



Storied Lives

Episode 3: Old Enough to Hit

Full Transcript

Introduction

Narrator: *Please be advised that the following podcast explores intersecting themes of poverty, family and sexual violence, intimate partner violence, and harassment. You may find some scenes distressing.*

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Welcome to Storied Lives. A podcast that looks at the lived realities of poverty from an intersectional lens. This is episode three. Old enough to hit.

[musical intro]

Story

Composite Storyteller: When I was young enough to play with dolls, I watched my stepdad sling empty bottles at my mom like it was his favourite pastime. Sometimes she'd call the police and they'd take him for a night to his 'hotel room' — that's what they called it. They'd let him out in the morning and he'd come back and explain how bad she betrayed him.

I'm always hungry and I never invite friends over 'cause the cockroaches in the carpets, and the mold veining up out of the shower, and newspaper pillars teetering in every corner, and the flies that attacked when you went near the mound of dishes in the sink.

I ran away when I got old enough to hit. Years blur by in shelters and hostels, on friends' couches and subway grates, more hostels — pushed along a conveyer of grease-fire-mop-bucket jobs by managers who'd ask me to work late so they could push me up against the freezer door and grab my ass. I'd lose

whole months' rent too terrified to go back for my pay — they'd tell me I was just stuck-up, and they were keeping what was theirs. I never had the time to file a complaint and even if I knew where to start, what good would it do? The one time, the worst one, I get to the door of my building, knees skinned raw and my neck polka-dot-covered in finger-tip bruises, and it takes a moment to realize that the sweaters and underwear, trampled flat, damp and dirty and on the sidewalk are mine, and I remember my landlord pushing a nicotine-stained finger in my face, wheezing at me all phlegmy about how *if I don't bring him rent like fucking yesterday...* the typical threats. His eyes flutter across my body like seeing me for the first time. *Unless, he says, chewing his thumb nail, if you wanna put that body of yours to work, I can go half on the rent.*

On the sidewalk is everything I have left. The rest is gone. Everything that took me years to accumulate. From thrift shops — rummaging through restaurant lost-and-found boxes sticky from spilled beer — canvassing the curbs for left-behind student furniture. Gone. All my clothes. My fucking bike. Everything. Gone.

My street mother finds me collapsed on a torn-up garbage bag half-stuffed with my mattress cover, bloody from all the times I couldn't afford tampons. I don't know what I would have done if she didn't find me. Every day is like scrambling out a deep dug pit in the earth and the more frantic I climb, the more of it crumbles away and the harder I fall. I feel tired, toes curled over the black edge of giving up. She takes my hand and walks me to a shelter. Patches me up. Days blur by and she keeps showing up and I'm so sick of needing to be helped that I tell her fuck off more than once and she keeps showing up with food and clothes and appointment cards. She finds me a caseworker who helps me apply for OW. I tried that when I first left home but couldn't make it past the blinding flashbulb memories of case workers walking through my childhood kitchen telling my mom that, *if things don't get better, we're going to have to take your daughter.* I remember my mom, before every meeting, panic-tearing the house apart for the right ID and bills and forms.

This time, my case worker, she guides me through the OW application — a maze of paperwork that chokes tighter when I tell the lady behind the counter that all my stuff got taken — SIN card and everything. Also, she gets me emergency counselling — the therapist tells me, *you have complex PTSD.* Something like, *if you don't get help, you risk re-enacting again and again all your traumas.* I don't really know what that means but it doesn't matter because I can't afford it. The big thing though, my caseworker, she helps me register for the GED. Convinces me that *getting a degree improves your earning power.* Tells me about loans and how, *it sounds like a lot now but when you get a good job, paying it off'll be nothing.*

Days blur by and a little bit, I let myself hope, fantasize about getting closer to the top where the dirt feels solid and I can finally pull myself up and out and into the light. At university, I get benefits that pay for a dentist to fix my cracked and rotting tooth from when I got jumped that time — and the 24/7 high-frequency pain melts away and I can finally do things like smile and fall asleep. I get glasses so

when I do homework, or when the case worker slips me another form, it's not just blurry rivers of ink. I meet a boy. He says he loves me and clears out a drawer for all of my stuff. He doesn't really care about school — he's going to inherit his father's company anyway. So when I'm on hold with the abortion clinic he's all, *don't worry* — unhooking the phone from my grip and hanging up — *I will take care of the baby*. The first diaper change convinces him it's actually time to start working for real — it's not a conversation. I drop to part-time online studies, and it takes forever to finish my degree as a full-time mom.

