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When Will We Care About Domestic Violence?

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No Visible Bruises: What We Don't Know About Domestic Violence Can Kill Us
by Rachel Louise Snyder
Bloomsbury, 307 pp., $28.00

As countries around the world have tracked Covid-19, they've seen a sharp spike in another scourge, one of far longer duration and with no known cure: domestic violence. In the last weeks and months, confinement necessitated by the pandemic has caused an increase in calls to police and crisis centers, reporting severe beatings and murder-suicides in the home.

Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource

Käthe Kollwitz: Mothers*, 1919*

At the beginning of April, for example, in a Chicago suburb, a fifty-four-year-old man convinced that his girlfriend had contracted the virus (she had not) shot her in the head, then killed himself. In the US, calls are pouring into the National Domestic Violence Hotline, whose chief executive told *The New York Times*, "We're having really difficult

conversations," advising women to sleep in their cars to escape violent partners and, during arguments, to stay out of dangerous spaces, such as kitchens and bathrooms.

In the UK, at least sixteen domestic abuse killings of women and children occurred during a three-week period from late March to mid-April, double the average. The Canadian Women's Foundation has been circulating a one-handed signal—fingers entrapping a thumb—for women to use on video calls to silently alert authorities that they need help. A quarantined woman in China told the *Times* that her husband beat her with a metal high chair while she was holding their infant, until she had no feeling in one leg. A health care worker in Herat, Afghanistan—a country where more than half of all women experience domestic abuse in their lifetime—reports that she has lost touch with many victims in quarantine. She fears for their lives.

Spain has seen an 18 percent rise in calls to hotlines; the UK, 20 percent. French police have reported a 30 percent rise in calls. In Italy, hotel rooms had to be requisitioned when shelters were shut down. The United Nations has called for governments to "put women's safety first."

But that has never happened in any country, crisis or no crisis. As Rachel Louise Snyder reveals in her invaluable, deeply reported book *No Visible Bruises: What We Don't Know About Domestic Violence Can Kill Us*, the prevalence of domestic violence is nothing new. Household barbarity is not only a "global health problem of epidemic proportions," according to the World Health Organization, it is also the bare twisted root from which other violence in American society stems, from school shootings to mass murder.

Within the first few pages, you will learn that such violence is not an "unfortunate fate for the unlucky few." In fact:

- Each day, 137 women are killed throughout the world by domestic partners or "familial violence."

- There are more than a dozen countries where violence against a spouse is legal.

- In 2017, 50,000 women were killed worldwide by partners or family members. Or as Snyder emphasizes, "*Fifty thousand women*." Those are global pandemic numbers.

- Fifty American women are shot and killed every month by "intimate partners."

• Between 2000 and 2006, there were at least 10,600 domestic homicides in the US. During the same period, 3,200 American soldiers died in Iraq and Afghanistan.

• In the US, twenty people "are assaulted *every minute* by their partners."

• Homicide is the leading cause of death for young African-American women; domestic violence the second most common for all African-American women; the third most common for Native American women; the seventh for Caucasian women.

• Homicide is the leading cause of mortality among pregnant women in several cities and states, including New York City, Chicago, and Maryland.

• 54 percent of mass shootings in the US involved domestic violence.

Snyder's discussion of that last statistic, regarding mass shootings, is particularly astonishing, drawn from a 2017 report by the activist group Everytown for Gun Safety. Guns are a huge part of the problem, and Snyder is unsparing on that score. But it is revelatory to learn that many notorious mass shootings originated in acts of domestic violence. According to one expert, more than half of mass shootings are, in fact, "extreme incidents" of such brutality, including Charles Whitman's 1966 sniper attack at the University of Texas at Austin that killed sixteen: his spree began the night before, with the murder of his wife and mother. John Allen Muhammad's 2002 trail of terror, culminating in shootings in Virginia, Maryland, and Washington, D.C., began in Washington State, where he had long abused his wife. Omar Mateen, who shot and killed forty-nine people at an Orlando nightclub in 2016, was in the habit of beating and strangling his wife; had he been charged with and convicted of that, the other attack might never have occurred. Adam Lanza killed his mother before moving on to murder twenty-six children and teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut; a document was later found on his computer defining women as "selfish." And on and on and on. This April, in Nova Scotia, the largest mass shooting in Canadian history began with a domestic abuse assault.

