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HOUSE/BROKEN: Debbie Drechsler’s Daddy’s Girl
and the Crisis of the House.

by

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ABSTRACT

HOUSE/BROKEN:

Debbie Drechsler’s Daddy’s Girl and the Crisis of the House.

by

Christi Kayte Young

HOUSE/BROKEN examines the relationship between architecture and its inhabitants. It focuses on the single-family dwelling, and specifically investigates the relationship between a child-victim of domestic sexual abuse and the space of the house. These issues are explored through the work of artist Debbie Drechsler. Drechsler’s book Daddy’s Girl is a comic book depiction of a child’s life inside a sexually and emotionally abusive home. The comic strip narratives in Daddy’s Girl are carefully read for what they can reveal about the complex relationship between a child-victim and the dangerous place called “home”. I draw upon the work of Elaine Scarry to consider how architectural elements such as rooms and doors, and objects within the house such as beds and cookie jars, are transformed into weapons, traps, warnings, friends, or signs of danger--through the routine practice of abuse.
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introduction

A house is:


A door is:

an opening. A barrier. A warning.

A bed is:


House/Broken. When I say the house is broken I mean that it is not a shelter. Not a safe place. It has ceased to provide its most basic function, the function of architecture itself: to shelter, to shield from harm. When abuse is happening inside the house it becomes a dangerous place. The house is broken. It has broken down in its role as house.

There is another way to read the term house/broken. When we speak of a dog who has been house broken, we mean a dog who has been effectively domesticated. A dog who won’t shit on the rug. The dog’s animal spirit has been broken so that it may live amongst humans in the house. One of the goals of child abuse, particularly repeated, systematic, family violence, is to break the child, to shape and to control the child. It is a kind of training and it uses corporal means to accomplish this “domestication”.

Does the house do the breaking?

What role does the house itself play in narratives of family violence? What does architecture, the space of the house have to do with the oppressive environment of the family and structures of abuse? Does it play a role? In abusive households, what kinds of
relationships are formed between the inhabitants and the house? How does the house figure in memory and trauma recollection, testimony and representation of memory?

I have spent a large portion of my adult life devoted to the study of domestic violence, specifically the abuse of children by parental figures, and even more specifically child sexual abuse within the family environment. I have approached this topic first from the standpoint of a victim/survivor trying to make sense of my own life, and then as a political analyst and cultural critic wanting to understand the impact of this practice on the greater society. As a student of architecture, I increasingly became interested in the structure of familial violence and what role the physical structure of the house itself might play in abusive practices. It occurred to me that when the house becomes a dangerous space for some of its inhabitants, then it breaks down in its role of providing shelter. This reversal, of inside-as-dangerous, outside-as-safe(r), seemed to be a discussion worthy of devoting a thesis to.

My starting place for gathering information about these relationships is written narratives of survivors of childhood domestic violence, as adults, looking back and speaking out about their lives, usually in fragments, collected in anthologies. In the 1980s, in the U.S. at least, a movement springing from feminist and psychological communities began that some have named “the incest survivor’s movement.”¹ Women began to speak out about their childhood experiences of sexual violence, and began to name their perpetrators, sometimes publicly. Several anthologies were published around this time (and since), collecting the narratives of victim and survivors. Some of the stories were written in therapeutic writing workshops as healing exercises, some of them were

taken from the autobiographies of famous writers other public figures; some of them were transcribed from taped interviews. I began to look at these texts as my objects of study and to read them for how the architecture, the space of the house, objects in the house and architectural elements, figured in the memory and the telling of these stories of childhood trauma. At first I wasn’t sure I would find much. But, as I made my way through the stories in one of the better-known anthologies called, I Never Told Anyone, making small marks next to passages where architecture was mentioned, I soon found that I was marking the entire book.\(^2\) The accounts were riddled with descriptions of walls, doors, locks, hallways, closets, attics, garages, secret hiding places—in short, I learned that I would not be at a loss for material, and also that perhaps there was something to this hunch of mine.

One of the narratives I came across actually falls outside of the scope of the survivor anthologies from the 1980’s. Debbie Drechsler’s 1995 Daddy’s Girl is a collection of comics depicting the life of a girl whose father is sexually abusing her.\(^3\) In some of the strips, the actual assaults are graphically represented, while others show the subtle yet striking effect of the abuse on the child’s life and self-image. What I am interested in is the ways in which the domestic space is rendered in Drechsler’s story and what it can tell us about the way the family interacts with the space in such a household.

As I moved further into my study of survivor narratives, I noticed patterns and themes beginning to immerge. There were issues of access and lack of access to certain rooms in the house. The house itself, or elements and objects within it, immerged as signs

\(^3\) Debbie Drechsler, Daddy’s Girl (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 1995)
and often as weapons. For instance, the sound of footsteps on stairs served as warnings, or a victim was pushed into furniture, or thrown onto the floor. Victims tended to develop a secret knowledge of the spaces in the house: hiding places, special doors, and an awareness of sights and sounds that assisted them in their navigation of this dangerous place they called home.

I found myself irresistibly drawn back to Debbie Drechsler’s book of comics. Perhaps because of the profound effect the book had on me when I first came across it. The stories in the book resonate with my own experience so strongly, seeing them out in the world, I finally feel known—–as if my story is told, without me telling it. The medium of the comic, image and word, and the stylized, almost primitive nature of the drawings combine to form a powerful representation of a child’s world in a dangerous house. The images are graphic without being sensational or titillating. The comic book also finds itself situated in a very different context in terms of readership and exposure than any of the survivor narrative anthologies, which were largely intended for those dealing directly with abuse issues. This book is sold in comic shops, marketed to an alternative comic subculture. Readers without a specific interest in abuse issues are picking up this book.

When most of us think of comics we either think of superhero stories, or the Sunday funnies. The word comic implies “funny,” or, in the case of the superheroes, at least not serious. Drechsler’s stories are not funny. They are very serious. And while each story in the book stands on its own as a complete strip, one always feels that there is more to each narrative, which will never be revealed. Her stories are filled with long pauses and the

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4 Of course in recent years, a genre of comics known as “adult comics,” or “alternative comics” has begun to stake out significant territory in the world of comics. These comic books and graphic novels take on more serious themes than what is traditionally associated with comic books. Drawn & Quarterly is a major publisher of these types of comics. Drechsler’s work falls under this genre.
narratives unfold slowly. This is especially evident in her *Nowhere* series which followed *Daddy's Girl*. Because the stories unfold, in part, through images, careful readings of those images allow me to bring forward issues that are consistently present in survivor narratives as a whole, while engaging with the visual/architectural problems of representation of space through drawing. Each strip in Drechsler’s collection entitled *Daddy's Girl*, lends itself to an investigation of this nature. Her work is the primary object of study for my project.

My thesis is organized into five sections. Harmful House, More or Less a Room, Body as House, Body Outside and (Un)Known House. These categories allow me to read across Drechsler’s series of strips, pulling out the moments where the abuse narrative and architecture collide. Informing my readings of Drechsler’s work are the dozens of other, written, survivor narratives that I have poured over, as well as the work of theoreticians like Elaine Scarry, Michel de Certeau, Gaston Bachelard, Michele Foucault, Lars Lerup, John Bintl and Marilyn Frye, among others.

The first section, Harmful House, addresses generally and specifically the space of the house as dangerous or even toxic to the character Lily in *Daddy's Girl*. Lily’s relative safety and lack of safety within the home are marked out in absences and presences of particular family members, and her position in terms of the public and private spaces within the house. The level of threat the house poses depends largely upon *who* is located *where* in relation to Lily. In addition to this level of potential harm within the house, we also find that the house holds substances that are harmful, potentially deadly to Lily. In one of the stories, Lily goes to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom to

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find pills to do herself in. In other scenes, she binges on cookies and Cheetos for comfort, though the effects are rarely beneficial in the long run.

The section More or Less a Room asks a theoretical question about architecture: what qualifies as a room, as a discrete place within the house, when doors can always be opened, when privacy can always be intruded upon? In Drechsler’s work, does the room recede or come forward during violent events?

The third section, Body As House, theorizes the relation between the corporeal and the architectural, looking at the ways in which Lily, like many abuse victims, attempts to shelter herself through loose clothing and weight gain. In this section I discuss the spaces of and around the body, and the way that physical sexual abuse is an invasion of the space of the body. Elaine Scarry’s analysis of the structure of torture, and the use of pain to instantiate beliefs, is brought to bear on the practice of child sexual abuse. Physical contact with the body is a powerful training and controlling device.

The fourth section, Body Outside, explores the conflicted relationship that Lily develops with the world outside the house, specifically, the natural world, and the woods near her house. In the woods and in the outdoors she finds both freedom and more abuse. The conflicted relationship that child victims establish with both the house and the out-of-doors stems from their simultaneous fear of and dependency on the house and their so-called guardians.

My fifth and final section is called (Un)known House. Here I look at the ways in which Lily both knows and doesn’t know the house. Children, and in particular abuse victims, develop intricate knowledges of the subtle details of the houses they inhabit.

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They come to know a house to which others may not have access. They learn when it becomes necessary to sneak and to hide, objects and movements, knowing the best hiding places, and which of the stairs creak becomes crucial. In this section I also look at forgetting. Lily forgets what she knows about the house, after relocating to a new house, she seems to hold onto an idealized image of her old house, apparently forgetting what took place within its walls.

I interrogate these themes of bodies and spaces through close readings of Drechsler's comic strips. Her work asks of the reader to look deeply and to consider the everyday spaces of living, on equal footing with the people and events taking place in those environments. Her work is atmospheric.

One of the myths of suburbia is that it is a safe place to live, away from the crime infested city. In the early 1960's, feminists like Betty Freidan called attention to the isolation of the suburbs and how that played into women's oppression.7 Daddy's Girl takes place in the suburbs, but it is important to keep in mind that abuse happens any and everywhere. Not just the suburbs, not just shoddy apartment projects in the ghetto, not just trailer parks...and when we look at family abuse, the private family dwelling, whatever shape it takes, becomes a major player. It is the site. There are other sites where violence occurs, (perhaps no place is exempt from violence) some of the sites that we typically think of as dangerous are parks, back roads, alleys, cars, parking lots, but these sites are often associated with what I call stranger-danger. Women and children are especially taught to be on guard in those kinds of spaces. What I am talking about here is violence in a place that is supposed to be safe and full of love and nurturance. I am

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talking about violence at the hands of those who are supposed to love, protect, and teach. And I am talking about repeated violations occurring within the space of the house, so that the space is marked with the abuse, both in living in the house, and in the memory of the house. I am talking about violence in childhood, by those who are teaching us about the world, about how to live and be in the world, how to be adults. How to view, and how to feel about ourselves in relation to the rest of the world. That the house figures into this process/practice is undeniable. How exactly, is still rather fuzzy.

