

All In the Family
Eric Witte

(Intro Music: Ring around the rosy; a pocket full of posies; ashes, ashes; we all fall down.

Sherry: Welcome to the Parricide Podcast. I'm Sherry...

Marie: ...and I'm Marie. Welcome back from the winter break. Today we're going to...well, it's a pretty terrible story. Well, let's just get started.

Sherry: Okay. So first, here's a heads up. Our episodes contain adult themes and adult language, and these stories are not for kids. If you like what you hear, please follow our show, and share it with your friends.

Marie: Today's episode is called, It's a Family Affair - because this really gets the whole family involved.

Sherry: Absolutely does! This is the story of the Witte family.

Marie: Is it Witt or Vittuh?

Sherry: I don't know. Is it Witt or Vittuh or Witty or white?

Marie: I don't know. I think we should say 'Witt' because that's what I hear in my head when I see W-I-t-t-e.

Sherry: Okay. And to anyone who knows this family - if we're saying it incorrectly, we apologize. And for the rest of you - if you don't know this family, you'll have to fight us if you don't like it. (giggles)

Marie: (giggles)Okay.

Sherry: So, on September 1, 1981, the Porter County Indiana Police Department was called to a home for an accidental shooting. The police and EMTs encountered the saddest of situations; fifteen-year-old Eric Witte sobbing - telling them how he had found a gun and decided to ask his dad about it. He headed into the living room and tripped over - either a dog or a living room rug...

Marie: He couldn't tell the difference between a dog and a rug?

Sherry: Um. I'm not sure why that story goes back and forth. Apparently, the dad would train sled dogs and so...and by some reports it was a dog, by some reports it was a rug, and I couldn't really find any confirmation. Maybe it's because it wasn't true and maybe the story changed. I'm not sure.

Marie: Okay.

Sherry: Anyway - either a dog or the living room rug as he approached his dad, who was sleeping on the couch. The gun had accidentally fired; tragically hitting his father in the head.

Marie: That's quite a coincidence.

Sherry: Right. In the top of his head. And there was his dad - dead on the couch. Luckily his mom was just returning home when this happened and was able to call 9-1-1.

Paul Witte was not a stranger to the people of Beverly Shores, Indiana. By trade he was a tool-and-die maker, but he'd been a volunteer firefighter and all of the emergency responders knew Paul and his family.

Marie: Oh, that would be horrible to show up to, you know, an accidental shooting and to see your friend there on the couch.

Sherry: I think that would be very difficult; and really hard! Because they knew the family. They knew of how he'd struggled with his health in the past three months - and he was just inundated with waves of unexplained dizziness and headaches that often left him weak and feeling terrible.

Marie: Oh, that's terrible.

Sherry: I think so, too.

Marie: And suspicious.

Sherry: A little bit. Anyway, there was a brief investigation and the two witnesses who had been inside the home at the time of the shooting - Paul's other son and Eric's mother's mother (his grandmother) who lived with them - corroborated Eric's story. After several demonstrations of how this freak accident had taken the life of his father, the police reluctantly declared the shooting accidental.

Paul was cremated with a small ceremony, and Eric went back home to live with his mother, Hilma Marie, and his 11-year-old brother, John David - everyone called him Butch. Friendly eyes were watching this family, and everyone was giving them the benefit of the doubt despite neighbors whispering that this was no accident. In Season 6 Episode 15 of *Deadly Women* - even Paul's half-sister, Regina, says she knew it was him when she heard of the shooting but didn't yet know who the victim was. She said, "I just knew."

Marie: Wait. So, she heard that there was a shooting in that town, and it was her brother?

Sherry: Yes.

Marie: Oh.

Sherry: Yeah.

Marie: So, she suspected something was wrong in this family.

Sherry: I think that everyone suspected something was wrong in this family. This was a fairly...odd family.

Marie: Ohhh.

Sherry: But with Paul dead, Hilma Marie (the mom) quickly found herself destitute. Money didn't really spread as far as she'd thought it would. Eric and Butch were fairly close, but court documents indicate the family was having problems with drug and alcohol abuse. And here's a spoiler - Marie's defense team will say that after Paul's shooting both boys started having problems with drinking, doing drugs, skipping school, and stealing - but in an evidentiary hearing the Defense Attorney claims that Butch, at age 11, was already struggling with alcohol and drug abuse; and had a history of emotional problems

that would cast doubt on his ability to be an accurate narrator for trial. We'll let you draw your own conclusions after you've heard everything.

Marie: This is already one of the most interesting families so far.

Sherry: It just keeps on getting there! So, Paul had a stepmother (the dead dad?), and her name was Elaine B. Witte.

Marie: Oh, were they close?

Sherry: She was very close with Paul in fact she was so fond of him and his family that she had been grandma to the boys their entire lives. She opened up her Trail Creek, Indiana home to them in 1982 when their home burned down.

