

## Kinship Bonds and Breaks: Toxic Masculinity Meets White Evangelicalism

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**Abstract:** *This familial autoethnography evokes fragments of rural, white, working-class norms of U.S. manhood, which are framed as particular everyday life performances of a cis-gendered masculinity. A daughter attempts to understand her entanglements with an aging father whose identity has coalesced around a national white evangelical political movement, fueled by religious talk radio, geographical isolation, and U.S. mythologies of exceptionalism and rugged individualism. Gathering and re/membering what T. Spry (2011, p. 19) calls autoethnographic “bodies of/as evidence,” a personal map of deeply intertwined ideologies of nativism, racism, homophobia, sexism, anti-intellectualism, and distrust of government and science emerges. Piecing together repeated utterances, masculine-coded artifacts and actions, and partial memories that “stick,” this performative text grapples with a daughter’s notions of kinship, home, love, and exile.*

**Keywords:** autoethnography, toxic masculinity, white evangelicalism, white supremacy, kinship



*Manhood is neither static nor timeless. Manhood is not the manifestation of an inner essence; it’s socially constructed. Manhood does not bubble up to consciousness from our biological constitution; it is created in our culture... [T]o be a man in America depends heavily on one’s class, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, region of the country. (M. Kimmel, 2012, p. 5)*

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“Hey there, girl!” my daddy wheezes when he finally answers his flip phone. I’ve called him 5 times in a row today. This is our pandemic routine across time zones. He rarely answers his phone, and he doesn’t remember how to set up voicemail, so I can’t leave a message. Over the years, I’ve had to call the local sheriff to drive outside the closest tiny town and check on him. He doesn’t like this. His greeting on this day surprises me. He sounds... almost affectionate, familiar, even perky, like a man who can still get around, who has things to do, and people to see.

My dad’s nickname is short for a fictional character who could fly, because of his puckish looks, I’m told. This nickname seems oddly whimsical, but his legal name sounds strangely formal, and German. I don’t have many photos of Daddy, but I’m struck by several black and white images of this smiling, freckle-faced boy with dark hair.

### **A Portrait of Aging Toxic White Masculinity**

If you met my dad today  
You’d hear his persistent smoker’s cough  
The drone of Christian talk radio  
The crunch of caliche on the dirt road  
A choral buzz of cicadas in the brutal heat  
The acrid burn when he lights his Pall Malls.

You’d see a man with few teeth and mottled, sun-damaged skin  
Wearing a dirty t-shirt, sweatpants, and old slippers from Walmart.  
You’d see trucks, car parts, a large garage packed with tools.  
You’d smell dust, automotive grease, perhaps some car exhaust,  
And decades of choking cigarette smoke that stains his walls.  
He probably wouldn’t want to meet you.  
Maybe I’m wrong.

This old man lives with too much silence  
Growing confusion  
Intense back pain that severely limits his mobility.  
There is no medicine—he doesn’t believe in it.  
There are no doctors—he doesn’t trust them.  
There is no health insurance, although he has resources.  
No vaccines. No masks.  
He has no friends anymore.  
His few interactions happen when he goes to the post office  
or shops at the Family Dollar in his nearby town.

He lives with an outsized fear of the world  
And people who look different from him,  
especially those who risk their lives to cross the Texas/Mexico border.  
I have long lived with fear of men like my dad.

Those romantic mythologies of fatherhood and the nuclear family,  
Of “Father Knows Best,” and “Daddy’s little girl”?  
This isn’t where I come from.

*Where do you come from?  
Where do you NOT come from?  
What’s your family story?  
Where do you go and what do you do  
to get away from parts of where you come from?  
And what does this exile do to you?*

#### **Where I Come From (Bodies of Evidence):**

M. Kimmel (2012) insists that “we must make gender visible...” (p. 3) to understand how manhood is constructed, performed, demonstrated, and achieved as an invisible place of power. He argues that manhood is less about domination and more about fear of being dominated, losing control or power, or being seen as “weak, timid, frightened” (p. 6).