When I first started architecture school, I had an intuitive sense about architecture's relationship to human action. Looking back, I wanted to believe that buildings made people do things, caused them to behave in certain ways. My ongoing fantasy of changing the world, of saving the world could be realized through architecture, through good design. I simply needed to learn exactly how spaces were operating on people. I needed to understand the precise nature of that relationship, and then set to work on the transformation of the built environment towards a more humane and just world. I saw the current state of the built environment, cities and buildings as contributing to, if not causing the major social problems of our time. As a feminist, I sought to reveal the ways in which architecture acts on society, reinforcing structures of power and dominance along gender, class and racial lines, and to uncover design strategies that would radically alter the world-as-we-know-it. Predictably, my studio projects were often didactic and heavy-handed, and always fell short of my lofty intentions, but nonetheless consistently grappled with architecture's relationship to society, to culture, to politics. I rarely managed to get beyond the "revealing" stage, to approach the "solutions" part; that is to say, I was good at exposing structures of power and dominance present in
architecture, but faltered when it came to designing buildings that somehow worked against these oppressive systems.

I recall a discussion in my first semester studio, I was making an argument that architecture can make someone feel something, and respond, based on a recent visit I had made to the Houston Holocaust Museum. I had gone to see the Art Speigelman (creator of the Maus books) exhibit, and was walking around in the building, checking it out. I came to the entrance to the memorial room, not really knowing what it was, but as I began to take a step into the room, I stopped short. The space felt sacred, and I had the strong sense that I did not belong inside. I did not enter, and left feeling strongly affected by the experience of the architecture. When I brought this up in class, to make the point that something about the architecture had stopped my movement into the space, our professor asked me to consider all of the other factors at play in my response to the entrance of the memorial room. These included things like who I am, my own history and awareness, the exhibit I had just seen, what I had to eat that day… I had to admit that what I had experienced could not be reduced to a singular cause. Through my studio projects and in working on this thesis, it has become clear to me that we are not in a deterministic relationship with architecture, that buildings alone do not make people do things, and that one cannot change the world simply through designing buildings differently. Realizing this has been difficult if not heartbreaking, but it is important to note that my discovery (or rather, rude awakening) is not that this relationship doesn’t exist, or that it is insignificant, but rather that it is complex and subtle, and not easily reduced.
I have never been able to let go of completely, this hunch that there is something serious happening between us, and the spaces we occupy, and in some ways, my conviction has grown stronger. I believe space is primary. It is one of the first and most profound things that we experience as human beings. We each leave the perfect housing of our mother’s womb and enter an inevitably flawed room. Prior to birth, our clothing, our shelter, our home, our sustenance was another human body. Suddenly we are thrust outside of, and separated from this life force. Once we were one, but now distance lies between our bodies and our mother’s body. This is a spatial relationship, and it is something we know through bodily experience. This relationship is felt.

Understanding the profundity of this spatial relationship, however, does not make the task of designing any easier. In fact, if anything, it makes it much more difficult. So much is at stake, and so little is known still about the nature of this relationship and how exactly the built environment effects behavior. Designing and building buildings, making architecture, begins to seem very dangerous. If I don’t understand the nature of this relationship, how will I know what to make? How can I have the arrogance to say “I know what should be here, and I will design it, and it will be built”--knowing that once it exists as a built thing, people will encounter it, live with it? It becomes part of the physical environment. If I cannot predict the effects my building will have on people, on the world, then how can I, in good conscious, build? This kind of thinking (paralysis) has led me to continue my investigation of this mysterious relationship between people and architecture.

It is my sense that we, in the field of architecture, don’t take these questions seriously enough. It is certainly true that there are those who have taken on the difficult
questions about architecture’s role in social issues of this nature, but even an entire issue of Assemblage in the mid 1990’s, dedicated to space and violence, ⁸ failed to have much of an impact on the discipline, and while many important problems, questions, and speculations were raised, they were not taken up in the larger discourse. I suggest that we return to the can of worms opened up in that journal, and I see my project as a step in that direction.

While there is much to explore in the study of cities, urban environments, suburbia, office space, and institutions such as museums, schools or even prisons, I find myself most drawn to the study of domestic spaces. Personal experience and exposure to radical feminist analysis have led me to a reading of the family as an oppressive institution. I understand the family structure as one of the fundamental underpinnings of the patriarchal society that we currently exist under, a system which is damaging to all, not just those perceived as victims. ⁹ Given this positioning, it makes sense that I would focus my speculations concerning architecture and human action on the space of the

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⁹ When I use the word “patriarchal,” I am referring to the system of dominance and oppression of males over females. However, this system is not limited in its scope, it affects many other systems, particularly those of racism and classism. I am quite aware that this phrase has fallen out of fashion within academic feminism, but it is a term that I continue to find useful, and one that I believe needs to be revisited before being completely evacuated from feminist discourse. More importantly, it is the concept itself, or the reality of women’s oppression that I feel should not be forgotten. It is still in operation, and needs to be fully understood before it can be fully deconstructed. Allan G. Johnson, in his 1997 book The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy, offers a working definition of patriarchy:

Patriarchy is a kind of society, and a society is more than a collection of people. As such, "patriarchy" doesn't refer to me or any other man or collection of men, but to a kind of society in which men and women participate. By itself this poses enough problems without the added burden of equating an entire society with one group of people.

What is patriarchy? A society is patriarchal to the degree that it is male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered. It also involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women. Patriarchy is male-dominated in that positions of authority—political, economic, legal, religious, educational, military, domestic—are generally reserved for men.

When I talk about how I see patriarchy in the built world, I am talking about the dominance over nature, the resistance to viewing the world as a delicate system of interdependencies, the use of architecture to control movement and to express and enforce the superiority of one group over others.
house. I was tempted at first to try to formulate an argument concerning single family
dwellings and how the design of the house contributes to or causes violence, abuse,
oppression…but I quickly ran up against all the problems that line of thinking brings
forward. The relationship is not direct, and abuse happens in all types of spaces. (Oddly
enough, as I have been working on this project, almost everyone who encounters it wants
to know if I plan to design or suggest the kinds of domestic spaces that would prevent or
discourage abuse, or somehow solve the problem of domestic violence. Apparently I am
not alone in my grand fantasies of wanting to save the world through architecture…).
Still, my gut feeling about some kind of significant relationship between the house and its
inhabitants persists. I believe that the exploration of the relationships we establish with
our everyday environments, especially childhood living spaces, is crucial to beginning to
formulate a theory about the ways in which architecture operates on people in profound
and irreducible ways. The study of these kinds of relationships should be important to
anyone engaged in the practice of making buildings. Even if that study is speculative,
non-scientific, and based on readings and interpretation, as this one certainly is.

When I was deciding on the scope of this project, I knew that I didn’t want to
focus on isolated, one-time violations of children by strangers. First, because, contrary to
media mythology, these occurrences are much more rare than violence within the home,
and second, because I am interested in exploring the way that these actions operate on an
individual as a system, over time, and within the institutions of family and house.
Drechsler is interested in this too. I find in her book a complete analysis of the
machinations of family abuse. Drechsler’s work bridges analysis of family abuse issues
and the architectural issues of the house. I pull from that, from her poignant and 
exquisitely nuanced drawings, speculations on the house, speculations on architecture.

Before I move into the sections, I would like to say a few words about my 
understanding of the way abuse operates within a family. One of the problems I run into 
when reading Drechsler, or any of the stories of abuse survivors, is that, while I am, for 
the purposes of this project, reading with an interest in architectural issues, it is nearly 
impossible for me to bracket my obsessive interest in the operations of abuse, the tactics 
of abusers and the blatant and subtle effects on the victims. I am convinced that there is a 
structure and a methodology to the ways in which familial abuse is practiced, and that the 
results are calculated to produce adults who are controlled and easily controllable, largely 
in the most undetectable yet profound ways. So, when I read Drechsler, when I look at 
the images and the overall composition of the book, I see her astute analysis, conveyed 
through story telling, of the machinations of child sexual abuse in the family. I could 
easily do a reading of Daddy’s Girl that outlines this structure. It is something I have 
been studying relentlessly for nearly thirteen years. It is a phenomenon that I have 
observed over and over again in people I know, have known, and is even something that I 
believe I can spot in strangers on the street. Once these symptoms, or sets of behavioral 
patterns have been identified, they are difficult to ignore, even as they are nearly 
impossible to confirm. So many victims of this type of abuse have no memory of it, or 
are afraid to report or admit the abuse, especially when it occurs within the family. They 
have been trained to protect the perpetrators, and may believe that their own or other’s 
survival depends on their silence. Others, in order to cope and to survive themselves, 
have buried the memories deep within the psyche. As a result, statistics on this kind of
abusive practice are impossible to gather with any accuracy (though conservative estimates reveal that one in four girls will have been sexually assaulted by the age of 18) and when symptoms do emerge, rarely are the causes correctly identified. I bring up the numbers only to convey the magnitude of the problem, and to reveal the ways in which this narrative operates below the surface of such a large percentage of seemingly benign narratives of childhood and family.

It is certainly easy to oversimplify the relationship between Drechsler’s protagonist, Lily, and her father as one of victim and perpetrator—period. And it is certainly a true characterization of their relationship. It is also true that their relationship is complicated by many other factors and relationships within the household. I am not blind to these complexities. I can even notice Lily’s acts of complicity and failure to actively resist what is happening with her father. For instance, she consistently “forgets” her rule about never being alone anywhere when her father is at home. She doesn’t lock the door to the bathroom when she takes a shower. Later, as a teenager, she leaves herself

10 Diana Russell, 1983, David Finkelhor, 1978, Vincent De Francis, 1969. Source: Southern Arizona Center Against Sexual Assault, Tucson Rape Crisis Center, http://www.sacasa.org. Other significant statistics from this source include: 1 in 6-10 boys will have been sexually abused by age 18. (Terryann Nielson. 1983: National Council for Prevention of Child Abuse. 1979: Susan Sgroi. 1978) 90% of offenders are known to the child. Child sexual abuse is more frequent within families than outside families: disabled children are especially at risk of sexual abuse. especially from people they already know. (Sexual Assault Center. Seattle: National Council for Prevention of Child Abuse. 1979) Child sexual abuse happens in all racial, religious, and ethnic groups, and at all socio-economic levels. No group is ‘immune’ from sexual abuse: the offender can be a person in any occupation. (Summit & Kryso. 1978: May, 1977) The average age for the onset of a sexually abusive relationship is 6-8 years old. Reports of molestation of very young children are increasing: more than one-third of all child victims may be 5 years old or younger: children as young as one week old have been molested. (Sexual Assault Center. Seattle: Child Protective Services, Seattle: Department of Health and Hospitals, City of Boston, 1984 ) Child sexual abuse Is seldom a one-time occurrence. Abusive relationships last an average of -4 years. and many last much longer than 4 years (National Center for Prevention of Child Abuse. 1979) At least 65-75% .of prostitutes were sexually abused as children. (Boyer & James. 1982: Enablers Study, Minneapolis. '980: C. Henry Kempe Center. Denver) Offenders almost never seek treatment voluntarily. Abuse will most likely continue unless a report is made. (Groth, 1979) Children very rarely lie about being sexually abused. (Sanford. 1981: Burgess. Groth. Holmstrom & Sgroi. 1978 ) The large majority of child sexual abuse Incidents go unreported. but the reporting rate is increasing in many parts of the country. (National Center for Prevention of Child Abuse: Child Protective Services. Seattle)
vulnerable to an older acquaintance in the woods, and fails to utter even a simple “no” when he makes sexual advances and rapes her. Lily herself is not “innocent” when it comes to violence towards others, and repeatedly assaults her younger sisters for minor trespasses, or simply to vent her own anger. I can even recognize the moments when Lily’s father seems pathetic and victim-like in his relationship with Lily. Lily is often belligerent and mouthy with her mother as well.

