outdoor ex-husband. I tapped the phone receiver against my forehead. Was there something wrong with that damned tank? In a flash, it hit me. Last spring, he said he was having trouble with the emergency shut-off. Had he not broken it and rigged up an illegal flip lever instead? Crap! At the

time of our propane argument in September, he said the part would cost me \$1,000. Plus, I would have to pay to have them pump the fuel out of the tank before it could be fixed. Christ. What are the chances he was exaggerating or lying the day he wanted to dump my last 200 gallons on the ground? Shit! There goes my bonus. How do I get the repairs done, get enough fuel to get through winter, and get the boys Christmas gifts? Why did I move back into that stupid house? I placed the handset back on the receiver. I stand up and head back into the barns to check on my crew.

For the next 4 hours, I am plagued with the now what? How are we ever going to have enough fuel to get through winter? What can I do to come up with that kind of cash? Where would I look for a second job? How do I fit a second job into a custody schedule? Could I get enough hours at a part-time job to make a difference for us financially and still maintain custody of my kids? I cannot work when I have my kids. That is out of the question.

After showering out of the barn, I noticed a message from the gas company on my cell phone. Shit. I need to call them back. What else could that asshole possibly come up with to keep me from obtaining fuel this time? Did he find an extra test he could charge me for? Ground clearance from the bottom of the tank must be 13 inches. No wait. The fuel price jumped a dollar over the last few hours, and he could not wait to tell me. Or he discovered a divorcee surcharge that gets tacked on only to accounts of those he dislikes with every fill. God, I hate that guy.

Sitting in my car, I stare at the two white barn structures in front of me—one that runs horizontal to the parking lot and the other vertical, which looks like the corner of a prison fortress—with its secondary vertical and horizontal barns set behind the initial structures hidden, and the interconnecting hallways more of a labyrinth. Most farrowing barns have a simple pattern. They have four vertical barns connected by four horizontal intersecting hallways. Those

barns are also more of a straightforward cross-like-looking pattern. As I tapped my cell phone against the steering wheel, I wondered if I had the energy to go one more round with Dick. Why couldn't the secretary have left a message that provided more information instead of, "Please return my call?" Then I would know. Do I want to return this call or not? I started the car and rolled out of the parking lot and down the long gravel driveway. Screw it. Dick is going to be the same person tomorrow that he is today. Why let him ruin tomorrow too?

To my surprise, the secretary turned me over to someone else entirely. At first, the name does not register, but his voice does when he comes on the line. Nick (not his real name) was an older man from my ex-husband's church. What could he possibly want? Nick had a snow-white short-cropped beard and a full head of silver hair, but if I remember correctly, he was an elder of the church. Not much of a talker, but then neither was I. When I attended the church, I sat in the last row with this super old guy named Sibbs (not his real name). I was never sure if Sibbs could hear anything, which was probably why it never bothered him to have the boys playing on the floor before us. He could not hear them anyway. My ex-husband, another elder, always had other duties, so we rarely sat together, and I always had kid duty. However, I remembered Nick in passing. Part of me prepared for a setup, and part of me held out hope. What if Nick had a solution to my problem?

Nick wasted no time getting to business once he came on the line. He can set up the Right to Know appointment for Thursday, December 3, at 3:30 p.m. They already know the shut-off needs to be fixed on the propane tank. He does not say how they know, but it would not be too far of a stretch to guess who the number one suspect would be. Fearful, I asked how much the shut-off would cost.

"With a tank below 10%," he said, "probably \$50 to \$80."

I am stunned. That is better than I had anticipated. “Ok,” I said. “Fix it.”

“Actually,” Nick said, “I was calling to tell you that the company buys tanks like yours. You could then lease it back from us. We would have to keep up the maintenance and pay when things break on the tank, not you.”

Skeptical, I asked, “How much does that cost?” I cannot afford any more monthly bills.

“The lease is free. There is no monthly fee,” Nick said. “We buy the tank for around \$600 to \$800. I need to do the Right to Know first. Then we can talk price.”

“\$600–\$800?” I asked. That would be enough to get us fuel before my bonus came.

On pins and needles, I can hardly wait for Thursday. Once the Right to Know had been completed, I called Nick to determine what my tank was worth the next day. He is a tough man to reach, and with every call I place, I am worried the secretary will give me to Dick. At about mid-afternoon, I reached Nick. He had forgotten to check but said he would call me back. I hung up the phone, deflated. Maybe it was all just a ploy. He sounded sincere, though. . . What if Dick found out that Nick offered to help me? Maybe Dick somehow stopped my chances of getting fuel.

Since the workday was almost over, I pushed my fear as far down as possible and returned to the barns, to my all-male crew. Actually, the entire barn was male. I was the only female, which equals no emotions allowed. A year or so before I left, my husband, Max, my Golden Retriever/Lab of 14 and a half years, passed away. My husband called me at lunch to say he had found him down by the garage and buried him. I hung up on that call, knowing the next 4 hours would be the hardest of my life. I pushed that pain down as far as possible to keep it from surfacing or catching me by surprise. I absolutely could not cry. I finished out my day. By the time I left work, my heart hurt as if someone had grabbed each side of the heart muscle and

proceeded to tear each connective tissue apart, layer by layer, until there was nothing left but a gash-torn pulpy muscle. It felt like when my dad died. I knew what the pain was, and it was pain denied.

As I left the barn at 3:30 p.m., Nick's name flashed across my cell screen. I stopped walking to my car. I held my breath and pressed send. Nick goes right to the point. They can purchase the tank for \$650. The only catch was that I would have to get the 7% I had in the tank to last until Monday. No problem, I thought, there is only a cold front with rain coming. At least I will not have the kids for the weekend. I asked if he was optimistic that this could happen. Nick reassured me he would be at my house on Monday at 4:00 p.m. He would fix my tank and bring the 385 gallons of fuel for the 1,000-gallon tank. It was not much, but I was much closer than days ago when I argued with Dick.

True to his word, Nick was at my house Monday at 4:00 p.m. That Monday afternoon, he said my tank was at 3%, for sure less than 5%. With 385 gallons in the tank, I would get through the first significant snowstorm of the year, which was quite literally hours away. The weather had already turned bitter cold, the wind picked up, and the clouds a dark grey. I thanked him that day for finding a way to get the boys and my fuel. He pushed it aside, kept doing his work, or changed the subject and told me something I needed to know about the tank. The two of us never crossed paths again after that event. However, for those few days in 2009, he was the first person to step across that invisible line, a line that seemed to let everyone in our community know I was not worthy of respect, decency, or goodness because this was a rural community where I was not born and raised, even though I had lived among these people for 11 years as a married woman. At the base of this community, I was an outsider and that determined my worth within the

community. That did not include all the crap I put up with from my pissed-off outdoor ex-husband.

Take, for instance, the condition the marital home was left in. It took me an additional 6 months and \$800—I cashed in all of the equity on the small life insurance policy I had since birth—to get the house’s interior into a saleable position. I fixed the walls by mudding holes, painted, re-varnished kitchen cupboards, and completed trim work. When I tried to ask area carpenters for help to hang the trim work—the very same carpenters whom we had employed while we were married to work in that very same home—sounded like they would come out to do the work, but they never called me back to set up an actual date to come out to do the work. When I tried to price flooring for the kitchen, I was met with comments like, “Yeah, we are going to be busy for a long while.” These were businesspeople I had known all of my married life. I had interviewed them for the local paper over the years, and I had shopped locally when we could as a couple. Many of them I considered as friends, but I guess not. Instead, I quickly realized I would need to rent the equipment and figure out how to do the work myself. No one was coming to my rescue. Outside of my mother, my long-standing friend from the barns, her sister, and a few close friends from AA, few people were willing to step foot on my property.

After a 2-day snowstorm in the first 10 days of January 2010, I got my Dodge Intrepid stuck on the way to work. Thankfully, I do not have the boys. Unfortunately, the farmhouse is located on an old lakebed shoreline that was drained for farmland over 100 years ago, which in the case of a severe flood or if they ever decided to fill in the lake again, would make me a lakeshore property owner. However, it is not great during lightning strikes, snowstorms, or after snowstorms. Since my house sat on a hill, I navigated the fresh snow drifts for a quarter of a mile in either direction once I exited the driveway. Neither route was ever technically conducive to

getting out effectively. I glanced down both directions, looking for some break in the drifts, where my car could catch gravel and, hopefully, pull us through to the next drift. Deciding to go left, the car became impacted by 3 feet of snow less than a quarter of a mile from my house. I get the shovel out of the trunk and begin working on the car.

My neighbor, a roundish chubby man whom I have never met personally in the 12 years I have lived at the house, is forced to help me get the car unstuck. I am taking up the center of the road. He cannot go around in his new F250 pickup truck, but grudgingly, he has a shovel. Once the car is loose enough to get out of his way but not completely free, I still have an equal distance of snow yet to shovel. He wished me good luck, climbed back into his cab, and shimmied around the car. Thanks, I thought as I grabbed my shovel. I remind myself never to help that guy if he ever needs it and shake my head as I watch him head up his driveway. Before shoveling, I made one last call to my boss, Damon. I needed to tell him I would be an hour late, "I got to shovel the car down the road."

"What?" he asked. "The roads are not that bad out my way."

Irritated, I said, "Well, I cannot make the car go when it does not want to. I will be in when I am done shoveling."

"Oh, for Christ's sake," he said, "I will be over shortly to help you."

By the time he gets there in his Black Jeep Cherokee, which he bought from his most recent ex-wife, I have only got the car moved ahead about 15 feet. He can get close enough to pull my car. However, upon examination of my car's front end, he realized there was no safe way to pull it without ripping the bumper off.

"Leave the car," Damon ordered. "I will take you to work."

"What if something happens to it? I cannot leave it. It is all I have. Literally."

“Leave the car. Get in,” Damon said. He is in one of his pissy moods. I know my hesitation will not be received well, but I cannot help it. I am reluctant to leave my car behind.

“What if it gets towed while we are at work?” I asked. “Or hit by a grader?”

“Stop taking things so personally. Not everyone is out to get you,” Damon said. “Besides, it is a gravel road. They do not tow cars on gravel roads.”

As I climbed into his truck, I looked back at my car. “I am leaving my only vehicle on the side of the road,” I said. “She is my only vehicle.”

“Yeah, and it will be fine,” Damon said as he turned the truck around.

That evening after work, Damon drove me to the sitters to pick up the boys from daycare. We headed back to the car, figuring removing it would be easier since most of the snow was cleared. Rounding the curves before the gravel road to my house, my youngest son asked, “Mom, where is your car?”

Looking ahead and across the field, I noticed he was right. There is no car. Panic sets in. I tried to rationalize that maybe I had left the car further back into the dip of the old lakebed, which is why I could not see it. “I am sure it has to be there, dear.”

“Nope, it is not,” he said again, as sure as before.

Struggling not to say I told you so, I looked at Damon, but my son’s right. The car is gone. “Shit,” I muttered.

“I am sure he did not have it removed,” Damon said under his breath, loud enough for only me to hear. I am tempted to tell him to pull over. I wanted to puke.

“What are we going to do without a car, Mom?” My youngest asked.

Even if my boss insisted it could not be my ex’s fault, I dialed his number. My answer was confirmed the second he picked up the phone.

“You wanted to do things yourself,” my pissed-off outdoor ex-husband said. “This is what you get. Figure it out.”

“Where is my car?” I asked as patiently as possible. I cannot get into a yelling match, not with the boys in the back seat and Damon as a witness.

“This is all your fault,” he said. “You deal with it.”

“I realize this is my fault, but where is my car?”

“Why would you leave it in the center of the road?” He asked. That question alone informed me that he knew exactly where my car was. He would have no reason to be on my side of our town. I decided I did not have to answer him. I am not his wife.

“Where is my car?”

“It has gone.”

“Obviously.”

“You would think you would know better.”

“Where is my car?” By this time, Damon was slowly pulling into my driveway. It is 4:48 p.m. There was not much time left to get my car if the outdoor ex-husband did not tell me where it is within the next few minutes.

“It is in Vernon Center,” he conceded, “they towed it.”

I cover the phone’s receiver, “We have to get to Vernon in 15 minutes.” Damon quickly turned the Jeep around and sped out of the driveway.

“Did you have my car towed?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “They called me to see what I wanted to do with the car.”

“How is it that it got towed if they asked you what to do with my car?”

“A friend of mine from the snowmobile business is a sheriff,” the pissed-off outdoor ex-husband said. I listen intently for a slight shift in the tone of his story. That is how I have always known when he is lying. People always missed it, but he could never keep a lie consistent. Eventually, the lie would be exposed through a slight shift in his voice that would not match his words, or the slight shift happened in the story itself. “He called and said my ex-wife’s car blocked the road.”

“And you did not think to call me at the barn?” I asked. “I could have come and got it.”

“Your car is not my problem.”

“How does my car end up getting towed?” I asked again.

“I do not know,” he said. “They called me after it was towed.” Right there, the story changed. He lied. He knew exactly how my car ended up in Vernon.

Hanging up the phone, I realized my next problem. It is not a pay week. I have \$40 in my name. I have no money. Where will I come up with the money for a tow fee? I barely had enough food and milk for the boys for the weekend. What if it is more than \$40, and I cannot get the car? Sensing my rising panic, Damon said, “I will pay for the fee.”

“I cannot have you do that,” I said.

“Well, this happened because I made you leave the car,” said Damon. “End of discussion. You will take my help.”

By the time we get to the towing service, I have only minutes before they are about to close the doors. Once inside, I asked for my car. A man in his late 50s offered a grease-stained hand. He said the cars were back, but the tow would cost me \$75.00.

I pulled out Damon’s cash. I cannot help but ask, “How is it my car ended up getting towed when I left it a quarter of a mile from my house?”

“I thought that was the weird thing, too,” he said. “We could have dropped the car off in your yard and left you the ticket. You would not have had to race down here if we had.”

“Why didn’t you?” I asked curiously, trying not to give away what I suspected to be the correct answer.

“Well, I know they called your ex-husband and asked him what to do with it,” he said, placing his hands in his jeans pocket. He shrugged his shoulders as if he could not have overridden this part of the decision that was made on my behalf today. “From what I understand, he told the officer to have it towed.”

“Thanks for letting me have my car back,” I said, handing him the \$75.

On a typical late spring afternoon in Minnesota in 2010, the dusk turned grey as a semi-thick cloudy fog settled into the muddy, snow-slush landscape after the rapid melt of the warm spring day. The grounds were a mess, which resulted in a fog with a half-mile visibility in the evening. Damon’s kept us late at work again, so when I hit HWY 169, my mind is back at the barn and not on the fact that I have not bothered to turn on the Dodge Intrepid’s lights, especially since it does not have automatic daytime running lights. My mind does not register the city cop sitting at the corner of HWY 169 and the road to the barn. If anything, I have learned over the years that for myself, it does not pay to speed. If anyone were going to get caught, it would be me. I cannot go anywhere without running into a cop. It is a given. Therefore, when I got pulled over, I was madder at myself for being so preoccupied with work that I forgot to turn my lights on because I already knew what I was being pulled over for. I also know I do not have the funds for this month’s fine. After turning the corner, I had not even hit 55 mph yet, so it was not my speed.

While I waited for the cop to approach my window, I noticed he was not the usual full-time cop. He is either a new full-time cop or a part-timer. There were serious issues when an Amboy/Vernon Center part-timer officer over-exercised his power for sexual gratification regarding the women he had pulled over. However, I had thought he was fired the previous summer when I had worked on the paper. At the time, I let the thought go. I rolled down my window. We went through the usual technicalities. I am not speeding. I do not have my lights on. That is my problem. I apologize. The officer wanted to see my license and insurance. No problem.

I started to fish through my purse. I found my license but quickly realized I had one huge problem. I have a billion insurance cards, but they have all expired. My stomach dropped, realizing I knew right where my current insurance card was. It is on the top shelf of my bookcase, in my dining room, on the way to my kitchen. I am horrible about placing them in the State Farm Insurance envelope they came in, then slipping them between two hardcover books, John Saul's, *Blackstone Chronicles*, and Greg Iles's, *24 Hours*, on my dad's black wooden bookcase, which he made in shop class as a senior project in high school. Then the cards sit between the books until divine intervention reminds me to put them in the car.

I realized I could not produce an insurance card from thin air, and in 2010, there was no State Farm app to pull the card up on a second's notice, or at least not one I knew about. I opted to tell the officer the truth.

"I have insurance through State Farm," I said. "We could call them to verify if it was not after 5:30 p.m. I can give you my license and bring you my insurance tomorrow since you are the cop uptown. I live outside of town. I have no reason to lie," I said.

"Where are you headed now?" The officer asked.

“I am actually on my way to the AA meeting,” I said. Given that my car was towed only 2 and half months prior, I still do not know who my greatest threat is, a sheriff or a city cop. The last thing I needed was for this officer to decide to implement a field sobriety test at 5:30 in the afternoon, while everyone I knew was coming home from work, merely as a favor to my ex-husband. So, I quickly added, “I have been sober since March 6, 2008.”

The news that I have been sober for a few years does not make the officer happier. If anything, he is more cross than when we started this whole event. The officer looks me up and down, then across the dash of my intrepid and back to the license in his hands. “I am going to run this,” he said, “I will be right back.”

I was pregnant with my youngest son the last time I got a speeding ticket. I was late to pick up his brother from daycare. That had to have been over 8 years ago. Other than that, the officer would not find any drinking-related charges because I was not a drinker who drove. I drank to escape the rapist in my bed. Every night, I prayed for oblivion while rotating on a pitch-black traitorous cloud, intent on tossing its sequestered debris to the queen-sized bed beneath the rapist himself. AA old-timers told me that everyone paid a price to get into AA, and each price was unique to that person. My price was not judges, treatment centers, or driving while intoxicated. My price was not having a rapist for a husband, either. However, my price was paid in full.

When the officer came back, he handed me my license. “You know it is illegal to drive without insurance, right?” He asked.

“Yes, but I have insurance,” I said, “I just have a crappy memory and the card is probably at my house. Besides, I can prove I have insurance. It is automatically taken out of my bank account.”

“That may be, but . . .” said the officer with a long sigh, “I could still charge you for driving without proof of insurance.”

He has my attention now. Suddenly, I remember being pulled over in a different town on a different night, a year or two before the divorce, when I was still the town’s reporter for the local paper. I had known that cop from the city council meetings. He had pulled me over for a blown-out headlight, and of course, I had every old insurance card in my purse and in the dash of my car, but the one I needed. The one I needed was between two of my favorite hardcover books back home. He ended up letting me go with a verbal warning and told me to get the card in my car, which I had, the very next day, divine intervention. Except, this encounter does not feel like that encounter or even the one where I had gotten my two speeding tickets. Something is off. I stayed silent, crossed my arms over my chest, and prepared to wait this out.

“Without proof of insurance,” he said, “you are looking at a hefty fine, anywhere from \$200 to \$1,000, your driver’s license suspended, and your plates pulled for up to a year, then there are fines to get those back, and maybe even community service.”

“Okay,” I said. I do not know what else can be said. While I am not an expert on the law for driving without proof of insurance, he cannot possibly be right. Do I not have the option or ability to prove I have insurance first before they throw the book at me? I might have to pay a fine, but it could not be as bad as he outlines if I proved I had insurance. I do not argue. Although the interior of the Intrepid felt large only 5 to 10 minutes ago, it has gotten smaller with each word from the officer. Now, he seems determined to let the silence ride out between us as he watches me for something while I glance to the road in front of me and then back up at him.

“All right,” he said, pulling out a business card from his front left shirt pocket and flipping it over to write something on the back, “here is what I will do for you. I am going to let

you go to your AA meeting tonight. I am not going to write up a ticket just yet.” He paused long enough to hand me the business card, “You will find my cell phone number. Tomorrow, I want you to meet me at Casey’s at 6:30 p.m. with your proof of insurance for this car. If I am across town or in Vernon Center at 6:30 p.m. and not at Casey’s, you are to call my cell phone. Stay at Casey’s. I will get there as soon as possible to see your proof of insurance. If you fail to show up or fail to stay at Casey’s and wait, I will be at your house tomorrow night with that ticket. I will charge you to the fullest extent you can be charged for driving without proof of insurance. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I said. “Thank you. I will be at Casey’s at 6:30 p.m.”

“All right,” he said, “Have a good night at your AA meeting.”

I watched him walk back to the car in my rearview mirror before pulling out onto HWY 169, thinking one problem at a time. One problem at a time. Get to your meeting. Then go home and find that damn card. I will deal with him tomorrow.

The next evening, I am at Casey’s with both boys at 6:20 p.m. It is my night to be with them, but the meeting with the cop is one I cannot miss. At the same time, they were not overly thrilled at dropping everything to race back uptown at 6:15 p.m. to go to Casey’s. I told them that Mommy had to show the cop uptown that she had insurance because Mommy’s memory is crappy. Of course, Mommy would not have the card on her when he had asked to see it yesterday, so they do not ask why he would want to see it. They want to get back home. Thursday night is our movie night. We watch Cars and have popcorn.

At 6:30 p.m., the officer from last night is not at Casey’s. Looking in my purse, I pulled out his card and called. He answered immediately. The initial background sounds are of laughing by someone near him.

“I am at Casey’s,” I said. “I have my children.” I hoped this would hurry him up.

“Yeah,” he said, “I will not make it. Why don’t you return to town at 8:30 p.m. to the police office at City Hall? Do you know where that is?”

As my stomach sinks, I said, “Yes, I do.”

“All right,” he said, “8:30 p.m. it is.”

As I put the car in reverse, I told the boys we would have to do baths first and then a short movie night tonight because we must return uptown at 8:30 p.m. The cop cannot meet us till then. My youngest, the constant negotiator, asked, “If it is a short movie night, do we get ice cream instead of popcorn?” I agreed to his proposal if they agreed to go uptown with me and not cause any problems while we were there. “Deal,” they agreed in unison.

At 8:25 p.m., I unstrapped the boys from their car seats and placed each one on the sidewalk beside me. I reached back into the car for my purse and the printout of my meager checking account for the past 3 months, which showed the automatic withdrawals from State Farm Insurance on the first of the month. It is all I have for proof, as I could not find those damn insurance cards anywhere, not even on my bookshelf. When I called my insurance agent earlier that day to ask them to send me a new card, I also asked what I could do to prove I had insurance. I told her about my situation with the local officer. She said my bank account was more than enough proof but was surprised I was forced to go this far to prove to a cop that I had insurance.

“Normally, a ticket would be issued by the cop,” she said, “and from that point on, you would have 10 days to respond to the courts with the necessary proof of insurance. Once you do that, there is seldom a penalty assessed to the driver.”

If that is true, what was going on with this officer? Was this the person who towed my car? Was this my ex-husband's friend? Or was it something else? Since the divorce, I was the smallest I had ever been, 115 pounds. All I had known for sure was that my kids were coming with me to any meeting with this officer this afternoon and tonight. There was no chance in hell I would meet him anywhere, alone.

The boys—in their Thomas the Train and Bob the Builder jammies—opened the screen door to the city's police office as they bargained over which Roscoe Riley book to start when they got home at bedtime. The youngest wanted to read about racing a runaway pumpkin a second time, while my oldest wanted to start the series over. He wanted to start with why you should not superglue your friends to chairs. As I followed them down the hall, I was mildly listening to the book debate, my mind on what was ahead.

The officer from yesterday comes around the corner in front of us, looks down at the boys, and then back up at me, confused. As the boys file out of the hallway into the opening of the office area, I hand him the printout. He has still got his eyes on the boys.

"What is this?" He asked, barely taking his eyes off them to glance at the papers. "I said I needed proof of insurance."

"I talked to my insurance agent today," I said, "they told me a printout of my bank statement for the past 90 days was more than sufficient to prove that I have insurance. As you can see, I highlighted the State Farm Insurance withdrawal on the first of every month to locate it quickly."

The officer grunted. He finally looked at the papers in his hands and shuffled them slightly but by no means investigated them for proof that I was right. Instead, he looked over the paper at the boys for a while. They have gone silent beside me, their little blond heads bobbing

between us. Finally, he looked back at the papers for a second or two before handing them back to me. “Okay. You are free to go,” he said.

“Thank you,” I said. “Let us go, boys.” I turned them toward the door as I cram the paper back into my purse. I did not breathe until the boys were buckled into my car, my car was in drive, and we were headed back to the farm site. Once we got to the farm, I let the boys out, telling them to get ready for bed. Mom will be in the house in a minute. They run into the house, and the discussion of which book to read is back on the table as they head for the bathroom to brush their teeth and get ready for bed.

I walk across my yard to the cement crypt and sit on the edge. The crypt looked like a giant above-ground cement burial vault but was an old cistern slash, capped well. From where I sat, the view was of the backside of the circular driveway, the sheds at the bottom of the hill, the grain bins, and a fairly steep hillside with a drop to the field below. It is the old lake bottom shoreline that runs around the backside of the property. I have a few moments to breathe as I bring my shaking limbs under control. Across the twilight sky, I heard my oldest say, “Mom, you ready to read? We decided on the book.”

During the winter of 2010–2011, I was prepared for Dick. I already know he plays a no-mercy game. Therefore, when my tuition loan money came for Minnesota State University, Mankato, in September of 2010, I first pulled what I needed for fuel.

Then I called his secretary. “I got the money,” I said. “I want to buy 1,000 gallons.”

“Well,” she said. “You cannot. You buy 800 and leave room for air.”

“Oh, great,” I said. “Can I still buy 1,000 gallons now? Then, when I need the second 200 gallons in February, I can call you, and you can come deliver it?” I already knew from last year’s debacle with Dick that they would not deliver unless you bought at least 200 gallons. However,

if she let me purchase the total 1,000 gallons now at a much lower price in September, I would have the other 200 gallons in reserve for when I needed it. Technically, I was proposing the same plan as the one we had when we were on their locked-in farm plan account, except I offered to pay for all of the fuel costs up front rather than in monthly installments over the winter, which Dick would never let me do, because of my letter B for bankruptcy emblazoned in my blood across my forehead.

“Sure,” she said. “I do not see why not. Bring in the cash, and I will write up the sale.”

The next day I arrived in Lake Crystal and paid the secretary. She scheduled the first 800-gallon load to be delivered in the next few days. I double-checked one more time. “Will that 200 gallons still be here in February when I need it?” I asked.

“Yes, just give me a call,” she said. “We will bring it out.”

By January 2011, I am getting signed letters from Dick every week. The letters are threats and start when I clear 50% of the propane tank. Every week it is a version of the same threat: We know you have a certain percentage of fuel left in your tank. If you run out of fuel, we will charge you an additional \$X amount for running out and \$X amount for an emergency delivery, plus the price of propane per gallon, which was higher since we were in the dead of winter. Dick’s \$X’s are exorbitantly high, to the tune of \$100–\$200 or better for each infraction he has listed, and he has a page full of them. The infractions list gets longer as the weeks pass, with the prices worsening. Dick is like a rabid dog, so I kept throwing his personally signed letters into the circular file.

I was not too worried as we entered February. The tank was around 25%. December and January produced record blizzards and cold conditions, once again, it seemed like, for the second year in a row. Plus, I still had 200 gallons on reserve that I paid for in September 2010. I am

good yet. By mid-February, I would call the secretary and get my propane delivered. We would make it through March, nothing to worry about, and then I called his secretary.

Instead of talking to her, she put me through to Dick. My heart sunk right out of the bottom of my feet. Something was wrong. As always, no hello.

“Now you want your fuel,” said Dick.

More of a statement. I am perplexed. What is he up to now? Deciding to rattle him, I went with pleasant conversation. “Hi, Dick,” I said. “How are you?”

“I have told you before,” he said, “no money. No fuel.”

“Oh. Well, I have fuel there,” I said. “Please deliver it to my house. I want my 200 gallons.”

Dick snorted. “When you pay the rest of what you owe.”

“Come again?” I asked.

“The price of propane has gone up,” said Dick. “It is \$2.04 a gallon right now.”

“What?” I asked. “I paid for 1,000 gallons back in September for like \$1.74 a gallon. It was like \$1,740. You only put 800 gallons in my tank. That means I still have 200 purchased gallons at your location waiting to be delivered to my house. There are 200 gallons there. Your secretary said it could be done that way. I asked her twice.”

“You have \$348.00 on account, is what you have,” said Dick. “So, at \$2.04 a gallon times 200 gallons, you need \$408 to get us to deliver your fuel to your house. So, another \$60.00?”

Unable to control myself, I slammed the handset into the receiver again. “Fuck!” I picked the handset up and banged it against the office desk four more times.

However, I had a plan by the time I got home from work. With roughly 6 weeks until April 1, I was determined to stay supplied with fuel. I was unsure how, but I was not giving that

man \$60 more on principle alone. I bought the boys electric blankets instead. I borrowed electric space heaters, filled my kerosene tanks, and hunkered down for the last 6 weeks of winter. We turned down the thermostat to 65 and held on. When the boys were not at the house, the thermostat went even lower, down to 58. I bundled up and lived under my electric blanket.

Dick's letters kept coming. Each one with more severe monetary threats than the last if I let that tank hit zero. His letters sounded like I was ignoring the tank, but I was not. I knew exactly where that tank was at. Luckily for me, 22 of the 31 days of March were above average temps, with 4 of those days hitting 60 degrees (Huttner, 2010). I was going to make it. Dick had to have known it too because his letters stopped coming, almost as if he had conceded the battle for now.

By the end of April 2010, I went to Dick's office. I told his secretary I needed to speak with him. It was urgent. She looked at me wearily but pointed me toward my most considerable pain for the past 9 months. I was not 100% certain what I was about to do would work, or that I had any legal grounds to say what I was about to say, I was tired of being pushed around. It was time someone pushed him back for a change, and he had my money.

Dick's office was nothing fancy, merely four pine plywood type walls, dark beige Berber carpeting, and a metal desk. Walking up to his open doorway, he is bent over his desk, writing something down. I knock on the door. When he looked up, I realized I did not know this man. I have never met him in passing. I am not even sure how he would know my pissed-off outdoor ex-husband so well or why he would have taken to making my life so difficult for the past 2 years. Seriously dude? Why? What could I have done? That last thought reminds me why I have come and brings up that well of anger I need for what is about to come.

“Yes?” Dick asked. “Do you need something?” His confusion is apparent. He does not know me. My presence does not spark the usual greeting, “No cash. No Fuel.”

It is my turn to snort. “I am Heidi.” As recognition dawned across his face, I realized my voice and name had done the trick. Now, he can put a name with a face, but not before.

“What do you need?” Dick asked.

I take three steps into his office since he does not seem overly inclined to invite me in. “I am here to get my money. All \$348 of it,” I said. I maintained eye contact—step 1. Do not show weakness.

“What money?” Dick asked. “I do not have your money.”

“Oh, yes, you do,” I said, “and I have the receipt to prove it. See, I gave your receptionist out there,” I turned slightly to wave to her—not necessarily expecting her eyes to be on us, but they were—before turning back to Dick and holding out a copy of the receipt, “\$1,740 last September of 2010, for 1,000 gallons of propane, which was priced at \$1.74 a gallon. Your company only delivered 800 gallons to my residence. Since you failed to render the rest of my services, I am owed my money back, which was \$348.00 for the remaining 200 gallons that were never delivered.”

“You know why they were not delivered,” Dick said. “We are not giving you any cash back. That money will stay on your account.”

Without meaning, too, I laughed. “Oh yes, you will write that check out,” I said, “and you will write it out to me, Heidi Sampson, not me and my ex-husband. Just me, because I alone am the one who paid for the services you failed to deliver. That failure constitutes a reimbursement for services rendered or its fraud, plain and simple. So, you can write that check out to me today

or get that check in the mail and have it to me as soon as possible. Either way, you will be paying me my money back. If you do not, I will be back to check on the status of my check.”

Dick’s head flushed red. He was livid. “We will not pay anything,” he sputtered.

I turned to leave his office, but just as I crested the door frame, I paused and looked back at him, “Two weeks,” I said, “Or I will be back every 2 weeks to check on the status of that money. \$348.”

With that, I left Dick’s office, never to see him again. By August, we had moved out of the farmhouse and into a town outside the school district. When I got to my car after confronting Dick, I sincerely doubted I would ever see my money. It would have been a fantastic bonus to walk out with the cash in hand, but he would never have caved that easily. I knew that going in. For me, taking my power back was enough. I was tired of the troll tossing boulders on my bridge to freedom. Maybe next time, he would think twice before he went after another single mom. Two weeks later, an envelope from the propane company was in our mailbox. It is probably a formal notice explaining why he cannot pay me. However, as I opened the envelope, the only thing inside was a check for \$348.00 made out to Heidi Sampson.

After Chuck Derry and Ed Heisler’s presentation at Minnesota State University, Mankato, I slowly packed my notepad and pen in my book bag. I wanted to speak with Chuck but would not do it in front of anyone from my class. Thankfully, most of them filtered out fast; even the future officer had nothing to add tonight, a welcomed change. As I stand before Chuck, my mouth has dried up. Chuck tilts his head to one side and waits me out.

“I only wanted to say that your project idea is the best I have ever heard of,” I mumbled.

“Well, thank you,” he said.

“No, really,” I said, “you need to establish that in small towns too. Not just towns like Mankato. We need you in small communities.”

“We hope to get this system adopted statewide,” he said. “What is your experience?”

“My ex-husband has done a lot,” I said, “from making it damn near impossible to fill my propane tanks through his contacts with them to having my car towed the year after our divorce. The worst part, a sheriff or an officer, I am not sure which—someone who was sworn to protect and serve—helped my ex-husband have my car towed because he did business at my husband’s shop. The tow company knew something was wrong with the situation, but no one said anything. They towed the car anyway. If there had been one person willing to say no, we are putting the car in her driveway, which was literally a quarter of a mile from where the car got stuck, it would have meant a great deal for me financially and emotionally. Instead, I felt like I was the only one in a sea full of people intent on their loyalty to my ex that they kept pulling my head underwater. I felt like I could not breathe.”

Context

This context section for Chapter V provides background information for the autoethnographic story above. For Story 1—MENding the First Year—the context information for that autoethnographic story is below. The context section utilized the newspaper archives from The Free Press in Mankato, Minnesota, other relevant archival newspaper information, Minnesota Legislative records, and other necessary contextual background information to support and provide greater contextual detail for the autoethnographic story above.

The Worst Year for Intimate Partner Violence Cases

*Ashley Sullivan & Chester (Chet) Gronewold*⁶

Anna Gronewold lost both her daughter, 25-year-old Ashley Sullivan, and her husband, 59-year-old Chester (Chet) Gronewold, to a double murder-suicide when Ashley's estranged boyfriend and father of Ashley's youngest child, Shawn Haugen, 28-years-old, broke into Anna's rural home in Lewisville, Minnesota, on January 17, 2010. Ashley had woken her mother up around 5 a.m. to let Anna know that Shawn had been calling and texting Ashley since 3 a.m., clearly breaking the no-contact order again. Since it was still so early, neither wanted to call the police figuring their problem could wait a few hours more. Unfortunately, neither Ashley nor Anna could have known that Shawn was likely already outside their home lying in wait due to the pile of cigarette butts later found near his pickup truck. Ashley's sons were also in the home, her oldest was 6, and her youngest was 18 months.

Unfortunately, the judicial system had failed Ashley Sullivan numerous times in the month and a half before her death and the death of her stepfather, Chester Gronewold, at the Lewisville farm. In December 2009, Shawn became violent during a custodial visit with his son. He broke Ashley's phone, put a fist through her television, and fled with her son to Frost, Minnesota, a town near the Iowa border. With the Order or Protection or "Domestic Assault No Contact Order," otherwise known as DANCO, in place, Shawn was charged, and a \$5,000 bail was set. He was released on December 22, 2009, when he posted the \$500 cash to a bail bond agent.

By Christmas Eve, Shawn was calling Ashley in direct violation of the DANCO, but she refused to speak with him. Around 8:30 p.m., she learned her Lewisville residence had caught

⁶ The discussion of this case is based on my reading of Fischenich (2010), Nienaber (2010g, 2010h, 2010k), and Ojanpa and Murray (2010).

fire. By 9:30 p.m. Ashley received another call from Shawn, “Are you ready to talk now, Babe” (Fischenich, 2010, p. A5). On Christmas morning, Shawn was finally arrested for harassing Ashley at her grandmother’s house in Lake Crystal, Minnesota, which resided in Blue Earth County. He was taken into custody by the Lake Crystal police, and his vehicle was impounded. At the time, there was also some suspicion and speculation that Shawn burned down Ashley’s Lewisville residence. However, authorities ruled the fire accidental. The authority’s determination of the loss of her Lewisville residence as an accident had not set well with Ashley.

With her home destroyed, Ashley and the boys moved into Anna and Chester Gronewold’s Lewisville farmhouse. While in the Blue Earth County Jail, Shawn managed to break the DANCO on January 7, 2010, by sending Ashley a letter, and again on January 9, 2010, when he called her place of employment four different times from the jailhouse phone. On January 11, 2010, \$500 secured his release from the Blue Earth County Jail, except he was immediately transported to the Watonwan County Jail for the previous DANCO violations he had incurred in Watonwan County.

In Watonwan County, Shawn’s bail was set at \$20,000, which meant he needed \$2,000, and by January 14, 2010, he had the cash in hand. Shawn was once again a free man, three days before Ashley Sullivan and Chester Gronewold would lose their lives.

Stiffer Fines & Penalties Versus Victim Blaming. Less than a month after the loss of Ashley Sullivan and Chester Gronewold, Julie Rosen, the Minnesota State Senator, and Tony Cornish, Minnesota State Representative, and Lake Crystal Police Chief, met with the mothers of both Ashley Sullivan and Shawn Haugen. Both mothers pledged to work together to change Minnesota’s domestic violence laws. At the same time, Senator Julie Rosen and Representative and Lake Crystal Police Chief Tony Cornish had begun drafting a bill proposal to give the

mothers a jump start at creating change around Minnesota's domestic violence laws. The proposed bill would increase bail and violation penalties.

Anna Gronewold testified before Minnesota's Senate Judiciary Committee in March 2010. Anna made the case for why the bail statutes in Minnesota needed to change by relaying the circumstances that led up to the death of her daughter, Ashley Sullivan. Anna told how Shawn and Ashley were relatively happy for 18 months of their relationship, but things changed after the birth of their son. At that time, domestic violence assaults occurred several times. Ashley ended the relationship in May 2009 and then tried to patch things up for 3 weeks in July 2009. Unfortunately, things had not changed. Ashley appeared at Anna and Chester's house with a black eye, requesting to be taken to the hospital. From July to December of 2009, things just got worse. On January 14, 2010, when victim's services called to say Shawn Haugen was released yet again, "Ashley's face [drained of color] and [her eyes] 'welled up in tears,' Gronewold said. 'Her fear was apparent, and rightfully so'" (Fischenich, 2010, p. A5). Regrettably, the system failed Ashley.

Initially, Senator Rosen and Representative and Police Chief Cornish had hoped the new legislation would give judges more extensive discretion when it came to setting bail limits as high—as the Judge would like to go—especially if the individual was believed to be extremely dangerous. However, they were forced to "compromise with maximum bails of \$30,000 for gross misdemeanors and \$10,000 for misdemeanors—meaning bonds could generally be purchased for about \$3,000 and \$1,000, respectively" (Fischenich, 2010, p. A5). The compromise developed out of a concern that if a judge were allowed to set bail too high for a misdemeanor, the new law would be ruled unconstitutional because the U.S. Constitution guarantees everyone the right to bail.

In a letter to State Senator Julie Rosen, Watonwan County Attorney LaMar Piper voiced his concerns regarding the push for the new domestic violence legislation. Watonwan County Attorney LaMar Piper argued that the Ashley Sullivan and Chester Gronewold murders were not a “good foundation for new legislation” (Nienaber, 2010h, p. A1). The County Attorney followed up his assertion with two main points where he felt the case broke down. The first breakdown happened when the judges dealing with Shawn Haugen refused to set his bail higher than they did. According to County Attorney LaMar Piper, Blue Earth County Prosecutors had requested “a bail of \$50,000 with conditions or \$100,000 without conditions” when Shawn was arrested on Christmas (Nienaber, 2010h, p. A7). However, District Court Judge Bradley Walker set the bail at \$5,000. The second breakdown—and, of course, this is where the victim-blaming begins and where County Attorney LaMar Piper placed the majority of the blame—is that Ashley and her family did not call 911 the second she started receiving calls and text messages from Shawn during the early morning hours of January 17, 2010, prior to her murder. Although, County Attorney LaMar Piper realized that the first breakdown might be helped by the legislation proposal, which he chalked up to nothing more than theatre meant to distract people from the real issue. The second breakdown would not be helped by anything less than education and behavior change.

