

THE CROOKED PATH: FORGIVENESS IN THE AFTERMATH OF INTIMATE  
PARTNER VIOLENCE

by

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A Thesis  
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## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to those who did not survive.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE CROOKED PATH: FORGIVENESS IN THE AFTERMATH OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE**

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This thesis is an exploration of forgiveness in the aftermath of IPV. It argues that forgiveness plays a paradoxical role in the life of IPV victims, and identifies a specific rhetorical use of forgiveness that the author terms “silencing forgiveness.” “Silencing forgiveness” simultaneously diminishes the victim’s experience, marginalizes their voices, while placing the onus for conflict resolution on them. In the process of researching and writing this thesis, the author conducted a literature search and review in a broad array of disciplines including criminology, conflict resolution, psychology, sociology, and victims’ narratives. The author’s IPV narrative offers the reader an account of a victim’s emotional growth in the period leading up to separation from an IPV abuser. It provides a window into the intimate and social dynamics in which forgiveness has a place.



## INTRODUCTION

*“...I never once thought of myself as a battered wife. Instead, I was a very strong woman in love with a deeply troubled man, and I was the only person on Earth who could help [him] face his demons.”*

– Leslie Morgan Steiner, TED Talk, 2012<sup>1</sup>

An IPV victim experiences many conflicts. First, there is the conflict within themselves. Second, the conflict with their abuser. Finally, there is the conflict with society. The victim’s conflict (sometimes referred to as a dialogue) with society shapes how the IPV experience is communicated, including what is kept in and what is left out of the dialogue. This insight has its source in the author’s personal experience that inspired an exploration of the literature on IPV. It was part of a personal effort to understand a broad array of behaviors that I had experienced and observed in others. I draw from a dynamic and growing body of multi-disciplinary work that includes, but is not limited to: sociology, criminology, psychology, public health, and autoethnography. I also looked at numerous IPV narratives to add experiential insight to the data reporting and analysis.

One way the victim’s conflict with society plays itself out is the experience of “silencing forgiveness.” “Silencing forgiveness” is the rhetorical use of forgiveness to silence a dissenting, disturbing, or otherwise unwelcomed victim’s voice. Despite its

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Steiner, L.M. (2012). Why domestic violence victims don’t leave [Video file]. Retrieved from [https://www.ted.com/talks/leslie\\_morgan\\_steiner\\_why\\_domestic\\_violence\\_victims\\_don\\_t\\_leave/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/leslie_morgan_steiner_why_domestic_violence_victims_don_t_leave/transcript?language=en)

seemingly beneficial allure, forgiveness presented in a particular social context has the power to marginalize the victim by silencing their narrative. It is usually presented as a question: “*why don’t you forgive?*”

“Silencing forgiveness” has its source in contemporary therapeutic and self-help movements where the generalized concept of forgiveness has become synonymous with “healing.” Healing is assumed to lead to a sort of peace of mind that allows the victim to move on from the trauma, and stop talking about. “Silencing forgiveness” is a paradox: a negative act wrapped in the positivity of emotional healing after conflict. The phenomenon of therapeutic forgiveness has its critics who, among other arguments, point out that female victims are often burdened with the expectation of forgiveness in the context of IPV.

Studying IPV is a dismal, but necessary, science. Dismal because of the chasm between how it is lived and how it is known by others (family, friends, social workers, policy makers, for example).<sup>2</sup> This chasm creates divergent and often conflicting social expectations that place the victim in service to others’ interests, generating a sense of despair that can be as traumatizing as the abuse itself. Necessary, because IPV’s long-term effects on society range from lost productivity to murder and may even play a role in a more recent social pathology: the mass shooting.<sup>3</sup> The consequences of this

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2 There is this endless cycle of victim terror, ineffectual social response, more terror and debasement, followed by social ambivalence. Eventually, the wheel stops: the divorce is finalized, custody is granted, and slowly other cares replace the abuser in the forefront of the victim’s mind, but they are never fully erased. There is always a rational and well-founded fear that the abuser will return. The victim is never fully free of their abuser.

3 A relatively recent and still untested observation suggests that over half of all mass shootings are associated with IPV or IPV behaviors. Much more research needs to be done, but according to a recent nonprofit organization, 54% of the mass shootings since 2009 have had an IPV nexus. Though tragic, there is in this data an opportunity to understand the nature of both the perpetrator’s personality and the potentialities of IPV-related behavior when it is turned outward (“Mass Shootings in America, 2009 to 2017,” n.d.) (Mayer, 2017)

debilitating divergence cannot be overstated. It leads to wasted social responses such as the creation of bloated, self-interested bureaucracies of caring that are often ineffectual and sometimes contribute to a victim's suffering. It contributes to social indifference by playing on assumptions that social safety nets exist if the victim chooses to use them. Victims' narratives stand in stark contrast. They are often filled with bewildering and frustrating contradictions that challenge assumptions about our justice system and the bureaucracies of caring so many assume are enough to address the problem.

Victims' narratives discussed below generally lack forgiveness, or any good will, toward the abuser. It is a deliberate and justified silence, contrasting with "silencing forgiveness" expressed by third parties. This dichotomy is an expression of the wide gap between what victim's seek and value in the wake of IPV and what society claims is best for them and the greater good. In an effort to explain "silencing forgiveness," what it is and how it impacts victims, it is necessary to close the gap between the victims' experience and how others understand that experience. This thesis integrates IPV research and IPV narrative, including autoethnography. Drawing on previously published quantitative and qualitative research, it proposes that despite outward appearances of support and acceptance, IPV victims navigate a social landscape that dismisses and marginalizes their voices. In this environment, forgiveness may be used to silence, not empower, a victim. The only way to show its complexity is through narrative that will present observed social cues and real-world outcomes for behaviors.

## METHODOLOGY

This thesis is a review of the literature related to IPV and forgiveness. The inspiration for the thesis originated in the critical insights gained through personal experience with forgiveness in the months following separation from an abuser. It integrates the techniques of the analytic autoethnography with a literature review of relevant topics. In their advocacy for autoethnography, Adams, Jones and Ellis (2011) describe it as a counterpart to the quantitative methodologies that seek to understand generalized social phenomenon. According to them, autoethnography offers the reader “nuanced, complex, and specific knowledge...rather than general information about large groups of people.” Their arguments hinge on the assumption that autoethnography serves the same purpose as data-driven inquiry by taking the personal and conforming it to generalized, social insights. However, generalization is only one facet of autoethnography. The substance of its counterweight is to be both complement *and* challenge to data-driven insights.

Autoethnography is anchored in the narrative, an element important to the experience of trauma, in general, and IPV specifically. Brison’s (2002) discussion of the importance of the narrative to trauma recovery is explained in more detail in the Literature Review section, but summarized here: she emphasizes the victim’s sudden unexpected loss of self (by another’s will). She goes on to describe the painful, but

necessary, process of reclaiming that personal narrative. Every opportunity to tell the story becomes an opportunity to reclaim the personal narrative and the identity.

Audience (and social context) plays an important role in this process. I argue that they influence how a victim shares. The victim's narrative is reshaped by the audience's response. It becomes imperative then that we better understand the interplay between victim and audience in all aspects of the IPV cycle. The period following a separation is long acknowledged as the most dangerous and most transformative. In order to improve victim outcomes such as health and safety, much more needs to be understood about this period of growth and development. I hope this thesis contributes to this effort.

My experience contributes to the discussion, but is not central to it. Instead, I address facets of "silencing forgiveness" that can be understood through existing research across a range of disciplines such as criminology, sociology, and clinical psychology. Also, I complement the science with seven other personal narratives. Academics Sharon Hayes and Samantha Jeffries (2015), Loreen Olson (2004), as well as Dalesa Scott's doctoral dissertation (2013), represent four autoethnographic works using three different means of academic communication: book, journal article, and dissertation, respectively. Scott's dissertation is an account of IPV at the socioeconomic margins of American life. Her narrative is the only one to acknowledge and discuss intergenerational IPV. And she is frank about her skepticism and strong suspicion of the police.

There are popular accounts from women outside of the academy who share similar socio-economic characteristics and many similar experiences. Leslie Morgan Steiner's *Crazy Love: a Memoir* (2010) is a best-selling autobiographical account of IPV

told from the perspective of the socially privileged author. In June 2018, a locally prominent radiologist, Dr. Connie Jones of Scottsdale, Arizona, gave a remarkable first-person account of IPV in the form of a press conference, and later *Dateline* (NBC) interview, she discusses life with her abusive husband, Dwight Lamon Jones, following his four-day shooting spree outside of Phoenix, AZ that left six people dead (EDT, 2018) (“Ex-Wife of Arizona ‘Spree Killer’ Dwight Jones Breaks Her Silence,” 2018) (“DATELINE NBC EXCLUSIVE,” 2018). And finally, there is the story of Debra Newell, whose complex and terrifying relationship with abuser John Meehan is told in the popular podcast serial, *Dirty John* (2017).

Different women, different perspectives, different mediums of communication, but surprisingly similar patterns of entrapment, abuse, and survival: Hayes, Jeffries, and Olson, the academics; Connie Jones, a radiologist; Morgan Steiner, a writer; Newell, a business owner; and, Scott, a therapist. And, with the exception of Scott, none mention forgiveness after the fact.

## **Definitions**

Definitions aid the researcher (and the reader) by providing conceptual boundaries when discussing such wide-ranging social phenomenon as IPV and as complex a concept as forgiveness.

### ***Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)***

I sought out a definition that best reflects my lived experience *and* maintains consistent fidelity to observable behavior and outcomes in both the abuser and the victim. I find forensic psychologist's Evan Stark's (2007) theory of coercive control to have the most fidelity to the complete IPV experience. Coercive control is:

...course of calculated, malevolent conduct deployed almost exclusively by men to dominate individual women by interweaving repeated physical abuse with three equally important tactics: intimidation, isolation, and control. Assault is an essential part of this strategy and is often injurious and sometimes fatal. But the primary harm abusive men inflict is political, not physical, and reflects the deprivation of rights and resources that are critical to personhood and citizenship. Although coercive control can be devastating psychologically, its key dynamic involves an objective state of subordination and the resistance women mount to free themselves from domination. Women's right to use whatever means are available to liberate themselves from coercive control derives from the mode men use to oppress them, not from the proximate physical or psychological harms they may suffer because of abuse... (Kindle Location 136-137)

Since its publication in 2007, other scholars have enhanced the definition, making it more gender inclusive (Anderson, 2009) (Arnold, 2009). Coercive control continues to be debated and reassessed particularly in the context of IPV interventions and legal practice (Douglas, 2018). Yet, its fidelity to the IPV experience remains as relevant now as it was at publication.

The concept of coercive control is grounded in Stark's decades-long work with IPV victims, law enforcement, and legal regimes around the world. He was inspired to, in his words, "close the gap between the dominant model used to understand and manage abuse and the prevailing strategy men have adapted to oppress women in personal life" (2009, p. 1510). The "dominant model" Stark mentions is the paradigm of intervention

and treatment that sees IPV as an “incident specific crime, [that] equates abuse with physical and psychological assault, [and] applies a ‘calculus of harms’ to assess severity.” This prevailing, nearly ubiquitous, paradigm disaggregates the severity of the consequences from the abuser’s intentions (maintaining the victim’s subjugation), essentializing the experience into another data point added to a form (2009, p. 1510). One way this manifests in the lives of actual victims is when a judge rules against a protective order request because there has been no observable physical abuse against the victim. For example, see (Goffard, 2017) and other victim narratives discussed in greater detail below.

Though there is much more to learn about the dynamics of coercive control, I believe it best reflects the totality of the abuser’s repertoire, and in the process opens the doors to a more effective understanding of what is at work.

### ***Forgiveness (Clinical and Popular Definitions)***

The definition of forgiveness applied in this thesis is based on its secular, primarily therapeutic, use in some clinical psychology settings. It is as follows:

“a willingness to abandon one’s right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior toward one who has unjustly hurt us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love toward him or her” (Lamb, 2005, p. 64)

There are as many definitions of forgiveness as there are articles and books devoted to it (Deering, 2011) (Davidson, Lozano, Cole, & Gervais, 2015) (Ballester, Chatri, Sastre, Rivière, & Mullet, 2011) (Ascioglu Onal & Yalcin, 2017) (McCullough, 2001). Yet, they more or less reflect the above definition. Still, for this thesis it will need to be refined even more, because it still does not fully represent the implied



understanding of forgiveness in “silencing forgiveness.” The epiphanic episode I discuss in the Literature Review does not represent theological forgiveness, or even therapeutic forgiveness, but the deliberate use of the idea (and its assumed benefits) to silence a victim. Forgiveness in this case is tied to the popular concept of healing.

### ***Victim/Survivor***

When writing about IPV, the author has to choose whether to refer to their subjects as *victims*, *survivors*, *subjects*, or any number of other terms. However, when the author *is* the subject the question of word choice becomes challenging. Hayes (2015) and coauthor Jeffries write of their rationale behind choosing *victim* over *survivor*, noting that

...the process of recovering from romantic terrorism is protracted, and there is always the threat of being revictimized when revisiting the abuse. The ability of romantic terrorists to continue victimizing their ex-partner, even in the absence of any contact, needs to be recognized (Hayes, 2015, p. 3)

I am persuaded by their argument, because victims, including myself, often experience effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and health problems that were a direct result of years of instability and physical degradation. Also, the term “victim” has more fidelity to the predatory nature of the IPV relationship.<sup>4</sup> However, many different words are used by authors quoted in this thesis and should be considered synonymous.

### ***Abuser/Perpetrator***

I use the term abuser when discussing my own and others experiences, because it respects both their individual agency and the purpose of their behavior. It is also gender-neutral, and allows for conceptualization beyond the normative assumption of a

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<sup>4</sup> For example, see Muller, M. N., Wrangham, R. W., & Ebrary, Inc. (2009). *Sexual coercion in primates and humans: An evolutionary perspective on male aggression against females*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13x0j2b>

male/female relationship. Another common enough word – perpetrator – has connotations associated with law enforcement. As with the previous question of what word to use to describe the subject of IPV, word usage varies, and all related terms should be considered synonymous.

