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# “Taking the Power Away”: An autoethnographic exploration of intimate partner violence, social support, and survivorship

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“Taking the Power Away”: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Intimate Partner

Violence, Social Support, and Survivorship

Darrian Pickett

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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## Acknowledgements

I've come a long way since the events described in my project took place. I sometimes feel detached from that person and that time in my life; other times, I feel like I'm reliving it over and over again as the memories are etched in my mind, my heart, and my body forever. I didn't think I would make it to my 21st birthday let alone through graduate school. I've dreamt of the day that I would be able to share my story freely, learn from it, and allow others to learn from it, too; that has come and I couldn't be happier. I want to thank a few people who have made the entire process (from recovery to now) a little bit more bearable and manageable.

To my parents, thank you for loving me unconditionally and forgiving me for thinking that love would cease to exist after I told you the truth. Thank you for being there and for providing an environment filled with kindness and compassion during my time of recovery. Healing would not have been possible without the love and support I received at home.

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## Abstract

This thesis is an autoethnographic exploration of my experience with same-sex intimate partner violence, the development of the abusive relationship itself, my journey to escape the abusive relationship, and the comfort that I found among my social networks after the abusive relationship ended. First, I provide a brief overview of intimate partner violence. Second, I describe autoethnographic methodology and my rationale for using narrative inquiry as a way to make sense of my experiences and to offer a concrete portrait into the lived experience of interpersonal violence and survivorship. In the narratives, I describe my experiences as a pastor's kid, the development of a same-sex violent romantic relationships, the movement from shame and hiding to coming out to family and friends to seek help, and the kinds of social support I found afterward. The scholarly literature is weaved in between the narratives to create a conversation between my experiences and the ongoing scholarship on each topic and theme addressed. The thesis ultimately enabled me to examine and reflect on the complex experiences of IPV and social support that enables survivorship, ultimately contributing to the body of research on intimate partner violence.

## Introduction

It was our secret, but sometimes the truth spilled out. Regardless of who we told those people were just ears. They stayed out of our lives for the most part; *and* they didn't offer me any help. Those who knew us as a couple were college friends, so the chances of our loved ones back at home finding out were slim. Once our families and close friends got involved, I knew that the consequences would ruin everything. I was convinced it would ruin my life for sure. I knew her sister would tell my brother while they sat among the other freshman in their high school math class. My brother would come home in the afternoon to tell my parents what he heard about me, and then my parents would call me and ask me to explain. I'd sit in front of my family and struggle to explain the sneaking around, my withdrawal from church, the stitches, and hospital bills which made up only a tiny portion of my abusive relationship with Christine. I didn't want them to find out that way. It had to come from me, first, whether I was ready or not.

\*\*\*

I am an African-American woman who grew up in an upper-middle class family. I am an adult child of two non-denominational Christian pastors, so I self-identify as a "pastor's' kid." I am also survivor of intimate partner violence. The friendship I had with my abuser, Christine, an upper-class white female was well known, but the romantic and violent nature of our relationship was carefully kept secret from my social networks, including my family. Throughout my journey toward survivorship, I came to make sense of and label Christine's verbal and physical abuse as well as the nature of my intimate relationship with her. My story of survivorship, while unique in its own ways, has the potential to resonate with other survivors and their social networks. Further, my narrated

experiences showcase the complexity of intimate partner violence (IPV) , social support, and survivorship, thus have the potential to add to the existing knowledge and insight on the topic.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a prevalent issue among young adults. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 1 in 5 women and 1 in 7 men are victims of physical intimate partner violence (CDC, 2011, p. 1). For college students, “almost 80% of females report experiencing at least one incident of physical or sexual aggression by the end of college” (OPDV, 2016, p. 1). Other authors discuss how LGBTQ+ women (e.g. Badenes-Ribera, Bonilla-Campos, Frias-Navarro, Pons-Salvador, & Monerde-i-Bort, 2016) and African-American women (West, 2004) are more likely than straight, white women to experience intimate partner violence. The prevalence of IPV described in these statistics provides an image of the landscape, but not a window into the meaning and experiences of abuse. Narratives of IPV survivors are important toward understanding both the experiences of abuse and the reframing of identity and consequences on the victim’s broader relational network after they leave an abusive relationship.

Scholarship on IPV provides important insight into the impacts on victims and survivors. Much research has focused on the mental health and well-being of survivors (Miller & Irvin, 2017), and the stigmatization of abuse (Simmons, Lindsey, Delaney, Whalley, & Beck, 2015; Carlton, Cattaneo, & Gebhard, 2016). For example, Simmons and colleagues (2015) focused on mental health issues and mental health resource utilization among IPV survivors. Specifically, they argued that mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD are a result of IPV and the barriers that these survivors

faced included being told not to get help, having more important things to worry about, and increased stigmatization (Simmons et al., 2015). Barriers to seeking help differ depending on the social locations of the victim, particularly for victims in same-sex relationships. For example, Calton et al. (2016) systematic literature review revealed barriers that the LGBTQ community faced in regard to seeking help. The barriers included a lack of understanding about intimate partner violence in the LGBTQ community, stigmatizing opinions, and inequality (Calton et al., 2016, pp. 586 - 591). These studies reveal the varied struggles that survivors face after they have left an abusive relationship such as mental health issues. Mechanic, Weaver, and Resick (2008) cite PTSD and depression as issues that abused women experience. (Mechanic et al., 2008).

The purpose of this thesis is to provide an autoethnographic examination into the lived experience of IPV in the context of a same-sex romantic relationship and the social support of friends and family. Specifically, I contextualize the unique intersections between the social identities I held as a pastor's kid raised in a Black family, the development of an increasingly psychologically and physically violent romantic relationship, and the challenges I faced in leaving that relationship and seeking help in moving from victim to survivor. The previous interdisciplinary literature on intimate partner violence sets the foundation for my autoethnographic exploration. In the thesis, I will first discuss the value of autoethnography for examining IPV, survivorship and social support and offer a detailed description of the methods used in constructing, arranging and reflecting on the narratives presented. Second, the thesis layers narratives about abuse and social support from the past and the present organized around the themes

that emerged through narrative writing that situates both my identities and meanings of and through survivorship while also exploring the existing literature on each topic; I will weave literature intermittently throughout the thesis to highlight comparisons and contradictions in my experiences.

The literature focuses on the full psychological, social and cultural contexts of intimate partner violence, including how these relationships develop, the dynamics of abusive relationships, victim and perpetrator experiences, how IPV is portrayed in the media, and how social support helps victims of these relationships. Further, as my own survivorship has been connected to these concepts, I examine the literature on coming out communication, queer theory, and shame and hiding as it pertains to same-sex relationships. Specifically, I story how my same-sex relationship and abuse challenged my identity as a heterosexual, African-American female pastors' kid, how I hid my relationship because of the shame surrounding same-sex relationships in my community. Further, I show how telling my family and friends and claiming my experiences allowed me to recover from those three years of abuse. Through this autoethnographic inquiry, I seek to develop and communicate an understanding of my own experiences and sensemaking of intimate partner violence, and specifically the nature of social support as I experienced it during and after my abusive relationship. Through telling the story of my own survivorship, I hope to help others develop an understanding about their own experiences and showcase the power of narrative as a way of shedding light on how victims grow and recover from intimate partner violence through social support.

## Chapter 1: Methodology

Tiny pieces of tape  
held my fragile heart together  
trying to beat and love  
through the pain.

My mind raced  
a continuous treadmill of thoughts  
fears  
worries

muscles tightened  
attempting to soften the blows  
that lay into my ribs and my back  
my strength left my body. My willingness to live  
following closely behind it.

Christine was my friend  
then my lover  
my abuser

My everything  
then she was gone

she didn't leave empty handed  
she took my dignity  
pride  
sense of purpose

Losing identity  
losing her  
left perpetual sadness  
crippling sense of worthlessness.

I felt her presence  
a shadow that wasn't my own  
following me

Felt her hands around my neck  
squeezing tighter and tighter  
felt the pressure of her fists  
ramming ramming into my abdomen.

Her words echoing  
"You'll never be anything, Darrian."

"You're a piece of shit, Darrian."  
"I couldn't care less about you."  
"Maybe if you had kept your mouth shut,  
I wouldn't have had to get violent."

I couldn't enjoy freedom  
Still a prisoner to my past

\* \* \*

Narratives of IPV survivors are important toward understanding not just the experiences of abuse, but also the reframing of identity and consequence on other relationships after they leave an abusive relationship. Scholarship in this area has focused on the mental health and well-being of survivors (Miller & Irvin, 2017), and the stigmatization of abuse (Simmons, Lindsey, Delaney, Whalley, & Beck, 2015; Calton, Cattaneo, & Gebhard, 2016). Simmons and colleagues (2015) focused on mental health issues and mental health resource utilization among IPV survivors. Specifically, they argued that mental health issues are a result of IPV and the barriers that these survivors faced included being told not to get help, having more important things to worry about, and increased stigmatization (Simmons et al., 2015).

Other pieces however focus on the voice of the survivor in regard to why they stayed in an abusive relationship (Weathers & Hopson, 2015; Weathers, Sanderson, Neal, & Gramlich, 2016) and performance of experiences with intimate partner violence (Stern, 2014). Both studies discuss the importance of narrative and performative inquiry for this topic. Stern writes, "Feminist scholars must continue to fill the void left by a popular culture and dominant paradigm of silence" (p. 375). Narrative inquiry allows women with stories like mine and stories like Stern (2014) to dismantle the silence.

Dwight Conquergood makes the case for the use of performance and embodiment

as inquiry and a way of knowing "that is grounded in active, intimate, hands-on participation and personal connection: 'knowing how,' and 'knowing who'" (Conquergood, 2002, p. 146). He makes the case for complete submersion of oneself into the field and essentially into one's research (Conquergood, 1991). Conquergood serves as an advocate for challenging the empirical way of knowing and allowing embodiment to emerge as an epistemology that holds its own in academia. When I thought about my own experiences, I wondered how I could perform the pain (both physical and mental), anxiety, exhaustion that came with those experiences. I could reenact scenes from my past as scripts to be performed, such as the nights I spent staring at the ceiling in my dorm room trying to figure a way out of an abusive relationship only to find that taking my own life seemed like the only way out. Writing allows me to revisit my past and take myself back to the feelings and emotions that made that time in my life so difficult; writing allows me to think about the conversations and fights that I had with my abuser retrospectively and examine them as a survivor rather than a victim. I probably will never know *why* these things happened to me, but seeking to understand *what* happened allows me to heal and come to terms with the intricate details of the abuse, while simultaneously offering insight for readers that there is no single narrative of an abusive relationship. In fact, my own assumptions about what an abusive relationship looked like limited my ability to make sense of what was happening in my relationship. For these reasons, I chose autoethnography.

\*\*\*

My professor's office was empty and quiet. None of my classmates were sitting in the extra chairs, chatting on the floor, or making coffee before their next class. Not even

my professor was sitting at her desk complaining about how much grading she had to do with so little time to do it.

A stack of papers sat in front of the file cabinet against the drawer that held the snacks. Each paper in the pile represented a semester of work. I held mine tightly as I closed my professor's office door behind me. I was about turn in my first research proposal, the project I had been working on since late September.

My own experiences with depression and suicide ideation led me to read about how mental health issues affected other college students. I found statistics about college students and suicide, college students and depression. I wrote about the study I was proposing, and presented it to my professors and classmates. Still, after a semester of work, I hesitated to turn in the finished project to be graded. It felt incomplete, an unfinished story. Or one that had not been told. *Not really*. That untold story was mine. Everyone in my class had done research on a topic with which they had a personal connection. One classmate who had experienced an elimination diet for health reasons conducted her research on provider-patient communication about elimination diets. Another, conducted her research on living life in Appalachia as an African-American woman. I followed suit and chose the topic that meant the most to me. For the first time in my college career, I actually enjoyed doing research. I piled articles about college students and mental health into a folder and sorted them by theme hoping that each one would answer the many questions I had about mental health and my own mental health journey; hoping that I would find affirmation somewhere that what I was experiencing was real. The articles did just that. However, when the project came to an end it felt incomplete. *I felt incomplete*. I had learned a lot about mental health issues and how they

affect college students, but there was no heart or body at the center of the piece. *I didn't include my experiences or story in the project.*

A few months later, I applied to graduate schools. I hesitated when making this decision, in fear that I would go to school for yet another two more years without having the opportunity to tell my story. I knew I would have the opportunity to tell someone's story, but the desire to tell my own only continued to grow. I documented my experience in my journals, but worried that sharing them with anyone would have to again take a backseat to my academics once I found a program that suited my interests. *That call to write remained.*

“In the end, we choose to write. Write our collaborative ethnographic narratives into being, whether experimental or just as the way we embody truth as we experience and feel it” (Broderick & Hobson, 2016, p. 7). *This is it.* This idea was a turning point for me, but I couldn't have gotten there without a little help.

The basement classroom in the communication building was colder than usual. My classmates drifted in slowly and found their seats we made into semi-circle for our seminar in research methods. We were well past the middle of the semester, and our tired and sluggish demeanor made it evident that the demands of our first semester of graduate school were taking a toll on our bodies and minds. The five of us sat in silence snacking on the remaining bits of our dinners or pre-class snacks when Drs. Kathryn Hobson and Michael Broderick surprised us, walking into class in full Halloween attire. Dressed in extravagant makeup and a puppet mask, they sat in front of me and my classmates discussing narrative and performative methods in my first research methods class as a graduate student. Drs. Hobson and Broderick are engaging in a lively banter about

experimental writing and the meanings constructed in this methodology that is wholly new me to.

Dr. Hobson tells us, “You can find a story in any and everything”

Dr. Broderick, adds pointing to me, “Like that honeybun, Darrian’s eating. You could write so much about that.”

A honeybun. Something as simple as a honeybun? What???? *If he’s telling me that I can write about a honeybun and have it matter, why can’t I tell my story?*

Throughout the class meeting, Drs. Hobson and Broderick told stories of their experiences in academia and dedication to autoethnography, and how this untraditional method provided them with the opportunity to incorporate their bodies and their embodied experiences into their research. One class changed the way I viewed research and academia as a whole.

Autoethnography is a qualitative method that involves using personal narratives in an attempt to reveal or answer questions about particular experiences (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2016, p. 22). Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis (2016) distinguish autoethnography from autobiographical work, asserting that autoethnographic work will contribute to scholarship on storied phenomena, include the experiences of others, and present the author as a vulnerable subject. Specifically, they note:

If an author experiences an epiphany, reflects on the nuances of that experience, writes to show how the aspects of experience illuminate more general culture phenomena and/or to show how the experience works to diminish, silence, or deny certain people and stories, then the author writes auto-ethnographically. (p. 22 - 23)

Autoethnographic work, then, is characterized by the recollection of experiences and the emotions that accompanied those experiences using literary components such as characterization, explication, and dialogue to recreate the scenes (Ellis, 2004). Other authors characterize autoethnography as the connection between the experiences of the writer and the writer's research subjects (Foster, McAllister, & O'Brien, 2005), self-reflection (Holt, 2003), a challenge to empirical ways of writing and conducting research (Wall, 2006), and a clear acknowledgement of the "self" (Tracy, 2013, p. 30).

Scholars have widely discussed ways in which autoethnography, and qualitative research in general, contribute to the field in a manner that quantitative research does not (Wall, 2006; Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2016). When using autoethnographic methodologies, the identities and personal experiences of the writer are welcomed and valued as a form of evidence (Muncey, 2005; Wall, 2006). In contrast, Wall (2006) discusses how quantitative research eliminates the researcher's ability to insert their personal experiences into their work, and how any aspect of the piece that puts the reader at the center of the problem is not welcome (Wall, 2006).

While quantitative methodologies have made critical contributions toward understanding the varied contexts and conditions of IPV, they do not adequately represent the unique lived experiences of individual survivors. Methods of inquiry that seek to aggregate and reduce the experiences of IPV survivors remove and sterilize important aspects of violence and survivorship, failing to capture the embodied experiences with intimate partner violence, mental health issues, and social support. Autoethnography enables me to explore my unique embodied experiences with IPV and survivorship in the contexts of the many cultural identities that situate my experiences.

Duncan (2004), who writes about autoethnography as a method, describes the process of coming to autoethnography that resonates with my own journey to the method:

I needed a method in which the lifeworld and internal decision making of the researcher were considered valid and noteworthy. I needed methods that encouraged systematic reflection and ensured a scholarly account. I needed a means of analyzing evidence that not only organized a record but also enabled discovery. What I needed was autoethnography. (p. 29)

Similarly, my experiences required me to be self-reflexive (Goodall, 2000; Holt, 2003) in order to answer questions about and make sense of my journey through intimate partner abuse and into survivorship. Quantitative, or even qualitative studies focusing on other victims of intimate partner violence offer different insights to represent certain trends, themes, or patterns among IPV survivors. However, in my case, autoethnographic methodology produces knowledge concerning same-sex intimate partner violent relationships specifically how they form when one party identifies as a heterosexual. Knowledge on same-sex intimate partner violence between women is scarce, so not only will the use of this method empower me to tell my story but it will also answer questions about an understudied topic.

