

Who We Became

Sarah Senet

To anybody scared,
To anybody in need of safety,
To anybody interested in helping,
To anybody.

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Introduction

I decided to focus on experiences of domestic violence for my senior project because to me, it isn't talked about enough. Especially not in schools, where the education about patterns of abuse **should** start.

I was put in contact with the women who gave me their testimonies through social media, and most of the interviews occurred on Zoom, due to the pandemic. However, I had the chance to conduct one of them in person. Being in front of the person you are interviewing makes it easier to stay focused, to pay attention and show you are paying attention. On the other hand, Zoom creates a bit of a barrier between interviewer and interviewee, because being connected is so important for the topic of this project, being able to connect to whoever is sitting in front of you.

A lot of emotions were exchanged between those courageous people and me, and my goal is to share those emotions with you, the reader, in as raw a way as possible. For brevity and clarity purposes, some excerpts of the anecdotes have been edited. For privacy purposes, I have changed names to safely share their stories as accurately as possible.

This is a book written from my point of view, a 17 year-old teenager, with my authentic reactions and feelings. Some of the reflection passages are written in more colloquial language; this was intentional. I decided to keep the writing style my own, instead of trying to sound more professional or experienced; this is because all of the knowledge I have is what is going to be presented throughout this book.

Writing *Who We Became* was and still is a process. Each interview, each chapter is a new experience and that is what I love about this project. There may be emotional weight to bear but being able to gain perspective on all of these stories is what makes it worth writing and learning about.

Note: "XX" means that there was information I preferred not to share, for privacy reasons. It may be a child's current age, a location (like a town close by), depending on the context. States have been left public. These decisions were made not to censor stories, but to protect the privacy and anonymity of the women who chose to share their stories with me.

It is important for me to warn you, the reader, that the stories in this book get intense, and the content could be triggering to certain parties. Here is a list of the topics mentioned:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Violence- Substance abuse (alcohol, pills, drugs)- Pornography addiction- Rape	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Graphic images described- Child abuse and neglect- Some cursing- Stalking- Suicide
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At the beginning of each chapter, I will tell you which topics are mentioned so that you can make an informed decision about what to read. You may choose to skip chapters that could be triggering entirely or you may decide to come back to them at a later point

If, at any point, you realize that you feel unsafe and/or relate to some stories and feel like you need help, I encourage you to contact any of these **HOTLINES** for immediate help:

- +1 (877) 785-2020 (MA statewide SafeLink hotline, Spanish & English)
- +1 (800) 799-SAFE (7233) (national domestic violence hotline, bilingual also)

Chapter 1 - Heather

Trigger warning: This chapter mentions the topics of: violence, substance abuse (alcohol), child abuse

The following is the original transcript of Heather's experience.

My name is Heather, I am 47 years old. I have lived in upstate New York for around twenty years, but I grew up all around the world because my dad was in the Air Force.

I met the man who was abusive to me when I was 17 and we stayed together for 3 years total. His name was Mike. First we were just high school friends, but I had a huge crush on him, so did everybody at my school. Everybody looked up to him. I like to joke that I won the boogie prize, because I was the one to find out he was actually a terrible person.

So we ended up dating when I was 19. After dating for a while, I became pregnant with my son, Tom, and we decided to move in together. As soon as we lived together, he started beating me up, but that wasn't all. He also was very controlling of the money and of the only car we owned. I didn't have access to my bank account, I had absolutely no control over anything. He was very emotionally abusive even before we moved in together. He called me nasty things, he would get mad and hang up on the phone, he would tear apart pictures. He tore my senior pictures apart. These are all things I should have seen, but I didn't.

Now, I for sure realize that there were big red flags, but when you are young and you don't know what you are doing, you can't see the signs. If girls were educated in schools to observe those red flags, a lot of women would have had it easier to make a plan and escape. Now, if I see those signs in someone else's relationship, I immediately am like "Wow, you need to step away right now".

He abused me pretty badly. He would hit me a lot, he would drag me by my hair. Most of the time, he hit me in the face or the head, he would pull my hair out, etc. The hitting was probably around once a week, sometimes it was more, sometimes it was less. As well as emotionally and verbally abusing me, of course. ... "You're fat, you're ugly, nobody wants you".

Every time I tried to leave him, he became even more abusive, so I kept calling the police for help. The police would come to my house and tell me things like "Are you sure you want him arrested? Are you sure you want us to take him away? You could try to talk to him first" but they never made him leave. And of course, I would then get punished for having called the cops because they would leave me there alone with him.

He drank a lot, and that made the abuse worse, but he would still abuse me when he was sober but wanted to be drinking instead. He didn't have money to go to the bar, he was probably in withdrawal, therefore irritable, he would get pissed off at the slightest thing and take it out on me. And since we lived in such a small town, he knew all the policemen and they were nice to him. That's why he never got arrested.

Sometimes he would pull my hair out, and people would notice, like my hairdresser. There were so many times I could have said something, asked for help. But I was ashamed. Especially since my mom kept telling me to go back and stop arguing with him so I wouldn't get hit again. I couldn't do anything, so I started thinking it was my fault.

And a lot of people would think: "Yeah, but why didn't she just leave?", but the thing is that I could not leave, at least at the time. I didn't have any money, and my family wasn't supportive of me at all. When I told my mom I was being abused, she told me that if I stopped provoking him maybe he would stop hitting me.

He never really gave me a reason for hitting me. It was always, "You're a bitch and if you didn't act like this I wouldn't hit you". Always something like that. But nothing normal, nothing valid, not that there is a valid reason for getting hit, but you get it. His reasons didn't make sense. If we were in the car and he was driving, he would just go and punch me when I was sitting next to him.

At some point, my brother found out. He didn't have a place for me to stay, but he kept telling me that I needed to leave. Unfortunately, I didn't have the money. I couldn't do anything, so my brother started trying to help me. He gave me some sort of pepper spray and told me to hide it somewhere in the house for the next time Mike would try to hit me. He also told me to call the state police¹ because they wouldn't let him go like the local police did so many times.

The time came, and he hit me. I had put the pepper spray between the bed and the house phone, like in the old days. He hit me, and I ran there to call the police. When he tried to stop me from calling, I sprayed him in the face and that was the best day ever. Seriously. I called the state police, they came, they arrested him, and they forbid him to come back into the house. So I got to stay in the house for at least a little while in order to find a new place. He didn't stop there though.

I got orders of protection² from the court and he would violate them. He broke into my house, he also lived in my basement for a while without me knowing, which is super creepy. He stole my mail, and when I would drop my son, Tom, off to see him, he would call me bad names and sometimes even hit me. It wasn't my decision to let Tom see him, the judge said

¹ Can also be called state patrol, depending on the location

² Official document signed by a judge in court meant to protect one from harassment or abuse

he had to visit his dad. So Tom would go see Mike because the court said it was okay since he never hit him. However, when my son was 5, Mike punched him in the face. He hasn't seen him since then.

The worst thing Mike ever did was one time, I gave him my son and I was walking away to get to my car. He started calling me a whore, chased after me, jumped on me, grabbed my hair and hit my head on the driveway so hard he broke my jaw. I called the local police but they didn't actually do anything and he didn't get arrested then. That is the story I remember the most specifically, because it was so hurtful. Everything else is sort of blending in together, because it has been 27 years since it all happened, after all. It also just happened so often that I didn't really make a distinction between all the events.

By then, I was working with a domestic violence organization, and they acted as an advocate for me. I called them from the hospital, and they went to the district attorney to issue a warrant for his arrest. He got arrested. The police didn't make it happen, but the advocate did. They are so important. They went to court with me, stood near me so he couldn't hurt me, they helped me get daycare for Tom, they helped me with services so that I could afford to pay for things, they were the reason I survived leaving him.

I think it is important to say that I didn't leave for myself. I didn't have enough self confidence for that. I left because my son saw my ex-husband hit me. I have a very good memory of that, actually. My son was sitting in his high chair in the kitchen, and we got into a fight. I don't even know why, but he came across the kitchen and hit me, and because I fell, my son flew off the high chair. Tom was going "Don't hit mommy, don't hit mommy!", and that is when I knew I was going to leave, because I had to. For my son. By leaving him then I left right in time for my son not to be affected by the abuse he was witnessing. But when he found out, years later, that his father was abusive, he said that he remembered when Mike hit me. He said: "It was in a brown kitchen and I was wearing green pajamas". I was really shocked. He remembered the colors, the sounds, but nothing else.

I was such a weak person then. I was shy and I was very scared. It took me a year to realize I deserved better than being with an abusive partner. Before then, I didn't think I had enough self-worth for it. I think that now, I would probably stand up for myself and beat him back up, but he wouldn't come around because of my current husband and my son, who is now a grown-up and doesn't want anything to do with him. Even if Mike only lives 20 miles away from where I live, there is no way he can actually reach me.

People should know that Mike went on and abused the three women he was with after me, and he got put in jail. He was in the newspaper a couple times, but he never did any time in prison. So he would get arrested, put into jail, someone gets his bail paid and he goes to court, never gets sentenced and gets out with some community service, or probation. But he never gets sentenced—which is terrible.

I think that his abusive behavior was caused by his alcoholism, but I also think that his dad was very abusive too. It is a cycle, his dad was abusive, and he became abusive later on. Mike was a different person when he was sober, and like I said before, when he doesn't actually want to be drinking. What I am saying is that he would need all the alcohol out of his body to be an okay human being. I don't think he will ever stay sober though.

Even if it is very hard, sometimes I feel pity for him. But most often, I don't. I feel like he has made a lot of bad decisions, and he grew up in a very nice home, he has had a lot of opportunities. I think that my son should have been a good enough reason for him to stop drinking. And that's why it's so hard to feel pity for him.

His mom passed away when I was pregnant, and that was also really bad. It was a huge thing. But I think that it is just in him, because those things happen to other people too. Other people have their mother die and they don't become abusive. Once, his dad and him got into a fist fight right in front of me. That is the kind of people they are, and I was not used to that at all. They were both very verbally abusive and violent people, very mean.

And something else is that, even though his parents were very mean to him ever since he was young, he was allowed to do anything he wanted in the community. If he got caught smoking pot or drinking, his parents would lie for him. His dad has paid to get him out of jail every single time he got arrested for the last 27 years—he hasn't spent more than 2 hours in jail, ever. They enabled him so much.

His sister and I actually are very close friends, and she has always been wonderful to me and Tom. She has begged her father to stop letting Mike get out of jail and let him suffer the consequences of his actions, to save his life. But as a dad, he feels like it's his job, to bail his son out of jail, around 20 times now.

I remember another story, related to his family. We were at his dad's house. Mike was drinking, and I don't even remember why he got mad (there never was a true reason for it anyway) but he came flying at me and started hitting me. His sister came by, she was holding my son. She started screaming at Mike: "Stop it, stop hitting her, stop it, stop it". Instead, he went and punched her in the face while she was holding my kid. Mike clearly didn't care. He punched me, he punched his sister.

And one thing he would do, I can remember that it was at his parent's house too, we stayed there a lot because they had a nicer house, and we could do our laundry there, we didn't have a lot of money. We were in his room, he got pissed off and punched me in the face. After that, he would hug me, try to take care of me, draw me a bath and say very sweet things, apologize. It's when things like that happen that you start wondering if you are crazy. He was acting like a psycho and now he was super nice, it was very confusing.

3 or 4 years after I got him out of my life for good, I went to college. My parents wouldn't pay for it before then, and honestly I think it could have helped me not get stuck in that relationship, because I would have had more education and more self-esteem if I went to college right after high school. My mother is super religious, and she doesn't believe that women should be allowed to go to college, so I didn't get to go. But the irony is that my mom did go to college later on. She was not the most supportive person, not the best mom in the world. And I think I was always looking for someone to rescue me, I think that is what abusers look for. They look for the little girl who needs them and who they can pray on and they can control immediately, from the beginning. Because you have nobody else. Even in my family, he would isolate me, saying things like: "I'm not going there, they're jerks, we're not going there". He did that because he wanted to isolate me from anyone who could end up helping me.

And now, life is good! About 3 years after I left him, I met my husband, whose name is also Mike. Yes, I know, interesting. He has a son who is the same age as Tom. His name is Tim, and they were best friends at preschool. I know that sounds crazy, but it's true. Mike and I hung out for 5 years before we got married, and we have been together for 25 years now, my son calls him dad, and he is his dad. He is the one who does everything and is there all the time. We are empty nesters now, we have no kids here, which is really sad. He has an older child too, a 30 year old son who lives locally. His 26 year old lives in XX, is married and is having a baby very soon (that was supposed to be a secret, "don't tell anyone") and then mine lives in Florida and he is a basketball coach there. It's far away, but he has a good job there. So life is good, we are alone, we have two dogs, and that's it! Of course, now, we are stuck because of the pandemic. Normally, we like to travel.

Coming back to the main topic of this story, my husband knows a ton about my years spent with the other Mike. Tom knows some of it, but not all of it. I didn't want to talk to him about it too much when he was growing up because I wanted to give him the chance to decide what to think of his father.

Tom remembered that his dad hit him. He knew he wasn't allowed to see him. When he was about 16, his father got arrested for hitting another woman and it was in the paper, so he came up to me to ask if Mike beat me, and we talked about it. He doesn't know a lot in detail, because I think he would be very upset, since he and I are very close. Overall, he knows his dad was abusive.

A lot of people have asked me what it feels like to know that my ex is Tom's father. You know, I had always hoped Mike could get sober and be a great dad. In my perfect world he would have, because there were moments where he was a good father. There was a whole period, maybe a year after Tom was born, where he actually was sober for a few months and you could see that he had the ability to be a good person.

So for me, I had hoped that he would get clean, and that he would straighten out his life, and that he would be a co-parent, but he just couldn't. The only part of it that bothers me is that he couldn't get his life together even for his own child. It doesn't bother me that they are physically related though. It makes me sad that my son has to know that his dad wasn't a good husband or father. When I told Tom about what happened, I said Mike was just sick, that he had an addiction and that he can't get over it. So that part makes me really sad, but I am not disgusted by the situation whatsoever. I have some sadness for him, but he doesn't. He doesn't care about his father. Tom looks just like his dad, they're like twins. People see him and they get confused most of the time. People who I grew up with will see Mike in my son very easily.

