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IMMACULATE DECEPTION: ONE EDUCATOR'S EXPLORATION INTO  
THE SYSTEMIC SHAMING OF WOMEN IN IRELAND

A Thesis Presented

by

Alanna Scully

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Education  
Specializing in Interdisciplinary Studies

May, 2018

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis explores the topic of shame through my perspective as a pro-choice woman and future educator. It tells of the long relationship I have had with shame, which began when I had my first abortion. It also describes the history of shame inflicted on the women of Ireland, who continue to fight for their reproductive rights. I use these narratives to support my position that educators have a responsibility to create safe spaces for controversial topics and vulnerable populations on university campuses.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many twists and turns occurred during my three years as a UVM graduate school student; events that have fragmented my family and re-shaped my life in ways that I never fathomed. Three years ago, this acknowledgement section might have been a lot longer. Now, I try every day to be proud of myself and my accomplishments, recognizing that what I have been able to achieve on my own is worth celebrating. There are those, of course, who have supported my success and continually cheered me on through this process. Below I give my heartfelt thanks to them; without these beautiful souls, this thesis would not have been possible.

To my mom, who gave me life, love, and more support than a person deserves in a lifetime. I cherish you in ways that I could never describe; you are the writer in the family, not me, and I hope someday you write the story of your life, so I may discover even more ways in which I am proud of you and thankful for you. I do not know what I would do without you in my life. I love you unconditionally and wholly, and I thank you for the setting the example for me of what a woman should be.

To Robert, who gave me a chance at success and encouraged me to find my voice. I have enjoyed every moment on this path to self-discovery, and I thank you for the role you have played over the past three years as a teacher, mentor, friend, and fellow sugar-holic.

To Amy, who started out as my coach and became my friend, my neighbor, my classmate and my constant support. Every day I'm reminded of how much bad we have in the world; it is people like you that remind us how much good there is too. Your spirit shines as an ever-present light for those like me, who are constantly losing the way. I'm blessed to have met you and I hope I have been half the friend to you that you've been to me.

To Ben, who got me through this experience. I literally could not have written this narrative without your help. Thank you doesn't seem enough, but it is all I have. Thank you.

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To M, who I will be forever thankful for. We walked through that experience together, and writing this thesis, over ten years later, I still felt you walking beside me, holding my hand and propping me up on the rough days. Your words of support and encouragement to write about what we went through meant everything. I will always be here for you, the way you have been for me.

“Words have a longevity that I do not.” This is one of my favorite lines from *When Breath Becomes Air*, a novel that inspires us to live while simultaneously facing our finitude. With these words in mind, I would like to recognize two specific groups of women below. My goal with this thesis has never been to speak for them, but to add my voice and their words to a collective record, so that the injustice and indignity inflicted upon the women in this narrative does not fade easily from our memories and lasts long after we are gone. It is important to acknowledge that this systemic shaming is not just a part of our past as women, but persists today.

To the women I interviewed for this thesis, I cannot thank you enough for the bravery you showed in sharing your words and your stories with me. I realize that these were not easy memories to revisit, but you did so with grace, dignity and faith. I admire your strength, resiliency and dedication to the fight for women’s rights in Ireland. I hope you can feel me cheering you on from this side of the pond. #repealthe8th

And finally, to the throngs of women in Ireland who have experienced the societal shaming I speak of in these pages, the ones who have been silenced for far too long. Your persistence and resistance continues to inspire me. I “stand in awe of all mná”... but especially in awe of you, who are on the front lines of this fight. Please know that you matter, that you are supported, and that you will overcome.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Author and philosopher Iris Murdoch once said, “I think being a woman is like being Irish. Everyone says you’re important and nice, but you take second place all the same.” The thesis that you are about to read focuses on the shaming of women in Irish culture. It discusses the stigma of abortion and the taboo of sex education within Ireland’s culture of Catholicism, which author James Smith also refers to as the “nation’s containment culture” (Smith 2007, p. 2). It explores the identities I have held for myself, as a woman and as a pro-choice Irish-American student, and how these identities will help me in my future in education. It takes my past history with abortion and uses it to contextualize how we can better support women and cultivate safe spaces for controversial topics and vulnerable populations on college campuses. This thesis is about the ongoing fight for recognition of bodily autonomy and reproductive health as a basic human right. This is my story, their story, our story. It is the story of every woman who has taken second place, every woman who has had to make a tough decision or has had to stand by and watch as one was made for her, every woman who has been shamed or blamed by the culture she once proudly called her own. It is not history but herstory, told from the perspective of a woman awakened.

I am 35 years old, a distinction that is unremarkable at the grocery store or the arts and crafts store or the bookstore, but that stands out much more starkly when walking into a graduate school classroom. It took me 10 years to get to graduate school, 10 years to determine what I was passionate about and what population I wanted to work with. I have been behind the pack for most of my life, always running my fastest and doing my

best to catch up. I am the straggler in the back, struggling to find my pace and accept that although I will never be the winner, with sure footing and steady determination, I will get there in my own time. There is here; this thesis that you are reading is the culmination of my time of self-discovery, catch-up, and finding my way. It is the conclusion to my graduate school story. It is messy and complicated and full of doubts and questions. Who am I as a woman? How much of who I am is a product of my environment? Are the choices I have made the right ones? Would I be here today without them? Am I allowed to feel shame without feeling regret? Am I allowed to use my shame to teach others how to embrace and overcome theirs? Is all of this teachable, learnable, worthwhile? How can we, as educators, approach controversial truths and topics and encourage students to embrace and share within the safe spaces we create?

I believe that stories have the power to change our lives, to create connection when once there was loneliness, to teach us so that we do not repeat past mistakes, to foster change so that we may grow as a people and as a society. Stories can be heartbreaking to share and gut-wrenching to read, as they often give voice to atrocities we were ignorant to and awaken us to the horrors of humanity, or a lack of it. Stories are a part of us all; they create a timeline of where we came from and of who we become and how.

In this thesis, I will use Ireland as my case study in discussing the shaming of women. I will delve into Ireland's controversial abortion laws, give a brief history of sex education in Ireland, and discuss how the strict "culture of containment" in this predominantly Catholic country led to shameful Irish secrets, such as the Irish abortion trail, as well as the Magdalene Laundries and the mother and baby homes. I will candidly

share my own personal history of being what the older Irish generation might consider a “fallen woman”, a term that will be explained in Section 2.2. Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN), a writing methodology I learned in my first graduate class at the University of Vermont (UVM) with Dr. Robert Nash, allows for scholarly research to go hand-in-hand with the personal stories that make our lives “signify”, and so it seemed only natural to write my thesis in this form. In the next section, I will detail this methodology and how it helped me to find my voice as a scholarly writer.

### **1.1 The Methodology and Madness Behind Scholarly Personal Narrative**

When I first encountered Dr. Robert Nash, I was 32 years old with a complete lack of both fulfillment and direction, searching for contentment in both my personal and professional life. I had moved to Burlington two years prior, a dream realized after 30 years in the making. I had grown up spending summers on Lake Champlain with my family, and while most of my friends started flying south after college for the warmer weather, my geographical compass had always pointed me north to the Green State. Unfortunately, when it came to career aspirations, my compass always seemed to be broken. Since receiving my undergraduate degree, I had bounced from job to dead end job, never finding my place or my passion. I had landed a comfortable position at a reputable architectural firm in Burlington, but I was not happy. I went to a job coach, took personality tests online, bought self-help books and pored over them, desperate to find my calling. I wanted to know what I wanted; the unknown of my situation was slowly killing me. What others perceived as a lack of ambition, I perceived as complete

hopelessness; I desperately wanted to find a career path I loved, I just had no idea how to do that or where to start.

Two years after arriving in Vermont, I started looking into graduate programs. Even this was a daunting task; after all the job coaching and self-help exercises I was no closer to figuring out what I wanted to do with my life, so how could I possibly choose an educational program to guide me? I had always thought about being a counselor, and in recent years I had become more interested in the Higher Education field as a potential career track. I decided to combine these two interests and work towards becoming a college advisor. After touring several campuses in Vermont and meeting with directors from various programs, I found myself gravitating to a program at UVM: The Interdisciplinary Studies in Education program.

The first time I met Robert was for an early breakfast at his “office”, a local restaurant called Chefs Corner. This is true of the second, third and fourth times I met Robert. I arrived early, pulling out my notebook, lining my pens up neatly, and flipping to my page of questions containing precise spaces where Robert’s answers would soon go. This is also true of the second, third and fourth times I met Robert. Creatures of habit, we both are, and I soon got used to seeing him stroll into Chefs Corner, a book under one arm, chatting with the staff with familiar ease. I am sure he got used to seeing the novella of questions I had waiting for him as he rounded the corner to greet me. We would chat about whatever book he was reading that day, and then the conversation would flow easily, three hours gone in the blink of an eye, and I would look down at my notebook, which would contain vague scribbles under a fraction of my questions. For the most part, the questions I had would go unanswered... oftentimes, I would emerge from

our meetings with more questions that I came up with during our talk. The strange part, especially for the Type A person that I am, was that I was never bothered. Our conversations usually stirred something new and exciting in me, and I always left feeling the general contentment you experience after catching up with an old friend. Of course, I did not know our relationship would evolve into a friendship at all. At that first meeting, Robert was simply a teacher and I was simply a prospective student. He was an accomplished writer and a tenured professor who had multiple degrees and countless publications. I was an Administrative Assistant whose undergraduate degree was a hard-won distant memory. He was happy and jovial. I was terrified.

As we talked about the Interdisciplinary Studies program and the application process, he allowed me to ask my questions and explained to me that there were no GREs required for acceptance. I would have to provide transcripts detailing my undergraduate academics, of course, and I would also need to write a personal essay describing my journey to graduate school and what led me to this program. Robert told me to use my voice and write from the gut. I said I understood and nodded as he talked about heart thinking versus head thinking. I feigned comprehension but I did not have a clue, a scary realization I wrestled with the whole drive home that morning. What did he mean, I thought. Write from the gut? On an essay that would determine my acceptance into a public ivy dream school? Wasn't this a bit too important to trust to my gut? Didn't I need to be writing an academic piece, something that proved my intelligence and showed I would be an asset to the university? I started emailing Robert with clarifying questions as soon as I got home, and this began another now-familiar ritual that has become

characteristic of our friendship: I write worried emails, and he writes reassuring responses. It also began my relationship with SPN writing.

SPN is a qualitative writing methodology created by Robert Nash. SPN combines me-search with research to create an academic piece of writing that is viewed through the lens of the author's personal experiences. The goal of this writing is to move from particulars to universals and back again, communicating the value of personal experience to the audience, each of whom will take away something different from the narrative presented. The writer is kept central as the story unfolds, and it is up to the writer to move beyond the data to interpret their findings, relate the scholarly research to their own background, and convey this information in an intimate, engaging, and meaningful way. SPN writing requires vulnerability, so that a bridge can be built between author and audience and human experience can be used to teach, remind, advocate, and awaken.

The main focus of SPN writing is addressing the what, so what, and now what of a chosen topic. When we answer the question of what, we are providing the foundation of our writing. The what is essentially the meat and bones of what an author will be writing about. So what? This section explains to the audience why they should care about the topic. Why does this subject matter? How is it relevant to your audience? How will it affect their personal or professional lives? Why should they take the time to read this piece? What is so important about what the author has to say? The now what closes with the take-aways for the reader. What are the universal lessons to be learned? What did the reader relate to? How do the implications of the writing apply to a broader picture? How can I take what I have learned and further the discussion around it? In this way, the now what can also serve as a call to action.

At first glance, I was skeptical of SPN writing. It seemed too easy, too mundane... SPN was like writing my thoughts down in a journal, and surely there was nothing in the journal of my life that could be interesting or beneficial to anyone else. I did not believe that SPN could convey important ideas or interpret intellectual findings... SPN certainly has detractors who indeed believe that it cannot, that it is “too soft” to be considered an academic methodology. Demanding the evidence-based scholarly writing traditionally utilized in higher education, SPN has often been dismissed as fluff by its naysayers, the metaphorical “black sheep” of the academic world. Ironically, it was this metaphor that drew me towards learning more about it; as the literal black sheep of my family, I felt a kinship for this underdog, and decided it needed a bit more investigation. Today, three years after first becoming acquainted with SPN writing, I have done an about-face, my first impressions so far off the mark of what this methodology actually is.

What is SPN, and what does it do for me as a writer? Certainly, each scholar approaches thesis writing in a different way, and the choice of methodology is an important one. SPN allowed me to tell a human story, one not based on charts and graphs and data, but based on the value of shared human experience. Below, I detail the ways that SPN writing has helped me as a writer, a scholar, and a woman seeking meaning.

## **Finding Myself**

*“For what it’s worth: it’s never too late, or in my case too early, to be whoever you want to be.” – Eric Roth*

When I started in the Interdisciplinary Studies program at UVM, I was certainly nervous for the impending coursework; I had been out of school for 10 years, and I did not know if I had the capability to complete a Master’s program. Furthermore, I did not know if I had the interest. I had been a strong student at my undergraduate university, but my degree and the thousands of dollars I spent there had not been the Holy Grail or the Golden Ticket. I had worked hard since then, but no job was a vocation, no position ignited passion. Did I really want to spend thousands more and risk coming out of it with a similar lackluster feeling?

I was first introduced to SPN writing in my Philosophy of Education class, during the first semester spent at this public ivy institution. I was shocked at the authenticity it demanded; all I remembered from my undergraduate years was voiceless writing that you would retain just long enough to pass an exam. SPN asked for my story first: who was I and what was important to me? These are questions that I was allowed to process and explore with each writing assignment. SPN allows you the space to come to terms with your thoughts and feelings about your past, present and future. It implores you to find yourself by tracing your journey, while teaching you that what you believe now may change in the future. SPN taught me that I am a learner of myself and will continue to be; I will be a life-long student in this subject. Like all humans, I am constantly

evolving; SPN reminds me to check in with my authenticity so that I may always be aware of my current truths and unanswered questions. SPN gives me the freedom to be myself; after all, as the popular saying goes, “everyone else is already taken.”

### **Fostering Connection**

*“The shortest distance between two people is a story.” – Patti Digh, as heard in a lecture*

*by Robert Nash*

Shortly after I moved to Burlington, the MOTH radio hour started hosting monthly shows at a local restaurant. Truth be told, I did not know what MOTH was until the monthly Story Slams began, and I decided to check it out with a friend from work who was a fan of the radio program. MOTH embraces storytelling in its truest and simplest form: one storyteller, an audience, and words meant to enlighten, entertain, and evoke connection. The MOTH originated in Georgia, where founder George Dawes Green recalled how moths would gather around the porch light as he and his friends told each other tantalizing tales late into the summer nights. A beautiful visual in itself, the creation of MOTH demonstrates one of the most important aspects of SPN writing: storytelling as a way to bring people together. The Burlington MOTH gatherings are proof that people long for this type of connection; tickets sell out in a matter of hours, and month after month, ArtsRiot is packed to the brim with storytellers and their anxious audience, everyone awaiting to be transfixed, transported, and transformed.

Why are we so desperate to connect with people? Brené Brown (2012) suggests that we are hard wired to connect with others, that it is the very reason we exist; our culture's obsession with staying busy certainly seems to echo this viewpoint. As a single woman, I spend a fair amount of time planning events and get-togethers; outside of work hours, I spend the majority of my week alone, and so I like to fill my planner with brunches, group hikes, and girls' nights on the weekends. For me, connection is about alleviating loneliness and the sadness that can often accompany it. At the end of the true-life movie *Into the Wild*, Chris McCandless, alone and dying, scribbles between the lines of a book "Happiness is only real when shared." In many ways, I believe this to be true. The happiest times in my life have been when I am surrounded by others; very rarely does an evening alone produce true elation or any kind of good story or memory to recall.

SPN fosters pure connection by being raw, unassuming, and utterly authentic. It is about listening more than talking, finding commonality in conflict, and fostering community above competition. SPN forces us to re-examine our realities by exposing us to new ideologies. SPN implores us to approach each other with compassion and empathy, so that we may learn and build from what we have in common, rather than close each other off because of our differences. I believe that the four most powerful words in the English language are "tell me a story". SPN provides a doorway into each other's worlds; we just have to be brave enough to step through it by asking for someone's story and sharing ours in return.

## **Embracing Vulnerability**

*“When you shut down vulnerability, you shut down opportunity.”- Brené Brown*

When I first started learning about SPN, there were numerous fears about what I would be writing and whether anyone would or should care. As far as the methodology, however, my greatest fear was this: I could fall into the habit of using the written word as my therapist, and I could lose my audience by over-sharing with them. Brené Brown (2012) calls this floodlighting: sharing vulnerability and shame stories with those who we have little or no connection to, who in turn wince and turn away from our abrasive admissions. I didn't want this, but what I was writing was so deeply personal, and yes, so deeply shameful. I barely knew my classmates: how could I avoid floodlighting them?

First, I learned the connection I talked about above must be watered as much as possible, whether you are writing for an acquaintance, friend, or anonymous audience. Show the same respect they are showing you, by acknowledging that your truth may not be somebody else's and that your words are not infallible. Inspire vulnerability by showing your own. Write from the trenches, as openly and honestly as possible. This serves to inspire a common recognition that we are all human and therefore all capable of missteps, regret, and humiliation, all the while being deserving of compassion, forgiveness and redemption. These are the human experiences that connect us; by refusing to be vulnerable in sharing them, we isolate ourselves and shut down connection. We miss an opportunity for personal growth and enrichment.

Second, I came to understand that while my writing could be therapy, my audience could and should not serve me the same way. While I was searching for meaning for myself through my words, I needed to remember that my readers would be doing the same. They would be searching for how my words connected to their lives in a way that might be illuminating or transformative. SPN holds me responsible for providing this connection: my writing cannot be a one-sided word-dump, and telling my story cannot be a chance to clear my conscience and call it a day. SPN writing reminds me of the obligation my words have to serve a greater purpose. I can ensure this by exposing my vulnerability and writing unselfishly through themes of the human experience, and not just focusing on the particulars of my own human experience.

### **Validating my Voice**

*“I learned the significance of my own insignificant life.” - Frank McCourt*

During the course of my Master’s program, I sat in on a meeting of Robert’s Religion, Spirituality and Education course. As we were going around the room getting acquainted with one another, and I was smiling at familiar and unfamiliar faces, Robert piggybacked on one student’s introduction of herself. He said that when they met (again at Chefs Corner), she told him she never felt the need to be important. I felt an immediate and overwhelming sense of respect for this woman as Robert went on; she wasn’t turning red or getting embarrassed, she looked unapologetic and unashamed. She looked strong and proud and dedicated, the way I want to look when I disclose that I, too,

have never had the desire to feel important. At the same time, her revelation was a reminder that being unimportant does not mean that her life, and mine, cannot signify. To the contrary; at that very moment, she became significant to me. I have never had a class with this person and I have not seen her since that day, but I remember her face and her words because of our commonality, because of the unspoken connection produced through our shared truth. Her disclosure validated my own internal voice. It is okay to want to be unimportant; that does not mean you do not have things to say or contributions to make.

There have been so many times in my life where I have come across people who made me feel that my thoughts, opinions and beliefs do not matter. Over the years, I have learned that while healthy disagreement and debate is vital for our intellectual evolution, there are those who will try to invalidate your voice simply by pretending you don't have one. SPN writing connects you to the people who know otherwise, the people who know that thoughts and feelings are all we have, and that sharing them through a vulnerable and open voice brings us closer to each other, and to our own humanity.

Alex Haley tells us, "Every death is like the burning of a library" (Haley, cited in Pipher 2006, p. 45). How many beneficial stories and valuable lessons would be lost if we spoke only in statistics, charts and graphs? Scholarship is validated through personal voice, and personal voice is validated through the understanding that everyone has a unique story to tell that is worthy of being heard. It is the connections we make to the data, but also to each other and to ourselves, that bring SPN to life. The lessons we leave behind through our actions, our words, and the causes we champion have the power to make even a simple and "unimportant" life significant. As a classmate once said so

eloquently, “I believe I am incredible because everyone is.” SPN validates our voices by allowing us to express what is truly important to us, and by building a community that rallies around our success.

## **Unshackling the Shame**

*“Being likeable is complicated. It doesn’t mean hiding all our flaws.” - Mary Pipher*

When I first thought about writing a thesis, there was no question what I wanted to write about, what events had the most effect on me. They were the same events that were in the forefront of my mind after learning about the Magdalene Women and Ireland’s ongoing abortion crisis: I wanted to write about terminating my pregnancies. During the time period that this idea began to percolate, the media was covering a rape case at nearby St. Paul’s School in New Hampshire, and soon after that, a similar case at Stanford University in California. We were inundated with pictures of Owen Labrie and Brock Turner, and my heart broke over their victims and the way their lives had been tragically and horrifically transformed at the hands of another. Like the Magdalene Women and the women who suffer under Ireland’s 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment, they were stripped of their free will and human agency; they had no choice in their suffering. I began to think about myself, and what I was considering writing about. Am I allowed to speak of my suffering and call it that at all, if I was the one to blame? When Dr. Norman Rosenthal (2013) wrote about adversity, he wrote of the shame that comes with the adversity you create yourself through some mistake or error in judgment. This was the shame I have

lived with for 17 years. It was my choices that had brought about my guilt; unlike the victims of sexual assault or rape, I had sex by choice. Unlike the Magdalene Women who were forced to give up their children, I chose to terminate mine. Am I allowed to say that I suffered, when I was the cause and reason for it?

I believe the answer is yes, and the truth is that the shame should never have been mine to carry alone. The burden of being a woman is that we are often subjected to indignity and forced to wear the scarlet letter, while our male counterparts do not have the same cross to bear. Writing about this imbalance allows me to release some of the burden and move past the shame that has been both self- and culturally-inflicted upon me. I understand that abortion is a very taboo subject, and there is certainly a risk of being disliked for my decisions. Further, there is a risk of being absolutely despised for writing about these choices openly. It was these very thoughts that kept me up at night, these very thoughts that almost stopped this thesis in its tracks. The fact is, I have been silent for too long, and though I may have been the one who put myself there, I need to write from the margins and let the chips fall where they may. Why do I need to be better than my story? Hiding this piece of myself hides it all; the choices I made were the defining moments of my life, and there is not a day that goes by that I do not think of those decisions with both gratitude and sorrow. Too often, we compartmentalize to close off the events that hurt us or to lock away the parts of ourselves we do not like. It is endurance through suppression, it is self-preservation at its best. And it is harmful, because all it does is compound the shame, which in turn compounds the stigma. SPN writing is about pushing boundaries, especially the comfortable ones we set for ourselves. It is about shattering stigmas and stereotypes. It takes courage and grit, and the road isn't

easy. “Often the result of daring greatly isn’t a victory march as much as it is a quiet sense of freedom mixed with a little battle fatigue” (Brown 2012, p. 43). I know I will emerge from this experience exhausted and a bit bruised, but also proud of myself for being brave enough to honor my story. No longer will I hold my shame in silence. It is time for liberation.

### **Healing the Hurt**

*“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”- William Faulkner*

William Faulkner said it best when he reflected that our past is, essentially, never behind us. While some writers might use SPN as a way to relate to their world in the present, others may use SPN to reconcile who they were and what happened to them in the past. I argue that these past and present worlds are one and the same. We bring our past into our present and our future, and SPN provides an outlet for writers to process past traumas, reconcile past events, and even make amends for past missteps. We can do this by finding and sharing the greater meaning of our experiences. Each event we go through provides a valuable lesson, and each lesson we learn is one we can also teach. By ensuring that some good comes out of our suffering, our adversity, and even our mistakes, we can start to heal, forgive, and live alongside our pain, without letting it suffocate us or stop us cold.

I referenced Chris McCandless above, the subject of the book and subsequent movie *Into the Wild*. McCandless was an avid outdoorsman, and his decision to live off

the wild in Alaska is what eventually led to his death in a broken down bus in Alaska's backwoods. Emaciated and shivering, McCandless writes, "Happiness is only real when shared." Whether this quote was something Chris really wrote or a liberty the author of the book or director of the film took, I do not know. And no one will ever know what the last moments of his life were actually like. What I do know is that while solitude can be tempting and disconnection can feel gratifying, we need people to both share in our joys and help shoulder our burdens. The phrase "it takes a village" is relevant not just for our upbringing but for our continued existence. To add on to the final thought left with us in *Into the Wild*, I would say that sadness is only healed when shared. SPN gives me the opportunity to heal my past scars by sharing the value of the hard lessons I learned, and learning from how these lessons affect others. The circle of reciprocity never ends. Through SPN, we invite others to bear witness to our meaning-making experiences, knowing that everyone in our audience is going to take something different away from the story we tell. That is the power of the written word: the power of perception.

### **So What Makes SPN Scholarly?**

This is the first thing that traditional scholarly writers and readers want to know: why should SPN be considered true academic writing? What is it that makes personal stories important in an academic context? Many scholars argue that with all this talk about the self, the research is lost. I would argue that the research is found, and given new significance to the writer and the reader simultaneously. Why should we care about the topic an author writes about? SPN helps a writer illustrate the importance of a topic

by telling you how it affected them directly. There is a relatability that can be lost in strictly academic writing. This is putting the research in a context that is both interesting and informative. SPN offers a way of understanding research by making it more accessible and more appealing to the reader.

### **What is eSPN?**

Epistolary Scholarly Personal Narrative (eSPN) is a creative variation of SPN that allows the writer to utilize letters, one of the oldest styles of communication, to convey their thoughts, opinions, feelings and passions to the reader. Like SPN, it requires vulnerability and authenticity. Though this thesis is written predominantly in SPN, I utilize eSPN in my conclusion to address my future colleagues in education. My objective in using this type of SPN to close this paper is to directly connect with my audience, to let them know the lessons I have learned through the thesis-writing process, and to inspire a dialogue that I hope will continue after these pages are finished.

## **1.2 Establishing My Overall Theme and Its Implications for My Audience**

I started the process of writing this thesis over a year ago. I would take my laptop out onto my front porch, and I would let the words flow freely as I talked about my past experiences, my past life. These pages were both the easiest and hardest to write; I was confronting my demons in a way I never expected to be able to, especially in an academic setting. I think this has been one of the greatest gifts of the Interdisciplinary program: the

realization that scholarship comes from all different fields and voices, and that they all have a place... including mine. In the pages that will follow, you will engage with academic research, along with a mix of other sources that will complement it in a way that, I hope, adds to the narrative presented.

Over and over in my research and in my own personal writing, I kept coming back to that dirty little s-word: shame. We hear it all the time and there is not one person I know who has been immune to its wrath. But what does it really mean? There are thousands of different opinions, of course, and I would invite you to explore your own definitions of shame as you read this thesis. To me, shame is the simple fear that we are not worthy. Something that we did, something that we said, the way that we were raised, the way that we interact, the way that we look and dress... we are simply not good enough. Of course, this inherent lack of self-worth is compounded by external influences that both show and tell us how we really should be. And in the narrative presented here, you will see that I focus on one such influence, the patriarchal culture of Catholicism in Ireland, to make the point that shame around sexuality, as well as the direct shaming of women who transgress cultural norms, has led to devastating consequences.

“Shame is universal, but the messages and expectations that drive shame are organized by gender” (Brown 2012, p. 107). I focus on women and the unique shame that we face not only because of its long history of oppression, but because it is currently the driving force behind social change that I hope will continue for years to come. Women continue to step out of the shadows and demand that their stories be heard. The #metoo and #timesup movements have shown us that women are done being shamed and playing nice to placate powerful men and to satisfy society’s view of how a good girl

should act. The #repealthe8th campaign in Ireland is helping women who have been silenced to speak their truths loud enough for political leaders to finally sit up and take notice. Women are being empowered to step to the podium and speak their injustices aloud. This begs the question: now that we have a platform on which to speak, what are the best ways to share our stories while people are still listening?

For me, this writing is my small contribution to a shifting cultural narrative in which women are shedding the shame that used to be synonymous with not only bodily autonomy, but with the very lived experience of being a woman. I wish I could say there was some grand call to action that I have come up with that would turn this short-term excitement into a long-term social initiative. Unfortunately, there is nothing quite so ambitious contained in these pages, but it is my belief that you have to initiate change locally before you can expect change globally. My friend Amy recently said to me, “You can’t stop global warming without starting in your neighborhood.” This is me, starting in my neighborhood, asking my neighbors to examine their own perceptions of shame, so that we become more fully aware of it, how we embody it and how we project it, how we conquer it and ultimately transcend it. These words are my own transcendence; in sharing things that have previously been unspeakable for me, I am looking my shame in the face and saying “no more.” I am done living with my secret shame as my constant companion.

I realize that portions of this thesis are not for everyone, and I am not asking you to change your own beliefs about social issues such as abortion. I am asking that you consider different ways of looking at this controversial topic. I am asking that you approach the stories told here with benevolence and support for the women who lived

them and had the courage to share them. I am asking that you consider the way that shame has shaped the very experience of being a woman.

I also recognize that parts of this thesis are critical of the Catholic Church, and I wish to make it clear that I do not aim to alter, demean or degrade anyone's faith in these pages. As a secular humanist, I abstain from religious and spiritual practice while advocating and encouraging religious autonomy for those who find their comfort, their truth, and sometimes, their very identity, in their faith. I am pro-choice in more ways than one, and I support a woman's right to both bodily and religious autonomy. The reality, however, is that these two things are commonly in conflict with each other, and the teachings of shame often synonymous with the Catholic Church can serve to further marginalize vulnerable women. The pages that follow give a factual representation of Ireland's history of shame, but the representation of these facts is undoubtedly influenced by my own experiences; how I have lived them, how I have interpreted them, how I have learned from them. In his truly academic account of Ireland's Magdalen Laundries, James Smith provides the preface that "moral outrage and academic objectivity do not sit easily on the same page" (Smith 2007, p. xix). Part of the reason I utilized SPN when writing on this topic is that I do not claim to be as objective as Smith; you will see that moral outrage does sneak onto these pages, and I welcome it as part of the process of confronting shame through this type of storytelling. I think it is important to name the parties culpable for the persistent shaming of women, so that there is an understanding that forgiving is not the same as forgetting. A collective public archive of these events, narratives and stories also serves as a lesson to future generations, so that past mistakes

do not recur. As George Santayana stated in 1962 (p. 284), “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

I write this thesis in the hopes that even one woman will read it and recognize how their own shame has held them back. I write it for anyone who works with women and for women, anyone who is an educator in the literal or metaphorical sense of the word. For anyone who has a daughter, sister, or friend who has felt the sting of shame inflicted on them. I write it for any woman who is being marginalized at this very moment. I see you. I feel you. I am with you.

## CHAPTER 2: A HISTORY OF SHAME

*“The biggest sin in Ireland, well apart from having a baby in them days without being married, was to talk. You never let the neighbors know.”*

*Martha Cooney, Sex in a Cold Climate*

I have been a student of shame for as long as I can remember. Long before I could name it, I could claim it... I have viewed my body with contempt and disgust, I have stayed quiet in classrooms for fear of sounding unintelligent, I have apologized profusely and excessively for things that have not been my fault or did not warrant an apology to begin with. It was during one of these “sorry sessions”, when I was sincerely apologizing to a waiter for not moving my salad plate out of the way fast enough for my main course, that my boyfriend at the time, who was born and raised in Ireland, rolled his eyes and asked me jokingly “Are you sure you’re not Irish?” I looked at him quizzically, unsure of the point he was trying to make. “Because you seem to have that unrelenting Irish guilt that most of us here have!” I laughed at the joke; I had only been in Ireland for two months at that time, but I knew exactly what he was talking about. Guilt and shame seemed to be as synonymous with Ireland as rainy weather and Guinness.