**West Texas.** My daddy was a handsome and talented auto mechanic and needle maker who could build, fix, and survive anything, at least in my mind. I often describe him as the ultimate boy scout, but that’s not the whole story. I only have fragments that I keep trying to piece together...

My working-class mom eloped with my middle-class dad in 1963, two years after my mom graduated from high school. This act of rebellion may have saved my father’s life. Their marriage, and my birth at the end of 1966, prevented him from being drafted into the Vietnam war.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> President Kennedy’s 1963 Executive Order allowed fathers to qualify for a hardship deferment. By 1969, over 4 million U.S. men held hardship deferments...” until President Nixon ended this policy in 1970 (Bailey & Chyn, p. 220-221). In 1966, the Pentagon started the “Project One Hundred Thousand” to enlarge U.S. troops in Vietnam while reducing draft pressures on middle class white men. According to P. Murray (1971), adjusting military recruitment standards led to “the dramatic increase in the percentage of black [and Latino] draftees from 1966-1967” (p. 72). Reflecting institutional racism in the armed forces at the time (P. Murray), this significant moment is also likely an example of my father’s racial and economic privilege at work early in his adult life.

My mom, who went to college part time for years and eventually became a high school teacher, divorced my father when I was 5 and my brother was 3. When I ask her why she married him (they were shockingly incompatible), she insists that she loved him very much. She also admits that he was very good looking and assumed there must be some mystery behind all that silence... I was mostly raised by my strong single mom, who was always seeking more education and got heavily involved in Democratic party politics. My maternal Granny and Grampa played a tremendous role in my upbringing too. As I grew older, I determined that my dad was an emotional bully and an absent husband and father who worked obsessively in his wholly masculine world of auto repair, and later, on his land. He remarried two more times; these women & their children eventually left him too.

In considering the ideology of the self-made man, C. Dzenko (2015) argues that "...threatening to withdraw from the... world recalls the masculine exercise of preserving one's honor and status; if unsuccessful in navigating the situation at hand, manhood means that men tend to escape before they fail their specific situations completely" (p. 9).

Daddy has lived alone for a long time now.  
On his land.  
In rural West Texas.  
We live worlds apart  
Yet we remain strangely connected.

**In the last 20 years,**  
My father hasn't left the state of Texas.  
Never a religious man,  
He somehow found God in the early 2000s  
through a TV evangelist, religious pyramid schemes, and American Family Radio

Daddy says *all good Muslims are terrorists*.  
Daddy says *gay marriage is an abomination*.  
Daddy says *abortion is an abomination*.  
Daddy says *THE BIBLE SAYS...*  
Daddy says my education *ruined* me.  
Daddy describes women as having a *nice figure* or *big as a house*.  
Daddy refers to men he's hired over the years as *wetbacks*.  
Daddy has always had guns.

Daddy buries gold in ammo boxes in the ground.<sup>2</sup>

(*silence*) What happened here? What happened to him? What twisted the men (and women) who stormed the U.S. Capitol, who took part in the lynch mobs, who were the cowboys, the cops, the mass shooters, the raging alcoholics, the heavy smokers, the men who are so alone, emotionally isolated and stunted, and almost always angry?

T. Coates (2015) notes that “There is nothing uniquely evil in these destroyers or even in this moment. The destroyers are merely men enforcing the whims of our country, correctly interpreting its heritage and legacy” (p. 10).

I am my father’s daughter, but I keep driving away from his hot dusty place as fast as I can. I’ve been running away from home, and from parts of my West Texas kinship ties, for years...