My Response. In Ashley Sullivan’s case, she was not protected from her abuser due to a protection order that failed to work and a bail system that could not provide a high enough bail to keep him behind bars despite his repeated and progressive violations of the order. As women, we are trained, groomed, and socialized from young on not to be a bother, so I can see why Ashley and her mother waited to make that phone call the morning she ultimately died. A man might make that phone call, whereas a woman would look at the situation differently. We do not make

phone calls in the early morning unless it is life or death. At that point, that threshold had yet to be crossed. He was only texting. They did not know he was most likely in their yard watching the house. Additionally, if she had called at a different time, on a different protection order violation—not saying she had, but hypothetically—and was met by a rural cop who was unhappy about the late hour or early morning, or maybe it was a false alarm. Women remember that stuff—last time, the cop was upset. This time I need to wait. All those elements go into a woman’s decision-making process, which would have played a factor that morning. Plus, her children were there, and one does not wake their babies up early on the weekend. As mothers, those are the only days we get to sleep, sometimes.

When County Attorney LaMar Piper argued that the second breakdown would not be helped by anything less than education and behavior change, he was wrong to victim blame. We do, however, need that education and behavior change to stop victim blaming from taking place to constantly educate about domestic violence and it absolutely needs to happen among those who encounter victims of domestic violence, those who are supposed to defend them in court, the judges, officers, and most especially the wider public.

Minnesota Senate Bill 2437. The work Anna Gronewold put in on behalf of her daughter Ashley Sullivan and her husband, Chester Gronewald, culminated by her telling Ashley’s story in front of the legislature and, so, did pay off. On May 10, 2010, Governor Tim Pawlenty signed into law S.F. No. 2437 (Domestic Abuse No Contact Order, 2010). The Omnibus Domestic Abuse Bill S.F. No. 2437 included many changes and additions such as expanding the definition for no contact orders, enabling courts to protect pets and companion animals in protective orders, extending protective orders around dwellings or residences to whatever a Judge deems necessary, changing the rules around stalking, increasing the maximum

bail for domestic assault, and ordering for protection violations. It also allowed judges to order reoffending defendants to wear electronic monitoring devices on a pretrial basis.

S.F. No. 2437 also includes more specific laws surrounding domestic abusers who attempt to tamper with witnesses or falsify information through intimidation or intentional influences, which means that prosecution can now look at a particular action as proof of intimidation, or the totality of the circumstances with which the domestic abuser has been involved, enabling them to better prosecute the domestic abuser based on their actions (Domestic Abuse No Contact Order, 2010). When it comes to stalking laws, S.F. No. 2437 guarantees that when a stalking act is committed in two or more counties, the stalker can be convicted in any of the counties for which they have crimes charged against them, for all of the violations of which they are charged in all of the counties they have committed a criminal act, rather than being released and sent to a different Judge and prosecutor for that counties crime (Domestic Abuse No Contact Order, 2010).

Svetlana Vladimirovna Munt⁷

On Sunday afternoon, March 28, 2010, Joel Marvin Munt, 33, of Burnsville, Minnesota, killed his ex-wife, Svetlana Vladimirovna Munt, 32, of Mankato, Minnesota, when he rammed her car with his SUV, pinning Svetlana's car between his vehicle and a tree (Nienaber, 2010e). From initial interviews, authorities gathered that although Joel Munt was not scheduled for visitation until 2:00 p.m., both Munt vehicles ended up in the Rasmussen Nature Reserve, incapacitated, shortly before noon. Svetlana's three children—ages 7, 5, and 4—watched as their mother scrambled into the back seat with them while their father gunned her down, causing one of the children to be covered in Svetlana's blood and shards of glass. Joel fired seven times at

⁷ The following account was based primarily on my reading of Murray, 2010a, 2010b, 2010d, 2010e. Nienaber, 2010d, 2010e, 2010i, 2010j, 2011a, 2011e, 2011f, 2011g, 2011m.

Svetlana—still in her vehicle—hitting her three times in the chest and once in the head (Murray, 2010d). Next, Joel used a knife to cut the children from the seat belts and pull them from the car.

Due to the noise and the smoke from the vehicles, a man walking his dog swung by to help, but Munt turned the gun on him and told him to leave (Murray, 2010d). A short while later, an SUV arrived, and the driver and the wife got out to help Munt and his children. Munt pointed the gun at the woman as she was to get her children out of her SUV. While Munt loaded his children into the SUV, the woman told her children to run for the trees and not to look back, assuming she and the driver would be killed. Once Munt left the Rasmussen location, he called his girlfriend, Tracy Schantzen, to inform her that Svetlana was dead. He was pulled over a short time later, where officers repeatedly heard Joel telling his children that they were safe now, as he angrily told them how the system had failed him and his family as he was being arrested.

Joel Munt and Svetlana Munt had been divorced for several years by the time Joel shot her in Rasmussen Nature Reserve, which left the authorities not entirely positive as to why or what Joel's motive would have been when he killed his ex-wife. However, they would soon realize that there was one gigantic clue, a divorce file containing over 1,000 pages worth of court documents at the Nicollet County Courthouse describing the destruction of Joel and Svetlana's marriage and custodial battle. According to the court documents, there were allegations of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and complaints of lousy parenting going both ways. However, by her death, life was starting to turn around for Svetlana. She had gotten a driver's license, a psychologist had cleared her of Joel's earlier allegations, giving her custody of the children, and she had been approved to purchase a small house. She planned to move into her new home with her children, and a Nicollet County judge had given her custody of their children.

The Hero on the White Horse. Svetlana Vladimirovna Budnaya, the only daughter of Liudmila Budnaya and Vladimir Budniy, grew up in a nine-story apartment building in a working-class neighborhood of Krasnodar, Russia. By all accounts, Svetlana was a straight-A student in high school. She was trained to teach language and literature at a Russian University, again earning all A's in her coursework. She met Joel Munt through an online dating service with an office in her neighborhood in the 1990s, which specialized in hooking Russian women up with men from abroad. Unfortunately for Svetlana, he was one of the first men to show an interest in her romantically, and she often referred to him as her "hero on a white horse" (Murray, 2010b, p. A1). In August of 1998, Joel came to Russia to meet Svetlana and her parents, staying for 2 weeks, and then returned in November to marry Svetlana. Everything seemed fine. It was a traditional Russian wedding. After the wedding, Joel returned to America, and Svetlana stayed in Russia to finish her studies.

The Abuse Starts Stateside. Svetlana flew to Minnesota Lake, Minnesota, to be with her husband, Joel Munt, in June 1999. The honeymoon did not last long before Svetlana called her parents to tell them Joel would not let her go anywhere, refused to let her get a license or a bank account, and absolutely, no Russian was spoken in his home. Not even when her parents visited, they did not know much English. Even the Minnesota Lake city clerk noticed something was amiss between Svetlana and Joel. The city clerk recalled that Svetlana was never allowed to go out, Joel placed a big fence in his backyard, Svetlana wore long sleeves and pants even on hot, humid days, and there were bruises.

The city clerk recalled taking Svetlana around town to some garage sales, but when she brought her back home, and Svetlana noticed her husband's vehicle in the driveway, her mood changed, and Svetlana started to shake. When the city clerk would ask Svetlana if she needed

help to get out or if she was being abused, she would deflect the question or say she was not a “good American wife and mother. I deserve everything I get” (Murray, 2010b, p. A5). The city clerk even went to the local police on Svetlana’s behalf, but they said there was little they could do until Svetlana asked for help.

According to court documents, Munt was actively looking for a replacement for Svetlana and would brag about the websites he was on, the responses he would get from other women, and how soon it would be before she would be out the door. Central to Joel and Svetlana’s problems was how the children should be raised, punishment for the children, and of course, Svetlana was not allowed to speak Russian around the children. Between 2003 and 2004, Svetlana finally called the police for help, and they took her to a safe house.

1,000 Page Custodial Case. Much of their divorce proceedings, all 1,000 pages, detailed an intensifying paranoia in Joel Munt and the increasing stress level of Svetlana Munt. Joel even enlisted his new girlfriend to help detail and document every possible injury they believed was inflicted by Svetlana. Joel and his girlfriend’s method of documentation were so rigorous that after reading reports by others, a social worker did not find Svetlana to be abusing the children at all. However, that same social worker did state for the record:

I do believe that Joel Munt and (his girlfriend) are causing emotional harm to these children and I am recommending that a change in visitation occur until the visits are appropriate and in the best interests of the children, probably supervised. I am also questioning if the two can be considered reliable reporters for future reports of allegations. Two detectives stated they are not seriously taking reports from (the girlfriend) anymore. The interrogation of these children needs to stop. (Murray, 2010b, p. A5)

During their many divorce and custodial proceedings with Nicollet County District Court Judge Todd Westphal, noted on more than one occasion that while they had what amounted to essentially joint legal and joint physical custody, “that arrangement has turned out to be nothing short of disastrous” (Murray, 2010a, p. A5). Not only was Joel and Svetlana’s divorce

contentious, but Joel also blamed everyone in the Nicollet County Family Court system he felt kept him from total control and custody of his children.

1 year before and then again, several months before Joel Munt killed his ex-wife, Nicollet County Attorney Michael Riley was concerned about what Joel was writing on his Dragon Empire Website. However, he could not file criminal charges. When Nicollet County Attorney Michael Riley realized what had happened to Svetlana, he wrote a letter voicing his concerns to Assistant Attorney Pat McDermott. The Nicollet County Attorney's letter urged McDermott to increase Joel Munt's bail from \$600,000 to \$1 million with conditions that Joel be tracked with a global-positioning system if released. The letter also detailed that if released, Joel Munt would likely go after those he felt were keeping him from his children, which placed Nicollet County Judge Westphal, a guardian ad litem (a neutral person appointed by a court to protect a child's interests) who had already experienced conduct and threats that were borderline criminal, as well as other Nicollet County employees that were involved with his case in jeopardy. In fact, on October 2, 2006, Svetlana reported that Joel Munt threatened to burn her house down in Minnesota Lake with her inside of it. According to an affidavit, Svetlana filed for an order for protection after the incident, "I told Joel that I have rights and he told me that I do not. We were arguing about a divorce and he told me that he would make me disappear" (Nienaber, 2010i, p. A7). However, in a court appearance after Assistant Attorney McDermott received the letter, he only forwarded the letter at that time to District Court Judge Norbert Smith (Nienaber, 2010j). It is unclear if he knew about the October 2, 2006, altercation at the time of the court appearance. The Assistant County Attorney then asked for a condition of GPS monitoring to be added to Joel Munt's bail but did not raise his bail.

First-Degree Murder. In the State of Minnesota, a first-degree murder charge requires a grand jury to indict, and evidence must also support premeditation. When the grand jury convened the week of April 19, 2010, Assistant County Attorney Pat McDermott secured several new charges. The most serious of the new charges were related to the four counts of first-degree murder, one count for killing his ex-wife, Sevtlana Munt, and three counts for committing a drive-by shooting, during a domestic assault while kidnapping children. Of course, the first-degree murder charge will bring a life sentence in prison if proven guilty. Joel Munt's Defense Attorney, Scott Cutcher, decided to argue that his client was mentally ill, believed his children were being abused, and therefore, had to kill his ex-wife to save the children. Defense Attorney Scott Cutcher felt his proposed defense was his best option even though the psychological evaluation found that Joel was not mentally ill when he killed his ex-wife. Essentially, Joel Munt argued that he was justified in killing his ex-wife.

Once Dead, It Is Not Kidnapping. Just as the trial got underway, the defense attorneys for Joel Munt argued to have the three felony kidnapping charges against their client dismissed. The sleaziest part of their argument was based on the grounds that once Svetlana was dead, "there was no longer anyone to kidnap the children from" (Nienaber, 2011a, p. A1). At the trial, Joel Munt would testify on his behalf, claiming that "It" took over when he just happened to pull into the same park that Svetlana often took the kids to before she would drop them off for visitation at CADA with their father. "It" grabbed the gun. "It" saw Svetlana trying to get into the back seat of her car. Joel claimed "It" watched Svetlana use their youngest son as a human shield to save her from the bullet. If this is true, the boy never got hit by the bullets, which also hit his mother in the head and body. However, the youngest boy was covered in his mother's blood and glass from the window shattering. After "It" shot Svetlana, "It" asked the kids if they

wanted to come with him, and they said yes. Therefore, Joel also argued with the County Prosecutor that he could not have kidnapped his children because “It” asked them if they wanted to go, and they said yes. Since Svetlana’s body had landed on the oldest child, their daughter, “It” had to push Svetlana up to get that child out from underneath her. Although “It” threatened and stole the other couple’s SUV, “It” did apologize to them before leaving the parking area. Joel also claimed his children did not get upset until he was arrested by the officers a short while later.

Sentencing. In the end, Joel Munt was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole plus 21 years. He was also guilty of murder, robbery, kidnapping, and assault when all was said and done. Joel Munt was not found insane during the shooting (Nienaber, 2011g). Both psychologists—for the defense and prosecution—agreed that Joel understood what he was doing at the time of the shooting and knew it was wrong.

My Response. A 1,000-page custodial case is a relatively good indicator of problems. The fact that the family courts let that entire situation get out of control and that it resulted in the death of Svetlana in front of her children was needless. This case is an excellent example of an abusive relationship, how one plays out, and even how the abuser can successfully operate in Family Court. The Family Courts put Svetlana through psychological evaluations, but the newspapers never asked if or stated that the Family Courts made Joel go through the same evaluations to prove he could parent. When you read the newspaper accounts, it reads as if “she is the villain, possibly. However, she died.”

After everything was said and done, no one looked at Svetlana’s case for the failures in Family Court or for where they could have circumvented this situation and prevented her death. There was no accountability at the Family Court level for the death of Svetlana. I do not believe

the Family Court system did not know this could potentially happen. The neighboring District Attorney's letter to Blue Earth County's District Attorney asking for a higher bail to protect their county workers signifies they knew Joel Munt was a time bomb. If that was the case, why did no one help Svetlana? Why was she left to fend for herself? Was it because she was an outsider? A single mom? Or both?

Jennifer Nibbe⁸

I want to preface this next case with a disclaimer. Jennifer was the killer. In this location, saying anything other than that can have you blackballed. However, this case has never set right with me. I include it here, not because I think she is innocent, but because of the stigma she faced, which was significantly different from Joel Munt or even the case that follows hers. If James had killed her, would the case have played out the same way? I do not think so because one of the overall themes of this case is how do we keep her silent.

Around 6 a.m. on August 31, 2010, James Mervin Nibbe, 26, of Lake Crystal, Minnesota, was found dead, lying face down with his arms over his head as if sleeping, shot in the back of his head while he slept. His wife, Jennifer Lee (Gilman) Nibbe, 33, and her teenage son had been home at the time of the shooting, initially reported as a burglary by Jennifer. Jennifer said she had been in the bathroom getting ready for work and had not heard anyone enter the house or shoot James. Therefore, she did not realize there was an intruder until she came face-to-face with them after coming out of the bathroom, at which point the intruder pinned her down in the living room and cut her legs before fleeing the scene due to the dog's barking. Jennifer's 16-year-old son had slept through the shooting and attempted assault.

⁸ My description of the case is based on my reading of Kent, 2010, Murray, 2010f, 2011, Nienaber, 2010a, 2010b, 2010f, 2010m, 2010o, 2011b, 2011c, 2011i, 2011j, 2011k, 2011n, 2011o, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d, 2012e, 2012f, 2012g, 2012h, 2012i, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d, 2014e, 2014f.

Jennifer Nibbe was employed at the Mankato Surgery Center as a nurse and an emergency responder. James Nibbe was an apprentice at Maple River Electric. James and Jennifer were married on May 24, 2008. Prior to meeting James Nibbe, Jennifer had been a single mom. Around 2005, she built the home the two currently lived in, purchasing the land from her father or uncle. However, it should be noted that the newspaper provides conflicting reports on whether the house existed on the property at the time of purchase or if she had built the home and purchased the land. Either way, she purchased the home before her time with James Nibbe.

Inconsistencies. Only days after her husband's funeral, Jennifer Lee Nibbe was arrested in the parking lot of her employer, the Mankato Surgery Center, for the shooting death of her husband. According to officers, parts of Jennifer's story had not lined up right from the start. For instance, it had been raining the day of the shooting, except the officers could not find footprints or tire tracks outside the house. Despite claims that Jennifer had fought off an attempted sexual assault in her living room, there was no evidence of a struggle on the floor, and the cuts she sustained on her legs were not typical of defensive wounds. Plus, Jennifer's story had changed. When the second deputy arrived and questioned Jennifer, she said she was in the bathroom off the master bedroom getting ready for work. When she opened the door, she saw the man holding a shotgun above her husband. He then pointed it at Jennifer and pulled the trigger, except nothing happened. The intruder threw down the gun, struggling to bring Jennifer into the living room for the assault, before ultimately fleeing due to the dog's barking. She did tell the second officer that the shotgun in the bedroom had been bought for her by her husband for deer hunting and that the duo had completed target practice the night before. Also, Jennifer claimed she and her husband were not having marital problems, yet Jennifer's cousin told officers that Jennifer was unhappy.

Jennifer was sexting another man even though she loved her husband, according to her journal. Next, the officer's discovered Jennifer was obtaining prescription pain medicine illegally and had been spending roughly \$1,000 a month, which they figured meant she was thousands of dollars in debt. The final piece of evidence pointing to Jennifer's guilt consisted of the \$250,000 insurance policy on James Nibbe, issued on June 25. However, James Nibbe was aware of the life insurance policy, as they had taken it out together in the event of his death.

Mental Evaluation: Trained for Abuse vs. Luck of Draw. Before a grand jury could be called to determine premeditated first-degree murder, Defense Attorney Richard Hillesheim asked for a mental evaluation of Jennifer Nibbe due to her inability to remember and discuss the critical details of the events that happened on the day her husband was shot. Defense Attorney Richard Hillesheim said he needed to determine if his client suffered from a mental illness or mental deficiency, or was experiencing a withdrawal from Tramadol, the pain medication she had been abusing in large quantities. Although Blue Earth County District Attorney Patrick McDermott did not object to the mental evaluation, he did object to the defense's request to use Dr. George Komaridis.

According to ASC Psychological Services (n.d.), Dr. George Komaridis founded and directed ASC in Mankato, Minnesota. ASC offers individual and marriage therapy, trauma and grief programs for veterans, individuals facing addictions, and forensic evaluations and testimony. Komaridis received his undergraduate from Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, and his graduate degrees from the University of Nebraska—Lincoln, Lincoln, Nebraska. As a practicing psychologist since 1970, Komaridis's specialty was trauma and stress-related disorders, anxiety and depressive disorders, co-occurring substance abuse and mental health disorders, forensic examinations and expert witness testimony, along with

certifications in numerous kinds of specialized therapy. Unfortunately, Blue Earth County District Attorney Patrick McDermott objected to using Dr. George Komaridis's services. He asked the Judge to send Jennifer to the Regional Treatment Center in St. Peter for evaluation by a forensic examiner on staff instead.

The Regional Treatment Center was first known as the St. Peter State Hospital in St. Peter, Minnesota. It was the institutional hospital for those with mental illness established in Minnesota in 1866 (Minnesota Legislature, 2015b). Over the years, the St. Peter State Hospital has taken in what they considered to be the "tubercular insane" in 1911 (Minnesota Legislature, 2015b, para. 4), the developmentally disabled, and eventually, sexual predators. In 1985, the name changed to St. Peter Regional Treatment Center. The Minnesota Security Hospital operates within the campus and has been maintained in conjunction with the St. Peter Regional Treatment Center since 1907. However, Minnesota Security Hospital does have a separate medical director. This building was originally designed and called the Asylum for the Dangerously Insane, in which only men would be committed by the courts or transferred from hospitals and correctional facilities since 1911 when the building was completed (Minnesota Legislature, 2015a).

In 1957, the name changed to the Minnesota Security Hospital (Minnesota Legislature, 2015a). According to the Minnesota Department of Human Services (2018b), the complexity of the cases of patients they receive far exceeds that of other hospitals, with people being civilly committed as mentally ill or dangerous, which also means volatile and physically aggressive. About 835 full-time direct care staff work in forensic services in St. Peter, including their Security Hospital, Transition Services, and the Forensic Nursing Home (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2018b). Sometime between 2018 and 2022, the name changed from the Minnesota Security Hospital to the Forensic Mental Health Program (C. Hughes, 2022). The

Forensic Services Director at the Minnesota Department of Human Services oversees all mental health programs except the Sex Offenders Program, which resides on the lower campus (Hughes, 2022). Nowhere online does it explicitly say where the state's forensic examiners are housed at the Regional Treatment Center, nor is there a list of forensic examiner qualifications that I could find in my search of the web.

Evaluator Biased. After receiving the first competency evaluation, Jennifer Nibbe's Defense Attorney, Richard Hillesheim, requested a second evaluation and a neurological exam, even though she was deemed competent to stand trial (Nienaber, 2011j). In particular, Hillesheim thought the examiner's report by Dr. Jeff Haun was biased and that the examiner stated things outside of their expertise. When Jennifer said she could not remember everything that happened the morning of the murder, the examiner thought she was faking her amnesia, but then also said, "as experienced genuine memory loss due to unknown organic or dissociative causes" (Nienaber, 2011j, p. A7). Also, the examiner did recommend a neuropsychological assessment to determine memory functioning despite initially believing she was faking her amnesia. Finally, the examiner believed Jennifer was depressed, anxious, and suffering from traumatic stress. She presented herself as exceptionally free from shortcomings, and by presenting a positive impression, she could have disturbed the test results of the competency evaluation.

According to the American Institute for the Advancement of Forensic Studies (n.d.), Dr. Jeff Haun has worked in forensic psychology in Minnesota since 2008. Concordia University (n.d.) confirmed that Haun received his doctoral degree in clinical psychology at Pacific University, Forest Grove, Oregon, and a postdoctoral fellowship in forensic-clinical psychology through the University of Washington School of Medicine in Seattle, Washington. At some point, he became a licensed psychologist in the State of Minnesota. In 2008, he became

employed as a forensic psychologist at Minnesota State Operated Forensic Services (Concordia University, n.d.). The Forensic Mental Health Program is connected to the Minnesota State Operated Forensic Services in St. Peter, Minnesota. Haun conducted forensic evaluations with juveniles and adults at this location, offered consultation and training, and provided clinical supervision and training for the Minnesota Forensic Services Forensic Psychology Fellowship Program. Haun also teaches undergraduate classes as an adjunct professor at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota (Concordia University, n.d.).

Haun was called to trial to clarify some of the psychological evaluation results he had reported on Jennifer Nibbe. He informed the court that he was concerned with Jennifer's suicidal thoughts and depression when he first interviewed her on November 29, 2010. To that point, he had read in her files that she had complained of hallucinations, depression, and memory loss, roughly a week after she arrived at the jail on September 10, 2010, which meant Jennifer had not been provided any psychological assistance for at least 7 weeks (Niebnaber, 2011o). Since Haun met with her, she has been seeing a psychiatrist and was placed on an anti-depressant and sleep-aide medications.

Nibbe's Family Visits Exact Dr. Defense Wanted. When Defense Attorney Hillesheim's argued before District Court Judge Kurt Johnson why Jennifer Nibbe should be entitled to a new competency examination, the public learns the real reason why Haun was chosen and not Dr. George Komaridis, whom the defense had initially requested. According to Hillesheim, the reasons why Komaridis was not selected were not due to the judge choosing Haun over Komaridis. Johnson was for Komaridis, who would have been the competency evaluator if, after the competency hearing, the Blue Earth County District Attorney Patrick McDermott, had not called stating someone from James Nibbe's family had sought out

counseling from Dr. Komaridis the day prior. Yes, 1 day prior. For Defense Attorney Hillesheim, this was overly convenient. While he did not think the prosecutor would do anything to disqualify Komaridis intentionally, only a select few people knew Komaridis' name had appeared on the motion filed by Hillesheim in the request for a competency hearing.

Defense Attorney Hillesheim was willing to mention the ironic nature of Dr. George Komaridis's dismissal from the competency evaluation to *The Free Press*. Blue Earth County District Attorney Patrick McDermott responded to Hillesheim's request for a second competency hearing with a resounding "no." As far as the Blue Earth County District Attorney was concerned, Haun had stated that Jennifer Nibbe was competent to stand trial whether she can remember or not. Unfortunately for Jennifer Nibbe, Judge Johnson would rule against the second evaluation citing Haun:

Ms. Nibbe presently possesses sufficient ability to rationally consult with counsel, to understand the proceedings, and to participate in her defense. . . [and] it is my opinion that the defendant was not laboring under such a defect of reason at the time of the commission of the alleged offense as not to know the nature of the acts constituting the present charges or that her actions were wrong. (Nienaber, 2011, p. A7)

On March 30, 2011, Jennifer Lee Nibbe was indicted by a grand jury on first-degree murder charges for the death of her husband, James Nibbe.

Defense Raises Questionable Tactics. On September 6, 2011, the Jennifer Nibbe trial was set to begin, but her attorney's father passed away during the early morning hours of that day. However, there were a few pre-trial motions he wanted to argue, which were to have the first-degree murder charges dismissed due to investigators interrogating Jennifer inside a squad car the day her husband was found murdered. If not, he wanted both statements before and after she was arrested thrown out. Jennifer had first requested an attorney when officers pointed out the inconsistencies in her story on the day of the murder. After Jennifer said she wanted an attorney, she was told she could leave, but at the same time, her cousin had also arrived, telling

investigators she wanted them to tell Jennifer she was there to give her a ride home. Instead of informing Jennifer of her cousin's arrival, they placed her cousin in a separate room. At the same time, the two detectives questioning Jennifer got tape recorders and were suddenly available to take her home. Although the detectives did not openly ask any more questions on the ride home, they did comment, suggesting that she admit to the shooting so that her teenage son was not put away from the crime. Jennifer's cousin did not realize Jennifer had left until her mom called and told her Jennifer was home.

The second motion requested information regarding who was notified after it became known that James Nibbe tested positive for HIV and hepatitis during his autopsy, to which the Blue Earth County District Attorney Patrick McDermott responded that the information was irrelevant to the case. Defense Attorney Hillesheim wanted more information on what James Nibbe was doing in the weeks and days before his death (Nienaber, 2011c). He then accused the investigators of focusing too soon on Jennifer Nibbe, given that there was pornography and other sex-related evidence in James's pick-up truck, bedside table, and closet (Nienaber, 2011c). Also, Jennifer's father, Dan Gilman, had found a players club membership to a Twin Cities strip club 10 days after the house had been returned to him. As a result, Defense Attorney Hillesheim wanted to know where else James Nibbe had been, who he had been with, his cellphone data, and access to his financial information, given that he tested positive for HIV, as that alone could have given someone a reason to kill him. Also, there was evidence missing that would have been unfavorable to the prosecutors' case, and the defense wanted the jury to be made aware that it was gone. Unfortunately, District Court Judge Bradley Walker denied almost everything Jennifer's defense attorney tried to do on her behalf—the questionably obtained investigation tapes, the implied charges the investigators stated might get leveled at her son if she did not

confess pointed to coercion, the missing evidence, the confession obtained while Jennifer was suffering from lack of sleep, the withdrawals, or that her attorney was not present. Plus, the investigators deliberately did not call the attorney to be present (Nienaber, 2012d). Anything Jennifer may have said to investigators after she asked for an attorney, and they told her she was free to go, could not be available in court.

Prosecution: No Abuse in Marriage Defense. In March 2012, Defense Attorney Hillesheim was again trying to get the first-degree murder indictment off the table due to what happened when the grand jury was convened. While prosecutors have also filed a motion to shut down any chance the jury would have to hear of James Nibbe's positive HIV test, his adult pornography interests found throughout the house and his truck, as well as any testimony given by an expert who could testify to cell phone data and computer information recovered from the house. Also, the prosecutor wanted the following defenses removed from consideration: self-defense, defense of others, the heat of passion (i.e., abuse within a marriage), and involuntary toxification.

Defense Attorney Hillesheim was upset that during the grand jury trial, a juror asked if Tramadol might have affected Jennifer's thinking. However, the prosecutor (unsure which since they were not referenced by name in the transcripts) referenced what an investigator said that it should not have been a hallucinogenic (Nienaber, 2012f). However, they never said how much she had in her system. When the juror brought up the issue a second time, the prosecutor offered to get an expert "but then told the juror, 'That is not going to happen this afternoon'" (Nienaber, 2012f, p. A2). Grand jurors can call witnesses and investigate beyond what is presented, but according to Defense Attorney Richard Hillesheim, many grand jurors are unaware of that. There was also a lot of incorrect evidence provided, or it was not provided, such as they were not told

about Jennifer's addiction, the crime scene photos—when the grand juror asked for crime scene photos, or to hear from a forensic expert. They were incorrectly told that Jennifer's hands were positive for gunshot residue.

Judge Orders Defense to Provide Strategy. Eighteen months after Jennifer confessed to investigators that she shot her husband, District Court Judge Bradley Walker ordered the defense to reveal their strategy at trial. Defense Attorney Hillesheim was not happy being forced to reveal his strategy because it gave the prosecutor the unfair advantage of having a preview of his case. In Hillesheim's response, he detailed how Jennifer Nibbe was experiencing physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her husband (Nienaber, 2012g). James Nibbe preferred to restrain her during sex forcibly. There were injuries if she avoided sex and strangulation during the assaults. If James had already viewed pornography, his requests became more aggressive, forcing her to do what he saw and tearing her apart if she failed to comply. Jennifer started using Tramadol to numb herself to James's sexual requests/assaults/marital rapes, and as time increased, she increased her dosage to deal with what was happening. Dr. Lynn Powers, a defense witness, was prepared to testify that Jennifer suffered from and was diagnosed with PTSD as a direct result of the sexual abuse she suffered at her husband's hand (Nienaber, 2012g). Also, James Nibbe had learned he had contracted HIV from a sexual partner (not his wife), so he purchased the life insurance policy before showing signs of an infection (Nienaber, 2012g). This would also explain his depressed state before his death, asserted Defense Attorney Hillesheim. The HIV was why he kept a stash of latex gloves with his condoms and pornography.

Defense Attorney Hillesheim also believed that investigators had ignored anything they believed would harm their case. For instance, they were pulling information from a computer

that would harm Jennifer but entirely ignoring anything to do with Nibbe and his pornography obsessions. Also, pornography found in the house turned over to investigators was deemed unimportant and destroyed. In contrast, pornography and correspondence Jennifer's father discovered in James's pickup truck were also inadvertently destroyed since he did not realize what he was sitting on would have helped his daughter's case and burned it. Therefore, it is not entirely possible to determine the nature and type of pornography found in those locations because the defense no longer has access to them. A motion was filed to move the trial due to media coverage. Plus, James Nibbe's family had created a school scholarship and started fundraising events, which have made it and would make it next to impossible to get an unbiased jury.

In May 2012, District Court Judge Walker once again quashed any hope Defense Attorney Hillesheim may have had of getting any motion passed by his desk. This time Judge Walker denied the chance to drop the first-degree murder charge because he did not believe the prosecutor did anything that would have stopped the grand jury from reaching its own independent opinion. Next, he shut down the opportunity to move the trial to another county because Judge Walker believed that there were still people in Blue Earth County who were free from media influence and would make great jurors. Regarding the prosecutor's desire to throw out the pornography, he did not rule against the jury hearing about it but reserved his right to do so later. When Hillesheim asked about the pornography that had gone missing, wanting the jury to know it could hurt their case if it were still in existence, Judge Walker could not see how any of that was relevant to his case (Nienaber, 2012h). Even after reading Hillesheim's defense strategy and the abuse Jennifer Nibbe suffered at the hands of her husband, Judge Walker could not see how pornography was connected to her sexual assaults during the marriage.

Plead to Second Degree Murder. On June 20, 2012, Jennifer Nibbe pleaded guilty to second-degree murder, admitting she shot her husband, James Nibbe, in their Lake Crystal home but without pre-meditation (Nienaber, 2012e). She also stated that she did not remember the details of that morning. She will receive credit for the time served, 21 months, and would most likely be on supervised release for 15 years, with a total sentence of 25 years (Nienaber, 2012e). Initially, the plea was accepted conditionally by County District Court Judge Walker, as he wanted to review supporting evidence. Jennifer accepted the plea because she did not want to put her family or James family through a trial. She also did not want more of her abuse allegations to be brought to light (Nienaber, 2012e).

On July 9, 2012, Jennifer's plea agreement was accepted. However, James's brothers and sister were not happy with the sentence that dismissed the chance for life in prison and are considering taking civil court action to get his items from Dan Gilman, Jennifer's father. Defense Attorney Richard Hillesheim said he had been prepared to explain to a jury how Jennifer was a victim of physical and sexual abuse, how she went from being a person with no criminal background to a convicted murderer, which included a husband who tested positive for HIV. Those would be "fairly uncomplimentary things about James Nibbe . . . they [the Nibbe family] have an idealistic view of who he was" (Nienaber, 2012b, p. A5). Judge Walker sentenced Jennifer to 25 years, with credit for the time served. Since she was 35 years old, she would be on supervised release in 15 years. Judge Walker also ordered her to pay for the \$11,418 funeral expense owed to Mankato Mortuary for James Nibbe, which was to come from her prison earnings.

Nibbe's Family Unhappy with Plea Deal. Nibbe's family made known their hatred of the plea agreement during the victim impact time. When Defense Attorney Hillesheim

commented that what he had found out about James Nibbe did not match with family accounts, a Nibbe family member started yelling at the defense attorney. Then, Judge Walker had to scold James Nibbe's family. Jennifer commented, "I'm not here to damage his reputation or integrity. But I don't care how close you are to somebody, you don't know what goes on behind closed doors" (Nienaber, 2012b, p. A5). To make matters worse, people in opposing camps were even arguing outside the courthouse. Afterward, James Nibbe's sister claimed the abuse allegations were absurd and instead pointed to the evidence that Jennifer was having an affair. She also stated that there was no mention of abuse in the first 10 months. If Jennifer never mentioned abuse, the entire story was a complete fabrication by her defense attorney, according to Nibbe's sister.

The Nibbe family does host events almost immediately after his death, all money staying within the family and going to the James Nibbe Outstanding Character Award. For instance, in Good Thunder, there is Good Thunder's Nib Fest in July and the James M. Nibbe Memorial Golf Tournament in St. James on the anniversary of his death, as both benefits fund the James Nibbe Outstanding Character Award Scholarship provided annually to a student at Lake Crystal Memorial High School.

Journal and Texts Released. After Jennifer Nibbe was charged with murder, *The Free Press* ran another article a day later with the headline, "Abuse not mentioned in Nibbe journal: She was planning tryst with former boyfriend" (Nienaber, 2012a, p. A1). Apparently, with the close of the case, one day later, on July 10, 2012, the texts and the journal were made public. According to *The Free Press*, Jennifer exchanged texts with another man about 1 month before she killed James Nibbe. The journal also started about 1 month before James's death and discussed a husband who was not contributing financially. Jennifer's major complaints included

James having money to go on fishing and hunting trips, his making fun of her for refusing to go camping, and his not attending church with her. There was also a sexting message to a former boyfriend whom she planned to meet up with, a man who had a girlfriend and a baby at the time also sent her explicit texts back. Defense Attorney Richard Hillesheim had planned to bring in an expert to testify about the abuse, plus two of James Nibbe's ex-girlfriends to discuss their relationships with him. The journal says nothing about sexual, physical, or verbal abuse—and I would not expect it to either. Although everyone seems to think that is precisely what should be in her journal, it will not be. That would be the last place I would ever put it.

Nibbe's Family Sues Jennifer's Dad. In September of 2012, Attorney Patrick Casey, representing James Nibbe's family, received confirmation from a judge that Jennifer Nibbe's father, Dan Gilman, would need to turn over several items he took from the home. Casey claimed the items had more sentimental than monetary value, and the family was concerned that they had been lost or destroyed. Leslie Johnson, James Nibbe's sister, asked for the items after Jennifer was arrested in September 2010, but Dan Gilman responded that doing so implied his daughter was guilty, so no. After Jennifer Nibbe pleaded guilty in June of 2012, a judge issued an order allowing the family to take the items from Gilman's home. Some items were there, and some were not. The latest list detailed 30 items, some of which included: "An end table with a mounted albino grouse that was shot by James Nibbe, pottery items he made in high school, his watch, his high school class ring, afghans and quilts made by his grandmother, and woodworking tools" (Nienaber, 2012c, p. A4). Other items included yard games James made, old bills, tax records, and bank statements.

Nibbe's Family Wants Law for Material Items During Murder. In February of 2013, Leslie Nibbe Johnson went before the Minnesota Senate committee with Minnesota

Representative Tony Cornish to discuss how her family was victimized twice, once by the woman who killed her brother and the second time by the family who refused to give them their brother's items. Initially, Gilman said no problem. If they made a list, he would take it to his daughter, and then anything that belonged to James would be returned. Then two year's passed, and the Nibbe family had only recovered a fraction of the items they initially wanted and their brother had left behind. According to Leslie,

The manipulation and the pain that her father was able to put us through simply because we had no rights just added to the agony and suffering that our family went through. It's bad enough to lose someone. But then you lose someone to murder and you have to struggle for two year's to get a pair of tube socks back. It's really sad. (Nienaber, 2013a, p. A1)

Leslie told the House Civil Committee a similar story the following day. Minnesota

Representative Tony Cornish sponsored a bill to give the victim's family more property rights when the victim's spouse is also the suspected killer. The bill would adjust a law that already stops someone guilty of murder from financially profiting through life insurance and real estate cash assets after being found guilty of murder. If the new law was passed, a victim's family could ask a judge to freeze specific property, thereby forcing the property to be placed into storage until the conclusion of the murder trial. Technically, a judge could inventory a couple's property for the record, and then the assets needed to pay fees could be sold off as needed.

Nibbe's Family Files Wrongful Death Suit. In March of 2013, a wrongful death suit was filed against Jennifer Nibbe by James Nibbe's family. According to Attorney Scott Kelly, representing the James Nibbe family, they are not looking for money. However, they want to ensure that Jennifer never profits from paid television, book offers, or interviews. If the James Nibbe Family received money, it would go to a nonprofit foundation, where a scholarship fund in James Nibbe's name has already been established. Therefore, the family was suing for medical

expenses, funeral expenses—even though Jennifer was already ordered to pay that as part of her jail sentence—and other damages, including “loss of aid, comfort, society, and companionship” (Nienaber, 2013b, p. A4) to be collected after she was released from prison. By this point, the family has settled their civil lawsuit with Dan Gilman for the missing items. The life insurance policy of \$250,000 that was issued on June 25, 2010, was turned over to James Nibbe’s mother, Karen Nibbe, which had accrued interest, with the final total ending up at \$262,000, as issued by court order from Blue Earth County District Judge Krista Jass. State Farm Insurance paid out the policy to James Nibbe’s estate, which was handled by his sister, Leslie Nibbe Johnson.

Minnesota Court of Appeals. In March of 2014, the Minnesota Court of Appeals cited unusual circumstances as a possible reason for a Blue Earth County District Court Judge to reconsider whether or not Jennifer Nibbe would be allowed to withdraw her guilty plea for 2nd-degree murder for the death of her husband. Due to the unusual circumstances of this case, the Minnesota Court of Appeals cited another case by the Minnesota Supreme Court, *Brown v. State*, where Jacob Brown’s guilty plea was not valid due to a factual error in the record because a side agreement that was not made public was either not voluntary or intelligent. The reason why Jennifer Nibbe’s plea would be considered unusual is that she used what was called a Norgaard plea, which acknowledged that a jury could find her guilty of murdering her husband due to the evidence, but at the same time, also allowed her to say she did not remember shooting him either.

