

# Invisible Women, Fairy Tale Death: How Stories of Public Murder Minimize Terror at Home

DOI 10.18422/62-05

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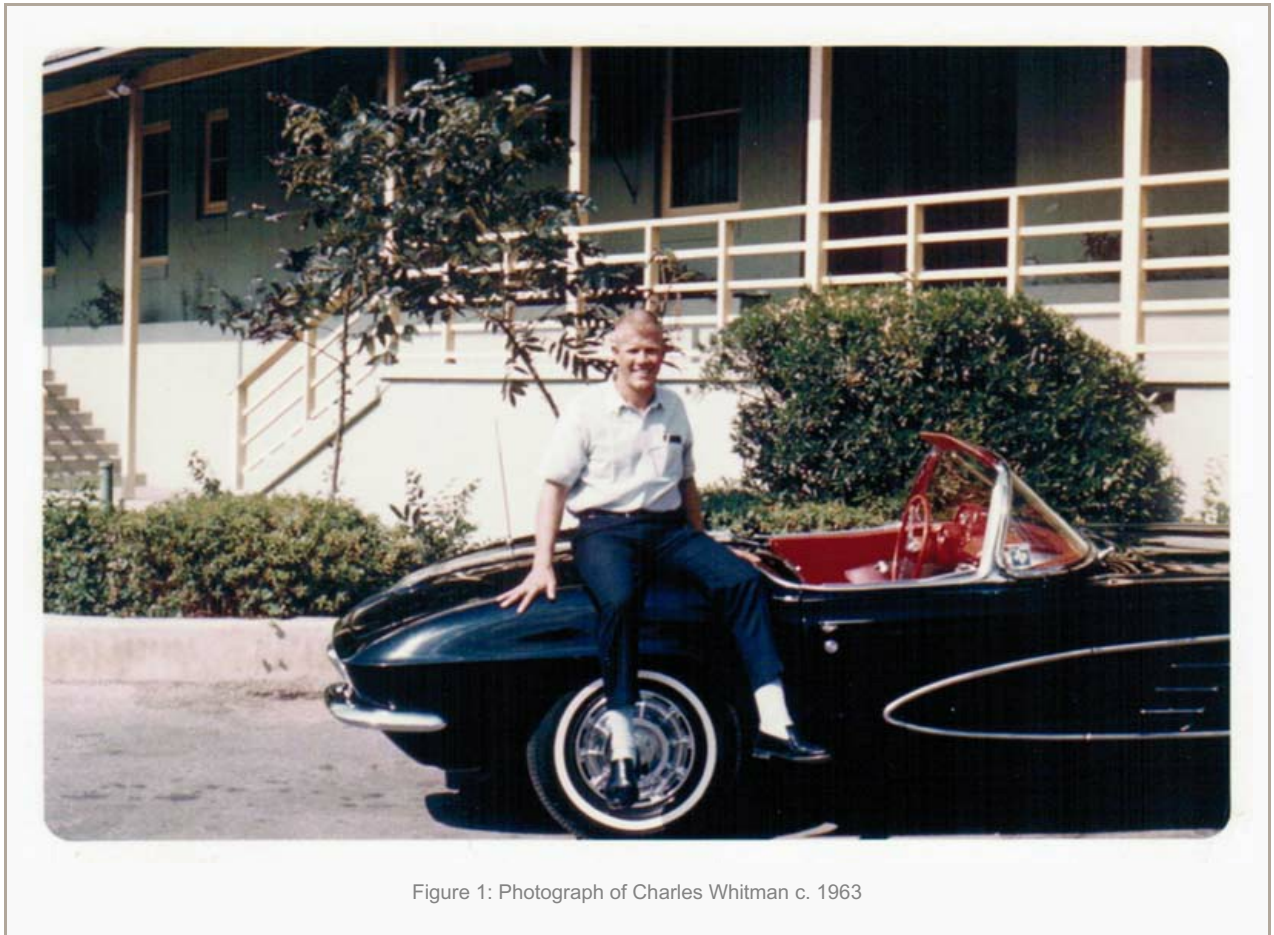
**Repeated true-crime narratives tend to deflect serious examination of the misogynistic attitudes, abuse, and/or fatal violence that too frequently precede a public massacre. A reconsideration of surviving writings by Charles Whitman, the 1966 UT Austin sniper, alongside newly-discovered letters of his wife and second victim, Kathy Leissner, reveals how inflexible gender attitudes and judgments took a profoundly toxic and eventually fatal toll in private, long before Whitman's display of hyper-masculine force from atop a landmark tower.**