I told my husband about what happened right away, I had been out of the situation for about three years, and I was definitely more self-assured. My ex was still trying to reach out to me at the time. Once, he showed up at my husband's house, which was not a good idea because my husband is a big dude. Men who abuse, it's so ironic because they abuse women but they can't stand up to stronger men. So he came after me and when he met my husband he couldn't even look him in the eye. So he could hit me, but he couldn't look at my husband. Men who abuse are weak. Mike knew right away, and he went to court with me when my ex hit my son to make sure my ex couldn't hurt me, because he would obviously be very aggressive at the court.

Lastly, I should mention that I went to the victim resource center³ after I left the first Mike I was with. They had counseling so I did some group counseling and they helped me talk through stuff a lot. I learned a whole lot there, and at the time, I knew I was physically abused. What I didn't know is that I was also financially, mentally and emotionally abused as well. They have a very interesting chart, it's called the wheel of abuse and it shows all the different kinds of abuse one can endure.

They gave me the wheel, and when I looked at it, I noticed all the ways he abused me.

Now, it doesn't affect me at all anymore, like 0, but it did for a long time. I mean it's been 27 years. When I met my husband, I was still having nightmares about it all the time. I would be very worried about him, whenever we got into a fight, I would be scared to death that he was going to hit me. Which he would never do, but you never know, right? I wouldn't think that fights were normal, I didn't understand that one could have a fight and still love somebody. I thought that he was going to become violent because that's how it always was.

I would also trust no one with my son, because he was abused too. I would say it probably took 10 to 15 years to really not think about it, but it's been 27 now. And things are good, my son is healthy, and he has a great job, and he is the opposite of a child raised in an abusive home, which was my goal.

³ Place that helps victims of crime/abuse with information, counseling, financial assistance, etc.

Heather - Reflection

Heather's story was the second one I heard for this project. Before it started, I thought I would be more prepared for what I was going to hear about because I had heard another story. But I clearly wasn't ready for the violence of the incidents Heather told me about. I also want to say that I wasn't prepared for any of the stories, and that was probably because I hadn't been educated on the topic, and I hadn't been taught how to take things in and be a good listener. So I tried to learn, but all the interviewees were incredibly kind and patient with all my questions.

One of the things I picked up on was the mention of the pattern of abuse. The fact that abuse can be transported from an abuser to their partner, or child, or sibling, and that a survivor can become an abuser and transport it to somebody else, again and again if there isn't some sort of intervention, such as therapy or counseling, to break the cycle. It really struck me. That cycle of abuse definitely revolves around denial and guilt, both from the abuser and the victim. The abuser could find excuses, like Heather said, that their partner deserves it because they are a bitch, or whatever else they find, and the survivor will likely blame/shame themselves and "protect" their abuser, or go back to them after they try to leave.

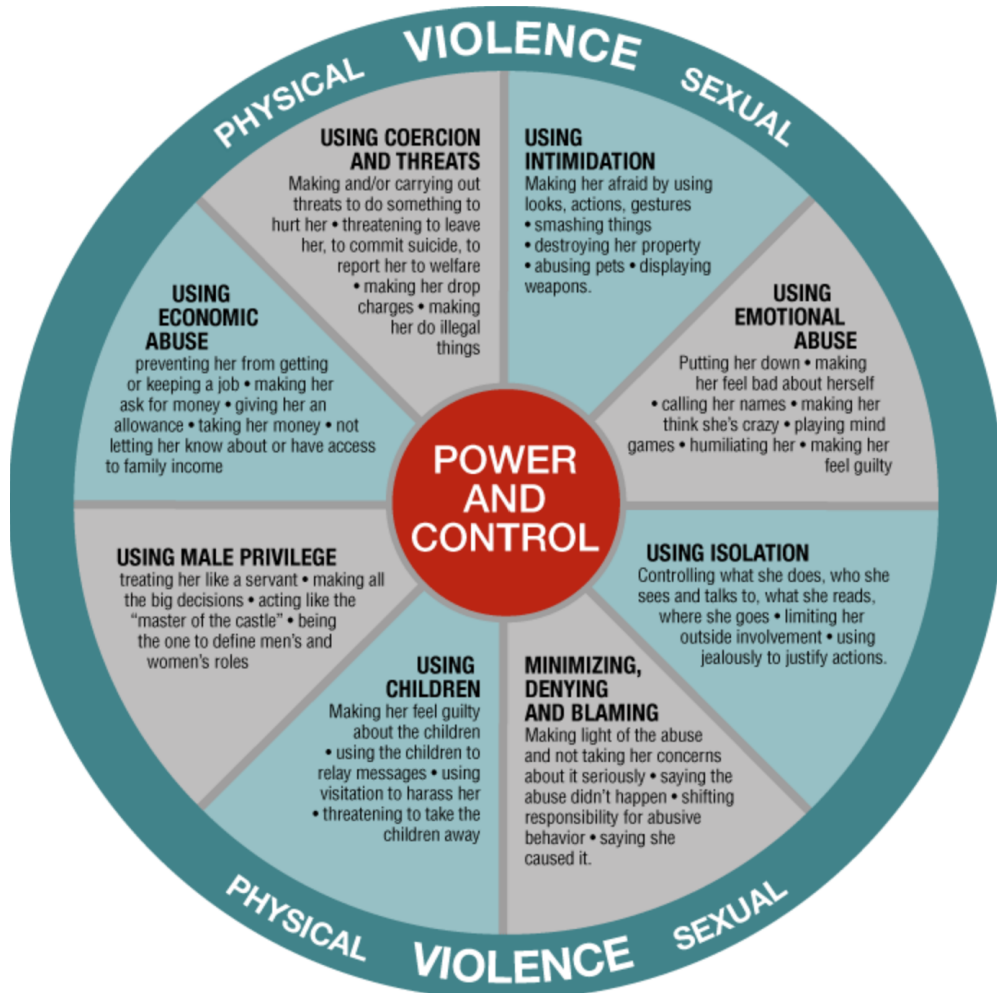
Victim shaming is real, and it is quite destructive. Sometimes, victims do it without even realizing it. Heather said she was "a weak person then, shy and scared" but in my opinion, she definitely wasn't. She is definitely stronger now, but I don't think that the fact she is stronger now makes her past self weak in any way. But of course, that is my point of view, and I cannot put myself in the place of anybody who has been abused. Outsiders often oversimplify and wonder why a survivor "didn't just leave" their abuser. That sort of behavior reinforces the pattern because it puts even more shame and judgment on the victim/survivor. What I am trying to say is that I decided not to say anything at the moment because I thought it could have been perceived as a "good vibes only" or "it could be worse" message.

Heather also talked about her son, and how she left for him. I found it so interesting that almost every time, there was something pushing the victim to leave, either a child, or a goal, maybe another job in another city or state sometimes. The strength it takes to find an escape sometimes takes an outside element to be pushed in that way, and that is quite incredible. And when she talked about the time when her ex-husband broke her jaw in his driveway, I didn't have words to express how shocked and disgusted I felt. It just sounded so awful that her son had to be around that kind of event, and that she had to suffer the consequences of it instead of her abuser.

My favorite part about Heather's story was hearing how well she is doing now, with her husband, and her son in Florida, and her two dogs. It is heartwarming to hear that somebody who has gone through so much finally got the chance to be at peace and receive the kind of life they deserve.

During the interview, Heather did most of the talking. I was pretty much silent until she was finished, because I wanted her to have the space to tell her story. I asked a bunch of questions,

and we also had side conversations which were really nice. It was important for me to feel connected to her, since I couldn't be in front of her because of the pandemic. When she got to the counseling part of her story, Heather mentioned a wheel of abuse. She sent it to me after the interview, because she said it would be helpful for people to be able to see it too, because it helped her, and because it's important to raise awareness about the fact that all abuse centers around power and control. So here it is, for you.



Chapter 2 - Valentine

Trigger Warning: This chapter mentions the topics of: Pornography addiction, substance abuse (pills and drugs), rape, suicide, graphic images, sexual violence, name calling

The following is the original transcript of Valentine's experience.

My name is Valentine, I am a stay-at-home mom at the moment, I am 37 years old. I am currently trying to get certified at medical billing and coding. It's new for me to be furthering my education because I wasn't allowed to do so while being married. I have two daughters, My oldest is XX and my youngest, Pearl, is XX. They are both incredibly strong, tall, and smart kids.

I wasn't subject to physical abuse, except once. However, I experienced emotional, mental, verbal and sexual abuse. My children got some of it too. The girls were always trapped in their room, or sent outside because he didn't want to have them around.

The man who abused me, Jason, has a major anger problem, and I obviously didn't realize that at first. I'm not even sure of how it started exactly, because, like I said, I didn't realize. I knew it didn't feel right but I was young, dumb and uneducated and I just figured that it was part of marriage, that everybody experienced it, and that I was going to make it work. He liked to joke harshly, so I can admit that things happened right away, I just thought he was joking. The funny mean calling, giving me a hard time constantly... It got to the point where it wasn't funny anymore, but he didn't stop. I also didn't know it was abuse because he never put a hand on me except for that one push, but I always tell myself that it happened because I was blocking his way. Yes, it was a push, but I think part of it was that I was in his way. That's still no way to be treated and no way for children to grow up though.

My daughters have unfortunately experienced the abuse too, but more Pearl. She probably had the worst because she has less of a filter, so she would just say things she shouldn't have said, but you know, she actually should say those things. I used to beg her to be quiet so he wouldn't yell, and I know that isn't right either. She didn't want to be quiet, she wanted to be a kid. And she had every right to want that.

Jason mainly had anger issues with them, it was almost like they were better seen but not heard. As long as they were quiet it was okay, but if they spoke, it was over, he wanted them gone. Pearl tried to connect with him, almost desperately. He was a mechanic, and he was overly into video games, so she would go out and try to work on the car with him. She would be so excited, trying to actually learn about it and connect. She would always end up coming back in tears because he yelled at her, or they would be playing a video game and he would also end up yelling at her. It's a game, it's supposed to be fun. She always tried,

and she is still trying now, which is really hard to watch. Although, both of my daughters have a lot of anger towards him right now and I can't blame them for that. It's justified.

Jason would threaten me to leave me if he didn't get his way, there even were times when he would threaten that if he did leave, he would take the kids and there was nothing I could do about it. Again, young and dumb, so I believed it. It got to the point where I was completely trapped. I was a stay-at-home mom so I didn't have any income or any means to take care of the children, who I didn't want to leave alone with him. They're good girls, you know. They are smart and if it wasn't for them, I would still be with him now, dealing with it all.

Jason also has a major porn addiction, and a video game addiction. His porn addiction caused a lot of sexual abuse, and because of that, he assumed that I should be available to him whenever, and it felt like he wanted me to be one of those porn stars. It always went back and forth between him promising he would quit watching it, me falling for it, and the situation repeating over and over. It never actually stopped. It actually escalated, because at one point he put an ad on Craigslist and he was looking for sex with no strings attached, and I came across that ad.

The whole situation got so bad to the point where it took my daughters to sit me down and tell me to leave him, about 4 years ago. It took me about a month after that, to tell him I was leaving him.

I should say that Jason is also a pill and drug addict. So when I told him I was leaving, he grabbed his brand new prescription of hydrocodone and he told me he was going to "see how fast his car can go and drive it into a wall after swallowing all the pills". Normally, after one of those threats, I would beg him to stay, but that day I didn't. I just let him leave. That's when I knew I was ready to leave him.

Looking back, I really didn't do it right. I didn't have a plan, I hadn't figured out a place to go, I just left Jason. He kept trying for a while after that, he would try to come visit me, but never the girls, he said he didn't see that he did anything wrong, he didn't see that he had an anger issue. He even told his parents that I was the one with a drug problem. And I'm not saying that I never did any, because I did. But for me, it wasn't an addiction, it was more like every now and then, because I needed to feel numb. He would come home and I would never know what mood he would be in, and even if he was feeling okay, it could change very fast. He could go from laughing to yelling in two seconds. It was all just scary and bad generally.

We were married for 15 years. We dated for about a year in high school and we got married right before he got into the Air Force. We actually are still married, after these 4 years. He

took too long to fill out the divorce papers so I have to start over, but the pandemic happened so I was forced to wait.

He actually moved to Florida about a year and a half ago, with his much older girlfriend. He even claims he is sober now, but he hasn't texted me or asked about the girls since April of 2020. So he is still torturing them because he just texts Merry Christmas but that's it, he doesn't ask how they are doing or anything. He does the bare minimum, which isn't enough.

So the day he pushed me, I think we were having a fight about porn actually. We were going back and forth with the whole "you said you would stop and you didn't, you're lying, you're hiding shit" and he said he was going to pack his stuff and leave. I was trying to calm him down and ask what was wrong, but he was determined to get a suitcase. I got in his way, so he pushed me with his body and I fell backwards on the metal cigarette machine that had a metal handle on it. It went right into my spine, so I bruised my back very badly.

(Some information about the sexual abuse was kept private for this book's younger readers.)

He was also really controlling with sex. He would tell me that if I didn't do certain things, he was going to leave me. He did things I told him I never wanted to do, things that hurt. There were times where we got into fights and he suddenly would decide he wanted sex, and it didn't matter if I was sobbing from the fight or not, he would get what he wanted at all costs. He expected me to take care of him on a daily basis. No one is in the mood everyday, but again, you feel like you have to do it otherwise he will leave you, right. He claimed his sex drive was so high that it was either me taking care of him everyday or he would go find another chick to do it instead. His porn addiction caused him to want things like anal, etc., which I ended up agreeing to do because I didn't really have a choice. It was so painful, I was bleeding with a stomachache for two days after it. But he kept wanting it, and I kept accepting it.