The spatial aspects of these intersections and reversals of power and perpetration within the house are made explicit in Drechsler’s comic book. For instance, the scenes between Lily and her father take place behind closed doors, in bedrooms and bathrooms. Lily’s confrontations with her mother and sisters happen in the more public spaces of the house: The kitchen, front door, living room, hallway, and even in the car. [Figure 01] When Lily randomly beats up on her little sister Kay, she does it in what appears to be the hallway. So, Lily’s violence is exposed to the other family members, and she is likely punished for her behavior. This kind of set up, where the victim ends up looking bad while the perpetrator is rarely exposed is typical in family abuse narratives. Why and how I see these tendencies immerse in the character of Lily, and why I don’t see them as a negation of the power and predominance of the abusive relationship between her and her father is something I address later, particularly in the third section Body as House. For now, let’s move into the first section, Harmful House.
Hey lil, what's matter? You in a bad mood or something?

You stupid brat! I wasn't in a bad mood til you started to bug me!

I'm sorry! I didn't mean to...

Yeah? Well now you're really gonna be sorry cuz I'm gonna cream you!

No lil, please don't! I was wrong. Ok? You weren't in a bad mood!

But she really ticked me off bad.

Well you're wrong again 'cuz now I'm in a real bad mood!

Oh kay! God, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it, honest!

I'm telling mom on you! You hurted me, lil!

I just started yelling and hitting her.

Man, I don't know what gets into me. It's like I just lose control. I guess I'm as bad as my dad says I am.
1 Harmful House

This first section addresses the space of the house as dangerous or even toxic to the character Lily in Daddy's Girl. The absence or presence of particular family members, as well as her position in terms of the public and private spaces within the house, determine her safety, or lack-there-of, in the house. In “Too Late” the narration informs us that Lily has made a promise to herself to never be alone anywhere when her dad is at home [Figure 02]. In Lily’s house, being alone makes her vulnerable to her father’s intrusion into her space and potential sexual violation. So being “alone” translates into: away from family members other than her father. Alone in the house when her father is at home is a condition of danger for her. The presence of her mother or other siblings is safe(r) when her father is present. When the others are absent and he is present she is in danger. We see this later in “Too Late” when her mother and sisters have left her to clean her room while they go out shopping. Her father stays behind as well, and interrupts Lily’s cleaning demanding oral sex. So, the level of threat the house poses depends largely upon who is located where in relation to Lily. In addition to this level of potential harm within the house, we also find that the house holds substances, which are harmful, potentially deadly to Lily. In “Too Late” Lily goes to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom to find pills to do herself in.\(^\text{11}\) [Figure 03] In other scenes, she binges on cookies and Cheetos for comfort, though the effects are rarely beneficial in the long run. In both instances of gorging on food, she throws up the next day. [Figure 04] This can be

\(^\text{11}\) I find it interesting to note that Debbie Drechsler mentions in an interview that her father is a pharmacist. The autobiographical nature of this work is something that remains in question, even to Drechsler herself, but it seems worth remarking on.

Debbie Drechsler, “Debbie Drechsler,” interview by Leela Corman (indy magazine: the guide to alternative comics!, 1999)
As soon as the doorknob started to turn, I knew I'd blown it again.

I remembered how I swore never to be alone anywhere when my dad was at home.

Also, how every time I swore I'd go and forget just like I did that day, when he came into my room...

I was wishing like anything that I would've remembered, but it was too late, way too late.
I got so close to doing it, and then I just chickened out.

See, if I did it, my mom would be so hurt. I could’ve written her a note to say why I did it...

But then she’d know about me and my dad. I didn’t want to make her suffer. She had too much other stuff to worry about already.

Somehow I would have to find a way to rise above it all. Somehow.

Figure 03. from Drechsler, Daddy's Girl, 52.
Hey, Lily! Phoo-e-o-e... it's a boy!

Well... we can write every day and visit on holidays...

...if our parents let us.

Oh, they have to... don't they?

On our last night of living here I was sneaking some Cheetos when my boyfriend called.

He wanted to say bye again, one more time. I just kept putting Cheetos in my mouth, one by one.

Geez, where can I hide this so mom doesn't find out? I ate the whole bag?

We talked a long time and somehow, those Cheetos were all gone when I got off the phone.

All night I kept wondering how I could eat all those Cheetos and still feel so empty inside.

Figure 04. from Drechsler, Daddy's Girl, 30.
seen as a physical manifestation of her pain and confusion, a cry for help, which is never heard.

I’ll start by looking at the level of harm within the house based on absences and presences. I begin with the aformentioned story or strip in *Daddy’s Girl*, “Too Late.” The story consists of 8 pages of four frames each, extending over what appears to be a period of a few days. [Figure 05] The first frame shows Lily, a close up crop of her face in profile—bangs, stiff and almost helmet like in form, eye peeking out, looking at the door. The door is partially visible, its recessed panels articulated, the grain of the wood carefully rendered. The doorknob is turning, a motion indicated, cartoon style, by the parenthesis marks surrounding it. Three different textures are depicted in this frame. One, the texture of Lily’s hair, dark, thick, carved into distinct segments—densely rendered in long and short lines, almost like wood. Two, the door and its frame are speckled with short marks indicating wood grain in the shaded areas. Three, the wall, with no apparent pattern of wallpaper. This wall may be painted a solid color, but a texture exists nonetheless. The markings run perpendicular to the grain of the wood on the door and its frame.

This first image is zoomed in and cropped tight. It is as if a photo was taken right up against Lily’s head. Depth of field is collapsed as Lily’s features and the details of the door are depicted with the same level of precision. The words run across the top of the frame, in their own bounded space:“as soon as the doorknob started to turn, I knew I’d blown it again.” As we take in these words, we begin to wonder what it is that Lily has done? What is she about to be caught in? Was she bad? Did she do something wrong? Is
Too Late

As soon as the doorknob started to turn, I knew I'd blown it again.

I remembered how I swore never to be alone anywhere when my dad was at home.

Also, how every time I swore it, I'd go and forget, just like I did that day, when he came into my room...

I was wishing like anything that I would've remembered, but it was too late, way too late.

Figure 05. from Drechsler, Daddy's Girl, 49.
she about to get in trouble? Maybe she was supposed to be cleaning her room, and was playing instead? In any case, the doorknob turning is the sign of her knowing that she has “blown it again.” It is the reminder, the indicator. It is clear in this frame that Lily has something to fear, or that something unpleasant is coming, and that it is her fault. Her admission of error leads us to believe that perhaps what is coming could be, at least in part, somewhat deserved.

The tragedy of the child’s life hits hard when, in the second frame, the narrative voice of Lily reveals her transgression. She remembered she forgot her rule about making sure she was never alone in a room when her father is home. The viewer now faces Lily head on, positioned slightly above her looking down. She is sitting on one of two identical twin beds; a book spread open between her legs. Her legs themselves straddle the book, forming a wide arch. Next to her, on top of the soft fabric of the beds, sits a spiral bound notebook. It seems as though she has been studying. The rug beneath the bed is now visible as a dense pattern of tufts. Its surface is bumpy. Lily’s rubber band arms are bent up towards her face. Her hands cover her eyes, her mouth is open, as if screaming; chastising herself for forgetting the crucial promise she made to herself. She swore “never to be alone anywhere when my dad was at home.” Her big mistake was to be away from others. She is alone in her room (which she shares with her sister) reading.

Reading is a solitary activity. It is something that one does alone. Gathering from other stories in the book, the character seems to use reading as a form of escape. But ironically her escape is also her trap. She seeks quiet, out of the way places to read in peace, and it is there that her father finds her. In this scene, she is inside a space within the home, which is marked as territory she can partially call her own. But she knows from
experience that no place in the house is hers. No place is safe from her father’s intrusion. It’s not safe to be alone in her room.

The first frame has as its primary subjects Lily’s eye and the doorknob. The second shows what is being interrupted. It is at this moment, the moment when the doorknob begins to turn, that she has been thrown out of the world of her book and into the reality of her life.

In the third frame our view moves behind Lily, still towering above her. Her figure is hunched over, arms and legs pulled in around her. Her head is down. The figure of the father is entering the room. The frame crops the father’s body just above the waist. His hand is behind his back, and both feet are inside the threshold, right foot leading. He passes the still carefully detailed door and frame. Now descriptions of baseboard and floorboards join the patchwork of textures. A simple bookcase is shown against the wall to the left of the doorway. The bookcase is wood grained and stacked with thick books, with a perforated sliding door on the top shelf. The father’s clothes are creased with thick bundles of horizontal marks. The black pants are riddled in white lines, his white shirt striped with black. Lily’s clothes too are lined in finer horizontal lines. Details like belt loops and cuffs are not ignored. Indeed everything in the scene, which progressively becomes more intense, is depicted in excessive, competing, textured detail. Words on the page of Lily’s open book are scratched out in rows of short vertical hatches, the only order in the chaos of pattern that is the room, which is fast closing in on her. Here, the narration recalls how she keeps forgetting her promise, like she did that day. How could she keep forgetting? “when he came into my room” is followed by an ellipse. The sentence continues into the next frame.
Woulda, coulda, shoulda. She wishes she'd remembered. It was too late. "way too late" the text informs us. Why did she forget? As we move through the rest of the story, it becomes clear that she will forget again. Does Lily set herself up for these scenes with her father? If so, why? If she didn't forget, would she be safe? Does her father's abuse depend on where and with whom she locates herself in the house? Perhaps Lily wants or needs to believe that these events are in her control. If she does not place herself anywhere alone in the house, then her father won't bother her. It is all up to her.

Believing that she has the power to control the abuse certainly would make the house and the world a much less scary place. The fact that she keeps forgetting suggests that she is unable to control it, but since she feels that her memory is something that she should be able to control, forgetting becomes an opportunity to blame herself. Her father has, over time, drilled into her head that she is the one responsible for the abuse. She doesn't want to believe it, but eventually does. I suggest that believing it is some kind of comfort to her. It makes everything less terrifying.

