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## My Favorite Murder as Discursive Performance

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# MY FAVORITE MURDER AS DISCURSIVE PERFORMANCE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Communication Studies

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION: <i>MF</i> .....	1
CHAPTER TWO. METHODOLOGY: EXPLAINING PERFORMANCE-CENTERED DISCOURSE ANALYSIS .....	10
CHAPTER THREE. PODCASTING AS MEDIUM: DIY AESTHETIC AND PUBLIC INTIMACY.....	37
CHAPTER FOUR. COMIC STRATEGIES: IMPROVISATION AND FAILURE .....	54
CHAPTER FIVE. DESTABLIZING TRUE CRIME DISCOURSE .....	68
CHAPTER SIX. FEMINIST RESISTANCE AND THE MURDERINO GRRRL .....	79
CHAPTER SEVEN. CONCLUSION: MENTAL HEALTH WON'T RUIN THIS PARTY.....	93
APPENDIX. <i>MF</i> EPISODE TRANSCRIPTION .....	113
WORKS CITED .....	178
VITA .....	182

## ABSTRACT

*My Favorite Murder as Discursive Performance* uses performance-centered discourse analysis to explore the major narratives informing the popular true crime comedy podcast, *My Favorite Murder (MFM)*. Hosts, Karen and Georgia draw from podcast, comedy, true crime, feminist, and mental health discourse to create a unique discursive space where “murderinos” (fans of the podcast) express and explore aspects of their own life experiences. I explore the performative strategies *MFM* uses and the effects of those choices, drawing on some of my own experiences as a murderino. Ultimately I argue that a performance lens reveals some of the imperfect but powerful ways that *MFM* resists dominant performative discourses.

## CHAPTER ONE.

### INTRODUCTION: *MFM*

#### Interpellation

"Do you mind if I play a podcast? It's called *My Favorite Murder*." Martha<sup>1</sup> asks the group on our drive to Baton Rouge, LA from Petit Jean Performance Festival in Arkansas. Half asleep, the car agrees to listen. Winding down the mountain curves, we sit in silence, listening to the catchy opening jingle, "My Favorite Murderrrrrrr." The hosts, Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark talk about the week leading up to the recording. Karen Kilgariff explains, "This is a true crime, comedy podcast . . ." Martha turns to the car and explains the structure of the podcast. It starts with casual conversation and transitions to the hosts taking turns telling each other murder stories. I feel a mutual hesitancy from the car as one person shifts uncomfortably, and another widens her eyes from the backseat as if to say, "yikes!"

The *MFM* episode begins, and some of us laugh at the conversation. Karen and Georgia<sup>2</sup> talk about their failures of the week. Karen says, "This is a true crime comedy podcast, and if you don't like it you can get the fuck out!" Georgia begins telling a murder story to Karen, who is also hearing it for the first time. I do not remember what episode it was, but I do remember that the story involves children getting kidnapped (I now know that doesn't narrow things down very far for *MFM* episodes). I hear someone gasp, "OH MY GOD," and another "WHAT!" We leave it on for a few more minutes until someone demands: "CAN YOU TURN THIS OFF? I CAN'T DO THIS." They did not like it. They got the fuck out.

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<sup>1</sup> As is accepted practice for academics, I have used a pseudonym here.

<sup>2</sup> As is accepted practice for fans of the podcast, I have addressed the hosts by first name here and throughout the document.

I devoured the rest when I got home. Soon I was obsessed. I listened in my car, on my walks, at my house, at the gym. I was ravenous. In a matter of weeks, I had listened to over 100 episodes. In months, I had caught up to current releases. I took a solo trip to Pensacola Beach with my dog and the entire time I listened to *MFMM*. It felt like I had brought a couple of talkative friends with me on the trip.

I have always been a fan of comedy, so that part was not surprising. However, I had never cared for true crime. It felt too heavy a topic to engage in a world that felt heavy enough. It is not that I had an aversion to true crime, per se, but I had never been drawn to it. Something was different with *MFMM*. Even though the stories often disturbed me, they enchanted me. Sometimes they comforted me. They often enraged me. The delicate balance between comedy and tragedy was refreshing and stimulating in a way I had never experienced before. The humor made the violent stories more palatable. I allowed myself to listen to the tragic stories they told instead of instantly rejecting them. I am not sure if that is a good thing, but it felt right in the moment.

I began researching the details of murder trials, serial killers, and victims. I found myself knee-deep in *Helter Skelter* and Ted Bundy documentaries. I bought Ann Rule's *Stranger Beside Me*, a famous true crime book about Ted Bundy told from Ann Rule's perspective, who knew Ted Bundy personally. I listened to *MFMM* stories while laughing out loud. One time a friend asked, "What are you laughing at?" I took one headphone out and said, "Ted Bundy." Again, something seemed very wrong, but it felt so right. I felt like I had been missing this podcast my entire life.

*My Favorite Murder* came to me in the 2nd year of my Ph.D. program. It became my escape. I would often begin listening as I got ready for school, continue to listen in the car, and

then listen in my headphones as I walked to class. It felt like I had two friends with me at a time when I felt particularly isolated. In other words, *MFM* came to me at a time when I needed it the most. The hosts' willingness to joke and talk about their struggles was freeing. I told everyone I knew about the podcast. As I searched for a topic for my dissertation, I realized I wanted to write about *My Favorite Murder*, "*MFM*" to murderinos.

At all live shows and in some prerecorded episodes, Karen says, "This is a true crime comedy podcast and you don't like it you can get the fuck out." In the live shows the crowd often yells along with her. Like the people in the car on the ride back home from the Petit Jean festival, some do not like it and get the fuck out. This ritualistically repeated phrase is a performative in JL Austin's sense of a saying that "does something" in the world. It is not a truth claim but a social action. It makes some people part of a fan base and not others. *MFM* is, proudly, not for everyone. Those who choose to stay on despite the warning now understand themselves as part of an inside group that "gets it" in contrast to others who "get the fuck out."

The horrific details of the crimes can be taxing on the mind. Some stories stick with listeners for weeks, months and years. I have had moments where I have to take a step back, take a break from episodes, but somehow I keep coming back for more. *MFM* gives uncommitted listeners every opportunity to walk away. Nevertheless, the murderinos who love *MFM*—love it deeply. Once I became one of these people, my friend Martha and I would never pass up an opportunity to discuss that week's episode. I found myself wanting to be caught up on episodes so that I would be ready for these conversations the next time I saw her. I soon became captivated by true crime, something I had previously avoided all together. How, I began to ask, did this interpellation happen?

One compelling aspect of *MFM* is Karen and Georgia's ability to tell a murder story while being funny. The podcast oscillates between horrific murder details and irreverent wisecracks. I find this to be a controversial topic when I bring it up with friends. "True crime...comedy?" they ask, rhetorically. I tell them Karen and Georgia never laugh or joke about victims or details surrounding the victim. They always laugh at the absurdity and ridiculousness so often wrapped up in any narrative. They manage to laugh about these peculiarities, drawing attention to the heinous crimes committed. They are vulnerable as they self-disclose their struggles with mental health. They draw from the language of self-help, personal empowerment, and social justice. They also sign off of every episode of their podcast with an irreverent plea to "stay sexy and don't get murdered." This performative invites listeners to continue the spirit of the podcast in their daily lives between episodes. But what exactly is an ethos that combines horrific crime narratives with personal empowerment? They cover many topics and draw from seemingly incompatible discourses to create a complex, unique discursive space. My interest in this project lies at the heart of this complexity.

## **Background**

*My Favorite Murder* is a podcast created in 2016 by comedian Karen Kilgariff and TV personality Georgia Hardstark. The podcast is a self-proclaimed "true crime comedy podcast," and as Karen and Georgia announce at their live shows, "if you don't like that, you can get the fuck out." The origin story of the podcast is told repeatedly on *MFM* by Karen and Georgia. Karen and Georgia met at a party through mutual friends and immediately started a conversation about their love for true crime. As they continued talking about the details of a particular crime, they found that all of the friends around them had left, and it was just the two of them. They decided they needed a space to continue their discussion, forming *MFM*, the podcast. They



figured if they were so deeply interested in talking about true crime, there must be a whole host of others who would want to join them.

Karen is from Petaluma, California, and Georgia is from Orange County, California. They originally recorded the podcast at Georgia's apartment in the Los Feliz neighborhood of Los Angeles. Now they record in their very own podcast network studio called *Exactly Right*. However, since the COVID 19 pandemic, they recorded via Zoom from their own homes. Zoom was popularized in 2020 out of necessity since the COVID 19 pandemic essentially shut down the world. People worked, met, and socialized via Zoom since meeting in person was considered a risk. Karen and Georgia started *Exactly Right* because of *MFM*'s success. They talk openly about their transition from Georgia's apartment and how they've grown. They now produce several shows including, *Do You Need A Ride*, *This Podcast Will Kill You*, and *I Said No Gifts!*

*MFM* has a reasonably organized form that they have called "structured chaos." The podcast consists of studio-recorded episodes, live-recorded episodes, and what they call "minisodes," which I explain in Chapter 3. The studio recorded shows begin with "banter" or "riffing," a term often used among comedians and podcasters to explain informal daily conversation, riddled with jokes and wit. After the conversational opening, Karen and Georgia each tell a murder story to the other. The stories are meant to be a surprise each week, both for the each other and for the listeners. Throughout their stories, they continue to riff with each other informally, organically, and improvisationally. There is comedy sprinkled throughout often detailed accounts of murder, which is perhaps why *MFM* is simultaneously controversial and mega-successful. They also talk about their own experiences with depression and anxiety, the personal struggles they face, and their relationship to mental health. They are blunt and honest in their stories of therapy and even disclose medications they take or have taken.

In a *New York Times* article titled, "Grisly Murders and Serial Killers? Ooh, Tell Me More," Alex Hawgood notes that Karen and Georgia have become superstars with a following of "groupies" who sell out large theaters. Karen and Georgia's followers call themselves "murderinos," a term Georgia came up with in an early episode. Murderinos have become a considerable part of the podcast. Murderinos buy merchandise, create merchandise, and gather on Facebook in groups. At first, Karen and Georgia had a single Facebook group, but it was closed when that group grew too large. However, murderinos have created their own groups that cater to a wide variety of interests. For example, one group is called "Weederinos" for murderinos who have an interest in cannabis. One group is called "Schitterinos," where murderinos who watch the hit show *Schitt's Creek* can share memes and inside jokes. There is even a Facebook group called, "There's an *MFM* Group for That," where listeners can ask a question about something, and volunteers will lead them to a specific murderino sub-group. Some such groups include "True Crime Pupperinos," for murderinos who love dogs; "Ga Fit Yourself," for murderinos into fitness (a play on one of Karen and Georgia's famous phrase "Ga' Fuck Ya'self"); "Toxic Mothering Ruins The Party Again," for murderinos seeking support for their toxic mothers; "Skaterinos" for murderinos who – you guessed it – skate! And the list goes on. Although a "Dissertatarinos" group has yet to be formed.

### **Research Questions**

I began to ask myself, how is this podcast so successful? The content is highly controversial. The genre – true crime, comedy – is contentious in and of itself. Why do some people "stay sexy and don't get murdered" and others "get the fuck out?" I began thinking about this intersection of true crime and comedy, but as I delved deeper, I realized much more informs this podcast. Karen and Georgia are liberal politically and operate from a feminist paradigm.

They also often strategically disclose personal information about their struggles with mental health. Karen and Georgia appear to value the intimacy of the podcast medium and seem committed to mobilizing this intimacy for political effect. I realized many different discourses are operating in *MFM*. These discourses have come together to create a unique community of murderinos who are committed to living in, and living out, this unique discursive intersection.

As I explored *MFM*'s discursive universe, a lot of questions about Karen and Georgia's whiteness arose. Since discourse is always related to power, Karen and Georgia's whiteness and the whiteness of *MFM* as a whole is a huge . Every time I tried to address it, my ideas felt shortsighted considering an entire project could be devoted to addressing the whiteness present in *MFM*. Thus, In future research, I would like to take a more "intersectional" approach to *MFM*. That is, I would like to take into account Karen and Georgia's *whiteness* and how that influences their performance of *MFM*.

Karen and Georgia are white, heterosexual, cisgendered women, and I know this effects the way they are and are not allowed to perform. I thought about this issue a lot while writing this dissertation, but it seemed like a topic for another project, one with a more intersectional goal. It would be interesting to see how Karen and Georgia's privilege, as well as their marginalization, affects their performance. I acknowledge this project's limitations in terms of its overall intersectionality and I address this limitation further in my conclusion.

Ultimately, in this study, I seek to understand how Karen and Georgia have created this unique community of "murderinos." I want to understand the discourses informing their content and their performative approach to crafting their conversations. How have they joined discourse from true crime, comedy, feminist thought, podcasting, and personal/mental health to construct such a unique performance that has captured the hearts of so many "murderinos?" What

discursive moves in their podcast make the performative speech acts “get the fuck out” and “stay sexy and don’t get murdered” so effective?

## **Chapter Previews**

In what follows, I conduct what I call a performance-centered discourse analysis. Spoiler Alert: It is a discourse analysis that centers on performance moves! I explain what I mean in greater detail in Chapter 2. In brief, this study takes one typical episode of *MFM* and highlights some of the significant discourses that inform it. Ultimately, I analyze the major discursive influences, paying special attention to Karen and Georgia's performative approach. In other words, I explore the text and content in and of itself and take a particular interest in how they perform that content and context. Karen and Georgia's performance of the podcast (their tones, attitudes, voice, and sounds) is a significant part of what makes the podcast unique. Their nuanced ways of crafting narrative along with their performative approach can help explain what has made their podcast so effective at organizing its fans into “murderinos.” This chapter also outlines the theories that inform how and why I will be conducting a performance-centered discourse analysis. I explain the literature of storytelling, discourse analysis, and performance to lay the grounds for my analysis and provide a rationale for my chosen method of performance-centered discourse analysis.

Each of the subsequent chapters center on a different set of discourses and performance moves that I see in the episode of *MFM*. Chapter 3 addresses podcasting as a medium that is both hyper-public and hyper-personal. I explain the do-it-yourself (DIY) punk aesthetic of the medium that was so eagerly devoured by comedians seeking an outlet in a competitive industry. Chapter 4 addresses how Karen and Georgia carefully use comedic methods to gain listeners. I

explain how their collaboration and adoption of improvisational methods has heavily influenced their performance.

Chapter 5 discusses the true crime discourses that are heavily present in *MFM*. First, I address the podcast's focus on serial killers, survivor narratives, and the victims in their stories. I address the overwhelming, disproportionate number of women verses men who consume true crime, and I explore the ways Karen and Georgia disrupt existing discourses on true crime.

Chapter 6 explains some of the feminist narratives informing *MFM*. First, I present how Karen and Georgia's speech brings up a competing feminist narrative about vocal fry and other aspects of “valleyspeak.” Then I explain how their uncensored irreverent style works to empower women, specifically “murderinos” to go beyond the podcast and create their own networks, similar to the D.I.Y punk feminist riot grrrl movement of the 90s.

Chapter 7 concludes this dissertation. It explains how Karen and Georgia’s performance has challenged mainstream discourses around mental health and have in-turn, changed my life. I explain specifically how *MFM* has drawn from discourses of self-disclosure to destabilize current norms regarding mental health. I explain how all of the discourses from which *MFM* draws come together to form not only a successful podcast, but also a movement. I also address some of the limitations of the study and propose some future avenues for research.

## **CHAPTER TWO.**

### **METHODOLOGY: EXPLAINING PERFORMANCE-CENTERED DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

This dissertation is a work of what I call a performance-centered discourse analysis of an episode of *My Favorite Murder*. This chapter explains what I mean by “discourse analysis” and “performance.” The concept of “performance” is highly debated, some have argued that it is an “essentially contested” concept meaning that some disagreement about performance is bound to any discussion of performance (Strine Long and Hopkins 183). Still, for the purposes of this project, I first ground my understanding of performance in Langellier and Petersen's *Storytelling in Daily Life* as my base method.

Below I describe their method while also extending it to suit my goals for this project. I then explain how I have analyzed a specific episode of *MF*M and why I chose this episode. Lastly, I will explain how I apply these methods to *MF*M to understand Karen and Georgia's unique performative moves that create this discursive space. As the reader has likely already noticed, I wrote this dissertation in a conversational style in order to mimic the performance style of Karen and Georgia. Ultimately, this felt like the only appropriate way to write about *MF*M considering they value informality, improvisation, and intimacy. While some of this may remind the reader of other methods (e.g. auto-ethnography), my goal is not to locate myself as a source of truth, but to join Karen and Georgia in a particular set of performative moves. That is to say, I don't write as a disinterested observer of *MF*M. I write as a participant—as an invested “murderino.”

#### **Taking and Making**

Karen and Georgia are not just performers in the generic sense that all humans to some degree perform social roles in public. They are specifically invested in aesthetically marked

performances of storytelling. More to the point, they are storytellers. This is arguably a key part of their identity and inarguably a key component of their brand. Storytelling is what they sell to their listeners.

In his essay, "The Storyteller" or "Die Erzähler," Walter Benjamin suggests that storytelling was already dying out in the 1930s. Benjamin argues the causes of this death of storytelling are many: rapid industrialization, the ubiquity of print, the First World War and the desire to keep silent about its horrors, and the rise of information in newspapers. Information is an enemy of storytelling because it prioritizes facts over the narrative threads that connect them. However, Benjamin is not entirely gloomy about storytelling. He argues storytelling is deeply rooted in society and still rampant with possibility despite the many forces that are against it.

Benjamin sees the storyteller as a craftsperson. In other words, the storyteller takes experiences from themselves and others to form something unique and valuable. The storyteller always becomes a part of or character in the story: "traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel" (5). This is a beautiful way of describing how the narrator, by including their beliefs, attitudes, and identities, shapes the story itself. The storyteller is an artisan who uses their own life experiences to sculpt experiences for their listener: "The storyteller takes what he tells from experience-his own or that reported by others. And he, in turn, makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale" (3). Langellier and Peterson emphasize Benjamin's insight in *Storytelling in Daily Life*. They provide a more systematic approach to Benjamin's "taking" and "making." They use discourse analysis to show how the storyteller "takes" an experience and "makes" it into a meaningful event for an audience, not just a list of "information."

Benjamin's "taking" and "making" are an essential part of this project. In *MFM*, Karen and Georgia "take" murder, survival, or crime stories and "make" them into a new unique storytelling experience fraught with comedy and personal anecdotes. Karen and Georgia also "take" from a wide range and unique combination of discourses in order to "make," not only new discursive formations, but also a counterculture and community. The "murderino" results from this story that Karen and Georgia have consciously crafted. I draw from this idea of "taking" and "making" to understand how *MFM* has been created by combining discourses from true crime, comedy, podcasting, and personal or mental health narratives. This project explores the performative moves and the content that has either consciously or unconsciously been adopted from different discursive formations. Ultimately, this project seeks to highlight how this performance has functioned to create a new discursive community complete with an entire counterculture, the "murderino."

Langellier and Peterson develop four aspects of storytelling. Storytelling is embodied, situated and material, discursive, and open to legitimation and critique (8). Below, I explain these four aspects of performing narrative according to Langellier and Peterson and set the groundwork for my discussion of how Karen and Georgia operate from these four aspects throughout *MFM*.

First, storytelling is embodied. Langellier and Peterson describe how storytelling is performed by some(body). Thus, performing narrative inevitably involves the body. In other words, the story must be consumed and, in-turn, felt, heard, or touched. Voice, gestures, tones, emotions, and identities are actively uniting to form this unique storytelling event. Not only do the storyteller's identities, beliefs, and attitudes influence the story, but the identities, beliefs, and attitudes of the audience influence the story. Langellier and Peterson draw on Benjamin to



explain this (9). Benjamin's description of storytelling situates the narrator or storyteller as another character in the story. If, for example, the narrator says, "Let me tell you a story," and then begins to tell their story, the narrator is now interacting with the story as another character by describing this past event. The bits of input and additional remarks about the "happening" create a new character in the story, the narrator.

Langellier and Peterson use an example to explain the myriad of ways performing narrative is embodied not only by the narrator, but also by the audience. Eight women attend an "immersion weekend" in Quebec City. They are told to save their stories for later that evening when they join in the hotel room. Together they tell stories in the hotel room, drinking wine, sometimes talking simultaneously, eager to engage in the activity. As Marie tells a story about her son Paul's birth, another tells a story about how her nephew and son turn into "little devils" at the store (10-11). As they tell these interweaving stories, it becomes clear that storytelling is a bodily practice – not something outside of themselves, or disembodied. It is essential to understand that this has become an embodied storytelling space. In this space, storytelling is encouraged and allowed to exist based on the context they find themselves in, a space for these women to feel heard and seen.

Understanding storytelling as embodied acknowledges that stories are explicitly linked to the personal for both audience and narrator. Storytelling not only evokes our past but also creates possibilities for the future. In *MFM*, Karen and Georgia are telling stories via podcast, so listeners are engaging with the voice and content they present. While this is different from in-person storytelling, it is still a context in which the audience brings themselves to the stories to make sense of them. Storytelling is always embodied through the subject. Storytelling is not an activity apart from the teller.

Second, there are “situational and material constraints” in performing narrative (14). The body is constrained to its environment. For example, if the narrator/storyteller has to tell the story in a loud room, they might speak louder for people to hear. Another example is if one person is interrupting another person's story with their own story; this becomes a situational constraint. In other words, the story always exists within a context, never in a vacuum. The body is dependent on the environment and literal limitations of the body in physical space. Cultural differences are a situational constraint as well. Storytelling requires an audience, "shared language, history, and culture of the audience in order to tell a story" (14). These constraints restrict and facilitate possibilities for expression. Langellier and Petersen use the example of two lifelong friends, Marie and Louise. As Marie tells a story about her son, Paul, Louise interjects bits of her perspective. This interaction between environment and people within it shapes the story. If Louise were not there, perhaps the story would have been presented differently (16). The environment and audience act as a character in the story, shaping and crafting what it will become. These constraints are present in any human interaction, not just storytelling. However, it is useful when thinking about the situational and material constraints of *MFM*.

One obvious material and situational constraint of *MFM* is that it is a podcast. Audience members are interacting with voice and sound. While podcasts record the performers actually "podcasting" live and in-person, this is just one aspect of *MFM*. They host live shows, which changes the material and situational constraints at that moment, but for the most part, their performance takes place via audio, which I will be focusing on for this project. This means the storytellers, Karen and Georgia, do not have the opportunity to convey or communicate anything with their physical body, gestures, or facial expressions. This is a situational and material constraint of pre-recorded podcasts. I believe this affects the ways the stories are interpreted and

understood. The audience member is also constrained considering they are only allowed to consume this story in a particular way via podcast.

Power relations are constantly influencing material constraints within storytelling. When asking what material constraints are active in a particular story, one might ask what particular power structures are functioning within the context. In other words, what language, history, culture, identity, race, age, class, and/or sexual identities are being either mobilized or silenced? What is allowed to be told or not told within this particular context? Constraints can act as either implicit or explicit disciplinary tools. Every story contains these restraints while also emerging from a particular discourse, which I will explain further. Langellier and Peterson pose a series of helpful questions that I think highlight the power implicit in storytelling:

What resources in the situation make storytelling possible? What material conditions, what economic and cultural resources does storytelling draw upon and mobilize? In what places and spaces is narrative performed? How is it embedded in surrounding discourse? What kind and how much time is given to perform? How do the situation and material conditions constrain-both restrict and enable participation? How much and what kind of effort does it take to perform? How does storytelling point to or assume social conditions of its production? Are there economies of performance made possible by habitual forms of bodily conduct? How do particular historical and cultural formations-such as race, sexuality, gender, age, and class-serve as resources? How does the distribution of resources constrain what stories and meanings can emerge, who can tell them, how they are told, and to what audiences? (18)

These questions illustrate how every storytelling experience is explicitly linked to power, whether obvious or not. The question, "How do particular historical and cultural formations – such as race, sexuality, gender, age, and class – serve as resources?" reminds us that all stories are told by people who have identities, beliefs, and attitudes. Storytelling techniques or maneuvers that enforce or challenge power emerge from a particular "discourse," or overarching narrative. Langellier and Peterson acknowledge that every story emerges from discourse as the third aspect of storytelling.

Third, to perform narrative is to do something in and with discourse (18). As mentioned above, the material and situational constraints highlight the discourse controlling and shaping the narrative. Langellier and Peterson draw on Michel Foucault's understanding of discourse. I will now explain his regulatory principles of discourse according to Langellier and Peterson before moving on to the fourth aspect of storytelling.

The first regulatory principle is that discourse dictates the external rules governing power and knowledge. These rules enforce boundaries and implement discursive force through prohibition, division, and rejection (19). Discourse is disciplined through these divisions. In other words, this principle seeks to identify what central narrative is informing the storytelling, and how it is interpreted within that particular context.

The second regulatory principle of discourse that Langellier and Peterson outline is that discourse forms through classification, ordering, and distribution (19). Through repetition, it is possible to identify what Foucault calls "major narratives." *Major narratives* are the stories that have become told and retold over time, always connected to power. Foucault writes "I suppose, though I am not altogether sure, there is barely a society without its major narratives, told, retold, and varied; formulae texts, ritualized texts to be spoken in well-defined circumstances; things said once, and conserved because people suspect some hidden secret or wealth lies buried within" (*Archeology of Knowledge* 220). In other words, discourse is created by privileging a particular narrative. The story repeats so much that it becomes a popular narrative, and these major narratives shape discourse and create norms within society. Later, I examine the major narratives informing *MFM*.

The third regulatory principle of discourse focuses on the speaking subject and audience, as well as the rules of knowledge and power that reveal who is qualified to speak on a subject.

Langellier and Peterson write, "Discourse rules also govern who can or who has to listen and to what extent audiences can contribute, interrupt, or challenge what is told" (20). As audience members, we evaluate, through experience and "major narratives," how we can interact with the story and how the storyteller can communicate the story. In *MFM*, the audience is only allowed to interact with the story during live shows if they have attended, of course. However, a particular structure allows Karen and Georgia to have power. Not only do the show hosts perform on a stage that visually represents a hierarchy, considering the audience is situated lower than the performers, but Karen and Georgia also hold microphones and space to tell their stories. This power structure governs who is allowed to speak and who is expected to listen. Otherwise, podcasts uphold a power structure because the audience is listening to a pre-recorded story and cannot talk back in real-time. The structure of the podcast puts the performers in a place of power. Even if they ask for feedback or response, the power is with Karen and Georgia at that moment. For example, the minisodes consist of "hometown stories," audience members' responses to a variety of topics encouraged by Karen and Georgia. The hosts devote these minisodes to reading listeners' emailed stories aloud, in the writer's own words. However, Karen and Georgia still hold power in choosing what stories they will read and how they will present them.

Additionally, Karen and Georgia often have a segment in the podcast they call "Corrections Corner" to correct mistakes they have made in past recordings. Usually, the mistakes are brought to their attention by listeners. These are just a few examples of how power functions in *MFM*, and I will be further examining these throughout this project.

The final regulatory principle of discourse is an effort to analyze and discuss the discourse. In other words, to understand the conditions that limit and propel discourse to become

possible, it must be open to analysis (Langellier and Peterson 20). This is not an attempt to pin down meaning or stabilize truth but instead, understand what power structures are operating to make discourse possible. Analysis of discourse brings to light the tension and struggles over meaning-making. It examines which stories and whose stories are made possible and why. Analysis of discourse also highlights what identities are made possible or even just represented through different types of storytelling. I have offered a general explanation of the meaning of "discourse." I will later explain more about how to implement discourse analysis and how it will be a tool to understand how discourse is operating in *MFM*.

Now that I have explained the regulatory principles of discourses, I will explain Langellier and Peterson's fourth and final aspect of storytelling – that performing narrative is always open for critique. Experience, identity, and discourse are more tangible and accessible through storytelling. Performing narrative is political and open for legitimation and critique. Langellier and Peterson ask:

How does storytelling regularize-transmit, reproduce, and legitimate-existing power relations? How does it work to thwart, critique, and render such power relations fragile? Rather than ask about individual motivation or social pressures, we ask what strategic functions storytelling performs. Why tell this particular story in this way to this audience? How might it be performed differently? Who has access to storytelling? Who benefits? How do particular discourse patterns- such as turn-taking, intonation, pauses, hand movement, posture, gaze, and spatial arrangement- open up or close off possibilities in storytelling? What subjects and voices are heard more readily than others? What does narrative construct as normal? What strategies and tactics does storytelling employ to reproduce itself within what is considered normal? How do strategies constrain the availability of tactics that may be employed? How does the use of particular tactics alter the definition of strategies? In what contexts are performances circulated and distributed, produced and commodified? (29-30)

These questions exist at the heart of discourse analysis. By asking these questions, privileged narratives are under scrutiny. It is possible to see the power structures working to inform how the narrative will be perceived, valued, devalued, critiqued. Storytelling is always discursive and

should be open for critique, response, and analysis. Furthermore, by opening storytelling to critique, it is possible to understand the inner workings of how particular discourses or power structures are mobilized.

For this project, I ask how discourse is functioning in *MFM*. For example, how do Karen and Georgia either challenge or uphold existing power relations? How have they used discourse to create a unique community of "murderinos?" In other words, how are they "taking" and "making," and from what discourses are they taking, either consciously or unconsciously? What particular identities are mobilized in *MFM*? Have specific identities been silenced through their narrative performances? Are they intentionally leaving out particular identities in order to create their unique discursive space? For whom is the performance meant? I am interested in Karen and Georgia's performative choices that have created this discursive space, a community of murderinos who are not just devoted to *MFM*, but are also empowered by *MFM* to mobilize their beliefs outside of the context of the podcast.

### **Discourse Analysis**

Before I explain what I mean by "performance-centered discourse analysis," I first explain how discourse analysis functions generally. After, I extend my understanding of discourse analysis by explaining what I mean by "performance-centered."

Discourse analysis is inextricably linked to power, and I approach "power" in a Foucauldian sense. Foucault's panopticism addresses institutional power by examining the politics of the panopticon, a space designed to survey and control inmates. The inmates do not know if a watchman is watching them from the tower in the center. They live in a state of constant surveillance—a disciplined state. Panopticism suggests that institutional systems function in this way to discipline the body. Foucault writes, "Hence the major effect of the

panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (*Discipline and Punish* 201). In other words, panopticism functions to keep individuals compliant to the institutional power structures, discursive formations. Institutional power reduces people's consciousness and capability to challenge the systems that govern our daily lives by relying on surveillance, people, and discourse as a disciplinary force. Thus, I am interested in power in a Foucauldian sense when analyzing the discursive themes in *MFM*. That is, I examine power that is functioning beyond the literal text, the power that is influencing the ways they are allowed and not allowed to enter discursive spaces.

Discourse in the Foucauldian sense is not simply a singular meaning of a word but an abstract configuration that contains meaning beyond the sentence. Discourse focuses on the "big picture" that informs meaning, the contextual space from which meaning derives. In other words, discourse analysis is not concerned with meaning as information, but focuses on how meaning is constructed and dismantled through situational and contextual events. For example, Karen and Georgia using vocal fry knowingly and enthusiastically is a performative move that places the performance in a specific discursive space. All of the meanings associated with vocal fry are brought to the surface. The feminist debate around vocal fry and "valleyspeak" becomes a powerful narrative that informs this podcast and the meanings it constructs. I analyze this in-depth in Chapter 5. Discourse is intrinsic to power because it relies on major narratives that create meaning and nothing stands outside of discourse.

Foucault himself resisted prescriptive methodology. Foucault, who resisted the nomenclature "poststructuralist," once stated, "I take care not to dictate how things should be." (*Power* 288). Thus, it is counterproductive to dictate truths and pin down meanings. Discourse



analysis accordingly focuses on what discourses do instead of what they say. I have no intentions of dictating truths or pinning down meaning related to *MFM*. Instead, following Foucault I seek to disrupt certainty, challenge norms, and destabilize “truths,” to show the “doings” that go into and come out of the podcasts as “sayings.” That is at the heart of discourse analysis. I understand that my job is partly to point out the power structures informing the performance and examine them in-depth to understand how they operate within the podcast. In what follows, I address some of the guiding principles of my performance-centered discourse analysis of *MFM*.

Linda J. Graham has greatly influenced my understanding of how to navigate discourse analysis. Graham draws from Foucault's insights and creates a "discursive analytic, a methodological plan with which I can set about doing a form of discourse analysis that is informed by and consistent with the work of Michel Foucault" (2). Graham is keen on expressing that this will not be a set of rules but rather a journey or conversation. After addressing the complexity of different types of discourse analysis, Graham explains "discourse analysis as an exercise in explicating statements that function to place a discursive frame around a particular position" (20). In other words, discourse analysis explores the larger narratives that inform a conversation and its meaning. One of the main ideas behind discourse analysis is a journey into what central ideas or structures inform a conversation or set of meanings. This is not an exact science. It is always open for interpretation, but worth exploring nonetheless. Identifying the major narratives and how they influence meaning-making within a particular context is a powerful exploration of how language can work as both a “prison house” and a form of resistance to those in power. Thus, in this project, I will be identifying major narratives in *MFM* to understand how they have gone about upholding, destabilizing, and challenging major narratives to create a community of devoted murderinos.