### **Author Background**

My chosen means of communication reinforces my privilege. Autoethnography is a qualitative method of academic inquiry. It may be possible for non-professionals, non-academics to apply its principles when narrating their IPV experiences; however, autoethnography is largely a means for specialized professionals to communicate with others in their profession. Its existence, then, is one of a medium of privileged communication. This fact should not discourage any victim/researcher from narrating their IPV story, but rather to place before the reader something that should be obvious. If they are communicating their IPV experience via autoethnography then by default the author is approaching the experience from a privileged social location.

Between April 2009 and February 2018, I was in a relationship with an individual who became my husband and my abuser. We were married on May 29, 2010, and divorced on May 29, 2015. In keeping with the common experience of many IPV victims, after our separation in the August 2013, he began to threaten and physically stalk me. I have maintained an active protective order since then. It is an onerous task that requires court hearings every two years to reevaluate what the state of Virginia calls a “permanent” protective order.

I also underwent an effort to understand this man from as many perspectives as possible. However, his fluid use of a multiple identities made it impossible to track his past movements and build a significant fact-based biography. However, I did learn that in 1997 he had been arrested for assaulting his then-estranged wife in the French town where she lived. Soon after he would emigrate to the United States. Sometime in October 2017, he was arrested by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. To the best of my knowledge, he has been deported back to France where he still holds citizenship. I do not know for certain because the federal government does not disclose deportation information without written permission from the deportee.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*I was attending a church-sponsored women's event in late 2016. I was sitting at a table with other women. One was an acquaintance who knew my "story." She asked me how I was doing. I began to answer, when another woman at the table, whom I did not know, wanted more "back story." She would later take me aside and tell me she, too, was an IPV victim. It was at this point that a prominent member of the women's group - I will call her Mrs. X - leaned over from the adjoining table, interjected without as much as a polite pause, and asked me: "Marisa, why don't you just forgive?" And without another pause returned her attention to the women at her table. It halted my narrative mid-sentence, and I (and everyone one at my table) realized that she was telling me to shut up. Someone quickly changed the subject, and my story was forgotten.*

### **Introducing "Silencing Forgiveness"**

In a discussion of something as peculiar as "silencing forgiveness" there is an obligation to define it. I begin by describing it as it happened, as an epiphanic episode. Denzin (2014) describes the autoethnographic "epiphany" as a lucid moment of social awareness that inspires the researcher. The conflict represented in the epiphanic episode above is between me (the IPV victim), and Mrs. X, a third party who is acting on their knowledge of me as an IPV victim. Thus, in the above example, the victim (me) is about to speak, and in a moment of reaction, a third-party silences her by suggesting

*forgiveness*. In that moment, the participants and the observers all understood what was happening. But *what* exactly was happening?

The idea of “silencing forgiveness” is not explicitly found in the critical literature on forgiveness. However, critics of forgiveness observe its presence, particularly in social and political discourses on marginalized communities “who are more vulnerable to institutional injustice, more prone to suffer harm without redress and who tend to receive silencing and disrespecting messages from society at large” (MacLachlan, 2008, p. 137). However, I would argue that the origins of “silencing forgiveness” are not in the misuse of it in the exercise of power (that comes later), but in the contemporary understanding of forgiveness as a means of interpersonal conflict resolution, what is commonly described as emotional “healing.” Lamb (2006) points to the emergence of forgiveness as a “therapeutic strategy.” Its new position as a treatment modality coincided with the rise of managed care in mental health service. She writes:

All this focus on forgiveness therapy fit with broader cultural trends that supported forgiveness therapy, some having little to do with victims of violence per se. One cultural trend was the managed care phenomenon, which demands short-term therapy that can be validated empirically because it is cost effective. As hospital stays became shorter, so did therapy, and when a symptom could be relieved through manualized treatment, the whole person could be ignored. Forgiveness therapy focused on one problem, promised relief in a set number of sessions, and measured the relief in reference to that one problem (pg. 51).

Forgiveness Therapy reached popular understanding in the subsequent decade, and maintains positive popular culture references. Now the idea that forgiveness offers therapeutic benefits fuels a market in self-help books that present forgiveness as a source

of emotional healing.<sup>5</sup> The suggestion of forgiveness was actually a command to shut up, be quiet; “move on” so we do not have to listen to you anymore. It has a demeaning character, as if to suggest that the victim’s voice is some kind of unwelcomed noise that needs to be turned down.<sup>6</sup> Mrs. X (as stand in to any other person) is assuming a position of authority, and demanding silence from the victim in the *nicest possible way* given the social context of a church event. Either taken by surprise, or tacit consent, the others at the table did not reply. The victim’s narrative was silenced.

Mrs. X is displaying one expression of the social response to the knowledge of IPV (KOI). I may initially respond to it as if it was about her callous disregard for my suffering (and I did), but with further consideration, it became clear that Mrs. X was responding to a discomfort by drawing from a repertoire of normative behaviors. This may explain what is happening, however, does not address the question: why is it happening?

Once a subject for theologians and philosophers, since the 1980s forgiveness has taken the form of psychological therapy, also called Forgiveness Therapy. Hundreds of peer-reviewed articles, books, and other media have touted the long-term psychological and physiological benefits of forgiving someone who has done something to hurt you. Pioneers of the practice point to research findings that prove forgiveness’ many health and psychosocial benefits (Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998) (Worthington, 2006) (Akhtar & Barlow, 2018). Thus, the confluence of forgiveness with “healing” has its

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<sup>5</sup> With titles such as Hamilton, A. (2018) Finding Peace Through Letting Go, Noor, M., Cantacuzino, M., & Standing, S. (2018) Forgiveness is really strange, and Wild, S. (2018) The art of forgiveness: How to get past it without letting anyone off the hook. New York: Morgan James Publishing.

<sup>6</sup> Something my abuser used to tell me when I would point out something he was doing wrong – like hoarding used paper towels or the starvation and neglect of the small pets.

source in decades of clinical research studying the apparent health benefits of forgiveness. Much of the popular literature assumes a dichotomy that pits forgiveness as the positive opposite of negative emotions such as vengeance or anger. Negative emotions are “bad” because they lead to bad health outcomes (Ballard, 2017) (Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2017). To this day, readers’ interest in the therapeutic benefits of forgiveness fuel a thriving market in forgiveness self-help. In early 2018, I conducted a simple and limited search of the *WorldCat* database for all English language books published since 2016 with the word “forgiveness” in the title. The search resulted in over 800 hits. Though only an anecdotal example, it highlights the significance of forgiveness in our social discourse. With such positive connotations, no wonder then that someone may use the idea of forgiveness (after all, it can only help) as gentle cudgel, marginalizing the IPV victim’s presence by shutting her up: *why don’t you forgive?*

Conventional wisdom on forgiveness suggests that the forgiving, empathic person experiences improved health outcomes in the wake of trauma, and contributes to the betterment of the social order. Early clinical work on victim forgiveness focused on adolescent moral development (Enright, Santos, & Al-Mabuk, 1989), the relationship between religious practice and health outcomes (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000), and efforts to integrate forgiveness into clinical theory (Worthington, 2006). According to Spiers (2004), programs that encourage “forgiving attitudes and emotions” appear to lead to “decreased anxiety and depression” among victims of violent crime. In a related study, researchers looked at the presence of “forgivingness” among subjects who had experienced negative romantic relationships, and found that a subjects’ ability to

forgiveness contributed to a “lower likelihood of dating abuse perpetration” primarily because it allowed for the development of “positive ways of coping with interpersonal conflict” (Garthe et al., 2018). Watson, Rapee, and Todorov (2017) researched children’s attitude toward bullying and found that forgiveness resulted in less anger and improved coping responses in victims. With decades of “proven” positivity, it is unsurprising to see it seep into the popular consciousness as something positive that should be emphasized for IPV victims. In the process, however, it can become a means of silencing those victim.

I would argue that one reason victims are silenced is that KOI can function as a *memento mori*. Knowing that IPV exists in your social location can threaten your sense of personal security. As a living IPV victim (dead ones are easy to forget), I am a reminder of an undercurrent of uncontrollable and unknowable threat. Thus, KOI can be accompanied by a range of emotional and social responses such as curiosity, rejection, and denial. Brison (2002) writes of the “massive denial of those around me –

...a reaction I learned in an almost universal response to rape. Where the facts would appear to be incontrovertible, denial takes the shape of attempts to explain the assault in ways that leave the observers’ world view unscathed. Even those who are able to acknowledge the existence of violence try to protect themselves the realization that the world in which it occurs in their world and so they find it hard to identify with the victim. They cannot allow themselves to image the victim’s shattered life, or else their illusions about their own safety and control over their own lives might begin to crumble (p. 9)

Brison’s observations are backed up by research into victim-blaming behaviors (Janoff-Bulman, Timko, & Carli, 1985) (Gillogly, 2018) (Janoff-Bulman & Morgan, 1994) that suggest that there is a primal psychological source for Mrs. X’s behavior:

When bad things happen to someone who seems a lot like us, this threatens our belief that the world is a just place. If that person could fall victim to rape, assault, robbery, or attack, perhaps we could, too. So, to comfort ourselves in the face of



this troubling realization and maintain our rosy worldview, we psychologically separate ourselves from the victim. We wonder if he or she had done something to invite the tragedy. Maybe that survivor of sexual assault was wearing provocative clothing. Maybe that shooting victim was involved in gang activity. Maybe my neighbor had invited that burglary by associating with the wrong people. If this is the case, we tell ourselves, then it won't happen to me (Feldman, 2018).

I am a reminder that IPV can happen to anyone, including the affluent members of a church group. In a similar vein, KOI challenges the knower's assumptions about who are victims and perpetrators of IPV. After all, some will know both abuser and perpetrator. They are drawing from their own experiences. My abuser was a kind and generous man to others. He was able to make anyone feel special, cared for. A third-party who knew him would likely be skeptical of my narrative.

What was silenced was a narrative, an IPV narrative to be precise. That narrative presents tensions, threats, and even the occasional triumphs in a way not unlike a novel.<sup>7</sup> But, there is a social response to the IPV narrative very different from that of a novel (even a novel with an IPV theme). It offers us a window into the essential nature of the victim's relationship with the society, and society's relationship to the victim, what Brison (2002) characterizes as the "fundamentally relational character of the self":

Survivors of trauma recover to a greater or lesser extent depending on others' responses to them after the trauma. These aspects of trauma and recovery reveal the deeply social nature of one's sense of self and underscore the limits of the individual's capacity to control her own self-definition (p. 64).

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<sup>7</sup> The IPV narrative when told well by the victim is the real-world example of the ideal narrative: exposition (how the relationship began), conflict (how the abuser treated the victim), climax (how the victim gets away), and resolution (the recreation of the victim's identity). Of course, this is just an intellectual exercise because even when the victim does survive very few are willing to tell their stories. The reality is the protagonist is a broken person who needs to rebuild their lives often from nothing: no home, no social network, no job, etc. That "story" is often lived, but never told for any number of reasons, including trauma (difficulty remembering details).

Brison's observation complements Simmel, who decades earlier had characterized the relationship of the isolated individual as essentially social in that isolation does not exist *without* the social (Simmel, 1950). The IPV victim *is* a social entity. Yet, there is no word or descriptive phrase for the social experience of being an IPV victim. Victims lack a particular ontology, and as a result, they are usually placed into the pre-existing ontology of relationship pathologies. They are having "troubles." They must have "grown apart." Their troubles are associated attributed to generalized societal ills. It is not until after the fact, sometimes well after, that more precise language of psychological pathology and victimization are employed, terms like "personality disorder," "Machiavellian," and "anti-social."

Once the IPV relationship has been severed, the victim is once again able to enter into broader social life, and form new identities. This reformatory period is represented in part by the conflict between the victim's new self and how others see them. Therefore, the identity of the IPV victim now outside the relationship is no longer tied to the relationship but to how others interpret *them* as victims.

Mrs. X's remarks suggest that I had not forgiven my abuser. In fact, in July 2013, I had. I experienced a warm moment of charity and generosity toward my abuser. It occurred during a period when I was attempting to come to terms with his increasingly dangerous behavior. I kept to the ideal of forgiveness when his behavior escalated, and tried to use its calming influence ("I can't do anything about it"; "he's suffering"; "I'm at peace with whatever comes"). In reality, he may have been trying to kill me, and I was

blinded by my empathy (my sadness at his desperate incoherent behavior), and could not see the signs not only of deep paranoia, but of his deliberate efforts to end my life.

I did not reconsider my forgiveness of him until the September 2, 2013, incident where he attempted to run me over with his car. Up until that point, I was pitying him, but keeping my distance. I respected the protective order (he did not), and did not communicate with him. Once the tweeted threats began, and the full extent of his deliberate efforts to hurt me were exposed, I no longer saw any reason to empathize with him since I could not (and still do not) fully understand the source of that kind of remorseless behavior.

In the case of *Dirty John*, the victim, Debra Newell also explicitly forgave her abuser while they were still married, a behavior that has been shown to have long-term detrimental impacts on victims (McNulty, 2011) (Davidson, Lozano, Cole, & Gervais, 2013). *Dirty John* tells the story of John Meehan, a serial abuser who was eventually killed in an attempt to kidnap and murder one of Newell's adult daughters. Despite serious verbal and psychological abuse, and her discovery of his hidden past, she brought him back into her life. An act so inexplicable and frustrating to the reporter/podcaster, Christopher Goffard, that he dedicates an entire episode to it (Goffard, 2017). The answers he receives remain elusive. Newell is not as much evasive as unable to articulate a single satisfying reason for the intended audience (Says, 2017b). However, there could be underlying social influences at work, ones that were similarly affecting my rationale for forgiveness, such as prevailing social expectations of feminine patience.

Boss offers a feminist critique of forgiveness, noting that it has a “gendered history,” associated with the socially lauded virtues of “compassion, selflessness, softness and other traits culturally coded as feminine.” In the context of IPV, Lamb and Murphy (Lamb & Murphy, 2002, p. 163) see “traditional notions of what it means to be a ‘good girl’ or ‘good woman’” influencing victim’s decisions to forgive their abusers. In their reading, women are expected to suppress “anger and resentment,” and by implication avoid disambiguation from the abuser. To forgive becomes a female obligation in couple’s therapy. Lamb and Murphy note how forgiveness advocates portray female patient’s intransigence at offering forgiveness as providential – bringing down health and emotional problems on them for a refusal to forgive. “Those theorists who advocate forgiveness,” they write, “often make judgements that the person who can’t forgive, can’t let go, and can’t give up resentment have gone too far in their resentment...” (2002, p. 160). In this context, the victim’s negative emotions are discouraged in favor of conflict resolution through an emphasis on victim’s forgiveness.