Among the persistent themes of *No Visible Bruises* is the basic need for society to grasp the physical, emotional, and generational toll of domestic violence. The economic cost is known: $3.6 trillion in the US,

according to the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, including $2 trillion in medical expenses and $73 billion in criminal justice and court costs. Yet however widespread and homicidal, however entrenched in every class and stratum, from the most disadvantaged to the highest officials in the land, its devastation is still overlooked. Snyder laments the very name it goes by, which can seem to trivialize the issue, making it possible for officials to dismiss "domestic" crimes casually, as a mere nuisance, implying that "assaults from a family member deserve lesser attention than those of a stranger." Other terms include "intimate partner violence" or "intimate partner terrorism," which is a bit more like it.

Describing the rampages of one former offender, Snyder calls him "a domestic terrorist." That would be Jimmy Espinoza, a former San Francisco pimp and gang member who served his time and is now a graduate and group leader of the Resolve to Stop the Violence Project (RSVP), a county jail program aimed at rehabilitation. "Terrorist" is a polite version of what Espinoza calls himself. Owning up to his long history of abuse, he's more apt to identify as a "bottom-feeder" or a "low-life motherfucker." Espinoza offers a fascinating glimpse into the mind of the perpetrator, both his own mind and those of the men he's training, teaching them how to recognize the ways in which they've bullied, blamed, demeaned, and tormented the women in their lives, not simply through brute force but also through browbeating, their abusive narcissism evident in everyday language. He tells them to watch out for words such as "just," "if," and "but," as in "I just pushed her a little. She's overreacting." He forces them to realize that self-control will be a struggle every day, comparable to dealing with addiction; he urges them to confront the fact that many were themselves sexually assaulted as children. (Fifty percent of boys who grew up in foster care suffered such abuse; an estimated 12 percent of those in county jails have as well.)

RSVP has posted impressive statistics: 80 percent of inmates who spent time in the program have lower recidivism rates for violent crimes. Yet even Espinoza backslides, on one occasion disappearing for a time back into narcotics and then turning to rehab. He refuses to talk to Snyder further when he learns she's interviewing his former girlfriend, Kelly, who was twice kidnapped and held by him, once with a knife and once, for days, at gunpoint. After she escaped the first time and ran to a police station, the cops told her to go back and retrieve the knife for evidence. She declined. Kelly, who has a child with Espinoza, tells Snyder that she believes he has changed his abusive behavior but trusts him only so far. She says, "I will never allow myself to be alone with Jimmy again in my life." While gun crimes would be preventable with sane

regulations, the larger unanswered question that hangs over Espinoza's story and the book as a whole is: Is violence preventable?

The theme of *No Visible Bruises* is that the male of the species is far and away deadlier than the female. As Hamish Sinclair, a cofounder of RSVP who has dedicated himself to grappling with the problem, puts it:

> Every commonly available…statistic, and every anecdotal account about domestic and all other kinds of violence throughout the United States and around the world, point clearly to the fact that men almost monopolize all sectors of violence perpetration.

Snyder isn't satisfied even with that, writing, "It is *men* who are violent. It is *men* who perpetrate the majority of the world's violence, whether that violence is domestic abuse or war," an assertion validated by the UN's Office on Drugs and Crime, which has calculated that an average of 95 percent of those convicted of homicide are men. In addition to school shootings and mass murders, we have "gang warfare, murder-suicides and familicides and matricides and even genocides: all men." Therefore it's men, she says, who are going to have to "learn nonviolence."

Any attempt to describe violence in a nongendered way is, according to Sinclair, itself a form of "meta-violence…aiding and abetting" denial of the problem, amounting to "a careful attempt not to see this crucial piece of evidence," distorting attempts to deal with it. "Domestic violence is like no other crime," Snyder writes, and by the time you finish this book, you will believe it.