## **Performance-Centered**

To mark *MF*M as a performance is both to pin something about it down and to open it up simultaneously. Performance by its very nature, resists stable definition and disciplinary origin. Performance is not only an event but a methodological and theoretical framing of the world. In other words, "performance" can be considered a methodology for performance practice, a theoretical framework at which to view the world, and an aesthetic event (Conquergood "Interventions and Radical Research" 152). It is essential to explain what I mean when I say "performance" or "performance-centered." *MF*M has moments of planned storytelling (true crime narrative) and more improvisational storytelling that appears to happen organically and is usually about the hosts' personal lives. All of these, in different senses, can be considered performances.

"Performance" has often been understood as the theatrical, the aesthetic, the literal audience and performer on stage, usually to dismiss it. These notions of aesthetics contrast the "fake" on stage with "real" life. Jonas Barish critiqued these notions of performance as "anti-theatrical prejudice" (5). This viewpoint limits performance to mimicry, catharsis, and entertainment. Drawing on Conquergood, my understanding of performance includes not only mimesis but also poesis, marking the ability of performance to do consequential things in the world, and kinesics, marking the ability of performance to break and remake the social world. Conquergood describes this aspect of performance as "movement, motion, fluidity, fluctuation, all those restless energies that transgress boundaries and trouble closure" ("Of Caravans and Carnivals" 138). In other words, performance is not bound and contained in a particular moment of the aesthetic event, but instead flows and continues to move, change, and grow. This is important for my understanding of *MF*M because I understand the many different elements of

performance that take place in the podcast are not limited in efficacy to the moment they are recorded or to the moment they are experienced by any given audience. To be “performance centered” means that my analysis is interested in how the podcast exceeds its moment as “event” and becomes part of social movement(s).

I take from Conquergood, a “performance paradigm” which “privileges particular, participatory, dynamic, intimate, precarious, embodied experience grounded in historical process, contingency, and ideology. Another way of saying it is that performance-centered research takes as both subject matter and method the experiencing body situated in time, place, and history” (*Rethinking Ethnography* 92). The situated, material bodies of Karen, Georgia and their listeners are my starting point of analysis. In other words, performance-centered research always takes into account the body situated in context and makes sure to understand the situation holistically. However, locating things in performance as event is not something that creates reductions and stabilized “truths.” Instead this postulates a more encompassing analysis that never diminishes embodied experience but instead expands it carefully. To center on storytelling as a performance is to ask what is made bodily present in the moment of performance, what discourses does it “take” from and how does what it “makes” exceed the single aesthetic moment of mimesis into poesis and kinesis.

### **Performativity**

My approach to performance-centered research is also grounded in my understanding of performativity as articulated by J.L Austin in *How to do Things With Words*. Austin’s sense of “speech acts” argues that some words are not simply words; they are doing something (6). An utterance is performative to the extent that it tries to accomplish, to change the state of the world rather than merely “state” some preexisting truth. The clearest example of this in *MF* is the

phrase “Get the Fuck Out!” This is not a statement of truth, but a (usually effective) attempt to change the social order of the world: to make some people leave and others stay and to constitute those who do stay as an “us” that “gets it.”

Derrida critiques Austin's discrete sense of "speech acts" by arguing, in essence, that all language is performative. He deconstructs language to argue against the very concept of stable meaning for any utterance. He argues that meaning is the performative effect of repetition or “citationality” (17). Derrida argues that language is not inherently doing something, and that language does not have inherent meaning. In other words, meaning is the social effect of widely repeated speech acts. While this project is not Deridian in a broader sense, I do draw from this critical insight of citationality to understand citationality and repetition are a significant part of *MFM*. The podcast relies heavily on inside jokes that repeat time after time. The repetition has created a norm that has then created murderino culture. Even statements that Karen and Georgia make that are not explicitly performative such as “Toxic Masculinity Ruins the Party Again” do more than just state truth. They become rallying cries and touchstones for an in group/out group meaning system.

Judith Butler extends both Austin and Derrida's critiques by taking Derrida's argument and applying it explicitly to gender and to extra textual embodiment. Butler argues that, like language, our gestures and behavioral patterns are adopted through repetition. For example, "women" learn to cross their legs—and repeatedly do it over time. They might even be punished for not doing it. This becomes a "feminine" gesture. By completing enough “feminine” gestures a person can become a “female.” There is nothing inherently "woman" about any one body or any one physical gesture. However, through the performative work of repetition and citationality, we create "woman” as a locus of meaning and power. Butler defines these performative gestures,

patterns, and learned behaviors as "stylized repetition of acts" ("Performative Acts and Gender" 519). Gender is not information one can point to. It is a story we tell ourselves, a performative chain that we craft and make up together as we go along. Performativity is always linked to power because it only becomes meaningful through repetition, and we repeat what we see. We repeat what we see, and we "cite" it in our behavioral patterns. Even when or if we try to "do" gender differently we risk becoming incoherent to broader meaning systems. This is how norms get perpetuated—through the disciplining of our bodies and the bodies of others.

Elizabeth Bell writes, "all performances are citations—enacted references to ways of doing gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and ability that are bound by constraints that are legal, medical, religious, and always political" (188). Performativity highlights how identity and meaning is constructed in the social world. We interpret others through their performative acts and "citations" and in turn we create our identity and the identity of others.

Performativity is a useful way to understand the power structures, especially of gender, that *MF*M seeks to change. It is also a useful way to understand how the murderino identity came into fruition as a resistant performative. Through Karen and Georgia's repetitive jokes and "citations," the murderino has emerged as another way of "doing" woman than the dominant ways we have inherited. By continually referencing and citing the "murderino" through performative phrases, Karen and Georgia lay out "ways of doing" and "ways of being" a murderino as, among other things, an alternative way of doing gender.

### **Comedy**

*MF*M uses comedy as more than just entertainment. In *Wit's End: Women's Humor as Rhetorical and Performative Strategy*, Zwagerman discusses women's humor as a rhetorical and performative strategy that informs my understanding of how *MF*M "does" gender differently.

Humor is what Zwagerman refers to as "shifty," elusive, challenging to theorize or pin down. Zwagerman writes, "humor's use of multiple meanings, of indirection and implication, it's play with language and conventions—in a word, it's shiftiness—seems to confound every attempt to contain humor within clear categories, definitions, or theories" (1). In other words, although many have tried to theorize humor, as a performance practice, it resists stable meaning. Humor, by definition, seeks to disrupt and find new possibilities in the chains of citationality. There can be no comprehensive theory of jokes because jokes are anti-comprehensive and multi-comprehensible. As Constance Rourke writes, "humor is a lawless element, full of surprises" (qtd. in Zwagerman 1).

Zwagerman stresses the importance of discourse and context that allows humor to exist. In other words, he notes that to understand a joke you need to understand its context. Therefore, jokes are an interesting way, not of understanding other jokes, but of understanding the discursive context that made way for them. Zwagerman touches on Nancy Walker's point about the situational definition of humor and how it changes based on context. In a debate about what qualifies a film or image to be pornography, Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart said, "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced with that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it" (2). Humor operates similarly in the way that it exists contextually, and you know it when you see it. This can make it a difficult site for some kinds of discursive analysis because they are moments when discursive rules are broken or challenged. However, it makes it an ideal site for performance-centered discourse analysis because it points to places where discourses might move from the mimesis of citation to creative poesis and revolutionary kinesis.

Zwagerman's careful discussion of humor extends "theories of performative language to an assessment of the 'end'—both the goal and limit— of humor as a strategy in everyday discourse" (3). Zwagerman writes that one could say that the goal of performative speech is to do something effective. He has no interest in humor that was not intended to be humorous but is. Zwagerman's focus is on the strategic use of humor, that is, speech that intends to succeed at being funny. I think that is an essential distinction because, throughout an episode of *MFM*, there are funny things that may not have been intentional attempts at humor. There are also apparent, intentional attempts at humor that are all complicated, considering they discuss such serious topics within the umbrella of "true crime." Not all of Karen and Georgia's jokes are funny to all listeners. Not all are effective tools of performative change. However, all are part of a counter-citatoriality practice that is not just trying to say something *about* true crime, professional comedy, podcasting, gender, or any of the other discourses it draws on but to *do something* with them. Zwagerman argues that "to equate the humorous with the trivial is to slight the performative activity of humor, specifically the humor of gendered talk"(44).

Dusty Goltz has also informed my understanding of humor with his careful analysis of stand-up performance in *Comic Performativities*. Goltz addresses the fact that comedic moments and comedy, in general, are often taken out of context, cherry-picked, and critiqued in a way that undermines the performative moves the comedians carefully construct. Often, for example, a comedian is deemed racist, sexist, homophobic based on a joke taken out of context when that very joke is subversive in a unique way. Goltz is keen on picking these moments apart instead of simplifying them and doing what he calls "actively writing the body explicitly into the analysis" (42). For example, Goltz discusses Amy Schumer's moment roasting Mike Tyson during the Charlie Sheen Roast on Comedy Central. He describes the moment exhaustively as an example

of what it means to write the body explicitly into the analysis. He writes about her body rocking from side to side, her eyes squinting, a quick flash of a smile, the way her head pops up, her graceful walk, her playful expressions. Goltz even addresses "a quickness in her shifts of the head and her facial meta-commentary that cites a docile femininity, yet simultaneously undercuts it" (42). Goltz is thorough and hyper-descriptive of this short moment, and that is the point. This embodiment of humor as performance, not merely its extraction as text or "information" is how it "does things" in the world. Schumer's performance was critiqued and bashed for being insensitive and racially charged. Goltz is trying to show how her body and the performative moves she makes are more complicated and perhaps even subversive to mainstream power structures. Without acknowledging these intricate bodily acts, the power dynamics of this performance change completely and so does its meaning.

Goltz shows how the body is written into a text and its compelling and complicated power dynamics. Only by taking the performative moves into account precisely and carefully can one understand how power and control function. Goltz writes that Schumer's "ironic performativity, the interplay of her words, her gestures, and the discursive field that precedes them—continually plays with and against sexist expectations of politeness, cuteness and white feminine modes of accommodation" (44). This is an example of how her physical gender performance is ironic. In that way, it challenges femininity and "cuteness." Only by taking into account such bodily performances are we able to contextualize her work as performative action rather than textual description.

Goltz's insight into the intricacies of comedy is helpful as I think about *MFM*. While we may not be able to visibly see their bodily performance, Karen and Georgia's performative moves have created a unique discursive space that is worth examining holistically. Their bodies,



even when understood primarily through their voices, are a crucial part of understanding what they are doing. Goltz's insight reminds me that I cannot just read the text and analyze the words in the literal sense. It is essential to consider how their performative moves through voice, sound, rate, pitch, and tone function. These performative moves shift meaning and power dynamics. As I move through the episode, I consider the performative moves, the meaningful discourse, and narratives informing their conversation and the ways that they “take” all of those and “make” them meaningful for their listeners.

### **Performance-Centered Discourse Analysis**

My performance centered discourse analysis of *MFM* will combine the insights of Benjamin, Langellier and Peterson, Austin, Butler and the other folks I have cited above to explore what discourses Karen and Georgia “take” from, and what embodied moves they make to move towards poesis and kinesis. This project explores the primary discourse functioning in *MFM*, with particular attention to the performative choices. In other words, I will identify what power structures are informing their conversation and the performative choices they make to create their own discursive space within it.

To focus my analysis, I have chosen episode 209 from June 2020 titled "Big Sweater Energy." Over the years, I have listened to over 300 episodes of *MFM* which equates to roughly 18,000 minutes or 500 hours, which equals about three straight weeks of episodes. I chose this episode because I believe it represents a typical episode of *MFM*. It includes many of the elements that are ubiquitous throughout the podcast. Although there are many different types of *MFM* performances (e.g. pre-recorded, live shows, minisodes, derivative podcasts) I have chosen a pre-recorded full-length episode because I believe it is representative of the central narratives that are functioning within the podcast. It is the center of the *MFM* discursive universe. Such

episodes are the most important citational practice in *MFMM*. I have transcribed the entire episode and placed it in an appendix to this dissertation and reference specific moments within it. However, ideally, the reader would be able to listen to the episode, provided it is still available. The transcript I have included falls short. The experience of listening to an episode as opposed to reading a transcript of it is far superior. It is difficult to capture every vocal shift, tone, and annunciation. Not to mention the constant interruptions and overlapping “crosstalk,” which refers to moments Karen and Georgia are talking simultaneously. However, I have consumed enough *MFMM* performances to state with confidence that the performative choices I have chosen to highlight are pervasive across all the mediums that *MFMM* contains. My examples are not “cherry-picked”; I did not choose examples to best suit my interests (in, for example, feminist, resistant moments). Instead, I chose moments that stand in for significant citational chains. They are representative of the narratives often brought to the forefront in *MFMM* and I looked for what those moments are doing with(in) their discursive context.

The chapters that follow break up these moments into five sections: podcasting & intimacy, comic performativity, true crime narratives, feminist discourse, mental health. Each chapter centers on examples from the episode which I believe to be representative of some of the key ways that the discourses work across the *MFMM* universe. I began my analysis not at which moments I found most interesting, but at which moments I found most typical. From there I tried to understand what is interesting about that “typical” move in context. In other words, I carefully move through this episode, analyzing particularly unique aspects of it. I included the excerpts in the chapter while also adding meaningful performative choices such as tone of voice, inflection, pauses, and vocal fry.

## **Interpellations**

Additionally, throughout the chapters, I provide personal reflections to explain how the discourse lands with me as an invested murderino. In order to set the groundwork, I will explain interpellation and how it relates to my project. While some might call these moments “auto ethnographic” I prefer the term “interpellations” because it highlights the ways that I am pulled into this specific discursive formation. I don’t write about all of me, as I am not the subject of this dissertation. I do write as myself, however, in an effort to describe what *MFM* does to pull me in. I borrow the term “interpellation” from Althusser, a French Marxist Philosopher who was much more interested in how people get interpolated into dominant ideologies. Interpellation broadly refers to the cultural process by which we encounter a set of ideological values and internalize them or adopt them. Althusser's concept of the subject is from Lacan's psychoanalytic idea of the subject which asserts that when a child looks at their reflection in the mirror, they see themselves as a disembodied "other" detached from itself. Althusser believes we are born subjects. In other words, we do not become a subject by looking in the mirror; we are born subjects. The reason Althusser asserts that we are born subjects is that ideology precedes us. We are born into an ideology. Thus, even before we have a concept of "self," we are already a reconstituted human subject, born into a specific set of ideologies or cultural scripts.

According to Althusser, interpellation relates to an act of what he calls "hailing." Althusser provides a famous example. When a police officer yells "hey you" and in turn acknowledges you as an actual human subject, that is an act of hailing you into an ideology, what Althusser calls “interpellation” (105). At the moment of the hailing, you become aware of your subjectivity, that you are a human subject. That realization is interpellation. Interpellation makes us aware of our subject position within an ideology. Interpellation always involves a hail from

the outside which addresses you. Your ideological position as a subject within a system of power reminds you of your power or subjectivity within that dynamic or ideology. That recognition of who you are within it is the focus of the concept of interpellation (106).

As I move through my analysis of *MFM*, I will explain how I have personally been affected by the discourses present within *MFM*. I believe interpellation is a valuable way to explain subjects within discourse. I will unpack the discourse while also grounding it in my own experiences, my own experiences influencing the ideological systems and discourses that govern the content of *MFM*. I will focus on their performative choices while also explaining how it has forced me to acknowledge my subjectivity.

### **Plot Summary**

A full transcript of the 1 hour and 50-minute episode “Big Sweater Energy” is in the appendix at the end of this project. However, to aid the reader I have provided a brief plot summary of the stories the hosts tell each other in this episode to provide context for the analysis that follows. These plot summaries, stripped of the discursive moves that embody them are, in a word, horrific. Like Karen and Georgia, I seek to respect and honor the victims in these stories they tell. While I highlight many of the comedic choices and other potentially irreverent choices that Karen and Georgia make, I understand the “target” of these performative moves to be the discourses that oppress all of us, not horrific experiences of the victims. I do not want the stories of these women ignored, minimized, or brushed over.

Georgia’s story, as told to Karen: The mysterious death of Davina Buff Jones. Davina is a new cop on Bald Head Island, a small island on the southern tip of North Carolina's Cape Fear coast. In the 70s, Davina was known as a tomboy because of her "smoking, spitting, and cursing." She is only 4 foot 11 and weighs 90 pounds. When Davina is 33, she graduates from

the police academy and starts working for the Bald Head Island PD, where crime is nonexistent. Davina is a rule-following new officer, so many of the esteemed locals on the island dislike her right off the bat and often hassle her. By the fall of 1999, Davina is unhappy with the situation and begins sending her resume across North Carolina in hopes of finding a new job.

On the evening of October 2nd, 1999, Davina is on a routine patrol without her partner, even though he asks why she will not wait for him. She ends up making a phone call to her ex-boyfriend's house, where she had shown up drunk a couple of nights before, so investigators presume that is why she went on patrol by herself. While on patrol, Davina radios in, "Show me out with three. Please stand by," which means she has come upon three people that she is going to approach. Davina leaves her mic on so that the station can hear what is happening on the scene. On the mic, Davina is heard saying, "There ain't no reason to have a gun here on Bald Head Island, Okay? Come on, do us a favor and put down . . ." and then there is a high-pitched squeal in the mic, which is presumed to be a gunshot that maxes out the mic's frequency. After hearing the radio, her partner runs out to try and track her down when he comes upon her truck at an old lighthouse. Keith finds Davina's body lying face down near the base of the lighthouse. She has a single gunshot wound in the back of her head, and her pistol is near her right hand.

Georgia then goes on to explain the many theories surrounding her death. The first theory is that the three men Davina approached were engaged in a possible drug crime and shot her not to be caught. The other theory that Georgia dives deeply into is suicide. Georgia explains that Davina had seen a therapist for several years and had recently experienced some suicidal ideation not long before her death. Some argue Davina might have staged the scene as a homicide so that her family could collect her life insurance payout. Ultimately, the case is deemed suicide but

reopened after the Buff family filed a civil action, and in 2003, several retired investigators declared that Davina's death was likely homicide. However, the case is still unsolved.

Karen's story, as told to Georgia: The survivor story of New Jersey woman Tiffany Taylor. Tiffany Taylor is a 33-year-old woman who lives with her young daughter in Roselle, New Jersey. Tiffany is raised in government housing, and after moving home, she eventually starts hanging out with a guy named Khalil Wheeler-Weaver. Tiffany's friend is hooking up with Khalil; however, eventually, Khalil begins begging Tiffany openly for sex. Tiffany always says no, but Khalil eventually offers to pay her \$200 to sleep with him. Tiffany agrees but has no intentions of sleeping with him, but instead plans to rob him. Tiffany goes to Khalil's house, and after taking his cash, she pretends to fetch some condoms from the car but never returns.

Later, Tiffany's mother, with whom she lives, is diagnosed with cancer, and Tiffany becomes pregnant with her second child. Tiffany decides she is going to take up sex work in order to provide for her family. Tiffany starts working from the Ritz motel, where she often buys crack for her current boss. At some point, she starts getting texts from a stranger, begging to pay her for sex, but Tiffany does not know the person, so she keeps declining. Finally, on November 15th, she decides to go through with it but secretly plans to take the money without having sex with him. Tiffany meets this "John" outside the Ritz.

When the guy shows up, he is wearing a black hoodie, black gloves, and a ski mask. Tiffany borrows her boss's burgundy Lincoln Sudan, and they leave the Ritz Motel. They pull away, and Tiffany says he either hit her in the head with a blunt object or drugged her because she was out cold. She wakes up in the back seat, handcuffed with duct tape around her mouth and nose, to the man sexually assaulting her. Tiffany starts screaming, and the man takes off his

ski mask and asks, "Do I look familiar? Do you remember me? You took my money." Tiffany then realizes it was Khalil Wheeler-Weaver.

Here, Karen cuts to another part of the story, leaving her audience on a cliffhanger. Karen then tells the story of Robin West, also a sex worker, from Newark. Robin and her friend Bernicia venture out to find "Johns." Robin goes missing, and eight days later, they find her body in an abandoned house in Orange, New Jersey. Karen cuts to another story of Joanne, "Billie Jo" Brown, another sex worker in Newark. She leaves the south side of Newark with a "John" and is later found dead at the same abandoned house in Orange, New Jersey. Joanne's friend Amina reports her missing after she does not come back.

Karen cuts back to Tiffany Taylor's story. Tiffany Taylor is double-jointed, so she manages to slip out of the handcuffs and plans to strangle Khalil Wheeler-Weaver from the back seat. They drive past the motel with plans to go back and get Tiffany Taylor's phone, and when they get to the motel, Khalil Wheeler-Weaver walks her to her boss's hotel room. When her boss answers the door, Tiffany runs in and slams it behind her, deadbolts it, and goes to the window and shows the handcuffs dangling off of her hand.

Tiffany asks Khalil Wheeler-Weaver to leave her boss's car keys. Tiffany calls the cops, and when they arrive, they do not believe Tiffany, and they let him drive away in his car.

Karen cuts to another story of Sarah Butler, a Jamaican immigrant who also meets up with Khalil Wheeler-Weaver. She ends up raped and strangled. The police questioned Khalil Wheeler-Weaver, but since they had not found the body yet, they could not arrest him. Four days later, the police found the body of Joanne "Billie Jo" Brown in the house on Highland Avenue in Orange.

On December 6th, the police arrested Khalil Wheeler-Weaver, after taking three years to build a case against him. Tiffany Taylor, who was not believed by the police, finds out Wheeler-Weaver is arrested in the news and then volunteers to testify against him. Her testimony seals Khalil's fate, and he is convicted on 11 felonies, including murder, attempted murder, kidnapping, and aggravated assault.

This is a brief summary of Karen and Georgia's stories in order to provide context for those who are unable to listen to the episode. The transcript is also provided in the appendix for those who might want to read how Karen and Georgia went about telling their stories. I included the most pertinent information so that the moments I have chosen to highlight are contextualized.



### **CHAPTER THREE.**

## **PODCASTING AS MEDIUM: DIY AESTHETIC AND PUBLIC INTIMACY**

The primary question guiding this project asks what particular discourses does *MFMM* draw from, how does it deploy them, and to what effect? I am particularly interested in how the podcast has created the “fan cult” of “murderinos.” My analysis has uncovered that some of the key discursive moves that lead to the “fan cult” emerge from podcasts as a technological medium. In Langellier and Peterson’s terms, the medium forms part of the “material constraints” of *MFMM* storytelling (14). Karen and Georgia are operating under the constraints of podcasts as a medium. Their live shows function differently but are still recorded and available to listeners at home.

First of all, the technological medium “podcast” is a particular performance in and of itself. Marshall McLuhan’s famous statement “the medium is the message” becomes a crucial site of understanding how technologies perform. McLuhan suggests the medium itself, not necessarily the content it contains, should be under investigation. The podcasting medium is relatively new, originating in 2004 and only becoming popularized within the last decade. *MFMM* began in 2016, after podcasting had become more popular. Podcasts operate within their own set of discourses which I will outline below. I will start with a short explanation of Karen and Georgia’s different types of episodes, then describe the medium and explain how podcast discourse operates in *MFMM*.

I will now explain the different types of episodes *MFMM* contains to further explain how Karen and Georgia have engaged with the medium. They have pre-recorded studio episodes, pre-recorded live-episodes, minisodes, and live in-person shows. They record their in-person live performances in various cities around the world. The live shows are structured similarly to the studio recorded episodes except for a few details. First, Karen and Georgia enter the stage. You

can audibly hear the crowd cheering for them. Then, Karen and Georgia stand on stage and greet the audience, often talking about something related directly to the city they are visiting. After, they often say, "well should we sit down" and they find their way to their seats at a table. Then, they each take turns telling the other a story with a large audience present. Since the performance is live, they often have visual aids and pictures to provide context for the audience. In the end, they do not do a "fucking hooray," which is a designated moment in the recorded episodes for Karen and Georgia to tell each other something good that happened to them that week. Instead, they invite someone from the audience to tell a "hometown murder." The hometown murder must be a murder story that happened to someone closely related to them or that happened somewhere in their hometown.

The minisodes are much different from both the live-recorded shows and studio-recorded shows. While the minisodes are studio-recorded, they are much shorter, ranging from 30 to 50 minutes. In the minisodes, Karen and Georgia take turns reading listener emails. The emails began with people telling stories about murders directly linked to them, whether closely or simply in their hometown. Over time, the minisodes have morphed into various topics, often relating to something that happened or came up in the previous episode. For example, they once asked listeners to write stories about their parents forgetting them or having a bad parenting moment.

*MF*M has gone from a low-budget production in Georgia's apartment to a high-budget phenomenon. The podcast has gained wide popularity at the same time it has been scrutinized for its controversial nature. The fan site is called "The Fan Cult," not only because of Karen's love for cults but because of the obsessive and infatuated nature of *MF*M fans, referred to as "murderinos." The inside jokes are repeated and cherished among murderinos, often appearing

on merchandise. One shirt reads, "You're in a cult, call your dad," a quote once said by Karen Kilgariff which has now taken on a life of its own.

Additionally, in 2018, Karen and Georgia wrote a book titled *Stay Sexy and Don't Get Murdered*. In the dual memoir, they alternate writing chapters telling stories about their lives. Their stories are vulnerable, funny, and hyper personal. Karen and Georgia's opportunity for success has grown exponentially throughout the podcast.

I attended a live show in Houston, Texas, in 2018. At the time, I had no idea I would be writing about *MFMM* for my dissertation. Had I known, I might have jotted down some of my experiences after the show, but then again, a certain informality is part of what it means to listen to and produce podcasts, so maybe I wouldn't have. I attended the show with a group of friends. I remember waiting in line before the show surrounded by hundreds of fellow murderinos, most of whom were wearing *MFMM* merchandise. I remember shirts that said, "Toxic Masculinity Ruins the Party Again" and "Murderino." There were many other shirts and swag with Karen and Georgia's famous sayings on them.

I always listen to the podcast by myself, usually through a set of headphones. It is an intimate act that can lead listeners to believe that the hosts are speaking to them personally. The experience of being surrounded by people while also listening to this live recording of the podcast I love so dearly was jarring. I noticed I had trouble watching them on stage and also processing their words. I was not used to listening to Karen and Georgia with other people, especially in a large theater full of loud fans. I remember feeling annoyed at the people who constantly yelled out or talked through the whole show. My aversion to the live show was shocking since I was such a huge fan. The experience that felt hyper-personal became hyper-public. There was something about this event that was exciting, but felt definitively *not* like a

podcast. Podcasting carries the feeling of an intimate conversation between friends and this rock-concert ambiance was a jarring juxtaposition.

Podcasts are “audio and video files that can be downloaded to a desktop computer, iPod, or other portable media player for playback later” (McClung and Johnson 83). The Podcasting format has origins in talk radio and radio broadcasting. While podcasting initially posed a threat to radio broadcasting, it was eventually adopted as an opportunity. Podcasting became a great prospect for audiences and radio broadcaster to free themselves from the “tyranny of live.” (Murray 199). It also offered producers an opportunity to explore a wider range of topic more in depth. Many news sources and radio broadcasting company’s also have their own podcasts. Although the name “podcast” originates with a reference to the Apple iPod, podcasts can be downloaded or streamed, and accessed on most smartphones, computers, tablets. Podcasts range from traditional radio talk shows to “radio plays,” to downloadable versions of radio and video programs. Investigative journalists have created podcasts to spread awareness on silenced or controversial issues (e.g. *Serial*, *Dr. Death*). Many podcasts feature hosts discussing a popular television show. Both true crime and comedy, as separate genres, were regularly featured in podcasts prior to *MFMM*, but *MFMM* was the first to combine the two. Stand-up comedy is something that audiences are accustomed to experiencing in public, and true crime is something that audiences are accustomed to watching in private, on television on programs such as *America’s Most Wanted*. The typical media for these performances tells the audience to assume that they are not alone, that “the world” is watching with them. Podcasting, at least in 2014-2020, carried with it the sense that one was listening by oneself or in the relatively select company of other listeners who “get it” and are in on the joke (or horror).

## DIY Aesthetic

One significant aspect of the podcast is its "do-it-yourself (DIY)" capabilities (Meserko "Standing Upright" 22). The narrative around the medium is "anyone can start a podcast." The DIY nature of podcasts provides anyone the opportunity to start a podcast from their garage or living room. It is possible to order a podcast microphone and begin recording a podcast with very minimum technological supplies. A basic setup costs less than \$200, but studio recording space can cost tens of thousands of dollars. Karen and Georgia's early apartment recordings begin at one end of the spectrum, while their new studio set up is at the other end. During the COVID 19 pandemic, Karen and Georgia began to record via Zoom from their respective homes, returning to some of their DIY roots. Even their studio recorded sessions carry some of this spirit. They may not be hunched in closets with towels to block out ambient noise, but they still carry the feeling of "Hey, we're making this up as we go along."

One example of the DIY ethos in *MFMM* occurs at the beginning of the episode after Georgia burps into the camera. Karen hits the table and causes the mics to cut out. Karen then calls for Steven, their audio engineer, to fix the issue:

Georgia: [laughs]

Karen: Did you hear that Steven?

Steven: No.

Georgia: Oh.

Karen: I slapped the table and all the audio went out for me and Georgia.

Georgia: [laughs]

Karen: Plug our things in.

Steven: Can you hear yourselves?

Karen & Georgia: Yeah.

Steven: Ok, cool.

Karen: Yeah, we're in.

In this moment, we hear a technical issue take place. Steven is the audio engineer for the podcast and really only speaks when spoken to. They call out to him to fix necessary technical issues or as a joke, when they want him to edit something out. They will say "Steven, edit that out!" and the joke is, Steven doesn't edit it out. This gives listeners the feeling that Karen, Georgia, and Steven are "winging it." In reality, this is a performative move that creates the DIY aesthetic that shapes the way we interact with the podcast. Some podcasts would edit this portion out, that is, if they were going for a polished product, or trying to "mask" the DIY aesthetic.

The DIY nature of the podcast medium has opened doors for comedians. Meserko writes about comedy podcasts and how comedians have successfully made space for themselves to exist within the often exclusive ranks of comedy performers. Addressing the possibilities of podcasting, Meserko writes, "an analysis of podcast discourse is an object lesson in the way that emerging media are giving identity to subcultures, reinforcing the characteristics that define them while providing a forum for reflection and critical insight" (38). In other words, podcasting has opened up doors for subcultures to reinforce their group ethos while bypassing traditional gatekeepers such as network executives and booking agents. Since professional comedy is a highly competitive race to be popular, comedians have taken to the podcasting platform, many becoming quite successful in cultivating niche audiences. Those who succeed are able to make a living, gain a foothold in a cutthroat industry, and contribute to conversations from which they would have previously been shut out. Such success often comes from identifying or creating a subculture that is hungry for content that would not interest a mainstream audience. Karen and

Georgia deem their listeners "murderinos," a term Karen and Georgia borrowed for people who consume true crime. The term "murderino" tells listeners that they are part of an elite group who are in on the joke. It tells them that their choice in entertainment is not just about leisure time, but is also an identity they can proudly perform. Although the episodes feel like conversations between friends, they are distinctly conversations that would not be appropriate in most friendships. Karen and Georgia often speak about the taboo nature of the topics they discuss. By highlighting the taboo, they cue listeners to identify as members of the "cult" willing to challenge the taboo. Discussing murder stories blatantly in social situations is stigmatized, often horrifying people who do not consume true crime. The podcast medium carves a space for murderinos to gather. In other words, the podcast's DIY nature allows for non-mainstream cultures to gather.

The DIY nature of podcasts extends from production to consumption. With the ubiquity of smartphones, few barriers exist for listeners to subscribe to podcast series. Not only are they typically free to stream, but they are available on many different platforms, including Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, and Spotify. Since the medium has expanded visibility for entertainers, journalists, and even listeners, podcasts have opened up doors for a wide variety of non-mainstream narratives. One popular podcast by investigative journalist and *This American Life* alumna Sarah Koneg's *Serial* explicitly calls attention to injustice in the criminal justice system. Doane writes, "audio media such as *Serial* are accessible to the public, often available for free online, and reach a diverse listenership. Scholars can engage the public with multimedia pieces that then serve as catalysts for discussions on social justice topics, without preformed criticism or ideological stance"(120).

In other words, podcasts can engage a wider public while also discussing social justice issues that may never receive attention in mainstream media. Thus, podcasts may provide an opportunity for what bell hooks would call "talking back." According to hooks, "talking back" is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side. "Talking back" is an opportunity for the exploited to respond to oppressive power structures. Many investigative journalist podcasts like *Serial* have gained popularity and made the public aware and critical of the often corrupt justice system. Michael Buoziš echoes the idea that podcasts give "voice to the accused" while also providing a voice to challenge institutional truth claims from within crime journalism (245). This exposure and widespread access provide more opportunities to challenge mainstream discourse. While the success of podcasts at creating sustained challenges is debatable, the idea that one is challenging the "mainstream" as a podcast producer and consumer is a well-established trope that has its roots in the decentralized ways that the medium is distributed. Even if one is listening along with millions of others, podcasting has a way of making listeners feel like they are in an exclusive group.