When *The Free Press* contacted Jennifer Nibbe’s attorney, Assistant Public Defender Rick Gallo, for a follow-up on what her plans would be now, to pursue the Supreme Court or do nothing, he rather callously said, “I have hundreds of files. I do not have time to look into that” (Nienaber, 2014a, p. A5). The only problem with pursuing the withdrawal of her plea in the

death of her husband was that Jennifer Nibbe would run the risk of a grand jury once again deeming there was enough evidence to convict her of first-degree murder and in the State of Minnesota, that comes with a mandatory sentence of life in prison without the possibility of parole. At the time, she was in prison for 17 years to be released in August of 2027. By the end of March, Jennifer Nibbe does take the gamble and try her luck with the Minnesota Supreme Court to see if she can have her guilty plea withdrawn based on the fact that she claimed she did not fully understand what Judge Walker was asking her to plea too (Nienaber, 2014d). However, Jennifer Nibbe did not have to wait long to hear from the Minnesota Supreme Court, as they refused to review the plea removal because they believed that she did understand based on the court transcripts (“High Court Won’t Review Nibbe Appeal,” 2014).

William Mitchell Law College Represents Jennifer in Civil Suit. Blue Earth County District Court Judge Kurt Johnson granted Jennifer Nibbe more time to prepare in May of 2014 for the wrongful death civil suit taken up by James Nibbe’s family since she now has a certified student attorney, Andrea Skolnick, of the William Mitchell College of Law’s Legal Assistance to Minnesota Prisoners Organization, with Supervising Attorney Bradford Colbert (Nienaber, 2014e). The Nibbe family attorney, Scott Kelly, opposed the extension since he had already submitted his list of witnesses and the evidence he planned to use at the trial.

Nibbe’s Family Moves to Block Abuse Claims. By mid-August of 2014, James Nibbe’s family was going after Jennifer Nibbe’s ability to say she was abused in any manner whatsoever in a court of law. James Nibbe’s family attorney Scott Kelly demanded that Jennifer Nibbe provide solid proof of abuse—physical evidence, expert testimony, or witness testimony to support her claim that she was sexually, physically, and emotionally abused—or she was to drop that portion of her claim before they went to trial in October for the wrongful death (Nienaber,

2014f). Scott Kelly also wanted all his attorney's fees and costs for even having to make his motion taken care of by Jennifer since Jennifer's attorneys were still gathering information and could not respond.

In September 2014, the two parties met with District Court Judge Kurt Johnson to discuss Jennifer Nibbe's ability to say if she was abused. Also, once Nibbe's family attorney realized Jennifer was planning to hold to her original story, he filed a motion to throw out the evidence related to James Nibbe's pornography collection and the abuse allegations. Since Judge Kurt Johnson was unsure what would be admissible in court, he sealed the motion and court proceedings to keep the jury from being tainted before the trial in October.

Civil Suit: Odd. In October 2014, the wrongful death civil trial was a joke. Reading newspaper accounts, it felt put on for the enjoyment and further monetization of James Nibbe's family rather than for accomplishing anything worthwhile. According to accounts in the newspaper, they were unsure if Jennifer Nibbe was forced or if she did so willingly, as she went in front of the courtroom and took "responsibility and accountability" for killing her husband (Nienaber, 2014c, p. A1). She had to apologize to the Nibbe family for shooting James Nibbe in the back of the head while he slept in August of 2010, the only public part of an otherwise confidential hearing. James Nibbe's family initially asked for more than a million dollars in damages but somehow managed to keep that out of all newspaper reports until the last trial (Nienaber, 2014c). Although in earlier newspaper accounts, the Nibbe family had said it was not about the money. They were awarded \$220,000, to be paid out after Jennifer Nibbe was released from jail to the family throughout her lifetime, as they wanted her wages garnished from that point forward. The other punitive damages Jennifer will be forced to pay were confidential. In a rare moment of agreement, both Leslie Johnson Nibbe, James Nibbe's sister, and Dan Gilman,

Jennifer Nibbe's father, were disappointed when Judge Johnson threw out evidence both sides wanted in the trial. For instance, Leslie Johnson Nibbe wanted the sexting texts with Jennifer's supposed boyfriend and their plan to meet up and possibly have sex to be heard. Dan Gilman wanted the chance for his daughter to be able to tell her the truth about living in a physically, sexually, and emotionally abusive relationship with James Nibbe. According to Dan Gilman,

His daughter has no money, and he believes the wrongful death lawsuit was filed out of vengeance. He also said he was disappointed that the punitive settlement is confidential . . . The Judge said she wouldn't be able to tell her side of the story. (Nienaber, 2014c, p. A4)

My Response. Defense Attorney Hillesheim tried reasonably hard to do what he could for his client, Jennifer Nibbe. When reading the newspaper accounts, one can see where the defense strategy was headed long before it was officially announced. I do not know the statistics for HIV in our rural community, so I cannot speak to that. However, if Jennifer did not test positive and James did for HIV, he obviously got it from somewhere. Who was he with? How did he get HIV? HIV is not something a person obtains, like diabetes or a heart condition. Why was he not slut shamed and vilified in the press? Obviously, he had stepped out of their relationship long before Jennifer thought about stepping out and sexting some old friend.

Much effort was put in place to ensure Jennifer could never say something, and we would never know whatever that was. I suspect the silence is in part due to the physical, emotional, and sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her husband. Sadly, women are not allowed the opportunity to defend themselves properly in a court of law. When officers and the justice system cannot comprehend how pornography, membership in a strip club, and HIV, might also be connected to years of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, then some severe education needs to take place to properly educate those in the courts, and the officers who respond to the scenes of crimes. When the justice system assumes that some evidence is entirely unrelated to

the civil suit, like pornography and the membership in the strip club in the cities, they hinder a possible domestic violence victim's ability to properly defend herself. I assume those items fell under a man's prerogative and were not seen as items that could fuel abuse, but that would be incredibly shortsighted. Therein lies the problem within our judicial system.

Violence Free Minnesota

In 1978, Minnesota started a program called "Violence Free Minnesota" (Violence Free Minnesota, n.d.-b). However, the initiative was first called the "Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women" (MCBW), a massive group of over 90 programs working together (Violence Free Minnesota, n.d.-b). For over 40 years, they ran by the name MCBW and then switched to Violence Free Minnesota, as this was their ultimate long-term goal. Violence Free Minnesota does a lot of great things. They have conducted reports looking into the needs of Native American Women who were incarcerated and their re-entry needs. They offer one-time cash grants to victims of sexual and domestic violence. They have looked at how to provide safety and security to the victims of those incarcerated. They also have worked with homelessness, safe housing, and the Minnesota Femicide Report (Violence Free Minnesota, n.d.-a). For over 30 years, Violence Free Minnesota has gathered the names, photos, and circumstances of every person who has lost their life due to domestic violence homicide in what used to be called the Femicide Report. Now it is called the Homicide Report: Relationship Abuse in Minnesota (Violence Free Minnesota, n.d.-a).

The Femicide Report. In the Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women's (2010) *Femicide Report*, James Nibbe is listed as a man murdered by an intimate partner, which was true. However, there are no news reports that give an account of anyone witnessing Jennifer Nibbe being verbally, physically, or even sexually abusive to James. There was not one instance.

She sexted and planned to have sex with another man possibly, but what man has not done that before? The only evidence the report listed of abuse was the statement, “They subsequently learned that Jennifer Nibbe had a drug habit, significant debts, and had taken out a life insurance policy on James” (Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women, 2010, p. 26).

I have watched enough crime documentaries to know that people kill their spouses for all three reasons. I guess my question for Violence Free Minnesota would be: Is the goal to be violence-free, as in all violence, which could encompass a broader range of violence like gang violence, homicides from home invasions, missing people who turn up dead, and the like, or is the goal to be free of intimate partner violence? If the goal is the second, then there need to be clear, established patterns of abuse.

My Response. Also, out of all of the families that lost a loved one in 2010 to intimate partner violence—including the case that follows, James Nibbe’s family benefited the most financially from what I can tell, with upwards of \$482,000, not counting the punitive damages which were confidential, and that is not counting the gag order they managed to place on Jennifer so that we will never know the truth of how much financial gain they obtained. Maybe what bugs me the most about this case is what happens if Jennifer Nibbe was not lying. What if they turned her abuser into a saint and then gave a child a scholarship based on a lie? We never gave her a real chance to tell her story. Joel Munt received more than enough chances to tell his story through 1,000 pages of a custodial dispute to his murder trial. No one placed a gag order on Joel Mundt. What does that say to other women who are being abused and are at wits end? When and if they act—self-defense or not—they will not be believed? Alive or dead, they will never have a voice.

Jennifer Nibbe was a single mother who raised her child independently of a man, having gotten pregnant in high school. However, she finished high school, went to college, became a surgery nurse, bought a farm and a house, had her life together with her bills paid, and yet, managed to lose everything within two years after she married James. Coincidence? Was she just a typical drug addict? Or was she a killer lying in wait for the right man to kill? Or did she unknowingly allow an abusive man into her life? Did she pay the ultimate price when she could not see a way out, opting for the worst decision of her life when she could not physically or emotionally do one more day?

Teaming Up to Train Officers

In 2011, Leslie Johnson Nibbe and Anna Gronewold—who lost both her daughter, Ashley Sullivan, and her husband, Chester Gronewold—teamed up for a domestic violence training session for 70-plus Faribault County law enforcement officers (Faribault County Register, 2011). The event was sponsored by CADA of Faribault County. Anna relayed how it felt to have a system where bail was incapable of keeping a dangerous man behind bars, and two counties' worth of order for protection was not enough to keep Ashley's ex-boyfriend and the father of her youngest child away. He still managed to break into their home, shoot her daughter, bludgeon her husband, and shoot himself. While Leslie relayed what it was like to learn her brother had been shot and killed. She learned 10 days later that it was his wife who killed her brother, how she has relentless anger against this person, and how her family is the victim, and yet, her family has no rights. She then talked about how they could not retrieve James' items.

*Jessica Buboltz*⁹

At a party on October 28, 2010, Tyler Andrew Wicklund, 23, of Elk River, Minnesota, convinced his former girlfriend, Jessica Buboltz, 20, of Kasota, Minnesota, that he wanted to discuss their relationship (Murray, 2010c). Kasota is roughly 11 miles from the edge of Mankato, and while it lies within Le Sueur County, Mankato falls within Blue Earth County.

Tyler claimed that after engaging in sexual activity, he wanted to discuss their relationship, but Jessica went to the bathroom (Murray, 2010c). With a knife in hand, Tyler decided to follow Jessica (Murray, 2010c). Tyler grabbed Jessica from behind, slashed her throat, placed her in the bathtub to bleed, seized their 14-month-old daughter, and fled to Sherburne County (Murray, 2010c). Tyler was not arrested until October 29, 2010, when his grandmother, who owned a rural home in Sherburne County, called the authorities. The grandmother called the authorities after Tyler left her house with a shotgun, appeared suicidal, and confided that he had killed Jessica (Nienaber, 2011d). A search of the grandmother's home turned up blood-stained socks, and a search of Tyler's body produced blood-stained feet and legs (Murray, 2010c).

On February 24, 2011, a Le Sueur grand jury issued six felony indictments against Tyler in the Le Sueur County District Court. Tyler was accused of killing his former girlfriend, Jessica. The first two felony counts, "first-degree murder with premeditation and first-degree murder while committing criminal sexual conduct, carry maximum penalties of life in prison without the possibility of parole" (Nienaber, 2011h, p. A1). The second account accuses Tyler of raping Jessica at knife point, despite his previous claims of a consensual sexual encounter. Roughly 3 weeks before Jessica's death, she had filed a civil lawsuit against Tyler in Nicollet County's

⁹ The presentation of Jessica Buboltz's story is based on my reading of Murray (2010c), Nienaber, 2011d, 2011h, Ojanpa (2011).

family court for child support owed for their 14-month-old daughter. Jessica filed on October 4, 2010, and the hearing was scheduled for November 12, 2010, except she died on October 29, 2010.

On November 2, 2011, Tyler Wicklund was sentenced to life in prison for the murder of his former girlfriend and the mother of his daughter, Jessica Buboltz. He will not be eligible for parole for 30 years. The November sentencing was based on a September plea agreement in which Tyler pleaded guilty to one felony first-degree murder charge. Thus the life in prison with the eligibility of parole in 30 years, and one felony charge for the possession of a firearm, of he will serve a 60-month sentence. The charge of rape with a weapon was dropped.

Jessica Buboltz—My Response. The newspaper does not get into this account much, probably because of Tyler's plea. I do wonder, though, to what extent her death had to do with the impending custody dispute and the child support that was owed. The accounts in the newspaper never told what the back amount was precisely. Was the amount significant? What would have been significant for Tyler? She filed October 4, 2010, and was killed 25 days later and 14 days from November 12. That could not have been a coincidence. This would be another case where the Family Courts should send an investigator out to the families afterward, to the people who attended the party, and to those who lived at the apartment, read all the reports and Family Court documents. Find out what went wrong. Women cannot be helped without learning to see the signs in the places women are with their abusers.

The Only Domestic Violence Shelter in Nine Counties

CADA: Too Much or Too Little

The Committee Against Domestic Abuse (CADA) provides sexual and intimate partner violence services throughout the nine-county region (CADA, n.d.-a). By 2021, this includes Blue

Earth County, Brown County, Faribault County, Le Sueur County, Martin County, Nicollet County, Sibley County, Waseca County, and Watonwan County (CADA, n.d.-a). In south-central Minnesota, CADA will have two Keep Me Safe locations by 2021—one is in Mankato, Blue Earth County, and one is in New Ulm, Nicollet County—for the custodial exchange and supervised visit of parenting time. CADA also has one emergency shelter since the 1980s—and it is in Mankato, Blue Earth County—capable of housing up to 22 women and children. Finally, there will also be seven advocacy offices throughout the nine-county region by 2021. It may be an understatement to say they may be a bit stretched in terms of counties served to actual human lives needing help.

However, it was reported that CADA saw 1,800 cases of intimate partner violence between October 2011 and September 2012 (Murray, 2013). Murray (2013) does not say in what capacity they saw them, how they helped them, if they could help them, or how many of that 1,800 they had to turn away. CADA can only house 22 women and children. At 1,800 individual cases of intimate partner violence in a year, let us say they took in only 22 women per month with no children, swapping out those 22 women every 30 days—mandatorily whether they are ready to go or not—for the next 22 women in need of help means CADA can only help 264 women a year with no kids, and that is only if everything goes right. The woman is 100% back on her feet in 30 days. That means there could be 1,536 individuals they could not help if they needed shelter services, assuming all 1,800 needed that specific service. From October 2012 to September 2013, CADA would see a second rise in intimate partner violence numbers, with cases hitting 2,933 for that period (Murray, 2013).

Minnesota Compass (n.d.-a) is a project of Wilder Researcher and was developed out of a need for credible, easy-to-access, and reliable data for community leaders across the State of

Minnesota. Utilizing data sources from the U.S. Census Bureau and other reliable sources, Minnesota Compass tracks, analyzes, measures, and interprets the data relevant to each Minnesota community so that those communities can then make the proper decisions that enable them to identify, understand, and act on the issues that are most affecting their quality of life.

Taking Minnesota Compass's (n.d.-a) numbers for women in each of the nine counties CADA serves, how many women might that be? According to Minnesota Compass, between the years 2017 to 2021, the number of females in nine south central Minnesota counties were as follows:

- Blue Earth County: 33,977 (Minnesota Compass, n.d.-c)
- Brown County: 12,936 (Minnesota Compass, 2023, n.d.-d)
- Faribault County: 6,892 (Minnesota Compass, 2023, n.d.-e)
- Le Sueur County: 14,108 (Minnesota Compass, 2023, n.d.-f)
- Martin County: 10,037 (Minnesota Compass, 2023, n.d.-g)
- Nicollet County: 17,102 (Minnesota Compass, 2023, n.d.-h)
- Sibley County: 7,345 (Minnesota Compass, 2023, n.d.-i)
- Waseca County: 9,808 (Minnesota Compass, 2023, n.d.-j)
- Watonwan County: 5,549 (Minnesota Compass, 2023, n.d.-k)

Within those nine counties, there are 117,754 females. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV; n.d.),

1 in 4 women and 1 in 9 men experience severe intimate partner physical violence, intimate partner contact sexual violence, and/or intimate partner stalking with impacts such as injury, fearfulness, post-traumatic stress disorder, use of victim services, contraction of sexually transmitted diseases, etc. (para. 2).

Dividing 117,754 by 4, that is 29,438.5 women who may need help in nine counties across south central Minnesota. Some counties are an hour from the nearest shelter, of which there is only one in Mankato, with 22 beds.

Minnesota's No-Fault Divorce Law

In 1974, Minnesota passed a no-fault divorce law, which opened the possibility of divorce to many more people (Minnesota Women's Legislative Library, 2008a). Prior to this, if anyone wanted a divorce in Minnesota, they would have to prove their spouse was guilty of one or more of the following grounds for divorce: adultery; impotency; a course of conduct that would harm the marriage relationship; be sentenced to prison in any state in the United States after the marriage has taken place, in which case a pardon would not restore the right to sex; choosing to desert the marriage for 1 year prior to filing; continual drunkenness for 1 year; and finally, 3 years of commitment either within or not within, that of a mental institution for a mental illness, but it does not need to be three continuous or consecutive years of commitment, as prior commitments also count to assist the nonmentally ill spouse in filing for divorce ("No-Fault Divorce," 1974).

My Response on Minnesota's No-Fault Divorce Law

I believe in a no-fault divorce. However, a no-fault divorce cannot be an easy out for Family Court so that they do not have to deal with more pressing problems. A divorce that also does not ask if other problems need to be addressed when considering what is in the best interest of the separating family is like sticking a case of sweating dynamite into a dusty old hay barn on a 100-degree day, then making the divorcing couple who owns the property that the barn resides on throw a never-ending town gathering—complete with food, games, dancing, and even a parade—while the courts walk away pretending nothing could possibly go wrong.

Minnesota's Marital Rape Exemption Law

Marital Rape Was Legal Until 2019

That is right, 2019! Until May 2, 2019, it was perfectly legal to rape one's wife or spouse and not be prosecuted due to Minnesota's Marital Rape Exemption Law (Minnesota Legislature, 2019). Minnesota Governor Tim Walz signed into law a bill brought forward by Representative Zack Stephenson, which essentially repealed the state's Marital Rape Exemption law shielding rapists from prosecution if married to the victim at the time of the rape (Minnesota Legislature, 2019). How is it possible that such a law would even exist? Good question. During the 1980s and 1990s, a series of marital rape laws were passed in all 50 states to protect women, but apparently, there were loopholes designed into those laws within several states (O'Brien, 2019) on the off chance they might be needed for men.

A 1975 Exemption to Rape

In Minnesota, the marital rape exemption law appeared to have been designed for the sole purpose of protecting husbands even though it is not given the specific title marital rape exemption law. In the Minnesota Legislature Laws for 1975, Statute 609.349 clearly stated,

A person does not commit criminal sexual conduct under this act if the actor and complainant were adults cohabiting in an ongoing voluntary sexual relationship at the time of the alleged offense, or if the complainant is the actor's legal spouse unless the couple is living apart and one of them has filed for separate maintenance or dissolution of the marriage. Nothing in this section shall be construed to prohibit or restrain the prosecution for any other offense committed by any person against his legal spouse. (A person does not commit criminal sexual conduct under this act if, 1975, p. 1251)

When Statute 609.349 showed up in the Minnesota Legislature Laws for 1975, it appeared between a statute on evidence and a statute on the costs of medical examination (A person does not commit criminal sexual conduct under this act if, 1975). Notice the last phrase in which nothing in this statute could stop anyone from prosecuting on the husband's behalf should his

wife be raped by anyone else but the husband. To him and the law, she was still his property in 1975.

Voluntary Relationships Defense

In 1980, Statue 609.349 got the title “Voluntary Relationships” (Voluntary Relationships, 1980) providing what would become known as the Voluntary Relationships Defense. Sadly, at the same time this law is on the books, the state of Minnesota is making huge strides as a pioneer in the Domestic Violence shelter movement, and yet, the state is not ready to give up the protection this law affords husbands who rape their wives. In 2002, minor revisions were made to the wording, but the property ownership of the last six words is swapped out for “committed by one legal spouse against the other” (Voluntary Relationships, 2002, p. 1315). The wording almost seems to muddy up the waters a bit. What are they really trying to say?

Drugged, Raped, and Video Taped: Jenny Teeson¹⁰

What led to Minnesota finally repealing the right for husbands to rape their wives legally? In 2017, Jenny Teeson was at her home with her mother, cleaning items out of her house, only to discover a flash drive full of her husband’s secret videos, which included not only clips of his co-workers using the bathroom but Jenny getting dressed, the duo having sex, and four videos of Jenny, unresponsive and yet, being raped by her husband. In one video, her 4-year-old son lies beside her on the bed while her husband forcibly rapes her with an object, and Jenny is entirely unresponsive. That footage was filmed in 2015 after the duo hosted a New Year’s Eve Party at their home. Jenny had no recollection of the rapes or the other video-taped footage her husband had secured without her knowledge. However, the video footage did secure the answer to one problem she was wrestling with, it was time for a divorce.

¹⁰ Details of the case involving Jenny Teeson are based primarily on Zraick (2019).

According to Jenny, the couple met in college, married, and had two children. She worked in hospitality sales, and he worked in a local bank. They looked like the perfect couple. Married for 12 years, by the time they divorced no one suspected the verbal abuse or the constant pressure for sex acts Jenny was uncomfortable performing. As is often the case, what happens behind closed doors is unseen by the outside world, especially in cases of verbal, emotional, and sexual abuse.

After she found the disturbing evidence, Jenny turned over the flash drive and the family's laptop to the police for further investigation but had to call them repeatedly to get them to take her statement. Finally, the Anoka County Attorney's Office called to tell her the ex-husband/husband would be charged with a "felony count of criminal sexual conduct in the third degree and could face up to 15 years in prison if convicted" (Zraick, 2019, para. 30). For Jenny, someone was finally validating what happened to her. It was excellent news. It was also short-lived news. The Anoka County Attorney's Office called her back within hours. The felony charge had been dropped after her ex-husband/husband's attorney called the Anoka County Attorney's Office to make them aware of a little-known law—referred to as the Voluntary Relationships Defense or the Marital Rape Exemption Law. Ultimately, Jenny's ex-husband/husband was charged with fifth-degree criminal sexual conduct and interference with privacy at home. He pled guilty to the latter, and the sexual conduct charge was dismissed. He served 30 days in prison, even though he was sentenced to 45 days for recording his co-workers in the bathroom.

After Jenny's frustrating experience with the legal system, she went to the Minnesota Capital to advocate for a law change. Due to Jenny's advocacy work, the Marital Exemption Law, or the Voluntary Relationships Defense, was repealed on May 2, 2019 (Minnesota

Legislature, 2019). According to Director Lynn Hecht Schafran of the National Judicial Education Program at Legal Momentum—a defense organization for women—marital rape came up in the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, a historic gathering convened to discuss and advocate for women’s rights (McMillen, 2008). However, the notion of fighting for marriages free from rape was given up in favor of the right to vote. Was it respectability that stopped them?

Respectability Politics

The idea that White women pushed aside the problem of marital rape for voting rights is not at all surprising. For White women, the fighting strategy tends to be the easiest to obtain respectably first while hoping the rest will fall into place if only by abiding by the rules set before them by White men (Kendall, 2020). Kendall (2020) openly criticized White women and White feminists for falling into the trap of respectability politics because “respectability depends on acceptably performing gender and sexuality in ways that do not threaten traditional ideas of masculinity” (p. 81). Therefore, what would be more respectable in 1848? To talk of marital rape, sexual preferences in the bedroom, sexual coercion between a married couple and behind closed doors, or the right for White women to be able to vote? What did respectability get any of us in the end? American White women started to have the ability to vote in 1920, but not all women or even all men, and then for another 103 years, we experienced more of the same. All the while ensuring our daughters are never free from rape by the man they marry, no matter their race—but do not give up that respect. That is all we have as women, but do we even have that? Do we?

Story 2—The Single Mother Stigmata

Since we no longer live at the marital farm and living in the boy’s school district is too expensive for a single mother, we live in Winnebago, Minnesota, 10 miles south. The rent was

cheap, and the elderly lady I rented from was willing to take us on. Winnebago is a conglomeration of older adults, orphan parents, and stray children from surrounding school districts. In 2011, it was cheaper to live in Winnebago, located at least 40 minutes from Mankato and 20 to 25 minutes from Fairmont. They did not have the large city to drive-up housing costs. Winnebago did not have \$200,000 houses or higher in 2011. They might get close in 2023 to \$200,000 in some locations of town, but those houses would be an oddity. Most houses sell between \$70,000 and \$125,000 in Winnebago, which has been and still is a consistent price range. The higher end of houses might be sold for \$150,000, maybe \$175,000, during the summer of 2022 if someone was crazy and decided to engage in a bidding war, but they will never get that back out of the houses here. With the fuel price, it is not sustainable to have a high house payment and monthly fuel bill while driving to Mankato to work every day.

The problem with Winnebago is that one can walk a straight path down eight blocks and run into two kinds of neighborhoods with no reason for the disbursement. One will find the typical home styles throughout Winnebago, a rambler, two-story craftsman, bungalows, colonials, or 4-squares, littered everywhere, with no natural rhythm or reason to layout. It is not like Winnebago added in a subdivision of ramblers in the 1980s. Therefore, those houses are all in the southwest corner. No, it is nothing like that at all.

When I was married, I used to mow the cemetery outside of town. It was not an easy cemetery to mow because there was no rhyme or reason for how they buried their dead. So, getting a straight line was next to impossible. It was as if they dug a hole, placed the person in, dug another hole facing a different direction, placed them in, and kept that kind of scattershot pattern up for the entire oldest section of the graveyard. They did not utilize the nice, neat rows. Stones facing every which way meant a ton of trimming when the mowers did not fit. In the 2 to

3 hours, it would take to mow and trim with my friend and my ex-father-in-law, I would run possible scenes through my head as to how the cemetery came to be shaped the way it was, drunk graveyard digger—I do not know. I just kept coming back to the drunk graveyard guy. It was the only thing that made sense.

Anyhow, while Winnebago's blocks are square, what is on the blocks is atypical. One block will be reasonably kept up, a lawn freshly mowed, gardens planted, houses maintained, children are playing, a dog running loose, and not even a half a block later, is abject poverty and despair. The houses will not only be run down; the exterior never painted, windows missing and never replaced; chimneys that caved into the house, while a blue tarp is nailed to the roof and covers the hole left by the chimney, for the 8 years or better; the foundations of homes that no longer support the weight of the structure are bowing outside walls; windows are boarded up; yards are a littered disaster of garbage debris and vehicles that never ran; and children run as wild as the dogs they chase in the afternoon sun, unsupervised. Then, half a block more, and we enter the perfectly maintained yards, houses, families.

Despite Winnebago's gruff exterior, one could live in Winnebago and drive to the larger cities, provided gas remained relatively low. Alternatively, work in one of the numerous factory farms within 10 to 15 miles of the town. At least three to four different school districts, which send buses to pick up and drop off kids around town, will drive those children 10 to 15 miles or better back to their school district of origin. However, the school district both of my children belong to will not step foot in Winnebago. They will pick up children in the country within 3 miles of town. The bus will not come into town, even though there are at least three or four families, with over three-quarters of us falling into single-parent families, which means we could

use that bus. It would make our days more manageable. We could stay at our jobs longer if only our children could walk home from a bus stop in town.

Wishful thing aside, my days are structured around bus stop drop-offs and pick-ups, my class times at Minnesota State University, Mankato, and work at the hog barn until the summer of 2014, or whatever job I managed to get to bring home some funds from the day of the divorce until my youngest son obtained his driver's license in 2018. In 2011, I worked 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. on the days I did not have to drop off/or pick up the boys from the bus stop in Amboy, plus every other weekend I did not have them. If I have the boys overnight, I am late to the barn the following day. The boys and I head out to the bus stop in Amboy at 7:00 a.m. We wait out the bus that arrives between 7:30 and 7:40 a.m. Since there is no warming house or other method for the children to keep warm or supervised until the bus arrives, everyone who brings their children from out of town, or Winnebago, is forced to wait. On the afternoons I have them, I am back at the bus stop by 2:50 to 3:00 p.m., waiting again on a yellow bus that arrives between 3:25 to 3:35 p.m. Sometimes, if I do not have the boys overnight, but I know I am picking them up after school, I go to work between 3:00 a.m. and 4:00 a.m. to pick up a few extra hours. Thankfully, the barn does not care when I come in as long as I appear without fail every other weekend.

In December 2010, I decided to step down from my position as a Farrowing Department Leader for Damon. He would allow me to continue my studies and collect full-time pay and benefits if I continued managing his farrowing barn. Except, I knew something he did not know: a hidden cost with upper management if I went that route.

In August of 2010, I met with Delilah (not her real name) in Mankato at the mall. She requested the meeting after I had said I was going to college. I needed to back off my duties as a Farrowing Department Leader. I was resigning. On that day, as we sat next to the carousel

horses, listening to the carnival song with the sun's warmth beating on us from the giant windows to our right, she laid her theory of my future life out for me if I chose my current path. She knew writing was my main interest; if I went to college, I would be more than likely to become a creative writer. After all, I had been writing for the company newsletter for 2 years. Therefore, from her purse, she pulled out a legal-sized yellow notepad where she had sketched out what I would likely be making as a writer after I obtained a 4-year degree from college. What kind of writing position did she use as a base? I have and had no idea. According to Delilah's calculations, I would be making the same, if not less, than I was currently making for her as a Farrowing Department Leader.

In 2010, I made a \$34,500 salary on a 48-hour week if we never worked late and did not pull extra weekends. But let us not get into how often that happened, which was constantly and all the time. When I left that barn, I had been recording our hours out of curiosity. We were far from a 48-hour work week. We averaged well above that on any given week. I started at \$20,000 in 1997. Thirteen years later, and I am at \$34,500 because of a barn manager jump in pay. When I came to MP10, to get me to go there, I was given \$4,000, a barn manager's salary, to go and stay. Otherwise, I would have been at \$32,500 if they had given me a simple department leader's raise. Every year, a \$1,500 bonus is possible if we manage to keep the piglets we send to the nursery in top quantities throughout the year. However, that was never a guarantee. One good health crisis could wipe out a large chunk of the herd and half the babies for a third of the year. Those were the calculations she was basing her figures on. I remembered the \$4,000 raise I would not have typically received but that they graciously gave me to attend MP10. Therefore, she removed \$2,000 from my wage figures, and the writing job would not even be able to match

the \$32,500. “How would I raise you boys on less than \$32,500 a year,” she had asked, “and by yourself at that?”

Next on her list, she was concerned I could not handle the stress of college. Okay, this was an interesting argument. I see this woman once a year at the annual farrowing meeting and at my review time. What does she know about the stress levels I can or cannot handle?

“Trying to be a single mother, going to college, and working would spell disaster for yourself and the boys,” she argued. “It would end in a mental breakdown. After all, you remember Sam (not his real name), who was doing supervisory items over the barn projects a few years back. He took only one college course online for one semester while working full-time and flamed out dramatically. He ended up in the psych unit of the local hospital in Mankato.” Obviously, by implication, I could never be a mother from a psych unit, let alone a single mother from a psych unit, when I flamed out of school too. I do not know how much truth there is to the psych unit story and Sam. Most likely, it was a rumor. I did not respond to her statement because there was no chance. Plus, she has already moved on to her following reason.

She felt compelled to call the meeting we were in because she thought I was making a rash decision based on myself and not on what was in the best interest of my boys. One mother to another, I needed to change my priorities and start thinking about them first. Indeed, all these reasons she put before me meant my decision to go to college was not financially sound. I would be jeopardizing my family, and I needed to think about them first. I was a mother. I listened to her arguments, all the while wondering how I had worked for her for almost 9 years, and yet, she thought so little of my capabilities as a human being, as a leader, to overcome my situation and station in life.

Finally, she wanted my opinion. She asked, “Why do you even want to return to college? You are going to be what? Thirty-one years old?”

I laughed at the one. She had 20 years on me, at least. Old at 31 years of age? Who knew? I motioned to the wall of windows to our right, the heat of the late afternoon sun beating down on us. “I want to work where I can feel the sun on my face,” I said, “any time of the day. I want to pursue the dreams I never got a chance to, and just because one male could not do college, does not mean I cannot.”

“Well, if you are determined to ruin your life,” She said, “I suppose we can help you for a while. We can give you a semester to try it out. If you work three days a week and every other weekend, staying 30 hours a week, we can pay you your full-time wage and keep you on the health insurance plan. Then, when December comes, we will assess how it is going. You will need someone to be in charge while you are gone. I am assuming you are taking a bunch of English classes?”

“Of course. Creative writing would be my major,” I said.

“Well, if we keep the current plan going after December,” she said, “you will start taking classes that are more beneficial to what I need. English will be out.”

When my December review came in 2010, I knew one thing for sure. No one was placing me in a box ever again. I would not give up my college education in creative writing for pigs, any classes related to pigs, or even business classes. Nor would I ever let someone tell me what I could and could not take for courses. No one was taking control of the trajectory of my education. If they did, I would only be handing control over from my husband to the next controlling entity, and who knew what it would take to break that link down the road? No.

When Delilah and Damon sat down with me to ask what my plans were, Delilah told us about the company donating \$100.00 to some food raffle to be given to needy families in Gaylord, Minnesota, where our main office was located. It is where Delilah's located. On the day of the raffle, she went to represent our company as an owner, along with other business owners. A single mother received the \$100.00 gift certificate from Delilah on the company's behalf. She said the single mother was very appreciative and took the gift card. What surprised Delilah was that the mom went shopping immediately instead of leaving and shopping at some other time. Worried that she had given money to someone who would buy booze, smokes, or junk food with the \$100.00, Delilah recounted how she followed the single mom up and down the aisles, watching the items she placed in her cart. Delilah was surprised to find that the single mom used a slip of paper where she was actively calculating the costs of the food she was buying. When she hit \$100.00, she promptly stopped, went to the front of the store, and purchased her items with the gift certificate.

Delilah had been telling everyone she knew since she witnessed the single mother's grocery shopping habits. She was astounded that the single mom bought usable food items with the \$100.00 she had won from the raffle. I was shocked too. I was shocked that Delilah felt entitled to overlook another woman's personal shopping decisions just because the company donated \$100.00 to some feed the hungry campaign at Christmas time. Unfortunately for the woman who won the prize, she was also a single mother. I could not imagine being in that single mother's shoes. What would I have done if I were being tailed aisle to aisle?

With the recession and a housing crisis in full swing, each \$685.00 house payment I made brought my checking account closer and closer to nonexistent. I could foresee a time when one day, I might be that single mom in a store, grateful for the hundred dollars during the

holidays to get the much-needed groceries for my family. However, I sure as hell would not want to be tailed by a self-righteous woman who thought I would only use the money on smokes, booze, and junk food. When I was a child, I remembered being embarrassed when my mother shopped for groceries in Redwood Falls as she carefully and methodically added figures on a slip of paper next to the names of the items we needed. I swore I would never be that mom, and yet, I had begun to take a calculator into the grocery store to ensure I stayed under the allotted limit for the week. However, unlike my mom, I cannot add in my head, so the calculator was always a dead giveaway as to how broke I really was if some self-righteous person watched me.

In January 2011, I left the Farrowing Department Leader position, Damon's barn, and Delilah for a 1,500-head sow unit over by Lake Crystal that was closer to Mankato. They promised they would work with my schedule and provide solid hours. After 6 months, I realized that the part-timer was the first to get told to leave when they started watching their hours and cutting costs for quarterly budgets. At the current rate of my nonexistent income in May of 2011, while also freelance writing for a Mankato newspaper, I would lose the martial farmhouse by the end of that summer. The clock was counting down.

With the housing crisis in full swing, that damn house would not sell to save my soul, and the recession was not helping. Of course, there was my wonderful pissed-off outdoor ex-husband who went around town—and he told my children on more than one occasion—that he had offered to buy the farmhouse from me numerous times for a price well above the asking price, but I kept refusing the offers out of spite. That lie functioned on two levels. First, it made those who knew both of us side once again with my pissed-off outdoor ex-husband. Here he was, willing to give me more than I was asking for the house, and yet, I was refusing out of pure stubbornness during a recession, no less, which meant I was being a bitch. I deserved whatever

came my way financially, from the sheer stupidity of failing to jump on such a generous offer. How dare I. Especially since the rural community we lived in all knew he had bought that house a year or two before we had gotten married, so by my “not taking his offer,” it sounded like I was doing precisely that, not taking his offer out of spite, had he actually ever offered. Plus, “my attempts to block” him from getting his first home back were downright cruel to the rural community. Therefore, if local buyers wanted or were interested in the house, they did not come near that place. No one wanted to get involved. His lie kept us locked in the house.

Second, my children hated the idea that I would not sell the only home they had ever known to their dad. They would come home begging and pleading for me to accept their father’s offer so they would not lose their home. I would try to explain that their father had never once, not once, offered to buy the house for any price whatsoever and that I had no idea what they were all upset about. They would not believe me. Why would Dad lie? Then I heard it around town. Bancroft (2002) called the manipulation of the children by the abuser his attempt at making her fail in her new life because the last thing an abuser wanted was for his previous partner to succeed. If she succeeded after the separation or post-divorce, that would mean that he was the problem all along, and he cannot have that displayed in the community or even to his ego (Bancroft, 2002). Therefore, the best way to get at a previous partner who was also a mother would be through her children because not only would he disrupt the mother-child relationship, but in some cases, he could eradicate the relationship (Bancroft, 2002) if he was just crafty enough. There was also an added benefit; any control he can maintain over the children through manipulation will keep his presence around his previous partner until those children are 18 (Bancroft, 2002).

As spring moved into summer, my financial troubles worsened significantly. I started to weigh the necessity of bi-monthly mowing the entire 4.6 acres of lawn. Who would notice if it got long? I mowed all of it, including the pastureland on the hillside, only to make sure my pissed-off outdoor ex-husband did not steal even a single blade of grass to sell as hay to his farmer friends, which he had done our first summer on the farm. I had grown the pasture grass over the hillside to sell it to my neighbor, who had Belgian horses. However, my pissed-off outdoor ex-husband must have been watching that pastureland too. I came home from work one hot summer afternoon to find my pasture flattened. The grass was drying out to be bailed in a couple of days. I had a pretty good idea who he employed to cut the grass, a man we had taken with us for years on snowmobile trips out west while we were married. So, with the money I had been banking on gone, I added one more name on my list of people I could no longer trust. I was furious. I contemplated driving to town and picking up enough fuel to light the entire hillside on fire a day later, but I did not. I could not bring myself to destroy someone's hay directly, especially when he was probably manipulated into cutting it and was nothing more than a pawn in the pissed-off outdoor ex-husband's game. The pawns also made the betrayal hurt that much more because they were always the very people, I would have sworn would never have hurt me prior to our divorce. I also think that was why they were chosen too.

Instead of burning up the hillside, I mowed every blade of grass on that 4.6 acres of land as short as possible every time I mowed. I was determined to make sure he could never make a profit off my land again. Except, I began to wonder if my desire to be on the side of the right was worth the cost of fuel during the spring of 2011. Regarding my car, I had begun to measure the miles I had left to travel for the week by the spare change in my checking account and the

mileage left on my tank. I started to think my calculator was broken because no matter what I did, the numbers never worked out in my favor.

I caught a small break when the friend who helped me leave my ex-husband also happened to be Blaze's (not his real name) department leader early in the summer of 2011. She asked him if he would take me back as an employee. Ironically, Blaze was the one I interviewed with that distant day before I met my fiancé's boss in the horse barn. Blaze was my first barn manger. I met my barn friend at a different barn over by Good Thunder around 1998. After my dad died of cancer, I was rehired by Blaze for his barns in November 2003. I was transferred to Damon's barn as a Farrowing Department Leader around the spring of 2007. So, I have known Blaze since 1997. I had purchased Skipper from him, my first horse, long before I ever started working for him. So, when my barn friend asked him if he would take me back, Blaze said he would if I started immediately, like the next day. With no hesitation at all, I took the job. I called the Lake Crystal barns and quit. I was back working for another one of Delilah's barns, but this time only as a part-timer who would work every other weekend. The pay was not even close to what I got 6 months earlier, but the hours were guaranteed, and I came and went as needed.