The IPV narratives discussed in this thesis were chosen for their complementary characteristics to my own narrative (Appendix 1). It was only later on that I noticed that all but one (Scott<sup>8</sup>) includes a final expression of forgiveness. That is, after-the-fact forgiveness. So what is at work in the real lives of victims that would have them pass up forgiveness, an apparently positive and emotionally fulfilling act of generosity? I believe

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<sup>8</sup> Scott’s (2013) act of forgiveness toward the father of her child had mitigating circumstances. For instance, he could not stalk her, because older family members had pressed him to relocate to the other side of the country (p. 149-150, lines 1701-1709).

the question lies in what victims implicitly understand about their abusers as deliberate manipulators of them, and the social order.

The lack of post-relationship forgiveness in the narrative accounts challenges its presumed central role in a post-traumatic “healing process.” All the authors assert, either directly or indirectly, their reconstructed strength. They claim a desire to share their stories, because they see themselves as examples of overcoming, succeeding as Olson declares to, “regain my spirit and reclaim my own voice.” Morgan Steiner (2010) writes: “And although I don’t have to, nearly every time I speak publicly I briefly mention that I was once married to an abusive man—because I never know who is listening, who my words might help” (p. 322). If the assumptions regarding forgiveness are true, then why would the subjects simply ignore it? Something else is at work, and it suggests that at least in the case of IPV, forgiveness may be superfluous. In some cases, like mine, it may be downright dangerous. And if forgiveness is problematic in the context of IPV, in what other conflict contexts does it also present problems?

One could argue that none of the subjects have “healed,” because they continue to discuss their experiences. They are, in a sense, not “over it,” if they continue to share their story. This is false, because one of the pillars of IPV is the silencing of the victim. The abuser’s need to dominate overwhelms the victim’s humanity and their desire to connect and communicate with others. Social isolation (and thus silence) is one of the largest and brightest warning signs of IPV. To assume that a victim, finally freed from that influence, should be quiet, or that it is somehow in their best interest to be quiet, is an extension of the abuser’s influence in the social order.

Buried right below the surface of this argument is the silence distortion. That forgiveness will quiet the victim's mind, give them peace, and in essence, give them a reason not to talk about the traumatic experiences. If they are talking about it, they are not healed. Forgiveness, when used in this way, carries a near-magical sedative function that can draw out bad thoughts, and quiet the victim's voice. It is this distortion that lies at the heart of "silencing forgiveness."

Moreover, the apparent lack of forgiveness lies in the victim's knowledge of their abusers' intentions, particularly in the period following separation. It is in this formative moment, when the victim observes their abuser's behaviors with a clearer eye, and in the context of intimate partner stalking (IPS). Scott's (2013) abuser eventually went to jail for a robbery, providing her a physical and psychological distance. No such distance existed for the other victims. With the exception of Olson, who does not mention IPS, the either experienced stalking, the sadistic use of the legal system to torment them (what I describe as "stalking by proxy"), or both. In Newell's case, her abuser stole her car and set it on fire (Goffard, 2017), and physically stalked her adult children. Despite this, Newell was unable to secure a legal order of protection:

She began wearing a wig, living and working out of hotels, checking in under the names of her assistants. In a request for a restraining order, her lawyer laid out John Meehan's long, ugly history. How the Indiana nursing board had yanked his license and called him "a clear and immediate danger to the public." How he'd jumped out of a moving ambulance in Michigan. How he'd swindled multiple women and done prison time and been slapped with restraining orders. How Laguna Beach police, who had also asked for a restraining order against him, had found cyanide capsules in his belongings. An Orange County judge decided there was no immediate threat to Debra's safety. Her husband lived in another state; he had never physically harmed her (Goffard, 2017).

Jones, too, had a difficult time securing a legal order of protection. This despite relentless threats and physical acts of intimidation and stalking by proxy from her abuser (Vasudevan, 2018). For Hayes (2015), her abuser made numerous attempts to gain custody of their children despite debilitating drug addiction, and threatened superfluous legal action in order to continue to deplete her financial resources and disrupt her life (p. 29-30).

Intimate partner stalking (IPS) is defined as the “a set of controlling and obsessive behaviours such as constant phone calls or instant messaging and online surveillance, threats, physical attacks and destruction of victims’ belongings” (Cinquegrana, Regalia, & Crapolicchio, 2017). Stalking’s psychological effects compound the already toxic long-term effects on victim’s health and potentially prolonging trauma (Antai, 2011) (Toussaint, Shields, Dorn, & Slavich, 2016) (García-Moreno et al., 2013) (Botzheim, 2017) (Brady & Nobles, 2017). In a 2004 study of the prevalence of PTSD symptoms among IPV victims, it was found that the “more types of violence a woman experiences, the more increase in PTSD symptoms.” Thus, the existence of stalking behaviors compounded the victim’s already compromised health and well-being (Basile, Arias, Desai, & Thompson, 2004). As a 2017 study noted, “It can be assumed that IPS has a unique link with PTSD symptoms due to the nature of stalking” (Cinquegrana, Regalia, & Crapolicchio, 2017). However, victims who are unwilling or unable to forgive are portrayed as intransigent and ignorant; intentionally closing themselves off from forgiveness’ boundless benefits to health and well-being.

Lamb and Mayo also recognize the cultural distortions in victimization. Mayo's "magnanimous" victims (2015, p. 1) and Lamb's "pure" victims (2002, p. 164) are a contemporary portrayal of the imperialist "noble savage," a sort of human exotic – half real/half angelic – who must be protected from the ferocious logic of human self-interest. In order to maintain this fantastical illusion, the victim must remain attached to the perpetrator. Thus, forgiveness is encouraged in order to maintain the social construct of the "good victim."

Skeptics argue that forgiveness never operates in a social or political vacuum, that there are no distinctions between the political forgiveness of, say, a peace negotiation between two warring countries, and the interpersonal forgiveness between an abuser and victim. The latter is presumed to be "immune to political analysis, or not affected by questions of power, authority and wider social structures" (Maclachlan, 2008, p. 259). In fact, no act of forgiveness is separate from "questions of power," because forgiveness is tied to acts wrongdoing and injustice.

Haaken (2003) interprets forgiveness' many gendered and cultural power imbalances, and its uncanny power to incline newly empowered victims to silence, noting that "[a]s oppressed groups gain the strength to speak up and claim new rights, including the right to disengage from abusive relationships, the powerful rediscover the salutary virtue of forgiveness." Maclachlan (2008) argues that despite a forgiver's intentions acts of forgiveness are "rarely, if ever, without political dimensions." She explains that forgiveness "arises in the aftermath of wrongdoing and injustice," and that these wrongdoings take place within political contexts, and thus deserve political (and I would add



social) analysis. Viewed this way, any single act of victim forgiveness could be seen from multiple perspectives. Maclachlan (2008) and Lamb (2006) also explain how forgiveness can undermine self-respect and act as a form of silencing minority or other marginalized groups.<sup>9</sup>

Mayo (2015) goes on to argue that contemporary emphasis on a victim's obligation to forgive unconditionally is a modern-day distortion of previous centuries of forgiveness hermeneutics where conditionality is assumed. This common distortion is "read back" into the Biblical text to justify dangerous obligations on victims, particularly victims of IPV:

When such conflation occurs, victims are sometimes pressured to forgive by pastors, psychologists, legal representatives, family members, or friends. Such pressure can be both physically and psychologically harmful. In her work on trauma and recovery, Judith Lewis Herman describes the "cruel torture" of forgiveness that appears to be out of reach to most victims. In some cases, victims succumb to pressure, forgive unrepentant offenders (who are potentially still dangerous), and make themselves vulnerable to future injury (p. 3).

In her final point above, Mayo articulates an insight I arrived at independently and experientially during the period following my separation. Forgiveness worked to break down the mental barriers between my fear of and my empathy toward my abuser. In this way it clouded my judgement at a time when I needed to be more vigilant. It may do the same for other survivors. Research agrees that this post-separation period is by far the most dangerous for IPV victims. According to one study "47% of 236 femicides occur

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<sup>9</sup> It is not just forgiveness' potential for silencing. It can also have the power to negate a victim's experience. While assessing the work of fellow philosopher Vladimir Jankelevitch, Jacques Derrida (2015) argues that the Holocaust represents a single moment in time that represents the "end of the history of forgiveness." And more so, that to forgive the Nazi would be an act of self-negation, setting aside a part of the collective self-redefined by their atrocities.

within 3 months and 74% of them occur between 2-6 months after separation” (D. Ellis, 2017). Rather than appeal to forgiveness, security should be the social imperative.

IPV adds daunting complexity to this proposition, because perpetrators often wield social norms as weapons to manipulate victims and tools to confound third-parties. In early efforts at gaslighting, my abuser used to play on the idea of the independent woman in order to convince me to refrain from socializing (*you’re strong, you don’t need those stupid friends*). In a general example, a perpetrator may poke fun at their victim’s “craziness” to others (“my partner can be crazy sometimes”). They will present themselves as the jovial sufferer, playing off of gendered stereotypes. Dwight Jones crying about his mental health issues was appealing to Connie’s sense of compassion, partly gendered and partly associated with her profession as a doctor (“DATELINE NBC EXCLUSIVE,” 2018). The podcast, *Dirty John*, shares some of abuser John Meehan’s Machiavellian efforts to maintain what he saw as an advantageous relationship (his victim’s income was significant). In text messages to his victim, following one of their separations, he appeals to culturally informed images of masculine love and self-sacrifice with text messages like:

“I will do whatever it takes to make your life easier,” he wrote. “I can travel with you and be there for you. No more lonely nights and no more being alone. I am your husband. That means forever. There is nothing to debate. This is going to work. Forever means forever.”

And,

“When you are near me I want to protect you and be certain you are safe. It’s a good feeling. It’s just a bit odd feeling dependent on someone. Even married I never did. Bad habit I guess. I love you Deb. Nothing can take that away.” (“Dirty John Part 4: Forgiveness - Los Angeles Times,” n.d.)

When he was no longer in control of the relationship, Meehan's abusive texts draw on his victim's culturally influenced insecurities about age and desirability:

"You lying old bag," he wrote. "You'll grow old alone." (Goffard, 2017)

Olson's abuser would appeal to her desire to be a "good wife." Looking back on her experience, she notes:

females in our culture have been raised to elevate the male perspective. "so she may silence her own mind and submit to his construction of reality even if that means being hit". Abused women know that they will be blamed for walking out and abandoning the family should they make their own needs primary. The feminist lens helps me process, in retrospect, much of what occurred in my own abusive relationship. My husband truly believed he was superior and had the right to control me. I, like many other abused women, succumbed to the abuse, in part, because of my adoption of the traditional female gender role even with my earlier feminist ideological attachment. I wanted to be a good wife. I also assumed responsibility for his behavior and wanted the emotional and financial security a marriage could provide. (2004, p. 21)

There is a wealth of primary source data emerging from video, audio, and social media platforms that shows the subtle (and not so subtle) means by which abusers abuse. For example, disturbing recordings of John Meehan taken while on the phone with his ex-wife, Tonia, offer examples of the kind of verbal abuse and threats that IPV victims experience. In this case, Tonia was compelled by a court order to engage Meehan in order to coordinate child visitations (Says, 2017a). More text, audio, and video examples of coercive control tactics may open up opportunities for inquiry into the cumulative day-to-day behavioral dynamics that are so elusive to capture and communicate to others.

## **Understanding Silencing**

The epiphanic incident previously discussed is an unambiguous use of forgiveness as a rhetorical means of silencing. In this section I will examine silencing, in general. Then explore why victim silencing occurs in the aftermath of IPV, and how the use of forgiveness fits into the silencing repertoire.

If silence is generally defined as the absence of sound, then it is no intellectual stretch to assume that it can also mean the absence of speaking, or narrating. The incident, however, highlights silence in its verb form. According to the Oxford Dictionary of English (Stevenson, 2010), the verb “to silence is defined as to “cause to become silent; prohibit or prevent from speaking.” Silencing, then, is to take away someone’s voice. It is an assertion of power. “What is given voice,” Fivush (2010) writes, “will be recalled and what is silenced will be forgotten.”

Brison (2002) argues that narrative becomes a way for victims to reclaim the traumatic event and in the process, themselves. But she goes one step further by connecting the narrative to the act of telling it. “It is not sufficient for mastering the trauma to construct a narrative of it,” she writes, “One must (physically, publicly) say or write (or paint or film) the narrative and others must see or hear it in order for one’s survival as an autonomous self to be complete” (p. 62). In the context of trauma and subsequent unchosen, unexpected splitting of self in two (a before and an after), the victim takes up the newly fragmented memories and constructs new narratives. Any attempt at silencing hinders that process.

Fivush (2010) breaks down silencing into “silence as imposed” and “silence as shared.” In its imposed form there are two general methods: cultural and “conversational.” I focus here on the conversational because it best describes the social situation in which the epiphanic incident occurred. Fivush (2010) describes the conversational as

others who cannot hear what the speaker is trying to say. This can take the form of actually silencing, as in not allowing the speaker to talk, or it can be silencing through refusing to believe, deliberately misunderstanding or re-interpreting the event in ways that do not validate the speaker’s experiences... or simply by being distracted and inattentive...” (p. 91).

I have experienced each of Fivush’s conversational imposed silencing incidents:

- Filibustering (incidents where I am interrupted almost immediately when I begin talking and am never given another opportunity to speak again as the subject is changed),
- Rejection (I have experienced this almost exclusively as an expression of the hearer’s cultural biases. My abuser’s nationality and ethnic background are immediately declared the root of the problem, and I am admonished for having decided on a union with this sort of person.)
- Misunderstanding (I have witnessed this as intentional antagonistic confusion: “I’m sorry what was that, I don’t understand you.”), and
- Re-interpreting (I would describe this as a set of verbal cues that often leave no doubt about the listener’s disdain or condescension. “Well, why didn’t you just ask him to leave or something?”).