Comedy podcasts address a wider variety of topics than do true crime podcasts, but they share the DIY ethos and the sense that "anyone" can be a star. Meserko writes about how Los Angeles comedians, mostly men, have taken to podcasts to make a space for themselves:

These podcasters have each forged distinct places for themselves within this community, and their use of this upstart medium represents an important case study in the shifting cultural dynamics that the podcast introduces. The podcast medium allows this group of comedians not only to skirt FCC regulations and produce content not indebted to advertisers, gatekeepers, club owners, or executives, but also to feel empowered that their content will reach their most ardent fans in the most direct, intimate way. (20)

In other words, podcasts have provided an alternative way for comedians to build their careers, bypassing industry gatekeepers. This has been true for Marc Maron, a once struggling comedian who has become a podcasting superstar. Marc Maron worked as a comedian for years and



struggled to find sustained success. Maron’s brand of dark, hyper-confessional comedy won him the respect of many fellow comedians but never mass acclaim. When his show on the now defunct Air America radio station was cancelled, he snuck back into the studio and recorded his own episodes to distribute himself in the podcast that would become *WTF with Marc Maron*. He has since interviewed nearly every major comedian, many popular musicians, and one U.S. president. Both Meserko and Symon claim that this is an example of the possibilities podcasts provide. Symons claims that a new generation of 'outsider' comedians (Maron included) is challenging the American television industry's power through podcasting, which largely excluded them. This “stick it to the man” ethos is a significant part of how podcasts make meaning. Not all podcasts try to “stick it” to the same “man,” of course—Joe Rogan, arguably the most popular podcaster in the US, is an anti-vaxxer and supporter of Trump; Maron is decidedly on the left politically— but “sticking it to the man” is a dominant discursive trope in podcasting writ large.

Karen and Georgia’s story fits squarely within this frame. Both started in the entertainment industry but struggled to find success for many years. Karen began as a stand-up comedian in Sacramento before moving to Los Angeles, where she spent most of her stand-up career while also writing for television. Karen often speaks about the comedy industry, the trials, the bureaucracy, the frustrating nature of comedy. Karen speaks about specific experiences at comedy clubs and the array of shows she performed highlighting her bona fides as someone who struggled in the trenches of the industry. Georgia started as a blogger before eventually landing a spot on TLC's *Unique Sweets*, a comedic food show where Georgia and her cohost traveled around and ate sweets. Both had enough success to keep them going, but neither had a “hit” prior to *MMF*. The story Karen and Georgia tell and re-tell on *MMF* is one of closed doors and hustles

prior to podcasting. This frames *MFM* as a subcultural achievement. Their podcast asks listeners to affirm the medium that is bringing them together with their hosts. The “mainstream” kept us apart, *murderinos*, but now this alternative medium is bringing us together. “Join us in our apartment as we talk about murder stories, make jokes, and drink wine.” They thus offer listeners not just a sense of intimacy and togetherness, but a sense of freedom. “The man” doesn’t want us to be *murderinos*, but as DIY podcast consumers and creators we can find one another and make meaning together. The dominant DIY aesthetic carries over even into highly produced episodes of *MFM*. This is, in part, because being DIY is part of the situational and material constraints, or at least the generic expectations, of podcasts as a medium.

This DIY ethos emerges from material and situational constraints of podcasting, but it does not stay there. It is, to some degree, a myth that “anyone” can start or consume a podcast. They are free and can be accessed from any smartphone device, computer, or tablet. However, the reality is that some may not have access to these technologies or to the data plans to download episodes. Additionally, while less expensive than opening a comedy club or a movie studio, it is still time-intensive and expensive to start a podcast. Many who want to start a podcast may not have the time if their work schedules do not allow. Also, editing and publishing a podcast may pose a challenge for those lacking the necessary technological skills to do so. Even having access to a closet free from noisy neighbors, traffic, children, and pets is a privilege many do not have. The DIY origin stories of podcasts, including *MFM*, obscure the relative levels of privilege necessary to gain access to the “free” medium.

### **Public Intimacy**

As Langellier and Peterson note, storytelling is not just bound by “situational and material constraints,” it also requires bodies to bring stories to life (14). Karen and Georgia

spend considerable time and energy making their episodes feel intimate, as though they are produced by the two of them as specific bodies for their listeners to also hear as specific bodies. While some podcasts are available in video form, the primary means for this aspect of storytelling in podcasting are heard. Audiences consume the story by engaging with tone, volume, pitch and overall vocal delivery. They cannot see the person who is telling the story, but know they are there. Thus, they imagine how the host may look or what they are doing at particular points of the story. When the hosts laugh, audiences picture someone laughing. Karen and Georgia achieve this aspect of storytelling primarily by serving as surrogate audiences for one another's stories. They tell their stories to the audience by first telling their stories to one another. They tell one another stories for the first time. One of them has researched the crime in question. The other has not. The storytelling style, though rehearsed and edited, feels extemporaneous and left up to chance. They often interact with one another, ask questions, and interject for emphasis. Even when they repeat all or part of a story in different episodes, it always has the feeling of being told for the first time. They repeat key phrases and details from the story. In short, Karen and Georgia embody each other's stories as surrogates for the distanced audience who will listen to the recording later.

One way this embodiment happens is through the improvisational ways they interact with each other. For example, as Georgia begins her story, she mentions the location of the murder of Davina Buff Jones and the rest is history:

Georgia:                   Let me first start by telling you about a little place called Bald Head Island.

Karen:                     [sighs] Is my dad there?

Georgia:                  [laughs]

Karen:                     I told you I didn't want to talk about him anymore. [laughs]

Georgia: He's there with my husband and they're having a grand old time.

Karen: And a lot of people we know actually

Georgia: That's right.

This moment feels left up to chance. Karen and Georgia are embodying each other's comments extemporaneously and in-turn gives listeners the feeling that they are not only improvising, but also perhaps, sitting next to them in the room.

Karen and Georgia often talk about how new listeners either cannot tell them apart based on their voices, or get them mixed up when they see what they look like. They mirror each other's speech so well that the audience often gets the feeling that they are part of the same entity. They give the impression of best friends who can finish each other's sentences without skipping a beat. The audience cannot see the performer's physical body, nor can the performer see the audience's reactions. The audience can imagine the performer's facial expression, but similarly to hearing someone's voice, the audience must use their imaginations. Because audiences lack explicit visual imagery of their bodies, Karen and Georgia give the impression of an intensely shared spirit of embodiment. The audience can consume the stories while walking, driving, cleaning, working. Their bodies are free to be only partly engaged in the act of listening in no small part because Karen and Georgia are so deeply engaged in listening to one another. In another moment shortly after the Bald Head Island jokes, Georgia begins telling a story about Davina Buff Jones:

Georgia: [laughs] By her 30th birthday she's been married and divorced twice. In 1994, she's charged with simple assault for—are you ready for this— spitting on the mother of her then husband's child during an argument.

Karen: Look, that's a tough situation.

Georgia: Sure.

Karen: No spitting allowed.

Georgia: No spitting.

Karen: This is just, like, the pool rules always. No bottles, no cut-offs, no Running, no spitting.

Georgia: I think that's a great rule.

Karen: And you can throw a no gum rule in there if you're one of those kinds of people.

Georgia: Yeah and like maybe take a shower before you get in the pool and if you have diarrhea, don't go in the pool.

Karen: Yeah, stay out of the pool with diarrhea.

Georgia: That's right.

Karen: These are the pool rules. Apply to all of life.

In this moment, Karen and Georgia are quite literally repeating each other's words quickly, riffing on the scenario. They are mirroring each other's speech, attitudes, beliefs, and rhythm. Their connection and friendship are palpable. The listener feels the "simpatico" between Karen and Georgia, the like-mindedness and compatibility they represent for the audience. The connection between them and the active embodiment of each other's stories is undeniable in this moment. Audience members are invited to listen in such an intimate way.

Usually, I listen to the podcast by myself. I often listen in my headphones as I walk. The experience feels hyper-personal and exclusive. I am aware of others enough not to walk into them, but my body is mostly "tuned" to Karen and Georgia. I am in my little podcast world, left to my interpretations. In turn, I form a unique relationship to the podcast dependent on my own subjective experiences and beliefs. I feel as though I know Karen and Georgia, as if I am part of a private conversation.

*MFM* also extends this sense of embodied community. Listening to *MFM* feels hyper-personal, but it is simultaneously hyper-public. Thousands of people are walking around listening to *MFM* in their headphones. This is the nature of the podcast. It is actively making a personal experience feel shared. When Karen and Georgia mention "murderinos," I am reminded of the other people listening to the same podcast. At this moment, I remember my podcast experience is not unique. In this moment of intimacy, I am reminded that there are thousands of others with me having similar experiences. Podcasts as a medium allow this intimacy, but the people using the medium know what they're doing. Meserko writes about podcasting as a space that promotes intimacy between listener and performer ("Going Mental" 456). Analyzing Paul Gilmartin's podcast, *Mental Illness Happy Hour*, Meserko argues that this podcast disrupts normative understandings of celebrity interaction. By disclosing personal stories of their fears, trauma, and addictions, the lines between audience and performer and self-help are disrupted (457). Gilmartin's podcast has attracted over a million listeners. *The Mental Illness Happy Hour* is marketed as "a self-help podcast for people suffering from depression, anxiety, or mere frustration" (457). Gilmartin himself remarked, "There's no other medium where you can take your soul out and put it on the table and say: This is me" (qtd, in "Going Mental" 457). Gilmartin views his podcast as the only space where his "true" identity is allowed to exist. The celebrity or public figure is presented to the audience in a unique light, uninhibited by stage lights, cameras, or the strict demarcation of audience and performer. This brings up the question of authenticity and "true" identity.

Additionally, personal disclosure by celebrity complicates audience/performer relationships. Many scholars have explored this phenomenon since celebrities have become more easily accessible via social media and podcasting. Celebrities used to reveal personal matters

through mediated interviews, press conferences, and TV specials. However, since the rise of social media, this dynamic has been complicated. Celebrities self-disclose, share their personal stories, and invite the audience/public into their life.

Marwiche and Boyd characterize celebrity as an ever-changing "performative practice" rather than a set of personal characteristics or labels. Marwiche writes, "This [performative] practice involved ongoing maintenance of a fan base, performed intimacy, authenticity and access, and construction of a consumable persona" (140). Micro-celebrity is a term used to describe online and offline behavior linked to self-branding and strategic presentation of self. This has resulted from reality TV, social media, and the rising popularity of behind-the-scenes access to celebrities. One of the main characteristics of micro-celebrity involves viewing friends or "followers" as a fan base.

Podcasting has emerged as a medium for celebrities to disclose personal information about their struggles, mental health, and relationships and face both their "backstage" and "frontstage" presentation of self. Erving Goffman's, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* explores the idea that people, like actors, are constantly navigating "frontstage" and "backstage" versions of themselves. For example, the backstage would be the green room in a theater where people can relax, or a break room at the grocery store. The "frontstage" is the stage, or the moment you walk out of the breakroom and are expected to "perform" whatever is expected of you.

Identity and "self" are crafted through interactions with others. Goffman's "impression management" refers to this tension of upholding a preferred self-image, whether by encouraging social norms or challenging the power structures that uphold the social norms. Thus, negotiating self-presentation is always a performance practice and struggle in maintaining or saving "face."

The disconnect between a famous person's public persona and their own "authentic self" has always fascinated audiences. Podcasting as a medium allows celebrities and micro-celebrities to blur the lines between frontstage and backstage presentations of self.

Karen and Georgia's negotiation of "frontstage" and "backstage" is a blurry distinction. When *MFM* debuted in 2014, Karen and Georgia had experience in the entertainment industry but were not well-known public figures. They were upfront and candid in their failures, endeavors, and personal battles with their mental health, and Hollywood. They set a tone of self-disclosure as a foundation of the podcast. Yes, they shared murder stories, but they also shared stories about themselves. Their performance on *MFM* has always contained a "performance of backstage access" (Marwich and Boyd 145).

Marwich and Boyd focus on celebrity interaction through social media. They do not address podcasting and how it also encourages a specific type of celebrity/fan relationship. Meserko claims, "It tests previously held assumptions and makes ambiguous the lines between performer and audience, audience, and self-help community" (456). In other words, by expressing personal struggles with mental health to the public in the form of podcasts, the more traditional sense of celebrity vs. fan is challenged, and fans take on a different role, a more active role, one with perceived intimacy. I believe Karen and Georgia's performance in *MFM* operates similarly to Gilmartin's. It is achieving a certain level of intimacy and identification that complicates traditional notions of celebrity-fan.

When I first started listening to *MFM*, I would often get defensive if someone had anything negative to say about it. It didn't just feel like people were attacking a work of art that I liked. It felt like they were attacking me personally. I soon learned that many other murderinos felt the same way. A sense of camaraderie develops between individuals who listen to the



podcast. It acts as a symbol for people, and an immediate bond forms between listeners. If I see a bumper sticker or a T-shirt that says SSDGM (Stay Sexy, Don't Get Murdered), I immediately know that I share something important with the other person. The "fan cult" of murderinos is made possible by some of the situational and material constraints of the podcasting medium and by the particular ways that Karen and Georgia embody their stories. Combined, these two aspects of *MFMM* give the sense of a hyper-personal and hyper-public experience that is "outside" of the mainstream. When other murderinos and I nod at each other's swag on the street, we are not just saying that we like the same kinds of entertainment, but that we are the same kind of person. While it may not have been Karen and Georgia's initial intention to create a massive, devoted "fan cult," they have done so, nonetheless. Their carefully crafted engagement with the possibilities and limitations of the material constraints and embodied nature of the podcasting medium is just one piece of the puzzle in how they managed to create a mass following. Namely, they used a DIY aesthetic and performance of public "backstage" intimacy. But this is not the only piece of the puzzle. In the next chapter, I turn to some of the specific discursive regularities of comedy that are at play in the podcast.

## **CHAPTER FOUR.**

### **COMEDIC STRATEGIES: IMPROVISATION AND FAILURE**

Karen and Georgia call *MFMM* a "true crime comedy podcast." This genre distinction implies that *MFMM* contains elements of comedy and true crime. I bet you didn't see that one coming. Karen Kilgariff often talks about her career as a stand-up comic, comedy writer, and what she calls a "guitar comic." Karen has spent several years working in the comedy industry and is open about it on *MFMM* and even more open about it on her podcast with comic Chris Fairbanks, *Do You Need a Ride?* The true crime element complicates the comic element and vice versa. Since Karen and Georgia are women who also talk about women's issues, I draw on the insights of Joanne Gilbert, who explicitly addresses comedy and gender. Gilbert's insight draws attention to the tendency to dismiss and categorize humor as "men's humor" or "women's humor." These inadequate categorizations often lead to understanding women in comedy, as of course, subordinate to men, hopelessly "marginalized." Women are only funny if they can "take a joke" made by the ultimate rulers of comedy, MEN. In the words of Karen and Georgia, "toxic masculinity ruins the party again."

In her book, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*, Joanne Gilbert addresses the performative intersections of gender and comedy. Gilbert reflects on her own experience as a stand-up comic in the 80s and draws from performance studies scholarship. Gilbert argues that the "strategies women have used for years to articulate their worldview can teach us a great deal about humor, gender, and power" (XV). Gilbert is critical of previous scholars such as Judy Little and Regina Barreca who have suggested that women create a distinct "women's humor" and "feminist humor" (25-26). Gilbert finds this labeling as dismissive of the critical work that women do in/as comedic performance. These labels perform the marginality that women in comedy have deftly long resisted. Instead, Gilbert looks at how women have

resisted marginality, paying equal attention to the moves female comedians make and critical responses to these moves (XV). In other words, she examines the marginalization of women in comedy as an effect of specific discursive practices, not as an assumed state of the world. Ultimately, Gilbert stresses that women "perform marginality" and get paid to perform their marginality, often in a subversive way. Gilbert explains that marginal humor provides a rich subject of study, full of insights into how power functions in society to oppress some while liberating others. I draw on Gilbert to stress the importance of examining how humor is often simplified and categorized in irresponsible ways. Dismissal of humor and dismissal of women, in fact, often go hand in hand. To assume that women are "marginalized" as a state of being, rather than enactors of and resisters to "marginalization" is to miss some of the complex ways that female comedians move within discourses of comedy.

One of the key aspects of comedic discourse from which Karen and Georgia draw strategically is improvisation. Improvisation is most commonly used through mainstream performances such as comedy, jazz, and freestyle rap. The basic building block of improvisational comedy is the phrase "Yes, and. . . ." This translates to saying "yes" to your partner's proposition and then adding new material to advance the scene. Accepting and continuing with the idea ensures the scene will continue rolling. Saying "no" or failing to add to the scene stalls or halts the entire performance (Attardo 382). Improvisational comedy is often staged live but has been popularized in TV shows like *Whose Line is It Anyway*, where actors play improv games on stage. It is challenging to choose a specific moment that Karen and Georgia use improvisation as a performative move since it constantly occurs throughout this, and almost every other episode of *MFM*. Since the start of the podcast in 2014, improvisation has been a significant theme. As the podcast has developed a more consistent structure, this structure

has privileged space for improvisation. For example, Karen and Georgia move through the opening portion of each episode with updates about themselves and announcements. This portion of the show has become less improvisational, and less personal, over time as they have gained success. However, they still keep the improvisational spirit alive by updating listeners on the news regarding their podcast network *Exactly Right*, with live TV show recommendations, movies, and other podcast recommendations. For example, Georgia gives a long list of podcast recommendations from *Exactly Right* network at the beginning of the show:

- Georgia: Um, lemme talk about the exactly right network and what you can look forward to right now?
- Karen: This is, uh, Georgia's podcast guide.
- Georgia: Don't press fast forward because this is good shit too.
- Karen: Yeah, there's upcoming other shows. Sometimes, there's people who tweet at us and say, "Excuse me, I just listened to the whole, um, all... every episode. Now what do I do? Well, here's your answer.
- Georgia: Oh.
- Karen: Here's what you do.
- Georgia: Oh!
- Karen: Right?
- Georgia: Handpicked by us. So, the Fall line. Incredible podcast. Their new season starts on the 12<sup>th</sup>, which is yesterday.
- Karen: Two days ago?
- Georgia: Yesterday. Uh, and they're doing Beaufort County Jane Doe. The whole season is going to be really good. Uh, *This Podcast Will Kill You*, everyone's fuckin favorite podcast about infectious diseases.
- Karen: Who doesn't wanna hear about it?
- Georgia: They're doing a coronavirus special.

Karen: Yes, they are.

Georgia: Which is really exciting.

Karen: It's topical. It's the fear on every... On everyone's lips these days, and it's all in the news, um, and the ladies are gonna break down the Coronavirus for you.

This is just a portion of the long list of podcast recommendations they provide. In this example, Karen and Georgia interact with each other improvisationally as they provide their listeners with recommendations. That is to say, even though they have most likely planned this portion of their show, they remain committed to giving their listeners a sense that the episodes are happening in “real time.” While listeners can download episodes and listen to them at any time, these references serve to remind the listener that the hosts are not artifacts, but living people engaged in the world. Whereas early episodes featured a sense of personal disclosure and connection— as if to say “yes, listener, those things that you see, I see too.” Now this portion of the episode assumes a committed fan base and tries to send those fans out into other spaces where they can also enact their fandom. This commitment to an improvisational “in the moment” style is something that *MFMM* draws from stand-up comedy, which, no matter how many times it has been rehearsed, tries to give its audience a sense that it is happening for the first time live.

This improvisational spirit continues as the episode progresses with each host taking turns telling the other a story. During Karen's turn to tell a story, Georgia listens to this story for the first time, and vice versa. This allows more opportunity for improvisational performative moves. Improvisation allows for mistakes, failed jokes, misinterpretations. Thus, Karen and Georgia improvise through each other's stories adding commentary, jokes, insight, and stories from their lives. Karen and Georgia's jokes during their murder story appear planned, but sometimes it is impossible to know. We can only assume based on their reactions to each other.

Karen and Georgia take discourses of true crime and make them discourses of stand-up comedy through this commitment to improvisation.

One of the clearest examples of this improvisational spirit comes from the moment Georgia describes Bald Head Island during the story of Davina Buff Jones. As she describes the characteristics of the island, Georgia makes a mistake that spawns a conversation appearing to be completely improvisational. Instead of saying "plantation-style" beach homes," she accidentally says, "plantain style beach homes."

Georgia: Bald Head Island.

Karen: Oh, got it.

Georgia: So, the place we're talking about.

Karen: Oh, got it.

Georgia: So, it's a place where one-percenters' million-dollar plantain style beach homes, like, fucking...

Karen: Plantation?

Georgia: [laughs] What did I say?

Karen: [laughs] Plantain.

Georgia: I wrote Plantation, it's not plantain-style. That would be gross.

Karen & Georgia: [laughs]

Karen: It's a delicious little banana that's been fried up... a little sour cream.

Georgia: Truly love them. A little crème fraiche on there?

Karen: The more problematic plantation-style mansion?

Georgia: That's right. You know, in that style of fuckin' rich people.

Georgia makes a mistake. Karen addresses it. She doesn't just correct it and move on; however, she uses the mistake as an opportunity to "Yes, and..." her co-performer. She takes the mistake and reframes it as though it was done on purpose. This is an excellent example of how improvisational methods allow for play and possibility. Karen goes on with the joke replying, "it's a delicious little banana that's been fried up... a little sour cream," and then eventually corrects the mistake by saying "the more problematic plantation-style homes." At this moment, Karen and Georgia express their attitudes on plantations, historic homes that housed slaves. Karen addresses this misstep while also improvising and expressing her views on plantation-style homes as "problematic." The mistake of "plantains" draws attention to the word "plantation" which is a discursive trope in architecture that is often spoken while forgetting its original meaning. The detour through "plantain" makes "plantation" visible and discussible. By giving each other space to make mistakes, and committing to those mistakes, their comedy invites insights into some of the often-taken-for-granted aspects of race and class that are embedded in everyday language. In other words, not only does improvisation allow for play and possibility, but it provides an opportunity to challenge power structures in the way that Michel de Certeau's describes in his writing on "strategies" and "tactics." For de Certeau, a "strategy" is always the site of power (36). It is "the way things are done." Strategy posits control. Strategies are self-segregating in the way administration and management are self-segregating. "Plantation" shutters are part of a strategy embedding race and class inequality into housing. "Strategies" are in place as systems of power meant to discipline and organize bodies, whether consciously or unconsciously (36).

In contrast to "strategy," de Certeau describes *tactics* as the maneuvers of the non-powerful or oppressed (37). Tactics are an adaptation to the environment that has been crafted by

the powerful. De Certeau calls tactics the art of "making-do," a survival technique that is always "limited by the possibilities of the moment" (38). Tactics always involve turning something into an opportunity. The shared space of comedic improvisation becomes a tactical place from which Karen and Georgia reflect on privilege, including their own. Their willingness to not only be "wrong" but to embrace the possibilities of their error create a tactical space from which they can open up new possibilities of how they relate to one another and their listeners.

Throughout *MFM*, Karen and Georgia have improvised other sayings that are direct responses to power. Many of these sayings become codified as inside jokes, humor that only those who were there "in the moment" would understand. De Certeau would call this a "tactic." Take, for instance, the phrase "Fuck Politeness," one of Karen and Georgia's famous phrases appearing on shirts, stickers, mugs. This phrase emerged from conversation, a response to women feeling they must be polite in situations that may be unsafe. For example, when Ted Bundy, the famous serial killer, approached women asking for assistance, Karen and Georgia would tell them to "fuck politeness" and get out of there. It was first spoken "in the moment" as a response to a specific character in a story, but over time it became a reference to more than just that one listener. The phrase is a response to power and the power structures that have shaped the ways women are allowed to respond. Women feel they must be polite. This systemic "strategy" is in place to keep women docile, respectful, and obedient. "Fuck politeness" stands as a symbol of an improvisational tactic performed in response to a strategy to discipline and control women's bodies. "Fuck Politeness" is a way of making do in a system designed to control and discipline women. In context, it also points to how most true crime discourse does not function to empower women. It tells women that the world is a scary place and simultaneously, that they are responsible for protecting themselves not through fighting back directly, but by passive



aggressively being a “nice” girl to whom “those kinds of things,” will be less likely to happen.

Adopting improvisational comedic methods has shifted the often stifling true crime narrative that tells women to be scared, not run at night, and always be on the lookout. Instead it offers a brash ethos that says, “We Are Allowed To Be Here!” Women do not have to earn the right to exist in public by being polite or living in fear.

Verit Amit and Caroline Knowles expand on the ideas of De Certeau by deepening and extending our theoretical understanding of mobility in our daily rounds. “Tacking,” similar to *tactics*, provides ways to make new choices to respond to new possibilities. Amit and Knowles write: “To keep moving, a person may have to shift away from their original destination rather than continue to navigate in a direct line. But this kind of shift relies on a combination of knowledge, experience and improvisation.” In other words, tactics, improvisation, and “tacking” rely on a conscious shift away from the perceived or predictable path. Amit and Knowles explain, “Improvisation and creativity, we contend, are intrinsic to the very processes of social and cultural life” (168). Whether consciously or not, all of us frequently engage with improvisation while navigating space. This is part of our social condition. Amit and Knowles explain how this opens up a chance for new opportunities. When this improvisational spirit is enacted through the aesthetic performance practices of comedy, they become not just a moment of resistance, but a battle cry for a movement of resisters. Fuck Politeness.

Politeness implies a need for order, and it is often asked of women more than men, as though it is women’s job to be the keepers of social order, the “gentler sex.” Improvisation allows an element of mystery and an opportunity to challenge existing systems. Like a good standup routine, *MFM* keeps its listeners on edge. There is no way to predict where Karen or Georgia will land, which is part of the lure of improvisational methods that often destabilize

hierarchy and provide the oppressed a space to exist. By committing to improvisations, Karen and Georgia create possibility for other people imprisoned by politeness to live in a less predictable, more liberating way. It is necessary to “Fuck Politeness” to protect oneself from Ted Bundy and from other less extreme but no less insidious violators of women’s autonomy.

While many speech acts can rely to some degree on improvisation, it is essential to humor. Sean Zwagerman argues that this is one reason why women have turned to humor to communicate with men throughout American literature. Because their explicit performative speech has been traditionally denied women have used humor because it is a place where the rules of performativity operate differently. Zwagerman writes, "If performative humor's direction of fit is word-to-word, then "hundreds of" neologisms women have introduced are indeed powerful linguistic "currency" for purchasing new worldviews and social constructs"(52). In other words, if language and humor is a performative act to be taken seriously, regardless of the many misogynist readings of women's humor, women are inevitably creating new discourse through their way of navigating humor.

The phrase "fuck politeness" is an example of how improvisation and comedy create new pathways, world views, and ways of being. In a simple two-word comic performative, so much is happening. This performative act is not something to be taken lightly. Moreover, considering the massive following and evident success of *MFMT*, and specifically, the success of their impromptu quotable phrases, it is clear that these performative acts are a compelling source of exploration. By creating these catchphrases, Karen and Georgia not only construct a place for women to see themselves, but they also challenge existing discourse.

Zwagerman uses the ideas of Thurber to unpack gendered ideas of humor, how stereotypes of women and men engaging each other through humor function. Essentially Thurber

is a humorist who believes women and men are always combative with humor and connect across enemy lines. Zwagerman writes,

Against Searle's methodological justification that without abstraction and idealization, there is no systematization (speech acts 56), the shiftiness of humor, and the unpredictable and far-from ideal world of talk, remind us of the real-world obstacles to successful performative speech in everyday contexts. Though talk may be informal, its success is serious and important—given talk's absence of formalized, constitutive rules to support and authenticate success—often difficult. (4)

In other words, while these informal improvisational moments of humor may seem trivial, they are essential tools for creating new ways of being. I have shown how improvisation and comedy can be tools for challenging mainstream discourse, a significant theme throughout *MFM*. It is also important to note that *MFM* relies heavily on the relationship between Karen and Georgia. They are co/creators/co-directors, and their performance relies on the dynamic between them.

As Karen and Georgia have grown in popularity, it does seem like they have allowed for fewer improvisation techniques. Their chains of citation have become more predictable over time. However, it is essential to note that they intentionally allow improvisation to materialize together as a pair. I believe this is one of the central themes in the podcast that have helped shaped their discursive space, and this process relies on Karen and Georgia as co-directors and collaborators. Improvisation as a performative technique carries implications that I will explain through my experience co-directing a comedy show and through theories on improvisation. As I move through my own experience, I will also explain how I have gained more understanding of the process of co-directing, specifically as it relates to *MFM*.

I had the opportunity to co-direct a show called “Funny Her Her” with Cynthia Sampson in the Hopkins Black Box (albeit virtually) in the Department of Communications Studies at Louisiana State University. The show took place in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, so we decided to employ a fully mediated website instead of a live show. The performance was

asynchronous so that participants could explore the website on their own time. The process of co-directing and co-creating a fully mediated comedy show was a journey. We met via zoom and decided on a platform and direction for the show. We played, failed, listened, and said: "Yes, and..." Eventually, we found some grounding for our content. The show was a "choose your own adventure"-style website, so there was no predetermined way for the audience to move through the show. In this way, the audience was forced to participate in improvisation by choosing their own way through the performance. They had to click on links to get to the next page, and there were links within links. Thus, the performance could not be structured the exact same way every single time. The performance itself exemplified how improvisational methods allow for freedom of new experience. It also allowed me to understand the process of collaborating that Karen and Georgia utilize gracefully and sometimes ungracefully.

Cynthia and I also participated in a National Communication Association (NCA) conference panel about collaboration and co-directing methods. The panel was titled "Collaborative Directing at the Crossroads: Mapping the Future of Communication Studies by Means of Performance Methods." The panel's description focused on the creative process of co-directing. This panel and my co-directing experience gave me insight into Karen and Georgia's performative methods. Collaborating is by nature somewhat improvised, considering it is achieved without being provided a map or clear-cut directions. While *Funny Her Her* is not directly improvisational, I believe we created the show directly from improvisational methods.

A few years ago, I read Amy Poehler's memoir, *Yes Please*, and found myself captivated at the thought of everyday life as *improvisation*. While Poehler's book is not explicitly grounded in performance theory, her stories about her life and "improv" comedy drastically improved the quality of my life once embodied. I find that the five rules of improv as an approach or mindset

make the process of co-directing clearer. In what follows, I will draw on the five rules of improv as a guiding principle and tool for co-directing. This is more of a mindset or mode of operation to understand the collaboration process, a way to approach the process of co-creating. I believe Karen and Georgia enact these qualities as well.

The first rule of improv is “Play.” Conversational humor can be a strategy for enjoying the communication process for its own sake. Play for the sake of play, with no goal. We know play should be for pure enjoyment and unrelated to any goal you have. Play requires an inevitable release of control. Karen and Georgia engage in a level of “play,” which is an intentional performative choice. The example above where Georgia says “plantain” instead of “plantation” required a sense of play, a release into the unknown. This allows for the possibility of failure, which brings me to the second rule of improvisation. While creating “Funny Her Her” Cynthia and I started with several meetings Via Zoom. It was difficult to “play” through a screen. We would throw out ideas and jokes. Somehow “playing” via zoom fell short. Essentially, our “play” became more of a brainstorming session where Cynthia and I would throw out bad ideas to see how the other would react.

The second guiding principle of improv is to “fail.” Comedy and failure are constantly interacting. You can be “good” at comedy or even be a successful comedian, but there will still be people who do not think you are funny. Anyone who has ever tried to make a joke knows this. If you try comedy, you are going to fail at comedy. However, you will make someone laugh eventually. (Even a broken clock is right... What’s the saying?) There is always a fear of failure associated with directing, co-directing, performing in a show, and even podcasting. Halberstam's “Queer Art of Failure” reminds us that failure can offer a reward that allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline our behavior. Failure provides the possibility for existence

separate from normativity. Karen and Georgia have failed and continue to fail and that is the beauty of comedy. Cynthia and I failed daily while creating *Funny Her Her*. It was frustrating and confusing at times, but we knew in order to create funny content, we were going to fail in the process.

The third guiding principle of improv is to *listen*. I have listened to many podcasts—usually hosted by men—where the two hosts are not truly listening to each other. The conversation becomes more of a *competition*, as opposed to *collaboration*. The hosts talk over each other, ignore comments, and the conversation loses flow. However, Karen and Georgia appear to truly listen to each other. In order to respond improvisational with wit and personality, listening is an essential skill. Cynthia and I had very different senses of humor which made it somewhat difficult to choose content for the show. However, we did attempt to truly listen to each other's ideas. Listening via Zoom was difficult, and I relied heavily on nonverbal feedback, since so much communication is lost in the screen.