Blaze had a different approach to management. Some of it was straightforward. I had worked for Blaze on and off over the past 14 years. His belief that a farm should run deep to avoid employee shortages meant he would hire just about any previous employee back, which was good and bad. It depended entirely upon the employee.

In 1997, when Blaze conducted my initial tour of the 2,500-head sow unit he managed, the barn was nothing like my grandmother's traditional hog operation with the red barn, hay loft, and open outdoor pens. While the clanking of metal on metal by pig snouts hungry for more food may have been the same, Blaze's farrowing barn held 20 rooms down a long corridor of

rust-tinged, PVC wall-coated type boards, with dimly lit halogen bulbs inside glass jars that screwed into the ceiling, which were scattered down the hall every 20 feet or so. The barns were dingy, dark, and depressing.

Upon entering the first farrowing room, Blaze walked me around 24 pens sitting 12 deep, above a square lagoon pit. The pit contained a mixture of water, feces, urine, and moldy sour feed, a potent smell that initially stung the eyes upon entering the room. Within each pen was a crate containing a sow with only enough room to lie down, sit, stand up, or eat. The space surrounding the sow held a heat lamp, mat, and 10 to 14 piglets. Some piglets slept as we toured the room. Others rutted their mom's stomach, hoping she would roll over to feed them.

During my walkthrough interview, Blaze said, "I hire only women for this barn."

He seemed proud of this admission, as if he was creating jobs specifically for women, puzzled. I asked, "Why is that?"

"Because women have a better concept of the birthing process," he said.

"But I have never given birth."

"That is okay," he said. "It is intuition."

By August 2011, I sat in my best interview outfit—black slacks and a dress shirt—across from a woman who was a Blue Earth County Social Worker for the Family Services Unit in Mankato, Minnesota. My goal was to look like I had it together—so the custody of my children would not come into question—obtain information about needed services, and hopefully, leave with a plan to save the farmhouse. I was out of options. With no luck, I tried to support the farmhouse, which had been listed for sale for 2 years. Its heap of ever-increasing bills from the outdated septic system, which was on a countdown to mandatory replacement with 1 year left before Blue Earth County would begin sending me fines for not replacing the system,

something that could cost upwards of \$15,000 to fix, then there was the failing heater, appliances that kept dying off, and that corner of the house that kept trying to cave in on itself.

Between working part-time, writing freelance, and attending Minnesota State University, Mankato, I struggled to make the mortgage and complete even the most basic repairs. I had finally reached that place of no return. I had two options before me. First, stay in school and risk losing the house; second, drop out of college and go back to the barns full-time. The problem was that I wanted to continue to pursue my undergraduate degree at Minnesota State University. I believed our future—my boys and my own—depended on my finishing school, and yet I still needed dental insurance for my children.

In January 2011, when I left my full-time position as a Farrowing Department Leader for two part-time jobs, none offered dental or health insurance. According to Minnesota's Family Court system, dental insurance for the boys was my obligation and something I had no access to when I left my full-time position. I knew if my ex-husband caught wind that there was no dental insurance available for the boys—due to an innocent playground accident or if one of the boys started to complain of a toothache—I could get into significant trouble with the court system, mainly when I could not produce the insurance cards for the needed procedure. By August 2011, I was on borrowed time, and I knew it. Also, I was diagnosed with post-partum depression within the first year after having my oldest son. I have been on depression meds ever since. Without health insurance, I was not taking my medication, which made me overly tired, as in hard to function tired.

After completing extensive research online, I ended up at the Blue Earth County Family Services Unit in Mankato, Minnesota. My online research had said to come prepared. I needed copies of nearly every document I had—birth certificates for the boys and myself, my driver's

license, my social security card, all of the last month's bills, my mortgage payment, the divorce decree, the child custody decree, the bankruptcy notice, the title to my car, and my meager 401K paperwork—all of which, had to be represented at the first intake meeting. In my lap was a manila envelope with everything and anything she could ask me for, or so I hoped.

During the intake meeting, I had several questions I needed answers to. What was the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and how did it work? Could dental insurance cover my children through the state of Minnesota? What would health insurance entail for me? Most importantly, how do I keep my house? I was one mortgage payment behind and quickly approaching a second. While I asked the necessary questions, she stared at her computer screen, entering information she had obtained from me through interjected questions she needed to ask and requests for my paperwork. Our one-sided conversation went something like this:

“Why are you here today?” she asked.

“To see if you can help us.”

“What kind of help do you need?”

“Well, my children need dental insurance, I need health insurance to afford my medications, and I am behind a month on my mortgage payment,” I said.

“The mortgage we cannot help with,” she said as she turned to her computer screen. “I need to see your driver's license, social security card, children's birth certificates, and social security cards.”

As I handed over what she needed, I said, “I do not have their social security cards.”

“Why not?”

“They got lost in the divorce,” I said. “I have a handwritten copy of the numbers in my phone, but I do not have the cards.”

“You are going to need to get their cards replaced,” she said. “Give me what you have.”

I handed over my phone with the picture of their social security numbers. “I will get them replaced,” I said. “About the mortgage, who can if you cannot help?”

While she entered the information into her computer, she glanced my way, “You will have to go online and look for services that can assist you.”

“Like who?” I asked again.

“Do you have your divorce decree and child custody agreement?” She asked.

I hand them over. “The house,” I said, returning to my main reason for being at the appointment, “I am trying to sell it, but I cannot be a full-time student and employee. I need to finish my education.”

“Yeah, well, you still have to keep employment for our programs,” she said.

“I am employed,” I said, uncertain what she was getting at. “I have two part-time jobs. However, I need to keep the house. I also need to start thinking about filling the propane tanks for winter.”

“You will not qualify for cash assistance,” she said as she placed the copy of the divorce decree and child custody agreement into a neat pile to the right of her computer. “We may be able to get you some food support, but it will not be much. Maybe \$140 a month for you and your two children? Although that may be high. You do know that we have a food shelf in town?”

“Ah, yes,” I said. Is this what my life has come down to? A food shelf? “What about the dental and health insurance?”

“I can help with that,” she said. “Do you have copies of your last month’s utilities?”

I rummaged through what was left of the manila envelope and pulled out the utilities. “As I said, I do not have the propane bill because I have not filled the tank yet. It will cost around

\$1,500 or more for 700 to 800 gallons, which is probably a low estimate. That is roughly what I paid last year, and I did not even get the tank filled. It is a 1,000-gallon tank. I need at least 1,500 gallons to get through a winter.”

“If you need help with utilities, you will need to talk to your utility carriers and set something up or find area programs that will help,” she said. “How long do you anticipate needing assistance?”

“Well, I have 2 years left on my undergraduate degree,” I said. “I hope to find a job, but I also want to apply for my Master’s.”

“You will have to find a job,” she said. “Assistance does not last forever.”

“I know that,” I said. “I worked full-time for 15 years. It is not like I am choosing not to work. I am trying to get an education to improve my job prospects.”

“Well, you have to work on this program,” she said. “That is the requirement. Alternatively, they will penalize you, and you will not qualify for assistance for at least 6 months. Also, we will need to contact your ex-husband to ensure he knows you need assistance for your children.”

“You cannot do that,” I said. “Please, do not do that.”

“We have to contact him,” she said. “It is his children. He has a right to know.”

“I have 60% custody and primary residence,” I said. “I am not neglecting my duties as a parent. I am asking for help, and I am asking you not to tell him. He will not understand.” I wipe my hand over my eyes. I hoped my nose was not turning red. It was a clear sign that I was on the verge of tears if it was. “Please. Why does he need to know? I thought this was confidential.”

“It is confidential,” she said. “He will not know about you or what you are asking for. However, he has a right to know that his children will enter our system.”

“Then I cannot do this,” I said. “I will have to find another way, but this is not it.” I start to get up from my chair to leave.

“Wait,” she said. “I will place a note in your file that you have requested we do not talk to your ex-husband. I cannot guarantee how long we can go without contacting your ex-husband, but it will not be today.”

I sat back down.

When I left her office, I felt like a failure. I was so ashamed. Somehow, the EBT card with a possible \$140.00 was supposed to make everything better 1 month at a time. Did she realize we were in a recession? The cost of food is astronomical right now. \$140.00 over 4 weeks was what \$35? I was supposed to feed the three of us on \$35 a week if worse came to worse. I do not know what bothered me more. The fact that single moms were living off \$35 a week or that it was now inevitable we would lose the house. The mortgage, my most pressing concern, still needed to be solved. Who had these programs that could supposedly help? Why didn't she have that information easily accessible and ready to pass along? Where were these organizations? It could not be like the utility company experience. I tried to get help the previous winter to fill my propane tank before the first snowstorm of the year and that had been a fiasco. My decision to ask for help landed me with a disgruntled propane guy who insisted on sending me nasty notes all winter long, “If you run out of fuel, we will charge you an additional \$200 to fill.” Great, that is all I needed. A longer list of people who hated my existence. At that moment, I never felt so alone.

While at the barn, I learned Blaze's management style meant he had no filter. He tended to spit shit out with no regard for who was around him, who his words might affect, or even if

what he said was appropriate. It was a trait I never noticed about him until I returned to work for him as a single mother. Suddenly, there seemed to be a ton of no-filter conversations.

Ten to 15 employees would be seated at the table during any given lunch hour. Most often, lunch was Blaze's most opportune time for spitting out inappropriate and seemingly random nuggets of right-wing stereotypes. The first time one of his comments was directed at my life, I was caught off guard.

"Women who seek assistance from welfare should automatically be fixed," said Blaze as he opened our lunchroom conversation. "That way, they cannot have any more children."

Startled, I glanced up from my peanut butter sandwich. Sitting to my left, a few of the most recent hires shook their heads in agreement. They muttered things like, "Yeah, that will fix them" and "Save on my tax dollars if we did."

Disgusted, I tried not to provide a reaction. From what I had discerned from other moments when Blaze randomly dropped crap from his mouth, the goal was to create a reaction. For some reason, a reaction equaled a yes for whatever topic he was spitting out. Therefore, if I reacted, it would mean I was getting assistance. He once hired 2 men from Texas for a summer, and Blaze kept the lunchroom conversation on the need for a border wall that entire summer. The men were Latino. So, I had an inkling that in Blaze's warped mind, the only people who would defend someone on welfare were those on welfare themselves, but with each bite of my sandwich, more of it gets stuck to the roof of my mouth.

"What do you think?" asked Blaze as he nodded in my direction, his hands interlocked behind his head.

I looked up. Swallowed the piece of peanut butter sandwich that was previously lodged to the roof of my mouth. Keeping my voice as even, I said, “No. I do not think that is right. I do not think being poor means one should forfeit control over their body.”

“I think, if a woman needs to ask for help,” Blaze said, looking to his groupies on my left, “then that is the least they can do.”

The Blue Earth County Human Services Department kept my involvement with them quiet for roughly 6 months. By the winter of 2012, the boy and I are in Winnebago. The farm is in short sale mode, inches from foreclosure. With my ex-husband’s name still on the deed of the house, the impending foreclosure is going to affect him and his live-in-girlfriend—whom he moved in after dating for less than 30 days back in November of 2010—therefore, he takes every chance he can to let me know how much of a failure I am now that I have also managed to lose the house too. But he becomes livid when he finds out about the county assistance. During his half-hour abusive tirade, he covered my incompetence as a mother, and he relayed every piece of assistance we obtained from the county, which included my health insurance. So, when I was told what I received for assistance was “confidential,” it was not “confidential.” Otherwise, they had a leak.

For the next few days, I endured call after call after call of my ex-husband threatening me. I heard, “I need to get the boys off assistance.” “My (his) children were not going to be on the county.” “This was all your fault.” “You had a job. You did not need to go to school.” “You needed to stop being lazy. What was wrong with you?” And finally, “If you cannot support the kids, you should not have them.”

The last threat to take the boys from me was the last straw. The next day, I was at the county office awaiting assistance—this time in blue jeans and a shirt. I politely asked to talk to

the woman who notified my ex-husband that my children were getting assistance. I must have looked non-threatening because they led me to a small conference room. A few moments later, a young woman who could not have been older than 24 entered the room with a folder and briskly sat down opposite me, a 6-foot table between us. Looking at her folder, she said, "What can I help you with?"

For starters, I thought you all could look a person in the eye. "Are you the one who notified my ex-husband that my children are getting assistance from the county?" I asked.

She looked up with a sigh as if I were wasting her time. "Yes. Why?"

"In my file, when I came in here in August, it should have been noted not to notify my ex-husband," I said flatly.

"Yeah," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "I saw it."

"So, if you saw it," I asked, "why would you send it to him?"

"Because every father has a right to know if his children are on the county for assistance," she said.

"But you are not my case worker," I said.

"So," she said, with a shrug of the shoulders. "He still has a right to know."

"And his right to know means telling him everything I am getting from the county because that is what you did. I mean, there is not anything he does not know. So, where is my promised confidentiality?" I asked.

"What confidentiality?" she asked. "He has a right to know what is happening to his children."

"And I have a right not to be abused," I said. "Do you understand that when I asked, he not be notified? It might have been for a good reason. Like for my safety?"

“Well, that is a bit dramatic,” she said with a sigh as she returned to looking at the items in her folder.

Having suddenly lost all my patience, I slammed my hand down on her folder, flattening it out between us. “It is not dramatic if it is a real concern!” I said, struggling to keep my voice level, “You do not know. You were not married to the man!” With the outburst, she jumped back from me. Her chair banged up against the wall behind her. I have her attention now, but she thinks I am the mental nutcase. Great.

“Is that all?” She asked as she jumped to her feet. She wanted to end our meeting.

Unfortunately for her, I have the door behind me. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a man has opened the door to my right to look in on us. “Yes,” I said. “Although, next time someone tells you not to notify their ex-husband, maybe stop and think about it before you hit ‘send.’ While your life might be perfect, you could endanger a woman’s life. If you hit ‘send,’ let the woman know so she has time to prepare. That was the very least you could have done for me.”

During a weekend shift in the breeding barn, Blaze and I artificially inseminate the sows. Normally, the full-time employees do the inseminating, except on Blaze’s weekend he has requested that I help him. After an hour, he reached across the blue iron crates that separated us to tap on my shoulder. I looked up as he motioned to my earphones. He wanted me to remove them. Unfortunately, he had something to say. For the past year, the earphones have been a welcomed distraction from the continual barrage of single mother comments that emit from Blaze’s mouth on any given weekend. Reluctantly, I pulled out the earphone closest to him while Cher’s “If I Could Turn Back Time” blared into my ear from the opposite side.

Blaze said, “It is just too easy for single mothers to abuse the system.”

I tried my best not to make a visible show of sucking in the stale, humid air surrounding us as I glanced back down at my bag of semen. I needed time to gather my thoughts, to calm the immediate anger that's boiled to the surface.

"I do not think anyone wants to be poor," I said. The desire to defend myself, even if in only a tiny way, caused me to drop my voice low enough so that he would not hear me over the sound of sow snorts, crate thuds and thumps, and various other bodily adjustments going on around us, "I know I did not," but divorce, bankruptcy, and foreclosure was a humbling progression of pain and humiliation.

"All they have to do is ask," Blaze said, as he folded down his rod blocking off the empty semen bag from the sow, "and our government throws money in their direction."

"No, they do not. There are forms to fill out and," I stopped dead. I have said too much. For a split second, I prayed that the shuffling of the animals around us would have kept him from pouncing on my admission, but it did not.

"How do you know?" He asked.

"I do not," I said. He looked at me critically, eyes narrowed as if trying to gauge how much I would lie to protect myself. "It just seemed to me that there would be a lot of paperwork to do before any money could be handed out from the government, seeing as how the government likes paperwork for everything else."

He grunts and walks down the row to heat-check the next sow.

I tried to remember that it was not entirely his fault; he was the way he was. He has never had to ask for help. He has never been in a position with his back against the wall. He does not understand how every 6 months to a year, I have to turn in at least 30 to 60 pages worth of copied records from checking account information to the boy's savings account information to

the bills paid over the last 30 to 60 days, which includes utilities, car repairs, rent payments, vehicle payments, and proof that the ex-husband is still sending his custodial payment, mostly on time. I may send the county more than they need, but I do not want to take a chance and end up in jail. I would rather over-send them information than miss something I should have sent. I glanced down to look at the bag of fluids in my hand. I check for possible air bubbles or backwash from the sow that could delay my time next to him longer than needed.

When the live-in girlfriend came into my son's life, they thought she was slightly strict but could also be fun in October 2010. She had four kids of her own, which meant new playmates—two of which were the same ages as my two, around 10 and 8 years old, from her second marriage. Her two oldest children were in high school and from her first marriage.

While the live-in girlfriend was by no means pleasant, fair, generous, or kind, the first year with her in all our lives seemed to go by rather quickly, with only minor incidents between her and my boys. The boys' first notable issue was when the live-in girlfriend and her family moved in that November 2010. My boys lost their rooms. Suddenly, they were forced to sleep on the living room floor for over a month while her children got their rooms. When I brought my concerns to my ex-husband, I was told it was only until everyone was situated. Apparently, it never occurred to either adult that moving eight people into the same three-bedroom house might have required adding to the house or reorganizing before moving everybody into the house.

The second issue within the first year was the live-in girlfriend's archaic rule that my children be forced to stand away from their father in public settings. I was shocked when my youngest came home to inform me that the live-in girlfriend was now the only one allowed to stand beside their dad. Who competes with their potential boyfriend or girlfriend's children for attention? Really? How old are you? Who does that?

When my youngest asked, “Why can’t we stand next to Dad, Mom?”

“I have no idea,” was all I said. It was all I could say. I had difficulty understanding why my ex-husband would even allow that to happen. Part of me wondered if my youngest son was somehow getting a mixed signal or misinterpreting the situation. Until then, my youngest son and ex-husband had been close. Our youngest son often came up, grabbed one of our hands to walk with us, or cuddled in and watched movies. It was natural, so for him to be turned away felt wrong.

A short while later, my children came home upset because the live-in girlfriend told them to go through her for everything instead of their Father. They were no longer allowed access to their father when he worked nights at his hobby snowmobile business. Technically, according to our divorce decree, he was not supposed to do work the nights he had our children. If he had the boys, he was supposed to be at home. He was supposed to call me if he knew he would be away from the boys for over an hour, and I would come to get them. While he never abided by the rules anyway, why were they even there at all if they were not going to have any access to him on the nights they were supposedly in his care? It sounded like the same setup from when we were married. He does not want to deal with the boys, and they should be in bed and fast asleep by the time he gets home.

I could see the benefit of moving a girlfriend into my ex-husband’s home within 30 days of meeting her. Only 3 months after the divorce, and with her kids as a natural anchor, she was free daycare. He could return to doing what he always did, precisely what the mediators said I should not judge him for. When the boys called their dad at the snowmobile shop to ask when he was coming home, the live-in girlfriend started to scream at them. If the boys relayed to their father anything that happened in the house while he was working at the snowmobile shop, there

was hell to pay the next time she got my children alone without their father. She even used her children to silence mine, as some of them ratted out my kids to their mom regularly.

Unfortunately, it would not take long before having any conversation in the live-in girlfriend's presence became a problem. Even a conversation with their mother on a Sunday night, after they had been with their dad all weekend, could be held against them the next time she got them alone. Their Father called my house every Sunday night that I had the boys. I let him talk to the boys. It was never a problem. Often, the boys would talk to their dad for upwards of a half hour or better. I never put a time limit on the time they spent talking to their father. He was their father. However, when I called on the Sunday nights he had the children, the live-in girlfriend wanted them to get off that phone as soon as possible. She would tell the boys that if they talked to me for too long, it made their dad want to cry because that meant they did not love him as much as me. If they did talk to me for too long, they paid the next time she got them alone in the house, either with extra house chores; or her famous hour-long verbal berating, which amounted to verbal abuse—if they cried, she would call them babies, and it would become much worse, lasting longer yet; she would make them stay in their rooms or assigning them extra homework above and beyond what they got in school. Fast forward to 2022, my boys went out to Sturgis, South Dakota, with their father and his wife, the old live-in girlfriend. Sadly, even though my children are 22 and 20 years old when they called me to check in of their own accord, they still whispered when they talked to me. As grown men, they still feared her wrath.

The first time one of them whispered on a call, I said, “Why are you whispering?”

My oldest said, “Um, you know.” It was sad to realize that, as grown men, they still could not get caught talking to their mother.

One day I discovered that my oldest had started peeing in bottles in his room at night. When I asked “why wouldn’t you go to the bathroom? Your dad has two of them,” he said they could not anymore. Anytime they attempted to go to either of the bathrooms at night, either to sneak a moment to call and talk to me before bed or to legit pee, the live-in girlfriend would be pounding at the bathroom door within seconds. She would yell, “Get out!” Then, she would not have to pee once my children exited the bathroom. She just did not want them in there, either. Unfortunately, the do not pee logic extended into the middle of the night, when for some unknown reason, she would get up and reenact the same behaviors if my children were in the bathroom in the middle of the night, actually relieving themselves. Terrified, they started peeing in empty 20 oz bottles and hiding them in their bedroom closet. What else were they supposed to do? At the time, I thought, really? You cannot pee now? Jesus. What next?

Desperate to help my children, I purchased them both cell phones. Then they would have them in their rooms. If they wanted to reach me, they could call. They would not need to grab their dad’s landline and head for a bathroom. I told the ex-husband. I would pay for the phones. That way, he would not control either of the boy’s phones. It was a great idea, in theory, not in practice. With the phones, they merely confiscated them, read their texts, and checked their call logs. The next time the boys came to my house, they relayed how they had gotten in trouble for calling and texting me all weekend on the phones that I paid for, when they got confiscated on Sunday night. So, I spent Monday night teaching the boys how to delete their call logs and texts immediately after using the phone to contact me. We practiced and practiced.

My dilemma was how do I get my ex-husband to see that what is happening to them, is hurting them, for the sake of our children? How do I get a narcissistic egomaniac to think of our kids? The live-in girlfriend made his life easier. He no longer had to care for his children. He

never cared to do that when we were married. He is not kicking out a golden goose, no matter how much she abuses his kids. Plus, it would be much easier to brush off my complaints as, “Heidi’s jealous and wants me back,” rather than seriously considering who he allowed into his home. I tried to talk with him numerous times, but he would talk to her. Then she would get the boys alone, and the punishment would worsen. The last thing I wanted was for the boys to buy into her party line and stop telling me what was happening at their dad’s. I also knew they would only take her abuse for so long before they decided it was better not to tell me, especially if they realized how powerless I was to help them. It was an endless cycle I could not stop, break, budge, or help my children out of. I turned them over, knowing she would do something to hurt them. I felt helpless. As a mother I was supposed to protect them, and I could not even do that.

Often when the live-in girlfriend was verbally dressing down one of the boys, the other would run to his room, and call me crying. He would tell me everything that was happening. I remember being at Minnesota State University, Mankato, walking to a late class when a call came through from my oldest. My youngest was getting torn into being in special education classes. As my oldest relayed the scene below, I backed up to a brick wall, slid down the length of it, and put my head on my knees. Every fiber of my being wanted to drive over there, grab my children, and I could not. I could not cry because I had to be strong for them. When I got divorced, it never occurred to me that the one person I would most need to protect my children from would be a woman in my ex-husband’s home. I always thought one woman’s kids would be sacred to another woman because she should know precisely what it took to get them here. I would never hurt another woman’s kids. Why was she doing this?

Bancroft (2002) believed a new partner could be a hostile, abusive woman. However, it was more likely that the abuser manipulated her to actively do what he could not, thereby

sacrificing his children to hurt the ex-wife (Bancroft, 2002). The new partner of the ex-husband demonstrates loyalty to his cause, beliefs, and lies by bending over backward to ensure the ex-wife is getting what she deserves; after all, the ex-husband has crafted the perfect story of abuse and casts the ex-wife as the perfect villain (Bancroft, 2002). When the new partner sees the ex-husband for who he is, the damage will be done to the ex-wife and her children (Bancroft, 2002). When I read Bancroft's words back then, I did not believe him. It was easier to see the new partner as a separate threat than as a pawn of my ex-husband. After all, what woman could be callous enough to hurt another woman's children? Looking back now, with time and more education, I can see how Bancroft was on to something. The new partner was the perfect fall guy, and she was too. Legally and within the social services system, if she was the problem, I had no grounds to pull custody from my ex-husband, no matter what she did. Technically, he had not done anything wrong.

My youngest child was held back in kindergarten, after which no one seemed to realize within the school system that he had a severe reading disorder until the second grade, 2010–2011. Even though he struggled with his schoolwork the entire time between kindergarten and second grade, most of the blame for his difficulties fell on me both as a married wife and, most significantly, as a single mom. I needed to do more, read more, help him study more, and be more encouraging. However, when he and I would read books at night, I noticed he was not reading the pages as much as he was reciting the pages back to me from the books I had already read to him repeatedly, such as Mercer Mayer's Little Critter series, *I Was So Mad* and *All By Myself*. No one seemed particularly concerned when I asked if this was normal.

One of the live-in girlfriend's favorite pastimes was to rub his reading issues in his face with comments like, "How stupid are you," and, "What child reads at a 1.5 reading level in the

3rd grade? Do you know how dumb that makes you?” It did not matter if he was steadily improving or not. She continued to make those comments for years. No matter how many times I stated her comments were entirely unnecessary for a child who already knew he was different, nothing changed. When my ex-husband and I meet with his teachers and the special education teacher, we are constantly told to encourage him. Of course, in these meetings, my ex-husband paints the perfect blended family life of nurturing encouragement, and yet, my youngest was constantly coming to my house telling me the latest insults he heard from the live-in girlfriend. When I tell my ex-husband what she has said this time, I am told, “She loves our children as much as you. She would never do such a thing as to call him stupid.”

By February 2012, my normally quiet youngest child had become more than his schoolteachers wanted to handle. His grades have plummeted, and the teachers have called to say he refuses to work. However, he was telling them one thing loud and clear for days, “I hate the live-in girlfriend,” to anyone and everyone who would listen, and yet, no one at the school listened. Instead, I received a phone call telling me to get him on medication or in counseling. The only thing good about the school strongly suggesting we place the youngest in counseling was that my ex-husband was big on appearances. With the school pushing for counseling, he could no longer refuse me, and he would never want to be the parent who looked like he refused treatment at the school. I had tried to send the youngest earlier, but until now, my attempts had been thwarted. Of course, why would my attempts not be thwarted? The status quo for his household: What happens here stays here and never tell.

After one terrible day at school, I was in his classroom speaking with his teacher when the subject of the live-in girlfriend came up. I backed up my son, telling her there was a legitimate issue of verbal and emotional abuse that my youngest son dealt with regarding the

live-in girlfriend, which was not helping the situation at school or his confidence level with reading.

“That is nothing new,” said my son’s teacher as she shrugged. “We know he hates her. So?”

With her words, I gathered my son and we left. There was nothing more that could be said to change her mind.

During a different lunch hour on a different weekend at the barn, I am alone with Blaze on break when he not so randomly asked, “Did you hear about that woman who kept using her food stamps after she won the lottery?”

“Yeah, I heard,” I said, glancing up from my word-find puzzle.

“What do you think?”

“What is there to think,” I said. “She made a mistake. That does not mean all welfare participants are screwing the system.”

“Well, it sure does not look like they are being honest either,” he said.

In the fall of 2012, my 10-year-old son giggled and snorted beside me at his computer on the basement floor of Minnesota State University, Mankato, Library. I cannot help but look over at what has captured his attention. He was not prone to either giggling or snorting while playing any game on a computer. He was more like me, overly competitive. If he loses the game, he tends to voice his opinion to the computer. A few weeks back, he had stayed home sick from school. He encouraged me to play Minecraft with him. As I was getting the hang of the game, building my home, it blew into a cloud of white smoke.

Shocked, I said, “What the hell happened?”

My youngest son only giggled and snorted in response. That giggle and snort I just heard only moments earlier was the same as the day he blew up my Minecraft house. Looking at his computer, I saw the familiar Sim City housing game on Facebook. It is a hybrid game that allows users to build their town with roads, bridges, stores, houses, and whatever else a computer-generated town does. At the moment, a fire truck is putting out a fire on one of my youngest son's main streets. He does not seem to be too concerned about the fire.

"Your house is on fire, dear," I said.

"I know," he said triumphantly.

"You are not worried then?" I asked.

"Nope," he said.

"Why are you laughing?" I asked. "Your house is burning down."

"It is not mine," he said, laughing louder, "it is Dad's girlfriend."

"Wait?" I asked. "You burned down her house, or it caught on fire?" For some reason, the idea of my son laughing hysterically while his dad's girlfriend's home burned to the ground does not seem reasonable, even if I do not particularly care for the woman. I cannot help but wonder if I should be worried.

"I burnt it down, Mom," he said. "I do not want her in my town, anymore."

"Will she not find out when she logs in tonight that you burnt her house?"

"Yep, and I do not care," he said. "Think she will finally move out of Dad's?"

This time I almost laughed. If only adult problems were that simple. "I highly doubt it, dear," I said as I returned to my screen. "I love you, though."

"Single mothers are weighing down the system," Blaze said as I sat across the table from him to eat lunch on a Tuesday at the barn. Suddenly, it crossed my mind that I could get up, put

my lunch out the window, shower, eat it in the car, and then shower back in for work in an hour. At least I could avoid Blaze's constant commentary on single mothers, but the idea of showering four times in one day kept me rooted to my chair.

Instead, I tried a different track, "But I am a single mom." I hoped he would think through his statement. Since I have worked with the man for over 14 years, maybe he would stop blanketing all of us into one category, a stereotype. Or maybe he would see that a stereotype could be cross applied to me, someone he had worked with for over 14 years, whether or not the statement was true.

"Yeah, but you are not one of those moms," he said. "You have a job."

From 2010 to 2016'ish, I called family attorneys to see how long it took them to tell me, "No, we cannot help you." Once, I was even turned down by the attorneys who are supposed to take on low-income people. That was their entire job description to help represent people experiencing poverty. I am more than qualified for their services, but they did not want my case. He said, "Unless you are in direct threat of losing your children to a custodial trial and need representation, we do not have the time to go after abusive ex-husbands or their partners. Call us back when he sues for custody."

Another time, I dive-bombed a county attorney—his door was open, and he did not seem to be doing anything—on my way to family services to provide the usual 10 pounds of needless paperwork they wanted. I asked him if he took on emotional or verbal abuse cases on behalf of children. He said, "Nope. Cannot help you there. I do other stuff," he said. When his gaze dropped to the human services forms in my arms, he said, "Call the free attorneys. That is what they are for." Apparently, what was in my arms meant I would not qualify for the "other stuff," whatever that was, but I had no idea.

Sometimes, I managed to only get a few words out regarding the situation I faced before I was told to try something else or to call someone else before I heard the dial tone in my ear. They do not even know the full extent of the problem and are pawing me off on someone else, hanging up, or doing both simultaneously. If it is a female attorney, she will listen. However, then I get told the following advice: keep everything that happens recorded on a calendar, in a notebook, or even better yet, do both the notebook and the calendar, plus email an accurate description of what happened to yourself because this will give you a time stamp and provide a location to house the material for safekeeping. It is almost as if these lawyers think I have nothing better to do than write and write and write.

The next lawyer I spoke with said, “None of that matters. 3 years’ worth of records will not be enough information inside a court of law because none of it will ever prove abuse. It is still your word against theirs, and only one of you is there.” Great, so I needed to find a second one of us to count in family courts.

Probably the worst betrayal came from an attorney in an AA meeting, an AA old-timer. He came up to me after a meeting and said, “Call me tomorrow at 9 a.m.” Thinking I had finally found someone to represent the boys and me, I called. He listened for only five minutes. Then he stopped me and said, “You must stop playing the victim card. That just is not going to get you anywhere in life.” Wow, now I am a victim. I only want to protect my sons. I need to know how to protect my sons. Nevertheless, I am playing the victim card.

Finally, there was the advice that made me laugh so hard I cried, which was when I called the most ruthless lawyer in Mankato. He was known for stripping moms of their children. I figured if anybody knew how to fight, it would be him. At least when all was said and done, I could guarantee my son’s safety. I had to convince him to switch his ethics and strip a dad of his

custody rights. To his credit, he listened to slightly over half of what I had to say before cutting me off, but I had condensed it down to significant bullet points, roughly 5 minutes. Otherwise, no one listened. Then again, they did not listen to bullet points either. He told me flat out, “I agree. What she is doing is wrong, but there is not enough money to fight the kind of battle you want. Do not call us back.”

In desperation, I returned to my divorce attorney, a man who’s last \$1,800 in lawyer fees was dismissed within my bankruptcy. He wanted me to pay the money back in installments following the bankruptcy, but what single mother on no credit, has \$1,800 to randomly start giving back? I never paid it back. Besides, he already took me for \$15,000, left me with a boatload of issues, and would not listen to me when I told him the husband would just replace me with some woman as soon as possible, that the perfect Dad routine he saw during the divorce would end. He downplayed the marital rape for no-fault divorce and, despite my safety concerns, gave me a pissed-off outdoor ex-husband that came with the marital home property for 2 to 3 years. Technically, if I kept the house, I would still have my pissed-off outdoor ex-husband for the rest of my life.

Days before the visit to my divorce attorney, the live-in girlfriend pulled my youngest son into her and my ex-husband’s room, where she screamed at him for a substantial time. My oldest son and ex-husband sat in the dining room, not even one door and a small hallway away, eating supper. My youngest son’s punishment resulted from his reminding his father to help him with his spelling words that evening because he had not wanted the live-in girlfriend’s help. He wanted his father’s help.

Upset, she pulled my youngest son into her room to yell at him. The usual insults spewed forth about how stupid he was, he would never amount to anything, he was lazy, worthless, and

useless. She also said he had no right to go against what she decided would happen regarding his homework. He should know better than to ask his father for help. He was also told that if he told his father what she said, she would make his life miserable the minute his Dad left the two of them alone together. My youngest son figured nobody had heard their loud conversation from the bedroom.

I found out a day later about the altercation, 2 minutes after I pulled out of my ex-husband's driveway after picking up the kids. Fighting the urge to go back and confront her or call my ex-husband, I kept my mouth quiet long enough to hear how the story unfolded. My children begged me to remain silent. "If the live-in girlfriend finds out we talked, we will be dead," they said. However, my oldest son does not need his little brother to recount what happened in the bedroom. He heard it all, as did his dad, at the dining room table, loud and clear.

Through a sheet of tears, my oldest said, "I could hear her screaming at my brother from the dining room, and Dad just sat there, Mom. Dad just sat there. Why would he do that? Why wouldn't he help him?" It is an unanswerable question. I wanted to believe my ex would do right by our children, even when he was incapable of doing right by our relationship, and yet, he seemed utterly unable to do so time and again when it came to that woman. "I do not know, dear," was all I could manage. With my anger barely contained, allowing too many words out at once might mean I would lose control of how they are placed. I cannot afford to lose control. I needed my boys to know it was safe to talk to me. I must remain silent, attentive, and calm. I cannot be judgmental.

At the divorce attorney's office, I have only begun to repeat the recent verbal attack against my youngest son, desperately building my case for why he should care and help me. I have 3 years' worth of recorded notes on calendars, emails addressed to my ex-husband

acknowledging the problems have been discussed while remaining unresolved between us, as well as emails to myself documenting the various verbal attacks against my youngest son, all of which are neatly stacked between us, waiting for him to decide to act. I want someone to do something. For once, listen to me. Please help us, but halfway through, I stopped talking. He is leaning back in his chair, arms crossed. The condescension on his face goes well with the standoff body behavior, which does not bode well if I want him on my side. Therefore, I stopped. He has not been listening to me. Something else has been on his mind.

He lets the silence grow between us. Then he sat up in his chair and looked at me, the items in front of me, and said with a shrug of his broad shoulders, "What has your moral capacity been since the divorce?"

Unsure if I heard him correctly, I asked, "Come again? My what?"

"Your sex life," he said. "You know, how many men have you run in and out of your children's lives since the divorce?" he asked, this time much more sternly.

"None, why?" I asked. "What the hell does that have to do with the live-in girlfriend's verbal abuse directed at my son?"

"I need to ensure you are on the up and up."

"So, it is okay if my ex-husband takes my kids on a first date to the live-in girlfriend's house and calls it a 'sleepover,' but I am not allowed to have sex?" I asked.

"That is not what I am saying."

"What are you saying?" I asked. "Because that sounds like a double standard and a stupid one." My divorce lawyer was old. He was probably in his late 60s when he represented me for the first time, which put him somewhere shy of 70. With all white hair, he is not frail like a 70-year-old. He looked more like a bulldog. My near-constant polling of attorneys to find

someone to help us has been insightful, if not disturbing. Male attorneys will not even listen to more than 3 minutes of what I have to say, minus the ruthless attorney who listened for roughly 5 minutes before telling me never to call him back. The female attorney's answer to my problem is always the same, document, document, document. For fuck's sake, when do we, as women, stop documenting? When do we get to stop worrying about double standards that men do not have to live by and start taking our lives back? "Are you saying," I asked, "it is okay for my ex-husband to move a woman he has barely known for less than 30 days into his home, but I am not allowed to date?"

"He is a man," he said as if that statement was all the justification needed. That was a piss poor excuse if I had ever heard one.

"What does any of that have to do with my child being verbally abused, regularly, by my ex's girlfriend?" I asked again.

"You cannot file a lawsuit against your ex-husband's girlfriend," he said. "It is as simple as that. Your ex-husband was not doing anything wrong."

"Wait, what?" I asked. "Doesn't he have a responsibility to ensure my children are safe?"

"He was. He is paying his child support, right? He has a job, right? He is doing his part," he said. "You just do not like his girlfriend."

In my gender and women's studies courses, I know sexual abuse charges can be brought up against any person who has direct influence or who holds a place of authority over a child, even when that person is a girlfriend or boyfriend to an ex-spouse. If proven, sexual assault abusers can be liable and punishable for their crimes. However, this was not the case for live-in girlfriends who specialized in verbal and emotional abuse. Why?

On a different lunch hour on a different day at the barn, our supervisor, Rich (not his name), came down from the head office. Blaze has a new audience, so he has begun his usual thread of rants: single mothers, left-wing politicians, unions, tenure, and the school systems actively eating up his tax dollars when he does not have children of his own. I am forced to stay in the office for lunch on the off chance Rich might hold a barn meeting at 12:30 p.m. Otherwise, I had taken to skipping lunch altogether lately. I was doing my blood pressure a favor by staying in the farrowing office and entertaining myself by staring at the grubby walls.

Unable to withstand Blaze's rant a second longer, I offered, "I have a suggestion." I look pointedly at Rich, who once promoted me to Farrowing Department Leader in Damon's barn and occupied the chair to my left. I purposefully waited for him to respond before I proceeded with the next part of my request. I know he is ignoring me. He will not look me in the eye.

Finally, we an exasperated sigh, Rich asked, "What is that?" He still will not look my way.

"I think I should be allowed to eat lunch free from Blaze's political ideas," I said. "Can't you pass some rule that states Blaze has to keep those comments to himself?" Blaze's beady eyes narrowed when I glanced back at him. He was pissed off. I will probably pay for my insubordination with harsher single-mother attacks tomorrow, but I wanted to make a point right now. The same point he made every day when he attacked one of us with his random ass comments, except mine was geared toward helping us in a roundabout way. His comments should not be allowed in the first place. I probably was not going about it any better than he was, but so far, telling him to back off and being civil was not working. There should not be stereotypical comments about drug addicts made at the lunch table when a coworker's daughter struggles with addiction. They needed support and reassurance, not that crap. There should not

have been comments about building a wall when those Latino men worked with us for a summer. It was not right. I was tired of it.

“I could,” said Rich, “but I have no comment.” Rich quickly shifted his gaze to his water bottle, avoiding Blaze and me. Even as Rich opted for the coward’s way out, Blaze does not make another single mother comment for the rest of that day.