- 1 Four years ago, in an essay titled “Shooting Sprees Start with Women,” I explored how the private brutality that precedes violent spectacle is often buried by coverage of the public event. An accumulation of such stories—from Sandy Hook to Orlando, from Casper College to UCLA—still treats domestic death or wounding as an afterthought to more serious or offensive crimes.
- 2 As a result, those terrorized in private do not fully register on the compass of collective outrage, except as targets of direct or indirect blame for the public outcome. In 2015, Bill Maher argued on his show *Real Time* that young males commit mass killings because they simply can't “get laid,” even though commercials depict women as ready and willing sexual objects (n. pag.). Maher didn't mention to his applauding audience that a significant percentage of these same men stalk, abuse, or kill women as a prelude to attacking strangers (Everytown 2–5). Furthermore, Maher's commentary unwittingly replicated the entitled misogynist “reasoning” often broadcast by the killers themselves (Schonfeld)—as in the cases of Marc Lepine (1989), George Hennard (1991), George Sodini (2009), and Elliot Rodger (2014).
- 3 One enduring example shows how ingrained our current script and its gendered erasures can be. Since 1966, writers, artists, and documentarians have retold the story of Charles Whitman's clock tower rampage at the University of Texas at Austin, which left nearly fifty people dead or wounded, including Whitman himself. Unlike most mass killers, he was married rather than single. But like many others, he murdered women at home—his mother, Margaret, and his wife, Kathleen—before shooting anyone else. And like many men who commit similar attacks, Whitman viewed women as objects both to desire and control.
- 4 It is important to examine how the UT Austin narrative—like so many others—diminishes, romanticizes, or sequesters domestic murder. I will argue that this repeating dynamic reflects something all too ordinary and self-implicating: fear and suspicion of women. Whitman's actions and personal writings must be understood within this context. Newly available primary documents finally make it possible to consider the perspective of his wife as well as her family.

## Charles Whitman's 1966 Rampage

- 5 The UT rampage was not the first mass murder in American history, but it was the first televised shooting of its kind, and the sensational scale of Whitman's crimes generated media headlines across the country. For five decades, the story has been a subject for continued “true crime” exploration, inspiring made-for-TV style documentaries ranging from *The Deadly Tower* (1975) to *Deranged Killers: Charles Whitman* (2009). In 2016, the film, *Tower*, became the first theatrical release to document the experience of victims and survivors on the ground. Gary Lavergne's book, *A Sniper in the Tower* (1997), is considered the definitive synthesis of the case, so much so that Lavergne himself was the subject of a 2003 documentary for the History Channel's *True Crime Authors* miniseries (“Sniper in the Tower”). Story

after story addresses Whitman's Eagle Scout achievement, his military training, drug use, fascination with guns, hatred of his father as well as his much-debated brain tumor (Ward). Limited attention has been paid to Whitman's attitudes about women and sex. Whitman's wife and mother are usually rendered through romantic/sensational re-enactments or minimalism/omission, all in service of "true crime" formula with its victims, heroes, and obvious villain. This repeated and recursive glossing suggests gendered habits of mind—both of authors and audiences—rather than direct intention or malice.



- 6 As a former Boy Scout and altar boy, as a handsome, white college student and former Marine, Whitman embodied the mid-century, postwar "All-American guy." Yet privileges of gender and race, bound with the motifs of American individualism, have cast Whitman as a "crazy, deranged individual who had suddenly gone completely berserk"—an exception to the rule (Special Report of the Grand Jury 1, par. 2). In his book, *Murder over a Girl*, Ken Corbett describes gendered inattention this way: "One of the ways that [boys] get to be boys is that they get to be invisible," meaning, in part, that classmates, colleagues, family, and friends "refuse to know what they knew" (151). In a similar vein, one of Whitman's peers recounted his pranks and other high-risk behaviors after the massacre with amusement and disbelief, saying: "If Charlie was a monster, then so are we all" (qtd. in Dugger 3).
- 7 There's yet another factor which has camouflaged Whitman's attitudes. In contrast with "lone-wolf" shooters who left behind over-the-top diatribes against women, Whitman's surviving letters and journals rely heavily on the language of idealization. Yet his attitudes are no less objectifying, despite his repetition of "love" and other flowery terms. Furthermore, his idealization divides women into simultaneous targets of worship and punishment (Madonna/whore), demonstrating what Julia Kristeva calls a "conjunction of opposites (courtliness and sadism)" (162–63). Rather than enacting an aberrant tangent, Whitman's first murders fulfilled—in the most extreme way—the code of mid-century American masculinity he had absorbed, practiced, and even struggled against, defining real men as dominant and powerful and real women as subordinate and submissive. The pattern normalizes victimization of women when individual men do not see themselves living up to the stereotype of their own gender: "The target must already be seen as legitimate [...]. [M]asculinity may not be the experience of power. But it is the experience of *entitlement* to power" (Kimmel 181, 185).