I didn’t know it then, but there is a huge difference between guilt and shame. Brené Brown (2012), who I consider to be an expert on both topics, makes it simple for us: guilt is the feeling that we did something bad, while shame is the feeling that we are bad. Brown goes on to explain that while both emotions hold immense power, guilt has the ability to affect positive change in us, while shame is destructive and makes us believe we are unworthy. To me, guilt is a surface emotion; it is temporary and fairly easy to rectify. If we are conscious of the transgression between who we are and what we

did, guilt can help us to right the wrong without any long-term damage to ourselves or others. Shame, on the other hand, is the guilt we internalize; essentially, the bad thing we did makes us a bad person. Shame is self-destructive because it makes us believe that we do not have the capacity to change and improve ourselves. This is not a fleeting emotion that is quickly or easily repaired, and the feelings of disconnection and inadequacy that accompany shame can be a life-long hindrance to our development and well-being.

I began this chapter with a quote from the documentary *Sex in a Cold Climate*, which shares four survivor accounts of their time inside Ireland's Magdalene laundry system. In doing the research for this thesis, a recurring theme I came across was Ireland's obsession with keeping up appearances. Diarmaid Ferriter in 2009 (p. 546) rightly called this "a preoccupation with what was seen, not what was suffered". While other countries were struggling with social problems like sexual abuse and teenage pregnancy, Ireland was seen as the land of Catholic virtue, a fallacy that the Church and State worked together to protect. "Not in Ireland" (Ferriter 2009, p. 398) became the nation's unofficial mantra, rolling off the tongues of priests and archbishops as smoothly and as frequently as "Hail Mary" and "let us pray". It wasn't just the Catholic Church, but rather the wider deference to the Catholic Church by both government and society, which resulted in a culture where shame was used as a tool and silence was seen as the only solution.

What makes shame so appealing as a tool for conformity? In my experience, shame exploits our insecurities and capitalizes on our past failures, creating a toxic atmosphere where fear replaces vulnerability. We are afraid that if we put ourselves out there, that if we share our truths and "dare greatly" (Brown 2012, p.1), others will laugh

at us, reject us, tell us we are not enough. We let this fear keep us from deviating from the norm; we conform because we want to be accepted and we want to be a part of something.

“We live in a world where most people still subscribe to the belief that shame is a good tool for keeping people in line... Researchers don’t find shame correlated with positive outcomes at all- there are no data to support that shame is a helpful compass for good behavior” (Brown 2012, pp. 72-73). When I was studying in Ireland in the fall of 2017, I went to the Galway Cathedral one Sunday morning for mass. I am not Catholic, but I was knee deep in this thesis and I wanted to see the inside of the cathedral, so I told myself that for educational purposes, I would attend Sunday service. Within five minutes of the sermon starting, however, I was told at least five times that I needed to beg forgiveness for the sins I had committed since last Sunday. I sat, dumbfounded and defensive, thinking to myself, “But I was so good this week, I really don’t think I did anything wrong...” I found myself shutting down, angry that Catholic service often focuses on our faults instead of celebrating our strengths. I believe the Catholic Church has long used shame as a weapon of social control, especially in Ireland; they emanated power from the pulpit and used fear to elicit obedience.

In this chapter, I will discuss shame as it relates to women in Irish society and Irish history. I will start with a general overview of Ireland’s Catholic culture and how the Church influenced the availability of sexual education in schools across the country. I will then give a brief history of the “fallen women” of Ireland, who were considered shameful objects that needed to be removed from public view (Ferriter 2009). Finally, I will talk about Ireland’s abortion laws and examine the past cases and United Nations

(UN) recommendations that have led to the upcoming referendum, where Irish citizens will have the opportunity to vote to repeal the incredibly strict abortion laws that are enshrined in their constitution.

Throughout these sections, I will also be referring to interviews I conducted in Ireland in November 2017. Three of these interviews were conducted during a marathon day in Dublin; the other two were conducted in Cork and Galway on different dates. The majority of these interviewees expressed their desire for anonymity, which shows that the stigma surrounding abortion and reproductive rights in Ireland is still very much present. “S” and “G” are Irish citizens who both flew to England to terminate their pregnancies. “L” is an American living in Ireland who flew home to the states to have an abortion. “P” is a woman who accompanied a friend to Liverpool for a termination. My final interview, Catherine Coffey O’Brien, is a former inmate of both an industrial school and a mother and baby home. A second-generation survivor who was once considered a “fallen woman”, Catherine spent much of her early life institutionalized, and wished to have her full name published as a way to preserve the collective memory of a nation that is eager to forget. The narrative that emerged from these conversations is the one that I expected, but so much more: the deep-rooted, Irish version of Catholic shame is so ingrained in Irish society and culture that it has become a standard characteristic of Irish identity.

These interviews, as well as the snippets of history I share here, fall under a broad umbrella of Irish shame, one that needs to be continually named and claimed in order to honor those who have suffered because of it.

## **2.1 The Moral Authority: Ireland's Culture of Catholicism**

“Culture narratives and nostalgia around the Republic of Ireland’s foundation as a state are markedly characterized by Catholicism, dating back to missionaries of the fifth century” (Sherlock 2012, p. 388). While this brief background of Ireland’s culture of Catholicism will not start at the fifth century, it is worth discussing how historical events like the Great Famine and the partitioning of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland reinforced the Catholic stronghold on Irish culture, and particularly, its influence on the nation’s moral climate. This will help to inform the following sections on sex education and Ireland’s response to women who have transgressed sexual norms in the past and present, as well as provide a basic understanding of how Ireland’s culture of Catholicism continues to govern as the self-appointed moral authority of the nation.

Prior to the Great Famine, the ratio between priests and parishioners had been declining; the population of Ireland was increasing so rapidly that the Church had been unable to recruit clergy fast enough to keep up with the influx of followers. After the Famine, however, the macabre reality was that the population had decreased so significantly due to death and emigration that the Church was able to better fulfill the spiritual needs of its followers.. This, in combination with British supremacy permeating Irish culture, led to a “devotional revolution” that the Church was only equipped to handle after the Great Famine (Miller 1975, p. 83). Particularly, the replacement of the Gaelic language with English may have created a sense of lost identity among Irish people, causing them to look elsewhere for a new symbol of their culture and their collective identity. “This is what sociologists would call a functional explanation: the use

of the Irish language fulfilled a role which had to be performed by something else when the language disappeared” (Miller 1975, p. 88). Miller (p. 94) also gives a broader explanation, taking into account the modernization of Ireland during the nineteenth century when he states, “whether more formal religious practices will flourish depends on whether the religious structure they represent functions to alleviate the peculiar stresses arising out of modernization itself.”

Indeed, it may have been a comfort and familiarity with the Church as a symbol of Irish nationalism that contributed to the continued dedication and loyalty of the Irish people after the War of Independence. The southern territory of Ireland became known as the Irish Free State, and later the Republic of Ireland, while the north became Northern Ireland, opting out of the Irish Free State in order to remain in the United Kingdom. While the dominant religion in the North was Protestant (with followers who were also known as unionists), Catholicism commanded the Free State, where “few concessions were deemed necessary in the way of pluralism in the institutions of state, in the education system, or in the culture generally” (Rossiter 2009, p. 128). Catholicism had become ingrained in Irish society and culture, particularly in the area of sexual morality, and the Church and State worked together to squash contradictions to their desired image of a puritanical Irish community (Smith 2007). This emerging picture of Ireland was especially oppressive to women, whose identity was now perceived and expected to be maintained solely in the domestic sphere; “women were mothers, women were wives” (Valiulus, cited in Smith 2007, p. 3).

So how did Catholic morality become “a hallmark of Irish identity”? (Smith 2007, p. 3). The alliance between Church and State played a huge role in the emergence of

moral purity as a national trademark, one that sought to conceal social problems and represent Ireland as a beacon of goodness and chastity. Within the first five years of the establishment of the Free State, the Church and State had already collaborated on legislation that had censored films and books and outlawed divorce (Smith 2007). There was also a long list of investigations conducted, and the Church was often consulted before the reports from these inquiries made it to the legislation process. Because of the focus of this thesis, I will only give brief details on the Carrigan Report (Report of the Committee on the Criminal Law Amendment Acts 1931), which James Smith in 2007 (p. 2) called “a formative moment in establishing an official state attitude toward ‘sexual immorality’ and the subsequent legislation in authorizing the nation’s containment culture.”

The Carrigan Committee was formed in June 1930 to address issues such as Ireland’s legal age of consent and the rise of juvenile prostitution. The Committee consisted of 29 members examining sociosexual topics and giving testimony about how the law approached sexual crime in Ireland (Ferriter 2009). These witnesses consisted of police (known in Ireland as Garda), clergy, lawyers and female doctors. In the end, the Carrigan Committee Report was the key influence behind the Dance Hall Act and the Criminal Law Amendment Act, both passed in 1935 (Smith 2007). The Dance Hall Act sought to crack down on the “loosening of morals” (Ferriter 2009, p. 137) in Ireland by restricting the number of dance hall licenses, while the Criminal Law Amendment Act outlawed contraception and raised the legal age of consent to 17 (Ferriter 2009).

Besides the legislation it produced, the significance of the Carrigan Report lay in the narrative that emerged from it, or, should I say, that did not emerge at all. The

Carrigan Report painted a grossly accurate picture of Ireland that contradicted everything the Church and State had worked to represent, so much so that “the obvious conclusion to be drawn is that the ordinary feelings of decency and the influence of religion have failed in this country and the only remedy is by way of police action” (cited in Ferriter 2009, p. 141). Because the Carrigan Report portrayed Ireland in an unflattering light, it was decided on direction from the Department of Justice that it would not be made public, which “legitimized the stigmatization of illegitimacy and contributed to the perpetuation of oppressive conditions directly and disproportionately impinging on women and eliding male culpability” (Smith 2007, pp. 16-17). It was determined that wide circulation of the report would encourage public discussion about morality in Ireland, and that doing so could undermine the Catholic Church, as well as the authorities who were charged with handling sexual crimes. It could be argued that these two entities, the Garda and the Catholic Church, had the most influence on the outcome of the Carrigan Report. Garda Commissioner Eoin O’Duffy provided statistical analysis that shed light on the prevalence and immoral nature of sexual crimes occurring in all 26 counties and urged the State that “the whole question of morality crimes should be now dealt with from an Irish point of view” (O’Duffy, cited in Smith 2007, p. 12). The Church, for its part, contributed largely to the suppression of the report, but was also called upon by the newly elected Minister for Justice, James Geoghegan, when the report moved toward legislation. In the end, their influence can be seen in key elements of both the Dance Hall Act and the Criminal Law Amendment Act.

It is noteworthy to add that while 18 of the 29 members of the Carrigan Committee were female, their testimony was almost completely ignored in the final

report submitted. Although they were accomplished women who were well established in medicine, education and social work, their recommendation of “prevention rather than punishment” (Smith 2007, p. 14) was overruled. Furthermore, their emphasis on sex education for young Irish women, particularly those that were impoverished or institutionalized, was also disregarded (Smith 2007); you will read more sex education in Ireland, or the lack thereof, in the next section. Smith sums up how the women on the Carrigan Committee were treated, and the relation this had to broader society, when he states that “these women were silenced in the official discourse of the state, which established a further precedent in the area of social provision as church and state countered expertise with resistance and failed thereby to respond to social need” (Smith 2007, p. 14).

Of course, the silencing of women is a common theme in this thesis, and so it was important for me to hear from Irish women first-hand about their experiences. In discussing Catholicism as a significant part of Irish culture in my interviews, it was interesting to hear S, who grew up in a rural area in the west of Ireland, tell me that her family would not consider themselves to be very traditional, but that religion was indeed the backdrop to every-day life. “I suppose I did have quite a conservative background, it just didn’t feel conservative at the time because that was normal,” she told me (Nov 2017). Her statement made me think of all the ways in which our every-day life, instruction and interactions serve to influence our sense of what normal is. This was the same for L and G, who were also raised in Catholic families but have since turned away from the Church. Though each named separate incidences that diminished their faith, the common thread between them is a certainty that the teachings of the Catholic religion no

longer align with their personal values. G (Nov 2017) shared with me that her daughters attend a non-denominational school and she is raising them to understand that “you should do the right thing because it’s the right thing to do, not because you’re afraid of the consequences.” L (Nov 2017) echoed the sentiment of Catholicism being much more of a cultural thing in Ireland, and while her children attend the local public Catholic school, she firmly asserts that, “you can still have morals and values without having them be religiously based.”

The historical events described in this section clearly illustrate the ways in which the State bestowed moral authority onto the Catholic Church, and how society, perhaps unwittingly, played a part in reaffirming this identity. In *The Gift of Adversity*, we are reminded to “be wary of authority figures. They’re human, fallible and powerful- a potentially dangerous combination” (Rosenthal 2013, p. 54). In the following sections, you will see how the Catholic Church yielded its power to suppress and silence that which challenged its moral authority.

### **2.1.1 Sex Education in Ireland: A Case Study in Conflicting Human Rights**

The following section contains excerpts from a piece of writing I did for my Gender, Globalization and Rights course in Ireland. The assignment asked us to look at two specific human rights in human rights law and how they affect women. Wanting to delve deeper into the implementation of sex education in Ireland, I was granted permission to write about the conflict I saw between the Freedom of Religion and the right to education. I think it is important to recognize how religion impedes proper

teaching on topics like sex and reproductive rights, and how the lack of education on these subjects can lead to larger societal issues. I approach this conflict through a human rights lens, and recognize that most of the concepts addressed in this section are true for all students in denominational schools in Ireland, and not just females.

When it comes to international human rights law, the International Bill of Human Rights sets the most universally adopted standard for the protection of basic human rights. The International Bill of Human Rights consists of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Civil and Political Rights are also known as the First Dimension or First Generation of Human Rights. Article 18 of the UDHR is included in this dimension: the freedom of thought, conscience and religion guarantees that every individual has the right to choose or subsequently change their religion or belief (UDHR 1948). The second dimension of human rights involves Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Article 26, the right to education, falls under this category of rights, and guarantees that education shall be free and accessible in the foundational years of a person's schooling, with a provision that the parents of the member state shall have the choice on where to send their child for education (UDHR 1948). It is often emphasized that all rights are equally important and that one set of rights cannot override another. This is referred to as the indivisibility of human rights, and it implies that rights can only be recognized and utilized when they work in harmony with each other. What happens, however, when rights come into conflict with each other? What does it mean for an individual when the Freedom of Religion is in tension with the right to education? Finally, can the religious

ethos of a school interfere with a student's right to a well-rounded and progressive education?

As a predominantly Catholic country, the strong intersection between religion and education in Ireland is undeniable. I believe that access to both are fundamental human rights, but in countries where religion is ingrained in every aspect of culture and society, including teaching and scholarship, the question arises as to whether some facets of a progressive education are hindered by being provided through a religiously conservative lens. In this section, I will be focusing on the implementation of sexual education in Ireland, and how the ethos of the Catholic Church has impeded the dissemination of important information about sexuality, reproductive health, contraception, and pregnancy in academic settings. I feel that this important deficit in Irish education was a contributing factor to the prevalence of Magdalene laundries and mother and baby homes throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And although access to information has become considerably easier with the emergence of the internet, smart phones, and social media, there is still a lack of consistent sexual education and access to birth control for teens below the age of consent, both of which could be considered contributing factors for Ireland's ongoing abortion crisis. Indeed, a 2006 survey conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute and the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland found that:

*Overall, young people are now more likely to use contraception and protection the first time, but earlier sex is also strongly associated with a lower likelihood of using contraception... Social inequalities also emerged from the study as a concern, with regard to likeliness to use contraception. Almost 50 percent of*

*those surveyed said they got no sex education at all* (Layte & McGee, cited in Ferriter 2009, p. 540, my emphasis).

In the following sections, I will explore the Freedom of Religion and the right to education, as they are set out in both regional and international human rights standards, and how Ireland approaches its obligations to both. I will then give a brief summary of the conflict between the different dimensions of rights. Finally, I will discuss how the willful combination of Church and State has led to the normative practice of religio-centric teaching, the likes of which has delayed the proper implementation of sexual education over the years.

## **Freedom of Religion**

As mentioned above, the UDHR lays out the freedom of religion in Article 18:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance (UDHR 1948).

As the UDHR is meant to be a set of universal principles guaranteed to all on the basis of being human, you can assume upon reading Article 18 that every individual is free to worship the god of his or her choosing, with the assurance that they can change

religions freely without fear of recourse or retribution. This Article also gives each individual the right to worship and observe their religion either in solitude or with their community.

While Article 18 of the ICCPR contains the provision above, it adds that individuals shall not be subject to any coercion that would hinder the ability to practice the religion or belief of his or her choice. Seemingly recognizing the cross-section between religion and education, Article 18 of the ICCPR also states that legal guardians have the right to ensure that the religious and moral education of their children is in line with their own beliefs. Finally, the article states:

Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others (ICCPR 1976).

The wording of this particular provision, contained in both the ICCPR (which Ireland ratified in 1989) and The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR, which Ireland ratified in 1953), lays the groundwork for a “margin of appreciation” between states when it comes to implementing the Freedom of Religion. This term shapes jurisprudence in the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), where it was difficult to identify and enforce universal human rights standards across diverse member states. In other words, while states that ratified the convention must continue to pursue total

compliance, there is an understood level of compromise in implementation and follow-through. The framework of the ECtHR allows for this flexibility so that the cultural and legal traditions enjoyed by each Member state can be recognized and balanced with the Member state's obligation to the convention (Council of Europe).

Author Jack Donnelly, who explores the ways in which human rights can and cannot be universal in his piece "The Relative Universality of Human Rights" (2007), introduces a similar principle to margin of appreciation when he talks about cultural relativism. According to Donnelly (2007), culture is the most common argument for relativity, meaning it is the most common argument against the universality of human rights. Cultural relativity guarantees that the traditions of a society take precedence over the norms set forth in human rights mechanisms such as the UDHR. Donnelly contends that there are dangers to this "cultural absolutism", including the risk of reducing "right to traditional" and accepting that any culture could be morally infallible (Donnelly 2007, pp. 295). Indeed, I believe that in Ireland, there has to be a progression from the "let sleeping dogs lie" mentality, and a departure from the misguided thought that something is right simply because "that's the way it's always been done."

What does all of this mean in terms of Freedom of Religion in Ireland? The state does guarantee an individual's freedom of religion and freedom of conscience, as well as a religious organization's right to property. Looking at the Irish Constitution, however, you can again see a margin of appreciation in the wording: the free practice of religion is subject to public order and morality. Since the Catholic Church holds such significant influence in Ireland, the question arises as to whom is determining what is orderly and moral. This is a perfect example of cultural relativism, as for decades, the Catholic

Church was regarded as the governing “moral authority” of Ireland (something I discussed in the previous section). This leads to skepticism over the State’s constitutional claim that they do not favor any specific religion, especially when you consider that over 95 percent of Ireland’s denominational schools teach about their religion *only*, to the neglect of all other faith groups (O’Mahony 2015). Indeed, when speaking to one of my interview participants in Dublin, S (Nov 2017), she informed me: “Religion class wasn’t a study of all religions, it was a study of our religion and how to better our relationship with God.” Other friends and interview participants reported the same; that there was no objective view or history of religion provided, but rather focused instruction on the Catholic faith and how to better serve God in daily life.

The commitment put forth by the State that children can receive public educational funding without having to attend religious instruction in school can also be challenged. If a child is not baptized, he or she will be unable to secure a spot if the local school is overcrowded, which can lead to longer drives to and from school and isolation from friends and home communities for non-Catholic students. Another interviewee (Oct 2017), Catherine (who shares her personal story in Section 2.2), confirmed this, stating that the only reason her children were baptized was so they could be enrolled in a proper school. When you read Catherine’s history with the Catholic Church, you will understand why this must have been a very difficult moral decision for her to make.

Once in the school system, non-Catholic parents can choose to opt their children out of daily religious instruction; however, there is nowhere for them to go, no substitute lesson or instructor to fill their time. Most often, they are sent to the back of the room to work independently and quietly (Sherwood 2016). One thesis interviewee (Nov 2017),

L, told me that although her children are “opted-out”, she was informed by the school that they would be required to remain in the room, unless she came to school daily to collect them during this period. Work obligations made this “option” impossible for her, and certainly, this means her children would still overhear the religious lesson being provided. If guardians choose to opt their children out of “faith formation”, the overheard lesson would most likely be in conflict with the family’s religious beliefs, and would therefore be a form of coercion that, I believe, would be in violation of the student’s Freedom of Religion. Although the Supreme Court has clarified that opting out of religious instruction does not give a child permission to detach from the overall principles of a denominational school, this seems to ultimately contradict the point of opt out altogether (O’Mahony 2015).

Finally, the overflow of religion into other aspects of school life could also be regarded as a violation of Freedom of Religion. While religion is allotted a half-hour per day in a typical school timetable, in his review of “The Catholic Church and the Secondary School Curriculum in Ireland”, McBride noted in 2000 (p. 527) that “religion permeated the school day; instruction in the faith infused the teaching of secular subjects.” Certainly, times have changed, but religion still has overflow into extracurricular activities and assemblies. My interviewee, L (Nov 2017), spoke of the anxiety she has about her daughter’s upcoming communion year, when even more classroom time is devoted to religion as students prepare for their communion:

*And it gets a little bit harder when they get to communion year, because in communion year everyone makes their communion except for, you know, two*

*kids... and there's a lot of time, of classroom time, devoted to the prep for that... you know when I made my communion I went to public school so we made our communion, we did the Sunday school and we made it on the weekend, so you weren't taking school time. I don't think that school time should be committed to religious instruction... I just don't (my emphasis).*

The physical presence of religious symbols throughout hallways and classrooms is also ever-present. In 2011, an Italian mother brought a case against Italy before the ECtHR (*Lautsi and Others v. Italy*), claiming that the display of crucifixes on the classroom walls in the state school her children attended violated Article 9 (Freedom of Religion) and Article 2 of Protocol 1 (right to education). Surprisingly, the ECtHR found that there had been no violations to the rights in question. Unsurprisingly, they referred back to the State's margin of appreciation when justifying their decision.

### **Right to Education**

The right to education is set forth in Article 26 of the UDHR and includes the following:

1. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory.

2. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups.

3. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their child (UDHR 1948).

The ICESCR delves deeper into the right to education, acknowledging that education should be directed to the full development of the human personality and asking for agreement from States Parties that education promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all racial, ethnic or religious groups (ICESCR 1966). The ICESCR also vows respect for a parent's right to choose their child's school, as to ensure that religious and moral education is in line with their own convictions. It is interesting that the wording of this provision in both the ICESCR and the ICCPR is nearly identical; while one is addressing education, the other is addressing religion, but the very wording and the fact that it is included in both shows how difficult it is to completely separate the two.

The ECHR also protected the right to education in Article 2 of Protocol 1, reiterating that "the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions" (ECHR 1952, p. 32).

Irish Constitution also promises that primary education will be free, a provision the State has delivered on for both primary schools and the majority of secondary institutions (see below). The Constitution also details the rights of parents “in the matter of religious and moral formation” (Constitution of Ireland 1937, pp. 162-166). However, Article 42 of the Irish Constitution could almost be regarded as a contradiction in terms. This is due to two main factors. First, the location of a family would play a large part in available resources. With the Catholic Church dominating 90 percent of state-funded schools, more choice would be available to those living in urban areas in Ireland, rather than in rural counties. Even then, an assumption is being made that people in urban areas could afford to go with an alternative education option, such as private school, if they did not agree with the ethos of their local public school. My interviewee, L (Nov 2017), who identifies as Atheist, is raising four children in a Dublin suburb. When talking about alternatives to state-funded schools, she laughed and said that one would have to be independently wealthy to put even one child through private school in Ireland, let alone four. This leads to the second factor, which is the family’s financial situation. While the Article gives parents the freedom to provide education in their homes if the State schools are found to violate their conscience or lawful preference, the State would be cognizant of the fact that this would be financially impossible for many families who rely on two incomes to make ends meet.

It is also interesting to note that the State does not make any reference in Article 42 to the inclusion and promotion of diversity, in matters of both race and religion. As mentioned in the Freedom of Religion section, 95 percent of denominational schools in Ireland, which are funded by the state, teach only the religion that is in line with the ethos

of the school. This means that lessons will be highly subjective, and without a proper opt-out procedure in place, this could be considered a violation of a student's right to education, as well as a parent's right to choose the type of education their child is exposed to. In the *Folgerø v. Norway* case heard before the ECtHR, it was found that a religion class had a disproportionate focus on Christianity and that this, along with an improper opt-out mechanism, violated the parent's rights to choose education for their child that was in line with their religious convictions (O'Mahony 2015).

### **Conflicting Human Rights**

As I mentioned earlier, the Freedom of Religion and the right to education fall under two separate dimensions of rights, and these dimensions themselves have often been in conflict with each other. Historically, there were differing opinions from the East and the West on which rights were more important; after the Cold War, the socialist Eastern bloc placed more significance on economic, social and cultural rights, while the liberal Western bloc stressed the value of civil and political rights (Office of the United Nations 2008). There was also a misconception that economic, social and cultural rights cost more to implement and enforce than civil and political rights, which only require the absence of State involvement. Finally, states claimed that ESC rights could not be brought before a court because they only have an obligation of gradual realization and because implementing and enforcing them requires resources and finances that States Parties might not possess (Bantekas & Oette 2013).

Putting these barriers and rationalizations aside, States are required to respect, protect and fulfill economic, social and cultural rights (Office of the United Nations 2008). If we use the freedom of religion as an example, we can say that the government cannot hinder an individual's right to choose and practice his or her religion, and cannot condone a third party (for our purposes, a public Catholic school) to do the same. To fulfill its obligation, the State must incorporate the teaching of other religions to make the religious period at school all-inclusive.

Human rights must work together in order to work at all. In 2013 Bantekas and Oette (p. 367) gave an example of this, stating that, "a decent education is a good platform for an informed exercise of the freedom of expression." If we bear this in mind, we can say that an understanding of religions comes from a strong and diverse education, and a strong and diverse education can be bolstered by religious teachings. It is when one supersedes the other, however, that conflict can arise, and that individuals can be unfairly deprived of a fundamental liberty.

### **The Overlap Between Religion and Education in Ireland**

As described above, Ireland has a long way to go in separating Church and State. In my opinion, one of the areas that the need for this separation becomes most obvious is education. By normative practice, a State's government should have control over matters of public education, with no outside influence from any particular denomination. If we look at Ireland, however, we can see that Church and State have historically been considered one and the same. The stronghold of the Catholic Church over public

education in Ireland raises many questions about the State's willingness to provide academic instruction that is not in line with the Catholic ethos, such as sexual and reproductive health education. Therefore, the separation of Church and State is quite important when we look at Ireland's commitment to both Freedom of Religion and the right to education. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss the dominance of the Catholic Church over Irish educational institutions, the history of Irish sexual education, and how shifting attitudes towards human rights in Ireland have the potential to finally splinter Church and State for good.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, an agreement was reached and implemented in Ireland between the government and the Catholic Church that granted the Church control over state-funded primary schools. The Church's rights had been enshrined in the de facto constitution before the establishment of the Irish Free State and they continued to evolve with support from nationalist politicians after the War of Independence (McBride 2000). This arrangement still holds true today: the majority of primary schools in Ireland are privately owned and operated by religious orders, while being funded by the state. Ninety-six percent of primary schools are denominational and 90 percent of these schools are run by the Catholic Church (Ireland, Department of Education and Skills). Primary schooling typically starts at four to five years of age and continues for eight years (Ireland, Citizens Information). Typically, students enter secondary school at age 13, and start in what is called "junior cycle", which consists of three years of schooling and a junior certification exam. In "senior cycle", a student has a choice on whether to enroll in a fourth year of schooling or explore other interests, such as obtaining a job or doing volunteer work. This optional fourth year is known as "transition year". The fifth and

sixth years of secondary school are mandatory, and a student's secondary education is finished when they complete their leaving certification exam at the end of sixth year. Most secondary schools are also state-funded in Ireland, and like primary schools, the majority are privately owned and run by religious orders. Though the numbers are drastically different, religious denominations own and operate 52 percent of the State's secondary schools (also known as voluntary schools), with vocational and community schools making up the rest (Ireland, Department of Education and Skills).

Although there is said to have been informal and "morally appropriate" Catholic instruction around sexual education for decades, I have not been able to find any information relating to how the Catholic Church implemented this teaching throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During my thesis research, however, I interviewed G (Nov 2017), who had gone through Catholic public school in the late seventies and early eighties. When asked if she could remember any sort of sexual education in school, she laughed and told me, "I remember us being told 'Keep a penny between your legs. You should never have your legs wide enough apart that the penny could fall.'" Writer Sean O'Faolain recounts his anger at the sexual ignorance imposed on him:

*Whenever I think of the turbulence and agony of nubile youth, the terror of a boy at the first discovery of his manhood, at a young girl of her first experience of womanhood, I can only rage at our pious elders who so sweetly, so virtuously, so loftily and benevolently sent us naked to the wolf of life*  
(O'Faolain, cited in Wohlgeleit 1977, p. 73, my emphasis).

Indeed, I believe the lack of information provided by the Church could be considered a violation of human rights, and a survey published in 1977 entitled *Prejudice and Tolerance in Ireland* seems to show that 89.2 percent agree with me on this point (MacGreil, cited in Ferriter 2009, p. 407). Students were not given adequate guidance on bodily autonomy and reproductive health and safety, and were therefore unable to make educated decisions about sex. During a humorous exchange in the true-life film *Philomena*, the title character tells the reporter helping to find her son that “I didn’t even know I had a clitoris” (Frears 2013). This utter lack of knowledge could be considered a major contributing factor to social problems such as abortion, infanticide, and the multiplication of Magdalene Laundries and mother and baby homes in Ireland, which will be discussed in the next section and which were, not surprisingly, also run by religious orders.

It was not until the mid-nineties that a formal sexual education program was introduced in the Republic. It is said that local events contributed to this shift in the educational discourse around sex, such as the death of pregnant teenager Ann Lovett and her baby boy. Indeed, when trying to explain to me the watershed moment that turned her away from Catholicism, G told me (Nov 2017), “I can pinpoint the moment when I really did lose my faith.... There was a young girl called Ann Lovett...” By this time, Ann Lovett was a very familiar name to me, as it had come up time and again in my research. Lovett was 15 years old when she was found clinging to life in a grotto of the Blessed Virgin outside Granard, Ireland in the winter of 1984. The body of the baby boy she was carrying, which no one admitted to knowing about, was found on a stone beneath the Blessed Virgin statue. Scissors Ann had brought to cut her child’s umbilical cord

were found near the bodies, and Ann herself died in the hospital shortly afterwards (Ferriter 2009). It is clear that Ann's death also marked the death of denial in Ireland; no longer could people claim ignorance or hide behind the impenetrable cloak of the Catholic Church. Editor and author Fintan O'Toole proclaimed, "Hers is the name we give to lies and hypocrisy; to the reality behind the official veneer of Holy Ireland. The version of Ireland that most carry in our heads changed for good" (O'Toole, cited in Ferriter 2009, p. 525).

The growing phenomenon of infanticide, as well as global tragedies, such as the HIV crisis and the abuse scandals of the Catholic Church, also put pressure on the Irish government to introduce sexual education into schools (Wilentz 2016). Of course, this was met with strong opposition from the Catholic Church, and it would take over 10 years for Ireland to introduce the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum, which included Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) (Wilentz 2016). This could be considered another example of "an Irish solution to an Irish problem"; while the tragedies of Ann Lovett and other dead mothers and babies sparked a crisis response, the follow-through fell short of precipitating any immediate change.

Eight years after first being introduced, RSE became a required course for students in both primary and secondary schools (International Planned Parenthood Federation 2006). The goal of RSE was to:

...provide structured opportunities for pupils to acquire a knowledge and understanding of human relationships and sexuality through processes which will

enable them to form values and establish behaviors within a moral, spiritual and social framework (Government of Ireland 1997).