The fourth guiding principle of improvisation is to say "Yes, and..." This is the most well-known aspect of improv. Saying "Yes, and..." is an acknowledgment of the cohost's idea. Instead of completely shutting down their insight, "Yes, and..." encourages collaboration. Karen and Georgia "yes, and..." each other continuously throughout their performance. The banter that takes place in the scene above illustrates this. Instead of simply correcting Georgia's mistake, Karen builds on it by extending the joke. Karen says, "it's a delicious little banana that's been fried up... a little sour cream," and Georgia accepts the opportunity to riff with Karen by saying, "Truly love them. A little crème fraîche on there?" Improvisation as a performance method cannot succeed without "Yes, and..."

The fifth and final guiding principle of improvisation is to relax and have fun. While this may seem rudimentary, I think it is important to note that if the performer is not having any fun, specifically in comedy, the audience is probably not going to. Karen and Georgia's casual, conversational demeanor comes across as relaxed. They appear to be genuinely enjoying themselves! Laughter is a central part of the performance. Karen and Georgia always allow space for audible laughter, and we all know laughter is contagious.

When I listen to *MFMT*, I often laugh out loud or giggle to myself. Karen and Georgia's sense of humor speaks to me. The truth is that if it were not for their humor, I doubt I would have gotten hooked on *MFMT*. As I listen, I find that their cheeky comments and improvisational moments pull me in and keep me guessing. I am an active listener, engaged and enthusiastic about what's to come. The improvisation that is so prevalent in *MFMT* is partly why I love them. Karen and Georgia welcome failure and are willing to take a chance. A willingness to fail takes a tremendous amount of vulnerability. Once I started engaging with this type of comedy, I saw the world differently. It allowed for play, possibility, disaster! This podcast as a whole has a delicate balance of both comedy and tragedy, a compelling remark on life in general.

The discourses Karen and Georgia "take" and "make" have infiltrated my life. The juxtaposition of murder and comedy is stark in *MFMT*, and it illuminates much about the human condition. Karen and Georgia are illustrating Walter Benjamin's "taking" and "making" as they explicitly take true murder stories and make them into new stories fraught with comedy, tragedy, triumph, and failure. As Benjamin addresses, the storytellers, Karen and Georgia, become a character in the story. Karen and Georgia shape the story inserting pieces of themselves, their beliefs, their values, and their improvisation.

## CHAPTER FIVE. DESTABILIZING TRUE CRIME DISCOURSE

Karen and Georgia “take” known murder stories and “make” them into a new story. They take information from TV shows, Reddit, news articles, true crime websites, often citing the major sources in their story. The details and tone in Karen and Georgia’s stories are a performative choice. Their use of comedy and personal disclosure complicates existing true crime discourse. In this regard, Karen and Georgia are taking from an existing discourse and making new discourse that has its own set of rules, behaviors, and norms.

Karen and Georgia have a unique way of discussing true crime. As the podcast continues, Karen and Georgia make podcast, TV show, and movie recommendations. This is a standard segment of *MFMM*. Karen recommends *Sexy Unique Podcast*, a podcast about a reality television show not directly related to true crime. After, Karen and Georgia begin talking about a documentary about Ted Bundy told specifically from the perspective of Bundy’s longtime girlfriend. Karen and Georgia discuss their feelings about the documentary and their general desire to watch these often tragic, violent storylines.

Georgia: I love it. [referring to *Sexy Unique*] Speaking of reality TV, I watched the new Ted Bundy special.

Karen: Oh yes.

Georgia: Shockingly, I watched it with Vince [Georgia's husband] who is like not into...

Karen: He can't do that normally. [Karen interrupts]

Georgia: He can't. So, but he, I was like, can we just put this on? We just interviewed the amazing director and producer Trish Wood Ted Bundy falling for a killer. And it's just interviews with the women who were involved in the case, and so I really wanted to watch it from that angle. So, I put one episode on. And I was like let's just watch this. And later he was like, let's put that show on and I was like, what show? And he was like that Dahmer show. [laughs]



Karen: Vince!

Georgia: Like he doesn't even know what serial killer it is. but it was so good and the daughter of his girlfriend Liz, that lived with him?

Karen: When she was a little girl. She is so incredible, as played by Renee Zellweger for sure. in the future film

Georgia: In the future film. A punk rock Renee Zellweger. I just f\*\*\*\*\* loved her. They're so strong and you know everyone in the whole show is incredible.

Karen: And it's such a cool thing you know we had a long long conversation with Trish Wood all about editing it down to a very short thing, but umm maybe we'll make that available. It was such a fascinating thing to actually discuss with the Creator director about looking at it feels like this is the trajectory of True Crime the culture of True Crime interest is now taking because the majority of the audience is women and the interest has to do with being kind of being a woman any idea that we're now taking these things instead of the strange attention that we're paying to the perpetrators of the crime instead.

Georgia: We can't identify with it at all in any way.

Karen: Which is part of the fascination with what type of monster is that I want to be able to recognize that. Whatever but instead to look at these women who ones who did survive what they go through and what that's like and the strength that they have from somewhere to not only continue to live but thrive and help others. It's just that's the best story that can be told.

Georgia: Absolutely.

Karen: It's so cool that it's being told around such a dark subject matter.

Georgia: Yeah, a hundred percent.

Karen: Trish Wood really have pulled it out there got a story going that hasn't been. It should have been, but I also think people were very respectfully keeping their distance, you know, like it had to be their decision.

Georgia: Totally.

First, Karen and Georgia have a shared history as they discuss Georgia's husband, Vince. When referring to watching a true crime documentary about Ted Bundy, Karen says, "he can't do that normally." This suggests to the listeners that these two women have discussed this topic before and that Vince doesn't usually "get" true crime. Georgia says that Vince becomes intrigued by the show and later asks if they can put "that Dahmer show" on. Karen laughs and, in a way, celebrates that Vince finally wants to watch a show about serial killers, even if she gently mocks him. Georgia says, "Like, he doesn't even know what serial killer it is." This not only suggests a shared history between the women, but it illustrates a very particular attitude toward true crime. Georgia's comment implies that it is simply unbelievable that Vince does not know the difference between Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy. C'mon, Vince. It also suggests that there is something particularly compelling about this documentary if even Vince can "get it."

This conversation suggests that Karen and Georgia's relationship to true crime differs from Vince's orientation to true crime. Karen praises Vince's desire to watch a documentary about Ted Bundy. This sentiment may seem insensitive or bizarre if unfamiliar with Karen and Georgia's performative tone. But, watching true crime is not stigmatized in this space. It is so clearly encouraged, even celebrated. Karen and Georgia often discuss the stigmatization of talking about true crime around people, addressing how others refer to true crime as a "dark topic." This moment shows how Karen and Georgia are not hiding their love for true crime, but are in fact, unashamed! They realize the importance of discussing it and acknowledge how we are taught to suppress interest in such "dark topics." They are actively creating space where people drawn to true crime can feel welcome and "normal." Here, Vince is the oddball.

In "Victims, Families and America's Thirst for True Crime Stories," author Britt Peterson discusses the true crime boom in America. For Peterson, the crime boom refers to a

sudden increase of true crime podcasts, television series, documentaries, and even events like *CrimeCon*. Peterson problematizes this obsession, addressing that the victims of these crimes often become distant characters as people forget those heinous crimes committed against them.

Peterson writes about her experience attending *CrimeCon* and notes:

"CrimeCon guests—like true crime fans generally—are demographically similar to the victims most featured in true crime shows and books: 80 percent female, according to organizers, and largely white. The CrimeCon line was dominated by white women: white women in large, laughing groups, white women tugging a husband or boyfriend by the hand, white women in "Stressed, Blessed and True Crime Obsessed" or "Talk Murder to Me" or "It's Always the Husband" T-shirts." (Peterson)

Peterson draws attention to the fact that white women are the prime audience of true crime. En masse this group is an obnoxious bunch, uncritically consuming *CrimeCon* as a spectacle, a direct illustration of society's sudden spike in true crime consumption. Additionally, her experience at *CrimeCon* echoes *MFM* culture to some degree. Although I can't say Karen and Georgia would promote a shirt reading "Stressed, Blessed, and True Crime Obsessed," their merchandise features similarly irreverent sayings. However, Karen and Georgia present a compelling case that there are complex, compelling people behind true crime consumption statistics as well as crime statistics.

Karen illustrates one of the reasons many women consume true crime: they live in a culture that disproportionately suggests that these "monsters" could attack them. Consuming true crime is a way of gaining some agency over this dominant cultural script. For example, when Karen and Georgia begin talking about the details of the Ted Bundy documentary, Karen talks about an interview she had with Trish Wood, the documentary director.

Karen: . . . it feels like this is the trajectory of true crime, the culture of true crime interest is now taking, because the majority of the audience is women, and the interest has to do with being kind of, being a woman and the idea that we're now talking about these

things instead of the strange attention that we're paying to the perpetrators of the crime instead.

Georgia: We can't identify with it at all in any way.

Karen: Which is part of the fascination with, what type of monster is that? I want to be able to recognize that.

Karen and Georgia identify with the desire to “take” the experiences of female victims and “make” them shared experiences with their audience rather than a singular focus on the “monsters” who commit violent crime. They also want to understand what is generic to the “monsters,” Not their spectacular individuality or “mad genius” but their “type,” so that she[Karen] can be armed against them in her imagination and in a potential future that she is often told may be hers. Tanya Horack writes about true crime in the digital streaming era in *Justice on Demand*, Tanya Horack notes that “women love to know all the terrible details of murder cases so that they can gain some sort of power over culturally endemic narratives in which girls and women are brutalized” (1). In other words, women watch true crime so they can claim some sort of power over events that may be in their future and are part of their cognitive present whether they want it to be or not.

Amanda Vicary and Chris Fraley argue that women are often more disgusted than men by gory experiences, but are more drawn to tales of violence. Both their disgust and their intrigue stem from the fact that are more likely to fear being victims themselves. True crime can provide insight into tactics and strategies for women if they find themselves in a dangerous situation. Browder writes, “In a world in which women fear violence, but are culturally proscribed from showing an interest in violence, true crime books provide a secret map of the world, a how-to guide for personal survival—and a means for expressing the violent feelings that must be masked by femininity” (929). Breaking the taboo against discussing violence for women means making

them feel more physically and emotionally prepared to face violence should it happen to them. This can decrease the power that violent narratives have over women's psyches

In other words, women seek out true crime books as a way of protecting themselves, to learn possible tactics and strategies if they ever become the victim. Indeed, women are much more likely to be the victims of violent crimes by men than men are of violent crimes by women. Diving into these tales of murder, and focusing on the "types" of monsters can help them ease their fear ever so slightly, giving them a sense of the patterns of their behavior. Turning the "monster" into a "type" means making him more boring and therefore more predictable. Furthermore, by highlighting the voices of victims as opposed to perpetrators of crimes, Karen and Georgia try, with varying degrees of success, to give agency, however constrained, to characters typically depicted as passive in true crime narratives.

Even as Karen and Georgia try and honor the victims, their stories still often focus on the perpetrator. They, and their audience, are still part of the "we" that has a "strange fascination" with the killers. For example, Karen and Georgia often provide details about the killer's childhood and they often have significantly more details about them than the victims. In "Natural Born Celebrities, Serial Killers in American Culture," David Schmid draws a parallel between celebrity and serial killer, stating that the details of serial murder reach a diverse group of people. Much like the "celebrity," the more people who hear about the serial killer, the more popular and known they become. Schmid also gives three reasons why serial killers and celebrities are related. First, serial murder can be used to support a wide variety of ideological agendas (6). Second, as the serial killer's celebrity status grows, their potential for popularity inevitably grows even more. Third, both figures, the celebrity, and the serial killer, inspire complicated feelings of attraction and repulsion. Schmid writes: "That is to say, the serial killer makes a particularly

appropriate (even emblematic) celebrity because both figures inspire feelings of attraction and repulsion, admiration and condemnation"(6). In other words, serial killers become a type of celebrity for the same reasons celebrities have fame. While the "normal celebrity" is often loved and admired, resentment and fascination are still part of celebrity culture. For example, Madonna is loved and admired, but there is a resistance and fascination that is a huge part of her fame and inevitable notoriety.

Overall, the serial killer or perpetrator has become the “star” of documentaries, news stories, and TV series. Often, there is a desire to understand the serial killer or perpetrator's past, and in turn, programs center the serial killer. The victims are decentralized and often dehumanized, and of course, the victims are usually women. Karen and Georgia actively resist this trope, expressing their disgust for the focus placed on the perpetrators, even as they participate in it, however begrudgingly. This is a reoccurring theme in the podcast as a whole. In turn, Karen and Georgia are careful in their explication of the victim's story, always providing the name of the victim in addition to some facts about them. They attempt to humanize the victim, remind the audience that these people are just like us. Whenever available they are careful to point out any evidence of how the victim fought back against their assailant. In my understanding, *MFM* is a discursive space in which Karen and Georgia actively try to fight against the fascination with killers. As they do with the victims in their narratives, I try to give them the benefit of the doubt. The odds are stacked against them, but they are not without agency. For Example, Karen’s story in “Big Sweater Energy” features the following details about the victims.

Karen:	So, Tiffany oh, she was raised in the housing project, the one called Salem Lafayette apartments. She and her mom moved to Orlando briefly because Tiffany was a professional dancer. And she went to a place called Valencia College down there to study
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Psychology and music, um, but after a few years there she gets pregnant unexpectedly so her and her mom basically move back to New Jersey.

Karen: So, we're going to talk about Robin West. She is a rebellious, adventurous young woman from Philadelphia. Mostly, she lives with her mom in West Philly, but she also spends time with her dad who is a Philadelphia School District police officer and Assistant Church Pastor. She lives in North Philly and she goes to church with her mom on Sundays. She sings in the choir, sometimes she even sings lead, which . .

Karen: Now we go to another story oh, this is the story of Joanne. Her nickname is Billie Joe Brown. She is one of eight kids, 2 girls and 6 boys. She is born in Augusta, Maine. When she's five-years-old her family moves to Newark, New Jersey. She has bipolar and schizophrenia, but her friends and family describe her as warm and fun-loving. When she gets older which is very common with a lot of people with mental illness, she self-medicates with drugs, and she begins working as an exotic dancer and a sex worker she uses the alias, London. So, her family is very concerned that she's gone into this line of work. They asked her to stop. She tells them she's not, she's not giving it up and it's her livelihood that's how she's making money. But eventually she does end up going to a place for drug addiction. She gets housing, counseling, and drug treatment, but it's too hard for her to live that structured lifestyle, so she keeps on doing her sex work and she skipped her counseling appointments.

Karen: Sarah Butler one of three girls her parents were Jamaican immigrants who worked hard to make the best life for their family in Montclair, New Jersey which is just North of Newark. She works several jobs during high school, she buys herself her own car oh, she's a dancer who practiced tirelessly with her own dance troupe. Or with a dance troupe. I don't know if it's hers. In June of 2016 they actually, her and her dance troupe, they get to be on amateur night at *The Apollo*.

Karen provides details about the victims beyond what's relevant to tell the murder story. She tells us about their families, interests, and personal struggles. True crime programs like *Forensic Files* will often give a short bio for the victims. The bio would read something like, "Jane was a church member and a devoted mother." This can be seen an attempt to humanize the victim, but

often results in a “hallmark” version of the person. It turns the victim into a “type.” Karen tries to provide a more holistic, and ultimately humanized, picture of the victim.

In Karen’s “Big Sweater Energy” story, Tiffany Taylor survives Khalil-Wheeler Weavers attempted murder. These survivor stories are often presented differently than stories that end more tragically. Karen and Georgia appear excited to tell listeners about the perseverance and true grit of survivors of violent crimes. Karen orients even more toward survivor narratives and is upfront about her partiality. The details of the survival narratives are often just as graphic as the details in a murder story, except for one thing, the victim survives. Karen often adapts stories from an episode of *I Survived*, a TV series featuring survivors telling first-person accounts of their stories. Karen and Georgia often correct themselves, referring to “victims” as “survivors,” another important discursive space they explore.

Nancy Naples “questions the development and analysis of so-called survivor discourse that has yet to be explored” (1151). Naples writes primarily about survivor discourse, specifically about survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Those who have suffered abuse, she notes, are likely to recognize denial and repression as major factors in the ongoing abuse of women and children. Naples writes “The term “survivor” is typically reserved for those who have self-consciously redefined their relationship to the experience from one of “victim” (1151). Redefinition of victim to survivor is usually not accomplished on their own but through intervention, whether it be therapy, personal reflection, survivor narratives, and discussion with other “victims/survivors.” In other words, the move from “victim” to “survivor” is a social shift. It is not a matter of individual courage but of collective action.

Karen and Georgia's approach to true crime is nuanced compared to the many other ways I have experienced true crime. I have always been scared easily. When I was little, maybe 7 or 8,



my mom, an avid prankster, grabbed me through the shower curtain. It shook me so bad, I hysterically cried. I still peek out of the shower every few minutes, even if the door is locked. When I encountered *Forensic Files* for the first time as a teenager, I could not sleep. The graphic images flashed in my head as I tossed and turned. I once heard a story about a man hiding out under a woman's bed. I still get a running start every night as I leap onto my bed. Okay, maybe not now, but I did this for YEARS. I identified with these stories strongly and, in all cases, imagined myself as a potential (perhaps inevitable?) victim of the crime.

Karen and Georgia's stories did not scare me so much as they intrigued me. The way they talked about the realities of true crime was approachable, fact based. I realized their reactions to the heinous crime might be the reaction I would have. Instead of simply telling the story from some objective, "typical" viewpoint, they embrace their subjective experience and honest reactions. They insert comments, take breaks, laugh, even cry. The story becomes real as opposed to a mystifying distant event that happened, far away from me. As a lived narrative it is something I can work through and be less afraid of. This is unlike a *Forensic Files* episode, told in a deep voice, haunting music playing ominously in the background, violent graphic images flashing on the screen.

### **Fuck Politeness**

Karen and Georgia have not only shifted true crime discourse by honoring the victims, but they have challenged the pervasive narrative that works to instill fear in women. Instead of telling these stories with the purpose of spreading terror to women, Karen and Georgia have done major performative work to empower women through their stories. One of their most often repeated phrases, "fuck politeness," exemplifies this performative work. The phrase is geared toward women and the expectations women have put on themselves, or rather society has placed

on women, to be polite. The phrase originated in an early episode as a performative that function to tell women to STOP BEING POLITE! If something seems off about a person, Karen and Georgia tell women to trust that instinct. Criminals depend on the politeness of their would-be victims. Women are systemically trained to ignore these “gut feelings” and be proper, polite, and kind. In contrast to dominant cultural scripts that tell women it is their job to help “civilize” men, Karen and Georgia encourage women to follow their intuition and “fuck politeness” if needed.

Encouraging women to follow their intuition and “fuck politeness” is not only radically feminist, but often unheard of in true crime. Instead, popular true crime narrative tells women to stop living life normally. “Don’t walk alone to your car.” “Don’t run at night.” I agree that the details of these violent stories, by their very nature, can instill fear, but maybe there is a bigger issue at play. Maybe if women were not stifled by the expectation to be “polite,” there would be less women who fall victim to charming sociopaths, something much more likely to happen to them than a random attack on a run at dusk. When I read stories about how murderers find women, famously Ted Bundy, by asking for help or presenting as “harmless,” I know I could have easily been one of his victims. That is, because of the disciplinary mechanisms placed on me since I was a little girl. “Be polite, Taylor. Be Kind. Help the poor man. I’m sure he’s harmless.” Additionally, the phrase “fuck politeness,” challenges discourses beyond true crime, empowering women generally to drop, or rather “unlearn” this sentiment which makes them victims of many other daily acts of violence from sexual harassment to bullying. It challenges women to “unlearn” the oppressive forces placed on their bodies which I explore in Chapter Six.

## **CHAPTER SIX. FEMINIST RESISTANCE AND THE MURDERINO GRRRL**

The episode begins with a short, sweet, and soft acoustic guitar riff with Karen Kilgariff singing “My Favorite MurdEEEEER.” She extends the “er” as if it were a jingle for a new toothpaste marketed to angsty teens:

Karen & Georgia:	Hello.
Karen:	And Welcome.
Georgia:	To My Favorite Murder.
Karen:	Uh, the true crime, uh, comedy podcast that you’ve heard about from your friends.
Georgia:	That’s right. That’s Karen Kilgariff.
Karen:	That’s Georgia Hardstark.
Georgia:	We sound exactly the same right now, but pretty soon you’ll get it.
Karen:	Yeah, because it’s actually not exactly the same in any way.
Georgia:	Nope.
Karen:	We’re incredibly different.
Georgia:	So different.
Karen:	Vocally. Uhh maybe we’re from the same state, sure. Maybe we have the same accent, absolutely. Uhh do we like vocal fry? Hell yes. Are we pushing it more than ever before? Yes. it’s a selling point [BLEEP SOUND].

Even within the first minute of the podcast, we can see what interests are being mobilized and served by this and what interests are not. This podcast will be irreverent and supportive. The hosts will support one another and anyone who doesn’t like it can BLEEP off. We can also see what identities, actions, practices are made possible and desirable or required by this way of thinking/talking/understanding. The hosts are like one another, they are women, they are “from

the same place” and willing to “push” the markers of this shared identity and yet refuse to be defined as the same. The second “so different” from Georgia supports and undercuts the Karen simultaneously. Wait, how different are they if they have to say it twice? This opening portion also illustrates significant narratives this discourse relies on. They will combine the discourses of true crime and comedy. They are also showing us what external rules of power and knowledge regulate their storytelling: They anticipate listeners’ critiques of their vocal fry and a tendency to dismiss them as people based on their manner of speech. They promise to “push it more than ever before.” They will resist the norms that regulate them, together. (Langellier and Peterson 19)

Karen and Georgia do “push” their vocal fry and also use valleyspeak. It is one of the first things many new *MFM* listeners notice about the show. High pitched “hyeeeeee”s and “byeeee”s and vocal fried “likes” pepper their speech throughout every episode. I noticed it right away, and I was not sure if I liked it. Some, like the other occupants of the car when I first heard *MFM*, find it annoying enough to tune out completely. Others, like me, might find it annoying at first but find it fades quickly. Maybe that’s because, like the hosts, I’m a California native who finds that “valleyspeak” rolls easily off her tongue from time to time. Then again, “valleyspeak” has been found throughout the US, even stretching as far away as New Zealand. Martha who introduced me to *MFM* is from Iowa. So maybe there is something about how valley girls speak that is less about being from the valley and more about being like, a girl.

### **Characteristics of Valley Speak**

In an article called, “In Defense of the Valley Girl,” Assad Abdermane details some of the key characteristics of “valleyspeak.” The “valley” in question is the San Fernando Valley in Southern California. The characteristics of valleyspeak took shape in the 1980s. According to

Abdermane, the Valley Girl uses "like" as a "one-size-fits-all grammatical connector," her voice is abnormally high, and her statements sound like questions because her inflection goes up at the end, often called "upspeak." The accent is sought after by some and disposed by other because of its association with young, upper-middle-class white girls from southern California. Ubiquitous "likes" and upspeak create either a sense of low effort or low confidence. Saying "let's go to the mall" with an upward inflection, for example, could mean "but only if you want to" or "of course you'll also want to go, obvi!" Either "I can't be bothered to explain more" or "I'm not sure that I trust that you will follow my explanations." The discursive style was "borne out of mimicking people who seemed to have it all: [white,] upper-middle-class Californian women." In other words, the valley girl accent is both a social marker and a negotiation of social position. Popular depictions of valleyspeak in films such as *Clueless* and *Legally Blonde* tells stories of valley girls who are dismissed as shallow but eventually find a way to share their depth. From this perspective, valleyspeak is discursive negotiation by people who do not feel they are taken seriously. When Karen and Georgia "push" valleyspeak, listeners who are inclined to not take upper middle-class white women seriously are likely to tune out, leaving them in the company of people who are more likely to respect them.

Karen and Georgia don't just use "vocal fry" and valleyspeak, they do so proudly. Their announced intention to "push it more than ever before" challenges some of the other aspects of both vocal fry and valleyspeak. While they do often say statements as if they are questions, they do not hide behind any sense of meekness that this affectation might provide: "Hey yes!" and, once more for the people in the back, "It's a selling point BLEEP SOUND." This deliberately vulgar speech would be much more at home in an LA Punk Rock club in the 80s than in a mall in the Valley.

The vocal fry which they use so proudly is an often certified speech pattern that is different from valleyspeak, but related in a cultural aspect. Vocal fry can be considered a strategy to combat valleyspeak, but both are performed in *MFM*. Karen uses vocal fry more often, and Georgia uses valleyspeak more often. Vocal fry refers to a lower pitch in the voice, that guttural growl at the back of the throat, how a Valley Girl might sound. Jeremy Hornbrook, Tika Ormons, and Margaret MacLagan study the use of vocal fry in young women and explain the lack of academic scholarship or news media about the phenomenon. Vocal fry is not viewed as an involuntary disorder but as a volitional strategy that became recognized in the 1960s (36). Like statements that sound like questions, vocal fry can convey either a lack of confidence or extreme confidence. “I don’t trust what I say enough to project more” or “If you need me to project more you wouldn’t understand me anyway.” Pop singer Britney Spears and TV personality Kim Kardashian both use vocal fry, maintaining some of this ambiguity as they navigate public space as hyper-sexualized women who are often simultaneously idolized and dismissed by critics.

In 2015, feminist Naomi Wolf, plead with “young women” to “give up the vocal fry and reclaim your strong female voice.” Wolf cites a bluntly titled academic article to support her argument: “Vocal Fry May Undermine the Success of Young Women in the Labor Market.” The survey based social science research argues “in relation to a normal speaking voice, adult female voices exhibiting vocal fry are perceived as less competent, less educated, less trustworthy, less attractive, and less hireable.” Consequently, the authors suggest that young American females “should avoid using vocal fry speech in order to maximize labor market opportunities.” In other words, this social scientific study resulted in a prescriptive disciplinary mechanism over women’s voices. I am certainly curious about what the study participants and authors constitute as a

"normal speaking voice." If normal is defined purely as "maximizing labor market opportunities," I might prefer to remain, like, abnormal.

Fellow feminist Erin Riley, argued that "Naomi Wolf misses the point about 'vocal fry' It's just an excuse not to listen to women." Riley claims that vocal fry phobia is "is merely another excuse to dismiss, ignore and marginalize women's voices, both literally and figuratively." Riley addresses the historical and present pervasive rejection of women's literal voices, including overuse of the word "like," upspeak, and the actual sound and pitch of a woman's natural voice. Riley insists that if "vocal fry" no longer becomes the problem, people will find something wrong with women's literal voice. In other words, women are under constant scrutiny, policed and disciplined by culture to speak in specific ways. The problem isn't that they are from the Valley. The problem is that they are girls.

Ann Friedman also responded to Wolf with an article from *The Cut* titled, "Can We Just. Like, Get Over the Way Women Talk?" Friedman addresses the many ways women have been told to speak. Essayist Sloan Crosley and comedian Amy Schumer tell women not to say sorry so often. A career coach at Goop (Gwyneth Paltrow's lifestyle brand) warns women not to use too many qualifiers. Radio listeners calling in to complain about vocal fry in female speakers. Friedman explains how this barrage of advice and warnings caused her to question her voice. Friedman writes, "Men also use the word 'just.' Men engage in upspeak. Men have vocal fry. Men pepper their sentences with unnecessary 'likes' and 'sorry.' I haven't read any articles encouraging them to change this behavior." Women are told how to talk, walk, and sit, and most men are not under the same microscope as women. Linguist, Robin Lakoff, puts it even more bluntly: "This stuff is just one more way of telling powerful women to *shut up you bitch*. It makes women self-conscious and makes women feel incompetent and unable to figure out the

right way to talk. There is no right way." The problem isn't that they are from the Valley, the problem is that they are girls.

By celebrating vocal fry as a "selling point" *MFM* claims the right to be a bitch and not shut up. It rejects the arguments that blame women for their own oppression and instead claims as space free from the critics. As a performative move, the promise to "push" the vocal fry is also a means to push away anyone who finds vocal fry disqualifying. If you, like, don't like vocal fry, you can like, get the fuck out. This counter-performative evades the disciplinary apparatus that would police their speech and claims their right to define their own standards, whether you bleeping like it or not. The selling point for the people who stick around is that those who "get the fuck out" will take their disciplinary mechanism with them. Bleeping hooray! Praising vocal fry is a way of saying that women's voices don't have to be any particular way to be heard.

To underscore this point, Karen and Georgia soon reveal that the bleep sound wasn't masking a four letter word at all:

Karen: Vocally. Uhh maybe we're from the same state, sure. Maybe we have the same accent, absolutely. Uhh do we like vocal fry? Hell yes. Are we pushing it more than ever before? Yes. it's a selling point [bleep sound].

Georgia and Karen: [laughs]

Georgia: Yeah girrrll.

Karen: I just belched at Georgia while smiling and pretending I was about to say something.

Georgia: Ew I was not buying it which is why I screamed so loud. Please don't play that. Steven please mute the . . .

Karen: Steven please. Steve can you actually just put a beep like it's, uh we're...



Georgia: No, leave the burp in. Leave me screaming into the microphone off is what I'm saying .

Karen: [laughs] I thought you were asking me.

Georgia: No, I would never censor your burps are you kidding me ? I live for them.

Karen: Umm you censor your burps though.

Georgia: I do because they're so many. It almost seemed like aggressive at one point you know what I mean. Like she's doing that on purpose. Really. .

Karen: She's just doing it for attention!

They could have completely cut the belch out of the podcast if they did not want to include it. However, instead, they chose to bleep it. This serves as an example of the improvisational moments and the slight resistance Karen and Georgia have to normative performances of femininity. Of course, the burp may have been an accident, but the choice to leave it in with a "bleep" sound and the conversation that follows is what I am interested in exploring discursively. By bleeping Karen's burp, *MFM* turns non-speech into speech. They emphasize the degree to which they will not "censor" each other by expending this radical acceptance to include bodily excess. I'm sure that women who burp in job interviews also "fail to maximize their labor force opportunities." Women are taught to keep their burps to themselves, keep themselves quiet. Leave the dinner table if you have to burp. Bodily functions are supposed to be hidden. But, of course, what could be more "normal" than burping? The suppression of burps, of the corporal body is a suppression of women's right to speak in public unless they do everything in their power to make themselves palatable to their listeners. Mock censorship of burping becomes another place for resisting dominant discourse when Karen ironically proclaims, "she's just doing it for attention," a phrase with which women's speech is routinely dismissed in public.

One implicit critique of this dominant discourse that Karen and Georgia make is that you only have to think that women are “doing things *for* attention” if you don’t assume that they are worthy of attention whether they “earn it” or not. This moment in the podcast makes me laugh because they are breaking a taboo, but also because they help me to see the insidious nature of that taboo and, possibly, a discursive space beyond it. BLEEP yeah!

Bartky uses Foucault's ideas on power and discipline to deconstruct the patriarchal force over the female body. Bartky addresses the different ways in which the female body is oppressed and deemed insufficient. Highlighting how the female body is disciplined by advertising, Bartky writes, "Since the standards of female bodily acceptability are impossible to realize fully, requiring as they do a virtual transcendence of nature, a woman may live much of her life with a pervasive feeling of bodily deficiency, hence a tighter control of the body has gained a new kind of hold over the mind" (42). In other words, the arbitrary ideal women are taught to achieve gains power over women's minds. BLEEP. Thus, women may never feel sufficient, and self-surveillance is a form of obedience to patriarchal dominance (42). Bordo similarly analyzes the female body and how it has been constructed in Western culture (166). Bordo recognizes this disciplining of the female body as a form of social control. Women discipline their bodies, and Bordo believes this to be an illustration of the patriarchy.

Even though Karen and Georgia have this moment of resistance, they are still disciplining themselves and each other in a way. When Karen says, "Steven please. Steve can you actually just put a beep like it's uh . . ." and Georgia interrupts with "NO! Leave he burp in," we can see this battle between resistance and compliance to the patriarchal forces that have been so ingrained in women. Georgia then says, "No I would never censor your burps are you kidding me? I live for them." And the battle continues.

## **Stay Sexy and Don't Get Murdered**

Now I want to unpack the phrase "Stay Sexy and Don't get Murdered (SSDGM)." Karen and Georgia say this phrase whenever they sign off or end an episode of *MFMM* in both recorded and live shows. In the live shows, Karen and Georgia say, "Stay Sexy," and the audience yells, "And Don't Get Murdered!" This phrase originated in an early episode and has been their sign-off ever since. It is arguably the most famous of their performative phrases. It eventually became the title of their book. It originates from a callback comedy moment, but it stuck and has remained one of the most repetitive, widely used phrases among murderino culture. I have seen "SSDGM," an acronym for "stay sexy and don't get murdered," on shirts, bumpers, and laptops. I am sure many people do not know what it means, but murderinos do. That is a perfect example of how *MFMM* has cultivated this insider, exclusive culture. If another murderino sees the sticker "SSDGM" on a laptop they might say, "Oh I listen to *MFMM* too." This becomes a serendipitous moment where community and connection are cultivated. There is no question that this results from Karen and Georgia's carefully crafted culture and community through their unique performative practices. The phrase itself acts as a symbol for those who listen to *MFMM*.

