

Our Father, the Outlaw

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The day they caught the Unabomber I watched with the rest of the *San Francisco Chronicle* newsroom on the TV suspended above our desks. Far away, in the deep woods of Montana, an FBI SWAT team encircled a derelict little cabin. The whole nation was watching that April of 1996, my brothers and sister included. A pale, bearded scarecrow emerged, ragged and handcuffed and stumbling between the burly, heavy-vested agents. The camera zoomed in, and I felt myself relax. Until that moment I didn't know I even harbored the thought. But the thought was this: *the Unabomber, thank God, was not our Dad.*

Our sister Ann Victoria, who we called AV, was thinking the exact same thing. "I kept peering at that little cabin," she said when I called her in Pennsylvania. "It wasn't a trailer, but...."

I dialed our brother Joe, the eldest and our father's namesake, in Santa Barbara. "So much for the reward," he dryly said.

We'd each been thinking it privately for years, it seemed. Dad could easily have been that criminal mastermind. He was just brilliant and nuts enough to curse the world as Ted Kaczynski had. Long before anyone knew the identity of the mystery bomber, we knew our father fit the profile. He was eccentric and highly intelligent, an electrical engineer with a doctorate from Stanford hiding out somewhere in the West, as far off the grid as it was possible to go. He too hated the world as it had become. Everything went to hell, he used to say, with Vatican II: with the Catholic Mass said in English and the loosening of strictures of all kinds, from the lace mantillas women no longer had to wear to church to the entire mass movements of the 1960s that put Blacks and women where they didn't belong. We kids used to joke, when we were free of his yoke, that he was slightly to the right of John Birch. He could have been the Unabomber. He even had a manifesto.

All these years later I'm astonished that the idea even seemed plausible. But I suppose it reveals the enormous distance that stood between us, and how far into the darkness, in our minds, the man had traveled. None of us, as far as we knew, had seen our progenitor for twenty-five years. We had no accurate knowledge of his existence, only his vanishing, and the strenuous efforts he made to erase all links that might lead us—or the authorities—to him. He was a cipher, a nullity, and yet a threat: an unexploded bomb somewhere in Nevada. He might have been the Unabomber. In a way specific to us, he was. He had proven himself willing to throw a bomb into the heart of his own family, to destroy what he professed to love.

I see him mainly as colors now: the jet black of his crewcut, glacial blue of his eyes, off-white of his cowboy hat. The crimson leather of his '57 Chevrolet, white on the outside, glowing red as a womb inside. It was my favorite place, a hot space parked on the gravel drive on a half-country road where I could sneak away to dream and read. For it is true that we had a most idyllic childhood. Our home in a green California suburb was filled with music and books and roses in the garden. Over the hill momentous changes were underway, in Berkeley and Oakland and the Haight-Ashbury, but we knew nothing of these. Not until the day he walked out, abandoning five children and

the wife who'd filed for divorce—skipping across the state line so he wouldn't have to give her a penny to feed or clothe us. That, at least, was the story she told.

Every story has its own protagonist, though. Rarely do they think their actions wrong, or causing harm. Our father had a coherent story he told himself, as well. For a long time it wasn't a story I cared to seek out. The damage he left behind was far too potent. And then seven years ago the nation tilted in a shocking way and up surged so much male rage and hate. We'd thought those toxins gone, but they were only dormant. A hateful man in the highest office in the land dragged me right back to Dad and made me look again, and try to understand.

Why had he run, why did it feel like he was still out there somewhere, ready to explode? What power did he have to harm us more than he'd already done? There was a violence within him, a darkness that we sensed but could not grasp. Nor was it the usual violence: he never harmed us physically, except in the autocratic way of a fifties father punishing his sons with lashes from his belt. But then, there are many kinds of harm.

The mystery of how he became a man who could abandon his family isn't only his story, of course, but hers—his wife, our mother. In another way, I think now, it's the story of the United States. Our parents would prove to be two poles in the American story, two visions pulling ever further apart. Two visions of how men and women should be, two opposing ideas of what this nation should look like.