He also tried to kill himself, once. About a year after I left him. He always had joked about it, like "I'm going to get my belt and hang myself", but it's not funny at all. I always told him that. It got to the point where he was talking in a way that even his mom was concerned, so they made me call the police. We weren't living together anymore so they went and picked him up for a well check, he talked his way out of it, so he got home the same day.

Then, he got really angry, he was yelling at me, yelling at his parents, and he ended up grabbing a bottle of pills and his phone. He called me, while walking into the woods. He was giving me a countdown on how many pills he had taken. He was walking into the woods because he wanted the pills to kick in before anybody could find his body.

The cops wanted me to keep him on the phone so they could track him and the whole time he was telling me every single bad name, saying every single terrible thing he could come up with. He was threatening to call the girls and tell them it was all my fault, and that if it wasn't for me, he wouldn't be doing this. The police found him and kept him for 72 hours. During that time, he left awful voicemails, "I can't believe you f*****g did that, I can't believe you called the police..." etc.

My interactions with my daughters also changed a whole lot since I left him. They used to talk to me about it more, but he disappeared from their lives, on his own. And even though I realize it was abusive, my girls are old enough, in my opinion, to take what they're seeing with their own eyes, and hear with their own ears. He was never physically abusive, so I wasn't worried about their actual physical well being, they just never wanted to be around him, so he just sort of faded away.

I think my interactions with them are stronger. We are a team, we always say it's us against the rest of the world. They tell me everything. Pearl smoked weed and she video chatted me, freaking out. And most kids wouldn't call their parents if they did something like that, especially not a video chat. I think it's also because I am honest with them. I've been a kid, I've messed up, I've done it. And if they're going to have sex, let's get them on birth control, let's buy condoms. You know, I think that they respect the fact that I'm their mom but I can also be their friend. We have just become a lot closer since we left Jason.

A word from Valentine:

I was in that marriage for so long, with all of the things that were happening, and it still affects me to this day. I am on medication for anxiety and depression. I have PTSD from the suicide attempt and I am in therapy. I used to be against it but it is really good. It's definitely not a cure but it definitely helps start to sort through your feelings. I know some people block things out as a defense mechanism. I don't want to remember, but it's helpful to unblock things while being in therapy. I remember things that I blocked out little by little, to survive, to make it.

Healing is a process.

Being in the relationship is damaging but the aftermath is also very bad and I don't think people always realize that. Everybody is different, but please, don't punish yourself while you are healing because everyone is on their own timeline. You just have to make it to the next day. You get through today, and you make it to tomorrow.

Valentine - Reflection

Valentine was the last interview before I decided to move on to the next step of my project. Her story was even more heartbreaking to me than the other ones, because it was the most recent one. She is still married to her abuser and like the other victims, she is still working very hard on healing from her trauma. Valentine also proceeded to do a lot of self blame when she talked about her past self, the version of her that was in the abusive relationship. During the interview, I wanted to respond and say “no, it wasn’t your fault, you don’t have to talk like that about the person you were before”, but I decided not to say anything, because I wasn’t sure if it would have been received well, or if it even was my place to say it. So I just listened.

Valentine’s story is filled with violent and intense kinds of abuse, and a lot of them are related to drugs and alcohol consumption from her abuser. The porn addiction topic, I have to admit, made me a little bit uncomfortable. It isn’t something we talk about in everyday life, right? It made me realize that addiction isn’t always about drugs or alcohol, it could be self harm, or porn, or food.

Valentine taught me that the world is a very dangerous place when you don’t have the resources to escape or get help. She also taught me that if you try hard enough, you will make it out, and that it is important to ask for help however you can. She said she didn’t have a plan when she left, which isn’t always a good thing, but it happens more often than you might think. Safety planning is one of the most important aspects of escaping the abuse one could be experiencing. Having emotional support, friends to stay with and/or talk to, a work space that will assure you protection, or even just money to sustain yourself and your children if need be. For those who might not know what safety planning is, it consists in having an “exit door” ready, with a plan on where the survivor is going to stay, maybe some money saved for food, all that.

Sexual violence was another topic that we talked about during the interview, and I can assure you, reader, that I was not ready to hear what I heard. Valentine kept things broad while speaking, maybe because she was more comfortable with not saying anything too graphic. But after the interview, she sent me an email telling me that she found a letter she wrote to her current boyfriend explaining everything that happened to her. In that letter, she talked about the actual experiences of the sexual abuse she survived. I decided not to include some of the things I read because I thought that it would be too much, even though I already knew this book was going to be a very intense and graphic piece of writing. It was deliberate, for the protection of Valentine and you, the reader.

At the end of the interview, Valentine addressed you and I directly. She said that “Healing was a process,” and I think it might be one of the most powerful messages I could transmit through this project. It does not matter how mild or severe the trauma you experienced is, it is still trauma. It won’t always be easy, but it will make you grow as a person. And there is no need to rush yourself into healing, and there is absolutely no need for you to blame yourself for the things you had to go through. Valentine said it way better than I ever could, because she knows it. She had to do it, and now she knows it.

Chapter 3 - Chloe

Trigger warning: This chapter mentions the topics of: Violence, Child abuse, neglect, name calling, threats of killing, mention of suicide at the very end

The following is the original transcript of Chloe's experience.

I live in western Mass, I am an occupational safety and health specialist, which means I work with companies and I make sure that they are treating their employees correctly, doing the right thing, being safe, etc. I have two daughters named Samantha and Alice, they are XX and XX. I have lived in western Mass since I was 13, I moved to XX for a little bit but I came back soon after. Before that I lived in Montana as a kid, but I was born in XX. I am a single mom and I work a lot.

Before I start, it is important for me to say that I am pretty open about this stuff but it did take me a long time to talk about it openly with other people because there is, and I am sure you will hear this from other people too, a lot of shame around this topic even after you are out of it and you know that it was the right thing for you to do, there is still this shame about letting it happen. I still want to protect others from what actually went on, almost to protect his reputation, which is weird because why would you want to protect the man who abused you, right?

Within the last few years I realized that I didn't have to do that, because he did what he did. I have been out of it since 2012, so about 8 years ago, and it's only recently that I've been able to get to the point where I am like "It is okay to talk about it and you are not bad-mouthing him, you are just talking about what happened to you".

So, I was 18 when I met my abuser, my ex-husband, Fred. When I look back, it definitely started right away, this systematic way that he went about things, the little things that he would do. My experience wasn't so much about physical abuse, he only pushed me once, when I asked for a divorce. However, I was always scared things would escalate to a point where he would put his hands on me.

You can handle a lot of stuff, but everybody has their own breaking point. For me, rock bottom was to have someone put their hands on me, it's just a super unsafe situation I need to get out of very fast. What you don't necessarily realize is that the emotional, mental and financial abuse also was unsafe.

He was very controlling, at the end he would even control what I would wear, what was acceptable for me to wear and what wasn't. He wouldn't work, so I had to keep the full time job as well as maintaining the house and taking care of the kids. Basically, he would be at home with the kids during the day and that was fine, but as soon as I got home he would be

off duty. He would go off into a room and everything would be my responsibility from that point. It wasn't really a relationship anymore, it was more of an arrangement for him.

There is also the financial abuse, where even though I was the only one working and bringing in the money, he had total control over it and he had free use of whatever he would like, he would get angry if I paid the bills, if he wasn't able to get his cigarettes or his marijuana. There was a lot of anxiety built up around the whole situation because I didn't know how he would react to any decision or situation. He very much wanted me to be under his control the entire time.

Back when I was 18, when we first met, I had cancer at the time. So I was very dependent on him for almost everything, and I just recently found out (I still discover new things as I get into conversations with people) that he told my friends and people we knew that I didn't want them around. So he essentially cornered me off from everybody at a very important time, and he made me feel like nobody was there for me, except him. That made me become dependent on him, because I didn't have anybody else. That is probably a big hook on why I stayed for as long as I did. He also forbade me from going to family events with him, he would take my oldest with him and he would leave me home with the youngest. He would go out with friends and I wouldn't be allowed to go. And I found out over the years that that was when he told my friends I didn't want to see them.

My cancer was serious, they didn't know how much time I was going to have. I wanted to have kids, do the things that I had always wanted to do. I was with him for a long time, and when we got engaged and found out I was pregnant with Samantha, my first daughter, we bumped the wedding. We got married and then she was born.

It got to the point where, on the day Alice was born, my youngest, he brought my oldest in to meet her and to have dinner together. He told me that he needed to have the nurses check me out, because he needed me to come home to take care of Samantha. I had just given birth about 6 hours prior, so that was crazy. He got really upset and angry at me and he was yelling in the hospital. I remember sitting there like "this is not how the birth of your child is supposed to be". That is when I started thinking there was something really wrong going on, that it wasn't supposed to happen.

It actually wasn't so bad for a little while, when Alice was a baby. We found out that he actually was bipolar, towards the end of our relationship. I went home and I told him he had to seek help or I would leave him. So, we went down the path to see if we could get him help of some kind, and it took him a while to do that because my youngest was 2 years old when he started getting help and we got him a diagnosis and provided him medication. Things were okay for a little bit after that, but then, even on the medication, he still had these ideas of what a wife should be that just weren't right. I didn't witness the angry outbursts and the highs and lows that he used to experience as much, but there still was a

sense of "I control you, you are my property, you will do what I want you to do" so it's like okay, well now you are not at these extremes, you are just more leveled about the ideas.

I laugh about it now, because it is ridiculous to me that I could have been in a situation like this one. The entire time, I held a job, and they were good jobs. I also project myself as a smart person, I've always succeeded at what I do, and I was always able to have that in the background. He has definitely cost me jobs in the past because of his behavior, so I knew stuff was wrong, and I saw that, because we were married, I had to fix it. For the kids.

One time, I was putting Samantha to bed when she was around 6 or 7, and she said she didn't ever want to get married. When I asked why, she said that all husbands make their wives sad and make them cry. It really hit me that a 6 year-old could think that that is what marriage and relationships really look like. The most important thing for me is that they are better off than I was. Isn't that what every parent wants to achieve, after all? The next generation to have it better than their own? To hear that from her, knowing that I am a role model for her since she is my daughter, was shocking. She can't think that this is what a relationship is for sure going to look like. I know she is afraid it might be the case.

I can't remember for sure how long after this was, but my workplace has an employee assistance program that basically allows you to call them if you have any issue and they will help you in any way they can.

I was on the phone with Fred and he was yelling at me while I was sitting at my desk because he didn't want me to work where I was working anymore because I was climbing and becoming more important. I started off as an assistant, now I am a safety director, you know, we have 140 employees, and I manage the marketing. That was the plan when I was first hired. But every time I would go up at my workplace he would want me to quit. He got insecure because he was staying home while I was making money, but at the same time I couldn't quit my job so it was very confusing. He did that all the time.

He was screaming that he wanted me to go home that day, and my boss heard everything. I said I was okay and waved him away, and he walked over to his office. I told Fred I had to get off because I was sure I was going to get fired since my boss could hear the swearing. I hung up and my boss asked me who it was so I explained the situation. He said he would never talk to his wife like that, that it wasn't okay for me to be treated that way.

He had me call the assistance program, and once he "cracked open the door", I mean someone from outside of my house saw a bit of it all, I was like wow, this is it. He was brave enough to ask me if I understood, and he helped me find a path out. He was a huge support through my whole exit process, supporting me and keeping me safe at work.

There were so many threats.

The thing with domestic violence is that it does escalate and eventually, when the tactics don't work anymore, they will escalate to worse things to keep control, whatever they find. That is definitely what I was experiencing as I look back. And I have gone through therapy, I have read a lot of books about it and done my healing too.

It surely is a process.

When I sent Fred the divorce papers, he went off the rails. But we knew it was going to happen, so my office had put a protective plan in place. We had a hotel booked in case I needed to leave the house, I had friends with me that night, and you can be sure that as soon as the papers were delivered, he blew up my phone, he called the office and made a lot of threats. It went from taking the kids away to killing me, stalking me. He tried every little thing he could find. When I wasn't responding to him the way he wanted me to, he started saying he was going to kill himself. He said he was going to hurt himself and other people. I still wasn't responding like he wanted me to, so he started calling me names like a fifth grader.

He called me a "stinky poo poo face". These were his last words to me. It was so him.

A long time after all this, when people found out that I was actually divorced from him, they came and shared their own stories about him. He lost jobs I didn't even know about, for punching walls, threatening other people. There was a lot of physical violence outside of the house, which I wonder if he was just trying to channel that outside instead of bringing it into the house.

After we got divorced, I tried to let him have a 50/50 custody but he wouldn't set a time. He wouldn't commit to days, which is another aspect of the abuse, as well as "leaving with the kids because he is their father". You are forever connected to that person unless you can do some legal fancy work to get them out of your picture, and you have to have reasons for that too. Something that's hard is that I was abused for years but there never was any sort of physical evidence of it, I couldn't show it with proof. I would have had to get my kids involved, and you don't want to bring it up. I did luckily have a very smart lawyer who wrote a very specific clause in the divorce papers that I don't even think Fred knew he was signing for. It gives me ultimate decision making rights over the kids, as long as it stays reasonable, of course.

Warning: The following is a passage where child neglect is mentioned. You can skip to the next warning if you need to.

You know, the whole time I understood that I was being abused, and that my children seeing it was also a form of abuse, but I didn't really see the abuse that the girls were getting. There was a lot happening when I wasn't around. I knew that children reacted to

divorces and parents fighting in different ways, at different times, so I fully expected them to have issues coming from that. My parents got divorced when I was the same age as Samantha, around 7 years old.

So my goal with them was to make sure they were being taken care of, that's what I wanted from him too.

When we finally sorted out the custody situation, he would be in charge of Samantha and Alice on Saturday afternoon, keep them overnight Sunday and bring them to school on Monday morning. I would pick them up from school and keep them for the rest of the week.