My student loan interest kicks in before I shuffle across the stage for my diploma — pregnant again. Days blur by and I haven't talked to anyone but him and the grocery cashier — and the baby. Every time he finds me hush-talking on the phone, he makes me hang up, in case work calls, he says. If it rings, I only ever half get up before he grips my shoulder, pressing me back into sitting. *Sorry, she's busy*, he says into the receiver. When I ask, he tells me, *it was nobody*. And when I ask to buy a cellphone, he sneers, *no, what do you need a cellphone for anyway?*

I can feel my social work degree going stale. I fantasize about what kind of frame I'd use for my diploma, how I might decorate my cubicle. All I want to do is help people, like my street mother helped me. I need a resume, so every day I try to guess the password for his computer — but only a couple times at once, or it will lock me out and he'll know. Every move I make, I measure the weight of the diamond wedding band tugging me back. Still, between groceries and the park, I sneak to the library with the kids and piece together a resume. I get lucky and someone calls for a phone interview. They ask about my degree, *What took you so long to graduate?...oh I see...so you have a baby and a youngster at home*. They don't call back. Other job offers come in, but he gets to the phone first and I start collecting bruises. Every time the phone rings I flinch and wait for the, *She already has a job, it's called a mother and a wife!* The world closes in around his clenched teeth, saying, *Next time I'll kill you*. I'd change the locks but, in his house, he stomps locked doors into kindling. I'd call the police, but I remember how with my stepdad it only made things worse.

We run when my oldest gets old enough to hit. She moves onto her friend's couch and drops out of school so she can work — so she can eat. We move into a dungeon with a coat rack. It doesn't matter that the only window pop-falls right out of the frame with barely a touch; it doesn't matter that her left arm is peppered with scabs from when the electric heater blew up next to her — the building manager sighs, *Why didn't you bring this to my attention sooner?* He forgets that I did already, and he refused to send me the inspection results. When I remind him, he threatens to evict us.

Days blur. On my way to pick up my food hamper with my youngest balanced on my hip I see my street mom and we talk for two seconds about a lawyer. But there's no way — my student loan is inflating every month since he stopped paying it. My youngest tugs my jacket, buries her face. She doesn't like new people. I see my street mom notice the pockmarked scars scaling down her fragile little arm. I hike her up on my side and say, "She's just not safe at home. I'm trying to get her into a day-camp for when

school ends but I can't get a subsidy unless I have a job, and I can't get a job unless I have child-care, and I can't get child-care without a subsidy." Round and round.

By the time we get approved for subsidized housing, my oldest, she wants to live with me so she can go back to school, but the caseworker warns me, *you were only approved for one dependent. If your other daughter moves in, it doesn't matter if you sleep in the bathtub, you could all get kicked out.* So, through tears, I tell my daughter, *I'm sorry. You can't move in. But can you take care of your little sister? I need to look for work.*

I can't find anything in my field, so I get a job dumping coffee into cups — I have to — but I tell myself it's just for now. While I was on OW I had this amazing worker, she found me extra money and support. But when she left, my new worker hit me with thousands of dollars in overage. So now I owe *them*. Finally, a dream job calls about my resume, but it doesn't matter. I can't miss work for an interview — I can't miss work for a 'maybe job.' My margins are paper-thin and I've seen what happens when people ask for days off. All of a sudden, their schedule shrivels into nothing. So, if I miss work reaching for a pipedream job that I don't get, the smirking teenage manager will slash my hours. Sitting on an upturned milk crate next to the parking lot dumpster, I watch my interview time come and go. I leave nail prints in my palm when my manager drapes his shadow over me, tapping his watch even before my fifteen-minute break is up.