Marie: Wait. Their home burned down after Dad died?

Sherry: Yes. Imagine what bad luck they were having.

Marie: What year was this?

Sherry: 1982.

Marie: Huh.

Sherry: So, a year after.

Marie: Okay. I mean houses don't burn down that often. And that just seems kind of strange. Was it arson?

Sherry: Like a whole bunch of bad luck.

Marie: Nah. I don't believe in bad luck when it comes to these families.

Sherry: (laughter) Well, I don't know if it was arson or not. I could not find the records on that. I think that's something that should have been looked into more closely after everything unfolds. You'll have to tell me what you think.

Anyway, Elaine and Hilma Marie got along wonderfully. They liked to share drinks and a smoke and visit on the back porch. But Elaine realized there was something missing - specifically her life savings of \$16,000 and several of her Social Security checks.

Marie: Oh dear.

Sherry: She started to suspect Hilma Marie was behind these thefts. She was in the beginning stages of figuring out the details of the thefts in January of 1984 - and she made a point of telling Hilma Marie that whoever had taken her money was going to find herself in jail. And the next thing you know, Elaine was suddenly just...gone.

Marie: Okay. This is starting to get out of control shady.

Sherry: Well, it's not even shady yet. All you have is a man who died by accident, and a grandma who (at 73 years old) disappeared.

Marie: And a house that mysteriously burns down.

Sherry: Right.

Marie: Oh, and missing money.

Sherry: Okay.

Marie: A few things.

Sherry: Okay. (laughter) We'll call it. At this point, Hilma Marie and Butch were still living at Elaine's. They kept saying Elaine was visiting friends out of town, but Elaine's friends and family insisted this was not the case. The Investigating Officer assigned to Paul's shooting case remembered Hilma Marie from the 1981 shooting. To him, Paul's death had always felt a little bit shady; but there was nothing they could do about it as Hilma Marie and her boys insisted that the shooting was accidental.

Marie: Where was Eric?

Sherry: Oh, he'd suddenly joined the Navy and left town. He was in California in Boot Camp.

Marie: Okay. I mean, that's not *not* suspicious.

Sherry: Well, Eric was the one who had shot his dad, remember?

Marie: Yeah. And now he's suddenly left town.

Sherry: I don't know, I think I would have suspected Eric, myself, and gone, "Oh! He wasn't there, so maybe it's okay."

Marie: Hmm. Okay.

Sherry: You're just too suspicious.

Marie: I'm becoming more and more suspicious every day.

Sherry: (laughter) The investigator was convinced that something was amiss. And that Elaine's disappearance was most likely a bad sign. But Hilma Marie and Butch were largely uncooperative, and the case started to go cold. In a last-ditch effort to jumpstart a dying case, the Investigator visited Elaine's house one more time in the Autumn of 1984, and again encountered a lot of resistance from Hilma Marie. As he left, he angrily told her, "This isn't over. No matter what, we always get our man!"

Marie: (chuckles) Is it always a man, though? Dun dun dun.

Sherry: (chuckles) Angry - and possibly a bit frightened - Hilma Marie had *had* it. She told Elaine's neighbors she was fed up with everyone and everything. She was tired of Indiana and was dreading the upcoming winter that was already upon them. Her son, Eric, was stationed in California and she decided to move to Chula Vista and try her luck.

Eric mysteriously reappeared with a friend, Douglas Minkle, in tow. Eric and Douglas helped the family pack up the house and they all headed out to California, leaving Elaine's house empty.

Marie: So, this was what year?

Sherry: This was in September of 1984.

Marie: Okay. So, how many years is that after the dad's accident?

Sherry: The dad died in September of 1981.

Marie: Okay. So, in three years Dad has died, their house has burned down, Grandma has gone missing, and they've all moved to California?

Sherry: Right. A lot of change.

Marie: That's a lot!

Sherry: Um-hmm.

Marie: I think it's pretty clear, at this point, that Hilma Marie was looking for money - at least with grandma. Like, something happened with money. She wanted grandma's money. Grandma is missing; probably dead. And they're just going to move to California.

Sherry: Yeah. But Marie was still counting on that money that she was stealing from what was now Elaine's estate to fund her life. Grandma's missing but – spoiler - Grandma's dead. Hilma Marie's move to California was a bit hare-brained, because Elaine's checks were still going to her home in Indiana. Easy peasy. Hilma Marie was pretty sure she could fix that.

On November 14, 1984, she was either in the bank trying to cash Elaine's most recent check - or she was at the Social Security office trying to get Elaine's future checks mailed to her new home in California - when an employee realized something was very wrong. They called the police, and Marie and Butch were picked up and taken in for questioning. The California police were unaware that Elaine had been reported missing when they took the family to the police station to see if they could figure out what had happened to Elaine. It was her Social Security check, and she should have been the one cashing it. Approximately one hour into his interrogation, Butch suddenly blurted out that he'd actually killed his grandmother with a crossbow on January 8th of that year.