While it is important to note the absence of any religious mention, it is interesting to consider that each school in Ireland was thought to have their own “characteristic spirit”, the definition of which does indeed mention denomination. The RSE Policy Guidelines stipulate that RSE in each school would be developed in conformity with said spirit, and goes on to say:

When drawing up RSE policy, it may be helpful to be aware that while the NCCA curriculum and guidelines provide the proposed content of programs, you have discretion in deciding how your school’s characteristic spirit will inform the teaching of a program (Government of Ireland, 1997).

While it is a requirement of each school to teach every aspect of the RSE program without omitting topics such as family planning and sexually transmitted diseases, the school is advised that the program can and should be taught within the ethos and value system of the school (DES Circular 0037/2010, 1-2). This could be said to be another example of “margin of appreciation”; Irish schools are being required to implement the RSE program but are also being given the freedom to let the school’s ethos dictate how the teaching will occur. This should not be the case, especially since the ethos of so many of these schools contributed to the shame that surrounded talking about these subjects for so long.

This brings us to another factor affecting the proper teaching of RSE, which is the overall discomfort of staff who must work within the ethos of a Catholic school. One interviewee, S (Nov 2017), shared:

*Health ed, my sex ed classes, didn't involve contraception. It was pretty much like "this is, you know, when a man loves a woman", birds and bees kind of story, and I remember in secondary school, my final year, one of my teachers, who was young, actually turned to us, to the girls, and said "You can't let this get back to the Principal, but I'm going to have to tell you about contraception because you're young women, you're going to college, and this is a reality (my emphasis).*

While S was grateful for her teacher's information, it is obvious from this statement that the teacher was fearful of the consequences she may face from administration, if it was found out that she was speaking about birth control to her students. This exchange happened in 2010.

In combination with being "culturally Catholic", RSE teachers are also, in many cases, not properly trained to deliver such lessons (Sherlock 2012). Indeed, an inspection report compiled by the Department of Education and Skills from the academic year 2010-2011 found that without a core team of teachers with recent training and long-term interest in RSE, the program suffered and was not consistently taught. In some cases, the job of instructing RSE often fell on tutors, who might use the designated class period for other work (DES Inspectorate 2013). In Catholic schools, it is not surprising to find such

uneasiness when teaching sensitive subjects such as RSE. Without a qualified pool of mature teachers, however, the shame of talking about subjects that were once considered taboo will only be perpetuated and projected onto the students, who need adult guidance to navigate these issues in their formative years.

There has also been confusion regarding what kind of information can be provided to students under 17, the legal age of consent in Ireland. The Department of Education and Skills failed to clarify whether information on contraception and safe sex could be provided to students before they turned 17, resulting in sex education that was often delivered too late and thus, rendered ineffective (Wilentz 2016). While I agree with the gradual evolution of sexual education, it is clear from past cases of infanticide and sexual abuse, as well as the history surrounding Magdalene Laundries and mother and baby homes, that girls in Ireland should be given the proper information about healthy relationships, safe sex, and reproduction before the age of consent, as by then it may be too late to be of any use to them.

Furthermore, it has been found that in many schools, the delivery of the RSE program was left entirely to outside facilitators, instead of using these external facilitators as a complement to a whole-school RSE approach. In December 2017, the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, also known as the Oireachtas Committee, reviewed the current standards on sex education and found:

Such agencies and their use by schools are not regulated and those delivering the course are not required to have a teaching qualification. It therefore appears to the Committee that any person can set up as an agency to deliver sex education

(Report of the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution 2017, p. 14).

While a survey conducted by the national youth parliament of Ireland, Dáil na nÓg (2010), found that a majority of students would prefer to learn RSE from external sources, the exclusive use of outside facilitators could be seen as a school's way of sidestepping their RSE obligations. Additionally, the neglect on the part of the Department of Education (who provide the funding for outside sources to deliver relationship and sex education) to create qualifying guidelines or standards for outside agencies teaching RSE in schools leaves room for lessons that indoctrinate instead of educate. As one might expect, the outside agencies are often chosen on the basis of how they fit in with the ethos of the school. Recently, the Sunday Times reported that Accord, a Catholic agency that does not provide information about contraception, abortion or homosexual relationships, gave RSE lessons in over 400 schools in 2016 (Coyne 2017). L (Nov 2017) mentioned that Accord is the provider for RSE at the school her children attend, and that she had a problem with the instruction that they give, as it does not give any information on LGBTQ or trans identities, and is "very Catholic-based." In the same report cited above, the Joint Committee stated, "information should be provided in an impartial and factual manner that is independent of school ethos" (Report of the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution 2017, p. 14).

The inconsistent guidelines in implementing RSE, as well as the lack of a core team of teachers (including an RSE coordinator) and the over-reliance on outside facilitators, has led to patchy interpretation and fragmented implementation of the RSE

program across Ireland. In the Dáil na nÓg survey mentioned above, only a quarter of the students polled reported receiving any RSE classes, despite 91 percent of respondents stating they felt it was important or very important for people their age to learn RSE in school (Dáil na nÓg 2010). When talking to my own Irish friends this past fall, none could remember more than one sexual education class in their 18 years of public schooling. Most described RSE as a joke, both to students and to teachers. One recalled that her RSE education consisted of a graphic video showing an abortion procedure that they were forced to watch during junior cycle. And still another said that abortion was never mentioned, as that might open Pandora's box. "It was completely out of sight, out of mind", S told me (Nov 2017).

So can the religious ethos of a state-funded school stand in the way of a progressive education, and does this, in turn, lead to a violation of human rights? It is hard to read these reports and hear these first-hand accounts, and come to any conclusion other than yes, on both counts. From a human rights perspective, Ireland has fallen short in providing sexual education that measures up to standards set forth in such human rights mechanisms such as the ICCPR, ICESCR, and the ECHR. Although not adjudicated in court, the State has also willingly been a party to Religion of Freedom and right to education violations, by funding schools that favor enrollment for Catholic students and provide Catholic-centered religion lessons, while subsequently ignoring the need for effective, science-based reproductive health and sex education.

There is, however, reason to hope that things in Ireland are changing for the better. The "yes" vote in the 2015 marriage referendum shows that the people of Ireland are slowly removing the shackles that bind them to the exclusionary teachings and beliefs

of the Catholic Church. The Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> campaign, which I will discuss in more detail below, certainly marks a drastic shift in terms of women's rights in the Irish Free State. Finally, the advanced liberalism of the millennial generation has the potential to lead Ireland in a completely new direction, one in which the Church and the State are not so inextricably intertwined, and objective and necessary health education will be a priority in schools across the nation.

## **2.2 “Fallen Women”: A Brief Background of Ireland’s Magdalene Laundries and Mother and Baby Homes**

*(Note: It was ultimately Irish society that sent its children, unmarried mothers, and victims of sexual abuse to institutions. There was a general belief that sex was a sin and a young girl who had sex outside of marriage, or who had been raped, was tainted. This put the onus on women for their rape or sexual assault in an attempt to justify that these girls belonged in institutions. The language surrounding the depiction of these women from that period is often one which emphasizes their "immorality". It is imperative to acknowledge the critical attitude and language of that time, so that an accurate portrait can be depicted of the cultural bias against these women and children. The terminology used throughout this chapter is not my personal perception but rather the language of religious hierarchy and state officials in correspondence records from the period. Quotation marks have been used each time I introduce a derogatory phrase or term for the first time, but are not used when repeated.)*

Nancy Costello was an orphan found lying in a basket in Limerick. She was brought up in an orphanage with other so-called “unwanted children”, until she was sent to a Magdalene laundry when she was 10 or 11. The nuns from the orphanage sent her there for being “a troublemaker”, and over the course of the next 11 years, Nancy was an inmate in laundries in Cork, Waterford, Limerick and Wexford.

Diane Croghan was born to a teenage mother in Enniscorthy, who cared for her for two years before running away and abandoning her. She was fostered out to a strict family in Kiltaley, and after the patriarch of the family died, she was sent to the Summerhill training school for girls, a Magdalene laundry run by the Sisters of Mercy. There, she was shown anything but mercy, as she was punished for being left-handed, beaten for making mistakes with the machinery, and had her hair violently hacked off for trying to escape.

Marina Gambold was a young girl from Wexford town, the middle child born to a mother and father who both later died of tuberculosis. After her grandmother also passed on, Marina’s aunt brought the 16 year old girl to The Good Shepherd’s convent in New Ross. She was given the name Fidelma, and for the next three years she worked the presses and sewed holy images onto cloth for the nuns to sell. She lived in constant fear of the nuns and their punishments, which included beatings, withholding of food, and being left out in the cold overnight.

Marie Slattery was born in County Cork in 1960, the third in a family of six and the self-proclaimed “hated child”. Marie was just five when her grandfather began sexually abusing her, and only 12 when she was left at the Good Shepherd Laundry in Cork for being a temptation to him. She became pregnant three times over the course of

her life and spent time in both Magdalene laundries and mother and baby homes, all run by different religious orders.

Kathleen Legg was born in the county home in Limerick in 1935 to an unmarried mother, making Kathleen “devil spawn” to the nuns at the home. At the age of three, she was sent to live with her grandparents while her mother started a new life alone in Dublin. When Kathleen was 14 and her grandmother had passed on, she was sent to St. Mary’s Training Centre, Stanhope Street, where she was told she would be educated and trained for a career. She spent the next three years working as an unpaid inmate in the Laundry, an experience that gives her nightmares to this day.

These women, along with thousands of others, make up a shameful part of Irish history. I describe it as shameful because Ireland, their native country, turned away from them, content to lock away the “immoral transgressors” of a puritanical society. The collusion between Church and State meant that the girls had nowhere to turn to report the abuse and neglect they suffered at the hands of their moral mentors, who were ultimately responsible for the brutalization and subsequent life-long trauma of thousands of women. They were sometimes referred to as the “Fallen Women of Ireland”, and though their stories differ in many ways, they have one thing in common: they had no warning, no knowledge, no consent and no choice in what happened to them. In many cases, they were plucked from the lives they knew and placed into the Irish laundry system, where they were tortured and tormented as penance for their “sins”. The five women listed above chronicled their tragic stories in the memoir *Whispering Hope: The True Story of the Magdalene Women*, and while their accounts are horrific, they are not unique. It is estimated that over 10,000 girls and women were confined in Ireland’s Magdalene

laundries, until the last one closed its doors in 1996. These laundries, along with other institutions that I will detail below, sought to take care of all manner of “problem women” by concealing them from view and forcing them to repent for their sins through work and prayer. They were sent to these institutions for offenses ranging from being too pretty to becoming pregnant out of wedlock, and the physical, emotional and spiritual torture of these incarcerated women became Ireland’s darkest and best kept secret.

### **Awakened to Disgrace**

When I took my first trip to Ireland in 2013, it was everything I expected and more. Having considered myself an aficionado on all things Ireland for quite some time, I worked hard to save up enough money to spend three full months traveling the country I had loved from afar and getting to see the sights I had, until then, only daydreamed about. The rolling green hills, the dramatic cliff sidewalks, the sheep peppering the pastures and roadways. I wanted to hear buskers playing music in the streets, I wanted to taste a warm Guinness inside an old Irish pub, I wanted to smell shepherd’s pie coming straight from the oven. I wanted to experience these things for myself and be wide open to adventure and meet new people and hear about their lives. The Irish are well known for their storytelling skills, through spoken and written word as well as song. I wanted to hear every story Ireland would tell me, and I did. Stories of love and loss, of hard times and resilience, of celebration and mourning, of hope and despair. I listened intently, and I fell achingly in love with the Ireland I had known all along. At the end of my three months

abroad, I thought I had heard it all, but there was one story Ireland didn't share with me. It is a story of shame and of guilt, of suffering and of silence, and it has become the nation of Ireland's greatest disgrace.

Two years after my trip to Ireland, I was living in Burlington, Vermont. Though I loved my job, my friends, and the community I had built around me, I was still thinking about Ireland constantly and talking about it just as much. It was one of these conversations about the Emerald Isle that sparked a suggestion from my roommate, Jackie, that we watch an Irish movie one night. She went to her room and came back with *The Magdalene Sisters*. In skimming the back cover of the DVD, I assumed what we would be watching was pure fiction. If only I had been wrong.

*The Magdalene Sisters* is a 2002 film loosely based on the 1998 documentary *Sex In a Cold Climate*, which I referenced in the introduction to this chapter. Though the movie takes liberties with the storyline, the reality of the laundries was not far off from the shocking horror depicted in the film. James Smith, historian, author and committee member for the Justice for Magdalene's Research, wrote in 2007 (p. 140) that the film broke "the long historical silence that allowed these institutions to maintain their secrecy and invisibility." In it, you learn of four girls who were committed to the laundry system for different reasons; two had given birth to babies out of wedlock, one had been raped by a cousin and brought shame upon the family for speaking about it, and the last was a temptation to boys at her industrial school, a troublemaker who had to be removed from society before she became a fallen woman. The movie inspired another filmmaker, Steven O'Riordan, to make a documentary about the Magdalene women, and his journey led to the formation of the support group Magdalene Survivors Together. It also led to

the book *Whispering Hope*, which I referenced above and which O’Riordan helped co-author. Likewise, the movie inspired me to learn more about this secret Irish disgrace, and to include the narrative of the Magdalene women in this thesis.

When talking about the history of shame in Ireland, or what James Smith coined in 2007 (p. 2) as “Ireland’s architecture of containment”, it is important to talk about the industrial schools, the county homes, the Mother and Baby homes, and the Magdalene Laundries. However, the history is so vast, expansive and intricate that it would be hard to do so without focusing in on a specific time frame in a specific type of institution. For the purpose of this thesis, I will provide a brief overview of the way these institutions were interconnected with each other and how each functioned to keep shameful women hidden from view in Irish society. “Transferring women and children from the care of one Catholic religious congregation to another facilitated Ireland’s culture of containment” (Smith 2007, p. 45).

### **“Architecture of Containment”**

Before the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, workhouses were the only form of welfare offered by the State to unmarried mothers. With the revival of the welfare system in 1922, county homes were founded and were, in essence, replacements of the workhouses, often being the same building where the workhouse had once been (Smith 2007). These county homes were funded by the government through local Health Boards, and served to accommodate a mixed population of unmarried mothers, women who had been charged with imprisonment, and prostitutes, as well as destitute and sick

women. Even after the name of these facilities changed to county homes, a stigma was still attached to anyone who came or went from one. The Carrigan Report, which I detailed in an earlier section, pointed to “the objectionable fact that unmarried mothers cannot be maintained apart from the other inmates” (Report of the Committee on the Criminal Law Amendment Acts, cited in Smith 2007, p. 18). County homes contained women that were deemed, under the 1928 Commission for the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor, as “hopeless cases” who could serve to negatively influence “first offenders” (Smith 2007, pp. 51-53), who were seen as redeemable if set on a proper moral path. The Irish clergy sought to rehabilitate these women and saw the need to rescue them from the “moral danger” of the more hardened cases around them (Smith 2007, pp. 48-49). Since county homes could not turn away downtrodden women or those convicted of criminal offenses, another solution was needed to house first time unwed mothers who could be “morally saved”.

Mother and baby homes were founded to answer this need. Established in 1922, these homes were also funded by state and local government and operated by orders of religious nuns until the 1970s as a way to keep the first offenders away from the hopeless cases (Smith 2007). The main goal of these homes was to completely segregate unmarried mothers from the other types of women who made up the county homes. The other goal was to return the redeemable woman back to society without any stigma attached to her for having an “illegitimate” baby; her secret would be safely hidden back at the home where she could visit it each week. Mothers were to be trained and prepared for outside life in these institutions, and were expected to pay for the baby’s care after release. The babies would eventually be fostered out or transferred to an industrial or

reformatory school run by a religious order. After Ireland's Adoption Act passed in 1952, these children were also free to be formally adopted domestically and internationally (Smith 2007), though it has come to light that these adoptions began informally (and often, illegally) long before the Act. The book, *The Lost Child of Philomena Lee*, and the subsequent film *Philomena*, both of which are quoted in this thesis, tell the true story of one such heartbreaking adoption story. We know today that these mother and baby homes were the setting for cruel physical and mental abuse, as well as unprecedented coercion and neglect. I will talk more about this abuse below.

The industrial schools that the illegitimate children were transferred to were an important link in the chain of Ireland's "culture of containment". The schools were financed by both the government and the taxpayers, and housed illegitimate children as well as juvenile criminal offenders. All the children found themselves under heavy surveillance at these schools, as all were deemed to be at moral risk to themselves and to the moral fabric of Ireland. The industrial schools were also not without abuse; the physical and psychological suffering of children in industrial schools in the fifties and sixties was the subject of a 1996 television documentary titled *Dear Daughter* (Smith 2007). This documentary opened the floodgates to many more survivor stories coming to light, which broke the "culturally imposed closed ranks and silence typically accompanying such sensitive issues..." (Smith 2007, p. 88). Many girls were sent directly from industrial schools to Magdalene laundries, perpetuating the containment culture of Ireland. While the girls sent from industrial schools to Magdalene laundries were a mix of juvenile offenders and illegitimate children deemed at risk because of their age and their ignorance, they represented a collective population known as the

Magdalene asylum's "preventative cases" (Smith 2007, pp. 45-46). Smith points out an interesting contradiction when it comes to the handling of these at-risk girls, in the context of an interview by Halliday Sutherland with the Mother Superior of a Magdalene laundry:

*They are re-institutionalized ostensibly to safeguard their moral purity. But if the girls' moral purity is really what is at stake, then the interview exposes a fairly evident contradiction: the Magdalene asylum places young women whose moral purity is beyond question- girls who come of age in an industrial school under the watchful supervision of religious women- alongside unmarried mothers considered 'hopeless cases' because they relapsed more than once (Smith 2007, p. 46, my emphasis).*

Indeed, Magdalene laundries were established to house repeat offenders, or "penitents", as they were referred to by religious congregations and state officials (Smith 2007, p. 35). These were unmarried pregnant mothers who had given birth to more than one child out of wedlock. Like the girls transferred directly from industrial schools to the laundries, these mothers were deemed in "need of incarceration and/ or self-protection" (Smith 2007, p. 48), and though the asylums were said to be "voluntary", conditions were often attached to leaving that made such an option impossible. These conditions included paying one hundred pounds to the Church, or needing to provide proof of an adequate place to live upon release. The girls were also kept under lock and key during their "voluntary" stays, and would suffer severe beatings for attempting to escape. If they did

manage to make it out, they were often caught and brought back to the laundries by the local police. The big difference between Magdalene Laundries and the other institutions mentioned is that the laundries were privately run by the religious orders of nuns and did not receive any government funding, a distinction that exempt these facilities from being regulated or inspected by the state. This fact alone meant that rampant abuse and torture was permitted to take place with very little state interference.

Much research has been done on how these institutions functioned in Irish society, and how the abuse that took place inside them was allowed to go on for so long. As has been mentioned before, there was a general deference to the Catholic Church in the Irish culture, especially when it came to social problems that the state could not handle on its own. “The government had allowed the Catholic Church free rein in handling the nation’s illegitimate children, partly because it was ill equipped to deal with the problem itself and partly because Éamon de Valera depended heavily on the support of the archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid” (Sixsmith 2009, p. 24). In allowing the Church to take control in regards to pregnancy and illegitimacy, Éamon de Valera, who served as both President and Taoiseach of Ireland and was a close friend of Archbishop McQuaid, allowed the situation to be viewed and addressed as a moral problem rather than a social one. Since it was deemed immoral to have a baby outside of marriage, the girls and women kept in Magdalene Laundries and mother and baby homes suffered extensive mental and physical abuse as penance for their sins.

Upon arrival at the homes and laundries, girls were given a new name and told not to speak of where they came from to anybody. Their hair was cut short or shaved completely, and often their breasts were bound “so that you wouldn’t look like a girl,

because your body was sin and belonged to the devil” (O’Rourke 2011, p. 209). This practice of binding had another use after the baby was born and the nuns tried to stop natural lactation. The clothes the women arrived in were confiscated and they were given shapeless, coarse dresses to wear as their uniforms. There were no mirrors in these facilities, as mirrors were seen as vain and taking pride in your body was also regarded as a sin. The penitents worked six days per week, 52 weeks per year. The work day usually started around 5:00 a.m. and finished around 6:00 p.m., and consisted of a strict regimen of prayers, labor, mass and meal times (O’Rourke 2011). One witness, who had been transferred to a laundry from an industrial school, recounted that “working conditions were harsh and included standing for long hours, constantly washing laundry in cold water, and using heavy irons for many hours” (O’Rourke 2011, p. 208). Recreation was taken in a small, enclosed yard and never lasted more than an hour. These intense schedules denied the girls proper leisure and rest. Penitents were constantly monitored and talking to each other was strictly forbidden, as was forming friendships of any kind. Letters to their families about life in the laundries were censored. They were not allowed to attend school nor provided any educational opportunities. Meals consisted of bread with drippings and watered down milk. Beatings were regular and severe (O’Rourke 2011). They were not paid for their work while they were in these institutions; it would not be until 2013 that a redress system was set up to compensate survivors. Of course, this means that those who died before 2013 were never compensated for their time or labor.

The free labor, of course, was what made the business of the Magdalene laundries profitable. Although the State had granted the laundries charitable status, there was

considerable money to be made from commercial laundry contracts and authentic Irish wares, handmade by the penitents and sold and exported by the Church. “The nuns told the girls their scrubbing, wringing and ironing symbolized the cleaning of the moral stain of their souls, but they were also profitable for the convent; the Church may have been saving souls, but it was not averse to making money” (Sixsmith 2009, p. 22). Indeed, one witness who gave testimony for the 2009 Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse talked about her experience in the Good Shepherd Magdalene laundry in Cork: “They were making beautiful wedding dresses, first holy communion dresses, Irish linen tablecloths, that were being shipped over to Harrods in London... so they were industries” (O’Rourke 2011, p. 205). This is one example of the part society played in the “success” of these institutions, which I will discuss at greater length below.

### **Complicity by State and Society**

While it would be simple to lay the entirety of the blame on the Church, the role of the State cannot be understated when it comes to the abuse inflicted and suffered in these institutions. As I have mentioned, the State was ready and willing to allow the Church to take charge of the problem of unmarried mothers. Their collusion did not end there, however. The State would subsidize many of the women who had been placed in Magdalene Laundries by state actors; this was commonly referred to as a “headage fee”, according to the interviewee you will meet below. This amounted to quite a large sum of money, when you consider that over a quarter of the women placed in Magdalene laundries arrived there through State actors or agencies such as the Garda, the court

system, local health and social services, and, as mentioned above, industrial schools and mother and baby homes (O'Rourke 2016). The State also continued to utilize Magdalene Laundries for large commercial laundry contracts, which included state-run hospitals and the Irish Department of Defence (O'Rourke 2011). They did this with the awareness that the residents of these institutions were not being paid for their labor (O'Rourke 2016).

Another argument that can be made for the State's responsibility is the fact that state-funded schools, run by religious orders, did not include sexual education in their curriculums. This is discussed at length in the previous section, and combined with strict laws regarding birth control, the case could be made that the state willingly set women up to "fall." Contraception, once completely illegal, eventually became accessible to married women, who would have to provide a note from their parish priest to the pharmacist to confirm that they had a husband. This meant that it was inaccessible to anyone who did not have proper documentation. "Contraception was illegal and there was no sex education but religious dogma alone failed to prevent many thousands of single young women from becoming pregnant" (Humphries 1998). This is another example of the State deferring to religious instruction to prevent moral impurity. Unfortunately, that religious instruction steered clear of taboo subjects and failed to adequately inform and prepare students. This makes the State as culpable as the Church for the high levels of illegitimacy throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Along with James Smith, who is heavily cited in this section, Maeve O' Rourke, lawyer and advisory board member for The Justice for Magdalenes Research, asserts that the State's responsibility under certain human rights laws supersedes any governmental

objection that the state was not responsible for the human rights violations taking place in Magdalene laundries.

*I argued that the State had violated its positive obligations under several international treaties, the European Convention on Human Rights and arguably the Irish Constitution to protect women and girls from the treatment to which they had been subjected. It did not matter how women or girls entered the laundries- for example, at the hands of family members rather than the State- because the international legal obligations of States regarding slavery, servitude and forced labor were designed to ensure the suppression of non-State actors' use of these forms of exploitation. Furthermore, the State's legal obligations to prevent and suppress slavery, servitude and forced labor dated back to the 1930s (O'Rourke 2016, pp. 163-164, my emphasis).*

O'Rourke and the Justice for Magdalenes campaign were among the driving forces that eventually led to a state apology to survivors of the Magdalene laundries, issued in February 2013 by former Taoiseach Enda Kenny. Part of this statement read: "We lived with the damaging idea that what was desirable and acceptable in the eyes of the Church and the State was the same and interchangeable" (Kenny 2013). This comment is telling, in terms of what has already been discussed in this paper: the Church's moral code became the State's natural law. Four months after the State-issued apology, it was announced that a redress scheme would be offered to the survivors, and would include lump sum payments, pension plans, and health and community care. This

redress was offered with the stipulation that each woman accepting compensation and benefits could not sue any State agency in regards to their time in a Magdalene institution in the future (O'Rourke 2016). Although the state apology and the establishment of a redress scheme was a huge victory for the Magdalene survivors and those advocating on their behalf, there has been a massive gap between what was agreed to by the State and what has actually been implemented. Some areas where the redress scheme has fallen short include failing to provide the full range of health and community care services that were recommended, not allowing public access to the archive of state records, and refusing to accept responsibility for forced labor or any other abuse inside these institutions (Justice for Magdalenes Research). This is an important distinction to note: while the State recognized and apologized for their involvement with the laundries, this apology came on the heels of an investigation into state interaction only. A formal investigation into the abuses inside these institutions has never been initiated.

In another section of the speech referenced above, former Taoiseach Enda Kenny states "I believe I speak for millions of Irish people all over the world when I say that we put away these women because for too many years we put away our own conscience" (Kenny 2013). While this comment could be viewed as an eagerness of the State to share responsibility with the Irish public, it is indeed important to recognize the complicity of Irish society itself for what occurred in these institutions. Girls were often brought to the Magdalene laundries or mother and baby homes by their families or their local clergy; most often, this was done so that the respectability and good name of the family would not be tarnished by any scandal. "For as long as I could remember the worst thing that could happen to anyone's daughter in Ireland was to have a baby and not be married"

(Richards, cited in Ferriter 2009, p. 435). The institutions were often at the top or bottom of small Irish villages, making it hard to imagine that locals were not aware of what they were utilized for. Survivor testimony describes being marched through town by the nuns: “Walking down the street, everyone knew you were out of an institution” (O’Rourke 2011, p. 211). Indeed, *The Magdalene Sisters* depicts a similar scene, in which the local passersby avert their eyes as the women march through town; the symbolism of this simple action is powerful. In an opinion piece published soon after the release of *The Magdalene Sisters*, an anonymous contributor to *The Irish Times* noted: “No one entered a Magdalene laundry without a relative, an employer, a neighbor or friend knowing it” (“Irish Society Colluded” 2003). And, as mentioned above, the laundries held commercial contracts with local businesses; they also solicited business from upper- and middle-class families “that never inquired as to who performed the actual labor” (Smith 2007, p. 145). The handmade Irish goods produced by the penitents were available for sale and export, keeping the laundries profitable through consumerism. Though it may be instinctual and easier on personal conscience to blame the Church and State, Irish society played their own significant role in the shame of these institutions by looking the other way. As my interviewee below says (Oct 2017), “They couldn’t have been operating without the input of the government and society. They’re all blaming the Church but this is a three way street.”

It is also important to address how society regarded the men who were involved with or impregnated these fallen women. The patriarchal bias that was fostered in Ireland often served to sacrifice shameful women at the altar, while willfully ignoring their male counterparts or abusers. Indeed, many of the women and girls hidden away in Magdalene

laundries were victims of sexual abuse who needed to be silenced to save a family's good reputation. A revealing statement made by the Mother Superior in *The Magdalene Sisters* sums up the gender bias that was a prevalent part of the Irish Catholic culture: "All men are sinners and therefore all men are open to temptation. In any God-fearing country if you want to save men from themselves, you remove the temptation" (Mullan 2002). Again, it is significant to note how these religious attitudes permeated Irish culture. In 2007, Smith cited (p. 93) Brooke Brogan's play *Eclipsed* when talking about a "state-supported sexual double standard that institutionalized women for falling foul of society's moral proscriptions." There were no equivalent institutions for men; unless convicted of a sex crime and imprisoned, men were generally left to carry on with their lives. "There were no 'fallen men' in Ireland" (Ferriter 2009, p. 17).

All of this contributed to the shame and secrecy that continued to silence thousands of survivors over the years. Below, I describe meeting one such brave woman, and I detail the powerful parts of her testimony that corroborate the range of abuses suffered at these facilities. I also discuss the collusion between Church, State and society that she witnessed firsthand. Hers is a real-life account of the "architecture of containment" which was written about extensively by James Smith and which I described in detail earlier in this section.

### **Breaking the Silence**

While I was in Ireland in the fall of 2017 (an experience I document in Section 3.2.3), I met a woman named Catherine, who was a survivor of a mother and baby home

in Cork. I had been reading different articles on these homes and their relation to the Magdalene laundries, and at the bottom of each web page was a set of links to related stories that might be of interest. I soon landed on a story about Catherine and Angela (whose name had been changed for privacy reasons), two grown women who had run away together from the Bessborough Mother and Baby Home in Cork in 1989. The article gave the basic details of their escape and how they had not seen each other in 28 years, until they reunited last year (Kelleher 2017). That reunion was the subject of the article I had found, and through Facebook, I was able to track Catherine down and ask if she would be willing to talk to me about her time in Bessborough. She agreed without hesitation.

I took the bus from Galway to Cork in late October and met Catherine at her “local”, an Irish expression for the bar an individual frequents in their neighborhood. The sun was out but it was chilly, being late fall, and so I was surprised when Catherine breezed in and asked if we could sit outside. Catherine had a vibrant, quirky presence about her; she didn’t smile much but she was extremely polite, and she had a dark sense of humor that oddly put me at ease with the sensitive and somber topic we were discussing. She admitted later this was one of the coping mechanisms she uses to deal with her past trauma, and I was reminded of a quote by Viktor Frankl in his 1946 memoir *Man’s Search for Meaning* (p.43): “Humor was another of the soul’s weapons in the fight for self-preservation.”

We took a table outside and I began with my questions. Three hours later, I think I had only managed to ask one or two from my long list... but what I gleaned from Catherine’s candid honesty and vulnerability was worth far more than the structure my

questions would have allowed for. Her story was a first-hand account from a second-generation survivor who had been determined to break the cycle of institutional torment she had endured. She shared with me her personal feelings of shame and worthlessness, as well as anger at the collusion that had allowed and even encouraged her suffering.

Catherine started her story by first telling me about her mother, who was put in an industrial school at age 14 and used as a hired hand at a nearby hotel, instead of being fostered out to a family. Though the school intercepted her wages from the hotel, Catherine's mother managed to stash away the tips she received, and she used the money to escape to England, where Catherine was born. Catherine describes her mother as "very damaged, institutionalized, and socially conditioned" by all that happened to her while in the industrial school. Catherine was brought back to Ireland at six weeks old, and due to her mother's frequent breakdowns, was committed to the same industrial school her mother had been in, even being raised by the same Mother Superior who raised her mother. She described the conditions of the industrial school as "survival of the fittest" and shared that her level of torment was especially high, due to her Traveller ethnicity.

When she was 14, Catherine was released into the care of her mother, who sent her on an errand to the store one evening. Catherine took a short cut on her walk and was raped by a stranger. She described the scene after arriving home and telling her mother what had happened (Oct 2017):

*My mother packed a little plastic bag. The guards were involved, and my mother said 'You're after shaming us. You have to go.' This was in the eighties, there*

*was no such thing as counseling or 'it wasn't your fault'. It was 'you shouldn't have gone down that lane. You took that short cut' (my emphasis).*

The victim blaming portrayed here is a common trademark of a patriarchal society. Catherine's story is a perfect example of the vast gap between how men and women were treated in terms of sexual discourse; Catherine's attacker was never brought to justice, while Catherine was sent back to the industrial school to "straighten her out" and to prevent further shame to her mother.