The phrase "Stay Sexy and Don't Get Murdered," evokes a complex net of discourse. First, by saying "Stay Sexy," Karen and Georgia imply that the audience should embrace sexuality, express femininity, be proud of womanhood! However, saying "Don't Get Murdered" stands as a somewhat comical and straightforward acknowledgment and reminder of the disproportionate amount of crime and harassment women face. It is as if they are saying, "go live your life, but remember that you can get murdered."

A mountain of quantitative evidence points to how women are at a much higher risk than men to experience violence. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV)

reports that 1 in 3 women have experienced physical violence from an intimate partner. In a survey "Stop Street Harassment" conducted, they found that 65% of women report street harassment by men. Furthermore, nearly 30% of women have experienced rape. According to the Women of Color Network, a project ran through the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, women of color experience these acts of violence at a rate 35% higher than white women.

### **Murderino Grrrls**

Discourse is created by privileging a particular narrative. The story repeats so much that it becomes a common societal narrative. These major narratives shape discourse and create norms within society. Karen and Georgia's feminist approach to true crime has paved the way for murderinos to exist in a unique discursive space. They have challenged discourse and created a feminist space for murderinos to consume true crime that does not disempower them. Langellier and Peterson write, "Discourse rules also govern who can or who has to listen and to what extent audiences can contribute, interrupt, or challenge what is told" (20).

To what extent can audiences contribute, interrupt or challenge what is told in *MFMM*? The audience is only allowed to interact with the story during live shows if they have attended, of course. Other than that, Karen and Georgia hold the floor. Since most of the shows are prerecorded there is not much opportunity for audience to interact directly. At live shows, Not only are they usually on a stage that visually represents a hierarchy considering the audience is lower than the performers, but Karen and Georgia hold microphones and space to tell their stories. This power structure governs who is allowed to speak and who is supposed to listen. Otherwise, podcasts uphold a particular power structure considering the audience is listening to a pre-recorded story and cannot talk back in real-time. The structure of the podcast puts the

performers in a place of power. However, the minisodes allow for listeners to write in emails about a variety of topics. Karen and Georgia read their stories on the podcast. So, the audience is given some power at that moment. However, Karen and Georgia still hold power in choosing what stories they will read and how they will present them. Additionally, Karen and Georgia often have a segment in the podcast they call "corrections corner" to correct mistakes they have made in past recordings. Usually, the mistakes are brought to their attention by listeners.

The fact that they allow listeners to write in and “talk back” is one aspect that gives the audience some power in the performance. Because they allow and encourage listeners to write in, they are giving the audience some agency and some opportunity to challenge them. Often, they read the corrections out loud. This gives the listeners an opportunity to contribute, interrupt, and challenge what is told on *MFM*. In context, these corrections are an extension of the *MFM*’s ethos of allowing women to exist imperfectly in public. They make corrections, acknowledge mistakes, but never perform shame or retreat behind politeness. This accessibility and overall care for their listeners is echoed in many other feminist groups and movements, specifically the riot grrrl movement in the 90s.

There are some interesting parallels between *MFM* and the DIY punk feminist movement of the 1990s, also known as the riot grrrl movement. According to “Grisly Murders and Serial Killers? Ooh, Tell Me More,” *MFM* is today’s answer to the DIY feminist punk movement of the 1990s (Hawgood). It is not difficult to identify the glaring parallels. The DIY feminist punk movement, also called the riot grrrl rebellion, was started in the 90s by women in punk bands, including bikini kill and Sleater-Kinney. The movement was created to respond to the predominantly white male punk scene and intended to make girls and women more involved in the punk scene.

Julia Downes writes about the riot grrl movement and its sociocultural influence on the music scene. Downes writes:

Riot grrrl disrupted the conventional ordering of gender difference in punk subcultures: to provoke, politicize, and resist hetero-feminine girlhood. Riot grrrl refused to denigrate the feminine and instead created a visual and sonic spectrum of politicized girl signifiers within a subcultural punk context. (210)

Riot grrrls sought to disrupt conventional understandings of femininity, not by rejecting femininity, but by embracing different gender performances and politicizing their identities. Riot grrrls encouraged their listeners to address uncomfortable taboo subjects as opposed to avoid or ignore them. I am reminded of Karen and Georgia's performance of gender and disruption of hetero-feminine performance. By addressing the reality of the gruesome nature of crime and bringing themselves to the stories they tell, they mimic some of the key qualities of the riot grrrl movement.

The starkest similarity is how the riot grrrl movement worked to empower women to create alternative spaces and communication networks extending far beyond the movement's originators, which is so pervasive in *MFM's* murderino culture. For example, the riot grrrl movement empowered artists to create zines, a self-published do-it-yourself medium that encouraged women to express themselves honestly and straightforwardly. Zines also dove straight into difficult topics such as rape and abuse. (Rosenburg and Garofalo 810). Downes writes about the topics of the discussions and meetings early riot grrrls were addressing in their communities:

The discussions spilled over into DIY subcultural activism: young women and girls intervened in their surrounding subcultures to create politicized girlcentric conventions, music, fanzines, art, and gigs. In riot grrrl attempts were made to confront conventional standards of heterofemininity; including challenges to beauty standards, competition for male approval, Whiteness, heteronormativity, sexual double standards, and consumerism. (209)

*MFM* and Karen and Georgia are no stranger to difficult topics. Murderino's have utilized private Facebook groups to gather and discuss numerous amounts of difficult topics. Additionally, murderinos, similarly to the riot grrrls, have created a network of artists. While the topic of *MFM* is true crime and comedy, many of the same themes highlighted in the riot grrl movement relate. Karen and Georgia welcome a wide range of gender performance from their fans, and encourage them to get involved in the many different Facebook groups available to them. Karen and Georgia are also not shy in expressing their battles with mental health. They actively encourage women to seek help, express themselves, join support groups, and create a community. They also are not shy in explaining how women are disproportionately the victims of violent crimes. Karen and Georgia frankly speak of the ways toxic masculinity is the cause of many violent acts. These themes show up in the riot grrrl movement. For example, Riot Grrrls also spoke frankly about toxic masculinity.

One part of the DIY ethic of riot grrrl is that they made themselves highly accessible to fans. For example, in the 90s the bands often included their personal addresses or even phone numbers on their records. The small record labels would easily forward mail to the artists. According to Kristen Schilt they wanted to be accessible, so they did not appear to be the “unapproachable” rock star. Ultimately, they wanted the fans to be an active participant in creating the culture and community around their band. Karen and Georgia do not post their personal addresses or phone numbers, but I would argue they make themselves accessible to fans in other ways. For example, they encourage listeners to email them and often read their emails out loud on the minisodes. They also talk about their live shows and the murderinos they met on their travels, often naming murderinos by name. Additionally, they give shout outs to groups of murderinos and specific murderinos they meet on a daily basis. When they first started out and

they had not gained widespread popularity, they were definitely more accessible. They had a Facebook group they would post in and respond to murderinos as well. Now that they are more popular, I think their accessibility has become more limited for the simple reason that it would be difficult to respond to so many people.

Schilt also writes about bikini kill's lead singer Kathleen Hanna who notes that she still receives the same amount of mail in 2019 that she did in 1992 (120). This speaks volumes to the community riot grrrl created. They were not just popular because of their music, but the movement they created. The fans are highly invested in the message and the overall movement speaks to them on another level than just fandom. While Karen and Georgia are still releasing episodes, I can see similar characteristics in the devotion of murderinos to *MFMM*.

Karen and Georgia have mobilized murderinos, unashamed and unapologetic of their performance of "woman-ness." By celebrating vocal fry, complicating gender performance, and crafting a space open to critique, they say, "fuck politeness," and in turn, inspire a unique feminist space that echoes the DIY punk feminist movement of the 90s. This space is cherished among murderinos, a thriving community, unafraid and determined to support each other. This brings me to the next and final discursive topic in *MFMM* that I cover, mental health.



## **CHAPTER SEVEN.**

### **CONCLUSION: MENTAL HEALTH WON'T RUIN THIS PARTY**

*MFM's* many performance moves do not work in isolation. DIY aesthetics, public intimacy, improvisation, survivor focus, and subversive femininity come together for different murderinos in different ways. For this murderino, the most profound effect of *MFM* has come around issues of mental health. Karen and Georgia talk openly about therapy, depression, and anxiety. Mental health awareness has been a through line of *MFM* since the beginning. Many listeners and murderinos write into Karen and Georgia about their mental health struggles, often thanking them for their openness on personal battles with depression and anxiety. While *MFM* is not explicitly about mental health, Karen and Georgia talk about mental health A LOT, whether directly related to the murder stories or themselves. Depression and anxiety, along with therapy, have always been a significant discourse operating in *MFM*.

It comes as no shock that depression carries a social stigma. In Georgia's story of the mysterious death of Davina Buff Jones, they talk about Davina's struggle with depression while also referencing their struggles with depression. Georgia tells the possible theories of Davina's death, homicide, or suicide. After explaining the theory around homicide, Georgia explains the theory around suicide. Georgia starts by explaining that Davina was shot in the back of the head and that it would be challenging for a woman of Davina's stature (4 ft. 11) to accomplish. Georgia goes on to explain that theories of Davina's death as suicide emerged after Davina received over 170 outpatient treatments over four years "for adjustment disorder with mixed emotional fears and chronic depression" comes out to investigators. Karen and Georgia explain that if Davina were going to therapy weekly for four years, 170 sessions would not be a shocking number of sessions. Then, they talk about the other details of the theory surrounding Davina's death as suicide.

Georgia: But when she was in high school, Davina had swallowed a bunch of Tylenol and had to get her stomach pumped, so the people who think it's suicide said that she had suicidal tendencies in the past.

Karen: Okay, I mean, maybe. It would be interesting if you forced people to be really honest with you, what you could pull out of people's past that would justify something, like an act of violence like that.

Georgia: I have them.

Karen: Everybody does, fucking high school sucks shit.

Georgia: It sucks shit.

Karen: And people do stuff and you know if you don't have support and you don't have people around you, you're going to go to therapy a bunch of times, you're going to get, especially depression, I mean like . . .

Georgia: Depression is a fucking bitch.

Karen: It's rough.

Georgia: Two days before her death Davina had told her doctor that she experienced suicidal thoughts the previous week that involved wanting to walk out into the ocean until, quote, until she couldn't swim anymore which is a pretty passive way of saying that. It's that thing that I've had in depression where I don't care what happens to me, I almost want something bad to happen to me so I can take my mind off of this. But I don't really want something bad happening to me.

Karen: Right it's almost a coping mechanism to say, here's what I think I could manage.

Georgia: Right, and here's how much I don't care anymore. Her doctor referred her to a psychiatrist, she set up an appointment, but the doctor didn't believe the comment warranted hospitalization. In his opinion it was more of a fleeting thought than like, actual suicidal ideation. But he made her promise that if she seriously started thinking about suicide, that she would call him and in his opinion, Davina was a low risk for suicide, but it is you know interesting that two days before, she said that. I mean, you can't, I want to defend her, and defend her, and defend her, but that is a compelling point.

Karen: Yeah, it's, you know, at this point anything is possible, but it also makes me think if I had a job where I was trying to do what I thought the job was and I was actually getting kind of attacked for it.

Georgia: And sexually harassed.

Karen: And sexually harassed, and there were all these kind of problems, part of that could have been, just, it's the statement I always use is, I don't have the bandwidth for it, but that come out as I want to walk into the sea until I can't swim anymore, cuz what you're saying is, I can't deal with this, like help me, because I can't deal.

Georgia: That's a good point and think about the fact that she's 33 when she becomes a police officer, divorced twice like it's probably this exciting new beginning for her, and it's not fucking going well.

Karen: Yeah, it's going badly, I would say. You know if that if she's trying to do this thing and this culture of the island and the department is saying shut up, sit down, stop doing your job, and then she's thinking this will be my noble fight. It's tough. That's a lot to deal with.

When Georgia explains that Davina had tried to commit suicide in the past, Karen responds with, "it would be interesting if you force people to be really honest with you, what you could pull out of people's past that could justify something like an act of violence like that." This appears to be an attempt to relate and perhaps explain how the stigma of depression is an oppressive force for many people. Georgia's response, "I have them," directly relates to the victim, Davina Buff Jones. This conversation is a moment of personal disclosure for both Karen and Georgia. In a nutshell, Karen and Georgia believe many people struggle with mental health, not just themselves or the victims and survivors in their stories.

Georgia says, "depression is a fucking bitch," a direct reference to her struggles. Karen agrees, "it's rough," throwing herself into the discourse as well. Georgia explains that Davina had recently told her therapist that she wanted to walk out into the ocean until "she couldn't swim anymore," which Georgia explains as a "pretty passive" way of saying she is suicidal. This is just

one of many moments Karen and Georgia bring up the topic of depression or mental health. What appears to be a moment of relating to the victim or trying to understand the story becomes a moment that evokes the large narrative around depression and social stigmatization. Karen and Georgia are quick to disclose their struggles, a conscious choice by the performers.

In "Disciplining through Depression: Analysis of Contemporary Discourse on Women and Depression," Nicole E. Hurt examines the ways popular discourse constructs women and depression. Hurt explains that women's depression has always been stifled, confined to the private and taboo. Hurt describes the controversial interview with Tom Cruise where he proceeded to criticize Brook Shield's use of antidepressants to treat postpartum depression, relaying that exercise and vitamins would cure depression. Mansplaining ruins the party again. This public display of discipline leads Hurt to her argument that "dominant discourse constructs women as possessing defective bodies and passive minds; bodies that are sites of danger because of the unmanageable problems that accompany women's "natural" susceptibility to depression" (285). Hurt explains that this action functions as a "disciplinary mechanism—one that by encouraging maintenance of the female body functions to silence a complex experience and mask the cultural, social, and political factors at work in that experience." In other words, the dominant discourse surrounding women and depression works as a tool to oppress women's bodies and silence them by deeming their experiences "madness."

I see this discourse at work in Georgia's story of Davina Buff Jones. Davina's mysterious death was deemed suicide based on her past treatments for depression and adjustment disorder. Disregarding the fact that Davina's wound was on the back of her head, investigators used her treatment to dismiss the facts of the crime. Not only do I see discourse around women and depression working in Davina Buff Jones' story, but in *MFMM* as a whole. By repeatedly talking

about their struggles with depression, Karen and Georgia challenge this dominant discourse that stifles women's experiences. By relating to the victim, confirming their struggles, they are actively fighting to destigmatize and empower women to understand and validate their experiences and mental health struggles.

I find myself drawn to this discourse around mental health. As someone who also struggles with depression, it is impossible to dismiss myself from this conversation. While Karen and Georgia relate to Davina Buff Jones, I find myself relating to Davina Buff Jones and Karen and Georgia's story. Karen and Georgia's personal disclosure on the subject of depression is a comfort to me. I see myself in them, and they see themselves in the stories they tell. Karen and Georgia insert themselves into the stories by relating to the victim, and in-turn humanize themselves and the victim. While the narrative around women and mental health is changing, most popular true crime does not allow space for such vulnerability. The true crime stories Karen and Georgia tell land differently. The very act of speaking out about mental health is an act of resistance and an act that challenges dominant discourse surrounding women's experiences.

Karen has a particularly raw moment at the end of the episode. Not only does she bring up therapy, but the specific details about a recent breakthrough she had. The storytelling ends, and Karen and Georgia go to the "fucking hooray" segment at the end of the podcast. The "fucking hooray" is supposed to signify the end of the gruesome details of the crime stories they told. "The fucking hooray" is included in hopes that listeners will leave on a lighter note. Karen talks about her breakthroughs in therapy for about 15 minutes. The fact that they make this space for Karen, 15 minutes, nonetheless, is an act of resistance.

Karen and Georgia banter about mental health validating each other's experiences. The lines between frontstage and backstage are blurred, and we catch a glimpse of their lives in a

particularly intimate way. Podcast medium allows this disclosure to create a sense of intimacy with the audience, fans, followers, murderinos that the audience not only wants but encourages directly.

Karen: [laughs] I think it is this. Somehow I am in all of my. . . The thing I never thought I would be able to do in this life is not, the second a feeling struck me, believe it and go with it, and then basically my mouth would go... Connected to it. That... I remember talking about wanting to do that long ago, and then just being like, “This is never going to happen.”

Georgia: Right.

Karen: It’s never going to happen.

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: Um, kind of being overtaken by storylines and story-writing and kind of future-thinking and pretend-mind-reading and all those things.

Georgia: And you feel... And you get the emotions that go along with it, which aren’t healthy because they’re not real.

Karen: They’re not real.

Georgia: They’re not real! I have made myself cry from imaginary scenarios.

Karen: Oh my god. It's like one of my pastimes.

Georgia: [laughs]

Karen: Working through scenarios and there was, um, I can't even remember... It wasn't even anything big, um, but I remember just this week, talking to my therapist about having a moment where there was, like... A feeling struck me that was big and sad. And then instead of the reaction—going straight to their reaction—just going “Oooh, what's happening here?” [giggles] And not being so, um... Because it's this feeling that I'm interpreting as negative, uh, I have to do something about it right now, and I have to convince that it's not that, and I have to, whatever, care-take around...

Georgia: You have to manically control it.

Karen: Yes.

Georgia: In whatever way you can, you have to manically control it. It doesn't feel good.

Karen: No, 'cause the idea is that if I don't manically control it, then it, like... Then the bad feeling is just going to expand and take over, and I will, like, be annihilated. Essentially.

Georgia: Mm hmm.

Karen: And so, the practice of actually just having a feeling and not doing anything at all, which is brand-new. And I, I'm sure there are some people that are like, "What the fuck are you talking about?"

Georgia: Yeah, but there's so many more people who are like, "thank you."

Karen: Yeah, it's weird. It's just, like, to have a feeling that is strong and negative and not do anything about it. Not say anything, not use anything, not eat anything, not drink anything. Just to sit and be like this is interesting because I...

Georgia: Observe it.

Karen: Yeah, which is like, I remember when we used to talk about that say, eight years ago, and I just be like... I'd kind of nod and smile, but in my head, I was like, "impossible!"

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: "Ridiculous. This is stupid to even talk about." I don't know. It's... I think also because our lives are calming down so much, and this kind of strange explosion that has been a true blitz... Like, as great as it's been, and no complaints, and all the things we say... But a huge adjustment and very threatening to me. Very threatening. 'Cause there's nothing scarier to me than potential happiness.

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: That's just like... You might as well come at me with a gun.

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: [laughs] So all these kind of, like, you know, reactions to fix or prevent, which is the intention... And then the thing that actually happens is actually kind of, like, what the fuck are you doing or saying?

Georgia: And you also don't let anything in. So, like, whether it's positive, like the positive thoughts and the daydreams... How nice would that be instead of the "everyone hates me. I think Jay thinks I'm lazy..."

Karen: [laughs]

Georgia: Like it hit me this week... It hit me this week that I'm not lazy. Like that's always been my voice in my head. That I'm lazy, and I'm lazy, and I'm lazy. And then I'm like, there's no time to be lazy. Maybe Jay doesn't think I'm... Our assistant, and also it's like... He's not thinking things like that.

Karen: I really don't think he is.

Georgia: [laughs]

Karen: But yes, because that would be... You've decided that's the worst thing you could be, and therefore, uh, that must mean someone thinks that, and then now I have to do a thing to make sure that goes away.

Georgia: Oh god.

Karen: And instead, that idea that maybe just the feeling of being able to build up a tolerance to negative feelings and watch them sit there and then watch them go away is like... I remember trying to do this when I lived in Chicago, when my life was also very terrible, and there was kind of no silver lining whatsoever. And I would listen to Pema Chodron, Getting Unhooked, I would listen to the... Here's what Buddhists do, and I would just be like "Pfff, that's impos- What are they talking about?"

Georgia: But you know, those negative emotions and those negative thoughts at the time might have been helpful for you because they got you out of that situation you didn't want to be in.

Karen: Yes.

Georgia: Right, so like the negative feelings and negative emotions... The shit that I have... It's like, it totally served a purpose at some point in my life, and I just haven't caught up to the fact that it's just not working anymore and there's... It's time for a new...

Karen: Yes, or like, you're that middle area, where you're like, "I don't think this is working anymore, but there's no way I'm letting go of this, of this fake steering wheel."



Georgia: Right.

Karen: “‘Cause I have to drive this car.” And it's like, “No, sorry. You're Maggie Simpson. You're not driving the car.”

Georgia: [squeals]

Karen: Sorry, you're high if you think you're driving this car.

Georgia: Amazing.

Karen: Right.

Georgia: [laughs]

Karen: So, just getting this handle on that... There's also the option to do nothing, which I think is this thing of like, sorry... Because I know this is going on forever.

Georgia: No, I love it. I need it.

Karen: It's just all my life that was my, “I'm uncomfortable; I'm going to make a joke. I'm uncomfortable; I'm going to talk super loud. I'm uncomfortable; I'm going to be mean to somebody else.” I had like five options.

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: And I didn't like any of them. But it was like I didn't have a choice.

Georgia: I noticed last night. We were in fucking meetings all day yesterday, and I noticed you did a thing where you yelled at me about something, and I was like, “I know!” Like, you didn't yell back at me. That sounds terrible. But like, you know, you got mad at me about something, understandably, and it was just like, “Oh, yeah. Okay.” Instead of, like, us fighting about it.

Karen: Right! Yeah, because I fuck it up sometimes. My reactions are like... The scale is incorrect, and it's also like I talk to you like I talk to my sister.

Georgia: Right.

Karen: Which isn't accurate to our relationship.

Georgia: ‘Cause your sister, ‘cause your sister could scream back at you.

Karen: And also, that's all my whole family. It's literally like turn out the light Georgia.

Georgia: And I'm like, "Why are they mad at me? They hate me. Why did I leave the light on? I'm so stupid. I can't believe I left the fucking light on this whole time. God, Georgia."

Karen: You're over there going, Jay thinks I'm lazy and I'm like [inaudible]

Georgia: [laughs]

Karen: We are perfectly set up to like trigger each other...

Georgia: I know.

Karen: But it's that thing of, like... Then I would normally be in a reaction of "I just did that wrong," but I can't be wrong, so I have to make you be wrong, and then blah, blah, blah.

Georgia: Yeah

Karen: As opposed to drop it, just drop it. Oops sorry didn't mean to say it right. Oops you can absolutely go back real time.

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: I can, I should say.

Georgia: As someone who... Yeah, it works.

Karen: It works. Immediately apologize. Immediately go "Oops, I shouldn't have yelled that. I just spent five days with Jim Kilgariff. Everything is on volume 11. My apologies." Where it doesn't have to be a thing, and everything isn't this, like you're saying, it's not this proof that I'm this fucking... The worst person. It's all just human reaction. That's what everyone does in different ways.

Karen: And it's been working for us for so long. Maybe there's a better way, and you know what? I think it's like, I think at the very center of the circle is the podcasting sweater.

Karen expresses how she tended to live in imaginary scenarios in the future that cause anxiety and emotional turmoil. Karen explains that instead of immediately letting her thoughts of sadness take over, she has learned to observe the feeling, to let it be. Normalizing personal struggle, reflection, and therapy has always been a strong through line in *MFMM*. While the podcast is considered a true crime comedy podcast, one of the driving factors and major discourse

operating is personal disclosure. In other words, Karen and Georgia's self-discovery and personal disclosure is a major theme that has made this podcast the success that it is. Karen and Georgia blur the lines between audience and performer by performing self and presenting personal struggle. I am not sure that *MFM* would have a cult following "murderinos" if they only talked about gruesome murders and inserted some jokes now and then. The performance of their struggles humanizes them, making the murder stories fraught with comedy more palatable. As audience members, we can justify listening to a "true crime comedy" podcast simply because we understand that Karen and Georgia are good human beings who care about other people and the social world on a deep level.

I know other true crime podcasts exist, but *MFM* has become a particularly unique phenomenon. It is safe to say that Karen and Georgia's unique performative techniques have culminated and complicated true crime, comedy, and personal discourse. Would *MFM* be as famous if Karen and Georgia never talked about themselves or their battles with depression, anxiety, and daily life?

I am taken back to the moment I first heard *MFM* in the car ride back from Petit Jean. I was not offended but interested in the details of the crime. I wonder if my friends would have been less offended had they heard more about Karen and Georgia. I wonder if my friends would appreciate their wit and comedic banter. I know that Karen and Georgia's performance of self-disclosure is one of my favorite things about the podcast. I follow their lives like I would a friend's. When I listen to them by myself, I do not feel like I am only consuming gruesome murder stories but catching up with my buddies.

When I finished my undergraduate degree, I experienced a deep depression. I had played volleyball my entire life, and my eligibility had run out. I had moved back home, and I found

myself unable to get out of bed. Similarly to the way Karen and Georgia describe Davina Buff Jones's relationship to depression, I was okay with not living. I knew that I was strong and I hated myself for not being able to tough it out. I had adopted the mindset, "what do you have to be sad about?" and "you have to get over it and move on."

I was eventually put on an antidepressant. Over the next few months, I felt better, but I hated that my feeling better was the result of a pill, not my ability to "snap out of it." I resented the little pill I took every morning and it stood as a symbol of my weakness, my failure. I stopped taking the antidepressants after a few months and slowly felt the depression creeping back in. I managed to control it only because of my extreme resistance to medication. Over the years, I still had bouts of depression and extreme anxiety. I knew that this was something that might follow me.

Georgia is particularly open about her struggles with mental health. She often posts pictures of herself holding her medications in her palm on Instagram to normalize mental health and medication, more specifically. In one post made on June 23, 2020, Georgia posted a picture holding her medication (Hardstark). It read, "I found a great new psychiatrist (ask your therapist or GP for a recommendation) and we're slowly tweaking things to help lift me out of this cozy little anxious depression I've stumbled upon recently (haven't we all?!)." She then lists the medications pictured in the photo: Effexor, Wellbutrin, Buspar, and T3/T4. She hash tagged the post #mentalhealthawareness #Mentalhealth. Georgia's vulnerability is an attempt to normalize medication, something so many, including myself, resist. Seeing these posts on Instagram affected me greatly. I began to form a different relationship to my depression and personal mental health battles.

Georgia's post is just one of the ways *MFMM* has encouraged mental health awareness. When I started listening to *MFMM*, I began to form a different relationship to my depression and the medication I had to take. Ironically, I felt seen and heard even though Karen and Georgia could not see or hear me. Their candidness was refreshing. It helped me open up. I often felt like there was never a good time to bring up my struggles with mental health, but I realized that it was something I wanted to share with people. I wanted to talk about it with the people closest to me. As I opened up, I realized how many others (most people) also had similar struggles. I noticed that if I opened up, others would too. This helped to ease some of the internal stress I had been experiencing for so long.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I quickly realized that it would be a battle. Am I right? I rely on my communities for not only emotional support, but purpose and joy! The lack of social interaction was eating at me, and I found myself in another depressive state. Instead of fighting like mad, I decided treatment was crucial for my survival through this strange time in the world. Since my relationship with my depression had shifted, I recognized that it was necessary to get back on medication. It would have taken me much longer to seek the help I needed had I not been exposed to *MFMM*. By repeatedly hearing about Karen and Georgia's mental health over the years, I realized it is brave to seek help. By embracing my depression and medication, I see how much their performance has changed me. I think it is important to acknowledge the impact that this performance may have on other listeners, not just me.

Bhabha uses "performative" to refer to action that "incessantly insinuates, interrupts, interrogates, antagonizes, and decenters powerful master discourses which he dubbed "pedagogical" (Conquergood "Of Caravans" 27). I believe Karen and Georgia's explicit decision to self-disclose is a performative act that antagonizes and decenter powerful narratives around

mental health. Not only does it destigmatize struggles with mental health, but it creates movement in its listeners that change their lives for the better. I have experienced this firsthand. If it was not for Karen and Georgia's performance, I do not know where I would be.

When I began this project, I had no idea where it was going. Perhaps more to the point, I had no idea where I was going. I was in a Ph.D. program, but struggling to keep moving. I knew I loved *MFM* and how Karen and Georgia have influenced my life, but I was unsure about writing about it. In part, I wanted to give Karen and Georgia the credit they deserve. I also wanted to understand what it was about this discursive space that I found so empowering.

I have discovered that it is not easy to think carefully and critically about things you love. I wanted to write about this community carefully and cautiously, which creates a sense of hesitancy and exacerbated some of my mental health issues. I know it is impossible to account for every murderino's experience or even Karen and Georgia's experiences or intentions for the podcast. Yet I feel pressure to do so as I conclude this document. In other words, I feel pressure to be perfect in order to share this document publicly. I know that this research experience has been worthwhile, but I feel an overwhelming sense that it has been pointless, that my perspectives are too obvious. I find myself wanting to write prose in upspeak, to include the hesitancy of "likes" and to create a written equivalent of vocal fry. "Is this, like, good enough?" "Am I, like, allowed to exist in this space?" Then I am reminded of the space that Karen and Georgia have created through their carefully crafted performances: a space for people who did not have one before, a space full of community, comradery, catharsis, expression and empowerment. One of the ways I know that I feel empowered is that Karen and Georgia have given me permission to be imperfect. Karen and Georgia have prepared me for how to make

public corrections gracefully without surrendering my right to exist and express my thoughts. Careful, yes. But not debilitated by perfection.

I recently made my way to the meta “There’s an *MFM* Group for that” Facebook group. The group is meant for murderinos to direct murderinos to other murderino groups that may interest them. Say “murderino” again: “murderino.” My only thought is that murderino “identity” acts as a type of screening, i.e., if you like *MFM*, you are someone who will get along with this group, regardless of what the other interest is. This speaks volumes to Karen and Georgia and the specific ways they have carefully crafted their community. There is an exclusivity inherent in this type of alliance, one that works to create a strong sense of community and safety.

For example, as soon as I joined the group, I scrolled down and saw that one group member asked, "Is there a group for people with OCD?" Group members answered with "*MFM* & OCD: OCD Ruins the Party Again." This is a play on Karen and Georgia's often repeated phrase "Toxic Masculinity Ruins the Part Again," a phrase you can see on shirts, mugs, totes.

As I continued browsing the Facebook group, "There's an *MFM* group for that," I realized that some groups are so exclusive that you have to be invited by another member to join. This speaks to my comment about how these groups attempt to create a sense of safety for their members. For example, "Mental Healtherinos" requires an invite from a group member. I asked for an invite and got accepted. I saw that the group consisted of murderinos sharing their mental health struggles, questions, and realizations. My interactions with other users in this space have enabled me to finish this dissertation. They have given me a space in which to be myself with all of my struggles and to push through to get this document to where it is, even as I know that it can be so much more in the future.

Since the beginning of *MFM*, listeners have been encouraged to make art related to the podcast, echoing the DIY ethic of the Riot Grrrl movement that has encouraged fans to create their own subversive creations (Downes 204). Karen and Georgia have actively encouraged murderinos to sell their merch on Etsy, an online marketplace for vintage and handmade goods. Many artists start by selling their goods on Etsy since it is a popular and affordable platform. Instead of policing content and prohibiting murderinos from profiting from *MFM*, they have empowered listeners to contribute and profit from *MFM* as a space of shared labor. Karen and Georgia could have easily policed their listeners and copyrighted their sayings, but they didn't. If you search Etsy for *MFM*, there are 1,091 results. The first thing that comes up is a crewneck sweatshirt with the words SSDGM (Stay Sexy and Don't Get Murdered"). As I scroll down, there are numerous T-shirts, stickers, art prints, mugs, tote bags. Another product is a series of brown leather keychains. One of the keychains read "YOU'RE IN A CULT, CALL YOUR DAD," another reads "MURDERINO," and another "LOCK YOUR FUCKING DOOR." The keychains have 1,561 reviews. One art print is an animated drawing of Karen and Georgia sitting on separate couches, and the words "LOOK. LISTEN. TRUE CRIME IS MY THERAPY. SSDGM." While I don't expect it to sell on Etsy, this dissertation is my own work of fan art.

Rosenburg and Garofolo write about the Riot Grrrl movement's profound effect on women's lives. Addressing how the Riot Grrrl movement means community and emotional support to many women, Rosenberg and Garofolo quote one woman named Madhu. Madhu says, "Through Riot Grrrl, we can get with people with similar problems and interests, and constructively try to change our world. It's community and family" (810). This sentiment reigns true for this murderinos. I don't think I would have been able to face the challenge of this dissertation if I thought it was something I was doing by and for myself. While I know that



Karen and George are not my friends. I know the podcast medium is, in a sense one-way communication, I also know that I have new survival mechanisms because of the community I have found with other murderinos. Call my dad. I'm in a cult.

Like many graduate students, I have battled imposter syndrome in conducting this research and sharing my findings in this document. But I feel I have shown some of the ways embodying Karen and Georgia's performance has changed my life.

First, Karen and Georgia's irreverent philosophies mostly targeted to women have changed the way I live my life. The phrase "fuck politeness" reminds me that my identity as a woman does not mean I must value politeness over my sanity. I do not have to have perfect manners or value politeness over my intuition. The repetitive way Karen and Georgia remind me to "fuck politeness" has changed the way I interact with people on a daily basis.

Second, analyzing Karen and Georgia's performance in an academic setting has taught me that my thoughts and ideas are just as valid as others. In academia, graduate students often feel inadequate. I have felt this. Karen and Georgia remind me that we don't have it all figured out and I don't have to be a particular type of graduate student. They remind me there is beauty in vulnerability and failure.