He listened to the shrill tones of Paul Harvey warning of the communist menace on Saturday afternoons. She began reading *Ramparts*, the left-wing monthly published by the hippies he derided. When Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated, our father was glad while our mother wept. They were alike in many ways: gifted, beautiful, blazingly smart. Of course. And, too, their lives had a fearful symmetry. They courted as students at Stanford and died alone, separately, in single-wide trailers in desolate places, the metal battered and bleached by the sun. The division in our household began as the Vietnam War reached its crescendo, widening with the years, as I picture it doing all over this land. The rift deepening decade by decade between those who embraced the profound social changes underway, and those who resisted them, trying always to return to some golden time before.

“Did I ever tell you how he would come into my room late at night, when he came home?” My sister spoke quietly on the phone. “How he'd stand there over my bed?”

“No,” I replied.

“I'd pretend I was asleep and it was so incredibly terrifying. Just holding my breath while he stood there looking down on me, like some kind of monster.” She paused. “It's really deep, this terror, it's in my cells, my bones.”

As she spoke I had a sudden memory of her as a tiny thing. Our beautiful, perfect little sister, a golden angel who arrived as a surprise. On Groundhog Day, no less, though there was no shadow, only sun that year. From her earliest awareness she was told by our father that it would be her job to look after him when he was old. She took this charge into the depths of herself.

Her room was at the end of a long corridor, so distant it was spooky. In the center of that wing was an indeterminate space shut off by louvered doors, a room trapped between two halls that felt like an emptiness at the heart of the house. We slept here when my best friend stayed over. “I remember those nights,” I said. “He terrified me, too.”

We too heard the key in the lock, the heavy footsteps. Our hearts hammering, we squeezed our eyes shut as he drew near, peering in, clomping on, making his tour of the sleeping house. To AV’s room, where I now knew he would bend and watch, his breath rank with beer and tobacco. To the baby’s room, past us again to the boys’ room, echoing finally away. It was always two or three in the morning. We didn’t know that his small electronics business was failing, and that after toiling late at his circuit boards, he spent the rest of the night closing the local bars. All we knew was the fear and disturbance of that nocturnal trawling.

After Dad bailed, we fell out of wealth and learned to scrabble. We comforted our mother, and we coped. We were the five Christies, golden and gifted, abandoned yet upright. We three oldest—Joe, Andrew and I—were a litter, almost, the Catholic *bang bang bang* before our father’s father, a doctor, smuggled our mother the Pill. She was bright and fierce and kept the wolf from the door, her own dreams long deferred. We all took her side, except Andrew. He was the only one who tried to bridge the gap between them with his heart—and split apart, and ended taking his own life. If I say now that he died as a result of what happened to our family, it only means that we still do not know how to nourish children, how to keep their bodies and souls intact. Six years before we saw that cabin in Montana, he had ended the horror of mental illness with a bullet through his brain.

The only time I ever asked our father for help was when Andrew was sick with schizophrenia. I had Dad’s phone number in Nevada on a Rolodex card, thanks to Andrew, who had kept in touch with the old man. I must have had it in case of emergency, but I never used it, until the emergency was Andrew’s breakdown. I called him once, early on, to see if our brother could come stay with him, and he said no. “There’s not a thing I can do for him,” I remember him saying. When Andrew shot himself, I called our father from a pay phone at the Seattle airport. Even then, even after everything, I somehow still felt he had a right to know. When I told him Andrew was dead, all Dad said was, “I expected that.”

Once, around that time, a kind of woo-woo therapist who probed past lives asked me if our father might have molested my two older brothers. There was a darkness she saw there, the woman said. I was furious at the idea; I never went back. Why did the darkness have to be that particular darkness, I thought then—and think still. Is this the only kind of darkness we can imagine? (Although of course he might have, though my brothers had no such memories; Dad attended a Catholic boys boarding school.) Are there not other ways to annihilate children, though—and are these not also worthy of note?