It started off okay and everything was fine, but then, after a few months, he started calling me saying he didn't have food for their daily snack for school, so I would go to school on Monday and drop off some snacks for them. When he moved out, he said he had space for them to have a bedroom, so we split their wardrobes so they could be fully decked out for both places. Then, he said he didn't have clothes for them, so I would drive them up clothes on Monday morning, and the clothes they had there would just be in disgusting piles on the floor, right in front of the washer. He didn't do laundry, that's why he didn't have clothes for them to wear anymore. He had them one and a half days a week but he didn't do laundry for them. That is neglectful.

Prior to the pandemic, I would travel across the country for work a lot, so there were a few times where I had to be gone for a few days in a row. I dropped off the girls at school, went to my conferences and all that, and I had to come back early because he said he had to drop them off at my cousin's house, and I had to get them because my cousin said they had to be somewhere at a certain time.

When I got there, I had been gone for three days. Alice still had the pig tails I had made her before I left, she was still wearing the same underwear. That was just such severe neglect to me, that she hadn't been changed or didn't get her hair brushed in three days. So what else didn't happen? She was only 3 years old at the time, that was a big deal, which left me feeling like I couldn't leave them with him for extended periods of time. It wasn't even like I could go to DCF⁴ to say he should get his parental rights taken away.

But I could ask him to change, nothing was actually "severe", I could ask him to change.

Then he ran out of heat, he ran out of water, he ran out of food for dinner. He called me saying he didn't have heat anymore and that really was the last straw of me letting the girls go to his house. So I went up there and got them, so that they could have a warm place to sleep and have actual food for dinner. What happened is I went back home and basically talked to my lawyer to ask if I had the right to do this...telling him he can't keep them

⁴ Department of Children and Families. They can have custody of the kids if the parent in charge has a hearing, etc.

overnight until he can get himself financially stable or even just stable again, until he has the basics. Wash the clothes, have food for dinner, I mean a box of macaroni and cheese is like 60 cents, we can do this.

He accepted, so I was able to tell Fred he could still have the girls on Sundays during the day, but he couldn't keep them overnight and he had to drop them back off after dinner and then I would just handle it until he could get stable again.

Shortly after that, Samantha started not wanting to go to his house at all. She didn't want to tell me why, she just didn't want to leave me. I made her go for a few weekends but at some point, she just had a full on meltdown.

They were going to go sledding and she didn't feel safe where they were going to be sledding. She was right that her uncle hit a tree there when he was younger and he has no spleen anymore. I said that I would tell daddy not to go there and that they could go to another place instead. I told him, and he said he wouldn't go there, but he did. He took her sledding there, and she refused to sled. She said she would just sit and play in the snow, that she was happy to do it and that it wasn't a big deal. But he was insisting, she refused again, so he told her to go back to his house. She said she wouldn't go back up by herself.

He then proceeded to drag her by the hand up the hill to his house, that is like 200 feet being dragged. He tossed her into the house and told her to go to her room until they were done. She was very upset when she came home that night but she wouldn't talk about it to me. So I asked Fred about sledding, he said she threw a tantrum and that he punished her so that was probably why she was upset. But when she actually told me what happened...

You know that's not how you treat a child. There is nothing wrong with not wanting to sled, you can't punish her like that. That again, showed his control issues.

As she started talking about it more, Samantha said her father was hitting her, sometimes for no reason. She said she didn't feel safe and she didn't want to go to his house, and that ended it for me. I told my lawyer about it and he said I could cut it off. I also called the girls' therapist and I told her what Samantha told me, we had an emergency session the next day, and Samantha went privately and told her about things. To this day, I don't know what she said, I just remember about certain incidents that are impossible for me to repeat out loud.

Sometimes you catch yourself thinking that there are so many degrees of abuse, and you are just grateful you didn't reach a certain level, you know. I remember him saying to me : "I might be mean but at least I don't hit you", and sure yes he didn't hit me but he hit the kids. There has never been evidence of that, nor accusations made. Thank goodness it was only

this stupid physical abuse and intimidation that was happening to these two little girls, and nothing more.

Most of the time we can take things on ourselves and deal with them, but they can't protect themselves, and parents are supposed to protect their children, especially little girls like mine. I don't know, I'm a daddy's girl, my dad would never hurt me. I just can't imagine being afraid of my own dad.

Alice was so little that she remembers some things, like the yelling, but she doesn't know him, and she doesn't care to know him either.

So yes, that time with Samantha really ended it for me. DCF was involved, they interviewed both of us, but because of that smart clause in the papers I mentioned earlier, DCF didn't have to take action, since I had legal rights to take action to stop him from seeing the girls. So I did stop him, and I gave him a list of things I would like him to accomplish before he can see them again, to sort of earn back what happened.

I asked him to get his bipolar [disorder] treated, his anger management, and I also asked him to follow a course for domestic abusers. DCF backed me up saying that if he wasn't able to accomplish things because of a court order, they would come into play.

One thing that is good, is that my daughters and I do talk about it now. Though I was very much hiding that stuff at the beginning. You know, you want to be strong for your kids, but I learned during my therapy process that me crying in front of them is actually strong, because they need to see that it is also an effect of the abuse I experienced. When I wasn't allowed to show emotions, I just thought I shouldn't be showing them to the girls either.

I was with Fred for 11 years, and now, I know all of this. But when I was 18, I couldn't see it at all. It's very slow, as they build blocks of things that they do and at the end you are just buried, you can't get out of the blocks they put around you.

So we do talk about it, because it's healthy for them. I don't bring it up, but I want to make sure that if they have questions, I will give the truth. I want them to be able to recognize patterns in life later on.

It's good because they are very open and honest about things and they will come to me with anything. In the beginning, Samantha didn't trust me to tell me everything, because she thought she might get in trouble or that I would try to get him in trouble for something so it took a lot of earning her trust. Even with sharing stories, age appropriate of course, because now she is XX and she brings stuff up a lot, but they haven't seen him since 2013. They run into him here and there but we try to keep our distance. I still have a good relationship with his family, so when there is a funeral, he shows up.

I don't want them to hate him, I want them to understand what happened, and that he is mentally ill, that he needs help for it and that it isn't in any way their fault. They didn't ask for any of this.

End of trigger warning.

Fred just wouldn't do anything, and we ended up spending the next few years like that, him threatening me with something from time to time. I haven't heard anything in a while, probably once in the past 4 years.

I go through the health connector for my insurance, that means the girls are on the child care one for healthcare, and he is considered an absentee parent.

I don't know where he lives, I know he is around, but I certainly don't want to know where exactly. Because he is an absentee parent, the state knows where he is, even if they can't tell me. They tried to get him to pay for some of the health insurance, and I heard from him then because he was mad, because he thought I was trying to get money out of him.

It makes me laugh because it is clear that he doesn't care about other people's emotions. I remember there was a thing where we weren't allowed to be emotional about anything when we were at home with him. You can't be crying, it isn't allowed. Or if it is, not for long. You just have to be strong, no emotions in reaction to something he would have done, whatever he does is right and good.

Something that is important for me to say before I start telling specific stories is that, I say that I wasn't getting physically abused, but after the fact I realized that physical threats are also physical abuse. So while he never hit me, there were times where he hit the wall right next to my face.

We actually had a ceremonious burn of a table that used to be in my back hallway, in the table there is a big circle because he slammed a hammer right next to my hand. I cannot remember what it was that upset him but I remember the hammer in his hands, he got mad and slammed it down right there, and that circle was there for years. I had to look at it even after he left, and one day I finally thought I should get rid of that constant reminder of him. I think that, for a little while, it was a good reminder of me not going back to anything like that again.

So you know, throwing things, punching things, destroying things, it's just as bad as them actually hitting you. There was that: "Well, at least I didn't hit you", he kept reminding me that it could be worse. He used to tell me that this is what it was like, and that people just don't talk about it in the rose-colored world, but that it is the same for everybody.

Of course it isn't.

And my mom is not the best role model for this, she was not in the greatest of relationships. I love my dad, but he is in his fourth or fifth marriage now. It is what it is, but I don't have the best relationship role models, and I think that plays a little bit into it too because I ended up in this situation that I have seen my mom in as a kid. You find yourself sort of repeating that cycle, because even if it wasn't good for her and I fought against it, then... I thought it was somehow acceptable for me.

And the other thing is that there is a really great book that I read even if it was difficult because it hit home very hard. It is called **"Why does he do that?" by Lundy Bancroft** and it gets into the mind of abusers. It talks about situations and helped me realize that what I experienced was not my fault. I ran away to save my girls and that was a valid thing to do. In the book, they also talk about co-parenting and control, and as I go through the checklist of what was going on with Alice and Samantha, the neglect, not being able to provide basic needs, etc. That stuff is really common—I didn't realize that until I found out how deep it really went with the kids.

I would say that the birth story was one of the things that marked me the most, since it was a big turning point. But generally, on a day-to-day basis, I worked full-time, and I get up at 5:30. I have some coffee, hop in the shower, get the girls up at 6:30, get them fed and ready for school and get ready to go out the door. At this point, we all had to creep around the house quietly because he is still asleep and we can't wake him up. Imagine me and two children trying to get ready without waking Fred up.

Then came a point where he quit his job, and we agreed that he would take care of Alice at home, but he still wouldn't get up before I was running out the door. There would be mornings where I couldn't get him to get up while I was trying to get out of the house and there was a 3 year-old alone on the couch that needed someone to be with her. But no, he would scream at me for not getting him up earlier even though I had been trying.

I would bring Samantha to school, work all day, come back and get her, come home by 5:30. He would have food out on the stove from lunch, the apple was left on the counter, the dirty mac and cheese pot would still be on the stove with dried food in it, paper towels everywhere. He wouldn't have taken care of the cat box, he wouldn't take the dog out so he would just let him out in the backyard and the landlord would yell at us.

As soon as I was home, he was off-duty. He would go back to the bedroom that he was in when I left and played video games. Meanwhile, I had to clean up the living room, keep the girls entertained, do the dishes and make dinner, feed everybody, bathe everyone, get the girls into their pajamas, and get them to bed. He came out to eat with us, then he would sit

in the living room. When the girls had gone to bed, he would want me to go to the bedroom and he would keep playing video games.

That was my life for years. Years of this in-between, where I am just here to serve him, and if I don't serve him, I get degraded and called every name he could possibly think of, for not doing what he wanted me to do.

Here is a specific story for you.

Prior to the job I have now, I worked for a manufacturing company and I had to travel so I was gone for a while. I had to stop traveling because my daughter was born and then she was an infant. But then, I had the opportunity to make a lot more money if I started leaving for a little bit again. Fred said he thought it was a good idea. So I had more responsibility for work and when the traveling started happening, he would have to be home with the girls and he wasn't working at the time. I would be gone for 6 days, be back for a day, and then be gone for 6 more days. Apparently, he couldn't handle it, and I remember one time very clearly.

I was leaving to go to Las Vegas for a week, and he was upset because I was going to be back for only a day and then I had to go to North Carolina for another week. He was fighting with me and saying I shouldn't go and that I should quit my job, but I couldn't. He knew it was going to be more difficult but I couldn't keep track of everything in the country at home so I had to travel.

I remember that I had to leave to get to the airport for a 6 AM flight, so I was leaving at 3 in the morning. He was still fighting as I was walking down the stairs. He said, "I hope your plane fucking crashes". It was already around the time when I was asking him to leave me but I still can't believe that someone wished for my plane to crash, and that I had to leave the house with these words being his last ones to me, because I had to go do my job. He would always go to these extremes to get me to do what he wanted.

When I got out to Vegas, he was calling me all the time. We were showing our furniture at expositions and for that one, my boss was a little crazy and he loved to set a target with the team, and if we had a good sales day, we could pick a good restaurant to go to. The plan was that if you had the most amount of sales that day, you were the one to choose.

I wasn't responding to Fred's texts because I was working, and then I texted him that I won and that we were going to a great restaurant, so that I would call him later. We got into a huge fight and he said I was having an affair with my boss, but if you knew the guy you would agree that it's a no. At the same time, my boss was calling me on my work phone so I told my husband I needed to answer the phone because I had to confirm I would be in the lobby in 10 minutes. When I came back to talk to Fred, he hung up on me and texted me

that the fact I had to answer the phone proved I was actually having an affair, so all my stuff will be on the porch when I get home, and I can say goodbye to the girls.

So I am in Las Vegas and I am being threatened that my children are going to be taken away from me because I was trying to do my job, but he is all over the place holding me back. So I wasn't sure if he was going to show up at the airport, but he did. He didn't do anything from what he said he would do. There were so many threats.

I mean, he tried once, the first time I asked for a divorce. He told my landlord I was going to move out and that he was going to keep the kids and get a roommate. My landlord, who passed away last year, always had my back during that whole thing. He said to Fred : "I'm not stupid, I live in the same house as you, I can hear and see what's going on, I know who goes to work everyday, I know who pays rent every month, so if Chloe leaves, you're being evicted, but if she wants to stay, she is fine. You are leaving anyway though, you don't get a say in who leaves and who stays in my house". I also remember my landlord yelling to me when I got out of my car that he needed to talk to me before I went upstairs.

I actually think that is a big part of my story. I had a huge support system around me that I wasn't really aware of, and it only took one of them to crack open the door. And when I finally tried to get out of it, people stepped up to help me. My landlord told Fred I was staying, I had my boss at work, also just regular people, friends I have in the community that pointed me in the right direction.

At one point, we were even looking at being homeless, because we couldn't keep up with the rent, since he was spending all the money I got by working. So we had to seek emergency assistance. There is so much that stems off of a situation like that.

It has a huge impact on my life. I still live in a little bit of fear because I don't exactly know where Fred is. I know he is not stable, so I live with that, and I try not to focus on it but it's always going to be there.

Honestly, I'm not glad it happened, but I say this; my life has been very bumpy, and I look at it the same way as I look at cancer. Do I want to have cancer again? No. I would go through the process of it again though. Because it definitely shaped who I am now, and the same goes for that experience, it shaped me in a good way at the end. I have always been outspoken, and I stood up for the little person but now I can stand up for myself. I have been able to let go of certain things and learn how to control some of the anxieties that were controlling me before.

When you make a mistake, it is so much easier to ask for help and fix it together than hide it and try to fix it yourself, because it will get worse.