### **Gains & Losses**

My daddy has never seen me perform. He never attended my dance recitals, elementary talent shows, baseball games, volleyball or tennis matches, high school plays and musicals, choir concerts, or graduations. Known as a quiet man, perhaps he was uncomfortable in public settings with other parents? Maybe his absence was a generational norm? My mother notes that “he was *always* working,” yet it was my mom who was juggling the many obligations of family, work, furthering her education, and our social lives. I was a well-loved child with a large extended family, but as a theatre kid and performance studies scholar, my dad’s absences seem striking. Perhaps his fathering from a distance reflects how he was parented? I’ve almost always had to come to him, get on a plane, drive a car, call him, send him cards, mail the school pictures, call the sheriff. When I tell him I love him at the end of our occasional phone calls, he is unable to say those words back to me. Instead, he says “Check you later.”

He did go with me to a father/daughter Brownies (Girl Scout) event once at my friend’s house, but an epic hailstorm and tornado shut it down right as we were getting started. Did he take this as a bad omen and just give up?

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<sup>2</sup> Performance and photography artist Kerry Skarbakka, who stages precarious visual portraits of rural white masculinity, argues that the men he conjures “...are not born. They are bred...,” often by religion and fear (2019, p. 1). “By projecting their innermost dialogue and insecurities onto the other, they succeed only to protect themselves through misinformation, aggression, and control” (p.1).

My brother and I would visit my dad in his little trailer house outside of town after the divorce. We'd ride around in his dune buggy. He'd cook venison and fresh vegetables for us (a novelty)—he was a hunter, and very thrifty. He took us to several of his extended family's Christmas gatherings, and we went on one camping trip to New Mexico with his second wife and her two kids, all of whom I loved. I remember the mountains, a lake, the bear that came into our camp site, and showering with a portable bag tied to a tree. When he bought his own land that included an old farmhouse, he taught me how to shoot a .22 rifle and let me drink icy cans of beer the few times we went fishing in his creek. My brother and I loved to wrestle at his house, inspired by the professional wrestling we'd watch on his old TV that only picked up a few channels.

My mom moved me and my brother to the Texas panhandle the summer before I started 8<sup>th</sup> grade to pursue her law degree. I thrived, but my younger brother hated the changes and wanted to live with my dad. As my brother grew more difficult, he was finally allowed to move in with my dad out in the country for middle school and high school. This decision was disastrous or perhaps inevitable, depending on your perspective. While my dad and brother haven't spoken in years now--there was alcohol-fueled emotional and physical violence between them--my brother shares my father's love of working outside and hard physical labor, quickness to anger, and socially conservative views.

### **“Rapture Ready” (Putting Pieces Together)**

R. Moore notes that Kristin Du Mez's 2020 book *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, traces “...what has passed for evangelicalism over the past decades” as a fringe movement that “turned out not to be fringe at all” (qtd. in S. Bailey). D. Camacho (2020) reminds that “white evangelicals’ embrace of Trump is the manifestation of a militant masculine idea that’s been more than 50 years in the making.”

A. Butler (2021) takes an even longer view: “It is racism that binds and blinds many white American evangelicals to the vilification of Muslims, Latinos, and African Americans... that impels [evangelicals] to oppose immigration...that motivated believers to separate and sell families during slavery and to march with the Klan... and [participate] in lynchings. Racism is a feature, not a bug, of American Evangelicalism” (p. 1-2). This cult of militant, hyper masculine, white supremacist Christianity harkens back to U.S. foundations of rugged individualism, brutal westward expansion, and genocidal savagery against indigenous, black, and brown people.

Always trying to recruit me, Daddy gave me a religious book years ago written by Robert Jeffress (2013) called *How Can I Know? Answers to 7 of Life's Most Crucial*