Snyder begins with the harrowing story of Michelle Monson Mosure, a woman in Billings, Montana. As in so many such accounts, a gun was involved, and as the author notes later, "It is surely no coincidence that the states with the highest number of guns per capita also happen to have the highest rates of domestic violence homicide." Montana is among them.[1]

Michelle met Rocky Mosure when she was fourteen and he was twenty-four. Nicknamed after Rocky Marciano, the boxer, he was described by those who knew him as either "charming or manipulative," but whatever charm he may have had remains elusive. He began binge drinking and shoplifting at twelve. Although he grew up in a family and eventually had counseling for his troubles, he spent time in a home for "troubled boys" and eventually dropped out of school. As an adult he worked on oilfield crews and was

arrested on a drug charge in Texas. Within two or three days of meeting him, Michelle believed herself to be in love; soon she was pregnant. Her mother, Sally, threatened to have him arrested for statutory rape, but Michelle said she would retaliate by running away with boyfriend and baby and never seeing her family again.

Sally hoped that Rocky would grow bored with his young conquest and responsibilities, but he did not. Michelle was fifteen when she gave birth to Kristy in 1994; a year later the couple had another child, Kyle. As Rocky became more deeply addicted to meth (eventually involving Michelle's younger sister, Melanie, in drug dealing and addiction as well), he grew more violently attached. Michelle stubbornly succeeded in receiving her high school diploma, even while caring for her babies, but Rocky, only sporadically employed in construction, spent his time controlling her. He didn't want her to work, didn't want her to go back to school to become a nurse, and discouraged her from seeing family and friends. Once, after Michelle sought treatment for depression, he threw away her medication. Nonetheless, she persevered in putting together what might have been an independent life for herself and her children, secretly putting a down payment on a house her father had built. She married Rocky eight years after they met, only when it became clear that she could not otherwise qualify for financial aid for college. After she enrolled, Rocky began stalking her whenever she went to classes.

Her family knew little of the abuse that had been taking place until a series of fateful events unfolded, all too rapidly, in the fall of 2001. First, Michelle began to suspect that Rocky was having an affair, a belief that spurred her to begin planning her escape. One day in September, Michelle brought the two children, aged seven and six, to stay at her mother's house while she went to tell Rocky that she was leaving. She warned her mother that if he showed up she was not to let him take the kids. Less than two hours later he broke a window in Sally's back door and crawled through, spattering blood, grabbing Sally by the neck as she tried to shield the children, and shoving and injuring Michelle's pregnant sister. He drove off with Kristy. As Sally saw the children's numb reaction to his violence, she realized they had not only seen it before, they were habituated to it.

Only now did Michelle begin to share with her mother and sisters details of what she had endured: Rocky had beaten her in front of the children, threatened to shoot them with her grandfather's rifle, and often took the kids and disappeared for long periods of time. She described her raw terror when he'd acquired a rattlesnake, keeping it in a cage in the living room and telling her he'd put it in her bed when she was asleep.

After his assault on her mother, Michelle filed for a restraining order, and Rocky was arrested. The police, however, were "uninterested," as Sally put it, charging him only with misdemeanor criminal mischief, including nothing about the injuries suffered by the women in the report filed. Sally urged her daughter to write down a record of his abuse, and she did. But two days later, Michelle learned that Rocky's parents had bailed him out of jail. She immediately and frantically recanted her affidavit, pleading with authorities to drop the restraining order. This would prove to be a critical juncture, when obvious warning signs were missed by police and errors were committed in the charging paperwork by the district attorney's office.

Rocky then returned home, and he and Michelle cut off most contact with both of their families, although they were not reconciled. According to a friend, Michelle was still intent on leaving. But on Monday, November 19, 2001, the week of Thanksgiving, Rocky Mosure bought a .45-caliber pistol through an ad in the *Thrifty Nickel*, telling the seller he was "getting the gun for his wife." He wasn't exactly lying. Later that day, after Michelle had collected the kids from school, he pushed a wad of chewing gum into the ignition of her car so she couldn't get away. Then he dragged her down the stairs to the basement and shot her four times in front of Kristy and Kyle, whom he caught and shot in the head. To make it look like an accident, he started a fire in the house that smoldered for hours but eventually burned out. No one in the neighborhood heard shots or smelled smoke. At some point, he shot himself. The bodies were discovered by her parents the following day. Michelle was twenty-three.

Sometime during the last days of Michelle's life, Alyssa, her older sister, thought, "Someone needs to kill [Rocky] because he's going to kill her." But when a woman kills her abuser, the woman pays, self-defense being often reserved for men, as recent investigations in *The New Yorker* (one by Snyder herself) have shown.[2] No one knows how many women in prison are there because they killed their abusers, but a 2005 New York Department of Corrections study cited by Snyder found that 67 percent of women who kill partners "had been abused by their victim."