8 Violence against woman can thus embody a primal, “restorative” strike to (re)assert masculine dominance, “returning [...] to the moment before that sense of vulnerability and dependency was felt” (Kimmel 177–78). Historian Gerda Lerner hypothesized that the awe-inspiring power of women was first venerated and then objectified, reflecting male dread, envy, and eventually ownership of the capacity to create and sustain life (45–53). In this way, Whitman’s first murders can be understood as acts of self-ordination to “divine” male dominion over life and death—first in private, then from more than 300 feet above sidewalks and streets. It is no coincidence that his first target from the tower was a heavily pregnant woman, Claire Wilson, whose child was aborted in utero with his first bullet (Maitland). Confronted by repeated failures as a Marine, as a college engineering student, and as a husband, Whitman still felt entitled by a toxic residue of privileges he was born into as a white male Southerner. Storytelling that avoids (or “abjects”) gender, sexuality, or race inadvertently re-inscribes that same toxic inheritance.

## Depictions of Intimate Murder in the UT Austin Case

In addition to the investigative documents assembled by law enforcement agencies, a significant sample of Whitman’s personal writing (from ages 15–25) was publicly preserved and is now housed in the Austin History Center. Documents in this archive include notebooks, a day planner from his first year of college, a diary, miscellaneous “inspirational” notes, and four letters he composed within hours of the shooting. This was the extent of the accessible record until 2015, when I was granted exclusive access to additional materials from the private collection maintained by his wife’s eldest brother.

- 9 Over time certain documents—and parts of documents—have received more scrutiny than others. Whitman’s simplistic references to “love” for his mother (“I loved that woman with all my heart”) and his wife (“my most precious possession”) have been inextricably bound to his justification for their murders. In the History Channel miniseries episode “Sniper in the Tower”, Lavergne summarized a motive for the first two killings, sampling Whitman’s language from his typed letter the night before: “He probably killed them for the reason he said he killed them: to spare them the trauma and embarrassment of what he knew he was going to be doing later that morning.” Lavergne, taking Whitman at his word, reserves “trauma and embarrassment” for the public acts “he was going to do later,” inadvertently ennobling the private murders as tragic casualties of misguided valor or mistaken generosity (00:25:24–00:25:40).
- 10 We can see similar gaps of attention when it comes to the content of Whitman’s writing in the scene where he murdered his mother. In the one-page letter he printed on yellow legal paper and left on his mother’s body, he repeated twice that he had “relieved her of her suffering” at the hands of his father, to whom she had given “the best 25 years of her life.” He portrayed himself as a divine agent, sending his mother to “heaven” after suffering from his father’s abuse. But Whitman also added a grotesque verdict: “[My father] has chosen to treat her like a slut that you would bed down with, accept her favors, and then throw a pittance in return” (“To Whom It May Concern”).
- 11 This statement is composed of two clauses—the ugly main clause and a long dependent clause—and only the very last phrase (“a pittance in return”) has drawn serious attention. The language parallels two other final references to money and family: one, in a short note referring to forty dollars sent by his brother, Patrick; the other, a mention of his mother’s “usual standard of living,” hand-scrawled at the end of a typed letter found in his home. Understandably, like investigators after the crimes, Lavergne zeroed in closely on Whitman’s accusation about his father as a withholding “provider”:

In an attempt to trivialize the area of life in which his father was clearly superior, Whitman again focused on what his father allegedly failed to provide for his mother [...]. [His father] actually provided quite a good standard of living for his entire family, even after Margaret left Florida. There were allegations from Margaret’s brothers, however, that [he] had cut off all financial support for Margaret and Charles [...] only the day before [Charlie] decided to become a mass murderer. (108)

While questions about economics are important, Whitman's choice of words points us to something profound. Summing up his father's treatment of his mother with a mixture of vulgarity and delicacy communicates sexual shaming as well as a high-stakes division between "mothers" (good women) and "sluts" (bad women). Here, financial anxiety or blame cannot be isolated from gender norms that divide women and assign heterosexual family roles, protection, and ranks. Kathy's brother, Nelson Leissner, informed me in an interview that Whitman's father called to brag days before the shootings about his involvement with a woman Kathy's age. (By November after the killings, his father married again.) The question of divided resources would have been fraught by any "threat" of a new sexual-familial relationship, particularly with a younger woman who already had one child and another on the way (Lomartire).