Finally, Karen and Georgia's performance has transformed me. Conquergood traces the shift of performance as mimesis—to poiesis—and finally kinesis. I find that through this project and my experience as a murderino, I have experienced what Bhabha describes as "remaking." Homi K Bhabha's politically urgent view of performance as breaking and remaking is a compelling way to explain my experience of Karen and Georgia's performance. I feel as though I have had to "break" some of the toxic discourses I had embodied personally to "remake" them.

## Future Research

In future research, I would like to take an “intersectional” approach to *MFMM*. That is, I would like to address Karen and Georgia’s *whiteness* and how that influences their performance of *MFMM*. In relation to comedy, specifically, Pelle examines the performances of queer Asian American stand-up comedian Margaret Cho and argues for an intersectional approach to gender, sexuality, race, and nation. Pelle explains the adversity Cho has faced as a queer Asian woman in comedy. Pelle writes, about Cho's body, "In contrast to the normative body that is always bound, contained, autonomous, and fixed, Cho's body is interpreted and responded to as excessive, and threatening because it is big, loud, leaky, perverse, abject, dangerous, and always transforming" (22). In other words, because Cho is not heterosexual and white, her body is perceived as grotesque and threatening. Instead of challenging the norm, Cho decides to adapt to the norm to gain some sense of power.

Karen and Georgia are white, heterosexual, cisgendered women, and this influences the way they are allowed to perform. I thought about this issue a lot while writing this dissertation, but it seemed like a topic for another project. It would be interesting to see how Karen and Georgia’s privilege, as well as their marginalization, affects their performance. Pelle’s insight on Margaret Cho reminds me that Karen and Georgia move through *MFMM* with privilege, and it would be interesting to explore how they do or do not acknowledge their privilege. Karen and Georgia bring up issues of race often, specifically in relation to inequities in true crime. They have made noted shifts in response to letters from fans, both white and not, asking them to “check their privilege.” White victims of violent crime are covered more often than crimes against people of color. Race is something that they find important across the podcast, and it

would be a significant site of analysis. I am particularly interested in fan responses to their apologies and changes of focus.

In future research, I would also like to see how other murderinos experience *MFM* and conduct a more explicitly ethnographic exploration of murderino culture. The murderino community is strong and I don't think it is going anywhere. I have found out that many murderinos still identify as murderinos even though they no longer listen to the podcast, expressing discontent in the ways the podcast has changed. As Karen and Georgia have gained huge success, some murderinos have complained of their performances changing in ways that no longer serve them. I have seen complaints that they are no longer as "down to earth" and that they focus too much on the success of their network "Exactly Right." Karen and Georgia often plug or promote all of the other podcasts they feature within their network. Some murderinos are happy they have achieved success and believe they deserve the notoriety and monetary compensation for their contributions to the true crime comedy community. I think it is a complex site of exploration considering some murderino do not listen to *MFM* anymore, but still participate in murderino groups. This speaks to the strength of the community and the carefully crafted performances by Karen and Georgia.

One way I could continue this research would be to explore the murderino Facebook groups in depth. There is an ethical dilemma, as most of the groups are private, and as mentioned above, require an invitation to join. I will say, I tried to participate in the "Rainbow Murderinos" group by asking participants in the group to share how the *MFM* has influenced their lives. My request to comment was either denied or never approved. I was hesitant to post because I thought it might be scoffed at by other murderinos. The nature of the murderino is to remain underground, exclusive. They want to keep the murderino community safe, and I think that

speaks to the desire to weed out the inauthenticity of so many social media groups. Keep the trolls out! I respect the denial of my comment and I believe it brings up an important characteristic of the murderino community.

As a longtime listener of *MF*M, I see how Karen and Georgia's performance has influenced my life. I have embodied their philosophies as a direct result of their powerful performative moves. Karen and Georgia empower murderinos to create, gather, and form community far beyond their podcast. They "take," disrupt, destabilize and challenge existing discourse on podcast intimacy, comic performatives, true crime narratives, feminist resistance, and mental health, and in-turn "make" a new discursive space, *MF*M. This space has become a home to me, a place I can embrace failure and recognize that I don't need to be perfect to exist in public, or to publish my thoughts. This last insight is a particular comfort, and challenge, as I conclude what is, by far, the most substantial piece of writing I have ever written. I can definitively say that I did not get murdered. I'll let the reader decide if I stayed sexy.

## APPENDIX. *MFM* EPISODE TRANSCRIPTION

### “Big Sweater Energy”

Karen & Georgia: Hello.

Karen: And Welcome.

Georgia: To My Favorite Murder

Karen: Uh, the true crime, uh comedy podcast that you’ve heard about from your friends.

Georgia: That’s right. That’s Karen Kilgariff.

Karen: That’s Georgia Hardstark.

Georgia: We sound exactly the same right now, but pretty soon you’ll get it.

Karen: Yeah because it’s actually not exactly the same in any way.

Georgia: Nope.

Karen: We’re incredibly different.

Georgia: So different.

Karen: Vocally. Uhh, maybe we’re from the same state, sure. Maybe we have the same accent, absolutely. Uhh do we like vocal fry? Hell yes. Are we pushing it more than ever before? Yes. it’s a selling point [bleep sound].

Karen & Georgia: [laughs]

Georgia: Yeah girrrll.

Karen: I just belched at Georgia while smiling and pretending I was about to say something.

Georgia: Ew, I was not buying it which is why I screamed so loud. Please don’t play that. Steven please mute the . . .

Karen: Steven please. Steve can you actually just put a beep like it’s uh, we’re. . .

Georgia: No leave the burp in. Leave me screaming into the microphone off is what I’m saying.

Karen: [laughs] I thought you were asking me.

Georgia: No, I would never censor your burps, are you kidding me? I live for them.

Karen: Umm, you censor your burps though.

Georgia: I do, because theres so many. It almost seemed, like, aggressive at one point. you know what I mean? Like, she's doing that on purpose. Really. .

Karen: She's just doing it for attention!

Georgia: Because my gut microbes are, like, overflowing with. . . with joy. How are you?

Karen: I'm good. How are you ?

Georgia: Good . . Good. Good, good.

Karen: Yeah you seem good.

Georgia: Oh, thank you. Oh, really ??

Karen: Uh Huh.

Georgia: Oh!

Karen: To me.

Georgia: In what way?

Karen: Uhhhh, calm. Easy going.

Georgia: Really?

Karen: And kinda like, what? Okay.

Georgia: I mean, I'm not.

Karen: And that's fine with me. A lot of that kind of stuff.

Georgia: Oh cool!

Karen: Yeah it's nice. I like it.

Georgia: Interesting.

Karen: I'm working on matching your energy.

Georgia: Okay? I think it's my big sweater energy.

Karen: That, well. And I should mention that you did offer to give me that sweater.

Georgia: I said I might.

Karen & Georgia: [laughs]

Karen: Georgia has the best sweater on right now because it's cable knit. It's a cardigan. Black. But it has silver threads in it.

Georgia: And, it's like, loose. It's not my style at all and I saw it on a website and I specifically bought it for podcasting. I was like that is a great podcast sweater.

Karen: Cozy, kind of like.

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: An outfit, but you don't have to commit.

Georgia: Feels like I'm wearing. . . like, I'm in a blanket at home . . .

Karen: Yep.

Georgia: but I'm in the studio, where I don't live.

Karen: You're saying, get your own sweater, Karen?

Georgia: Noooo, yeah.

Karen: I think it. . . Yeah, if it works.

Georgia: Okay

Karen: Yeah don't doubt it. You get to be comfortable.

Georgia: Thank you. Thank you for that.

Karen: No problem.

Georgia: Hold on [BEEEEEEEP]

Karen: Yeah, get it on the record.

Georgia: Take that off [laughs]

Karen: Do not take it off.

Georgia: That one was, uhh. That was like . . .

Karen: Low and slow?

Georgia: Yeah that one was, like, FOUL.

Karen: [laughs]

Georgia: In like, like a little gutterall. UH OH.

Karen: Sorry.

Georgia: [laughs]

Karen: did you hear that Steven ?

Steven: No.

Georgia: OH.

Karen: I slapped the table and all the audio went out for me and Georgia.

Georgia: [laughs]

Karen: Plug our things in.

Steven: Can you hear yourselves?

Karen & Georgia: Yeah

Steven: Ok cool.

Karen: Yeah we're in.

Georgia: Um, lemme talk about the exactly right network and what you can look forward to right now?

Karen: This is, uh, Georgia's podcast guide.



Georgia: Don't press fast forward, because this is good shit too.

Karen: Yeah there's upcoming other shows. Sometimes there's people who tweet at us and say. Excuse me, I just listened to the whole um, all... every episode, now what do I do? Well, here's your answer.

Georgia: Oh.

Karen: Here's what you do.

Georgia: Oh!

Karen: Right?

Georgia: Handpicked by us. SO, the Fall line. Incredible podcast. There new season starts on the 12th which is yesterday.

Karen: 2 days ago?

Georgia: Yesterday. Uh, and there doing Bufort county Jane doe. The whole season is going to be really good. Uh, this podcast will kill you. Everyone's fuckin favorite podcast about infectious diseases.

Karen: Who doesn't wanna hear about it.

Georgia: They're doing a coronavirus special.

Karen: Yes, they are.

Georgia: Which is really exciting.

Karen: It's topical. It's the fear on every, on everyone's lips these days, and it's all in the news, umm and the ladies are gonna break down the Coronavirus for you.

Georgia: Right. It's exciting. Murder Squad did a Jon Benet special. Also on the murder squad on the 17th Phoebe fuckin Judge is a guest.

Karen: Pheobe Judge comes through. That's criminal!

Georgia: It's criminal.

Karen: It's criminal.

Georgia: How much we love her. And then on the 24th fucking Josh Makowitz, the Our personal friend.

Karen: The greatest. You know him. You love him from dateline.

[4:34]

Georgia: That's right.

Karen: Josh Mackowitz wil be on murder squad. They've got quite a lineup coming.

Georgia: They do, um, the purrcast has the "Well Hiii" cat on.

Karen: The southern gentlelady cat.

Georgia: If you haven't seen it just look up, "well hi cat."

Karen: Yeah.

Georgia: You'll just have the best time and then OH MY GOD. On the 19th the Purrcast is having celebrity Jackson Galaxy. Cat celebrity, for all us cat people. Jackson freaking galaxy. Do you wanna tell us about Dou You Need a Ride and what's on that, since it's your podcast.

Karen: The great James Fritz. One of the great LA stand ups stand-ups everyone here knows, loves, and worships him he does incredible work in the comedy field and he is our guest and he's so hilarious. Such a fun, chilled-out. He just, he had just come home from spending the holidays with his family.

Georgia: In Chicago? Is he a Chicago dude?

Karen: No, he is, I believe Kentucky, and he had dark time but were all in the car together. It's really real and funny and as sad as it is, great. And he's just the funniest person. I really love him.

Georgia: Love it.

Karen: Yeah, so that's what's going on on Exactly Right Network, so tune in. There's so much exciting stuff.

Georgia: We're so close.

Karen: Actually we had to work on a press release last night on new shows that are about to come out.

Georgia: That's how real they are.

Karen: They're super real, and they're right on the verge, so we will of course, keep you updated. But we have two podcast coming out in the next couple of months. And even more slated on the way so just hang in there cuz we have all your favorite new podcasts that you haven't heard of coming.

Georgia: That's right. 2020 is the year of Exactly Right.

Karen: That's true. And if I may, if we can do just a tad, just dip into the podcast recommendation area.

Sound [laughs]

Karen: You barf into your sweater.

Georgia: Through my sweater and then I give you my sweater. OH here. Here's that sweater you wanted. [laughs]

Karen: I just wanted to say my friend Carrie O'Donnell is guest host on a podcast called Sexy Unique Podcast and it's hosted by a woman named Lara Marie Schoenhals. I believe that's how you pronounce her last name. And basically she started it as a recap podcast. I believe it was Vanderpump rules recap podcast, but now they have gone, they have gone out, so she has lots of different co-hosts. I started listening because my friend Carrie O'donal is great, he is hilarious, he's on twitter. So they did like, season 2 of the Real Housewives of New Jersey. They do Real Housewives ` obviously. They do Vanderpump obviously. They do. There's a show called Gallery Girls that used to be on that they have done the entire season of. Right now I'm listening to them covering Lohan Beach Club TV show. I think it was a year ago or so and here's what's fun, I don't watch any of these shows. Reality TV makes me very uncomfortable and It makes me feel like I have to get up and start producing these people. It makes me feel like it's my job to make it work. And it stresses me out.

Georgia: It is. We all talked about it. You are responsible.

Karen: Why do you have a clipboard if you're not gonna produce?

Georgia: Truly.

Karen: Um. So I can't watch it. But I realized, listening to these two hilarious people recap and do the voices of the Real Housewives of New Jersey or Lindsay Lohan. It is one of the funniest podcasts.

Georgia: Excuse me.

Karen: One of.

Georgia: Its one of the 2nd funniest podcasts.

Karen: It's just so delightful. I've really been doing that thing where it's like, it feels like I'm spending time with my friends, but its actually just me listening. So its called Sexy Unique Podcast. If you're into reality shows at all and comedy this is definitely the podcast for you because the way they discuss everything it's really hilarious but then it gets very thoughtful like they flame people and they like, they definitely shit on behavior but then they start talking about, why people are doing what they're doing

Georgia: I got to listen to it though because I don't watch any . . .The last one I watch was like, Rich Girls. Remember that with fucking Hilfiger, Tommy Hilfiger's daughter.

Karen: [laughs]

Georgia: Remember that in the early 2000s.

Karen: Did that get filmed in LA?

Georgia: No, that was so New York. It was so good. Yeah, that sounds good. I need to listen to stuff like that without having to watch that shit. Because I love like Bachelor recaps on, like, BuzzFeed or whatever but I don't want to watch it.

Karen: No, I can't it. I genuinely suffer when I watch reality TV. It embarrasses me. I get embarrassed in my living room but to listen to my funny friends, or my one funny friend but I know in real life. And my other funny friend that I don't actually know. I've never met her. But they do these voices, everything about it is just very enjoyable, so just if you're looking for something that's very different from true crime, that's very different from any of that stuff, but you're into reality TV, I think Sexy Unique Podcast is for you.

Georgia: I love it. Speaking of reality TV, I watched the new Ted Bundy special.

Karen: Oh yes.

Georgia: Shockingly I watched it with Vince, who is, like, not not into . .

Karen: He can't do that normally.

Georgia: He can't. So, but he, I was, like, can we just put this on? We just interviewed the amazing director and producer Trish Wood. Ted Bundy Falling For a Killer. And it's just interviews with the women who were involved in the case and, so I really wanted to watch it from that angle. So I put one episode on, and I was like let's just watch this. And later he was like, we had watch one episode only and he was like, let's put that show on and I was like what show? And he was like "that Dahmer show." ` [laughs]

Karen: Vince!

Georgia: Like, he doesn't even know what serial killer it is. But, it was so good and the daughter of his girlfriend Liz.

Karen: That lived with him?

Georgia: When she was a little girl. She is so incredible, as played by Renee Zellweger for sure, in the future film.

Karen: In the future film.

Georgia: In the future film. A punk rock Renee Zellweger. I just fucking loved her. They're so strong and, you know, everyone in the whole show is, they're just incredible women.

Karen: And it's such a cool thing, you know, we had a long long conversation with Trish Wood but it all got edited down to a very short thing, but umm, maybe we'll make that available. It was such a fascinating thing to actually discuss with the creator/director about looking at, it feels like this is the trajectory of true crime, the culture of true crime interest is now taking, because the majority of the audience is women and the interest has to do with being, kind of being a woman. The idea that we're now taking these things instead of the strange attention that were paying to the perpetrators of the crime, instead. . .

Georgia: We can't identify with at all in any way.

Karen: Which is part of the fascination with, what type of monster is that I want to be able to recognize that. Whatever, but instead, to look at these women ones who did survive what they go through and what that's like and the strength that they have from somewhere to not only continue to live, but thrive and help others. I mean, it's just, that's the best story that can be told.

Georgia: Absolutely.

Karen: It's so cool that it's being told around this, such a dark, horrible kind of subject matter.

Georgia: Yeah, a hundred percent.

Karen: Trish would really pulled it out, there, really got a story going that hasn't been. Should have been, but I also think people were very respectfully keeping their distance you know like it had to be their decision.

Georgia: Totally.

AD: [Low jazz music plays in the background]  
Georgia: Being busy doesn't mean you have to resort to take out or overly processed food because thankfully, there's Daily Harvest.

Karen: Daily Harvest makes it easy to eat more fruits and vegetables with thoughtfully sourced chef-crafted foods that can be prepared in 5 minutes or less.

Georgia: They work directly with Farms to harvest organic Fruits and vegetables at their peak and then freeze them within 24 hours to lock in their nutrients, so everything stays fresh until you're ready to eat and enjoy.

Karen: Choose from over 65 different options like smoothies, hearty soups, harvest bowls, and overnight oats.

Georgia: Each recipe takes one step to prepare with room to make them your own.

Karen: Add your favorite milk to the smoothie or heat up a harvest bowl and top it with an avocado or a fried egg.

Georgia: Mmmmm. Whether you're at home, or at a desk, or on the go, Daily Harvest is the easiest way to have a delicious and nutritious meal or snack. We are obsessed with this.

Karen: I mean, I have one every morning and when I don't my whole day gets screwed up.

Georgia: Totally.

Karen: Like today. I ate a weird some kind of pastry thing this morning because I was like, oh company is over and I've been off all day.

Georgia: The overnight oats I love eating those first thing in the morning and they have these bites.

Karen: Yeah.

Georgia: Have you had the little bites? I've been eating those at night instead of sweets and it's just, like, so satisfying.

Karen: It's kind of like you're the best vegan in the world that's eating an avocado for dessert when actually it's just a chocolate ball that tastes delicious.

Georgia: We've been having one to two Daily Harvest meals a day. It's the best.

Karen: They really are. It's the best

Georgia: It's the best.

Karen: Go to [Daily Harvest.com](https://DailyHarvest.com) and enter promo code "Murder" for \$25 off your first box

Georgia: that's promo code murder for \$25 off your first box at [Daily Harvest.com](https://DailyHarvest.com)

Karen: I said [Daily Harvest.com](https://DailyHarvest.com)

Karen & Georgia: Goodbye

Georgia: Hiring is challenging

Karen: True. But there's one place you can go where hiring is simple fast and smart and that's ZipRecruiter

Georgia: co-founder Gretchen experienced how challenging hiring can be after unsuccessfully searching for a new game artist to grow with her education tech company

Karen: but then she switched to ZipRecruiter and saw an immediate difference and you came to by signing up for free at [ziprecruiter.com](https://ziprecruiter.com) favorite

Georgia: ZipRecruiter doesn't depend on candidates finding you it finds them for you

Karen: and by using zip recruiters screening questions to find candidates Gretchen. it's easier to focus on the best ones. Then find the right one.

Georgia: in fact after posting her job on ZipRecruiter Gretchen said she was honestly surprised you found applicants so quickly and hired a new game artist in less than 2 weeks

Karen: Gretchen s and Gretchen that it's no wonder four out of five employers who post on ZipRecruiter get a quality candidate within the first day

Georgia: like Gretchen ZipRecruiter, the smart way to hire.

Karen: see why ZipRecruiter is effective for businesses of all sizes

Georgia: try ZipRecruiter free for ziprecruiter.com favorite Ziprecruiter.com/ favorite that's F A V O R I T E

Karen & Georgia: Goodbye

Georgia: Okay.

Karen: Tell me a story.

Georgia: I'm gonna tell you a story.

Karen: Okay.

Georgia: I'm going to tell you about the mysterious death of Davina buff Jones.

Karen: Okay.

Georgia: I got information from articles from Forbes. There's an article by Stacy Gdingrich? Stacy deatrich ? A Charlotte magazine article by Adam Roo. And, of course. our friend Reddit and also are Bros over at generation why podcast.

Karen: Yeah.

Georgia: Let me first start by telling you about a little place called Bald Head Island.

Karen: [sighs] Is my dad there?

Georgia: [laughs]

Karen: I told you I didn't want to talk about him many more. [laughs]

Georgia: He's there with my husband and they're having a grand old time.

Karen: And a lot of people we know actually.

Georgia: That's right.



Karen: It's pretty hot. it's a hot island, You have to admit it.

Georgia: It's a pretty hot island.

Karen: It's kind of attractive.

Georgia: It's a pretty hot island, I noticed that island the moment I walked into that bar. Bald Head Island is on the southern tip of North Carolina's Cape Fear Coast.

Karen: Yes.

Georgia: Which means nothing to you and I from Southern California but I think to a lot of people it means something to them, probably their grandparents went there.

Karen: Maybe they saw the movie with Robert De Niro.

Georgia: Or maybe they saw the movie the fucking tour-de-force 1989 movie Weekend at Bernie's, which was filmed there.

Karen: [laughs]are you serious? Oh, I bet you, I bet that's like, a deep cut, like film nerd piece of information, where you know, where Weekend at Bernie's was filmed? Cape Fear!

Georgia: That's right so it was filmed there and in the movie, as you know, they go to this island and there's like rich people, and that's like the theme of the movie. And it's totally accurate.

Karen: I'm sorry. Weekend at Bernie's was filmed at Bald Head Island or Cape Fear?

Georgia: Bald Head Island.

Karen: Oh, got it.

Georgia: So, the place were talking about.

Karen: Oh, got it.

Georgia: So it's a place where one percenters, million-dollar, plantain-style beach homes like fucking. . .

Karen: Plantation?

Georgia: [laughs]What did I say?

Karen: [laughs]Plantain.

Georgia: I wrote Plantation, it's not plantain style. That would be gross.

Karen & Georgia: [laughs]

Karen: It's a delicious little banana that's been fried up, a little sour cream.

Georgia: Truly love them. A little crème fraiche on there?

Karen: The more problematic plantation-style mansion?

Georgia: That's right, you know, in that style of fuckin rich people.

Karen: Sure.

Georgia: Um, on the island it's only accessible by a 20-minute ferry ride. It was that kind of place. And according to the website, it's 12,000 Acres total and 10000 of those acres are just beach marsh and forest preserve. So it's not built up people love it, the nature, and you know, those things that money can buy.

Karen: And you're free to be bald-headed if you if you want to.

Georgia: That's right.

Karen: Must be nice.

Georgia: They ought to start insisting.

Karen: Don't wear that hat!

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: We celebrate you here.

Georgia: Show it to the world. The island has a small year-round population but of course there are tons of vacationers who have their vacation homes there, and the island has these beautiful sand dunes. It's got Spanish moss on trees. The air is all lovely.

Karen: Spanish moss just kind of hung on wires.

Karen & Georgia: [laughs]

Georgia: On the ground.

Karen: Yeah, just laying there.

Georgia: Spanish moss doesn't grow on the ground, right?

Karen: I mean...

Georgia: I can't imagine, okay, so since it's only 20% developed, there are no cars allowed so everyone fucking goes around on golf carts.

Karen: [sighs] I love it.

Georgia: Do you?

Karen: I genuinely do.

Georgia: Okay.

Karen: You can only go so fast in a golf cart.

Georgia: Right.

Karen: But as fast as you can go, is really fast for a golf cart.

Georgia: Sure.

Karen: And so it makes it really fun.

Georgia: Okay, that's cool. I wasn't sure how I felt about it but I can deal with that. If there's a car it's only because it's like a government person's car and, like, a police officer's car. So in 1999, one such officer was a 33-year-old woman named Davina Buff Jones. So Buff was her last name. Jones was her last married name, but she goes by D to her friends and family.

Karen: Okay.

Georgia: Growing up in 1970s in Charlotte North Carolina, "D" had been known as a tomboy because of her smoking, spitting, and cursing.

Karen & Georgia: Oh, hiiii.

Karen: Hi, D.

Georgia: Welcome.

Karen: Yep.

Georgia: She was a scrawny teenager, you know, with the, big, you know, hair and she had a toothy smile. She looks like anyone in the 70s and 80s Um growing up at a time who was named Debra. She just look like that, with the short hair on top that was, like, feathered a little and then the longer hair in the back that was curly.

Karen: Totally

Georgia: Just like, you know, pretty standard stuff. She'd worked at her parents steakhouse with her sisters in Charlotte. Her parents described her as talkative and outgoing at times, but other times, hostel and withdrawn. So she kind of had a dual personality. She's a classic, overshadowed middle child.

Karen: [sigh] That's the worst position to be in in birth order.

Georgia: Oh, truly.

Karen: And, uh, yeah I have the qualifications of a middle child, but I'm the youngest.

Georgia: Right.

Karen: But I have middle child tendencies.

Georgia: Oh, do you?

Karen: Yeah, because I got plenty of attention but I was still like HELLLo my BABY. Like, I just couldn't get enough.

Georgia: [laughs]By D's 30th birthday she's, been married and divorced twice. In 1994, she's charged with simple assault for—are you ready for this? Spitting on the mother of her then husband's child during an argument.

Karen: Look, that's a tough situation.

Georgia: Sure,

Karen: No spitting allowed.

Georgia: No spitting

Karen: This is just like, the pool rules, always. No bottles, no cut-offs, no running, no spitting.

Georgia: I think that's a great rule.

Karen: And you can throw a no gum rule in there if you're one of those kind of people.

Georgia: Yeah.

Georgia: And, like, maybe take a shower before you get in the pool, and if you have diarrhea, don't go in the pool.

Karen: Yeah, stay out of the pool with diarrhea.

Georgia: That's right,

Karen: These are, this, pool rules apply to all of life.

Georgia: That's right. So, in January of 1999, back on Bald Head Island, the 33-year-old graduates from the police academy and starts working for the bald head PD where crime is, like, nonexistent. It just doesn't happen. She's 4'11" and 90 lbs.

Karen: Oh, no.

Georgia: So, she's a teeny tiny little thing.

Karen: Okay.

Georgia: Davina's a little Spitfire.

[20:51]

Karen: She doesn't have a golf cart. She has one of those little kids cars that the kids get for Christmas.

Georgia: Awww, yeah.

Georgia: She has two Australian shepherds named Lord Adam and Precious Queen.

Karen: Oh, so there. They have papers. These are breed dogs.

Georgia: Probably.

Karen: Wow.

Georgia: So, she has to sit on a phone book in her car to make everything work.

Karen: [laughs] Wow.

Georgia: Like, can you imagine trying to have authority and then, you're like, I'm out of here, and then you jump on a phone book, like that's got to be hard.

Karen: That's where the spitting comes in.

Georgia: Yeah, like, you got to be pretty tough to be taken seriously at 4'1."

Karen: Yeah.

Georgia: Especially as a cop.

Karen: Very much so.

Georgia: Gets assigned to work with Keith Cain. He's a former truck driver and has been on the force less than a year.

Karen: He's seven feet tall, they're the perfect combination.

Georgia: Awwwww. So, you know, like many first-year cops she is a rule follower she doesn't believe in bending the rules for anyone, and for the rich people who could name drop on the island and were contributors to political bullshit. . .

Karen: Yeah.

Georgia: Of course they didn't like that. She'd be writing them a citation and they'd like, do you know who I am? And she'd be like, I don't give a shit and give them a citation anyway.

Karen: Okay, just imagine Bald Head Island for the one percenters, every goddamn asshole on that island is, "do you know who I am?"

Georgia: Right, and none of them stop at the fuckin stop sign, you know that. In their golf cart.

Karen: Nope. They slide on through, there always 3 gin and tonics in, like they're living their life, Oxycontin here, Oxycontin there.

Georgia: Sure.

Karen: They're not ones to be corrected or disciplined in any way. That's a nightmare.

Georgia: So, she refuses to you know bend a citation, and so locals on the island start complaining about her. She's kind of hassled a lot in the short time that she's a cop there.

[22:30]

Karen: Yeah.

Georgia: By fall of 1999, Davina is unhappy with the whole situation and she starts sending out her resume to police departments across North Carolina hoping to find a new job, which has to suck.

Karen: Yeah.

Georgia: On the night of October 2nd, 1999, Davina's doing a routine Patrol with her partner Keith. They return to the station, and as Keith explains, D unexpectedly is like, I'm going to go out and patrol and he's like why don't you just wait for me and she's like no, no I'm just going to go. So she heads out. It's possible that she just wanted to be alone so she could make a phone call which she does at about 11:19 p.m. at a payphone at the marina. The call is to her ex-boyfriend who had just broken up with her that week, so she probably wanted to go out, call him, and be alone.

Karen: Yeah.

Georgia: She showed up at his place drunk a couple nights before, which was totally out of character for her. She apologizes to him on the phone and tells him she wants to stay friends. He wants to stay friends so it seems pretty amicable split. The call last couple minutes and she says so talk to him later and then she goes back out on the road patrolling. She heads towards the island's lighthouse known as Old Baldy.

Karen: [laughs] Sure, it's a theme.

Georgia: [laughs] Yeah, it's just decorative. It doesn't even actually fucking work.

Karen: Oh.

Georgia: At 11:48 she radios into dispatch, says through the. . . what is it called?

Karen: Radio?

Georgia: Radio [laughs] she says that she's out with three people, basically she says "Show me out with 3, please stand by" so it's basically" I've come upon three people, standby." maybe she's still in her car, like I'm about to

get out of her car maybe she's on foot and comes across three people but that's what she calls in.

Karen: Okay.

Georgia: And then she leaves her mic open so she doesn't have to press on it anymore and then there's another transmission over the open mic where she calmly but firmly says, and you can hear this online “there ain't no reason to have a gun here on Bald Head Island okay? You want to put down the gun? Come on. do us a favor and put down. . .” and there's a high-pitched squeal, it's like, feedback you know when you get to close on the mics and it's fucking gives that awful feedback.

Karen: Yeah.

Georgia: You hear that, the signal breaks up, and that's it. And that's all you're hear.

Karen: [sighs]

Georgia: Except Generation Y, when they played it, they kept playing it, and you can hear a voice that says, “oh Lord, oh my God” like you can hear a woman saying, it's probably her saying saying that.

Karen: Ohhhh.

Georgia: I haven't heard it anywhere else and there's not a lot of articles about this or videos so the fact that they, they found that, is interesting.

Karen: That's very cool.

Georgia: But, you know, you don't hear any other voices. You don't hear anyone yelling at her. It's just her voice saying that.

Karen: Okay.

Georgia: Alright, so after hearing her radio transmission, her partner Keith runs out to try and track her down. She hadn't said where she was, and he's driving around for about 15 minutes, and then he comes upon her white pickup truck at the Old Baldy lighthouse. The truck is sitting at the end of an alley, it's backed into a dead-end about 20 yards from where the street ended, and the sand dunes and trees started. The trucks lights are on, and the engine is running.

Karen: Ooh.



Georgia: Her flashlight is on the seat which he says she always took with her when she got out of the car at night. So next to her truck Keith finds D's body lying face down near the base of the lighthouse, by a white picket fence.

Karen: Oh no.

Georgia: I know. She has a single gunshot wound to the back of her head, and her 40 caliber glock duty pistol is near her right hand.

Karen: Oh, wow.

Georgia: Yeah so Keith checks her pulse, he doesn't find one, he calls in the rescue unit and then he takes her gun. He picks it up and put it back in her truck, like on on the ground of her truck. Which seems weird, right?

Karen: Yeah, I can see my logic of that would be, I don't know who's around here, and I don't want anyone to pick up her gun.

Georgia: That's exactly what he said was the reason, but he also disturbed the crime scene, but he's panicking at this point. His partner is on the ground. He doesn't know what's going on.

Karen: And I bet you there are very few murders on Bald Head Island.

Georgia: Exactly. And a police officer is just like...

Karen: Yeah this is unlike anything they deal with on a daily basis.

Georgia: Right, so okay so here is some fucking crazy. . . the only available backup arrives. It's volunteer fire chief Kent Brown and two EMS workers. One of those EMS workers had had a sexual harassment complaint filed against him recently the week before, by. . . Davina Buff Jones.

Karen: Uh oh.

Georgia: So, he's one of the people who shows up on the fucking scene. The men lift her body onto a gurney and transport it to the ferry dock, which I totally don't understand because she has no pulse, she's dead. You should leave the crime scene as it is, but they take her to the ferry, uh, I think, thinking to take her across to the mainland.

Karen: To the hospital?

Georgia: Exactly, but they leave the body uncovered and totally exposed to the elements of the ferry. Yeah.

Karen: So there's just no, nobody has any sense of how crime scenes are processed or anything?

Georgia: Wait, it gets worse.

Karen: Okay, I'm sorry.

Georgia: Meanwhile at the scene there's a bloody palm print on the back of Davina's truck, there's drag marks, there's blood spatter evidence, but none of this is preserved because there's a wedding of a prominent Bald Island family scheduled to start in just a few hours, and so at the chapel next to the lighthouse. So the volunteer fire chief thinks the prominent family shouldn't have to look at this crime scene, so he orders the whole crime scene to be hosed down with a fire hose.

