

# This is What Domestic Terrorism Looks Like

Home is Where the Hatred Is

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2020

More than a decade ago I worked as a newspaper reporter in a rural New York State town. For a time, I covered the police beat, and was tasked with picking up the crime blotter each morning to see if there were noteworthy crimes.

On my first day of work in a town with a population of 1,800, the chief of police told me he wouldn't release the blotter. "We got no crimes to report," he said. "only domestics."

"If someone robs the grocery store or gets stopped for DUI" he said "I'll let you know."

At other regional newspapers, part of my job was reviewing the blotter from state police headquarters and from the local police departments, neither of which balked at giving it to me. These documents were long lists of men's names followed by the crimes they'd committed.

Working as a crime reporter, even for the smallest publications, these patterns emerge. "Domestic" crimes—harassment, stalking, battery, rape, and death threats occurred with nearly the same frequency each week. The only other crimes that occurred as often were drug offenses.

I did not live in a particularly violent region of the country, still every hollow and hillside has these stories, these "domestics," creating an atmosphere of terror for the women experiencing them, but ubiquitous enough to be unmemorable, considered insignificant on a broader scale.

Invariably though, the people known for mistreating others, if not stopped, commit acts that are more violent. Like the man who murdered his girlfriend's two-year-old child, or the man who slaughtered a herd of cows with a shotgun then set his house on fire because he was "angry at his wife," or the graduate student who slit his wife's throat in a public park, or the man who raped and killed a thirteen year old and propped her body in a standing position between two dumpsters. or the men who gang raped, murdered, and buried a twenty-two-year-old woman and dumped her body in a ditch near an Indian reservation, thinking police might be thrown off their trail.

I covered crimes like these in the Rust Belt, and in farming communities, and there was little variation in the cynical way they were received by the public and by law enforcement.

This callousness is its own form of propaganda; a clear message that it's a roll of the dice for women; up to their own "good" or "smart" or "careful" behavior, whether or not they end up in that ditch. The ubiquity of violence against women also sends a message to dissociate, to look upon a depiction of your own body, ruined and put out like trash, and to barely see it.

This imposed invisibility makes each act of brutality seem discreet—disputes between two people, not crimes that are part of a system founded in hate, as long-standing and cruel as racism. A system that could cause a chief in rural law enforcement, as recently as the early '00s, to believe assaulting and terrorizing a human being was not a crime, but that robbing a grocery store was.

Once, after I had moved on from the town of 1,800, I ran into the chief of police at an ice cream stand. He was wearing his gun—a rarity. I asked him why. A man had some trouble with his lady, he said, so he paid them a visit.

The man was holding her in their house threatening to kill her and kill himself. It's all sorted out, he said with a shrug, nobody got hurt.

With the ongoing revelations of open secrets in Hollywood and in media, the statements issued by women in the arts, the #MeToo campaign holding men accountable for their actions, it's easy to think that we are in the midst of a watershed moment for women who work in culture.

It is tempting to think that this watershed moment might trickle down to all women, that together we rise, that someday soon there might be fewer stalkers and rapists on the blotter, fewer mass shootings by men who got their start beating a girlfriend. I would like to believe that.

My fear is that it might be the other way around, that the treatment of women living in places like northern Appalachia and in what are smugly referred to as the flyover states, dictate a great deal about the culture of misogyny in this country. And, that no amount of typing #MeToo as a facebook status has changed the implicit threat of physical violence and economic sanction that continues to be levied against women in every sector of society, and that emboldens abusive men.

One cannot talk about gender without context.

The economic reality is that women belong to a class of people who in the U.S. were prevented by law from voting until 1920, who were prevented for centuries from attaining education, from owning property, from having private bank accounts, who could not obtain their own credit cards until 1974, who were told it was the natural order for them to work harder and receive less pay, and who, even in the highest positions must maintain perpetual vigilance to avoid physical attacks and exploitation by people who hate us for our gender, and benefit from our lack of power.

What does that sound like?

Every woman who goes along with coercive behavior, has at the deepest levels, an understanding of where resisting has gotten an unlucky sister. Every woman who does speak up knows the potential risks. The loss of a job, the bullying, or worse.

Ten thousand women are murdered in this country every year by men, half of whom were once their intimate partners. That's double the number of soldiers killed in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—yearly. Mass murder on the installment plan. If change is to happen, it rides on women understanding that the face staring up from that ditch is our own.

The fact that there is no word like lynching or pogrom to describe gender-based violence, no word like apartheid to describe the centuries of oppression, murder, and inequality women live with, can't hide the fact that sexism is a terror campaign—one that only gets attention when it spills over and takes the lives of bystanders.

Devin Kelly, the 2017 Texas church shooter who committed the worst mass murder in the state's history, had a repressive, misogynist system of support that allowed him to escalate from sending threatening texts and abusing women to murdering 26 people in cold blood. There were vigils and talks about gun control and debates about why some shootings are labeled as terrorism and others are not.

But by the end of the week, that same number of women had been murdered by men and no one said a word.

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Fifth Estate #406, Spring, 2020

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