Adding a critical aspect to autoethnography allows for the possibility of making change. Conquergood (2002) along with Holman-Jones (2016) and Denzin (2017) focus on critical (auto)ethnography and this responsibility that comes with qualitative inquiry. Denzin (2017) writes, “this [autoethnography] is a call for interpretive, critical, performative qualitative research that matters in the lives of those who daily experience social injustice” (p. 8). Holman-Jones (2016) discusses using both components of story

and theory in collaboration as a catalyst for changing. Essentially, one or the other will not suffice for critical autoethnography (Holman-Jones, p. 229). For survivors of intimate partner violence, writing about this topic serves as a glimpse of hope and assurance that recovery is possible; for victims of intimate partner violence, writing about this topic offers the opportunity to find some comparisons to their own experiences and understand that even though their experiences are subjective, they are not alone. I lived in secrecy for so long, afraid to talk in detail about anything that happened to me because I was so afraid that none of it would matter; I was afraid that none of it was valid. But I also felt completely powerless even after I had gotten out of the relationship with my abuser. Telling my story allows me to validate the abuse, validate my fear, and take my power back from my abuser. I hope that other victims and survivors will read this project and be able to relate my experiences to some of their own and in turn find a way to make sense of their experiences with abuse.

### **Quality Criteria for Autoethnography**

There has been considerable debate as to how to assess the quality of autoethnographic work. Evocative, ethical, reflexive, and significant to the field of research as a whole are some of the criteria that authors mention when it comes to writing and conducting qualitative research (Ellis, 2000; Richardson, 2000; Goodall, 2008; Tracy, 2010). As an autoethnographer, I seek to produce narrative understandings that demonstrate excellence in qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). For example, I sought to construct narratives that ethically contribute to the topic of intimate partner violence while also establishing my credibility as a survivor of intimate partner violence. Considering there are other people involved in my story, I struggled to figure out whether

or not I should disclose certain information that is specific to not only my life but to their lives as well. Each person in the story with the exception of my abuser had the opportunity to read their chapter to make sure that they understood the role that they have played in my life, while also making sure that they were okay with how they were portrayed in the story. I wanted to make sure that everyone had the opportunity to contest or address any issues with how they were portrayed. Upholding my integrity and the integrity of those involved was important to me.

Another key component of excellence in qualitative research is resonance, which assesses a work's ability to affect an audience (Tracy, 2013). For autoethnography, this is characterized by evocative and vulnerable writing that enables identification. Resonance through evocative writing is the most important criterion for me to meet in regard to this project. Goodall (2008) argues that an evocative story will contain conflict, connection, continuing curiosity, and climatic satisfaction" (p. 5). This is done through "bricolage" (Tracy, 2013); providing narratives that layer my identities of an African-American female, pastor's daughter, and survivor of intimate partner violence in a way that reveals the complexity of my experiences in a same-sex relationship and with intimate partner violence.

My primary goal is for my stories to resonate with readers, such that the narratives relate their own struggles to the struggles I faced on my journey to survivorship. Other IPV survivors may find similarities between my story and their own, and be reminded that they are not alone in their recovery. Readers who have not experienced IPV may experience transferable insights and relate their own struggles to mine as well in terms of having a strong support system to help guide them through hard

times. This project can offer resonance for people who experience different types of trauma that yield similar consequences as trauma is subjective and can manifest itself in many different ways.

First, the relationship I was involved in was same-sex. Prior to becoming involved in this relationship, which started as a close friendship, I had no knowledge about abusive same-sex relationships nor did I even think that they existed. My knowledge about intimate partner violence was strictly limited to heterosexual abusive relationships, and I never once considered the potential of a woman being an abusive partner. I was thrust into the relationship quickly with no knowledge of how to navigate it or any idea of the nature of the relationship I was in. I felt forced into silence and truly questioned the validity of my situation as a victim of abuse but more importantly as a victim of woman-to-woman violence. In her chapter in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, Metta discusses the power of women's autoethnographic work, particularly in the context of storying abuse. Metta (2013) writes:

Women's autoethnographic writings provide critical spaces for women's silenced experiences, voices, and stories to be told, mapped, and shared, and hence, contribute to the ways in which we make knowledge about the world and our senses of place in it....by creating new knowledge of women's lives and experiences that have been marginalized based on gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and nationality as well as their lived experiences of trauma and violence, feminist autoethnography can reclaim their authority and sovereignty over their own narratives and knowledge-making. (p. 491)

I never once questioned or consider how my freedom and dignity being taken away from

me was an injustice or how it could provoke social change. I internalized it to the point where I felt that I probably was the only person experiencing this issue.

In her autoethnographic essay about her experiences in an abusive marriage and her survivorship, Olsen (2004) discusses the importance of voice to counter the victim-blaming that takes place in order to take away the voice of women that have been abused (p. 2). She also quotes Lenore Walker (1979) who writes “that it will only be through listening to what battered women say that we will be able to understand what happened to a battered woman” (p. xiii as cited in Olsen, 2004, p. 2). In other words, the lived experiences of those who have experienced abuse is the best “data” for understanding intimate partner violence. I hope my story can offer some insight on the topic of same-sex intimate partner violence, shame and hiding, and ultimately survivorship.

## Chapter Two: A Pastor's Kid

**“There is a straightforward, blunt, in-your-face expectation that PKs [Pastor's Kids] will behave “better” than our peers. We will have inherently better judgment, avoid temptations common to our age and gender, express none of our baser thoughts or feelings, and generally reflect positively on our parents and their position. Which is total nonsense.” - Barnabas Piper**

*“I dreamt of telling Pastor Todd Pickett, my father, that I had not only been in a relationship with a girl for three years but that I also let her beat the shit out of me on more than one occasion. I didn't want to ruin his birthday, but I couldn't wait any longer.”*

I never snuck out of the house. I stayed away from drugs and alcohol. I was home by 10 PM every Friday night. I may have talked back every now and then, but I think that is pretty standard for teenagers. For the most part, I avoided trouble and trouble avoided me. Or at least what my parents considered to be trouble.

16 years ago, my parents were ordained as non-denominational Christian pastors at a conference center in Maryland. All of our friends and family attended, even my second-grade teacher came to celebrate with us. A few years after that, my parents started a non-denominational church and I officially became a pastor's kid. That label came with so many expectations, rules, and consequences that made growing up difficult. Everyone at church knew if I got a bad grade, if a boy tried to kiss me, or if I played a “bad” game. I had no secrets. My private life wasn't private. Everyone had an inside look into my life and I essentially had no choice in the matter because of what my parents did for a living. That exclusive inside look that the church's congregation and my parents' pastor friends had into my life was uncomfortable and not something I enjoyed or asked for.

In a study that focused on perceptions of pastor's kids, Steven Tighe (2011) writes about the negative impacts of this religious version of celebrity status, including the

pressure and stress it causes, as well as the pressure to be perfect models of Christianity (Tighe, 2011). Despite this pressure that other authors also mention (Anderson, 1998; Langford, 2010; Piper, 2014), McCown & Sharma found that pastor's kids behave in the same ways other kids do (McCown & Sharma, 1992). Many of the findings and narratives offered in these studies represent my experiences as a pastor's daughter quite well. For example, like other studies of pastor's kids, I also built a resentment of my faith (Tighe, 2011; Piper, 2014), felt as if I was always being watched (Tighe, p. 26, 2011), and felt as if the church, religion, and the congregation come before the family (Langford, 2010, p. 44). As a kid, my father and mother spent countless hours hosting bible studies and counseling people in their marriage. While this is not to say that they did not pay attention to me. Indeed, they were at almost all of my basketball games and performances at school - model parents in the community, However, in regard to my emotional needs and stresses, I felt like the only time I got real attention was when I was in trouble or when I did something so bad it needed to be addressed. When I was at the lowest point in my life mentally and emotionally, my parents' support kicked in, but it was absent when I experienced anxiety and depression as a child.

That resentment (Tighe, p. 26, 2011; Piper, 2014) I felt towards my faith, transferred toward my parents for being emotionally negligent when it came to the stresses of being a teenage girl and my struggles with depression and anxiety. After I told them about my abusive relationship with Christine, they were forced to pay attention.

\*\*\*

“I need to tell you something.”

*SHIT. Am I really about to do this?*

“Okay? What is it?”

I paused for about 30 seconds rethinking everything.

*I'm not ready. I can handle it on my own. Maybe she doesn't have to know about the relationship part.*

I probably would've remained silent for much longer if my mom hadn't screamed into the phone to pull me out of my trance.

“Darrian! What's wrong?”

“Nothing. Nothing's wrong. I just needed to tell you that Christine and I have been in a relationship for a while now, and she's been really awful to me.

Now there was silence on her end of the phone.

“What do you mean awful?”

I decided not to tell her everything right then and there. I knew she'd be upset with me if she knew that I let them pay my hospital bills to protect Christine.

“She's hit me and a lot of things, but she's been threatening to tell you about us, so I wanted you to hear it from me first.”

“I feel sick.”

*Ha! She feels sick. I feel like my heart's about to explode.*

“Okay.”

“Not because of that, but because this happened to you. Well...okay. So, are you gay?”

“No, mom.”

“Are you sure? I just don't understand.”

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I was expected to know my bible verses by heart - which I did; well, at least most of them. I was expected to behave well all the time. That meant no cussing, no inappropriate behavior with boys, always attending church on Sundays, and no long trips to the bathroom to avoid listening to the sermon like the other kids did. When all my friends were kissing their boyfriends, I was getting grounded for kissing mine. Although, my parents will tell you that expectation was not true, arguments about attending church conferences when I wanted to hang out with my friends told me otherwise.

“Mom, even if you gave me the choice to skip this conference, it would still not be a choice.” I complained.

“What do you mean? If you don’t want to go, you don’t have to.”

“Yes, I do,” I said chuckling. “If I say I don’t want to go, and you say it’s okay if I don’t, you’ll tell me later how embarrassing it was that I didn’t attend.”

“Honestly, Darrian, I don’t care what you do, but you should want to attend all of the church events. You’re the pastor’s daughter.”

That was the guilt. I did not want to attend everything, but I didn’t want my parents to be disappointed either. To not be there, in the room as my parents taught, prayed for others, or hosted other pastors from other churches, was an embarrassment. God called them to be pastors, and therefore I was a representation of my parents’ relationship with God (Anderson, 1998, p. 394). I felt that I was expected to avoid anything that made me a “normal” kid growing up - sneaking out, going to parties, missing curfew, having sex, sneaking alcohol. I avoided those things successfully, but I’m almost positive that my parents would have preferred catching me coming home late or sneaking out over finding out that their daughter was in a same-sex relationship.

### **Father's Daughter**

People say my father and I are twins. I've never truly seen the resemblance, but I guess it's genuinely there because people have been telling me how much we are alike for as long as I can remember. His smile stretches across the full width of his face and it shines brightly; just like mine. His eyes sink deep into their sockets, and dark circles sit underneath them; just like mine. Those were features that we shared, but I didn't notice them until recently. I always paid more attention to the similarities in our character.

He is caring. And gave every ounce of himself to others. He had an infinite amount of time to those who needed him. All of his effort and hard work went into pleasing those around him. I grew up watching him give and give and give, but there were moments when I could see exhaustion in his eyes. There were moments when I could feel his frustration and see that his soul was drained. There were moments when he would isolate and shut down to everyone and everything, and nothing could stop that from happening. Those moments came, but they were fleeting. He then reverted back to life as normal. Toughness and kindness were two things I had not yet learned to balance at thirteen when I started seeing cliques form inside the walls of my middle school or when the cute boy from church showed an interest in me. I was kind to a fault; unceasingly generous and caring, without any hesitation or apprehension whatsoever.

I can recall a conversation I had with my dad as a child when I came home upset about a friend who had hurt my feelings.

“Why are you crying over this friend?”

“Because she's mean to me. I don't know why, but I don't want to lose her as a friend. I need her to continue to be my friend.”

“No, you don’t. You should never be desperate for friendship. Being a good friend is important, but never be so desperate that you let someone walk all over you or treat you in a way you don’t deserve.”

I dried my tears knowing that I wouldn’t get anymore advice from my dad about the conflict with my friend. I remembered what he said throughout my life, but when it came time to tell him about Christine, the guilt of knowing I had let her treat me so badly after all of his lectures about being strong and standing up for myself weighed on me almost more than telling him I had been in a same-sex relationship for three years.

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When my dad found out about Christine, he asked the questions that I expected him to ask.

“I don’t understand. You don’t need anyone to be your friend. Do you feel unloved?” he asked.

“No, dad. I just wanted to help her. It just happened and I was scared.”

“You shouldn’t be scared of anybody, Darrian.”

I could not change the fact that I was terrified of Christine in every way - physically, mentally, emotionally. She was my deepest fear, and I felt that she was for good reason. However, I knew those reasons were not good enough for my father.

His opinion was probably the most important to me. I knew his character and I knew his heart. I was convinced it was made of gold. I believe that it still is. It killed me to know that my experiences not only hurt me, but that they had hurt him as well.

The things he had done to hurt me were forgivable. I hated hearing the sound of his voice yelling over all the other parents in the gym at my basketball games. I was upset

when he didn't let me buy a candy bar when we went to Target. I got upset when he wouldn't let me go to beach week. Those things seemed like normal, fatherly things to do. I usually forgot about them within a couple of days. It wasn't until the summer of 2015 when my father sat in front of my brother and me to tell us that he was cheating on my mother. This trumped being grounded for unexplainable reasons, or being yelled at for missing a layup at my basketball game. I didn't know how our family would come back from it. I didn't know what would happen if my parents separated. I didn't know what the news of my father's affair would do to our relationship. In a way, I felt responsible. I thought that my mistakes put too much of a strain on my family and on my parent's marriage. I was broken and they held me together. My dad warned me about the danger I might've been in and my mom supported me and defended me.

But that day, everything I had ever done to disappoint my father became irrelevant to our relationship. The one thing my father had always done right and with much success was loving my mother, and I had no doubt in my mind that their relationship should be viewed as the standard for my brother and I when we found the people we wanted to spend the rest of our lives with.

We all sat in the basement of our house with five other people that I knew well. They had all been apart of my life for quite some time, but I didn't understand why they were all staring at my brother and me with looks of concern on their faces. I was afraid someone had died. My dad sat across from us while everyone in the room watched us. I could feel their eyes burning holes into my body like lasers. I was getting nervous and that tingly feeling under my armpits started again.

"We called you guys down here because I have something to tell you," my dad

said as we entered the room.

My brother and I sat in silence so my father continued.

"I had an inappropriate relationship with another woman. I wanted to say that I'm sorry and ask you both to forgive me."

I had never felt tears form so quickly. I closed my eyes and began to cry. My mom walked over to embrace me and my brother walked across the room and embraced our dad. My dad began to cry, as well. It was in that moment of complete vulnerability, that I realized my dad was a human being who made mistakes just like I did. At that moment, I had never been angrier with him, but I had also never loved him more.

In weeks prior to that night, his beard had become so gray. His eyes looked even more tired and he was starting to look even thinner. I was worried about him. I didn't know he had been harboring such an emotionally taxing secret, but I knew how keeping a secret of that significance could affect someone's physical and mental health. I felt his pain. And I kept that in mind, even though I was angry, even though I was disappointed, and even though I was hurt to my very core.

Before that moment I had always seen my dad as strong, powerful, and courageous. The man I saw in front of me that night in our basement was weak, tired, and ashamed of his actions. We surrounded him in his time of need.

### **“What happened was your dumb ass fault”**

Healing meant writing and sharing my story of abuse. I needed the freedom of taking control of my story, one that had felt out of my control for so long. I needed to tell my parents about my intentions before they saw my story online.

My mom's response to my story didn't surprise me:

"It's so great. I know that you aren't, Darrian, but if you could clarify that you aren't gay. Maybe throw it in at the end?"

"I don't see why I need to. I say that I wouldn't date girls ever again because I wasn't attracted to them, but honestly, that's not the focus of the story."

"Can you add it just for me please?"

"I'll think about it, but if people read it and focus on that one part, then they missed the whole point of the story."

My mom agreed and was still supportive, but asked me to think about adding more clarification to my story. Getting her approval made waiting for my dad to read the story and give me his opinion less stressful. He called me later that night.

"Nothing in the story is going to help anyone. It seems like you're just doing it because you got your feelings hurt, which isn't a good reason for you to share something this personal. I don't think that you should post it."

"Okay, well I was showing you as a courtesy, not to ask for your permission."

"I seriously advise against it."

"That's okay. It doesn't matter."

"You don't care about my opinion?"

"Not really. Especially if you're going to tell me I shouldn't post it."

"Darrian, I really think this is immature."

"It's not though, who knows how many people this could help."

"It probably won't help anyone because what happened was your dumb ass fault."

Everything I had ever done ever was broadcasted to a congregation of over a 100 people, but the moment I wanted to share something about myself on my own accord was a problem, his problem.

**“Give your cares to God. That’s what going to cure your depression.”**

I felt my mom's presence in my doorway as I slept. I think my parents watched me sleep more frequently than I thought. It was creepy, but I knew they had good reason to watch me. She tried to be quiet, but quiet wasn't really in her nature.

"What is it, mom?"

"Oh nothing, I was just checking on you. Don't you think it's time you get up now?"

"I'm tired."

"Okay. I just want to make sure you're not depressed."

I hated when she said things like that. To her, depression was a mood rather than a state of being. Telling her about my relationship with Christine was the toughest thing I had ever done, but trying to get her to understand the consequences of my relationship with Christine was proving to be even harder. It was winter break and I had nothing to do. Sleeping in was probably normal for any other college student, but my mom was right to be suspicious or concerned about my health.

My thoughts were consumed with sadness, regret, and guilt. I had lost Christine, seemingly disappointed my parents, and was left to rebuild my life on my own. I thought the desire to kill myself was at its peak when Christine was the only thing that mattered or meant anything to me; when she was the only thing that could hurt me, but the thoughts persisted. Experiencing life without her, now, was like trying to build a chair

without the instruction manual. I needed to support myself; I needed to hold myself up, but I didn't know how to put the pieces back together. My mind and my body felt lost. My spirit was broken.