Marie: Ugh! With a crossbow?!?!

Sherry: Yeah.

Marie: Why??

Sherry: Because he'd been told to; if you want the short answer.

Marie: I guess. I guess there's not a good answer to why. That's awful!

Sherry: He was shaken and crying as he told the police he just wanted to get everything off of his chest. Remember he's barely 15 years old now.

Marie: That is horrible.

Sherry: He couldn't sleep, and he was wracked with guilt. That wasn't something that he'd wanted to do. The officers were stunned! They quickly contacted Indiana to learn that, indeed, his Grandmother Elaine had been listed as missing.

Marie: Well because they just thought it was a simple, like, Social Security fraud case.

Sherry: Right.

Marie: And they have this 15-year-old being, like, 'Oh yeah. Well, it's a little more complicated. I actually shot my grandmother with a crossbow.'

Sherry: Right. They really stepped in it. Butch told them his mom had insisted he kill his grandmother. She told him it was imperative. He had no choice but to kill her, but he could choose the method of murder. This is a quote, "My mom said I could strangle her or use my crossbow - it was up to me."

Marie: Oh, so, just two of the worst options.

Sherry: Yeah. Well Marie had told Butch that Elaine was 'tired of us living here and going to kick us out on the street; and we might as well do her in.'

Marie: Yes. That's everyone's reaction to that situation.

Sherry: Yeah. And then Butch said something that stopped all of the investigators in their tracks.

Marie: I'm pretty sure they were already frozen.

Sherry: Yeah. Confessing to the Investigators had been very cathartic for him and he hadn't felt safe for years - and he hated that he was a murderer. He'd already told them he was a killer, but he was also carrying guilt for a huge secret he'd been forced to carry all those years. Butch told them he had watched his brother, Eric, aim a .38 caliber gun at their sleeping father and shoot him in the head. Here's what he said to the investigators, "I turned around and I saw this...flare in...you know, coming out of the gun. And I saw my dad's leg move straight up and, a kind of, gasping for air noise coming out."

Marie: Ugh. That's awful.

Sherry: Umm-hmm. And this is when all of the missing pieces started to fit in a macabre and ugly puzzle.

(musical break)

Sherry: Hilma Marie Witte - she went by Marie - was an unhappy woman with a disagreeable temperament. Not a lot is known about Marie's childhood, but the Vidette-Messenger reported that she had a rather turbulent childhood. Margaret, her mother who went by Marcy (but we're going to continue calling her Margaret, because that's how she's referred to in court and in the media.)

Marie: And because Marcie/Marie – it's too much to keep straight

Sherry: It absolutely is. But she lost custody of Marie - and her sister - when Marie was six years old.

Marie: Oh, no! What happened? Do we know?

Sherry: We don't have any record of what happened. But we do know that Margaret had a history of instability and visits to mental hospitals.

Marie: Oh, that's sad.

Sherry: So, not sure what – but...

Marie: That's a pretty traumatic thing for a six-year-old.

Sherry: Right. The girls lived in a group home for a period of time and then they were sent to live with their dad in Pennsylvania.

Marie: Oh. Wow!

Sherry: I'm not sure when, or how, but the girls ended up back with their mother. In a nudist colony based in Delray, Florida.

Marie: Wow, that had to be an adjustment.

Sherry: It was so surprising to me that some court somewhere was willing to send Marie and her sister away from their father in Pennsylvania and back to their mother in a nudist colony.

Marie: Yeah, that's not really a traditional household.

Sherry: No, it's not. But this is where Marie was to spend her teen years. Her mother admitted this was all true; saying her husband had decided he wanted to live in a nudist colony, so she went with him - with her girls in tow - to keep the family together.

Marie: Which kind of doesn't make sense; because they hadn't been together.

Sherry: Right. And where in the world was their father when the girls were moved down to a nudist colony? He'd been caring for them. He was connected.

Marie: Yeah. It's kind of weird that we don't have any information about where their dad went.

Sherry: Right. But no one really says, and no one says what happened there - so that's all we know. But, predictably, an older man in the colony took a liking to Marie and they married in a nude wedding ceremony - where guests were apparently charged admission to attend, and photos were taken to feature in a popular nudist magazine.

Marie: Oh, that doesn't sound exploitative.

Sherry: Not at all. That marriage was short-lived. But while she was still 16, Marie married yet another man from the same nudist colony - his name was Paul Witte.

Marie: Oh, wow. So, that was her permanent marriage - was when she was 16.

Sherry: Right. In a nudist colony.

Marie: It's an odd beginning.

Sherry: I was very surprised.