However, by looking at other stories in Daddy's Girl, particularly the first story, "Visitors in the Night," it seems that the presence of others does not insure Lily's protection. Her father is shown moving into the bedroom that Lily shares with her sister, Pearl, while both of the girls are asleep in their side-by-side twin beds. It is assumed that Lily's sister Pearl is not awake to witness the sexual violation of Lily by her father, but it is clear later that she is awake and scared. The bottom two frames of page 3 [Figure 06] depict the moments just after the father has left the room. The spatial politics of the room have changed. Lily can now speak again. As she starts to get out of bed, she looks over and asks if Pearl is awake. But it never seems as though she wants Pearl to be awake, or
Figure 06. from Drechsler, Daddy's Girl, 3.
Even really wants to know if she is awake. Pearl’s back is to Lily, but the viewer can see that Pearl is indeed awake. Her face expresses terror and confusion. Lily is easily satisfied by Pearl’s lack of reply, and begins, in the final frame, to get out of bed, her eyes still fixed in Pearl’s direction. Pearl’s lips widen and slightly part, as her eyes look sideways towards Lily—almost as if she is about to speak, but there is no exchange between the two girls. Pearl’s presence in the room did not protect Lily, and she in not capable of offering any comfort either. I will leave this scene for now, but will further explore the story in later sections.

Returning to the reading of “Too Late”, in this fourth frame, the father has closed the door, has moved towards Lily and is standing in front of her. His face is cut off by the strip of text that runs across the top of the frame. Only the end of his nose and his mouth are visible, and he is wearing a closed mouth grin. His posture is somewhat meek, yet smug; his hands are in his pockets. He is wearing a dress shirt tucked in, and a tie. The shirt has one left breast pocket. Door, wall, bookcase, floorboards, rug, are all still rendered in the same exacting detail as the previous frame. Lily’s position appears unchanged except that here, she is looking up in the direction of her father. Her eyes gaze up towards his face, and her mouth is set at precisely crotch level. Lily’s face, in profile, not smiling. She appears to be in a state of dread and regret.

A later scene in “Too Late” shows Lily being left at home with her father, to clean her room while her mother and sisters go out shopping. [Figure 07] In this instance, she did not forget, she was forced into the situation by her mother’s discipline. Is it possible that her mother knows how severe her punishment will be? Does the mother consciously or unconsciously aid the father in his abusive relationship with Lily? In either case, she is
MY MOM SAID I COULDN'T GO SHOPPING WITH HER AND MY SISTERS.
I WANT YOUR ROOM CLEAN BY THE TIME WE GET BACK!
NO IF'S, AND'S OR BUT'S, YOUNG LADY.
MY DAD WAS SUPPOSED TO BE DOING TAXES.
SO, LIL, LOOKS LIKE YOU NEED A BREAK.
NO, DAD, I JUST GOT STARTED.
C'MERE, LIL.
DAD! C'MON?!
HE SAID HE HAD SOMETHING HE WANTED TO SHOW ME.
C'MON, DAD. I GOTTA CLEAN MY ROOM. THIS WONT TAKE LONG.
C'MON, LIL, COME TO YOUR DADDY.
left alone in the house with her father. Her father finds her in her room, cleaning, and demands that she “take a break” to perform oral sex on him. Her protests are completely ineffectual. As he forces her face into his crotch, she begins to laugh uncontrollably at the sight of his penis. [Figure 08] It suddenly appears amusing to her, and as he loses his erection, she laughs even harder. She recognizes this as a way of “rising above.” Her laughter infuriates her father, who promptly zips up his pants and starts hitting her. She doesn’t seem to care. She has finally found a way out. In the final scene she wakes up, presumably the next morning, goes to the breakfast table with her family, in sort of a daze, and tries to recall something that she wasn’t supposed to forget. [Figure 09] Her father shoots her a dirty look over his morning paper, and she appears to not know why he might be angry with her. In this kitchen table scene, her mother, with a dazed expression herself, fails to notice the cup of coffee her father has spilled on the table and denies that what Lily has forgotten could be of any importance. Lily begins to feel sick, and still can’t remember what she forgot. Presumably the cycle started in the first page of the story continues.

There is something still left to say about this strip. It has to do with what it means to belong to a family, to be inside of a household and the importance and power of that feeling or need. When Lily discovers her way to “rise above” it is only a momentary triumph. While her father’s immediate wrath seems not to faze her, the exchange of looks at the breakfast table indicates that the consequences of her actions will be much more far reaching. Her father will find a way to get to her. The most effective way will be to ostracize her, to give her the “silent treatment”, or to treat her in an overtly hostile, yet
He was pulling me toward it and all the feelings in me were gone.

That's my girl.

Oh God! Please help me to rise above it! Please!

Suddenly, the thought of what it looked like seemed so funny! I must have gone temporarily insane!

What the hell are you laughing at?

Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha

His thing got all sort and that just made me laugh harder, even though he was madder than I ever saw him.

He hit me but I didn't even care! I'd finally found a way to rise above it! He couldn't hurt me ever again!

You cold bitch! You're gonna end up just like your mother! Frigid!

Figure 08. from Drechsler, Daddy's Girl, 55.
I woke up with this feeling of something really important I should remember.

What's matter with you?

Nothing, oh I dunno.

My mom wasn't much help at all.

Geez! I keep having this feeling I forgot something. Well, then, it couldn't have been that important.

My dad gave me this dirty look like I did something real bad. I wondered what his problem was.

My stomach started to hurt and then I got this awful headache. I never did remember the thing I forgot.
unexplained (to the rest of the family) manner. It is also clear that Lily’s mother will offer no support, or even pay attention to what is happening. It is my guess that this treatment will be unbearable for Lily. If Lily can’t remember why her father is angry with her, if she cannot remember what happened the day before, then she has forgotten not only the original rule about not being alone, but also why, what her father will try to do to her, and, most importantly, she will forget her strategy for “rising above.” The respective safety and danger of presences and absences applies to the contents of Lily’s memory as well as the contents of a room, or of the house.

An additional way that the house becomes harmful to Lily is through the toxins it holds, substances which are, or become dangerous. The most obvious appearance of toxins in Lily’s story are the drugs in the medicine cabinet. [Figure 10] Lily has suffered one encounter too many, in which her father has convinced her of her own inherent badness, and the inescapability of her position in relation to him. She turns to the medicine cabinet. Stored within the wall of the bathroom are substances which can heal, substances which can suppress symptoms. Those same substances can also cause harm, even death. Lily turns to the contents of the medicine cabinet to find relief, but the only relief for her illness, in her own mind, is death. Suicide. In another story, she wishes she could get cancer and die. Her sister expresses a similar desire when she realizes that she has no memory of her early childhood. The feeling of entrapment that the girls experience, within the family, and within the home blocks their imagination for a different life, and leads them to wish for death. As Lily stands at the medicine cabinet, contemplating her options, tears streaming down her face, she ends up talking herself out of it when she thinks of how it would hurt her mother. If she left a note, explaining why,
I got so close to doing it, and then I just chickened out.

See, if I did it, my mom would be so hurt. I could've written her a note to say why I did it...

But then she'd know about me and my dad. I didn't want to make her suffer. She had too much other stuff to worry about already.

Somehow I would have to find a way to rise above it all, somehow.

Figure 10. from Drechsler, *Daddy's Girl*, 52.
then her mother would know how bad she was. She resolves to find a way to "rise above." As we have looked at previously, she finds her way, at least temporarily, through hysterical laughter.

In addition to the drugs found in the medicine cabinet, Lily also seeks relief from her inner turmoil in the kitchen. The kitchen is the place of nourishment. Inside the cabinets, on the countertops and in the refrigerator are treats and other foods offering comfort and sustenance. [Figure11] Looking again to the first story of the book, "Visitors in the Night" where Lily is depicted as quite young, between 5 and 7 years old, we see her sneak out of the bedroom, in the middle of the night, after her father has sexually violated her. She creeps down the stairs and into the kitchen and uses a chair to reach the countertop, where her friend, Mr. Owl Man lives. Mr. Owl Man is the name she has for the family's cookie jar, which appears to be a ceramic depiction of an owl with spectacles, holding a book between his wings. She sits atop the counter, removes Mr. Owl Man's cap and devours the contents of the cookie jar. In one frame she is shown with a pile of cookies in her lap, on top of her nightgown, one hand to her mouth, stuffing cookies in, while the other hand reaches in for more. As she performs these excessive actions, she talks to Mr. Owl in her mind. She declares him her only friend in the world. Out loud she observes that she has had too many cookies, but prefers the sick feeling in her tummy to the taste of her father's sperm in her mouth. Lily replaces one poison with another. One poison is forced upon her, the other she chooses for herself, and takes risks to get to. She navigates the darkened house at night, breaking the rules of the house, for an illicit rendez-vous with her friend, Mr. Owl Man.
Figure 11. from Drechsler, *Daddy's Girl*, 4.
On her trip to the kitchen, she is a paper-doll cut out figure, almost floating down the stairs. She is always looking over her shoulder, until she receives Mr. Owl Man’s comfort. Then she focuses on him, and on her own state of sickness. The perspective in the darkened kitchen scene is off. We see the tops of canisters tilted forward, Drechsler’s use of detailing and patterns of hatchmarks shows up here as in the drawings we have already looked at. Here, white scratches define the edges of the blackened surfaces of drawer fronts, cabinet door handles, Mr.Owl Man’s feathers, and the reflective surface of the canisters on the counter. Mr. Owl Man is her mute object, animated to become her friend and confidant.

In the morning, she tells her mother she is sick, but her mother sends her onto school. She vomits at school and is later picked up by her mother. “Too many cookies” are transformed into a sign of Lily’s trauma, a sign her mother refuses to read.

A similar scenario takes place later in the book, when Lily is middle school aged. The family is moving away, and this is their final night in the house. [Figure 12] Lily is talking to her boyfriend and binging on Cheetos she has snuck from the kitchen. By the time she gets off the phone, she has finished off a family sized bag and is looking for a place to hide the empty bag. She feels guilty, or knows she will get in trouble if her mother finds out. Later that night, she lies awake in bed and wonders how she could eat so many Cheetos “and still feel so empty inside.” Her comforting Cheetos, consumed addictively while talking on the phone, become toxic on the car trip the next morning. In her sadness and anger over the move, she lashes out at her sister, who slugs her and causes her to vomit in the car. Once again, the symptom of her internal pain is manifest outward and given physical form, first in aggression towards her sister, then as the vomit
Hey, Lily! Phoo-e-e-e-e! It's a boy!

Well... we can write every day and visit on holidays... If our parents let us. Oh, they have to... don't they?

On our last night of living here I was sneaking some Cheetos when my boyfriend called.

He wanted to say bye again, one more time. I just kept putting Cheetos in my mouth, one by one.

Geez, where can I hide this so mom doesn't find out I ate the whole bag?

We talked a long time and, somehow, those Cheetos were all gone when I got off the phone.

All night I kept wondering how I could eat all those Cheetos and still feel so empty inside.

Figure 12. from Drechsler, Daddy's Girl, 27.
inside the compact space of the family car. The narration notes that everyone is mad at her for throwing up, once again, she is blamed, is made to look bad for her displaced expression of inner anguish.