The murders of Michelle Mosure and her children caused outrage and soul-searching in Billings and around the state, where the then governor, Judy Martz (still the only woman to have held the office in Montana), had previously made this archaic remark to a Butte business group: "My husband has never battered me, but then again, I've never given him a reason to." The murders gave rise to the state's Domestic Violence Fatality Review Commission, an effort to intensively research and learn from grievous failures of the criminal justice

system. The Mosure case was the first in the state subjected to such analysis, in which team members (including the state's attorney general, a judge, law enforcement officials, women's advocates, and a pastor) compile background on victim and perpetrator and a detailed timeline of the case, trying to identify gaps in the system as well as legal points of intervention and tools that might be used to protect victims. Several countries and more than forty states now have such teams, and the data have helped save lives.

Snyder recounts the Mosure story in part to highlight gains made by programs like this, which have gradually begun to recast the all-too-common narrative of abuse, based on the world-weary assumptions of the criminal justice system. It used to be taken for granted that women reporting domestic crimes were apt to be unreliable or hysterical, and likely to change their stories, as Michelle did, leading to the dismissal of criminal charges and restraining orders. Indeed, on average it may take women seven tries to leave their abusers—and in 70 percent of court cases, victims refuse to testify—but Snyder argues decisively that recanting testimony has long been "profoundly misunderstood." Such reversals, she says, represent not a failure of character or will, but rather victims' justifiable fear that the system cannot protect them. When Michelle Mosure learned that her husband had been bailed out of jail, she knew she had to negotiate the terms of her life and her children's lives with her abuser, renouncing her own statement in a desperate, if failed, bid to save them all. Instead of the inevitable query about why women stay in abusive relationships, a far more relevant, constructive question is now being posed by advocates: "How do we protect this person?"

Beginning with a "no blame, no shame" attitude and borrowing the intensive accident investigations of the National Transportation Safety Board as a model, data-driven tools such as fatality reviews and a written questionnaire called the "Danger Assessment" have upended misogynistic assumptions. Asking victims to categorize their abuse, the Danger Assessment enables nurses, counselors, police, prosecutors, judges, and others to identify women most at risk of being killed by their partners. Its scoring system makes for grim reading. Victims are asked to assess and classify the attacks that led to their injuries, beginning with slapping and pushing; proceeding to punching, kicking, and beating ("severe contusions, burns, broken bones"); and culminating with the use of weapons.[3] As Snyder points out, the high-risk factors in the Danger Assessment read like a summary of Michelle Mosure's life, beginning with an impulsive, love-at-first-sight courtship and moving on through the abuser's control of everyday activities, constant jealousy, drug abuse and heavy drinking, violence and threats of violence, and, most menacing of all, the presence of a gun in the home.

Both in the Danger Assessment and in other "Lethality Assessment" models, particular attention is now being paid to strangling, identified as a potent signal that the situation is leading to murder. Depending on how far it goes, the survivor may not remember the event accurately or at all. Only a small percentage of such attacks leave visible marks, but they can cut off oxygen to the brain, causing the confusion, uncontrollable fear, and changeable behavior that often cause police to disregard victim accounts.

Many survivors may also show impaired judgment from blunt trauma to the head, resulting in the most grotesque irony of all: because victims are so physically and emotionally damaged—their lives so "messy," afflicted often by extreme poverty, drug addiction, and mental-health issues—they're less "likable" than "the average batterer," according to David Adams, leader of another abuse intervention program. Our society, Adams says, loves abusers, who can be charming, charismatic, and successful, beloved by institutions dedicated to elevating male authority and vanity, such as the National Football League and the Catholic Church. They're all around us, he says, and "they're clustered at the top."

The bipartisan passage of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in 1994, cosponsored by Senators Joe Biden and Orrin Hatch and signed into law by Bill Clinton, was meant to establish a bulwark against violence in the home, and it did, reducing annual rates of domestic violence by 64 percent between 1993 and 2010. It originally provided more than $1.5 billion to support the investigation and prosecution of violent crimes against women, imposed mandatory restitution on convicted abusers, and funded grants for enforcement of protection orders and the creation of transitional housing for victims. Those grants have served victims across a range of groups, from Native American and rural women to elderly and disabled victims. Bipartisan majorities supported the act's reauthorization in 2000 and 2005, but in 2012 Republicans attacked it, objecting to protections for those in same-sex relationships and aid to victims who were undocumented immigrants. Nonetheless, it was reauthorized in 2013, and Obama signed it into law.