Karen: This happens a lot in these stories where you think, and it's easy for us... 20/20 hindsight. It's 20/20 on Barbara Walters; this is 20/20. But how this is going to hold up in 3 years? No one gives a shit about that. I bet if you asked the family, they would never want a crime scene hosed down, just because people, you know, like, the logic behind that is so strangely self-serving, and just... It's a bad move.

Georgia: It's also suspicious as fuck.

Karen: It's so suspicious. It adds so much to that to be like we can't trust anybody who's running stuff on this island.

Georgia: Police chief Karen Grasty. She orders the scene be contained until the state borough of investigation could arrive and she's repeatedly told twice to "go home and shut up."

Karen: By who? The fire chief?

Georgia: I guess so.

Karen: Oooh telling.

Georgia: Uh huh. When the medical examiner finally conducts her autopsy later that morning after she hasn't been properly, her body hasn't been properly stored to preserve evidence. He writes a 4-page report that is incomplete, inconsistent, and factually incorrect in some places. For example, the head wound diagram. He draws a rough circle behind and slightly below her right ear even though the wound is, and this isn't disputed... The wound is actually in the very center in the back of her head.

Karen: I mean...

Georgia: Yeah. So, he later blamed his errors on a lack of sleep and a rush to move quickly to provide information to investigators, like they we're saying they needed. Almost like they needed to wrap this up because we don't want the residents of Bald Head Island to be freaked out that there's a murderer on the loose. Ya know?

Karen: I mean, there's a real issue. There's a real issue with rich people... They're a real problem.

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: In this country.

Georgia: Oh my god. Seriously.

Karen: But also that doesn't really hold up again if, say, if this was IBM. And this is the way you were doing your job, so you're hurrying up to give incorrect information. So you're hurrying up to give this information that won't help anything because you're actually screwing the case up more.

Georgia: Or it's almost like you know what they want the end result to be, which is whatever ruling is and so you're hurrying through it cuz you're not actually looking at any evidence, you're getting to the conclusion.

Karen: That they want you to. It's also, they're all drawing suspicion on themselves.

Georgia: 100%. The death was immediately determined to be a homicide, but two weeks later Brunswick District Attorney Rex Gore determines the cause of death to be suicide.

Karen: Oh no.

Georgia: So two theories about Davina's death emerge, homicide or suicide. Okay. So I'm going to give you the case for homicide. There were allegations of large drug transactions happening on the island. There were these inlets, hidden creeks the traffickers use to make drops of weed and coke. Almost sounds like remember in bloodline when they would be going through the little. . .

Karen: Yeah, like a swamp, kinda.

Georgia: Yeah, maybe. Ten years earlier in August of 1988 a vacationer, a fucking-joggin down the old beach or whatever finds a soggy pillowcase near the water, and in it is 8 kilos of coke.

Karen: [laughs]

Georgia: Which is worth about 3 million on the street.

Karen: So they dragged that pillowcase up onto their own porch.

Georgia: So, they kept running and minding their own fucking business and don't get involved.

Karen: I see no pillow case.

Georgia: What would you do? I would not touch it, and I would anonymously call the police.

Karen: Let's see. I would look in there. I would see it was coke and then I would duck and run because the only thing that's going to happen after you discover \$3 million worth of coke is someone's gonna to come for it. So you don't want any part of that.

Georgia: You don't.

Karen: Even though you think, I could make some money off this. I could have a great weekend.

Georgia: You can't.

Karen: No, none of those things are going to happen.

Georgia: This isn't Weekend at Bernie's everyone.

Karen: No. Stop being immature. Stop it.

Georgia: Why do I have to keep telling you these things? The week Davina died she had told her dad that she wanted to look into the drug activity on the island, you know, she wanted to be a cop, and she wanted to do it well, so she was like, I'm going to look into this. She told him she arranged a meeting with the sheriff's investigator who handled narcotics cases, like she was into it. She wanted to go undercover to help track down drug runners and distributors and she had also told her ex-boyfriend a few months before she died that she got information that they were making big drug deals down by the lighthouse, "not quarter bags," he said, kilos," big suitcases of money we're being transferred."

Karen: Okay, but I mean, you can't, you know? It's noble intentions. You cannot do it by yourself. I mean you just can't and that's. . .

Georgia: Well it doesn't sound like she was, it sounds like she was trying to get involved in it, but who knows it could go all the way to [inaudible]

[33:00]

Karen: Well, and also, she went by herself so she didn't even include her partner she didn't have backup, or anyone covering her.

Georgia: But she could have just been doing simple patrolling.

Karen: True, true.

Georgia: She might not have expected to come up on anything

Karen: I'm just saying, just watch Beverly Hills Cop because when you watch a renegade who gets into the middle of drug-dealing, it ends bad. You need your friend Judge Reinhold to work in the Beverly Hills cop department.

Georgia: Everyone needs a Judge Reinhold. We always say that. You guys won't listen to us.

Karen: Just check your exhaust pipe for a banana, that's all I'm saying.

Georgia: That scared me so much as a kid. I was like, anyone can put a banana in an exhaust pipe?

Karen: Sure.

Georgia: It also came out that at 6 a.m. the morning after Davina's death, three men had been discovered trying to sneak off the island via the ferry. They had been briefly questioned and released and then when chief Grasty, she attempts to re-interview them later, she's given a stern warning to quote, just let it lie. She is told the men are quote good Christians and not considered suspects.

Karen: They're good Christian drug dealers. . .

Georgia: . . .Who are sneaking off an Island at 6 a.m . . .

Karen: Because they killed somebody.

Georgia: Right.

Karen: Geez-o.

Georgia: Allegedly. Doing her own investigation, Grasty finds that the men all have criminal records over forty eight pages long so they're not who you think they are and you should have fucking looked into them either way. Grasty believe that Davina interrupted a drug transaction and was killed as a result. So they found that the bullet that killed Davina came from her own gun. There are no identifiable prints on the weapon at all.

Karen: Of course not, because it got touched, and picked up.

Georgia: Right, yeah. Davina was wearing fingerless gloves at the time and they do find some particles of gunshot residue on the back of her right glove but it could have come when she was at a shooting range or whatever. It didn't seem it was, like recent.

Karen: From that moment.

Georgia: Exactly. So there are theories about how Davina could have fired her own gun. Oh, God, this is so fucking crazy, so how she could have fired her gun into the center, the back of her head. and you should have seen Vince and I sitting there on the couch, and I was like, "Do you think you you could shoot yourself in the back of the head?" it's just this weird conversation that I would never expect to have with my husband, but yeah, he was like there's no way you could do that.

Karen: And also there's just no reason to do it.

Georgia: Wow, I can tell you what they are.

Karen: What the reasons are?

Georgia: So basically, let me just finish this. The trajectory of the bullet is up and to the left from the center of the head that means if she did fire the gun, she wasn't holding it upside down. So the theory is she was. Basically you hold a gun in front of your facing you and you put both of your hands over your head and pointed to the back of your head with your hands with a gun upside down. That's their theory, and that's how you could have, possibly shot yourself in the back of the head. But then, the problem is, that the shell casing would have gone to the left and it said it went to the right. So it just doesn't make any sense.

Karen: Also trying to move your arms like that, I don't know.

Georgia: Plus, she was 4'11" so we can assume she had really small hands. To hold a big old fucking glock, you know, being able to do that.

Karen: Also, if you were trying to kill yourself if that is what you're actually trying to do you're not going to do it in a way that might just leave you very brain-damaged. You're going to put the gun in your mouth.

Georgia: Right, but that's, yes, okay so. .

Karen: There's an argument to that?

Georgia: The case for suicide, which is, why would she have staged her own suicide to look like a homicide? so it's families of police officers killed in the line of duty are entitled to death benefits and payouts, but police officers who take their own life are not eligible. But the thing is she didn't have children her parents and her sisters were all doing fine, they didn't need the money. It wasn't like, some scam like that. Those who believe the suicide Theory point to the fact in 1994 and 1998 Davina had received 170 outpatient treatments for adjustment disorder with mixed emotional fears and chronic depression. That sounds like a big number, but if you think of going to therapy every week between 1994 and 1998 it's not.

Karen: Yeah, that's really only under two years of therapy if you went every single week.

Georgia: Right. Its like, If that would have happened in the last two months sure that's a lot but it's really not a huge amount.

Karen: Not over two, over four years at all.

Georgia: But when she was in high school, Davina had swallowed a bunch of Tylenol and had to get her stomach pumped, so the people who think it's suicide said that she had suicidal tendencies in the past.

Karen: Okay, I mean, maybe. It would be interesting if you forced people to be really honest with you, what you could pull out of people's past that would justify something, like an act of violence like that.

Georgia: I have them.

Karen: Everybody does, fucking high school sucks shit.

Georgia: It sucks shit.

Karen: And people do stuff and you know if you don't have support and you don't have people around you you're going to go to therapy a bunch of times, you're going to get, especially depression, I mean like . . .

Georgia: Depression is a fucking bitch.

Karen: It's rough.

Georgia: Two days before her death Davina had told her doctor that she experienced suicidal thoughts the previous week that involved wanting to walk out into the ocean until, quote, until she couldn't swim anymore which is a pretty passive way of saying that. It's that thing that I've had in depression where I don't care what happens to me, I almost want something bad to happen to me so I can take my mind off of this. But I don't really want something bad happening to me.

Karen: Right it's almost a coping mechanism to say, here's what I think I could manage.

Georgia: Right, and here's how much I don't care anymore. Her doctor referred her to a psychiatrist, she set up an appointment, but the doctor didn't believe the comment warranted hospitalization. In his opinion it was more of a fleeting thought than like, actual suicidal ideation. But he made her promise that if she seriously started thinking about suicide, that she would call him and in his opinion, Davina was a low risk for suicide, but it is you know interesting that two days before, she said that. I mean, you can't, I want to defend her, and defend her, and defend her, but that is a compelling point.

Karen: Yeah, it's, you know, at this point anything is possible, but it also makes me think if I had a job where I was trying to do what I thought the job was and I was actually getting kind of attacked for it.

Georgia: And sexually harassed.

Karen: And sexually harassed, and there were all these kind of problems, part of that could have been, just, it's the statement I always use is, I don't have the bandwidth for it, but that come out as I want to walk into the sea until I can't swim anymore, cuz what you're saying is, I can't deal with this, like help me, because I can't deal.

Georgia: That's a good point and think about the fact that she's 33 when she becomes a police officer, divorced twice like it's probably this exciting new beginning for her, and it's not fucking going well.

Karen: Yeah, it's going badly, I would say. You know if that if she's trying to do this thing and this culture of the island and the department is saying shut up, sit down, stop doing your job, and then she's thinking this will be my noble fight. It's tough. That's a lot to deal with.



Georgia: And, she's looking for, the fact that she's looking for another job actively means she has some hope.

Karen: Yeah, she wants to work somewhere else.

[41:10]

Georgia: When Davina's parents Lloyd and Harriet these incredible people, they go to their daughter's house that day the day that she dies and they find... So she had those two dogs, right? they find her back door propped open and there's like this makeshift DIY tunnel so that the dogs can go in and out as they want and friends and family say they've never seen that kind of setup before. So that led some people to think that she knew she wasn't coming back anytime soon, so she wants to let the dogs in and out, but like, who sees their friend's house in the middle of the day when they go to work?

Karen: Right, and whatever setup you might have. True.

Georgia: Right. And on the flip side they also find a to-do list on the kitchen table with things that she had planned to do after her shift that day.

Karen: Yeah, yeah.

[41:49]

Georgia: So, because of this information district attorney, Rex Gore, he influences the medical examiner to rule Davina's death a suicide yeah so some say the campaign so, some say that it's because the residents of Bald Head Island thought their properties would decline if there's, like a murderer on the fucking Island. And it's just, you know, of course they're voted in, they're going to get influenced by that.

Karen: And, also if there is an issue with a drug trafficking, which they're like, I'm going to go out to my vacation house and snort an 8-ball of cocaine. They don't want anyone interfering with that either.

Georgia: Yeah, totally. Later, there are local state and federal independent hearings. They include extensive testimony by experts, so everyone's trying to look into this case and form their own opinion, but unfortunately because the crime scene was so compromised, there's not a lot to go on except looking into Davina's life and figuring it out on their own. And then also looking into the gunshot wound and having their own... It's really an opinion. "Can you do that yourself? Can you not?" They had all these women of her size try to... What's it called? Recreate that, and they really weren't able to do it. So in November 2001, uh,

District Attorney Rex Gore... He closes the case, calling it a suicide and refuses to reopen it.

Karen: Wow.

Georgia: So, after he closes the criminal investigation, the Buff family files a civil action, for the... They want to determine the cause of death. They are horrified to see their daughter's name, you know, dragged through the mud, and they want it ruled a homicide and, you know, have justice. So none of the Davina's journals indicate that she had any suicidal thoughts or the type of planning that it would have been necessary to carry out such an elaborate suicide disguised as a murder. It's pretty complicated. Her family says that, quote, losing her was indescribable, but slandering her in death was worse.

Karen: I bet.

[43:00]

Georgia: In 2003, the North Carolina Industrial commission hearing resulted in the finding that Davina's death was likely a homicide, and they awarded her family \$50,000 in death benefits for law enforcement officers. That's good that, you know, they didn't want the money but... In 2006 US Department of Justice awarded the Buff's nearly \$147,000 through its Public Safety Officers Benefit Office. So they're not ruling it different, but they're saying it probably was homicide.

Karen: They're like, in the meantime you should get the benefits in case it wasn't that.

Georgia: And there's no hard evidence that it was suicide, so we can't say that it was.

Karen: Right.

Georgia: In 2011, this dude, John David... He fucking gets Gore out-of-office in the race for the Brunswick County DA's office. John David criticizes Gore's handling of the case and wants it reopened, and he makes the case file available to a group of retired FBI agents trade of which I want to sit in that fucking meeting, right?

Karen: Hey, hey. There's the Bald Head Island I do want to visit.

Georgia: [Laughs] That's right. But the agents... They were like, split.

Karen: Really?

Georgia: Again. Like, not half and half, but again... Some thought it was suicide. Some thought it pointed to homicide, which just tells you how complicated the case is...

Karen: Yeah.

[45:00]

Georgia: Without any evidence to be used.

Karen: Right.

Georgia: He... John David concludes that the file will remain open, and any new leads will be pursued, so it's not closed anymore. And in 2007 Brunswick County Sheriff Ron Hewitt is indicted and found guilty of federal obstruction charges. He's arrested and investigated for several crimes including embezzlement, sexual harassment, and showing up at crime scenes intoxicated.

Karen: Uh oh.

Georgia: Don't do that.

Karen: It's not allowed apparently.

Georgia: Apparently. And in 2013, Gore pleads guilty to allegations that he conspired with an assistant DA in fraudulent travel reimbursement schemes, and he gets 18 months probation. So the people who are ruling it suicide aren't, like, clean. You know what I mean?

Karen: Yes.

Georgia: There have been at least eight separate reviews of Davina's death in the nearly 20 years since she died. Lloyd and Harriet Buff hired private investigators throughout the years, and they try to come up with new leads. And Davina's sister, Elaine Buff, wrote a book about the case called Out with Three: The Murder and Betrayal of Bald Head Island Police Officer Davina Buff Jones. And the Buff's scattered the ashes from the piers where she used to go fishing with her grandfather.

Karen: [sighs]

Georgia: I know... But there's no memorial marker for Officer Buff at the spot on the island where she died, and Davina Buff Jones' death is officially classified as "undetermined." And that is the mysterious death of Davina buff Jones.

Karen: Wow.

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: Wow.

Georgia: Isn't that crazy?

Karen: Also, like, I mean... I want to get into my assumptions because it's like...

Georgia: Do it, do it, do it.

Karen: Like, when you start talking about the people who were, like, it's obviously suicide... I was just, like, wait what? Like, no, it is not.

Georgia: It's not obvious.

Karen: And the idea that she would call in... Like, I feel like if she was trying to stage anything, like, opening her own radio and involving people and letting people overhear anything makes no sense.

Georgia: Right. It's like... Yeah, it's too tricky.

Karen: It's very risky. Like, I mean, but who knows? But the... I feel like it's so difficult to argue with the quote, unquote coincidence that she opens her radio, says she's there with three people, and then three guys are trying to sneak off the island.

Georgia: One hundred percent.

Karen: That alone moves it up into a different category where, yeah...

Georgia: I mean, those cases where the people in charge and the people who rule, like, what the case is... When they are so dead set on one answer... It just drives me crazy.

Karen: It's infuriating. Well, and also just that overtime, I think it's maybe a thing that people are only starting to realize now... That the truth will out. It always does and so...

Georgia: It might not.

Karen: I mean there are definitely times when it doesn't.

Georgia: [laughs] Sorry.

Karen: No, you're right.

Georgia: I'm so negative.

Karen: But I mean I think in the eventual, there's going to be a technology where we can set some drone over there, and it could recreate the scene and it's impossible to blah blah blah... You know, that thing.

Georgia: Right. Well, you hope that the evidence... like, the actual evidence, which is, like, the wound and you know, the... I think there was blood splatter on both her hands, so why wasn't there gunpowder residue on both of her hands? That kind of thing. Those hard evidence points. And then, like, it's just crazy.

Karen: And also how about we pull in the guy that decided to hose the whole scene down? What's his background? What are any of those decision makers... When are they going to get pulled in the way her personal life has been pulled in and judged and taken apart? And, you know, every little thing you've ever done. I mean, I think it's very telling that, you know... She, she was confiding and saying things to her therapist, but not enough to put them in her journal. So maybe it was a thing of...

Georgia: She just went through a breakup, you know?

Karen: Right. And after a long conversation, it's like... uh, I just want to walk into the sea. Like, it's so open for interpretation.

Georgia: Yeah. You want to hear the audio?

Karen: Oh no. Of her?

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: Noooo! I mean, you can play it, and I'll just take my audio off.

Georgia: No, no, no, no, no. No, no, no, no. They can find it online.

Karen: I mean, I believe you.

Georgia: [laughs]

Karen: It's Generation Y, guys, but no way.

Georgia: That's 'cause she sounds so calm. Like, she sounds like a police officer doing her job and stopping people. Like, I feel like if she had been making the whole thing up, she would have sounded fake-panicked.

Karen: Yes. There would have been a little layer of acting.

Georgia: Of acting, and there's no acting. It's this trained person, asking to... For someone to put the gun down and trying to casually have a conversation with them. Not like screaming at them or anything.

Karen: Right, yeah.

Georgia: It's creepy.

Karen: [sighs]

AD

Karen: Georgia?

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: Here's some info for you. Your local police department probably receives a hundred calls a night from burglar alarms and usually have no idea whether or not the alarm is real.

Georgia: Or a raccoon.

Karen: Right.

Georgia: All the alarm company can tell is that the motion sensor went off.

Karen: Well, SimpliSafe security is different. You get comprehensive protection for your home.

Georgia: SimpliSafe uses real video evidence to give police eyewitness accounts of any break-ins.

Karen: They can tell them whether the Intruder is in the home, whether they're armed, and what they're doing.

Georgia: Police will dispatch up to 350% faster than normal burglar alarms.

Karen: Outdoor cameras and doorbells alert you to anyone who's approaching your home.

Georgia: Entry, motion, and glass break sensors guard the inside.

Karen: Plus, SimpliSafe protects your home from fires, water damage, and carbon monoxide poisoning.

Georgia: And it's all monitored 24/7 by live security professionals.

Karen: You can set up all by yourself with no tools needed or they can do it for you.

Georgia: And it's only 50 cents a day with no contracts.

Karen: Go to [simplisafe.com/fave](https://simplisafe.com/fave) today and get a free SimpliSafe security camera.

Georgia: Normally \$100. Go today, and it's free.

Karen: It will help you capture crucial evidence for the police and get 350% faster dispatch.

Georgia: Go to [SimpliSafe.com/fave](https://SimpliSafe.com/fave).

Karen & Georgia: Goodbye!

[Music fades out.]

AD

Georgia: With stackable seating, sofa beds, extendable tables and multi-purpose poofs...

Karen: [laughs]

Georgia: Article's selection of stylish furniture has exactly what you need to upgrade your home...

Karen: With poofs.

Georgia: [laughs]

Karen: Article offers direct-to-consumer furniture and combines the curation of a boutique furniture store with the comfort and simplicity of shopping online.

Georgia: Their design team focuses on beautifully crafted pieces, quality materials, and durable construction.

Karen: Each piece reflects Article's modern aesthetic, mid-century Scandinavian, industrial, and bohemian design.

Georgia: You'll save up to 30% over traditional retail prices, and shipping is fast and affordable across the US and Canada.

Karen: Plus, Article offers options for in-room delivery and assembly assistance.

Georgia: You get 30 days to make up your mind with a simple return and exchange.

Karen: I love Article. I have indoor furniture from them. I have outdoor furniture from them.

Georgia: We have furniture in our office from them.

Karen: They really... It's like, it's got so much stuff on their website that you kind of get lost. It's like these key pieces that you look at and the choices are so good.

Georgia: Yeah, and they all look so classy. They really tied the room together. You'll always find something.

Karen: You'll always find something, and it's incredibly affordable.

Georgia: Right.

Karen: That's the thing... I just got all excited about it because when I was shopping for patio furniture last summer... I'm not putting something outside that's going to put a dent in my budget. Oh, and here comes Article with like \$39 chairs. They're doing it.

Georgia: Yeah, it's the best. Article is offering our listeners \$50 off their first purchase of \$100 or more.

Karen: To claim, visit [article.com/murder](http://article.com/murder) and the discount will be automatically applied at checkout.

Georgia: That's [article.com/murder](http://article.com/murder) to get 50 bucks off your first purchase of \$100 or more.

Karen & Georgia: Goodbye.

[52:54] [can opens]

Georgia: Canned wine. It's February.

Karen: Crack it. You did your time.

Georgia: I did my time.

Karen: You served your time.

Georgia: I did.

Karen: You did. Okay, this story, uh, I actually saw this when one of the pieces of the story broke as a news item, but then, recently, one of our listeners... Her name is Elise Teribio, that's her name on Twitter also, @eliceteribio. And she sent this and said, "This story is unbelievable, and it's a survivor story."

Georgia: [gasps]

Karen: So this is a survivor story, of Tiffany Taylor, and these New Jersey women who stopped a serial killer. Are you ready?

Georgia: A hundred percent.

Karen: Oh, that... Sorry. I got information from [allthingsinteresting.com](http://allthingsinteresting.com)

Georgia: Great site.

Karen: But the article that Elise linked me to was from a website called [www.northjersey.com](http://www.northjersey.com), and it was written by a writer named Christopher Maag, but there was also contributing reporters: Julia Martin, Tom Nobile, Keldy Ortiz, and Svetlana Shkolnikova. So, it's 2016... We start



2016. Thirty-three-year-old Tiffany Taylor lives with her mom and her young daughter in Roselle, New Jersey, which is just south of Newark.

Georgia: Okay, where the fuck is Newark?

Karen: I mean, it's by the Newark Airport.

Georgia: It's by the airport. Got it, got it, got it. Okay.

Karen & Georgia: [laughter]

Karen: Also, she is originally from Jersey City

Georgia: Cute place.

Karen: I don't know about that

Georgia: I've been. It's actually cute.

Karen: For real?

Georgia: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Karen: Okay.

Georgia: It's cute.

Karen: I only ever hear... It's, like, I have leftover 80s comedy ideas of New Jersey, where it's, like, [in accent] "New Jersey." It was always shitting on New Jersey. But then all the people I know that are from there are vigorously proud of being from New Jersey.

Georgia: Yeah. Totally.

Karen: So...

Georgia: Enough shitting on New Jersey, you guys. Or go ahead.

Karen: I mean, apparently, there's great stuff about it. They have that really big mall.

Karen & Georgia: [laughter]

Georgia: There's good stuff; there's bad stuff.

Karen: You know, like any place.

Georgia: You know.

Karen: So, Tiffany, uh, she was raised in the housing projects. The one called Salem Lafayette apartments. She and her mom moved to Orlando briefly because Tiffany was a professional dancer, and she went to a place called

Valencia College down there to study psychology and music, um. But after a few years there she gets pregnant unexpectedly. So her and her mom basically moved back to New Jersey. They move home.

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: Then, okay, so basically once she's back home, Tiffany eventually meets this guy, uh. So it's a guy that her mutual friend is hooking up with. He's 20 years old. His name is Khalil Wheeler-Weaver. Not easy to say.

Georgia: No.

Karen: They, the two of them, Tiffany and Khalil get along. Sometimes they hang out. Like she plays video games with him, whatever. Um, but, you know, nothing big.

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: But Khalil starts obsessing over Tiffany. He asked their mutual friend, uh, the one he's sleeping with, if, like, how to get him hooked up with Tiffany.

Georgia: Awesome.

Karen: Right? Tiffany is not interested because he's already sleeping with her friend, and he's a lot younger than her. She's just always turning him down, telling him to get away from her. In spring of 2016, he starts just begging her openly to have sex with him.

Georgia: Oh my god.

Karen: And she always says no. He eventually starts offering to pay her, and it's not until he offers her \$200 to sleep with him that Tiffany's like, sure, but she actually has no intention with a sleeping with him. Her plan is she's going to take that money and rob him basically and not sleep with him.

Georgia: Okay.

Karen: Because she was sick of being treated like a sex object. That's actually a quote she ended up giving in one of the newspapers.

Georgia: Wow.

Karen: So around 8 o'clock on April 10th, 2016. Tiffany goes to Khalil's parents' split-level home in Orange, New Jersey. So, he lives there with his mom and his stepdad. He meets her at the front door, gives her \$200 cash, then he walks her up to his bedroom. She says he has the tiny bed of a boy.

Georgia: OH! My god!

Karen: [laughs] A tiny little, what I imagine to be, a twin bed.

Georgia: Can you imagine?

Karen: Maybe shaped like a race car. It's the tiny bed of a boy.

Georgia: [laughs] Maybe a bunk bed?

Karen: [laughs] I mean, just little. Maybe it's like a slightly larger dog bed?

[56:49]

Georgia: A cot? Or a dog bed? [laughs]

Karen: Okay. Once she's in his room, she pretends that she left the condoms she brought out in the car. She's like, "Oh, sorry. Let me run out to the car and go get those." She said she'll be right back. Instead, puts that \$200 in her pocket and drives away, and she never sees him again.

Georgia: Later days.

Karen: Right? Okay. So soon after that experience, Tiffany's entire life is turned upside down. Her mom was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. The treatments, the medical bills start to pile up. It leaves them penniless. They get evicted from their apartment. They have to live out of Tiffany's car.

Georgia: Oh god.

Karen: So when Tiffany finds out she's pregnant with her second child...

Georgia: God, getting cancer shouldn't make you fucking live out of your car. It's horrifying.

Karen: That's America today.

Georgia: That's, that's unacceptable.

Karen: It really is.

Georgia: That's not human rights.

Karen: No, it's not fair.

Georgia: No.

Karen: It's not fair. Because you have to be rich to survive cancer these days.

Georgia: Totally.

Karen: It's insane. Let's fix the system?

Georgia: Let's fix the healthcare system.

Karen: Good luck, everybody. Okay. So Tiffany decides that she is going to take up sex work. She needs to earn money for this family and for... Now it's going to be four people and it's...

Georgia: Who's the fourth person?

Karen: She already had a child.

Georgia: Ohhh, I get it. Okay.

Karen: Her mom, and now she's pregnant again.

Georgia: Got it.

Karen: So she's like I have to make money. Then in November of 2016, she gets a side job from that, which is basically picking up crack for someone who pays her just to go pick it up. And that person lives in room 32 of the Ritz Motel, which sounds classy, but actually is not.

Georgia: [laughs] It doesn't sound classy.

Karen: The Ritz, honey!

Georgia: The Ritz Motel??

Karen: [laughs] I fell for it.

Georgia: Oh, I could have guessed.

Karen: The Ritz. We're going to the Ritz for high tea.

Georgia: High tea is right.

Karen: [laughs] Real high. Crack-level high.

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: It's on Route 1 in Elizabeth, New Jersey, which is where all the great motels are.

Georgia: [laughs]

Karen: Okay. So around the same time. Okay, so she's basically like, this person is like, "if you go get my drugs I'll pay you for it." She's basically just doing what she can to survive and to make sure her family survives.

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: Around the same time, she starts getting text messages from a stranger who's begging her to pay her for sex. So this is what she's basically

already doing; it doesn't shock her; it doesn't come as a surprise, but she doesn't know who the person is so she just keeps declining. They continue to contact her even after she gets a new phone. He somehow finds her new number and hits her up again. She says no until he offers more money. And then she... On November 15th, 2016, she finally decides the price that he offers is going to be worth the risk of not knowing who this person is, and again, her plan... She's going to go get that money, and then, and rob him.

Georgia: That scares me.

Karen: Okay. So Tiffany decides to meet this John that night outside the Ritz.

Georgia: Sure.

Karen: Around 8.

Georgia: At the valet?

Karen: Out at the valet. She, like, says goodbye to her boss, says “thanks so much. I picked up enough hours this week.”

Georgia: I'm going to grab some cucumber water on my way out.

Karen: Just. And I might just put those on my eyes and lay on the chaise lounge in the waiting room.

Georgia: Oh, sure. The waiting room? [laughs]

Karen: The waiting room at the Ritz. It's gorgeous.

Georgia: Didn't you know that... You've never heard of the waiting room at the Ritz? It's the classiest fucking place.

Karen: So, it's 50 degrees outside, and when the guy shows up, he's dressed in a black hoodie, black gloves, and a black ski mask.

Georgia: Mmmm mm. Wait, what?

Karen: Yep. But Tiffany's like, “Oh, he must be cold.”

Georgia: Noooooo.

Karen: Yeah. She doesn't red flag it at all.

Georgia: Is the ski mask like around his face, or like a beanie?

Karen: I think since it says “ski mask” instead of “Beanie or hat” that he's wearing a mask.

Georgia: Okay, I have a pro- Okay.

Karen: Right. It's not good.

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: But she's like, I need to get this money. She's in a bad place. So he gives her eighty bucks up-front. Um, then she borrows . . . [laughs] the phrase... Jay did this research for me, and he keeps referring to the person she runs and gets crack for as "her boss." [laughs]

Georgia: Jayyyy! I mean that's very fair of him.

Karen: Her boss. But it is technically her boss.

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: So she borrows her boss's burgundy Lincoln sedan. That's probably also how it's described in the newspapers or whatever. But she borrows this burgundy Lincoln sedan, and they drive... They basically leave the Ritz Motel.

Georgia: Okay.

Karen: They pull away, and then as they go, he asks her after a little while to pull over because he has to pee. So she doesn't know what happens next, because he either hit her over the back of the head with a blunt object, or she had an iced tea that she had in between the two of them in a cup holder, and she was like, "I was so out cold he could have drugged me."

Georgia: Wow.

Karen: And 'cause when she woke up her head was pounding. So she knew there was something... Either she was struck or drugged.

Georgia: Scary.

Karen: But she wakes up. She's in the back seat of the Lincoln. Her hands are handcuffed behind her back. Her mouth and nose are wrapped with duct tape, and he has her pinned by the throat, and he's raping her.

Georgia: Oh my god.

Karen: So this causes her... She, like, wakes up to this nightmare scene. She bites her tongue so hard it starts to bleed.

Georgia: Oh my god.

Karen: The blood... Between the blood and the tears coming out of her eyes, it loosens up all the duct tape. So, she starts screaming. He takes off the ski mask, and he says, "Do I look familiar? Do you remember me? You took my money." And that's when she realizes it's Khalil Wheeler-Weaver.

Georgia: Oh my god.

Karen: She begs him not to kill her. She explains, "Please don't kill me. I'm four months pregnant." And he just simply states, "I know." And that's when she realizes he is going to kill her. Okay, now. Now, we're going to go... We're going to change the story. We're going to change the time frame.

Georgia: Okay, you're going to leave me here.

Karen: Yeah, sorry. We're going to put a pause on that.

Georgia: Okay.

Karen: Because we have to tell a different story.

Georgia: Okay, here we go.

Karen: So, we're going to talk about Robin West. She is a rebellious, adventurous, young woman from Philadelphia. Mostly, she lives with her mom in West Philly, but she also spends time with her dad who is a Philadelphia School District police officer and Assistant Church Pastor. Uh, he lives in North Philly, and she goes to church with her mom on Sundays. She sings in the choir; sometimes she even sings lead, which...

Georgia: Damn, girl.

Karen: She must be good because that's where all the good singers are. But as she grows up, her rebellious side takes over. She won't stick to curfew; she argues with both parents a ton. When she's 14 years old, she gets sent to a place called Wordsworth Academy, which is a treatment center for young people with behavioral and/or mental health issues. But it's not as nice as it sounds, and actually, the living conditions are terrible there. There's allegations of counselors who beat and abuse and even rape the students that go there.

Georgia: Oh my god.

Karen: So Robin goes there, and she makes two great friends there, Tracy Johnson and Bernicia Patterson. And they're like sisters, the three of them. So when Robin gets out, she's still struggling with depression; she still fights with her mom. So when she turns 18, she moves out of the house and starts to try to make it on her own.