- 12 Such a "threat" would have mattered only to a young man already deeply indoctrinated by masculine codes of competition, female subjugation, and domestic purity. Some sons would dismiss the sick hypocrisy of any father using sexual taunts to pressure the abused mother to return. But this was an eldest son who had married in a Catholic church on his parents' wedding anniversary four years earlier, a son who was still not financially independent and who feared that he might be sterile. Viewed together, Whitman's ceremonious use of a brand new Bowie knife and crushing his mother's wedding ring finger (Lavergne 102–03) gruesomely reference the attempted restoration of a violated honor.
- 13 Blind spots in reconstructions of his wife's killing are even less subtle. Kathy's murder is framed like a dark fairy tale, a convention reinforced by her youth and beauty as well as her marriage bond with her killer. Typical phrases are "killed in her sleep" (Garcia) or "stabbed to death in her sleep" (Eagleman). Such passive descriptions are shorthand for an approach used by Lavergne, who recreated the scene entirely from Whitman's perspective. After describing his quiet approach to Kathy's bedside, his exposure of her nude body, and the "considerable strength" of "vicious thrusts" from his hunting knife, Lavergne concludes:

Given the size of the knife and the location of her wounds, Whitman probably hit her heart [...]. Without struggle, Kathy died instantly. [...] She most likely went from sleep to death without ever seeing her murderer. It was just as well. Whitman was right: she was as good a wife as anyone could hope. Her loyalty never wavered, even after physical assaults and mental anguish. She stayed with him until the very end. (108)

This representation disallows entirely the possibility of Kathy's pain, terror, or physical resistance to an attack while at her most vulnerable—committed by the man with whom she had shared a bed. Ironically, Lavergne does imagine the possibility of Whitman's final homage to Kathy's body before he left the house, reinforcing the image of Kathy as an object of her husband's gaze: "No one will know if [he] looked at her one last time" (120). The result of the sequence is a perverse *aubade*, a violent lover's farewell. Kathy's qualities as "a good wife" (who "stays until the end") are also emphasized here, validated by the author's agreement with notes Whitman added above and below a journal entry from 1964: "I still mean it," he wrote. "My wife was a true person" (*Daily Record of CJ Whitman*).

- 14 Continued repetition of select declarations from Whitman, divorced from the context of his language and the dramatic irony of his violence, has unintentionally ratified them, perpetuating a wounding against the women and their families—and by extension, any women killed under similar circumstances. One enduring impact is to cast additional scrutiny of these scenes as unnecessary or unseemly, making narrative realism seem salacious in comparison to the common wisdom of the tale as repeated again and again. Another dangerous result is an overemphasis of the victimized party's character qualities as a necessary threshold for empathy from readers.

## A Fractured Fairy Tale: Whitman as "Man"—Kathy as "Wife"

- 15 We can now read Whitman's attitudes by tracing them forward in select letters to Kathy beginning two

months prior to their marriage. An even larger sample of her letters—both to Whitman and her own mother—provide insightful points of comparison, showing how she experienced his behavior as well as how she constructed her own responses. Whitman’s posture of control is evident early on, prior even to the couple’s official engagement, as in the first line of a letter referencing their dating relationship: “How’s it feel to be tied down to the same fellow for 4 months, 1 day, 23 hours, and 35 minutes? I sure am glad I tied down that little dropper of mine.” His fixation on a precise moment of “capture” and a third-person reference to Kathy as a “little dropper” together undermine his inquiry about her feelings. A sentence shortly afterwards supports this interpretation, as he critiques her latest letter: “Miss Leissner I have a bone to pick with you [...] if I want to read typewritten paper I can find plenty of it at the ROTC building” (12 June 1962, Select Letters).