All of that is related to thinking it was all my fault. You know, even when I found out I was pregnant, I was afraid to tell him because I didn't know what his reaction was going to be at all. I was always walking on eggshells. I actually remember him being mad at me for spending our last 20 dollars on a pregnancy test when I thought I was pregnant with my first. But I needed it, because it was either I was pregnant or something was really wrong.

It was like that with anything, I was always afraid of him and it definitely affected me afterwards. During the whole therapy process they said I have PTSD, and I notice it more in my actions with other people. When something goes wrong or I make a mistake, I still get that rise of anxiety but I understand now that I can make mistakes and fix them and it's okay. 99% of the time it's completely fine.

I think it made me stronger, I do not want other people to go through it, but it has given me another aspect. It's important to do stuff like this interview, so other people can hear about what I have been through because you will hear other stories in your life, but sometimes it isn't as obvious and you are just trapped in that environment. I did not have a life for a very long time.

There is that Facebook thing where you have to post your latest solo picture and your last one, I did that. The oldest one was from 2007, when Samantha was XX years old. She, herself, commented : "You can tell that you were in a toxic relationship and that now you're so happy". She saw the pain in my face. And I remember feeling that way, but I don't feel it anymore. And that's nice, that all the bad emotions are moderated now.

It has also had bad impacts, of course. It's hard for me to trust men in particular, I see a lot of red flags, and I try to be reasonable but it is difficult sometimes. And I know, deep inside of me, that I could find someone who is even worse, so there's that fear.

For my girls, you know, it impacted Samantha a lot. To the point where it took her a year to get back her academic levels, second grade was a complete wash. They didn't put any standards on her as long as she could get through school. She had anger issues, she was suspended for violence, she had to go through a bigger therapy than Alice, who has separation anxiety. She is nowhere as bad as she used to be but it used to be very bad. Samantha has a lot of anger and she also definitely has PTSD triggers. She ran from school and we ended up in crisis a few times. I had to stop her from jumping out of her window twice when she was around 8, which is crazy. She just wanted to disappear, she said.

If you met them now, you wouldn't know. Samantha is a straight B student, which is all I can ask from her, she wants to own a bakery someday. Alice is a great artist, her art is her

therapy, it helps with her anxiety and she does some awesome artwork. They are both very outgoing and outspoken, they stand up for themselves and for others, which is a good thing I taught them. It is okay to talk about things that have happened to you, you do not need to be embarrassed, it is okay to talk about challenges and to talk to me about hard stuff too. There are a few negative things, but more positive things, and we are doing so well now. It's almost like we were birds being held back in a cage and we were finally released.

Chloe - Reflection

Chloe's interview was the first one I was a part of where child neglect and abuse was talked about explicitly, which, honestly, was very hard. All the interviews have something that stands out. From my point of view, it was the children's part for Chloe.

When Chloe mentioned her parents getting a divorce, I decided to open up and mention my own family history with parents divorcing. We ended up talking about it for a little while, and even though it may have seemed like nothing in the recording, to me, it felt refreshing to be able to have something to connect with the survivor, and empathize. During all of the interviews, part of me felt very helpless as far as being present for the other person and showing that I was present for them. Finding a way to connect, as small a conversation as may be, made the intensity of the rest of the conversation more bearable.

Here is a quote from Chloe's interview: "It's very slow, as they build blocks of things that they do and at the end you are just buried, you can't get out of the blocks they put around you". She was with her husband for 11 years. And she said she couldn't see it at all during most of that time, which was very surprising to me. But then I understood that the tactics abusers tend to use aren't always obvious and easy to recognize. It also starts out low, and then rises slowly. One thing I learned after the fact, when I talked with my mentor and other people who helped me with this project, is that there is a certain wave pattern to abuse. It builds up and rises, it explodes and "gets resolved" but it doesn't go back down all the way to where it was before. So then, the next time it rises, the wave is a little higher. And again, and again, until the abuse reaches severe highs. But the thing is that it never stops rising and "resolving". You have to get out, instead of believing that the wave will be the last one when your abuser tells you so. Because the threats will not stop. Chloe also mentioned the cycle of abuse, when she mentioned that her mom experienced the same thing as her and that the way she grew up caused her to end up in the same situation, which stood out to me.

Chloe taught me that mistakes don't make me us who we are, but the way we deal with our mistakes does. It seems easier to keep it to ourselves and try to fix it alone, but asking for help and fixing it with someone is the only way to stop the mistake from happening again or getting worse. Chloe taught me that there is no shame to be had for the trauma or mistakes one could have had in their past

Chapter 4 - Carla

Trigger warning: This chapter mentions the topics of : Violence, drug use, alcohol

The following is the original transcript of Carla's experience.

My name is Carla, I live in XX, I work for the chief of staff for the Mayor of XX, and I am 46 years old. But I was 22 when my story happened.

So basically, it is an ex-boyfriend. I had decided to take a year off from college but I didn't want to bum around here in XX while I was taking that time off, and I had friends moving to North Carolina, so it seemed like a good risk to take.

So I moved there, and I worked in a restaurant. There were lots of young people around so it was very nice. I met a guy and we started dating. Dating is such a weird thing to say now, because unless you grew up in the 50's, you don't go on proper dates anymore, you usually hang out with groups of people and you go to parties until you end up hanging out with just the person, right?

So we hung out, his name was Hunter. We started dating down there and he was from the south. That information somehow feels very applicable because the culture down there is so different, people get married younger, they think that guys are more outgoing in terms of talking to girls but there is also a lot more misogyny, not with him though, he was sweet, or seemed sweet.

At the beginning, everything was fine. What happened was, I remember him getting super weird and jealous about other guys. I am a very outgoing person, I am friends with everybody, I am not shy and I kind of have a dark sense of humor, so you see what it's like. I realized he was serious when I joked around when he made a remark about some guy and he got really mad. So that was the first red flag, but nothing physical happened then. I just found myself watching what I said around him, and then watching what I said out in the world, but I didn't really change who I was as a person if I knew he wouldn't hear about it, which is also not okay.

Hunter and I ended up moving in together, and that was really hard because he started being really weird and bad with money after that. So I ended up paying for a lot of stuff, I was working full time, and I decided to go back to school, so I didn't actually take time off from college for that long. He was still jealous about things.

We went on a trip somewhere not far from North Carolina, called Myrtle Beach. We went with a bunch of friends also in their 20s, drinking, going to clubs. I remember we got into a big fight at the club because of the jealousy thing, and I walked back to the hotel by myself

at night, which really wasn't safe. In the middle of the night he woke me up, and he had his hand around my throat. He whispered in my ear how embarrassed about me he was and all that stuff. That was the first physical thing.

After that, nothing happened for months and months, he would just occasionally do that kind of stuff, hold me down and get mad at me, usually when he was drunk or something. I found out later that he was using drugs other than pot, probably cocaine or something else when he was out with his friends and then would come home, pick a fight and get mad at me. The more independent I got, the more it pushed him.

Some years into our relationship, we were together for about 4 years and I don't know how long into it that was, I just know I didn't break up with him right after that happened... So, one of those nights of drinking and rage that he had spent out with his friends and came home to me, we got into it again and I just wasn't having it so I was fighting back. He pushed me so hard I flew across the room, hit the wall, and fell back down. I heard and felt my ankle roll over, like you do when you step off a curb. It was the most extreme pain I had ever felt.

So I was laying on the ground, and immediately he was like, "Oh no, oh shit, I did something really bad, you're okay right, you're okay". We didn't really do anything about it but through the day it turned purple, and I couldn't put any weight on it, so I went to the emergency room. Oh and that week, I was also going to an info session to enroll full time at school, I wanted to go to the info session for a women's college called Meredith College where I ended up graduating from eventually. This info session was on Monday, and I didn't want my leg to make me miss it, so I decided to suck it up and go, and I remember sweating in pain during the event and my friend drove me to the ER, and we met Hunter there.

They took X-rays and we found out it was broken. And a thing that I realize now, as an adult, I mean I was an adult then too but I didn't see things then, is that they bought my story which was some version of tripping over something in the bedroom. They never asked him to leave the room to ask me what happened, he was with me the whole time. I remember thinking that was weird, when they didn't ask me about it alone, because I feel like I could have told them at that point.

We had lived in our apartment for a while, and then we decided to move into a bigger, cheaper place with some friends. Somewhere around that time, the roommates didn't clearly say they knew what happened, but they told me that if I needed them to kick him out they would be on my side.

I couldn't drive, work, or anything else really, and I needed him to drive me to appointments, so I didn't break up with him then. That was the last time he physically abused me, because I actually think that the incident scared the crap out of him.

There were a lot of little things though, we would get into fights but he wouldn't punch me in the face because it would be too obvious for people. It was more like holding me down, saying mean things, not paying bills, spending all my money, probably sleeping with other girls when he was out with his friends doing drugs, so putting me at risk in that way too.

People have this certain image of what a woman who puts up with that for 4 years would look like, and people who know me that it really isn't me, but I did. It felt really hard even just to kick him out and then have to recalibrate the whole "who is paying for what" etc. But in the end it ended up being my friend Suzanne who drove me around to my appointments and helped me.

So I got the cast off, and then went on vacation with him and his family to the beach, but we had to share a common room with his cousins, and I was next to his mom the whole week, she didn't leave my side, I still wonder if they bought the story or not.

We ended up breaking up, but not right away, because he ended up getting sick from something else and he was in the hospital for a month and I felt super weird trying to break up with someone who is in the ICU. We broke up shortly after that and it was filled with drama. He used words like "disrespectful", to which I replied something like "Is it really disrespectful for me to talk with men who I work with when you are not there?"... It was really weird.

I was 22 when I met him, we broke up when I was 26, and I moved back here a couple months later, and he was still living with me when we broke up so I told him to come get his crap, you know, whatever. We had this whole thing where he came to get furniture that was his when I wasn't home, and his mom gave me a bunch of christmas presents because she was sad we broke up but honestly, her son was a jerk.

He never got any consequences for anything. He actually ended up being arrested twice for possession of cocaine I think, and both times he got on probation and never went to jail. So he is a charming-looking jerk, with a drinking and drug problem. I found out about the drug problem later because one of my friends in North Carolina got a picture of us in the staircase of our beautiful house, which I paid for, obviously. She has a frame of it in her house and a friend of ours was like: "I went to a party at that house, there was this guy and his girlfriend was out of town and there were drugs everywhere" and when she told me, well, I wasn't surprised.

But that's it, and I've never had any other relationship like that one, the cycle doesn't apply to me. After, or before.

But you know, I think that every time he physically abused me, he was intoxicated, or at least some sort of intoxicated. The simmering jealousy underneath all of that was often there, not all the time, but often. He was a little dismayed that I thought it was weird he was so jealous. If you want to cheat on someone, you will, whatever happens. That's just how some people are. So that was sort of a mindset he had, or an insecurity, or probably because he was cheating on me and he thought I might be as well. These are all things I realized after the fact.

It was just overall very confusing, like what the hell was happening you know, I didn't have a lot of boyfriends, I didn't cheat, I had three boyfriends before I got married and he was the second. I just didn't know where it was all coming from and it made me feel like he thought I was this completely different person.

When I told him I wanted to break up, the first handful of times we talked about it, he would start apologizing like: "I am so sorry, I won't ever do it again". But he didn't, and then he got sick, and then he told me that he wanted to become a better person.

But I think I was already kind of done at that point, and I had my plans. I was graduating from college, I was going to move back here, and I told him he could come if he wanted but I knew I was moving with or without him. He would leave and go to his parents house, but he would take one of my suitcases, stuff like that. And I told him he was going to come back every time to punish me or something, but it wasn't going to work the way he wanted it to because I was always okay on my own.

Some of this I don't even fully remember now. I was working full time, paying for all my bills, and going to college. So it wasn't like I had any time for that, to a certain extent. I remember my mom asking what Hunter thought about me going back to school and she had that look in her eyes, and I asked her not to ask again, so she kind of knew.

I know, by the time we actually did break up, we were getting out of the apartment at the end of a few months, it was going to be December, and he brought trash bags to get his stuff in October, so he wasn't coming back and that was just fine. We talked a few times after that, and it was all awful drama, there was other stuff going on in my family, my mom got sick with cancer that year, so that part was important and he wasn't. I just separated myself from it all, so we didn't really fight for it at that point, he knew that I was serious.

I can definitely say it has affected my life. When I first started seeing my husband, who was one of the only relationships I had after Hunter, the way he dealt with conflict was so different and confusing. He would de-escalate fights instead of the other way around, and I was just really shocked.

But it quickly went back to normal in my relationships, I didn't have anything happen as a child or anything, so to me, it wasn't that traumatic. I had friends who had stories that were traumatic to them though.

I think it also affected me in the way that I had those year long nightmares that were about me having to go back to North Carolina, I couldn't stay up here and I had to go live down there and I wasn't allowed to come back home.

My leg always hurts when it rains. A broken leg at 25 and it still aches sometimes. And then I just get mad a little bit, when I see the jealous stuff with people I know, I usually tell them I don't like it, because it feels so weird observing that.

I think I got out pretty lucky. There is this weird thing where, the one person I will internet stalk from time to time is him, to know what's happening. I don't bother looking with other boyfriends. For him, it's different, I always want to know. He has been married twice since then, and I just think about those women and I hope he has learned his lesson, but unless he has gotten help for drugs and alcohol, it isn't very likely. But then again, in his case, I think he could have changed if he got some real help about his mental health. I don't think he was a trauma monster with a background of systemic abuse, I don't even know what his deal is actually, it was just weird.

I totally thought about contacting the women he has been with. I don't know what stopped me, well, they wouldn't believe me. The ex-wife maybe would now though, but I think it would have fallen on deaf ears if they were in love with him and all that stuff. Or maybe he told them some version of the story that was likely to be believable enough for them, and he probably told them I am crazy, things that guys do.

It didn't feel worth bothering.

I also don't think he is dangerous, in terms of killing somebody, he is just a stupid idiot who doesn't know his own strength. He is really dumb. He also was very freaked out by my broken leg as he should have been.