I picture the damage in our family like a crater in the jungle, inflicted by a force so ancient and powerful it can't be seen except from space. The impact of our father's desertion was extreme. It was not just Andrew's madness. As each of us entered adulthood, we began to spin out in other ways: into depression, addiction, withdrawal, and in my case, men.

The last time I saw my father before he disappeared for good was on my fourteenth birthday. It always fell on or around Father's Day, a fact that has galled me my whole life. He was taking me out to lunch, a most uncharacteristic gesture. Excited and nervous, I waited for his Chevy to crunch down the loop. I gave him a peck on the cheek and we sailed off, tail fins shredding the air. I hadn't seen him for the longest time, but he looked the same, he acted the same. He hung his left elbow out the window and steered with his right hand, eyes narrowed against the glare, in a white short-sleeved shirt and tie with a plastic protector in his left breast pocket for his ballpoint pens.

"Where are we going?" I asked as he drove up and down hills and under the spaghetti snarl of the freeways. He just smiled and said, "You'll see."

I was dressed up, wearing the newest thing I owned: a plaid blazer bought with my babysitting money, ivory with red, green, and blue stripes that was not only ugly but undeniably cheap. In the months since he'd moved out and started fighting Mom over custody in court, our financial bottom had fallen out. We shopped for clothes at a store called Thrifty in the local strip mall. I hated with the purest passion the girls who could still shop at the expensive department store in town.

We rolled slowly through a wasteland of broken glass and tire scraps beneath the freeways where Dad's office used to be. I breathed out only when we stopped before a low building with a pebbled façade and brown door. It was a windowless restaurant-bar like several others scattered in that dreary zone. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been to a restaurant. The hostess seated us and I looked self-consciously around. I wanted to do things right: napkin in lap, salad fork, sips from the water glass. Did you even say grace in a restaurant?

"Well, what'll it be, young lady?" Dad winked from behind his menu. I did love him, though he was so hard to please. I ordered Shrimp Louie. The place was half full in the middle of the day, dim and airless, the kind of place where men order something battered or drowning in sauce to accompany their third or fourth drink. To this day this kind of place gives me the creeps.

"One Hamms and one Shirley Temple," Dad said to the waitress, who smiled and said how nice it was to see a "dad-and-daughter" date.

"Couldn't agree more," he said in an undertone that made me feel skittery. I was a skinny kid with lank hair, unaccustomed to being out without my brothers or my friends. I was on edge, too, in case he said anything mean about Mom. We caught her crying sometimes; we knew he sent poisonous letters. I racked my brain for funny stories about the younger kids; I tried to guess what I was supposed to say. Finally he cleared his throat.

“Fourteen, eh,” he said. “That’s pretty grown-up.”

“Yep.”

“Pretty soon you’re going to start getting attention from boys.”

He was staring at me, eyes narrowed, as if I were responsible for this. He looked a little like Andrew did the year before when I came out in pantyhose and lip gloss for a junior high dance. Drew had turned away then, disgusted at my betrayal. Whereas Dad kept his eyes on me, daring me, it seemed, to show any interest in this attention I was supposedly going to get.

“So what I want you to know—what you’d better be darned sure of—is how to protect yourself.”

He was leaning toward me, arms crossed on the table, frowning like he did when he was angry—like when he wanted us to “get something” through our “hard heads.”

“This is what I want you to remember,” he said. “You’d better be damned careful when it comes to men.”

I had no idea what to say. It was so strange. What I mainly felt was surprise. This was why, after months of silence, he’d come to take me out to lunch—to warn me against men?

Which, I wondered, was not to be trusted—men, or me? And how, exactly, did I protect myself?