- 16 Proprietary demands pepper Whitman’s communication, and his sweetness or politeness always betrays an agenda. He treats Kathy’s social connections as his own from the beginning: “Oh, ask Floyd [the Justice of the Peace] if he can sell me liability insurance. I am having some trouble here. [...] Find out and let me know if he can insure me” (9 June 1962, Select Letters). His requests reinforce Kathy’s expected menial or secretarial roles, such as sewing a patch on his karate outfit, taking care of floor mats for his new car, keeping track of clothing he left here or there, sending him a tinted photo of herself, cleaning their new apartment “the way she likes it,” and wedding preparations—including a task traditionally performed by the groom: purchasing the wedding bands.
- 17 Whitman also casts himself as “expert” in odd ways, advising Kathy, for example, about getting a “premarital exam” because he’d seen an article in *Modern Bride*. (This after she has already informed him that she saw the family doctor.) He directs her to “get her teeth in good shape” because she won’t be covered under his military dental policy, adding another comment that describes Kathy as a material property rather than a person: “Your dad’s sure getting stung isn’t he. Getting you ready to give to someone else” (24 July 1962, Select Letters).
- 18 By age twenty-one, Whitman was already heavily conforming to a paternalistic mode of relating to women, applying emotional pressure to get his way. His intention to marry simply emboldened and legitimized this “adult” posture. On occasions when Kathy’s parents—particularly her father—raised doubts about a hasty wedding date, or whether Whitman should be allowed to stay overnight at their home, he pouts: “If I’m going to cause trouble I’d rather not come” (19 June 1962, Select Letters). The same letter includes an ultimatum to Kathy that pre-figures what he will write to his in-laws four years later: “I don’t mean to hurt your Mom and Dad by taking you away, but if you marry me I’ll expect you to go with me.”
- 19 Letters written by Kathy and her mother reveal that there was a significant crisis within the first six months of marriage, due to what Kathy’s mother called Whitman’s “desire to dominate Kathy”—a desire revealed, in part, by his assertion that she “need[ed] to see a psychiatrist” because she had “changed” and was unhappy (qtd. in Scott-Coe “Listening”). Kathy’s subsequent actions and letters indicate in various ways that while her husband continued to practice an ethos of control, she was testing her independence. Kathy initially left her family in February 1963 to withdraw from UT and join her husband on active duty in North Carolina, but after six months she also managed to get away from him and return to Texas, her family, and school when he was deployed to Cuba—despite disapproval from her in-laws as well as pressure from Whitman to have a baby (Scott-Coe “Listening”).
- 20 Kathy’s letters to Whitman during their separation (July 1963–Dec. 1964) provide many examples that demonstrate how she had internalized her husband’s displeasure and adjusted to his preferences, even when it meant questioning her own judgment. In a long letter after their first anniversary, she apologizes for making him mad and for complaining about not hearing from him, pledging not to “nag” him about his gambling. She also downplays a more intimate, and sad, concern: “Please don’t think I still have that dumb notion of your only desiring me for sexual release” (Letters 27 Aug. 1963). However, the longer Kathy lives apart from Whitman, the more deeply her writing expresses desires for change in their relationship (Scott-Coe “But What Would *She* Say?”). She explores one of his insecurities at length in a letter dated 6 May 1964:

[Y]ou think it's dependence but really that's the way it should have been when you first thought you were in-love with me [...]. [I]t's going to be almost like getting to know each other again when you get out [...]. [W]e are both going to have to realize that when we get back together and respect each other's new ideas. [n. pag.]

In another letter the following month, she worries that the “awful nice things” he said about her from a distance could be ominous:

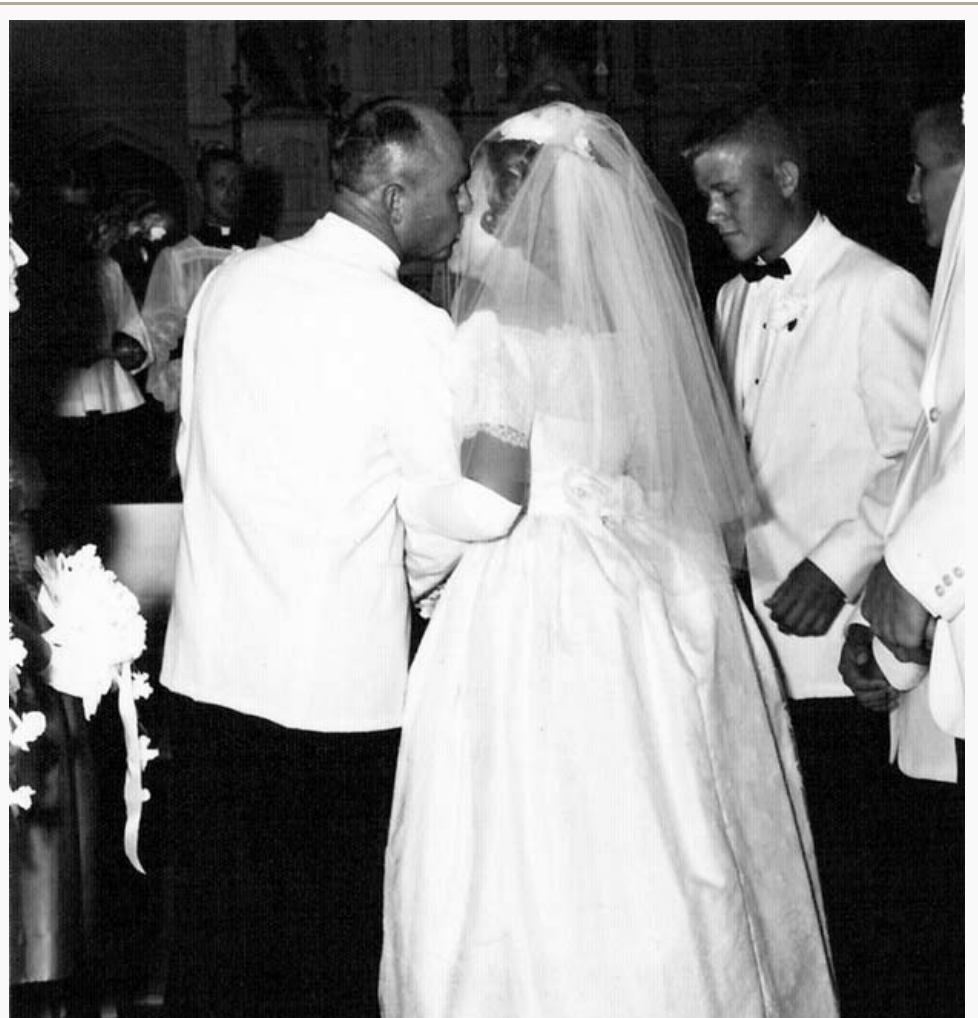
Honey, when your [sic] not with someone you love, it's awful easy to build them up to something they aren't and I'm afraid this may be what you're doing. I even got this impression when you were home on leave in May. You seemed a little dissatisfied with me in some ways and I really am the same girl you married. I may be unjustified in my fear but it could happen. (Letters, 13 June 1964)