I would add, too, the silencing through marginalization. Dismissing a voice outright because it is outside normative expectations of a victim, or does not suit the third-party’s own interests. This can be done by calling into question the victim’s psychological or emotion state:

“Whereas consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s and the kind of therapy that went on between activists and victims of abuse concentrated on the emotional reactions of humiliation, shame, and anger, the new diagnosis of PTSD for abuse victims focused on the symptoms of numbness, fear, and helplessness. Thinking about these psychological reactions and what they represent, it seems apparent that the victim was no longer the angry woman but the helpless girl. (Lamb, 2006, pp. 48–49)

Or, calling into question a victim’s reputation:

Just as earlier when the public believed that good girls couldn’t be raped, representations of the victim showed the public “good girls.” On the one hand, a victim needed to be “good” to arouse sympathy; on the other hand, she was still deviant or damaged goods, due to the effects of the victimization and the list of symptoms she had accrued (Lamb, 2006, p. 49).

I am also enhancing this list with “silencing forgiveness,” which I see a means of conversational silencing that places the onus on the victim to stop talking and move on to another topic.

### **Understanding the IPV Narrative**

What exactly is being silenced? The IPV narrative poses a unique challenge to anyone exploring IPV. The chasm between the narrated experience and third-party or social understanding of IPV lies in part in how romantic relationships are generally viewed. For example, relationships begin with optimism and sentimentality.

Relationships sour. Partners grow apart, become incompatible. There is assumed good will and reciprocity. There is assumed pain and sadness at a relationship’s ending. Most romantic relationships are approached by others from a sentimentalized distance. Once understood for what they are, victims realize that their abusive relationships were predicated on the abuser’s deliberate manipulation tactics (Kiire, 2017) (Dykstra, Schumacher, Mota, & Coffey, 2015). This is far from the normative understanding of love and intimacy, and is the reason IPV narratives often lack sentimentality. When a

victim makes the connection between their abusers' behaviors and their deliberate intentions, many of the hopes and dreams for positive outcomes fall away. IPV victims (many of whom fear being murdered) do not have the luxury to view their abusive relationships with any sentimentality. Their narratives are often filled with dark, malevolent behavior that takes place in the intimacy of home and family, acting as reminders of the presence of human malevolence in this still-idealized environment.

There are few IPV narratives written during the relationship for a reason (I could not find an example of one). IPV is constant, debilitating, and cruel. IPV lacks linearity and cohesion by design, and is thus difficult to capture in a form consumable to a third-party reader. A skilled abuser keeps their victim on edge all the time:

Gradually the moral certainties which she carries into adulthood become undermined and replaced. The opinions and purposes by which she follows her dreams become cloudy. The energy and vitality with which she engages with the world become channeled in a single direction. The increasing burden of responsibility for behaviours over which she has no control drive her to search ever deeper within herself for an adequate response to difficulties in the relationship. Her declining ability to use her own language to describe her experience leads her to keep secret the most difficult aspects of her story. The slow diminution of her inner voice, the gradual influence of the skilled offender, is noticed in the changes in her language and narrative (Worden & Carlson, 2005).

Once the victim is free to reclaim their "inner voice," that voice becomes a living narrative, a tale told and retold to friends and family, and often to third parties, such as law enforcement, social services, and the bureaucracies of caring they operate in. In service to the bureaucracy, the narrative takes the form of a "statement" or an "account." That such a significant, likely dangerous, act of separating from an abuser could be trivialized into a two-step intake process, or something similar, is not a reflection of the

victim's judgement or actions, but of a process-laden bureaucracy that lacks any real connection to the problem at hand. Still, victims separate from their abusers, and at this point third-parties both human and bureaucratic "systems," begin to play a role in the victim's life. They may represent some of the first people a victim socializes with after separation.

Baly (2010) notes that the victim's response to abuse is a phenomenon that is "lengthy, difficult, and dynamic in nature." In the process of reasserting their individual personality, an IPV victim must recreate their world linear fashion, because that is how third parties synthesize it. There is a strong likelihood that the victim's first statement will be spilling out onto the back of a form of some kind. It is the first step in the linearization of the victim's IPV experience, and part of the early steps in the creation of their narrative. In my example, the case worker emphasized that I should keep my statement to one page. This was not a difficult instruction for me, because as a career analyst I am used to writing to size, scope, and time constraints. However, it took me time and deliberate action in order to achieve it (See Appendix 2). It does not reflect my fear, let alone the totality of my experience. However, it does serve the process of obtaining a temporary protective order in the state of Virginia. After this step in the process is complete, the protective order needs to be served, which can take time, sometimes days. The victim then needs to navigate to the next step in the process, obtaining a permanent protective order. There is no guarantee that one will be issued,



even with an attorney present.<sup>10</sup> If that is the case, then the abuser may have a right to return to their home. None of this is easy or guarantees security, but it is the process for many victims in the United States and other countries with similar legal regimes. And it is the first step toward a redefined self.

Brison (2002), Scott (2013), and others (Cole, 2010) (Akinsanya & Bach, n.d.) (Volpe, Quinn, Resch, Douglas, & Cerulli, 2017) (Weeks & Pasupathi, 2010) (Bullen, 2015) (Minze, 2009) have noted the power of narrative to transform the trauma victim's post-traumatic self. To talk about it "again and again," according to Brison, is a way of "remastering the trauma". For Scott, "restorying a dominant narrative is critical to the healing process." Why is this? IPV experience is organic, and uncontainable, but the introduction of third parties immediately forces inorganic structure, likely in service to a bureaucratic process. "Regretfully," Hennesy (2012) writes,

most jurisdictions rely on the victimised person to gather and present the evidence to the justice system. This results in all of the responding agencies having to grapple with the story of the woman without knowing her history. We have all failed our clients to the extent that we have failed to discover what is really going on" (1287-1290 – Kindle).

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<sup>10</sup> The consequences for such an act of defiance in this very early stage of separation cannot be overstated. This act was viewed as an escalation in a battle going on only in the abuser's mind. We had spent the previous month discussing his leaving, only to have him double down on not leaving. He was attempting to buy time in order to find another way to regain control. Now with a protective order in place, he had lost total control with the exception of one option: kill me. When a victim goes to seek a protective order, that is always in the front of their minds. They are taking a calculated risk that the third-party, in this case a local security and legal bureaucracy, may be able to protect them better than they are able to themselves. Even as the threat rises significantly. As Leslie Morgan Steiner says in her 2012 TED Talk, "the last step in the abuse cycle is 'kill her.'" And life had to go on. I needed to go to work, and find a divorce attorney. I needed to find the money for all this. I found out that I could not do this all on my own, and I decided to recruit people to my cause by essentially making it about them. He was a threat to the residents in the building, and so the staff became "eyes and ears." I called up companies I do business with, like my cell phone provider, and just told them about my situation. They gave me a discount and blocked his number. I did this again and again, thus using KOI to build a fragile safety net and tripwire.

The police report in any form represents contained, artificial environments that impose a sort of bureaucratic suffocation on the victim's account. They rely on common socially accepted tropes (it was a "dispute" over something trivial – "man killed wife over salad dressing") or legally sanctioned language ("I fear for my life"), and rarely provide outlets for greater elaboration. The victim's experience is condensed to a limited number of lines to better suit bureaucratic processes and data collection. If they do not meet an opaque social or financial bureaucratic benchmark, they are often left to fend for themselves without "assistance." Hennesy (2012) and Stark (2007) both question the long-term effectiveness of these bureaucracies of caring. Klein (2012) notes, too, that not only are the systems inadequate, they can be contradictory being both enabler and hinderance to the same victim (p. 74).

What about those third parties unfamiliar with IPV, like the participants at my table that day in 2016? Their response is even more remote, more dependent on dominant social cues. It is what makes it so interesting to personally experience and to observe it in others, too. IPV experience is defined and redefined depending on the social distance between the listener and the victim. It is a distance that the victim becomes acutely aware of overtime and responds to with an available repertoire of anecdotes and insights appropriate to the audience and the moment. I regularly observe a "popular" response that, in short, consists of the fastest possible cognitive route to an "explanation" for the abuser's behavior. The lay-person makes sense of IPV as gendered ("male domination"),

or as crazy (they “snapped”<sup>11</sup>). The abuser’s behavior becomes “culturized” in my listener’s mind. “Culturize” is my neologism for the simultaneous assumption that an abuser’s race, religious creed, and/or ethnic origin “explains” their behavior (“he’s from France, that explains it”). Once quickly placed in whatever cognitive peg hole the third-party feels comfortable with, I can no longer explain my experience outside of that frame of reference. My experience – the long sleepless nights, the hours-long verbal attacks, the social isolation and physical confinement – that pulsing organic drama, becomes a short flat line toward whatever ossified assumptions that listener holds. I then need to decide whether to play along with the assumptions or expend effort to correct them.

When I discuss the dichotomy between the lived experience and the response to it, my insight comes from being both victim and third-party analyst. It comes from drawing myself out of the primordial ooze of exhausted terror, not yet entirely lost in my abuser’s “unreality” (Williamson, 2010), only to now narrate the unutterable on forms of ten lines or less, and explain to the uninitiated what 18 months of impenetrable insomnia does to your health and cognition. Filing that first police report. Writing a statement for a protective order. Telling the HR person. These are often the first steps on the long journey to self-reclamation, and could not be more artificial in the context of IPV’s organic chaos. If an IPV narrative loses its fidelity to reality it is because narrative is an artificial, albeit necessary, construct.

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<sup>11</sup> Example: “‘He must have just snapped,’ Daniel Luke’s brother says of tragic events,” <https://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2015/10/09/daniel-luke-family-speaks.html>

Theory can also influence how a victim shares their narrative. Olson's 2004 autoethnographic account, published in the journal *Women's Studies in Communication*, relies on the theoretical frameworks of social constructionism and symbolic interactionism. She argues that both suit the study of IPV, because they emphasize the necessity of others in the shaping of human identity. "Our identities," she writes, "are not created in a vacuum, but instead, are the by-products of our interactions with others. She further argues that IPV is an example of the "dark side of a social constructionist framework" (p. 4). The question of why she chose these two frameworks over others may have its source in Olson's personal experience with IPV-induced social isolation which she describes as a "domination" and negation of the victim's "personhood" (p. 4). A sense of a return to society makes its importance ever clearer. A victim's awareness of their place within a social order is surprisingly emotive, as they untangle their lives and retake their place in that social order.

Hayes and Jeffries 2015 book, *Romantic Terrorism: An Auto-Ethnography of Domestic Violence, Victimization and Survival*, is a collaborative effort exploring the commonalities between two distinct IPV experiences: Hayes' heterosexual and Jeffries' homosexual IPV-centered relationships. Both are harrowing accounts of entrapment and subsequent emotional devastation. For example, both abusers employed the insidious tactic of gaslighting, leaving the victims to question their observations and insights about the relationship early on. Hayes' account holds the sinister dynamic of the manipulation of the bureaucracy of caring – law enforcement, social work, shelters, family courts. And yet even here, the sub-system is more or less ineffective. Hayes, presenting herself as the

pseudonymous Joy describes the frustration of a family court system that did not take her abuse narrative seriously. “She was accused of being hysterical...

The violence was presented as “mutual”, the relationship described as “co-dependent” and thus “dysfunctional” and Joy’s fear unfounded because she had plenty of opportunities to leave Joe, if she had actually been “that scared of him” (p. 82).

Hayes is a foreign academic and single mother living in Australia when she encounters “Joe” at a party. Hayes then describes the early stages of entrapment, what she and others term love-bombing (Ciurria, 2018), and “characterized by all the common trappings of romantic love” (p. 43). Love-bombing includes expressions of devotion and commitment that have their source in social constructions of male and female romantic behaviors. The opening of doors (Newell’s experience), expressions of acknowledgements of wrongdoing and sincere efforts at personal reforms. My abuser presented himself as a sincere hard-working man (a restaurant manager) who longed for the opportunity to once again provide for a family and run his own restaurant. Newell’s abuser presented himself as a busy, high-performing doctor who admired her achievements (“Woman whose real-life story is depicted in ‘Dirty John’ says it ‘could happen to anyone,’” 2019). Olson (2004) recounts how late-night mentoring sessions with a leader in her profession became increasingly personal. “His openness,” she writes, “and apparently honest and sincere interest in my life made it easy to disclose such private information. He was so easy to talk to, so nonjudgmental, so supportive” (p. 12). For Hayes, aka “Joy”:

Joe also appeared supportive of Joy’s career. He frequently told Joy how clever she was, what a wonderful mother she was and how proud he felt to be with such a beautiful, independent and accomplished woman. (2015, p. 44).

The relationship progresses and Joe endears himself to Hayes and her child. Details of “Joe’s” life begin to creep in to their relationship: his lack of significant friendships, poor relationships with family, and seeming inability to maintain a job. However, none of these would be considered red flags in and of themselves. As a matter of fact, “Joy’s” generosity sits squarely into the “common socially constructed feminine expression of love, and many women actually enjoy anticipating and meeting the needs of their partner” (p. 36-37).

One of Hayes’ early experiences with Joe includes the tactic of “honesty” or what she calls the “confession of failure and rehabilitation” (p. 43). In her case Joe discloses that he was once a drug addict. This targeted her “natural ability to empathize and was intended to draw her in through the use of honesty and openness” (pp. 43-44). There should be no red flags in expressions of honest human failures. After all, who would want a companion who hid their failings. Yet in the hands of Hennesy’s “skilled offender” (2012), this expression of personal failure becomes part of a deliberate repertoire designed to entrapment victims.

Jeffries, who uses the pseudonym “Grace,” experiences a similar honeymoon/entrapment phase during the early stages of her relationship with the pseudonymous “Lee” (p. 44). “Lee” confesses to “Grace” “a couple of major faults, one being a failure to engage in any long-term romantic relationships” (p. 45). Again, the use of this disarming honesty appeals to “Grace’s” empathy and comes across as endearing expression of self-awareness, not a deliberate act of emotional entrapment.

Hayes also mentions a social construct that has received little if any attention in published research: stigma. The personal and social image of the themselves as the strong, educated women in control of their life's circumstances is dismantled when the victim realizes that they are trapped in a relationship that is completely out of their control. The sense of embarrassment is compounded by a fear of the unknown, and a confusion brought on by the lack of social information that comes with social isolation. Financial, social, and other reason exist for victims to remain in dangerous relationships, but so does the fear of being seen as weak:

In addition, the fact that such an intelligent and accomplished woman has landed herself in such a situation is embarrassing beyond belief, to the extent that she tells her friends and workmates that she took Steph [the child] out of her private school because their Dean of Students was inadequate, and their fees had gone up astronomically. The fact that she can't afford the fees because her partner is leaching off her and using his own money for drugs is too humiliating to admit (p. 51).