It took me a little to tell my husband about what had happened to me. I actually didn't tell anybody about it, even my roommate who asked me if I wanted him to be kicked out. A year later, I went to visit that same friend, she was living in Florida and we were both single at that point. One night, we were hanging out on her patio and I told her, but kind of in the context of "how did you not know, how did you not figure it out?" and I actually was kind of mad at her. She said that she didn't know what to do about the doubts.

After that, I didn't tell anyone, even my sister and my husband, who was my boyfriend at the time, until probably about 10 or 15 years ago and the story happened from 1996 to 2000 so it had been a good few years before I started telling people.

I think I didn't before then because I was embarrassed. I was embarrassed that I was with somebody who would do that and that I stayed with them instead of leaving when it happened.

Carla - Reflection

Carla was a little bit of a different story, because she didn't experience any sort of cycle in her life. It happened with one relationship, but never before and never after, which is interesting, because it proves that even if there are patterns, they don't always apply.

One thing that stood out to me from the interview was that Carla mentioned red flags, and how they evolved from something very insignificant to something completely out of control. She started by watching what she said around him so he wouldn't get jealous, but then she realized that even if she wasn't changing who she was, it was only if he didn't notice it. Carla also mentioned that her abuser was usually more abusive when he was drunk or intoxicated or on drugs. It was also the case for a few other interviews I had, and it really struck me, because **someone who is abusive might get worse if they are abusing alcohol, but an alcoholic won't necessarily be abusive.**

When Carla said that she decided to suck up the pain she was feeling from her leg and go to the information session, and when she said that the hospital staff didn't ask her what happened when she was by herself, I started shivering.

Carla taught me that not everything is obvious, and that if somebody really tries, anything could go unseen. She taught me that it is important for somebody to advocate for themselves, and to leave when they are ready to. Carla also taught me that independence is never something to be ashamed of, and that it is okay for one to need some space, or that it is just okay for somebody to prefer living by themselves.

That interview with Carla gave me hope, because it showed me that not all abuse happens within an endless cycle. For some people, abuse is a one time thing and with the right resources to support their healing, they can go on with their lives in a reasonably normal way.

Chapter 5 - Kirsten

Trigger warning: this chapter mentions the topics of: violence, child neglect and abuse, rape, alcoholism

The following is the original transcript of Kirsten's experience.

My name is Kirsten, I am the executive director and chef at the Stone Soup Café here in Greenfield Mass. I was born and raised in New York City, I lived in Cleveland for 13 years and then I moved back here, for the past 21 years now.

My experience with domestic violence started with my mother, I was an abused and neglected child. I am the older of two children and my mother's abuse was verbal, emotional and physical. I know the very first sort of abuse that happened to me was when I was around 3 years old, my mother was breastfeeding my sister and I was very curious so I guess I intruded on her space too much at the time because you know, I was a curious toddler, so she screamed and kicked me across the room. She told me that once I hit the door jam, I got up and I looked at her in a very determined way like I was never going to let that sort of thing happen again, but that is not the case.

My mother suffered from abuse too, and the thing with abuse is that if you live with it and if you don't rectify your life and trauma through therapy and counseling or some kind of remediation or justice, you continue the cycle. There really is a cycle, and my mom was an abused child, with emotional, verbal, and physical [abuse] too. And then, throughout my childhood, she would get angry, fly into a rage and get it out on me.

So I grew up in this environment where I had that person who could be so caring and loving and sweet and nice, but then flip on a dime. And I don't know what it was in me but I had this thing where I loved my mother very much and I wanted everything to be perfect so I would do anything, to make it perfect with my mother.

Some time, in my early teenage years, around 13, I realized that it wasn't going to change. There was a time where she went to slap me and I caught her hand and bent her hand backwards so she fell down on her knees and I told her never to hit me again, because I was big enough to protect myself.

I got involved with somebody when I was 14, and he was 21. When my mother found out about it, she put me in a home, so I no longer lived under her roof. My dad fought for custody and got me out of the home, he always dealt with things a very different way.

I already had the abusive patterns in my DNA, so the relationships I had with men were very codependent and by that, I mean that people who are codependent are always looking for

acceptance in all kinds of places they shouldn't be looking. The mechanism that helps them protect themselves or make choices for themselves is not fully established, and I had a lot of that.

That first boyfriend was actually quite a long relationship, it lasted more than five years. During that time, I had a lot of fantasies, like we were going to get married. I got pregnant twice and I had abortions both times, and somewhere in my 19th or 20th year I understood that it was probably never going to happen. He wasn't Prince Charming even though there were good things about this relationship, the promises that were being spoken never came to reality. But our story was still beautiful.

We lived in a building in Washington Heights that had a doorman, and to this day it still has a doorman. I grew up on 169th street, there was an elementary school facing our building's front door. My first boyfriend's name was Juan, he was hired to be the doorman of our building. Before they put in the 100% automatic elevator, the doorman was also the elevator man. Juan was Cuban and he was drop dead gorgeous, like Richard Gere-gorgeous.

He lifted weights, he was into music, he was tall and broad shouldered. I had a huge crush on him, and somehow my huge crush was reciprocated. I was this little kid, 14 years old when I met him, and this reciprocated crush... I am not sure how it really started, maybe with some chatting in the elevator, whatever.

He invited me to his house to see his stereo system. It was in the late 70s, when the bigger the speaker, the better, and every turntable was epic. He was really into stereo equipment, and he invited me to see his stuff. Did you really think that, at 14, I thought anything else would happen, well no. Had I watched enough romance movies, and you know the way that relationships were objectified in the media at the time, plus having a father who was older than my mother. He was 16 years older than my mother, so looking at a guy 7 years older than me made total sense to me. I already had a woman's body at 13.

So I went to his house, and he put on his stereo system. It was amazing, and of course it was in his bedroom. I stood in the doorway, and we ended up making out. And then, we started meeting secretly, usually I would go to his house. It was so enticing you know, because we were doing all the things we were not supposed to be doing. You weren't supposed to have an older boyfriend, and sneak off places, and make out. You weren't supposed to let somebody touch you in a certain way. Anyway, it was definitely delicious and wonderful, I can still visualize the bedroom, and it was 42 years ago. Deep memories.

When my mother found out, after 7 or 8 months of the relationship... For the longest time, my line was "You can't bullshit a bullshitter" and quite frankly, if I hadn't cut school... There were things that were going on that she didn't listen to. I had gotten into a very preppy school, the kind of school you have to pass a test to get into. It wasn't what I wanted to do,

but my mother was not listening to me. She had this racist attitude where she didn't want me going to school with kids in our neighborhood. It had changed from being Cubans who were middle class and had fled, and German Jews, to Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, less of the other two. There were more people of color, and my mother came from the south, she didn't want me going to the high school where all my friends went. She wanted me to come to that preppy school.

So she didn't listen, and I hated school. Juan worked nights and I could stay with him, you know, I was kind of running away from everything, my mother, school.

I don't think I knew I needed to... run away. My parents had a very ugly divorce, they fought a great deal, and my father won when he got custody of me at 15, that is when my mother said she wasn't my mother anymore. I think he started fighting for us when I was 8 years old. It was a long battle, lots of fighting, lots of family court. He would call and it would be dinner time so my mother would yell at him like a stupid truck driver. You know, it was just ugly, really ugly. She limited his visitation; he has passed away now. He was an actor in NYC and it's a hard profession, he wasn't always paid, sometimes he drove a taxi, it was difficult.

When my father got custody, he accepted Juan. There were times where my dad would piss me off for whatever reason and I would just go to Juan's house, not answer the phone, or just let him know where I was and that he should leave me alone. I was one of those kids who probably would have done really well with somebody saying "okay, clearly, this is not working for you, let's figure out a way to channel your energy," but that never happened. I had to figure it out for myself.

Juan wasn't abusive at all, he was just caught in a weird situation, and bizarrely, after I broke up with him, he showed up with a ring, but I said no. I wonder what my life would have been like if I said yes. I would probably be living on the 17th floor of George Hill in New York. I remember the address. I think the woman he married is actually Cuban, and I know they had at least two children. Good for him.

Trigger warning : The following is a passage where rape is mentioned. You can skip to the next warning if you need to.

There was a time during my relationship where I was actually blackmailed by a man and then raped by him, simply because I was not 18 and he threatened to tell my mother that what I was doing at 14 was illegal. Abuse leads to other situations in which you place yourself in parallel because you don't have the strength to stand up for yourself, and rationalize so that you are not acting in fear all the time.

(The following story was taken apart from later in the interview for clarity purposes. However, it does not impact the flow of Kirsten's narrative)

So, what happened is that the man told me he was going to tell my mother that I was seeing somebody. It was really weird, you know, it was kind of a threat of abuse.

My mother was receiving food stamps, and she was in a situation where she would ask me to go up there and get it for her. I was around 14, and my mother was sending me to the food stamp office by myself.

This person, he was the person who checks you in online, so he did that for me, but then he asked me how old I was, where my mom was, if I had a boyfriend etc. I didn't have enough of a filter to not say things. He came back and said that my mother was going to have to come but that I had to do blah blah blah because if I didn't, he would tell my mother that I was seeing someone I shouldn't be seeing, and so I had to go to his house.

So, I went to his house. He made me do things I didn't want to, he was not my boyfriend, he was not the person I was in love with. I think it happened twice, where I was blackmailed into going to his house and servicing him, which I call rape because I really did not want to do it. He asked me to come back again, but I said no and I told him to do whatever the fuck he wanted to do.

Think about this. Your mother sends you 3 miles up the road, this is New York City though, so you live in Washington Heights, you are going past Cabrini Heights to Fort Tryon. We are talking about three neighborhoods, to go to the welfare office to get food stamps, all that when you are 14. Who does that crap, seriously?

A lot of people think of rape as this thing where you get jumped in the street or you get pulled out of a car, and yes, sure, rape happens that way, but what happened to me actually happens to more women than that other situation. And I shouldn't just say women, you know the uncle comes over and molests the little boy, it happens in families, somebody brought a friend over and they get you into the backroom. Depending on your age and their ability to sweet talk, you can easily be talked into doing things you would never have done. And that is what happened to me, I was blackmailed and talked into doing things I would never have done.

I never told Juan about what happened to me. I actually never told anybody until I told my father about it, and even that was after my relationship with Juan was long gone. I don't think I ever told my mother, you know, to be honest, my mother would have never gotten over that shit.

That's the other thing about abuse, is that you often end up protecting your abuser.

End of trigger warning.

When I was 21, I got involved with the person who is my son's biological father, and he was not physically abusive, he was emotionally abusive. He was actually carrying on other relationships with other women and had other children. When I got pregnant with my son, I decided that I would keep the baby because I already had two abortions and I didn't want to live through that kind of horror again.

I mean I think that we, as women, should have the right to choose what our lives will be and if you're pregnant and you are not going to have any way to take care of it and you can't imagine giving birth and giving it away, you should have the right to choose... and yet, that choice comes with consequences. For me, it was a guilty conscience thing.

So I decided to have the baby and at the same time, I got a job offer to move to Ohio. I took the job, I took my stuff, and I moved with the baby. I decided I was going to be a single parent, I didn't care about how I was going to do it. I had a job, a place, so I left my last piece of support system and I left to have this child miles and miles away.

For quite some time, years actually, I was not dating, I was just being a parent, And probably when my son was 4 or 5, I met my first husband, and he was somebody that I had hung out with for a long time because we were best friends. But when we got married, he was a different human being. I think he was expecting me to not be who I was, and just because we are married doesn't mean I am changing who I am. I really thought our relationship started with friendship, we even shared background stories since we were both New Yorkers living in Ohio.

He became different in a lot of ways, except that on my 30th birthday we went out and had a night of dinner and karaoke and drinking. When we got home, something transpired between us and an argument started, he got really angry, and he pushed me. He pushed me so hard that I went flying across the room and I was stopped by the stove. I cracked some ribs and I was stunned so I spent the next 7 months making an exit plan, even though I had only been married to him for 5 or 6 months. I was kind of just: "wow, you really are not safe, and this is just like night and day". This was such a bizarre situation.

So, I remember that there were conversations I had with him about drinking, and conversations about the activities I was doing.

I distinctly remember a Sunday morning where he really wanted me to stay in bed, and I wouldn't stay in bed because I had to get up to go to church to teach Sunday school, or go to the service or something. I remember asking him why he wanted me to stay in bed, and he said that it was because I was his wife and he wants me to stay with him.

And I said that just because I am his wife doesn't mean that the things we did before I became his wife aren't going to be the same after I became his wife. Maybe that wasn't the right train of thought because what he was offering was an opportunity to be sexual, or romantic, or cuddling, to take a breath, but that wasn't my demeanor. My demeanor was that I had something to do.

There were a couple times where we had conversations where I asked him to slow down because I was afraid he would become an alcoholic. He denied it every time, so I said okay. I was seeing a pattern. "I'm talking to you, remember we are best friends, don't get mad at me about it, just listen and also why aren't you noticing what is happening here". I had never been to AA or anything, I had no tools to help frame that conversation a different way. Those were the two places where I knew something was weird.

I am being really broad with you, Sarah, but I can tell you that that night, we went out with a girlfriend of mine, and we all went out to a karaoke, we had all been drinking. I wasn't driving but he was. I was in the backseat and they were in the front, having this conversation about how sex is casual. And like, this is my new husband of 5 months and they are having this conversation in the front seat. I could feel the fear and anger rising up the back of my head. And we had a dog.

When we got to my house, her car was in the driveway, so she took her car and she left, he walked the dog and I put my on my flannel nightgown, which was pretty much saying "do not come near me", but that isn't what happened.

So we were having sex, it was definitely not making love, it was the continuation of the conversation in the car. He slipped, and actually made wrong contact which really hurt me. So it was almost like being raped by my own husband. I hate to say it like that but... I started crying because it hurt and he got mad, that's where the argument started.