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: She starts stripping to earn a living. Her friends and family keep track of her on Facebook but she, uh, she kind of is, like, off trying to make it and do her thing. So one day, August 2016, Robin and Bernicia decide to go

to New Jersey together. Remember, they're from Philly. At first I was confused I was like, "This is New Jersey." So they're from Philly; they go to New Jersey; they stay at the Garden State Motor Lodge in Union Township, which is about 15 miles outside of Manhattan.

Georgia: It's the Ritz of Union Township.

[1:04:52]

Karen: [laughs] It's the Ritz Motel of Union Township.

Georgia: That's right. They've got a waiting room.

Karen: [in accent] "Bettin' on the Ritz."

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: It's like a dish with three old Ritz crackers in it.

Georgia: [laughs]

Karen: And you go to take one because you think they are complementary, but they're like, "That is 11 dollars."

Georgia: Oh, 11 dollars for a Ritz?

Karen: They pulled a Ritz on you. Okay, so essentially they stay there for a few days. They run out of cash. They decide to turn tricks to get money. Robin isn't experienced, and this isn't something she does. She's just been dancing. Bernicia shows her the ropes. August 31st, 2016 around 11 at night, Robin and Bernicia, they walk Newark's Nye Avenue and that goes through a really bad neighborhood where it's like abandoned lots, burnout buildings, rough stuff, but that's where the sex workers go to get... To find John's. They're hanging out there. A man in a silver sedan pulls up. He starts talking to Robin, so Bernicia, the genius, goes over and writes down the man's license plate number in her phone and saves it. So when Robin gets into the car to go have a date with the man, Bernicia tells the man, "Be careful with my sister because I love her."

Georgia: [gasps]

Karen: So Robin is now in the car with this John. He drives her to an abandoned house at 472 Lakeside Avenue in Orange. He spends an hour inside, and he leaves at 1:27 a.m. Twenty-three minutes later, a neighbor calls 911, reports this abandoned house on fire. When firefighters show up and put out the flames, they find a body inside.

Georgia: Oh no.



Karen: And the lead arson investigator and firefighter Matthew Picerro, who works for the Orange Fire Department, uh, and he's been investigating arson for 17 years, describes what they found as the most destructed body I've ever come across.

Georgia: Oh god.

Karen: So the next day when Robin doesn't show up, Bernicia reports her missing. She gives the police the license plate number of the man whose car she got into from the night before. They link it to a silver BMW. Two weeks later, on September 13th, 2016, investigators are able to use dental records to identify the body of Robin West, and it's just eight days after her 20th birthday.

Georgia: Ugh, that's so sad.

Karen: Now, we go to another story. This is the story of Joanne. Her nickname is "Billie Jo" Brown. She is one of eight kids, um, two girls and six boys. She is born in Augusta, Maine. When she's five years-old, her family moves to Newark, New Jersey. She has bipolar and schizophrenia, but her friends and family describe her as warm and fun-loving. When she gets older which is very common with a lot of people with mental illness, she self-medicates with drugs, and she begins working as an exotic dancer and a sex worker. She uses the alias "London." So, her family is very concerned that she's gone into this line of work. They ask her to stop. She tells them she's not giving it up, and it's her livelihood and it's how she's making money. But eventually she does end up going to a place for drug addiction. She gets housing, counseling, and drug treatment, but it's too hard for her to live that structured lifestyle, so she keeps on doing her sex work, and she skips her counseling appointments. So on October 22nd, 2016, Billie Jo, who is now 33, and her friend Amina Nobles... They're hanging out near the Southside of Newark, and at 1:16 in the afternoon, a man shows up in a silver sedan, and, uh, he starts talking to Joanne. She agrees to take him as a client. Normally, when she leaves with a client, she'll call her friend, Amina, and tell her where she's going and when she'll be back. That's usually the setup they have, but she lent her friend her phone before she left, uh, so she asks this John if she can use his phone instead. He says "yes." She calls Amina at 1:30 from the car and basically gives her the information.

Georgia: God, it's just so... The thought of having to call your friend to tell them where you are every time is just... You know you're at risk, and you still have to do it anyway.

Karen: You have to do it.

Georgia: It's just so sad. What a hard life to live.

Karen: Yeah. Okay, so they drive to an abandoned house at 354 Highland Avenue in Orange, New Jersey, and they go inside. This John wraps Joanne, “Billie Jo” Brown’s head in duct tape. He strangles her with a jacket, and he leaves her on the second floor landing. So, at 3:09 Amina Nobles gets a call from the number that Joanne had called her from at 1:16, and she basically picks up the phone and says “London?” because that’s the fake name she used. And the caller says nothing and hangs up. So Amina calls back 3 or 4 times, but he doesn’t pick up the phone again.

Georgia: Creepy.

Karen: Yeah. Uh, so, she goes to the Newark police and reports Joanne missing. Now we’re going back to Tiffany Taylor’s attack. It’s on November 15th, 2016. She’s... So, they’re in the backseat of her boss’s Lincoln sedan. So in the middle of this attack, she is screaming, crying. Then she thinks quickly and she realizes... She tells him that the handcuffs are way too tight and asked him to loosen them, and he does, and when he does that she realizes that she can get the upper hand here. So, she will later say, “Once he agreed to that... In my head, I said, I got him. He’s weak.”

Georgia: Wow.

Karen: Yeah. So, she keeps talking to him. She reminds him that he texted her, and their entire conversation is on her phone which is back at the hotel, and if the police finds it, he’s screwed. And this actually plants a real seed in his brain, and he starts to get nervous. And he was like, “We have to go back and get your phone.” And he climbs into the driver’s seat and heads back to the motel. Tiffany is still in the back seat, and she is double-jointed, so she manages to slip a hand out of her handcuffs.

Georgia: Dude.

Karen: Yes. Okay, so... So she makes this plan in her head that when he drives past the motel, “I’m going to sit up, and I’m going to put these handcuffs around his neck and strangle him. And then even if we crash, at least I will kill him.”

Georgia: A hundred percent.

Karen: ...Is what she’s thinking in her head. And she’s like, but if he stops at the motel, then I will run.

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: So, he stops. So she puts her hand back into the handcuff, and he lets her out of the car. He puts a jacket over her shoulders to hide the handcuffs. He leads her to the room of the door 32, her boss’s motel room.

Georgia: Fuck.

Karen: At the Ritz. He says go in and get the phone and then come back out. She kicks the door, like, to knock it. The boss answers, she runs inside and slams it behind her and deadbolts it. He's shocked, like, he can't believe... He's shocked. He screams, "Come back outside!" She goes to the window and just shows the handcuffs, just only dangling off one hand.

Georgia: Oh my god.

Karen: And then he runs. Okay, so she texts him and says – this is the most amazing part. She texts him and says you need to bring back the keys to the Lincoln and if you just drop the keys off, I won't call the cops. Because it's her boss's car and, like, don't steal my boss's car.

Georgia: Totally.

Karen: He fucking does it. But she's already called the cops.

Georgia: Yeah, she has.

Karen: So when he comes back... to drop off the car key...

Georgia: Oh my god.

Karen: The police are there. So there's surveillance footage catching him, dropping the keys on the doorstep and running away.

Georgia: I'm on the edge of my fucking seat right now.

Karen: [laughs] Isn't this incredible?

Georgia: Incredible.

Karen: It's incredible.

Georgia: Yes, it's horrible.

Karen: It's horrible. It's the beautiful shining human story of when you're in the shit, and you fucking turn it around for yourself. Because it's like, she bit her own tongue to loosen the duct tape.

Georgia: So she could talk him out of... [sighs]

Karen: And every little tiny gain that she got, she used and used to her advantage. It's amazing. Okay, so he's still there. Basically, the surveillance tape sees him go and drop the thing off. He's still there when the cops show up at 9:28 p.m. The cops let him drive away in his own car and then the police come in and interview her. She basically says here's what he did to me, here's how he attacked me. You know, my whole head was duct-taped. Here's his phone number, here's his home address, here's

his Facebook account, uh, here's his full legal name, Khalil Wheeler-Weaver. She shows the injuries on her body, the handcuffs that are still on her wrist... They don't believe her.

Georgia: [gasps]

Karen: Because she's a sex worker, uh, because they're at the Ritz Motel.

Georgia: God damnit.

Karen: Probably because she's a woman of color... On and on.

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: Right, the usual bullshit.

Georgia: Damnit.

Karen: They accuse her of sex work. They threaten to arrest her for that.

Georgia: What the fuck?

Karen: After an hour, back and forth, and as she said being treated, quote, like trash, the cops leave.

Georgia: I just don't have the words. That's...

Karen: Well, it gets worse...

Georgia: Insane.

Karen: Because, of course, seven days after Tiffany's attack, he strikes again.

Georgia: No. She tried to fucking stop it.

Karen: She tried to stop it, and she did, like, superhuman things to stop it, and yeah.

Georgia: That's on them.

Karen: That's the thing. It has to change. It has to change. Okay. So now we have to talk about the final victim, that could have been avoided.

Georgia: That didn't have the chance.

Karen: Sarah Butler is one of three girls. Her parents were Jamaican immigrants who worked hard to make the best life for their family in Montclair, New Jersey, which is just North of Newark. She works several jobs during high school; she buys herself her own car. She's a dancer who practiced tirelessly with her own dance troupe, or with a dance troupe... I don't

know if it's hers. In June of 2016, they actually, her and her dance troupe, they get to be on amateur night at the Apollo.

Georgia: Nice.

Karen: They come in third place.

Georgia: Oh my god!

Karen: They place on it. I mean, that's a big fucking deal.

Georgia: Totally.

Karen: That audience doesn't like anybody. After she graduates from high school she goes to New Jersey University. She's the first person in her family to go to college.

Georgia: Wow.

Karen: But she does have trouble adjusting there, so, and making friends. She, like, doesn't... She feels like she doesn't have enough friends, so in November of 2016, she joins the social media platform, Tagged.

Georgia: Never heard of it.

Karen: Never heard of it.

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: Um, Steven's on it.

Georgia: [laughs] I could see him writing. Steven's like, "Got to get an account quick."

Karen: Stephens like "bigcat632"

Georgia: He's like, "I gotta get the Purrcast an account before someone steals it."

Karen: Jurassiccatparty987.

Georgia: Plus mustaches. [laughs]

Karen: [laughs] Mustachecatparty838. Okay, so somebody with the username "Little Yacht Rock" messages her with just a phrase: sex for dollar sign, question mark.

Georgia: Oh, dear. Poet.

Karen: She writes back "Wow. Well how much?"

Georgia: Fair enough.

Karen: Well, I mean, okay. What are we doing here? He asked how much she wants. She says \$500. He agrees.

Georgia: Okay.

Karen: She's like, what's happening? She writes back, "You're not a serial killer, right? LMAO." He writes back "no."

Georgia: What does LMAO mean?

Karen: Laughing my ass off.

Georgia: Got it.

Karen: Did you really not know that?

Georgia: I've never known, and I see it all the time, and I've just never asked anyone.

Karen & Georgia [laughter]

Karen: That's like the grandma move where they think LOL means lots of love so it's like, "So sorry about the death of your mother. LOL."

Georgia: Oh god.

Karen: That's my favorite. That one and when Facebook first started coming out and you could tag people to a picture and grandparents would start to write "Grandma" but it would turn into Grandmaster Flash.

[1:17:26]

Georgia: [laughs] No!

Karen: Because somebody... That had already been used so many times.

Georgia: I've never heard this.

Karen: Yeah, so people... Yeah, so people would get like family pictures, and Grandmaster Flash would be tagged in every single one of them because their grandma was trying to write Grandma's house!

Georgia: That's the best thing I've ever heard.

Karen: [laughs]

Georgia: At Grandmaster Flash's house.

Karen: [laughs]

Georgia: Oh my god.

Karen: Isn't that the best? So, basically, as I said, he says no. They make plans to meet up, but she gets cold feet, and she stands him up. Also, let me just say this. Sarah was not a sex worker; she was just a student.

Georgia: Yeah, it's circumstances for all of them.

Karen: It's circumstances. It's circumstances, and, uh, it makes me think of— Did you hear what that Harvey Weinstein's female lawyer recently said... 'Cause somebody asked her, like, "What would you do if this was you?" And she said "I would never put myself in that position."

Georgia: That fucking cunt. How dare you?

Karen: But here's how they dared. This is the rationalization... This is, it's this weird leftover problem from women my age and older because that's the only line that ever got fed to anybody, which is you... It's on you to prevent a rapist attacking you.

Georgia: Right.

[1:18:46]

Karen: It's on you. And that's what all of culture said, and that's what all of other people said, and there was no social media with super cool feminist writers that were going, "Absolutely not. It's the rapists that need to stop raping." And like, it's just such an old mindset, but the idea that, like, these days to hear it back now is...

Georgia: So to hear that a woman was sexually assaulted, it's like another point in your favor because yet again, it's never happened to you, so you must be doing something right, and, like, you know what I mean? Instead of that being... You just never know.

Karen: I would love to actually crack that open though and really see what's behind that because I can't believe that a woman that's a very successful Defense Attorney actually believes that. I can't believe that. And I can't believe it, and I can't believe that she would say it, unless she is just an absolute, like, mercenary sociopath that simply doesn't give a shit about other women or other people.

Georgia: I think that's what it is. You hate other women. You also don't know the nuances of sexual assault, and you, uh, you want to blame. You just want to blame.

Karen: Or. Or you'll do anything for the money your client is giving you.

Georgia: Right.

Karen: Which includes basically telling like a bold-faced lie. You can't control the situation. You can't control that. You would like to think you could.

Georgia: Makes you feel safer.

Karen: Yeah, it makes you feel safer, and it makes you feel superior.

Georgia: Like you have some control over your life.

Karen: Sorry.

Georgia: And it makes it so that you don't have to empathize with Harvey Weinstein's fucking...

Karen: Victims.

Georgia: Victims, and yeah, you don't have to empathize. You don't have to feel like shit for being a fucking... for defending Harvey Weinstein.

Karen: And well, also, and 'cause it just also then takes the focus, which happens all the time in sexual assault situations and cases... The focus magically gets taken off the rapist, and we're suddenly talking about what the victims did or didn't do to deserve what they got. Fuck you. Bullshit.

[1:20:45]

Georgia: It's a... Yeah, okay, go on.

Karen: We could go on forever. Okay, so. Essentially, she thinks she's flirting with somebody on this app and talking about stuff so they make plans to meet up she gets cold feet and stands him up.

Georgia: Okay.

Karen: Two days later, she changes her mind and messages him, "Sorry about the other day. I got really nervous. I feel like an ass. Your voice and your pic don't seem like a match." He tells her I'm a really cool guy when you get to know me. On the night of November 22nd, 2016, Sarah does her hair, red extensions in a ponytail. And she borrows her mom's blue Minivan, and she meets up with who she knows to be "Lil Yacht Rock" at the address he gave her, which happens to be the abandoned house at 354 Highland Avenue in Orange, New Jersey. When she pulls up to the house, it's 9:55 p.m., and Khalil Wheeler-Weaver gets into her car.

Georgia: Fuck.

Karen: She drives to a 7-Eleven. Surveillance cameras capture him buying condoms. He then has Sarah drive up to a wooded Hillside of a park called Eagle Rock Reservation, and up there, there's a restaurant called High Lawn Pavilion, and it's like up on a cliff. He directs her to the back



of the restaurant valet behind a green trailer. I'm sure she thinks that they're driving to go make out or hook up or whatever. Instead he attacks her, he wraps her head in duct tape, he rapes her, and then he strangles her to death with a pair of sweatpants.

Georgia: Oh, my heart hurts for her.

Karen: It's awful. When he removes the duct tape, he takes off some of her red extensions with it. He drops her body behind the trailer and basically puts leaves and twigs over it. When Sarah doesn't show up the next morning, her mom calls her cell phone. It goes straight to voicemail so they... Her family reports her missing.

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: Three days later on November 25th, 2016, Bassania's friend spots the blue... And I'm sorry if I'm pronouncing that name wrong, but that's what it looks like. They spot the family's blue minivan, um in that same lot, so Bassania and her friend Lamia Brown, along with the police, go check it out, and that's when they see Sarah's hair extensions.

Georgia: Oh no.

Karen: So knowing she's in danger, Lamia and Bassania drive to Sarah's house. Uh, Lamia knows her, Sarah's laptop password. So they log in to see if Sarah's been chatting with anyone and that's when they find the conversation with Lil Yacht Rock, and they get this idea. So they have another friend named Samantha Rivera create a fake account and start chatting with him.

Georgia: Oh my god.

Karen: A day later the three women are at the police station giving another statement about Sarah's disappearance when Lil Yacht Rock messages Samantha. He says his name is Taj, and he tells her everything he was telling Sarah, basically offering money for sex and saying let's go hook up. So the texts turn into a phone call with Taj while they're at the police station. So Basania pulls out her phone and takes a video of Samantha having the conversation.

Georgia: [gasps]

[16:47:00]

Karen: Yes, it's all there. The women trick him into meeting up at a nearby Panera Bread then two detectives take the women's place and meet him there.

Georgia: Holy shit.

Karen: So when he shows up, he gives police his real name, which is Khalil Wheeler-Weaver, the police question him. There's no body. There's no clear evidence that he has anything to do with Sarah's disappearance. They still don't know where Sarah is, and they can't— There's nothing to arrest him on, so they talked to him, and they let him go. But they continue the investigation. They used Sarah Butler's phone to trace her last movements. They see that there's a ping shown to be the Eagle Rock reservation, and on December 1st, 2016, police go to that location, and they find Sarah's body there.

Georgia: [sighs]

Karen: So four days after that, on December 5th, 2016, two housing contractors arrive at 354 Highland Avenue in Orange, and they go to inspect the house because the owners want to sell it. And when they get there, they find the body of Joanne “Billie Jo” Brown. She is the second victim who he left on the stairs.

Georgia: They never found her.

Karen: She was just missing.

Georgia: Oh, shit.

[1:24:45]

Karen: Yeah, so police now realize they have a serial killer on their hands, and all the women in these cases are connected. So, on December 6th, 2016, police arrest Khalil Wheeler-Weaver, but it takes them 3 years to build their case against him.

Georgia: Hmm.

Karen: When police questioned him, he lies to their faces. He shows them where he met the women. He claims he returned them all safely and soundly. None of it's true, and it isn't until they look in his phone records that they actually get the evidence that they need. So the phone actually shows that he was at every location where each girl was murdered.

Georgia: Those fucking pings, man.

Karen: Yeah.

Georgia: You can't do it anymore.

Karen: You can't. And also you can't do it anymore because he googled things like, quote, “how to kill people with bleach,” and quote, “homemade poisons to kill humans,” and he also googled “police entrance exam practice test.”

Georgia: [gasps]

Karen: Yeah.

Georgia: Whoa.

Karen: Yes, which is kind of a weird common thing with serial killers. A lot of them want to go into police work.

Georgia: Or like are super interested in what— police stuff.

Karen: Yeah, probably because they want to outsmart them.

Georgia: Right, yeah.

Karen: Okay, so Tiffany Taylor does not find out about Khalil's arrest from the police. She reads about it in the paper 3 weeks after her attack and subsequent escape.

Georgia: Wow.

Karen: So they don't even reach out to say, "We got this guy and we arrested him."

Georgia: Yeah, "because we didn't believe you to begin with."

Karen: Right. When Khalil is arraigned in Newark Court on December 13th, 2016, Tiffany Taylor is there.

Georgia: Yes.

Karen: And she goes back in February of the following year when he is indicted for three counts of murder, one count of attempted murder, aggravated arson, desecration of human remains, aggravated sexual assault and kidnapping. And at this point of course her mistrust of police and of you know

Georgia: Law enforcement.

Karen: Like the system. Yes, the system entirely. She fears them. She doesn't trust them. It has not worked for her, but she still shows up to testify against this guy in court.

Georgia: Incredible.

Karen: She faces him from the witness stand as she describes her attack which is the exact same M.O. of the three murdered women. She is quoted saying, quote, "I want him to see me. I want him to know it was me."

Georgia: Wow.

Karen: And it is Tiffany Taylor's testimony that seals Khalil's fate because on December 19th, 2019.

Georgia: What? Holy shit.

Karen: Just three months ago, the jury finds Khalil Wheeler-Weaver guilty of 11 felonies, including murder, attempted murder, kidnapping and aggravated arson. He is still awaiting sentencing. And that is the tragic story of the murders of Robin West, Joanne Brown, and Sarah Butler, and the amazing survival story of Tiffany Taylor.

Georgia: Wow.

Karen: Just happened. Just happened.

Georgia: That is incredible.

Karen: So when Sarah Butler was murdered... That was an article that I remember reading online because of the thing where she said, "LOL are you a serial killer?" And that was kind of the... How they pulled that all out, but I don't think that they knew about the stories of the other victims and how much they intertwined and how much, you know, Tiffany Taylor, like... She couldn't have had more proof. She couldn't have had more evidence.

Georgia: Totally! She had fucking handcuffs on.

Karen: On her person. And she was dismissed because of what she did for a living and...

Georgia: That is incre- I'm so glad I went first and don't have to follow that.

Karen & Georgia: [laughter]

Georgia: Because there's just no way. Oh my god.

Karen: Yeah, it's incredible. It's such a good story. Thank you, thank you so much, Elise. That was such a good suggestion.

Georgia: A plus.

Karen: A plus work.

Georgia: Amazing. I... Honestly, for the first time in my life, I am speechless.

Karen: [laughs]

Georgia: As the baby sister, I can say... For the first time in my life...

Karen: For the first time, you have no retort.

Georgia: I can't believe that.

Karen: I know. It's incredible. And also just the bravery of Tiffany Taylor to go show up to the man that violently and brutally attacked her. And was just, like, "Goodbye, it's me." Yep.

Georgia: And the friends of the victims who wouldn't let go, and ya know...

Karen: Sister and friends... I know.

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: And friends that are as close as sisters. It's beautiful, it's beautiful.

Georgia: Wow. Great job.

Karen: Thank you.

Georgia: Great job. It reminds me of the Alaskan story you did recently, too, a little bit.

Karen: Yes.

Georgia: Of like survivors not being believed.

Karen: Right.

Georgia: You know.

Karen: And having to basically just power forward anyway.

Georgia: Right. Wow. So, what's your fucking hooray now?

Karen: What's your fucking hooray?

Georgia: Because mine is possums, and I don't want that to be it. It can't be possums that are visiting my patio. Like, it just can't be.

Karen: [laughs]

Georgia: It has to be something else. Let me think.

Karen: Mine's possums.

Karen & Georgia: [laughter]

Georgia: And it can't be, so let me think.

Karen: Well, no, so this is... Uh, it's not connected. These are like... Now, this is just the...

Georgia: Right, it's making you happy.

Karen: It's the palate cleanser. It's the thing of... We focus on these stories because we want to hear these stories. We embrace these stories, we want to lift up these stories, but also we have to then put them down and make sure...

Georgia: That reminds me when Vince watched all the episodes of the Ted Bundy doc which he was so into, and we were just like commenting... It was so good... Vince is becoming such a good feminist.

Karen: [laughs]

Georgia: Um, at the end, he was like "I'll meet you downstairs for bed in a minute because I need a palate cleanser." And he has to watch something, like, lighthearted.

Karen: Yeah.

Georgia: So he totally has that too. He can watch these horrible things but has to have a palate cleanser.

Karen: One hundred percent, yeah. That's what we're doing.

Georgia: Um, so mine's possums.

Karen: [laughs]

Georgia: So, we have a balcony-patio-thing, and there's a tree that animals... That we realize animals climb up to. And we've seen raccoons, and we have squirrels, and so last night there was a little baby possum. And so I just kept throwing food out, and it looks like we're composting on the patio, but really, we're just throwing all of our fruit and vegetables out because I love possums.

Karen: So possums will come?

Georgia: Yeah, and Dottie is so into it, which is really exciting.

Karen: Because she will absolutely eat one of those possums if she gets outside.

Georgia: Uhhh, they're bigger than her.

Karen: Oh, are they?

Georgia: But she's just like, yeah, it's like watching TV for her, but yeah, I just love those animals. What's yours?

Karen: Umm, I think...

Georgia: Possums.

Karen: [laughs] I think it is this. Somehow I am in all of my. . . The thing I never thought I would be able to do in this life is not, the second a feeling struck me, believe it and go with it, and then basically my mouth would go... Connected to it. That... I remember talking about wanting to do that long ago, and then just being like, "This is never going to happen."

Georgia: Right.

Karen: It's never going to happen.

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: Um, kind of being overtaken by storylines and story-writing and kind of future-thinking and pretend-mind-reading and all those things.

Georgia: And you feel... And you get the emotions that go along with it, which aren't healthy because they're not real.

Karen: They're not real.

Georgia: They're not real! I have made myself cry from imaginary scenarios.

Karen: Oh my god. It's like one of my pastimes.

Georgia: [laughs]

Karen: Working through scenarios and there was, um, I can't even remember... It wasn't even anything big, um, but I remember just this week, talking to my therapist about having a moment where there was, like... A feeling struck me that was big and sad. And then instead of the reaction—going straight to their reaction—just going "Oooh, what's happening here?" [giggles] And not being so, um... Because it's this feeling that I'm interpreting as negative, uh, I have to do something about it right now, and I have to convince that it's not that, and I have to, whatever, care-take around...

Georgia: You have to manically control it.

Karen: Yes.

Georgia: In whatever way you can, you have to manically control it. It doesn't feel good.

Karen: No, 'cause the idea is that if I don't manically control it, then it, like... Then the bad feeling is just going to expand and take over, and I will, like, be annihilated. Essentially.

Georgia: Mm hmm.

Karen: And so, the practice of actually just having a feeling and not doing anything at all, which is brand-new. And I, I'm sure there are some people that are like, "What the fuck are you talking about?"

Georgia: Yeah, but there's so many more people who are like, "thank you."

Karen: Yeah, it's weird. It's just, like, to have a feeling that is strong and negative and not do anything about it. Not say anything, not use anything, not eat anything, not drink anything. Just to sit and be like this is interesting because I...

Georgia: Observe it.

Karen: Yeah, which is like, I remember when we used to talk about that say, eight years ago, and I just be like... I'd kind of nod and smile, but in my head I was like, "impossible!"

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: "Ridiculous. This is stupid to even talk about." I don't know. It's... I think also because our lives are calming down so much, and this kind of strange explosion that has been a true blitz... Like, as great as it's been, and no complaints, and all the things we say... But a huge adjustment and very threatening to me. Very threatening. 'Cause there's nothing scarier to me than potential happiness.

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: That's just like... You might as well come at me with a gun.

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: [laughs] So all these kind of, like, you know, reactions to fix or prevent, which is the intention... And then the thing that actually happens is actually kind of, like, what the fuck are you doing or saying?

Georgia: And you also don't let anything in. So, like, whether it's positive, like the positive thoughts and the daydreams... How nice would that be instead of the "everyone hates me. I think Jay thinks I'm lazy..."

Karen: [laughs]

Georgia: Like it hit me this week... It hit me this week that I'm not lazy. Like that's always been my voice in my head. That I'm lazy, and I'm lazy, and I'm lazy. And then I'm like, there's no time to be lazy. Maybe Jay doesn't think I'm... Our assistant, and also it's like... He's not thinking things like that.

Karen: I really don't think he is.



Georgia: [laughs]

Karen: But yes, because that would be... You've decided that's the worst thing you could be, and therefore, uh, that must mean someone thinks that, and then now I have to do a thing to make sure that goes away.

Georgia: Oh god.

Karen: And instead, that idea that maybe just the feeling of being able to build up a tolerance to negative feelings and watch them sit there and then watch them go away is like... I remember trying to do this when I lived in Chicago, when my life was also very terrible, and there was kind of no silver lining whatsoever. And I would listen to Pema Chodron, Getting Unhooked, I would listen to the... Here's what Buddhists do, and I would just be like "Pfff, that's impos— What are they talking about?"

Georgia: But you know, those negative emotions and those negative thoughts at the time might have been helpful for you because they got you out of that situation you didn't want to be in.

Karen: Yes.

Georgia: Right, so like the negative feelings and negative emotions... The shit that I have... It's like, it totally served a purpose at some point in my life, and I just haven't caught up to the fact that it's just not working anymore and there's... It's time for a new...

Karen: Yes, or like, you're that middle area, where you're like, "I don't think this is working anymore, but there's no way I'm letting go of this, of this fake steering wheel."

Georgia: Right.

Karen: "'Cause I have to drive this car." And it's like, "No, sorry. You're Maggie Simpson. You're not driving the car."

Georgia: [squeals]

Karen: Sorry, you're high if you think you're driving this car.

Georgia: Amazing.

Karen: Right.

Georgia: [laughs]

Karen: So, just getting this handle on that... There's also the option to do nothing, which I think is this thing of like, sorry... Because I know this is going on forever.

Georgia: No, I love it. I need it.

Karen: It's just all my life that was my, "I'm uncomfortable; I'm going to make a joke. I'm uncomfortable; I'm going to talk super loud. I'm uncomfortable; I'm going to be mean to somebody else." I had like five options.

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: And I didn't like any of them. But it was like I didn't have a choice.

Georgia: I noticed last night. We were in fucking meetings all day yesterday, and I noticed you did a thing where you yelled at me about something, and I was like, "I know!" Like, you didn't yell back at me. That sounds terrible. But like, you know, you got mad at me about something, understandably, and it was just like, "Oh, yeah. Okay." Instead of, like, us fighting about it.

Karen: Right! Yeah, because I fuck it up sometimes. My reactions are like... The scale is incorrect, and it's also like I talk to you like I talk to my sister.

Georgia: Right.

Karen: Which isn't accurate to our relationship.

Georgia: 'Cause your sister, 'cause your sister could scream back at you.

Karen: And also that's all my whole family. It's literally like turn out the light Georgia,

Georgia: And I'm like, "Why are they mad at me? They hate me. Why did I leave the light on? I'm so stupid. I can't believe I left the fucking light on this whole time. God, Georgia."

Karen: You're over there going, Jay thinks I'm lazy and I'm like [inaudible]

Georgia: [laughs]

Karen: We are perfectly set up to like trigger each other...

Georgia: I know.

Karen: But it's that thing of, like... Then I would normally be in a reaction of "I just did that wrong," but I can't be wrong, so I have to make you be wrong, and then blah, blah, blah.

Georgia: Yeah

Karen: As opposed to drop it, just drop it. Oops sorry didn't mean to say it right. Oops you can absolutely go back real time.

Georgia: Yeah.

Karen: I can, I should say.

Georgia: As someone who... Yeah, it works.

Karen: It works. Immediately apologize. Immediately go “Oops, I shouldn't have yelled that. I just spent five days with Jim Kilgariff. Everything is on volume 11. My apologies.” Where it doesn't have to be a thing, and everything isn't this, like you're saying, it's not this proof that I'm this fucking... The worst person. It's all just human reaction. That's what everyone does in different ways.

Karen: And it's been working for us for so long. Maybe there's a better way, and you know what? I think it's like, I think at the very center of the circle is the podcasting sweater.

Karen: [laughs] It's time for you to give it to me.

Georgia: Oh my god. I'm handing it to... We'll both wear it. We'll wear it half and half.

Karen: You do not have to give it to me.

Georgia: [laughs] I'll get you one.

Karen: You knit me one.

Georgia: I will fucking... I'll learn how to fucking knit, and I'll sit in front of the TV, and I'll fucking knit you a sweater. See? Look at me. I had to make a joke because I was so...

Karen: I know. I was going to say, “Prove you're not lazy and knit me a sweater.”

Karen & Georgia: [laughter]

Karen: No, I don't do that anymore. Fuck you.

Karen & Georgia: [laughter]

Karen: I will not be oppressed by my own ideas.

Georgia: [inaudible]

Karen: Is that... I mean, is that one? Or should I have said “possums?”

Karen & Georgia: [laughter]

[1:39:00]

Karen: Cleaner, shorter.

Karen & Georgia: “OH-possums.”

Georgia: Mm hmm...

Karen: Well, we've done it again.

Georgia: We did it again, guys.

Karen: There, take it.

Georgia: All of us together holding hands... We were skipping...

Karen: Barfing it out.

Georgia: We barfed it all out.

Karen: Tellin' stories.

Georgia: Suggest more stories for us because these have been really helping us.

Karen: Oh my God. We've been getting great suggestions. Thank you all for participating. Also, people are being very thoughtful about the stories they are suggesting. It's really cool.

Georgia: Yeah, that and then... Oh, shit. We were going to do fucking hoorays. People have been telling us they're fucking hoorays.

Karen: Oh, right. And Jay printed them out for us.

Georgia: Yeah, and then we completely forgot because we didn't record last week so our brains...

Karen: We have them somewhere.

Georgia: Yeah. We're going to read you back your fucking hoorays next week, so if you want to comment...

Karen: I literally thought you forgot we just did it.

Georgia: [laughs]

Karen: I was like, “Did I talk so long you forgot that I was doing a fucking hooray?” You're like, “that story was great.”

Georgia: So, anyways... Possums.

Karen: [laughs]

Georgia: Do it.

Karen:               Possums.

Georgia:            No.

Karen:               [laughs]

Georgia:            The other one.

Karen:               Stay sexy.

Georgia:            And don't get murdered.

Karen:               Goodbye.

Georgia:            Elvis, you want a cookie?

                      [cat noise]

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## **VITA**

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