Hayes recounts the downward slide of her abuser as drug addiction took over. Her narration of "Joe's" transformation parallels most of the other narratives, including my own. As a matter of fact, it is series of behaviors that appear to be so commonplace that they could form the basis of a typology if one existed. For Connie Jones, her then-husband stopped working soon after she entered medical school and rarely worked after that ("CONNIE JONES: Ex-wife of man who killed 6, self speaks in Flagstaff, AZ (FNN) - YouTube," n.d.). For Jeffries (Hayes, 2015), her partner also stopped working once in a relationship, as did Leslie Morgan Steiner's former husband (2010). My abuser quit his job four months after we married, leaving me the sole income provider for six months.

Hayes (2015) details how the abuse escalated, evolving into terrifying verbal threats that included murder/suicide. It was compounded by a financial situation that grew increasingly dire, along with the demands of work and raising a child. Hayes, Morgan Steiner, and Jones all describe the emotional weight and confusion their abusers placed on them even as they struggled to maintain facades of normalcy to outsiders.

Physical abuse is a common theme, but there are few black eyes and bruises, and not all of the victims suffered physical trauma enough to seek medical care or even to call the police. For instance, Scott emphasizes her community's distrust of police made it difficult to call the police, despite physical abuse. She writes that she had seen her friends "arrested and harassed by police on too many occasions to believe that I would be protected in this or any instance" (p. 191). For Newell, the abuse was emotional and psychological, and never became physical. After her first effort to separate from him, Meehan began using all of Newell's emotional insecurities against her. "Everyone is a better Christian than you," he wrote. "Paybacks are costly and a bitch." "You lying old bag," he wrote, "You'll grow old alone" (Goffard, 2017). The second and final attempt at separation led him to steal and burn her car. However, because of a lack of physical violence, Newell was unable to get a protective order, an example of the many mercurial dissonances a victim experiences in their journey through the bureaucracy of caring.

After years of escalating verbal abuse, Jones told her husband that she planned on leaving him. She retells how "he laid on the floor for three days crying and said that it was his mental illness. That he loved me. That he didn't want to lose me. And that he would do whatever he needed to do." And though his behavior improved temporarily



following the birth of their son, like Morgan Steiner's and Hayes' experience, Jones' abuser once again slipped into controlling and violent behavior. He became "obsessive and controlling," and unpredictable. She had no idea who she was going to be facing when he came home in the evening,

"The garage door would open. And we didn't know what we were getting.... You know, if you punch someone in the eye, that kind of thing, it's obvious that you're being abused. But hitting you with their forearm, physically holding me down, pushing me into walls, those things don't leave bruises. But they are very violent."

Jones wired her home, and recorded his verbal abuse:

"See how smart you are, bitch. See what your college degree taught your dumb ass...I'll take you out to this (EXPLETIVE DELETED) pool and drown you...Call the (EXPLETIVE DELETED) now. Let's see what happens. You want to see?"(Holt & Mankiewicz, 2018)

The evening those words were spoken Jones' abuser took their son hostage, and then used him as a human shield against responding police. The next day Jones filed for divorce.

Morgan Steiner underwent a period of awareness-building, where posing as the journalist, she sought out and interviewed a therapist who specialized in treating abusive men. It was this encounter that began her painful process of awareness and ultimately, the strength to walk away:

This stranger on the phone had described my relationship with Conor in dreadfully accurate detail. Our first fight had been the night we moved in together—when I had nowhere else to go any longer. The first time he beat me was five days before our wedding. For two years I had let him beat me, in the name of "helping" him work through his childhood traumas. (p. 241).

For Jones, separation and survival were far more problematic and ultimately tragic. In her interview with *Dateline* (2018), she describes her efforts to evade his violent behavior,

including full-time body guards, safe houses, and a concerted effort to keep up legal barriers to Dwight's acquisition of a gun. The latter ultimately failed when the court did not renew her protective order, using the justification that no physical harm had been done. Jones estimates she spent close to \$650,000 to keep up the level of vigilance needed to survive.

For Olson, narrative represents a theoretical conduit for understanding the IPV experience. Narrative takes on the role of metadata, presenting to the reader the process of how individuals "form their self-identities" through interaction with others. Through narrative an IPV victim can "provide important insight into identity construction" (2004, p. 5). As metadata, narrative provides "sequential organisation" and an "explanatory and evaluative framework for understanding how and why events unfold as they do" (Fivush, 2010, p. 89). Its still largely unexplored structures could give future researchers opportunities to better understand the underlying dynamics of IPV.

Narrative will have an even greater role in understanding IPV in the future. It is one of the only means of capturing its subtle psychological dynamics. The assumption that IPV means physical violence is challenged by a growing body of research that suggests most IPV is psychological and that violence, when it happens, occurs as an extension of psychological abuse. Stark (2009) argues that IPV theorists and researchers rely on a "widely accepted domestic violence model" that itself interprets IPV as "incident specific," and equating IPV with certain measures of physical harm. What Williamson calls the "evidence-based remit." For the most part, this model ignores the overwhelming influence of psychological violence on the abused. The presumed

existence of mental illness is a regular addition to what Adams describes the “common stereotypes” of the perpetrator as “alcoholics or as mentally ill”:

Other common myths about batterers are that they are predominately on educated or unemployed or that they are criminals or “tough guy”...In reality, the vast majority of abusive men do not have criminal records other than their arrests for domestic violence... most studies have found battering to occur across all educational and income levels, go abusive men from lower economic levels are more likely to be arrested and prosecuted for domestic violence (Adams, 2007, pp. 24–25)

Adams also argues that the “stereotypes” provide abusers with cover. Friends, family, and coworkers do not see them as potential abusers because they do not fit the stereotypes. Their lives do not conform to the dominant narrative. Creating a myriad of reactions that taken as a whole are characterized by a cultural “unreality.”

Williamson (2010) writes about the victim navigating the abuser’s “unreality,” a collection of dynamic but incrementally escalating controlling behaviors that work toward the goal of the victim “capitulating to an abuser’s notion of reality rather than trusting one’s own senses...” She describes the process in which an abuser establishes control. I present the following passage from Williamson’s article, because it is a powerful analog for what happens when IPV victims begin to navigate their post-IPV lives:

Such control comes from the fact that abusive men are manipulative in many complex ways. Most of the abuser’s rules taken in isolation are insignificant. It is only seen in the wider context that they become problematic. Similarly, many of the insignificant expectations are grounded in wider expectations about making your husband happy (buying food he likes) or protecting your boyfriend (not having him arrested in a foreign country). Ultimately, women succumb to the abuser’s alien world through fear. The successful abuser achieves the implementation of his own reality on his partner because he is able to shift the measure of her self-worth from her own behavior and actions to the response he offers to them (p. 1418)

In the aftermath of IPV, the victim must then navigate a similar social “unreality,” facing judgement, ambivalence, and hostility. This is where professional observation ends, and social, or lay, observation begins. This is also where KOI becomes a factor in social interaction.

### **Knowledge of IPV (KOI)**

Part of the mechanism of “silencing forgiveness” is the dynamic I call knowledge of IPV (KOI). In this section, I will address the meaning of KOI, and its role as the “society,” the individuals the victim interacts with in their post-IPV lives. It could be family and friends, coworkers, or just members of a social media group, commenting on a news article. When a person learns of another’s experience of IPV, they acquire KOI. The victim in real terms and symbolically, represents the experience of IPV, and regardless of whether a theoretical framework is involved, must come to terms with a myriad of responses and reaction to its social existence.

Olson (2004) emphasizes social constructivism (along with symbolic interactionism) as an essential theoretical framework for understanding the role of narrative in the victim’s social reclamation:

Social constructionists (e.g., Berger & Luckman, 1967), in general, and symbolic interactionists (e.g., Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934), specifically, remind us that our identities are not created in a vacuum, but instead, are the by-products of our interactions with others (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). According to Grumet (1990), “identity is a choral and not a solo performance” (p. 281). We are the individuals we are because of the social, political, and interpersonal worlds we inhabit. Moreover, we come to know ourselves by understanding the view others have of us. Specifically, according to Umberson and Terling (1997), “an individual’s self-concept is formed, in

part, as a reflection of the way that others view the individual; thus relationships with others are fundamental to the formation of self-concept” (p. 3-4).

The relationship of the individual to broader social structures has long been the topic of social science inquiry. Without much background knowledge of any of these writers in 2013, I still observed obvious changes in verbal and physical behavior once it became known that I was an IPV victim. Social constructionism and symbolic interactionism were never so obvious than in the period where I was reclaiming a social location within a broader community. An observer is never more aware of something until it is absent from and returned to their view.

The victim is not fully aware of or in control of how individuals will construct their responses to KOI. Our normative understanding of IPV appears to be in flux. Research seems to suggest that third parties who are close to IPV victims experience their own trauma (Sigurvinsdottir, Riger, & Ullman, 2016), but also offer support and are effective actors at mitigating violence and abuse (Shernock, 2005).

However, we also have a problematic picture of the general social response to KOI through public surveys, social media responses, and other forms of collective commentary. I would characterize it as a love-hate relationship whose offspring is ambivalent indifference. In much of the research, public responses to IPV are calibrated to the situation/scenario provided (if one is provided). In general, however, public opinion surveys (Worden & Carlson, 2005) express sympathy, but also show a persistent victim-blaming (Witte, Schroeder, & Lohr, 2006) (Alfredsson, Ask, & von Borgstede, 2016) (Gracia, 2014) (Stewart, Moore, Crone, DeFreitas, & Rhatigan, 2012) (Herrero,

Rodríguez, & Torres, 2017). The IPV victim navigates these unpredictable cultural waters as they move on from the day-to-day IPV life into a post-IPV life where in many cases that IPV identity is unwelcomed.

## **CONCLUSION**

The idea of “silencing forgiveness” is not explicitly found in the critical literature on forgiveness. Despite decades of research showing positive therapeutic outcomes, skeptics have pointed out that forgiveness does not operate in a sociocultural or political vacuum. IPV victims may be pressured to show forgiveness to an abuser or risk being labeled as insincere or irrational.

The potential abuse of forgiveness as a means of silencing victims points to a far more problematic role of forgiveness in conflict resolution than is assumed in the body of research literature dedicated to IPV. In the future, conflict resolution practitioners should be aware of forgiveness’ potential to marginalize and silence unwelcomed voices.

Future areas of inquiry could explore the dynamic relationship between victim and social context in the dangerous period of reformation following separation. Quantitative research will continue to play a significant role in our understanding of the victim’s relationship with society, but autoethnographic (and other qualitative methods) should counterbalance data-driven analysis through innovations in theory and methodology. Social media platforms offer a wealth of possible primary source information that may break down our barriers to understand IPV as it is lived.

There is so much more to learn.

## **APPENDIX 1: PERSONAL NARRATIVE**

As noted earlier, a victim can identify and ascribe meaning to their abuser's behaviors that may be glossed over by a third-party researcher unaware of the particular knowledge that imbues intimate communication. Non-verbal cues can be particularly powerful, and are tied to daily intimate communication. A glance, a change in a habit, even (in one personal example) the impulsive purchasing of shoes and kitchen items, could be signals of oncoming abuse. This incremental (sometimes loud, sometimes imperceptible) communication once dominated by the abuser's "unreality" (Williamson, 2010), becomes a curio cabinet of sinister verbal and non-verbal cues.

Bound by the abuser's "unreality," the victim is often kept in a state of anxiety, exhaustion, and day-to-day discomfort, anticipating yet another shoe to drop. Lack of sleep, the constant anticipation of their abuser's state of mind, or unpredictable use of drugs and alcohol, make long-term recall of events difficult. The daily experience of trauma, often related to seemingly inconsequential things, makes the accurate recall of such incidents difficult even when they turn out to be of significant consequence. For example, my narrative begins with a piece of dropped lettuce.

By the evening of July 3, 2013, I had reached the end. I do not know how many times I had said "it's over," but when the time came it was as obvious as the sky. After months of giving it another try, starting fresh, sometimes three or four times a week, his



meltdown over a piece of dropped lettuce was a point of singularity. After three years of trying to calm him down when I failed to perform to his inchoate and ever-changing standards, I was willing to take him at his word when he told me he was fed up with my pathetic, stupid behavior and was going to leave me. Instead of begging him not to go, I asked him what day he intended to leave. From this point on I will refer to “him” under the pseudonym Pierre.

The first sentence of the first entry in the first diary, dated July 9, 2013:

*Thursday really was independence day for me. I finally realized I could no longer do anything for him. He looked at me square in the face and said he had never lied to me, ever. And it all finally clicked. Despite knowing Full well that I know he withheld and lied about his divorce, he told me straight up and with sincere conviction—I have never lied to you...*

I attributed Pierre’s behavior to some innate inability to recall when he was wrong.

*Where he’s clearly wrong—he simply doesn’t remember. It never happened.*

Look at what is happening here. This early “interpretation” turns out to be entirely wrong.

What I did not understand at the time was that his lying was simply part of his manipulative repertoire. It was deliberate. It took me years to recognize that what appeared to be uncontrollable behavior was likely intentional. This moment of understanding, this horrible epiphany, rarely acknowledged outside of first-person narratives, needs to be the focus of further research. In a 2008 study of victims’ leaving strategies, researchers found that the decision to leave was

reached because of some decisive event or experience, a point in the relationship, which resulted in the woman feeling forced to make a definitive break (at least purely physically) with the man either immediately or in time, as a releasing turning point” (Scheffer Lindgren & Renck, 2008, p. 119).

Morgan Steiner describes a similar moment when after a similar “period of reform” she realized that “There was no ‘old Conor’” (2010, p. 250). Far from being sincere, she realized that her then-husband had put no real effort at controlling his behavior, and thus there was no hope of real reform.