A year later, Catherine was released to a halfway house, and while the caretaker of the house was receiving a payment for Catherine from the state, this money wasn't actually being used to provide proper lodging or food. Catherine was forced to sleep in a converted shed in the garden. She soon found out that the halfway house was actually a front for a brothel; the woman offering to take girls in was training certain girls to become prostitutes. One day, Catherine was doing her required cleaning of the brothel and an older man tried to seduce her. She ran away and lived on the streets for a few weeks, eventually meeting the man who would become the father of her children, and later, her ex-husband.

"It sounds desperate now, but I just wanted to be loved." Catherine told me how this new man showed her the affection and attention she had craved but never received before. She fell in love with him and got pregnant very quickly, as she was never taught about babies or families or how both came to be. Of course, Catherine had never learned anything about reproductive health or sex in the industrial school, and her take on the

way this rendered her helpless illustrates how ignorance inflicted by the Church left women powerless to make proper decisions about their bodies (Oct 2017):

*They took the control from us without us ever even knowing. Because by not informing us, they made us vulnerable. If you have an informed choice, then what you do is your own business. We didn't have a clue (my emphasis).*

When she was three months pregnant, Catherine learned that her boyfriend was cheating on her, a revelation that convinced her to end things with him and seek support from the social services office for help with her pregnancy. Her social worker told her she would be going to an independent living unit, where she would receive the support she needed to be able to keep her baby. Instead, Catherine describes her heart pounding in her chest when she was greeted by a nun upon arriving at the bus station in Cork. She was taken to Bessborough, where she was once again forced to do manual labor, and where she watched as other penitents knitted baby clothes for children they would never get to keep. Catherine was told that if she had a son, he would be adopted without problem, but if she had a daughter, the girl would most likely end up in the same industrial school she and her mother had attended. Hearing this, Catherine began to formulate a plan for running away; she did not want another generation of her family entering the system. Her idea was further reinforced when she met a woman in Bessborough who had been forced to give her son away. When Catherine asked why she had never gone home, the woman replied, "I can't. They don't want me." She had been there for over 40 years.

Catherine described a dichotomy to me between the two types of women in industrial schools and in Bessborough: there were girls like her, who had been in the system before, and there were girls who were put in there by their families, who were not “trained up” or conditioned yet. She stated that those whose parents had paid the nuns were not required to do heavy manual labor while they were pregnant. Catherine, on the other hand, was “one of their girls”. This meant that the nuns knew what she was capable of and what kind of manual labor she would be best suited for. On the positive side, this also afforded Catherine a certain amount of trust from the nuns. Because they were familiar with her and because she had not tried to run away before, Catherine was given tasks that often took her out of the institution, like depositing checks and mailing letters and packages. Perhaps because of this, she was soon approached by Angela, another woman in the home who wished to run away. On the day of their escape, Catherine was granted permission to bring Angela on her errands. After the tasks were completed, the girls, both heavily pregnant, decided to hitchhike from Cork to Tralee, Angela to return home and Catherine to find her ex-boyfriend. Angela was brought back to Bessborough by her family to have her baby, but was eventually allowed to keep him and raise him in the family home. Catherine was taken in and supported by the mother of her ex-boyfriend, who soon became her husband. She went on to have three more children with him, despite the physical and emotional abuse she endured in the marriage.

The first thing that resonated with me about Catherine’s story was when she described her ex-husband as the first person that ever showed her attention, and how overall, she just wanted to be loved. I understood that sentiment very well; it was how I ended up pregnant in high school, a story you will read about in a later section. In

Catherine's case, her childhood and formative teenage years were spent shuffling between an unstable mother and the volatile atmosphere of religious institutions, where the physical abuse she endured would have long-lasting effects. She told me about times she was beaten for speaking in her native language and described being battered so severely as a child that she has permanent hearing loss. These are scars that don't easily heal; Catherine shared with me that long into her adult life, if someone near her raised their hand quickly, she ducked.

The physical abuse Catherine experienced in the industrial schools and in Bessborough was compounded by psychological trauma as well. This trauma corroborated what other survivors shared: stories of shaming, degradation, control, and social isolation. In one institution, Catherine was stripped of her own name and called Jane, as they already had too many Catherines in the group. She describes a cold environment where there was no support or affection shown for the girls. "They didn't nurture, they didn't love, none of that... they took my identity. My birth right. My name. And they changed it 'cause it suited them." Catherine's dark sense of humor came out when she told me that they were also denied basic human necessities, like adequate food and drink: "We always made a joke: 'We were always on fucking Lent.'" The girls were not given a proper education or even taught life skills; the focus was often on manual tasks such as cleaning and sometimes cooking. This left Catherine wholly unprepared for the outside world when she escaped from Bessborough (Oct 2017):

*I didn't know how to decorate a Christmas tree, I didn't know how to hang a curtain, I didn't know how to... you know I didn't know how to do the normal*

*things that you all take for granted. I didn't know how to wrap a present, I didn't know my proper date of birth, I didn't know my proper name, I didn't even know my own favorite color, I didn't know how to hang tinsel, I didn't know what it was like to sit at a table and have a family dinner (my emphasis).*

Of course, by keeping these women ignorant, the nuns were able to perpetuate the feelings of worthlessness they inflicted on them. The girls were not taught any skills that they could use to better their situations outside the convent walls, and so the cycle of power and control persisted to keep the girls down in the gutter and dependent on their abusers. It is no wonder, when you consider the patterns of abuse suffered by these women, that some, like Catherine, would end up in abusive relationships with partners when they left the institutions. This vicious cycle is another unfortunate legacy these homes leave behind.

Catherine also had a criminal record from the time she spent in an industrial school. She shared with me that even if you went into an industrial school at six weeks old, you automatically had a criminal record; her record has only recently been expunged as part of the redress scheme. This, along with what Catherine refers to below as a headage fee, confirms complicity on the part of the State. She spoke of the revenue the Church received from girls like herself (Oct 2017):

*When you were in an industrial school or a mother and baby home, if you came from a deprived background, a low socioeconomic background, the State subsidized your stay, so the Church was no charity. They were getting a headage*

*fee from the government, from the Department of Education, so they weren't doing unconditional charity, no, no, no... this was a business (my emphasis).*

This statement corroborates earlier details about the profitability of these institutions for the Catholic Church.

“To judge a society, see how it treats its vulnerable.” This was something Catherine said during her interview that stopped me cold, something that I repeated and rolled over in my head again and again on the bus ride back to Galway. I have described the way these women were treated inside the four walls of these institutions, both in general and in Catherine’s case specifically. However, in talking to her I realized that maybe the bigger betrayal came from outside the four walls... maybe it was society’s role in the abuse that made the sting that much harsher for survivors. I watched Catherine grow angry as she talked about Ireland (Oct 2017):

*I'm sick to death of the hypocrisy in this country. They knew full well, cause they used to... when we were marching up the church, they used to say, parents used to say to their children, if you don't behave yourself, you'll end up with them... so people that go 'oh we didn't know this, we didn't know' ... don't be a liar. Admit that you didn't know what to do. Admit that you were scared yourself. But don't lie. Don't pretend that you didn't know. There's too much evidence there (my emphasis).*

This dialogue was powerful to me for so many reasons. First, it showed the raw anger and frustration Catherine felt towards the people of Ireland. She was raised there and lived there nearly all of her life, and yet, it was full of people who had turned their backs to her and her plight. It is clear that these were words Catherine had been forced to keep to herself for far too long; the positive side of state acknowledgement is that there is finally a platform on which to speak, on which survivor testimony can be heard... and perhaps most importantly, be believed.

The second part that stuck with me long after this conversation was Catherine's challenge to society to admit that they knew what was happening. The reason this was so powerful to me was because her own humanity showed through her anger and her conviction; in asking people to admit that they were scared themselves, she is acknowledging that she understands why people did not intervene and do more to help her and those like her. She is also asking those same people to concede that silence is no longer acceptable; absolution can only be reached through addressing and apologizing for past wrongdoings. It is a moving statement that shows the control the Church wielded over not only the girls inside the institutions, but over society in general. Fear was not contained within four walls.

Finally, it brought to life the words I had read from other survivor accounts of similar marches through town, to and from the homes. The shame of these marches would be part of the ongoing stigma survivors would face; in one story, a former penitent described life after institutionalization: "I thought people would know who I was, what I had done, that I was supposed to be a bad person. If someone looked at you in the street, you thought they were looking at you because you were bad" (O'Rourke 2011, p. 212).

Catherine's experience shows the hypocrisy of a society that claimed ignorance, simply because they were able to avert their eyes. In her case, she and her fellow penitents were used to instill fear in children about how they could end up if they were bad. They were a vulnerable population that people utilized as a lesson; if you lived a life of moral purity, you would not be sent to an institution to suffer for your sins. Of course, this also confirms what people knew: if they were using the laundries as a threat to those who were at risk of transgressing norms, it is clear they knew the women being sent there were treated poorly.

Catherine (Oct 2017) also echoed earlier sentiments when she discussed the role of the fathers, and how they were able to continue living their lives while the women and children were stuck with the shame and the stigma, as “the ‘stain’ of illegitimacy ‘never wears off’ and could last for generations” (Ferriter 2009, p. 55).

*Little Johnny who had the farm, and he knocked up Mary, and Mary wasn't from the proper family... Mary would be shipped off to the convent, the child would be gotten rid of, the inheritance rights removed. Johnny could get on with his life, but Mary, oh no... Mary's life was ruined. She was a marked woman. That's the way it was (my emphasis).*

Catherine's interview substantiated much of the research I had already done into the way these institutions functioned in Irish society and the manner in which they treated the marginalized populations they “served”. The shame and secrecy surrounding these facilities had two purposes: to cover up the abuses happening inside, and to keep society

in line with the Church's puritanical views of what was moral and what was sinful. As I walked away from Catherine that afternoon, I thought about how incredible it must be for her to now be free of the constraints that once bound her in metaphorical chains. I know the reality of it, however, is much more complicated than that. "Freedom is not the last word. Freedom is only part of the story and half of the truth" (Frankl 1946, p. 132).

The injustices that were visited upon Catherine (and all women in Ireland like her) were done so in the name of the Church and the State, and in the spirit of a patriarchal society unwilling to recognize a woman's agency and autonomy. This mistreatment was horrific, it was cruel, it was evil. I would fully expect anyone who had suffered through this brutal background to have a dark and disenchanting view of the world around her. Maybe that is the part about Catherine's interview that moved me the most; the recognition that through all of this, her humanity has remained unbroken: "I don't do organized religion," she told me. "My religion is how we treat each other."

### **2.3 "Love Both": Ireland's Anti-Choice Abortion Laws**

My great-grandparents came from county Tipperary, and being Irish Catholic was a huge part of the Scully family narrative while my father was growing up. He was one of six children, and he and his siblings went to Mass each Sunday and attended Catholic grammar school. This is probably what saved me from such a fate; my father endured such abuse by the nuns that he turned away from religion completely, and so my sister and I were raised without any religious direction. Ireland, however, remained a steadfast

and important piece of our family history, so much so that when my father married my stepmother when I was 10, they went to Ireland for their honeymoon.

As I described in the previous section, I took my first trip to Ireland in 2013. At the end of my three months abroad, Ireland had become the country of my heart. I never imagined that the feelings of love I experienced there would someday sour, and that the country of my heart would also become the country of my shame. As I learned more about Ireland's abortion laws, its abuses against women, and the interference of Church and State in the lives of thousands, however, I felt the shame of my ignorance as strongly as I once felt the shame of my abortions.

In this section, I will examine Ireland's abortion laws and the cases that have both affected them and been affected by them. I will give evidence to my belief that Ireland has continuously sidestepped its obligation to recognize women's reproductive health as a basic human right. Abortion in Ireland is only legal under a very restricted set of circumstances, and the unclear guidelines surrounding these situations make abortion a rarity in Ireland. As a result, an average twelve women per day are forced to leave the safety and security of their homes in Ireland and travel abroad to terminate their pregnancies, often to their own financial and medical detriment. Current Irish law prohibits doctors from making medical arrangements for women experiencing crisis pregnancies, and only under the most specific of circumstances are women entitled to counseling after their terminations. This lack of support from conception to termination leads to additional emotional trauma, and the lack of follow-up medical care has in some cases led to severe health problems. You will notice that in the heading of this section, I refer to these laws as "anti-choice"; in my opinion, this phrase more aptly describes the

agenda of those who support Ireland's current constitutional stance on abortion. You will see this term throughout this narrative, as an admitted reflection of my belief that a person cannot be "pro-life" if they are not equally concerned with the rights of the mother, and do not have any investment in the welfare of the child once he or she is born.

The first official document criminalizing abortion in Ireland was passed in 1861, a time when Ireland was still under British rule. Sections 58 and 59 of The Offences Against the Person Act deemed the procurement of abortions unlawful and fixed the punishment for committing (or assisting to commit) such acts as life imprisonment. The "attempts to procure abortion" section of the Act was intended to prevent women from seeking abortions, as well as prohibit doctors and health care providers from offering them (Offences Against the Person Act 1861). These laws remained in place even after Irish independence in 1922. The exact wording of these sections reads:

58. Every woman, being with child, who, with intent to procure her own miscarriage, shall unlawfully administer to herself any poison or other noxious thing, or shall unlawfully use any instrument or other means whatsoever with the like intent, and whosoever, with intent to procure the miscarriage of any woman, whether she be or be not with child, shall unlawfully administer to her or cause to be taken by her any poison or other noxious thing, or shall unlawfully use any instrument or others means whatsoever with the like intent, shall be guilty of felony, and being convicted thereof shall be liable... to be kept in penal servitude for life...

59. Whosoever shall unlawfully supply or procure any poison or other noxious thing, or any instrument or thing whatsoever, knowing that the same is intended to be unlawfully used or employed with intent to procure the miscarriage of any woman, whether she be or be not with child, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor, and being convicted thereof shall be liable... to be kept in penal servitude...

(Offences Against the Person Act 1861)

As you can see, there are no gray areas in these clauses. It is worth noting that at the time the Act was passed, women living in Ireland were not allowed to vote (Doran 2015). It is also noteworthy that although the UK legalized abortions by passing the Abortion Act 1967, this did not transfer over to Northern Ireland (Kelly 2016), and Ireland, as an independent republic, did not follow suit in passing similar legislation. It would be over 120 years after the Offences Against the Person Act before abortion laws would once again be addressed in Ireland.

After the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision in the U.S., which granted a woman the right to have an abortion under the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution, people and politicians in Ireland feared a similar judicial ruling that would allow women to seek abortion privately (Ferriter 2009). In 1983, several activist groups such as the Council of Social Concern, the League of Decency and the Irish Family League, united to form the Pro-Life Amendment Campaign (PLAC). They campaigned for the introduction of a bill that would insert a “pro-life” amendment into Irish Constitution and would make it unequivocal in its ban on abortion (Rhinehart 2013). In the end, the PLAC got their wish

and the amendment was passed by a 67 percent majority (Doran 2015). The Eighth Amendment of the Irish Constitution states:

The State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right (Eighth Amendment of the Constitution Act 1983).

The purpose of this amendment was to further emphasize the Constitutional rights of the unborn and to establish that the unborn has the same Constitutional rights as the mother. This is where the term “Love Both” comes from; it became a popular term for Irish anti-choicers who continue to advocate for this amendment to the present day. The other objective of the amendment was to make it clear that abortion would indefinitely be considered an illegal and punishable act in Ireland. Although the Amendment does concede that the life of the mother has equal value to the life of the unborn, both previous and subsequent cases unfortunately show the heartbeat of the unborn fetus taking precedence, leading to tragic outcomes for Irish women.

The first of these highly publicized cases happened preceding the passing of the Eighth Amendment. Sheila Hodggers, a pregnant patient suffering from cancer, died in Our Lady of the Lourdes in Drogheda in March of 1983 (Holland 2012). Sheila was a breast cancer survivor suffering a recurrence when she became pregnant. The hospital took her off cancer treatment, stating that it would harm the baby, and refused her pain medication for this same reason (Irish Family Planning Association, n.d.). This left

Sheila in debilitating pain as tumors developed on her neck, legs and spine. The hospital denied her husband's repeated requests for a C-section, early delivery or termination of pregnancy (Holland 2012). Eventually, Sheila prematurely delivered a daughter who died immediately. Sheila herself died two days later, succumbing to the cancer that had spread throughout her body (Holland 2012).

In 1992, the "X" case brought the issue of rape, pregnancy and suicide to the public's attention like never before. "X" was a 14 year old girl who was abused and raped by a neighbor and became pregnant. "X" began to have suicidal thoughts as a result of the pregnancy, and upon expressing these to her mother, the family decided to travel abroad to terminate the pregnancy. Before they left, the family asked the police if DNA could be used from the aborted fetus to help convict the neighbor, who denied his involvement. Hearing that "X" planned to have an abortion, Attorney General Harry Whelehan sought an injunction against her under the Eighth Amendment, preventing the family from following through with their plans for termination (Kelly 2012).

The "X" case was first brought to the Irish High Court, who granted a temporary and then permanent injunction against "X", essentially barring her from leaving Ireland until the birth of her child. The parents of "X" then appealed the High Court's decision to the Supreme Court, who overturned it and ruled that suicide was a valid reason for obtaining an abortion. Because suicide should be considered a grave threat to the mother's life, X was entitled to an abortion in Ireland under the clause of Article 40.3.3 requiring the State to have "due regard to the equal life of the mother" (Irish Family Planning Association, n.d.). When "X" and her family were given the court's permission

to travel to England to obtain the abortion, “X” miscarried her child. Nonetheless, her case did lead to two important constitutional amendments (Kelly 2012):

Thirteenth Amendment: This subsection shall not limit freedom to travel between the State and another state (Thirteenth Amendment of the Constitution Act 1992).

Fourteenth Amendment: This subsection shall not limit freedom to obtain or make available, in the State, subject to such conditions as may be laid down by law, information relating to services lawfully available in another state (Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution Act 1992).

It is important to note that any changes to Irish Constitution have to be voted on through a referendum. The Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments were voted on in November 1992 and became law approximately one month later. These subsections of Article 40.3.3 now allowed pregnant women to travel out of Ireland to procure abortions, and made it possible for them to avail themselves of information on abortion services abroad. A third proposed amendment asked that prohibition on abortion apply even in cases where the pregnant woman was suicidal. This amendment was rejected in 1992 and again in 2002 (Kelly 2012). I think the rejection of this amendment shows a shift starting to take place; empathy was starting to replace absolutism when it came to abortion in Ireland.

The other important case of 1992 that brought Irish abortion laws back into the ECtHR was *Open Door and Well Woman vs. Ireland*. In October of 1992, *Open Door*

Counseling Ltd. and Dublin Well Woman Centre Ltd. were victorious in their complaint that an injunction placed on them by the Irish Supreme Court violated Article 10 of the ECHR (Irish Family Planning Association, n.d.). This injunction had banned these two nonprofit groups from distributing information about abortion services legally available in other countries to pregnant women in Ireland (Rhinehart 2013). The ECtHR ruled that the restrictive injunction did violate Freedom of Expression and made it more likely that women seeking abortion may end up in dire medical straits due to lack of accessible information about their options (Rhinehart 2013). This case highlighted the importance and obligation of making information available to pregnant women and emphasized the line between advising and advocacy in matters regarding abortion services. It also undoubtedly influenced the passing of the Fourteenth Amendment.

The decision in *Open Door and Well Woman vs. Ireland* also had bearing in another piece of legislation passed in Ireland's ongoing abortion discussion. The Regulation of Information (Services outside the State for the Termination of Pregnancies) Act, passed in 1995, gave legal permission to doctors and medical groups to disseminate information on abortion services abroad to patients soliciting this information (Irish Family Planning Association, n.d.). This Act had two important stipulations: the doctors and medical advisors were required to dispense information about adoption and parenting concurrently with the information they were delivering about abortion, and under no circumstances were the medical caregivers to arrange an abortion abroad on their patient's behalf (Regulation of Information Act 1995).

In 1997, the "X" case made headlines again, as the decision in that case and the Thirteenth Amendment became the justification for a controversial ruling in the *A and B*

vs. EHB and C case. “A” and “B” were the parents of “C”, a 13 year old rape victim who developed suicidal ideations as a result of her pregnancy (Irish Family Planning Association, n.d.). Although C wished to travel abroad to terminate, her parents were against it and took legal action to prevent the Eastern Health Board, the entity that had guardianship over C at the time, from taking the girl abroad (Clifford 2002). Both the District Court and High Court deemed that C’s life would be at risk of suicide should she be required to continue with the pregnancy, and she was allowed to travel to England to abort her pregnancy (Irish Family Planning Association, n.d.). The “X” case had set the precedent to allow suicide as a justification for abortion, and the Thirteenth Amendment had made the travel between states for abortion services legal.

In 2007, a pregnant Irish teenager who was dubbed Miss D discovered that the fetus she was carrying had a fatal fetal abnormality and would likely die shortly after childbirth, leading to her decision to terminate (Bowcott 2007). At the time, Miss D was under the care and supervision of the Health Services Executive (Ireland’s national health and social service system), who sought to prevent her from traveling to England for a termination (Irish Family Planning Association, n.d.). The case was brought before the Irish High Court, which found that Miss D had a right to travel for a termination (Bowcott 2007). HSE was chastised about the way they handled the situation and was ordered to pay significant restitution to Miss D (Carolan & O’ Brien 2007).

Much like Sheila Hodgers, “C” was an Irish woman who was being treated for cancer when she unintentionally became pregnant. She felt that she was not able to get clear medical advice or information about how carrying the child to term could affect her health or her life (Irish Family Planning Association, n.d.). She decided to travel to the

UK to have an abortion, after which she was forced to seek follow-up medical care in Ireland (Enright 2010). C eventually became part of the landmark A, B and C v. Ireland case, which put pressure on the State to more clearly define which circumstances and situations would permit an abortion to legally take place in Ireland. Plaintiffs “A” and “B” in the case also travelled to the UK to obtain abortions, to their own financial detriments, and like C, also suffered prolonged issues that required attention after returning to Ireland (Enright 2010). However, there were also differences between the women. C was the only plaintiff legally entitled to an abortion under Irish law, due to the threat her pregnancy caused for her own life (Enright 2010). A and B did not fall under this clause but petitioned the court that abortion should be allowed under a broader scope of situations (Enright 2010). All three women alleged their rights had been violated under Article 8 of the ECHR (Enright 2010), which states:

1. Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence.
2. There shall be no interference by a public authority with the exercise of this right except such as is in accordance with the law and is necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security, public safety or the economic well-being of the country, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others (ECHR 1952).

In 2010, the ECtHR presided over *A, B, and C v. Ireland* and found in favor of plaintiff C (Rhinehart 2013). The court felt that Ireland had violated Article 8 in C's case because it had not implemented the already-existing constitutional right to a legal abortion for a woman whose life was under immediate threat (Irish Family Planning Association, n.d.). They contended that her rights had been infringed upon because she was not provided with information that would determine whether she was legally eligible to receive an abortion in Ireland (Rhinehart 2013). No judgments were made in favor of A and B. It took until June of the following year for the government to move forward with a plan to enact the A, B, and C case ruling.

Michelle Harte became another important name in Ireland's abortion debate in 2010. Michelle had been battling terminal cancer for nine years when she discovered she was pregnant. Her medical team at Cork University Hospital advised that she terminate her pregnancy (Irish Family Planning Association, n.d.). Ultimately, the recommendation was ruled against by the hospital's ethics committee (Cullen 2012). The committee refused the termination on the grounds that Michelle's life was not under "immediate threat" (Irish Family Planning Association, n.d.). This would make it illegal to perform the abortion in Ireland. Michelle was forced to travel to England to obtain the termination, a trip made incredibly difficult due to her illness and weakened condition. In 2011, Harte sued the State for violation of her human rights; the case was settled out of court in July 2011 and Michelle was substantially compensated. She died from cancer later that year (Cullen 2012).

It is important to note how the Human Rights Council has dealt with Ireland's handling of abortion. The first cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Ireland

was conducted in October 2011 and addressed abortion in a short paragraph in section 79, delivered to the Human Rights Council by Minister for Justice Alan Shatter. The dialogue references the landmark 2010 A, B, and C v. Ireland case, which I described above. Although Ireland had ruled in the 1992 X Case that abortion could be allowed in certain circumstances where the mother's life was at risk, legislation on this had not yet been passed. This left the medical community struggling with the ambiguity of the Irish law on abortion and unable to provide clear-cut answers or adequate care to patients for fear of legal backlash. It was the vagueness of the law that had led to the victory for C.

During their UPR review in October 2011, Ireland expressed its commitment to "ensuring that the judgment in this case is implemented expeditiously" (UPR 2011) and promised to employ an expert panel of doctors and lawyers to determine how the state could properly put the judgment into effect. Several member states (France, Slovenia, The Netherlands and Germany) shared interactive dialogue with Ireland about their intentions to form an expert group to address the effectiveness and accessibility of information on legal abortion. Despite Ireland's claim that they were fully committed "to the UPR process" and intended "to pay the fullest attention to the recommendations of the Human Rights Council" (UPR 2011, p. 3), Ireland subsequently rejected all recommendations that addressed abortion. These included that Ireland:

108.5. Introduce legislation to implement the European Court of Human Rights judgment in the A, B & C versus Ireland case (United Kingdom);

108.9. Ensure that the establishment of an expert group on abortion matters will lead to a coherent legal framework including the provision of adequate services (Netherlands). (UPR 2011).

Similar recommendations on abortion were also made by Denmark, Slovenia, Norway and Spain.

Despite their contradictory statements during their first UPR cycle, Ireland did indeed establish an Expert Group in January 2012. The 14-member group was tasked with providing recommendations to the government within six months on how to establish a clear framework to implement legally justified abortions, in response to the ECtHR ruling in the A, B and C v. Ireland case (O'Carroll 2012). In October, four months past the deadline the working group was given, Galway resident Savita Halappanavar died of sepsis during an inevitable miscarriage, six days after her husband first requested a termination of pregnancy due to her severe pain and rapidly declining health. The working group submitted their report to the Irish government hours before news of Savita's death went public (Dalby 2012). It is likely that the inevitable backlash of Savita's death forced the hand of the working group, who were already way past deadline in getting their recommendations on implementing abortion to the Irish government.

It seems almost impossible that I had not heard about any of the other cases I mentioned here until I started doing research for this thesis. Sadly though, it is true; it was not until Savita's case that the cruelty of Ireland's abortion restrictions and the scandal those restrictions were causing spread across the pond and invaded my bubble in

America. By 2012, I had already become pregnant twice and had two abortions. I was living at home with my father and stepmom, saving for my three-month trip to Ireland the following year. My dad would have ABC Nightly News on each evening as we sat down to dinner, and the candlelight vigils taking place across the country of Ireland for Savita sparked my interest. I turned up the volume and the outrage was palpable, even from the TV screen. Because the baby still had a fetal heartbeat, and because the legislation on this issue was still so unclear in Ireland, Savita's medical team had been unsure as to whether her case qualified for a legal abortion, and the delay in administering proper treatment is what ultimately led to her death.

In July 2013, President of Ireland Michael Higgins signed the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act (POLDPA) into law. This legislation came in response to Savita's death (Felzmann 2014), but also in response to the ongoing demands for implementation of the X and A, B, and C judgments (Irish Family Planning Association, n.d.). The Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act became legal in January 2014 and stated that termination can occur legally in three circumstances:

1. The Mother's life is at risk from physical illness.
2. The Mother's life is at risk during an emergency.
3. There is a clear risk of suicide.

(Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act 2013)

The intent of the POLDPA was seemingly to clarify what would constitute a legal abortion in Ireland, but the ambiguous wording of the Act left much room for debate.

What is the legal definition of “at risk”? What constitutes a physical illness? What constitutes an emergency? Who decides? Who decides on a women’s mental health during threats of suicide? What is the chain of responsibility in making sure those to blame for negative health outcomes for women are held accountable? It would be months before a guideline was released to medical professionals further clarifying the law, but by then it was clear that the Act did little to alleviate restriction on access to legal abortion in Ireland. The Act did not account for terminations in cases of rape, fatal fetal abnormality, or grave threat to a woman’s health (Felzmann 2014), notably stating that it is her actual life that must be at risk. Along with these glaring omissions, the Act actually made it more arduous to obtain a legal abortion, requiring the unanimous decision of two specialist practitioners to determine physical health risk and three specialist practitioners to determine mental health risk (Felzmann 2014). It is clear that the purpose of the POLDPA was to show that Ireland was fulfilling its obligation to the ECHR and to the Human Rights Council, when in fact the state was doing as little as it possibly could to loosen the restrictive legislation regarding abortion.

In early 2013, an article published in the Penn State Law Review discussed the “theory versus practice” mentality that Ireland displayed in regards to the ruling in the *A, B & C v. Ireland* case and moving abortion issues forward following the first UPR recommendations (Rhinehart 2013, p. 960). In particular, this article highlighted the contradiction Ireland seemed to be dedicated to upholding: on the one hand, Minister Shatter had advised the Human Rights Council that Ireland was committed to implementing the decision of *A, B & C v. Ireland*; on the other, Ireland rejected the UK’s request to do exactly that. The author notes that, “The Irish Family Planning Association

subsequently criticized the government for sending what it called ‘mixed messages’ on how the government planned to implement the ECHR ruling” (Rhinehart 2013, p. 972). Indeed, Ireland’s consistent inconsistency leaves many questions about their intentions to follow through on decisions regarding abortion. The ECHR listed their main concern as “the striking discordance between the theoretical right to a lawful abortion in Ireland and the reality of its practical implementation” (ECHR, cited in Rhinehart 2013, pp. 972-973). The age-old adage of “actions speak louder than words” seems to apply to the Irish handling, or lack of handling, of abortion issues.

In 2014, “Miss Y” became the first publicized case following the passage of the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act. Miss Y had been raped in the country she was fleeing, and having arrived in Ireland seeking asylum, she learned she was carrying a child as a result of the sexual attack she had suffered. From the start of her pregnancy, Miss Y made it clear that she would rather end her life than have the baby she was carrying. Because of her status as an asylum-seeker, however, she was told she would need to fill out complicated visa paperwork and would need over €1,000 for travel expenses to the UK. She was never informed of her rights under the POLDPA, which would have permitted an abortion in Ireland based on her suicidal ideations. She made repeated threats to end her life and began a hunger strike, which was abandoned after legal proceedings started to forcibly hydrate her. She eventually delivered her baby via C-section (Ms. Y’s Case: Denied a Lawful Abortion in Ireland 2016).

Another notable case to come before the UN Human Rights Committee after the passage of the POLDPA was *Mellet v. Ireland* in 2016. Amanda Mellet learned that her unborn fetus had congenital heart defects that could be fatal, and was later told that the

fetus had a condition that would result in certain death before or shortly after childbirth (De Londras 2016). Taking all steps to ensure that medical treatment could not proceed in Ireland due to the presence of a fetal heartbeat, Ms. Mellett did fly to England to abort the terminal fetus. The case highlighted the need for language regarding fatal fetal abnormalities, but it did something more. Finding in favor of the plaintiff became a landmark decision, as it was the first time the UN Human Rights Committee had determined that the criminalization of abortion could result in ICCPR violations (De Londras 2016). Although the Committee's findings on the Mellett case did not legally bind the state to reform abortion law, it did lead to the formation of the Citizens Assembly, tasked with examining the abortion laws in Ireland. If you're thinking this sounds redundant, it's because it is; like the 2012 Expert Group before them, the Citizens Assembly seemed to be nothing more than a stalling tactic by the Irish government, who wished to give the appearance of taking action without actually doing so. Nevertheless, the UN committee ruling on *Mellett v. Ireland*, along with the international controversy surrounding the death of Savita Halappanavar, may have been a leading factor in the negative response Ireland received from member states on abortion in the next UPR cycle.