His warning felt all the more potent when two or three weeks later he disappeared for good. Those, then, were his final, parting words. Not words of reassurance or love, but a message which, forever after, I could only interpret as perverse: *beware, my girl, beware of men.*

They were mostly older men, naturally. I was a hippie chick with no bra and long flowing hair and offered no resistance when pursued. One old enough to be Dad, a European seducer in the classic mold. Another a playwright in his thirties, dallying with me on the side. When I was twenty-four, and briefly entered the corporate world, I ached to be seduced by my boss, a man in his forties who was recently divorced. An honorable man, he did not seize that advantage. My mother and I had never had “the talk.” I had never seen her naked. Everything I knew about sex I had learned from *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.

Recently, reading drafts of this memoir, my oldest brother said he was shocked. He hadn’t realized I was so promiscuous. Promiscuous: such a finger-wagging word. Was I, I wondered? What did the word even mean? In our mother’s etymological dictionary I discovered that the term derives from the French *promiscuité*, which in turn is “learnedly formed from the Latin *prōmiscuus*: confused.” *Confused*.

It was the late 1970s, a time when there was birth control, but not yet AIDS. We were promiscuous, but this only tarnished you if you were a girl. “I must have slept with a hundred women,” my brother admitted, even as he professed his shock. Yet every one of my sexual encounters left me cold. I fell under the sway of any man who looked my way. It seems to me now that I played dead. When I was twenty-three and living in Manhattan, I called my oldest friend to confess that I had never had an orgasm.

She instructed me over the phone on the mechanics. Yet even so, for years afterward I slept with men and did not feel a thing. As my brothers spiraled into spiritualism and schizophrenia, I spun through lovers. Until a night arrived when I was thirty years old and found myself racing at eighty mph down a freeway trying to shake an angry ex-boyfriend from my tail, weaving and dodging and expecting at any moment to feel the gunshot. He would have killed me, as punishment for leaving him. That ended my limpness—my blindness—at last. I perceived that I had a life and body of my own and sought an order from the court to keep him well away.

Was this what he meant, my father, when he said *beware of men*?

Somehow I doubt it.

His was less a gesture of protection for me than a lesson from his own life. A message not to do as he had done, to steer clear of that terrible trap: that first, unplanned pregnancy, the shotgun wedding, the wife, the preemie son. And everything that followed. That baby boy, our eldest brother, figures this is why our father never liked him much. For sixteen years he bullied him relentlessly. And so the cycle was set up: at length our mother had enough, and broke it off to save the boy, and Dad pulled out the pin and lobbed the bomb and fled.

Three years after Andrew died, our father sent AV the strangest letter. I found it among her things when she too died, far too young, of breast cancer. Eventually I would unearth a copy of this letter in my own files, in an envelope she apparently mailed to me, postmarked 1993.

What is striking is that I wiped away all memory of this letter, and its accompanying sheet of “maxims”—our father’s very own manifesto.

My sister and I were writing ourselves through our grief at losing Andrew in those years. I wrote prose, she poetry. Her collection about our lost brother eventually won a prestigious prize. In the act of composing, she found she needed to see Andrew’s letters, and for this reason she wrote to Dad. The mere fact of that overture astonished me. Of all of us, she had always most vehemently rejected any contact.

His response in this letter, and its appendix—a document summarizing the “wisdom” he had accrued over sixty-two years—carry such a malevolent charge. It’s hard to say which is more horrifying, the contents of his manifesto, or the fact that he signed it, “Your former father, Joe.”

He began by describing himself as “63, in excellent health and a contented bachelor of 20 years.” He went on: “The Andrew matter was unfortunate.”

I set it down, knowing I must have done the same thirty years before. Now I know, I thought, why he always felt so dangerous. He lacked normal human feeling.

He continued: “Insofar as the events of twenty years ago, suffice it to say that the matriarchal insanity then didn’t quite work out the way their colossal egos had planned. [Your grandmother] was probably the most malevolent psychopath I had the misfortune to meet. While [your mother] might invoke hereditary reasons for her actions, I thoroughly enjoyed her hurried exodus.”