My mom saw a happy child turn into a angsty teenager. That angsty teenager turned into an outgoing young adult, and this bout of depression seemed sudden to her. In all truthfulness, I had finally reached my breaking point. I was struggling to survive. What I needed most was my mom to see what was happening; I needed her to open her eyes and see what was happening to me for what it was. I needed her help and telling her and my father about Christine and the things she had done was my way of asking. I believed the support I got from her would save my life. I just needed her to believe it as well.

My friendship with Christine started a few years prior in my senior year of high school. We did not attend the same school, but went to high school in the same county and lived less than ten minutes away from each other.

### **Interlude: Relational Beginnings**

None of my friends had ever come to me with this kind of problem. My father doesn't hit me either. I didn't know what to do. I knew that my parents would know what to do, but Christine didn't want them to know.

She came back into my room and began to rummage through the large duffle bag we had gotten from her house earlier that evening. After she told me what was going on, we drove back five minutes down the road to her neighborhood. I went with her to make sure she was safe. We pulled into the short drive way of her home, and entered through

the three-car garage. A navy-blue Nissan stood in the garage with an empty space next to it that I assumed was for her mom's car.

“Is this where your mom parks her car? Where is she?”

“Yeah, she's on a business trip in Denver.”

Christine opened a door to a long hallway that led to the large foyer at the center of the house. Her barking dogs greeted us. Well, they greeted her, but they weren't keen on strangers. She scolded them for growling and barking at me as we walked further into the house. It was dark; no lights could be seen anywhere. We weren't there for too long, thankfully. The entire house felt almost haunted and cold as we moved quietly upstairs walking past a set of double doors that I assumed led to her parent's bedroom, to her room so that she could gather her things. She threw a bunch of basketball shorts and sweatpants into a duffle bag as quickly as she could, and we walked back down the hallway past the double doors. I imagined her father behind the doors. A sleeping beast that would wreak havoc on anything and anyone that disturbed him. We tiptoed past his bedroom with even more caution than we had the first time, and then back out to her car.

Christine only brought enough clothes for a couple of days, but I had a feeling that she would be staying for much longer than that. She was already dressed, so I guess she was looking in her bag for her brush. She moved slowly around my room as if she was in pain; like her back was stiff.

*Damn. I wonder what happened to make her hurt that badly. I don't think I actually want to know...it's probably best if I don't.*

“Do you mind if I sit on your bed to do my hair?”

“No. Not at all.”

She sat on the bed next to me and swung her legs slowly around so that her head was hanging off of the edge of the bed and started to brush her hair. I had never seen anyone do it that way before, but I guess it worked for her. It was weird, and I'd get used to seeing her hang over the bed upside to put her hair into that tight ponytail that she loved pretty quickly. At the time, the way she did her hair was the least of my worries.

I pulled out the trundle bed for Christine to sleep on and she slowly knelt down onto the bed and got into a comfortable enough position with a grimace on her face.

*I'm in over my head here, I thought to myself. She needs help, and I need help in order to help her. I can't do it by myself.*

"Christine, listen. I really think we should tell my parents about what's going on with your dad. They can help you."

"No. They can't know. No one can know.

"Well, they're not just going to let you stay here for no reason."

"I'll decide what to do. I'll tell them when I'm ready."

"What do I say when they ask? Because they're going to ask."

"I don't know. Make something up."

I didn't like the idea of lying to my parents, but they did give her permission to stay with us for a couple of days even though they didn't know why. I thought it might be okay, so I let it go for the night. I figured she'd been through enough.

I wondered why I was so willing to help a girl that I barely knew. The biggest question though? What could possibly make a father hurt his kid that way? I fought with my parents, sure, but my dad stopped hitting me when I turned eleven. Even before that, I knew the violence was all-disciplinary regardless of how mad I was at him for punishing

me. Fathers are supposed to be protectors, but Christine's father was an abuser. That's got to get to you, but before that night I would've never suspected she was holding onto such a burdening secret. It became my secret to bear, too.

Christine came to my house every day after school, and left around midnight. She stayed over every weekend, too. Sometimes she was there when I wasn't, and she came and went as she pleased even though it was sort of against house rules. Maybe it wasn't, but I never stayed out past ten. We were truly like roommates. We shared my room, she had a place to keep her things, and we hung out separately with our respective friends when we weren't hanging out with each other which was rare. My friends never really asked about the random girl that stayed in my room and hung out with her own friends instead of hanging out with me on Friday nights. What they didn't know is that she was there all the time, and that we hung out ALL the time. Almost nonstop. Every morning and every night. After the second or third weekend, they began to ask questions and I realized I had never bothered to introduce them to her before.

### **High School Roommates**

"So, do your parents know that you're practically living here?" My mom asked entering my room one afternoon

Christine shot me a look of fear of disappointment.

"I didn't tell her anything, I swear, Christine."

"Yeah, she didn't. But I need to know what's going on if you're going to continue to stay here. It would be wrong of me not to ask."

Christine sat on the floor of my bedroom; I thought it would take some convincing, but she answered my mom's question without any resistance.

“My dad hits me.”

“Like hits you, hits you?”

“Yeah.”

“Does your mom know?”

“No. She doesn't know.” Maybe she knew this was her only shot at safety; maybe she knew telling my mom her secret was safer than returning to her own home.

Having my mom in Christine's corner, in our corner brought a small amount of peace to my mind and to my heart. My mom passed on the information to my dad, and he called Christine and I into his room one night for a discussion. With the help of both my parents, I just knew Christine would be okay; I knew she would be safe.

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“So, Christine, your dad puts his hands on you?” my dad asked as him in my mom sat in their bed and we sat on the ottoman that stood in front of their bed.

She didn't look my dad in the eye, but answered his question without any hesitation.

“Yes. he does.”

“Okay, how long has this been going on?”

“As long as I can remember, but definitely since my mom got so busy with work.”

“So, she doesn't know what's going on at home?”

*Dad, you're asking too many questions. Mom was supposed to tell you all this stuff. We need to know what to do.*

I didn't say anything; I just sat and listened to the conversation that Christine was having with my parents.

"No," she continued. "Not at all. It's always behind her back or when she's gone on business."

"Okay..."

My dad took a long pause and chewed his tongue like he always did when he was trying to come up with a solution. That was a good sign because that's what I wanted more than anything and what Christine needed more than anything.

"This is what I'll do...you can stay here for as long as you want, but you need to tell your mom where you're at."

"Okay. I can do that."

"Good. I can also come with you to talk to your parents about what's been going on."

"No. I can't. That will ruin everything." She pleaded for my dad to just drop it, but he insisted that they have the conversation with her parents whenever she was ready. He said one last thing before we left my parent's room.

"Christine, you need to know something..." he started. "Fathers are supposed to protect their daughters, and yours is the one causing you pain; It's not your fault, so don't you ever think it is."

Tears started to stream down Christine's face as she nodded in agreement with my dad. We left my parent's room that night satisfied that we had a temporary solution and the support of my parents. Most importantly, Christine had a safe place to lay her head.

### **Mom**

No one ever rang the doorbell, especially not if they had been to our house more than once and especially not if they practically lived with us, so I was surprised to see Christine standing on the front porch waiting for me to invite her in. Our door was always open, and she knew that. We hadn't made plans that day either.

"Hey! What're doing here? And why are you ringing the doorbell? You know you can just walk in."

Christine's eyes avoided mine, but that wasn't out of the ordinary for her. "Is your mom home?"

"Yeah why? Come on in."

"We're going to get my prom dress, today."

Christine's response to why she wasn't at my house to see me didn't surprise me at all. I hadn't heard anything about my mom's planned outing with my friend, so they must've planned it on their own. My mother's favorite thing to do was shop, and her second favorite thing to do was shop for other people.

They spent the day together, which gave me some time to myself. I didn't have much of that anymore. It was only a matter of time before her and my mom started to bond. My mother was probably the one-person Christine needed to be around the most. Her presence was calming and uplifting; she did her best to understand, and I think that's what Christine needed the most. Someone to understand what she needed.

I thought that I'd feel weird about one of my friends spending the day with my mom without me there. I expected even a little bit of jealousy, because my mom couldn't take me to find a prom dress, but joy filled my heart instead. To share my mom was to

share the kindest and most loving human being with someone who didn't have that, and that was the ultimate gift.

She was a small woman with short, bleach blonde hair; she changed it pretty often, but she stuck with the blonde for a while. Her style was loud and colorful and sometimes I wondered how I was really her child. I was plain and boring. I wore dull colors, settled for jeans and a t-shirt most days, and didn't care much for fashion or pampering myself with manicures, pedicures, and the like the way that she did. I may not have been like her in that way, but I strived my best to emulate her kindness in every way that I could.

My mom was the only person who seemed to understand why I wanted to help Christine so badly. Sometimes I thought she might have wanted to help her just as much as I did. She didn't question my reasons for giving Christine a countless number of chances to be kind to me; she stayed up with us in the wee hours of the morning as we explained why we were fighting or arguing that day, and she cared for Christine as if she was truly apart of our family.

Christine's prom took place a couple of weeks after my mom helped her pick out a dress. Her own parents wanted her to take pictures with her date at their house and she obliged, but we both knew she would end the night at my house. I decided to wait up for her just in case she needed a ride home, but she wasn't out as late as I thought she would be. My phone rang at around 11 p.m. The voice on the other end was loud and sloppy. Christine slurred her words, so I could barely understand what she was saying. I managed to figure out her location and enough to know that she was drunk and attempting to walk home from the party she was at.

"You don't have to come get me. I'm walking home."

"What? No. Where's your date?"

"I don't know. He's still at the party, I guess. I'll be home soon."

"Christine, no. I'll come get you. Stay where you are."

I ran into my parent's room to explain why I was going to be leaving the house so late. My dad was sound asleep next to my mom, but their light and television were still on. It was probably better that my mom was awake and not my dad. I figured she'd handle it better than he would.

"Christine's drunk. I have to go get her."

"What? Where is she?"

"I'm not sure exactly, but somewhere in Raspberry Falls. I need to go right now."

"Okay, take your brother with you."

"Why?"

"It's late. You don't need to go by yourself."

I woke my brother up and we got in my car to go look for Christine in the middle of the night. Luckily, my house wasn't far from the party. We drove through our neighborhood and into Raspberry Falls, looking on the side of the road for Christine. I wasn't too familiar with the affluent neighborhood, but I knew Christine lived there. Luckily a few of my brother Bubba's friends did too, and he knew his way around pretty well. Christine was too drunk to give me an actual address, so I guess it was a good thing that Bubba was with me. We still drove aimlessly into the poorly lit neighborhood until we found Christine.

After a few miles, we spotted a figure wobbling from side to side on the shoulder of the road. It was Christine. I pulled the car over immediately, and my brother got out to help Christine get into the car. She was more talkative than usual and more open than usual. My brother didn't know why she was staying with us, and I don't think he cared either. That night, Christine's sober thoughts were revealed in her drunken stupor openly for the first time while my 15-year-old brother was in the car.

"You know what, guys?"

"What Christine?"

"I'm drunk because my dad hits me."

My brother and I sat in silence while we drove Christine back to our house. He spoke before she could continue her rant.

"Am I supposed to know this? I feel like I'm not."

"It doesn't matter. It's the truth, Bubba."

We were home before she could reveal any more of her secrets. Christine was taller and heavier than me; my brother and I did our best to remove her from the car, get her through our front door, and up to my room. She fell in the grass and laid there for a few minutes telling us to leave her there.

"Just leave me. I'll sleep in the yard."

"No, Christine. We're almost to my room."

My brother and I grabbed each of her arms, put them around our shoulders, and carried her the rest of the way to the house. When we got inside, my mom was standing at the top of the stairs. My body shook in fear for Christine. She was the first kid to come to my parents' house drunk and underage. My brother wasn't anywhere near old enough to

have had an experience with alcohol, and I was too scared to even attempt to get drunk. I had no idea how my mom would react, but I knew Christine was lucky my dad was asleep.

"Bubba, go get her some water. Darrian, let's get her into bed."

My pounding heart began to slow down as my mom gave us instructions on how to help Christine. She fumbled around trying to take off clothes while my mom retrieved Motrin from her bedroom. She spilled water on my spare mattress, and kept letting us know that the room was spinning. After we got her settled into bed, the lecture began.

"Christine, why'd you get this drunk?"

With her body sprawled over the spare bed in my bedroom, she managed to come up with a response to my mom.

"Because it's prom."

"That doesn't mean anything...you have to be careful. This is unacceptable."

What came out of Christine's mouth next would've gotten me or my brother an ass whooping, but my mom kept her cool.

"Why are you always on my back? Just relax."

"Excuse me? I don't know who you think you're talking to like that, but I know you're drunk. Go to sleep. We'll talk about this in the morning."

The encounter between my mom and Christine that night didn't go the way I expected it to. But my mom's grace and kindness was something I was used to. I probably shouldn't have been surprised.

Christine lived at my house for the rest of the summer. We graduated high school and went to college as best friends, a relationship that later blossomed into a romance for which I wasn't prepared.

### Chapter Three: Shame & Hiding

**“Another common theme emerged that provides insight on the gap between a woman experiencing IPV and her agency to disclose the abuse - the fear of bringing stigma and shame to herself and/or to her family”- McCleary-Sills, Namy, Nyoni, Rweyemamu, Salvatory, & Steven**

*"I don't know if I can do this, though, Christine. I can't date a girl, I'm a Christian."*

I don't think that I realized how ashamed I was about my relationship with Christine, until I thought about talking about it or sharing that part of my life with anyone, especially with someone close to me. I pushed the idea of telling anyone about relationship so far out of my brain and consciousness and only let it make an appearance in moments like sitting in the emergency room because I had a gaping hole in my lip or when I thought of taking my own life as a means of escaping. I only thought about the idea when I was concerned for my physical safety, but the idea of telling someone and the consequences of that conversation deterred me every time. The shame of both my relationship and the abuse I was experiencing weighed heavily on my chest; an anxiety that would not subside unless I put it out of my mind completely, like I was procrastinating doing homework. The consequences of not doing my homework were far less dire, but the longer and longer I put it off, the more difficult it was to confide in others.

The shame came with the fear of not having a choice in my identity once I revealed that I was in a same-sex relationship. Sexual acts in my mind could not be separated from sexual orientation, which left me conflicted on where I belonged or how I would explain my actions and my relationship once someone found out.

*Christine hated my roommate freshman year, so I slept in her room with her and her roommate, Ali almost every night for an entire month.*

"How do you guys sleep in the bed without cuddling?"

"Why would we want to cuddle? I asked. "There's enough room for the both of us on the bed." That wasn't true. I was at the edge of the bed while Christine pushed her body as close to the wall as possible.

"Because you're best friends. Me and my best friend practically sleep on top of each other."

"It's just not something we do."

"Y'all are weird."

The three of us continued to watch television together in silence and Christine's long arm wrapped around my torso and her body pressed up against mine.

*Maybe best friends do cuddle...but do best friends make out? I'm pretty sure they don't.*

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"I think I'm in love with you." I confessed.

It was a visceral reaction to the nights that we spent together alone in our dorm room. I was honest with her about my feelings and my reservations about what the consequences of those feelings might be.

"I don't know if I can do this, though, Christine. I can't date a girl, I'm a Christian."

"Let's just see how it goes and if you decide you can't do it, just tell me."

"If we do, we can't tell anyone."

"Yeah, I don't think I'm ready for that."

I was glad she wasn't ready for people to know because I sure as hell wasn't.

People always questioned Christine's sexuality because of how she dressed and carried herself. I had never questioned my sexuality and neither did anyone else, but I was certain that I cared for Christine. I cared for her more than any friend I had, and I loved her more than I had loved anyone or anything ever before. I didn't know what it meant to love Christine. I didn't know if that made me bisexual or a lesbian. All I knew was how strongly I felt and that I didn't want to hide those feelings. Keeping the romantic nature of our relationship a secret was a decision we made together as we tried to figure out how to navigate our first same-sex relationship.

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Queer Theory did not exist in my mind before I came to graduate school. In fact, I didn't even know that "queer" was a word that was acceptable to use in everyday language. I imagine it might have helped me understand and make sense of my relationship with Christine. According to Jagose (1996), "queer theory's debunking of stable sexes, genders and sexualities develops out of a specifically lesbian and gay reworking of the post-structuralist figuring of the identity as a constellation of multiple and unstable positions" (p. 3). In other words, queer theory focuses on the complexity of identities which gives me leeway when it comes to how I define my sexuality. I don't identify as gay or bisexual, but I fell in love with a woman; through the lens of queer theory I am able to separate the concepts of my sexuality and my romantic desire for Christine. I know this now; however, at the time I had similar struggles to Jose Munoz that he describes in his book "Cruising Utopia." Munoz (2009) describes this feeling of being an outsider in a heteronormative world, how he studied the movements and gestures of straight men that did not match his true identity (pp. 68-69). In a way, I felt

like a poser in both the world of same-sex and heterosexual relationships; not because I felt like I didn't and couldn't find a place, but because I thought I would be rejected from each world if anyone found out about the nature of my relationship with Christine and my simultaneous attraction to men. I was attracted to men, but I performed sexual and romantic acts with a woman. I had no desire to be with any other woman other than Christine and would have chosen to date men had we not been together, but I still viewed Christine as my girlfriend. Not considering myself fully fitting into the LGBTQ+ community and identifying as a straight woman left me in this limbo with a feeling of uncertainty about where I belonged.

### 328

Our romantic relationship began in room 328 on the third floor of Commonwealth Hall. I became a victim of abuse in room 328 on the third floor of Commonwealth Hall. My life began to fall apart in in room 328 on the third floor of Commonwealth Hall. That's really where it all began. It was a bland room, no decorations, no vibrant colors except for my multi colored bed spread my parents bought for me over the summer. It was small and cramped with all of our clothes laying on the floor, but big enough to hold all of our secrets. The walls were thin, so I know a few of our secrets weren't exactly secrets to the other girls on our floor who heard us arguing in the middle of the night or day. Christine and I only left that room to go to class and to eat. Our small dorm room was the only place our relationship truly existed. Outside of the four walls of that room, we were just best friends. Still inseparable, still together at all times, but as for as the rest of the world, not romantically involved.