The second cycle of Ireland's UPR took place in 2016, with Ireland presenting in February. Immediately noticeable upon reviewing this document is that the abortion issue moved from section 79 to section 30, and was discussed at greater length than during the first cycle. Seemingly patting itself on the back, Ireland reported the establishment of the POLDPA and announced that 26 abortions were legally obtained in Ireland in 2014 due to its passing. Ireland also announced that the creation of the Act had

satisfied The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in regards to implementing proper regulations for abortion in response to the A, B & C v. Ireland case.

Even more noteworthy than Ireland's UPR presentation was the response Ireland received from member states in July 2016. While the state clearly considered itself as having taken great strides in the abortion arena, the UN Human Rights Council did not appear to agree. In Ireland's first UPR review, only six member states made recommendations regarding abortion. During the second cycle, this number more than doubled, with 17 member states making recommendations. These new recommendations included:

136.18. Repeal legislation that criminalizes abortion and eliminate all punitive measures, in particular article 40.3.3. of the Irish Constitution (Iceland)

136.65. Take all necessary steps to revise the Protection of Life during Pregnancy Act 2013 in line with International Human Rights standards (India) (UPR 2016)

Recommendations were also made by the Czech Republic, Germany, Lithuania, Republic of Korea, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Slovakia, Sweden, Uruguay, the U.S., France and Canada, as well as the six countries that had made initial recommendations on abortion during Ireland's first UPR cycle. The interactive dialogue between countries, as well as the concluding recommendations made by member states, showed that while Ireland had made some progress in other recommendations of the Human Rights Council, their advancement on abortion was not satisfactory. The U.S.

went so far as to note “negative developments in women’s reproductive health” (UPR 2016, p. 7). The tragic and highly publicized death of Savita and the lack of clarity coming from a law that was meant to clarify was enough for member states to sit up and take notice, and in many cases, these member states were calling for a total decriminalization of abortion in Ireland.

During the first UPR cycle, the recommendations of member states regarding abortion “did not enjoy the support of Ireland” (UPR 2011, p. 21). In layman’s terms, Ireland was not going to pretend to even entertain the idea of repealing the Eighth Amendment or broadening the scope of legal abortions. Surprisingly, Ireland did agree to examine the recommendations put forth by member states during the second cycle of the UPR. Unsurprisingly, in September 2016, the official state response was a unanimous “not accepted” when it came to any recommendation made regarding abortion.

The implementation of legislation on abortion in Ireland has been slow at best. While the POLDPA did fulfill its obligation in the X case (and the subsequent A, B & C case), it had taken 21 years to do so, and the requirements it laid out for pregnant women made obtaining a legal abortion more taxing than ever before. It also failed to decriminalize abortion completely, merely reducing the sentence for procurement of abortion from a life sentence to 14 years imprisonment. This still meant that women seeking abortions were considered unlawful offenders and would be incarcerated as such. Ireland has consistently favored the life of the unborn over that of the mother, which shows in the POLDPA: the wording is such that medical intervention can only take place if the mother’s life is at risk, not her health. It is clear from the growing frustration from

member states that Ireland must make more significant advancements to its abortion laws before the next UPR cycle.

It is not just the frustration of the UN, however, that has finally brought the issue of abortion to the forefront of Irish politics. Groups like the Abortion Rights Campaign (ARC) and Reproductive rights, against Oppression, Sexism and Austerity (ROSA), as well as county pro-choice groups and student groups across Ireland, have strengthened their visibility and determination in recent years, building momentum in a way that is no longer easy for politicians to ignore. In 2015, then-Taoiseach Enda Kenny stated:

*I do not believe that this house should be rushed into making a decision ... This requires the most careful consideration by whoever is elected ... There won't be a referendum on this in the lifetime of this government (Kenny, cited in Ryan 2015, my emphasis).*

Kenny's statement ignored the fact that a decision on relaxing the archaic laws of abortion in Ireland was over 30 years in the making. Upon taking office in June 2017, however, new Taoiseach Leo Varadkar immediately announced that a referendum on the Eighth Amendment would occur in 2018, and he charged Minister for Health Simon Harris with drafting the referendum legislation (McNamee & Power 2017). Groups like those mentioned above were no doubt a driving force in this decision, as were internationally publicized cases like Savita and Siobhan Whelan. The announcement was also unquestionably influenced by the April 2017 recommendation of the Citizens Assembly to amend or replace the Eighth Amendment. This proposal was examined in

the fall of 2017 by the Oireachtas Committee, which I first mentioned in Section 2.1.1. After three months of thorough examination of the Citizens Assembly report, the Oireachtas Committee endorsed a full repeal, asking that the Eighth Amendment not be replaced, but be removed from the Irish Constitution completely (Report of the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution 2017). The expert testimony and scientific evidence that justified these committees decisions has led some previously anti-choice politicians to change their stance on abortion. Most notably, Micheál Martin, leader of Ireland's Republican party, Fianna Fáil, announced his support for a repeal in mid-January, acknowledging that his new position was divergent from his past stance on the issue and that "the diverse contributions of women" were an important factor in his change of heart (Martin, cited in Murray 2018). "Nothing is more powerful than individuals acting out of their own conscience" (Havel, cited in Pipher 2006, p. 29). In his speech to Dáil Éireann (Ireland's parliament), Martin added: "Women known to the public only by a single letter of the alphabet have exposed the cruel inflexibility and unintended consequences of the Eighth Amendment" (Martin, cited in Murray 2018).

I met some of these single-letter women during my time in Ireland. S, G, L, and P, who I introduced in an earlier section, were all women I interviewed who had flown abroad to have an abortion or to accompany a friend who was having an abortion; none were willing or able to give their full name to be published in this paper. Again, this should illustrate how significant the stigma still is around this topic in Ireland, and how the secrecy and silence around these stories serve to punish women twice. First, they have to deal with flying to another country for an invasive, uncomfortable, and ultimately

life-changing procedure; second, they are forced to bear their secret alone, unable to reach out for fear of a negative reaction or judgment.

The word travel usually evokes pleasant connotation. When I think of travel, I think of getting on a plane to a sunny location, the kind of trip in which your carry-on contains flip-flops to accommodate for the change in climate between your departure and your destination. When you say the word “travel” in Ireland, however, it can often be code for something very different. L, an American citizen, described the first time she learned of this linguistic dichotomy (Nov 2017):

*When I first moved here, I hung out with this group of friends, and someone’s girlfriend was traveling to England for an abortion, and they had mentioned it to me like “Oh yeah, so and so, she’s gone to England, you know...” and I was like “No, why?” And it was like wink wink, she’s in Liverpool type thing... I was like “You need to spell this out for me because I don’t understand” ... and they’re like “You know, to have an abortion” (my emphasis).*

In her 2009 book on the topic, Rossiter called the route traveled between Ireland and England for abortions the abortion trail and the people who travel it Ireland’s “invisible export” (p. 36). Indeed, two of my interviews described a guessing game they played on the plane, trying to pick out other female passengers who might be flying to the UK for the same reason they were. They both confirmed to me that they saw familiar faces in the clinic and on the route back, during which the girls were severely

uncomfortable, still recovering from their procedures. “The travel was the most traumatic part, really” (G, Nov 2017).

The secrecy around both travelling and the abortion itself is the other traumatic part of this shameful stigma. Since travel arrangements must be made quickly, the fares are often quite high, and because they cannot disclose why they need it, women are often forced to come up with the money to travel in very little time without financial help. Cover stories must be created to explain the trip to bosses, family members and friends. S, who was 16 weeks along when she discovered she was pregnant, describes the days leading up to her trip (Nov 2017):

*And because of how far along I was, time was of the essence... I was studying, I had work commitments, I could tell no one, so it's really hard to be like “by the way, can I have four days off in the next two weeks? If you wouldn't mind...” so that was really difficult (my emphasis).*

The weight of the secrecy can be heavier after the procedure, being back among family and friends who do not know. L described having to return to work as a home caregiver for her grandparents one day after her abortion (Nov 2017):

*My grandfather was disabled, and that day he fell down the stairs... and I'm running over trying to lift him up and he's like “you have to lift me up higher!” And I'm trying to lift him up and I was in so much pain myself, and I was just crying and thinking you don't even know what I've gone through yesterday, you*

*have no idea. And I have to sit here and pretend like my life is totally normal (my emphasis).*

Another interviewee, P, traveled to Liverpool with a friend who had chosen to terminate her pregnancy. Their cover story was that they were attending an engagement party for her friend's former co-worker. Once in Liverpool, they bought souvenirs and went to some touristy areas for photos, so that their parents would be satisfied that their story was the truth. P told me (Nov 2017):

*It's funny...from that day to this, the word abortion was never mentioned. It was never mentioned. In keeping with how clandestine this all is, nobody but you and I know that I am in here this evening. And that's 20 years on (my emphasis).*

This echoed a sentiment from Rossiter's book in 2009 (p. 35): "Chances are they will never speak of it again, even amongst themselves."

The common theme I noticed throughout these interviews is the anger these women feel towards the State. This is unsurprising, of course, as the State is responsible for keeping laws in place that force travel and demand secrecy. These are the women living behind the statistics; for every highly publicized case brought against the State for human rights violations regarding abortion, there are probably many more who have to hold their anger at bay. S, who was studying for her final law exams when she became pregnant, told me, "At the time I was devastated, now I'm just angry towards it." She goes on to say (Nov 2017):

*It seems ridiculous that legislators get to decide in terms of health... and as a future lawyer, that just blows my mind that judges and court systems and that rules of law that are hundreds of years old can decide... (my emphasis).*

L, who has lived in Ireland since her termination in the states, brought up a thought-provoking point in terms of the government being allowed to classify abortions (Nov 2017):

*They're either against repeal, like Fianna Fáil, or they're for it in limited circumstances, like rape or fatal fetal abnormality, or serious or grave risk to the woman's life... what that feels like to me is still dividing into good abortions and bad abortions, and that's saying that there's still women that won't be able to access abortion here (my emphasis).*

The frustration these women feel is completely understandable; all too often in politics, the people making the decisions are not the ones directly affected, and are lacking the empathy to understand a situation as serious as crisis pregnancy. The hypocrisy of it was something that I saw as a clear source of aggravation for these women who had lived the experience and trauma of abortion firsthand. It brought to memory this quote from *When Women Were Birds*:

*There is nothing more sobering than for a woman to place her hands on her belly and wonder what is the right thing to do. It is always about love. It is never done lightly. And there is nothing more demeaning to women than to have a man, especially a man we don't know, define the laws that will govern our milk and blood (Williams 2012, p. 103, my emphasis).*

Finally, it should be noted that none of the women interviewed expressed regret about their choice. I think too often, those who regret their abortions are exploited for the sake of the anti-choice side; they are used as examples of why it is morally safer to choose life. For me, I long confused shame with regret (something I discuss in the next chapter), and so it was important for me to know whether any of the women I interviewed regretted their decision. The common theme that emerged from their answers was that no, they did not regret their choices... and their lives would not be the same had they gone down a different road. G and L are both happily married with families, while S is at the start of a promising law career. All three told me that if they had not chosen to terminate, they wouldn't have all the wonderful things they have today.

Whether we are discussing Ann Lovett, X, Savita Halappanavar, Miss D, the countless women exiled from society to Magdalene Laundries and mother and baby homes, or the faceless women who have traveled Ireland's abortion trail, women's bodies have long served as sites of oppression, mistrust, suspicion and shame throughout the history of Ireland. Thankfully there are people who are dedicating their passion, talent and ambition to cast off these remnants of old and cruel Catholic Ireland and to usher in a new era of freedom, equality and acceptance. In May, it will be up to the people of

Ireland to decide whether they will embrace this change or maintain laws that have served to repress and shame the women of Ireland since 1983.

### CHAPTER 3: A PERSONAL EXPLORATION

*“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you”  
- Maya Angelou*

Sometimes I think about myself on the gurney. It is a strange image to conjure up, and when it comes, it is usually because someone is telling a hospital story or talking about a recent doctor’s visit. I never thought I would need to remember what that cold leather felt like or how bad the lighting was to someone with a photographer’s eye... I never imagined those memories would be useful, but somehow I retained them anyway. If someone had told me then, while I was laying under that harsh light and praying to a God that I didn’t know if I believed in, that the pain of my experiences would be a lesson someday, I might have hit them. If they had told me that these same experiences would be an integral part of my graduate college thesis, I might have hit them *and* called them a liar. And yet, I will never forget the moment I was told... no, I was *encouraged*... to write about anything I wanted, any topic I felt passionate about, any story that felt as if it needed telling. I knew immediately what that story was. Of course it was going to come out. It had to. It needed to.

“Storytelling is a fundamental part of how we deal with trauma” (Rosenthal 2013, p. 235). I recently sat with a friend and classmate who had learned a devastating truth from her partner. He had been holding in a secret so profound and horrendous that the weight of it was literally breaking his body. After the initial shock had worn off and she had moved into the acceptance phase of how this new reality would affect her life, she

found herself jokingly asking her partner, “So are you ready for Robert’s program yet?” Storytelling has been an invaluable part of the Interdisciplinary Studies program, and for this, I am grateful. It has given me the chance to confront my own trauma, and to shed the weight of the shame that I have carried before it broke me completely.

I start this chapter of personal exploration with a simple confession that might serve as an explanation for all that comes after it: for as long as I can remember, my life has been tied up in getting others to love me. It’s embarrassing, it’s weak, it’s not the way strong and independent women are supposed to think or talk. But isn’t it this type of pressure about the way women are “supposed to be” that is weighing us down? It’s one of the main themes of this thesis: women are needlessly and continuously shamed for deviating from society’s definition of what an ideal woman should be. So, with that, I confess my hidden truth: I have spent more time than I care to think about seeking validation from men who did not deserve the power I gave them over my self-worth. Another truth I have learned over the years: the corny old adages that talk of the need to love yourself before you can love another do actually hold some weight. I never loved myself enough to walk away, to say “I’m better than this”, to demand more, to *be* more.

My father, the first man I ever loved, brought me up to believe that men are very visual creatures, and that if I just lost a few pounds, I would have boys knocking down my door. My father is an avid runner and fitness enthusiast, and deep down, I truly believe that this was his way of advocating for a healthy lifestyle and encouraging me to exercise more. What it did, instead, was make me believe that my worth was wrapped up in my waistline, and since I was never able to be the perfect size four that I wanted, I was never able to see the value in myself. I once had a personal trainer who told me that 90

percent of her clients could not look at themselves in the mirror while working out. Recently, I went to a Zumba class and watched a girl in the front row staring right at herself in the mirror, square in the eye, the entire class. I envied her confidence and her strength from my spot in the back row, away from the mirrors. Why can't I be like her, I thought. Why can't I look in the mirror and be proud of what I see?

I believe these thoughts of worthlessness, first emerging around 11 or 12 years old, continued to grow stronger in my high school and college years and led to regrettable choices in romantic interests. These relationships, in turn, perpetuated the false notion that what I had to offer could be reduced down to my physical being and nothing more. Too many times, I hid what I really wanted to say or do for fear of rejection. I spent a lot of time dreading the bad things someone might say to me because my self-esteem was so low that is all I thought I deserved. I gave too much of myself too quickly in order to be liked, then spent hours, days, months staring at the phone, waiting for a call or a text message that would never come. After an appropriate amount of mourning time, during which I would agonize over everything I had done wrong, I would go out and find someone new to hitch my star to, someone who would appreciate everything the last guy missed. This endless cycle has led to a lot of heartache and pain. Yet, at the same time, am I allowed to indulge in the hurt I have felt? You are about to read the story of my two pregnancies, or more accurately, my two abortions. I feel selfish to reflect on my past and to say that I have suffered, but at the same time, I know it is an important narrative to tell, so that I may start to heal. I can't depend on anyone but myself to be the hero of my story. "It's not the lips of a prince that will save us, but our own lips speaking" (Williams 2012, p. 125).

I know that sharing this intimate and shameful part of my past will shatter the silence I have held and the stigma I have bought into that my choices have defined who I am and rendered me worthless. “That which is unspoken becomes unspeakable” (Rich, cited in Pipher 2006, p. 90). It is time to speak my truths, regardless of who might cover their ears.

### **3.1 The Scarlett Letter A: My Abortion Story**

The loneliest place in the world is probably a relative location. For some, it might be a church or a cemetery. Others might find their own home lonely, empty of the love that might have once filled each room. For me, it was sitting alone in the Planned Parenthood waiting room, asking myself every question my confused mind could think up, rubbing my flat belly and trying to feel something, anything. It still didn't seem real, and yet, I knew my life had been changed forever. Was I doing the right thing? The question repeated and repeated, so loudly in my head that I didn't hear the nurse call my name. She came and touched my arm, asking if I was ready. The answer was shaky but certain: “Yes.”

I have been pregnant twice in my life, a fact that I am reminded of at every gynecologist appointment by some teenage LPN-in-training who's wearing a Patagonia fleece over her scrubs and those ridiculous ear separators, a fashion statement that seems like a bit of an oxymoron for a healthcare professional. It's not that I have ever forgotten the fact that I have been “with child” twice, but the way they ask it is an imposing and

unwanted verification of who I am. It is part of my identity, yes, but it is also part of the security check now: name, age, date of birth, number of pregnancies. These, along with the indirect but not-so-subtle probing hints about my lifestyle (“Have you ever traded sex for money?”), are the questions I have to get through to see the real doctor. The one that has pearls in her ears instead of holes large enough for me to flip a nickel through.

The first time I got pregnant, I was a graduating senior in high school, and I was positive that I was in love for the first time, a concept that both intrigued and mystified me. Like most girls, I didn’t start noticing boys until puberty, and by then I was all braces and bangs and baggy jeans. My stepmother had to buy me ProActiv for my skin and my voice took on a decidedly Fran Drescher-like quality. It’s a cruel irony in life that just as you discover your own sexuality, you simultaneously become someone no one could possibly want to have sex with. Luckily, most everyone around you is also in this stage, and so you are able to fumble around with each other in the dark, ignoring the acne and the awkwardness, trying to figure out what it was that all the movies and rap songs were going on and on about. The first time I had sex was with a boyfriend when I was a junior in high school. I wasn’t in love, but he was older, and the attention and affection he showed me were enough to convince me that I could be in love with him, someday. It took several very unpleasant and uncoordinated tries before we were able to say that we were no longer virgins. I remember that the pain was absolutely excruciating. It did not compare, however, to the pain I felt months later when I learned that he had been cheating on me. He was my first real relationship, and from then on, a disturbing precedence was set. Being a person who internalizes things, I saw his cheating as failure on my part to be a good girlfriend. If I had been good enough or pretty enough or

adventurous enough, he would not have strayed, and I would not be alone. Looking back on it, I see how formative this first experience with “love” turned out to be.

The following year I started taking an active notice in B, a boy I had known since middle school. After 5<sup>th</sup> grade, all the elementary schools in my town dumped into one large middle school, and those were the kids you would be with until high school graduation. I was a quiet student, not necessarily because I was concentrating so hard on schoolwork, but because I was desperate to find my footing in this sea of jocks and smarts and stoners and rich kids. I was none of these things, and so I chose the wallflower route in an effort to blend in for fear of standing out. In the spring of my junior year, however, I was starting to come out of my shell a bit. I had already had an older, somewhat popular boyfriend; this secured me a higher rank in the social hierarchy, and while I was not popular by any means, I had friends and belonged to a social circle and was having the all-American high school experience. It was only natural, then, that the all-American captain of the football team would be the guy to catch my eye. B was tall, handsome, with a rough-around-the-edges exterior that both frightened and captivated me. He wore his jeans perfectly tucked into his unlaced Timberland boots, and the way he filled out that plain, dirty white t-shirt he wore would have made James Dean jealous. He listened to hip-hop music, he drank, and he didn't seem to care about school or what anyone there thought of him. He was a bad boy at the time in my life when that was wildly appealing, and I fell hard. I divulged my feelings to my best friend in hopes that she would tell him, as you do in high school. Sure enough, he approached me at the next party we were both attending, and we talked all night. When we weren't kissing, that is.

He had had a rough life. B lived in a run-down, second-floor apartment in a remote and undesirable part of town. His older brother was already a father at just 20, living out of the house in another run-down apartment across town, and B lived at home with his mother Y and his younger sister A. B's father had been an abusive alcoholic who had left without a word when B was 9 or 10. Y had worked at the local supermarket for as long as B could remember, long before his dad had walked out, and you could see the years of hardship behind every tired smile she gave. A was a welcoming ball of energy, and she clearly loved and idolized both her big brothers. Unfortunately, she also resembled them both in an uncanny and unattractive way, and so she was doomed to be teased and bullied for her boyish looks throughout her high school years. You would think that having an older brother who bench-pressed nerdy freshmen for fun would have helped her cause, but B saved his energy and his focus for the football field, at the expense of family, friends, and ultimately, me. I have heard that Texas is the place to be if you eat, breathe and live football. Western Massachusetts, on the other hand, didn't have quite the same dedication to the sport, but try telling those players that every Friday when those lights came on. B was proud to wear his uniform on game days, proud of the "C" patch placed prominently on his shoulder to let everyone know he was a Captain, and therefore, untouchable. He would strut through the halls like a peacock, feathers on full display, and he and his teammates would gather at a locker and discuss game strategy. The girlfriends of these players would wear their boyfriend's away shirts on home game nights, and their home jerseys when the team had away games. They would carry their books for their boyfriends all day as a sign of... well, of what, I'm not sure. Loyalty? Respect? Concern over a

strained back before a big game? I never found out, because I never carried any books. I never wore any jersey through the halls.

B was very quiet and standoffish, and he had convinced me, very early on, that he was an incredibly private person. He had been through a lot, and he didn't want sympathy or pity from anyone for his home life, or lack thereof. He didn't like people in his business, and he kept most people at arm's length because he didn't think anyone at school would understand his situation. Most of our classmates were middle class and still had both parents in our lives, myself included. We didn't know what having an abusive and then absent father could do to your family, who it could turn you into. I don't think he did either, as he always seemed scared of his own anger. He could be gruff and he could intimidate you if you didn't know him, but I thought I did, and I settled for the private moments we shared while secretly longing for a public declaration of love from him. When we started "dating", I met his mom and sister right away, which felt like a huge step at the time, but I quickly learned it had more to do with his aversion to hooking up in my tiny car, which he had ironically nicknamed "the pregnant roller skate". His mom was always too tired to care what he did, and so while my house had a strict "open door, feet on the floor" policy, at B's we weren't bothered. I would go over a few nights a week, or basically whenever he called. I gave him rides to and from his after-school job so he wouldn't have to walk. On Valentine's Day senior year, we skipped school and went to his apartment. On the dining room table he had placed a card and a drug-store stuffed kitten that said "Be Mine" when you squeezed its paw. It was the first gift I had ever received from him, and in my 18-year-old brain, it might as well have been a diamond ring. That was the day we made love for the first time, a slow but

also panicked process, as we feared his mom might come home and discover us.

Allowing me over behind closed doors on school nights was one thing, but walking in on us fornicating in her living room during school hours was quite another, and we did not suspect she would be very understanding, regardless of the romance of the holiday.

After that, sex became pretty regular. We had each lost our virginity in previous relationships, and so while those were the discovery relationships, what we had was exploratory and learning based; sometimes I was the teacher and sometimes I was the student. We were patient with each other, and he was tender and caring; my favorite moments became the times after sex, when I would lay my head on his chest and he would stroke my hair. He had scars from places his father felt he needed to leave his mark, and I would trace them with my fingers and tell him he deserved better. I trusted him, loved him in the naive and feverish way they write country songs about; I felt that I would surely leave town with him the minute he asked. The problem was, he never did. He would talk about the future and getting out of our hometown, but didn't ask about my goals or dreams or plans for us. He talked more and more about the possibility of college and city life and going somewhere new, but when he talked there was a lot of "me" and very little "we". The plans never seemed to include me. Neither, it turned out, did his plans for prom. As the date approached, I hoped and I prayed that he would ask, that he would finally feel comfortable enough in our situation to let others know that we were together. Turns out he was more comfortable asking my cousin, an underclassmen who didn't know of our history, to be his date, and for the first time I realized that we actually were not together, in any sense of the word. We were not planning together, we were not dreaming together, and we certainly were not being seen together. I found another date

for prom, but even surrounded by my best friends and schoolmates, I felt utterly alone watching B swing my own cousin around the dance floor. Only my best friends knew our secret, and now, there was nothing to know. I realized then that being a “secret girlfriend” keeps you in the same limbo as words like “maybe” and “almost”. It is not something to hitch your star to, because in the end, maybes, almos, and secret girlfriends have one thing in common: they don't count. I made a vow that night to never speak to B again; we were almost done with school, after all, and we weren't heading to the same colleges. I knew it would not be easy, but I was strong in my conviction that I needed him out of my life.

Summer came and went with the usual fanfare, and because most of my friends were heading off to different schools in different states, it was a busy time of graduation parties, weekend trips to Cape Cod, and late-night goodbye bonfires. I was also working full time and getting ready for my first semester at the local community college. There was no doubt that my plate was full, and so it wasn't until August that I realized something both startling and unsettling: I had not gotten my period all summer. It took that simple realization to know what was later confirmed by a pregnancy test I drove three towns away to buy: I was pregnant.

“If you want to hear God laugh, tell him your plans” (Yiddish proverb). I had sworn B off at the start of summer, and I had done well with my word: I hadn't called, texted, done the drive-by thing. I was busy and I was hurt, but now, I was pregnant and I was scared. My mother was the type to want me drug tested for taking a nap in the afternoon, and my father was the angry explosive type that would surely detonate with

the news that his baby girl had been so careless and irresponsible. There was no one else, and since I wanted him to be part of the decision as well, I knew that I had to call B.

One ring, two rings, three rings. Where was he? I left a voicemail and waited anxiously. One call, two calls, three calls. No response. One week, two weeks, three weeks, and I knew. I knew I was not going to hear from him, that this decision would be mine to make alone. I had been to the doctors, something I paid out of pocket for because I was still under my father's insurance plan and couldn't risk him finding out. The doctor had told me that if I chose not to keep the baby, I only had a certain window of time to have the procedure. And three weeks later, I knew I was approaching that deadline. I also knew that B didn't care enough about me to call me back, so how could I expect him to care enough about me to raise a baby together? His silence was my decision. I made an appointment to terminate my pregnancy.

I got to Planned Parenthood about an hour before my procedure. It was a Saturday morning, so I had to walk through a small throng of protesters and pass through the metal detectors to get to the lobby. I filled out the clipboard full of paperwork they handed me and fished out the envelope of cash I had stashed in my purse for the abortion. The money was from my college savings account, and as they took my paperwork and the overstuffed envelope, I felt another small piece of my dignity go too. I went and took a seat in the loneliest place in the world, contemplating how I had gotten to this point. There were other faces around me; some were alone and looked sad, others were with partners and looked excited. I saw myself in the sad faces; I saw who I wanted to be in the happy ones. My eyes shifted to the materials on the tables, the plastic model of a vagina catching my eye and causing me to blush. I waited anxiously for my name, and

by the time it was read, I barely recognized the sound of it. In the movie *Juno*, the title character tells her father of her unplanned pregnancy. After some angry words, the father looks at his teenage daughter and says, “I thought you were the kind of girl who knew when to say when.” Juno replies, “I don’t really know what kind of girl I am” (Reitman 2007). As I sat in that waiting room, I didn’t know either. Even my name seemed foreign.

After the procedure, I was wheeled into a room with several other beds separated by thin curtains, and I could see I was the only girl there who was alone. There was hushed whispering and dim lighting, and I curled up in a fetal position and pulled the blanket over me, even though it was August and this place did not seem to have proper air conditioning. The abortion was quick and painless, so why did I have this stabbing pain in my stomach? I felt empty, starving with no desire to eat, and the pain would not subside. Phantom pain, maybe, and I just couldn’t help it: I wanted B there. I wanted him with me. I wanted him to wrap his arms around me and stroke my hair like he used to, I wanted him whispering to me in hushed tones that all of this was going to be okay. I knew he wasn’t there, though, and wouldn’t be even if I tried to call, and so I forced sleep to come in this unrestful place.

A couple hours later, the nurse woke me up and asked me who would be driving me home. I called the friend I had enlisted for caretaker duty, and she was there within minutes to help me into her car and drive me to her house. Her bedroom was above the garage, detached from the main house, so it was the perfect hideaway from prying parents who would want to know why I was taking a nap at their house in the middle of the day. She let me sleep and cry, sleep and cry, until finally it was just sleep, and I woke up the

next day almost refreshed, almost feeling like everything that happened the day before was a bad dream. Almost.

It took me a few days to get back to my normal self, though I suspected I would never be fully normal again. I didn't know it then, but abortion marks you with a scarlet A that only you can see. You see it when you are naked in front of the mirror, you see it when you spot children playing in the park. You feel it burning your skin when you walk by a Planned Parenthood; the burn hurts even worse when there are anti-choicers outside with their graphic signs and their cruel judgments. You wear the A on your clothes the same way B had worn his Captain's patch, except it was invisible and painful and it wasn't anything to be proud of. It is a 20-minute procedure that stays with you for the rest of your life. I didn't know that then, but I know it now.

A few weeks later, I was at a birthday party for a friend, and I unexpectedly ran into B. I asked if we could talk, and beers in hand, we headed to a corner of the yard, where I told him what had happened and why I had been trying to call him so frantically at the start of August. I don't think I will ever forget what he said after my admission: "I figured that's why you might be calling."

I don't know what made it worse, the words he spoke or the way he spoke them. Such nonchalance, such indifference. He had figured out that that's why I was calling, and he still hadn't bothered to pick up the phone. He had suspected that I might be pregnant with his child, and he never called me back. He was busy, he explained. He had offers to play football, but his mom couldn't afford even the small amounts that the scholarships wouldn't pay, and he had been anxious, trying to figure out his future. I heard his explanation, but everything after that first sentence seemed to bounce off of me,

like I was wearing sunscreen that reflected his harsh glare. He didn't ask how I was, he didn't ask how the procedure had gone or how I was feeling, physically or emotionally. It was another conversation that was all about him, no thought of me or the child I had carried that had belonged to him. I looked back towards my friends, laughing and enjoying the party, and I again wondered when I had become this girl. This girl who barely existed, the one with the invisible A, standing with the guy who should have been wearing it too, the guy who should have been sharing the burden. The guy who could not stop talking about himself, the guy who could not spare a five-minute phone call for his child. I felt silly for ever loving him, silly for having dreams of leaving town and starting a life and a family with him. I felt naïve in the thoughts I once had that we could be all we ever needed for each other.

At that same moment, I also felt vindication. We would have never been the family I had always hoped for, and keeping the baby would have meant decades of hardship and possibly regret. I would have turned out to be like his mother Y, who had lived three lifetimes in a mere 40 years, with a son or daughter that looked like B, someone that would serve as a daily reminder of this pain, this hurt, this insensitivity. More than my own anguish, I would have been giving my child a life full of struggle. I knew that I didn't have the support system, that I couldn't provide the things that a child needs, that I wouldn't have been enough on my own. I was 18 years old, and I was not ready. If I had someone to do it with me, maybe things would have been different. But I had been alone in this from the start, and in that one backyard conversation, all my moral questions had been answered. I knew I had done the right thing.

It would seem that this experience and the way it affected me would have been enough to scare me out of having sex ever again. The emotional scars had stayed with me, and I thought about the baby a lot, actually... what my life might look like if I had decided to keep it, whether I would have had a boy or girl, what kind of mom I would be. I hated myself for what I had done and I missed what could have been, even though I never doubted the choice I had made was the right one. I didn't want the pain I went through to be in vain, and so for the next few years I made a vow to remain abstinent until I was in a caring and committed relationship. I found it a hard vow to keep, however, in the raucous and rowdy college environment I was residing in. I was away from my parents for the first time in 20 years, I was free, I was making new friends and enjoying new experiences. I was meeting new boys, boys that were different than B and everyone I knew in my hometown. And I was still as desperate as ever to be loved by someone, anyone. It wasn't long before I let my vow of chastity go, and I found history repeating itself in the most unfortunate and unexpected way.