Marie: Yeah.

Sherry: So, on December 19, 1964 - when she was 16 and Paul was 26 - they were married.

Marie: That is quite the age gap; when she's only 16.

Sherry: It certainly is.

Marie: I wonder how nobody got arrested in this situation. I mean she was underage.

Sherry: She was quite young, and he was really quite old. I don't know. I don't know if it's just because it was the 60s - so no one thought about statutory rape. Or because her mother was there and involved; if that counts as consent.

Marie: Yeah. Maybe there was some, like, Parental Permission law in Florida at that time. Because, I mean, she got married twice when she was 16!

Sherry: Right, right. It's just beyond comprehension. Anyway, they had two children together. Eric was born in 1966 - two years later - and then John was born three years after that. Eric has happy memories of his childhood. He says he was close to his father and to his mother. They enjoyed spending time together - he and his dad - and his dad took delight in sharing his favorite activities like hunting and fishing with him and his brother.

Marie: Were these boys raised in the nudist colony when they were young?

Sherry: No. I'm not sure when they moved, but they seemed to go from this nudist colony to a very traditional neighborhood in Indiana - without any information about the family in between.

Marie: Huh. Maybe that's where his family was from, but that's - that's a long-distance move.

Sherry: Mm-hmm. I think that his family was from Indiana - because that's where Step-Grandmother is later in the story. And we know Marie has some roots in Indiana and in Florida and in Pennsylvania.

Marie: Okay, so Indiana kind of made sense for them

Sherry: Um-hmm. So, Paul and Marie were pretty old-school when it came to family life. Marie was to take care of the children and make dinner and Paul was to earn the household income and discipline the children. He strongly believed that sparing the rod would spoil the child. When Eric and John misbehaved - if they lied, got bad grades, or forged notes from school (for example) they could expect a swat on the behind. Sometimes with a belt and sometimes with a hand.

Marie: Ouch! I think it's so strange that we just all thought it was normal to get hit with a belt.

Sherry: When I was little it was normal.

Marie: I mean it was normal when I was little, too. But I can't imagine doing that now.

Sherry: No, I can't either. But it was normal when we were young. Both boys knew that backtalk would result in a back-handed slap across the face.

Marie: Now that seems a little out of place. It doesn't seem quite as much like discipline.

Sherry: Right. Because, if you think about it, a smack on the face with the front of your hand is very different than a back-handed slap.

Marie: Yeah, and kind of just - in the moment - it just feels kind of like he's just popping them because he doesn't like what they said.

Sherry: Which is probably what was happening. So, Marie was never the disciplinarian. She left all of that to Paul. She would circle back after the spankings to comfort the child and encourage him to do

better next time. This was how you raised kids who towed the line and acted responsibly - according to Paul and probably the majority of the parents who were rearing children in the 60s and 70s.

Marie: Well, I know that physical discipline was more normal in this time; but it still had to hurt.

Sherry: Well, that's my memory of it. It did hurt! (laughter)

Marie: Yeah, it did. (laughter)

Sherry: Yeah. But as Eric put it in his documentary:

Eric (recording): He was a very large powerful person. A back-hand from him; that's not a love tap - not from him."

Marie: Well, that makes it sound really scary. But, then again, as a child - you see your parents as larger than life sometimes. And they're certainly a lot larger than you because you aren't grown, yet. He was only 15 when he killed his dad. So, was Paul really that large? Or was he just that large to a teenager?

Sherry: I think he was actually not that large. It's not like he was lifting weights. He was a mill-and-dye guy. And he had two jobs. He was also a volunteer fireman. So, we know that he was strong; but it's not like he was huge...powerful. We'll leave a photo of him at parricide.org and you all can check it out and decide for yourselves.

But Eric also admits that he felt his dad was his best friend. He felt close to him and loved by him. When Eric was young, he was taught to be loyal to his family - and he was - but something was changing. And even today as you listen to Eric describe what happened, you can see how Marie worked to alienate him from his father. But I'm not sure Eric understands it - even today.

Marie: Well, how could he not understand it at this point?

Sherry: Well, he was a kid. And he wasn't aware of everything going on behind the scenes. To this day he doesn't seem to be fully aware of how his mother would eventually turn him against his father, and groom him to eventually murder him. But it appears to be what happened. During his interview with ID Discovery, Eric says something that clearly indicates he was a victim of Parental Alienation.

Marie: What did he say?

Sherry: He said:

Eric (recording): The reason for helping my mother. I was always taught to believe that you're supposed to, uh, protect, defend, support your family against anybody and anything. And if my definition of family seems a little strange because it somehow excluded my father, it excluded him because he became the threat.

Sherry: Notice that. He became the threat; not he was the threat.

Marie: Okay. So maybe, on some level, he kind of gets that his father wasn't really a threat to him.

