



When a popular attorney/male model is arrested for killing his ex-wife, a graduate journalist student decides to address the question of whether it was murder or suicide, in an extremely personal way. She asks people closely connected to the case to contribute a written reaction to various aspects of the trial.

Project

by Beth Button

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PROJECT

Beth Button

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Introduction

On Friday night, September 19, 1997, Natasha Emily Hillshaw was found dead. Her ex-husband, Jacob Charles Grazen, now faces the death penalty, after being convicted of murdering her. Her body was found at his house, they had argued earlier that day, and domestic violence had dominated their marriage. However, to many of the people who have been following this case, it is not an open and shut one.

There are many suspicions and questions about what happened that night and what led up to it. Was the correct decision made by the jury in this trial? The victim had suffered from depression for years. Jake Grazen had been in therapy since the divorce and was diagnosed as not being a threat to anyone. Suicide is therefore the actual cause, some believe. In which case, an innocent man is going to die for a crime he did not commit.

I'm a third-year graduate student, in Journalism, at Arizona State University West. Last spring, I chose the topic of abusive relationships for my next project. I turned my attention to the Grazen trial, because I recognized it as an important opportunity. By interviewing people in the midst of their experiences, I could bring a real depth to my project.

The initial atmosphere in Phoenix seemed to be one of constant public debate. Some members of the press and domestic violence advocates focused on the abusive relationship and Jake's standing in the community. Should a well-known, influential man's

violence create any more or less concern and outrage than the violence being committed in countless households on a daily basis? Friends and families to the victim, on the other hand, were just trying to get a handle on their grief and confusion, while battling with the strong media presence. And Jacob Grazen and his supporters were concerned with his fate.

I didn't have the delusion that I would come up with some great resolution, answering everyone's questions and ending the problem of domestic violence by discovering some crucial truth. However, I thought that by focusing on the individual feelings and reactions of the people who had direct connections with the case, I could address the specific issues in a more productive and real way.

I contacted several different people with ties, personal and/or professional, to this case and asked them to contribute a candid and thorough reaction to each aspect of the case affecting them. I offered the choice of an interview format or written descriptions. Kristin Hillshaw chose an interview and helped me edit her answers, adding some of her own questions. The others opted for written contributions, which they wrote at various points in the trial. (Only four people declined to participate.)

Some of the participants wanted to discuss the project at different points in their writing process and I did meet with them, but I didn't offer much editing beyond a spell check because I wanted to preserve the exact tone of each piece. I sent out a packet to each participant, with everyone's submissions before the

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final version was compiled, so that they could respond to the other accounts if they chose to, or contact me with any last-minute additions.

At this time, I do not plan on submitting this book for publication. I'm a student and I'm compiling this information as a part of my education. This is essentially a term paper. If I change my mind at a later date and do try to get it published, it will only be within the college circuit, as a classroom demonstration and discussion tool for Journalism programs. I explained this carefully to the contributing writers, making sure they all knew that this is not a tell-all gossip book or a screen-play.

(In the interest of eliminating confusion, I should note that Natasha was also known as Natalie.)

Meredith Kendall

May 20, 1998

Maggie Gellar

Maggie Gellar is a Physician's Assistant in San Antonio, Texas. She was a close friend of Natasha.

September 20, 1997

I've always kind of thought of Natalie as a mirror image of myself. I am a few years older and I watched her go through each stage of the violence, remembering and relating to it. Her life was so similar to mine and we had compared our life-threatened lifestyles so often, that I feel as closely connected to her death as I did to her life. What happened to her, could have very well happened to me. In fact, there was a time in my life when I truly expected that to be the case.

I have learned, from everything that has happened since my dear friend's death, that I need to advocate for everything I believe in, especially now. I was inspired and encouraged by Natalie's strength to stand by her most precious values. If I shut off my emotions, bury my anger, and don't face up to all the ignorant lies people are saying, I won't be doing anything to keep the truth alive.

Natalie would want people to know what her life really was about, what she was really like. Why should Jake have the last word on her private thoughts?

I met Natalie in March of 1991. She had only been with Jake for a few months, but they had gotten serious right away. I was married to Alec Warner (who is now my ex-husband) and he worked for the same modeling agency that Jake did. So, Natalie and I saw each other at all the shows and parties that were basically mandatory for the significant others to the models, especially if you were concerned about your loved one's fidelity. Both Natalie and I had that concern.