At home, my youngest sops up tears with the cuffs of her sweater — her friends won't let her sit with them because her tuna sandwiches smell gross — and besides, why won't her mom give her money for pizza-day? I don't tell her I can't afford it. I just hand her the money, clenching steady the hunger tremors in my hands. I google for a list of all the emergency food supports in town but nearly all the links tell me, 'service temporarily unavailable,' 'error 404,' 'page not found,' 'broken link.' The websites that do work are all telling me how *I* can give and donate and contribute and by the time I wade through all the broken links and loops sending me back to the same happy images of bleach-clean women with shirts that say 'volunteer!' across the front, I hate myself for even having to call. They tell me, we're open mornings — but only some mornings. Of course, I work mornings. I hang up and go back to dumping coffee into cups. I find one that's open for an hour at night. I get there minutes after it opens and grab a number. But by the time I walk up to the counter, all the fresh produce is gone. A girl with the top half of her onesie snow suit dragging on the slush covered floor taps my thigh and says, *you got to get here early and wait outside.* I pocket a can of tuna, baked beans, canned corn that will maybe make a casserole. They tell me, *you can come back in two weeks.*

[musical interlude]

Interview with Lieran Dacherty

Lieran Dacherty: My name is Lieran Dacherty, I'm the Director of Programs at Woman Abuse Council of Toronto. We're a policy and planning body; the work we do is really to work towards eradicating

violence against women, but we do it through system change, mainly at the intersections of economic security and gender-based violence. I've always worked in the gender equity field and the first 10 years was really working frontline — I worked as a women's advocate. And it was actually the reason why I got into systemic work is because I was working with individuals up against systems that were keeping them marginalized. These women didn't have access to housing because of the system, they were being criminalized because of the system, not because of their choices, they were experiencing violence because they lived in an extremely misogynistic world. Poverty is a result of interconnected systems and structures that make it more difficult for some people than others to have access to high quality jobs, to health care, to housing, to transportation, to education. The systems, they're designed, unfortunately, to keep some groups of people having better access than others. And that's really what we mean by systemic inequality. And that is really the cause and the root cause of poverty. And where we have a system of inequality, I always like to remind us that it's actually a system of privilege as well, right? So, it does, in addition to keeping some groups from acquiring these resources, it keeps some groups having better access and having control. It's also really important to remember that these systems of inequality, these systems of privilege, they're highly sexist, they're highly racist, and they're highly rooted in colonization, right, and colonialism. This isn't because of personal choices and individual decisions. It's because women and groups of women especially have experienced social and economic marginalization for years and years and years. And that's why women are more likely to live in poverty, we do not value women's time, we expect women to give up careers and give up work to do free childcare. People think that if you work hard, you will have success. If you work hard, it will equate to wealth and, you know, good health. It has nothing to do with hard work or initiative; I have worked with women who have been living in extreme levels of poverty, and they are the most resourceful, hardworking, taking-initiative groups that I know — it isn't about hard work or initiative.

[musical interlude]

In the story, she speaks a lot about social assistance. And unfortunately, social assistance rates are too low that we hear from many community members that they can't even make ends meet on social assistance. But also, what we hear is that people encounter social assistance programs that are more focused on rules and regulations and obligations, rather than a focus on, kind of, entitlements and exceptions and, and making it work for that individual. One issue we see over and over again with social assistance programs, are that they aren't promoting women's economic security. So, in Ontario, social assistance has a policy that's called the 'shortest route to work' policy. And what that really means is that, for women, they end up in very precarious underpaid short-term work, which is not lending itself or at all tackling women's economic security. And I think that that is highlighted in this story. She faced a social assistance program which was shuttling her into precarious work. When she was trying to look for another job and another role and had an interview but wasn't able — she wasn't able to take that interview. Because when you're in precarious work, you don't have the sick days, you don't have the vacation days you can take off, you might not even have ever met your supervisor or

your manager or the HR manager. So, we have a social assistance program that's driving women into precarious work, putting them on zero-hour or short-term contracts. And let's think about all of the challenges that that's causing in that individual's world in terms of being able to find housing. Well, to find housing, you have to show that you're in employment and often show your contract or your pay slips, and what does that look like for someone who's on zero-hour and their pay slips are very different, or who doesn't have a contract that says, in six months, they're still going to be employed – that's going to be a barrier to that person finding housing.