Sherry: But he does know that he *became* a threat.

Marie: Yeah. That makes sense.

Sherry: Sadly. But kids who grow into adults do have tricky memories and they often remember things from a unique perspective; not even realizing it. If you don't believe me, go visit the elementary school you attended and try to use the restrooms. It's a shock to realize the bathroom stalls are tiny and short and the toilets and sinks are super close to the ground. Most adults don't realize elementary bathrooms are scaled to children until they revisit one of those bathrooms as an adult.

Marie: That's a funny example. I feel like I kind of had the same experience - going back to a school and going, 'Why are these bathrooms so tiny?' But you're right, at the time you're using the bathroom different places and you don't see the difference because it's the right fit for you.

Sherry: You're right. And sometimes what kids remember is skewed based on the lies or manipulations foisted upon them by the adults in their lives - not just the facts of the differences. Parents who engage in parental alienation are usually aware of this. And I'm convinced that that is exactly what Marie did.

(musical interlude)

Sherry: In truth, Marie was tired of being married to Paul and simply wanted him gone. She decided he had to die because, when he was gone, she would get his insurance money and be free to do whatever she wanted. She had literally run the numbers and realized a divorce would not leave her with the amount of money that she wanted.

Marie: That's cold.

Sherry: Uh-huh. Not wanting to get caught in her plot to rid herself of Paul, she started making plans. One night, Eric was being spanked (or beaten - we aren't really sure, but most evidence indicates it was most likely spanked to be fair) for lying and forging his parents' signature on a school note. Marie showed up, as usual, to comfort him.

Marie: So, after looking at all of it, do you think the dad wasn't really abusive?

Sherry: I'm not sure, to be honest. It sounds like everything physical was tied to discipline and even Marie said that at trial. And some people will say that the boys were spanked and slapped -- the end -- that was it. Which, in the context of the 60s and the 70s, would not be considered abusive by the standards of the time. And yet another source - an ex-classmate - claimed Eric was physically abused, but then goes on to discuss the abuse present in *their* home; with no details or facts about the Witte household. Eric, himself, claims he was egregiously abused - several years after the murders. But a lot of his interview indicates that may or may not have been the actual case. In the show, *She Made Me Do It*, Eric claimed his mother had to take him to the hospital after some of what he called beatings. But there were never any records located indicating these claims were based in fact. And remember there was a trial; so, there would have been a search for records. Was he spanked as a form of discipline? Definitely yes. Was he severely beaten as he claimed after the fact? That much is unclear. There is a general lack of evidence as to the magnitude of physical punishment that went on in the Witte household, so we may never know.

Marie: So, as far as research - would we count this case as an abuse case?

Sherry: Absolutely yes! Because the court used physical abuse as one of the mitigating factors in the case. We operationalized Confirmed or Substantiated Abuse as abuse that was confirmed by the courts

or DFS. But, that said, the fact patterns and subsequent convictions indicate that these murders would have happened *regardless* of whether there was physical abuse by their dad in the home - because all of the evidence points directly to the psychological abuse and, really, torture that was heaped upon these boys by their mother. But, that said, the fact patterns and subsequent convictions indicate that these murders would have happened regardless of whether their father was physically abusing them because all of the evidence points directly to the psychological abuse and really torture heaped upon these boys by their mother.

This case (and, really, the Dutton case we presented in Episode 8) illustrate how physical abuse can be present in the home but not the motivation for the murders.

Marie: I think that's really interesting; because even in cases where abuse - like the Dutton case - the abuse was so egregious no one would have blamed them for feeling like murder was the only way out.

Sherry: But they never would have murdered their father if he hadn't messed with Sissy.

Marie: Exactly. So, despite this horrible abuse that you would think was the motivation; the true motivation wasn't even the abuse, even though it was there.

Sherry: Right. Murder wasn't in those kids' makeup.

Marie: Um-hmm.

Sherry: At all. The only reason that happened was because the father had set a firm rule and the boys followed what their father said.

Marie: It's true.

Sherry: So, 15% of the cases in 754 Youthful Parricide cases included in our research involved instances of child abuse. And, like I said, not all of the murders are a direct result of that abuse.

Marie: It's just so complicated. I think what's been most surprising from this research is how complicated it is to say why people kill their parents.

Sherry: Oh, absolutely. I think that we do everyone in injustice when we go, 'Oh, they must have abused their children.' It isn't fair to the parents. It isn't fair to the surviving family. And it isn't fair to the kids when you go to treat them.

Marie: Yeah. How are you supposed to rehabilitate someone based on false assumptions?

Sherry: Exactly.

Marie: So, back to this story. How did Marie get started on getting her son, kind of, on her side and against his father?

Sherry: Well, as she would comfort Eric after he'd been disciplined (and remember the point of discipline is a point that's usually humiliating for a kid if they've been spanked).