We became close friends. We shared the same interests, had the same sense of humor, and were involved with the same type of men, so we hit it off very well. We relied on each other as allies in a secretive war. Although it didn't seem secretive at the time. Or not to me at least, because my life was so completely defined by what Alec did to me, I thought it would be clear to the rest of the world too. I always expected people to know what was going on. At times, I even prayed for it, even though I knew the risks involved, because I thought maybe there could be a way out for me. Maybe someone would catch a glimpse of a bruise, where my make-up had worn off, and somehow be able to help me.

I'd been with Alec for about a year and a half at that point, so I was right into the lifestyle Natalie would have to quickly absorb. In a way, I felt like her supervisor in a difficult job, trying to encourage her and give her advice. I had the knowledge that she was starting to gain on her own. Sometimes I wanted to tell her that everything would be okay, that you got

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used to it, and that it wasn't as bad as it seemed. Other times, I was too tired. Or I would feel slightly bitter. "You're young, you're just getting into this, so it's not too late to get out," I thought. And since she didn't, she was paving the way for more and more trauma. The bitterness was there because I felt like she was letting me down by not doing what I wished I had done.

One myth about domestic violence victims, which I've heard a lot, is that we carry around a basic belief that things are going to get better. This certainly wasn't the case for me, and from everything Nat told me about her relationship and her basic outlook on it, it wasn't true for her either. Early on in my relationship, I tried having hope that Alec would change, but there just wasn't anything to back it up with. After just one time of getting beat up after a long, drawn-out, seemingly genuine string of apologies and promises of change, my hope vanished. I did create a whole system of denial about how dangerous he really was, but it was always superficial and I knew it. It was more suppression of reality than fading optimism or weak hope for improvement.

As we got to know each other better, we'd exchange coping tactics and engage in long gripe sessions. It was both relieving and depressing. We could confide things to each other that we didn't share with our other friends, which felt good, but it was sad too.

We rarely had light discussions. I don't remember exactly when we figured out that we were both in

abusive relationships. We kind of gave off vibes to each other and had intuitive feelings that we were in the same situation, and then one night after we'd both had 4 or 5 vodka tonics, we began discussing it. Natalie was the only person I've ever felt comfortable talking about the violence with, even though I know several other women who have been through it. We were so close and comfortable with each other that there was no hesitation about revealing the most private details of our relationships.

Being in an abusive relationship isn't something you advertise. There's so much shame that your life becomes engulfed in pretense, which causes more shame, unless you're comfortable with lying. I got to the point of feeling that I had no choice but to become comfortable with it. I had to lie to myself about my own safety--"He's really not that bad, he wouldn't ever do anything if it came down to that," and lie to everyone I had contact with about my happiness. That was my biggest reason for finally leaving Alec--I was completely exhausted by the constant acting and lying, both to others and to myself. When I was at the grocery store, I had to act like my biggest concern was picking out the best cut of steak and when I was around my kids, I had to pretend that we were all living in a safe, loving home. It literally gave me a headache, trying to drown out my real feelings with the life I believed I had to live out for everyone else.

The modeling business just intensified the double life, with dose after dose of superficiality. I know it's not a career that many people take seriously, but it

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brings a whole culture of its own, to the models and their partners. And I agree with some of the skeptical attitudes about the field, so it was one more situation of feeling like a hypocrite. I was sometimes disgusted by all the emphasis I was putting on the most superficial aspects of my life, like what I should wear every day and how often I should change my hairstyle. I felt like I had betrayed my own personality, as weird as that sounds, because my priorities and concerns were very different than the ones I had before the marriage. I had always liked shopping and doing my make-up, but it hadn't been a complete obsession. When I spent hours looking for the perfect dress for a given show, paid ridiculous amounts of money for hairstyles and facials, and killed myself at the gym every day to keep my body firm, it wasn't fun. I was always thinking how Alec would go ballistic if my ass looked fat from any angle, so whenever people would say they wished they had a body like mine, I would cringe.

I was also disgusted by my own sincere belief that I had to do all of it. I could completely understand Natalie's description of realizing she had choices, when she got the divorce, because I went through that same transition from believing I was required to live out the lifestyle my abuser had created, to seeing what a pile of crap that was. But it took a long time to get there. Egos thrive and expand in a context of constant socializing and a microscopic focus on image. When your husband gets paid for looking perfect, he can't have a bleary-eyed, nervous, unhappy wife by his

side. And I wanted to hide the secret as much as he did. I didn't want anyone to know my shame. I wanted to look like I could cope with all the pressures and come out on top.