During winter break for the boys, the live-in girlfriend met me in the driveway as I got out of my car to pick up the boys for the day. I thought it was unusual. We usually do not go out of our way to address the other person, but here she was, cheerful and friendly. I felt uneasy—something was up. The boys come barreling out of the house shortly after that, excited and jumping around. That was also not characteristic of the boys either. Typically, they monitor their performance whenever the live-in girlfriend is present. What in the hell was happening?

“Mom,” my oldest asked, “Can we stay at Dad’s for the morning?”

“Well, I planned to go over to Grandma’s today,” I said, groping for any quick excuse to get them in my car. “We are supposed to go over for that pancake breakfast.” The boys love pancakes. They have never turned down a chance for Grandma’s pancakes. In a way, it is a cheap shot at getting them into my car, but I also know the effect her homemade maple syrup has on them. It is the only kind my kids will eat. Even if mine is made from the same recipe, it is still not Grandma’s, and they will not eat mine.

Surprisingly my oldest said, “That is okay, Mom. We can eat there some other time. We want to stay.”

Unsure of what to do, I looked to my youngest son for any sign that something was wrong. He is not too committed to making eye contact. He watches only the live-in girlfriend and her ankle-biter dogs running between us. Everything about the situation felt wrong, but I could

not see what was wrong in a tangible way, not enough to call it out and name it. I have a pretty good idea their feeding me a line of bullshit, but I cannot ask that question directly. My ex-husband is at work. It is 8:30 a.m. Hell, she is supposed to be at work too. Why was she not at work?

During the divorce, I was continually hammered by the lawyers and mediators not to provide a flat-out “no” when my ex-husband or the boys wanted to do something. I am guessing that now extends the live-in girlfriend, as it seemed like everything else has now done so. They also accused me of being too “predictably routine.” Wasn’t that a good thing? All the parenting books, magazines, and doctors advocated for children to have routine bedtimes, baths, dinners, and expectations. The lawyers also said I was not “flexible enough to allow for my children to do fun things” and that this “could be detrimental to their growth” if I withheld them from seeing their father due to my inflexibility toward fun.

Once, I freaked out when my oldest was 6 months old, and my husband tried to take us into the Mall of America in 2000. I had a full-on panic attack. We ended up not going into the mall that day. I lost my first child. I could not help that I was protective of the child I got to keep. There were minimal things I could control at the Mall of America, and ever-present was always the memory of Jacob Wetterling. He was my age when he was kidnapped, and my dad said we were not far from where Jacob lived. I remembered watching the television for days afterward, praying he would come home. There was also a minor incident where my mom had sent my sister, who was 5 years younger than myself and me, uptown to get the mail on a Saturday.

Around the same time Jacob disappeared, we were probably 11 and 6 years old. Some guy at the post office took an interest in my sister while I grabbed our mail. He gave her a quarter. He gave me a quarter when he realized I was with her. In the late 80s, no one gave

anyone quarters, not even for school fundraisers. We always got pennies, nickels, and dimes for school fundraisers. Therefore, I suspected something was wrong immediately. I made up a story to get my sister to wait, so the guy would leave before us and not at the same time as we did from the post office. We could only stay in the post office for so long. I also knew I had to get back home, or mom would kill us. I was wondering if we were safe enough to leave yet. With our quarters in our hands, I poked my head out the door. There was no sign of the guy. I also had no earthly idea what car he had brought to the post office, assuming he came in a car. The bar was right next to the post office in Morton, Minnesota, and always packed. I grabbed my sister, and we started trekking the four to five blocks to return home. About two blocks into our walk, I noticed a car following us. My sister was not paying attention to the car at all. She was rambling about what she could buy with the quarter and about her dolls.

“You got to give me your quarter,” I said.

“Why,” she asked. “That man gave it to me.”

“I know he did,” I said, “but we were not supposed to take anything from strangers. You know the rules.”

“Oh,” she said. She looked like I was about to take her Jem doll from her.

“Okay,” I said, “Let us do this; you give me the quarter. I will place the quarter in the lilac bush. We can come back for them later. However, for now, we need to ditch these and run.” The bush was in the corner of our neighbor’s property about a half block up. We just breached the brick house on our right. I was not sure if anyone was home or who happened to live there now.

“Why do I have to run?” She asked.

“Do not look,” I said, “but he is following us. That car never passes. That is him.” As we approach the alley to our home block, the neighbor’s lilacs are directly in front of us. Our home is one long yard over. If my sister ran at a straight diagonal, she could make it to our house without intersecting with the road. She would make it back home. “Give me the quarter. I will drop them in the bush. You run for mom. I will be right behind you.”

Without further complaint, she handed me the quarter, but as she glanced back at the car, the car screeched beside us next to the curb and stopped. We heard the squeak of his door opening.

“Run!” I yelled. With that one word, my sister took off straight across the lawn, screaming for Mom like a banshee. I hit the lilacs straight ahead in two steps, dropped the quarters, and then turned to follow my sister. As I cleared the halfway mark of the neighbor’s yard, I looked back long enough to notice the guy was getting back into his gold-colored car. I slowed. I watched him pull out from the curb, drive up the block to the stop sign, take a left, and speed off. He would be out of town in seconds, whether he followed it to the end and went right or took two lefts and a right.

With my sister screaming bloody murder, my mom met us in the garage. “What in the hell is going on?” She asked. She was holding my sister at arm’s length, inspecting her for missing limbs. I do not have to say what happened. My sister rattled the whole story, including the part about taking the quarters, which got me a death glare. “Where are these quarters?” She asked.

We walked Mom back to the lilac bush. I showed her where I threw the quarters. Once she saw those, she picked them up and demanded we get into her car. The three of us went uptown to the post office. She started asking around. Did anybody notice a man who gave her

daughter quarters? Of course, nobody saw anything. She even went next door to the bar, but nothing. She was not sure the event happened as we said it did, but she could not rationally explain how we ended up with two quarters, either. She knew, just like we did that quarters were gold in the '80s in Morton. So, yes, after all that, as a child, I was the parent who would go to the State Fair in St. Paul, Minnesota, with a safety harness and leash for each of my children. They would not escape me if they wanted to walk around, not on my watch. No one was taking my babies. Ever. Of course, being that kind of a protective parent was held against me in Family Court.

So, on this day, as the boys requested to stay, I wondered if refusing their request to stay at their dad's house with the devil could count as grounds against my inability to parent effectively. I doubted it, but then again, if he hauls me back to court. . . I cannot run the risk that I could lose them. Or, if I finally get a lawyer to help us, I cannot risk of being seen as uncooperative. I will lose them because I have already been flagged as too protective and uncooperative. Christ.

"Okay," I said. I turned to the live-in girlfriend and asked, "Is that all right? Will you be home this morning?"

"Oh yes," she said, a smile spread broadly across her face like the Cheshire cat in Alice in Wonderland. I always hated that movie, especially that cat.

With her confirmation, I said goodbye to the boys and told them to call me when they were ready to go. I started to head home, back to Winnebago, all the while wondering, did my children want to stay in her care? As I pulled into Winnebago, I was one block from my house when I received my answer. My cell phone started to ring. It is my oldest son.

“Hi dear,” I said cautiously, but before I could say anything else, the sob came through the phone loud and clear. He could barely get the words out. I whipped the car around. I am headed back to Amboy.

“The live-in girlfriend just left Mom,” my oldest son said between sobs. “Please come back and get us.” After he gasped for more air, he said, “She made us tell you we did not want to leave. Why did you leave us with her?” I do not know what to say. I had not wanted to.

Election season was the worst at the barns. For Blaze, election season equaled Christmas morning for a toddler. He could spew forth his usual crap on a continual, relentless basis as if saving our souls for the coming birth of the election of Christ. During this lunch hour, he started by bashing democrats—the women democrats—and followed up by praising the most conservative republicans—all men—in Congress. He tired of the topic quickly since no one cared enough to argue with him one way or the other. He has moved on to a discussion surrounding the school district, which he believed was costing him money, and he does not even have children. Why should he have to pay for everyone else’s children?

“I think open enrollment should end,” he said.

“I think you should tread lightly,” I said as I keep my gaze focused on my crossword puzzle. My children are one of the open enrolled. He knows that, but I cannot afford to live in the school district. The cost of living was too expensive. It was not like I did not want to move back. My life would be easier if we could. Instead, I ran my schedule around when I picked up and dropped off my kids for the school bus. Daycare was not an option. It was too expensive. The boys were too old anyway but not old enough to drive themselves yet.

“It is a waste of my money to pay taxes for people who do not live in the district,” he said. “They should live in the district and pay taxes like I do if they want their kids to attend.”

“Yeah, Blaze,” I said, with a long-exasperated sigh, “All of us bastards who live in Winnebago and send our kids to your school district do so for the sole purpose because we know that it costs just you and only you, your money.” In the word find, the word stuck appears. I circled it.

After the incident over Christmas vacation with the live-in girlfriend’s odd push for power, when she had my children say they were not coming home with me, I went to child protective services in Faribault County. A blond, masculine-looking woman escorted me to a private room, a blank sheet of paper in her hands. She told me I could either give her a name or not. It was up to me. I fidgeted with the edging on the table. I was taking a considerable risk by being here. If they pulled my children from me, I would be useless to my youngest son. I took a big breath. She patiently waited, tapping her pen against the table, “Well?” she asked. I took a second big breath. I told myself: Do not cry, whatever you do, do not cry, I thought. Do not look like you are the crazy one.

“My ex-husband’s live-in girlfriend has been verbally and emotionally abusing my youngest son for 3 and a half to 4 years,” I said. I felt relief as those initial words poured out of me onto the table between us. However, without writing a word down, she put the pen down on the paper, no longer as eager to be in the room with me. My relief sank like the new anchor my Dad bought for a vacation up north when we were kids, except when my brother threw it overboard as instructed, my Dad realized too late that he forgot to secure the anchor to the boat. What had I forgotten to do?

“I cannot help you in cases of verbal or emotional abuse,” she said, and with those words, there also went my hope. Out of sheer frustration, I started to cry. This was not what I wanted to

hear. I came here for help. They are supposed to help, and already the interview is over. I have not even had a chance to recount what has happened or been happening. It was one sentence.

“What do you mean you cannot help?” I asked.

“Well, emotional and verbal abuse allegations are sometimes made by mothers who are jealous of their ex-husband’s new girlfriends or wives,” she said. “Verbal abuse is a hard claim to substantiate.” I wondered how many false claims they get, or is that a stereotype they utilize to avoid looking at the problem?

“But I left him,” I said. “I do not want him back.” I quickly began to recount the actions of the past week. She made my children tell me they did not want to leave with me. My oldest son called, not even 10 minutes later, asking for me to come back after she left. I brought up the most common verbal abuse my youngest son received daily, she picked on him for having a learning disability, and he hated going to his dad’s house. How she told him, he was stupid. She threatened to lock them in their room for hours if they did not do what she wanted. He feared closed doors, but none of these concerns mattered to her.

“Well, if she had locked them in a room, you might have a claim,” she volunteered enthusiastically.

“I *might* have a claim?” I asked. Seriously?

“Yes, you would have a better claim if she was a meth mom, if she hit the kids leaving marks, or locked them outside in the winter,” she said. “Those are things I can investigate.”

“So, I must wait for her to hurt them physically?” I asked. “Do you not think that is ironic? I am here because I am trying to avoid a situation like that at all costs. Do you realize that it might be too late by the time I have physical proof?”

“Sadly,” she said, sighing, “that is how the system works.”

In the spring of 2012, I visited my usual AA meetings on the weekends when I do not have my kids. A new doctor has shown up to the meeting. He was a member, had just moved to the area, and was an older man. As usual, we all started chatting before the meeting about our week, what we were doing, or whatever else was going on. Somehow, someone mentioned I was in school.

The doctor turned to me and said, "Are you not a bit old to be in school?"

Thinking he meant high school, I said, "I am at Minnesota State University, Mankato."

"Yeah," he said. "That is what I meant."

"How am I old?" I asked. "I am going to school to get a better job for me and my children."

"Oh," he said with a chuckle.

I missed what was funny. "Oh, what?" I asked. Lost.

"You are one of those," he said.

At first, I was confused. Then it dawned on me. He thought I was the single mom who stayed in college to avoid work to collect welfare benefits when this was my first time in a four-year school. What the hell! "Excuse me," I said, "but how many years do you have under your belt to get that fancy doctor's degree that you have?"

"Well," he said, "That was different."

I am being investigated for fraud by the Department of Human Services (DHS), but they did not call it that in the spring of 2013. They said it was because my number was lucky enough to be drawn out of a pool of others who were also unfortunate enough to have to ask for help during this 6-month check for food support. As a result, I am informed by an official letter from the state of Minnesota that I will need to produce three separate copies of 6 months' worth of

statements regarding all of my bank accounts and my children's accounts, all of my paid utilities, my vehicle payments, a rental verification release, and three references with contact numbers of people I know who can vouch for my credibility in being broke. Why they needed three separate copies was beyond me, but printing everything they needed for this investigation costs me an additional \$60 in ink for my printer, which does not factor in all the paper I had to buy. I am not at all thrilled. It was also finals time for college.

When I get the second letter from DHS, they wanted me to call the Quality Control Viewer to set up an official appointment. If I do not call within 3 days, I will be considered non-compliant, which was punishable by law. I have been trying to reach their person for three days straight, but they have yet to answer. I have left messages, but no return phone calls. I have not gone to work for 3 days because, of course, the hours in which I can call this person are only during work hours. I cannot make this call from work, not with Blaze in the office. Finally, I gave up calling the Quality Control Viewer and called Faribault County Human Services on the third day. I told them I was being audited. I figured it sounded better than saying I was being investigated for fraud. I was on my third day of trying to reach this Quality Control Viewer person. I have left messages and called, and they do not call back. I do not want to get into trouble. What do I do? The Faribault County Family Services employee told me to stay by my phone, and we disconnected. Guess who called my cell, the Quality Control Viewer, within 15 minutes. Really? That was all I had to do? Call the county and have them get on their ass?

The Quality Control Viewer person was a woman. She wanted to set up a time for us to meet, and she wanted to pick up my three copies of the required documents. I suggested meeting in Mankato since she was coming from the twin cities. I am there most of the time anyway, and if she comes from the cities, it would be easier for her.

She said, “No. We have to meet at your house.” She quickly corrected course, “I want to see your house,” she said in a much friendlier tone.

Right, I thought, sure you do. I was not dumb. My house would be inspected too. Great. I planned for her to visit on a day the boys are scheduled to be with their dad. I have consistently tried to keep county and state humiliations to the days my boys are not home to keep some semblance of my remaining integrity left. She agreed to meet on the date I suggested.

On the designated day, the Quality Control Viewer from the DHS officially arrived at my home over an hour late. There was no call to say she was going to be late, because I had taken the day off to ensure my house was spotless and ready for her arrival. She was just late. She was not sorry she was late either. She hurriedly sat at my kitchen table and asked for the paperwork. I showed her the three piles. Each pile has been sorted, paperclipped, and has a large envelope below for the corresponding pile. Everything was organized. While she was sifting through one of the piles, I asked, “Why do you need my references?”

“To make sure the people covering your case are giving you the best possible services,” she said rather quickly, shuffling through my stack of financial papers. Realizing the references were not in the pile, she asked, “Do you have them?”

“Yes, of course,” I said. Irritated, I wondered why if that was the case, she did not ask Faribault County to provide references for the employees handling my case. It would be a lot less embarrassing for them. It was their job. After all, would it not be more essential to find out if they were doing what they were supposed to be doing rather than assuming I was telling everyone how successful I am at getting assistance from the county? At the very least, tell me the truth. What would my references know about my caseworkers? Nothing? I have not told

anybody, at least not willingly. So obviously, that was not what she was going to be asking them. It was more or less about me and my conduct.

I passed over my three closest friends' names and phone numbers in triplicate. Friends, who, after 2 years of seeking help from the government, would now know of my failure once the county or this woman called them. Across my table, the Quality Control Viewer decided there was one small thing she needed before we could finish the interview, "I will need that written statement from your boss too."

"But you have my pay stubs," I said. "Obviously, I work there."

She slides the paper Blaze needed to sign my way. "I will need them to sign this form."

Shit. "I cannot get that signed," I said.

"Why?" She asked, leaning into the table as if she had caught me in a lie. Like, maybe I really do not have a job and I fabricated the pay stubs before her.

One time, a family services worker had the gall to ask me if I sold my body for money during one of my case's 6-month or 1-year reviews for assistance. At first, I laughed. I thought she was kidding. She was not laughing. Shocked, I asked her when she thought a single mother had the time in Faribault County. She said I should not get so offended. That was why they did these constant checks of income every 6 months, to ensure those seeking help were working at a legitimate job and not selling their body for money. If only she knew I was forced to have sex by my husband, that I could not sleep at night, and that the idea of selling my body for money was the furthest thing from my mind. On a different review, a different family services worker told me I could end my problems if I married. Sure, because that was a great idea. Get married right away and land me a husband just like the one I had so that I would be right back here with the same problem in a few years. Great idea.

It never failed, though. Every review was when a family service worker felt inclined to provide life advice as if their lives were somehow better when there was nothing that separated me from them other than whom I married. If circumstances had been different, our life roles could easily have switched. All she had to do was meet my ex-husband before me and fall in love with him or someone like him. She could have been me. I could have been in her chair and she in mine. We were both one situation away from the same fate. Maybe her situation would be different from mine, but she did not somehow have the key to success. I never chose this. I do not think any single mom chooses to deal with this crap, this utter lack of respect, everywhere they go. I had never had to do an HIV test until my routine pap smears after my divorce. Saying divorced as an answer to marital status somehow forced the test on two different occasions, even though I also said I was not sexually active. When I said it would be a waste of money, I was told, "Well, you can never be too sure." Both tests came back negative. Oh gee, what a surprise.

"Well," I paused. I tried to think of a polite way to say my boss is a misogynistic bastard. I opted for, "Some people just do not understand why I might need help from the government. He would be one of those people," I said.

"Oh, he cannot be that bad," she said.

"He will tell everyone I am seeking help." I lowered my head and grabbed the back of my neck with my hand. I felt a migraine coming on. My neck was stiffening. I added, "I will never hear the end of it." Again, the woman tried reassuring me that my boss could not be that bad. Indeed, he would be more understanding than I realized.

"Perhaps, you are not giving him the benefit of the doubt," she said.

"No, no," I said, "he really will not understand."

“Well, he does not have a choice, does he,” she said as if somehow that statement alone would solve all my problems. “So, get him to sign the form.”

“Now, you do not understand,” I said calmly. “If you make me do that, I will quit my job.” It was the only threat I could think of that a county worker might fear more than an unsigned form from a boss. A single mother without a job. It was a risky shot, but it was my only bargaining chip, which was not much at all given I had no power. If she thought about it rationally, she could have countered with, “Well, then you will lose your assistance,” which I would. Nevertheless, I was counting on her having an unacknowledged pre-existing world view that fed into her stereotypical fear of a single mother mooching off the system.

Beside me, she sucked in her breath. “Well, that would not be a good solution at all.”

“It might not be,” I said. “But I will not tell him. If I do, he will find a way to fire me, so whether I quit today or he fires me tomorrow, I will be without a job.”

“He cannot do that,” she said. “That is illegal. You cannot be discriminated against for being on welfare.”

“I cannot be discriminated against for being a single mom either, but that does not seem to stop people,” I said.

For what seemed like an eternity, she stared at me. “All right,” she conceded, “we will not make you have him sign that form today.”

On a different day at the barn, Blaze called me into his office. I sat opposite his desk as he leaned back in his chair.

“What is up?” I asked. I am eager to get started in the barns, the sooner I can get home.

“Well,” he said as he leaned forward onto his desk. “The office might start drug testing employees. Part-timers would be included in that drug test requirement.”

I cracked up laughing. Confused, he does not understand why I am laughing. By now, I have been sober for at least 5 years. I am not afraid of a drug test. Over the years at the barns, I worked with some sketchy drunks. One gal was so drunk on a weekend that she had fallen out of the break room and hit the opposite wall of a hallway, then asked when we put that wall there. A teenager of a local doctor helped us one summer—we have no idea what he was on—but we sent him up to paint some doors, thinking he could not screw that up, but he painted one side and proceeded to wait for the paint to dry. He literally sat and stared at the paint. We told him to find us when he got one of the sides painted. Nope, he stayed. When we found him, that was precisely what he was doing, sitting on the chair, motionless, staring at the paint. Granted, there was a time at Christmas parties when I was drinking, and I worked for Blaze, that I drank too much. He would sit by the bar and shake his head at me and my friend if we went back too many times for a beer. But this? A drug test? Seriously? Since he was not laughing, I tried to keep a straight face.

“Like this week, next month?” I asked, trying to gauge a timeline.

“Well, I am not sure,” he said. “I wanted to forewarn you.”

“Forewarn me of what?” I asked. “That I need to take that week off work because no one will be employed here when everyone fails?”

“No,” he said angrily. “I just thought you should know.”

When I asked my friend in the barn about the drug tests later that day, I told her about Blaze pulling me into his office. I asked, “Did you know about the drug tests? Are they going to start doing them soon?”

She looked at me like I lost my mind. She said, “That was mentioned in passing at a meeting some time ago, and it was a hypothetical for years down the road. Why would he make

it sound like it was happening next week? They know they cannot drug test us. Half the crew will not pass. They will not have any workers.”

In 2012, I managed to get my youngest son into counseling with a male counselor. The day I was determining who to go with it was between him and a female. The problem was that I needed someone my ex-husband could not suck into his lies and manipulation. I needed someone who could see past that and help my son. The problem was I could not come right out and ask if they knew how to work with a father who was a narcissist, excellent at manipulation, and that they could never believe a word that came out of his mouth without diligent investigation. In fact, investigate us both if it made them feel better, but whatever they did, they could not give him a free pass. However, the day I was trying to decide if I should go with the male or female, I called the receptionist for the male therapist back.

I asked her, “If my ex-husband was a creatively abusive, severely manipulative man, would this counselor be able to see through that? I need your honest opinion.”

She paused for a slight second. “I am not sure I can answer that as you asked it, but I will anyway because you need to know. Yes. Go with him. You want him. He will not put up with bull shit.” For once, someone who was honest. I made the appointment.

The entire time my youngest son was at school and going to his dad’s, I set up his counselor appointments for the Tuesday after the weekend he was at his Dad’s house. That way, he was in my care for the appointment. His Dad and the live-in girlfriend could not silence him either. They would have to behave over the weekend if they did not want my son to report it on the following Tuesday. It mostly worked. Mostly. It was the only check and balance I could get. At least someone was listening to my son. As always, the ex-husband appeared for every appointment since looks are essential. We are called in as a family for the first 10 minutes at a

typical appointment, and the ex and I go to the waiting room. My youngest would stay, and they would play games and chat. The counselor never told us what they discussed, but at the next appointment, the counselor would help my son to advocate for himself regarding his dad and the unrealistic expectations set by the live-in girlfriend. Sometimes that did not work. Sometimes, she still went after my youngest son as soon as she got him alone, but I kept those appointments religiously. My son's counselor was my only lifeline by this point.

The live-in girlfriend/wife tried different strategies to cause havoc despite the counselor. There was the divide and conquer phase. Luckily, my boys saw the benefit of sticking together, so it never worked when the live-in girlfriend tried to play them off each other. That was something I pounded into them early on. Stick together. You two are stronger together than you ever will be apart. You must stick together.

Around the eighth grade, my youngest wanted out of special education even though he still qualified. His special education teacher, his dad, my youngest, and I decided to let him try it for 1 year. He can still qualify for special education services if it does not work. 1 year later, he was in high school but struggling with bullying. He does not want to be in school at all anymore. All I can think is, how will I ever get this child to graduation?

I work for a convent. One day at lunch, I mentioned to the sister campus administrator about my son's struggles with school and his special education history. She said I should take him and tour the Catholic school across from the convent. The school utilized a more one-to-one type of teaching method.

My youngest son and I set up a tour with Sister Isa (not her name) to see the Catholic high school. After the tour, my youngest son is sold. He wants to go to the school. However, we must first convince his father that this would be a good idea. That may not be possible. Sister Isa

was more worried about the tuition expense and said I should ask the convent for more money. We told her our first problem was his dad, not the tuition. My son's dad would not be very receptive to this idea at all. Even so, my youngest son was determined to convince his dad, so we set up a second tour with Sister Isa for a few days later. I went home to figure out how I could afford tuition alone. I already knew from experience that the only way this would work would be if I found a way to pay for all 4 years by myself, but could I do it? We were strapped as it was for cash.

The second tour with Sister Isa was comical. My ex-husband initially tried to charm her but quickly settled on pouting in a standoffish mood and then wanted all the attention sent his way. Sister Isa would not have it. She walked us through the school and treated him like the petulant child he was. Once we were done, we walked outside.

"That nun did not even talk to me," he said.

My son and I looked at him. "Yeah, she did," said my son. "I want to go here."

"No," he said.

By this time, my youngest had moved in with me full-time, and my oldest had gone to live with his dad full-time. My oldest was not a direct target of the live-in girlfriend/wife. He had wanted to go, even though I reluctantly let him go live there. My youngest, sensing the opportunity, took it and fought to live with me full-time at the same time. I do not know if the two of them worked that out to save my youngest, but that was what happened. There was also one last nasty fight between my ex-husband's now wife and my youngest son at about the same time, which ended up with my son in the hospital being evaluated for psych care. It was his father's night, but the doctors would not return him to his dad's custody. I had to come in and pick up my son. I still do not know what went down that evening, but my youngest son never

returned to his father's house after that night. The counselor helped my youngest son to get his father to accept that our youngest would be living with me.

So, when my ex-husband said no to Catholic education, I said, "You do not get a say. I am sorry. We showed you the school. We are trying to get you to participate in this, but no is not an option. Our son lives with me. I can get him into the school. I will pay for it."

In the end, I paid for all 4 years. I worked as an adjunct at the local college, picking up whatever I could for courses. Even my ex-husband admitted that after 6 months, the move to the Catholic school had turned out to be the best move we ever made for him. Our youngest son found his niche. He got to talk and work directly with teachers. For once, I did not have to worry about him graduating, and as an added side benefit, my ex-husband and I were equals at the Catholic school. That was never the case in the rural school my son had been attending. I was always out of the loop, four steps behind, and somehow to blame.

When Sister Isa died suddenly, roughly 2 years after we toured the school, I had to work on her obituary for my job. She was the first woman I ever met who did not immediately get charmed by my ex-husband. The fact that she would not put up with his crap, endeared me to her. She won me over that day. However, more importantly, I realized that it was possible to see an abuser, to see them for what they were. For once, he could not hide behind that false charm.

Context

The context section for Chapter V provides background information for the autoethnographic story above. In this instance, it is for Story 2—The Single Mother Stigmata. Therefore, the contextual information is found below. The context section will utilize the newspaper archives from The Free Press in Mankato, Minnesota, archival information from the

Minnesota Legislative records, and other necessary contextual background information to support and provide greater detail for the autoethnographic story.

Rampant Welfare Fraud

I looked at The Free Press archives for August 2008 to July 2014, to see what was being printed in the newspaper utilizing the topic of welfare fraud to determine just how much material Blaze could have been encountering during the time I worked for him from May 2010 to July 2014. Even though I started physically working with Blaze in May 2010, I went back to August 2008 only because this would have been within months of leaving my ex-husband. I wanted to understand the community temperature regarding welfare fraud in the media before I came to the welfare system myself, even though I would have only been going into the divorce process at that time. When trying to determine how to list my community findings on welfare fraud for my location, I was a bit perplexed. At first, I thought it would be good to place the list in order of timeline. Then I thought grouping them by offenders, such as couples versus business versus single people versus fearmongers, might be better. I still do not know the best way to list these. So, I have settled on a combination of both. I kept them in chronological order but have listed the main title as one of the following categories:

- Republican fearmongering.
- Fearmongering editorial.
- County worker commits fraud.
- Single person commits fraud.
- Single mom commits fraud.
- Business commits fraud.
- Couple commits fraud.

- County program changes—investigative and investigative awareness.
- Legislative changes for welfare.
- Legislative changes for welfare investigations.

Republican Fearmongering

Republicans—Out-of-State Usage of Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) Cards

Equals Fraud.¹¹ In August 2008, Minnesota’s House Republicans, especially Republican Marty Seifert, called for an investigation of \$10 million in out-of-state transactions due to welfare participants using their EBT cards in all 50 states. Over half of the out-of-state transactions are in bordering states. However, Republicans are concerned that 2% of almost 500 million could indicate a misuse of taxpayer money, as if welfare recipients are taking vacations and using their EBT cards. Although they do not come right out and say welfare recipients are taking a vacation, it is implied when they mention that \$3,000 was spent in Hawaii. Although using the EBT cards outside of the state of Minnesota was not illegal, that fact does not deter Republicans. At the same time, Assistant Human Services Commissioner Chuck Johnson said he would review the Republican’s analysis for signs of fraud but was not expecting to find many new cases because they already have measures in place to catch fraud. Linden Gawboy from the Welfare Rights Committee of Minneapolis, Minnesota, commented, “I mean, people have families” (The Associated Press, 2008c, p. B4). Six days later, Minnesota State Auditor James Noble believed the \$10 million in out-of-state purchases were a huge red flag and must be investigated. Therefore, he has taken over the investigation even though it is not illegal to use EBT cards out of state.

¹¹ The information about out-of-state usage of EBT cards is drawn from The Associated Press (2008a, 2008c).

County Program Changes—Investigative and Investigative Awareness

Nicollet County—How to Report Welfare Fraud. In March of 2009, *The Free Press* ran an article about tracking down welfare fraud recipients and how to best report abuses just in case someone suspects their neighbor of foul play (Ojanpa, 2009). Of course, the how-to report is done under cover of telling a story of what it is like to be a man named Dean Cowdin, an investigator of welfare fraud for 13 years in Nicollet County, a county adjacent to Blue Earth County. Cowdin was a Mankato police officer. Once again, Republican Marty Seifert is pushing the rhetoric that the scope of the welfare fraud problem in Minnesota requires massive reform. At the same time, DFLers believe that welfare benefits are a small portion of the state's budget, and getting caught up in welfare fraud issues is focusing on short-term thinking. With the economy amid a recession, more and more people are becoming jobless and in need of public assistance, which has created an upsurge in applications in the Nicollet County Office (Ojanpa, 2009).

Legislative Changes for Welfare Investigations¹²

Legislature—Welfare Fraud Program Restructured. By October 2009, Minnesota had restructured its welfare fraud efforts and expanded its program from 55 counties to 74 counties. The Minnesota Legislature added \$228,000 to the program for the expansion, as counties were already receiving \$1.5 million a year to conduct welfare fraud prevention efforts. The problem is that some counties will be doing double duty. For instance, Clay County investigators will also be tasked with Becker County, stretching the limited investigators thinner and extending their caseloads.

¹² Discussion of restructuring of welfare fraud Program based primarily on The Associated Press (2009).

County Worker Commits Fraud

Welfare Fraud—Lucy Jo Mikolai—B.E. Welfare Specialist Steals \$1,211.¹³ In December 2009, a former Blue Earth County Fraud Investigator who transferred to become a Blue Earth County Financial Assistance Specialist was charged with welfare fraud for signing her mother, a non-native Minnesota resident, up for welfare benefits. Lucy Jo Mikolai, 36, was accused of stealing \$1,211 in assistance when she enrolled her 55-year-old mother, Rozanna Freundl. In Minnesota, it is illegal for a Public Assistance Specialist to enroll a family member, friend, relative, or business associate into the welfare program. After Mikolai approved Freundl's application, "the first payments were \$105 in cash for general assistance, \$91 in food stamps and an \$812 check to pay for rent at a Lake Crystal residence" (Nienaber, 2009, p. A2). Freundl claimed she never filled out the forms and earned too much money for January to qualify. At the time, Freundl had \$1,200 in her Texas bank account, three vehicles in her name, and a Mack semi-tractor and trailer in her late husband's name. Freundl had faced welfare charges before when she pleaded guilty to gross misdemeanor theft in 1994 for failing to report income she received from a renter. Between 1991 and 1993, she had stolen \$2,300 in public assistance.

By July 2010, Lucy Jo Mikolai, 37, pled guilty to one count of felony theft and gross misdemeanor misconduct and was placed on 5-years probation (Nienaber, 2010c). If she does not break probation, the felony will never be on her record, but she was asked to complete a Sentence to Service program instead. When this trial would have been in the news, I would have worked for Blaze for at least 1 month, if not 2.

¹³ Account of the Mikolai case based primarily on Nienaber (2009, 2010c).

Couple Commits Fraud

Welfare Fraud—Tari and James Lauer—Duluth—Steals \$20,000.¹⁴ In April 2011, Tari Lauer, a 43-year-old from Duluth, Minnesota, was accused of obtaining \$20,000 in welfare assistance with the help of her husband—now ex-husband, James Lauer—from October 2006 to July 2008. Tari was ordered to pay back the \$20,000 in cash, food, medical, and childcare assistance for failing to report \$400,000 in income and other assets. The duo bought a Cadillac Escalade and a Nissan Titan during the same time frame. James Lauer is also expected to appear in court as he faces five felony counts of welfare fraud.

Single Person Commits Fraud

Welfare Fraud—Tessa Weatherspoon—Duluth—Wrong Residence—\$17,000. For the second time in April 2011, Duluth, Minnesota, is dealing with a woman accused of accepting welfare benefits fraudulently (“Woman Accused of Welfare Fraud,” 2011). Tessa Chereese Weatherspoon is accused of receiving more than \$17,000 while living in Superior, Wisconsin. Weatherspoon signed a lease for an apartment in Superior in November 2009. However, when her benefits came due in January 2010, she merely listed her residence as Safe Heaven Shelter in Duluth, Minnesota, rather than re-certifying in Wisconsin, when she moved to Superior in November.

Republican Fearmongering and Legislative Changes for Welfare Investigations

Governor & Republicans—Seek Data Miners for Fraud Analysis. Also, in April 2011, Democratic Governor Mark Dayton called for number crunchers willing to find fraud and misuse of public spending in public programs (“Number Crunchers Asked to Find Fraud,” 2011). Governor Dayton’s goal is for all Minnesota state programs to become more efficient. However,

¹⁴ Information on the Lauerfraud case is based primarily on The Associated Press (2011).

this announcement comes on the heels of Republicans pushing for a more significant analysis of Medicaid, the state's Medical Assistance program used by people experiencing poverty.

By September 2011, Minnesota named Jerry Kerber Inspector General for Fraud, Waste, and Mismanagement in State Health and Welfare Programs, a brand-new position at the Department of Human Services, with 150 employees at his command (Lohn, 2011). The new department will look for welfare fraud and false claims submitted by medical service providers. The new program will mostly do data mining, in which the group will look for analysis anomalies.

Fearmongering Editorial

Fear Mongering Editorial—Supposed Firsthand Account of Illegal Purchases. In June 2011, a letter to the editor accused the Minnesota Legislature of not being interested in ending welfare corruption (Petrick, 2011). According to Petrick's (2011) eyewitness account of purchases by those on welfare,

I see people with EBT cards buying beer, cigarettes, Wii's, jewelry, and TVs. I even see them using their cards for cash to go to the bar and casinos. Instead of buying what their family needs, such as shampoo, clothing, and toilet paper, they're buying junk and gambling. That's not what I pay my taxes for. (p. A4)

I do not think they saw what they think they did, or maybe it happened decades before. I believe they are peddling the same misconceptions that were fed to them. I once went into Cub Foods, our local grocery store, to pick up food items, and when placing our items on the conveyor belt, I forgot the EBT card would not accept toilet paper. The second I went to pay for the groceries, the EBT card was declined instantly. With people behind me in line, that EBT card being a light blue with orange, yellow, and varying shades of green trees across the front, and Minnesota "EBT" written in big letters across the top left, it is a noticeable card.

Granted, I did not start using EBT until August 2011, but you were lucky if you got a card reader near you that did not require giving the cashier your card for verification purposes at that time. Most of the time, I had to give my card to the cashier, and they ran the card because the card reader would not read it by design or chance. The person running the cash register was never discreet about giving it back either. The day my EBT card was declined for toilet paper, I could not just ask the lady to take that off the receipt and rerun the card. That would have drawn way too much attention to me. Instead, I pulled out my checkbook. With absolutely no money in my account, I wrote out a check. I did not know what else to do. It was not like they made a manual for dealing with things like that in the grocery line.

Petrick (2011) suggested hand scans at all driver's license locations and government locations where people apply for aid to verify the person applying. Also, random drug testing would be a perk.

Republican Fearmongering

Republicans—Bill to Stop Welfare Migration—Must Wait 60 Days.¹⁵ In February of 2012, a bill was created to require those new to Minnesota to wait 2 months, instead of 30 days, before becoming eligible for welfare benefits. Republicans, a significant backer of the bill, believed the bill would be a definitive cost-saving measure and an effective fraud-prevention tool. However, Democrats do not believe this is true and have stalled the bill on the Senate floor for now. Republicans used anecdotal evidence and reports of Minnesota as a migration magnet due to our generous welfare benefits system to state their case. However, welfare advocates claimed that a benefits-drive migration is just not accurate, and where wait limits have been imposed, those limits have been deemed unconstitutional. For instance, 20 years ago, Minnesota

¹⁵ Information on the Bill to Stop Welfare Migration is primarily from The Associated Press (2012).

tried to impose a six-month waiting period for new Minnesotans. However, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the law saying it was unconstitutional, especially when the requirements halted travel and severely reduced equal protection under the law. Welfare Rights Committee Member Debra Howze stated, “Restricting state assistance stigmatize poor people and come[s] off as mean-spirited toward the most vulnerable” (The Associated Press, 2012, p. B3). At the same time, Mark Toogood of the Minnesota Department of Human Services told Senate members that Minnesota’s benefits were the same as, if not slightly worse than, other states.

Single Person Commits Fraud (Possibly a Single Mom)

Welfare Fraud—Amanda Clayton—Michigan—Wins \$1 Million, Collects \$5,475.¹⁶

In April 2012, a 25-year-old Lansing, Michigan, woman named Amanda Clayton was charged with two felony counts of welfare fraud and failure to inform, which were punishable by 4 years in prison for each felony offense. Amanda had won the Michigan state lottery’s “Make Me Rich,” a \$1 million game payout, plus she was employed for 5 months in 2011, and she continued to use her food benefits card after she won. The Department of Human Services estimated that from August 2011 to March 2012, Amanda collected roughly \$5,475 in food and medical assistance.

By July 2012, Amanda Clayton was sentenced to probation for welfare fraud, resulting in her taking \$5,475 in food assistance payments when she neglected to inform the Michigan Human Service Department that she had won a \$1 million lottery. Wayne County Court Judge Margie Braxton ordered the 25-year-old mother to serve out 9 months of probation for her

¹⁶ Information on the case of Amanda Clayton drawn mainly from “Lottery Winner Charged with Fraud” (2012) and “Probation for Welfare Fraud,” (2012).

crimes, plus she was to pay back the money she took—\$5,475, the courts, any fines incurred, and she was to get a job.¹⁷

Business Commits Fraud

Welfare Fraud—Mayo Clinic—Submits False Claims—Settles for \$1 Million.¹⁸ The Mayo Clinic of Rochester, Minnesota, was in the hot seat for billing the government for lab tests that were never performed. The U.S. Department of Justice and four whistleblowers came forward to accuse the healthcare giant of “‘knowingly’ submitting false claims for nonexistent pathology tests over an eight-year period, from 1999 to 2007” (“Mayo to pay \$1M,” 2012, p. B1). However, Mayo Clinic calls the theft a billing error and merely agreed to the \$1 million settlement to avoid a lengthy legal battle. The Mayo Clinic also cited a similar issue in 2007, when they voluntarily paid back \$263,000 but neglected to mention that the payment came only after allegations were brought forward by a physician who also happened to be an attorney.

County Program Changes—Investigative & Investigative Awareness

Blue Earth County—Drops Private Investigation Firm – Hires Sheriff’s Deputy. In April 2013, the Blue Earth County Human Services Department stopped using the Midwest Welfare Fraud Investigation private investigation firm and instead decided to utilize a single Blue Earth County Sheriff’s Department Deputy (Fischenich, 2013). While the county stressed this does not mean they are looking to prosecute more criminals, they were hoping to streamline results, such as when the Sheriff’s office might be pursuing a criminal investigation of fraud at the same time that the contracted investigator was also pursuing a case of fraud, they hoped to cut down on the overlap by utilizing a deputy with the necessary law enforcement background

¹⁷ This is the only article that referred to her as a mother, but it did not say what. I could not find another article that referred to her as a mother, not even where she died in a couple of years. That article did not mention children.