I thought back to his disappearance, the sudden sale of our house, the instant plunge into precarity, the children split to live in three different places. Mom did not recall signing a second mortgage as Dad's business began to fail. Nor did it occur to her that he would simply refuse to support his children. He "thoroughly enjoyed" seeing her—and us—expelled from our family home. This fact, more than any other, stuns me. Here, I think, is the vital clue. It was always about striking back and punishing her, with not a whisper of concern for their five children.

It's perversely useful, I suppose, that he compiled his beliefs into a manifesto. A few points feel pertinent. They help me put a name to his disease:

4. All the laws in the world CANNOT make male/female equal. The entire concept of equality in philosophy/mathematics assumes that the entities being made equal belong to the same class of things. Clearly, one cannot compare apples/oranges any more than M/F. The physiological functions, which totally control the mental/psychological sense of reality, are totally different in M and F.

5. Females, by psychology, are schizophrenic. From puberty, menses and menopause, no honest observer can argue otherwise. Females are continually torn between being a world-class whore, like Jackie O, and being the ideal mother—like the biblical madonna. The happy ones, there must be a few, achieve a balance they can live with. The world's "oldest profession" hasn't ever changed and never will—leopards will always have spots!

6. The single largest difference between M/F is the simple, highly intangible concept of INTEGRITY. Females are honest with others' property and things but they do not have integrity in the personal sense. It may well be grounded in the biological need for deception to protect fledglings. Males, real ones not the current crop of yuppies and faggots, on the other hand, seem to value their "word," bond or sense of integrity most highly.

Our father wanted to be a cowboy. He didn't want to live in this "hive" he called the modern world. He started wearing the cowboy hat the year we moved to Montana when I was five. Suddenly we were the real McCoy, real Westerners riding horses and fly-fishing. Knee-deep in a river is the only time our brother Joe can recall him smiling. Our parents hailed from Michigan and British Columbia; they hankered after peaks and open spaces. Even before we left California they packed us regularly into the station wagon to roam across the West. In the home movies the landscape unfurls, badly shot and frequently bleached. Our father panned and panned.

He loved broad vistas most, followed closely by waterfalls. He was taken by the dramatic

and grand. AV copied these movies onto videocassettes, although in none of them was she yet born. She trolled through them later, as did I, searching for clues. Dark

firs and snow-tipped rocks, white torrents of water in a river gorge; a mountain range serenely reflected in a lake. In none of these movies were there ever any people.

When he died at the age of eighty-seven it fell to Joe to clean out his single-wide trailer. It had been forty-three years since he lit out and left us. Joe found an album there, filled with photos just like the films, seemingly a record of Dad's first trip west around 1950. Lakes and cataracts, Spanish moss and mission bells, cactus and buffalo. Near the end were photos of a house in the woods we assumed was the one his parents built outside Pontiac, Michigan. It was as if he was working his way back to his origin from his end, on a remote lot just off Interstate 80 in Nevada, where he lived alone at the last, a misanthrope in a bolo tie and cowboy hat.

In my mind's eye he's always leathered, one booted foot propped on the open door of his '61 Ford pickup. Lone man on the range, solitary and in tune with the land: the archetypal frontiersman. "Hard, isolate, stoic, a killer," as D. H. Lawrence wrote. Self-reliance was his religion; he was the rugged individualist in the legend of manly prowess that is one story of America.

Besides the album and Dad's high school yearbook, Joe found his files. One folder in particular was stuffed with copies of letters and court filings. When it arrived, I knew immediately that it was important. The manila folder gave off such a charge. I put it in a box I'd already made to hold his surviving letters and manifesto. To keep the poison well-contained, was how it felt; I thought of lead-lined boxes, caskets for hearts from fairy tales. One by one I drew the papers out and read them through.