So together, Natalie and I showed off our highly perfected skills of pretense. We would stroll around parties with a martini in one hand and a Sobranie cigarette in the other, and smile non-stop. Our expressions said "Isn't my husband wonderful? Aren't I lucky that he's chosen me? I only wish I could come to these lovely affairs more often!" We comforted each other by the bond we both had with our secrets and with our honest confessions to each other about what was really going on in our lives.

We used to joke about how our friendship was a co-dependent relationship, but it wasn't really a joke. In some ways, I think we fed off each other and wrapped ourselves up in our hopelessness. Self-pity often felt like the only comfort we had. We didn't have to make excuses or explain why we did anything, because we both knew. There was no way out, and our consolation was sharing the misery.

We looked out for each other, but everything was lined with depression, for both of us. We shared stories, but didn't always talk about the real danger. We didn't have to. I couldn't tell her to get out or encourage her to stick with it, because I knew her impossible dilemma firsthand.

I got really worried about Natalie, as time went on, but I felt that I wasn't in the position to do anything. I obviously wasn't strong enough to help

her. I would have been a hypocrite if I advised her. She probably looked at me the same way: knowing that something was wrong and feeling helpless to fix it.

I've heard a few people talk about Natalie's depression, but mostly it's been buried. I don't know if her other friends are trying to hide it, or if it's just too painful to discuss. I think that it's an important part of what went on with her and Jake. It's not covering the whole story to simply say "she wasn't happy." I think that's too soft. She was in agony, in every possible way. I'm not going to say Jake was responsible for Natalie becoming depressed because I don't think of it that way. When something terrible happens in somebody's life, they don't just react to one specific problem. The pain spreads out to everything and everyone in your life.

Maybe Jake was the reason she hated herself and her life or maybe it was the effects of loving him. Either way, the depression took on its own personality. It controlled her. She had so much anger, mainly towards herself, and she didn't know how to let it out. She was very self-destructive at times and it was almost as if she was trying counteract Jake's bad behavior by treating herself badly at the same time. She would isolate herself, not seeing her friends or doing anything for herself. It got to the point where it was hard for me to tell which restrictions were hers and which were Jake's. She thought most or all of their problems were her fault, so she felt like she deserved his insults and control tactics.

Natalie and I had some crucial differences. Jake was the first man she loved. He was also the first man she slept with. (I know everyone talks about Ryan as her first love, but it wasn't on the same level as her love for Jake. Ryan was her friend who became her boyfriend, and Jake was always her lover.) I was with quite a few men before Alec. So, I was a little more bitter about men. I went into the relationship with the opinion that men were incapable of committing. Alec was eagerly searching for a committed relationship because he had just been badly hurt by a woman he'd been engaged to. He was very insecure and he threw everything into our relationship, in the beginning. That was a clear-cut example of co-dependency because we were both looking for proof of love, trust, and security. Natalie, on the other hand, got all of her bitterness about men from Jake. She began their relationship with a lot of trust and love, which Jake grabbed with both hands. When he began manipulating her, she didn't see through it for a long time because her trust was so strong.

Another difference was that I have kids. My protective desires came out, when it came to Natalie, because she wanted so badly to be a mother. I just didn't want her to experience the intense fear and guilt that comes along with having kids with a violent man. In my situation, I just couldn't figure out a solution. I have always been very happy that I have kids, but unhappy for what they have gone through. My bad choice in a husband and father for them was their model of behavior. But once I was in the situation, I

couldn't dwell on that. I tried weighing my options, but nothing seemed safe. If I left, he would find us. He could get custody, he could hurt them even if he just got visitation. If I stayed, the danger seemed more constant, because he was right there with them, but I could at least be there too and do my best to protect them.

When I first met Alec, I thought that men became models for money only and moved on to a "real career" once they earned a lot. I would never have guessed that guys like Jake, who were lawyers or doctors, would stay in modeling once they finished school and got high-paying jobs in their other field of work. What I soon realized was that models' egos can be much more motivating than money. People make jokes about Jake's strange combination of careers, saying it sounds like a bad soap opera plot, but they don't realize just how serious he was about modeling. Alec stayed in modeling for the same reasons, but he didn't have Jake's challenge of balancing a tax lawyer's lifestyle with the modeling world.

Image was everything to Jake, so he fit right into the business. He set out to gain as much acceptance in Phoenix for his modeling accomplishments as he had gained in the tax law community. There wasn't much doubt among the people who knew him about his ability to do it, Natalie explained to me, and I could definitely see why when I got to know him. Jake is the smoothest person I've ever met. He's consistently friendly, witty, and seems to be a great listener. He is of course extremely conniving, but you'd never really

know that because he appears to be so warm and genuine. He seems like he never has a negative thought.