I'd steal kisses before I left for practices and savor the taste of her lips until I returned back to the room that night. I'd steal a few more like a thief in the night before we crawled into the twin size bed to sleep. Her body molded to mine perfectly as she wrapped her arm over my torso as we slept.

That dorm room was our sanctuary, an escape from the chaos of freshman year and basketball practices. This utopia we had created encompassed and protected our love. Inside that same dorm room, though, I also became a victim. A victim of Christine's control that isolated me from the outside world. Our dorm room began to serve as her way of keeping tabs on me. Our utopia soon turned into a prison. Christine was the warden and I was her only prisoner. I was let out by myself for class, basketball practice, to use the restroom, and to bathe. Any other time I was with Christine if she wanted to go out to eat, go to the movies, go for a drive, or when she wanted to take our fights outside of our room and onto campus. Her favorite thing to do was go to the gym at night when she felt sad. The musty smell of the old gym seemed to bring her peace. I always accompanied her because I didn't like the idea of her walking around campus at night by herself, but I stopped playing with her. Twice-a-day and six a.m. workouts kept me in the best shape of my life. I played ball every day, and when Christine and I played against each other, I always won. A game to 11 would turn into another game of 11. After she lost a few, she would situate herself on the baseline and run sprints until she got tired.

“You don't have to do this you know? It's just a game.”

The sound of her heavy feet continued to echo in the old gym, as I sat in the bleachers waiting for her to be done. She ignored me, and kept sprinting up and down the court.

“Christine, come on. It’s getting late. Let’s go back to the room.”

Her pace slowed down and she sat down for a rest. I hoped that maybe she would be done running and we’d go back to our room.

“How about we race back to the dorm?”

“Race? Like run back?”

“Yeah.

“What for?”

“For my love.”

It was insane, but I knew that she was serious. Our relationship was the only thing that I cared about. Her love and affection was the only thing I wanted. I was kind of worried I’d lose though. I was pretty fast, but my endurance was less than exceptional. When it came to distance, she would always outrun me. I had done a lot of crazy things for Christine in the past, and I added a long distance run in the middle of the night for her love to that list.

We stood in front of the gym in a runner’s position, and I waited for Christine to start the cadence. Before she did, I looked at her and said, “hope you’re ready to lose.” I was confident that I would lose, but I needed her to know that I was going to give it my all. When I heard “go,” I took off running. The cold, mountain air made it even harder to breathe. I started to taste blood on my tongue after we made it up the first hill. She ran a few feet ahead of me at a pretty steady pace, and I could feel my pace slowing down. I swore I was running in slow motion, but my heart was beating a mile a minute. People that were hanging out on the lawn or walking back from the library, didn’t pay us any

mind as we ran past them. I guess two girls going on a run in the middle of the night wasn't as weird as I thought it was.

We got to a split in the path. One route went around the performing arts building and by the lake that smelt like dead fish. The other went straight past the counseling center and around to the cafeteria. They converged back together and led directly to the door of our dorm building. I took the first route, and Christine took the second. As she ran out of sight, I instantly regretted my decision to take the opposite route. I should've ran behind her and sprinted in front of her. I hadn't gotten my second wind yet, but it was too late to turn around. I had already chosen my path, and Christine had chosen her own. I rounded the corner of the performing arts building and made my way towards the lake. It didn't smell that bad that night; maybe the cold masked the stench. I caught my second wind as I passed the lake, but I didn't think it mattered because Christine was probably already back in the room. I started to pick up my feet a little higher of the ground instead of dragging them; I started to swing my arms a little faster, and at the same time my heart started to beat faster and the air seemed to be getting thinner. When I made it back onto the path, I didn't think Christine would be behind me, but there she was trotting behind me. I picked up my speed a little bit more to ensure that I kept my lead. I almost collapsed when I reached the benches outside of Commonwealth. I had never run that fast for so long, nor had I ever won a long-distance race. It was a fulfilling accomplishment, but the prize for winning this race was much more valuable to me than a gold medal. I had won Christine's love and affection, and that's what I got. For that night. Every night thereafter, our little room turned back into my prison cell.

The nights of sound sleep gone, now turned into nights of restlessness as Christine's arm took its normal place across my torso. It felt like I was suffocating under the weight of her arm. It was hard for me to breath; it was hard to sleep with my abuser holding me so tightly. I used to crave that feeling when I was away from her, which wasn't very often, but I soon began to dread bedtime more than any other part of the day.

Exhaustion took over my body and I longed for a solid night's rest. I knew I wouldn't get it if Christine was in my bed.

"Do you think I could sleep alone tonight?"

"Why?"

"I just haven't been sleeping that well. I think it'd help if I slept alone just for one night."

"You don't want to sleep with me? Or cuddle?"

"I do, Christine. I'm just asking for one night."

With that request, she'd sulk over to her side of the room and get into her own bed without saying another word. I knew asking to sleep alone, to her, meant that I didn't want her or that I didn't love her. I'd cave and invite her back to my side of the room. She would crawl back into bed with me and resume her position as the big spoon. Once again, I was trapped under the weight of her arm; suffocating and struggling to breath.

### **Password Protected**

Christine and I laid in bed together one night in our dorm room before I got up to take a shower in the communal bathroom down the hall. An old friend of mine from high school, Tristan, had messaged me over the weekend. We were not super close friends, but he sent me some selfies of himself in which he just happened to be shirtless. I did not ask

for them or even acknowledge them because of the platonic nature of our relationship. I left to take my shower, and when I returned, Christine claimed that her friend Cameron told her that I was cheating on her. Cameron was one of Christine's best friends from high school whom she always claimed to have a crush on. I had only met Cameron one time.

"What's wrong?" I asked as Christine paced around our dorm room.

"Cameron told me you were talking to someone from back home."

*How the fuck would Cameron know that? I don't talk to him and it's not even true.*

"That's not true. And how would Cameron know that?"

"He knows the guy."

*What guy?!*

"What guy? I barely know Cameron and I doubt he knows any of my friends, so tell me the truth."

"Some guy named Tristan. I am telling the truth. That's what he told me."

*Tristan?*

"But that doesn't make any sense. When did he tell you this?"

"While you were in the shower."

*How did Cameron know I was in the shower? How did he know when he should tell Christine about my supposed affair?*

"Okay, but I'm not talking to anyone, so that's not true."

"Why would Cameron lie?"

*Good fucking question.*

"That's a good fucking question. I don't know why he would lie. Tristan just texted me a couple days ago, and we are not 'talking.'"

"That's just what Cameron told me."

*I'm calling bullshit.*

"Did he? Or did you look through my phone?" "Babe, did you look through my phone? Just admit it if you did."

"Why is he shirtless in those pictures?"

That was the closest thing to a confession that I was going to get.

"Babe. I don't know. You read the messages, it's not like I asked him to send them."

Her brow furrowed and her mouth twisted into a knot.

"I'm not cheating on you. I swear."

It wasn't the first time she looked through my phone, but it was the first time she had done so when I wasn't in the room. It was one of the more controlling and invasive habits she had, and it kept me on a short leash. I had other restrictions, too, though. I had to be back right after class and if I got back any later than I normally did I got a "where are you?" text or a "why aren't you home text?" In order for my activity to be "approved" I had to have a perfectly good explanation for why I went to the library after class or why I stopped on campus to get something to eat. If I was dressed in anything else but sweatpants, I got asked "who are you trying to impress?" or "who do you look cute for?" I didn't bother wearing jeans or anything cute unless I had to dress up for a class presentation because Christine always thought I was trying to look cute for someone if I dressed nicely; she always thought I was fooling around with a boy if I wasn't back from

campus in a timely fashion. Anytime her whereabouts were unknown to me, and I asked where she was she kindly reminded me that it was none of my business.

### **Mind Games**

"You're a poor nigger, and you'll never be good enough to be friends with Christine." I had already started to see a glimpse of Christine's craziness, so it didn't surprise me that her friends were crazy, too. I had never been called a nigger before, and I didn't think I would ever be called a nigger. I thought that it couldn't get any worse than that, but I was sadly mistaken.

I started to get messages from a strange twitter account. I assumed they were from Christine's friend, Catelyn. Catelyn was Christine's best friend from her childhood. Christine told me to ignore her messages, so I did and I blocked the account. .

The nightmares started again a week after I stopped talking to Catelyn and Cameron. I imagine the reason was that Christine kept showing me videos of her friend from back home, and Cameron had somehow found out about us. I started seeing Catelyn and Cameron in my sleep. In the nightmares Christine's friend came from Wisconsin to kill me and Cameron threatened to tell everyone about my relationship with Christine. I woke up in the middle of the night clutching onto Christine's arm. She always reassured me that nothing would happen to me, but I didn't know how she could be so sure.

"How do you know she won't come down here? She threatened me."

"Because Darrian, I'm sure."

"She said she would though. And Cameron he might tell everyone back home about us. Do you want them to know?"

"Darrian, nothing is going to happen."

"But how can you be sure? I think we should tell someone so that they can help us. I'll call my mom."

"No don't. Everything's gonna be fine."

"You don't know that for certain."

"Yes, I do. I haven't talked to Caitlyn in years, and Cameron thinks you're a bitch."

"How?"

"You haven't talked to either of them."

"What do you mean? Yes, I have. I showed you the texts."

She remained silent as I tried to put the pieces together.

"Who have I been talking to this whole time then? You?"

Her continued silence was a good enough answer for me.

*How'd she fake the text messages? Did she make the twitter accounts, too? How did she get multiple numbers?*

I asked her to explain. I watched her enter her phone number into her phone, change the contact name to Caitlyn, text her own phone, and create a text thread. That's how she created the screenshots calling me a nigger and telling me I wasn't good enough. But the Cameron piece still didn't make any sense.

"What about Cameron?" I asked. "His messages weren't iMessage. They were regular, green text messages."

She pulled up an app on her phone, created a phone number and texted my phone from the app.

"So, he doesn't know anything? It was just you the whole time?"

"Yeah it was. Everything is fine."

She begged me not to tell anyone about what she had done, and I guess that meant she knew it was fucking crazy, too. I didn't think I'd ever tell anyone because I felt so fucking stupid. She'd made everything up, and I fell for it.

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I found this behavior strange and bizarre, but I did not associate it with abuse or coercive control. Now I am able to recognize that behavior as coercive control. Kelly and Johnson (2008) define Coercive Controlling Violence as a “pattern of emotionally abusive intimidation, coercion, and control coupled with physical violence against partners” (p. 478). The physical violence had not started yet in my relationship with Christine, but it followed shortly after the psychological incident I just described. Other authors discuss the potential for coercive control leading to other types of IPV (Tanha, Beck, Figueredo, & Raghavan, 2010), the types of control that are used in abusive relationships (Johnson, 2006), and how people in same-sex relationships might be hesitant to disclose about the coercion and control their partner inflicts on them (Fontes, 2015). For example, Fontes claims that members of the LGBTQ+ community might ignore pleas and cries for help from members experiencing this type of intimate partner violence to protect the belief that abuse and control does not affect the community (Fontes, 2015, p. 98). Christine’s control and manipulation kept me from dressing and eating a certain way, talking to certain people and was a complete invasion of my privacy.

As a reader, you may be thinking “Why didn’t she just leave?” You may be blaming me because this behavior should have been a red flag. Some may think that it

might have been easier; looking back it is obvious to me that Christine was abusive and controlling, but I did not consider that as I was experiencing it. There are common misconceptions about the ease with which victims of IPV can leave their relationships. Research on IPV has examined a range of topics to contribute to an understanding of its prevalence, including the portrayal of intimate partner violence in media (Thaller & Messing, 2014; Carlyle, Savage, & Babin, 2014), perceptions of the victims of intimate partner violence (Berns, 2001; Halket, Gormley, Mello, Rosenthal, & Mirkin, 2014; Lin, Sun, Wu, & Liu, 2016), and IPV victim's perceptions of their own situations (Goodman & Walker, 2016; Richardson, 2013; Weathers & Hopson, 2015; Langan, Hannem, & Stewart, 2016).

Intimate partner violence is routinely depicted in a variety of media including mainstream news media (Berns, 2001; Weathers et al., 2016; Carlyle et al., 2014), film and television (Lenahan, 2009), music (Thaller & Messing, 2014; Franuik, Coleman, & Apa, 2017), and music videos (Thaller & Messing, 2014). Often these representations are characterized by victim-blaming. For example, Thaller & Messing (2014) analyzed how IPV was portrayed in a popular Eminem and Rihanna video arguing that the video blames the victim of IPV for initiating their own abuse and having the agency to leave or remain in an abusive relationship, reinforcing misperceptions about IPV. These misperceptions include, "most women could get out of an unsafe relationship if they wanted to," (p. 627) "some women that are abused secretly want to be treated that way," (p. 630), and "some women initiate IPV by treating their men badly or taking the first swing" (p. 631). Similarly, Carlyle, Savage, and Babin's (2014) examination of IPV in news media found that newspapers described IPV by looking at the individual situation rather than how the

situation adds to the overall problem of IPV. The authors argue that this type of framing perpetuates victim blaming and stigma (Carlyle et al, 2014). In this study, social contexts could mean how a victim's or an abuser's past relationships have influenced them and their behaviors over time. Similarly, Berns (2001) discussed how magazines targeted at men and politics portray IPV, finding that the representations suggest that women are not always the victims or as innocent as they claim to be (Berns, 2001, p. 269).

Perceptions of IPV abusers and victims vary across cultures, gender expression of the individual, and age group. Some authors discuss the opinions that public holds about IPV (Cismaru, Jensen, & Lavack, 2010; Halket, Gormley, Mello, Rosenthal, & Mirkin, 2014, p. 39; Lin, Sun, Wu, & Liu., 2016; Thaller & Messing, 2016). For example, Lin et al. (2016) examined the difference between how Chinese and American students viewed IPV. They found that Chinese students were more lenient than American students when it came to identifying IPV behaviors (Lin et al., 2016). Additionally, Thaller & Messing (2016) concluded that people who were in support of male dominance were more accepting of IPV and opinions were influenced by age and gender (Thaller & Messing, 2016, p. 186). In contrast, Halket, Gormley, Mello, Rosenthal, and Mirkin's (2014) study of college student perceptions of intimate partner violence victims found that people had negative perceptions of victims who chose to stay with their abuser.

Research examining how IPV victims and survivors perceive their own stories and experiences showcase the internalization of societal viewpoints, but offer a more complex understanding of the dynamic of the experiences. Langan, Hannem, and Stewart (2016) looked at how women used certain language to define their experiences to others when they are trying to get out of an abusive situation or explain their situation to

someone after being removed from it. Specifically, they found,

The women's combined use of institutional discourse (e.g. 'altercation') and indirect speech (e.g. 'stuff like that') serves to socially distance the abuse and results in a lack of detail and clarity about the women's experiences. In this way, macro and micro forces join together to diminish the experiences of these women. (p. 233)

Combined, these studies showcase the current climate regarding intimate partner violence, and their findings give us insight on how people's values influence their perception of intimate partner violence and how victims of IPV, like me, recall or form their narratives. Growing up, I always had sympathy for those that were victims of domestic violence; I knew that it was never the victim's fault, but even though I held those opinions, it still took me a long time to release all the guilt I had held onto and reclaim my experiences as a victim of abuse rather than someone who was at fault.

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**“Before I knew it, she had pushed me up against the side of my slightly lifted dorm room bed...but...it was just a push.”**

*The first time it happened left us both standing there in the middle of our dorm room not sure what to do about what had just transpired. A few minutes prior, Christine had shoved me across the room; I slapped her across her cheek in retaliation in one swift motion. Her eyes widened as she held her hand to her face. I could feel my chest tightening and the air escaped from my lungs making it harder to breathe. She pushed me first and I retaliated, but the facts didn't matter when it came to Christine.*

**“The day I hit first far outweighs the day she first hit me...”**

**but even then, power was still hers”**

I looked at her soulless eyes concentrating on the road like she didn't feel anything. They were black, like always. No color. No emotion. No life. Nothing. Nothing infuriated me more than being overwhelmed with emotion and watching her sit there like nothing was wrong. That was the first time I had lost control. I reached across the center console with a clenched fist and punched her in the head as hard as I could.

*Darrian. What the fuck did you just do?* I thought to myself, but there was no going back.

“Wow. Did you really just hit me? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Me? What’s wrong with you? You hit me all the time. This is the first time I’ve ever hit you.”

*Why are you trying to reason with her, Darrian? There is no reasoning with her.*

She shook her head. “You’re crazy, you know that?”

“I’m crazy? You’re the crazy one. You always do this.”

Prior to that day, I had never done anything more than push her in self-defense or keep her from leaving the room. She always wanted to start a fight and then leave the room leaving me anxious and crying. I always wanted to talk it out. Now that I think about it, I might have been able to avoid plenty of beatings and arguments if I had just let her leave like I thought she wanted to, but I was stubborn. *At least I thought I was holding on to her, making her stay with me.* Even still, I can count on one hand the times that I hit Christine back. I didn’t want to cause her any pain, but I saw how easy it was for her to inflict pain on me. I saw how little remorse and empathy she had after she punched me in my ribs or threw me around the room. That day I hit her first because I knew that it

might escalate to violence anyway. For once, I had the upper hand, but it didn't feel as empowering as I thought it would. In a moment of weakness, I got so fed up with the fighting and being controlled I put my hands on her. They weren't holding her in the midst of a nightmare, they weren't gently gliding up and down her body in the intimate moments we shared; instead, they were pushing her. Tears welled up in my eyes because I knew at that moment, I had lost myself; I wasn't Darrian anymore and I was terrified that I would never be the same again. That was the first and last time I fought back.