¹⁸ Information on the Mayo Clinic case is drawn primarily from “Mayo to pay \$1M” (2012).

Minnesota's counties are fractured in how they pursue chasing down fraud suspects. Some counties utilize only human services employees, others contract out those services, and others utilize human services employees and law enforcement officials (Fischenich, 2013).

Welfare Fraud—Sheriff's Deputy—6 Fraud Cases in Blue Earth County. Almost a full year from the time the decision was made not to renew a welfare fraud investigative firm over hiring a sheriff's deputy, Blue Earth County officials are praising the decision to hire Sheriff's Deputy Ginger Peterson as the full-time Welfare Fraud Investigator for the Human Services Department (Fischenich, 2014). Since Peterson began working in her new role in July, she has helped bring six welfare fraud cases to prosecution. When comparing Peterson's results to the previously contracted services, the welfare contracted services last turned over a case for prosecution in 2006. Whereas Peterson managed to send on for prosecution some costly welfare theft cases, such as a theft that included \$100,000 in public housing assistance payments and another involving multiple payments to a 3-year-old child for a total amount of \$53,000 (Fischenich, 2014).

Legislative Changes for Welfare

U.S. House of Rep.—Cut Benefits by \$135 Billion—Let Charity Deal with It.¹⁹ In May 2013, the U.S. House of Representatives passed budget-cuts in food benefits of 18% or \$135 billion over the next 10 years. In the end, the bill would be detrimental to the U.S. poor if passed. However, politicians like Wisconsin U.S. Representative Paul Ryan, the author of the cut, believed that if it were successfully put in place, charity would pick up the pieces for what government would no longer pay for. As with all myths around food stamps and poverty, the fact is charity could never begin to pick up what the government would drop. While Americans like

¹⁹ Information about the 2013 welfare cuts draws primarily on The Philadelphia Inquirer (2013).

to think they would help people experiencing poverty due to their big hearts and eagerness, history has proven differently. For instance,

For each of the last 40 years, Americans have given away the same proportion of money without change: roughly 2 percent of GDP. Even after the Bush tax cuts in the early part of the century, the rate of giving didn't rise, experts say. (The Philadelphia Inquirer, 2013, p. A4)

In 2013, the federal government spent \$105 billion a year on food programs for the hungry, with \$80 billion of that going directly into the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—what was known as food stamps. The remaining money goes into the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), reduced and free school lunches, and other anti-poverty initiatives.

County Worker(s) Commits Fraud

Welfare Fraud—Director /Fraud Investigator Fired – Falsifying Timecard. In January 2014, Watonwan County Human Services Director Rich Collins was fired (“Human Services Director Fired,” 2014). Although the Watonwan County Board neglected to say exactly why he was fired during a closed meeting, they did say they had lost confidence in his leadership skills. The director’s firing comes on the tail of another controversial firing, the Watonwan County Human Service Department’s welfare fraud investigator, in August 2013. The welfare fraud investigator was charged with falsifying his timecard.

Single Mom Commits Fraud

Also, in January 2014, “Octomom” Nadya Suleman who gave birth to the world’s first surviving octuplets in January of 2009 and a single mother of 14 children, was in a Los Angeles court for failing to report \$30,000 in earnings when she applied for public assistance. She plead not guilty to the three counts of welfare fraud (The Associated Press, 2014). Although she was released, Deputy District Attorney Bill Clerk hoped the problem could be solved without a trial.

Couple Commits Fraud

In April 2014, a pair of Minnesota's Scottish aristocrats, Lord Colin A. J. Chisholm, III, 62, Lady Andrea Lynne Chisholm, 54, their 7-year-old son, and dog, had been on the run for 7 weeks, having finally been caught in the Bahamas (Sun Sentinel, 2014). The family was deported from the Bahamas to Port Everglades, where they were taken into custody for welfare fraud, a total of more than \$167,000 in government benefits over 7 years. At the same time, they were collecting welfare assistance, funneling millions through bank accounts they controlled, and owned a \$1.6 million dollar house on Lake Minnetonka in Minnesota. Their bank accounts were estimated to contain \$3 million when seeking welfare assistance ("Charges: Two Had Yacht," 2014). In early 2012, Medica Insurance investigators began looking into the Chisholms, suspecting they were obtaining medical assistance when it was not needed. The amounts listed for welfare fraud are only those related to the state of Minnesota, the amount of money the duo managed to take from Florida's welfare system had yet to be disclosed, but they were taking welfare funds from both states for the same 2-year period (Sun Sentinel, 2014).

By August 2014, Lady Chisholm, plead guilty to felony welfare fraud ("Lady Chisholm' Pleads Guilty," 2014). As a result of pleading guilty, she was sentenced to prison for 1 year and a day but received credit for the 4 months she has already served. Typically, such sentences are carried out on probation, but given the severity of the crime, the Judge felt that prison time was essential. Once released, she will spend 2 months under supervised release and has been ordered to pay back the \$160,000 to the county. However, Andrea intended to appeal the amount she would have to pay back.

In January 2015, Chisholm was sentenced to 21 months in prison for illegally obtaining \$168,000 in welfare food, cash, and medical care (Schwarze, 2017). In January 2005, she and her

husband lived on a \$1.2 million, 83-foot yacht in Florida while claiming to live with Andreas's mother in Minneapolis (Schwarze, 2017). In February 2007, 2 days before their son was born, they claimed they had no home and filed for welfare assistance in Florida. In April 2007, they moved to Minnesota and applied for additional benefits without disclosing that they were already receiving benefits from Florida, which is highly illegal in Minnesota. The couple moved into Andrea's grandparents' luxury home, but after her grandfather died, they were all evicted, which led them to the million-dollar home on Lake Minnetonka, Minnesota. Andrea also had power of attorney over her grandmother and control of her banking accounts, which were never reported to Human Services. However, Andrea did keep her residence as her mother's house in Minneapolis. In March 2012, Hennepin County's Human Services ended all benefits to the couple because they failed to explain "how they were able to 'pay rent and personal expenses with no income'" (Schwarze, 2017, para. 20).

In August 2018, Collin Alexander Chisholm, began serving a 4-year sentence for stealing more than \$2.1 million from those who invested in his Caribbean Television Network Inc. scheme (Schwarze, 2017). After he is released from prison, he will spend 3 years under supervision, paying back the \$2,106,688 he owes. Chisholm also lied about his background, as he was not the grandson of Hugh J. Chisholm Jr. of the Oxford Paper Company, nor was he a Scottish chieftain of the Clan of Chisholm, and he did not have close personal ties to President George H. W. Bush's dead brother, Prescott. However, his lineage was not his only lie. There was his employment record in which he had claimed he was once vice president of Turner Program Services, that he and Ted Turner were friends, and that he, Chisholm, had started CNN Headline News. He claims he wrote the entire business plan for CNN. It was estimated that over

10 years, Chisholm stole more than \$2.1 million from at least 38 different investors (Schwarze, 2017).

Welfare Fraud—Totals for 2008–2014

In reviewing the newspaper articles in *The Free Press*, the most prominent paper for southern Minnesota, using the search terms “Welfare Fraud,” “Single Mom and Welfare,” and “Single Mom Welfare Fraud,” there was not as many cases as one would have thought compared to the constant barrage of attacks, I received from Blaze daily.

I started my search before my time at Blaze’s barn to get a temperature of the community where I lived. In 2008, we were starting to feel the recession hit. In 2008, Minnesota’s House of Representative Republicans were creating much fear by suggesting that EBT cards were being used out of state, which is an implied illegal usage when the majority of the cards were used in the states surrounding ours, which is not illegal. However, if one starts pushing and fueling a talking point, people start to think everyone on welfare is out taking vacations while using their EBT cards.

In 2009, *The Free Press* ran a story about a welfare fraud investigator who used to be a police officer for the City of Mankato. The investigator tells a few stories about his job but does not make it sound like he is knocking doors down daily (Ojanpa, 2009). He only puts in 20 hours a week. However, the same Republicans mentioned in the 2008 article, stirring up trouble and fearmongering about the out-of-state usage of EBT cards, are also present and interviewed in this article. In this article, the same Republican lawmaker is pushing the same fear rhetoric that welfare fraud is rampant, and that Minnesota needs an entire massive welfare reform. Also included with the article of the St. Peter investigator was a 5x7 ad for people to cut out and place on the fridge, telling them specifically what to look for in those around them who may be

abusing the welfare system and whom to call (Ojanpa, 2009). Was there an uptick in calls after that 5x7 ad ran? Also, in 2009, Minnesota expanded its welfare fraud detection units into 74 counties, rather than the previous 55, which is almost a third more counties than the previous year (The Associated Press, 2009). The rhetoric is pushing toward creating fear in those listening who may not know much about how the system runs.

However, the first active welfare fraud case did not happen until December 2009 but will be on trial in July 2010, just as I start working with Blaze at the barn. The Free Press account does not say Lucy Jo Mikolai was a single mother or on welfare herself. She was, however, previously employed as a Welfare Fraud Investigator, who had recently transferred into the position of a Financial Assistance Specialist (Nienaber, 2009). She worked in the Welfare Department of Family Services for Blue Earth County.

The following welfare fraud case happened in 2011, almost a year later, in Duluth, Minnesota, 5 hours north of Mankato, Minnesota. Tari and James Lauer, a husband, and wife—were divorced when they were convicted of welfare fraud, as the couple stole \$20,000 in cash assistance, food support, and medical assistance (The Associated Press, 2011). They spent the money on a new Escalade and Nissan Titan. However, during the welfare fraud, they were married and not divorced. Neither of them were single parents or single mothers.

Unfortunately for Duluth, in 2011, the city was hit twice in 1 month with welfare fraud. There is the case of Tessa Cherese Weatherspoon, who moves from Duluth, Minnesota, to Superior, Wisconsin, a matter of one gigantic bridge and a body of water away—a total of five minutes by car—but she does not inform Minnesota of the move merely because she does not want to deal with Wisconsin and trying to get benefits from them after moving (“Woman Accused of Welfare Fraud,” 2011). Therefore, she left her address as it was listed in Minnesota.

Nowhere in *The Free Press* account does it say that Tessa is a single mother. It says she previously lived at Safe Heaven Shelter in Duluth, a shelter for women who have experienced domestic violence, but that does not make her more likely to cheat the welfare system. It only meant she needed help to get out of a bad relationship.

In April 2011, Governor Dayton started seeking data miners to find fraud in all government programs, not just the welfare program (“Number Crunchers Asked,” 2011). While Republicans have turned their sights on the Medical Assistance program, the number one source of assistance used by people experiencing poverty. They want an analysis audit completed fearing fraud in the program, as they are not worried about the rest of the state—the Republicans, during those years, seem to have a very targeted agenda.

In June 2011, a woman wrote an editorial claiming she saw welfare recipients purchasing TVs, beer, cigarettes, Wii’s, and even jewelry (Petrick, 2011). Once she established the usual welfare stereotypes within the article, she suggested solving the problem with hand scans to identify the applicant and drug tests (Petrick, 2011)—an old stand-by for fear mongers. By September 2011, one man, Jerry Kerber, with 150 employees at his disposal, would be hired to data mine for welfare fraud and false medical claims. This fulfills Governor Dayton’s original request to seek out data miners (Pioneer Press, 2011).

In February 2012, Minnesota Republicans kicked off the New Year with a bill to stop what they called “welfare migration,” which would make new Minnesota residents wait 60 days before they could apply for benefits (The Associated Press, 2012). When the Department of Human Services said that Minnesota’s welfare benefits are the same as, if not worse than, other states, there would be no reason to migrate to Minnesota for the sole purpose of going on welfare. The Republicans were pushing another stereotype in their agenda to cause problems.

In April 2012, Amanda Clayton of Michigan won \$1 million in the lottery (“Lottery Winner Charged,” 2012). She continued to collect \$5,475 in welfare benefits rather than notify the Department of Human Services that she was no longer qualified. One newspaper account did say she was a mother. It is not known if she was a single mother or a mother of what exactly, at least according to *The Free Press*. What should have made more significant news was that the famed Mayo of Rochester, Minnesota, was charged for the second time for submitting false claims for the tests never took place (“Mayo to Pay \$1M,” 2012, p. B1). While Mayo claimed their willingness to payout \$1 million meant they were not at fault, it was not the first time the healthcare giant had a whistleblower come forward about corporate welfare fraud. In 2007, they paid back \$263,000, claiming it had been a mere billing mistake and not a big issue. Having a well-paid communications team capable of spinning the news story in favor of the health care giant does not hurt either, which is something most people do not have access to for negative stories and single mothers absolutely do not have access to anyone willing to spin a story in their favor. Of everyone who has cheated the system thus far, Mayo submitting false claims to tune of \$1,263,000 is substantially more significant. Nevertheless, their submission of false claims will get swept under the rug and will not be remembered—not in the same way that others faced with welfare fraud charges will be remembered and villainized.

In April 2013, Blue Earth County decided not to renew its contract with a private investigation firm for welfare fraud and hired a Sheriff’s Deputy instead (Fischenich, 2013). In roughly 9 months, Deputy Sheriff Ginger Peterson had six people on the prosecution docket for welfare fraud, although the past investigative firm had not sent anyone on for prosecution since 2006 (Fischenich, 2013). The deputy sheriff caught some relatively larger welfare fraud fish: one

theft was \$100,000, and the other was \$53,000 (Fischenich, 2013). Of course, *The Free Press* does not specify if any of these cases are directly related to a single mother.

In May 2013, the U.S. House of Representatives cut \$135 billion over the next 10 years from the welfare program's food benefits (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 2013). Sadly, Republicans seemed to think that if the government stopped helping America's poor, the charities would pick up the rest (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 2013). However, America's charities claimed there is no way they could ever make up the \$135 billion the Republicans wanted to cut (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 2013).

In January 2014, Watonwan County took a direct hit when the human services director was fired, as this came on the heels of the firing of the welfare investigator who had been padding his time clock ("Human Services Director Fired," 2014). Also in January, Nadya Suleman, the woman who gave birth to the world's first octuplets and was a single mother of 14 children, forgot to report \$30,000 in income (*The Associated Press*, 2014). Despite her failure to report, the prosecution hoped the case could be settled outside of court and without a trial. It is not nearly as horrific as the others I have covered above. For whatever reason, the prosecution was not overly worried, which implied it was a mistake that could be fixed.

The last welfare fraud case I listed was especially interesting. In April 2014, Lord Collin and Lady Andrea Chisolm of Lake Minnetonka, Minnesota, were arrested in the Bahamas after fleeing for seven weeks (*Sun Sentinel*, 2014). These two were, by far, the worst case of fraud committed by a couple during the time I worked for Blaze, but I do not recall him ever bringing them up. The Chisholms stole \$167,000 in welfare benefits from Minnesota, which does not count their fraud in Florida, and that amount has yet to be stated (*Sun Sentinel*, 2014). Additionally, they swindled people out of \$2.1 million for a bogus television channel in the

Caribbean (Schwarze, 2017). What was worse was that while these two were collecting welfare from Minnesota and Florida, they lived between an 83-foot yacht in Florida and a \$1.6 million house on Lake Minnetonka (Schwarze, 2017), the most expensive lake to live on in the entire state of Minnesota.

When one takes the totality of those years as they appeared through *The Free Press*—not counting the nightly news on television or even the internet—there was only one single mother case where welfare fraud appeared, and she was in California. In Blue Earth County, there was only one welfare services financial assistance specialist who stole welfare money in 2009, before I started working with Blaze, and the six cases that Deputy Sheriff Peterson discovered in 2014, which were all supposed to be higher amount steals and those happened just as I was about to leave the barn.

Also, in 2014, Watwonwan County fired its director of human services and the welfare fraud investigator. The director was fired for his lack of leadership skills, and the investigator for padding his timecard. Therefore, during the timeframe between 2008 and 2014, out of the 15 cases of welfare fraud—including the two Watonwan County firings as welfare fraud—one case involved a single mother; two involved a married couple; three cases were about welfare worker fraud; one involved a woman who moved; one concerned a woman who won the lottery; one was a health care giant (Mayo Health System), and six cases were brought in by a deputy sheriff, but were not ultimately specified. There were also at least eight articles in *The Free Press* of Mankato where welfare fraud was mentioned, and some sort of corrective course was possibly about to be taken in legislative action. Of those eight, five involved Republicans peddling incorrect stereotypes about welfare recipients, despite other organizations and nonprofits trying to set the record straight and counteract the stereotypes put forward in the newspaper. After

reading this, *why was I such a threat at the barns?* Why did I warrant this attention on single mothers every day for 4 years?

The Case of Jacob Wetterling²⁰

I am including the background of this story for one reason. I was at work a few months back, and one of the women was at a function with Patty Wetterling. I thought everyone knew who Patty Wetterling was. So, I did not identify her as the mother of Jacob Wetterling. When one of my co-workers from St. Louis read the layout and saw the picture caption, she asked who Patty was and why she was in the picture. I thought, “Is she serious? How does she not know?” Therefore, for someone reading this who does not know the case, this is part of Jacob’s story. I was 11 when he disappeared. For many kids that October of 1989, we all lost our innocence because the bad guy became real.

On October 22, 1989, Jacob Wetterling, 11, his brother, and a friend biked from the Wetterling’s rural home into St. Joseph, Minnesota, to rent a movie. Unknown to them, a man named Danny Heinrich had spotted the boys, laid in wait for their return, and, when they did return, ordered them to lie face down into the ditch. His face was covered with a mask, and he had a revolver in his hand. In the following moments, Heinrich asked each boy for their name and age—It was his selection process. As he seized Jacob, he told his brother and friend to run, not look back, or he would shoot.

He handcuffed Jacob, drove him to a gravel pit near Paynesville, Minnesota, and sexually assaulted the boy. After he had finished with Jacob, Heinrich told him to get dressed. Jacob asked to go home. However, Heinrich said he could not take him as a patrol car with its lights

²⁰ This account is based primarily on Forliti and Karnowski (2016).

and siren passed nearby. Heinrich panicked, loaded his revolver, told Jacob to turn around, and fired three times.

Jacob remained buried in the gravel pit for a year as a statewide and then nationwide search for him unfolded. Then, Heinrich returned to check and noticed that Jacob's jacket and some of his bones had been exposed. So, he dug up the remains, transferring them across a highway to a field, and reburied him. Twenty-seven years later, Heinrich, by then 53-years-old, led authorities to Jacob's remains after U.S. Attorney Andy Luger made a deal with Heinrich that he would not face state murder charges for the death of Jacob Wetterling, so long as he took them to his body, and admitted to assaulting another boy, Jarod Scheierl (see below). Heinrich would, however, serve 20 years for federal child pornography charges, which will keep him locked up, followed by civil commitment.

Sadly, Heinrich was initially investigated when Jacob first went missing, but authorities never had enough to charge him, and he maintained his innocence. With the 25th anniversary of Jacob's disappearance, interest was renewed in looking at Heinrich, and at a similar sexual assault of another 12-year-old boy, Jared Scheierl, of Cold Springs, Minnesota. This had occurred only 9 months before Jacob was taken. Using technology not available in 1989, they could link DNA found on Scheierl's sweatshirt to Heinrich and used that evidence for a search warrant of Heinrich's home, leading to the child pornography charge. According to Forliti and Karnowski (2016), "Jacob's abduction shattered childhood innocence for many rural Minnesotans, changing how parents let their kids roam. His smiling face was burned into Minnesota's psyche, appearing on countless posters and billboards over the years" (p. A2). I remember seeing his billboards everywhere. According to Google Maps, when I entered Morton, Minnesota, where my family was located, and St. Joseph, Minnesota, we were 1 hour and 52

minutes apart, 98.7 miles, but it never felt like that growing up. It felt like Jacob was a part of everyone's hometown—maybe more so for those of us also born in 1978. Jacob's story also made the possibility very real that we could be here one minute and utterly gone the next, a stark reality.

Domestic Violence and Child Custody

In Minnesota, those divorcing are told to know Minnesota Statute 518.17, subtitled “Custody and Support of Children on Judgement” (2022). In its subdivision 1, the statute requires considering the “Best interests of the child for purposes of determining issues of custody and parenting time.” The statute sets forth 12 different factors for court to consider, as follows:

1. a child's physical, emotional, cultural, spiritual, and other needs, and the effect of the proposed arrangements on the child's needs and development;
2. any special medical, mental health, developmental disability, or educational needs that the child may have that may require special parenting arrangements or access to recommended services;
3. the reasonable preference of the child, if the court deems the child to be of sufficient ability, age, and maturity to express an independent, reliable preference;
4. whether domestic abuse, as defined in section 518B.01, has occurred in the parents' or either parent's household or relationship; the nature and context of the domestic abuse; and the implications of the domestic abuse for parenting and for the child's safety, well-being, and developmental needs;
5. any physical, mental, or chemical health issue of a parent that affects the child's safety or developmental needs;

6. the history and nature of each parent’s participation in providing care for the child;
7. the willingness and ability of each parent to provide ongoing care for the child; to meet the child’s ongoing developmental, emotional, spiritual, and cultural needs; and to maintain consistency and follow through with parenting time;
8. the effect on the child’s well-being and development of changes to home, school, and community;
9. the effect of the proposed arrangements on the ongoing relationships between the child and each parent, siblings, and other significant persons in the child’s life;
10. the benefit to the child in maximizing parenting time with both parents and the detriment to the child in limiting parenting time with either parent;
11. except in cases in which domestic abuse as described in clause (4) has occurred, the disposition of each parent to support the child’s relationship with the other parent and to encourage and permit frequent and continuing contact between the child and the other parent; and
12. the willingness and ability of parents to cooperate in the rearing of their child; to maximize sharing information and minimize exposure of the child to parental conflict; and to utilize methods for resolving disputes regarding any major decision concerning the life of the child. (Office of the Revisor of Statutes, 2022, paras. 2–13).

Minnesota Statue 518.17 references Minnesota Statue 518B.01, the Domestic Abuse Act (2023), for its definitions of abuse (Custody and Support of Children on Judgment, 2022). Statue 518B.01 describes domestic abuse or domestic violence as something that commits a physical injury, the infliction of impending physical injury, terroristic threats or threats of violence, sexual—first, second, third, and fourth-degree—conduct, sexual extortion, and/or interfering

with an emergency call or reporting a false emergency that results in severe injury or death (Domestic Abuse Act, 2023).

Who is considered family or household family members according to the Domestic Abuse Act? The usual people—spouses, ex-spouses, parents, children, anyone related by blood, anyone living together now or in the past, people who have a child together whether or not they have ever been married or lived together, a woman who is pregnant and a man who is alleged to be the father whether or not they have ever been married or lived together, persons in a significant romantic or sexual relationship.

Power and Control Wheel²¹

I had not seen the Power and Control Wheel used outside domestic violence shelters and colleges, as in the Gender & Women's Studies Program and the Family Violence class at Minnesota State University, Mankato. At least, those were the only places I encountered it before I became an Advocate for Victims of Abuse at Crossview Covenant Church. The Power and Control Wheel was created by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (DAIP) in 1984. DAIP was developing a curriculum for batterers and victims. However, they needed a way to describe a woman's experience living and/or being in a relationship with an abuser for practitioners, the criminal justice system, and the public, in a meaningful and impactful way that they would be able to understand the experience. DAIP decided to pull together several months of focus groups in which they listened to women's stories of abuse, terror, and resilience. As they listened, they documented the most common tactics or abusive behaviors employed by the men against the women. Unfortunately, those tactics and behaviors are the most universally experienced, even today.

²¹ The description here is based primarily on Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs (n.d.).

DAIP chose to call the model they created the Power and Control Wheel because power and control are at the center of the wheel or at its hub. At the heart of whatever tactic or behavior the abuser intentionally employs against his partner is power and control. The Power and Control Wheel helped to capture what Kirkwood (1993) called a “web of emotional abuse” (Kirkwood, 1993, p. 58). Each spoke of the wheel contained a tool, which is at the abuser’s disposal to maintain power and control, with the spokes being “Coercion and Threats; Economic Abuse; Male Privilege; Children; Minimizing, Denying and Blaming; Isolation; Emotional Abuse; [and] Intimidation,” (M. Johnson, 2020, p. 252) while the rim of the wheel is held together through the use of physical violence and/or sexual violence (M. Johnson, 2020). With the Power and Control Wheel set up as it is, the abuser has his victim firmly ensnared because no matter where she turns, she is caught. When the threat of physical or sexual violence is a possibility, he adds terror to the mix and the knowledge that the abuser will do anything to maintain control. According to M. Johnson (2020), intimate terrorism is what is usually thought of when thinking of domestic violence, which is almost always perpetrated by men against females. With intimate terrorism, violence is only one tactic—the one spoke—deployed for control within a larger grouping of possibilities or tactics at his disposal. While a single tactic might look short-term, intimate terrorists are playing for the long game, with each specific short-term tactic working toward a long-term goal (M. Johnson, 2020).

Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)

The Federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is a block grant that funnels federal money into four areas, assisting needing families with children that need to be cared for at home; ending government dependence, thereby promoting work and marriage; ending the crisis of out-of-wedlock babies; and finally, encouraging two-parent families

(Minnesota Department of Health, 2022). For Minnesotans, TANF can also be used for non-medical home visits, Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) services, and any youth development with a solid focus on reducing teenage childbirths. It is a bit rigid on that one with out-of-wedlock babies and reducing teenage childbirths coming up a lot.

Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP)

Out of TANF came the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP). MFIP is Minnesota's state welfare-to-work program for low-income families with children (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2018a). In MFIP, families qualifying for cash assistance are sidelined for the Diversionary Work Program (DWP), which is a four-month fast-track work program that hopefully, once gainfully employed, means they will not need MFIP at all. Families that do not qualify for DWP will go directly into MFIP, where they will find stable work, receive cash and food assistance if they qualify, and are limited to 60 months of assistance within their entire lifetime (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2018a).

Bridge to Benefits

It would have made my life so much easier. Bridge to Benefits is a project of the Children's Defense Fund, which seeks to improve the lived experiences of low-income families by getting them hooked up to the services that they need without all the searching and red tape (Bridge to Benefits, n.d.). Plus, it makes trying to understand programs like TANF and MFIP so much easier with explanations the layperson can understand versus trying to decipher the cryptic text of the Minnesota Department of Human Services. The best part of Bridge to Benefits is that it allows low-income families to come to one location on the web, fill out one form on the web, and then they will find out if they are eligible for eight public works programs and two tax

credits, all from the convivence of their home, without having to take unnecessary time off work to chase down an office employee one thinks might have the forms they need.

Linkages

Next, I will discuss the academic linkages that bring together the autoethnographic story and the contextual information for further academic analysis. We will be looking at the concepts of misogyny, patriarchy, rural patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity. Also, within the section are summaries of other published single-mother experiences with institutional obstructions to help visually show how misogyny, patriarchy, rural patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity play out.

Misogyny

Intersecting Nature of Institutional Obstructions for Single Mothers

Before looking at the intersectional obstructions most often present for single mothers, I wanted to take a moment to look at the definition of an institution that I am proposing so that there is no confusion. An institution can be any organization; a building occupied by an establishment of charity or religious group or society; it can be a public or a private place location; it can be a well-established and structured within society; it can be fundamental to cultural rules and regulations, customs, and laws; it can be long-standing, traditional, familiar; or even educational (Dictionary.com, 2023). An institution is a broad phenomenon but capable of more than we realize. In this section, I look at how misogyny is enacted in the policies, procedures, and the people within the institutions a single mother accesses for her family. I want to be precise. I am not laying blame on the individuals who work in these institutions. I believe misogyny is insidious; we all have a responsibility to name it, stand up to it, and change those policies and procedures that stigmatize and are based on stereotypes, and do better, to be better.

In 1996, when the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) was signed into law, the federal government officially tied the welfare system to the child support enforcement system, with a solitary focus of welfare cost recovery (Crowley, 2003). If states wanted their TANF block grants, they needed to ensure they had a child support system enforcement system in place so that paternity could be verified, and child support payments could pay back the cash assistance given to single moms. This enforcement by the federal government officially linked the child support system to the criminal justice and law enforcement systems. Therefore, Battle (2019) argued that the punitive nature of the current child support system and the certainty of consequences for being involved with the system are relatively large for those who utilize their services.

According to Baughman et al. (2021), what they consider to be the family regulation system—such as mental health services, health services, social services, child welfare services, the educational system, law enforcement, and judicial services—all have a reputation for functioning as a unit of the family regulation system in which, Black and Brown families, low-income families, and single mothers are liable to become ensnared (Baughman et al., 2021). They believed that each unit functions more or less as a tentacle of the whole in New York, which is the author's base of operations, thereby the tentacles, as Baughman et al. (2021) called them, seek out indications of abuse or neglect, which is nothing other than poverty, but because the report has been filed the family is now under a more significant threat of surveillance.

While these systems—the tentacles—attempt to identify the children they believe are at risk for abuse or maltreatment, the plan has inherent problems. According to Baughman et al. (2021), “The power of surveillance [quoting Gellman & Adler-Bell 2017] ‘touches everyone . . . but its hand is heaviest in communities already disadvantaged by their poverty, race, religion,

ethnicity, and immigration status” (p. 506). For instance, when and if a family encounters the more severe side of the family regulation system, they cannot afford the lawyer they will need to help them. Also, the family regulation workers do not have to tell the parents of their rights, as in there are no Miranda-type warnings for parents, so that they know when they should stop talking, sharing information, or at what point they need to get help. Meanwhile, everything they do or do not is reported on. Baughman et al. (2021) concluded, “While privacy rights exist, low-income people do not have the same means to exercise them” (p. 506). This inherently sets them up to fail before they even know something is wrong.

Suppose some surveillance tentacles felt the parent or parents are falling short of the perceived parenting ideal. In that case, they can draw up parenting plans, which are seldom created in the best interest of the parents but are more like cookie-cutter solutions that require multiple checks, balances, and hoops to jump through, often making life more difficult for the family. The surveillance of the tentacles is also linked directly to mandated reporting. However, they discovered that out of 4.1 million mandatory reports from mandated reporters nationwide, 2.4 million seemed credible at first glance (Elephant Circle, 2020). However, of the 2.4 million they thought were credible, less than 400,000 were cases based on evidence upon further investigation. That means families are subjected to investigations for no reason at all. According to Baughman et al. (2021), where mandated reporters are located is not by chance, as they most often occupy the places where the poor need to go for essential resources like hospitals, homeless shelters, and public assistance offices, which is why they feel that not all families are surveilled equally. More specifically:

The family regulation system does not surveil all families equally: the system’s reliance on institutions that are designated to help those in need suggests that the family regulation system is only interested in regulating certain types of families and communities, while

the private lives of more privileged communities remain out of view of mandated reporters. (Baughman et al., 2021, p. 511)

Sadly, even during a pandemic, mandated reporting can be adjusted to keep tabs on the targeted populations.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, as the school systems closed and that avenue of surveillance tentacle closed, the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) in New York quickly pivoted to increasing collaboration with the mandated reporters within the Department of Homeless Services, Health Services, and Hospitals (The New York Council, 2020 as cited in Baughman et al., 2021). At a time when the world was trying to figure out how to stay alive and distance safely, the goal should have been on reducing compound stressors for those who are poor, low-income, and living with extreme poverty. Their goals could have been focused on things like food, clothing, and helping them find a safe place to stay, but an ingrained bias towards those who are marginalized and/or also live with some degree of poverty, still took precedent even during a world-wide pandemic (Baughman et al., 2021).

Baughman et al. (2021) told the story of Kim, a Hispanic single mom of two children, one of whom was an infant. Kim was granted an order for protection from the father of her children, which meant the custody visits for him were to take place at the local police station. Kim believed this was a great idea because she and the children would be safe. However, Kim's oldest child, the toddler, got sick, and she was unable to get to WIC to get the supplies she needed for the newborn. She asked for help from her ex to get the supplies and drop them off at her place. The ex got supplies, but he also shoved Kim into a wall in front of the children, which prompted Kim to call the police and report the incident (Baughman et al., 2021). Sadly, calling the police sparked a visit from the family regulation worker, who stopped by her home the very next day and told Kim to come to the office for a conference, a "request" that was nonnegotiable.

At the conference, Kim was informed of their concerns regarding the multiple incidences of domestic violence in front of the children, especially the baby, and that she had not taken enough steps to ensure either of her children's safety. As a result, they would file neglect charges against her ex. She needed to enter a domestic violence shelter immediately, complete a mental health evaluation, and consent to home supervision by the Courts to avoid trouble. If she refused, they would remove her children from her.

Unfortunately, this tactic of forced compliance is not new. In fact:

Family regulation workers threaten to remove children if the parent does not agree to engage in services and cooperate with their demands. The system views a failure to cooperate or reluctance to consent as safety concerns, leading to increased or prolonged surveillance. (Baughman et al., 2021, p. 528)

Sometimes, even when a parent has completed all the mandated tasks required of them, there may be additional services that social services, or some arm of the tentacles, will try to get the parents to agree to, even though they are not required, but for the sole purpose of keeping the family close (Baughman et al., 2021).

Copeland (2021) agreed with Baughman et al. (2021) that the child welfare system operated more like a multi-institutional mechanism of surveillance, monitoring, control, and regulation by the courts, only choosing not to use the word tentacle for what happens on the west coast. However, Copeland took an entirely different strategy and asked the front-line child welfare investigative worker from Los Angeles, what impacts their decisions, and how they know when to move cases along for serious consideration of maltreatment. Copeland was interested in their intermediary, but conflicting role as someone who is supposed to report on problems as soon as possible if they arise, and yet, at the same time, also be the family's advocate.

Copeland (2021) wanted to know what led someone to be reported. Of the 18 front-line child welfare caseworkers from four different urban counties, Copeland discovered the following items were most likely to get someone pulled deeper into the multi-institutional surveillance mechanism. According to Copeland, investigators reported that a large portion of their process in deciding who moves deeper into the surveillance system depended on the parent's willingness to cooperate. If a parent were deemed resistant, their cases would escalate to the next level beyond any suspected or valuable evidence pointing toward abuse or neglect. Next was the fear of what would happen if they did not report something, and yet, they are liable for the outcome, especially when there was not enough evidence to prove abuse or neglect was happening in the home. In California, case workers can utilize discretionary drug testing as a precaution if they suspect a problem. However, if someone evades a test, this, too, can lead to increased surveillance. If a parent passed a drug test and they could not legally force them to take more tests, instead the case workers would show up unannounced, increasing drop-in visits (Copeland, 2021).

Copeland (2021) discovered that partnerships between caseworkers and other institutions, such as police officers, often meant that caseworkers were more able to access reports directly. However, since parents were asked to sign forms at the beginning providing access to data from other agencies, they could freely gather whatever they needed. That overarching access gave them direct links to police, medical, and even the children's school records, which they utilized to build a case of abuse or neglect against the parent (Copeland, 2021).

One participant discussed the concept of being *volun-told*, which meant that the family that had refused voluntary services prior to the volun-told are once again volunteered services by their caseworker in a volun-told kind of way so that the family is aware that if they refuse, the

children will be removed from the home (Copeland, 2021). However, the participant stated that they hated doing volun-tolds because it meant the rules the parent had to follow and the surveillance, they were about to be undergo would set the family up to fail, and they were taking the kids (Copeland, 2021).

According to Copeland (2021), the amount of inter-agency and cross-agency collaboration between welfare caseworkers and the rest of the multi-institutional surveillance mechanism meant that it was almost impossible for case worker to do their job without the collaboration. Due to the strong ties within the multi-institutional surveillance mechanism, caseworkers can better extend their reach, which makes a family's chances of escaping surveillance unscathed impossible.

Minnesota Family Invest Program—Preventing Child Maltreatment Pilot

When the Minnesota Family Invest Program decided to conduct a pilot study based on research from Milwaukee regarding the involvement of child welfare services among TANF families, the stats quoted as the basis for their reasoning were horrific (Idzelis, 2009). At first, the brief reasoning for the study claimed that child maltreatment had been down since 2003. This is excellent news, and yet, their main question is that if, in 2007, 80% of parents were the reason for child abuse and neglect, they needed to know who the target of the neglect was (Idzelis, 2009). Which parents? Two-parent families or single-parent families? Wouldn't this be a perfect time to pull the records of the 80% of parents who, in 2007, we know were responsible for the child abuse and neglect and ask them what went wrong? To look at their stats.

This is not what Minnesota's Department of Human Services decided to do. Instead, they found the Milwaukee study and based their pilot on what it does and does not say. The study had

a different intent than what the Department used it for. Minnesota's Department of Human Services pulled out these numbers:

In 2007, an estimated 5.8 million children were referred to child protective service agencies across the United States. Of these, about 794,000 children were victims of abuse or neglect, or about 10 children per 1,000. In Minnesota, the rate is about 5 in 1,000 children. (Idzelis, 2009, p. 1)

It is unclear where this data came from as the study presented no direct citation to support them.

Then, in scouring the actual study that the Wilder Foundation completed, I found a second reference to an odd sentence in the snapshot report (Idzelis, 2009), the progress lessons report (Idzelis & Skrypek, 2010), and in the outcomes and lessons report (Idzelis & Skrypek, 2011): it was similarly paraphrased in the three reports and said,

A study conducted by the Chapin Hall Center for Children found that 42 percent of the families receiving assistance ($N = 1,075$) had a child maltreatment report in the five years following their enrollment in TANF, including a high percentage of families who had no previous child welfare involvement. (Idzelis & Skrypek, 2010, p. 5)

However, looking at the article Wilder Research referenced by Dworsky et al. (2007) the best I can tell is that it is not cited correctly. Having read both Courtney et al. (2005) and Dworsky et al. (2007), I am not confident the Minnesota Department of Human Services's quote about people hurting their children after having been on TANF is the same or the only paraphrases of what one would write as the lesson learned. This led me to wonder: did Minnesota create a punitive trial program based on evidence gleaned from a single table on one page that was not mentioned again in conclusion and yet, somehow missed the wide range of other valuable points within the entire 40-page paper? If so, that is a relatively narrow, reasonably narrow negative focus.

To reiterate, the Minnesota pilot program was a coordinated effort to link the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) and Child Welfare Services as planned by the Minnesota Department of Human Services (Idzelis, 2009). Their reasoning for the collaboration was due to

the perspectives change that came with the 1996 welfare reforms, when Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)—which focused on support and cash aid to families—became TANF—the get-to-work and get off the system in 5 years plan. Clearly, they addressed more of the obstacles that stood in the way to employment, which is a lot of what Child Welfare Service does with an added emphasis on barriers that block effective parenting according to the Minnesota Department of Human Services (Idzelis, 2009). As a result, it made sense to create a pilot that would streamline those services and stop child abuse in the process (Idzelis, 2009).

The program started in October 2007 in eight counties across Minnesota and would continue for 3 years (Idzelis, 2009). The expectation was that they would work with 1,900 families in the process. At the end of the study, the significant finding was “there were no significant differences between families receiving services and the control group concerning child maltreatment reports or out of home placements” (Idzelis & Skrypek, 2011, p. 2). According to Dworsky et al. (2007), the only guarantee was that the longer a family’s involvement with Child Protective Services (CPS), the more likely they would always be involved with them. This could point to the same idea as Baughman et al. (2021) regarding surveillance tentacles.

Dworsky et al. (2007) developed a list of items more likely to get a parent back into a CPS office when working with them. For instance, women are more likely to be investigated; having an abundance of children; income hardships increase risk by every hardship suffered; a previous investigation was the best indicator; a CPS investigation within 2 years of applying for TANF, a lack of parent age was associated with lack of parent experience; a person who perceived having a child or family member with a disability also made work difficult; having a substance abuse problem at least a year before joining the program, higher levels of parental

stress; each economic hardship endured meant an increased hazard level of 29% chance of the parent coming to the attention of CPS. As Courtney et al. (2005) argued, “It is not difficult to see how such problems as loss of utility service, homelessness, and food insecurity might lead a family to the attention of child welfare authorities” (p. 148), given virtually every reason for which a family, parent, or single mother, is coming to them for help could also be a double-edged sword.