I feel weird when I try to figure out what Natalie was feeling and why she made certain decisions in her relationship. For one thing, those are deeply personal questions and for another, it seems like no one other than Nat herself could ever understand it. And there are a lot of things that she probably never understood either. I feel the same way when I try to figure out my relationship with Alec. Since “hindsight is 20/20,” people can sit down with a list of statistics and compare what went on. Now that the relationship is over, all the information is intact. But experiencing abuse isn’t something you can get on paper. You just can’t.

I didn’t know why I did *anything* when I was with Alec. And I don’t think it was all about being naïve or totally in love. I honestly don’t know what it was about, because I didn’t ever sit down at my kitchen table and say, “Gee, why is it that I’m still here after what happened last night?” If I did that, I don’t think I would have ever gotten a different answer than “Because I’m a fucking pathetic, stupid idiot.” That’s what Alec told me and that’s what I believed, not simply because he told me it, but because I grew to believe it on my own. I’m not saying Natalie dealt with her confusion and pain like I did. I’m saying I don’t think we can sort it all out. We can’t come up with definitive answers about a woman’s most intimate thoughts.

Natalie's letters talk about her shock the first time Jake hit her. That may sound strange. A woman should really know what her husband is like before something extreme happens, but I had similar feelings when the worst times came along. When I first found out he was cheating on me, I felt small. He was physically stronger than me, he twisted everything around to make me feel like I was always to blame, and now he was going elsewhere for sex. I felt like such a loser. He could do anything he wanted and there was nothing I could do.

I don't mean to totally lump together infidelity and violence, because I know you can have one without the other. But in my mind, the two things are very similar. They both cause you to feel shock, betrayal, and fear. With physical abuse you're in fear for your safety and with affairs, you're in fear of not being able to trust again. (Trust *anyone*. That's how much it affects your mind.)

I used to think that I would never put up with either. It was so simple for me to picture my actions before the fact. My choices would naturally fall into place, in response to my firm values. I would leave a man at the first sign of trouble. I had a clear idea of what's unacceptable, and if he crossed that line, it'd be over for us. Now I can say that no woman has the right to make that kind of assumption until she's in the position. I would never have predicted the choices I made once I was in deep and it wasn't that I changed my perspective. It just wasn't as easy as knowing what my husband did to me was wrong. He'd be the

first to tell you that he thought it was wrong too. That knowledge had nothing to do with stopping it from occurring.

It's really hard for me to clarify my views on domestic violence now. I mean, I know my feelings about my own experience, but when I'm confronted by people who have strong views about it one way or the other, I freeze up. About 6 months after my divorce was final, my sister's boyfriend set me up with a guy he worked with. We had been on a few double dates with my sister and when we had our second date alone, I walked out because we got into a discussion that overwhelmed me. He knew my basic history and I thought I was ready to talk about it, but when he asked me why women stay with violent men, I couldn't speak or respond or breathe. I know that's a simple question that many people have, but I feel like it's an accusation. It doesn't matter how carefully the person sets it up or explains their perspective.

I want to use my experience to help other women and I think I can do that. But I don't think I'll ever be into speaking at education programs or advocacy rallies about the general dynamics of violent relationships or why they happen, because I don't feel like I know. I can't always make the theories about a batterer's insecurity and control issues fit logically in my head. I can relate a lot easier to the typical "symptoms" of a victim because the feelings that the abuse brings out are very fresh in my memory. And it's clearer to me because that's what I went through. I have never felt like I understood why Alec hurt me,

despite the numerous explanations by him and many different therapists. I could never identify with his feelings that cause him to be violent, because I can't consider his perspective with any degree of objectivity.

My feelings about blame are simple. I don't think a victim of domestic violence is ever to blame, nor do I think that victims of any other crime are responsible for their own pain and loss. The person committing the crime has complete control over the act and is the only one responsible for it. I've been mugged, my car was stolen, my house has been broken into, and none of those things were my fault. Even if I had done something to entice theft, I wouldn't be to blame because I'm not the one who broke the law.

I'm so upset by all the rationalizing people do who hold the opposite view. What is the purpose of defending a perpetrator and pointing out ways the victim should have acted to avoid the crime? If an act is okay, it shouldn't be classified as a crime. I think rape is the best example of this. I can't hear someone talk about the "she asked for it" theory without feeling sick. It's so unfair to make up this elaborate set of rules for a woman and say that as long as she abides by them, she is not responsible for getting raped. And if she fights back, she will be believed. But if you wear the wrong outfit or give a man the wrong impression, your rights to live a safe life are gone because you're giving consent whether you mean to or not. And knowing this is the way it works, what is stopping a rapist from helping himself?