In this section I have shown the ways in which Drechsler depicts the house as harmful to Lily, the child-victim of abuse inside the family. First through the absence and presence of certain family members (or not) and second, through the toxins it holds which Lily consumes for comfort and/or self-destruction, and the ways in which those poisons often transform into physical symptoms, or cries for help. Cries which fall on deaf ears.
2 More or Less a Room

This section investigates the significance of the borders of a so-called private room, when those inside the room have no say as to who will enter and who will not. In “Daddy Knows Best” we see that even the bathroom walls are permeable as Lily’s father “accidentally” walks in on his naked adolescent daughter and proceeds to fondle her [Figure 13] In a survivor narrative from one of the anthologies the author talks about the door being permanently removed from her bedroom by her abusive father. In another narrative, From I Never Told Anyone the bathroom door is described as “cheap” since there is no lock to keep the author’s “crazy” father out¹². In this section I also examine ways in which Drechsler’s depictions of rooms animate the surfaces and objects within the rooms, with obsessively rendered textures and details. Drechsler’s drawings flatten the space of the house and seem to imply that the environment is at least as important as the players involved in the scenes. Again, in the opening frames of “Too Late,” notice how the frames become increasingly crowded with competing textures figures and surfaces [Figure 14]. It seems that as the threat increases, the presence or perception of the room, as a container, holding and trapping her, increases as well.

The full color cover of Daddy’s Girl shows Lily stretched out on her bed in “her room” reading a book, as her father is opening the door of the room and stepping in[Figure 15]. In this image, like the ones inside the book, the space of the room is described in meticulous detail. The rug is a swirling strawberry jam in which each fiber is drawn; the grain in the wood of the flooring is carefully rendered, including a system of

I was just minding my own business when my Dad burst in on me.

Oh, Lily! I'm sorry, I didn't know you were in here!

Damn, sure, Dad... I'm ok.

He acted like it was an accident only I knew it wasn't.

Why your little bosoms are getting real perky, aren't they?

Geez, Dad!

He said he would tell Mom how much I led him on, if I didn't let him look.

Dad, man, leave me alone, ok?

Lil, show me, right now!

Then he made me let him touch them.

I wished I could just drop dead.

You know, only a tramp would throw herself at her own father this way, right, Lil?

Yeah, I guess.

Figure 13. from Drechsler, Daddy's Girl, 31.
AS SOON AS THE DOORKNOB STARTED TO TURN, I KNEW I'D BLOWN IT AGAIN.

I REMEMBERED HOW I SWEARED NEVER TO BE ALONE ANYWHERE WHEN MY DAD WAS AT HOME.

ALSO, HOW EVERY TIME I SWEARED IT, I'D GO AND FORGET, JUST LIKE I DID THAT DAY, WHEN HE CAME INTO MY ROOM...

I WAS WISHING LIKE ANYTHING THAT I WOULD'VE REMEMBERED, BUT IT WAS TOO LATE, WAY TOO LATE.

Figure 14. from Drechsler, Daddy's Girl, 49.
Figure 15. from Drechsler, Daddy’s Girl, front cover.
joinery of the floorboards at the corner. The moldings, recessed door panels, door handle plate are all described in what seems to be a methodical, obsessive kind of detailing that is also somewhat distorted and childlike in its style. The wallpaper is a busy field of unique but similar roses on a yellow field, even the darkness outside the room is shown as a series of radiating contour lines tracing the figure of the father. The careful yet twisted manner of describing the space of a room is not unique to this image, but is a style that shows up in most of Drechsler’s images. This style of rendering brings the space of the room forward, animates the space, and reveals the architecture as one of the players in Lily’s story. In this image we see a pre-teen Lily in a sense, “being herself” in her room. She is reading on her stomach, long skinny legs twist and cross at the ankles, while her right arm forms an almost protective semi circle in front of her. Her eyes are looking towards the door, and her face expresses fear and dread. Her two shoes are placed haphazardly in front of the door, as if thrown off just as she flung herself on the bed to read. The door opens between the two shoes. Drechsler’s use of color in this book cover image portrays the bedroom as a warm, yellow, glowing, happy, isolated place that is being invaded by the cold blue darkness from the hall and the creepy gesture of the father entering the room. One foot has already passed into the room, and is bathed in the warmth of its light, while the other remains back in the blue with the rest of his body. The smoke form his cigarette enters the room, but does not change color. With Lily, on the fluffy red bedspread, on top of what appears to be a sweater sits a curled up cat with its eyes closed. The cat is not responding to the intrusion. The scene looks almost sweet and homey. Yet somehow, from the initial glance at this cover, it is clear that the situation is sexualized, and that the connotations of “Daddy’s Girl” are not positive.
When I look at this image I think of how simple it is for a wall to cease to be a wall. If a door can always be opened, then the seclusion of what we often describe as the “private” areas of the house, can always be violated, and therefore cease to be private, cease to be spaces of retreat or safety. The single-family house itself is a virtually impenetrable private space. Safe from the prying eyes of outsiders, “a man’s home is his castle.” But within the walls of the house, only those with privilege and power are allowed the luxury of truly private space. And physical space is not the only thing intruded upon in this house. [Figure 16] Lily’s mother reads her “private” diary, and she is punished for its contents, resulting in Lily’s abandonment of the diary she was initially so excited about.

Looking again at the first page of the story “Too Late” [Figure 14], but this time from the perspective of “roomness,” we can ask, is Lily’s room really her room? Is it a room at all? Do walls and doors keep anything out? What do they hold within? The wall is permeable to the patriarch, transparent and fluid. The wall is solid and impenetrable to those who are not to see in. It is precisely at this moment that the room becomes a room in its most powerful sense. Before the doorknob turns, she is unaware of the room. Of its walls, the door, that she is alone, that she is enclosed and also so vulnerable. Once the doorknob turns, she recognizes that she is in a space that can be intruded upon. Objects like doorknobs become signals, warnings, reminders, and threats. Ordinary objects become loaded with significance. A doorknob functions to allow access into a room. It is the interface between the body and the opening in the wall that is the door. A doorknob is used to both open a door and to shut a door. In some cases it can also allow the locking of
Dear Diary

April 2

I'm so happy you're my friend now! It was so great that Mom gave me my own diary for my birthday! I'm going to tell you all my most deep dark secrets! Thanks for listening! Love, Lily

June 17

Today Mom was such a B**CH! I know that's a bad word but it still fits! She told me I could go to Betty's house, then at the last minute she said I can't because my room is a mess! I hate her guts!!!

August 4

I can't believe it! Mom actually read my PRIVATE diary! Now I'm grounded for a week! It just isn't fair at all! I'll never be like this to my children! In fact I'll never have kids at all! NEVER!

August 9

You know I just can't think of anything to write these days. The weather's so gray, I guess...
the door. The prevention of access. But in this instance, it seems not to have a lock, or the
lock is rendered useless. A doorknob is connected to a latch that secures the door in its
frame. When the door is latched shut, views into the room are eliminated, and sound is
restricted. The closed door completes the wall, and marks the room as a discrete place
from the rest of the building.

In this series of frames, as the situation intensifies, the rendering of detail in the
room also intensifies. As I suggested earlier, the room becomes more of a room. The
characters and the floor compete with each other for visual focus. The increased busi-
ness brings the room forward as a player in the scene and also flattens the space. While
some of the furnishings are drawn in some kind of approximate perspectival view, the
excessive detailed texturing serves to collapse the space and to reiterate its two
dimensionality. Also, notice the way that Lily’s body is flattened out on the bed in frame
two. Her legs are not shown in perspective, but are instead pasted up against the side of
the bed. The profile of her face in frames 1 and 4 is a paper cut out. Lily’s world is a flat
surface of busy textures. As the scene progresses and the danger increases, the frames
thickens with the density of hatch marks. By the final two frames, the father’s clothes, the
rug, the bookcase, the floor boards, the door all seem to vibrate with tension.

Drechsler opens Daddy’s Girl with a narrative called “Visitors in the Night,” a
narrative which I have already begun to examine. Remember? Here we see the girls’
bedroom being transformed from a place for bedtime reading and sibling squabbles, into
a place of terror and confusion. [Figure 17] Centered on the facing page of the story is an
irregularly shaped vignette of the exterior of a house–an elevation view of the corner of a
plain clapboard sided wall, with one window showing, the branches of a tree, part of the
Figure 17. from Drechsler, Daddy’s Girl.
trunk, and a night sky sprinkled with stars. Here again, as with the cover of the book, there is a façade of hominess, of normalcy, a nighttime view of the exterior of a room that appears tranquil. The inhabitants of the house are tucked away for the night. This picture-perfect image of home, of family, contrasted with the reality inside makes that reality all the more powerful in its effects. Everything here is supposed to be good. Bad things don’t happen in places like this. In families like this (white, middle class), in neighborhoods like this (suburban). The myth of the nuclear family is shattered by the violence within the house. But the strength of that myth is precisely what allows those inside and outside the house to deny the reality of this family. It can’t happen here. It is not happening here.

The title page of the story consists of 3 frames; the top frame extends across the space of the two below [Figure 18]. The title, “Visitors in the Night,” floats across the scene of a girl’s bedroom at night. The floor plane seems to be tilted forward so that the reader has almost an aerial view. The two girls are shown in separate twin beds. Lily is sitting up in bed reading by the light of a desk lamp on the nightstand positioned between the two girl’s beds. Her sister pearl is lying down on her side, facing the viewer, eyes looking to her right, or behind her towards the other girl.

The room is rendered dark with distinguishable textures and patterns including the surfaces of wall wood, carpet, bookcase, nightstand, lamp, bedspread, sheet, pillow, nightgown, skin, hair. Dramatic lighting illuminates areas of the frames, casting shadow patterns. The two girls resemble each other, and appear to be close in age. Their hair is striped and cut in a matching bobs, with short bangs swept over to the left of each of their faces. Balloon dialog sets up the scene. Lily’s reading light disturbs Pearl. In frame one
Figure 18. from Drechsler, *Daddy's Girl*, 1.
Lily is absorbed in her book with a contented look on her face. Pearl appears to be wide-awake and bothered. When Pearl sits up, turns around and asks Lily to turn the light off, Lily looks annoyed. Her one eye, which is glaring at Pearl, is drawn as if it were a straight-on view. Pearl turns back around in the third frame, as Lily reaches for the light and declares her hatred for her sister. The sentiment is returned.

Page two consists of five frames, and they take place vaguely "later." The room is darker, with the lamp off [Figure 19]. The father lets in light from the hallway as he enters the room, calling for Lily. Upon first glance of the page, if one tends to read entire page layouts before the individual ones, the frame in the lower left hand corner of page two demands attention. It consists of the torso of a hairy man, dramatically lit, with his penis in his hand and a balloon with the text "oh, Lily...daddy's got a big surprise for his little girl." Musical notes bracket his words, as if spoken in a sing-songy voice. This image is shocking and highly disturbing. It is something we do not expect to see drawn in a comic book. The next two frames show him approaching the bed, going to pull down her covers, as she now, no longer feigning sleep, looks up at her father with bugged out terrified eyes, and attempts to seal her lips tightly as if she knows what's coming. The next frame reveals the father's penis in Lily's mouth, his hand on her head, pulling her forward, as he towers over her, hips pressed up against her face. [Figure 20] Still her eyes are open, looking up, or looking dazed. In the foreground of this panel, is the lamp, behind them is pitch black. Pearl is excluded from the frame.