There comes a moment in a victim’s internal life where they begin to understand the sinister relationship between the abuser’s words and their actions. They are saying and doing things in a deliberate and concerted effort to manipulate. Contemporary American society does not educate children, or adults, in recognizing this kind of pathology, and so the moment of realization is often full of terror (that you share your life with someone like this) and self-directed anger (that you got yourself into a relationship like this). The moment resembles a Big Bang. It is full of chaos, but also of reformatory potential. At the moment the victim becomes emotionally uncoupled from their abuser, their mind and emotional well-being are drinking in new ideas and seeking new ways of understanding the world around them.

Like Steiner, my struggle could go no further. By mid-July 2013, I felt as though I had completed a labyrinthine marathon, but I was unaware of the range of destructive personality disorders now understood to exist. I assumed that Pierre could, if he wanted to, control his impulses, and get help for his now-obvious alcoholism. I was angry that he was choosing drink and violent outbursts over the hope of something better. Luckily, I did not see this as my failure. Once I realized it was his choice, I placed the blame for his situation squarely on him. From the entry dated July 10, 2013, I began to catalog his aberrant behaviors:

*neglect & antagonism when I turned 40 - he was angry at me when I told him that I was disappointed that he did nothing for my 40th birthday[.] he said I was selfish & stupid for expecting anything*

The topic moves on to my observations of his impulsivity.

*He either forgot [about my birthday] or didn't bother. He never makes arrangements or plans things - doesn't work on a timetable. He just reacts to impulses. EXCEPT: he gets up on time [for work] and prepares to leave and leaves like clockwork. That he can do effectively... When it comes to shoes for himself and other random items - he's diligent in seek them out & purchasing them but to plan & coordinate an evening with other people he's incapable really incapacitated.*

His narcissism and general lack of empathy was something now clearly observable, but I lacked the vocabulary in July 2013. Before July 3, he was adept at convincing me that the arguments were legitimately about me and my effect on “us.” After July 3, he was bereft of that otherwise effective tactic. A July 10, 2013 entry, included:

*I'm feeling oddly relieved even with a powder key walking around outside the bedroom door - I'm already seeing a life without him - and it isn't bad.*

I expanded on this the following day:

*I feel both relief and fear. Relief that I've finally released myself from his yoke and fear that has more damage to do. I'm not seeing much in the way of him leaving – and I'm beginning to believe he's going to regret [what he said]. I'm fixed on this 1) he must leave and 2) he must be in extensive treatment and 3) he must come clean on his priors. I'm already anxious – like I want the rest of my life to start...If I make it out of this alive and in one piece I will dedicate a part of my life to women less fortunate than I am.*

At this point, he was sleeping on the couch most of the time. His job at a swank city restaurant was often a 12-hour day. What I did not realize at the time was that when I finally did go to bed he was drinking abnormal amounts of alcohol. In his research on abusers, Adams finds that alcoholism (and other substance abuse) was “a far better predictor” of serial abuse behaviors than any measure of personality disorders like

psychopathy. Studies from the mid-2000s found that rates of alcoholism among male abusers “fall in the 40-60% range” (Adams, 2007, p. 24).<sup>12</sup> John Meehan was suspected of having an opioid addiction (Goffard, 2017). Hayes’ former tormenter relapsed into substance abuse three months after the birth of a child (2015, p. 57).

On July 13, Pierre tried to stall again by expressing commitment at seeking help. It was a deliberate tactic meant to maintain control by compelling me to accept an otherwise admirable effort to always say yes to a new beginning. It also lays the groundwork for ultimate failure being placed once again on the victim when the “sincere recommitment” ends in more abuse. Still, even at this point I knew it was over. I was making plans, including building a list of people to talk to such as the local police and an attorney. This is when I began to engage third parties.

I had no idea where to turn since I realized that most of the literature on “support” services were geared toward women of little means with its emphasis on shelters. I was the opposite. I did have means. I owned the house. However, a nice bank account (he would steal the money later) does not make someone knowledgeable about legal rights and procedures associated with IPV. And at this point, I still did not see myself as an IPV victim. I was, like Morgan Steiner, a “strong woman” married to a disturbed man. Besides, I was beginning to understand and feel the nature of the threat looming over me. His behaviors were increasingly unpredictable, or to put it another way: I was finally acknowledging his behavior was unpredictable.

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<sup>12</sup> It would take me another three years to come to terms with the extent of his drinking, because he did most of it after I went to bed. Suspicions of other forms of drug abuse were just as long to realize, primarily because I had never been around frequent drug users. Behaviors such as long periods of time without sleep were interpreted as insomnia, not cocaine or methamphetamine use. Now, however, I cannot rule out that he abused both alcohol and at least one other illicit substance.

I approached this subject like a “problem set” I would deal with a work: I would get an expert opinion. I called the local domestic violence hotline with the intention of getting some advice on how to proceed. On the first call to the Arlington County domestic violence hotline, I was told to call back because it was only staffed with Spanish speakers at the time. The next day I called again. On the second call to the Arlington County domestic violence hotline, a pleasant man answered the phone. He laughed at me when I told him I would like to speak to someone about how to proceed with separation from an abusive husband. He then proceeded to remind me, in a condescending tone that must have taken effort, that men have rights too. I hung up on him. There was no third call.

I asked a co-worker who had been through a similar break up and divorce, and she suggested family law attorneys. I began to cold call law firms that specialized in family law. This was more fruitful, but still got me no closer to understanding the whole process. Since ending the relationship is the single most dangerous thing a victim can do, the cognitive processes that accompany that decision, and subsequent “separation” decisions deserves future study. I can say that my “insights” about Pierre were still under-developed. I knew he was a growing threat, but I did not understand what that meant. And still the problem of having him removed from my home was daunting.

How can third parties best help with that transition? Sadly, in my initial engagements with the IPV response bureaucracy I was greeted with unfathomable nonsense. The police officers I engaged later on would change my opinion. However, I

still wonder if I had received some kind of help from county-funded “experts”, perhaps a referral to a good lawyer, whether it would have had to come to a frantic 911 call.

At this point I am beginning to make sense of the relationship, and Pierre’s behavior, and the lists started. From the July 14, 2013 entry:

*His “support” for my decision to return to school - more like toleration if dinner didn’t get done or the house wasn’t clean. He didn’t help me by picking up some of the slack by cleaning or cooking. He just tolerated it if it wasn’t done regularly.*

*Those endless lectures at the beginning of the relationship: we need to work together, we’re a couple. We’re a team.*

- *The fucking highs and lows...*
- *His fucking impulses. The random buying of shit.*

Even in this early entry, I was beginning to connect certain behaviors to a still unknown pathology without the benefit of knowing that those “highs and lows” are likely symptoms of bipolar disorder. The impulsivity could be tied to bipolar or could be the sign of a deeper personality disorder. This emphasizes the importance of a basic training in the warning signs of different psychological and personality pathologies, particularly for children who come from high risk homes where abuse is already known to exist. A better command of the language and behavioral symptoms of psychopathologies could improve victim’s communication with authorities and their ability to assess subtle changes in behavior that could be signs of increasing danger.

The entry for July 16, 2013 (with the accompanying notation: “2AM”), points to both my growing awareness of the consequences of little sleep.

*Another night of no sleep. I’m really tired of 3, max 4 hours/night. I can count on 2 hands the number of times I’ve slept through the night in the last 2 years...My mind is racing slowly. I’m really tired but I can’t stop thinking...In the meantime I’m reading accounts of women who live with bipolar spouses. Holy Shit. One [in] South Africa went through exactly the same experiences. The belittlement, the*

*threat, the hypersexualization, the disregard, the 24/7 verbal diarrhea of hate...She wanted violence to occur so she could have the state come and take him away. I don't want the violence to occur but I'm not sure how to get him out of the house and into treatment.*

The literature on health outcomes for IPV victims consistently reports the presence of sleep disorders like insomnia. Missing significant amounts of sleep over months or years can have detrimental effects on a victim's cognition and emotional control. The likelihood that victims are suffering from sleep deprivation, and all of the emotional and physical challenges that it creates, should be considered before anyone judges victim decision-making, especially when they are under threat (García-Moreno et al., 2013) (Antai, 2011) (Toussaint et al., 2016) (Ysseldyk et al., 2017) (Ferrari et al., n.d.).

At this point, and for the first time, Pierre's behavior was finally becoming a linguistically graspable thing. I had words, ideas attached to his actions. Terms like "bipolar," "narcissism," and anti-social personality disorders are all becoming terms of familiarity. Finally, it was making sense. Those early days of online research was an empowering moment. Through the information I found, I realized that I was not unique, and that Pierre's behavior had potential names attached to it. It was no longer a mystery. This linguistic grounding was having an effect on my situational awareness and reasoning. I was able to give the behavior (both his and mine) names, and with that awareness came growing confidence over them.

From July 18, 2013:

*At least 2 incidents since [the 3rd] where I was concerned for my life:*

- 1. Following the purchase of the phone [early July Smartphone purchase]—threatening to spit on me and slap me [for not using the credit card he wanted me to use]*

2. *Following the incident with the lettuce where he followed me around for 3 days shoving things in my face and calling me dehumanizing names like dog Now he's got depressed, belligerent, and talking suicide.*

I grew more confident in my ability to control my reactions to his behavior. Until this point, Pierre had used his unpredictability to keep me in a heightened state of awareness.

“One husband in my practice,” Stark explains,

“would jump out of a closet where he was hiding to ‘surprise’ his wife when she returned home. Although he claimed this was only a joke, he knew his actions terrorized her because she had shared a childhood experience when an uncle had lain in wait in a closet, then raped her. The sudden destruction or unexplained disappearance of familiar objects that have a special meaning to the victim is a related tactic” (2007, p. Kindle Location 3139).

Pierre practiced both of these behaviors, particularly “stalking” me from behind doors slightly propped open. He would jump up at me when I walked through the door. When I asked him to stop, he would become offended. I was too stupid to understand the playfulness, he would say. In reality, Stark was right, he was deliberately making me feel uneasy in my own home. It was part of a relentless program to disarm and unsettle me. His objective was to weaken me.

The deliberate character of some of the abuser’s cruelties — actions that seem to be so spontaneous and thus so sincerely misdirected - is a difficult fact for IPV victims to process. It introduces the element of evil. In an entry from July 20, 2013, I listed out all the reasons he claimed I was cheating on him, including:

*...I wanted to get up [from the dinner table] and take walk around the block....  
When I was talking to [a neighbor] at the ice cream social (~July 2010)...  
[A friend's wife] sent out a group email to ~dozens of people inviting folks to a  
[birthday] party...*



His favorite declaration in this period was: “I’ll go to a doctor, if you agree to take the drugs since this is all your fault.” Remember, too, that I am going to work every day. I am sitting in terrible traffic, coming home exhausted, and having to gird myself for what I was increasingly aware to be psychopathological behavior that I could not anticipate.

Once that decision to separate is made, the wait can be agonizing and confusing.

From a July 22, 2013 entry:

*I’m just depressed. I don’t care and I’m not feeling much of anything. I just want this to end, but Perhaps my ideal isn’t what I think it is. I’m so confused, I’m not sure what decisions are the right ones. I feel like I’m drifting.... But all I can see is grayish misery like when the blue sky is covered in a single gray sheet of clouds. That gray. That’s what I feel. He won’t leave. He wants to give it one more try.*

I remember the uncertainty he was generating every moment we were together. However, as my confidence grew so did his desperation. From July 28, 2013:

*The last few days have been a terrible roller coaster. His behavior is such that I can’t trust him minute by minute. Yesterday, it was a minute by minute change in his emotional state. It’s difficult to explain. He acted reasoned but his words were disconnected from reality...He agreed to leave and to get a divorce. Two hours later he decided that he wasn’t going to leave...”*

Despite these increasingly disjointed conversations, I grew ever-more confident in my objective of getting him out of the house. However, I was still holding him to his word, that he was agreeing to leave. By July 31, 2013 he was uncontrollable and inconsolable:

*On Sunday, I think I dealt with ~10 different [Pierres]  
Angry  
Grumpy  
Passive Aggressive  
Vindictive  
Remorseful  
Over-compensating  
Paranoid  
Over-bearing*

*...He at once agree to leave but then added conditions...*

I was also thinking about timelines and patterns, piecing together some of the more egregious behavioral outbursts of the previous three years. From the same entry:

Thinking through some more incidents:

*Christmas 2012 meltdown*

*It was triggered after I decided to park in a park[ing] garage rather than drive around finding a place to parallel park – I think that I didn't ask for permission to do this. The meltdown lasted ~3 days with him at various points threatening me – with veiled threats of violence – “if you don't change I don't know if I can control myself.” The only thing that brought him out of this funk was the family Xmas gathering at [my brother's house].*

I recently reconsidered this incident, and the one described below from the same July entry. Now I wonder if both were not efforts on his part to put me in a vulnerable position to hurt or kill me. His insistence of driving down and parking on a darkened side street on a December night makes me wonder if he intended to kill me that night. His unprecedented meltdown (up until that point) when I turned into a \$1 parking garage rather than drive aimlessly around looking for an unlit street space to parallel park only makes sense if other impulses were driving his insistence. And in the context of other behavior from that period it becomes even more likely:

*Another thing I thought about today are the careless crazy risks he takes Sunday's risk—he decided to replace the light cover in the kitchen. He wanted to have me hold up this large 3' [to] 4' long wood framed cover over my head while standing on too-short step stool while he stood (in his flip-flops) on the counter and leaned into the middle of the kitchen with the screwdriver [pointed near my face]—I said no and walked away from this cluster fuck*

After weeks of looking around, I met with a divorce attorney on August 5, 2013. Finding a divorce attorney was not as easy as it sounds, especially in 2013 when the economy in the DC-metro area was struggling, an environment where weak marriages often dissolve.

Divorce attorneys were busy during this period, and most wanted a commitment (and a retainer) right away. The attorney I met with on August 5, 2013, was not the one I ultimately decided on. The next entry for August 9, 2013, is too difficult to share, because it deals with the previous night when he held me hostage and threatened to kill me in our bedroom. I fled out of the condo by distracting him. I threw my phone across the room, and he ran for it. I ran across the hall in my pajamas, furiously knocking on our neighbor's door. I called the police from there. The police came, one talked to me in my neighbor's unit, the others talked to Pierre.