People outside of this tragedy may wonder why it's such a big deal. I hear complaints that the soaps aren't going to be on when the trial starts. This is a big deal because it's a death that shouldn't have happened. Phoenix is getting all this attention because this tragedy has confused everyone. We're all careful about what we say and when--we have to be. I have tried not to care about what's being said and assumed about me. I still try. I try to just focus on sorting out my own emotions from everything the people around me are saying, but it seems to all blend together. I care what people say because they're combing through my memories and emotions. I feel like my life is an "open book," except it's even more revealing than that. It's like the world is watching a movie about my most private feelings, fears, and values and all I can do is watch along with them.

I would like to be able to talk about domestic violence openly, without people acting like I'm running for office or selling vacuum cleaners. It's one of the chic topics people debate about, trying to find a solution. It's a negotiation. I guess that in some ways it has become my "cause" for the simple reason that it will always be a part of me, but it was an assigned cause that I can't ever detach myself from. I always find myself wishing that people could know just how much I hated that assignment, and how much I would love for domestic violence *not* to be my cause. But the reality is that I just wish the reasons for my connection were different, because I wouldn't walk away from it for anything. I've never really thought of

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myself as being able to change anyone else's life or as being a decent role model, but I am going to try to help people through their pain, any chance I get. Maybe I wouldn't know how big a problem domestic violence is and how much we need people to give a damn about it if I hadn't been a victim.

Jake Grazen

Jacob Charles Grazen was a model and tax attorney in Phoenix. He is currently awaiting the death sentence. He was convicted of murdering his ex-wife.

November 16, 1997

I decided to write this now instead of waiting until my trial ends. If the worst happens, in terms of a verdict and sentence, I don't know if my head will be clear enough to write anything coherent at that time. And I do want to write this. I know that my words will be misinterpreted or disregarded by those who think I'm a murderer, but I have to get these thoughts out. This is the truth and I've got to at least release it, even if no one will listen or believe me.

When I started therapy for my violence, I was adamant that I didn't fit into any of the profiles for batterers. I didn't grow up seeing violence in my home, I didn't have a traditional view of sex roles, and I wasn't insecure. Well, it was a lie for me to think that, because every single one of those things were true for me. I couldn't see it though. I was different. I was justified to hit my woman because she just didn't understand. I'm sure I was a nightmare to all of my therapists, although my attitude was probably pretty typical. What a pain in the ass it must be, to try to help men who believe they are the true victims.

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I wasn't in therapy for the right reason when I first tried it, so I didn't work at it. I wanted to show Nat that I was willing to change because I wanted to make sure she kept coming back after our break-ups. However, I actually wasn't willing to make any changes because I didn't believe I had a problem. It was my way of saying to Natalie, "See, I love you enough to make yet another sacrifice for you." And I truly believed I was the one making sacrifices.

I blocked out most of my childhood. It was like I knew there was a big section of dark memories, but I didn't know the details. And I didn't want to know. When I did start to remember, it really freaked me out. I suddenly had this knowledge of terrible things that had happened to me. So much time had gone by and I was helpless. I couldn't go back and change any of it and I was angry that I had no control over how my life started out. I hadn't chosen for those things to happen to me. It wasn't fair.

I didn't talk about it for a long time because it seemed like I was whining and looking for sympathy. And I really didn't know what to say. I was ashamed and thought I'd done something wrong. When I got to the point of taking therapy seriously, which was after the divorce, I was hit with this feeling that I had deserved it. I saw the tragedy I endured early in life as punishment for all the ways I hurt Nat. Even though those things occurred first, I didn't really experience the full weight of the pain until I was an adult.

I was brought up believing that the best way to deal with pain is to ignore it. That worked for me for a

long time, so it was hard to give up. As most people know, my mother was killed in a car crash, along with my older brother and sister, when I was 4.

Dad had a real hard time dealing with it, so we moved in with my aunt and uncle (Mom's sister and her husband) a few months later. We stayed with them for a short while. We moved out because Dad didn't get along with my uncle. He had a nervous breakdown soon afterwards and my aunt and uncle obtained custody of me.

I lived with them until I graduated from high school. It's not a pleasant story. I didn't get to see Dad very often because he had very limited visitation rights and I was not happy living with Mary and George. They fought all the time and I saw a few physical fights, but it didn't seem abnormal to me because there was so much anger in the house. I never thought of them as being my role models, so I didn't worry that I would go on to have a relationship like theirs. I was too young to make connections like that. I just did what I had to do while I was living in their house and then moved on. It was shelter and that was the only positive aspect of it for me. These were people who kept me away from my father and I guess I ended up resenting them for that.