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**“There is gender symmetry in some types of intimate partner violence, and in some relationships women are more frequently the aggressors than their partners, including with their nonviolent partner” (Kelly & Johnson, 2008, p. 480).**

*“My grandpa always told me that ‘white men abuse black women.’ I wonder what he’s got to say about white women abusing black women.”*

I had no mental framework for same-sex violence. I always associated domestic violence with heterosexual relationships because that is all I ever saw in real life and on television. Not believing that domestic violence could exist or occur in friendship or in a same-sex romantic relationship is another aspect of my experience that kept me from disclosing the abuse.

IPV is just as prevalent, if not more prevalent in the LGBTQ+ community. For example, Edwards, Littleton, Sylaska, Crossman, and Craig (2016) found that “close to half (45%) of the participants in [their] study reported physical IPV victimization and/or perpetration experiences in the past 2 years, with some sexual minority students (e.g., bisexual-identified men and women) presenting greater risk for IPV than others” (p. 24). Indeed, a growing body of research looks at the context of IPV in LGBTQ+ relationships, but authors acknowledge that there is still a lack of information and research pertaining to

this topic despite the prevalence of IPV in same-sex relationships (e.g. Gabbay & Lafontaine, 2017).

Research covers topics such as barriers the LGBTQ+ community faces to seeking help for intimate partner violence (e.g. Calton, Cattaneo, & Gebhard, 2016), the difference between the psychological effects of heterosexual and same-sex intimate partner violence (e.g. Gehring & Vaske, 2017), how homosexual women are more likely to experience intimate partner violence than heterosexual women (e.g. Badenes-Ribera, Bonilla-Campos, Frias-Navarro, Pons-Salvador, & Monterde-i-Bort, 2016), and disclosure of intimate partner violence (e.g. Sylaska & Edwards, 2015; ).

I can relate in some ways to the barriers for disclosure in LGBTQ+ victims of IPV. Calton et al. (2016) found that stigma, minimal understanding of IPV in the LGBTQ+ community, and systematic inequality (pp. 586-591). These were all barriers for me as well, even if I did not realize it at the time of the abuse. I struggled with the overall stigma of being in a same-sex relationship, but I also did not understand intimate partner violence or that it could even occur in a same-sex relationship; moreover, I did not think that it would be *considered* intimate partner violence in the eyes of whoever I told. A man beating up his girlfriend or wife was wrong. A girl beating up her girlfriend or wife was just a fight. I had internalized the language that kept me from making sense of my own experiences of violence in my relationship with Christine (Langan, Hannem, and Stewart, 2016). I was so used to seeing and hearing about domestic violence or intimate partner violence within the context of a male-female relationship, that it was extremely difficult to believe it could exist in the context of other types of relationships.

**February 5, 2014 8:45 p.m.**

**“Blood pooled into my hand from my lip. I had never felt weaker than I did then.”**

I think I wanted her back, or maybe I needed her back. It was all so confusing. I missed her, but I also had no desire to deal with the cold shoulder. I didn't want to deal with the threats she was making to tell my parents about our relationship, and I needed to get her back. Being in a relationship with her, though, was like suicide in itself. It got violent at times and it was awful, but not being with her was much, much worse. I loved her so much, but it came at a price; an emotionally and sometimes physically painful price.

“Do you wanna get back together?” I asked.

“Do you?” The inflection in her voice let me know she was surprised.

“I mean, yeah. I miss you. I love you.”

“I miss you, too.”

We didn't do much talking when we got to her house, honestly. Kissing her felt tense sometimes like I was kissing my worst enemy, but other times it was just what I needed. I had never loved anyone so much, and the touch of her lips brought me comfort because I had become so familiar with them. They were soft even when they were screaming or cussing me out moments before they touched mine. We laid together in her room and she buried her face into my chest. Those were the moments that I felt the least vulnerable and weak. The moments when I held her tightly in my arms, I felt a sense of control in those moments. I used those moments to love every part of her, even if that meant just embracing her.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She shook her head.

“What’s wrong, Christine?”

She lifted her head up and looked at me; for once her eyes felt like they held something other than anger inside them; they were a dark shade of brown instead of the normal pitch black. I felt a knot form in my throat as I imagined what she might have to tell me. I pushed her hair behind her ear. I wanted to kiss her more, but I refrained because I felt that she was about to tell me something serious.

“I think I’m into someone else.”

*Maybe that person can replace me,* I thought to myself.

“Okay...who?” I asked trying to act concerned.

“I can’t tell you.”

“So you don’t want to get back together?”

I didn’t know how to take this information. On one hand, if she was into someone else, that meant that I was free. On the other hand, I really did love her and the thought of her being with someone else did hurt. She said she was confused. I had started talking to someone that I liked a lot; he treated me a lot better, too. She knew about him, and it didn’t make her happy. Christine didn’t want me to be with anyone else; if she couldn’t have me, no one else could.

If I was in a relationship with her, she was mean; if I was in a relationship with someone else, she was mean; if I was by myself, she was mean. It didn’t matter the circumstances.

A few days later after class, I tried to get her to talk about it with me again.

“Are you going to tell me what’s wrong?”

“Nothing I just don’t understand why you have to keep talking to him.”

Earlier in the week, I told her that if she wasn’t sure about our relationship then I wasn’t going to end things with a good guy for someone who wasn’t sure about me.

“I don’t. I want to be with you, but you said you’re into someone else. Why would I get rid of someone good, if you’re not sure you wanna be with me?”

She turned the volume up on the radio, and that usually signified the end of our conversation. I turned the radio back down. She turned it back up, and I turned it back down, again.

“Why won’t you just talk to me? We can figure this out.”

She turned the music back up. I turned the music back down. When she went to turn it back up, I grabbed her hand and moved it away from the volume dial.

“That is so childish. Why can’t you just talk to me about this? I don’t understand. We can just have a conversation about it and work it out. Now.”

Before I could continue, I felt a fleeting pressure on my lip. It happened so quickly that I didn’t even see Christine’s right hand come across my face and hit me dead in the mouth. I just felt it, and I wasn’t expecting it.

“What the hell? What’d you do that for?”

Silence. She kept her eyes on the road. Hands on 10 and 2. My face didn’t hurt, so I figured there was nothing wrong. This sort of thing happened all the time and we continued life as normal. We’d go and get dinner or get some ice cream after a fight, and I wouldn’t mention what we had been arguing about for the rest of the night. It was like when a fight took place, she wanted to forget about it as if nothing happened. It was

strange that she did that because she was the one that was inflicting trauma. I repressed a lot of the memories, but it was like she didn't remember the things she had done a few moments after they had happened. It was one of the most disturbing habits Christine had. We continued like nothing happened, but I always felt it the morning after. Shit I still felt it. I felt it all. Every fight. Every bite. Every scar. Every bruise.

I pulled down the mirror in front of me and I saw what looked like a hole in my mouth. It wasn't bleeding too badly, and the hole sort of looked like a small cut. I thought it was just busted. That had happened before, but this time I felt that warm, metallic liquid fill my mouth. It took a while for the bleeding to start, but once it did it didn't stop.

“Can you please pull over so I can spit this blood out?”

“No. We're going home.”

“Christine, please. I need to spit this out. Just pull over quickly right here, please.”

It took me a while to convince her that I needed to spit out the blood somewhere other than the inside of her car. She cared about her charcoal grey Volvo more than anything else in the world, so I figured that was reason enough for her to pull over and let me out.

She reluctantly pulled over in front of one of the car garages in town. It was around nine-o'clock, and we were the only ones in the parking lot. Wise was pretty much vacant at this time of night. No cars drove by as I stood a few feet away from Christine's car hunched over and spitting blood onto the ground. After I had seemingly stopped the bleeding I got back into the car and I looked back in the mirror.

“I think I need to go to the hospital.”

“You’re overreacting.”

“No, I’m not. There’s a fucking hole in my mouth.”

I felt the other side of the hole on the inside of my mouth with my tongue. The inside was swollen, but I couldn't tell if the cut had gone all the way through. It was clear that I needed to go to the hospital.

“Okay, but what are you going to tell them?”

“I don’t know.”

I looked at my face in the mirror for a little longer while I thought about her question. I decided it wasn't worth it. I was used to making up stories to explain cuts and scars on my body, but nothing this serious had ever happened; once doctors got involved, I didn't think I would be able to lie my way out of this situation.

“It’s okay. Never mind. Let’s just go home.”

I didn't want to come up with a story. I didn't want to lie, and I didn't want to sit in the emergency room for three hours because Christine couldn't control her emotions. I always had to suffer for her lack of control.

We pulled into the back of our apartment building. I got out; started up the backstairs, and I finally felt the pain. I don't know what triggered it, maybe it was the cold or the rain, but all at once my mouth, my teeth, and my head began to ache. I stopped in my tracks halfway up the stairs in the rain.

“Christine, I really do think I need to go to the hospital.”

“Why? What for?”

“I’m in a lot of pain. I’ll drive myself.”

“No, it’s okay. I’ll take you.”

I was surprised at her generosity, and accepted her offer to drive me. I didn't want to go to the hospital. I didn't want my parents to have to pay the hospital bill, and I didn't want to have to explain to them why I was going to the emergency room in the first place.

"Darrian...this is bad," Christine said driving as quickly as possible to the hospital while I held my hand over my mouth to keep the blood from dripping onto the leather seats of her Volvo. Every once in a while, the warm, metallic liquid would pool into the bottom of my mouth forcing me to swallow some of it before it overflowed over my bottom lip spilled out into the car. Christine was right. Our fights were destructive like a tornado ripping through a quaint town; I was always the one who ended up bruised, cut, or with a busted lip.

I knew I'd have to tell them, I just didn't know what I was going to use to cover for Christine, or if I was going to cover for her at all. She didn't say much on the way to the hospital other than that she "didn't like who she was when she was with me." She didn't want to hurt me anymore, but I didn't buy it. As soon as she left my life, she would do everything in her power to fuck with me outside of our relationship. As much as she hated who she was when she was with me, she couldn't stay away from me any more than I couldn't stay away from her. Every time she said she was through I told her it was okay, and that it wasn't a big deal, but we both knew that it was. Whenever something like this happened we were both forced to take a step back. She saw the consequences of her actions and I saw how dangerous things were becoming for me. I realize now that I could've ended my pain earlier by just telling the truth that night. The thought that I prolonged my own suffering keeps me up at night, but at the time telling the truth wasn't an option. Christine was vindictive and she wouldn't have let me go without a fight.

When we got to the hospital, we checked in and they asked me what happened.

“I got hit playing basketball earlier this evening. You know how it is.”

Christine looked relieved and I was just glad I was able to come up with a story. I knew I needed to call my parents and I told them the same thing.

“Yeah, mom. I took an elbow to the face and now I’m here getting check out.”

My mom and dad were worried, but told me not to worry about the money. I felt a little bit better about that, but the pain was becoming unbearable at this point.

*God Damn. She hit me pretty good. There’s a fucking hole in my lip. Who keeps letting that cold air in?*

I glance at Christine and watch her scroll through her twitter feed as she sat next to me. *How is she so calm about this? This is assault, right? I’m pretty sure it is. Christine assaulted me. FUCK. What do I do? What do I say? I guess every time she hits me, it’s assault, but nobody knows about those situations except for the two of us. What do I do? Should I call the police? Will the nurses call the police? Will the nurses believe me if I lie? What if Christine goes to jail? She can’t go to jail for this, can she? FUCK. Why won’t my lip stop bleeding? Friends hitting friends isn’t illegal. Girlfriends hitting girlfriends isn’t illegal either, right? SHIT. I. don’t. know. If Christine goes to jail for this, then everyone will know what’s been happening. She’ll never forgive me. FUCK. My lip hurts.”*

“Darrian Pickett?” I hear a nurse with a southern drawl call my name.

*Finally.*

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“Looks like you’ve got quite a cut there” the first nurse says as she pulls a latex

glove over her left hand and another on over her right.

“Yeah, you want to tell us what happened?” another nurse adds as she rolls in a cart with some metal tools in plastic packages on top of it.

*FUCK. I never decided on a cover story. Maybe, I'll act like I couldn't hear them. Yeah. That might work. I can hear Christine fidgeting and feel the air moving as she sways back and forth behind me as I sit on the bed. She's just as nervous as I am.*

I ignored the nurse's questions and proceeded with my own.

“What are you guys going to do?” I asked. I struggled to get the words out as they continued to poke and prod at my mouth.

“Yeah, it looks like you're going to need stitches. You're going to need to tell us what happened, honey.”

*WHY does it matter what happened? I'm here now, and I'm getting fixed up. The details are irrelevant; at least I wish that they were. Stitches, though? That sounds pretty bad.*

“Stitches? Really? I wasn't even going to come to the hospital.”

“Yeah. It's a good thing you did. There's no way you could've gone without closing this wound. I can't imagine how you managed to do this to yourself.”

*Wound? I'm wounded, and it's all Christine's fault. If I don't say anything. She's going to get away with it. She can't get away with it.*

“Christine punched me in the face about 45 minutes ago. That's how I got this cut. Or wound.” That word tasted sour as it came out of my mouth. Most of the wounds couldn't be seen, but this one was unavoidable.

*SHIT. I just told them the truth.*

“Okay and who is Christine?”

“My friend. She’s standing right next to me.”

*WOW. I really just told them the truth.*

All movement behind me stopped. I couldn’t hear Christine fidgeting or feel her swaying back and forth. She stood completely still.

The nurses looked at Christine simultaneously before asking “It was an accident, right?”

“No...she did it on purpose.”

*That makes her sounds like a terrible human being, but I don’t know how to make it sound any better.*

They ask Christine if what I’m saying is true. She tries to deny it.

*I’m too deep in now. Of course, she would deny it, but why would I lie about something like this? The nurses won’t believe her.*

“She’s lying. She punched me square in the face while we were driving home from class literally less than an hour ago. This isn’t the first time this has happened.”

“Go call the cops, Janet,” one nurse says as she continues to treat my cut and ask me questions.

“Can we call your parents, honey? Are you safe? Where do you live?”

The cops arrived shortly to ask their own questions. It might have been the numbing medicine that they had injected into my lip, but for the first time in two years I felt absolutely no pain.

I replay that scenario over and over again in my head. That’s how I wished that night had played out, but it actually went a lot differently.

**Take Two: What Really Happened**

“Looks like you’ve got quite a cut there” the first nurse says as she pulls a latex glove over her left hand and another on over her right.

“Yeah, you want to tell us what happened?” another nurse adds as she rolls in a cart with some metal tools in plastic packages on top of it.

*“FUCK. I never decided on a cover story.”*

“Yeah. Uhm. Intramural basketball gets pretty bad.”

*None of our teammates are going to believe this. We weren’t even scheduled to play tonight. I’m going to have to make up another story to tell them when they ask me what happened to my fucking face.*

“What happened? Did you catch someone’s elbow?”

*No...Christine punched me in the face.*

“Yeah you know how it is. The game can get pretty aggressive.”

*Hopefully, their buying this shit. You know how in movies people act like they believe your story, but then they go and call the police behind your back? Maybe that wouldn’t be such a bad thing.*

“Alright, honey. Well you’re going to need stitches?”

*Stitches? Really? I’ve never had stitches before.*

“Stitches? Really? I wasn’t even going to come to the hospital.”

“Yeah. It’s a good thing you did. There’s no way you could’ve gone without closing this wound. I can’t imagine how you managed to do this to yourself.”

“Will you guys put me under?”

*I’m hoping they do. This shit already hurts badly enough.*

“No. We don’t put people under for these types of procedures. Will give you anesthesia with a needle.”

“A needle?! Can I choose to be put under instead?”

“No. It’s against protocol.”

*FUCK this. FUCK protocol. This is going to be more painful than I thought it would be. Christine’s going to get away with it, too. FUCK her. Maybe she’ll hold my hand while they’ll stitch me up. It’s the least she can do.*

She did. The nurses told me lay back on the hospital bed while they prepared the needle, and Christine offered me her hand. I grabbed it and held on tight. The nurses let her suction the blood and saliva that filled my mouth as they conducted the procedure. I’m sure was unaware that I noticed, but the smile that spread across her face as the nurses did their work made my stomach turn into knots.

Sleep escaped me that night after Christine and I had left the hospital. I lie in my bed awake with the blue light of my television and the faint sounds of the food network keeping me company. The conversation we had earlier on the way to the hospital echoed in my ears as the night progressed. She came into my room and lied down with me. My lips tingled and I wondered if it was a physical manifestation of how badly I wanted to kiss her or if it was because of the stitches or the pain medication I was given. The sharp pain that accompanied the tingling sensation is a quick reminder that it’s the latter part of the two, but that didn’t change the fact that I wanted her lips pressed against mine...even if just for a moment, but the swelling, the pain, and the stitches.

“I want to kiss you. I know that I can’t because my face is gross, but would you stay with me tonight?”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Okay, well. Will you stay a little bit longer?”

“Sure.”

She held me for a while before I felt her hands start to move over my body and her lips started to move over my neck.

“What’re you doing, Christine?”

“Just trying to make you feel good.”

It was working. I didn’t want to indulge in her seduction, but I wanted to be close to her again. I started to touch her back running my hand up and down her back. In a kind of clumsy motion, she straddled me and began to thrust her hips back and forth over my body. I grabbed onto her hips, tilted my head backwards, and closed my eyes envisioning the last time we made love.