In the first panel of page three, only the father's upper torso is shown. His figure juts across the frame at an angle, as his head tilts back, eyes closed, ecstatic smile, "oh yesss... my little baby..." Afterwards, we see him bend to kiss horrified Lily goodnight,
Figure 19. from Drechsler, *Daddy's Girl*, 2.
Figure 20. from Drechsler, Daddy's Girl, 3.
as she holds her hand to her mouth, with those same bug eyes. The room returns now to
the bedroom of Lily and Pearl. It seems as though Lily is checking with Pearl, to see if
she is awake, not only to find out what she knows about what just happened, but also to
find out if it is safe for her to sneak out of the room in the middle of the night. Something
that is surely forbidden for the children of the house. While the room itself is a dangerous
place at night for Lily, leaving the room to go prowling around the house is not safe
either. If she is caught, she will get in trouble. Sneaking through the house is something I
will explore further in (Un) known House [Figure 21].

I will close this section with a quotation from Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain.*
The section “The Structure of Torture”, suggests to me that abuse within families
functions in a very similar way to torture. Her insights into the role of the torture room
and the objects within it allow me to make some connections concerning the house and
domestic abuse.

In torture, the world is reduced to a single room or set of rooms. Called “guest
rooms” in Greece (23) and “safe houses” in the Philippines, (24) the torture rooms
are often given names that acknowledge and call attention to the generous,
civilizing impulse only as prelude to announcing its annihilation. The torture
room is not just the setting in which the torture occurs; it is not just the space that
happens to house the various instruments used for beating and burning and
producing electric shock. It is itself literally converted into another weapon, into
an agent of pain. All aspects of the basic structure—walls, ceiling, windows,
doors—undergo this conversion. Basques tortured by the Spanish describe “el
cerrojo,” the rapid and repeated bolting and unbolting of the door in order to keep
Figure 21. from Drechsler, Daddy's Girl, 4.
them at all times in immediate anticipation of further torture, as one of the most terrifying and damaging acts (25). (40)

...the room, both in its structure and its content, is converted into a weapon, deconverted, undone. Made to participate in the annihilation of the prisoners, made to demonstrate that everything is a weapon, the objects themselves, and with them the fact of civilization, are annihilated: there is no wall, no window, no door, no bathtub, no refrigerator, no chair, no bed. (41)

When Scarry talks about the civilizing aspects of the names of the rooms, I compare it to the image of the house as warm, safe place to be, and the way that that space is converted into a place of terror through the acts of violence and violation taking place within the home. Lily and Pearl’s bedroom door, the doorknob, is no longer a door, is no longer a doorknob. The turning of the doorknob, the opening of the door become signs of danger. Lily’s bed is no longer a bed. It is no longer the place where she takes rest and comfort at night. Instead it is the site of the most intimate of violations, by one who is not named as her torturer, but her provider, protector, father. In the next section I explore just how annihilating such acts against the body of a child can be.
3 Body as House

Here we will look at how Lily, in the absence of a proper shelter to protect her, houses herself in thick skin (through gaining weight) and tries to hide her body in a second skin of loose clothing. In a scene from “Daddy Knows Best,” Lily, unhappy with the image of her adolescent body in the mirror, decides to conceal her figure in an oversized sweater that her grandmother made. [Figure 22] The sweater becomes a staple of her wardrobe and seems to serve as a second skin. As Lily gets older, she turns more and more to food as a comfort and coping mechanism, and this practice serves her doubly by increasing her size and offering her another layer under which she can hide her sexuality, which by this point has become a source of confusion and dread for her. Her mother directly and indirectly confronts this symptom, typically through accusation and ridicule. I also look at the ways in which physical abuse, in particular, sexual abuse, through violent contact with and forced entry into the body of the victim, works to instantiate belief systems, which reach beyond childhood and the family of origin.

13 Elaine Scarry describes the room as an extension of the body:

“In normal contexts, the room, the simplest form of shelter, expresses the most benign potential of human life. It is on the one hand, an enlargement of the body: it keeps warm and safe the individual it houses in the same way the body encloses and protects the individual within; like the body, its walls put up boundaries around the self preventing undifferentiated contact with the world, yet in its windows and doors, crude versions of the senses, it enables the self to move out into the world and allows that world to enter. But while the room is a magnification of the body, it is simultaneously a miniaturization of the world, of civilization. Although its walls, for example, mimic the body’s attempt to secure for the individual a stable internal space—stabilizing the temperature so that the body spends less time in this act; stabilizing the nearness of others so that the body can suspend its rigid and watchful postures; acting in these and other ways like the body so that the body can act less like a wall—the walls are also, throughout all this, independent objects, objects which stand apart from and free of the body, objects which realize the human being’s impulse to project himself out into a space beyond the boundaries of the body in acts of making, either physical or verbal, that once multiplied, collected, and shared are called civilization…” (38)
DID YOU EVER HAVE A DAY WHERE YOU COULDN'T DECIDE WHAT TO WEAR?

THAT'S WHAT HAPPENED TO ME. EACH OUTFIT I TRIED ON LOOKED EVEN WORSE THAN THE ONE BEFORE.

PRETTY SOON I'D TRIED ON EVERYTHING I OWNED AND THEY ALL LOOKED AWFUL!

THEN I REMEMBERED THAT SWEATER MY GRAMMA MADE ME ONLY IT HAD COME OUT WAY TOO BIG!

Figure 22. from Drechsler, *Daddy's Girl*, 33.
A dualistic mode of thought understands the body and mind to be split. The body houses the Self. For abuse victims, this idea of splitting can become exaggerated as one attempts to save or protect one’s Self from the trauma the body is forced to endure. One of the stories I came across in *The Courage to Heal* describes a practice of leaving the body, hovering above it looking down. In “Friends in the Night” Lily tries to escape the here and now (her body, her room, the house, her life) by tuning in to distant radio stations and imagining she is far away [Figure 23]. Lily also intentionally alters her body size through overeating. As I mentioned in the section Harmful House, Lily turns to food for comfort. This shows up in several of the strips in *Daddy’s Girl*. She also uses an oversized sweater to make her self larger, to add another layer, and to neutralize the visible signs of her sexual maturity. [Figure 22]

Lily dons her sweater as a coat of armor, to protect her body. It covers her torso and flattens the definition of her breasts and hips. I describe the rendering of her hair as “helmet-like.” She attempts to “thicken her skin” through the addition of layers of fat. Through weight gain she simultaneously hides and takes up more space. She perhaps imagines this thickening to protect her. To make her less desirable, less susceptible to sexual advances. This strategy of course fails to serve her in the ways that she imagines, and in some ways leaves her more vulnerable as she now must contend with the social stigma associated with being an overweight teenager. It is not clear how much control Lily has over her own size, but it is clear that she believes she can exert mastery over her

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Sometimes, at night, I feel so sad and lonely. I could die.

That's when I start turning the dial on my transistor radio.

Hellooooo Detroit! This is the Turtles! With their number one hit Happy Together. Imagine and you know I think...

...trying to find the very farthest station I can pick up...

...and pretending I'm there instead of here.

...and this one goes out from Jeff to Susan. His brown-eyed girl!
body/self in this way. It is something she feels she can control while all else is out of control.

At one point she wishes she knew what it was that she did to her father to make him "lose control" so that she could stop doing it. [Figure 24] It is right after the scene with her father in the bathroom that she finds herself in the bedroom trying on everything in her closet and hating how she looks in it. All of the clothes are snug fitting and show off her figure. Then she finds the too-large sweater, which hides her curves, and deems it "perfect". Here, she admits to, or believes her father that it is her fault, that she makes him do it, but she doesn't know how she does it. She doesn't intend to do it. Her father's words work to put her in the position of the powerful one. The one so powerful she fails to recognize the extent of her powers.¹⁶

While Lily attempts to house her body in various layer of protection, her body itself is an architecture of sorts as well. Sexual abuse most often involves an invasion of the body of the victim. A plundering of orifices: mouth, vagina, anus. The space of the body is physically entered in the abusive acts. While this is by no means the only invasion, (and not all sexual abuse involves this level of invasion) it is an essential one, a

¹⁶ This is an entire topic in itself. The ways in which abusers make their victims feel powerful, in control, to take the blame, to fill them with guilt, to make them fear their own powers for fear of the havoc they may wreak onto others...little gods. Controlling their fathers, controlling the family, controlling the world. It is a lot to carry. It is very effective. It is common for the perpetrator to present him or herself as weak, pathetic, out of control, sorry, guilty, worthless, bad, and most importantly powerless. The child often occupies a superior role, feeling sorry for the perpetrator, feeling higher -than, and responsible-for the abuser. Feeling that they must protect and take care of the abuser. He/she is sick and needs help. You can see this tactic represented on the title page of Daddy's Girl and in the bathroom scene, also in Marvin and in the scene where she laughs. She is accused of being bad, and worst of all, of being cold and uncaring. Frigid. Her father needs her, why doesn't she care? On the title page it is just a look. He is pathetic and deferent. This shows up in some of the other narratives I've read (and was definitely used against me most effectively. I am still haunted, more than by anything else, by those events in which I was made to feel mean, insensitive and hurtful towards one of my primary abusers. I can be instantly brought to tears of guilt just thinking about those times. But I was talking about the body...
Figure 24. from Drechsler, Daddy’s Girl, 32.
spatial one that should not be ignored. Elaine Scarry writes about the ways in which pain unmakes the world—shatters the world (3-23). Pain is physical. It happens to the body and yet it cannot really happen without the psyche. Scarry explains the way pain and injury are used (in torture, in war) to substantiate beliefs. To unmake and to make worlds (27-59). Many acts of sexual abuse do not involve pain. In fact, often, sexual pleasure for the victim is part of what takes place. But when sexual pleasure is forced upon anyone, especially a child, who, though confused, knows enough to understand that the activity is considered taboo, what would be pleasure becomes a source of deep psychic pain. This is another useful tool that perpetrators employ in systematic abuse. The victim will be compelled by her own guilt at her body’s natural response to stimulation, that she will be forced into silence, lest anyone should discover what a dirty child she truly is. I would argue that these physical acts, whether painful or pleasurable, since they often involve spatial invasion of the body itself, function in very much the same way as techniques of torture. Beliefs are imprinted into the psyche of the victim through and during the acts of physical violation, which operate in profoundly powerful ways throughout his/her life, unless they are somehow intentionally and actively undone. When Lily’s father accuses Lily of throwing herself at him in the bathroom, as he is fondling her breasts, the notion that Lily is ‘asking for it’ is given a power over Lily’s belief system, over Lily’s world, that far exceeds any statement that her father, or anyone else, would make without the simultaneous activity of touching her body in a sexual manner. The things that Lily’s father wants her to believe about herself, about the family, about him, about the world and her position in it, are made real through his physical engagement with her body. It is in this way that abusers so effectively protect themselves. This is such a simple
procedure. And virtually foolproof. Lily’s world, Lily’s belief system will be stocked with a number of notions which will prevent her from resisting, from talking, from proving him wrong. [Figure 25] In fact, she will go on, seemingly of her own accord, to prove him right through her own, supposedly voluntary, actions away from him. It is for this reason—as a result of this practice, that victims of abuse often set themselves up to look bad in any number of ways, and abusers are rarely suspected of doing anything to anyone. A perpetrator not only violates a victim while he has access to her or him, but also insures that the victim will continue to be victimized throughout her life, in order to reinforce the initial belief systems, in order to block the victim from any kind of analysis of the situation, in order to keep her from ever blowing his cover. And, in order to continue to control her, in whatever way he sees fit, for a lifetime. It is the intimate and repeated contact with the body that makes this possible. As I mentioned earlier, a child might try to get out of his or her body, or she might attempt to flee the house itself. The next section takes a look at ways of leaving.
I kept thinking about the things he said. How I would always be his.