The police officer listened, expressed empathy, but gave it to me straight: I had not been physically hurt so charges were not likely. At most, he may spend the night in jail, be released, rested and mean, in the morning. I could get an emergency protective order (EPO). That was three days. It would buy me time, but gave me no guarantee that I would be granted an extension. I immediately understood how dangerous that would be. He would be gone just long enough to be really angry. The police talked him into leaving, but told me it was voluntary, and to expect him to return that night. They offered to wait while I packed up some clothes and walked me to my car. One of the officers gave me his card and offered to help with an EPO. I left, drifting from hotel to family to hotel room for the next week, going to work and researching attorneys, and not knowing what to do next. The officer's instincts about Pierre that night were spot on. I found out the following day that he turned right around and went straight back to the condo. During this period, he barraged me with phone calls and text messages, declaring his undying love

for me, etc., with language similar to the kind that John Meehan and other abusers employ.

I returned home the night of August 15, 2013. He was uncontrollable. He started physically pushing me, and “throwing” his hands into my face – just close enough to make me flinch. And he was laughing. Pierre said something I will not forget: “Now that I know you want to throw me away, I can do anything I want to you.” I did not sleep that night. The next day, I woke up, called in sick to work, and went down to the courthouse to request a protective order. No phones are permitted in the courthouse, but I did have my diary with me. August 16, 2013:

*So far the process is confusing  
The website is not clear on where to go it appears to say 6700. It's not. A clerk in 6700 told me to go to either [the] 5[th] floor or to [the] police on [the] 1<sup>st</sup> floor. Went to police info—they sent me to the fourth floor. The reception at the Clerk's office were four wholly indifferent clerks—completely ignoring me. There were people at the counter—when she asked me (from her desk) what I was here for I had to call out to her that I was here for a restraining order. She pointed to me an adjacent office where the clerk was helpful... so far so good with the caseworkers. They are far more professional. Not surprising. I'm sitting here waiting for the court to call [Pierre's] name. And there I have to do something I never wanted to do— Go to court. The waiting though is terrible, and the room I'm sitting in is unwelcoming to say the least—two broken office chairs an empty bookcase, with a smattering of info pamphlets and children's books...*

The room was small enough to call a converted closet. I waited to be called in to the court room. Unable to step out for a bite to eat without the risk of missing the call, I sat in the closet for what felt like an interminable period of time. I was called in some time after lunch.

The hearing was the first time I had ever been inside a courtroom. It was intimidating. The court caseworker who helped me write my statement also stood beside

me, giving me guidance on court decorum. I repeated to the judge what I had written on the intake form. She asked me a few yes and no questions, and granted me the temporary protective order. This was now well after lunch on a Friday.

After I had received the order, I found out that it was up to me to coordinate with the sheriff's office to serve the order. There was a possibility that he may not be served that day (Friday), and I would be forced to wait until Monday for my next chance to have him served. This would mean another weekend of drifting from place to place. Something I was dreading. Luckily, when I arrived home later that day, I saw him from the street. He was standing on the balcony of my condo. I called the police from my car, told them about the protective order, and waited...

*Sitting and waiting— that's what I've been doing all day. There's two [police] cars here, and I've been sitting here parked for what seems to be an eternity. It's more like 45 minutes. Once again, I'm staring, just like I was this morning at court, waiting for the hearing. It's going to be 8 soon. I ate at 2. I'm tired -- just so tired. And all I can think of it is and get something to eat. The sadness is too deep, my desire to cry too strong at this moment. I realize how lonely I feel—and how lonely I need to be in order to get through this.*

By 11PM that night the locks were changed. I had been texting friends and family members throughout the day, once I had access to my phone. After the locks were changed, I sent out a text to them that included a link to the old Kenny Loggins' song, "I'm Alright."

I spent the weekend mostly inside, cleaning and essentially reclaiming my personal space. He had so thoroughly taken over my condo with his junk that it took months to clean up. The following Monday I retained an attorney who was willing to represent me not only in the divorce, but with the protective order, and any criminal

matters related to his behavior. By then he had stolen the nearly \$100K we had in a joint account. It essentially left me with no liquid assets. I never did find out what he did with the money. There was a protective order hearing on August 30, 2013. The attorneys negotiated an extension of the protective order. I would spend the next five years maintaining it.<sup>13</sup>

Three days later he would violate it by attempting to run me over with his car while I walked along a street by the condo. Between August 16 and October 9, 2013, Pierre would violate this and subsequent protective orders six times, including electronic contact that was expressly forbidden in the order's language. The September 2, 2013, attempt to run me over in the street, and the October 9, 2013, attempted ambush in the nearby mall were the most terrifying, because they showed that despite my vigilance, a period of jail time for him, and efforts at changing my pattern of life, he was so dogged that he was still tracking me.

In this period, the self-doubt started to flood in. From a long entry on September 8, 2013:

*I'm 43 (almost) and I realized today that there are men in my life who have given their wives more in a month [than what] I received in three years. What was wrong with me? What did I do wrong? I would have loved to just have security. Screw the indulgences like birthday parties or gifts—how about just being able to come home to the assurances of love: I know they exist. I've seen them in others. Why can I have that? What was I made for that?*

Further on, I am expressing what are clearly gender-informed insights into the relationship dynamic:

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<sup>13</sup> In the U.S. state of Virginia, a "permanent" protective order is reviewed every two years, and the victim must return to court (with or without an attorney) in order to argue for any extension. Abusers are also required to be there. States and jurisdictional definitions vary widely.

*I accepted all the blame—and excepted the negative outcomes: the isolation, the Loneliness, the Helplessness. It's not like ever did much. He only did what he wanted to do and I have to shower him with praise every time he lifted a finger to do something half asked like the kitchen light. If the outcome wasn't what he wants, it was my fault. Always my fault. After a while, I stopped believing him, but the damage was done.*

*I did most everything by myself: today while at BJ's I was putting items on the belt—recalling how he would stand there and stare at me [while] I did everything. At the end he would pick up something out of the cart and handed to me. He was either lazy. Entitled. Or so mentally challenged that it took him 10 minutes to decide what was going on in front of him.*

By September 16, 2013, exactly one month since the initial protective order was signed, I was already reclaiming my life. Of course, much of it had to do with property and the impending criminal case related to the September 2 violation of the protective order, but I was already reclaiming and reforming my life:

*Last night I went to bed exhausted [from] ...all the time thinking about my life and what I want to do next. The memories of the pain are fading. The memories of him are fading. I need to force myself to recall things. When I do feel angry and embarrassed that I let myself get so caught up in his crazy then I contextualize my own pain. He actually had me thinking that it was my own deficiencies that made me so scatterbrained, so exhausted, so isolated and feeling alone – and lonely.*

I recall managing a lot of self-anger in this reformatory period. Pierre, along with substance abuse problems, was a hoarder. With work and other obligations, I had to clean out his stuff and move it to a neutral location that would give him legal access to it. Legal obligations were now compelling me to still consider his needs, his rights. He, on the other hand, acted without any regard to consequences.

The act of cleaning out the condo was difficult and cathartic. He hoarded everything, from dead bugs, old tooth brushes, used paper towels, bundles of old pens,

mounds of junk mail, spent socks, old books, random broken lamps, dusty knickknacks, and broken kitchen gadgets. From a September 20, 2013 entry:

*Last night I found the little note I jotted down of the things he was saying to me in early July:*

*You are a fucking trash  
You are nothing  
There is nothing in the brain  
You are fucking shit  
[I should spit on you]  
[I will spit on you]*

It was a brutal reminder of what he was doing to me at the time, and it reenergized my efforts to get him out of my life. The hoarding took on so many forms that it was a challenge to plan and execute clean ups. There was just so much stuff. I found I needed to tackle it one corner at a time. What I thought was going to be a day project turned into a weeks-long project that almost daily surprised me with secrets. From the same September 20, 2013, entry:

*As I clean things out I'm suffering these rushes of anger. As I find his electronic trail I'm sickened. He was exploring pornography since at least late last year. God only knows how long... He was sliding down a very deep slope. And there was nothing I could do about it.*

The computer was one of the corners I was clearing out, and I was finding more and more pornography, much of it foreign language and associated with young women role playing as school girls. From the download dates I could see his progression. At the point of his removal in August, he had been cultivating a growing fetish for “deflowering” fantasies. It was a very disturbing turn. It was at this point that I researched his phone records (we were on the same plan) and realized that he had likely been engaging prostitutes in the year prior to our separation. The sense of violation was overwhelming, and compounded



by a fear that I may have contracted a sexually transmitted disease (STD). It took me days to gather enough courage to call a doctor and request testing.

At this point, I was beginning to understand the consequences of having this person in my life. A friend told me that Pierre's behavior suggested a lack of conscience, but that did not mean anything at the time. What does it mean to have no conscience? What does it mean to be bound to someone with no conscience? I am still on a journey of understanding that piece of my life. The entry continues:

*In the meantime I'm angry at how much I let him take over my life. He's in every nook and cranny. I keep on cleaning and I keep on finding things. He shoved his shit everywhere. It's so overwhelming that I can't get through it all. The dead roaches in the kitchen. The dirty moisture catchers – filled with mold and mildew. There's so much that's just gross that it makes me sick that I stayed with him so long.*

The roller coaster continued with the news of a removal hearing in his immigration case. In early September I had retained a second attorney to advise me on what to do about his green card sponsorship. I would eventually pull my sponsorship. Apparently, this hearing was the outcome. I was relieved because he was still stalking me, and his removal would have solved many problems. My hopes were dashed. I soon discovered that the subsequent "removal" hearing was scheduled for February 2016, two years into the future. In late September 2013, however, I was feeling sorry for him. From a September 26, 2013 entry:

*I feel this overwhelming sense of sadness and pity. Pity for him...*

My empathy would soon wither. As his online threats continued, and as I sifted through his junk, finding secret compartments, holding papers and photos from a previous life.

This process of exposing truth, of ripping away complex connection of lies and half-truths, generates an enduring anger.

I noted before how with the exception of one victim, none of the victim narratives include forgiveness. I posited that one reason for that was that most of the victims experienced stalking. But there is at least one case similar to the exposition. Debra Newell's discovery of John Meehan's other life – the one of prison sentences, law suits, license divestitures. It is one thing to think you are the victim of an abuser, it is something else – something deeply disturbing and offensive – to realize you are also the victim of an elaborate con. Pierre did not have the distinguished career in restaurants that he said he did. I found papers (he hoarded everything) that suggested he just barely kept himself employed. I found pictures of his first wife (ones he said he had burned) and naked pictures of women I assume were girlfriends. Pictures that are disturbing in their creepy voyeurism. There were what appeared to be pictures of him with a woman not his first wife and they are both wearing wedding rings. Is he still married to someone else?

I expended a great deal of effort to sift through piles of garbage, organizing it, and moving it into a storage unit. My attorney was pressing for him to arrange a pickup, but it would be another year before anything was exchanged, this despite its 24/7 availability. All the time he claimed I was hiding his belongings from him, including his passport (which was hand delivered to him between our attorneys – with an email trail). To this day, I do not believe people who say vindictive ex's have withheld important documents from them. My abuser lied about it so often, and with such emotional gusto, that I was in awe of his acting prowess. In October 2018, an immigration case officer told me that

Pierre had told him that he had every intention of leaving, but that I still had his passport. I emphatically corrected that lie (forwarding the old email chain). Of all the lies this was one of the most brazen, and has lingered long after his likely return to France. Still, this is five years into the future. By September 29, 2013, I was sensing very positive changes (perhaps too soon):

*It is such a beautiful night. The balcony I'll clean it is a pleasant place to sit and read well after dark...I'm going through some kind of transformation. In narrative about Pierre and I is forming. My life is moving ever forward. I just feel like things are in some kind of the embryonic stage. I can see in life forming now.*

I had a positive outlook, and I was relearning to socialize I was re-socializing and noticing others with an empathy I never had previously. It was the first inkling of how much I had changed. I was undergoing an exhilarating cognitive transformation. The world was opening up once again. From October 2, 2013:

*No more loneliness for me with each person I tell – I get to reinvent myself a little more. I'm still too goofy and socially awkward. I'm too chatty, but I DO ask more question of people and I do listen more.*

The literature on post traumatic growth (PTG) assumes that not all outcomes of trauma are negative. According to a recent study of PTG in IPV survivors, researchers looked for positive outcomes previously observed, including:

more adaptive views on life, stronger coping skills, new or fortified personal and relational resources...a sense of thriving; a greater understanding of one's needs, increased assertiveness and independence, a greater sense of self-worth, increased awareness of social justice issues, greater feelings of control; and satisfaction with one's life and relationships, personal growth, and motivation to take action to improve one's life (Flasch, Murray, & Crowe, 2017)

Identifying the positive changes in survivors may help practitioners improve treatments, and let observers better understand the signs of long-term trauma survival. One area

where third parties could help is in reminding and enabling operational security for those victims whose abusers refuse to let go. A successful month of self-redefinition is a positive development in the life of a survivor; however, threats to their safety may be close by. As I was quickly growing confident, Pierre was spiraling out of control. From an entry of October 8 and 9, 2013:

*His behavior is getting too strange. He's getting worse and I'm starting to get concerned no worried. I'm blocking the doors because I'm not sure about him. His Tweets are getting stranger and stranger. His mind is becoming increasingly unhinged...I've barricaded the doors and hope I'll hear it when he tried to break down the door.*

It was at this time that I found out he had been seeing a dentist in the condo building, a flagrant violation of the protective order. Later on, that same day, he would attempt to ambush me at a local mall. I was standing on an escalator and saw him running below trying to catch up to me. I immediately ran for it, and called 911. He saw that I was on the phone with the police. The dispatcher told me to find some place to hide inside a store. Without thinking of it I just turned into a hair salon and crouched underneath the receptionist's booth. I thought I heard people laughing, but one woman told them to stop. It was as if she knew. And I heard her say, "Don't worry about it, honey, keep on talking to the police." I think I nodded at her. About a minute went by before the police arrived. I thanked the folks at the salon, and I followed the police out to one of their cars. I went with them to the Magistrate's office to file a formal report. He was arrested a few days later. I did not step foot in that mall for nearly two years.