The year was 1973: there was a felony warrant out for his arrest. Dad got wind of this by casing the joint: he called the court in California to discover why he should answer to a Nevada summons. All this he noted down on a yellow legal pad, overwriting it again and again. Fifty years later the paper was still dented from the pressure of his pen.

So now he was an outlaw. I pictured the moment: a flare of anger like a match, a phone set back, a long stare out onto the dry, gray wash. I saw a hard smile, a harder jaw. He would find a way out of this trap. Still I was shocked when I grasped his plan. I shouldn't have been, not after all these years of his disregard. But seeing it in black and white made me sad all over again, and then furious, for the damage he dealt out to those young lives.

It's a strange letter, this one dated June 1973 to the deputy DA in charge of the Nonsupport Welfare Division. In it, Dad feels out his options, actually asks for advice. What would the authorities do if he were unemployed—which he has been, he says, for several weeks, though he would never under any circumstances accept unemployment benefits? What, he goes on, if "future part-time income would not exceed \$350 per month, which is a marginal living in a trailer with utilities etc?" Further on he rephrases: "What precedents, etc., exist within Nevada concerning probably legally sanctioned actions when all real property is less than \$1000 in value and poverty level subsistence is the only income?"

He planned to earn nothing ever again. He planned to drop to poverty level, so he could spite her and thwart her—and not pay a red cent to help feed and clothe their five children. The whole purpose of his existence had narrowed to punishing this woman, our mother, who had the temerity to stand up to him.

In a handwritten note that must be a draft of the points he wished to make, he wrote: “administrative approach to non-working situation in Nevada.” It’s an accident of fate that underneath this he marked the date: June 20, 1973. My fifteenth birthday. I wonder if it even registered to him. This date, in a way, stood in for me, for all of us, these five young human beings who appeared not to register, either, in his bitter crusade. And I asked myself, straining to see: What warped logic led him to this place?

I went back and read through the documents again. This was the closest I’d ever come to understanding why he dropped off the face of the earth. We children were ignorant, of course—we had no access to this grown-up information. We had no way of knowing that in the first tsunami of divorce decrees in the 1970s, judges invariably awarded custody of the children to mothers, with weekend visitation decreed for fathers. Our parents’ divorce followed this rule: Initially Dad was to see us on alternate weekends. He broke this off after two miserable weekend visits, and began to demand joint custody, it seems. Our mother’s attorney did not respond, and when the divorce hearing was held, Dad did not appear in court. From there it escalated to Nevada and the felony warrant.

His mind was the mind of an engineer. He viewed it all in terms of an equation. “No one can separate rights and obligations within a given context,” he wrote. This is his “non-negotiable position. My clearly acknowledged obligations toward my children automatically convey reasonable and unalterable rights which neither you nor your client can abrogate. The converse obviously also holds. It is, unfortunately, an elementary logical proposition that the rights and obligations either hang together or fall together.”

He viewed his rights severed, so he severed his obligations.

Nowhere, in any of these documents, the scribbled notes that reveal his sleuthing into mother’s sale of the house, his calls to officials and receipts for registered letters, did he betray the slightest concern about what his nuclear option would do to his five children.

Indeed, he almost relished the dénouement: “Unless a constructive solution can be found, and quickly, then almost certain a destructive solution dictated simply by cash flow will ultimately force adjustments in a new, and hopefully better direction.”

He would wait her out, until she—or we—came begging.

From time to time in our early twenties he sent us missives from his hideout to the repellent “anthills” in which we chose to live. When I was in college he wrote to me that he had never been happier: “I’m scribbling this by Coleman lantern and I bet there aren’t five people in 1500 square miles.... Watched the red sunset and the stars pop out and for me, this is the best thing in life.” He had no “ghosts from the past” and certainly no regrets. He’d turned to mining, developing a chemical process to extract

trace gold and silver from slag ore. For the rest of his life we kids would joke about the bars of gold we'd find someday, buried underneath his trailer.