It scared me bad. What if it was the truth? It couldn’t be, could it?

I used to think that once I was grown up I would be able to be my own boss but he said it wasn’t true.

For the millionth time, I wished I could get cancer and die.

Figure 25. from Drechsler, Daddy’s Girl, 53.
4 Body Outside

This fourth section, looks at the relationship that Lily develops with the outdoors, the natural world, and the forest near her house. Due to the suburban location of Lily’s house, she and her siblings have easy access to a wooded area in their neighborhood. In the woods and in the outdoors she finds both a sense of liberation, and more abuse. Lily also finds other ways of escaping the house and her body through imagination.

The notion of the house as a place to be escaped from, rather than as a refuge, is one of my initial entry points into this project. The conflicted relationship that child victims have, with both the house and the out-of-doors, stems from the coexistence of fear and dependency. The initial question posed when I began this project was: What happens when the home becomes the site of danger, the place to seek refuge from? When abuse occurs in the home (specifically emotional, physical and sexual abuse of children by the parental figures) the house is broken. No longer a safe haven, the home becomes a place which the less powerful inhabitants wish/need to escape, even while they are simultaneously dependent on the very agents of the abuse, and the material shelter that the home provides. Whether they literally leave the house, spend as much time outside the home as possible, run away, or mentally exit the present time and place for some other, (presumably better, safer, time and place) abuse victims are often absent from the frightening place called home. While there can be a highly developed understanding of the intricacies of the physical body of the house, during abuse episodes, the victim often finds ways to be mentally absent from the scene, while her physical body remains. The child may also call upon the tools of imagination, and through daydreaming, fantasy, and
other forms of escape, find ways to grab moments of security and comfort in the imaginary elsewhere:

In the strip “Claudia,” Lily romps in the out doors, with an ease and freedom that is not shown elsewhere in *Daddy’s Girl*. [Figure 26] And it is here that she questions her own conformity to societal pressures and peer opinions. She marvels at Claudia’s ability to stand outside of what is expected and to be her strange self. Lily knows she herself is quite strange, but she isn’t as brave as Claudia, who doesn’t seem to care what others think. Her relationship with the woods shows up prominently in a 1996 comic book by Drechsler called *Nowhere*. *Nowhere* is a series of comic books featuring the same family, and an older Lily as the main character. While the abusive relationship between her and her father is not explicitly depicted in this series, having read *Daddy’s Girl*, it is not difficult to read between the lines. In the first issue of nowhere, the family has moved to a new house in the suburbs, somewhere in the Great Lakes region. After days of being confined to the house unpacking with her mother and siblings, Lily is allowed out, and ventures into the woods alone for the first time. [Figure 27] At first she is afraid. Fairy tales warn of the danger of the woods. But the forest is also magical. After all, don’t fairies themselves live there? Lily fights her fears and soon discovers how wonderful it is to be away from the judging eyes of civilization. She imagines what it might be like to live in the forest, surviving on nuts and berries. A common childhood fantasy, but particularly poignant given Lily’s situation at home. She comes upon a clearing and is shown dancing on a make believe stage with the surrounding trees as her adoring audience [Figure 28]. Her imagination transforms the forest into another world. A world she controls. The forest is a place outside of the laws of the house.
YOU KNOW, I COULD TAKE YOU SOMEPLACE NEAT, IF YOU LIKE.

HOW FAR IS IT?

NOT VERY.

OK.

IT WAS UPHILL PRACTICALLY THE WHOLE WAY THERE...

WE'RE ALMOST THERE.

THANK GOD?

IT TURNED OUT TO BE WORTH IT, THOUGH.

I TRIED TO RUN LIKE THOSE DEER BUT ALL I DID WAS LOOK LIKE A JERK.

WOW!
I never planned on having to go into the woods all by myself, at least not the first time.

All of a sudden, they looked real spooky.

But I made myself go in anyway, just in case someone, like Pearl, was looking.

I had to work up all my nerve to keep going, once I got to where I couldn’t see any more houses.

What if I can’t find my way home?

The only thing that kept me going was how it’d look if someone saw me running out of there.

After awhile, I forgot to be scared, or something...

It smells gross in here.

It’s kinda mysterious here, and private, too, and quiet.
...and then it was practically, fun or something.

What if I could live here? Like an Indian, or something? I could live on nuts and berries and stuff.

Man! That would be so cool!

After I'd been in the woods forever, I found the nearest place I'd ever seen, practically in my whole life!

And the birds would actually fly to me and let me be their friend!

WOW!
For Lily, the woods are also a place of romantic and sexual discovery with a boy she likes [Figure 29]. However, her escape from the oppressive environment of the house turns dangerous as well when one afternoon she is confronted alone in the woods by an older acquaintance who ends up raping her. [Figure 30] In the strip called “Sixteen.” in Daddy’s Girl, Lily (here, re-named Frances) skips fourth period at school to go to the woods to be alone and think, maybe write a poem. Edgar, a creepy older guy who she had met once through some of her school friends, interrupts her solitude. The narration tells us that she doesn’t welcome the interruption, but doesn’t want to hurt his feelings, plus it makes her feel grown up, hanging out with an adult. Edgar wastes no time in taking advantage of her generosity, rapes her, humiliates her and then demands that she get up quickly before anyone sees her [Figure 31]. She gets up just before her friends show up, and her biggest concern is that they might find out what happened [Figure 32]. All she can do for the rest of the day is blame herself for not saying no, while she tries to hide what has happened. Later she seems to take very seriously what he did to her, more so than even what her father has been doing. She wonders, as she struggles to write a poem, (something she used to find pleasure in) if he gave her brain damage [Figure 33]. It is clear that he did do damage her hopes that the world outside, nature, the woods, might be safer than the inside of her house.

Lily has other less physical escapes from the house, or ways of getting “outside”. Her most common method is through reading, Lily is shown throughout the book reading alone on her bed. Books take her away from the other members of her family, and as shown earlier, her retreat to quiet spaces in the house often leaves her vulnerable to her father’s intrusion. But clearly, the relief she finds in her literary devices is worth the risk.
Figure 29. from Drechsler, *Daddy's Girl*, 45.
Figure 30. from Drechsler, *Daddy's Girl*, 70.
WE STARTED GETTING REAL PERSONAL.
YOU'RE KIND OF AN UPRIGHT CHICK, MICH?
NO, I'M NOT!
YOU STILL A VIRGIN?
NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS!
HA! THAT MEANS YOU ARE. I LIKE THAT. I LIKE IT HOT.

JUST WHEN I WAS THINKING I SHOULD LEAVE, HE PUSHED ME ONTO THE GROUND. I TRIED TO SAY "NO" BUT NOTHING WOULD COME OUT OF MY MOUTH.
I BET YOU'VE BEEN DREAMING ABOUT THIS, HUN?

WHILE HE UNZIPPED HIS PANTS, I JUST LAID THERE LIKE I WAS PARALYZED, EVEN THOUGH I WAS MORE SCARED THAN I'VE EVER BEEN.

BY THE TIME HE TOOK OFF MY UNDERPANTS, I COULDN'T FEEL ANYTHING ANYMORE. I KEPT WISHING SOMEONE WOULD COME AND SAVE ME, BUT WHO WAS GOING TO?
After he was done, he looked at me like I was dog shit on the bottom of his shoes.

C'mon, you cow. Get up before someone comes.

I couldn't seem to move at all.

If you don't get up, I'll kick the shit out of you, bitch.

Somehow, I got up. It's a good thing I did, because someone else was coming through the woods.

Hi, Edgar! Franny! Hey, are you ok?

Oh, she's just fine, aren't you, girl?
ONE NIGHT I TRIED TO WRITE A POEM ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED TO ME, BUT ALL THE WORDS KEPT COMING OUT ALL JUMBLED.

AFTER THAT, I TRIED WRITING ABOUT OTHER STUFF, LIKE I USED TO, BUT EVERYTHING I THOUGHT OF WAS TOO STUPID.

MAYBE THAT GUY GAVE ME BRAIN DAMAGE WHEN HE DID IT TO ME. I DON'T KNOW.

I HAD TO GIVE IT UP. THE POEMS WERE ALL GONE.

Figure 33. from Drechsler, Daddy's Girl, 78.
Lily also uses imagination and the sounds of distant radio stations in her attempt to remove herself from the reality of her life inside the house. [Figure 34]

The story “Friends in the Night” is the final strip in the book, and it consists of one page with four frames. Like several other of the stories, it features Lily lying alone in bed at night, thinking. This last story works with the first story “Visitors in the Night” to bracket everything in between. There are visitors and friends in Lily’s world, which come to her in the night. Sometimes the visitor is her cruel father, coming to secretly violate her while the rest of the family sleeps. Her other nightly companions consist of animated objects, like Mr. Owl Man, or ghostly figures of her imagination, hovering above her like guardian angels, comforting her, and helping her to fall asleep. In this last story, her friends take the form of voices from distant radio signals. The story is narrated in first person, present tense, with Lily describing one of her coping mechanisms. When she feels “so sad and lonely [she] could die” (and apparently these feeling are keeping her from sleeping) she turns to her transistor radio, searching for a far away station to listen to. The voices from other places take her out of her bed, out of the house, and into a different world. A world of sweet love songs and boys dedicating tracks to their brown eyeled girlfriends. This simple escape mechanism comforts Lily, she is shown resting her head on the radio and drifting off to sleep with a peaceful smile on her face, “pretending [she’s] there instead of here.”

As we can see in some of the other stories, when Lily is alone and troubled, her thoughts can lead her quickly into feelings of hopelessness and despair. In order to survive, to make it out of this trap called her childhood, alive, she needs to find ways to “rise above” as she puts it in the medicine cabinet scene. This can be read as a rising up
Sometimes, at night, I feel so sad and lonely I could die.

That's when I start turning the dial on my transistor radio...

Hellooo Detroit! This is the Turtles! With their number one hit Happy Together. Imagine, and tell me so! I think...