The second time I got pregnant was between my junior and senior years in college. I had rented an apartment just off campus with a friend for the summer, so that I could keep my waitressing job at the local alehouse. It paid well and really picked up in the fall, and I didn't want to lose the job by moving home for the summer. There weren't too many college friends who stayed in town over summer break, but those that did lived right across the street from my friend and I in their fraternity house. I had joined a sorority my first semester at school, and Sigma Pi was our brother fraternity. We held mixers and cohosted Greek events with them, and I came to be good friends with several of the guys in the brotherhood. One in particular, M, became my best friend, and I liked

the feeling it gave me to wear his letters and be seen with him and his friends. It made me feel like I was part of something, one of the cool kids. I felt comfortable with him, I trusted him, and despite his very unfortunate-looking wrestler's ear, I was attracted to him in a passive sort of way. We both dated other people, however, and I never really thought about taking our friendship to the next level. Until that summer, that is, when we were among that small group of people staying in town.

I was working double shifts at the alehouse and didn't have a lot of downtime. Some nights, when I would get home, my roommate Christine and I would settle in with takeout and watch re-runs of *Nip/ Tuck*. Other nights, I would come home to the loud noises of a party at the fraternity house, and we would wander over. One night I came home to an empty house, and decided to go across the street and hang with the boys. Christine was gone for a few days, and I had the following day off from work, so I was ready to cut loose and enjoy my summer a bit.

The usual suspects were at the fraternity house when I arrived, and we drank beer and played party games on the front porch while some other friends smoked marijuana in the backyard. M and I talked and laughed, as usual, and as the party died down in the early hours of the morning, he offered to walk me home. When we got back to my apartment, I invited him in for another beer, and he accepted. We talked in the kitchen for an hour or so, and when it didn't seem like I could keep my eyes open anymore, I asked him if he wanted to sleep over. Even though we were both single at the time, I really didn't think much of the invitation. We had slept in the same bed platonically many times before, and so it seemed as routine as brushing my teeth or taking out my contacts. When I climbed into bed with him that night, however, there was an electricity

between us that hadn't been there during those previous sleepovers. He asked if I wanted to cuddle, something we had also done platonically before; only this time, I knew it would be anything but friendly. I don't know what got into us; whether it was the beer, the appeal of a summer fling, or an irresistible desire that we had tried to repress all along, but within minutes, seconds maybe, we were having sex. It was familiar and trusting and in that moment, I did love M. It was over a few minutes later and he collapsed onto the bed next to me, pulling me close so that I fit right into the crook of his arm. We fell asleep, woke up, had breakfast together, and went on with our days. We didn't talk about it, but we didn't not talk about it either. We flirted, we stayed friends, we stayed comfortable with each other. Nothing came of what happened between us, but for the first time that was okay. I still trusted him, cared about him as a friend, and knew we would be in each other's lives in one aspect or another. I didn't regret sleeping with him. What I did regret was that we had not used protection, but in another moment of naivety, I figured there was no chance I could get pregnant. The sex had been too quick for that... right?

A few weeks later, I was standing at a computer at work, putting in an order I had just taken from one of my tables. One moment I was selecting what they wanted from an appetizer menu on my screen, and the next moment I was doubled over on the floor, trying not to cry out in pain. I had no idea what was going on, but it hurt, badly. My friend Katie rushed over to help me, and as I stood up and steadied myself at the waitress station, I tried to wrack my brain as to what I had eaten or what might be causing this sharp, shooting abdominal pain. I couldn't think of anything, and I tried to push it aside and go on with my shift. Ignoring it wasn't working, however, as every few minutes the

pain would come back full force, and I would find myself running for cover so that my tables wouldn't see me shaking in agony or writhing on the floor. Katie worried that it might be appendicitis, and she asked our boss if she could drive me to the hospital. Normally, I would have shaken off such concern and just tried to go home and ride it out, but the word appendicitis scared me and I didn't want to be stupid about my health. Our boss got our tables covered and let Katie bring me to the ER, where I was deemed non-emergency and waited for a few hours to be seen.

When my name was finally called, I went into a triage area and sat on the bed they assigned, watching the chaos around me and clutching my stomach every few minutes in pain. When the nurse finally came to see me, she asked me how I was doing and peppered me with the routine questions about my health. "Have you ever been pregnant?" I nodded in the affirmative and looked away, humiliated. "Could you be pregnant now?" The hesitation of my responding "No" both surprised and scared me. She eyed me closely and I explained that while I had had sex once recently, I really didn't think there was a possibility I was pregnant. She seemed to nod sympathetically, perhaps at my stupidity, and she said before sending me for any kind of x-ray, she was going to run a pregnancy test, just to be sure. I nodded in agreement, and I think it was then that it started sinking in: I could actually be pregnant.

After the test and another hour of waiting, the nurse came back to see me and pulled the curtain around the bed. The look on her face was enough, but she soon confirmed with words what I had come to suspect: I was pregnant. Again. Only this time, I had what is called an ectopic pregnancy: the fertilized egg was implanted outside the uterus, and the pain I was experiencing was due to a ruptured fallopian tube. There

was no point in riding out the pain: the baby was not likely to survive. It was not a viable pregnancy, the nurse told me in a quiet tone, but it turned out I was actually lucky: the stage I was in did not require emergency surgery, and it would be my decision to try to go ahead with the pregnancy, despite the risks to myself and the fetus, or to terminate, which could possibly save my life. I nodded numbly at her words, trying to formulate any sort of intelligent response. Truth be told, I was in shock. This felt unreal, like it couldn't possibly be happening again, and I felt anger with myself for repeating my horrible mistake. I tried to dissuade my guilt by reminding myself that the decision was pretty much out of my hands, but it didn't help. I knew how this story ended: I was going to terminate the pregnancy. I was going to abort another baby, because in the end, that was what was best for me. I felt like a selfish, cold, careless, heartless monster. I did not deserve to be a mother.

Katie was waiting for me when I walked out and looked up expectantly, waiting to hear the big news of what had me in all this pain. I didn't tell her. I couldn't. We knew each other from the restaurant, but not well enough, and I didn't want the gossip getting out that I was pregnant when I knew I wouldn't be for long. I made up a story about ulcers that she seemed to accept, and we drove back to the restaurant so I could get my car. I drove to my apartment and started packing a bag. I knew I needed to go home and deal with this right away. I called M, and he picked up on the second ring. I asked him if he could come to the apartment to talk, and unlike B had been, he was there right away. He sat on my bed while I walked around the room, mindlessly putting things in my bag and avoiding his eyes as I told him why he was there: our friendly roll in the hay had gotten me pregnant, and I wanted to let him know as soon as I found out. I was

having some pain, but I would be okay, and I just thought telling him was the right thing to do. He looked shell-shocked, but calm, and then, much like B, he said something I will never forget. Only this was for a much different reason:

“We can live at my dad’s house until we get on our feet with the baby. And I know it's a bit old-fashioned and maybe too soon to discuss, but I would really love to marry you so that we can be a proper family.”

I never thought my first (and to this date, only) marriage proposal would be in a tiny bedroom of a rented house in a moment that I was feeling so scared and alone. I knew at that moment that there are good men in the world, that I had found one and he was right in front of me and offering to care for me and our child in a way that B was never capable of. I was not alone this time; M was as emotionally involved as I was, if not more. He wanted to move in with me and marry me, and he asked if we could name the baby after his mother, who had passed away a few years earlier. I was floored, and I was wrecked, and without any words, I was crumpled in his arms bawling like a baby. I cried for what seemed like hours but was probably only 10 minutes or so; he stroked my hair and whispered that it was going to be okay, just like I had wanted B to do all those years before. And when I was finally positive that it would, in fact, be okay, I pulled away from him, collected myself, and told him what the nurse at the hospital had said. This pregnancy was extremely risky and could end very badly, and I had already chosen to terminate. I looked into his eyes and felt heartbroken for what I saw; I could tell he was devastated, and I knew this time that he would be bearing the invisible A as well. I had always wished I could share some of the burden of what I felt with B after my first

pregnancy, but standing there with M and dealing with my second, I just wanted to take his pain away. I wanted to carry the load for both of us, because I didn't want him to know how empty, how disgraced, how hollow it could make you feel. I had lived with that shame for three years; I knew all too well the toll it could take.

We went into the kitchen and I put a kettle on for tea; summer or not, I was Irish, and tea was the answer to most of life's problems. We sat at my kitchen table and talked everything out, allowing pauses to collect our thoughts and calm our nerves. M had some concerns, and there was some Googling done to support what the nurse had said and to answer questions I hadn't thought to ask. In the end, he agreed that my decision was the right one, and that helped me in a way I had not expected: much like the times I wore his fraternity letters or shared meals with him and his friends, I felt like I was a part of something. This decision was ours, not just mine, and however awful it was, knowing I was not alone in it was everything to me.

M wanted to come home with me and be there for the procedure, but there was nowhere for him to stay without raising suspicion, so I decided to go and face the music alone. I was worried about my job at the restaurant; I knew taking two weeks off would make it hard to pay rent, and with unflinching generosity, M paid my rent for me that month. He called, he checked in while I was gone; he even stocked my fridge so that I would have food when I got back. He was the opposite of B, in every way, and I was grateful beyond words for his support. I still am, as we remain great friends today. He went on to have a beautiful son, and there are times when I look at pictures of his boy and feel a twinge of sadness, wondering if maybe our child would have had some of his

features and characteristics. I think no matter how strong and confident you are when making a life-changing decision, the what ifs will always haunt you.

Over the years, I have told myself that the choices I made were for the benefit of the children I let go; maybe a huge part of the shame I carry is admitting that those decisions were for my benefit as well. I was young, I was selfish, and I was not ready to determine the course of my life yet. Now I am older, I am alone, and I can see that my decisions in those crossroads moments did exactly that. It is only now, writing about what I did, that I have started to come to terms with the underlying shame surrounding my choices. “Each of our moments contains eternities, if only we are willing to look for them” (Nash & Viray 2013, p. 90). I recognize how these moments of choice have become my eternities, but I would say the quote that resonates more with me would read: “Each of our moments contains eternities, if only we are brave enough to recognize them.” I wasn’t courageous enough then; I hope for the strength to be brave enough now.

The truth is, I always wanted children, but I was terrified that I would not be a good mother. I was scared, once again, that I would not be good enough... only this time, the stakes would be much higher and I would have more than myself to take care of in the inevitable fallout. I understood the gravity of parenthood and the work that went into raising a child. I did not want to be a mother in a bad situation, I did not want my child to be born into disadvantage. When we were in high school, my older sister and I did the math and realized my mom was already pregnant when our parents got married. This affected my older sister severely; our parent’s relationship was tumultuous until the explosive end, and my sister felt responsible for our collective misfortune as a broken family.

The first time I got pregnant, I thought B could take me away from my troubles, that we would get married and form the sort of family I had always wanted and that we both had always lacked. By the time I got pregnant the second time, I saw that starting a family without the total love and mutual respect of another person, a willing participant, would inevitably end in heartache and broken dreams. I knew that I did not have it in me to be a single mom, then or at any other point in my life. After my first abortion, I remember coming home from the clinic and shoving everything about the procedure and after-care instructions under my bed. I thought I could hide away what I had done. The truth is, you can't hide from pain. It will catch up to you, no matter what you do to push it away. In an interview about his career in 2014, actor Mark Ruffalo spoke about his brother's unsolved murder, and the interviewer asked him how you make peace with the pain of an event like that. Mark paused, his eyes misty, before delivering an eloquent and simple response: "You just live alongside it" (Ruffalo 2014). I am 35 now; for almost half of my life, I have tried to hide from the torment of my decisions. This writing is my attempt to pull my painful past from its hiding place, blow the dust off, and learn to live alongside it.

On a recent Sunday morning, I walked down to the house of friends of mine. They recently moved from a high mountain road in Waitsfield, Vermont to a nearby street in the South End of Burlington; actually, their new apartment is right next door to my old one. I had to drop something off for them, and when I arrived, they were dancing around the kitchen in their pajamas, their three-year-old son Aron cracking eggs into a mixing bowl and proudly announcing, "We're making pancakes!" They set a plate for me and told me I was staying for breakfast, and as I pulled up a stool at their breakfast

bar, Aron asked me if I wanted to help. He showed me how to measure the oil, and as he opened the bag of pancake mix, it exploded in a small cloud of white powder covering his face. Aron burst into a fit of uncontrollable giggling, and I masked the unexpected pangs of anguish I felt as I helped him dust off his face. We continued preparing the pancakes and the four of us ate breakfast together, talking and laughing and sharing stories of our weeks. I was grateful to have such good friends so close by. I thanked them for breakfast and gave their dog Miles a pet on my way out the door. And I cried the entire walk home.

It is my opinion that Carl Jung was right when he said, “People cannot stand too much reality” (Jung, cited in Pipher 2006, p. 195). It is hard for me to share how I feel with my friends because that means revealing my realities to them, and the weight of that truth might suffocate our friendship. The majority of my friends have married and had children, and they perceive my single life as carefree and happy. This is what I display to them because I don't want to burden them with the truth; that I feel physical pain whenever I hug their kids, that my heart hurts when I receive their smiley Christmas cards. I don't tell them that I avoid social media at holidays because I don't want to see the pictures of their children dressed up for Halloween, or sitting on Santa's lap for the first time, or hunting for Easter eggs in the backyard. They long for the peace and solitude I am able to have; I long for the clutter and chaos of the lives they inhabit with their children. The grass is always greener, as they say. I just wish that mine was filled with sandboxes and swings and toy mowers to stub my toe on.

I never wanted or planned to get pregnant before marriage; not because of any deep-seated religious belief, but because I know that raising a child is the hardest job in

the world. In Ethics class last year, we talked about certainty being the absence of doubt. I feel I can say, with absolute certainty, that I would not have been a good mom in those younger years. I would have tried my hardest, but I know I would not have been able to provide what is necessary for children to have a happy and healthy childhood. Neither of the men who got me pregnant provided me with the kind of love I needed; more importantly, I didn't love myself enough to love a child properly. Even though my parents were not devout Catholics, I didn't feel I could turn to them for help, and so it took me a long time, years after both procedures, for me to tell them about my choices. As for myself, I was irresponsible but I wasn't naïve. They say, "It takes a village to raise a child"; I say that when it comes to teenage parenthood, it takes an entire nation. I didn't have that, and I didn't have the strength to call myself a nation of one. This is part of my shame; knowing that I would not have been enough. And sometimes I feel that because of it, maybe I am being punished. Maybe the chances I was given to have children are the only chances I will ever get, and I squandered them. That thought is a huge cross to bear.

Does this mean I regret the decisions I have made? It doesn't, and I don't. For a long time, I might have answered differently, because for a long time, I was confusing my shame with regret. Earlier, I referenced one of the three types of adversity described in *The Gift of Adversity*, which is:

*...the adversity that we bring upon ourselves by making some error of judgment.*

*The pain of this type of adversity is compounded by feelings of guilt and shame of having been responsible for the misfortune* (Rosenthal 2013, xii, my emphasis).

Abortion is always difficult, but I think the negative feelings associated with my experiences were exacerbated by the fact that I had caused them by being careless. What happened to me could not have happened without me; if I had made different decisions, things might not have turned out the way they did. I felt intense shame that I was the cause of my own heartache and grief, and therefore I felt undeserving of it, as if terminating my pregnancies also terminated my right to feel anything.

The other adversity we face when we choose abortion is that which comes with being branded “one of those girls”, the ones that anti-choicers love to make an example of: the girls who use abortion as a form of birth control. In most cases, this claim is complete nonsense; in my case, it was unintentional but accurate. I truly felt that both of my pregnancies were crisis pregnancies; the first would have ended my life as I knew it, and the second could have ended my life, period. Still, there is shame in knowing that I added to a narrative that makes it harder for other women to seek abortions. A recent post in one of my “Repeal the 8<sup>th</sup>” Facebook groups read (2018):

*Even if there were women using abortion as contraception, then that isn't actually a good enough reason to stop all women from accessing abortions. We don't ban all driving just because some people check Facebook while driving, we don't punish all men just because some of them punch their partners, and we don't ban alcohol just because some people are alcoholics.*

Though the writer of this post makes an excellent point, it is still difficult and painful for me to accept that I made life just a tiny bit more difficult for another woman

in a desperate situation. When I was in Ireland, I found myself explaining to each of my interviewees that my second pregnancy was not viable. You see, one terminated pregnancy was bad enough... two was shocking and unheard of in this predominantly Catholic country. So there I was, interviewing women who had flown to other countries seeking abortions, women that were strongly pro-choice and were fighting for bodily autonomy through the Repeal campaign... and I still felt the need to explain that my second pregnancy could have killed me. It was during one of these interviews that I came to a startling realization. My interviewee was discussing her choice to terminate, and the circumstances that contributed to her decision. The most important of these was that her father had just been diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis and it was a difficult time for her family. And without any shame, embarrassment or guilt, she said to me, "Without it, I probably still would have come to the same decision" (G, Nov 2017). I realized then that I need to stop explaining away my second pregnancy with scary medical jargon; the truth is, I probably would have terminated even if the pregnancy had not been ectopic. Admitting this out loud means I am one of the women the anti-choice side likes to vilify, one of the women who makes abortion access harder for those in much more dire circumstances. This is a shame that I am still working on moving past.

In the next section, I will delve deeper into the shaming and blaming that continues to stigmatize women and abortion. A common theme that emerged from my interviews was that the secrecy surrounding their choice was as traumatic, if not more so, than the abortion itself. With this in mind, I will discuss the ways that societal norms continue to seek the silence of women around sexuality and reproductive choice.

### **3.2 How The Shaming of Women and Sexuality Leads to an Ongoing Social Stigma Surrounding Abortion**

I learned what an abortion was when I was 11 years old. My younger stepsister always seemed to know more than me when it came to the ways of the world... as a younger sibling it would seem that she should inherently know less, but being raised as an only child in an overly permissive household, she was allowed to do more than my older sister and I had been. This included music, television and films; she would often brag about her knowledge of movies that we hadn't yet been allowed to see. One weekend, she snuck a VHS copy of *Dirty Dancing* into my room, and I fell in love with Patrick Swayze, with the music, with the loss of innocence portrayed in the film. Some of my own innocence was lost that night, as well; I didn't understand why Penny was sick and crying, or what they were talking about when Johnny's cousin spoke of the doctor with the folding table and the dirty knife. My stepsister looked at me like I was nuts, disbelieving that I didn't understand what was transpiring on the screen: Penny was crying because she was pregnant, and the folding table and dirty knife were the surgical tools of an illegal, botched abortion.

I watched the movie again and again, mostly because of the way Patrick looked in that tight black tank top, but also because I wanted to understand what an abortion was, what it meant, why Robbie dismissed Penny and treated her as a second-class citizen. I think these were things that were beyond my comprehension at the time; I wasn't a woman yet, I hadn't even reached high school. I was blissfully unaware that Robbie's behavior was a manifestation of society as a whole, and that Penny's botched abortion

resulted from the patriarchal restrictions on reproductive rights that were commonplace at that time (and continue to be now in many countries, as has been demonstrated in this narrative). The movie was set in the U.S. in 1963; it would be another 10 years before *Roe v. Wade* set a constitutional precedent that allowed women to privately seek abortion in the states.

When I think about the way I was raised, I realize how little attention was given to sexual education, both in school and at home. My parents never talked to me about sex, and when I dared to tell my mother about boys I was dating, I always got a lecture that centered on the concept that “they’re not going to buy the cow if they can get the milk for free.” Sex was never something that was normalized in my home, and so open conversations about it that didn’t contain metaphors to farm animals simply did not exist. When I transferred from community college to state university my junior year and left home for the first time, my mother gave me a book titled *Don’t Be That Girl*. This was two years after my first abortion; it would take many more years before I was able to tell her that I *had* been that girl, and still was.

Why are women shamed into silence when it comes to expressing their sexuality? It is a question I have asked myself since I was a teenager, since the day I took that first pregnancy test, since the afternoon my mother handed me that book. Terry Tempest Williams writes that women are quiet about sex because of the history of harm and harsh judgments inflicted on those who speak the truth (Williams 2012). Where does this history come from?

From the earliest recorded stories of Western Christian culture, we have been taught that women are a source of original sin for men. Eve picks the forbidden fruit and

shares it with Adam, leading them both to be exiled from the Garden of Eden forever. Eve is portrayed as a temptress who is responsible for the “fall of man”, and used in biblical works as a warning to men and women alike of the dangers of disobedience. If she and Adam had not eaten the apple from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they could have remained in paradise forever. Eve, like millions of women who came after her, bore the burden of shared sin and was condemned to childbirth and marital subservience.

Is the tale of Adam and Eve the reason that women have been taught to repress their sexuality? As one of the oldest Bible stories, it is easy to assume that the account influenced the way women have been depicted and treated throughout history, especially in Christian-influenced cultures. Eve was punished for disobeying God, a lesson that the Catholic Church has used to its benefit when trying to turn women away from transgression. Can we assume that the way this story permeated our culture for centuries to come led to a shaming of women, who, like Eve, chose to rebel and partake in “sin”?

I think it is important to look at how the shaming of sexuality is primarily female-focused. If we look back on Adam and Eve once more, we see where God acknowledged that it is not good for man to be alone, and that a suitable helper should be made for him. My interpretation of this passage is that it is understood that man needs companionship; woman was created to fulfill this need. Does that mean that woman should enjoy her role as a sexual being? Not necessarily. If woman is actually made from man, as is portrayed in this testament, some may reason that her pleasure should be derived from his pleasure, and that her purpose is to satisfy him and nothing more.

Of course, I find this ideology completely fallible, but it bears some truth in the way that women continue to be shamed around sex. While men are seen as inherently sexual creatures, women are expected to be “good” and to serve as the moral gatekeepers between men and sin. While this is an archaic and perhaps oversimplified view, I can attest that Brené Brown is right when she says, “The messages and expectations that drive shame are organized by gender” (Brown 2012, p. 107), a quote that I used earlier and that bears repeating here. As a 35 year old single woman, I can recall many times that I have been shamed, both by friends and romantic interests, for displaying an interest in sex. Talking about sex, let alone taking enjoyment in it, is not deemed as lady-like, and has led to the cultural phenomenon of slut shaming. During my interview with Catherine (Oct 2017), she told me that “carrying on” is a derogatory Irish term for a liberated woman who has control over her body and enjoys sex. This goes to show that slut shaming is not an anomaly, but a normalized and universal part of the lived experience of being a woman.

It is my belief that the type of thinking that serves to shame women over sexuality links directly to the stigmatization of abortion. This is not necessarily because of what abortion is, but rather, because of what abortion represents. If women who embrace sexuality are seen as promiscuous or “morally loose” (another Irish term that Catherine shared with me), then pregnancy is seen as the consequence they must endure as atonement for deviating from society’s standards of acceptable female behavior. S reiterated this type of thinking when she told me (Nov 2017):

*It was absolutely an attitude that if you were careless enough to get pregnant... because that's what crisis pregnancy is, complete carelessness... if you were careless enough to get pregnant than you deserved to have to put up with the child or put up with the pregnancy for 9 months and then subsequently put up with the child (my emphasis).*

Attitudes like this add to the stigma that all pregnancies are the result of reckless behavior, and that all abortions are sought to shirk responsibility and get rid of an “inconvenience”. Larger analysis is ignored, including “the conditions that lead to unwanted pregnancies, the difficulties that poor women face in bringing up children they desire, and the relationship between lack of reproductive rights and gender inequality” (Kleinman & Ezzell 2012, p. 407). Indeed, I believe it is this type of false and narrow rhetoric that stigmatizes the word abortion.

The semantics surrounding abortion are important to understand. Anti-choice campaigners would have you believe that being pro-choice means being pro-abortion. On the contrary, while I identify myself as pro-choice and know plenty of pro-choice advocates, I do not know anyone who is pro-abortion. As a pro-choice woman, I see abortion as a necessary aspect of reproductive health; I agree with former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton when she states that abortion should be “safe, legal and rare” (Clinton 2009). Unfortunately, abortion often produces a disparaging binary, which paints one side as “pro-life” and the other as common murderers. Even pro-choice women who have not had abortions are labeled as supporters of legalized murder or baby killers (depending on which country they are fortunate or unfortunate enough to be

campaigning in). When I recently posted a pro-choice comment on an Irish news article on Facebook, the hashtag #alannascullykillsbabies was quickly created by an anti-choice commenter on the same thread. It is this kind of vicious and polarizing language that serves to perpetuate the shame that women who choose abortions have to endure.

It would be unfair, however, to hold anti-choicers completely responsible for the ongoing stigma surrounding abortion. When I was talking to my interviewee, L (Nov 2017), who went on to have four children in Ireland after her abortion, she recalled to me all the different midwives she spoke to who brushed her first pregnancy under the rug.

*They always have the standard question: “Previous pregnancies?” So I always count my first pregnancy as a pregnancy even though it ended in abortion, because it’s your medical history... and every time I’ve spoken with the midwives about this, they’ve always said “Oh we don’t need to write that down. We don’t have to record that. We don’t have to talk about that.” And so this always made me really mad, and I was always like “Well why don’t we have to talk about this? Because this is a normal thing, people do this all the time, this is a choice people make all the time... and you don’t have to record it in my medical history? Like it didn’t exist or whatever? And it felt very, like I was being silenced, you know? I couldn’t even talk about it in a normal capacity with a medical professional (my emphasis).*

While I am in no way suggesting that this type of interaction with trained medical staff is universal or even typical, the fact that L had a different midwife for each

pregnancy and that this was the reaction from each one does indicate that, at least in Ireland, there is a hesitancy and an uncertainty in how to talk openly about abortion, and there is an assumption that the patient would not want to discuss it. This is troubling, as a doctor's office should be a safe place where women can talk about their medical history openly and without fear of judgment. Furthermore, as an abortion is certainly an important part of your medical history, it should always be recorded, for health and safety purposes.

Finally, it is both our own dialogue and the lack thereof that has contributed to a lack of understanding, compassion and empathy surrounding abortion. In Section 2.3, I discussed the theme of secrecy that emerged from my interviews. I, myself, kept my secret for years; until I started writing this paper, only my parents, the men involved, and one or two friends knew about my abortions. All the women I spoke to reported the same, with P telling me (Nov 2017):

*Even still, anytime it was referred to since, it was referred to as 'that time we went to Liverpool.' And it's referred to very little, not because it upsets her, but because it's still the stigma (my emphasis).*

When we do talk about it, we tend to dance around it, so much so that "termination of pregnancy" has emerged in the last 20 to 30 years as a more socially accepted term for abortion. As I mentioned above, I have often found myself explaining my reasons for aborting a pregnancy that was not even viable. This shame and embarrassment around an abortion that was medically necessary is one reason we should

be having these conversations; there are literally hundreds more, any one of which could help break the barrier between silence and solace. And while the burden should not lie completely on us, I do believe that those who seek abortion have a responsibility to change the narrative. If we do not lead the charge in deconstructing the stigma of abortion, who will?

*I remember that I was too numb then to think of anything but immediate survival. In time, all the usual clichés about life never being the same again came true. I changed, I got angry, not at myself, but with the system. I spoke out, telling my story, saying ‘the unsayable’. What I can say now, more than forty years on, is that for Irish women ‘the unsayable’ still needs to be said: women have abortions; abortion must be safe and legal (Rossiter 2009, p. 139, my emphasis).*

### **3.2.1 The Binary Struggle Between Womanhood and Motherhood**

In the previous section, I discussed one binary that emerges from the concept of abortion: the binary between the “pro-life” side and the pro-choice side. In this section, I focus on another binary that abortion brings to light: the binary between womanhood and motherhood.

If I think about the gender roles that society often presupposes for women, I think of women as nurturers and caregivers. It should not be a surprise that these are the attributes that come to mind; for centuries, women’s roles were confined to the private sphere, where they were expected to maintain the home and care for the children.

Involvement with matters of the public sphere, such as politics or obtaining a job outside the home, was rare; in Ireland, this separation between the spheres is constitutionalized: “Mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties inside the home” (Constitution of Ireland 1937, p. 160). Author Aine McCarthy reflects on the role of the Irish mother as “self-sacrificing, dedicated to family and God, possibly in that order, and is the source of ‘selfless love and good dinners’” (McCarthy, cited in Rossiter 2009, p. 90).

While times have certainly changed and women’s roles have markedly evolved and progressed, there seems to be a lingering societal expectation that a woman should want to be a mother. One interviewee, G, described this as an expected maternal response conditioned into women by society. Indeed, there seems to be an underlying and ever-present assumption that women inherently want to have children. I have witnessed this assumption play out time and time again, usually at weddings of friends who I know do not want to have children. They are barely down the aisle and family members are already asking when they will be getting started on babies. It is always a cringe-worthy conversation that I have to turn away from, often from my frustration that we cannot simply live and let live.

Why does this association between womanhood and motherhood remain so strong? Often, it feels like we are conditioned to believe that we should want to be mothers just because we can... and maybe in some cases, it really is as simple as that. But does this not reduce the female body to a vessel, stripping women of their human agency? In *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood, a dystopian society is depicted in which fertile women are forced to bear children for infertile, upper class couples,

reducing the “handmaids” to “containers; it’s only the insides of our bodies that are important” (Atwood 1986, p. 124). Offred, the protagonist and narrator, discusses the resentment this involuntary role breeds towards her own body:

*I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it’s shameful or immodest but because I don’t want to see it. I don’t want to look at something that determines me so completely* (Atwood 1986, p. 82, my emphasis).

While *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a fabricated account of a fictional society, the premise of it is based in historical fact. Margaret Atwood has said that she didn’t write anything in the book that had not already occurred “at some time, in some place in history, or which was not happening when I was writing the book, so it’s all reality based” (Atwood, cited in Balsler 2017). You can hear echoes of Atwood’s work from Irish scholar Máirín Nic Eoin, who describes the female body as “the ground on which moral judgments are made” (Nic Eoin, cited in Ferriter 2009, p. 293). Nic Eoin also points out that the conflict between mother and non-mother is representative of a cultural correlation between fertility and social responsibility (Ferriter 2009).

It is this societal pressure to procreate, as well the ongoing stereotype of women as mothers, that leads to discord when it comes to abortion. For many, abortion simply does not hold space in a healthy and constructive society (I talk more about the role of abortion in society in Chapter 4). For others, abortion goes against the expectation of women as mothers, as nurturers and as protectors. “Abortion seems to contradict the image of what motherhood should be, especially when it is presented as something

counter-posed to motherhood and not as a decision a mother might make” (Furedi 2016, p. 29). Anti-choicers use these presupposed ideals to “insist that women are always hurt by the abortion experience because it violates nature, motherhood, and God’s purpose” (Rossiter 2009, p. 35).

What this ideology overlooks, however, is that many who procure abortions are already mothers. According to a study conducted in 2008, 61 percent of women seeking abortions already had children; 34 percent had two or more (Jones *et al.*, 2010). There are many reasons why this high percentage of mothers obtain abortions: financial constraints, medical necessity, a desire to limit family size, etc. None of these reasons make them any less of a mother than they already are. All of these reasons, however, can be used to challenge the misconception that those who seek abortion are lacking in motherly instinct.