I was pretty quiet as a kid. I had so much going on in my head-- mainly confusion about what had happened to my family. I didn't talk about any of it because I thought people would think I was crazy. I probably got this idea from my uncle, because talking about your feelings was a sign of being "a pussy,"

according to him. One day I tried talking to my aunt and uncle about the accident and I was so humiliated that I promised myself never to go through that again. I told them about some dreams I was having. Mom talked to me, in these dreams, about what it was like in Heaven and she asked me to take care of Dad. I felt good and like Mom was telling me it was going to be okay, but I was confused by that. Why would I be feeling good when something so sad had happened to me? My uncle told me that if I ever talked about these kinds of things, no one would take me seriously. He said that trying to find something good in something bad was wrong and all I could do was accept that my mom, brother, and sister were dead and that my dad was crazy. My aunt didn't say a word, probably because she was afraid of him, but I took it to mean that she agreed with him.

I decided that I had to take care of myself and shut out everybody else. I knew there were a lot of kind people around me and I wanted to trust them, but I never really did. I was confused and I thought I was weird. I felt like some big plan was going on that I didn't know about. Why else would I be stuck without a real family?

I didn't ever think of myself as sexist. I have nothing against women working, I've had a lot of feminist friends over the years, and I believe in equality. But I have realized that basically these have just been words that sound good, and they don't represent my true feelings. Also, I was defining sexism in a very extreme way. A man who believes

women are inferior to men and who demands that his wife stay home and keep house is sexist. Since I don't see things that way, I am Mr. Liberal himself. I didn't see my urge to control Natalie as meaning I hated women. It was just natural. And I loved her. I didn't think my feelings were misogynistic because it was about Natalie specifically, not women generally. I was enraged by her inadequacies, but I didn't see her as representing all women and I didn't think I had this major animosity towards women.

But there was a lot more going on than feeling like Natalie owed me something.

The anger I had went beyond anything she did, didn't do, said or didn't say. I was punishing her for things she couldn't control, because in my mind, she was responsible for everything. When I ranted about how I was the victim and she controlled me, I would accuse her of being a threat to me. That's how I saw it-- she had the control because I was desperate to keep her in my life. The fact that she loved me cursed her. I had to "make her understand" just how much I needed her. It was sick.

It's still very difficult for me to talk about the connection between losing my mother and the way I feared losing Natalie. Just hearing "fear of abandonment" was more than I could handle when my therapist first went into this with me. I couldn't deal with the idea that I was afraid of how someone else could affect me. I didn't need people to treat me a certain way, the only way fear could be a part of my life was if I was causing it for someone else, and who

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would ever want to leave *me*? This sounds like sarcasm, but sadly it's the actual perception I had.

In my mind, I needed to instill fear in someone else. That was my way of combating against my past and feeling powerful. I was entitled to the position of control, I believed, because of what I had endured. I built every situation into a 2-tiered set-up, where I was on top, dictating Natalie's behavior and her feelings. Even when I broke down and begged for her forgiveness, I was in control because I was manipulating the situation. When I told her I was afraid she would leave me, it was true, but it was also a total mind-game. I didn't have to say "like my mother did," because she knew that was at the root of it. She felt like shit and I had won.

I had a lot of anger toward my aunt, which probably helped shape my twisted view of women. She had let me down by not standing up to my uncle. I thought she and I should be allies because we had both lost family. It was her responsibility to protect her sister's only surviving child. She must have thought about my mother and my siblings every time she looked at me, so why couldn't she fight back-- for my sake and my mother's? Now I have a different perspective. Her sister was dead and she was as confused and hurt as I was. She also wasn't allowed, by her husband, to talk about it.

She was dealing with the same fear that I later caused in Natalie. Now I can see that I really did learn from my uncle's behavior and that I was expecting my

aunt to make up for the pain of my mom's death. Of course, no one could ever do that.

Natalie was the first person I opened up to about my past. She was so understanding and compassionate that it overwhelmed me. She never pushed me to talk about my childhood, but she was willing to listen unconditionally whenever I felt like talking. She offered insight when I needed it but didn't judge me. This was new for me.

I've been blessed with a lot of friends and caring people, but I always felt like people expected me to share personal issues with them to prove that I trusted them. I was uncomfortable with that. With Natalie, I felt relieved to have a relationship without that kind of pressure, but since I wasn't used to it, I was intimidated and anxious. I felt like I had burdened her by sharing my tragedy with her.