What will not get a parent, family, and/or single mother on a CPS surveillance list would be if it was an older parent at the time of the request for assistance, having a recent work history, and having solid income within the last year (Courtney et al., 2005). Courtney et al. (2005) believed that a recent work history and a solid income contributed to a person’s beliefs around their self-efficacy regarding self-esteem and their motivations, which meant they felt less stigma asking for help. Or the fact that they had a job with a solid income meant that the person fell outside of the preconceived ideas, biases, and stigmas held by the CPS workers of those they assist. Therefore, they were not judged as harshly to fail before they even got started within the TANF program.

However, given all the above information stating why someone would likely come to the attention of a CPS worker while in the TANF program, Dworsky et al. (2007) noted that their study does not support the idea that being involved in a welfare program, increases the likelihood that the person, family, and/or single mother will also be greater scrutinized by or reported to the CPS. Really? I had to read that twice. By this point, Dworsky et al. have just spent a good deal of time detailing how families end up on the radar of CPS. In fact, they specifically said that they had found a surprisingly high number of CPS case involvement among TANF applicants in the County of Milwaukee. However, in the next breath, they argued that the involvement of CPS

after a TANF application has been completed is unrelated. Nevertheless, when they compared across groups and time, there was a clear difference:

The 1-year follow-up CPS investigation rate of 13.8 percent among the 1999 TANF applicant sample is about 36 percent higher than the 1-year follow-up CPS investigation rate of 10.2 percent among the 1996 AFDC entry cohort in the comparison group. The 2-year follow-up investigation rate of 21.4 percent among the 1999 TANF applicant sample was about 40 percent higher than the 2-year follow-up CPS investigation rate of 15.6 percent among the 1996 AFDC entry cohort. (Courtney et al., 2005, p. 149)

The institution has become more punitive. I refuse to believe parents, families, and single mothers became a threat in 4 years. There was a threat, but the threat was the institution itself.

Dworsky et al. (2007) looked for child behaviors that might lead to a greater risk for child abuse, such as a particular need, then based on family and parent characteristics, could they predict who would abuse their children in the TANF program. They discovered they could not predict a family's abusive behavior based on child behaviors and parental characteristics. However, they could base the likelihood of child maltreatment investigations on the fact that if the person or family had been investigated previously, they would be investigated again. If they found that there had been a prior investigation, it was 2.5 to 2.7 times more likely that another investigation would happen—but there was no word as to if all investigations led to arrests or removal of children; also, the younger the youngest child, the more likely they were to be investigated; each additional child increased repeat investigation risks by 16–20%; and if the parent held a higher risk for depression, their risk for repeat CPS investigations also increased; the more significant the material hardships, the greater the chance of a CPS investigation (Dworsky et al., 2007). Again, their article is pointing toward a targeted behavior. However, as with their second article, the final verdict was that the single most significant risk factor of a CPS investigation was if the family had been investigated prior to a TANF application and if the investigation took place within 1 year prior to the TANF application the risk of a CPS

investigation doubled (Dworsky et al., 2007). What they were seeing in 2007, is what we would call targeted behavior in 2023. We do not know how many cases ended in abuse or whether charges were filed. What we do know is how to get on the radar of CPS.

Single Mother—Nile Pierce

Nile is a single mother. I found her story in a published book, *Single Mothers Speak on Patriarchy: A Girl God Anthology* (Hendren and Daly, 2016). There are not very many accounts out there of mothers who share. However, hers fit rather well with misogyny:

WE. ARE. AT. WAR. With ourselves, internally, and with the patriarchal structures of society, externally. We are at war with ourselves internally because the external social mechanisms and forces of misogyny press down upon us, press down upon our minds and our hearts, twisting our emotions, making it hard to know what to do with the “choices” we are forced to accept, realizing that in this system, the “options” available to us are not really choices after all, and so we are made angry, we are deeply hurting, we are made to feel like we have given up, like we are not contributing enough if we choose to stay at home with our children, we are made to feel like we are weak, non-contributing social leeches, unable to perform like everyone around us, according to male capitalist expectations. (Pierce, 2016, p. 69)

It is a no-win game in which everywhere a single mother turns, she is devalued and made aware of just how little value she has. Misogyny appears in the ideology of the institutions and how they choose to perpetuate that ideology which hurts those they are supposed to help.

Patriarchy

With patriarchy, I wanted to start with a story from a single mother that I found before going into the analysis. I wanted to provide an example from another single mother’s experience with patriarchy.

A Single Mother’s Perspective—Learning Patriarchy

Irene Sanchez (2016), a single mom of one son, recalled how she first learned her lessons of misogyny and patriarchy. For her, while she was young, it was normalized how a woman gets and keeps a man’s obedience (Sanchez, 2016). Sanchez argued that obedience can be learned

willingly or forced on us by abuse. Many of us experienced our homes as the battlegrounds in which “We learn patriarchy through speaking and by speaking we also learn that there is a consequence to speaking up or speaking out” (Sanchez, 2016, p. 120).

Sanchez (2016) spoke of how she will fight patriarchy all her life because she has a son. She wanted her son to realize that life does not have to be this way (Sanchez, 2016). What kind of a system allows for a single mom on welfare, to have a difficult time maintaining stable housing, with barely enough financial or emotional support, and yet, it keeps happening over and over? Sanchez argued that it is not just patriarchy but the entire value system that dehumanizes women, especially women of color, and the labor women put forward, from motherhood and caregiving to the work they do for employers. Sanchez (2016) has a final word of advice for why she keeps fighting and why she will never stop speaking up:

It is a vulnerable position to be in, but that doesn’t mean I accept, submit, and stay silent . . . It is a system that tells us we are not enough, that we are wrong, that we need to be silent when what we really need to do is speak . . . Patriarchy kills, but as a single mother I have learned silence has killed far too many of us already. (Sanchez, 2016, p. 121)

Irene’s story is from *Single Mothers Speak on Patriarchy: A Girl God Anthology*, in which numerous single mothers laid out their lived experiences (Hendren, & Daly, 2016). I have not found another book that openly contained such raw details of single mother’s lived internal and external experiences within a patriarchal system filled with institutional obstructions.

Insidiousness of Intimate Partner Violence—Emotional Abuse

When dealing with abusers who have employed intimate partner violence tactics—physical, psychological, and/or sexual—within an institutional setting, whether that setting is the family courts, a law office, a police station, a domestic violence shelter, social services, family services, medical services, as the list could go on and on, the intimate partner violence abuser’s victim is at a disadvantage.

According to M. Johnson (2020), despite 40 years of debate, the research indicated that domestic violence is mostly perpetrated and is always a gender issue. First, I want to acknowledge the myth that intimate partner violence is about men losing control or lacking control of their emotions and that once they learn better tactics, the problem is solved. They never abuse again, or the abuse that happened in the past is somehow not relevant to what the single mother is experiencing now. It is all relevant. My reason for doing so is because this theme appears in some of the women's stories (Hendren & Daly, 2016), where the judges, case workers, or police officers have made incorrect assumptions that are detrimental to the lives of women and their children.

Chuck Derry (2020) of the Gender Violence Institute wrote about the dangers of thinking that batterers/abusers just need help not to lose control or to avoid exploding and that what is missing for these men is that they lack control of their emotions, which is why they are violent. Derry argued that these were the same theories they labored under in the 1970s and 1980s when they first began working with the men who battered. However, they also held focus groups with the women they victimized, and through both groups, they realized the men were not out of control (Derry, 2020). Instead, they abused for control. For instance, while working with men who battered for over 10 years, he estimated he worked with around 2,000 men that were court-ordered to the program, with their initial approach being more psychological as the abusers learned how to identify emotions, learning how to communicate appropriately, what it means to be assertive, and in control of one's emotions. Then, through their focus groups with the women the men abused, and in some cases were still abusing, "we discovered they were using the skills they learned in group to further enhance their abilities to control her, and others within the system to avoid consequences. So, we were actually creating more sophisticated batterers"

(Derry, 2020, para. 3). Therefore, intimate partner violence abusers are not impaired or psychologically impaired. They are smart. They adapted and evolved.

The reason why Derry (2020) believed it is dangerous to psychologize the abuser was that if the abuser can convince us, it was not his fault, or that he did not know what to do, he did not know any better, or he lost control—then I will not hold him accountable, believing he needs education and support, not firm corrective action. Therefore, the institution's that single mothers come to for assistance desperately need to listen to their concerns as though they are valid. Otherwise, they are more likely to hold him unaccountable for his actions as they incorrectly understand what is at the base of the problem. Derry discussed how, during a routine intake of the men, he often asked them a set of questions, to which men would always answer that they lost control. To counter that narrative, he would ask them if they killed their wives, and when they said no, he would say they exercised control at some point because they stopped. For Derry, this meant they were actively deciding how much abuse to inflict, which is not a loss of control. He asked them where they hit their victims on their bodies, why that spot, and why the abuse stopped. All of which pointed to choices. According to Derry (2020):

It was always about him getting what he wanted and using violence and the threat of violence (and other tactics) to do so. Once he knew I would not accept this idea that he “lost control” of himself, we got deeper into his intents, and his conscious decision-making process, his minimizing, denial, and blame. (para. 5)

If the abuser still did not accept his part, Derry (2020) would ask if he hit his spouse in a church, temple, or at mass. As soon as the abuser would say, “No, of course not,” he would follow that answer up with where does the abuse take place at? As soon as the abuser identified the places that were more private such as home, Derry would reiterate that the man was choosing where to be abusive by the mere fact that he waits till he gets home or wherever his private location happened to be at, which was an active choice.

Therefore, if men can convince a judge, police, counselors, social service, child welfare, medical services, and the list could go on, that she is to blame, he is not responsible (Derry, 2020). If that does not work, he tells them he lost control, and again, the attention shifts to the victim, where they tell her just to ease up a bit and maybe not stress him out so much. Alternatively, he is sent to counseling and taught life skills, which is great for him because he is never held accountable, and the abusive tactics of violence, power, and control continue unabated. The end goal for him would be that nothing changes.

It is pretty telling when Derry (2020) conducted an eye-opening experiment in that he utilized a 4x8 foot blackboard and then asked the men in the batter's group what benefit they gained from their violence. They quickly ran out of space (Derry, 2020). He then took another 4x8 foot blackboard and asked the men about their abuse's negative consequences (Derry, 2020). They could scarcely fill up a 2x2 foot space, as men mentioned things like being arrested, jail, protection orders, and being there with Derry (2020) as a negative consequence. Pretty telling, is it not? Derry (2020) argued:

We need to attend to the intentionality of male behaviors toward women and children . . . And accept that this behavior is based on greed, selfishness, and self-interest. That becomes a larger challenge. I am concerned that we are . . . minimizing that challenge, because it is easier for us to do so. (Derry, 2020, para. 16)

The challenge is minimized, even trivialized, whenever a single mom is struggling within a patriarchal society. This is precisely what we say in our Family Courts, with our law enforcement and social services, when she is fighting to protect her family. We place patriarchal rights above her and her children's right to safety and a home free from violence.

Misogyny and Gender Imbalance Sustain Patriarchy

According to M. Johnson (2020), intimate terrorism and the gender imbalance that sustains it suggests that there is more to the problem than a mere male and female biological

difference and that the problem itself could be more deeply embedded contextually within our social structures. M. Johnson's idea of intimate terrorism is clearly men abusing women because, at the physical level, the average size and strength difference must be considered, in that, there must be a credible threat for disobedience to spark compliance. Not only at the individual level but also with a focus on gender socialization, as women are not always socialized to fight back. When coming from a man, the violence would be more credible, even if not inflicted, based on religious upbringing.

Intimate terrorists tend to have a specific attitude toward women, one geared toward misogyny and gender traditionalism, therefore the meaning associated or ascribed to that violence is based on the gender of the perpetrator (M. Johnson, 2020); that is, women get told not to nag so much next time, or women get told in family court just because he was an absentee father during the marriage, does not mean he will be now; or an abusive father and husband, while you were married, does not mean he will be one now, as he has learned the error of his ways; or she is so protective of the children she is suffocating them, but if she lets them walk 20 feet ahead of her in the mall, suddenly, she is an irresponsible mother who has no idea what her children are doing. Unfortunately, social norms for heterosexual relationships are profoundly gendered and rooted in a patriarchal model that places male knowledge and power first and foremost (Dobash & Dobash 1979, 1992; Yllö & Bograd 1988), which also appeared in the broader social culture and social context surrounding the couple (M. Johnson, 2020).

Once misogyny has infiltrated, it spreads into every corner and crevasse, leaving no portion untouched. M. Johnson (2020) argued that what is not working are the gender wage gaps that promote economic dependency for abusers while limiting a woman's ability to leave or to survive on her own. Society's stringent belief that caregiving is women's work and women's

work only, and yet when a woman does want to leave her abuser, her church and community may tell her to stay for the sake of the children, her caregiving role locks her into a difficult position (M. Johnson, 2020). Finally, the “criminal justice system, heavily dominated by men and involving a culture of masculinity that has not always been responsive to the problems of women experiencing intimate terrorism” (M. Johnson, 2020, p. 257). Sadly, the courts are a system dominated by patriarchy that is not always open to different voices.

A Single Mother’s Perspective—Patriarchy Values the Unproven Male Voice ²²

Beth Mattson (2016) knew precisely what kept her ex-husband’s voice in her life and that of her children’s despite having solid proof to the contrary every single day of her life, and that was patriarchy’s ability to accept the unproven and unsubstantiated word and value of a man over a woman. Initially, Beth had been granted the ability to leave the state she resided in while married—with the children, which is no easy feat for any woman anywhere in the United States—for her home state due to a stable job and extended family residing there, since the ex-husband also had no extended family in their marital state of choice.

However, Beth also had photos of bruises and dirt covering her children when they would come home from their father’s after a custodial visit, which happened even after the briefest of stays that he could not explain; nor did she get to tell the courts of a time when he was drunk and locked her out of the house, away from her babies; or how he terrorized her through house temperature campaigns that made absolutely no sense at all; or how he refused to put money in the primary checking account thereby stopping her ability to take the children to daycare, so she could not work; or how he cut her off from family and friends while they were married. When Beth’s lawyer tried to present additional evidence of past abuse at the divorce trial, the judge told

²² Information presented here about Beth Mattson’s case is based on my reading of Mattson (2016).

her lawyer to “get away from that.” Instead, Beth was to be grateful she was even being allowed to leave, rather than the judge taking the extra time to hear the full details of the case and then to make an informed decision from that point on as to how custody would look once she moved to her home state.

At one point, Beth asked a great question. It was one I have wondered about too. Why is it that when women know what it is like to live with their abusers, but women cannot look to a judge and say, “Let me be the one who gets to decide how custody will look for the safety of my children,” why is the voice and experience of women not enough? Instead,

We live in [a] patriarchy, a system that prioritizes a father figure at the expense of a mother figure . . . [because] I cannot end the trauma and after-quakes of trauma due simply to the codified patriarchal values absorbed by our entire legal and political system. (Mattson, 2016, pp. 11, 14)

Regrettably, Beth’s hands became tied in how she could and could not protect her children until they were 18. How is the same system that punishes us for not being good mothers, for not being protective enough, also punishes us when we are trying to protect our children from the one person we know can and will hurt us and them?

Rural Patriarchy

Rural Locations—The Abusers Playground

Rural locations present several difficulties for any single mother, but extreme difficulties for a single mother also dealing with a manipulative, abusive ex-husband at the same time, especially if that single mom is on his playground. Walker et al. (2015) maintained that several barriers are present for survivors of intimate partner violence in rural communities, which may complicate the process of leaving an abuser and is bewildering in the best of circumstances. Survivors may lack the needed financial resources for food, shelter, transportation, and health care, which could cause them to stay in the relationship longer than they should. For instance, a

geographical location may benefit a perpetrator (Walker et al., 2015). If a survivor must drive 3 hours for help, there is no one close by who may be impartial to the situation who can help that survivor in their time of greatest need. Rural communities tend to lack anonymity because everyone knows everyone else and their business, and they are proud that they know it. A survivor may have concerns over who works in a particular building and who has access to their records (Walker et al., 2015). There may be a lack of shelters and domestic violence programs available in rural areas, or if they are present, they are not easily accessible when they need them most. Rural locations, while beautiful to live in, are not conducive to fast escapes.

According to Bancroft (2002), anyone can end up supporting abusive thinking by adopting the abuser's perspective inadvertently, mainly because they do not fully understand what they are seeing and hearing from the abuser. Since the mother is typically the one who ended the relationship, and the abuser hates being rejected, the children become either pawns to get the woman back or a retaliatory weapon used to hurt the woman every chance he gets (Bancroft, 2002). There are several ways this happens, by pumping them for information, bringing them back home dirty, hungry, and tired; telling the children they should come live with him instead; driving wedges between the mother and the children anywhere and everywhere he can; undermining her authority by making his home a place without rules, no homework, and junk food only; becoming physically, emotionally, verbally and even, sexually abusive to the children; outright threats to remove the children from her care for any reason; hauling the mother back into court for more visitation rights or custodial powers; and finally, taking the children into his care, only to leave them with someone else, either the new girlfriend, wife or his mother, because he is rarely if ever is with them (Bancroft, 2002). Bancroft (2002) stated:

[There is a] need to create a social ethic that makes it clear that anyone who chooses to go to bat for a man accused of abuse has a responsibility to get all the facts and not just the

view that he promotes. The abuse of women is simply too rampant for anyone to assume that an allegation is false or exaggerated without checking it out very, very carefully. (pp. 352–353)

Instead of victim blaming, stigmatizing, and stereotyping single mothers, I agree with Bancroft (2002). We need a social ethic where people get all the facts first. We need to educate at every level how hegemonic masculinity assumes the batterer is innocent, especially in rural communities, so that instead of helping the abuser without thinking about the consequences, they will stop and think. Wait, if I do this, I tow her car. Am I contributing to a possible abusive situation? We also need to teach people to stand up and say no.

A Single Mother's Story—Religious Branding to Tight Ropes²³

When Anonymous met Matt, he was not encumbered by a religion that forbade his questions because he was not religious. Whereas Anonymous longed to be able to be free of the religious hold that told her she could not question her faith, even though she was faithful, but that was what attracted her to Matt. Once Anonymous's daughter was born, Matt became the thorn she did not need, as he constantly harassed her over the custody and visitation order and how much he was unhappy with it.

Anonymous managed to get an order that granted Matt only supervised visitations when her daughter was a toddler. Although she never specifies what led to the supervised visitations, she does recall how, even in those initial years, Matt's entire focus was on hurting her, making sure she knew he had power over her life, being irrational, displaying a strong sense of entitlement, and not focusing on being a father to their daughter. Bancroft (2002) argued that this arrogant and superior behavior is typical for an abuser because he considers himself the authority

²³ Information presented here is based on my reading of Anonymous (2016) and her case.

while contributing little, especially in parenting. No matter how good of a mother she may be, she will never be good enough for him.

Over time, Anonymous has played by the court order while holding her breath that he will remain on the edges of their lives. Her greatest fear is to go back to court, to face him in front of a judge who sympathizes with her ex and forgets about why her daughter must remain safe. Anonymous (2016) stated the single mother paradox:

He is a demon who latched on to me, a trial I have to endure until my daughter is grown. There is a paradox in wanting so badly to just hang on my daughter's childhood and enjoy it to the last drop—and simultaneously looking forward to her growing up, so I will finally be free of his presence. (pp.169–170)

For Anonymous, the wish is for a world where misogyny and religious patriarchal propaganda will not uphold the institutions, like the family court, demanding mothers walk a dangerous line between shared custody and an abusive ex-partner. Her hope is also that the exhaustion and isolation of single motherhood will one day no longer be the given climate they must navigate to survive in this country.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Since hegemonic masculinity is the strong-arm enforcer of patriarchy, and misogyny has infiltrated every aspect of the institutions around single mothers, ideologically, through our patriarchal ideas of what is acceptable and what is not in society, or who has power and who does not, hegemonic masculinity is how the wayward single mothers are kept in line. When a single mother steps out of line and dares to go it alone, without a husband, one of the fastest ways to cut her to size is through stigma.

Single Mothers and Stigmatization

Jarrett (1996) believed stigma was directly linked to single parenthood, immorality, and unemployment. Seccombe (1999) argued that we have known for a while, through extensive

documentation, that welfare recipients face stigmas and discrimination not only from the public but from those in the welfare office who are supposed to help them. Of course, poverty leads to discussions centered on moral judgments and deservedness regarding welfare benefits (Katz, 2013). Deservedness is based on a lack of laziness, a lack of degeneracy, and unfortunately, it is often based on a racist ideology in which people of color are highly scrutinized (Katz, 2013). Several social discourses, cultural institutions, and dominant social policies help to maintain and reinforce the tight relationship between poverty and shame (Jo, 2013). Therefore, the external projections of shame collide with the internalized feelings of shame, always letting us know who does conform to society's social norms and who does not (Battle, 2019).

According to Goffman (1963), there are two types of social stigma, that of character and that of one's group identity. When one thinks of character traits, it is often of someone who is weak-willed or has a behavior they are known to indulge in. A stigma associated with someone's group identity is because they may hang out with a particular group of people or it is someone with whom they associate and are considered to be a part of. A single mother would be a group identity stigma, but it can also be a character stigma in that single mothers are often deemed worthless. They sit at home, do nothing, refuse to work for a living, and/or are lazy. According to Battle (2019), the primary function of a social stigma is for optimum social control because it creates an experience of isolation for the stigmatized and a perceptive boundary that those who do not carry that stigma will not cross for fear of becoming stigmatized themselves. While the shame experienced by the stigmatized is largely internal, the external impact of being stigmatized leads to internalized feelings of shame (Battle, 2019).

Goffman (1963) believed the strategy of social control found in shame was in creating a sense of anticipation of the impending shame to be experienced by the individual. An individual needed to be conscious and monitoring for that shame. Therefore:

Shame is typically co-constructed in a combination of self-judgment, anticipation of judgment from others, and the actual verbal or symbolic judgment from individuals who consider themselves to be in a position of social or moral superiority to the shamed individual. (Battle, 2019, p. 646)

Battle (2019) argued that the welfare mechanisms, social policy, and the experience of being in the crosshairs of child welfare and/or the child support services enforcement team are specifically designed to produce shame. Unfortunately, welfare reinforces gendered roles in that women are still expected to do most of the care work, the labor inside, such as house cleaning, and still must work outside the home (Orloff, 1996). While going to the welfare offices can be good and evil, the element of shame tends to get underreported (Battle, 2019).

Although Desmond (2023) argued that it is not necessarily shame that gets in the way of seeking help from welfare directly, the problem is the process has been made so complicated and challenging that those needing to know what social programs or tax benefits could assist their situations never find out due to all the red tape and hassle. If a single mom cannot be shamed into compliance, then her way is made as difficult as possible, except when she turns out to be scrappy and resilient and finds a way through a challenging situation (Sandler, 2020). She gets the resources she needs by being tenacious. Hegemonic masculinity will tag her as a con artist and a troublemaker, as was the case for single mother Camila, as told by Sandler (2020). Hegemonic masculinity is a double-edged sword.

*A Single Mother's Story—When the Scars Are Internal*²⁴

Solana Simpson recalled how, at the beginning of her marriage's demise, her ex-husband handed her a list of statements, each beginning with an "I." Solana read his list of declarations:

Agree with 100% of what he says; agree with 100% of his parenting decisions; he has to be in charge of where my things go; that I must cease to have strong feelings; that I spend what he tells me to spend on groceries; that I inform him when my menstrual cycle is happening; that I believe everything he says; and that my Facebook and emails are always open to him. (Simpson, 2016, p. 41)

When she asked why, he merely responded that he needed control, so she gave him back the list, and of course, it was not long before the duo was divorced (Simpson, 2016).

During the mediation process, Solana was met with papers detailing her depression and parental inadequacies. Since her ex agreed to child support, she allowed him to bully her and agreed to his child custody plans. Solana recalled that her ex appeared to be collected and put together, and his family was close, with one of them being a deacon, a social worker, and his father being a divorce attorney. Solana was living a rural patriarchal nightmare for a single mother. They had all the power. Solana recalled the entire family's behavior:

If you insult one by non-compliance, you've insulted them all. If you are on one's blacklist, you are also on everyone else's. There is no grace and certainly no middle ground. And there is no one else that matters outside of the family. (Simpson, 2016, p. 42)

Once the trial was over, the ex stopped paying child support for the entire next year and a half. For a while, she saw many motions; 8 months after their trial, the ex was ordered to pay child support, but that only started another flurry of motions and appeals. Solana recalled visiting a friend who lived next door to her ex while he had the children. When her 4-year-old saw her, he came down the steps to hug her before she left, but her ex would not let him get out the door, so

²⁴ Information presented about Solana Simpson's case is drawn from Simpson (2016).

she got to hear his cries instead. Since her ex-husband was not outright abusive, Solana's biggest fear was that her children would think what he did was expected when it was not.

During a vacation with the children, Solana recounted how the youngest possibly sustained a concussion. The ex has Solana's son call her to inform her of the concussion. She convinced the ex to take the youngest to the hospital, so he told her the name of the hospital, but he refused to give her the state they were in. He even refused when she asked to speak with the doctor.

In the meantime, her lawyer and Solana kept fighting for child support while her ex kept arguing why he should not have to pay. One time, the ex-walked into a contempt hearing for not paying only to give Solana an 18-month back check in child support, and instead of the judge admonishing or punishing the ex, he congratulated them for working it out. Four months later, a new judge took their case, and the appeals court ruled that he had to pay child support. However, the next month, her ex filed to place Solana in contempt for minor schedule infractions, such as those made when he made flight arrangements for a long weekend and then brought the kids back 4 to 5 hours later, only telling her about a day before instead of giving her the notice she was due, plus, he wanted the child support dropped. The new judge ultimately agreed with him, dropping the child support and making Solana pay his attorney fees of \$2,300.

Solana received no child support, yet she was still responsible for the children's school tuition and supplies, and he made sure to work as little as possible to continue to avoid paying child support. Somehow, her ex could still keep barraging Solana with expensive motions.

Solana said of her experience:

I have something worse than having no co-parent at all. I have a hindrance, someone who seeks to financially ruin me and someone who uses a willing system to carry out his manipulation and control. This is essential patriarchy, the collusion of an individual's power-over dominance with an abusive system already in place to support his superiority.

I am now in college full time. I do not have my degree, despite the fact that I am in my late 40's. I work full time as a teacher. I take on extra jobs as an artist and a musician. And that doesn't include the time I spend parenting my children—or dealing with the constant drama that has become this court case. I take on odd jobs for sewing, singing lessons, and artwork commissions. My plate is too full. If I can work my ass off to support my kids, why the hell is he spending his time memorizing statutes in an attempt to retaliate against me? Does he really think this somehow supports his children? That is what is most disappointing for me, that none of this seems to take into account the children. (Simpson, 2016, p. 45)

Solana argued that a real father would know that nothing is gained for his children by bankrupting the mother regardless of how much he hates his children's mother. His children only benefit when he meets his obligations.

Sadly, Solana could never prove domestic violence in the form of physical abuse, her ex had only pushed her down once while she was pregnant, and she had broken her thumb. Solana did not experience the cycle of abuse typical for physical abuse, with the honeymoon phase and the build-up until the repeating event. Solana could also never say he swore at her or called her names because that was not his form of abuse. Solana's husband used a stony silence to demonstrate she did not exist in the marriage, along with a low-level contempt that was poisonous and infected the whole marriage. There were patterns of behavior she could count on that were abusive, the stony silence, being treated as if she did not exist, being deemed beneath him, unable to produce a valid thought, she was irrational, and only there as an object for him to do with as he pleased, and by implication, he was the only one that counted (Simpson, 2016). That, too, was abusive, degrading, and should be recognized as just as harmful as physical abuse.

Holland's Theory of Misogyny: Relevance to Abused Mothers Who Leave

I will now look at the application of Holland (2006) regarding how misogyny has infiltrated the institutions a single mother interacts with after leaving an abusive situation.

Holland (2006) found what would be the premise for every argument throughout time to the present day as to why women cannot have the ability to control their own lives in 205 B.C.E.

Rome passed what was known as the Oppian Laws, which regulated how much gold a woman could possess. It restricted how she chose to decorate herself within the public sphere and determined how luxurious her dress and garments could be during the war with the Carthaginian General Hannibal. However, 10 years after the war ended, the Roman upper-class women demanded to know why they must still abide by the Oppian Laws. After the women created enough agitation, the Senate finally decided to debate the issue. The women, eager to participate in the process, flocked to the Forum where the Senate was housed.

The main opposition to repealing the opium laws was Cato the Elder, the orator of his time. He believed in hard work, abstinence, and plain living and lived to show off his simple lifestyle. In what can only be called a misogynistic tour de force Cato declared:

If every married man had been concerned to ensure that his own wife looked up to him and respected his rightful position as her husband, we should not have half this trouble with women in mass. Instead, women have become so powerful that our independence has been lost in our own homes and is now being trampled and stamped under foot in public. We have failed to retrain them as individuals, and now they have combined to reduce us to our present panic . . . It made me blush to push my way through a positive regiment of women a few minutes ago in order to get here . . . My respect for the position and modesty of them as individuals—a respect which I do not feel for them as the mob—prevented my doing anything as consul which would suggest the use of force. Otherwise, I should have said to them, ‘What do you mean by rushing out in public in this unprecedented fashion, blocking the streets and shouting out to men who are not your husbands? Could you not have asked your questions at home, and have asked them of your husband’s?’ . . . Woman is a violent and uncontrolled animal, and it is no good giving her the reins and expecting her not to kick over the traces. No, you have got to keep the reins firmly in your own hands . . . Suppose you allow them to acquire or to extort one right after another, and in the end to achieve complete equality with men, do you think that you will find them bearable? Nonsense. Once they have achieved equality, they will be your masters. (Holland, 2006, p. 52)

Although Cato’s speech failed, the Senate overturned the Oppian Laws. However, Cato’s speech is the same misogynistic argument that has been used against women ever since, give women access to one sphere, and all hell will break loose in all the others, with immoral women running amuck. Cato’s speech has been the primary argument for why women cannot have control of

their lives or some semblance of equal rights. Cato's argument is basically the same argument that gets dusted off and revised in every decade that the Equal Rights Amendment has begun to gain ground.

In the Roman Republic, a few women made history by publicly using their voices to be heard on political issues affecting women. However, the only reason we know of their existence is that a male historian had been so outraged by a woman daring to use her voice in the public sphere to have written about her in their historical accounting of the time period. Such is the case when historian Valerius Maximus complained of Hortensia in 42 B.C.E. The Story of Hortensia is of a woman born to one of Rome's greatest public speakers Quintus Hortensius. With a lineage of public speaking in her family history, it is not hard to see how she could end up as a public speaker herself, even if she were a female. Of course, that is misogyny's biggest failing. It underestimates women.

In 42 B.C.E. in Rome, Hortensia spoke out against a heavy tax that was imposed upon upper-class women, even though she was going up against a three-man dictatorship that was known for its ruthlessness—consisting of Mark Anthony, Octavian (who would later become Augustus the Emperor), and Marcus Lepidus—known for purging 2,300 political opponents through arrest and execution, with the help of the 1,400 upper-class women who attempted to fight the tax also. They marched in protest, and they tried to speak to the women folk of three of the rulers, hoping they could persuade their husbands to reconsider the tax or at the very least allow the women to speak on their behalf, but in the end, the women were forced to bust into the Forum, the location where the speakers were housed and where the rules were created. Of the women who busted into the Forum, Hortensia stepped forward and pleaded their case:

For the first time the question of franchise was raised, if only by implication. During her powerful speech, which focuse[d] on the sufferings of women during war, Hortensia

asked, “Why should we pay taxes when we have no part in the honors, the commands, the statecraft, for which you contend against each other with such harmful results?” (Holland, 2006, p. 60)

Although she did not outright demand the right to representation or vote, Hortensia comes close to asking for what American women will demand hundreds of years later. How can women be taxed if they do not also have a voice?

Sadly, the women’s protest in 42 B.C.E. and Hortensia’s speech would be the last demonstration by women aimed at political change or any attempt at political activism on behalf of women for the *next 300 years*, until the 19th century. Instead, as with every century that followed 42 B.C.E, the backlash will be swift, as a conservative backlash aimed at the control of women and their subjugation to family rule will arise out of the turmoil. Up to this point, the rule of marriage that placed the man above the wife, as the absolute authority in Rome, had lapsed, but with the impending surge of the conservative backlash, that would soon change as a resurgence in the family values movement took hold with the rule of Augustus.

Augustus believed men had grown soft, so he drafted a series of laws called the *Rex Julia*, which called for restoring the traditional Roman family. Therefore, Augustus rewarded those who married by a certain age and bore children and penalized those who did not marry by a predetermined age. He also revived an old law that allowed fathers to kill their daughters and husbands their wives. Husbands were also forced to divorce their wives if they were found to be having an affair, or else the husband would have severe penalties for failing to follow through. In these instances, Augustus took the rule of the family away and handed it over to the courts. However, the divorce of a wayward wife was not enough. Augustus wanted the women hauled into court and punished publicly.

If a wronged husband still could not prosecute or punish his wife, he was given 60 days to get over his issues before a public member was given the privilege to prosecute his wife for him (Holland, 2006). If the prosecuting party was over 25, anyone who enjoyed seeing a woman humiliated and publicly disgraced could fulfill the role the husband refused. In typical misogynistic fashion, although a woman could divorce her husband for adultery, she could not prosecute him in public by bringing criminal charges against him because the public persecution and display of humiliation was entirely reserved only for female offenders (Pomeroy, 1975, as cited in Holland, 2006).

After the medieval witch hunts came the 16th and 17th centuries, but if anyone in that period expected a world free of misogyny or misogynists, they were in for more of the same. During the time of the greatest revolutions for mankind and womankind—intellectually, socially, economically, and politically—a time when what was sacred could be openly challenged, if ever a change could happen, it could have been during such rapid growth and development. According to Holland (2006), misogyny first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1656 and was defined as a “hatred or contempt for women,” while misogynists first appeared in 1630, in the pamphlet, *Swetman Arraigned*, who was the author of a notorious grouping of words attacking women (Holland, 2006, p. 281).

Holland (2006) argued it was easier for Galileo to prove the Earth orbited the sun than it would be to prove women were human beings worthy of respect or even that traditional misogynistic behaviors needed to change. In the 1600s, even in a socially and intellectually progressive Europe, women had no rights other than what would be recognized by local custom. Therefore, through marriage, she was under the absolute control of her husband as property.

Platonists of that period debated whether women had souls (Stone, 1979, as cited in Holland, 2006).

Therefore, women still lived a suspended existence, but with the Reformation beginning, the challenge to misogyny would finally gain a bit of substance. When the reformers allowed pastors to marry, it raised the status of marriage in the eyes of God, placing women a bit higher on the status pole, but not by much. After Martin Luther's declaration by nailing the 95 theses to the door of the church, the break between Catholics and Protestants would become permanent. Although, while women would be allowed more of an active role in the beginning of the movement to help men gain freedom from Catholics, as with all things that came before, even this was eventually curtailed once the support of women were no longer needed. Of course, as faith stabilized, so too did the willingness of the men to allow the women to be granted equality. Funny how when they need the numbers to guarantee the break, it was okay for women to be in positions of power, but once the men had the control they needed, now it was time to put the women back in the bottle. With the women under control and the new family structure in place, the father not only knew best, but he also knew better than the Pastor when it came to matters within his own home as the patriarchal family was reinforced by the Scottish Protestantism John Knox's pamphlet, *The First Blast Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, in 1558 (Holland, 2006).

The one thing the men of the time did not think through was declaring the Bible the authority most essential to their faith because that meant even women needed to be able to read (Holland, 2006). This slip meant not only allowing women to read but educating women to boot. Although not everyone was in favor of allowing women to read, and King James I hated the idea, it was not that he thought they were too dumb to learn but because he thought they were cunning

enough as it was, why give them unnecessary ammunition (Fraser & Knopf, 1984, as cited in Holland, 2006). Ironically, considering how much King James I hated the idea of women learning to read, the first translation of the Bible into English was undertaken by him for the sole purpose of teaching protestant daughters the word of God firsthand, to help them defend themselves against the Catholic church.

From the mid-17th century onwards, another concept came into play for why women should be educated, which was to produce a marriage of companionship, for a man to have a wife with whom he could carry on an intelligent conversation. By 1697, the author Daniel Defoe realized the purchasing power of women as readers and because of those women who already were his readers, especially since women were the most significant part of his readership (Holland, 2006). Therefore, Daniel Defoe became an advocate for women's education, even if their success only benefited him financially.

The English philosopher, John Locke, would offer a more fluid conceptual explanation for male autonomy in that the relationship between man, family, and state consisted of the responsibilities that each bore to the other (Holland, 2006). At the time, there had been a shift away from the fall myths of the Greeks and the Jews, in which male autonomy was predicated on the central fact that men were created before women and that men had lived quite happily without women, alone with their God (Holland, 2006). However, during Locke's time with the conceptual shift in what male autonomy meant, he pushed the shift even further as he argued that autonomy was attached to ideas of equality, the right to happiness (Holland, 2006). These were the foundations upon which liberty was built. Locke also believed that all humans were born as a blank slate, which meant that if his theory were true:

The causes of human behaviour [were] not in the brain but primarily in the world outside . . . [then] like a man, a woman was a blank slate at birth, then her 'inferiority' was not

inherent to her nature or predetermined by it but was a product of her upbringing and education [calling] into question one of the foundation stones of misogyny. (Holland, 2006, p. 136)

Locke's theory of a blank slate questioned the premise that women's subjugation to men and the pain of childbirth was women's punishment for Eve's actions in the garden during the Fall of Man (Holland, 2006). However, Holland (2006) also argued that it was a disservice to women to argue for equality based on the blank-slate theory alone. After all, Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution would end up casting doubt on the blank-slate theory, in that the theory of evolution suggested inherited characteristics and social factors shaped human behaviors.

The implications of the liberalism Locke offered were hard to avoid, and in 1642, for the first time since Hortensia's speech in 42 B.C.E., women took to the streets to protest (Holland, 2006). Four hundred women gathered outside Parliament to ensure their voice was heard regarding the financial hardships that affected their lives. Liberalism would also change the roles within a marriage, adding affection, and love with authority, but as partners. Two years after Locke's death, Mary Astell (1668–1731), the first English feminist writer, asked the question women all over the world are still asking in 2023, “If all men are born free, how is it that all women are born slaves?” (Holland, 2006, p. 137). It is a valid question. In every period since Eve, it has remained the unanswerable question.

Then in 1672, medical science discovered women had ovaries, which meant women were not the passive incubator Aristotle had purported them to be all those centuries earlier (Holland, 2006). Women were essential to the creation of life. Once again, this new knowledge, the advancement of medical science, intellectual reason, and the democracy of liberalism could not vanquish misogyny any more than any previous generations' successes (Holland, 2006). If misogyny has a constant, besides its definition, it is that when the most basic underlying assumptions become threatened, misogyny will rear its ugly head and become known once again.

According to Holland (2006), resilience in misogyny is found in misogynists because they can always have it both ways, thereby consistently winning. Women are either always the perpetual slut or the saintly victim, and whichever way a woman lands, the misogynist wins (Holland, 2006). They are either there to offer protection or take what they view as theirs because, as a woman, that woman is inherently inferior, unable to exercise the same control as them, which does apply to circumstances outside of the sexual realm, especially in hotly contested custody battles.

In the late 1700s, Mary Wollstonecraft argued for women's rights based on the fact that men have rights, so too should women (Holland, 2006). Dr. James Young Simpson, a Scot, proposed ending God's pre-ordained childbirth pain by giving women first ether in 1847 and then, later, chloroform, noting that a woman's contractions continued even if she was knocked out (Holland, 2006). However, the doctor would be hated and denounced from the pulpit by the religious, as they called the chloroform a distraction from Satan, robbing God of the cries of women (Holland, 2006). Holland (2006) noted that 30,000 individuals and many women attended the excellent doctor's funeral.