Marie: Yeah.

Sherry: So, she would come around to comfort him - and she started whispering about how they would be better off without his dad. This is what Eric remembers.

Marie: Okay.

Sherry: This was a departure from what she usually said to Eric. And he says he noticed that. Private talks about getting rid of his dad quickly shifted to how Paul really just needed to die. As Eric remembers it, his mother started telling him he was the only person who could make this happen. He was going to have to kill Paul. When Eric was mad at Paul, he would think about that a lot. But Eric still loved his dad and even *liked* him. Marie spent considerable amounts of effort working to destroy that bond between Paul and Eric as she engaged Eric in brainstorming sessions in which they imagined different ways for Eric to kill him - and talked about why they would be happier and better off without him. Like every predator parent, Marie begins to draw lines; pushing Paul over to the other side while holding Eric firmly on her side. At some point Marie let Eric in on a secret. She and Grandma Margaret were feeding Paul a mix of rat poison, arsenic, and Valium hoping to kill him.

Marie: Wow! She'd already gotten Grandma in on this crime?

Sherry: Yes. Margaret was actually living with them at this point and she and Margaret were both in on mixing different types of potions trying to kill Paul.

Marie: That's crazy.

Sherry: Yeah. I think it's way crazy. And to bring a child in on that - his child - seems cruel.

Marie: She already had someone to try and help her kill her husband. Why did she have to bring Eric into it?

Sherry: Eric has some ideas on that, but I don't think we're going to get into it.

Marie: Yeah.

Sherry: But his interview with Discovery ID implies that Eric was not aware that Grandma Margaret was actually involved in the murder plot - and was actually supplying some of the drugs and chemicals used to lace Paul's food. He thought it was just him and his mom.

Marie: Oh, okay.

Sherry: So, Eric - aware that his mom had trusted him with this monumental secret - started watching Paul. He was noting how the poison would make him sick; but he didn't die. He just got very sick, and that just made Marie's life even harder.

In the meantime, Marie had convinced Paul to take out a loan to buy new furniture for the house. But she spent the money on something else and was trying to hide that fact from Paul (who was getting increasingly upset when the furniture never got delivered).

Marie: That's hard to explain.

Sherry: Umm-hmm. And eventually her back was up against the wall, and she agonized over the best way to get Paul killed with the least chance of getting caught. According to the Associated Press News Marie's mother, Margaret, later recounted a discussion she and Marie had regarding this very topic. This is the quote that Margaret gave to the courts: "Something to the effect that Butch (age 11) was younger

and it wouldn't be as hard on him to kill his father and that Eric (at age 14) being older, would have more nerve than Butch. Along those lines.”

Marie: That's quite the conversation to be having about your, respectively, grandsons and sons.

Sherry: Yeah. I just find it so disgusting. Ultimately, Marie decided that Eric would be the hitman on this. Eric had just turned 15 years old which was perfect. 15-year-old killers go to juvie and get out when they're 18, right?

Marie: (laughter) I hope you all are laughing. And if you're not, go back and listen to Episode 10: No Men, No Tights we talk about Derek Clause - who was 15 years old when he killed his mother in 1993. He is now 44 years old and still serving time. Fifteen is not a get out of jail free card.

Sherry: No, not anymore.

Marie quit sprinkling poison and Valium in his food once she'd made the decision. And she started pushing hard for Eric to kill his father. She told him he could shoot him, or he could beat him to death with the hammer.

Marie: Again, with the horrible choices!

Sherry: Right. But she was telling him he could choose and there's a reasoning for this. In Marie's mind, if she's telling the kids, 'You can plan the murder. You can shoot him, or you can hit him with a hammer.' Then she can go to court and say, 'I wasn't involved in the planning.' Second Degree versus First Degree.

Marie: People are so funny! They think that a technicality like that means they weren't involved.

Sherry: Well, she tried really hard to get this to work. She pulls a couple of things that indicates she was thinking about this the entire time.

Marie: What a horrible choice, though!

Sherry: What a horrible choice for a child to be making.

Marie: Umm-hmm.

Sherry: But it was clear to Eric that Marie wanted him to both plan - and then orchestrate - the murder. And he - to this day - doesn't understand why that was so important to her (like we just talked about).

But Eric didn't really want to kill his dad. In retelling the story, Eric claims he eventually hides behind a door - gun in hand - waiting for his dad to get home so he can shoot him. When his dad gets home, not only does he not notice nor acknowledge Eric, he heads for the couch to take a nap. Eric says his mother discussed this failure with him; encouraging him to try again in the near future.

Marie: I mean, if he really wanted to shoot him, it didn't matter if his dad didn't see him. Right? I think this anecdote really shows that his heart was not in it.

Sherry: I agree.

Marie: And then it's really interesting, because his mom is like, 'Oh, it's okay! Get back on that horse.'