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It had been so long, but I remembered how her body felt against mine, the feeling of her breasts in my hands, and the saltiness of her skin. I remembered her lips were soft like cotton. Even after they spit words filled with venom, they fit so well with mine like a puzzle piece that found its neighbor. In a pitch-black room, my hands glide over her body, up and down, gently grazing all the spots that make her moan. She arches her back at my touch. I wrap my arms around her, letting my lips replace my hands; I place kisses over her neck, chest, and down her long, perfect torso. Small hills form on her skin. Hairs stand on end as I continue to make my way down. Dripping like a waterfall, I find her and caress her with my tongue. I try to maintain focus, but my mind and body are preparing for my turn. My tongue moves fast and then slow and then fast again with the

tightening of her thighs around my head letting me know I'm doing it right. When she finishes, she squeezes my head between her thighs as her body contracts. She releases and rests her legs on my shoulders while she tries to catch her breath. I wiggle free of her legs and rest my head beside her on the pillow.

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I didn't think I would experience that feeling again even though she sat on top of me leaving me wanting and ready to feel all of the things I felt the last time. My lips quivered which made my stitched pull the skin around my mouth; it was painful, but I couldn't help the way my body was reacting. I wanted to kiss hers. So, so badly, but I couldn't.

"I love you." I wanted her to know that I wasn't mad. I was, but I was getting over it because shit like this happens. It was all a cycle. We'd argue day in and day out. And then she'd snap and things would get violent; after that, things would be cool because she hurt me so badly physically. Sometimes she got hurt, too, and on those days, everything became my fault. I hated hurting her, and I wouldn't have ever laid a hand on her for any other reason other than showing my true affection. After a violent outbreak, things simmered down; it was like she was giving me a break. The physical pain brought relief to my emotional and mental pain for just a little while, and then the cycle would resume. Physical pain was the only escape I had from my mind.

"When I'm feeling better, we can talk about our future, yeah?"

"I don't think we have a future."

"What do you mean?"

"You're not pretty enough. This other girl is prettier than you."

“You barely know her. If you didn’t want to be with me, why did you hit me? Why’d you ask me to stop talking to that dude? Why the fuck are you on top of me right now?”

Christine left me alone that night. She left me alone with my thoughts and unanswered questions; she left me alone with our secret, and I kept it for a while hoping that it would all be worth it; I had a sick feeling that it wouldn’t be.

The next day, I stayed home from class. The doctor said it was okay and wrote me a note. I didn’t want anyone to see my swollen lip. I was nauseous, too, and I spent the day bedridden. I think the medicine made me sick, and I puked.

That day was pretty terrible, but the days that followed were worse. I went to class, and everyone kept staring at my face. Their facial expressions said it all.

They asked me: “Jeez. What the hell happened?” or “Ew. What happened to your face?”

“Oh, I fell up the stairs in the back of my apartment complex.”

I was a clumsy ass person and they stairs were metal, so my story was believable. My friends laughed at me and said, “Why didn’t you catch yourself?” “Didn’t you used to be an athlete?”

*You’re right, I would’ve caught myself if I had actually fallen up the stairs, you assholes. Can’t you see I’m lying and that the girl sitting next to me punched me in the fucking face?*

“Ah, yeah. Sometimes things just happen too fast. I couldn’t protect my face fast enough.”

Laughter always followed my explanation, but I hoped that they would see it in my eyes or read my mind, but it didn't work out that way.

I ate chicken nuggets from McDonalds through the left side of my mouth for a week and I applied baby Orajel to my gums every hour or so to stop my teeth from aching. Christine and I didn't talk much, but she was much nicer to me while I was hurt. I knew it was because she felt bad, but the relief from her evil nature was refreshing; it didn't change the fact that she didn't want me. While my face healed, my heart did its best to catch up but that process was much slower.

***The walls are too thin. How can she not hear us? How can she not know?***

Makenzie was our third roommate my sophomore year of college. She lived next door with to Christine and me in our dorm and had become a close friend. She was a college athlete, so she was rarely ever home, but I still worried that one day she would hear what was going on in Christine's bedroom.

"Hey Makenzie, were you home at all last night?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Oh nothing. Christine and I got in a pretty bad fight, we wanted to make sure we didn't disturb you or wake you up."

"Oh okay."

"Did you hear us?"

"Not really. I could tell you guys were talking, but I couldn't understand what you were saying."

We could never be certain that she was telling the truth when we asked her if she had heard us fighting, but I found peace in knowing she answered no every time. Even if

she had heard anything, she wouldn't have said anything about it. She was quiet, kept to herself most days, and didn't like confrontation. Around us she made jokes and laugh at ours, but still didn't talk much at all.

Christine and I were extra careful on the nights we wanted to be intimate; we'd lock both of the doors to our bedrooms and spend the night in her bed. In the morning, I'd sneak back into my room before we heard Makenzie bustling around in her bedroom.

It was hard enough to keep what was going on between us secret, having a third roommate made things more difficult. Having Makenzie in our apartment was risky; having her there was like having surveillance cameras in the house. We never knew what she would see or hear.

Still the arguing continued. The violence continued and we were pulling explanations out of our asses. The night Christine put me in the hospital we weren't at home, but my injury was too severe to hide from Makenzie or anyone else for that matter. My pain medication knocked me out. I woke up in my bed the next morning when Makenzie and Christine came in to check on me.

"Yeah, she fell up the stairs. It looks pretty bad."

"How do you fall up the stairs?"

They both chuckled. It was comical, and not out of character for me. It hurt to hear Christine laughing, though, because she knew the truth; her laughter meant she didn't care.

"What do you guys want?"

"Kenzie wanted to see your face. She didn't believe me when I told her what happened."

Christine had already explained what happened, so I didn't have to. I was surprised she took the initiative. Usually it was my job to make up the story, but it was the least she could do after punching a hole in my face. Other than forcing us to create new excuses for our behavior or my injuries, Makenzie was used to make me jealous. Not in a romantic way, but whenever she got the opportunity made sure to let me know Makenzie was her favorite roommate; she made sure I knew Makenzie was her best friend even though she did not feel the same way.

"Christine's really upset. She's really sorry. You guys should just talk it out."

**"No. I'm over her and her bullshit. You should be too; she treats you like shit. I don't know why you always defend her."**

She might not have known the extent of our relationship, but she saw how Christine treated me on an almost daily basis. Makenzie witnessed my truth, and validated it. I needed that more desperately than I knew.

I felt like my only choice was to let this secret go or take my own life. I had thought about the latter countless times over those three years. I prayed that something would happen to me; that I'd get hit by a car or that Christine would take it too far and kill me. I hoped for those things because I knew it'd be easier on my family that way. Somehow, I had made it to that day. Exhaustion had settled into my bones. My body was weak and my mind was weaker. Sweat dripped from my forehead, my eyes filled with tears as my vision blurred, and I had a knot in the pit of my stomach that twisted and turned as I drove through the back roads of Wise, VA. That day was wrought with emotion. I was anxious about how I was going to form words once my parents were on the other end of the phone call

## Chapter Four: Breaking Free

### Who am I without her?

The moment our parents left us in Wise county, after helping us get settled into our dorms Christine began to sob. She didn't cry often; most times she remained hard like a stone and didn't show much emotion at all. When she did, though, anger was the emotion she emitted, not sadness.

We got separated into our orientation groups for that night's activities. I had to give her a pep talk because I knew she was nervous. Christine wasn't good at making friends, and I was the social one. I didn't understand the anxiety that she felt when meeting new people or fostering new relationships until after she left my life; not until I had to adapt and relearn how to have normal relationships. At the time, making friends was easy for me like tying my shoe, and I guess Christine was worried I was going to leave her behind.

"Christine, everything's going to be fine."

"What if no one likes me?"

"They will, though. You're great, and they'll see that."

"I'm just afraid I'll have no friends, and you'll be too busy making new friends to have time for me."

"That'll never happen. As long as I'm around you'll always have a friend."

It was easy to reassure her because I wanted nothing more than for our friendship to remain the same; as strong as it had been before we had come to college. After every orientation activity, we met up to hang out, eat, or talk about people that we met. She talked about boys that she met, and plans she made to hang out in the lounge with our

other hall mates. I had met a few people myself, but she seemed to be doing just fine without me. I knew once she got comfortable everything would be okay, and I knew people would see and love her the way that I did.

The attachment and dependence we developed when Christine moved in with me and my family, carried over into college; then, it was worse because we were in a new, unfamiliar place away from everything that made us feel comfortable. We were 300 miles away from our families and friends, and the only thing we had to remind us of home was each other. We clung to that with every ounce of strength that we had during our first year.

During the rare moments when a friend would see me without Christine or Christine without me, they asked us "hey where's your friend?" We became a package deal; practically attached at the hip like Siamese twins. We had become one entity. I could feel the empty space on the right side of the bed before I even opened my eyes in the morning. I had been sleeping by myself for quite some time, but I don't think that I had really gotten used to it, yet. We rarely ever spent any time apart. I sat in my spacious, new bed that sat in my brand-new apartment and waited for her to text me our plans for the day. I waited for her to walk into my bedroom to see if I was awake. I waited for something that wasn't going to happen. I thought about my freedom constantly and what my life would be like without Christine controlling every aspect of it; however, I hadn't thought of what I would do if she wasn't around to tell me what to do.

Research describes enmeshment and entanglement of identities and emotions and dependency in abusive relationships (Olsen, 2004; Bornstein, 2006). For example, Bornstein (2006) describes emotional dependency as the need for support from a partner

when one is capable of completing a challenge on their own (Bornstien, 2006, p. 597), while Olsen (2004) claims that dependency and enmeshment can make it hard for someone to leave an abusive situation (Olsen, 2004, p. 4). An enmeshed relationship is one in which an individual's identity and view of themselves is entirely dependent on the other person. On top of the shame I felt, I stayed with Christine because I had no idea how to live my life without her. Indeed, we were in an enmeshed relationship. There was never one without the other; she was in control, though, so I guess you could say there was no Darrian without Christine. Everything I did, everything I said, everything I thought was a product of her control. Nothing was my own. Like many other aspects of my relationship, I did not realize how much I depended on Christine until she was no longer in my life. Once Christine was gone, I thought there would be nothing left. She had taken it all. I wanted it back. I know there are things about my identity that will remain the same, but I also understand that nothing in my life will be like it was before I met Christine. Olsen (2004) writes that "as pieces of our past are drawn together in our present, the lines of our old identity may come close to our new one, but they never completely overlap. We undoubtedly will never be the same" (p. 26). After Christine left my life, I saw glimpses of my old self and my past life, but never fully felt like my life went back to normal.

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***Relax, Darrian.***

*I am relaxed...I could relax a little more though I guess.*

***It's normal for people to have more than one friend.***

*It is, right?"*

***Of course. Completely normal.***

*Christine got so mad when I tried to put time into other relationships.*

***She wanted to control you.***

*No. She just loved me so much, and didn't want to lose me.*

***I don't know why you keep telling yourself that? That wasn't love.***

*Isn't that how all friendships work, though?*

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***Relax, Darrian.***

*I am relaxed. I am.*

***No, you're sad.***

*Why am I sad?*

***Because you think you're getting replaced.***

*That's right. I am sad. I am getting replaced.*

***But you're not.***

*I am. The same closeness she has with me, she has that with someone else. How can that be?*

***It's completely normal.***

*Christine said it's not. No one, absolutely no one, came before her. If someone came before me, that meant she didn't love me anymore...so if someone comes before me, that means I'm being replaced.*

***No.***

*If a friend chooses to hangout with someone else over me, that means I'm being replaced.*

*No, Darrian.*

*If a friend confides in someone other than me, that means I'm being replaced.*

*No.*

*Yes.*

*No. Normal friendships don't work that way.*

*Yes it is. When you care about someone that's how it works. This is the way it's been for so long. I don't know anything else.*

*Yes. You do, Darrian. It's just going to take some time to get reacquainted with how normal, healthy relationships work.*

*How long will that take? When will I stop feeling replaceable and disposable? When will things go back to normal?*

*When you realize that your past wasn't normal.*

### **I-81**

The 6-hour road trip had never felt so solemn. I still haven't gotten used to driving it alone. At times like this, I wished I didn't feel things so deeply. The shell station in Ironto, the Sweet Frog in Harrisonburg, the Exxon station with the subway somewhere between Staunton and Lexington, the Pilot station across from the Ironto shell station, the random building that looks like a house somewhere between Pulaski and Christiansburg, and the random parts of the I-81 shoulder that I walked up and down all provoked memories that I haven't been able to escape for two and a half years. I'd lost count of how many hours I've spent on the interstate, but the winding, mountainous road and the events that took place upon it had become a part of who I am. I drove with Christine, someone I loved and knew; the most beautiful and evil person I had ever met. I was convinced that

you could see the darkness in her eyes. They were black and cold, until she decided to get blue colored contacts to make them look brighter. Every trip with her held its own surprises, and I didn't look forward to any of them.

We passed through Harrisonburg, and I could feel Mother Nature running her course through my body; my time of the month began as I sat in the passenger seat of Christine's car. Christine rolled her eyes when I asked for the opportunity to take care of my personal business; my request was denied several times and I couldn't stop thinking about blood seeping through the fabric of my pants onto her leather seats. When we drove in the daytime, I got fed up with Christine's antics, and decided to walk the rest of the trip. Christine would let me off on the shoulder and get out and walk with me, and I'd threaten to jump out in front of the next 18-wheeler that passed by. Anything seemed more appealing than living the rest of my life trapped in Christine's possession, but death was the only thing that could truly set me free of all the pain she had caused me. All I wanted was to be left alone and to travel in peace; I wanted to see my family even though we fought more now than we ever did when I was a kid. I knew that when I walked in the door of my home, I might feel a small moment of peace when my mother embraced me. Christine made it hard to have peace because Christine didn't know peace. All Christine knew was turmoil and dysfunction. Therefore everything she touched experienced turmoil and dysfunction. Her dysfunction spread through every aspect of my life like cancer spreading through someone's body. Christine touched me a lot. Sometimes it felt good, and sometimes it hurt. It depended on Christine's mood and how mad she was.

When I tried to sleep, Christine would swerve relentlessly down route 58 before we reached the interstate. My car was old and I knew it wasn't stable enough to handle

the way Christine was driving it. It was an SUV, and I swore that one wrong turn down this curvy road would send us tumbling down the mountain. The sad part is, if she had killed us, I wouldn't have cared. She would've been doing me a favor.

"Can you please not jerk my car like that?" I asked politely.

"I'm not jerking it, so shut up." I closed my eyes again and tried to sleep. I was up all-night dreading what today would bring. My head rested gently on the side panel of the passenger seat door, and every so often the movement of the car would lift my head off the window, my entire body would swing to the left, and I'd be slammed back into the door when Christine decided to straighten the car back up again. I decided to just sleep when we got home.

That same day after we had driven for a few hours, I grabbed the wheel and turned it viciously. Christine regained control of the car, and screamed, "What the fuck are you doing? Are you trying to kill us?"

"Why do you care if we're dead? It'd be better than living like this," I said.

"You're crazy, you know that?" You really are."

"Of course you'd say that. A few hours ago, you were swerving down the mountain at 60 miles per hour. Everything you do goes out the window the moment that I retaliate."

Christine pulled off on an exit and parked in front of a brown building that looked like house, but I'm pretty sure it was a hardware store. She let me out of the car and merged back onto the highway. I started to walk up the highway before a man in a pickup truck pulled over to the shoulder and asked me if I needed a ride.

"That's okay. My friend should be coming back soon. Thank you, though."

“Alright. Be careful.” The man looked concerned, as he should have because I-81 isn’t a place for anyone to be walking. I knew that. The cars sped by quickly and many accidents took place. I wouldn’t have cared, though, if an 18-wheeler had lost control and took me out while I walked; Christine wouldn’t have cared either. Christine returned to the shoulder and picked me up and we continued to drive like nothing had happened.

When it was my turn to drive, the same antics continued, but I could never focus on driving when Christine was fighting with me; I usually pulled over until she decided to stop. Suddenly, I felt claustrophobic. I needed to get out. I was reminded of the nights Christine hit me, the times I would hit her back, the mornings I woke up sore like I had run a marathon the night before. I pulled over to the shoulder and got out of the car. I walked about 100 feet, and then I turned to face oncoming traffic. I looked back at Christine who had gotten out of the car and was waiting for me while leaning against the hood. I stood as close as I could to the traffic. I could feel the concrete shake beneath my feet as the cars passed me and honked their horns. When people ask me why I believe in God, I think back to that moment and remember that He had to have been the only reason I didn’t step out into the road. No other force could have stopped me. I pulled my feet away from the white line that separated me from traffic and walked back to the car. I-81 was where I first tried to take my own life, while Christine stood by and watched.

### **Fall Break**

I didn’t expect to hear from Christine when I went home for fall break because JMU didn’t have one, but I found out she was going home for the weekend any way when she texted me asking to hang out.

She asked me to go with her to get her hair done. I sat patiently next to her while

her stylist washed, cut, and styled her hair.

"How does it look?"

"It looks great. I like the blonde highlights."

"Are you just saying that?"

"No, I'd tell you." I lied. Her hair really did look great, but if it didn't I wouldn't have told her. In the past, I'd be more willing tell her the truth, but I learned not to do anything to piss her off.

After her hair appointment, we went back to her house to chill. I knew her mother's birthday was coming up, and in the past, I had joined them for her birthday celebration. I thought this year would be different, but it wasn't.

"We haven't seen you in a while, Darrian." She said as we all sat around in their kitchen talking.

"I know it has been a while. I miss you guys."

"You should join us for my birthday dinner this week, but maybe we can go to dinner this week separately, too."