[musical interlude]

There needs to be done an overhaul on the social assistance policy. So, a few examples of this: for women fleeing violence, in order to receive social assistance, they have to give up some of their assets or to access some services, to access some housing services. And in order to access some, for example, violence against women's shelters, which is an emergency service, you have to be on social assistance. So, there we have a policy telling women to give up assets, savings, in some cases, a car — for women in a rural community is critical for her employment for her safety, and we're asking her to give that up. Another example is that the definition of 'spouse' — in social systems policies, three months. That means a woman could be living with someone for three months, and they now have to claim that together. That's problematic, particularly because we know that, unfortunately, still, in most households, men hold the money and make decisions related to money. But also, in a lot of relationships, we know there's economic abuse. We should have a social assistance system that has an objective to get women into decent, well-paid jobs. And unfortunately, what the policy does right now is, it gets women into low-paid precarious jobs in which many of them remain trapped.

[musical interlude]

Research shows us that adults who were living in poverty, as children and during childhood, are more likely to be living in poverty as adults. This is for a combination of reasons. One, they're experiencing the long-term impacts of poverty — of having a lack of access to education and health care and nutrition. But also, again, the system isn't changing. The challenges, I'm sure, that her mother faced as a survivor of violence might have been very similar to the ones that she's facing as a survivor of violence, because yes, we've made some progress, but really not enough that her experience is going to be significantly different when interacting with these systems, when interacting with employers or landlords, educators, or partners.

Poverty is both a cause and a consequence of gender-based violence. So, living in poverty puts people — especially women and gender-diverse people — at greater risk of victimization and violence. And we saw that in the story, because you need a house, and you need some roof over your head, and you might stay with someone for that reason, and that's putting you in an unsafe position. It might be through a landlord, who is treating you differently and harassing you or victimizing you because you

are in poverty. And you're in that position of having less power and control. And, at Woman Abuse Council, we hear time and time again, that the greatest barrier to women fleeing violence is money and housing. In other words, it's very expensive to flee violence. Think about it, you need to find new housing, usually women leave with children and with very little items. So, if you look around you and your home, at everything that you would have to replace, right, it could be your identification that you have to replace, the food in your fridge, everything in your cupboards, the furniture, the clothes, everything your children needs, your prescriptions. It's very costly, and — and that's why financial hardship, sadly, is a universal experience for women leaving a violent situation. But, actually, the experience of violence also impacts someone's economic security.

It's very common for women living in abusive relationships to experience economic abuse — that could be a partner not allowing you to work, sabotaging your employment, withholding income from you — that has long-term implications on that person's economic security. But also, it's that experience of having experienced trauma and violence and then having to go to work and be productive and be focused. Actually having experienced trauma and even if you're out of the abusive relationship, that trauma can impact your employment stability for up to 10–15 years.

[musical interlude]

The greatest barrier to fleeing violence, we hear time and time again, is housing and having that money to access housing. Housing is expensive, and the lack of housing and the lack of affordable housing is compounding this greatest barrier for — for women. Unfortunately, in Ontario, our shelters are full — emergency shelters are full. On average, it's estimated that 200 women are turned away, every day, from a shelter in Ontario because of a lack of capacity. Another barrier that women fleeing violence are up against — and this is highlighted in the story — is discrimination by landlords. Studies show that women are more likely to be discriminated against by a landlord if they have children, if they're on social assistance, if they're fleeing violence, if they're racialized, if they're disabled. Like I said, it's a full circle here, and sadly, the main reason why women return to abusive relationships is because they don't have the housing, they don't have the money. And that becomes their only option. That shouldn't be their only option.