Sherry: 'It's a failure.' It's a failure to not kill your dad. How messed up is that!?

Marie: Yeah. This kid's scarred for life.

Sherry: Well, I'm not sure if she just said this to scare him - or if she truly believed it - but she told Eric his father was planning to divorce her. Because she wasn't the employed parent, she claimed Paul would put her and the kids out on the street and he would have to beg for money for food and shelter. She really freaked Eric out by telling him this. Again, doing her best to alienate Eric from his father.

Marie: That's a really scary thought for a 15-year-old boy.

Sherry: Um-hmm. She really did draw a lot of lines and push Paul over to the other side.

Marie: And when you're a kid, you don't always go, 'Oh, you know, is this a story that makes sense? Or is this a story that is coming from a place of self-interest and doesn't make sense.'

Sherry: No. Kids totally believe that that's possible. They don't understand that the courts are going to protect their interests.

Marie: Um-hmm.

Sherry: But on September 1, 1981, Marie decided it was the day Paul was to die - because of the furniture. She demanded Eric kill him.

Marie: Was that the day it was supposed to be delivered?

Sherry: It was supposed to be delivered the next day. And the dad was really angry because he kept getting this story, 'Oh, it will be delivered. Oh, It was delayed. Oh, it will be delivered.' And he was saying, 'This is it.'

Marie: She didn't want him to call the furniture company and find out she'd never ordered it?

Sherry: Probably that she'd spent that money elsewhere.

Marie: Oh. (sigh) I wonder what she did with it. It's just insane.

Sherry: I don't know! I don't want to know.

Marie: Yeah.

Sherry: Anyway, Eric refused; saying he didn't think he could do it.

Marie: Which is a reasonable response.

Sherry: Well, he'd already tried to shoot him once he knew what that felt like already.

Marie: Yeah.

Sherry: Well, Marie threw a fit and threatened to kill herself if he continued to refuse to kill his dad. She wanted him to have an ultimatum - her or dad. Choose.

Marie: That's sad.

Sherry: Right. And in the face of her threatening suicide Eric still refused, saying he didn't think he could do it. Well, Marie at this point - according to Eric - was hysterical. Screaming, crying, pushing every button she could think of with him emotionally. And then all of a sudden, she calmed down and said she was leaving. She said she wouldn't come back until Eric had killed Paul.

She called the home a few hours later and was furious that Paul was still alive. Eric told her he just couldn't do it. He loved his dad. He felt completely loyal to Marie - but he didn't want to kill his dad. Marie told him she would be home in about 15 minutes, and if Paul wasn't dead, she was out of there for good. The boys could just live with their dad, and they would no longer have a mother. The boys were young, emotionally abused, manipulated, and in a panic. They didn't think about the fact that their grandma, who was puttering around the house making dinner, was their mom's mother. Marie wasn't going anywhere. In truth, she'd been out shopping.

Marie: That's horrible! That's like the worst kind of emotional blackmail! Like - choose between me or having to both lose your father and become a murderer.

Sherry: Yeah. And while she's out shopping and having a good time, her sons are at home in anguish and under great duress.

Marie: It's horrible! But I guess he did it, right?

Sherry: Well, he took his gun and reluctantly approached his father who was asleep on the living room couch again. He saw the lights of his mother's car as she turned into the driveway and was panicked. He knew she would be firm with her ultimatum. He chose his mom. He shot his sleeping father as his 11-year-old brother watched.

Marie: Ah. So, both of them get to be traumatized.

Sherry: Yes. Hearing the gunshot from outside, Marie jubilantly entered the home proclaiming, "You did it!" She took the gun from him, checked Paul's pulse to make sure he was dead, and then got right down to business. She called the police, she provided the boys and her mother with a story to cover the murder, and she kept repeating what they were to tell the police as she prepared the scene of the accident. Marie promised her mother that if this secret was not taken to her grave, Marie would personally kill her, too.

Marie: Wow! What a sweetheart!

Sherry: And her mother took her seriously. She was kind of a scary lady.

Marie: Yeah. Even her reactions are kind of scary. Even the people who ask for a hit, usually are somewhat upset when they come home and see the reality of it.

Sherry: That's very true. But as she was preparing for the police to show up, Marie promised Eric that if he would just stick to the story, there was nothing they could put on her.

Marie: You mean him.

Sherry: Nope. Her. That wasn't an error. She also mentioned that - worst case scenario - Eric would only have to go to juvie until he turned 18 - and he was stunned! She'd never said anything about him going to juvie for this before.

Marie: Of course, she wasn't! He was already reluctant.

Sherry: Right. But he was willing to pay that price, if it came to that, he said. The Parental Alienator had successfully completed her mission.