I didn't want to look at Christine's face when her mother extended the dinner invitation to me, but I agreed to join them. Her family had always been so kind to me and I had grown to love them and cherished them like they were my own family. Christine's mom always reassured me that I was welcome to their home anytime even if Christine wasn't there and her dad was always kind and talked about the importance of being a good person. I had only briefly witnessed the anger he was hiding that caused him to beat his daughter the way she beat me; sometimes he'd make snarky comments about his family not respecting him at the dinner table or remove himself from the room without

excusing himself first. I always thought it was strange, and his sudden mood swings reminded me a lot of Christine. They were like my family. I had joined them for Christmas and Easter dinner, and they trusted me enough to watch their dogs and house sit when they went on vacation. I thought joining them for dinner would feel like old times before things got so screwed up. They were always screwed up, but at least I knew what was going on in Christine's mind.

Christine went back to school when the weekend ended, but we stayed in touch while I waited around for her mom to reach out to me for dinner. All Christine could talk about was her new friend. She wanted her to go to dinner with her family instead of me.

"You don't have to go to dinner with us for my mom's birthday."

"I know that I don't have to, but I don't mind! It'll be fun."

"But I don't want you to come."

"Oh okay. Why not?"

"I was thinking Haley could come with us instead."

"Why can't we both go?"

"I think that'll be a little weird."

"Okay, well what am I supposed to tell your mom?"

"Don't worry about it. I'll handle it."

I had been uninvited to the birthday dinner, but Christine's mom still asked me to come to dinner with her and Christine's younger sister. We went to the Cheesecake Factory. I had to come up with an excuse for why I wouldn't be at the birthday dinner, but that wasn't hard. I just told her I was going back to school a couple days earlier. She said that it was fine, but dinner with her was peaceful. They still cared about me even if

Christine didn't. The next day Christine told me she had changed her mind about the birthday dinner.

"Why's that? Because your friend can't come?"

"Yeah, she has a family thing tonight. I'll pick you up in about an hour, so we can go to the mall to pick up my mom a present."

Christine picked me up and changed her clothes quickly in the bathroom in my living room. When we left to go to the mall she asked me if any of her clothes smelled like smoke. They didn't, but her car did smell of marijuana.

"No. Your clothes don't, but your car definitely does. Do you smoke now?"

Christine judged anyone who smoked in the past. She used to think it was disgusting, and now she was smoking it by choice. She had changed, so much and it didn't make any sense.

"I don't smoke every day, just every once in a while."

"Oh. Okay. I was going to say that's not you."

"What do you mean it's not me?"

"I mean that's not something you did before."

"Yeah, well maybe I've changed."

She was right about that. When we got to the mall, I bought her mom a candle, and then we met the rest of her family at Carrabba's for dinner.

Christine's dad hadn't changed. He was still quiet and reserved. I don't think I had ever seen him in a bad mood. Christine was happy to be with her family, which was rare. I just sat there quietly until I was spoken to. Christine talked to her mom about school, her plans for her academic career, and her plans for after school.

"I think I can make \$70,000 right out of college."

Her mother was always so nonchalant. She made a lot of money, and knew what it took to be successful. She never did or said anything to make Christine more confident in her abilities, she just nodded or politely agreed or disagreed.

"That's very hard to do, but not impossible. You'll make what you make."

Christine always made it clear how much more marketable than me she was going to be after college because of her choice to be an accountant. I was unsure what I was going to do as a communication major, but to Christine that alone meant I was going to be poor.

"I'll at least be making more than, Darrian."

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat as she continued to rag on me in front of everyone at dinner.

"Journalists make like 20,000 dollars, that's nothing. I'll be making so much more than you when we start working."

Christine's mom interjected before I could defend myself.

"That's not true. Don't say that to her, you never know what kind of job or opportunity you'll get after college. No one knows for sure."

"I'm just saying, I'm more likely to make more."

"Not necessarily." That was the end of that conversation for the night. Christine continued to chug her wine, which was also something new. I'd like to believe she tried to embarrass me in front of everyone because she was under the influence. She was a little tipsy by the time dinner was over, so I had to drive her home and wait for her to sober up before she could take me home.

We ate cake at the house and that soaked up some of the alcohol, so Christine could drive me back to my house. I wanted nothing more than to be back home with my family. Shortly after that, we got back into her car and made our way to my house.

"Why did you ask me to come to dinner?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like why did you uninvite me and then invite me again?"

"I told you because my friend couldn't go, so I figured you could."

"Oh, well you didn't have to."

"I just don't get why you think you have to be invited to every family function."

"I don't though. I was perfectly content with staying home tonight."

"I don't see the problem here."

That was the problem. She never understood the affect her actions had on me. I can count on one hand how many times I lost my cool in a moment of frustration. It didn't happen often, but when it did I couldn't control it.

"The problem is, Christine, that you treat me like shit. You have been so terrible to me, and you don't care. That's the fucking problem."

"How have I been terrible?"

"Are you kidding? You tell me you hate me, you flaunt your new friends and tell me I'm going to be poor. Not to mention you've put me in the hospital and given me stitches. You're a terrible person."

Out of everything I said that night, and I said a lot, Christine only heard me call her a terrible person.

"I can't believe you'd say that about your best friend."

"You've told me about 50 times that we aren't best friends."

"Yeah, you're not my best friend, but I'm yours. And you don't say things like that to your best friend."

I punched the dashboard a few times before she dropped me off at my house. My hand hurt, but that pain took away from the pain I felt in my heart at that moment. I texted Christine later that night to apologize and she couldn't forgive me. For her calling her a terrible person was probably the worst thing I could've done to her. It might have been the single "worst" thing I had ever said to her in my entire time knowing her.

*"I know, but it's fine. It happens you know."*

*"It's not fine. You've been abused for so long, now you think it's normal."*

*"Abused? I haven't been abused."*

*"Darrian, what you've just described to me is a textbook example of an emotionally and physically abusive relationship."*

### **Thanksgiving break**

After what happened over fall break, I didn't expect to see or hear from Christine, but of course she reached out as soon as we got home.

I only saw her a couple of times, but they were not pleasant visits. She came over once to see me after Haley had ditched her to hang out with her boyfriend. Then she asked me to help her with her create a reference page for a paper she had to turn in. I was always better at it than her.

My friend Sarah came to visit while I helped Christine, and Christine kept hinting at the reasons why we weren't friends anymore. Sarah didn't know anything about the nature of our relationship, and I didn't want her to. Christine didn't care.

"You know what you did, Darrian. It's your fault we aren't close anymore."

"Oh is it?"

"Yeah, you shouldn't have done that."

"Done what, Christine?"

"You don't want me to say it in front of her."

"Go ahead, I don't care."

I did care, but I had no idea what she was going to say. It could've been anything knowing her. I decided not to push her any further.

"You really don't want me to do that, Darrian." She was right.

"Okay, let's just finish your homework."

She left after I looked over her reference page and Sarah reminded me how vapid and difficult Christine was.

"I don't know how you deal with her, Darrian. She is too much."

I laughed at the irony because I was thinking the same thing. I didn't think that I was going to make it much longer with Christine coming in and out of my life.

I wanted to know what she didn't want to say in front of Sarah.

"What is it that I did, Christine? I'm curious."

I thought it would be a lot harder to get it out of her but with no hesitation at all she answered my question.

"We aren't friends anymore because you fell in love with me. You shouldn't have done that."

I was relieved that she hadn't said that in front of Sarah, but it still didn't make any sense. We loved each other, or at least I thought she felt the same. The next day she came

back to use my dad's printer, but I wanted to talk to her. I needed to tell her what had been going on in my life and the pain she had caused me.

"Darrian, I really need to go."

"You used my printer the least you can do is listen to me for a second."

She rolled her eyes and sat down on the bed.

"Make it quick."

"Did you know you're abusive? You've been abusing me since we met. I've been seeing a therapist."

"Why?"

"Because I'm fucking depressed and anxious about everything now because of you. I have to take antidepressants!"

I imagined that she picked up the bottle that was sitting next to me and looked at it. I thought I might've seen concern in her eyes, but I knew it wasn't sincere.

"So does your therapist know about us?"

"I mean, yeah. But she doesn't know everything."

"Well you should probably tell her, you idiot."

I wasn't offended. I knew I wouldn't get anywhere if my therapist didn't know the truth.

"I told my sister though." I was shocked. Christine's sister was friends with my brother and I knew for certain that word would get back to him, it was only a matter of time.

"Why would you tell her? Are you trying to ruin my life?"

"It doesn't matter, Darrian. Who cares?"

"I do! Because once Bubba knows, he's going to tell my parents and that won't be good for me Christine."

"That's your problem. And you can't blame me for all your problems, Darrian." That was the last time I saw Christine. Was she right? Was she really the source of my problems or were they self-inflicted. If I couldn't blame her, the only other person to blame was myself.

### **Letting Go**

Thanksgiving break was over, and I spent my last night listening to the faint sounds of my brother's television and watching the shadows the cartoon characters made on the wall to my right. My brother slept soundly in his bed while I lied in the bed next to him. I envied him and hoped that he couldn't hear my tears fall onto my pillow or my desperate sobs that accompanied them; I took deep, slow breaths in an attempt to control my heart rate. It beat so fast and so hard that I could feel it in my ears. It was around three in the morning and I had a six-hour drive back to school the next morning. I knew I wasn't going to get any sleep. My chest was tight and my breathing was shallow. I couldn't forget what Christine had said to me earlier that day.

Christine and I had agreed we wouldn't tell anyone about us. It was our secret, but sometimes the truth spilled out. It was never intentional, and it never helped anything. The people who knew stayed out of our lives for the most part; and they didn't offer me any help. Those who knew us as a couple were college friends, so the chances of our loved ones back at home finding out were slim. Once our families and close friends got involved, I knew that the consequences would ruin everything; I had thought that it would ruin my life for sure. I knew her sister would tell my brother while they sat among

the other freshman students in their math class, my brother would come home in the afternoon to tell my parents what he heard about me, and then my parents would call me and ask me to explain. I didn't want them to find out that way. It had to come from me, whether I was ready or not. I lay in bed that night completely paralyzed, my body ached like I had the flu, and my mind would not turn off. I knew what I had to do, no matter how hard it was going to be. It was a matter of life or death; fight or flight.

The next day, my therapist and I sat silently in her dark office.

“So you've made your decision?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

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Ryan, Legate, and Weinstein (2016) define coming out as the “The events surrounding one's initial disclosure of sexual orientation to one's primary social circle” (p. 552), while Cassar and Sultana (2016) describes the experience as unpredictable (p. 990). I made the decision to disclose my same-sex relationship to my parents, but my parents were concerned about how I actually identified and if I actually identified as gay or queer. At the time, I believed that there was only straight or queer partly because of the influence of my parents, but also from friends etc. I didn't think that there could be an in between or if I even fell in between the two. In regard to my sexual acts, I knew that I did because I had same-sex sexual interactions as well as heterosexual sexual interactions. In terms of my sexual orientation and how I labeled myself, I knew where I *thought* I belonged, but I was more afraid of how other people would label me after finding out that I was in a same-sex relationship. That fear and confusion made me terrified to disclose about my relationship let alone the abuse I had experienced at the hands of a woman. I

can separate my sexual acts and my sexual identity. The rigid binaries that links sexual identity, gender identity, and sexual behavior break down in my own narratives and I realize that I have agency in claiming my sexual identity, while also participating in same sex sexual relationships. I know that now, but when I decided to disclose to my family, I was sure that I would be labeled immediately, losing my agency over my identity to how others wanted to ascribe it - my family, friends, and even my faculty. I was sure that my whole experience, all the pain I had been through, the physical, emotional, and mental abuse would be limited to a conversation solely about my sexuality instead of my healing. I can say that my experience was unpredictable because I did not know what to expect, but I do not believe that I was disclosing my sexual orientation to my loved ones, and that is why I struggle to consider my experience telling friends and family as a coming out experience. Yet there are strong similarities between my own revelations and the literature on coming out. For example, research focuses on the positive or negative outcomes of coming out (Ryan et al., 2016) and worries of those that are choosing to come out (Charbonnier & Graziani, 2016). Specifically, Charbonnier and Graziani found that their participants were scared of losing the love of a relative and were afraid for their own well-being after coming out (Charbonnier & Graziani, 2016, p. 323). Further, Ryan et al. (2016) found that those negative responses from coming out had a greater impact on participants than positive responses (p. 561).

The coming out process is characterized by a host of complex identification experiences and outcomes on the individuals. For example, Dunlap (2014) found several themes pertaining to the coming out process that included mental health issues, identity confusion, and restrictive labels. Specifically, participants in this study found difficulty in

figuring out how they identified, experienced mental health problems such as depression, isolation, and anxiety, and sought to figure out what their same-sex attraction meant. Many other themes emerged from this study, but these three specifically resonated with my own experience with disclosing about my romantic and abusive relationship with Christine. I struggled with labeling myself and figuring out my identity; not so much because I considered myself queer, but because I thought I had to have some kind of answer when people asked me about my sexual orientation. I also feared that no one would believe whatever I claimed as my sexual identity. If I identified as straight, I feared that people would not believe me because I had been in a same-sex relationship. My own reflections on this experience empowered me to be okay with having a same-sex attraction and sexual experiences, but also allows me to be okay with identifying as a straight woman. In fact, my readings of queer theory would invite me to drop these labels altogether, to resist the restrictive categories of sexuality, a challenge in a social world that reinforces heterosexuality and heteronormativity at every turn. I don't identify as lesbian or bisexual, but I did fall in love with a human being who happened to be a woman. My empathy for her touched a part of my soul; a part of me that was so determined to save her from all her troubles, a part of me that didn't see male or female, just a person in need of a friend. I worked hard to be that friend; that shoulder to cry on for her, and her dependence on me transformed into my dependence on her and that turned into romantic love and sexual relationship that I did not expect. I dated a girl officially for a year, and then on and off for a couple more years after that; yet my sexual orientation wasn't the part of my identity that was shaken. Although it does contribute, the fact that I was dating a girl, was less important than the pain I was experiencing, the

dire need I was in for relief, and the journey to rebuild everything that had been broken. I wasn't hiding who I was. I didn't feel that I couldn't love whom I wanted. Telling my loved ones about my relationship with Christine was difficult and while I worried they would be upset or look at me differently, it's different because at the end of the day I was asking them to help me, not to accept me for who I was and who I might come to love.

Once I answered "no" to the question "are you gay?" my family would be solely focused on helping me recover. In this way, I considered the homophobic obstacles that others experience in coming out. In my case, I desperately needed the support to heal from the psychological and physical violence of my relationship with Christine. Yet, if I had told my family that I had been in a same-sex relationship and that I was queer, I don't believe that the focus would have been placed on my sexuality and why it was wrong instead of on my recovery. I was afraid that my mom and dad would disown me or throw scripture at me until I was no longer gay. I was afraid that I would be rejected by my family. I had disappointed my family before, but coming out as gay would have been heartbreaking for both my mom and dad. That was made clear in my mom's initial questions when I revealed my relationship with Christine to her. In my family, identifying as Christian meant that I was supposed to be straight; being in a same-sex relationship was a huge contradiction to what others expected and how they had viewed me for my whole life. My friends have always been open minded, but I still worried that they would look at me differently. This was the backdrop of my revelations.

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The time came for me to let my secret go. I was relieved knowing that I'd be free from the clutch of my abuser, but an eerie wave of guilt and regret moved through my

body as I thought of leaving Christine in the world on her own. I didn't know what she would do without me; I also didn't know what I was going to do without her.

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I needed to start with someone I considered to be a safe and supportive listener, someone who wouldn't reject me. My friend Tim should be first, I thought. Even though he was four hours away, he always knew how to comfort me when I needed it the most; I imagined I'd be able to feel his warm smile and tight hug. I typed the words, "I need to talk to you" as I sat in front of my therapist. She wanted to make sure that I was going to keep my word. I left her office and walked to class. Ironically enough, it was raining. Large drops of water splashed on the pavement and on top of my head, I was so preoccupied that I didn't care.

As soon as I sat down in my chair, I noticed that Tim had texted me back. "Okay, what's up?" My palms began to sweat as I sat in the humid classroom and typed out the events that had transpired over the last three years while I listened to my Linguistics professor talk about phonemes. I never paid attention in my linguistics class, but today my focus was especially bad. Tim's response came quickly.

"I wasn't expecting that." He gave me the response I expected. I knew it would surprise a lot of people. Shit, it surprised me too. This wasn't how I imagined my life would be, but here I was trying to explain the relationship I had been in for the past three years to someone who knew everything about me. "...But that doesn't change anything for me. You're still my friend." My chest started to feel less heavy and tears welled up in my eyes before they dropped on the desk that I was sitting at. The relief brought joy to

my heart, but anxiety overwhelmed me again as soon as my fifty-minute class came to an end.

I walked down the steep stairs behind the library in the rain. It had picked up a bit, and the large, slow drops had turned small and fast; it almost felt like hail and it stung my cheeks. I didn't mind the pain too much. I had experienced much worse, but I was focused on the next conversation I was going to have. I got to my car and drove through town, and through the back roads of Wise a few times before I pulled into the parking lot of a bank. My friend Bella was awful at returning messages, so I called her instead. I knew she would answer because I only call her if it is important. Before she even answered the phone, tears started to well up in my eyes again.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Bella.”

“What's up?”

“I just need to talk to you. Are you busy right now?”

“I'm just at lunch, but I can talk. Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I just had to tell you something.”

I told her everything right there in the parking lot of the bank, although, I don't know how she understood me because I was sobbing uncontrollably. My breathing was shallow and my temples ached.

“I hope you still want to be my friend.”

“Of course, I do. Why wouldn't I?”

I rested my head gently on the cold, leather steering wheel of my car, and began to sob even more. I couldn't think of a legitimate answer to her question. I just assumed they'd all leave once they found out.