To have a sense of what was going on in his public persona, he was posting near incoherent messages on a Twitter account. His persona at this time was one of the hapless

victim of a cruel wife. I had filed a complaint about his electronic stalking, and those efforts were counted as violations of the protective order. In response, he began to post on Twitter messages to me without sharing them with me directly (that would have been a clear violation), displaying enough foreknowledge of wrong-doing, and attempting to test the rules established by the court. This is a common element of stalking found in several of the IPV narratives. Connie Jones had the financial resources to hire a physical protection team, but her abuser still found ways to test its resilience. John Meehan was reported to have stalked other victims by standing just feet outside the court ordered safe distance, and making sure they saw him. Pierre would park his car in my neighborhood just outside the distance defined in the protective order. This despite living five miles away.

Despite my efforts to convince the magistrate, they did not interpret these posts as a violation of the law. For reference, these were the posts up to, including, and following his attempted attack at the mall.

**Table 1 Sample of Twitter posts by Abuser from October 2013**

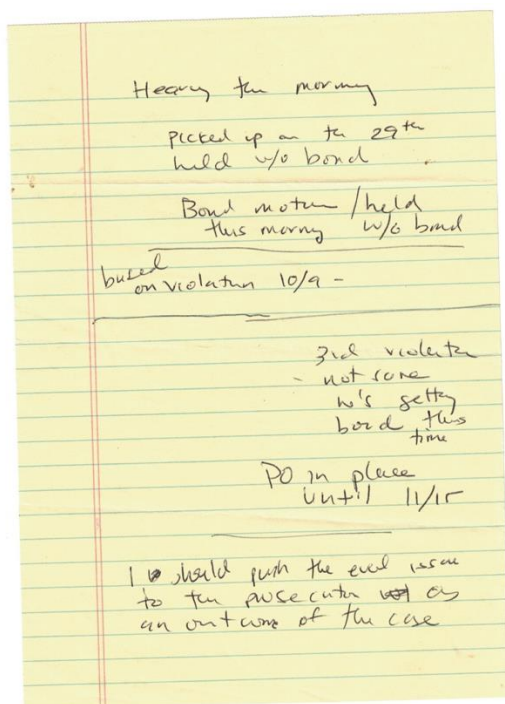
<b>Date</b>	<b>Content</b>
11 October 2013	<i>Why all this during I love u ? Please stop .Enough hurt please to the woman in my heart</i>
9 October 2013	<i>So be honest with your self before to be honest with the other . U know why this happen because u r dump stupid</i>
9 October 2013	<i>Kiss theme just I don't see here.let me I tell u something . You r very stupid and I don't dell with stupid dum like you.</i>
9 October 2013	<i>Today i was very sad when I see here run very fast ,behind a counter is not high and it was one lady sit so she knee beside her foot to</i>
9 October 2013	<i>If u call me we can solve al this problem and we will be so happy. But you decided this ugly way</i>

9 October 2013	<i>Why all that? What u want from me? Please leave me alone to make my life</i>
9 October 2013	<i>Thank you woman for your love ( hate ). To leave me without any thing to make my life. Many thank</i>
9 October 2013	<i>A lot of people read this . So u need me a lot . For that give me what belong to me then do your life .</i>
Source:	<a href="http://snapbird.org/XXXXXXXXXX/timeline/">http://snapbird.org/XXXXXXXXXX/timeline/</a> [details available upon request], Snap Bird - search twitter's history 11/12/13, 9:01 PM

What stands out for me, so many years later, is his complete loss of command of written English. Though not his first language, he was adept at it in spoken and written form. He had a knack for many languages, and math, too, which he could conceptualize with ease. This jumbled invective, incoherent as if anger had burst out of him like a stream of disturbed consciousness, was then and still is a shocking read.

At this point it became clear to me that he was not letting up in his physical stalking. In order for him to have known I was there he was either waiting somewhere along the road or a nearby parking lot outside of work for days at a time. He was driving and walking by the condo. He was following me however he could online. With the realization that he was still stalking me, despite a period in jail, and the admonishment of multiple law enforcement and legal authorities, I retreated for a while from public interactions. I would not feel confident to walk alone outside for about 6 months.

Following the October 9, 2013, incident my abuser was arrested but released after a weekend stay in jail.



Heavy the morning  
picked up on the 29th  
held w/o bond

Bond motion / held  
this morning w/o bond

based  
on violation 10/9 -

3rd violation  
not done  
he's getting  
bond this  
time

PO in place  
until 11/15

I should push the end reason  
to the prosecutor ~~not~~ as  
an outcome of the case

**Figure 1** Note taken during a phone conversation with an IPV court case worker

A few weeks later I received an anticipated subpoena to testify at his criminal trial. He had already been charged with violating the protective order and a court date had been set. Now, with the new charges, his criminal trial was pushed back to mid-December.

It was as if all of the progress I was making (I would not call it that now) had been pushed back. I felt vulnerable again. I went to work, and then came home, and rarely left the house. I worked around what I suspected to be his schedule. Taking the advice from security experts I worked with, I significantly altered my pattern of life (POL) – that is, the patterns of day to day living, such as picking up the kids from school or where you go grocery shopping. I changed churches, supermarkets, and gym membership. I found a new doctor. I attended a gym in a different town. I shopped in

town over 30 miles away in order to feel comfortable. I left work at different times. Came to work at different times. Parked in different spots every time.

Work colleagues looked out for him. Of all the efforts to address my physical security, changing my pattern of life was difficult, but perhaps the most effective at keeping me secure. Pierre was a creature of habit, and would not alter behavior without concerted effort. Pattern of life alterations kept him guessing, forced him to try new things. He could not keep up. I could find no research into the effects of pattern of life changes for IPV victims, not on survival outcomes or psychosocial improvements. This is a shame, because small changes like going to a different town for groceries may positively affect security outcomes for some IPV victims.

Concern over the impending trial may have been enough to change his behavior, because as December 2013 arrived, it was not apparent that he was stalking me every day, and it created a false sense of security.

I did not understand at the time why I would forget his two attempts at my life. Despite an effort, I could not keep them in the forefront of my thought. Yet, they would resurface in unexpected moments. It was Christmastime 2013, and I was shopping at a big box store. It was crowded. There were men everywhere, wearing leather jackets similar to Pierre's. With each one coming into view or lingering in the corner of my eye, my heart raced a bit and then calmed, and I kept on shopping. After a while of this, my heart would not stop racing. Suddenly, I couldn't breathe. He was right behind me! I gasped for air. I swung around. No one. I pulled cart backward until my back was against



a wall, safe. People stared. I finally caught my breath, and talked myself back into composure and feigned a coughing fit. Was this a panic attack?

Maintaining vigilance is difficult. I was needing to constantly remind myself of my duty to look around, check my car before getting in, avoid areas where I knew he frequented out of habit (like the mall). Still, I knew he was out there. I lived near a public transportation hub. Despite rejecting public transportation during our marriage, and relying on his car for every trip, after our separation he became a loyal transit user, parking his car around the corner for my condo and walking to the subway. I frequently saw his car, and soon began checking for it. This became a thing that I did, making note of every time I saw it, and attempting to discern a POL from it. What days was he working? When?

On December 17, 2013, he went to trial for the violations of the protective orders. If I had not been as conscientious and diligent with maintaining accounts of and reporting his violations, the trial may have never happened. It was the squeaky wheel of reporting all of those events, no matter how small, that gave the prosecutor the impetus to move forward with a case. It helped, too, that I had the energy to document his movements following the September 2, 2013 attempt on my life. However, on the day of the trial, I quickly discovered that, as a victim, I had very little influence over the outcome of the criminal proceedings. This despite the fact that I was the target of lethal animus. It was as if I was an afterthought.

I was represented by my attorney, a half-day's work for her that was close to \$2000. This is something to remember when assessing how victims interact with the legal

system. I was well represented that day, because I could afford to be. However, despite having an excellent attorney, there was not much neither of us could do. It was the game of prosecutor versus Pierre's defense attorney. I was feeling helpless. I knew my safety was essentially in the hands of two men who did not know me, and were pressed for time with other cases. Still, my efforts (the pictures, the reporting, the sheer number of charges – six in all) had created favorable conditions for the prosecutor. Pierre plead guilty to violations of the protective order, and as part of a plea deal he needed to accept a permanent protective order (2 years) and psychiatric assessment and counseling. Despite avoiding a mandatory jail sentence, he was clearly unhappy with the outcome. Then again, so was I, because he was still free to stalk me. From a December 18, 2013 entry:

*Yesterday was a big disappointment. I got what I wanted – a fair, optimal outcome – but it occurred to me that all this anxiety and anguish was for naught. We are basically back to where we were in late August.*

The final assessment is under seal. I have no rights to access it, nor do I have any rights to access his case file. This is just one of many examples of benign ambivalence to IPV within the legal system.

According to Virginia state law, as the breadwinner, I could have been responsible for supporting his living expenses while we were in the legally prescribed one year waiting period after I filed for divorce. I could have been responsible for his health care and retirement. It is a common enough experience for victims. As part of their divorce agreement, Connie Jones was responsible for paying \$6000/month alimony to her ex-husband and abuser, Dwight Jones (“CONNIE JONES: Ex-wife of man who killed 6, self speaks in Flagstaff, AZ (FNN) - YouTube,” n.d.). Hayes, too, was left with holding

both fiscal and familial responsibilities. A closer and honest look at how the legal system addresses victim's concerns needs to first reconsider how abusers manipulate the system to their advantage.

My education and relative financial means were enough to call into question my victim status inside and outside the courtroom. For example, in December 2015, I was at Arlington County's Juvenile and Domestic Relations (JDR) Court in an effort to schedule the hearing for the renewal of the 2013 protective order. Having just paid my abuser alimony, and the last of my divorce attorney's fees, I lacked the usual \$5000 retainer for an attorney and had to go it alone. I was sitting on a bench waiting to be called in to the court room, and beside me were two Latinas also waiting their turn. They were speaking in Spanish, and I was lost in a book that was lying about in the special office they have for victims (phones are not admitted in the courthouse). I did not notice that the talking had stopped, and then I felt a hand touch my arm. I looked up, it was the woman on the other side of the bench, and she asked me a question in Spanish. Before I could tell her my usual response "Sorry, I do not speak Spanish," the woman next to me translated: "She wants to know what a woman like you is doing here?" She went on to confirm what I had assumed from the question. The other woman could tell I was "educated" and "wealthy" and had no idea why I would be at the JDR.

A week later I was in court with Pierre, and the outcome was mixed. I represented myself, because at this point I was "broke" from paying off divorce settlement obligations. I remember the judge staring at me from over his glasses as I listed the threatening behavior I was subjected to in the previous two years. He was not impressed.

He was waiting to hear about violent behavior, not low-level disrespect for the law. It is a cruel kind of system that needs see violence in order to take any action to prevent it. The judge granted a six-month extension despite having requested another 2-year term. I left frustrated. A case worker who had witnessed the hearing later told me that I was perhaps too articulate for the judge.

Apparently, my abuser was also unhappy with the results, and filed an appeal without notifying me. A month later I received a surprise letter in the mail notifying me of a hearing at the Circuit Court. I still had no money for an attorney, because I was essentially paying off Pierre's bills, but he was still attempting to harass me through the courts. Hayes offers a good example of how her abuser used the courts to harass her (2015). Jones describes a similar kind of abuse.

I began 2016 with the looming threat of the Circuit Court hearing. Still unable to retain an attorney, I would go it alone. I would approach it like I was briefing a senior executive. I created a power point with pictures and diagrams. I had my talking points. I timed it for five minutes. I was well prepared for the hearing, and it showed. Pierre was not. He was unfamiliar with the differences in court settings. Domestic relations courts (district courts) tend to be closed because of the presence of juveniles; circuit courts hear a broad range of different cases, and are busy crowded places. He kept on getting up and leaving the court room. The presence of all those people was likely intimidating. However, I was confident and aware of my surroundings. When it came time, I presented my case like I was briefing a senior executive. When Pierre was given his chance to cross examine me, he mumbled and then began speaking in a loud voice, telling the judge I was

fat and ugly. The judge was unimpressed. I won the extension, and the respect of the crowded courtroom. I remember when I returned to the gallery, perfect strangers greeted me with handshakes and thumbs up signs.

Another two years. Later on, I found out that he had attempted an appeal the circuit court decision to the state's appeals court using only a scribbled note. Since appeals court require briefs and other formalities, his angry note was rejected. The protective order stood until February 2018. By that point, I had enough money to retain legal counsel. My abuser did not show up. After some searching through a third party, it is my belief that he was likely deported back to France.

After the divorce, the protective order hearings were his only means of legally being in my presence. I believe now that the first violations of the protective order were essentially tests of the system and of me. How close could he get? What will the police do? Without those early and definitive responses, I suspect he would have continued to stalk me, violently escalating his physical and electronic harassment. Those early interventions made the difference, and though the police could have been more enthusiastic and the courts less surprised by my race and social location, it worked out. It was successful. That, too, is an IPV-related subject that has eluded inquiry: the conditions that make a successful transition for an IPV victim.

The protective orders brought me time in the early days following our separation. I remained vigilant, but I could move on. Yet, he was still walking around the neighborhood where I saw and reported him in August 2017. He was still parking around the corner in October 2017. He had not stopped. He will never "move on".

## APPENDIX 2: PROTECTIVE ORDER AFFIDAVIT

### PETITION AND AFFIDAVIT

**PETITIONER:**

Date:

8/16/13

Last Name: Wago Shalan

First: marisa Middle: Ann

DOB: 9/12/70 Age: 42

Relationship to Defendant: spouse

**DEFENDANT:**

Last Name:

First:

Middle:

Have any other cases involving the defendant been filed in Court? If so, please explain:

changes in name; served time for  
abandoning first wife.

Did you file or attempt to file a warrant against the Defendant? If so, please explain:

called police last Thursday

Have you ever filed for a protective order in this or any other Court? If so, please explain:

NO.

Please describe in detail the most recent incident(s) of physical abuse. Were you living in the same household when this incident occurred? (Please note the dates):

Last night in Arlington, VA, my husband and I were in  
our house/condo. he followed me around the condo,  
getting up close "in my face," despite my request to step back. He  
was hitting me in the shoulder and arm - and then saying "it  
was nothing" despite my continued requests to step back and  
not touch me. He kept on saying threatening statements.  
Last Thursday, while my husband and I were in  
my condo, he physically restrained me from  
leaving our bedroom following a threat to "make  
me scream so loud that the neighbors will call the  
police." He threatened to keep me there all night.

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