As my insecurity and paranoia began to flourish, I regretted opening up to her because I felt like I had revealed too much of myself. Privacy had been my shield for most of my life and now I felt vulnerable. This hurt her because it meant I didn't trust her enough to let her in. As with the rest of my issues, my problems of not trusting people had nothing to do with her, but I treated her as if they did.

When I was in my senior year of college, I went through a down period. I'd never had a serious relationship because I hadn't wanted one, I wasn't sure which career was the best choice for me, and I felt nervous when I thought about the future. It seemed like

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everything I did was trivial and I didn't know how to get out of that holding pattern. I wanted more, but didn't know exactly what that meant for me. I was good at meeting people, but socializing felt really superficial. I got good grades, but being in college felt like an escape. It didn't seem real. I met Natalie and I was stunned that I could instantly feel like my life had direction, that things made sense, and that I could be unbelievably happy-- all at the same time.

I saw Natalie as the key to my complete fulfillment and I didn't realize how much pressure that brought her. I thought it was flattery. She got to be on the receiving end of all my affection. However, her end of the bargain was much more than returning my affection. I held her responsible for keeping my life balanced and ensuring my continued happiness. No one could possibly carry out that kind of role.

We were the super couple of Phoenix and once I took in that image and what it felt like, I became addicted to it. We were popular, rich, beautiful and everyone thought we had the perfect life together and the perfect relationship. I wanted both of those things to be true and I really believed that was what I was fighting for. The term "fighting" certainly sounds inappropriate given the circumstances, but that's actually the way I thought. I saw myself as struggling to keep my life intact and to get what I felt I deserved. And of course, I thought I was doing that for Nat too, so I saw her as ungrateful when she didn't buy into it.

I turned my mistakes into some great romantic phrase. “We are part of each other” was one of my favorites. What that really meant was that I could place all the blame on Nat because she was the evil side of my personality. You hear people say, “we’re the same person” or “she’s my soul mate.” You also hear “we were equally at fault.” Well I said those first two things, but I didn’t see it as equal at all. She was totally to blame. She was the bad part of our “same person” creation and I was just acting out against that.

I truly believed that the first violent episode was a one-time, isolated event. I had been in fights before, but I never thought I would hurt a woman. I grew up seeing that and identified it as wrong, so when I did it myself, I tried to sweep it under the rug as an embarrassing blunder. I just had one little disgusting urge and I got it out of my system.

My apologies and promises were sincere because I really regretted it and intended to never do it again.

When it became obvious that it wasn’t a one-time thing, my mind produced a pile of excuses. This had to be beyond my control. A psychological disorder, something bigger than my own behavior-- anything that took responsibility away from me. I was intelligent and good. There was no way I could be a batterer. Then the excuses easily shifted to Natalie, because believing I was mentally ill or being controlled by some higher force (which of course sounds crazy) was too tough on my ego. It had to be something that she was causing in me. She tried to believe that it was a mental issue because that was less

painful for her. However, only one of us could be immune from blame and it was going to be me. So, I came up with every possible reason why her behavior caused me to hurt her and constantly listed those off to her. In our relationship, the verbal abuse became a regular part of our arguments after the physical abuse had already started. It was just one more tool I used in controlling her.

Nat hated herself for staying with me and I fed off of that. I told her how stupid she was and filled her head with contradictions. She had created my anger to begin with and was helping it grow by staying with me. But if she didn't stay, she was weak and she didn't care enough about us to try to make it work. If she wanted to change me badly enough, she'd be able to do it. And if she was worth changing for, I would change. It gives me a headache to think about all this crap now and I said it to her all the time.

The way I truly felt about the situation was much simpler than all of my theories. Since she kept coming back to me after the worst fights, she was giving me the signal that my behavior was okay. She was showing me that I wasn't going to lose her if I didn't stop, so I didn't stop.

I felt guilty, on a pretty regular basis, about all the ways I hurt Natalie, but I suppressed it with my egotistical view of my life. I had taken the attention I got from modeling, from women, and from my success in college and in my firm, and based my self-worth on that. I believed that the positive attention

was what I deserved in every circumstance and that it entitled me to do whatever I wanted.