- 21 Kathy's insight and her “fear”—framed cautiously around a specific recollection of his “dissatisfaction”—are poignantly attuned to the dangerous nature of the pedestal Whitman had placed her upon. In a different marriage, the couple's reunion in December 1964 might have brought Kathy's “new ideas” of “respect” and mutuality to fruition. Instead, Kathy's college diploma and professional status as a certificated science teacher would become threatening evidence to Whitman that she could thrive without him—and that she was capable of eluding his control.

## The Problem of the Gender Pedestal

- 22 Whitman's use of a pedestal to elevate and to “measure” Kathy is documented in the diary he returned to after killing her. The entry dated 23 Feb. 1964, composed as he completed his sentence of hard labor following his special court martial, is often cited as proof of his affection. A more attentive reading, however, shows exactly how Whitman defined love, gender relations, and Kathy herself. The note he scrawled at the top —“I still mean it”—can only be interpreted favorably if we ignore the content of the entry he identified for posterity as important (Daily Record of CJ Whitman).

- 23 By framing our attention, Whitman sought to publicly perform his private



ownership of Kathy; thus, his presentation enacts a pornographic aesthetic.

Encompassing approximately four pages, the entry is one of the longest in

a diary where the author left three-fourths of the pages blank. From the beginning, he writes of Kathy in terms that emphasize her use to him, twice repeating the phrase “most versatile” to describe her, and adding that she is “everything [he] want[s] in a wife,” “the overall package,” “the ultimate in a

mistress,” and “my most precious possession” (Daily Record). Furthermore, he includes cooking, sewing, and driving among her skills, as well the ability to learn quickly in sports or games.



Figure 2: Photograph of Kathy Leissner (center) with her father (left) and Charles Whitman (right) at the altar of St. Michael's Catholic Church on her wedding day, 17 Aug. 1962, courtesy Nelson Leissner



Figure 3: Kathy Leissner, Letter 26 Aug. 1963, with permission from private archive of Nelson Leissner

24 Whitman's perspective is entirely reductive, with the first two pages itemizing Kathy's physical traits in comparison to “professional standards,” for which—according to him—she comes up lacking: “not beautiful,” “too short,” not “a model's figure,” “her knees and thighs are heavier than they should be” (Daily Record). He then selects certain parts as his to reshape (“we will be able to trim her legs down to the right proportions”) and dismembers other body parts he approves of, which he isolates for competition “against any recognized bathing beauty.” Ironically, he adds that his wife “is prone to feel inferior when she is in competition,” as if his assessments had nothing to do with insecurities she felt about her body or her intelligence.

25 When it comes to their intimate life, Whitman refers to what he gets rather than gives, crediting himself for his wife's “sexual prowess [sic],” commenting that “her naivety [sic] in the first place is pretty responsible for her success at this venture [...]. I have taught her how to please me, which she does so expertly” (Daily Record). He talks of sex in a depersonalized way—as a “venture” at which one “succeeds”—with Kathy merely being the winning contestant for his desire. He does not recount shared experiences or mutual discoveries.