Rereading these letters now, though, I spy a vein of something else. A continuous thread buried deep in the bedrock of this country. "Thank God most people think Nevada is ugly," he went on. "Pine, spruce, spring-fed brooks—beautiful Nevada is about the last place left where people can be and feel free."

He would have scoffed to be slotted into anything like a train of established thought, but this idea predates the American republic. It's the founding mantra of the all-American white male hero, conceived since before the nation began as the "natural man." He was the explorer and scout who forged himself from the imagined wide-open land, repelling and annihilating its many dangers. The mythic figure of the outlaw came to embody everything our father believed, just as it inspired the Unabomber, the gun-toting squatters of public lands, and any number of survivalists and white supremacists. The forces of "progress" are unnatural, destructive of the heroic individual American man; the cities are cesspools of deviance. Richard Slotkin, in his penetrating study *Gunfighter Nation* writes: "Like the Noble Red Man, American frontiersmen were practically forced to become outlaws, because they had been reared in a culture that places honor, proud 'manhood' and an intuitive code of 'justice' above the rationalism and restrictions of modern life." In our father's mind, and those of so many like him, a degenerating country must be put back to rights.

"Gentlemen must sometimes use violence because so large an element of 'The People' has become morally and racially degenerate," Slotkin wrote of the ideology built into this frontier ideal. Or, as our father wrote in his own manifesto: "Women can't control themselves—the world's oldest profession—so the culture must control the women for the sake of a reasonably ordered posterity."

It did not occur to me for decades that misogyny was the reason our father walked away. It took a lifetime to see its trace, perceive the shape it pressed upon our lives. It is the belief that women are naturally subservient to men, and that men are justified in punishing women who refuse their control. Over time I began to see the disturbance in our family, going back at least two generations: anger and resentment, bristling at the roles each gender was assigned. The full scope of the ways that hatred of women distorted our lives was harder to discern.

For a long time, in fact, I thought myself lucky as a woman. I was not among the one in three women raped or sexually assaulted in this world, the one in three American children sexually abused by a male relative, the one in four American women living with abusive men. Our father's abuse was of a different, more subtle kind. His aim was to punish our mother; we kids were just collateral damage. As a result, I do eventually show up in the statistics: the one in six American women who have been stalked and threatened with death.

Control is a continuum, extreme violence its endpoint. It is always about punishing the person—often a woman—who refuses to be controlled.

More than half of mass shootings are committed by men who have attacked the women in their lives—former or current boyfriends or husbands or rejected suitors. Parkland High School in Florida in 2018: the perpetrator who slaughtered seventeen students previously threatened to kill his ex-girlfriend. UC Santa Barbara, 2014: the attacker pledged to “enter the hottest sorority house of UCSB and slaughter every single spoiled stuck-up blond slut I see.” Montréal, 1989: the shooter at the École Polytechnique separated female and male students before shouting “I hate feminists,” killing fourteen women and injuring another fourteen. San Jose, California, 2021: a man accused of domestic violence slaughtered eight coworkers.

“More and more we see misogyny as the gateway drug for extremists,” says the Southern Poverty Law Center, which in 2018 added “male supremacy” to the hate crimes it tracks across the United States.

I never wanted to write about my father, or my family, not really. The losses were still too raw. But then my countrymen—and many women—elected a misogynist in chief. He lifted every rock with glee, to free the ugly hatreds lurking just beneath. It’s no surprise to me his followers stormed the ramparts, spewing blood and bile. They want to put us all — black, brown, gay, female, trans—back in our boxes. The rage of white men in America is not just on the rise: it never really went away. It’s a toxin in the blood, a poisoned cocktail of resentment and entitlement, a fear that there won’t be enough to go around.

“A dying mule kicks the hardest,” a preacher said when the former president was first elected. I’d like to think he’s right. I try to reassure myself this bigotry and hate is just the last, tired gasp of men who think they’ll always run the show. But then, I know this kind of man too well: the kind who breaks whatever he can’t have, destroys the things he can’t control.

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