After the investigators declared the shooting accidental and left, Marie told Eric how proud she was of him. Here, we have the quote from what he says about that moment:

Eric (recording): I didn't really get the sense that she was proud because I had killed him. But later on that evening, when the police finally had to say, 'That looks like this was an accident.' Then she was proud of me. I had stuck with the plan.

Marie: So, her pride didn't come until she was sure that she was safe.

Sherry: Um-hmm. Eric didn't feel pride. Neither did he feel grief, nor guilt, nor happiness. He was numb - and relieved that his mother's pressure was finally off of him. "What I needed to do had been done." he said. Now they could all move forward to that bright and happy future. But that wasn't to be according to Eric - and again this is a quote - "Killing Dad should have been the turning point of 'we're going to have a bright and happy future after this. The problem is she wouldn't - couldn't - settle into just having a nice life.'" Marie collected \$25,000 in life insurance after Paul's death in 2022 dollars, this money is equivalent to \$76,443. Seventy-six thousand, four hundred and forty-three dollars. That is what she had Paul murdered for - the insurance and everything she had wanted from a divorce.

Marie: Except for new furniture, right?

Sherry: Right. She did not get new furniture. When that money ran out, the house suddenly burned down, and Elaine Witte generously opened her home to them.

Marie: Hmm. I'm still suspicious of that house burning down.

Sherry: I will always be suspicious of that house burning down. But I could not find records to see what happened.

Marie: Yeah.

Sherry: Anyway seventy-one (or two) year-old Elaine Witte was beside herself with grief when her stepson, Paul, died. She may not have been Paul's biological mother, but she loved him like her own son and wanted to make sure she did right by his family. When Marie asked if she and the boys could move in with her, Elaine enthusiastically agreed to the arrangement. Marie and Elaine appeared to get along famously. They smoked the same brand of cigarettes, they enjoyed drinking Tom Collins together, they liked to sit around together and just chat. And so, they had some really nice nights together. Elaine was always willing to give Marie anything she wanted - and what she wanted was money. Elaine co-signed loans, loaned her cash, and gave her access to her banking accounts.

Marie: That's a lot of trust.

Sherry: Yes, it really is. Elaine would sometimes refer to her as her daughter - the daughter she never had. They never even had disagreements. But Elaine started to realize that Marie had slowly been stealing money from her bank account - stealing \$16,000 from her bank account (which is about \$41,000 in today's dollars) and had also stolen and forged a couple of her social security checks - and that wasn't

okay with her. What she didn't know was that Marie also had plans to cash her monthly Railroad Pension checks of \$102/month and her Social Security checks of \$288/month after she had murdered her.

Marie's quest to acquire money was insatiable and Elaine wasn't having it. She started to refuse to pay bills; telling Marie to use the money she'd stolen.

Marie: Oh dear.

Sherry: Right. And Eric noticed his mother was now adding poison, Valium, arsenic - whatever they had on hand - to Elaine's food and drinks.

Marie: She's got kind of a strong M.O., doesn't she?

Sherry: Definitely. I just can't believe she's only committed two murders. But.

Marie: It does, kind of, seem like she's a little bit more experienced and confident than you should be on your first - and now second - murder.

Sherry: I agree. Well, Marie knew one thing, for sure. She wasn't going to jail. She really needed Elaine to be dead. Much like most Red Collar Criminals, she was very worried about being called out for stealing Elaine's money. Again, she had resorted to poison and, again, she failed. I'm sure Elaine became very ill Marie was keeping Elaine on the edge of alive because she had no intention of being the one who killed her. That was for Butch to do.

Marie: No! Not another murder!

Sherry: I know. But we'll have to cover that in Part 2 of this Episode - because we're out of time today.

Marie: Okay. That's fair.

Sherry: So, we'd like to give many, many thanks to Investigation Discovery for the sound bites from their show, She Made Me Do It. It's in their Evil Lives Here series, and it's well worth the listen if you have an interest. It's a 40-minute interview with Eric Witte.

And we'd like to send a million thanks to Charlie, Lisa B., and Carolyn for their generous support on Patreon. Without your support this podcast wouldn't exist.

Marie: If you haven't yet, head on over to Patreon and check out Parricide Podcast. Each patron tier carries with it a small token of our thanks. We'd also like to thank our sources Horrorhistory.net, the AP News, The Times, My Life of Crime, Justia, the Sun Sentinel, Transunion, the Madison Courier, Deadly Women, hermitjim blogspot, Vidette-Messenger, the Muncie Star, the South Bend Tribune, Evansville Courier and Press, The Call Leader, Murderpedia, History.com, and My Life of Crime.

Sherry: And, of course, all thanks to Jade Brown for the music!

Marie: We'll see you next week for Part 2 of this episode.

Sherry: This has been the Parricide Podcast.

Marie: Good night and remember - always sleep with one eye open.

(Outro Music: ashes, ashes we all fall down)