26 Equally significant is how the entry explicitly positions Whitman as the superior male authority when assessing Kathy's character compared to other women's: “When I stand back and judge her,” he writes, “it amazes me that such a young woman can possess such outstanding qualities” (Daily Record). He

highlights her “common sense,” an “important asset which so many women do not have.” Predictably, his definition is entirely self-serving: “she detaches herself from her emotions and desires in spite of what she would like to do [...] quite extraordinary for her sex.” Here, gender stereotypes substitute for specific women, and he counts himself lucky compared to other men, who “have to put up with nagging temperamental



Figure 4: *The Daily Record of Charles J. Whitman*, where approximately three-fourths of the pages were left blank. Photo: Jo Scott-Coe.

wenches who will not use common sense [...] to realize that what their husbands are doing is correct.” Yet Whitman composed this entry while suffering serious military consequences for “incorrect” choices of his own, including the gambling that had worried his wife six months earlier. He seems vaguely aware that while he may be entitled to judge, he also falls short of his own standards. He writes that he hopes “to be worthy of” Kathy, and that “maybe someday [he]’ll be able to convince [her] of all the emotions and feelings.” He also casts the possibility of his own failure “by society’s standards” as a failure against Kathleen.

- 27 A scattering of other journal entries describes their relationship in zero-sum, high-stakes terms that do not bode well: “live and die as man and wife,” “she is my whole life,” and “without her, life would not be worth living.” While in the brig awaiting his court martial, he expresses a morbid, clinical view of death: “I have thought very much about the concept ‘death.’ When it overtakes me someday I must remember to observe it closely and see if it is as I thought it would be” (Memoranda 13 Nov. 1963). He also links Kathy, fatefully, to moral responsibility and self-control, describing how thoughts of her “kept him from beating the hell” out of a military policeman who interrupted him on the phone (Memoranda 22 Jan. 1964), and later writing that “she is really what keeps me straight” (Memoranda 30 Jan. 1964). Interestingly, Whitman appropriates Kathy’s moral authority as his own, emboldening more harsh judgments against others and allowing him another arena for competition: “Everyone I meet seems to look at me in awe when they realize I don’t run around [...]. [I]t ought to set some kind of record” (Daily Record of CJ Whitman 6 Mar.). When his boss questions him, Whitman reflects: “I couldn’t convince him of how much Kathy means to me or how little sex with some whore means to me now that I have matured” (Daily Record of CJ Whitman 6 Mar.).
- 28 One long entry dated 13 March 1964 begins with how “Kathy would have been proud” of him for rebuffing sexual advances from another woman at Jazzland, a nightclub he frequented (and where he appeared to be employed in some capacity, likely as a bouncer): “I notice other women only to compare them with Kathy. They are all so far below her standards, she has them beat by miles” (Daily Record of CJ Whitman) At times, he transforms his standards to Kathy’s, then projects his notions of “possession” onto her, writing: “Now that I am married, I feel as though I am her personal property and whenever another female touches me that she is violating my wife’s property.”

- 29 Letters from Kathy dated before and after this time (21 Feb., 23 Feb., and 28 May 1964) suggest that Whitman actively shared stories of past and present women while at the same time instructing Kathy “never to mention” them. He thus cast himself as a victim while also posing, sadistically, as judge for Kathy’s reasonable insecurity.
- 30 By re-centering his final attention—and ours—on these paradoxes of possession and ever-elusive courtship, idealism and inadequacy, competition and failure, Whitman underscored how volatile these values could become. By identifying Kathy with the “angel in the house” from a long distance, he also made her vulnerable to gendered judgments, even gaslighting her, as “madwoman in the attic” upon their reunion. Worst of all, his pedestal made Kathy a primary target for elimination when his “common sense” ultimately dictated that violence was best.