Also overlooked are the population of abortion seekers who wish to become mothers in the future. My interviewees, L and G, both went on to have families after their abortions. P told me the friend she accompanied to Liverpool is happily married with a child, and S is looking forward to having children with her partner as soon as her career in law has solid footing. I am also proof that seeking an abortion does not negate the desire to be a mother; despite being someone who has chosen abortion twice, I still hope to have children someday. I have always wanted them and that longing did not diminish just because I made difficult decisions under difficult circumstances. Marlene Gerber Fried sums up the problem with classifying women almost perfectly:

*Perhaps most problematic is the characterization that women themselves fall into two categories: those who want to have babies and the others who want abortions. The truth is that the same women are having babies and abortions, just at different times in their lives (Fried 2006, my emphasis).*

I say “almost perfectly” because Fried forgets an entire population in her analysis: the countless women who choose not to be mothers. Whether or not they seek abortion sometime in their lives, their decision to remain childless in no way invalidates their identities as women. We must continue to tear down the stereotypes that reduce women to a single narrative.

### **3.3 An Irish Awakening: My Semester at NUI Galway and the Experience of Being a Pro-Choice Woman in Ireland**

In the fall of 2017, I returned to Ireland to study at the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG). I had always wanted to study abroad when I was an undergraduate, maybe attend a university in Ireland or Scotland or England, always English-speaking countries because I’m not THAT brave. I longed to step outside of my familiar surroundings and experience a different culture first-hand. Unfortunately, finances and foolishness impeded my plan; it was both these things that also kept me away from graduate school for 10 years after completing my undergraduate degree. When I found the Interdisciplinary Studies in Education program, a huge draw to it was the option to transfer nine credits from anywhere in the world. An opportunity like this

was uncommon for a graduate student, so I was keen to take advantage of its potential. By this time, I had already gone to Ireland and fallen in love with it, so there was no question of where I wanted to take those credits, and I immediately got to work on making my Ireland dream a reality. It took two years of planning, hundreds of emails, numerous overseas calls, and many panicked and sleepless nights, but I worked tirelessly to set up an academic plan that would make sense in terms of writing a thesis about abortion and shame in Ireland. This effort led me to the Gender, Globalization and Rights program, part of the Global Women's Studies department at NUIG. It was there that I met Irish and international feminists, both male and female, who were all striving in individual ways to make the world a safer and more equal place for women.

It was an interesting time to be in Ireland. Although Brexit was looming and threatening to impact every aspect of Irish life, and although many Irish were already feeling the effects of the Trump administration in their businesses and their own families living abroad, not all the news was grim. The new Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, had announced his plan to hold a referendum on the Eighth Amendment in 2018. Having considered this announcement 34 years overdue, there were little thanks offered to Leo and little celebration from the women of Ireland, who felt that they had been stripped of fundamental rights for far too long. Instead, the collective response seemed to be "Finally", immediately followed by "Let's get back to work." A referendum meant more outreach, an increase in campaigning and visibility, and stronger and more targeted education for those Irish citizens who were content to leave well enough alone and continue to defer to Church and State, even in personal medical matters.

On September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017, exactly one month into my semester in Ireland, I joined my classmates on a bus from Galway to Dublin for the annual March for Choice.

Although this was the sixth march of its kind, there was an unspoken understanding that it might be the most pivotal protest yet: with the promise of a referendum but no actual date set, now was the time to show the Dáil and the Taoiseach that the women of Ireland would not wait any longer for the bodily autonomy they were entitled to. Joining us on the trip were the members of Galway Pro Choice, the NUIG Students Union, professors, students at every level, community members, families, friends, brothers, boyfriends. In one group was a new mom, with both her mother and her six-month-old baby with her. The baby, dressed in pink and smiling the entire way to Dublin (thank goodness), was named Rosa. Her mother, a social worker, told us her daughter had been named after Rosa Parks. Activism was not only in her blood, but in her namesake as well.

Upon arriving in Dublin, we headed to the Garden of Remembrance to gather for the march. When I saw the crowds at the garden, I remember thinking, “This is it?” There were hundreds of people, surely, but far less than the thousands I had predicted. Nonetheless, the garden was buzzing with excited anticipation. There were costumes of all kinds (including several women dressed as handmaids), there were t-shirts and bags and merchandise proclaiming “Repeal the Eighth” and “Free, Safe, Legal”, there were bullhorns and chants and songs being rehearsed. The real treasures, of course, were the signs. A few of my favorites read:

“Keep your rosaries off my ovaries.”

“Mandatory vasectomies for anti-choice men!”

“I’ve got rights in my tights.”

“Parents by choice, for choice.”

I walked around the park for about a half hour and snapped photos of the activity. You could feel the collective energy building and by the time we lined up, it was as if thousands of people had suddenly materialized out of thin air. The streets, the garden, and the sidewalks were packed. Somehow, our group ended up within the first few rows of marchers; great for the experience but a bit embarrassing at the same time. Most in our group were not Irish citizens and would have no right to vote on the referendum we were marching for. Nonetheless, we said hi to our neighbors and held our signs high, as cries of “not the Church, not the State, women must decide their fate!” were echoed by thousands of strong voices. We moved forward in an unstoppable wave through the streets of Dublin, a sea of protestors hoping our demands for equality for women and justice for prior victims of outdated and barbaric Irish law would be heard by the Dáil.

To say that this moment in my life was powerful would be an understatement. Like the Women’s March I had attended earlier in the year in the U.S., I once again felt awakened by a fire in my belly and an anger in my soul that this kind of demonstration would even be necessary. Women are complex human beings, not simply vessels of reproduction. It is regressive and archaic when we are expected to bare children simply because we can. It pares us down to our most basic function and strips away all other aspects of our identities, leaving us as a womb and not a woman. Women should be trusted to make decisions about their own bodies; as we have learned, a panel of men making these decisions can have tragic consequences, especially in Ireland.

The march lasted over an hour, with an estimated 40,000 people being cheered on by spectators and passersby on busy Dublin streets. The site was beautiful, the sound deafening, and when we reached the end, it took an additional 40 minutes for the people bringing up the rear of the march to file into Merrion Square and fill in the sidewalks and stoops of this leafy Dublin neighborhood. Musical parodies replacing Taylor Swift's "Shake It Off" with "Take It Off" (of the Constitution) and Tracy Chapman's "Revolution" with "Referendum" kept the positive energy flowing. Eventually, the speeches started and reminded us of the very serious reason that we were there in Dublin, shouting for change and refusing to be silenced: too many women in Ireland had suffered due to the patriarchal laws of its constitution. Used as an instrument of control, women like Siobhan Whelan and Savita Halappanavar had become devastating by-products of their country's continued shaming and stigmatization of abortion.

The last performance I got to enjoy before heading to the bus was the Galway Pro Choice Choir, performing "Quiet" by L.A.-based musician MILCK (2016):

Put on your face  
Know your place  
Shut up and smile  
Don't spread your legs  
I could do that  
But no one knows me, no one ever will  
If I don't say something, if I just lie still  
Would I be that monster, scare them all away  
If I let them hear what I have to say  
I can't keep quiet, no oh oh oh oh oh oh  
I can't keep quiet, no oh oh oh oh oh oh  
A one woman riot, oh oh oh oh oh oh oh  
I can't keep quiet  
For anyone  
Anymore  
Cuz no one knows me no one ever will  
If I don't say something, take that dry blue pill

They may see that monster, they may run away  
But I have to do this, do it anyway  
I can't keep quiet, no oh oh oh oh oh oh  
I can't keep quiet, no oh oh oh oh oh oh  
A one woman riot, oh oh oh oh oh oh oh  
Oh I can't keep quiet  
Let it out, let it out  
Let it out now  
There'll be someone who understands  
Let it out Let it out  
Let it out now  
Must be someone who'll understand  
I can't keep quiet

A few weeks after the March for Choice, I found myself outside St. Nicholas Church in Galway, surrounded by candles, signs and somber faces. I took the flowers that were handed to me and stood quietly next to my housemate. More and more people had started to gather, but the air was eerily calm and quiet, as if talking or making any noise in this sacred space might disturb her. She who we had come to remember, to mourn, to celebrate. Her photos were so vibrant and full of life, and yet it was her death that made her a household name, her tragedy that made it onto my TV that night during dinner at my parent's house, back in 2012. Her name was Savita Halappanavar, and in 2012, the Eighth Amendment of Ireland's Constitution killed her.

It seemed surreal to me that I was living in the city where this intelligent and accomplished woman had lived and died. Like many cities around the nation of Ireland, Galway marked the fifth anniversary of Savita's death with a vigil in her honor. Savita's picture was adorned on lanterns, her family and friends held candles and flowers, a "Never Again" banner with her photo hung above the speakers and presenters. A song was sung, a poem shared (see below), and one by one, members of Galway Pro Choice

read a timeline of the last six days of Savita's life. Savita was married, had parents and siblings, had friends and hobbies, had a career. The timeline of her life would show accomplishments beyond what many 31 year olds achieve; the timeline of her death would expose the failure of a system that valued her unborn child's life over her own.

Truth be told, I did not expect to become emotional at the Savita vigil. Although hers was the case that first made me aware of Ireland's abortion laws, I did not know her personally, and doing research into other cases, I had become aware that she was one of many that have died in Ireland as a result of the Eighth Amendment. This is not to say that she wasn't unique, but in many ways, Savita had become a statistic, in a country that was at risk of becoming desensitized. Much like the way that gun violence is addressed in America, Irish politicians offered condolences to the family and made half-hearted promises to the nation that abortion in Ireland would be addressed. And like many of the most heartbreaking stories that start out strong and prompt us to sit up and take notice, Savita's death eventually faded from immediate thought. It was never far out of reach, of course, but it had lost its momentum... and because of this, as I said, I did not expect to become emotional at the vigil. And yet, standing among her family and friends, listening to the details of her fatal six day saga, and hearing the poem below, which reminded me of all the women behind these statistics... it turned out that becoming emotional was not a choice that was mine to make.

### **Women This State Hates Us.**

*by Sarah Clancy  
as read by Sarah at the Galway Vigil for Savita 2017*

In case you had managed to misremember  
how much our country hates us  
along comes another woman needing shelter;  
because someone transgressed against her  
she needs help from us, just for the moment  
until all this is behind her,  
and do we make her welcome?  
Does she get the help she needs?  
Ah, you know the answer:  
does she? hell, this country hates the likes of her  
this country rapes the likes of her,  
we will leave her with her bodily integrity in tatters  
while psychiatrists fight it out about her psyche  
and no-one will ask her opinion on what's to be done  
she is not considered sentient  
and our state penetrates her over and over and over-  
she will be incorporated as evidence  
in a poisonous debate that skims over how  
very many ways the state we've built  
is willing to degrade us, she'll get a code name  
and become a touchstone, something (not someone)  
that we can talk about in concerned tones  
on Marion Finucane and we'll shake our heads  
and say it's clear now that our state hates us  
as if we hadn't always known it  
as if we haven't always felt it  
as if it hasn't been the subtext of our paths  
through life to womanhood  
men friends it's clear now too,  
that if you're so inclined you can rape us,  
and in all but a few cases you'll serve no sentence  
not only that but if we stay on this little island  
you could make us pregnant  
without our consent and just wait  
for our institutions to force motherhood upon us  
and they'll do it- they've proved it  
even if they have to perforate our mouths with tubes  
and force feed us, even if they have to sedate us  
then slice our wombs open with surgical knives,  
they can and obviously will do it, in this state of ours medical professionals  
will daub make up on our dead faces  
in the futile hope that if they pretend  
we're alive they can make us have babies-  
see? Even death doesn't end it,  
and deep down we always knew this:

we knew Savita Halappanavar  
we knew the Kerry Babies  
we knew of lonely deaths on wet days in Granard  
and the A, B, C, and X cases  
and the fortunate amongst us, the ones with resources know what ferry terminals  
look like at night time and how much it costs  
to raise a child in all sorts of currencies,  
we know if we are or aren't up for it  
there should be no shame in that but here, well,  
we must keep it secret because of how much  
our state hates us, when we have sex with men  
we take the risk of ending up in hospital  
in a country where if you're a pregnant woman  
'state care' is an oxymoron,  
it's a shame to say that as long as we have the capacity  
to bear children, Ireland is not safe for us;  
women, rise up, this country hates us  
it's long past time we changed it,  
let's not rest until we've changed it.

This poem struck me, and still does, as a call to remembrance and a call to action.

The author, Sarah, is saying this is what happens, these are the consequences of our shame. These women exist all over Ireland, and the patriarchal society that silences them is also a threat to their very existence. Ireland is not a safe place for women. It is both a startling and saddening realization to come to, as an American who would love nothing more than to live among the green fields of the Emerald Isle. This poem, these experiences... they have forced me to remove the rose-colored glasses and see all of Ireland's truths: the good, the bad and the ugly.

Towards the end of my time in Ireland, a friend agreed to bring me out to the site of one of these bad and ugly truths: Sean Ross Abbey is a former mother and baby home in Roscrea that is now a school for people with disabilities, run by a religious order.

Having read extensively about Philomena Lee, I wished to visit the Abbey to pay respects

to her son, Michael Hess, and to see what these institutions looked like from the outside.

Getting to Roscrea took about an hour and a half from Galway, and when we arrived, I was surprised by the contrast of the small town. We came to a t-stop, and looking one way I could see old stone buildings and beautiful masonry work indicative of a lifetime gone by. Looking the other way, I could see a gas station, a small shopping center and an auto mechanic, places that are characteristic of every small town in the modern era. A few minutes later, as we made our way into the abbey, this stark contrast showed its face again. The buildings had gotten a facelift and the cars in front of them were a reminder of the nuns and workers still living there and keeping the place alive, but the ruins and the old graves around the buildings were a reminder of the history kept here. Even the graveyard itself was a contradiction; many graves so old that you couldn't read the writing on them, next to shiny, newer headstones of those recently buried in the place they were born. It was one of these graves that we had come to see, the grave of Michael Hess.

My friend Lorraine had visited Sean Ross Abbey, now called St. Anne's Special School, a couple of times before. Philomena had begun an annual commemoration at Sean Ross to honor her son and the other families that were separated at these institutions, as well as the mothers and babies who had died in the care of the nuns and whose final resting place was on the estate. Lorraine, a Ph.D. student who is very involved in pro-choice activism, had attended the commemoration and met Philomena, whom she described as a "legend" and "absolute class". Lorraine also described the controversy of the first commemoration, when the nuns lined the road, trying to prevent cars from passing through to get to the cemetery. The cars instead parked right there by

the entrance, and people got out and filed silently past the nuns towards their destination. The power of intimidation that the Church once had was surely slipping away as people recognized the full extent and shame of the Church's sins.

Lorraine warned me that because of this incident, and because Sean Ross was now a school, we may run into a guard at the gate who would question our mission. Sure enough, we did have someone waiting as we pulled onto the property, though "guard" was a generous term for the unassuming nun who greeted our car. Looking like she was heading somewhere herself, she received us warmly, crucifix dangling, and asked what she could help us with. Lorraine responded that we would like to look at the graves. The nun, smile unfaltering, asked which graves in particular we would be interested in, and Lorraine replied "Michael Hess." She appeared unfazed, as I'm sure there are many visitors who come to pay respect to Michael, and she asked where we were both from. Lorraine told her she was local, from Roscrea, while I replied that I was from Boston. With a knowing look in her eyes and a smile still on her lips, the nun leaned into the open window and touched me on the shoulder. "Don't believe it all, girls", she said, and she ushered us into the abbey. As we drove past, we noticed a bumper sticker on her car, as well as on the window of the small guard building. The bumper stickers read, "Love Both."

We drove through the estate and I photographed the main building before we moved on to the cemetery. I wasn't surprised by the state of it; weeds overgrown, graves facing different directions, no rhyme, reason or order to it. Michael's grave, however, was easy to find; it was the first one to greet us when we walked up the stone steps. It looked just like it did in the movie, in the book: "Michael A. Hess: A man of two nations

and many talents. Born July 5, 1952, Sean Ross Abbey, Roscrea. Died August 15, 1995, Washington, D.C.” Around the grave were angel figurines, statues of saints, a hurling ball, plants. There was a candle with Michael’s picture on it. Underneath the picture were the words of a poem by Irish writer W.B. Yeats (1916) that was read at Michael’s funeral:

*Wine comes in at the mouth  
And love comes in at the eye  
That’s all we shall know for truth  
Until we grow old and die  
I lift the glass to my mouth  
I look at you, and I sigh*

We had a moment of silence at Michael’s grave and walked around to respectfully read the other tombstones, the ones that still had clear wording not taken by the Irish weather. We walked out of the graveyard, crossed the road and opened a metal gate with a crucifix at the top. The pathway led us past the nuns’ burial plots, and the contrast of this place struck me again. Where the mother and child graveyard had been chaotic and unkempt, the nuns’ cemetery exuded order and importance. The graves were perfectly aligned and proportionately spaced, and it was clear that this part of the estate was tended to on a regular basis. The lawn was mowed short and the thought occurred to me that the meticulous order these women had kept in life had followed them into death. It also occurred to me that even in death, they looked alike: each grave marker was a simple black cross with the name of the nun and her birth and death dates.

Lorraine led me down the footpath to the children’s cemetery, a quiet and secluded section of the estate dedicated to the babies who had died at Sean Ross. Even here, the order was unclear... while some headstone dates clearly marked an infant’s

grave, others indicated that mothers were also buried in this space. And in the middle of the garden, an homage to the hundreds of Irish babies adopted to foreign lands, mainly the U.S.: a stone cross surrounded by different state flags, with names and exact locations on each one. I couldn't help thinking that the names on those flags were the lucky ones; at least they knew where they came from. Because of the secrecy of Irish adoptions and the guarding of information by the nuns, there are thousands who still don't and never will.

As we walked from the garden to the car, Lorraine and I started discussing the Catholic school system. I had recently been on a few dates with an Irish man who had two young children, and we were discussing his faith and his family. While he had been a devout and practicing Catholic when he was younger, he told me that the only occasions that would take him to Church now would be holiday masses, weddings and funerals. He described a disillusionment with the Catholic Church felt by many after the numerous scandals that had plagued it. When I asked if his kids still went to Catholic school, however, he confirmed that they did, and that although he didn't like it, there was simply a lack of options when it came to decent schooling in Ireland. He believed that in the next few decades, things would evolve and public schools would outnumber religious institutions. I was relaying this story to Lorraine, who nodded in agreement and told me that she had heard similar stories from many friends who had school-age children and were confronted by the same conflict.

"Isn't it funny," she said, "how the stigma of shame they pushed on others for so long is now on the Church?"

We were passing by a grotto that had benches for praying and a monument of Mary, bearing a halo with the words “I am the immaculate conception.” I looked at Lorraine with a twinkle in my eye and asked if she had any pro-choice propaganda in her car. She replied that she did and quickly went to the car to grab a homemade cardboard “Repeal” sign. I positioned her in front of the statue of Mary and asked her to hold up the sign, in an act that Lorraine laughingly called “being bold on holy ground.” Truth be told, there was a bit of silliness to it, a bit of rebellion. But there was also a bit of justice, for all the women who were silenced and shamed and did not have a choice in decisions that would affect them for a lifetime. I don’t know if I believe in God, and maybe I’ll never know. But if He or She does exist, I have to believe that they meet us where they are, imperfections and all, and love us anyways. And if I believe in Mary, I have to believe that she is a kickass feminist who was smiling down at Lorraine as I took those photos, whispering, “You go girl.”

I included the pictures I took of Lorraine, as well as pictures from the March for Choice and the Savita vigil, in the presentation I did for my Irish classmates in mid-November. As part of the agreement between UVM and NUIG, I was required to present the topic of my thesis to my class. In all honesty, I had tried half-heartedly to get out of this particular stipulation in my “contract” earlier in the semester. These people in class were not my friends, and I didn’t feel comfortable standing in front of them, exposing my truth and baring my shame. “Vulnerability is about sharing our feelings and our experience with people who have earned the right to hear them” (Brown 2012, p. 45). It wasn’t even that I was scared about sharing my abortion story with classmates; it was that I felt they hadn’t earned the right to hear something so personal and sacred to me,

something that I had protected for so long. I felt like the presentation was a way for me to confront my own shame, but these were not the people I wanted to share that experience with. A lot of mixed emotions went into preparing myself for that presentation, but I am happy to say that I underestimated the level of support and acceptance I would receive with my disclosure.

My time in Ireland was invaluable for the development of my thesis, as well as myself. Missing a chance to go abroad during my undergraduate years turned out to be a blessing in disguise; I truly believe that I was meant to be in Ireland leading up to this referendum. As a pro-choice woman who has had two abortions, it was important for me to understand what the pro-choice movement looks like in a Catholic-influenced country. The events that I describe here and the remarkable people I met through them really helped to shed light on the motivations, sacrifices, and struggles of being a pro-choice woman in Ireland. I finally had the chance to fulfill my dream of living in another country and among another culture, and though the reality of this experience was not always pretty, I am eternally grateful for the chance I had to follow my heart.

## CHAPTER 4: THE ROLE OF ABORTION IN AN EDUCATED SOCIETY

*“Seventy-seven percent of anti-abortion leaders are men. 100% of them will never be pregnant.”*

*-Pro-Choice Public Education Project*

Throughout the course of this paper, I have illustrated the ways in which abortion has been condemned, leading to a stigma that has been perpetuated and reinforced by the government, the Church, society, and popular culture. I chose to open this chapter with the somewhat humorous statistic above to reiterate the point that most who make decisions about women’s bodies will never experience pregnancy, miscarriage, abortion or childbirth. Interestingly enough, while Gloria Steinem made the quote, “If men could get pregnant, abortion would be a sacrament” famous, she has attributed it to a female Irish cabbie who was driving her and civil rights activist Florynce Kennedy to a speaking engagement. As we well know, however, men do not bear the particular burden of pregnancy, and so abortion does not fit into their lives. Therefore, they do not understand how it fits into society.

I choose not to delve into statistics and graphs and tables here purposely; I believe that abortion carries such a stigma that the numbers around it can often be misleading. My main argument in this section is that abortion holds a place in every society, whether it is quietly acknowledged or vehemently denied. If we reflect on Ireland, we see a nation that has long dismissed any problems with unwanted pregnancy because these issues did not fit the Irish narrative of moral purity; the truth is that “abortion is as Irish as

the green little shamrock” (McCann, cited in Ferriter 2009, p. 473). If abortion isn’t acknowledged as part of society, it is forced to go underground, greatly increasing the risk of the procedure. Back-alley, botched abortions often lead to the death of pregnant women, and infanticide cases have shown the dark side of being forced to follow through with an unwanted pregnancy.

In 2009, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was questioned on what role the U.S. would play in providing access to sexual education, contraception, abortion and maternal health care to developing nations abroad. In her response, Secretary Clinton emphasized the importance of family planning and noted, “It has been my experience that good family planning and good medical care brings down the rate of abortion. Keeping women and men in ignorance and denied the access to services actually increases the rate of abortion” (Clinton 2009).

I use this chapter to discuss the ways in which educators can welcome controversial issues and marginalized populations to campus. We have the means to empower women, to unite them and to inspire them to demand access to choice and autonomy. We must always be aware, however, that schools are just one cog in the wheel.

As an educated and developed society, we now know how to administer abortions safely, in a time- and cost-efficient manner. This was not always the case. If we compare abortion to vaccination, another medical procedure which has progressed in sophistication and effectiveness over the past century, we can observe similarities in how even as the medicine itself has progressed, some members of society have not. Much like there are those who seek to ban abortion, there are also those who attempt to stop

vaccinations. What I would say to both groups is that everyone is entitled to their own opinion and their own choice about what is best for them and their family. This does not entitle them, however, to try to take the choice away from me or millions of other women. And while there are countless reasons that women choose abortion, many of which have been highlighted in this narrative, the bottom line is that it is a women's right to be able to plan her family and decide if or when she will become pregnant.

*Contraception does not and cannot prevent abortion... It may lessen the need for abortions and thus reduce the abortion rate. But the inconvenient truth remains: contraception sometimes fails and people sometimes fail to use it. If families are to be planned and births spaced, as the WHO recommends, to give mothers a chance to recover between one pregnancy and the next, and if children are to be wanted, abortion must be accepted as a fact of life (Furedi 2016, p. 27, my emphasis).*

Abortion is a reality that exists in our homes, in our schools, in our workplaces, and in our lives. Denying it leads to deadly consequences. Our focus should not be shaming or stigmatizing abortion, but instead encouraging and supporting parental responsibility. This responsibility starts with the ability to plan parenthood. It is the duty of an educated society to understand the role of abortion within its framework.

#### **4.1 Moral Conversation: What It Is and Why It is Important**

Earlier I told the story of presenting my thesis topic to my classmates in Ireland. In preparing for that presentation, I was scared and vulnerable, so afraid of judgment that I was almost, once again, silenced by my shame. I did not know how my classmates would react to the controversial topic I would be discussing and my personal experiences with it, and I simply did not want to share this intimate piece of my life with them. When I explore the reasons why I was so uncomfortable in that space, a space seemingly meant for respectful collaboration and encouragement of academic progress, I know why I was on high-alert: a culture of moral conversation had never been cultivated in the classroom.

Moral conversation is a concept I learned about in my very first graduate school course with Robert Nash. From the start, Robert fostered an open and inclusive classroom environment; you need only glance at the circle of students around you to see that like most quality educators, Robert values diversity in every sense of the word. Certainly, it was the acknowledgment of the university as a melting pot that led to the creation and implementation of moral conversation, the principles of which I will outline in this section.

In most Interdisciplinary courses, you will find students of every age, race, gender, and religion. This is not a surprise; the program attracts students from all walks of life because of the recognition that education comes from all shapes, sizes and sources. A diverse course of study is going to appeal to a diverse population. It stands to reason that when working with a group of students who contrast each other so significantly, some ground rules are necessary to ensure that respect is maintained, even when

discussing issues that often polarize. Nash (2001) outlines the six principles of successful moral conversation in his book *Religious Pluralism in the Academy: Opening the Dialogue*. I will list these foundational rules below, followed by my interpretation of each.

*1. Declarations of belief are not necessarily conversations about belief.*

This rule is the perfect starting point for talking about this kind of dialogue, and it closely relates to the other four rules that make up a successful moral conversation. In my opinion, a declaration is a close-minded, absolute statement, one that does not allow for a conversation of any kind to take place. A declaration indicates that your mind has been made up about something and it will not be swayed. When you make a declaration, you are not looking for feedback or the respectful reciprocity that comes with conversation. Your tone and the derivative of it will most likely close people off from engaging with you, and the “conversation” will be a one-way dead-end instead of a two-way street. If you approach your declarations of belief as open-ended, however, you leave room for your thinking to evolve as you learn more and hear varying perspectives. By demonstrating that your beliefs are not rigid, but flexible, you invite people to connect and learn with you, and from you, in shared respect. This leads us to Rule #2.

*2. All views in moral conversation deserve at least an initial respect.*

Sometimes we enter a classroom or a workspace without a clear mind. Daily life is filled with trials and tribulations, with petty annoyances and grievances, and these things can take up the space that allows us to be open and accepting of new thoughts and ideas. We may also have preconceived notions about the environment we are entering and the people in it. Moral conversation asks that we leave our egos at the door and enter with respect and empathy for those around us, who may be fighting battles we know nothing about. It recognizes that we may have starkly different opinions from the person sitting next to us. However, in my opinion, this is actually why moral conversation exists: to hold these varying viewpoints in a safe setting, and to teach us that while we may not arrive at the same conclusion, these conversations cannot even start if we do not enter the space with a mutual respect for one another.

*3. The golden rule in moral conversation is a willingness to find the truth in what we oppose and the error in what we espouse, before we presume to acknowledge the truth in what we espouse and the error in what we oppose.*

This particular rule of moral conversation is one that I have quoted over and over in my time in graduate school. My personal favorite of the five, the golden rule asks us to consider that what we say may not be infallible. This is hard, especially when we feel passionate about something; to admit that what we believe and impart what we are advocating for may not be the truth or the answer for someone else can be a tough pill to

swallow. And moral conversation isn't letting us off the hook, either; there may be times when it is necessary for us to explain or defend the truths that we hold dear and that we have asked others to invest in (Nash 2001). The principle of this rule, however, lies in the understanding that the truth is not ours to hold in entirety, and that those who disagree with us are not unjust or uneducated simpletons who are simply wrong in their views. If moral conversation is to succeed, we must make it a point to be aware of the truths and fallacies that lie on both sides of an argument.

*4. Either-or, all-or-nothing thinking is always a threat to destroy moral conversation.*

Closely related to Rule #1, Rule #4 reminds us that absolutes shut down moral conversation. This type of "either-or, all-or-nothing" thinking has a tendency to pare down the intricacies of a topic or an argument. It risks turning conversation into a confrontation that ends in contempt instead of compromise. And while compromise is not a requirement for successful moral conversation, a true effort in understanding the opposition's argument or viewpoint is. Moral conversation asks us to let go of our absolutes in search of a broader and admittedly more complex truth. We do this because we want to be acknowledged as intelligent, rational, and empathetic humans; we understand that others do as well. We want to recognize and embrace the humanity we have in ourselves as a collective species. In 163 BC, Roman playwright Terence said, "Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto." Roughly translated, this means: "I am human; nothing human is alien to me."

5. *In matters of religion, we do not live in reality itself. We live in stories about reality.*

With due respect to the factual truth that makes up our day to day lives, moral conversation reminds us that truth about religion is presented to all of us in varying ways through a multitude of platforms. Therefore, how we approach religion and the religious truths we hold are a social construct that is embedded in us at an early age. Our religious views are the product of our environment, and of the stories that intrigued and fascinated us so much that we chose to believe. This final rule of moral conversation asks us to take other narratives into consideration and remember that our realities and all the faults, fears, doubts and dreams that are contained in them could never fit into one story.

It is interesting and relevant to note that when illustrating both successful moral conversation and its opposite, Nash uses abortion as his case in point. The polarizing nature of this topic makes it the perfect example of how moral conversation can be created or destroyed. Nash describes how a mass shooting at Planned Parenthood in 1994 brought together a group of six women activists from “pro-life” and “pro-choice” organizations in Boston. The purpose of the 150+ hours of dialogue exchanged was to “communicate openly with our opponents, away from the polarizing spotlight of media coverage, to build relationships of mutual respect and understanding; to help deescalate the rhetoric of the abortion controversy; and, of course, to reduce the risk of future shootings” (Fowler *et al.*, cited in Nash 2001, pp. 181-182). Though the meetings got off to a rocky start, the group was able to utilize their own form of moral conversation to develop a sense of respect for one another. And while the views of the participants were

not swayed, they came to realize the importance of seeing the virtue and benevolence in their opponent. This newly found compassion only served to strengthen their activism.

On the other hand, as an example of absolutist thinking, Nash introduces Joseph Scheidler, who is the director of the Pro-Life Action League. Scheidler views abortion as murder, no matter what the circumstances, and his tyrannical view leaves no room for negotiation or divergent opinion. Scheidler holds the absolute and infallible truth, and he is ready and willing to impose it however and whenever he can (Nash 2001). Moral conversation would not thrive or even survive in his presence; the fanaticism of his beliefs would make this impossible. Screeching and preaching are not characteristics of productive moral conversation.

As I close this chapter of my education, I realize how much moral conversation played a part in the positive experience I had as an Interdisciplinary student. In most Interdisciplinary classes, moral conversation was treated like an extra member of our group, an entity in and of itself that was to be respected and cared for. In classes where moral conversation was not utilized, I found myself walking the proverbial tight rope, struggling between the desire to express my opinion and the fear that it might cause harm or controversy. I look back on my presentation in Ireland and I don't blame my professor for the discomfort I felt. While she tried to foster a sense of mutual respect in the room, moral conversation was not introduced, or given the same weight and significance that it had been in my UVM courses.

So how does moral conversation in the classroom translate to a more open, engaging and respectful dialogue across campus? Nash (2001) tells us (p. 196) that "good pedagogical principles are universally transferable" and gives suggestions as to

how the implementation of moral conversation might occur on college campuses. What I infer from these suggestions is that preparation, collaboration and innovation are the cornerstones needed for this campus-wide culture of conversation to work.

Administrators must be ready for conflict to arise, they must come together as allies instead of adversaries (at least when it comes to fostering effective dialogue), and they must move past the traditional classroom scenario when exploring and seeking teachable moments and spaces.