Also, in the mid-1800s, Henry Mayhew wrote a series of articles for a London paper that required him to go out and spend time among people with low incomes and in the slums of London. While there, Mayhew reported that the conditions in which the people lived allowed for the beating of wives and the rape of women to go virtually unnoticed (Holland, 2006). In 1857, English women won the right to divorce their husbands. While it was a victory of sorts, it came with many stipulations, such as proving the husband had committed "incestuous adultery, or of bigamy with adultery, or of rape, or of sodomy or bestiality, or adultery coupled with such cruelty as without adultery would have entitled her to a divorce" (Holland, 2006, p. 187). A

husband only had to cause his wife to commit adultery. The Married Woman's Property Act of 1870 provided more financial independence for women, but mainly for those who could afford to file for divorce (Holland, 2006). For the women who lived in the slums, their marital freedom prospects progressed much slower.

In 1902, Jack London would conduct a similar feat disguised as a working man in East London's slum, and once again, wife beating was the marital pastime for people with low incomes, according to London. Holland (2006) argued, "Poverty does not create misogyny, but . . . it tends to reinforce it" (p. 179). Although women were often beaten by their husbands, few reported the abuse, mainly because they could not survive without their spouse's income.

The reforms to the divorce laws were a threat to the standard misogynistic beliefs, just as most changes granting women a molecule of rights was from Adam and Eve to that point in time, it was a direct challenge to the conceptual ideal of man's natural superiority over women and women's natural inequality to that of man (Holland, 2006). Those natural differences justified how and why women were treated as they were. However, while women's biggest opponents will always be the misogynist themselves, their second biggest opponent, and many times the most difficult for them to fend off, are the women within who say the status quo is acceptable, leave it alone (Holland, 2006).

In 1920, the 19th Amendment gave U.S. women the right to vote. Slowly, women started entering the workforce, only to be met with head-on misogyny. Women's progress provoked misogynistic backlash at:

Several different levels: scientific, philosophical, and political. But if these reactions had a shared aim, it was to demonstrate that men's contempt for women was justified. The ancient prejudice had to be reconfirmed, if not reinforced, to reassure men that regardless of equality and women's rights certain aspects in the male-female relationship would never change. (Holland, 2006, p. 200)

From the mid-1800s to the early 1900s, women fought for the rights their mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmother, and the women before them tried to obtain in a never-ending battle. What we gain in one generation is lost by the next. For instance, the *Roe v. Wade* case won abortion rights for my mother's generation in 1973. She was in high school, about to start her own life. She had the right to control her body. Her daughters would also have that right, if she chose to have children. However, do not think that misogyny did not rear its ugly head in other ways, through abortion shaming, stigma, religious stigma, and the bombing of abortion clinics.

Unfortunately, by 2022 the conservative backlash would finally develop a strong enough foothold to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. While I have had my children, the loss will be felt by my future grandchildren and great-grandchildren as those women will have to fight for the right to control their bodies once again. Holland (2006) argued, just as much in this time, as in every time that came before, the essential fear of misogynists is that women can finally achieve control of their bodies, their reproductive fates, their right to parent their children, their lives free of marriage if they so choose, they will achieve the autonomy that every misogynistic person dreads, true freedom.

Does Holland Confirm, Embellish, or Contradict Single Mothers' Experiences?

I will now consider if Holland's (2006) work embellishes, confirms, or contradicts a single mother's internal and external experience within this chapter's focus on the institutional obstructions that make a single mother's life more difficult through the autoethnographic experiences, the contextual information, the additional single mother's stories, and the academic analysis provided below.

For Holland, misogyny has presented itself throughout his study of history as a relentless anxiety disguised as a form of protection for women—as if the protection is based on a moral high ground or a higher understanding of that moral high ground, that must be done for her wellbeing—in which, the sole purpose of that anxiety is to maintain control and superiority at all costs. If women succeed in gaining an ounce of freedom, the conservative backlash will be swift and brutal. Holland (2006) argued, “cruelty against women based on misogynistic feelings is often the norm. Women are frequently punished for their femininity, and for performing their biological role as mothers” (p. 218), which is the essential problem for every single mother within any institutional system. No matter how she comes across, she will be stigmatized and stereotyped even for doing everything right. She will never technically be in the right. For instance, let us look at Kali’s experience within the judicial system because she highlights this particular problem of double standards and how even when she does what she is supposed to do, she is still held to account by the family court and a misogynistic judge.

A Single Mother’s Story—Failing to Save Her Daughter²⁵

Kali Sunna was aware of her ex-husband’s established pattern of abuse because she had experienced it for 16 years. She knew the cycle involved 2 years or so of emotional and mental abuse that would explode into a physical attack, which was always just a matter of time (Sunna, 2016). Therefore, when her daughter came home with a bruised and puffy lip and face, with cuts on her arms and legs, she knew precisely who had hurt her child.

Kali recalled how for 10 years, she had been a regular seeker of assistance from the Bedford County and Roanoke County police departments after her husband’s physical attacks. In 2010, Bedford Domestic Violence Services had a file 2 inches thick regarding what happened in

²⁵ The following discussion of Kali Sunna’s story is based on my reading of Sunna (2016).

Kali's home. However, despite the past records, files, and calls to two different police departments, the authorities were continually baffled when the abuse and violence happened. Unfortunately, they also actively decided that what happened was the past. Therefore, it was unnecessary to consider it a consecutive event because the husband would convince them it was not his fault. According to Kali, "In the past, he has been quite successful at actually convincing the victims themselves, and others close to our family, that his outbursts were not his fault, and that his actions were not his responsibility alone" (Sunna, 2016, pp. 125–126).

When Kali's daughter came home bruised and battered, she did what any mother would do. She took her to the ER and a doctor. The ER called the Bedford County CPS and the Bedford County Sheriff's Office. Kali showed them the texts she had received from her daughter the night before while she (Kali) was asleep, detailing the assault, her fear, her dad's attack, and a picture of a bloody hand. The daughter explained the attack as follows:

She had been called ugly, and "a fucking retard" . . . she had been choked by her father's forearm, chased after, hit in the mouth twice causing a purplish swelling on her upper lip, picked up, dropped and dragged when she tried running for help, and banished to a couch in the garage for the night by herself with no heat in early March. The buildup to the assault included open humiliation of a child about her changing body followed by a forceful lecture. (Sunna, 2016, pp. 126–127)

Since CPS was already familiar with their case, they suggested Kali go straight to the court to request a protective order for her daughter, and while the CPS worker could do this, her caseload that day was heavier than usual. Plus, the CPS worker wanted the protective order to become effective before the next custody visit, so it fell on Kali to get it done.

Over the next several months, the Bedford County Sheriff's Office refused to press charges against the ex-husband because the injuries to the daughter were not severe enough. However, the deputy told Kali she could go before the Bedford County Judge, and press charges

herself if she wanted to, except the magistrate got mad and felt Kali was a parent who was trying to manipulate the system when really, she was trying to advocate for her daughter.

Unfortunately, the Judge refused to change another judge's custody order regardless of what an ER injury revealed following visitation with a parent. Of course, by the time they got to court, the ex-husband and his new wife had a completely different story. They spoke of the teenager having a tantrum and throwing herself on the ground; but the ex had no explanation for her lip injury. Before her daughter would testify in the judge's chambers, the judge was warned that the daughter had a PTSD diagnosis—which was in trigger mode at the time—and that the daughter needed to be handled with care. However, when the daughter and the judge got to his chambers, he,

Proceeded to verbally attack and berate the child when she began to bravely give testimony in chambers. His attack was so mentally damaging . . . After coming out of the Judge's chambers, she was horrified, choking on her own words, sobbing, trembling all over, and in a panic . . . The Judge had cut her off as soon as she started talking, told her to stop playing games with him, and said that her eyes and tears weren't going to get him. The Judge called her names, i.e. spoiled, and told her that what happened was her fault. When she insisted that her father had choked her during visitation, the Judge intimidated her into silence by threatening her with 'a jail cell.' She panicked for weeks and didn't sleep well for six months. As a result of this dishonorable conduct of a Judge toward a witness, her PTSD symptoms worsened significantly . . . Because I [Kali] sent a cell phone with the child to her visitation, the Judge declared in an official order that I was 'actively undermining the father's discipline.' This was in opposition to testimony (by my ex-husband's new wife) that I encouraged the child over the phone to actively listen and cooperate with both her father and with his wife, just before the incident. (Sunna, 2016, p. 129)

Then the guardian ad litem told the court the problem was with the child and not the father, despite the fact that the father had a record of this abusive behavior long before the daughter was born.

Kali argued that her ex was a manipulative abuser who was skilled at blaming others for his violence, and it happened every time he got into trouble for what he did. After all, he repeatedly hit her in the face when she was pregnant and said it was her fault. The outcome of

Kali's attempt to advocate for her daughter was not good. The guardian ad litem started a CHIPS petition claiming the child needed services for alleged behavioral issues. This means CPS, therapists, and two court jurisdictions are focused on what is wrong with the daughter rather than focusing on the real problem and that which has been documented for the past 16 years, her father's physical abuse. Although Kali was home asleep at the time of the incident, much of the Judge's issues and comments in his court order were directed at Kali and not the actual abuser. For instance, even though an ER doctor documented the physical injuries, the Judge accused Kali of fabricating the trauma in the child, which is not even possible because she had a diagnosis of PTSD—due to her father's abuse—long before the incident that brought them to the judge's courtroom. Kali was also accused of not being able to co-parent correctly, while “The Judge excused the father's domestic violence as quote unquote ‘an overreaction by the father’ and then, after verbally stating that the father ‘lost his cool,’ the Judge blamed the child for her own assault” (Sunna, 2016, p. 130). To top it off, the judge decided to diagnose the daughter with a specific mental disorder, which she has never had, and then told the father—the abuser—he was free to pick out a counselor to re-integrate the daughter back into his household regardless of any assessment of risk.

During a counseling session, the daughter refused to see the father again. The father had chased her with a machete during visitation this time, but nothing was done. Instead, the child was ordered to undergo an extensive psychological evaluation, while the father faced no consequences again. Kali's daughter was 11 years old.

Does Holland's (2006) work embellish or contradict this single mother's internal and external experience with institutional obstructions? Absolutely not. Holland managed to describe

precisely what keeps women from ever making progress, especially single mothers, without realizing it, and while it was never his intention. Holland (2006) believed:

The history of misogyny shows . . . the complexity of the relationship between women and men. It is biological, sexual, psychological, social, economic and political. It is a Gordian knot of interwoven dependencies, involving our very existence both as individuals and as a species. If we cut through that knot, where among the tangled skeins will we find the source of men's contempt for women? Every level from the biological to the political at which women and men relate to each other has generated a theory of misogyny. All of them assume that at the core of this contempt is men's fear of women stemming from the recognition that women are different from men in potentially threatening ways. (p. 255)

Holland (2006) also admitted that not all men are misogynists. I agree there as well. There are, however, two points where we disagree. He does not necessarily accept the idea that patriarchy is a system by which the power lies in men's hands, and therefore women are continually victimized as the underclass. He does not believe patriarchy is to blame because misogyny is the ideology that springs up to justify women's lowly status. It is almost as if misogyny is its own independent entity.

Holland explained the two reasons for this justification as follows. First, he believed misogyny exists in all cultures, even in ones where he thought it should not. But he does not specify that expectation. The second reason, he argued, was that misogyny is hallucinatory, as in not tangible. I do not believe misogyny just pops up. Yes, misogyny is an ideology, and no, not every male is a misogynist.

As an ideology, misogyny has infiltrated people utilizing either the Fall of Man myth or the Pandora myth, spreading like wildfire and fueling the basis for patriarchy. Then when patriarchy needed a way to enforce the rules and to keep women in control, hegemonic masculinity became the strong-arm enforcer. These institutions uphold archaic ideas of right and wrong that punish single moms for doing their best and stop single moms from protecting their children to preserve a father's patriarchal right based on misogynistic ideas grounded and

legitimized in patriarchy. So, do I think misogyny is merely a hallucinatory aspect of society?

No. I do not. I have been on the front lines. I have tried to protect my children. I have known the despair of utter defeat, when the best I can hope for is that today, just for today they (my boys) will be okay.

I am not alone. Hendren (2016) also argued:

As someone who has been both a married mother and a single mother, I can tell you that there is a big difference in the way the world treats you. There is also an enormous difference as to what your perceived “rights” are. (p. 1)

CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

The Dissertation's Purpose

The primary purpose of this dissertation was to shed light on the complexity of the single motherhood experience, both internally and externally. The dissertation is significant due to the contextual autoethnographic method applied to capture the single mother experience, which allowed for more of an extensive length of time to take a deeper dive into the single mother experience than had previously been allowed before. Typically, studies have focused on one aspect of the experience but have yet to try to capture a lengthier grouping of time. The contextual side of the autoethnographic method required capturing newspaper clippings from my lifetime and when I was a single mother, as I wanted to understand better what was also happening at that time. What may have been influencing some of the people in my life that I was encountering? I read a lot of Minnesota Laws and Statues along the way, as I learned things I thought women—myself included—had a right to, such as a marriage free from rape, only to discover we did not. Also, I was able to take a deeper dive into my religious upbringing, which required looking past my anger. Was what I remembered in my youth what they stood for, or was I mistaken? What happened in the larger congregation when I was confirmed, married, divorced, and my children were confirmed? How do all those moments and ideological differences affect us and our families during those pivotal moments in time?

This dissertation closely examined Holland's (2006) *A Brief History of Misogyny: The World's Oldest Prejudice* to show how misogyny as an ideology branched out through two myths, the Fall of Man and Pandora. From those myths, misogyny would be born. Misogyny is an ideology of dualisms—women must be morally protected and, at the same time,

controlled—which would infiltrate everything, every religion, political ideology, concept, society, and institution, through the historical usage of patriarchy, the idea of males as the head of the household, and women as not. This dissertation shows how Holland’s work can be extended into the realm of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity and how those have infiltrated modern-day institutional obstructions that a single mother will come up against as she fights for her family’s freedom. I show how hegemonic masculinity appears in the form of everyday lived experience, from stereotypes to stigmatization, to my own lived experience, and through the lived experience of the single mother stories I incorporated into the dissertation to help illustrate other single mothers’ experiences with institutional obstructions. Our stories are not an aberration. They are the norm.

Therefore, the proposed research questions for this dissertation were:

1. How do misogyny, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity show up in the social systems and institutions designed to help single mothers and the social systems and institutions a single mother is most likely to encounter?
2. How did misogyny, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity appear in my own life as a single mother through the social systems and institutions I encountered?

Single Mothers Specialize in Resilience Leadership

At the beginning of the dissertation, I wrote that I preferred Coutu’s (2002) explanation of resilience. Coutu believed there were three distinct elements to resilience: A single mother has these elements more than any other because it may be all she has as she fights to keep her children safe for one more day.

Face Down Reality

Coutu (2002) argued that resilience was the ability to face reality. I used to tell myself on my worst days as a single mother, “Remember, your worst day as a single mom is better than your best day married to him.” There were days I told myself that all day long. They say you cannot be discriminated against for being a single mom, but they can find other reasons to say no. I still deal with it daily. Whether I am trying to get a home or car loan, it is hit or miss, despite an improved credit rating. When employers find out I have PTSD, they do one of two things: embrace it and work with me or use it against me to get me out because they do not understand and do not want to understand. It depends upon if they feel I have a legitimate enough reason to have PTSD. I wish they knew how much I did not want it and never wanted it.

There was a winter, I was forced to work many hours for a photo directory from 8 a.m. to 12 a.m., 7 days a week, all of January, February, March, and April. If I took a vacation day, I would be back working later that day. When I asked for help, I was refused. I said to assign someone else. I cannot do this, nothing. When my aunt died, the one who raised my dad, I still ended up working at night. I could not fully be present for the funeral of the woman I loved more than anything. I tried to set boundaries. I sent firm emails trying to set boundaries. I was desperate. I would let them know the hours I worked on the weekends. I emailed HR, hoping someone would tell that person to settle down. I cannot work as a salaried person 8 a.m. to 12 a.m., 7 days a week. No one stepped in. No one. I finished the project in the timeline she set, working nonstop.

Then I was told there would be a meeting to “finalize the photo directory.” Me, my boss, and the boss would be there. I went thinking we would be talking about bills and whatever was left. Boy, was I wrong. The head boss started attacking me. “You are a horrible person to work with,” “You make working relationships tough,” “You send snarky emails,” “Do you realize you

are the problem”—and she just kept going. It was too late when I realized it was an ambush. She triggered the PTSD. I reacted. I thought I got out of the call and hung up before saying anything too bad. I do not know. I do not remember. I have not been triggered like that in a long time. I thought I said, “How can I be the problem? Do you know what I did for you all winter?” To which the head boss said, “That is not my problem.”

At that point, I said, “I am not doing this. I have other things to do,” I hung up on the Zoom call. However, they have many things they said I said before I hung up that Zoom call. It is not impossible. I could have said those things.

I have never been written up, but they claim it is an ongoing problem in my write-up. Although, I have yet to be written up or receive any other types of warnings to my knowledge during my time with the organization. In the end, they gave me less than a week to apologize to the head boss, or else I would be fired. Technically, it was supposed to be 1 week, but with Juneteenth being a holiday, I was not even afforded an extra workday for that.

It did not occur to me until sometime later, that my head boss, my boss, and HR all know I have PTSD. They all have known I am not supposed to be in situations like that, per my doctor’s orders, and that if we are going to be talking about conduct, good or bad, they should forewarn me, and have known this since my first year with the organization. I was not forewarned. Instead, they placed on that write-up that “I need to learn methods to cope better when I am triggered.” There was nothing in the writing about being set up to fail. I have gone 6 years without being triggered. So, how does an organization cover its own tail and eliminate someone who has been fighting back in the only way she knew how, by emailing, stating there is a problem, and asking for help, when there were questionable work ethic issues all winter long? Exploit the weakness and trigger the PTSD. Get her to react, and she will fire herself.

As a single mom on one income, I could not quit during that winter when I was treated worse than a dog. I wanted to. I applied. I interviewed for other jobs. I do not have a second income to rely on. I cannot just walk away. The head boss knew that, and so did my boss, which was why they ignored my repeated attempts to obtain help or when I asked to be removed. Can a single mother be exploited in a professional position? Hell yes.

I wish I could say the struggle ends, but it does not. However, when I called my boys to tell them that I would likely be fired, they said, “Mom, you were there for us when we needed you with Dad and his wife, no questions asked. We will be there for you. Besides, you taught us to fight, even when the odds look impossible. We fight for what we believe in and do not put up with abuse. You put up with abuse all winter. Enough is enough. It is time to fight.”

As a newly single mom, I had a sponsor who said, “Just for today. Let us take it one problem at a time.” One problem at a time, that is how a single mother faces down reality.

Acceptance

The second element of resilience for Coutu (2002) was acceptance of a particular moment in time (as cited in Hormann, 2018). Often that acceptance comes with a search for meaning, which is found in the journey toward one’s values and beliefs (Coutu, 2002).

Acceptance for a single mother was not about letting everyone walk over you. Hendren (2016) stated:

You don’t just recover from being a single mother. You deal with it the best way you can . . . we are shining the light on an important human rights violation—and allowing other women to do the same. We are demanding better lives for ourselves and our children. So often, we are told to just suck it up—for the sake of our children. The only group that our silence helps are the men who don’t do their part—and the agencies who allow them to get away with it. (pp. 4–5)

It is possible to accept our experience as single mothers and then use our experience to fight for change for other single mothers. Sometimes, how we choose to fight looks different. I have seen

some single moms who create more of a collective experience. They have a network of professional single moms and single moms who work together to help each other navigate family court, pick up kids, or help with whatever happens in each other's lives.

When I sat in the M.F.A. classes, writing my stories about my life, I was trying to process what was happening in an environment I could not or would not understand, but that was okay. Professors at Minnesota State University, Mankato, allowed me to bring my youngest son to class, no questions asked, every time he had a no-school day, which seemed to be all the time. He would sit in a corner desk, playing a game or watching TV on my phone with his headphones on, totally oblivious to what was happening in class. He was my shadow at school for 6 years because I could not leave him with my ex's girlfriend/wife for fear of what she would do. If those teachers had made him sit in the hallway, I would have been there with my son, listening through the open door to class. Yes, I am that kind of a protective mother. I have to be within arm's reach of my kids. However, how bad must it be at your dad's house when you are 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14 years old, and you would instead follow your mom, probably be bored to tears because of the classes she takes, but yet, that was somehow better than the chance that "she" will be having a bad day and take it out on you. We made the best of it, played chess with the outdoor life-sized chess pieces at lunch, and tried to make each day at the college an adventure as much as possible.

As an adjunct professor, I get to pay forward what those professors did for me. Once, I had a student who missed 2 weeks of school. I thought she quit, but she showed back up. When I asked what had happened, she said she had run into some problems with money and had to work to get some things taken care of before she could return. I explained that by missing the four classes, she had technically failed already. She was upset, and I could understand. The semester

just started. So, I gave her one more chance. If she did not miss another class all semester and got all her work in on time, I would not count it against her. She pulled it off. She was an A student, and she never missed a day. Sometimes, hard times fall on us all, and sometimes we all need a second chance.

Ritualized Ingenuity

For Coutu (2002), ritualized ingenuity is the uncanny ability to take a dire circumstance, learn from it, and improvise. For my boys and I, ritualized ingenuity often presented itself as humor. When everything went wrong, if we could still laugh, we were okay. When we were at the farmhouse, getting the boys up in the morning could be a chore, especially my youngest. He was not a morning person. He took after my father, kind of a grumpy bear in the morning. One morning, I walked into their room thinking I had shut all the alarms off my phone. As I reached down to wake my oldest, who was 10, my phone alarm went off. Up jumped my youngest son. My oldest and I watched him run out of the room, down the hall, hook the corner, fly down the steps, and disappear. While watching him, I grabbed my phone and shut off the alarm. My oldest said, “What got into him?”

“No idea,” I responded.

When my oldest and I descended the stairs, my youngest was waiting by the door with his coat, boots, and hat. Confused, we looked at each other and then him. He said, “Hurry up. There is a fire.”

My oldest started to laugh. “That was Mom’s phone, silly.”

A few years into the divorce, the Dodge Intrepid’s AC stopped working. One hot summer day, my sons asked me to turn on the AC. So, I rolled down the windows. They were not with me the day prior when I had realized AC would not be a luxury we would have that summer.

“No,” my oldest said, “Mom, you need to turn the AC on.”

“I did,” I said. “It is centrally located outside the car.”

My next car was an Impala, which worked beautifully for several years. We never had a problem with the AC. We did have a problem with the heater in the winter. It fogged the windows up so severely that you could not see. Therefore, whenever I drove the car or was teaching the boys to drive, we had to crack all four windows on the doors to keep the air circulating just enough so the windshield remained clear.

We have had an odd assortment of mowers over the years as well. When you are on a limited budget, you make do. My favorite, which I still use, is the push mower/slash trimmer. It is technically a push mower, or was, in its day. It is half trimmer because the guard for the grass clipping is gone, and the metal where the guard was is cracked with one metal piece that hangs down, so it works like a grass gatherer pulling wayward strands toward the mower for destruction. One of its four wheels flips up, which helps the trimming aspect allowing me to get close to objects, but it could be better on the lawn itself when it looks a bit like a tri-pod. Plus, the handlebar portion is held on by duct tape at the base connecting it to the mower. It sounds awful, but it has kept working for the past 12 years, and we only spent \$50 on her. Whenever my son sees me mow with her, he shakes his head.

Coutu (2002) argued that we realized we had resilience after the fact. I agree. When I was in the thick of single motherhood, I felt like I was holding on by my fingertips, and sometimes, I still do. Resilience is not something I would have attributed to myself, but here we are, my sons and me. The three of us have a very close relationship. Do we wish the circumstances of that period could have been different? Yes. Am I proud of the men they became? Yes. Was I thrilled the day my youngest son graduated? Oh yes, I was! Did the crap end? No.

When the boys were little and growing up, I told them repeatedly, “You have to stick together. You will be stronger together against them than you ever will be apart.” For a long time, that was what their motto was. Now, as they have girlfriends come into the mess we call life, they still follow the same rule. They tell their girlfriends, “We are stronger if we stick together. Do not let them divide us. We will always be stronger together than we ever will be apart.”

What Does This Mean for Organizations?

I hope that if an organization were to pick up this dissertation, they would consider the complexity of the single mother’s experience and the complexity of the abuser’s web that she must navigate. Not all abusers are physically abusive. I would argue that the ones that can operate in daylight, act like the perfect guy, with the perfect image, and still manage to destroy her life while everyone is watching, are also problem. Anytime any abuser—no matter what their specialty is—can enlist others to destroy the woman’s life whether those who are enlisted are cognizant of their active participation or not, they are still complicit and need to be held to account for their actions.

This includes churches. I agree with West (2006) that churches should be held responsible for policies and instructions where the sole purpose is to teach—or brand—children, girls, and women with the ideology that they do not have a voice, that they do not matter, that they are to live a life of drudgery and subjugation. Churches that hide behind the idea that the Equal Rights Amendment does not need to be passed out are fooling themselves and should be held to account for peddling untruths that will continue to keep women locked up in the cycle of misogyny, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity. Nothing changes if nothing changes. Branding takes years to undo, if ever. We have to realize that what we teach our children and the

religious ideologies we expose them to impacts them for life. It can be the difference between choosing a healthy relationship in later years and an abusive one. Somedays, I have a better connection to my faith than others. Somedays, that old branding from childhood rings loud and clear. On those days, I must remember that if God is love, the church of my youth is wrong.

I used to dread going to my children's school conferences with my ex-husband. He never failed in his humiliation tactics, ever, and no one ever called him out on it, ever. We would get into the conference, and at some point, he would outright verbally bash me in front of my children's teacher, and they would laugh as if it were funny every time. Every single time. It did not matter if the teacher was male or female. They would laugh as if he was joking. He was not joking. I knew he was not joking. He knew that I knew he was not joking, but it only emboldened him more, especially if the joke contained a threat to me and dealt with what would happen to the boys when the punishment was carried out by his live-in girlfriend/wife. That was not a laughing matter, especially when my youngest was in grade school at that time and was desperately trying to get anyone to listen to him about what was happening with her at his dad's home during the day.

There were many times when I knew why I refused a request, refused to work, or ended up in a doctor's office with my child rather than where I was supposed to be on a given day. Most often, I was forced to lie about where I was and what I was doing to minimize the impact on something I needed, like my education or my job. I could not tell my professors I had to stay home with my son because my ex-husband was manipulative and he waited until the last minute to back out of child's doctor appointment, or that it was his weekend and, once again, my children are dog-tired, too tired to function without a day to sleep it off. In fact, he was excellent at getting the children so tired from his weekend so that I had to keep them home after the night

they spent with me, as this functioned on two levels. Not only would it ensure I blew a test I needed to be at for college, which he may have heard the boys mention in passing over the weekend prior, or that I missed work and valuable pay, but for the boys' school, it looked like I was the parent who was irresponsible. After all, I kept them home after my nights with the children. Therefore, I was the reason they were not allowed to get an education, which at one point did land me a threatening note from my youngest son's school. If I kept him home one more time that year, they planned to turn me over to the county. They never asked why I kept him home or what was going on. Not once did they look beyond the obvious because they did not care. My son's rural school system had made up their minds. I was the problem. Never once did they consider that my youngest son barely made it through school on Mondays after his Dad's weekends—even if they sent a note home multiple times saying our son was tired on Mondays—which should have been their first clue that if I was keeping him home on Tuesdays, it might have been to help him catch up on sleep and that the problem was not with me. However, they never noticed that pattern. The fact was our youngest son needed his sleep. He still does need a lot of sleep to function, as that has never changed.

When I needed to rely on my ex-husband, he bailed, especially if he knew I needed him, and the consequences of him not being there would be significantly felt in my life each and every time. Otherwise, he had no problem meeting his obligations. He conveniently bailed on us while I tried to get an education and any job or position, I held outside of the barns, especially in the first six months to a year that I held that new position. He would go out of his way to make my life more difficult. In fact, anything that bettered my life, and by extension my children's lives, it was merely a given that he would immediately try to disrupt it. Therefore, when I say I lived my life by a code of silence, it was a code of silence. The less he knew about our lives the better off

we were, which is hard to do when the court system will not let us leave or let us protect ourselves meaningfully at the time of the divorce. People think the worst of single mothers rather than honestly considering what we are up against, or we are told we are being paranoid when we try to relay our experience and our fears for the future. As stated by Bancroft (2002) earlier:

We need to create a social ethic that makes it clear that anyone who chooses to go to bat for a man accused of abuse has a responsibility to get all the facts and not just the view that he promotes. The abuse of women is simply too rampant for anyone to assume that an allegation is false or exaggerated without checking it out very, very carefully. (pp. 352–353)

We absolutely do because that culture would not hold a single mother responsible for trying her best in impossible circumstances.

Misogyny, Patriarchy, and Hegemonic Masculinity

Holland (2006) proved misogyny is the most persistent and tenacious prejudice ever to infiltrate humankind as it seamlessly embeds itself within social, religious, and political issues throughout history. I agree with his concern that society, for some reason, maintains an inability to see and recognize misogyny even in 2023. I feel that by utilizing Holland's theory to extend it into the internal and external lived experience of single mothers, I was able to reveal how society continues successfully to justify the oppression and brutalization of half the population of the world. In this instance, through the treatment of single mothers with the usage of stigmatization, stereotypes, and institutional obstructions. Holland was alarmed to realize how quickly misogyny was a socially accepted norm within history. Still, everyone should be alarmed at how long misogyny has operated and the scope of its damage. Holland believed the reforms to the divorce laws were a threat to the standard misogynistic beliefs, just as most changes granting women a molecule of rights from Adam and Eve to any point in time have been. If the change was a direct challenge to the conceptual ideal of man's natural superiority over women and women's natural inequality to that of men, it had to be squashed (Holland, 2006). The divorce laws Holland

referenced were from hundreds of years ago. However, that statement is as true today as it was then. The history of misogyny has repeatedly demonstrated how dualistic systems of thought place women on the losing end of the spectrum every single time, as men deserve to enjoy positions of privilege and power.

What Solana (Simpson, 2016) experienced for abuse was not deemed valid by the family court system because the court would split the children anyhow. Solana said:

If our culture cannot even see their way through the inherent injustice of an unsafe, overtly violent situation, how is it going to serve families like mine—where the abuse is covert and pernicious, and where my ex uses the court system itself to punish and subjugate me? My answer to that is the system is not set up to serve families and children at all. It is set up to serve the very people who created it: White men. It is set up to receive all of their projection, inherent role dominance, and the desires of men. I was married to patriarchy, and I am still fighting it every day. (Simpson, 2016, p. 47)

That is misogyny, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity working together. It does not have to be this way.

We can do better.

Recommendations From This Study

The recommendations that arise from the present study are presented in three sections:

- for future research and practice,
- for future advocates, organizations, and institutions,
- for future policies.

Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

While conducting my research, there were several times when future research questions occurred to me. For instance, it appeared that as the 2008–2010 recession was ramping up in our area, I wondered how badly the welfare and welfare criminalization attacks were taking place across the country in media, both large and small. What were political people saying on both sides regarding welfare? Did it stop once the recession got better? Then I would go further back

in time to the recession that took place before 2008-2010 and conduct the same study. I would then move forward in time and conduct the study right now—the post COVID-19 recession—as we appear to be in a bit of a recession or wait for the recession to get a bit deeper. Basically, I would look for three recession points in time and focus on what was being recounted in the news. At what point do we stop blaming poor people for the economy before, during, and after a recession? Do we ever stop blaming the poor and/or single mothers?

A comment often seen in the literature was that researchers could not investigate emotional or verbal abuse allegations made by mothers or single mothers who are jealous of their ex-husband's new girlfriends and wives because verbal abuse was hard to substantiate. I do not believe it is hard to substantiate. Often, researchers do not have the resources to do the work, and it is easier to look the other way. I would conduct a study to look at the people who take those claims and say verbal abuse cannot be proven. What makes them think the mom is lying? I would also want to go into the home of the person accused of verbal abuse and find out if the mothers are telling the truth. Emotional and verbal abuse is just as harmful, if not more, than physical abuse. No child should ever have to live in a home where those elements are present. So, let us prove it one way or the other. Let us stop pretending verbal abuse cannot be proven because it can be proven.

In the section where the custodial disputes ended with the mother's death, I feel those are the cases where Family Court should open those records up to academics who are single mothers and who have experienced the system and to academics who have never experienced the family court system. Then let the two groups comb through the files. Let the groups interview the family members, the criminal, the witnesses, the attorneys, the family court members, social services, and anyone else involved. Then allow the two groups to write up their reports. I would suspect

that the single mother group that experienced abuse and family court will be able to tell you exactly where the family court went wrong. Furthermore, the academics with no experience, well, I would be curious to see if they can see past the misogyny, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity to view the real problem. I feel it would be an eye-opening study into precisely what is wrong within our judicial system. From the study, a new set of rules and regulations should be put into place for education surrounding intimate partner violence, sexual assault, harassment, and trauma with all officers of the court as I think a lot could be learned about how to effectively train people to see abusers for who they are, so they stop using the system to their advantage.

I think women need a better understanding of how the Bible is being used and manipulated to affect religious practice for the subjugation and control of women, as West (2006) stated to stop the traumatization of the next generation because it clearly has not stopped. It would also be a good idea to study other religious philosophy's main texts for the same ideologies and principles to see how those texts are also used and manipulated to affect religious practice for the subjugation and control of women. It would interesting to see which tactics are applied across cultures and religions.

Recommendations for Future Advocates, Organizations, and Institutions

There is a lot that this dissertation has implications for in terms of how it could help future advocates, organizations, and institutions. When a custodial or divorce ends up with one or the other parent dead, that should always trigger an automatic Family Court evaluation by an outside entity. The evaluator should come in and interview everyone involved with the case, the family, the family court, the lawyers, look at the records, and come up with a report of where the family court or the police or social services, whichever institution, went wrong. Some of those deaths, like Svetlana's and Ashley's, could have been avoided. However, we cannot begin to

help women if officers of the court, social services, police officers, and others cannot learn to see abusers for who they are as they come into contact with them within the institutions where the women go for assistance and will most likely also be with their abusers as the women beg for help.

This also means mandatory education on intimate partner violence, which should be more than just the month of October. There should be in-service training monthly centered on intimate partner violence, physical violence, emotional violence, and sexual violence. Intimate partner violence is not about men losing control or lacking control of their emotions or that once they learn better tactics, the problem is solved. They never abuse again, or the abuse that happened in the past is somehow not relevant to what the single mother is experiencing right that moment. The dynamics of verbal and emotional abuse, The Power and Control Wheel, and how all of those play out within the institutional setting are extremely important. Also, no employee should be above having to attend. Everyone must be present, whether at the highest of the law or the custodian. There should also be training in PTSD and the different forms of trauma. What it looks like, how it presents itself, and how a survivor or victim will most likely get diagnosed. They also need to know that PTSD and trauma does not mean a mother cannot be a mother.

I would suggest that social services do random checks of their employee's caseloads. Why are they pulling the same people into the office for "infractions." Are they really "infractions?" Or is it stigmatization, biases, and stereotypes? There should also be proper training at all within social services to get everyone to consciously be aware of their own preconceived stereotypes, stigmatizations, and biases they may hold, or even to be aware of ones they grew up with but thought they outgrew, regarding the populations they work with. There is

no shame in learning and education, in challenging old ideas. The only way to combat ignorance is through education.

Recommendations for Future Policies

We need to pass the Equal Rights Amendment. Without it, women will continue to fight the same battles from one generation to the next as we struggle for control over our bodies, our minds, and our lives. We will never be treated as equals in the court of law until it is passed. We will never have an equal say in our children's lives until it is passed. Our lives will not matter, we will continue to be treated as property, and our voices will never be heard as worthy until we are guaranteed Equal Rights by the Constitution of the United States of America.

Conclusion

Acknowledging All Stories as Valid

bell hooks has long been one of my favorite theorists. She argued that when women are abused or hit, a patriarchal society will rationalize the abuse away as she was hysterical and lost control (hooks, 2020). In an essay in which she spoke of being hit in a relationship, she recalled how sharing with her new partners in an early relationship how she was hurt as a child provided the perfect model with detailed instructions for the incoming partner to merely store and wait, biding their time to take over control, because now they know what has worked in the past (hooks, 2020). They know what to employ in the future to get what they want (hooks, 2020). It is uncanny to think intimate partner violence abusers would be so heartless, and yet, I should not surprise at this point:

There is no attention given to sharing woundedness in such a way that we let intimate others know exactly what can be done to hurt us, to make us feel as though we are caught in the destructive patterns we have struggled to break. When partners create scenarios of abuse similar, if not exactly the same, to those we have experienced in childhood, the wounded person is hurt not only by the physical pain but by the feeling of calculated betrayal. (hooks, 2020, p. 263)

However, who has not sat with someone they cared about in those early days of a new relationship and shared their hurts, those things they do not want to replicate in the fledgling relationship, thinking they are somehow setting boundaries and road map for what will not happen?

hooks (2020) argued that while we focus on extreme physical and sexual abuse, we forget about those who may experience physical and sexual abuse that looks different from what we may typically hear about. Therefore, it is just as crucial for research to look at cases that are not as typical, like those that might only happen once or do not follow a typical abusive pattern (hooks, 2020). How do those survivors recover (hooks, 2020)? According to hooks (2020), the marking of a woman, as in what it means to be a fallen woman, is something to consider also, as:

Within [a] patriarchal society, women who are victimized by male violence have had to pay a price for breaking the silence and naming the problem. They have had to be seen as fallen women, who have failed in their 'feminine' role to sensitize and civilize the beast in the man. A category like 'battered woman' risks reinforcing this notion that the hurt woman, not only the rape victim, becomes a social pariah, set apart, marked forever by this experience. (p. 265)

According to Bancroft (2002), what is not helpful is when the inability to believe women spills over into every institution, including courts, so that when women come forward, the tendency is to view the problem as she said. He denies it, so why bother, as if by the man's simple denial, the case is closed (Bancroft, 2002). Alternatively, he denies the abuse and conducts a cross-accusation, merely the abuser denying his conduct because her perceptions are distorted (Bancroft, 2002). According to Schur (2020), when a woman's claims of victimization are not taken seriously, offenders are not punished for their crimes. All of these are social indicators of how little power women have in society.

Emotional Maltreatment

While researching this dissertation, I did investigate the Minnesota Statute that relates most to emotional abuse for children—The Juvenile Court Act. Its provisions would have made what was happening to my youngest son, what he still deals with today from his stepmother, punishable by law since Minnesota acknowledged verbal and emotional abuse as valid. The “Domestic Violence and Child Custody” section above pointed to Minnesota Statutes that specifically said she was not exempt from prosecution for her actions, despite what every lawyer I encountered said. When I looked at the definitions provided for in Section 260C.0007 of the Juvenile Court Act, I found,

“Emotional maltreatment” means the consistent, deliberate infliction of mental harm on a child by a person responsible for the child’s care that has an observable, sustained, and adverse effect on the child’s physical, mental, or emotional development. [However] “Emotional maltreatment” does not include reasonable training or discipline administered by the person responsible for the child’s care or the reasonable exercise of authority by that person. (Emotional Maltreatment, 2022)

As with the Juvenile Court Act above, the first sentence makes it clear what is not allowed, and the second sentence provides for an obscure way out of trouble. Why is it that a law is created to protect against abusers and then another law immediately lets the abuser off free of charge when it comes to crimes against our children or us as women? It is no different from the rape laws of the 1970s. Rape is made illegal—but a clause is added that keeps marital rape legal. It is almost as if misogyny says, “Look here. I gave you this, but I am keeping this.” The problem is some women will fight for the easiest thing to obtain first. They stop after securing the first item, perhaps thinking, “Well, this is a start. We can fight for that second thing later.” But many never return to fight for the second thing. Hewett (2016) succinctly argued, “As a single mother in patriarchy I have learned that I must not trust, I must consider my future. And as a single mother in patriarchy, I must live with the experience of being an inconvenience. An irritation” (p. 59). I

would argue that for a single mother, resilience requires a tenacious ability to subvert power structures to create a life within the mess, and sometimes those power structures are one's ex-husband.

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