Nat liked my popularity at first because we were both really social, but it got out of hand pretty fast. I couldn't stand it when she went out with her friends, yet I was fine with the double standard of me having a blooming social life. And I threw it in her face. Infidelity slid easily into my rationale that I was above the concept of sin. Just as I wasn't responsible for the violence, I wasn't responsible for cheating. I remember saying, "Plenty of other women don't seem to think I'm so terrible, so why can't you appreciate what you have?" I would tell Nat how lucky she should feel that I had chosen her over so many gorgeous, intelligent women and not realize how stupid that was. I hadn't really chosen to be with her because I was unfaithful, and she certainly wasn't lucky to be the only woman who I beat up. She was simply the only woman who loved me and gave everything she had to our relationship, while I rewarded that with violence.

Usually when I abused Natalie, I didn't see her while I was doing it. I didn't focus in on her face. It was just an intense, hazy moment of attack. I was taking all my anger, frustration, bitterness, and urge for control, and channeling it into the highest level of physical energy I could reach. Usually I began with a complete awareness of what I was doing. I was incensed with something she had done and would scream at her, insult her, demean and humiliate her. I would work myself up until it escalated to violence.

But as I got to the peak of the rage, I separated the person I was abusing from my physical actions. Sometimes it felt like I was beating up a stranger and sometimes it didn't even feel like another person was involved. More like a faceless energy that was threatening me.

Sometimes I felt completely exhausted immediately after a fight, and my memory of it was fuzzy. Almost like I'd blacked out and was slowly coming to. I don't think I was really worn out, I think my mind was trying to protect me from reality. I needed to distance myself from what I'd just done. I had to escape. At other times, however, I relished every moment of the physical exertion-- the rush I felt during it and the release I felt afterwards. Feeling directly involved in the violent act was crucial to my experience. It was the whole point. I had to dominate, I had to put my mark on her-- bruises and abrasions on her body and hideous memories of my cruelty in her brain. She needed to know who she was dealing with, that she could never win, and she had to see and feel exactly how powerful I was. I gave her proof of what I was capable of and she lived in fear that I would become capable of much worse.

The control issues and insecurities have been a hell of a lot easier for me to own than the specific thoughts that went through my head before, during, and after the rages. These thoughts are very ugly and they represent the most base, animalistic side of my personality. It's so humiliating and disturbing to deal with that part of myself. When I uncovered my rage

mentality in my counseling group, I flipped out because I didn't recognize the emotions and thoughts as anything I could ever have engaged. They were gruesome and I was horrified to realize, "this is who I am."

It's hard enough to know that Natalie is gone. But my clear memory of the day she died just piles on top of that pain, to make it a million times harder. She took her own life. I was there when she did it and I couldn't stop her. This is what I dream about every night. When people see me crying and say that I'm acting, this is what is going through my head.

Sometimes I feel like I have nothing left. I don't have Natalie. I don't have a lot of the friends I trusted and loved for so many years. I don't have the livelihood that taught me so much and connected me to so many great people. But I still don't want to die. I have worked so hard to own every single one of my terrible acts. I have a long way to go, in healing and repenting. Death would steal away some of the time I desperately need.

Along with every lonely, scary moment that I continue to endure, I am rewarded with a long moment of realizing just how much I still have. The memories of the sweetest, smartest, kindest, most beautiful woman in the world are at the top of this list of treasures that I will carry to my death and beyond. She gave her love to me. How can I have knowledge of that fact without feeling completely satisfied?

I also have my faith. I didn't find it the first night I spent in my cell, but simply embrace what I've had

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since I was a child. For the short time that I was with my original family, we went to church together every Sunday, said grace at every meal, and prayed together every night at bedtime. I was so young that I hadn't finished learning what all of that meant, but I held onto it as a gift from my mother. I knew it was something special.

Now it has grown into a solid faith that gives me daily strength.

And of course, I have the loyalty of real friends. There are only a few, but their love and trust are worth so much. I can truthfully say that they are standing by me because they know the truth, not because they feel sorry for me. They know I didn't do this.

I know that Nat's family hates me and I don't blame them for that. I deserve a lot of the hatred that people have for me. But if I could choose for anyone to know the truth, it would be them. I would accept being found guilty and taking the worst punishment if I could have that. I know that her parents and her sister are suffering an infinite amount of pain. They never, ever hurt her the way I did. They gave everything they had to her.

Their love, their protection, their respect. They always gave her the right kind of love-- the kind of love she deserved.

I'd like to close with a quote, from a Natalie Merchant song, that reminds me of my Natalie. It sums up how I feel:

"My love is gone and now my suffering begins.
My love is gone, would it be wrong if I should just

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turn my head away from the light? Go with her tonight?”



When a popular attorney/male model is arrested for killing his ex-wife, a graduate journalist student decides to address the question of whether it was murder or suicide, in an extremely personal way. She asks people closely connected to the case to contribute a written reaction to various aspects of the trial.

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