[musical interlude]

The lack of childcare provision in Canada speaks to, again, a systemic issue where there is a lack of value placed on women's time. There's an expectation that women will do free childcare, and it is the biggest barrier to women's participation in work and employment and in so many other aspects of life. And unfortunately, it's such a barrier. And we see this in this story, that one point she is applying for housing, and they come back and say that her dependents' situation has changed. Again, how is our system not accounting for families, for single parent households with children? In the cases of women who've experienced violence or who are living in poverty, another great barrier is that they often have

to tell their story, time and time again. And people in these roles change. And you might have to tell it four or five times on the same phone call in order to be eligible for that service and support. It can be retraumatizing. But it's also as though we're putting people in the position in which they have to make their case. Survivors are often asked to either attest or prove their experience of violence in order to acquire a service, such as housing or — or legal. In some cases, you do need to show proof that you've reported it to the police. And we know that there are many barriers to reporting it to the police. The requirement to prove abuse, to prove that you're living in poverty, to prove that you're housing insecure, it reinforces the notion in many cases that women aren't to be believed.

[musical interlude]

In order to address the systems of inequality, it's really about taking a two-pronged approach. We have to change the system as well as ensure that in the meantime our policies are responding to the needs of those who don't have equal access. So we need policies that provide housing to those who have less access to housing, policies that provide a basic income for those who experience income inequality. But at the same time, we have to look at the areas of those policies that are continuing to perpetuate sexism and racism; we need to be able to respond to the needs here and now, but we need to actually fix the system at the same time. We also need to ensure that we are applying a rights-based approach to these policies and systems, really starting to realize, what does right to housing look like? It isn't just about having a roof over your head, that it is about feeling safe in there, feeling secure. I've mentioned social assistance is a policy that does need work, the rates are too low for people to meet their basic needs. Canada really does need a basic income, and a policy that speaks to a basic income. I think that would be a great outcome. We need systems that are ensuring that they can meet their basic needs, but also, creating enough support within those programs and within employment for women to advance, to find better paid jobs, to find jobs that are more meaningful to them, that they enjoy. We need paid sick days; we need a certain level of vacation days. And we also just need those supports in place that are there if someone does need to attend an interview, that it's okay to share that with an employer and not experience some repercussions or backlash. We should be having higher expectations for employers and workplaces. We do a good job at — sometimes — of creating policies, and then we're not implementing them. So, there is actually you know, a policy in Ontario in which individuals have paid leave for domestic or sexual violence reasons. So, you can take up to five days' paid leave to seek out legal support, attend counseling, find housing. Most people, including employers, don't know that that policy is in place. So, this isn't about just creating policy. It's ensuring that it's implemented, and it's ensuring that the likes of employers and other institutions are then being held accountable.

We need a greater representation in government, not just around gender, we need a representation of those who have lived experience of poverty, lived experience of violence, who understand the day-to-day challenges, frustrations — understand and can apply that systemic lens to their work. I get hope

from changes we are seeing in policy: a greater focus on a rights-based approach, a greater focus on ensuring that an intersectional gender-based analysis is applied to policymaking. And really, I think what keeps me hopeful is communities organizing about these issues — it coming from the communities not just from decision makers, but communities stepping up and saying, ‘this isn’t good enough, we don’t have enough affordable housing, this system isn’t working for us.’

[musical outro]

Conclusion

Narrator: Thanks for listening to *Storied Lives*. If you haven’t done so already, please complete the follow up survey by clicking on the link in the show notes. To create the story that begins this episode, we invited people living with poverty to share their stories with us. During a series of focus groups, participants revealed their unique experiences and how these are impacted by multiple overlapping and compounding oppressions. Using their testimonies, we composed four composite stories, including the one you just heard. These are fictional stories based on real experiences. Every scenario in these stories happened or was informed by themes that emerged in the focus groups. This four-part Podcast Series is a collaboration of the Guelph and Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination and the University of Guelph’s Live Work Well Research Centre and Community Engaged Scholarship Institute

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Please see the show notes for a list of all the people involved in the creation of these podcasts.

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