Under Trump, however, the VAWA expired during the government shutdown of 2018–2019. The House reauthorized it in April 2019, revising it to close the "boyfriend loophole" with language aimed at preventing anyone (not just spouses or partners living with a victim) convicted of domestic violence or stalking from possessing firearms. But since then, it has languished in Mitch McConnell's Senate, opposed by the National Rifle Association. On December 9, 2019, the Houston police chief, Art Acevedo, lashed out at the Senate and the NRA before attending the funeral of a thirty-two-year-old sergeant shot and killed in the line of duty

by the boyfriend of a domestic violence victim. Of McConnell and Texas senators Ted Cruz and John Cornyn, Acevedo said, “I don’t want to see their little smug faces [talking] about how much they care about law enforcement when I’m burying a sergeant because they don’t want to piss off the NRA. Make up your minds. Whose side are you on?” Apparently, GOP senators have done so, introducing their own version of the bill with the “boyfriend loophole” intact.

Snyder says, “I want to believe all this is making a difference,” citing improvements in awareness and attitudes arising from the Me Too movement, enlightened police departments empowering female cops who specialize in working with victims, prosecutors demanding better documentation of domestic abuse (so that cases needn’t rely solely on victims’ testimony), and judges authorizing “preventive detention” to keep abusers locked up for a few days, long enough for victims to find safety. That last measure alone might have saved the lives of Michelle Mosure and her children.

Yet Snyder’s skepticism is also clear, especially in her examination of the complex history of women’s shelters. While they’ve saved thousands, she says, they have done so at a profoundly disruptive cost to victims, forcing them to disappear from their own lives by agreeing to fill an opening at a shelter that may be hundreds of miles away, leaving jobs, families, neighborhoods, and friends, and removing their children from schools. That’s a kind of “ticket to welfare,” and may also lead, in some circumstances, to homelessness. Some well-funded programs have become increasingly sophisticated, offering support services for housing, employment, health care, and treatment for addiction. Yet while concluding that the national patchwork of women’s shelters is an invaluable component for saving those endangered, she finds it “an abysmal fix” that places the onus on the victim, not the perpetrator. Far better to identify abuse earlier, prosecutors have determined, at the misdemeanor stage, before it escalates. That, too, has reduced fatalities.

But in a society flush with firearms, there’s only so much that can be done. Snyder is unsparing on the role of guns in our culture, acknowledging that the US is “the most dangerous developed country in the world for women.” The most vivid characters in her narrative are all dead—women who lost their lives, most to gun violence. Yet she also paints an indelible scene of a meeting of the Montana domestic violence review team. There, a retired nurse sat knitting throughout, an implacably pacifist Madame Defarge who repeatedly pushed her fellow participants, largely men, to recognize what was staring them in the face: “Guns, guns, guns,” she said. “Get rid of the guns.” The cops laughed, saying, “This is Montana.” She said, “So what?!”

Recalling this scene, Snyder, who has a gift for clarity, asks, “Why are our guns more important to us than our citizens?”

Certainly, guns are a documented evil, but it’s not just weapons. Four hundred years ago, Shakespeare ran his own danger assessment on Desdemona, another young woman who fell into a too rapid courtship with a jealous, controlling man. For centuries, men without even the gravitas or tragic flaws of Othello, acting on their ire, have been saying, “I’ll tear her all to pieces,” and doing it, too, with their bare hands. Will they ever stop?

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1 The others are South Carolina, Tennessee, Nevada, Louisiana, Alaska, Arkansas, and Missouri. ↩

2 See Rachel Louise Snyder, “When Can a Woman Who Kills Her Abuser Claim Self-Defense?,” *The New Yorker*, December 20, 2019; and Elizabeth Flock, “How Far Can Abused Women Go to Protect Themselves?,” *The New Yorker*, January 13, 2020. ↩

3 Originally devised by Dr. Jacquelyn Campbell, an associate dean at the Johns Hopkins School of Nursing, the Danger Assessment can be found at ncdsv.org/images/DANGERASSESSMENT.pdf. ↩

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