We must understand and remember that our purpose for living is connection with others, something that cannot be achieved if we do not attempt to see the middle ground between our opposing views. You will notice that I said “see” and not “reach” when discussing this middle ground; I believe it is seeing with compassion that will carry us further than agreeing under coercion ever could. Above all else, moral conversation is an in-depth education in people that extends far beyond the classroom and lasts for the rest of our lives.

#### **4.2 Our Obligation as Educators: Cultivating Safe Spaces for Controversial Topics and Vulnerable Students**

When I was 12, my mom took a friend and me skiing for the day. We lived in Massachusetts and did not have many big mountains around us, but my friend and I were both learning, so Blandford Ski Area might as well have been Jay Peak. My mom spent the morning skiing with us, and when she got tired, she retired to the lodge for an afternoon of reading. Feeling confident, and finally parent-free, my friend and I began to

ski harder trails and jump moguls just a little more recklessly, the way you do when your parents aren't around and you can show off without getting scolded. It was in one of these daredevil moments when I suddenly found myself plummeting to the ground at a speed and angle that I knew spelled trouble. Sure enough, I came down hard on my side and heard a cracking sound that still makes me cringe to think about. I had broken my arm.

My friend skied over to help, and after a few minutes of crying and a few uncomfortable attempts at standing, we managed to maneuver me back onto my skis so that we could make it down the mountain and find my mom. When we got to the lodge, we stood at the door while skiers and snowboarders filed past us, each one in in a puffy parka, each one hitting my broken arm as they walked by. Tears rolled down my face as I rode out the pain, desperate to get inside and tell my mom what had happened. The doctor later told us that my arm was broken in seven places; if I had been helped sooner and avoided those extra hits to the arm, the break might have been less severe.

At this point you might be wondering what the point of this story is, and what skiing in Massachusetts has to do with safe spaces on college campuses. The answer is actually quite simple: I had never been told about ski patrol. My mother had started me out skiing on the small hill behind our house, and when we began going to Blandford, she was always with me. It probably just never crossed her mind to tell me about ski patrol, so I didn't know they existed. Similarly, I never saw them on the mountain, that day or any other; if I had, I might have been prompted to ask who they were and what they were about. That awareness could have saved a couple of the breaks in my arm.

When I got pregnant in college, it was the summer between my junior and senior year, and most of the university was shut down for summer break. If circumstances had been different, however, would I have known that there were places on campus that I could turn to for help? I knew about Student Health Services, but at that time I didn't know that my undergraduate university had a Counseling Center on campus. I didn't know about identity centers and affinity spaces, places where I could have been supported by not only university professionals but by other students as well. I needed help, and I didn't get it, I didn't even know that it was available to me. As a result, I dealt with the physical and emotional repercussions of my decision alone, which lasted for months after the abortion itself. Is my ignorance the exception to the rule, or the rule itself? My fear is that, much like I was unaware of ski patrol when I was 12, vulnerable student populations are not aware of the places on campus they can go to for support, either because they have never been told or because these spaces are not visible and prevalent enough across the campus environment.

In a crisis you often feel alone. Young people choosing abortion may not realize just how common it is; I know I certainly didn't. In Ireland, an average 12 women per day fly abroad for abortions. In America, statistics say that one in three women will have an abortion by the time they are 45 (Guttmacher Institute, cited in Kleinman & Ezzell 2012). To my knowledge, none of my friends in college had had an abortion; I look back now and realize that this is probably not true. I am certainly not an anomaly, but if we are not talking openly and honestly about abortion, how can we possibly know that we are not alone? If I had been brave enough to share my story then, would I have found the support that I needed, the support that I didn't even know existed?

As someone who hopes to work in the field of Higher Education one day, it is my belief that university professionals have a duty to support students, whether they are doing so inside or outside a classroom. I believe that informal learning spaces can be just as valuable to a student's academic success as the formal teaching they receive inside the classroom. Because of this, I use the term "educators" in this section in reference to all university professionals who contribute to a student's growth and development, and I include myself in this term as an aspiring educator who wishes to "teach" outside the classroom.

In the previous section, I talked about moral conversation and how it can be utilized in an academic setting. Since we often think of education as starting in the classroom, I believe that this is the space where moral conversation should begin as well. Students interact and form relationships with their instructors and classmates each day. In order for these connections to be positive, beneficial and benevolent, an open and welcoming space of empathy and non-judgment needs to be cultivated. Campus classrooms need to be spaces where students feel safe to share without fear of rejection or ridicule. Moral conversation is the tool that can help instructors make their classrooms feel welcoming, especially to vulnerable populations like pregnant students. Pregnancy is a reality on college campuses across the country, and for me, it would have meant the world to hear an instructor say, "I am here for you. *We* are here for you. You are safe." I never heard that from any of my instructors, before or after my abortions.

If a student feels comfortable enough with their professor to approach him or her with a problem or a crisis, this means that a level of trust has already been formed through respectful words and actions. This trust can be maintained by being open and

indiscriminately compassionate to whatever the student has to say. This is not to say that these “first responders” are required to bestow a solution, but instructors do have a unique opportunity to be the gatekeepers to a wealth of information that may help the student with their particular issue. Providing students with resources like books, articles, websites and online forums can be incredibly helpful. At the same time, these resources cannot provide the individualized support that a professor can and should not be presented as a way of brushing the student off. Inviting the student to come back and share dialogue about what they have learned or discuss further concerns they have is one way professors can sustain the connection they have forged between themselves and their student.

Of course, it is not always feasible for instructors to be as available as they would like to for each student. It is impossible to be everything to everyone, and quite frankly, a problem like crisis pregnancy may feel overwhelming to an academic instructor. If this is the case, it is important for the instructor to know what department or office they can refer the student to. This is where the other educators take over, the ones who work in discreet buildings scattered across campus that serve unique populations. This referral should be a seamless transition, as there is often nothing more frustrating or disheartening than being passed off from department to department, especially when in crisis. For this reason, I believe that it is important for professors to be familiar with all the departments and offices on a college campus; if we don’t know the resources available at our institutions, how can we expect students to know? Awareness of services is a key step in making sure that students feel supported in the academic environment that lies outside their classrooms.

Campus counseling centers can be a great place to start when referring a student in need to a place that will provide specialized support. I have spent time at three different institutions in the course of my academic career, and each one had a Counseling Center to support student mental health and safety. These centers are staffed with licensed professionals trained to support students in all manners of issues, from anxiety to eating disorders. At most universities, these services are free of charge for enrolled students, and may also include 24-hour access to a hotline or on-call counselor. Much like student to instructor ratios, however, student to counselor ratios may be high and serve as an impediment to students seeking help. For this reason, we cannot rely on these centers as a sole source of support for vulnerable students.

Identity centers and affinity spaces can be great resources of support, representation and empowerment for students. Having a place where students can be accepted as themselves and supported in their authentic identities will undoubtedly have a positive effect on their well-being. Furthermore, the informal learning that takes place in these spaces can be invaluable to a student's overall academic success. It is in this type of supportive and identity-reinforcing environment that I hope to educate students one day. My question is how can we, as the staff in these spaces, foster a strong community that will aid in student growth and development, and that will support students in times of personal conflict?

Based on my own experience, I think it is incredibly important to be visible to students from day one. When I was facing a crisis pregnancy, I didn't know where to turn, and the stress of my situation was compounded by the stress of trying to figure out if there was anyone to support me as I made my decision. Students should not have to be

searching and scrambling during a crisis; they should know about the support available to them through these types of centers because they met us at orientation, they saw our posters across campus, they heard about our events through social media. Visibility is the most important factor in bringing marginalized students or students in crisis to our doorstep. It is our job to create a strong presence that is inviting and that speaks to the experiences and needs of diverse campus populations, so that they may be aware of the ways they can utilize our space and services.

Collaboration and cohesion with other student spaces is also integral to visibility. There is no room for competition when it comes to supporting student needs; each office, department, identity center and affinity space should serve a unique purpose, and all should be working together as allies for students, especially marginalized populations.

The next step is to ensure that the moral conversation that began in the classroom doesn't end outside it. This involves laying the ground rules for respectful dialogue within our spaces. It also involves making taboo topics the norm instead of the transgression from it; if acceptance and personal growth are given priority in these centers, then there should be no subject that is off limits, no topic that is too controversial. Setting conversational restrictions would only serve to marginalize and silence. Students are simultaneously insightful and inquisitive; they should be provided a platform from which they can speak and question safely. As has been demonstrated throughout this narrative, safe and supportive dialogue is crucial to shutting down shame and stigmatization.

The main goal of this dialogue, of course, is to foster connection, something educators should be encouraging if these spaces are to serve their function properly.

“Education done well – regardless of how it is delivered – must first and foremost provide a forum for connection” (Nash & Jang 2015, p. 161). Students want to feel connected, to feel as though they are a part of something. They also want to experience the validation that comes with shared lived experiences. The informal education that students receive from identity centers and affinity spaces across campus should be based on the goal of bringing people together and cultivating respectful and reciprocal relationships, relationships in which the involved parties may be both student and teacher, at different times.

These connections should also extend beyond the campus. It is important to understand the university as part of a broader community, a cell within a larger organism. As educators, we have a responsibility to create a wide network of supports that can be utilized when we have gone as far as we can with the tools we have. Off-campus organizations can be a critical resource for educators seeking to address the needs of marginalized populations, and so it is vital to collaborate and connect with these resources. In the following section, you will read about an organization that the UVM Women’s Center refers students to in Burlington, Vermont. This organization provides financial assistance to women seeking abortion who cannot afford the procedure. I cannot imagine how invaluable this type of resource is for a student going through a crisis pregnancy.

I just described many broad ways in which educators can cultivate safe spaces in the academic arena of a college campus. I realize, of course, that much of what I have suggested here is the ideal, and that the reality that many educators face is full of incredible challenges. Tight budgets, long hours, and overcrowded classrooms and

campuses all contribute to the daily stress that so often leads to educational burnout. The diverse learning needs of students can make it difficult for teachers and professors to effectively deliver a standard curriculum. In addition, educators are frequently caught trying to balance the expectations of students, parents and administrators. In the midst of all this pressure, it may seem impossible to make supporting student needs a priority. I believe, however, that academic institutions have an obligation to get back to models that support the type of relationships I am espousing. I also believe that we, as educators, have a responsibility to teach and engage with sensitivity, empathy, and the awareness of the important role we serve to each student with whom we come in contact.

I am choosing to close this section by focusing on a case that made national headlines in Ireland last year. This case is the very antithesis of what I have advocated for in the last few pages, and I hope it will show how important it is for students to feel supported and accepted as autonomous human beings, by their teachers and by each other. As someone who experienced a crisis pregnancy in college, I can say that I personally felt very isolated from my peers in terms of what I went through. I came back to campus that fall a different person, a bit more mature but also a bit emptier. Like many young pregnant women who choose abortion, I had a strong desire to stay in school and continue my education, however, it was hard for me to focus on academics because I had not shared my story or taken any steps towards healing. As this narrative has shown, secrecy and shame are also a common part of the abortion experience, and both serve as roadblocks to moving forward in a healthy and productive manner. I believe this case illustrates how insensitivity and a lack of empathy can leave students feeling isolated,

unsafe and further marginalized. It also shows how absolutist personal views can serve to corrode connection.

In the fall of 2017, University College Dublin (UCD) impeached Student Union (SU) President Katie Ascough (Dunbar 2017). Ascough, a staunch “pro-life” supporter, had been elected as SU President in March. Although she had campaigned the previous year to change the SU mandate on abortion from pro-choice to neutral, Ascough insisted that her personal stance on abortion would in no way interfere with her role as President, and she promised to delegate matters involving abortion to other officers (Hardesty 2017). During the summer, the SU handbooks were printed; these books served to inform incoming students about all aspects of the college experience, from campus clubs and activities to the Dublin city life. In August, Ascough became aware of abortion information contained within the handbook. Because it was too late to pull the information and redesign the affected pages, Ascough spent €8,000 of university money to have the handbooks reprinted (Dunbar 2017). Her defense of this action was that providing such unsolicited information about abortion was illegal under the 1995 Regulation of Information Act (Hardesty 2017). Nevertheless, students who disagreed with the move organized a referendum, and Ascough was ousted from her position by a majority of her peers.

At first glance, it may seem like Ascough did the right thing. Many of us, when faced with the idea of legal action against us, might have made a similar decision. When delving further into the legality she used to justify her actions, however, it becomes obvious that the 1995 Act actually *does* permit information about abortion abroad, as long as the information relates to services that are legal in that place and inasmuch as that

information is provided objectively and does not promote or advocate for termination (Regulation of Information Act 1995). Furthermore, no SU in Ireland has ever been charged for providing similar, objective abortion information in a freshman handbook (Hardesty 2017). Irish politician Ivana Bacik (2017) reiterated this fact in an op-ed piece she wrote for *The University Times*, detailing her time as President of the Trinity College SU in the 80s, when the Eighth Amendment had just passed and resources for women experiencing crisis pregnancy were scarce. She confirmed that information about abortion abroad was always printed alongside “other options open to women facing a crisis pregnancy, such as contact details for single-parent support networks and adoption agencies.” Bacik went on to say that providing information on abortion in this manner should certainly be considered objective, as abortion is not being championed over any other available option.

I think it is essential that educators learn from this case. Even if an educator cannot personally relate to abortion, or disagrees with it on moral grounds, it is still vital to provide non-judgmental support to these vulnerable students. This support extends to the tangible resources that are being provided to students, which should never be censored based on personal belief. Safe spaces on campus can only be cultivated when the people running them are inclusive, accepting, unbiased and uncritical. There is no room on university campuses for attitudes that seek to censor, suppress and silence. Only when educators and student leaders are united in their commitment to this ideal will all students have an equal opportunity to flourish.

#### **4.2.1 An Argument for Women's Centers on University Campuses**

In the previous section, I discussed the role that identity centers can take in shaping and improving a student's academic experience. In this section, I will focus specifically on Women's Centers. I do this with the understanding that Women's Centers are not found on every college campus and, like other identity centers, often lack the funding to be as active and visible as they would like in the academic environment. It is my belief, however, that Women's Centers are an invaluable asset to the campus infrastructure. We need advocates who understand the unique obstacles we face as women; these centers can serve as a safe zone for women experiencing sexual assault, sexual harassment, relationship violence, or unplanned pregnancy.

In looking for literature about Women's Centers, I was surprised at how little I could find about the role of these centers in academia. What I did discover, however, is that Women's Centers serve a much greater purpose than I had initially realized. To complement my findings, I reached out to the Director of the UVM Women's Center, Melissa Murray, to obtain a better idea about what the Women's Center has to offer students. Based on my readings and my conversation with Melissa, I will focus on what I perceive to be the three main objectives of Women's Centers: to support marginalized women who have experienced gender-based conflict, to support the development of feminist research and pedagogy, and to encourage and enhance the connection between academia and feminist activism.

When I sat down with Melissa, I started the conversation with an emphasis on the support objective. Due to my experience with crisis pregnancy and the focus of this

thesis, I wanted to get a sense of how the Women's Center could be an ally to pregnant women on campus. I learned that while most of the employees who work in the Women's Center have a background in reproductive health rights, the main focus of the center is currently prevention of gender-based violence. To this end, the center employs a full time advocate who works directly with victims of gender-based assault and relationship violence. The Women's Center hosts an empowerment series that centers around weekly artistic activities and conversations about rape culture and gender-based violence on campus. The center also serves as a peer affinity space for students who have experienced this type of violence. Kasper (2004) states that assuming the role of the campus resource for education, support and counseling for sexual assault and gender violence can be a way of justifying the center's existence and therefore help to stabilize funding.

This does not mean that programming around sexual health and reproductive rights has fallen completely to the wayside. The center sponsors a weekly discussion about sexual health and wellness called "The Good Stuff", and while Melissa admitted she would like to develop more programming around crisis pregnancy and abortion, she espoused the importance of resource sharing. Through my conversation with her, I learned about the Vermont Access to Reproductive Freedom, which provides financial resources to women who cannot afford an abortion, and about PPGenAction, a campus-based affiliate of Planned Parenthood dedicated to raising public awareness about reproductive health and rights and educating students about sexual health.

Aside from providing support to vulnerable populations, Women's Centers also support and are a resource for gender-based research and the development of feminist

teaching methodologies. Women's Centers are often closely associated with Women's Studies programs and can be a place of support and collaboration for feminist research, essentially serving as both a "social and academic haven for feminist faculty and students" (Kasper 2004, p. 187). Researchers with a focus on gender can also find a special ally in Women's Centers as a place where their work will be encouraged and enriched with various opportunities for feminist pedagogy and practice (Kasper 2004). This enhancement of feminist instruction can come through events hosted by Women's Centers that empower students and faculty to find their voice and connect theory to personal experience (Byrne 2000), something that is often best done outside the classroom and can be especially important to student development. "Students cannot view themselves as constructing knowledge until they feel that what they think has some validity" (Byrne 2000, p. 49).

In addition to being a place of support for both students and faculty, Women's Centers also engage in social activism, bringing awareness of gender-based issues to the campus environment. As Byrne (2000) states, one of the requirements of feminist pedagogy is that it empowers students to apply learning to social action. This activism may come in the form of yearly events sponsored by the center, "such as Take Back the Night and the Clothesline Project, both of which focus on raising awareness about various forms of violence against women" (Kasper 2004, p. 186). Bringing organizations like To Write Love on Her Arms and Dress for Success to campus can also spread awareness and inspire social change. Women's Centers can serve as an advocate for causes that students are already involved in, or can serve as "an initiation experience for students who lack knowledge of and exposure to feminist theory and practice" (Kasper

2004, p. 186). Either way, they are an active and necessary proponent of important social dialogue, and can be an ally in the fight for social and political change.

Like other identity centers, Women's Centers face their share of obstacles. In a 2004 survey conducted by Kasper, Women's Center employees listed funding, apathy, time, unsupportive administration, poor attendance at center events, and territorialism as common problems faced when running a Women's Center. Attitudes towards feminism also created a barrier between the center and students; Melissa reiterated this point when she discussed the struggle of trying to reach the pocket of students who have not experienced gender violence and who do not identify as feminist activists. Visibility seems to be a problem across the board as well, both literally and figuratively. At UVM, the Women's Center is housed apart from the other identity centers and affinity spaces, and the distant location can create a barrier in terms of reaching students where they are. Figuratively speaking, the lack of a strong campus presence can lead to confusion for students and administrators about what the function of the Women's Center is, leading them to overlook the many ways in which the Women's Center can be utilized. Like other identity centers, the low visibility of Women's Centers is likely the result of working within the confines of a small budget.

Whether utilized as a place of support or as a place of advocacy for social activism, Women's Centers play an important role in campus life. In order to increase the participation, engagement, satisfaction and overall experience of women students and faculty, academic organizations need to be both willing to recognize and respond to the challenges Women's Centers face. Only with this commitment will women in academia have the support to reach their full potential as learners and leaders.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

*“If I hide myself wherever I go, am I ever really there?” – Barenaked Ladies*

*“Wherever you go, there you are” - Jon Kabat-Zinn*

It took me seventeen years to come face to face with the ghosts of my choices. It took me three years to figure out what it was I wanted to say about abortion. And it took me eight weeks, one day and roughly fifteen hours to write the pages you have in front of you. You would think that this would be the part where I breathe a huge sigh of relief. I can see the finish line, it's in sight, I'm almost there! The truth is, this is the hardest part, for now I've said my piece and I've sent it out into the world. I feel vulnerable, exposed, unmasked... but at the same time, liberated. Every page was part of a healing process that was long overdue, and every uncomfortable truth I told in this thesis was a contribution to the collective narrative of women who have felt shamed and silenced. “Word by word, the language of women so often begins with a whisper” (Williams 2012, p. 23).

In the Interdisciplinary program, a thesis is not a requirement. It counts for six credits, but you can easily skip the intensive writing that a thesis requires and take two extra classes or an independent study. So why did I choose to write? And why did I choose such a controversial topic? In part, it came from a need to unburden myself of the shame I have felt for nearly half my life. At the same time, I took on the burden of other women, those in Ireland who have been reduced to single letters because they cannot yet share their stories openly. I saw a little bit of myself in each of them, and it became

important for me to share their sorrow and anger. Writing this narrative has not been easy, but I wanted to dedicate myself wholly to the writing process, and to hold myself accountable to it and to the women I represented in it. In the end, I wrote more than 200 pages about the shame and stigmatization that women often face. I obviously had something to say.

The quotations I used to start this chapter may seem contradictory. For me, however, they are a perfect question and response... yes, you are always there, but it is your responsibility to show up authentically and unapologetically. I hope I have done that here, because I believe the story that emerged from me and spilled onto these pages is worth telling and worth teaching. I hold myself accountable to honor the lessons I have learned through this process. More than that, I hold myself accountable, now more than ever, to honor the person I have become and to stay true to myself and the moral of my story.

## **5.1 The Importance of Acceptance: How Confronting Past Shame Helps Me as an Educator**

We do not always appreciate the lessons our life experiences teach us. As they are occurring, we are often too preoccupied with the simple act of surviving, and we miss the message or moral of the story. When I think about the way an event like abortion can shape the course of a life, I am reminded of the seven stages of grief. There are clear parallels between the grief you endure when you lose a loved one and the grief you experience when you choose abortion. While anti-choicers might chime in here and say

this is because abortion is the death of a child, I believe this is because abortion signifies death in a different way; it is the death of the life you once had, the death of the person you used to be.

Both times I found out I was pregnant, I was truly shocked. That may sound silly or naïve, but it is absolutely true. I was not having frequent unprotected sex, I was not engaging in what I deemed risky behavior... I just did not think it was possible. There were days of denial, of trying to numb out the truth and pretend this wasn't happening. The next phase was the pain and the guilt. I was devastated, I was heartbroken; not because of the decision I had made but because I had put myself in the position to have to make it in the first place. No one chooses abortion lightly, and there is a tremendous amount of guilt involved, no matter how confident you are that your decision is the right one. After the pain and guilt subsided, I was angry. I was angry at myself for being irresponsible, I was angry at B for letting me down, and I was angry for the burden of shame I had to bear alone.

The next stage was the depression, reflection and loneliness. I remember those days well. The first time I got pregnant, only one friend knew; the second, I told three. That is not a lot of support, and I did not want to lean too heavily or depend too much on any one person. None of these friends had been through an abortion, and so I did not think any of them could understand what I was dealing with emotionally. I retreated inside myself, picking apart the past and dreading the future. I felt unlovable, like no one would want me if they knew what I had done; these thoughts only served to compound the loneliness and emptiness I was already experiencing.

As is true with many painful moments in life, the best healer is time. Happiness doesn't come all at once, at least it didn't for me, but eventually I noticed I was smiling again, laughing again... eventually there were more good days than bad. Sad thoughts no longer permeated every minute of my day, and a sense of normalcy and balance began to return. The turning point was a simple dinner out with a friend. I remember we were sitting at Red Robin and she said something funny, and all of a sudden I was belly laughing. Full on, unrestrained belly laughing. Not only that, but I realized I had eaten my whole meal, onion rings and all. That's when I knew that things were shifting, that I was experiencing the "upward turn" that is synonymous with Stage 5.

It took me a few weeks, but eventually I started coming to terms with my new reality; I had entered into the "working through" stage. I was able to focus on what was in front of me and make clear decisions about problems posed by my procedure. This meant withdrawing from one of my classes and taking a second job, to catch myself up on bills. It also meant spending time with those friends who knew my secret; although they had never been through anything similar, they were the ones I had trusted enough to tell, and I felt that I could be myself around them, and not have to hide the sadness that would sometimes creep in unexpectedly.

Now, I finally feel as if I have reached the acceptance phase. I'll admit it took much longer than it probably should have. This doesn't mean that I haven't been living life or experiencing joy, but until now, I never dealt with my experiences directly. Silence was my way of keeping the pain and the shame at bay. I never thought I would be able to look at my past objectively; it has been through the process of developing and writing this thesis that I have learned to make meaning from my mistakes. I have come

to realize that shame in who you are becomes an impenetrable road block to who you want to become. We must confront shame head on if we want to strip it of its power. By deconstructing my past narrative of shame and using it to inform others about the true experience of abortion, I have started to trust that my truth is enough, that I am enough. Where once there was shame and contrition, there is now acceptance and love. I recognize this transition as part of the life-long journey of learning and making meaning.

Though we may not always see the lesson as it is happening, I believe that eventually, when we are ready, it will be revealed to us. You never know when you are going to be shoved into a new reality, and for me, part of the lesson was about learning to deal with life's interruptions. I went through two crisis pregnancies and still managed to continue with my education and stay on track with my goals; I retained the jobs I had during my pregnancies, working 30 hours per week at both, and still graduated on time from my undergraduate university, all while learning to deal with a situation that had completely upended my sense of self. I believe this experience taught me the value and importance of adaptability. In 500 BC Heraclitus said, "The only thing constant is change"; I don't think a quote has ever been truer or stood the test of time quite so well. I dealt with a lot of change during those times in my life, both physically and emotionally. I believe it has helped me to become a more flexible person, one who understands that life is fragile and can change on a dime. We must have acceptance of what is and have faith in what will be.

I also think my experiences helped me develop a stronger sense of empathy. I was young when I had my abortions; the friends I chose to share with were my age as well, and we were all inexperienced when it came to making life-altering decisions. My

friends were sympathetic to what I was going through, and certainly there for me as much as they could be, but I didn't feel that any of them truly attempted to understand how this might feel from my perspective. Brené Brown in 2012 (p. 75) defined shame as a social concept that occurs between people; as a result, "it also heals best between people. A social wound needs a social balm, and empathy is that balm." I believe the lack of empathy I received helped me to cultivate my own, because it made me realize the importance of sharing someone's perspective and emotions. To have someone put themselves in your shoes and truly make an effort to understand what you are going through can be very comforting, and it became important to me to cultivate this characteristic in myself. A few years ago, a job coach suggested I take a StrengthFinders test; it was no surprise when the test results showed that empathy was among my top five strengths.

Our most painful moments can also be our most teachable lessons. I believe that the adaptability and empathy that I cultivated during these difficult times in my life helps me as an aspiring educator. The field of Higher Education is constantly evolving and demands compromise and versatility; every person I know working in this field tells me that on any given day, they are required to wear 10 different hats. It is a job that requires malleability, and I believe my life experiences, as well as past professional positions I have held, have prepared me to thrive in this sort of environment. I also have confidence that the empathy I have developed makes me an ideal candidate to work with college students who are in a unique period of self-discovery and need support as they navigate through a crucial time in their lives.

It has been a long road to acceptance, but I am proud of what I have been able to achieve through facing shame and drawing meaning from it. Life is a series of ups and downs, of highs and lows, of accomplishments and failures. The thing that matters most is the acceptance of who we are and the recognition of what we have to offer the world. This requires showing up authentically and letting ourselves be seen, battle scars and all. This is what makes us better educators and better human beings.

## **5.2 Lessons Learned: A Letter to my Future Colleagues in Education**

Dear Colleagues,

First and foremost, thank you for accompanying me on this journey. To share my truth openly in this format has been a significant and necessary step in the path towards self-acceptance, and everyone reading these pages has been a witness to my meaning-making process. It took me years to confront my shame, years to understand that my choices were the right ones for me, and that they did not make me any less of a woman or less of a human being. Terry Tempest Williams wrote in 2012 (p. 208): “We are all held captive by something.” Through this writing process, I have been able to step out of the shadows and into the light, a captive no more. This thesis is my final step in achieving liberation, and I thank you for bearing witness to my victory march.

In this paper, I detailed the long relationship I have had with shame. I shared my own abortion stories, as well as stories of women who are still fighting for reproductive health rights in Ireland. I used these stories in an effort to deconstruct the stigma around abortion, and to bring awareness that crisis pregnancy is a common societal issue that

touches the lives of millions of women. It could affect your sister, your neighbor, your cousin, your best friend. The decision to abort is never arrived at frivolously or without care and consideration; for this reason we must not treat those who choose it this way either.

Now, I want you to stand in front of a mirror while you picture this scene: a distraught student comes to you and tells you that she is pregnant. This news is probably shocking enough to hear as an educator, but then the student elaborates that she plans to have an abortion. What does your face do when you hear this word? Do your eyebrows rise involuntarily? Is there any movement in the mouth; a slight gasp that you didn't mean to let out, maybe? What about your eyes, do they betray any guttural reaction? Did your head drop or your shoulders droop without warning?

I ask you to perform this exercise for a reason. Like the rest of the narrative presented here, my goal is to make you aware of the stigma of abortion, and this exercise serves to illustrate how that stigma might affect your own reactions. We don't always recognize the instinctual responses we have to something, even something we support. Crisis pregnancy is always a sad situation; by its very definition, a crisis is a time of intense difficulty, trouble or danger. While it is perfectly normal to feel emotional when hearing that a student is in distress, it is our job as educators to provide a strong pillar of support. This means taking steps to ensure that our responses come from a place of reassuring empathy and not stunned dismay. Students in crisis are not coming to us for shock value; they need non-judgmental comfort, and anything besides that can only serve to perpetuate the stigma they likely already feel.

Whether you stand in a classroom, work behind a desk in an administration office, or spend your days rushing from one exam room to another in Student Health Services, I hope you gleaned something from this narrative that you can use in your work and in your life. I hope reading these stories helped you to examine your own perceptions of shame; maybe they even inspired you to redefine it and confront it on your own terms. Of course, I can't dictate the lesson for you, and therefore, I can't determine how you move forward after reading this thesis. You may take away something from this narrative that I never even thought of, and I encourage this as part of the beauty of SPN writing. This thesis might upset you, it might calm you, it might incite you to action. It might do absolutely nothing for you. In the end, I can only share the lessons this process has taught me, and hope that one or two of them will resonate with you.

We all experience shame in our lives. It is the ugly side of the human experience, the one we try to hide at all costs because it makes us feel unworthy. I tried to hide my shame for 17 years. I have learned from my own experience, as well as the shared experiences of others, that shame leaves us with only two options. We can ignore it like I did, and continuously try to avoid it in hopes that it will eventually disappear. The other choice is to address it directly before it takes us down. We can do this by exercising acceptance and allowing time to reveal the lesson to us. We can choose to forgive ourselves for our past mistakes and practice self-compassion, understanding that we are fallible humans capable of both shame and resilience.

I accept my past as an unchangeable part of who I am. One of the most important things that I have learned through both my graduate school program and the writing of this thesis is that I never needed to be absolved for making the choices that I did. My

shame did not come from choosing abortion; my shame came from putting myself in a position that I had to make such a difficult decision, and from the stigma I endured afterward that kept me silent for so many years. My abortions weren't my mistakes; they were the steps I took to correct my mistakes. The brokenness I have been trying to heal for so long came from my confusion between regret and shame. I know now that I never regretted the choices I made, but I felt shame because of the way those choices are perceived in society. It is my responsibility now to make meaning from my past and use it to educate others about the true experience of abortion.

“Change occurs when deeply felt private experiences are given public legitimacy” (Gandhi, cited in Pipher, p. 205). When I went through two crisis pregnancies and two abortions, I felt incredibly alone. When I started writing about abortion and talking to other women who had experiences like mine, however, I felt incredibly accepted and supported. Feeling marginalized has the power to drive you to silence; I can say with certainty that finding my voice and using it to speak about this issue has changed my life and helped me to recognize my inner strength. I move forward from this experience as a pro-choice educator who will continue to advocate for bodily autonomy, and advocate against self- and society-inflicted shame.

I hope this thesis has inspired a fresh perspective, one that you can use to help support the students who need it. I also hope that it has encouraged dialogue that can continue long after these pages are done. “Talk does not stop when two people part. Both people think about their exchange and independently add to it and uncover new truths” (McCarty 2009, p. 40). I hope this thesis will provoke ongoing thought and assist in the discovery of new and unexpected truths.

In respect,

Your Future Colleague

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