He went into the kitchen, I followed him, and then I got thrown against the oven. It was a heated argument, I am sure I was saying something like "I know this isn't just sex, you hurt me, why are you screaming at me," and I got close to him, and he pushed me. As I got up from the stove, I took a look at the knife block that was on top of the fridge, he saw me and he grabbed my chin and walked me across the dining room into the china cabinet. He didn't break the house, but it was very violent. The whole evening was violent, it wasn't what I had expected from him at all. He had been gentle and kind and silly and loving for the best majority of our relationship until that point.

The next day, he went and picked up my son, because he was sleeping at his friend's house, they went out and got me roses and presents. Meanwhile, I am laying in bed, shattered, with a continent of bruises on my back. He apologized, there was all this stuff

that went on, but the reality is that our relationship was broken that night. I don't think it was over, even after I divorced him, I still spent time with him and loved him so deeply. He was my best friend. I was shattered, and the relationship too, and it took me leaving to really cut it off, and not have any contact with him. We had the same friends, my whole world spun around him. Except for my kid, and what happened is my kid melted down.

We went into our own apartment, he started acting out and melted down. We went into family therapy and he had his own therapy also, and it came out that my ex-husband had been beating him. So I knew nothing because what happened is my son kept the same kind of secret that I kept for myself. It was heartbreaking.

As soon as I got the opportunity to be gone, school finished etc. I was like okay, we are leaving. We lived one suburb west of Cleveland, and there literally was one bar in this town. My ex decided that the bar he liked best was the one right underneath my apartment windows. There was a lot of weirdness.

There was somebody that I started to see after the divorce. My ex-husband got really mad and he came banging on the door at 10pm demanding to see my son. So I told him he was asleep and that he couldn't do that. I did not open the door, but I ended up having to call the police. I had to explain to the police that he couldn't come and bang on my door to see an 8 year old kid at 10 in the evening and that he couldn't disturb my home, and also that he wasn't the biological father of my child. The police went "oh" and then left.

He even tried to make me feel guilty the first Christmas after our divorce. He begged us to come over for Christmas breakfast. At that time, I didn't know that my son had been abused by him, until we went over for breakfast. He had done everything "right". He asked me to come back, he said we should go to therapy and I was really torn, but I said no. So the next time we were invited over, and I had a conversation with him and he told me that he closed the doors forever, he wasn't going to let everybody in ever again, it was all my fault.

There is all this stuff that happens, and you could be caught in a spiral forever. That is a lot of crap that went under the bridge. Lots of crap, lots of conversations, lots of everything.

When I left my first husband, he became very angry. He begged and everything, but it was a little too much a little too late for me to allow trust again in the relationship so I walked away, and changed my whole life. I went to college, became a teacher, and I had the opportunity to come back to Massachusetts. I seized the opportunity and brought my child with me, and we started all over again.

I will say that I did a lot of therapy, in Ohio and here. I went to a codependency issues place, my ex-husband had signs of alcoholism and I always thought he would become an

alcoholic. I was right, because he did become one. I am lightly in touch with him, over social media and such.

It was interesting because when I came back here, somebody from my past contacted me and we started dating, but he ended the relationship after 7 or 8 months and I never figured out why. He called me on Christmas Eve and I had my son and that tradition where I would have many people over and we would all decorate the tree. Fun time for friends and we would all troop off to the Unitarian church for celebrations and it was a great tradition we had. The guy called me and he proceeded to verbally abuse me by saying that I had forgotten him, and that I was having a good time without him blah blah blah, to which I responded that he could have been a part of the tradition. Thankfully, that evening, my aunt was in the house. She took the phone and told that person to stop harassing me, she hung up and took me in her arms, she told me I didn't deserve to be treated like that. "You have a party happening, it's okay, let's go".

I took a 6-month break from any sort of dating, to figure out what I really wanted and I started narrowing down what would be the best pick for me, and I started meeting people very lightly, and one of those people happens to be my second husband. And while he is not an abusive person, he has his own issues. There are times where we clash because of whatever happens that triggers him and makes him raise his voice, and then I am begging him to stop yelling.

We have a deep enough friendship and relationship that I would say it is the healthiest relationship I have had, and I found it when I was 36... only 20 years ago did I find the healthiest relationship that I have ever been in. It is a long haul to come out of that place where you think abuse is normal, and being yelled at is normal, and being lied to is normal, or being pushed around is normal, to a place where you look at your partner with enough love and care and you are able to ask them to lower their voice, and ask them what the problem is and if you guys can talk about it.

I will go back to my mother for a little bit because she is a fascinating human being. When I was 25, I had a conversation with her and I told her that she had a choice, she could either have a relationship with me and it is an adult one, or we have no relationship at all. We are adults, and I am happy to help her through this but there is a cycle happening here and we need to build the bridge to a healthier relationship. It has been 30 years of work, and it still isn't fixed, but it is better, and there are times where I don't speak to her for years. I just saw her for the first time in 10 years in September. It was lovely, and light, it was great. I have had a few phone conversations with her where we laugh and it's super nice. That is because I have boundaries.

Abuse can be all kinds of different things, to all kinds of different people. A lot of people would have said that my first boyfriend being an adult when I was still a teenager was an

abusive relationship, because he had a different level of power than I did. I don't see it that way, on many levels he helped rescue me from a terrible situation in my home, and then that becomes codependency because he rescued me. I think that breaking the cycle of abuse takes a lot of self reflection, understanding, and determination. You have to be aware enough of your emotions and how your body is feeling because sometimes it isn't an emotion, it's a pit in your stomach or a tension between your shoulders, so you really have to be invested.

As far as my childhood situation, I am sure that my mother would have screamed and yelled and beat my sister more often if I had let her but as the older sister who was taught to take care of the little one, I got in front of her a lot so their relationship is very different. My sister got away with a hundred times more things than I ever did as a kid, that is just the nature of having a younger sibling. My sister has a different level of resilience than I do, and she has stayed close to my mother and home, so I don't know if that would qualify as a codependent relationship. She did suffer, and she and I had conversations about "old Mommy", but in reality she has reaped the benefits of a relationship that was very different from mine.

Before I left the house, my sister and I were very close, But when I left the house, the message was loud and clear to my sister that she too, could be put in a home, and whether that was directly said to her or it was because I was put in a home, she intuited it, I am unsure, but she heard the line differently, so when I left at 14, she was 12, and we had different rhythms, but I wasn't there to see it. She had taken another path in education.

It was a very weird time in my life because my mother told me she was not my mom anymore, and I was shocked because she was still my mother but she was just not taking care of me, so what else was new, but of course I didn't say that because she probably would have decked me if I did.

Even today, my relationship with my sister is very bizarre. I would say that my sister is manic depressive but you wouldn't necessarily see it. She is very much like my mother, you don't know what reaction you are going to get from her. She happened to come up in September and she was on her best behavior, there wasn't a lot of fighting or anything. She can be very snippy and I find that to be extremely rude. I tried to have a conversation with her but she responded with the good old "you are not here in New York so you can't possibly understand" so, I mean, our father would be rolling in his grave hearing that. He was a New Yorker too, but he didn't act and speak like they do. I think there is something inherent in the younger sibling to be the center of attention, but what for? We both have our lives, with different lifestyles, in different places.

In essence, I would say that when I lost my mother, I lost my sister too.

As far as the time where I was assaulted, I am sure I told my first husband. I haven't told my second husband the whole story. The only stories I told him were made very broad. My husband David used to be a lot more triggered, especially when we were raising my stepson. I would be like "please, lower your voice," and finally I sat him down one day and I explained to him why his yelling was triggering to me, that I needed his help. I asked him what I could do to help him lower his voice without asking. I think we had that conversation around 10 to 12 years ago and we have been together for 19 years. It took me a while to get there but I trust him with everything.

Even now, I still feel shame about the fact that at 14 I didn't know what I was doing. Today's Kirsten knows that I didn't know at 14, and I know that I shouldn't feel guilty. But there is that stigma, and the shame and guilt that still resides. You can't really ever get rid of it.

I also think that I was protecting myself by not telling the people around me about what happened, because I think that I believed Juan would be like "you stupid ho" and that he would leave me. So then my relationship would be over because I didn't think he had the capacity to be compassionate and empathetic. And I didn't tell my mother because she would have called me a stupid ass and she would have beat me.

So that was totally self serving, and then there was the other part of it. If I told my mother that person did something to me, that person would tell her that I was seeing Juan. So I was trapped in this place, where if I tell my boyfriend he might leave me, if I tell my mother she will take me away from my boyfriend and he is the only happy spot in my life, so I had to keep it to myself, for myself.

It was a very demeaning situation, because I wasn't only powerless, I was also being degraded. You can still hear it now in my story telling, I walked around feeling like the stupidest ass on the planet. I had a very hard time making sense of anything. There are a few times this last year where I was thinking about my childhood, where I walked in a fog. There was the outside, my face, what people saw, and then inside, there was the fog. A lot of those years I don't remember, my sister can tell you chapter and verse stories, what was said and who said what. I can only give you rough brush strokes of things.

It's almost like being abused made me shut down a little. When my parents' divorce started, I started having this recurring dream. I had it for a very long time. My parents were Doberman Pinschers, and they were fighting and barking at each other. At some point, the barks became machine guns and they would destroy each other, and then I would wake up in a cold sweat. I know I was a sleep deprived kid, constantly on alert and constantly worrying.

You know, this is actually really interesting, what would Kirsten have been like if there was less of this abuse and neglect, and fear? What would it have been like if my parents didn't

get a divorce? Who would I have become? I don't dwell too much on that, because I'm okay with who I am today. I have had a hard enough time handling all the things I can do, so then when I start thinking about all those "What if?" scenarios, I don't take it down that road because I already am overwhelmed with all the gifts and talents that I have, so whatever. But that could be a way of living in the fog too...

I do not think I have recovered from the trauma at all. You can't forget those things. Here I am, telling you stories that are 25 years old. You don't forget anything, and you don't necessarily recover. Sometimes you fall back into old habits you used to do 10 years ago. You need to go back, and give yourself more time for reflection.

In my case, I hope that what I can say is more than just "no, I haven't recovered", but that I have learned. I am smarter, more diligent about what my needs are, about what my boundaries are. That same girlfriend that sat in the car that night talking about how sex is a casual thing, she is the same one who said "oh, well, where are your boundaries?". And I didn't know, at 30.

Thank goodness I have had 25 years to figure out what boundaries are. And now, in our society... I was born in '64, bras weren't being burnt yet, abortion wasn't legal yet, women had no rights whatsoever, the men ran everything. All those patriarchal things were so important, especially in the middle class. And my family very much had those moralities.

So one would hope that I have been able to recover from that and become self-determined as a woman, but I think that stuff runs rampant, like white supremacy, we are swimming in that whole patriarchy thing. Even in politics, you can see the differences, the racism and the sexism. There are all these proofs of this "old boy" network that truly allowed abuse and violence. I mean, I was born in '64 but that old boy patriarchy started 100 years ago in America, and existed for much longer, especially in European countries.

Kids don't really have a sense of causality. I was a school teacher and I noticed that kids didn't understand causality, history, and interconnectedness. And all that because abuse sponsors abuse, etc. The vast majority of the children that I serviced one town over from here were children that have the ACE syndrome, they all had trauma or neglect or abuse, they are all marked.

Each time you are abused, something breaks off in you. If you are 8 and you start smoking weed, something breaks off in you and stops developing. All those things are creating a way larger demographic of abused people. I think it would be interesting to figure out how we could systematically educate and find preventative measures so that if abuse is happening, you don't carry the shame and guilt that I carry.

I wish I could have painted a prettier picture, but we are worse off now than we were in the '60s, society wise. And while I really enjoy playing games on my phone, and I really enjoy the instant thing of looking something up and getting the information, that nature of instant is eroding all those things I have been noticing for the past 10 years in kids.

I think that all of my experiences, good or bad, ugly and disgusting, helped me be a more empathetic, loving and caring person. It helps me do the job I have in the community, I can actually tell people that I understand where they have been. Even if I have a nice house that we pay our mortgage for, I have lived on food stamps, I have been hungry. I have never been homeless, so that is one thing I can say never happened to me.

I have been abused, right? I have had those different levels of abuse and neglect that allow me to be there for people and listen for a lens of openness as well as experience, so I think that is the way it shaped me. I happen to be this person that bad things happened to, so what, life gave me lemons and I made lemonade.

I have this motto that says "If you're going through hell, keep going". You will get out. I think that is the other thing, all these things that happened to me on many levels, I overcame the daily horror of them. No, I haven't forgotten about them, I don't call myself recovered. I think it informs who I am today, because I lived it. And people who have never suffered from any form of "ism" or been abused, or have had some sort of trauma in their lives, don't have the benefit of being able to say "oh wow, that happened to you too" and have the empathetic or compassionate bond.

Kirsten - Reflection

Kirsten's interview was the first one I had, and it was also the longest of all. I was quite nervous when we started, but she was very open about everything and also was very kind to me knowing it was my first ever interview where I was the one asking the questions. Kirsten also made it clear that I could leave in the town she lives in and her profession, which is different from everybody else I talked to for this project.

Kirsten is one of the only interviewees who talked about being abused by a member of her family of origin as well as by partners in her life, which is something that stood out to me. Very early on, she said that her mom suffered from abuse too, and she was the one who introduced the concept of cycle of abuse to me.

One of the things that stuck with me most from Kirsten's story is the part about when she was blackmailed and raped at only 14. It is something that happens to so many girls, women, people, and nobody talks about it enough. I will forever be grateful for Kirsten and

how much she trusted me with her past. It broke my heart to hear that she had to live with that secret without telling anyone for so long because she was scared of the repercussions on all sides of the story if she said anything. She shouldn't have had to go through that kind of pain, nobody should go through it.

Kirsten was an example of someone who spent a lot of time making an exit plan. She knew she wasn't supposed to endure the things her partner was making her go through, and she had the strength to step up and make decisions for herself, many times. She also talked about how her trauma and all the different situations in which she has been abused shaped her to be the successful woman she is now, and it really inspired me to keep going with the project.