“I guess I just didn't want you to be freaked out.”

Our conversation didn't last much longer because she was at lunch with her friend, and I didn't want to take up too much of her time. I turned my car off and decided to stay in the parking lot while I made my last phone call of the day.

I continued down my contact list of friends, bolstering my confidence so that I could later call my mom. My friend Katie was next on my list. Katie never answered her phone, but I still called her just in case she decided to pick up this time. I didn't take it personally when she didn't answer. Katie was probably the most introverted of the four of us, and she did her best to avoid talking on the phone unless absolutely necessary. I sent her a text and when she responded, I explained the same thing I told the others. She responded quickly.

“Okay.”

Her reaction didn't surprise me. Katie didn't talk much, anyway.

“I understand if you don't want to be my friend anymore or if it weirds you out,” my own internalized homophobia spills out into the receiver.

“Why would it weird me out? Why wouldn't I want to be your friend?”

Those words warmed my heart, but I couldn't help but think about how different things would have been had I told them sooner; how different things could have been had I just decided to trust. People came in and out of the bank, and watched me cry in my car.

I decided it was okay for me to cry at home. I wish I could've been done that day, but I still needed to tell my parents.

The next day was my father's birthday, and I hadn't gotten a lick of sleep. I didn't want to ruin his birthday, but I couldn't wait one more day. I sat in my bedroom and thought about all the possible scenarios that could come about after I talked my parents. Many of the scenarios involved them sending me away to the Philippines on a missions trip, so that I could be made whole again, or being kicked out of the house. Needless to say, I called my mom the moment the sun came up. She was more moderately tempered than my dad, so I knew the conversation wouldn't evolve into a screaming match. I hopped into my car and drove through the hidden neighborhoods as I attempted to explain everything to my mom. My sweat glands started to tingle all over, and the knot I had in my stomach from the previous day had returned.

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"You don't have to cry. It's okay, but I need you to tell dad," I asked.

A lump in my throat began to form, and the tears welled up in my eyes once again.

My mom asked me a shit ton of questions, some of which I wasn't comfortable answering. I thought that the relationship on its own was enough for her to process at the time; plus, I needed her to be calm enough to talk to my dad, so that I wouldn't have to.

"Do you want me to tell your dad?"

"Yes. I don't know how to tell him, and I know that he's going to yell at me."

“Okay I will. Gosh, Darrian. I wish that you had told us sooner. I don’t want you talking to her anymore. Text her mother and tell her that you can’t watch their dogs over Christmas break, and I’ll call your dad.”

I texted Christine’s mom to let her know I wouldn’t be able to honor my commitment to watch their dogs while they were on vacation in Puerto Rico. I felt terrible about canceling on such short notice, but I knew being around their house would just make things worse. Later, my mom called me back with my dad on the line.

“Darrian?”

“Yes, dad.”

The tone of his voice screamed stress and disappointment, but it was calm; just like it was when I asked for money.

“What did I always tell you about being desperate for friendship?” I knew this was coming. I had strayed far away from the daughter he had raised.

“You told me to never let someone walk all over me just because I want them to be my friend.”

At the time, I don’t think he realized that I wasn’t desperate for friendship, how much I cared for Christine, and how terrified I was of her, what she could’ve done to me, and her threats. My parents knew about Christine’s past experiences with abuse. We all tried to help her, and they knew how much it meant to me to be the best friend that I could be.

My mom’s voice interjected. A wave of relief came over me as I easily navigated through the backroads of Wise county once again. Talking in the car ensured that my

roommate or anyone else would be able to hear my conversations. Some people I wasn't ready to tell yet.

“What your dad is trying to say is that we wish that you would have told us, and that we don't understand why you didn't stand up for yourself.”

My dad didn't talk much for the rest of the phone call. I did my best to explain everything to my mom, but there was so much to say. We hung up and I drove around for a few more minutes. The winding roads calmed my nerves; they brought me peace and gave me time to think. When I got home, I had a text message from my dad. I was honestly afraid to open it.

“I just want to protect you. We'll get through this.”

Texts from my mom started to flood in, too.

“I need you to come home. You need to be here with your family.”

“No, mom. I have school.”

“You can go to community college.”

“I'll be fine.”

Going home and finishing school at the community college in my home town did appeal to me, but in my heart, I knew that going home would mean that Christine had broken me to the point I couldn't even finish school. She'd find out from a mutual friend of ours that I went home and I imagined the sick satisfaction that she would get out of hearing of my misfortune and my weakness. I didn't want to give her that satisfaction. My mom kept pushing the idea, but I insisted on finishing at Wise.

Finally, the text I had been dreading showed up on my phone. It was from Christine.

“Are you serious? Don’t ask my family or me for anything ever again. Also, tell your parents about your medication or I will.” At that moment, I realized I had made the right decision. That was the last time we spoke. It’s been two years. I continued to reveal secrets that I had kept for so long. I told my mom the truth about my trip to the emergency room and about how my phone broke the year before; I talked to her about the bruises I had and explained why I wore sweatpants almost every day for two years. I explained why I got so stressed when she wanted me to spend time at home instead of at Christine’s house. Letting go was liberating, and letting people in was empowering. I was letting go of Christine; letting go of learned behaviors, letting go of the memories, and the pain. I was letting joy in; I was letting peace in, and I was letting strength in. That was something I didn’t think I’d ever be able to do, but telling my family and friends was the first step to recovering from the violence and emotional abuse I had experienced during my time with Christine.

### **Social Support and Survivorship**

Tiny pieces of tape  
held my fragile heart together  
trying to beat and love  
through the pain.

My mind raced  
a continuous treadmill of thoughts.  
memories.  
nightmares.

Scars visible.  
Wounds exposed. I didn’t have to hide.  
anymore.  
My abuser was gone. My everything was gone  
My dignity.  
pride  
sense of purpose.  
all left with her.

She was my friend  
He was my lover  
They were my crutch  
They held me up  
when I was too weak to stand.

Lost identity  
losing her  
left perpetual sadness  
crippling sense of worthlessness.

I felt their presence  
strength that wasn't my own  
following me  
catching me when I fell

Their words echoing  
"It's over now, Darrian."  
"You're safe now, Darrian."  
"We're here for you, Darrian."  
"None of this is your fault"  
We'll get through this, Darrian."

I learned to enjoy freedom.  
recovering with each passing day  
with each of them by my side.

I knew that my family and my friends were going to be crucial to my healing process even though I had isolated myself from them for three years. Once they knew what was going on, the love and support I got from them was overwhelming. Social support is an important aspect of a victim's recovery process. Thus, it is important to examine how researchers have discussed the effects and difficulties of social support in regards to IPV. Scholars believe that theories of social support can offer insight on how intimate partner violence affects the survivor (e.g. Lanier & Maume, 2009; Bauman, Haaga, Kaltman, & Dutton 2012; Wright, 2015; Edwards et al., 2016). The aspects of social support on which these authors focus include the amount of social support that

victims are offered (e.g. Bauman et al., 2012; Weiner & Hannum, 2012), how social support can either help or hinder victims (e.g. Sherman, Skrzypek, Bell, Tatum, and Paskett, 2011), what effects no social support can have (e.g. Sarason & Sarason, 2009), and how specific locations affect social support and therefore affect intimate partner violence (Wright, 2015), and support offered on college campuses for LGBTQ community (e.g. Edwards et al., 2016) Detailing the nuances of the specific ways in which social support can be more or less successful is something that can offer insight on what victims of IPV need. Interestingly, Bauman and colleagues (2012) believe that quantity is better than quality when it comes to social support.

In another example, Edwards, Littleton, Sylaska, Crossman, & Craig (2016) focused on how support is used and provided to non-heteronormative IPV relationships. Specifically, they discussed college and universities' ability to provide support to LGBTQ+ community in regard to IPV finding that most LGBTQ+ students believed that these kinds of services were available at their university and students were not aware that they were available (Edwards et al., 2016).

Studies have also demonstrated the complex conditions that are associated with increased and decreased presence of IPV. For example, Wright (2015) examined the interactions between the environment and presence of social support and their differential impacts on the presence of IPV in those communities, finding that support from family and friends was helpful in decreasing chances of IPV, but that buffer was dependent on the socioeconomic conditions of the community. Thus, while living in a disadvantaged neighborhood increased IPV, social support did not help people in disadvantaged neighborhoods with IPV (Wright, 2015). Similarly, Lanier, & Maume (2009) found that

in rural areas having more social support decreased IPV, but that was not the case for women in urban areas (Lanier & Maume, 2009, 1322). These authors believed that:

increased social support may reduce the ‘invisibility’ of rural IPV, not necessarily by making private problems more public but by providing a key source of support in areas with reduced resources and related economic distress at the individual level. (p. 1323)

Lanier & Maume (2009) argued that social support makes intimate partner violence less likely to be kept a secret. I would have to agree. Everyone in my social network knew Christine. They hung out with us and sometimes even witnessed our fights, but in trying to keep our relationship a secret, I had to keep the abuse a secret as well. My friends and family were always there for me; they tried to be anyway. I distanced myself as far as I could from my family because of how worried I was that they would find out about my secret. Christine did her best to keep me away from my friends, and I did my absolute best to keep my secret hidden. It was more important to me to keep the relationship a secret than the abuse that I was experiencing, but keeping one secret led me to keep the other.

### Chapter Five: Discussion

My narrative of abuse and revelation shows the mundane ways that IPV can permeate a relationship, become normalized and isolate an individual from her family and friends. Further, my stories illuminate the ways in which our social locations lead to our own internalization of social definitions of abuse, leading to self-blame and responsibility for our own victimization. My everyday experiences of abuse were not the only secret I felt I needed to keep, these narratives show the ways that help-seeking behaviors can be further impacted by community attitudes and messages about same-sex relationships. My fears of rejection coupled my own internalized victim-blaming for the abuse I experienced alongside the expectation that I would face homophobic reactions when I revealed my romantic relationship with a woman.

To do this, my thesis began with a case for the use of autoethnography and narrative inquiry for this project. Second, I layered vignettes that show the events of my relationship with Christine in an episodic manner, not always in the temporal order of their happening. I've mapped out the parts of my identity that led me to hide my relationship with Christine and the abuse, my experiences of abuse, and the beginning of my journey to recovery while weaving the literature on each topic into conversation with the narratives. I did this in order to offer reflexive explanations of the experiences and feelings described in the narratives while trying to locate my story in the larger scholarly conversation on this topic. In "There are survivors" Carolyn Ellis (1993) comments on her storytelling and how it is "is unique enough to provide comparisons, yet universal enough to evoke identification" (p. 725). Similarly, using my narratives and the literature in this conversational way provides a framework, but also allows me to highlight what

makes my experiences unique to me and my life.

Using autoethnography and personal narratives to make sense of my experiences with IPV and social support was the form of inquiry that I knew I needed coming into graduate school, I truly had no idea how to go about utilizing creative writing in an academic setting. Importantly, I learned that knowledge is revealed through the writing process itself. I had not fully considered all of the factors impacting my experience until I got about halfway through the writing process for this project. While I knew that the literature on IPV in heterosexual and same-sex relationships and social support was going to be important, I had not yet understood the pivotal experiences of shame and hiding, queerness, and being a pastor's kid as an influence in my experiences with same-sex IPV and survivorship. Writing about my experiences with IPV and social support turned into an opportunity to reflect not only on the abuse but also on my childhood, how my upbringing shaped my views of both same-sex relationships and intimate partner violence, and how it influenced my ability to disclose after three years of abuse.

I spent the years after ending my relationship with Christine developing narratives of my experience and trying to put them into words, while I also navigated new relationships and recovery as a survivor. Writing was critical to my survival because I had kept everything locked away for so long. However, the real sense making started when I allowed myself to look at my experiences holistically, one affecting the other, starting long before I met Christine.

### **Implications**

There are four major implications of my thesis. First, my thesis explores what interpersonal violence looks like in relationship that begins with a close friendship that

later merges into a romantic relationship. Second, my project showcases the intersections between religious identities and sexual identifications within the context of an abusive relationship, specifically offering insight into my role as a pastor's kid in informing how I made sense of my relationship from its early beginnings to its dissolution. Third, my narratives contribute to the corpus of stories that seek to challenge simple conceptualizations that link sexual behavior, relationships and identities. Finally, the methodology showcases the manner in which autoethnography as a process has the potential to reveal the internal dilemmas and struggles that individuals like me may experience in confronting their sexual identities in a reflective manner. Thus, the methodology complicates our understandings of not only the everyday experiences of interpersonal violence in same sex relationships, but the manner in which individuals make sense of their identities in the process. I describe each of these implications in greater detail below.

First, that intimate partner violence developing out of a friendship. Research on this concept is limited and pertains mostly to violence and conflict in young adult and adolescent friendships (e.g. Heinze, Cook, Wood, Dumadag, & Zimmerman, 2017; Giordano, Copp, Longmore, & Manning, 2015). There are no narrative accounts that show that development of IPV from a friendship into a romantic relationship. From here, I think it would be valuable for research to explore the idea of an abuse and control in friendship because that is initially how my relationship with Christine started; as a controlling friendship that turned into an abusive romantic relationship. This story reveals the possibility of abuse occurring in friendship and brings attention to an issue that people might not recognize to be an issue or as an aspect of intimate partner violence. My story

might also contribute to literature and the bigger conversation on bullying as well.

Second, my these showcase the challenges of juggling multiple identities, particularly those which may seem to be in conflict, when making sense of an abusive relationship. Specifically, my experiences as a pastor's kid in both a same-sex and violent relationship offers insight into how an individual balances and tries to maintain all facets of their identity while also attempting to reconcile contradictions between parts of their identities. Barnabas Piper and others discuss the turmoil that a normal child feels growing up and acknowledges the turmoil is intensified for a pastor's child (Piper, 2014). He writes, "For a PK [pastor's kid], there is no choice but to *be* holy lest the name of Jesus and position of Daddy be shamed" (p. 27). Piper's book highlights the struggles of a pastor's child and my story gives an in-depth look at the struggle and tension that existed between my relationship with Christine, the experience of intimate partner violence and my relationship with my parents. In my mind, the only thing worse than being abused with seemingly no way out was the idea of telling my parents about my same-sex relationship. I waited three years to disclose because of how scared I was of disappointing them and how scared I was of potential rejection.

Narrative inquiry regarding how pastors' kids navigate growing up while simultaneously trying to appease their parents may also offer insight on how pastors kids are conditioned to behave throughout their lives. My relationship with my parents has grown to a place where I consider them both to be great friends, but growing up things were difficult; this project offers insight about the complexity of the relationship between a pastor's kid and their parents as they develop into adults as well. It begs the question of: how do pastors' kids shape their own beliefs and values and narrate their own stories with

the pressure of their parents' occupation looming over their heads? I believe that my story reveals insight about how the power dynamic between a pastor and his daughter can affect a daughter's willingness to ask for help. It also reveals the ability of the mother to be the mediator between a pastor and his daughter. This could also be applied to kids that are athletes and feel pressure from their parents to succeed in their sport, and to how religious pressures and stress can manifest in the life of someone who identifies as queer. Some authors discuss how people's sexual identity impacts their commitment to their religion (Gross, 2008), and the church's attempts to make amends for years of homophobia in religion (e.g. Moon, 2005). I believe that my narrative account shows the tension and how that pressure and tension can lead to more harm than good. It also offers insight on the black church and homosexuality.

Third, this project has specific implications for people who do not necessarily know where they fall on the spectrum in regard to their sexuality. The concept of queerness and using queer theory dismantles the binary of sexual identity, and empowers people to decide where they fall based on their own subjectivity. My narrative account adds to the concept of both queerness and coming out because of how I choose to identify. It's an account of the tension that can be experienced when one attempts to separate their sexual behavior from their sexual identity. For further research, I believe taking the accounts of people who have experienced participated in same-sex sexual activity but do not identify as queer would offer insight about the fluidity of sexual identity. Katz-Wise (2015) claims that sexual fluidity "calls into question traditional conceptualisations of sexual orientation as stable, and suggests that these notions of sexual orientation may not be accurate for all individuals" (p. 206). This study in

particular is a quantitative look on how people choose to identify and their sexual partners, while my narrative shows the tension and struggle of communicating the instability of sexual identity.

Finally, this thesis offers methodological implications for both the study of interpersonal violence and sexual identity formation. Narrative inquiry provided a platform for me to work through the barriers that once kept me silent. I think that a narrative account of same-sex intimate partner violence is also valuable because it describes a real-life experience with the intricate details and complexity that people might not know exist in same-sex relationships. Metta (2013) describes the process of writing as:

provide critical spaces for women's silenced experiences, voices, and stories to be told, mapped, and shared, and hence, contribute to the ways in which we make knowledge about the world and our senses of place in it....by creating new knowledge of women's lives and experiences that have been marginalized based on gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and nationality as well as their lived experiences of trauma and violence, feminist auto-ethnographers can reclaim their authority and sovereignty over their own narratives and knowledge-making. (p. 491).

My use of narrative inquiry gives me the voice that my abuser, even as another woman, my religion, and shame almost took away from me.

This form of inquiry also allowed me to feel and discuss the tensions regarding my sexual identity. This was not something I planned on doing when I first began this project simply because I felt that I had resolved any confusion that I had about my

sexuality. However, the tension that I did feel was revealed to me through my writing of these narratives. In a way, I always knew it was there. However, the articulation of the tension through narrative writing helped me to more clearly understand that I did struggle with the fact that I was participating in a same-sex relationship but somehow still felt that I identified as straight. I also reveal that struggled with disclosing my relationship and the abuse I experienced because of the scrutiny I thought I would face, revealing internalization of expectations of my parents and others. After working through constructing these narratives, I know that the choice to identify and define my experience is mine and no one else's. It always has been.

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