...and pretending I'm there instead of here.

...trying to find the very, farthest station I can pick up...

...and this one goes out from Jeff to Susan... his brown-eyed girl!
and out of her own body, her own bed, the present time and place. By utilizing the tools of imagination and projection, Lily creates a space for herself to exist, a space that is apart from the troubling reality of her family life inside the house. Since, as a child, she is still dependent on her family and the shelter of the house for her physical survival, imaginary escapes are more practical than physical ones.
My fifth and final section looks at the ways in which Lily both knows and doesn’t know the house. Children, and in particular abuse victims, tend to develop intricate knowledge of the subtler details of the houses they inhabit. They come to know a house that others may not have access to. When it becomes necessary to sneak and to hide, objects and movements, knowing the best hiding places, and which of the stairs creak becomes crucial. In one of the survivor narratives from *I Never Told Anyone*, the author describes her ritualized journey, as a child, from her bedroom to the kitchen where she takes a butcher knife from the drawer and hides it under her pillow, “I know every quick hiding place from bedroom to drawer, every hidden space,” she confesses.¹⁷ Yet despite this intimate knowing of the house, inconsistencies in the remembering and representation of the house also persist. The survivor’s view of the house is not a totalizing one, but instead is made up of fragments, details and moments.

In this section I also look at forgetting. Lily forgets what she knows about the house, that she is not to be alone when her father is home, and also, after relocating to a new house, she has a nostalgia for the her old house, and when she goes back to visit, is crushed by how much it has changed. [Figure 35] She wishes she had never seen it in its new state, so she could remember it the way it was. She has either forgotten the reality of “the way it was” or needs the house to remain the same, as a marker of what she endured within its walls. It is also possible that part of the trauma of the move is due to the

Star bright, star light, first star I see tonight, wish I may, wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight.

Would you go by my old house with me? And then the candy store, too? Yeah, but you're not going like it, are you? What do you mean, you'll see.

If I could've had one wish it would've been to move back to our old house.

When I went back to visit I was so happy. I got to stay with my best friend, for a long weekend.

It's called urban renewal, and it's supposed to be this great thing.

Man, it sucks. (Yeah.)

But everything had changed. Our house was a whole other color and the candy store was completely gone.

What I wish now is that I never came back so I could've always remembered how it used to be instead of how it is now.

Figure 35. from Drechsler, Daddy's Girl, 30.
unfamiliarity, or lack of intimate knowledge of the new house, and the resulting increase in danger at the loss of such a resource.

One of the things I noticed from other survivor narratives is the inconsistency in the descriptions of the space of the house. One author told a story of being awakened in the night by the sounds of her parents fighting. As she silently moves closer and closer to the scene, trying to know what's happening as the violence escalates; she describes a nearly impossible floor plan in which the bedroom opens directly into the living room, with no mediating hallway. 18 In Drechsler's work too, I notice a discrepancy in the way the girls' bedroom is depicted. In "Visitors in the Night" the door opens to the right and the bookcase is to the left. In "Too Late" the door opens to the left and the same bookcase is on the right. Maybe they are different rooms in different houses. Maybe Drechsler's story is not even autobiographical, and she is not attempting to describe a place from her memory. But the bookcase shows up in so many of the stories, and is remarkably consistent in its depiction. It seems to be a bookcase that Drechsler knows very well. The drawings on the front and back covers of the book contradict each other and conflict visually with drawings of rooms within the book. The cat on the back cover seems to be looking back at a very different door than the one the father is opening on the front cover, [Figure 36] yet they are clearly meant to be the same door. This suggests to me that the way a house is known, and in this case, drawn, has little to do with an overall accuracy, and everything to do with details. Drechsler's doors are always carefully rendered with recessed panels, wood grain and doorknob plates; which way they open is not important.

Figure 36. from Drechsler, *Daddy’s Girl*, front and back cover.
Secret hiding places also show up in many survivor narratives. In Drechsler’s story, Lily is not very successful at hiding herself. She tends to pick the most obvious places when she tries to be alone. But she knows something about hiding objects that aren’t to be seen [Figure 37]. In “The Big News” after finishing the family size bag of Cheetos in one sitting, she thinks of a place to hide the bag so that her mother won’t notice what she’s done. She has been bad, there is evidence of her crime, and she wants to conceal it. In the story “Marvin”, when her beloved dog is missing, she seems to know all of his hiding spots too [Figure 38].

In “Visitors in the Night” there is a depiction of the child secretly creeping, through the forbidden territory of the darkened house, the house at night, when everyone is asleep. [Figure 39] Following the oral rape scene in her bedroom, which I have analyzed in previous sections, Lily sneaks out of the bedroom and down the stairs to the kitchen for Mr. Owl Man’s cookies. She moves out the bedroom door, carefully checking behind her, and down the hall. As she moves down the stairs, and even as she climbs the chair to reach the cookie jar, she keeps a lookout over her shoulder in case anyone else is stirring in the night. Lily knows how to walk soundlessly—she knows which steps creak, and in this way is able to complete her mission undetected.

To walk soundlessly, to run softly is a great skill. One learned over time in a household where eggshells must continuously be walked upon without the even the slightest crinkle. In homes where violence is a daily threat, one learns the intricacies of one’s surroundings in exquisite detail. To know where to step, where not to step, which boards creak, to measure precisely, by sight, the distance between the frame and the door, before it has been opened, in order to place it back the same way, in order to move
Hey, Lily! Phooe-me... it's a boy!

Well... we can write every day, and visit on holidays...

... If our parents let us.

Oh, they have to... don't they?

On our last night of living here I was sneaking some Cheetos when my boyfriend called.

He wanted to say bye again, one more time. I just kept putting Cheetos in my mouth, one by one.

Geez, where can I hide this so mom doesn't find out I ate the whole bag?

We talked a long time and, somehow, those Cheetos were all gone when I got off the phone.

All night I kept wondering how I could eat all those Cheetos and still feel so empty inside.

Figure 37. from Drechsler, Daddy's Girl, 30.
AS SOON AS THERE WAS LIGHT OUTSIDE OF THE WINDOW, I WENT TO LOOK FOR MARVIN...

BUT I COULDN'T FIND HIM ANYWHERE.

PSSST! MARVIN! C'MON OUT! IT'S JUST ME, LILY!

MY MOM CAME DOWNSTAIRS TO START THE COFFEE.

MOMMY, WHERE'S MARVIN?

LILY, YOU'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO BE UP THIS EARLY!

BUT, MOM, WHERE'S MARVIN?

LILY, MARVIN HAD TO GO AWAY. HE ISN'T COMING BACK SO GET USED TO IT.

EVER? NEVER. DON'T CRY BECAUSE IT WON'T BRING HIM BACK.

BUT MOM...?

LILY, JUST FORGET IT. HE'S GONE!

Figure 38. from Drechsler, Daddy's Girl, 15.
Figure 39. from Drechsler, Daddy's Girl, 4.
through space undetected--these are the skills of the survivor of domestic violence. The knowledge acquired of the finest details of the home becomes another tool in the ongoing strategies of survival.
Concluding Remarks

This project has been and continues to be a challenge for me both on a personal and on an academic level. Of course, these are intricately connected. My own narrative persistently haunts my reading and writing. As I have worked on the project over the past year, it has worked on me also. It has pushed me to articulate an analysis, which has been built over a lifetime, about a very personal, and prevailing issue in my own life. I have been forced to harness my training in a professional architecture school to investigate the spatial aspects of the house in crisis.

My feminist influences return as I now look to philosopher Marilyn Frye who so elegantly explains, through a spatial metaphor, the ways in which oppression (of which child abuse is a part) operates on an individual over time:

Cages. Consider a birdcage. If you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires. If your conception of what is before you is determined by this myopic focus, you could look at that one wire, up and down the length of it, and be unable to see why a bird would not just fly around the wire any time it wanted to go somewhere. Furthermore, even if, one day at a time, you myopically inspected each wire, you still could not see why a bird would have trouble getting past the wires to get anywhere. There is no physical property of any one wire, nothing that the closest scrutiny could discover, that will reveal how a bird could be inhibited or harmed by it except in the most accidental way. It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage, that you can see why the bird does not go anywhere; and then you will see it in a moment. It will require no
great subtlety of mental powers. It is perfectly obvious that the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, no one of which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon.

It is now possible to grasp one of the reasons why oppression can be so hard to see and recognize: one can study the elements of an oppressive structure with great care and some good will, without seeing the structure as a whole, and hence without seeing or being able to understand that one is looking at a cage and that there are people there who are caged, whose motion and mobility are restricted, whose lives are shaped and reduced.¹⁹

Child sexual abuse is one of the wires in a cage. While clearly girls are not the only ones to suffer this kind of childhood treatment, and males are not the only perpetrators, it can still be viewed as a patriarchal system for it feeds and plays into systems of dominance and power-over others that are at the very foundation of a patriarchal society.

There is another way to look at Frye’s metaphor, as it relates to this project. When we look at Lily’s story, at the comic strips in Daddy’s Girl, we see a depiction of a childhood that is not always traumatic, that in some cases appears quite normal. While some of the events are quite horrific, if taken alone, none of them would sustain the kind of damage to a person that lasts a lifetime. But Daddy’s Girl as a work, demonstrates the systematic nature of abuse inside the institution of the family. The ways in which belief systems are instantiated through repetitive acts on the body and psyche of the victim during the most formative years of life are poignantly rendered in Drechler’s stories. A

foundation of confusion, guilt, neglect, violence, and betrayal of the most profound nature, lays the groundwork for a life of oppression and self-alienation.

The project is far from over for me. In fact, it feels like a beginning. I don’t believe I have exhausted Drechsler’s work with respect to these issues. There are other approaches I might choose to take, and other narratives and theoretical discourses to engage in the exploration of relationships we form with the quotidian architecture that surrounds us. The initial questions which drove this project are far from being answered. Questions like: what role does architecture play in narratives of family violence? Does it somehow contribute to abuse, or could it assist in preventing it? What is the meaning of the word “House” when its role as shelter has broken down due to the danger within? What is it about the domestic environment that allows the perpetuation of the myth of “Home Sweet Home” when, for so many children, the house is a terrifying place? It is clear to me that violence cannot be ‘designed out’ of architecture, yet architecture’s role in family abuse is still mysterious for me. There does not seem to be a straightforward answer to this puzzle.

My work has generated new questions: why does architecture figure so prominently in narratives of abuse such as Daddy’s Girl, and so many of the others I have encountered? Clearly the relationships that victims establish with the house are significant and memorable. Does domestic violence rely in some way on the structure of the house itself? While questions remain, I hope, if nothing else, that this work begins to deconstruct the mythology of the house, as an architecture of refuge and fond memories. For so many of us, the unraveling of this lie is a crucial step in breaking the ongoing silence of child sexual abuse within the family. It is also my hope that a theory of
architecture is glimpsed here too—a theory about the power of our relationships to the everyday spaces we inhabit, even if that revelation is unnamable, ephemeral, and fleeting.
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