*Questions.* I didn't read it and hid this piece of evidence that I wanted to ignore behind other books on my shelf.<sup>3</sup> I recently rediscovered this important piece of my dad's puzzle. Robert Jeffress is a highly influential evangelical pastor of the 14,000+ member First Baptist mega Church in Dallas, Texas (M. Mooney, 2019). He is also a regular Fox News commentator who has been one of Trump's most "avid and outspoken advocates" (M. Mooney, par. 9). Jeffress has a daily radio show called "Pathway to Victory" that is "broadcast on more than 900 Christian stations across the country," including my father's only news source, American Family Radio. Jeffress also has a religious television program that airs 6 days a week in 195 countries (Mooney, 2019). Followers around the world can watch his weekly high-tech sermons on live broadcast, listen to his podcast, and read his almost 30 published books. His reach is huge, and he is a longtime celebrity among Evangelicals. His sermons include "Why Gay Is Not Okay;" he warns that "Jews, Hindus, Muslims, and nonbelievers are destined for hell"; he supports prayer in schools and secure borders; he is anti-abortion and anti-LGBTQ; and he believes in the anti-Christ and the Rapture, or the end times. "His reasoning is based on the fact that every word of the Bible is literally true," and he regularly gives out free copies of his books to followers and donors (M. Mooney).

My dad always had some books on Texas and Native American history, alongside his collections of "Indian arrowheads" found on his land and rattles from snakes he's killed. I appreciated my father's knowledge of the physical world and his seeming love of the land, animals, growing food, and Texas history. I realize now that he, like so many others, mostly worked to control the land and extract resources for his needs. I came to understand that his knowledge of history is partial, patriarchal, ethnocentric, and now biblical. He does not know or want to know the full weight of histories of U.S. domination and ongoing oppression that the state of Texas is trying to erase and distort in its textbooks. All of my dad's information and ideas now come from the alt right evangelical American Family Radio (AFR), which is considered a hate group by organizations like PFlag and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC).

Essentially, my father and many others in this particular evangelical cult are living in an "alternative media universe" (S. Posner, 2020) that is effectively eroding our separation of church and state and the very foundations of a liberal democracy.

For a long time, I've tried to look away and just cope with my dad. A therapist once told me my father is like an empty cookie jar that I keep trying to reach

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<sup>3</sup> After a traumatic experience at a Baptist youth camp in middle school, and growing up in the southern U.S. bible belt, I disavowed organized religion a long time ago.

into. “There are no cookies!” she said. That image actually helped me. I now carefully plan my once or twice a year visits—no more overnight stays, and only a half day visit at most to avoid what I have experienced as unbearable and traumatizing harangues about God, biblical study, and being saved. Ideally, we get out of his small home built to survive the apocalypse and into the tiny nearby town to eat at the local Mexican café. We might drive to the creek crossing, where I love to get my feet wet and wade in the shallow water.

My father is 80 now. He recently told me he’s “rapture ready.” His idea of “rapture” envisions apocalyptic end times full of intense chaos and suffering for those who are not “true believers,” and a magical escape for those like my dad who will be united in heaven (J. Rivera, 2021). I finally understand that my daddy is not an outlier at all—he is part of a growing white evangelical political movement with vast networks that led directly to Trump, dangerous conspiracy theories, a far-right activist SCOTUS, and deep distrust of government. In spite of being described as a quiet man, a man of few words, a man who keeps to himself and minds his own business, a religious man (who ironically does not believe in attending church), my father’s time, money, and cultural power have been used to support activism that is deeply entangled with white supremacist conservative politics.

### **Kinship (Bonds and Breaks)**

I like my dad better now that he is elderly. He’s more vulnerable, he needs me, and I can help him in small ways. He’s more quiet and docile, less insistent about his beliefs. He’s finally unable to disappear into his work. When I challenge his ideas now, he quickly says he’s going to stay out of politics: “I’m too dumb to get into politics, with my dementia. It’s too much for me. I’m not gettin’ into anything anymore.” This feels like both a dodge and a confession in my mind, but I’ll take it. While his chain smoking has always been unbearable for me, I now see it as an expression of anxiety.<sup>4</sup>

I feel my Daddy’s influence on me when I grow quiet and distanced, when I shut myself down, when I feel overwhelmed by large crowds, when I need time alone. When I become stubborn and cold, my mom likes to say that I’m “acting like a Shoemaker.”

In some ways, I’m thankful that my dad’s identity, among other things, pushed me to differentiate myself, leave Texas, seek more knowledge and education like my mother always did, and expand and diversify my sense of self and the world.