Kirsten taught me that trauma doesn't stop anybody from achieving their goals in life. She also taught me that it is important to have set boundaries in life, and to be confident about any decision one wants to make for themselves. Kirsten taught me that life can get ugly, it can get very scary. But life is also full of things that will make one grow, and learn. And there are certainly people who will make life a living hell because they act in terrible ways that traumatize others, but being a survivor of someone's abuse and having lived through it or even having tried to stay in it doesn't make anyone a terrible person. Kirsten taught me that trauma doesn't have to define someone. It hurts them, but if they're lucky and find the right support, then it can also help them learn.

Conclusion

Heather, Valentine, Chloe, Carla, and Kirsten are the women who made this project possible. I am forever thankful for their time, their willingness to work with me, and their vulnerability, strength and honesty. They are the ones who opened up painful pieces of their lives to me, and they are the ones who were willing to give their stories not only to me, but to the entirety of this community.

Heather, thank you for your kindness, your humor throughout our interview.

Valentine, thank you for your time, your willingness to share painful memories with me.

Chloe, thank you for your vulnerability, especially while talking about your daughters.

Carla, thank you for your confidence, your ease with giving details during our interview.

Kirsten, thank you for your openness, your willingness to open up to the world.

I do not recommend this senior project topic to all students. As you can imagine, it was a very intense and interesting process, and I ended up needing a lot of support out of my work with the survivors. I wasn't trained to take in so much information, especially not such heavy and traumatic stories. A lot of the time, when I look back on this project, I wonder what it would have been like if I had watched a professional interview with the survivors and just listened, instead of trying to interact and be present. It probably wouldn't have had the same impact on me. I am glad I made the decision to do the interviews myself, to contact the survivors myself, to do everything almost by myself.

If you ever wonder about how you can help somebody, my first answer would be to tell you to do something, anything, even the smallest thing. It is small actions like "are you okay?" or "how is life at home going?" that could make a difference, even if you don't notice it. It might make somebody realize that they need an escape. It might make somebody realize they are not actually alone, they have you. Small actions matter.

As I said in the reflection chapters, I was taught so much, but I do not think the learning will ever stop. I also have to say that my personal learning didn't only include the interviews. I had almost weekly conversations with my advisor, BZ, who made writing this book way less stressful than it could have been. I had zoom meetings with my outside mentor, Madeleine, as well as with Ella, who graduated from The Academy a couple years ago. They both gave me a ton of resources, websites to look at, information on all aspects of what abuse can look like. It is important for me to share with you, reader, that this isn't a project I did alone. I honestly do not think I would have been able to do it by myself. It took many weeks of

discussing, doubting and modifying to get to this final product, and I am grateful to have been surrounded by people during all those phases.

Finally, I want to thank you, reader, for contributing to this project by gaining knowledge about abuse. I hope you will keep these stories and emotions with you, and that you will transmit them to whoever, just like Heather, Valentine, Chloe, Carla and Kirsten communicated their story of survivors with me, and I shared my story of the listener with you.

Resources

- SAFETY PLANNING

Nathan Shulman, “Domestic violence safety planning”, YouTube, TN coalition, 31 January 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MnCw-WGhCNO> , accessed Jan 13, 2021

- CALL HOTLINE

<http://www.casamyrna.org/get-support/safelink/>

- CALL OR TEXT HOTLINE

<https://www.thehotline.org/>

- THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE

“The cycle of violence”, Marjaree Mason Center, <https://mmcenter.org/stay-informed/cycle-violence> , accessed Jan 20, 2021

- THE CYCLE OF ABUSE

“The cycle of abuse”, Manitoba.ca, Status of Women, <https://www.gov.mb.ca/msw/fvpp/cycle.html> , accessed Jan 13, 2021

- Smith, S.G., Zhang, X., Basile, K.C., Merrick, M.T., Wang, J., Kresnow, M., Chen, J. (2018). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2015 Data Brief – Updated Release. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- National Network to End Domestic Violence (2020). 14th Annual Domestic Violence Counts Report. Washington, DC. Retrieved from: NNEDV.org/DVCounts
- Dills J, Jones K, Brown P. Continuing the Dialogue: Learning from the Past and Looking to the Future of Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Violence Prevention. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019.

Appendix: learning journal

Aug 29, Saturday

During the past two months, I tried to brainstorm some ideas for this project, and I have to admit that it was more complicated than expected.

I wanted something that I like to do, mixed with something new.

A while ago, I had the idea of interviewing children and teenagers that have experienced abuse in their youth, and I wanted to tell their story from the point of view of a listener mixed with their own point of view. Covid made that a little bit complicated. It is still something I would like to do. After that, I had the idea of going to public places, to sit down somewhere and observe people. I would just look at them, and create a background story for them. Give them a name I think fits them and just make their story a chapter in the book.

I think I mostly just want to write, maybe a bit about myself and how I changed here, but mostly about other people. I don't know if I'm going to be able to do that during those coronavirus times.

I am also concerned about my project because I know that someone else in the class or maybe even a few people want to do similar things. Even if the ideas are different, they stay similar and that kind of stresses me out. I don't want to do like everyone else. I want to do different, new, and ambitious.

Aug 30, Sunday

I talked to Jodi (Gwen's mom) and she said that she hasn't received a response from the center I was trying to reach out to yet. That center is, I believe, a place where women that have been abused go for help. We thought that maybe I could interview some people there and write my book about that. So that's mostly what's new. I also had a conversation with Gwen and she said she would like to talk to people and make art about what comes from the conversations. It kind of expanded my fear of doing something that everyone is doing.

Aug 31, Monday

The stress of being back at school is boosting me to express my thoughts and feelings into writing. I think it would be very good for me to have a writing based senior project.

I'm also kinda becoming a bit worried about not having any other idea than just my writing ideas. Shouldn't I have like back up plans and other ideas to explore?

Sep 13, Sunday

It's been a while, big news incoming tho. I have finally sort of found a plan of attack. I found my question, the one I am going to give to Mr. Almeida at our next meeting. But before that, Jodi gave me a phone number, of her cousin, who has experienced domestic violence, and who is the leader of a lot of support groups etc. She is willing to talk to me about what happened to her, and she is also willing to give me more info and more people to talk to. I got her phone number, and I am going to be texting her pretty soon. Jodi also told me it would be good to create a confidentiality agreement form for me and the other person to sign, to make them feel safer and more comfortable talking to me. I think it is a very good thing to be planning all of this.

Obviously, I am going to have to talk to Mr. Almeida too, and I don't even know if it is going to be possible, but I really hope so. I'm into this !!!

Sep 19, Saturday

I had a meeting with Mr. Almeida on Wednesday to talk about my senior project, and he actually really liked my idea this time.

My project into a question : “How can we give a voice to people that have suffered from domestic violence in our community. How can those of us that have never heard about it before learn about it now, with the technological material we possess (zoom, etc.), in the safest way possible?”

I now have two contacts. The woman that has a peer group thing, and another woman, who started talking about her experience on social media a while ago. When my host mom texted her, she said she would absolutely love to help. She gave me her email address and now I can contact her as soon as I am ready. Sometimes I feel like I rely a bit too much on my host mom, and that it isn't completely my project. But I am trying my hardest to make it my own.

I talked to a few students about my project, and they all said that they really liked the idea. Molly especially, who I am co-team-leading with. We talked about it during our kayaking trip, and she said that it would be so interesting to bring that into a community like the Academy. I am now even more excited to do this.

I haven't gotten an advisor yet, but I am looking forward to sharing my ideas, to get another input on them. I also know that things might need a little bit of change, and that's okay. I am willing to adapt to what my advisor has to say about the project.

I don't really have doubts about “doing like everyone else” anymore. I guess that the clearer my ideas get, the less doubts I have.

October 6, Tuesday

I have a meeting with BZ, my advisor (woop woop) today to talk about my senior project and start working on my proposal. I'm a bit nervous but I'm sure it will be fine. I haven't paid much attention to my project for the past couple weeks, because there were a lot of other things I needed to take care of, but I hope I can start working on it more again soon.

October 9, Friday

I have emailed Chloe, and texted Heather. Chloe said she would love to talk soon and I told her I would get back to her soon, because I wanted to talk to BZ again, and write my proposal and come up with an agreement. I am so thrilled about this project.

I am actually really looking forward to getting interviews done, and even if it really stresses me out to be the person to ask questions, I think it will be a good exercise. I am going to create a folder with all my senior project stuff so it's easier to find them.

October 12, Monday

I just got a new contact for my senior project. Her name is Kristen and she is willing to talk to me about her experience, she also has a lot of contacts and is willing to direct me to them if I want more people to interview. EXCITING. I am waiting for my meeting with BZ to tell the three

contacts I have I am ready to meet with them. Because I think I need BZ's help to come up with the agreement.

October 20, Tuesday

Started working on the questions I am going to ask the people. BZ said it was important for me to be honest with them, to get to know them and to tell them about myself too. I am not entirely sure of what kind of story I want to write in the book anymore, it feels like my brain is going to different places. But I will figure it out.

November 3, Tuesday

I think I know why I haven't started my interviews yet. I am really scared of it hurting me emotionally. It's definitely going to be a lot of emotional stuff on my mind and I don't know if I can handle it quite well enough. I'm sure it'll be okay. BZ told me to talk to Aethena and Madeleine about it so it is easier. I will.

November 4, Wednesday

I just asked Aethena if we could meet soon so I could get some of the emotional weight off of my shoulders. Hopefully it goes okay.

November 12, Thursday

I came across a big situation last week, and another one a couple days ago. My head is a mess in all shapes and forms. I am trying to focus on this project but right now it is a bit difficult.

November 17, Tuesday

I have an interview tomorrow, and an interview on Thursday as well! It is so exciting. Jodi is also helping me find other people to talk to through her Facebook. The list is getting longer and I am so pleased to see it. There is still a lot happening out of school but making progress on my project feels really good.

November 22, Sunday

I had two interviews this week, and they were both really good. I have another one on Tuesday. I think it is affecting me a lot but I think I am handling it fairly well. I will be away from home for a week and I think it will be very beneficial for my productivity and my mental health.

November 25, Wednesday

Had another interview yesterday, and it went very well. I like this project. There is not much to say I have to schedule another 6 or 7 interviews but I think I will do that after break. Time to rest ;)

December 16

After a while, I have finished transcribing two of my interviews and I am starting the third one tomorrow, maybe today. I'm stressed because of how much I have to do before the deadline but it's great.

January 3

I had an interview yesterday that only lasted for half an hour so I already have transcribed it, and I have another interview today, which I'm excited about.

I have transcribed almost everything I have so far so I feel accomplished.

January 4

I transcribed Carla's interview (the one from the 2nd) and I am going to start transcribing Stephanie's interview today, or tomorrow. After that, I can either interview two other people or start writing the chapters already, I am not sure what my decision will be but there is a lot going on out of this project so I am trying to not worry about it too much.

Update : I finished transcribing my interview with Valentine also. So that's good. I don't know if it was the best idea to go through it all in one day, but I think I'm better off with the weight of it off my shoulders.

January 6

I made some research for articles about different patterns I have now noticed in my interviews. About the relation it could have with alcoholism, drug use etc., the aftermath, and how guilt affects all victims somehow, even if they say they have healed, and also how it looks when they are trying to make a safety plan but don't know how to.

I think it's all getting to my head right now, which I knew would happen. It just makes me so sad and angry for all the women, and other people of other genders who have and are experiencing it without knowing what to do or where to go or who to turn to.

I know I can't but I just wish I could help.

January 26, Tuesday

It's currently snowing outside and I have officially started the writing process of my book! Isn't it exciting? It is. It's also really scary, I feel like I don't know what I am doing, but that's okay.

February 24

I have written chapter 1 and chapter 2 entirely this past month, I am now working on chapter 3. I have just had a meeting with Ella about the content of my book parts, and I had a meeting with BZ earlier today to talk about how the process is going. I am meeting with Madeleine next Tuesday.

March 22, Monday

I definitely used to write down more stuff... I worked on my project for a while during march break so that was pretty satisfactory. I have been really stressed out the past couple days and I am unsure if the process of writing who we became is making life a little easier or a little harder while I'm trying to deal with this stress. I will vote for easier for today at least.

I am almost done with chapter 4, and I am dreading starting chapter 5, because it is the longest story, and also the one that talks about rape, which scares me a lot to read again.

I am waiting to start writing my reflection chapters to schedule another mentor meeting. The second meeting we had felt much more comfortable than the first one but I think we both needed some time to get to know each other, so I think it'll be okay ;)

March 28

I just started chapter 5 of the interviews and I also found out that the due date is May 17th, and it stresses me out a little bit but I think it will be okay because I have been getting a lot done and I still have a lot of time.

April 11

I am almost done writing the reflection chapters, and honestly I am getting excited to be done with it. I am still unsure how I am going to print the book out but I will figure out a way.

April 14

Currently writing the conclusion to the book. I have a month left to polish everything, talk about the presentation with BZ, and have a meeting or two with Madeleine and maybe Ella too. I am feeling more confident about this than I did a week ago, since now the only thing left to do is write in my perspective about how the project went. Which is probably the least difficult task to accomplish here.

April 21

I decided to take a week break from working on the book because I am getting a little overwhelmed with it, but I will start polishing this Sunday. For now, I am just looking at the comments on the document.

April 25

The goal today is to polish the book document, and figure out how much it would cost to get it printed at Staples.

Update, just finished the book! I polished everything I could think of, added page numbers, made a table of contents, everything is ready. I just need to figure out the front page.

April 26

BZ is making the last comments on the book. I am personally finished with the big of the project, but I cannot wait for the book to be called "completely done". BZ also suggested I add this learning journal at the end of my book, which is scary because I feel like everybody reading this is getting into my head. Well, hello there. The book is finished.

April 27

This could very well be my last report. The book is actually finished now, I just had to turn my resources into MLA citations (which honestly was more difficult than I anticipated but I believe I did my best and it's not terrible) and I checked the page numbers again so that the table of contents is correct. That's it, *Who We Became*.