## **New Artifact in an Old Story**

- 31 One letter preserved by Kathy’s family was written by Whitman and mailed to her parents the morning before the shootings on August 1. According to Nelson Leissner, it arrived the day of Kathy’s funeral and burial and was kept private for nearly fifty years (Personal interview). In two pages composed on drafting paper, Whitman reprises similar themes and phrases in the letters left with his mother (“I was just causing her unnecessary suffering,” “I believe she is in a happier place now,” “I did Kathy a great favor”). His admissions of personal and gendered inadequacy are trapped in a loop of circular reasoning for “tak[ing] Kathy’s life”: “I am so ashamed that I could never support her as she deserved” or “I will always regret that I did not feel worthy of her” (Select Letters). He also discloses that he had been contemplating murder “for the last two days” and that he “tried to be as sweet as possible on this her last day.” He then lists a childlike résumé of “sweet” activities as mitigating factors, including taking Kathy to lunch and seeing a movie during the break of her split shift at the phone company. He speaks on her behalf, stating that her “greatest fear in life was that we would be incapable of having children of our own.”
- 32 As hideous as all this is, no parent would have been prepared for Whitman’s turn in the second paragraph: “Tonight after she talked with you we shared a last interlude together, she has always been a fine lover. Then I tried my best to kill her as painlessly as possible, however, I have my doubts about how painless it was. She was a very strong girl” (Select Letters). The tangle of exhibitionism and romanticism —“shared” and “interlude”—makes the blasé transitions between sexual contact and brutality even more jarring. Whitman represents himself as final judge, including dehumanizing “compliments” and referring to Kathy as “girl” even in death.
- 33 It is difficult to face this document. However, it may help to remember that it was preserved rather than destroyed by her family, and that it witnesses the horror of Kathy’s last moments as well as the coldness and detachment of the man who killed her. We must also respect their sharing the letter with the public as a conscious choice. How are we to read this letter? With both the horrific understatement of Kathy’s pain and the suggestion that Kathy fought for her life, the document may best be viewed as a literary premonition of the “creepshot” photos taken by present-day campus predators after sexual assaults, “accidentally provid[ing] hard evidence in cases where ‘she’ was unconscious and cannot testify to what happened” (Oliver 9). In this case, however, the evidence was sent not to fellow conspirators, but to secondary victims, and Kathy was not unconscious, but dead.
- 34 A letter is not a photographic record, but this text exposes how perverse it is to perpetuate a self-serving myth of mercy for Whitman’s violence. In the absence of an autopsy, it has been disturbingly easy to employ language aestheticizing Kathy’s final moments. To acknowledge this epistolary artifact does not necessitate re-indulging the pornography of its author, but instead demands that we recognize intimate violence without airbrushed or “star crossed” verbiage that spares only the murderer—and us—rather than the victim or her family. After half a century, we should be shocked that a “creepshot” is necessary to disrupt how we elide or abject intimate murders through the gendered norms of true crime narratives. As authored for the intimate audience of grieving parents (and “with a love as thought [sic] you were my own [...] please forgive me, if you can”), the letter is a summative exhibit of “courtliness and sadism” (Select Letters)

## Conclusion

- 35 Narrative erasure of domestic injury or killing in American stories of public violence perpetuates a social injustice: repeated silencing of private victims who are usually women. We must reconsider how “softened” or selective depictions only make women’s deaths more palatable, especially at the hands of men who claim to love them. Mid-century sexism may appear quaint when we compare it to the misogyny expressed so freely in contemporary social media forums, but we have inherited its violent legacy. Fifty years after Whitman murdered his wife and mother before ascending the UT tower to shoot at strangers, American voters elected to our highest public office a man caught on tape bragging about grabbing women “by the pussy” (Mathis-Lilley). Attitudes that degraded, ranked, and separated women more than a generation ago continue to impact daily lived experience in ordinary domestic spaces—in bedrooms, offices, and on college campuses—whether or not anyone points or shoots a gun. Importantly, gendered entitlement transcends political identification, as demonstrated by the “volatile” and abusive background of James T. Hodgkinson, who in June 2017 shot at Republican congressmen practicing on a baseball field (Turkewitz, Stolberg, Eligon, and Blinder).
- 36 Domestic terror is a matter of women’s lives and public health, and it is past time to notice the connection between what happens, how we talk about it, and what we are able to remember. Writing of an estimated sixty-six thousand women killed by men every year, Rebecca Solnit refers to femicide as an ultimate erasure: “Such deaths often come after years or decades of being silenced or erased in the home, in daily life, by threat and violence. Some get erased a little at a time, some all at once. Some reappear” (71). Kathy has been able to “reappear” because her brother, Nelson, protected the primary documents that preserved his sister’s voice and perspective. When we do not question how and why domestic violence is subordinated to public spectacle, we unintentionally perpetuate the abuser or killer’s perspective about when and how women’s lives and deaths matter. We must re-attune our awareness so that gendered and sexualized violence no longer seems, by distorted comparison, a minor detail or narrative footnote, despite the reality of its massive and continued collective impact.

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**Jo Scott-Coe** is the author of two nonfiction books: *Teacher at Point Blank* and *MASS: A Sniper, a*

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## Suggested Citation

Scott-Coe, Jo. "Invisible Women, Fairy Tale Death: How Stories of Public Murder Minimize Terror at Home." *American Studies Journal* 62 (2017). Web. 15 July 2017. DOI 10.18422/62-05.



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