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<sup>4</sup> His father died of tongue cancer due to smoking. My mother, a cancer survivor, still smokes as well.



I always return home--never often enough--to grapple with where I come from and acknowledge my privileges and losses. My family, like so many other white families in the U.S., has been constituted within and sustained by implicit and explicit white supremacist practices, beliefs, and structures. Coming home is always complicated.

### **Pandemic Visit**

When I'm finally able to travel to Texas during the pandemic and visit my dad in person in 2021, I discover that he's living in squalor. There are dead bugs all over the floor; open bags of cereal, chips, sweets; rancid butter left out for who knows how long. All of his canned and packaged food is stacked on his kitchen table for easier access due to his limited mobility. I throw out rotten bags of vegetables in his refrigerator, an ancient moldy pizza in his oven. I drain a sink full of black moldy water and throw out the dishes. I collect several huge bags of trash, an old mattress cover, and a trash can full of adult diapers. He has enough canned food to survive the apocalypse, but his living condition is shocking to me. Everything is covered in dust and cigarette ashes. He uses tuna cans as ashtrays, but doesn't open any windows because he has no screens. His bathroom is terrifying. I attempt to clean: I sweep, mop, do loads of laundry, wipe off the yellowed kitchen appliances and counters, try to clean his toilet, and give up on the bathtub. I show him again how to use his TV remote. There are stacks of bibles, other religious books, books about Trump, pamphlets, and mailers about alternative medicines. I'm so busy cleaning--yet another woman taking care of him, I think-- that we don't talk about his pet subjects this time: death, his will, my brother, God, politics, and how much money his sister supposedly owes him from my grandmother's inheritance.

It is important to remember that my father has resources; he is a landowner who inherited money from his parents. He is not impoverished, and he has made choices.

Daddy refuses to consider living in town or in an assisted living facility, even though he could afford this care. He likely has untreated skin cancer. He claims he has dementia and is diabetic, but his Lazy Boy chair is surrounded by Whoppers, Hershey bites, sodas. He has trouble eating without his top and bottom dentures. He does most things sitting down. He only listens to the radio; when I call and ask what he is up to, he says "Nothing!" I try to set up a Home Healthcare visit once a week, but he calls the person back after I leave and cancels the first appointment.

My dad may die soon. He says he's ready, and I try to respect his wish to die at home. Storing my version of my father feels like preparation for deep grief, and

a painful reckoning. This work is yet one more attempt to better understand this man more fully, how I come from him, what I carry forward, and what I reject and change. As he grows more vulnerable, I do too. Autoethnography helps me grapple with all the gray areas of my complicated love for my dad, in spite of his familial failures and his dangerous fears of difference rooted in toxic masculinity. I realize now that my identity was shaped in part through the active escape and resistance of my father's influence.

### **Recurring Dreams of Loss**

I have this recurring dream of losing things: my purse, my cell phone, my car keys, my wallet, my shoes, my mom, my son. It's like a broken record variation on the same scenario where I'm stuck without any means of getting back home. This mundane dream is persistent, frustrating, & sometimes terrifying.

My father has never appeared in these dreams, until recently. In this new iteration, I'm in an unfinished structure that I think my dad built, and it starts to slide off a big cliff. My brother appears and heroically tries to pull the structure back, but we both end up falling off the cliff. As I read what I just wrote, I see some hope in this destruction of a structure. Maybe we are falling into something new? S. Holman Jones (2015) frames these kinds of stories as "kinesthetic homes: they create the sensation of movement and change, a vibrant materiality that takes us places even when we don't want to or can't leave home" (p. 181).

### **Postscript:**

Selecting a Father's Day card each year for my dad is challenging. I can't bring myself to send the gushy *You're the greatest Dad ever*, or the *You've always been there for me, Dad*, or *You taught me everything I know*, or *You're my hero* kind of cards. This year, I pick a card that states "It's plane and simple," with a small airplane hand drawn on the cover. When you open the card, it says "I love you. Happy Father's Day."



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